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New Houston and Other Stories

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New Houston and Other Stories

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Danielle Gilyot

B.A. University of Miami, 2003

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Copyright Statement:

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States of Matter

"In this bright future you can't forget your past/So dry your tears I say."

Bob Marley, "No Woman, No Cry"

New Orleans—a hot mess of a city. Literally. Humidity and trash. Local sex and tourist piss. Cops pay more attention to flashing tits and speeding tickets. Politicians build mansions with money set aside for education. Tourist industry no more than glorified indentured servitude.

Here, we celebrate death with street parties. Dancing on the same streets over washed-out blood. Here, we reach out and touch our dead.

Sometimes, they touch us back.

New Orleans never appreciates you while you're around but misses you fiercely after you're gone. The crazy ass girlfriend that begs you to come back after she put you out. Against your better judgment, you go back to her. Bags in hand, you hope she gets it together this time.

She doesn't.

Why do you put up with it? Who the hell knows?

This is what I know: there's no in between with this place. Like a drug. You'll spend your life chasing its high, and when the party's over, you'll crash.

New Orleans gets under your skin, and I've been slitting my wrists to get it out of me ever since.

That Monday morning began very still. Quiet. Power had gone out and left me at the mercy of August heat. Cracks of sunlight peeked in between the boarded windows in Mama's bedroom. Brought a little peace with it, too.

I hadn't slept since Saturday night. Rifle pressed against my chest, I listened for the enemy. Looters this time. Didn't matter to me if they looked like Charlie or Ray-Ray from around the corner. If they tried to come up in here, they got shot. Felt like Vietnam, but I was more prepared this time.

I wanted to call Mama to let her know I was doing fine, but my cell phone stopped working. Sent Katrina a text message. Hope it went through. My two favorite girls. Mama fattened me up while my daughter checked my sugar every chance she got. Both of them watched me like a hawk, but they had nothing to worry about. Sober for twenty-four years, five months, six days and counting. Thank my two favorite girls and God for that.

Water began seeping into the bedroom from under the door. No matter. I had wanted to rip up the carpet and put down wooden floors anyway. Wind began to pick up outside. Ray-Ray wasn't coming no time soon, so I let the weather put me into that good, deep sleep. Pop's old radio blasted something about water coming over the levees. I'd be fine. This wasn't Betsy.

I jumped out of sleep. Something licked my hand. Dark brown water surrounded the bed. Half-way up the nightstand.

Crash.

Glass shattered. Wind and rain beat up the boards I had used to protect the house. Water only knee-high at this point. I grabbed the radio, my rifle, and my phone. Started for the kitchen.

Crash.

I put the radio on the nightstand and cocked my rifle. Someone had busted through the back door. I had been trained for this, and yet I shook so hard. Butt of my rifle clicked against my watch. Get it together, Private Hampton Junior. Sergeant Perkins would drag out the Junior whenever he singled me out for fucking up. By the time I left Vietnam, I had fucked so much, everyone called me Hampton Junior. Sergeant Perkins and John Hampton, Sr. The only two men I've ever wanted to be like in life. Failed miserably at both.

High-stepping through water, I made it into the foyer. No Charlie. No Ray-Ray. Just me and this torn-up house that had a tree planted in the living room. I called myself being smart with insomnia and packed up all the food that wouldn't spoil in one bag and the bottled water in another. Put the bags in the sink and covered it with a flat piece of wood.

Pop stayed for hurricanes. He taught me well. Batteries, flash-lights, an old radio, Vienna Sausage, and some crackers. Gallon jugs of water that I had to share with my younger brother and sister. Mama made beds out of blankets, and we all camped out in the middle of house. Mama told stories. She fell off the step-ladder while seven months pregnant with Grace because Pop took too long to hang the wallpaper in Grace's baby room. Patrick had been named Patricia up until the time he was born. Pop swore he was a girl. Patricia was our great-grandmother's name, and so Pop had to settle for Grace Patricia when she finally came.

In elementary school, I learned that water takes the shape of whatever container holds it. Tuesday morning. Another quiet morning. I grabbed Katrina's baby picture from the mantle as I set up shop in the attic last night. Pumped up the air mattress, but sleep? Yeah, right. Not with the critters running around up here. Air sat on top of me; even though, I kept the hatch open thinking that something would circulate. I had been waiting for the water to go down so I could get back into the house and leave. Water probably got into the truck, but once those brakes aired out, I'd be good to go.

I've always appreciated noise. In Vietnam, I discovered that silence was the great deceiver. The hypersensitivity to sound I developed over there saved my life. This wasn't like Vietnam, though. I was better prepared this time.

That water came some fast. Never in my life have I seen flood water reach the ceiling. Sent Katrina another text. Told her that I loved her. I pulled out an old, rusted ax from the box of tools I kept in the attic.

Pop never taught me this.

DENIAL

Namesake

Killer Katrina. They whispered it behind her back at the office. She pretended not to hear them. Insensitive asses. The number two reason why she hated Houston. Number one had to be the traffic.

Katrina Marie Hampton rubbed her eyes as she sat in the computer room Thursday morning. Mr. Henry, the only person in the graphics department for Freedom Advertising, let her give feedback on the logos he designed for their clients. Mr. Henry needed someone to bounce ideas off of, and Katrina needed to something to keep her from giving her good job the middle finger and walking out. She had been hired at the Houston agency as an Accounts Executive just weeks after moving from the hotel room in Baton Rouge. Uncle Pat was so proud. Dad said she was blessed. She felt grateful for landing a better paying job so quickly, but she was far from blessed. Blessings were supposed to bring joy or at least some kind of peace. Right?

"I like the font," she said as she focused on the monitor. Mr. Henry's latest logo--Shock Value. A protein-based energy drink, Shock Value tasted like thick Vanilla Coke laced with speed, cocaine, crack, or all three. The entire sales staff had the shakes the day after they tasted the product for a brain-storming meeting.

Shock Value was one of Kegger's accounts. Not his real name, but he had to be one of those guys in college that woke up attached to a beer funnel. Kegger moved Shock Value's product launch up to next month in order to impress the owners. His frat brothers, of course. He really should've waited until the fall and not the middle of June with the summer weight-loss season well under way. He called her Killer Katrina more than anyone else in that office, and she didn't miss a chance to school his dumb ass in front of their boss, Victoria. She didn't have the energy to be the bitch to his asshole this time. Kept her common sense to herself.

Kegger had demanded Mr. Henry get a prototype of the logo done before month's end. He ran crying to Phil, the President and resident psycho of Freedom Advertising, when Mr. Henry told him two weeks wasn't enough time. Katrina, in another fight with insomnia, designed her own logo for the energy drink last night.

She pulled out her sketch book and flipped through the old logos and fashions she'd attempt when feeling bold.

"Look," she said like a kid showing off her latest macaroni art.

She had drawn an EKG with two leads. The first lead, instead of spikes, spelled out "Shock" with each beat. The second lead, in similar fashion, spelled out "Value".

"Kid," he said, "this looks good. It's been done before, though."

"I know it's been done before." She picked up a pencil on the desk and twirled it in her fingers. "It could still work. Maybe?"

"It could work," he said, "but we have to find a way to make it different. Something to make it pop."

Mr. Henry turned the pages in her book and stopped at the first logo she designed with him. The vodka bottle. "You've got an eye for this," he said. "You just need some polish."

She'd never get polish. Not here.

"I'll talk to Phil about it," Victoria had said, "and maybe he'll let you work with Henry part-time or something."

Let. The word made Katrina bite her lip to keep from cussing that day three months ago. The third time she went to Victoria requesting a transfer into the graphics department.

She knew Victoria hadn't breathed a word of it to Phil. Even if Victoria had said something, Phil would never transfer Katrina anywhere. Not when she served as his in-house sob-story to catch all those New Orleans businesses that evacuated to Houston. Didn't help that Katrina knew how to sell. She had too good of a teacher.

Patrick Hampton of Hampton Enterprises. Uncle Pat had advertised for New Orleans businesses for so long, he had gotten past chasing clients. They came to him. Allowed her uncle to do what he wanted to do. Advertising for those small businesses with little money and even less opportunity for success was what he wanted to do. For free.

"Katrina," her uncle would say, "what's the point of working to get to the top when you don't reach back to pull someone else up?"

One Christmas, Uncle Pat gave her a copy of *The Negro Problem*. "The Talented Tenth" by W.E.B. DuBois was marked with a post-it note.

So you'll understand. Love, Uncle Pat.

She lost that understanding at Freedom while she tap-danced for Victoria, Phil, and the latest displaced New Orleans account they wanted. Her good job had turned her passion for advertising into disdain, with seventy-hour work weeks that extended into Saturdays and holidays.

Mr. Henry's phone rang. "Okay," he said, "I'm sending her back now." He turned towards Katrina.

"Why didn't you tell me you had clients coming in?"

Damn. "I forgot," Katrina said. She gathered up her sketchbook.

"Leave it here," Mr. Henry said.

She placed the book on the table and walked into the hallway. Moving her neck like a boxer, she cracked one side and then the other. Only three hours of sleep last night.

"Wake ya ass up."

The Baker Firm, the oldest black-owned personal-injury law firm in New Orleans, decided to open their headquarters out here in Houston. They shopped around for an agency to handle everything. Re-branding the firm, launching it into the Houston market, and maintaining it afterwards. Close to a million dollars in revenue for Freedom. The commission alone would hold Katrina over while they transferred into the graphics department, or while she looked for another job.

She inhaled and looked into the glass-encased conference room. The Baker men sat across from Victoria and Phil sat at the mahogany table that reminded Katrina of Christmas at the old house on St. Phillip Street. Katrina's point-person at the firm, Mr. Baker's grandson, nodded his head as Victoria showed him the marketing packets. He looked no older than thirty and some fine with his fade and goatee. Skin the color of a Sugar-Daddy candy. Well, damn. Katrina should've worn a skirt to work today.

"This logo is interesting," he said.

Katrina smirked when she heard that. He sounded as difficult-to-please in person as he did over the phone. She designed it last week. Nothing special. She used Baker's old logo of a

filigree-designed fleur-de-lis and marked Houston on a blank map of Texas with it. Mr. Henry thought it made perfect sense, but Victoria turned her nose up at the finished product.

"They'd never go for it," Victoria said. "It's too simple."

"Yes, simple," Older Mr. Baker said, "just right."

Chocolate-brown with salt-and-pepper hair. Older Mr. Baker had to be in his late seventies with grown grandchildren. He still looked good like Billy Dee Williams still looked good.

Katrina straightened her black-and-white pinstriped jacket and showed off the top part of her lace camisole. Older Mr. Baker had been her uncle's client for years. She has known him since she started working at Hampton Enterprises as the copy girl. This had to be no-brainer for him. The grandson had been tapped to take over the firm. Uncle Pat told her that Older Mr. Baker planned to retire soon after they had established themselves in Houston. Katrina knew who she needed to impress.

She pushed the conference-room door. Everyone in the room looked up. Victoria looked relieved. Phil looked perturbed. Nothing new. Cute Mr. Baker looked surprised but covered it with a scowl. Not before he swept his eyes up and down her body. Older Mr. Baker smiled.

"Hi, Mr. Baker," she sang towards the older man.

"How's the family?" Older Mr. Baker asked.

"Everyone is good," she said. "Does Mrs. Baker still make those pineapple upside-down cakes? My absolute favorite."

"Of course she does," he said. "I'll get her to make one for our next meeting."

"Please tell Mrs. Shirley I said hello," Katrina said and rubbed her hands together. "My uncle's gonna be so jealous."

She watched Phil and Victoria fold their arms in smug satisfaction. Those piranhas had already spent Mr. Baker's money in their minds.

"Before you start talking cake, Ms. Hampton," Cute Mr. Baker said, "your firm still hasn't shown us anything that outstanding."

A bit of an asshole. She liked that. She glanced at his left hand. No ring.

"That's true," Katrina said. She fixed her eyes on him.

She heard Phil and Victoria shift in their seats.

"Why should we sign with you then?" Cute Mr. Baker sat back in his chair and folded his arms.

Katrina felt him staring at her neck. She placed both hands on the conference-room table and leaned over so that her eyes were level with his. She watched him as he tried not to look down her camisole. "Me."

He almost fell forward. "What'chu say, now?"

Katrina swallowed her laugh as she stood up straight.

"Like yourselves," she said, "there are a lot of people from New Orleans that have decided to make Houston their new home. You know how folks from New Orleans are. We don't like to do anything with people our mama and 'nem don't know."

She cut her eyes towards Victoria. "When you sign with Freedom," Katrina said, "you'll be working directly with me. You'll be my only account. You should hire someone who understands your company as you recreate your image. Haven't we all had to do that after the storm?"

"That sounds nice and all." he said. "However, in order for us to do this right out here in Houston, we need someone with more experience and more polish than you. This isn't New Orleans. The I-know-your-people way of doing business isn't going to work out here."

Every muscle in her body wanted to put her finger in his face.

"If that's the case, *bruh*," she wanted to say, "how 'bout you start with leaving 'what'chu say now' back in the seventh ward since we's in Houston now."

No wonder his ass wasn't married. Cute? Not anymore. Even if he did look like Katrina's favorite candy.

"Don't mind my grandson," Older Mr. Baker said. "He's got a lot on his plate with the move."

Younger Mr. Baker tried to speak but was silenced by his grandfather.

"Reading this packet," Older Mr. Baker said, "and looking at this MySpace thing you presented in here, I can tell you know us well enough to stick to our roots while moving us forward. Every other firm in Houston has offered us the same type of campaign."

"Which is why—" Younger Mr. Baker started.

"Hush, boy," Older Mr. Baker said. "You're correct, dear. Just like the law, it's the same no matter where you go. It's the service that matters. I've worked with your uncle for years, and he always took care of me. I trust you'll do the same with my Denny."

"Dennis," Younger Mr. Baker said. His face, red underneath his caramel skin, looked drained of all confidence.

Fix your face, Denny. The dick-look never worked for anyone.

“Trust me,” Katrina said to him, "it's a lot better than being called 'Kit-Kat' in meetings. We can go over everything in the packet today, and I'll email you a cost-benefit analysis this evening."

"We have another meeting to attend downtown," Dennis said. "Let's set up something for early next week."

"Why don't you come by the house for dinner on Monday?" Mr. Baker asked. He looked at Katrina and then back at Dennis. "Shirley can make that cake, and you two can discuss business without the suits."

She peeped the old man's game. "Sure, Mr. Baker."

Dennis was still an pompous asshole. She'd definitely wear pants whenever she had to see him.

"Perfect," Mr. Baker said, and he stood up.

Dennis stood up and placed the packets into his briefcase.

"Nice to meet you, Dennis," Katrina said to him as she extended her hand. She couldn't wait to call her cousin, Sienna, and tell her all about Denny's fine but stupid ass.

"Ms. Hampton." He shook her hand loosely.

A man who couldn't shake hands. The worst.

Katrina walked out of the conference room with them and left Victoria and Phil at the table. Mr. Baker gave Katrina a hug while Dennis stood off to the side checking his cell phone. She waved at them as they stepped inside the elevator and pressed the button. She overheard Mr. Baker scolding Dennis just as the elevator doors closed.

"Is that the way you talk to a woman?"

Phil clapped his hands as he walked up to Katrina with Victoria on his heels. "Great job in there," he said. "I see why they call you Killer Katrina around here."

Katrina felt her veins tightening. She stared.

"Because you killed it," Phil said, "and I just love the way you handled that boy."

He should've just said that nigger.

"They called the hurricane the same thing," Katrina said. "You know, the same one that killed all the black people in New Orleans. You remember, don't you?"

"Katrina Hampton," Victoria said, "my office. Now."

Katrina rolled her eyes and walked off in the direction of Victoria's office. She had to get fired now. Thank God. She'd be done with the "Killer Katrina's," the questions, and the unsolicited advice from her co-workers. *Did you live in that ninth ward? How much water was in your house? Do you know Lil' Wayne? I mean, why would anyone want to go back there? If I were you, I'd just start looking for houses here.*

Nobody fucking asked you.

Katrina pounded her way through the cubicle area. She heard the whispers from her co-workers as she rushed passed them into Victoria's office.

She sat down in front of Victoria's desk and looked around. Awards and newspaper clippings lined the walls. "Top 30 under 30." "Top 40 under 40." "Who's Who in Houston Advertising."

Katrina picked up the picture frame on Victoria's desk. Her boss, in a green evening-gown, stood between a woman and a man who had to be Victoria's parents. Victoria smiled a peaceful, all-knowing smile. Mimi used to smile like that. Victoria, however, was nobody's mother let alone grandmother. Still, Katrina felt a strange comfort as she looked at the picture.

Victoria closed the door behind her. "First of all," she said, "you did a good job in there. Not one of your best sells."

"I'd like to be transferred to the graphics department," Katrina said. "That or you'll have to find someone else to handle the Baker account."

"Don't start that again with me, Katrina," Victoria said.

"I'm serious."

"You just signed a million dollar account by guaranteeing you'll handle it personally," Victoria said as she sat down at her desk.

"I'll only work the Baker account then." Katrina placed the picture frame back on the desk. "I could split my time between them and graphics, and you should smile more."

"Stop asking me to move to graphics, then." Victoria crossed her arms in front of her.

"C'mon, Victoria," Katrina said, "you told me that you'd consider it at the very least." She liked her boss. Victoria pushed Katrina to do better like Uncle Pat, but Katrina was in no place to receive anything other than a way out.

"Your talents are best served as an accounts executive," Victoria said.

"I hate it."

"You don't hate it," Victoria said. "You may not like it right now, but that's life sometimes."

"Not the life I want," Katrina said.

"This isn't that much different from your work in New Orleans."

"That's who I used to be," Katrina said.

"Designing logos?" Victoria asked. "Is that who you are today?"

Katrina looked up at the ceiling. Don't cry.

“Look at me, Katrina,” Victoria said and pointed at the office door. “You’re much better at this than half of them out there. Much better than I thought when I first hired you. Don’t squander a great opportunity just because you woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.”

Katrina rolled her eyes at Victoria. “Do you think I like being called ‘Killer Katrina?’”

“I’ve never called you that.”

“I don’t see you correcting people when they say it.”

“That’s not my job,” Victoria said as she stared at Katrina. “If that’s the real reason, then quit. Transferring departments isn’t gonna help.”

“What do you suggest, then?” Katrina felt her arms tighten. “Just let them call me that.”

“No way in hell you let them call you that,” Victoria said and pursed her lips like Auntie Grace. “You tell them where to get off and keep doing your job. Just because a natural disaster brought you here doesn’t mean people will feel sorry for you and be nice to you. Especially when you make them look incompetent.”

Katrina rolled her eyes again.

The moniker started floating around the office after she landed a restaurant account from New Orleans. A six-figure campaign. The third account she had signed within a few months of being hired. Some of her co-workers, like Kegger, still hadn’t signed a second client, and they had at least six months on her at Freedom. Victoria threw salt into their wounded egos one particular staff meeting. She made Katrina tell them how she landed her third client in less than six months. Victoria called it a teachable moment. Killer Katrina was only twenty-five years old, too. The youngest person at the agency except for the mail-boy.

"So what they call you that," Mimi would say to Katrina. "It's when they stop talking about you, that's when you worry."

Bad enough people made faces whenever she said her name. She didn't need them using her name against her.

"Look Katrina," Victoria said, "I won't put myself in your shoes. This is business. Leave the personal at home. Saying those kinds of things to the President of the company is not the way to go. You're lucky he only cares about the bottom line."

"I'm sick of this shit," Katrina said and walked out of Victoria's office. She grabbed her purse from her cubicle and stormed towards the elevator. Her personal life streamed down her face.

Heat smacked Katrina in the face as she walked outside. Felt like the sun had stopped moving, but at least it was dry heat. New Orleans humidity would have Katrina sweating pounds, and she couldn't afford it. Replacing her wardrobe once in a year was enough.

Hips, thighs, and ass. She had all of it. Big fine. She used to squeeze her donk into a pair of jeans. She just has a booty now. Jeans not so tight anymore. She still had her 36 C's and kind of liked her new waist. If only her figure had been an achievement instead of a side effect.

Mimi made her eat on a schedule whenever Katrina came home for holidays. Red Beans and rice. Butter beans and rice. Black eyed-peas, cabbage, cornbread, and rice.

Most people gained weight after the storm eating vending-machine food and take-out. Katrina, ever the rebel, shrunk to size 8 from a size 12. She turned into a bobble-head doll, even though, she ate all kinds of junk food that went well with Post-Hurricane Syndrome.

Never mattered to Katrina that plus-size models looked like her. She loved her ass and her thighs and even the jiggle under her arms. So did the men, but they're men. They liked her at this size, too. Even Denny the asshole snuck a peek at her booty today.

Katrina slammed her car door shut. This couldn't be her life. French Quarter Fest and 190 Octane daiquiris. She and Uncle Pat plotting on how to expand Hampton Enterprises. Sienna aggravating the mess out of Katrina about everything. Her dad stuffing money in her pockets on Sundays when he was the one who needed it more than she did. New Orleans. That was her life. Not the forty-five minute drive to and from the office. Not the sleeping pills which made her sleepier the next day. Not the Killer Katrina's.

She slid a Maze CD into the car radio. "Happy Feelings." Her go-to song when the perpetual bad mood became too much for her. Katrina wiped her face and put the song on repeat. She wanted to go home and hide under the covers for the rest of the day. Victoria wouldn't like it, but she'd understand.

"Happy feelings in the air," Frankie Beverly sang to her. She turned the volume all the way up. An afternoon nap sounded great. An afternoon drink sounded much better.

Boudreaux's. The neon sign flashed from the interstate like those tourist restaurants in the Quarter. This place had the best fried crawfish tails, period. Better than New Orleans.

"Wait a minute," Sienna had said. "You're telling me that something in Houston is better than your precious New Orleans."

Katrina popped another crawfish tail into her mouth.

"This is the big one." Sienna waved her arms in the air as if the heart-attack came next. "Elizabeth. I'm coming to join you, honey."

The daiquiris at Boudreaux's couldn't touch the ones from home, but she didn't hold it against the place. It was there for her whenever she needed a New Orleans fix. Katrina pulled into the parking lot and called Sienna. Voice mail.

"Meet me at Boudreaux's," Katrina said. "I'll be here for a while."

Friday nights at Boudreaux's was the new Sunday afternoon on Lake Ponchartrain. Car show and all. The triumvirate of seafood, liquor, and music called to many displaced New Orleans souls. "Baby" and "Huh bruh" were the secret passwords. Bayou Classic weekend mixed with a huge family reunion every Friday night.

Everyone came to flirt. Even the Houston natives. Boyfriends and girlfriends didn't matter at Boudreaux's, which caused some of the fights and the eventual police cars camped out front. Just like home.

Katrina and Sienna talked with guys they hoped to never see again. They made up boyfriends. Didn't work for Sienna. She attracted every baby-daddy or common-law husband that snuck out of the house for the night. She had to resort to imaginary husbands.

Katrina ended conversations before they got that far.

"So where are you from?" he would ask.

"New Orleans."

"Oh, you're here because of Hurricane Katrina?" He'd narrow his eyes. "Wait, what's your name again?"

"Katrina."

"Damn." He'd give her the poor-baby face. "Did you make it out in time?"

"Yes." Obviously. Cut him some slack, Katrina.

"Family and friends okay?"

“Everyone is fine.”

“Where did you live?” He'd screw up his face. "The ninth ward?"

“New Orleans East. Lost most of my stuff.”

“You can replace stuff,” he'd say and unscrew his face. "You're lucky.”

“Have a good night,” she'd say.

Katrina would walk away with her drink back to Sienna. Luck had nothing to do with it. She didn't lose any family or friends, and she spent the hurricane in a semi-comfortable bed instead of on the floor. Fortunate, yes. She was lucky on the surface and didn't need some tool who hadn't experienced a heavy rainstorm talking to her about replacing her stuff. Her stuff had memories. She didn't want new stuff.

Sienna told her to stop being so hard on people. They didn't know any better. Sienna was right as usual, but that didn't matter.

“That shit sucks,” he should've said. "Can I get you another drink?"

Boudreaux's still had the best crawfish tails. Hands down.

Before the storm, Katrina never watched the news. Too depressing. Murders, robberies, and everything in between. Wanted criminals were not the last images she needed to see before going to sleep at night. She watched ESPN for football and read news stories on the internet.

She didn't even watch the Weather Channel like most people those days before the hurricane. She dismissed it like the others that turned away from New Orleans at the last minute. Like Hurricane Ivan. Twenty-four hours in a car with anyone that had the Hampton last name wasn't good on any level. Even Mimi got on Katrina's nerves.

Only when her father had told her to leave with the rest of the family did she start paying attention to this particular hurricane. Too late. She should've thrown a temper tantrum like she was five years old and wanted Cocoa Puffs. Her dad would've fussed at her. He might've beat her ass like he did when she was five years old, but she would've gotten her way. He wouldn't have stayed in New Orleans.

In Baton Rouge, Katrina watched CNN. She woke up to Soledad O'Brien. She fell asleep to Anderson Cooper. His strained and sweaty face brought her comfort in that hotel room. If he could survive long enough to report news from the chaos, then her dad had to be alive.

Four days, twelve hours, and thirty-four minutes since the hurricane hit. He still hadn't called or texted. Katrina set her phone ringer as loud as she could and kept the phone in her bra. Pissed her off every time the phone went off with texts reporting which parts of the city were underwater. She could see that shit on CNN.

Sienna came into the room that night with gas-station groceries. Beef jerky, bottled waters, Cokes, powdered donuts, Snickers bars. Sienna looked at the TV and then at Katrina.

"Yes, I'm still watching this," Katrina said without turning her head.

Sienna sat in the chair next to the sofa and picked up the remote from the end table. She flipped the channel.

"Jesus, Sienna, turn it back." Katrina jumped up from the sofa.

"This isn't good for you," Sienna said. "You're not gonna see Uncle Junior on CNN. Go get some sleep, or let's take a walk around the hotel."

Katrina balled up her hands. "Turn it back." Her body shook, and her knuckles started to lose their color.

Katrina was emotional and wore her heart on her sleeve. Never this crazy.

Sienna stood up and stretched her arms out for a hug. Katrina knew Sienna thought CNN had taken Katrina's sanity.

"Turn it back," Katrina said. "Turn it back. Turn it back."

Sienna flipped the channel back to CNN and threw the remote on the floor.

"Happy?"

Katrina slumped back onto the sofa. She didn't jump at the sound of the door slamming when Sienna stormed out. Katrina grabbed the beige hotel-blanket and pulled it up to her chin.

Anderson Cooper would never stop on Hammond Street with his cameraman to see if Dad made it out of the house. He'd call or just come to the hotel. He had to. Death wasn't an option for her dad. She watched CNN because she had to stay a part of what happened down there. Just one hour away.

Katrina refused to act as if it never happened because she made it out in time. The Superdome or the Convention Center would never be a part of her story, but she was obligated to listen to those left behind there.

"How could they leave us like this?" The question rang in her ears as she fell asleep. Soledad would be there in the morning.

Katrina walked into the hospital room at the end of the hall in the Emergency area. Late Sunday night or early Monday morning, Katrina lost track of time in the car ride to Metairie. Thinking back on last Thursday's work drama, she felt silly. So wrapped up in herself that she missed her weekly phone call with him.

"Dad."

A man on the other side of the curtain moaned like he'd vomit at any moment.

Mimi sat in a cushioned chair and raised her finger to her lips. "He won't wake up until the morning," she said.

Katrina leaned over Mimi and gave her a kiss on the top of her head.

"Hey, lady," Katrina whispered.

"Oh, sweetheart." Mimi's voice cracked.

Katrina squatted down and looked at her grandmother. Mimi had wrapped her rosary beads around Dad's wrist. The light over his bed wrapped the entire room in a dim, fluorescent haze. Gave her father the waxy look of a corpse she'd been called in to identify. His cheeks clung to their bones. His buzz-cut had turned into a grey matted-mess. Lips tight across his face as if he clenched his teeth in his sleep.

Alcohol poisoning? What the fuck, Dad?

Uncle Pat entered the room holding two cups of water. "Hey, Kit-Kat."

"I didn't see you when I got here," Katrina said as she stood back up. "Auntie Grace said she'd come in the morning."

Uncle Pat placed the cups on the little dresser next to Dad's bed. He opened his arms and engulfed Katrina. "He's okay."

Katrina sniffed. She held onto the back of Uncle Pat's shirt until the urge to cry left her.

"Stop all that." Dad's voice sounded in her head.

"Ma," Uncle Pat said, "c'mon, let me take you home."

Mimi stroked Dad's hand one more time. "Kit-Kat," she said, "you better call me if he wakes up before I get back here."

Katrina nodded her head and put her arm under Mimi's arm to help her out of the chair. Mimi cupped Katrina's face. Hands felt hard against Katrina's skin.

"Best thing my Junior ever did in his life," Mimi said.

Katrina wanted to let it all go in her grandmother's hands and let Mimi rock Katrina to sleep like she was ten again.

"I love you, too," Katrina said.

After Mimi and Uncle Pat left the room, Katrina sat down in the chair next to Dad's bed. Her superhero. The man built closet shelves and sewed buttons on shirts. He kissed her skinned knees and taught her how to fight. She cringed whenever he'd show up to awards ceremonies or school plays all dusty and dirty because he had left someone's work site. Paint splatches all over his jeans and loud as hell. Everyone just had to know that was his baby on the stage.

Who was this man?

She stared at the hospital gown that covered the top part of his chest to see if his dog tags were still there. She noticed them on the table next to his bed.

"You could just give them to me already," she said and grabbed them.

According to him, her fascination with his dog tags started the day they met.

"You used to play with my dog tags like it was nobody's business," he'd tell her. "Damn near broke my neck to get to them."

Every first day of school since the seventh grade, she'd beg him to let her wear them. He placed them around her neck as he zipped her gown the day of her high school graduation. She wore them in between her honor cords. Fiddled with them all day long just so people could see them.

"My daddy fought in the Vietnam War," she said to anyone who asked.

Sienna used to ask Katrina why she wanted those cruddy things. She just did, but she wanted them when he was old and had to live in the guest bedroom of her house. She wanted them long after he became Paw-Paw. Not while he was still Dad.

Katrina had to come home now. Mimi couldn't handle him by herself, and Uncle Pat was too busy paying for everything. No more sleepless nights. No more wasting away at that hell-hole she called a job.

The next morning, Katrina woke up on a cot next to his hospital bed.

"You fell asleep in the chair," Dad said. He looked like shit.

"You look like shit," she said and smiled. He looked alive.

"Wipe the drool off your face, Miss America," he said.

Katrina lifted herself off the cot. Her body ached as she leaned over him. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into the bed with him.

"I'm so mad with you, right now," she said and pulled the blanket over his chest.

He kissed her forehead. "I know, baby girl."

"Can you imagine getting a phone call like that," she said, "and then have to sit five hours in a car. Not cool."

"I'm sorry."

"Seriously, Dad," she said, "what's going on with you?" She needed to hear it from him.

"Talking isn't gonna change anything," he said. "I just gotta learn to live with it."

"Killing yourself isn't the way to live with it."

"I'm not gonna kill myself," he said.

"Really?" she asked. "Where are we right now?"

She felt him tremble and got out of the bed to pick up the blanket on the cot. He felt so cold as she smoothed the blankets over his feet. She noticed the marks in between his toes and started inspecting them to see if any were fresh.

"Stop that," he said. "I'm fine."

She wanted to believe him.

They had the most unusual stay-away-from-drugs talk the morning he took her to LSU. Opium. He had started it while overseas in Vietnam. He'd take it at night so he could forget what he'd done during the day. It chased away their faces from his mind. Only for a moment, though. So he chased the high until it led him to heroin. He even hooked Marie, his high-school sweetheart, on the stuff when he came back home. They lived in a camelback apartment in Hollygrove. They had the best sex on the stuff. Screwed each other until they passed out. He didn't pull out. They lost that baby. The first time he tried to quit.

He loved Marie, and he wanted to marry her. Have kids with her one day after they cleaned themselves up. By that time, she'd become worse of an addict than he ever was. He managed to get jobs working with Papa on his construction sites. Fought hard to keep them, too.

"But that stuff," he had said, "was more important than life back then."

Marie got pregnant again years later. He got kicked off another job site before he found out. Marie never wanted children. He begged Papa for money for an abortion, but it went to smack. Somehow, she survived. Born long before she was supposed to be. Seven months. Five pounds, four ounces. Katrina Marie Hampton.

"The last thing they let me do was name you."

Papa and Mimi chased him away from the hospital every time he showed up. Told him that the baby had enough working against her without her drugged-up father coming around.

They had already given Marie the ultimatum, and she chose the drugs. He showed Katrina his sobriety chips, dating back to the year she was born. Mimi and Papa let Dad move into the house on St. Phillip Street when Katrina turned two years old. The only way they'd let him be a father to her.

"We missed our call this weekend," he said as she got back into the bed next to him.

"You were supposed to tell me how everything went with Mr. Baker."

"I'm gonna come back home," she said.

"Don't start that again."

"I have to come back."

"What for?" her father asked. "Not because of me, huh?"

"I should because of you," she said. "Truth is, I'm so unhappy out there."

"Coming back isn't gonna make you happy."

"I can't stay out there any longer."

"There's nothing here, baby girl," he said.

"You're here," she said, "and Mimi and Uncle Pat are here. This is home for me."

"Have you seen the house on Hammond street, yet?"

"Didn't Uncle Pat demolish it?"

"Go drive around the neighborhood," he said. "Go see how it still looks after all this time and then tell me you wanna move back."

"I hate it out there," she said and sat up. "I hate all of it, and especially that job."

"Go find another job, then," he yelled.

Katrina jumped. No matter how old and grown she thought she was, whenever her father yelled, she turned into that six year-old holding the box of Cocoa Puffs.

"You can find another job or a completely different career if you want to in Houston," he said. "You're so smart, and that place has so many opportunities. Running back home is not gonna fix whatever you think is broken. Not this time, Kit-Kat."

"I have to, Dad," Katrina said. "I belong here, and you know you need me here, too."

"I need you to live your own life." He put her head on his chest and stroked her hair. "I'll be fine. Trust me."

Everything Katrina read on the subject told her that addicts could be very convincing.

She wanted to believe him.

Soul Food

Mimi sat at the small dining room table and sipped her coffee. Crabs, shrimp, and hot sausage simmered in the gumbo pot. Patrick wanted seven steaks and yellow rice for Sunday dinner today. Would've been much easier to cook, but he'd have to wait until next week. This pot of gumbo was for her Junior. His favorite.

She opened the newspaper.

“Meteorologists Predict Another Active Hurricane Season”

"These storms need to quit it," she said. She flipped through the society pages and death notices. Could careless who was out and about in the city, and she refused to become the old woman who scanned obituaries looking for people she knew. She didn't even read her own husband's notice.

“What for?” she had asked Patrick the day before the funeral. “I lived all of it.”

Sports—her John's section. To her husband, summertime was just in the way. He loved his Saints like a wife. Mimi was his concubine.

“This year's gonna be the year,” he'd say. By the third or fourth game of the season, he'd shake his head at the TV as they lost another one.

"Got damn Saints."

She'd pretend to not to understand the game. He'd light up as he explained different parts of it to her. If the kicker put the ball between the big H at the end of the field that meant three

points or one point if the team had scored a touchdown. She knew what a field goal was, but she let him be her man.

“Let’s hope this Payton does better than the last one, huh babe,” she said.

She separated the classifieds from the rest of paper and folded it neatly for Junior. All those good carpentry jobs. That boy missed out on so much money. Talented just like his father. The mantle piece he carved for the house on Hammond Street had his father's hand all over it.

All God’s children got to work. Her mama taught her that.

She opened the comics. “Poor old Andy Capp,” she said, “stays getting kicked outta that house.”

The gumbo hissed as it boiled over. “Good Lord.”

She rushed into the kitchen and grabbed the towel on the counter. Holding both edges of the towel, she moved the pot to the cold burner on the other side. The spicy and earthy smell of file traveled throughout the apartment.

“Shoot,” she said. Picking up a cooking spoon, she felt a small wave of relief as she stirred the bottom of the pot with ease. Burnt gumbo at the bottom would’ve spoiled the whole thing, and she couldn't have that.

"Family Reunion" sounded from the bedroom. Grace insisted on getting the thing when Mimi moved into the apartment alone. Please, this apartment was so small that if someone got into it, he'd get to Mimi long before she opened the cell phone. Junior lived down the hall from her which made Mimi feel better. She walked into the bedroom and opened the flip-phone.

"Gumbo ready yet?" Patrick asked her.

"Almost. Talked to your brother today?"

"He's not coming?"

"I don't know," she said. She had called Junior twice already, but he didn't answer. Mimi never wanted to be the kind of mother that got bent out of shape because her kids didn't call her back in two minutes. She worried about Junior. Already fragile. Already one setback away from picking up the needle again. She couldn't tell you who showed up in the hotel room in Baton Rouge after the storm. The Junior she knew still hasn't showed up.

"I'll go check on him when I get there," he said.

"Thanks, baby." She flipped the phone closed and walked back into the main area of the apartment.

Patrick had given Mimi a key to Junior's apartment when she and Junior first moved into their apartments in the same complex, but hovering over Junior caused more problems than she tried to prevent. Sunday dinner—her way of keeping an eye on him. Food worked in her family. Unless she had something on the stove, there was no point in calling them over.

She never pushed Junior. If he said he didn't want to come, she didn't ask him again until next week. Junior could get mean whenever he was in a mood, and Mimi didn't want to slap the piss out of her child.

Couldn't shake that feeling today. She knew her Junior. Mood or no mood, he always called her back. She opened her cell phone and dialed Junior's number again.

"Hello," Junior whispered into the phone.

"You don't know how to answer the phone?" she asked, relieved that she didn't have to bang on his door.

"I was sleep."

"I made gumbo for you today, baby," she said. "You coming over to get some?"

"Not today," Junior said. "I'm gonna stay in."

"It's your favorite," she said.

"I'll come get some tomorrow."

"Did you eat today?" she asked.

"I'll get some tomorrow, Ma," he said. "Leave it alone."

She didn't want to, but she knew that if she said anything else, he'd probably start fussing.

He really needed to see someone. They all needed to see someone.

"All right, Junior," she said, "tomorrow."

He hung up the phone without a good-bye. This wasn't her Junior. Not the one she raised.

She got up from the sofa and went back into the kitchen. Leaning over the pot, she stirred the gumbo. She thought she heard a knock on the door, but ignored it. Bet those damn kids from upstairs were playing on her door again. She'd never met such bad-ass children in her life. Just running around the damn apartment complex. Whatever happened to summer camp?

The parents were worse. Didn't even speak. Watched her struggle with grocery bags as they sat on their balcony and drank beers. The music. Why did they have to listen to some song about meet me in the club cause it's going down at seven o'clock every damn morning?

John would've had those children loaded up in his truck and dared the parents to say anything about it. They'd work with him at whatever construction site he had that day. He did that with the kids on St. Phillip.

All God's children got to work.

Even the babies on Hammond Street helped Mimi with the groceries. They knew if they didn't and word got back to their parents, that was their tail. Mimi's homemade brownies had

something to do with it, too. Some of the dads would help Mimi with the groceries looking for her brownies.

Mimi missed those days when she had more than just three children and two grandchildren to call family. Even after John died, she still had folks nearby so it didn't feel like she was alone. Her friends from St. Phillip Street came by the new house to gamble on pitty-pat and gossip some Sundays after church. Her new extended family on Hammond Street eased the pain of losing her sweetheart with each wave and "Hey, Mrs. Sadie."

She cooked more than enough food because she never knew who might need it that day. Armed with a full plate and some sage advice for whatever bothered one of her babies. Now, with her friends and extended family scattered all over the country, her days were filled with cooking just enough for three and cussing out the family above her.

She walked out of the kitchen holding the spoon in her hand. "Jesus, Patrick."

"I knocked on the door," he said.

"I thought you were them kids playing on my door," Mimi said.

The only child she knew that never made any noise. He'd sneak up on her like one of them *Village of the Damned* children.

"You need a bell for your neck like a damn cat," she'd tell him.

His daddy used to give Patrick a swift hand to the butt, especially when she and her husband would be fooling around. Patrick just like to be with his mama. The one thing she'd hope the storm would change but didn't.

Patrick laughed as he walked up to her and kissed her on the cheek. "Stop being so mean to them children."

Mimi tried to kiss him back, but he already moved past her into the kitchen.

He lifted the lid and stuck his face close enough to almost burn his nose. "Smells good," he said. "I'm gonna get my bowl."

"Let me fix your brother's first."

"Don't take all the hot sausage for him," he said. "I like hot sausage, too."

She paid him no attention and opened the cabinet above the stove to get one of her plastic containers. She pushed Patrick to the side with the spoon and began scooping gumbo into the bowl.

"I'll go see him after I eat." Patrick walked into the living room and turned on the TV. Some golf match.

"I'll tell him you're coming."

The loud music greeted her as she opened the door.

"Jesus."

She shuffled down the concrete walkway to Junior's apartment.

"Junior, open the door," she said.

The next door neighbor with her nosey self opened her door instead. "Hey, Mrs. Sadie."

"Hey, baby," she answered and banged on Junior's door.

"I haven't seen him all day," the neighbor said.

"I just talked to him," she said to her.

"I don't think he's in there."

"He's in there," Mimi said, "and he better open this door."

Mimi wanted to tell nosey neighbor lady to mind her own business with a daughter who swung around naked on pole for a living.

Mimi couldn't judge. All God's children got to work.

Junior flung the door open. "What, Ma?"

He held the neck of a half-full Jack Daniel's bottle. He turned the bottle up for a sip and swished the liquor around his mouth.

"I brought you some gumbo." She marched into his small kitchenette and placed the container on the countertop. "Pat's down the hall. He wants to talk to you."

Junior flopped into his recliner. His salt-and-pepper beard that he used to keep trimmed grew in patches on his face. He looked a hot mess as her granddaughters would say.

She opened the cabinet under the sink to look for some bleach and a sponge. Figured she'd wipe off the caked-on food and dust in the kitchen while Junior changed his mind. To-go plates all over the place. Trash stunk up the whole house. No bleach. No surprise there. Instead, she took the small, wet, mildewed rag in the sink and poured dish detergent all over it. She was going to clean something up in here.

"Tell him I'll talk to him tomorrow." He clicked on the TV and started watching the same golf match Pat watched in her apartment. He swished Jack Daniels again.

She rubbed at dried-up ketchup, closed her eyes, and prayed. Junior suffered. More than he did the last time. His suffering had infested the apartment, too. Good thing the complex had the Orkin Man come out and spray these places often. The roaches and rats would've been sitting on the floor by Junior asking him to pass the remote.

"When's the last time you've left this house?" she asked.

"Last night," he said.

"To do what?"

"My business," he said. "I came last by Sunday."

He took another sip.

For all of five minutes to fix himself a plate and leave. She and her Junior used to sit down and talk long enough for them to eat, let the food settle, and go back for seconds. They talked about everything. Including the addiction. Junior told Mimi stories that tore her heart, but she listened anyway.

When he talked about his daughter, and he could talk a hole in her head about Katrina, she heard her son at his best. Fatherhood saved him. He worked hard at it, and he did good work.

Junior asked Mimi every single question that popped into his brain when it came to raising Katrina.

"Ma, pink or purple?"

"Ma, Tylenol or Ibuprofen?"

"Ma, which preschool should Katrina go to?"

"Ma, which ones work best: Always or Kotex?"

"Ma, stick-shift or automatic?"

Mimi needed to speak to that Junior. This one turned the bottle up and took another sip.

She finished wiping the last of the nastiness off the countertop and rinsed out the dishrag in the sink. Mimi moved over to the open trash bag leaning against the full trash can.

"This is just ridiculous," she whispered to herself as she began to gather the plastic bag in her hands.

The Devil was a got-damn liar.

She checked her hands for prick marks. None, good. The open needle told her everything. It was a liar, too. Not after all this time. She looked at the back of Junior's head and shoulders. He turned up the bottle once more.

"Would you stop in there?" he asked from the living room.

The needle stared back at her from the top of that trash bag. Asked her how she'd let this happen. It mocked her. Dared her to say something to Junior this time.

Sadie Pichon Hampton, before she became Mimi, stayed home for hurricanes. Camille, Betsy, even Andrew. Her husband didn't leave, and she didn't leave him. John had died right before Georges, and she spent Ivan sitting in Patrick's truck for twenty-four hours for nothing. No way she was about to do that again.

Leaving felt like running to her, and the wind and water were not good enough reasons. Her home, her family, her whole life was in the city. Why run from that? Sadie had listened to the news on the radio when Camille hit. Happy when she heard that it mostly spared New Orleans. Poor Mississippi and Florida could never catch a break during hurricane season.

Betsy, for her and the kids, had occurred outside of a fourth-floor window of the Desire Projects. Only time she and John spent a hurricane apart. Her sister-in-law, Jeannie, had told her it was the safest place in the city. John made her and the kids go while he boarded up their house on St. Phillip Street and waited with his shotgun for looters. Grace didn't care; she was just happy to be out of school. Patrick always had to be around his mama. Junior, even as a child, wanted to show his father just how much of a man he could be.

"I don't wanna go to Auntie Jeannie's," Johnny Jr. whined. "It smells like pee over there."

"Go pack your goddamn bag," John screamed. "I don't wanna hear another word about it."

"This is bullshit," Junior said as he turned to go to his room.

"What in the hell did you just say?" John began to unfasten his belt.

"Don't," Sadie said, "he's scared. You're not making it no better by yelling at him."

"He's not staying here with me." He gave Sadie his I'm-the-man look.

"I know that, fool," Sadie said. "Go talk to him. Tell him you need him to be the man over at Jeannie's."

After the worst of Betsy passed over the projects, Sadie watched Jeannie's neighbors as they looted the empty units. She watched them carry out clothes and linens. Whatever they could fit in their hands or on their backs. They robbed the same people they had sat on the porch with just days before. A pack of creative negroes put together a raft out of broken front doors floating in the water and filled it with other people's things. A woman with a Virginia Slim cigarette hanging from her mouth stretched herself out on the raft. She'd drag on her cigarette and wave like a beauty queen.

Jeannie stood next to Sadie by the window. "There goes the Queen of the Nile," Jeannie said like this happened everyday.

Sadie ran from this hurricane. This hurricane named for her Kit-Kat. Patrick didn't play that staying mess with her. Junior stayed at the house with his rifle. Stubborn like his paw. Pleas from the family fell on Junior's deaf ears. Patrick and Junior got into it something horrible that day they all left.

"This ain't fucking St. Phillip," Patrick screamed.

"I'll be damned if the niggas come up in this fucking house," Junior yelled. "Flood or no goddamn flood."

Sadie should've pulled his own gun on him; even though, she hated the very idea of those things. Could've used it to put the fear of God into Junior that day. Made him leave with her.

"Leave him be, Patrick," she said instead, "he'll be all right."

The days after Hurricane Katrina, Sadie ate fast food even though the hotel had a small kitchen in the lobby. She watched Lifetime movies with the phone resting in her lap. Everyone, except for Katrina, tried to get her to leave the room.

"What if he calls today?"

"Mama," Patrick said, "he's not gonna call the hotel. He'll call my cell first."

"Give me your cell phone," she said and that was that.

Junior finally called. Patrick's cell phone vibrated on the table next to Sadie. She picked it up without even looking at the number. After Junior assured his mother he was alive and on his way to Baton Rouge, she thanked the Lord. Then Sadie Pichon Hampton unleashed a barrage of cuss words on her son.

Katrina and Sienna must've heard Mimi scream through the walls and ran through the doors connecting their rooms. Mimi never really cussed, not as long as Sienna or Katrina had been alive. Maybe damn it or ass, but those weren't real cuss words anyway. Sadie called her son every mother-fucker she thought of, and he deserved every last one of them.

"You're gonna wish that storm had killed your ass after I'm through with you, mother-fucker," she said. "Don't you ever do that shit ever again. You hear me, mother-fucker?"

"Mimi?" Poor Kit-Kat looked like she'd jump out of the window if that wasn't her dad on the phone.

"Your daddy is fine," Mimi said towards her granddaughter. "He's on his way here."

Sadie returned to her conversation with Junior. "Bring your ass to Baton Rouge right now. You hear me, mother-fucker?"

Sadie knew what death smelled like. She even knew what dying smelled like because of John. Junior smelled so much worse than that.

"Leave him be." She heard her own voice in her head as she looked at the man who resembled her son.

"He'll be all right."

Mimi picked up her bucket of cleaning supplies and opened the door to Junior's apartment. The apartment complex buzzed with Saturday night. Some fast-ass girls stumbled around wearing these short-ass skirts. Like they had cut the sleeves off their T-shirts and wrapped them around their hips. Music blasted from various apartments in some kind of rap harmony between someone who called himself Weezy and someone else called Jigga.

She should've stayed inside her own apartment, minded her own business, but she had to clean his place up. The entire family took the drive to Denham Springs to bring Junior to the rehab place this past Thursday morning. A spa resort celebrities checked into instead of going to jail. Patrick didn't need to spend that kind of money. She knew he didn't have the kind of money he used to, but she sensed Pat needed to give Junior the biggest and best care possible. It wasn't Pat's fault.

The last thing she wanted her girls, especially Katrina, to see was just how bad Junior had become. Mimi waited until they left early this morning for Houston.

Fresh house for a fresh start.

Mimi surveyed Junior's living room. She'd need two days to rid the place of this level of filth. Reaching into her bucket, she pulled out two pairs of thick, cleaning gloves. It wouldn't totally defend her from stray needles, but it was something. She pulled out the bleach and

walked into the kitchen. Had a mind to open the bottle and pour bleach onto the floor, on top of the counters, even on the walls and doors.

She needed a mop, broom, and a vacuum. She opened and slammed the pantry door. Why did she even bother? She grabbed her keys and went outside. She walked down the hallway, trying to tune out the craziness, and noticed a pickup truck blocking the entrance into the parking lot.

"Why do they have to block the walkway?" she asked. "What happens if there's a fire?"

She began to march over there but stopped when she noticed air mattresses and suitcases in the back of the truck. She saw two little boys wearing Transformers book-bags and sleepy-faces. A woman Mimi assumed was the mother pushed the two boys up their stairs. Poor thing looked over her shoulder as she dragged a worn-out suitcase.

Mimi had jumped for joy when she saw the bad-ass children and loud mama moving out of the upstairs apartment yesterday morning. She'd get some peace and quiet during the week; even though, with Junior away in rehab and Patrick re-opening his business, she had no idea what she'd do with it. Mimi picked up the rest of what she needed to clean Junior's mess out of her apartment and almost ran over the woman who flew down the stairs.

"Oh, ma'am," the woman said, "I didn't even see you."

"Don't worry yourself," Mimi said, "but you should slow down, baby."

The woman exhaled loudly. "I gotta get settled first."

"Need help?"

"No."

Well all right, then.

The woman gave Mimi the kind of smile people gave elderly people when they didn't want to be bothered without being rude. She turned her head towards the truck. Moving in the middle of the night, air mattresses and thrown-together suitcases, babies in their pajamas. Why didn't Mimi put two and two together sooner? A bruise—red blotch with defined fingers—stamped on the woman's throat. Mimi kept herself from reaching out to touch the woman's shoulder. Let her cry it out.

Mimi extended her hand. "I'm Mrs. Sadie," she said.

"Sabrina." She kept her arms tightly folded against her chest.

"I make dinner on Sundays." Mimi retreated her hand. "Why don't you and your boys come by and get a plate?"

"No, but thank you," Sabrina said and looked at the truck again.

Mimi, fighting the pushy-mother urge she felt in her gut, nodded her head. She'd leave a big container of whatever she cooked tomorrow at Sabrina's doorstep.

"I've got to start cleaning my son's apartment down the hall," Mimi said. "It's just a mess. Nice to meet you."

"Kinda late to be cleaning," Sabrina said and looked around. "On a Saturday night?"

"What else am I gonna do while he's away?"

Sabrina glanced at her truck again.

Mimi tensed up. "He's on a work assignment," Mimi said. "He'll be back in about a month."

She wasn't ready for strangers to know her failure. All too willing to look after someone else's child when she gave up on looking after her own son.

"I have to get back to unpacking," Sabrina said.

"Sunday dinner invitation still stands," Mimi said. "I can even make something special for the kids. Chicken nuggets? Kids like chicken nuggets."

"We'll see," Sabrina said.

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow."

Sabrina gave Mimi another fake smile and walked off towards the truck.

"It's gonna be all right," Mimi said.

Sabrina whirled around showing the red rings imprinted on her wrists.

"Whatever it is," Mimi said, "it's gonna be all right."

Mimi picked up the mop and broom and started down the hallway back to Junior's apartment.

All of it had to be all right sooner rather than later.

Right?

BARGAINING

Models

James Sheldon was smarter than most people. They didn't use their brains like he did. Evident as he sat in the staff meeting Friday morning. His supervisor, Dale, started these Friday morning meetings about three months ago. The junior and senior architects of Power Design got together at the ass-crack of the morning to share ideas, project updates, and get new design assignments.

What loser thought 8:00 on a Friday was a good idea? His boss back in New Orleans hadn't bothered coming into the office on Fridays. James drew concentric circles on his notepad as Dale rambled on.

"We've been contracted by the Verona Group to design their Galleria of the Woodlands," Dale said.

James continued with his circles. He had heard whispers of the firm beating out everyone else in Houston for this design. The Galleria of the Woodlands was a twenty-five story high-rise building that would span a twenty-acre lot. A high-end mall housed within the first five floors, office space for the next ten floors and then penthouse-style condos for the rest of the building.

He had waited his career for this. The Galleria of the Woodlands was the project he'd put on his resume and walk right into a job with Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill. New York. Where he would've been if not for Jamal and that damn hurricane. Jamal's job relocated him here, and their mother would've cursed James if he left Jamal in Houston alone. His twin brother aggravated the hell out of him, but he was James' only friend. Jamal had taken James out of

Kingston, the whole of Jamaica, and most importantly out of the hotel industry. James applied to LSU because Jamal convinced him to. Baton Rouge of all places.

"Since this is such a huge project for the firm," Dale said, "I'm not going to assign it to only one person."

James's finger shot up in the air as he looked around the room at the others. They all wore the same what-the-hell face.

"Before you all bite my head off," Dale said, "I'm going to split the design between the senior architects. Each of you will get a different section of the building. Use the junior architects assigned to you to help. The Verona Group will choose the lead architect and team based upon the designs submitted."

This had to be the dumbest shit ever. Only two other senior architects besides himself at the firm, and their faces thought the same thing. This hipster-looking guy, Seth. Twenty-six year old whiz kid with black, square-rimmed glasses. The nerd that still got ass from hot chicks. Not the most precise person in the world, but James knew that Seth would put in the hours to get it right. Seth was the son of the CEO, so it was no surprise that he had been promoted from junior to senior architect faster than anyone else.

The other was this girl named Heather who seemed way too chipper for eight o'clock meetings. The kind that would flip out if the coffee wasn't fresh. James had seen it first hand. Fucking hilarious. She impressed James because her ideas mirrored his. He would've told her so, but he didn't waste compliments.

The rest couldn't spell CAD without help. James had to help these lost souls called junior architects with their design projects because of his job description. Some each-one-teach-one bullshit. He definitely wasn't looking forward to holding their hands.

"James," Dale said.

"Why can't it be just one of us?"

The entire room except for Dale groaned.

"Don't act like you weren't thinking it," James said.

Dale rolled his eyes slightly. James didn't give a shit. At thirty-three, he was older than all of them, except Dale. He and Dale were the same age, and this *mascot* was his boss. James didn't care for any of them, so whether or not they liked him was inconsequential. He didn't need or want to get drinks with any of them after work. He had his brother for that. He didn't want to sleep with any of the women he worked with. He had the Sky Bar for that.

"After the meeting, James," Dale said. "I want to get the rest of the assignments out to the team."

"Fine." James drew circles on his notepad again.

Dale babbled on with the junior architects about the importance of timeliness with their designs.

"You're never the only one a client is talking to," Dale said, "and especially when you don't deliver on time. You can lose a project in an instant."

James had learned that lesson the hard way. In New Orleans, there was no company policy to help him as an architect straight out of college. He figured he had landed the job because of some unspoken diversity quota the firm had to fill. Black was still black regardless of the accent.

"It's never about how you get the job," his mother had said. "It's what you do with it that matters."

James had kept his head down during his first few months and soaked up all the knowledge he could from the older ones. He asked a lot of dumb questions back then.

When his supervisor discovered James was more than an affirmative-action hire, James received invitations to client dinners. James knew he possessed the talent for design and the ambition that bordered on obsession. Senior architects must've agreed with James, and he became their go-to assistant for the firm's bigger projects. He was due for a promotion. He was due for a pay raise.

"Sounds like you're due for a fuck up," Jamal had told him.

Hater.

The next week, James was a couple of days late with a sketch for an elementary school he worked on for the lead architect, and they almost lost the project. The invitations and requests ceased, and James put his head down again.

"All right, people," Dale said to end one part of this marathon meeting, "email me your progress reports by the end of the day."

James, Heather, and Seth remained in their seats as the juniors filed out of the room. Two of the females turned to Seth as they walked out.

"We're rooting for you," one of them said to him. Seth smiled.

"Be careful, dude," James whispered. "They want to screw you for your money."

"Must you be such a prick," Heather said.

"Thank you," James said.

"Whatever," she said.

Seth grinned at James. "They don't want to sleep with me."

James laughed loudly. "You already bagged one of them. Which one?"

"C'mon, Mr. James," Seth responded.

"Mister" shut James up. Nothing like working with college grads to make you feel younger until someone reminded you that you are not. Not that thirty-three was old, just much older than James dealt with on a daily basis. Much older than the women he slept with. Women his age looked for commitment in a one-night stand. James Sheldon didn't do commitment. The chicks who made it past a month got the boot the minute they complained that he loved his work more than them.

"Who said I loved you?" He asked right before he sent these women on their way.

Settling down was something he'd do later after he designed the latest world's tallest building. Maybe.

"Seth, you design the mall," Dale said. "Heather, you do the office floors. James, the residences."

"I'm supposed to design a part of a building without considering the entire structure?" Heather asked.

Exactly. This design contest sounded complicated for no reason. Competition brought out the best in most people, and the firm needed the absolute best for the Verona Group. He got that. Still, why break the design into parts? James envisioned the massive building when he first heard the rumors two weeks ago, and he knew the others did the same.

"Seriously," James said, "why can't each of us just submit a design for the entire building?"

"The CEO wants it this way," Dale said.

Heather turned to Seth. "You can't talk to him?"

"It won't change anything," Seth said.

"You could at least try, right?" she shot back.

"I promise you," Seth said, "if I thought I could change his mind about anything, I'd send him an email right now."

"Why don't you try anyway?"

James watched the back and forth, and he would've jumped into the middle of it. Add whatever pressure he could to get the kid to talk to his father. James knew all about that kind of father-son dynamic. James Sheldon, Sr. James was sure God had lost his patience with his father at some point. James stopped trying to reason with the man a long time ago.

"Let it go, Heather," James said. "I've got an idea."

"Like what?" she asked and pursed her lips. She looked like a fish but not one of the pretty ones rich men kept in their fish tanks. This chick needed some dick.

"We have some time to design our respective parts," James said. "So once we get out initial sketches down, let's set a date to present our initial sketches to each other."

Dale coughed as he took a sip of water. "That sounds like teamwork, James."

"I still understand the concept," James said. "We can't make fools of ourselves in front of the Verona Group. I still think it's the most back-asswards way to design a building, but the boss wants it done that way."

"Back-asswards?" Heather asked with her fishy attitude. "Must you be so country?"

"I had this professor at LSU that tore up all of my initial designs," James said. "He'd always say, 'Stop showing me that back-asswards shit and come back when you start drawing buildings instead of doghouses.' Pushed me to do better. He died right after I graduated."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Heather said.

"No worries," James said. That same professor was alive, well, and still tearing up students' work. The broad needed her ego deflated.

"Doesn't that open us up for someone to steal ideas?" Seth asked.

"We're not designing the same thing," James said. "These are just initial sketches, anyway."

"Besides," Dale said, "we're all on the honor system, here."

Such a *mascot*. This wasn't final exams. Stealing designs from other architects was beneath him. James was too good at what he did, but there was nothing wrong with getting glimpses into the minds of his opponents. James had decided long before this meeting that if Power Design got the contract, the Galleria of the Woodlands design was his. All of it.

"Hey, kid," James said, "at the point I'm willing to show my own sketches, you already know it's not about to go down like that."

Heather shrugged her shoulders. "All right, fine. Whatever."

Dale looked at Seth.

"I'm in," Seth said. "Let's get started."

"Great work, guys," Dale said. "Send me your initial ideas, before you start sketching, by next Friday. I'll get with you that afternoon to discuss them."

Why did they have to have meet for every thing? Fridays were for happy hour. Networking clients and finding the next woman to bring home.

After the meeting, which lasted yet another twenty minutes because of Dale's long-winded ass, James opened up his AutoCAD and pulled up a design he had been working on for the last two weeks. A summer home for an investment banker he met at an Urban League mixer last month. The CEO himself had told the entire team that they should start bringing in their

own clients, and networking was James' forte. James preferred skyscrapers to houses, but houses had been his claim to fame. This investment banker was friends with the mayor. The rumor around the city was the mayor wanted to move his office into a new, not-designed-yet building at some point before he term was over.

The house looked like the ones back in Kingston reserved for rich people. More bedrooms and bathrooms than necessary. Verandas and pillars and gold-plated toilets. The enormous palaces, empty behind iron gates, teased a have-not like James' father who still worked as a gardener. Maybe why James liked designing landscapes best. Something he and his dad could talk about.

His father wanted his sons to be engineers or doctors. The only two professions worth anything.

"You want to draw houses for a living?" his father had asked him in that condescending voice thick with Jamaica pride. "You can't be an engineer like Jamal?"

It never mattered that James made just as much as his brother and sent the same money home to take care of their parents. James was his father's other son.

James had to finish this house today. A mall-office-penthouse waited for him, and since this was the last house he'd design, this had to be his best.

Winding staircases. Built-in bookshelves for the banker's wife. A game-room with a wall-to-wall entertainment center. The master bedroom suite boasted double-vaulted ceilings. Directly above the bed, the ceiling dropped into an inverted-staggered pyramid. An upside-down Teotihuacán with four levels. The banker's wife told James to make the bedroom "an altar of love." Her words.

James lined the back wall of the bedroom with windows. French doors opened onto a wrap-around veranda. He decided against the usual wall of windows for the front portion of the house. Most people wanted to show off their formal living rooms, but not this client. The banker stressed the need for privacy. Why get this kind of house in the first place?

"Look at me," this house said. "I cost more than your life."

The only thing James had in common with his brother was their mother's womb. He didn't feel like going to the Sky Bar tonight; he had to work this weekend.

"Stop working and bring your ass," Jamal said over the phone.

He emailed his investment banker client to set up a Monday meeting. He finished the house, but he knew the banker's wife would have a list of changes for him. James shut down his computer.

The two for one Hennessey specials called him. At eight o'clock, James threw up a peace sign to the bouncer and walked inside the club.

The Sky Bar, encased in glass, afforded the best view of Houston's lights. Made James feel as if he moved here last August for better reasons. Tables and chairs surrounded a small dance floor, and a square stage presided over it all.

No matter where you were in the place—hugging one of the bars, conversing outside on the patio, or in the back watching ESPN—at eleven, you were on the dance floor waiting for the band. A damn good cover band. Played all those old school songs James used to get women to stay the night. Earth, Wind and Fire, Heatwave, and the panty-droppers Marvin Gaye and Rick James. "Fire and Desire." The true test of a woman. If she twisted up her face like she had no clue, she was too young to make it to the bedroom.

“If This World Were Mine.” When James heard the beginning notes, he looked around the place for her. The one with the short hair and those dark, dark eyes. She danced with herself, drank white wine, and wore her attitude. The last thing he'd ever take off a woman. He liked watching her dance, though. If there was any truth to what people said about dancing and fucking, this chick could do some damage with those hips. Name started with a K, but he could never remember it. She and her best friend. They both turned heads in that place.

The band with a lead singer that looked like Lou Fegredo's stunt double was the main reason James hung out at the Sky Bar more than any other place in Houston. He missed live music. Granted not the same as the New Orleans jazz he craved, but it worked.

Jamal sat at their usual table in the back of the place. ESPN Classic replayed the 2003 Sugar Bowl. Guys cheered as if they didn't know that LSU won years ago. Didn't matter. Tonight, the TV showed something about Louisiana that didn't mention the hurricane, the Superdome, FEMA, or Ray Nagin and his Chocolate City.

Tony, the bartender, nodded hello and put a glass on the bar. Hennessey and Coke.

“My man.” James grabbed the glass and sipped.

Tony pointed in the direction of Jamal. “Look at ya boy.”

Sure enough, he brother was buying rounds of rum punches and telling jokes to a harem way too dressed up to say they just got off of work. Then again, James was the only one who stayed at his job well past quitting time on a Friday.

Jamal raised his arms in the air as if an imaginary field-goal was good. “There goes me *Dan Dadda*,” he said. The broads swooned over his accent.

James shook his head and sat down. He contemplated going along with Jamal's dick-swinging routine. As lovely as they looked and as sweet as they smelled, most women overstayed their welcome by the time the sun rose.

He looked up at the TV. Game was over and Nick Saban hoisted the Coaches' Trophy as purple and gold confetti floated in the air around the team.

"Wad up rude buoy?"

James couldn't help himself. Work would wake him up bright and early the next morning anyway.

The chick he sat next to turned around. She had some nice features underneath all that junk piled on her face. Her jaw-line blended into her neck seamlessly, and the spot where they met looked good enough to kiss. Although she looked no older than twenty-three, laugh lines creased around her eyes when she smiled.

"What do you do?" she asked. She sounded like Eartha Kitt in *Boomerang*, but chick had nothing on Eartha Kitt. By far.

"I'm James," he said.

"I'm..."

James swore she had called herself Random Chick. She stuck her hand out for him to kiss before he could ask for clarification, so Random Chick she was. She had nice tits. Her bra peeked at James from her tight, button-down shirt. Made her tits look bigger than they were. Her pushing them into his face made them look bigger, too. Not that he cared.

"What's your name, again?" he asked. He just couldn't call her Random Chick to her face.

"Tina."

James bent his head down and kissed her hand. Gave him the chance to look at her ankles. James Sheldon didn't do cancles.

"What do you do, again?" Tina asked him as she turned her body towards him. She uncrossed her legs. Tight, black, satin skirt. No panties. Bald *pum-pum*. Not really James' thing, but he definitely preferred that to the bushes some women carried around. She crossed her legs again.

"I'm an architect with Power Design," he said.

"What kind of car do you drive?" she asked and finished the last of her drink.

"A two-seater BMW," he said.

He drove a Land Rover SUV, but she'd never sit in it to know the difference. If she asked where he lived, he'd leave her ass right there. She sounded like the broad that got fucked in the bathroom. Cost him a round of drinks at the most.

Instead, James shifted his chair closer to her and cupped a hand around her ear. His lips slightly touched her earlobe.

"I'm going to get another drink," James whispered. "You want something?"

She almost dropped the glass she held in her other hand. "Amaretto Sour," she said.

James snickered as he walked up to the bar.

"Up to your old tricks, too," Tony said.

"Give me another one and an Amaretto Sour for her," he said. "She won't even make it to the house."

"Must be nice," Tony said and placed the two drinks on the bar.

"You could get whatever piece you wanted in here," James said. "Women love good-looking bartenders."

"I had my pick," Tony said.

James looked down at Tony's wedding band. He had forgotten dude was married.

"Got you a good one?" James asked.

"I didn't meet her here." Tony poured white wine into glass.

"Ha, true," James said. He grabbed the drinks off the bar and started to walk back to the table.

He hoped the wine was for the chick with the short black hair, nice hips and pretty teeth. She had a genuine smile. Not the will-fuck-for-Prada smile James had seen enough of. James turned around to see some dude grab the drink.

"I thought you left me," Tina said while she stared at him.

Cartoon dollar signs must've floated around his head.

"Never that," he said as he sat down. He leaned over towards her and slid his finger from her knee down her calf and then back up towards the inside of her thigh. "Let's go."

"I just got my drink," she said and licked the rim of the glass with the tip of her tongue.

"Get a to-go cup," James said. He felt himself getting hard and didn't want that on display.

"What's a to-go cup?"

James opened and then closed his mouth.

"Finish the drink and meet me in the men's room," he said.

"What's in it for me?" she asked.

"You'll see." He stood up from the table.

Jamal looked at him, and James gave his brother a quick nod. Jamal shook his head and threw up the peace sign.

James stood at a urinal when he heard high-heels clicking on the floor behind him. Without a spoken word, he zipped his pants and followed her into the last stall of the empty bathroom.

He started at her chin and slid his fingers down her neck. Slowly. Making sure he felt her pulse through his fingertips. He reached the dent her neck made with her collarbone, licked his finger, and drew wet circles in that space. She laughed as she unzipped his navy-blue suit pants. With his free hand, he guided her hands towards his belt buckle.

"Keep your pants on," she said as she reached inside his open fly for what she wanted.

She loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top buttons to reveal sections of his skin not covered by his wife-beater. With her tongue, she traveled up the side of his neck to his earlobe. Hit all the nerves necessary to make him weak.

"Not as short as I thought you were," he said as he noticed she didn't have to elevate herself to reach his mouth.

She smiled at him, slightly parting her lips as if opening them fully would allow lust to drip out of her mouth. Like honey sliding down her chin into her breasts. She released him and turned around. He stroked the inside of her thighs until he felt her wet between his fingers. He backed away to take in the entire sight of her. Satin skirt tight around her hips, white button-down shirt stretched across her back, and black pumps. Heels made her calves look good enough to lick.

With his suit pants and shirt still on, tie undone around his neck, he spun her around, spread her legs and pressed her up against the wall. He traced a finger up and down her second set of lips, stopping to pay respects to her clit. Her moans sounded like the ancient Sirens.

Come inside.

Didn't have to tell him twice. He lifted her up. Her black shoes dangled in the air. She reached over to the purse she had placed on the tank of the toilet and pulled out a condom.

"You've done this before," he whispered into the crease her cheekbone made with her neck.

"You'll see," she said.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and squeezed her thighs as he rolled the condom on.

He slipped inside of her. So wet and so warm.

James stretched out his neck. The pain he felt from keeping his head down for two hours told him it was time for a break. He had been working on the mall section of the Galleria of the Woodlands all week at home, and he needed to get to the rest of the building. At the very least, he had to finish the part he had been assigned. The meeting to show their initial sketches to each other was this Monday. Eyes beyond bloodshot, James might have slept for a total of fifteen hours the entire week. Maybe. So worth it. He was on some Dubai-type shit here.

"*My yute*," Jamal said as he opened the door to their apartment, "Friday night. You know what that means?"

James stayed away from the Sky Bar after he left Tina in the bathroom two weeks ago. Not that he cared if he ran into her again, but he needed to work.

"Nah, kid," James responded, "not tonight."

"You say that every week." Jamal dropped his messenger bag on the sofa.

"You gotta leave ya shit everywhere?"

"Can I get in the fucking house good enough?" Jamal grabbed his bag, walked to his side of the apartment, and threw the bag at his bedroom door.

"Worse than a fucking woman," Jamal said and turned into the kitchen.

"I made ox tails," James said. His brother was so damn messy.

"Smells almost as good as Mummy's," Jamal said as he opened the lid of the pot. Jamal heaped a portion onto a plate. Meat and rice inundated with gravy. Jamal sat down at the table across from James and scooped a fork-full of rice into his mouth. "Taste almost like Mummy's. Needs more salt."

"You just need to feel your pressure go up every time you eat." He watched Jamal shake salt onto the food for what seemed like an entire minute.

"*Naa badda mi*," Jamal said and stuffed an ox-tail into his mouth.

James listened to his brother eat. Smacking and licking his lips. Guess the food was good.

James didn't eat too much of the stuff from back home anymore. Not since he lost all his weight playing pick-up basketball games at LSU. He still cooked it to keep Jamal from eating crawfish etouffée and only crawfish etouffée. James chose to fix himself a salad with ox-tails on top. All that rice made him feel heavy. Slowed him down.

"Sky Bar tonight?" Jamal asked.

"I told you," James said, "not in the mood tonight." He rolled up his vellum paper to keep Jamal from slopping ox-tail all over his plans.

"C'mon," Jamal said in between sucking a bone, "I've had a rough week. I could use at least one drink tonight."

"It's never one drink with you."

"Ducking that broad, huh?" Jamal asked. "Tina."

"You know better than that," James said. "Wipe your mouth."

"Then what is it?" Jamal rubbed his thumb across the side of his mouth and licked the gravy it carried.

"I've got work to do," James said. "I'm not in the mood for the foolishness, either. You've bought one rum punch, you've bought a thousand."

"You work too much." James used a piece of sliced bread to soak the last of the gravy off the plate and stuffed it into his mouth. "This some good shit."

James smiled. Felt like his mother was standing over his shoulder.

"Make me proud," she'd tell him.

He stared at Jamal savoring the last of his dinner. Jamal lived loud. Have you ever heard anyone walk hard on carpet? Jamal. Not because Jamal was some humongous person, Jamal just lived loud. James knew he could no more work with Jamal in the house than going to the Sky Bar.

"Just one drink," James said.

"Put some jeans on this time," Jamal said. "Suit pants make you look like you got money."

"We do have money, Mr. Engineer," James said.

"Doesn't mean you wear it on your belt." Jamal rinsed his plate in the sink. "Maybe the reason why broads think you'll buy them a Gucci bag is because you're sporting the Gucci belt and cuff-links. Ever thought about that?"

"I work for my Gucci."

"They'll work you for theirs."

James packed his drafting tools in his Gucci computer bag. "One drink, all right?"

"Just go get dressed," Jamal said.

In his room, James scanned his closet for jeans. Way in the back. He felt more comfortable sporting suit pants against his boxer-briefs. Jeans held his nuts captive, no matter how loose they fit. They fit, though. His parents would whip his grown-ass today if they ever saw him with his pants hanging off his backside.

He'd humor Jamal for tonight. He pulled out a dark-blue pair. James grabbed his white, purple-label, Ralph Lauren shirt. Felt like 1,000-thread count sheets against his skin. He worked hard for what he had. Hoes or no hoes.

Got damn two-for-one Hennessy drink specials. Already four drinks in, and James held his mouth to keep the liquor from flying out. Jamal ragged on everyone unfortunate enough to walk past their table.

"*Look pon di gyal dem,*" Jamal said as he pointed his drink in the direction of a group of girls standing at the bar. "A whole herd of horses are missing their tails today." He whinnied, and one of the girls turned around.

James couldn't hold it in and cracked up in his seat. "I can't take it."

No bevy of beauties surrounded them this time. Good. It felt good to be out with his brother. Tonight, they were the twins. Different faces. Same energy. It had been awhile.

"Hey," Jamal said, "isn't that the chick with the short hair you're always staring at?"

James looked to the side of the horse-hair crew and noticed the pair of girls sitting at one of the high-boy tables. Cosmopolitan in front of the one who faced him and a glass of white wine for the one who had her back to him. He saw her butt spilling over the small bar-stool. That could be her. He saw her neck swivel.

"That's her," James said. "Could tell that attitude from a mile away."

She wore short-shorts and high heels. Her skin taking on the reddish-tint of the patio lights. A silver anklet rested in the Achilles' heel of one of her ankles. A dark mark on that same ankle captured his attention, and he twisted his head to get a better line of sight of it. A tattoo.

"Of course she does," he said.

"Of course she does what?" Jamal asked.

"Nothing, kid," James said. He had to know what she inked on her ankle. "I'll be right back."

"I thought that you were trying to avoid broads tonight," Jamal said.

"I am trying to avoid broads tonight."

James grabbed his empty glass and walked to the bar. Tony put another glass on the bar as soon as James walked up and poured Hennessy into it.

"Get me a glass of wine she's drinking."

"Do you want me to send it to her?"

"Not necessary." James smiled.

Tony laughed as he finished the glass of wine for James. James picked it up off the bar and turned towards her table. She, however, walked right passed him with her friend. He heard the sound of an electric guitar tuning up. Must be eleven. Time for the band. He walked into the main room and found Jamal standing next to one of the tables off to the side of the stage.

"Who the wine for?" Jamal asked.

"For her," James said and looked across the room. "She came in here before I could even give it to her. Too quick."

"You are old," Jamal said, "and compared to her, you move like a grandpa."

"Then what does that make you?" James asked.

"Not the dude with the glass of wine in his hand waiting for some chick to notice him."

James stopped paying attention to Jamal. The band started off the set with some 90's song. "Rub You the Right Way."

Groups of girlfriends shook their asses while the men, who formed a sports-coat-and-jean wall around the dance floor, took in the single sights in front of them. Bobbing their heads to the music, but not too much.

"You know what I like about this place?" Jamal asked. "Everyone is here just to have a good time. No worrying about fights, or shooting, or any of that other shit."

"That's because we're in the nicer part of Houston," James said.

"Doesn't matter," Jamal said. "It's still a lot of us in here."

Not this discussion again. Although, he had to admit it, James has not witnessed one fight. Even on hip-hop night. A welcome change from the clubs in Jamaica and even some in New Orleans. That didn't mean he wanted to talk about it right now.

"Yeah, kid," James said, "so true."

Lou Farengo's stunt double finished another dance hit and sat down on his stool. One of the female background singers came to the front and was greeted by applause. This chick could blow.

Guitar player began stroking those an all-to-familiar first notes. The conga intro beat. "Pap. Bada pap pap pap." The bass guitar enchanted the crowd with that hazy bass line. The crowd slowed down and swayed. Even the wall of dudes. No one's too cool for this song.

"Stir it up," the singer began. "Little darlin' stir it up."

"Respect," Jamal said and put his hand on his chest as he danced with himself.

"*Baba Marley, Yah mon.*" James' favorite song from the great. Homegirl on stage did it justice.

He left both drinks on the table and walked towards the other side of the room. She danced with her eyes closed. He touched her hand just as she was about to lift in the air.

"C'mon," he said to her.

She pulled her hand away. "Umm, I don't want to dance."

He figured as much, but at least she didn't start twisting her neck. "Sure?"

"I'm good," she said. "I'm just here with my best friend, and we're..."

The best friend was on James' side. The best friend pushed homegirl into James' arms. The best friend raised the cosmopolitan glass to give her blessing.

"Don't get all up on my booty," she said. "I hate it when men do that."

"Men don't do that." James responded. "Boys do." He grabbed her hand and passed through the wall of gawkers to the dance floor. Couples moved in unison, and you knew some of them were going home to practice making babies.

"Quench me when I'm thirsty," the girl on stage sang. "C'mon cool me down baby when I'm hot."

She turned her back to him, but he spun her back around. He wanted to dance with her.

"Tell me your name," he said.

"Katrina," she said.

He had such a great conversation with her. Finally, a night without the foolishness. He didn't really want to bring Katrina home that night. He wanted to save her for later. She insisted, and he never denied a woman sex.

Katrina did this swivel thing with her hips later on that night. She looked like a cowgirl listening to reggae music. She put her hands in her hair and leaned back while she rode him. Grinding and winding her hips like a native.

He woke up in the middle of the night and reached over to her side of his bed. Nothing. No kiss on the cheek. No phone number written down on slip of paper on his nightstand. A first time for everything.

He rolled over and fell back asleep. Like a really good wet dream.

Work would be there for him in the morning.

New Houston

Sienna Bates found peace in the HEB grocery store on Sunday afternoons. She had to leave Wal-Mart alone. Club New Orleans. Sienna got so tired of running into people from home. New Orleans, rather. Evacuation stories. “How many feet of water did you get?” Grated her nerves. Avoiding people from New Orleans altogether became the better alternative to cussing folks out because they asked the wrong question on the wrong day.

Sienna insisted on shopping alone. She’d walk up and down each aisle, sometimes twice if she felt like it. Katrina never objected, gave Sienna some money, and spent Sundays falling in and out of sleep on the sofa. The only rest Katrina got all week.

Sunday cooking time had always been their catch-up time with each other. A standing appointment Sienna worked hard to keep with her best friend. Back in New Orleans, Katrina cooked while Sienna talked. Now, Katrina complained while Sienna cooked. Those few precious times Katrina didn't tire herself with life-sucks talk, they'd have a conversation that reminded Sienna of better days. One that started with the latest family gossip and ended in a debate on the meaning of life or love. Usually love. Today should be one of those days. Sienna didn't feel like hearing Katrina's whining anymore this week after lunch at Boudreaux's. Katrina got drunk and threatened to leave Houston for the thousandth time.

She loved Katrina. Katrina never judged Sienna for the type A+ ways. Katrina was Sienna's best dinner date. Katrina gave the best hugs. These days, loving Katrina required more counseling and less friendship. Sienna never felt like playing therapist. Definitely not on a Sunday.

During the week, Sienna looked up recipes for dishes like Baked Alaska and Beef Wellington. Her copy of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*--grease stains, dog-eared pages, and margin notes--sat on top of the Bible on her nightstand. She finalized grocery lists days before she went to HEB.

She pulled out the list from her purse as she walked through the parking lot--Chicken Fricassee with a white-wine cream sauce. Inside, she noticed the catfish fillets as she whisked passed the seafood case. Fried catfish. She turned around. Chicken Fricassee had to wait until next Sunday.

"Hey, Antonio," Sienna said to the man behind the counter.

"*Hola, guapa,*" he said, "cooking today?"

"Fried catfish and potato salad," she said.

"*Delicioso.*" Antonio slid open the door to the case and pulled on a plastic glove.

"Four, please."

"*Cuatro, por favor,*" Antonio said.

"*Cuatro, por favor,*" she repeated. Antonio has tried to teach her Spanish since she started coming on Sundays. He'd say things like *linda* and *guapa* to her, and she never paid any attention to him until she asked one of her co-workers for a translation. Antonio had to be in his late forties. Like her mother's age. That's just nasty.

Antonio pulled out the biggest four pieces of fish and wrapped them up for her. After he weighed and priced the package, he handed it to her.

“When you gonna let me take you out?”

She smiled to hide her embarrassment. “I think my boyfriend would have a problem with that,” she answered with a straight face. She hadn't had a real boyfriend since college. The fake one treated her better than the real ones, anyway.

“All the pretty ones are taken.” He placed the package of fish on the counter.

“See you next Sunday?” he asked. “I'll save some redfish for you.”

Blackened redfish. She'd finally get a chance to break in those cast-iron pans she got for Christmas.

“I'll be here,” Sienna responded and placed the package into her basket. She waved at Antonio before she strolled off to the produce section. She looked down. Two dollars and fifty cents for 3 pounds of fish. She'd be *guapa* for that.

Mimi used those dusty, brown potatoes for her potato salad, but Sienna liked the red, new potatoes. Crawfish potatoes, her absolute favorite. Uncle Junior boiled the crawfish in the family, period. Anyone foolish enough to even sniff around the pot, including her own dad at one time, was shamed into sitting back down. Uncle Junior always dumped an entire five-pound bag of potatoes in the pot just for her. Sienna ate potatoes and turkey necks. Left the crawfish alone. Give her some butter and salt, and Sienna put back at least a pound of potatoes in one sitting. All those carbs and Sienna never gained no more than two pounds for about two weeks.

“You must shit potatoes for a week straight,” her mother had told her one Easter.

He stood on the other side of the potatoes by the onions. She couldn't believe it. Anthony Mercadel--her high school boyfriend for all of nine months or forever in high-school

time. She used to wait for him with her friends outside of St. Augustine High School on A.P. Tureaud. Catholic-school skirt rolled up at the waist, she'd watch him play the trumpet during band practice. Some cute with his coal-black wavy hair and brown eyes but lacked in the muscle department. Didn't matter back then. Anthony used to play "A Kiss to Build a Dream On" over the phone for her.

She made a U-turn and headed towards the celery. Left her purse in the basket by the potatoes. Anthony's body finally caught up to his face. Weight looked good on him, but not good enough for her to have that awkward catch-up conversation with him. He'd talk about his wife, fiancée, or baby-mama and how she saved him from his whoring ways. Kids who brought him a kind of joy he never knew existed. Sienna would talk about her plans to run a university some day in life. Then he'd try to take her out to dinner or drinks because he missed the way her ass felt in his hands.

"Niecey?"

Damn it. She had to summon her imaginary boyfriend once again.

"Anthony Mercadel, please," she said, "you know that's not my name."

"I knew it was you," he said and laughed.

"Still a damn fool, I see," she responded. "No one calls me that foolishness but you." He started butchering her middle name, Denise, the day they met at McDonald's after school.

"Good to see you, Niecey." He walked around to Sienna and wrapped her up in a hug.

She felt so comfortable with her head pressed into his chest. Too comfortable. She pushed herself out of his hug and looked around the store making sure no one saw what she felt. His wife had to be around somewhere. She looked at his left hand. No wedding ring. He could've taken it off.

"How have you been?" she asked, as if ten years and a natural disaster hadn't happened since the last time they saw each other.

"I've been happy," he responded. "I see the rest of your body caught up with your head. I was concerned."

"Must you still be an ass?" Sienna asked.

He reached into this back pocket for his wallet and flipped through the credit cards to the pictures. Two little boys, dressed in matching jerseys, held mini-footballs and wore two bright and toothless smiles. They had their father's smile. "My little men," he said. "Twins."

Awkward catch-up conversation had officially begun.

"They're precious," Sienna said. "Look like a handful for your wife."

"My ex-wife," he said. He showed her a holiday picture with the entire family. One child looked like Anthony, and the other favored his wife.

"Beautiful family," she said. She meant it this time.

He still had the family picture in his wallet.

"Where are your pictures?" he asked. "I know you got some."

"Only one picture in my wallet," Sienna said, "and you've seen that one before." Her seventh birthday party. She sat on her dad's knee and planted a kiss on his face. Mickey and Minnie Mouse with matching ears and face paint. Sam Bates. She missed that man so much.

"No kids?" Anthony asked.

"No husband, either," she responded and put that hand back on her hip.

He smiled.

She knew it.

"I'm not giving you my number," she said and rolled the basket away. She didn't have time to play with Anthony Mercadel. She had fish fry and eggs to get.

Every brand of corn meal that ever existed but no Zatarain's fish fry. She sucked her teeth at the selection knowing she'd go to another store if she didn't find what she wanted. Brand loyal to a fault. Mimi taught Sienna that the ingredients were just as important as her skills.

"Yes." She grabbed the little box of Zatarain's tucked behind some corn meal at the back of the shelf. She opened it and tore a little piece of the brown-paper package. She poured some of the golden powder into her hand and shook it around to see if the little food bugs had invaded.

"That's some hot, ghetto mess," Ronald said as he rolled his basket towards her.

The fry powder in her hand spilled onto the floor, and she almost dropped the box. She'd be damned. "You stalking me, now?"

"Please," he said. He turned into the boy she made-out with in the back of his blue Cutlass. They'd park under a tree on Bayou St. John instead of going to the movies and practiced their stories on the way home.

"It's been a long time," she said.

"A marriage, divorce, and two kids type of long time," he said.

"Why do you keep bringing that up?" she asked.

"So you don't forget that I'm single."

"How old are your boys?" she asked to change the subject.

"Three and complete terrors."

"I can wait," Sienna said. "Me and kids don't get along right now."

"You should." He gave her the side-eye. "You probably can't a plant alive."

"That's harsh."

"Am I wrong?"

She thought about the dead roses sitting on her desk.

"So great to see you," he said. He reached into his back pants-pocket and pulled out his wallet again. This time for a business card. "We should continue this over lunch."

"We'll see." She opened her purse and dropped the card into the abyss. She noticed the blinking red light of her cell phone. Five missed calls from Katrina and one from her mother. She pressed the speed dial button for Katrina.

"Uncle Pat," Katrina started, "Uncle Pat found Dad in his apartment. He's not breathing."

Sienna felt that pain in her heart. Uncle Junior wasn't dead, but it didn't make her feel any better. Her heart stung the day her father died before anyone told he was gone. It stung as she watched the Weather Channel that Sunday before they left for Baton Rouge. Storm hung out in the Gulf of Mexico waiting for them to leave. It explained her ability to accept change better than most people. God must've given her those heart pains so she could prepare for the worst.

"They rushed him to the hospital," Katrina said.

"Wait for me before you try and jump in the car," Sienna said. She closed her phone and threw it into her purse.

"It's my uncle," she said to Anthony, "and I need get home before my cousin tries to drive to New Orleans by herself."

"He's gonna be all right," he said.

She rushed out of the aisle. As she turned the corner, she saw Anthony put back some of the items out of her basket onto the shelf. Sweet. She tried not to run. Last thing she needed was someone thinking she'd stolen something.

Sienna cracked the back window of her mother's car and let the wind blow into her face. The outside air smelled like rain as the car zipped passed the water tower for Orange, Texas.

"I just don't understand it," Katrina said.

"It's okay, baby," her mother said.

Sienna thought about joining the conversation. Say all those clichés people used to make each other feel better. She couldn't lie. The storm totally fucked Uncle Junior up. Sienna had hoped it was just liquor this time and almost dying would be the push he needed to get some real help. He needed much more than Mimi's home-cooked meals and phone calls from Katrina.

He needed to get away from New Orleans and the family. At least the rest of them got out before. Spared from what Uncle Junior had to do in that attic. For him to go back and live in that devastation after barely escaping it, Sienna didn't blame her uncle for drinking or whatever else he did.

"Still, Auntie Grace," Katrina said, "I never thought he'd drink himself to death."

"Good thing he didn't," her mother responded.

"Is it?"

Sienna could hear that Katrina on the verge of crying again. One thing to be told your father had already died. There were stages to deal with that. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Sometimes, she'd cycle through all of them in one day and then sometimes feeling one for weeks, months, or years. Sienna understood grief well.

However, to be told your father almost died by his own hand, what stages do pull from for that? Confusion? Relief he survived? Grateful you don't have to bury him? Guilt because you weren't there to stop him? Worried he might try again and succeed?

Sienna leaned forward and put her hand on Katrina's shoulder. Katrina pressed her face against Sienna's hand, and tears rolled in between.

Bienvenue en Louisiane. The blue sign looked smaller than Sienna remembered. Everything looked smaller now they'd crossed state lines. Even the trees. Houston was just huge—the skyline, the buildings, the malls, the houses, the cars, the hair, the opportunities. New Orleans could fit inside Houston with room to spare. Sienna wished it had. The people, the culture, and the soul of New Orleans would come to Houston and never leave. New Houston. Good schools that closed for Lundi Gras. French Quarter fest on Montrose Boulevard. Fried catfish and tamales on Good Friday.

That'll never happen, and Houston just had way more to offer. They were led to this place for far greater reasons besides getting out of harm's way. Otherwise, the destruction had been for nothing, and the storm lived up to the heartless bitch everyone had called it. Sienna accepted Houston for the "Land of Milk and Honey" she wanted it to be and kept it moving. She saw what dwelling on the past did to her cousin. Life was too short for all of that drama. Storm taught her that.

She watched the sign for Vinton, LA disappear. New Orleans about two-hundred miles away. She thought about next Sunday. Blackened redfish, mashed sweet potatoes, and roasted asparagus. Sienna could bribe Mimi into giving up the recipe for her famous praline topping for the sweet potatoes.

"You should call Anthony when you get back," Katrina said.

Why bring this negro up, now? In front of her mother? She had told Katrina about the grocery store run-in while they waited for Mama to pick them up. Antonio and the \$2.50 catfish had Katrina holding her side from laughing so hard.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sienna said and pinched Katrina's shoulder.

"Anthony?" her mother asked.

"Anthony Mercadel," Katrina said.

Sienna pinched Katrina's shoulder again.

"Anthony Mercadel from high school?" Her mother, determined to include herself in this conversation, called him "Ant knee."

"Didn't you cut class to meet him at the McDonald's on Broad?" Katrina asked.

"You were with me, remember?"

"Sienna Denise Bates," her mother said. "I know you didn't skip school to meet some boy."

"Mama, seriously," Sienna responded, "how long ago was that? You gonna ground me?"

"Never too old to get popped in the mouth." Her mother looked at Sienna through the rear-view mirror.

Sienna tried to avoid those back-handed slaps. Grace Hampton-Bates wore rings on most of her fingers.

Katrina turned around in the passenger seat and leaned over the console to face Sienna.

"Gonna call him?"

"He's got two kids and an ex-wife," Sienna said. "I don't think so."

"She's not a current wife," Katrina said.

Forever the optimist, Katrina loved falling in love more than she loved actual relationships. Everyone was "the one" until he did something stupid. Katrina had broken up with the last one a month before the storm and hasn't dated anyone else since then. Kind of boring. Katrina told the best crazy date stories.

"What I look like dating some divorcee with baby-mama drama?" Sienna asked Katrina. They must've passed one of those sulfur plants. The air smelled as if a landfill had blown up. "He's probably still legally married."

"You have to see a divorce decree to go to lunch with the man?" Katrina asked.

"Men will say just about anything to get in your pants." Sienna rolled her window up before she choked on Louisiana air.

"Including lying about a divorce?" Katrina sucked her teeth. "Be for real. Too many women willing to screw married men for dudes to make up divorce stories."

"Don't act like we don't meet those negroes who keep their hands in their pockets," Sienna said. "The ones with fresh tan lines on their ring fingers."

"Those are the ones that say, 'It's complicated'," Katrina said. "Anthony Mercadel told you exactly what the deal was. He's not that kind of guy."

"You think every guy's not that kind of guy."

"Just go on a date with him," Katrina responded, "and stop talking yourself out of a nice time. It's not that deep."

"Just don't give it up on the first date," Mama said. Not one to be left out of any conversation. "Men won't respect you afterwards."

"What if I want to?" Sienna asked. "Why not figure out if he can put it down in the beginning. I mean, there's nothing like..."

"Don't finish that." Her mother held her hand in the air.

"Auntie Grace," Katrina said, "a lot of guys say that giving it up on the first date doesn't matter. If they already respect you, they'll respect you regardless."

"He said this before or after you let him stick it in?"

"I'm not giving it up on the first date or any date for that matter," Sienna said hoping to end this Anthony conversation.

"Just go on a date with him, girl," her mother said. "You never know what could happen."

"He's got two kids," Sienna said. "I don't do kids or ex-wives. Not worth the drama."

"Just added that one to your list?" Mama asked with a sigh. "You're too damn picky. Pick, pick, pick and you pick shit."

Sienna laughed as she turned her head towards the window again. "Where's your man?"

"Don't worry about me," Mama said. "I gets mine."

"What about love, Mama?"

"Baby, I had that," Mama said, "and it was wonderful. I just need to get my rocks..."

"Just don't give it up on the first date," Sienna said and held her hand in the air. Mama had tried to deter Sienna from having sex while Sienna was in high school. According to Mama, an orgasm was no more than a release. Like taking a much needed number two.

"I've never heard you scream in the bathroom," Sienna had responded. "Definitely not like when Daddy was alive, and y'all were wrestling." Sienna had already given herself orgasms, and they felt nothing like whatever her mother talked about.

Her mother popped Sienna in the mouth that day. "Look, just keep your legs closed," she said. "You can't give your virginity back. Wait until you meet the right person. Your daddy was the right person. Get it?"

"Got it, Mama."

Sienna picked up her purse and dug around until she found the business card he had given her. Anthony L. Mercadel. L as in Louis Armstrong. She wondered if "Ant knee" still played the trumpet.

ACCEPTANCE

Heavy Lifting

Patrick noticed her spirits hadn't been the same since the storm. Like she put her life on auto-pilot. Mama would tune him out whenever he talked about any kind of recovery plans for the city or the family. He had tricked her into visiting the destroyed house on Hammond Street last December. She needed to mourn so that she could begin healing. Get back to herself again. Sitting in that little apartment in Metairie all day cooking and worrying about Junior wasn't helping.

"The Jones family done settled themselves in Atlanta now," she had said. Mama just stared through the car window at the house next door. Mattress stuck in its doorway.

"They tell me my little sweetheart, Jaiden, doing real well in school out there."

Patrick walked around to see the mold painted over the back of the house. The oak tree had split in two, one end on the ground and the other in the roof. The wooden fence Junior had built lay splintered and water-logged. Mama's flower beds spread over the yard. Red, yellow, and pink petals mashed into black mud. He saw Junior's hole in the roof.

Who could heal from that?

Patrick continued to talk about recovery plans, and Mama continued to tune him out. He told her about demolishing Hammond Street, and she nodded. He told her about his decision to gut his mansion in Eastover.

"Whatever you think is best."

He owed more on it than the insurance had paid. Some bullshit about it being strictly flood damage. Flood water didn't break the windows on the second floor. Another fight for another day.

Patrick collected every water-damaged picture he could find the day Hammond Street was razed. Paper mask covered his nose and mouth. Plastic gloves, contractor's jumpsuit, and steel-toe boots protected him from all the airborne shit the storm left behind. He took his time as he walked through the house. She picked out her and Pop's wedding picture, a Christmas card of Grace and Sam holding a two-year-old Sienna, Junior's Army portrait, and a Polaroid of Pat pointing at a newborn Katrina through hospital glass. Water-hardened corners and streaks of red and yellow ran through them. She threw the rest in the trash.

Pat plopped down on the sofa in Mama's apartment and clicked on the TV. He never missed a Sunday with Mama. Grace and his nieces away in Houston. Junior hardly left his apartment. After flipping through several channels, he settled on golf. 2006 U.S. Open. Tiger took a shot and missed.

"That's all right," he said. "He'll get the next one. Right, Pop?"

Patrick had given his father a replica of the green Masters jacket the year Tiger had won. His father's last birthday. Pop died on a Tuesday not longer after that. Buried that Saturday. Patrick walked back into Hampton Enterprises the following Monday. As he worked on a

proposal for a client, he looked up at the crown molding Pop had carved for his office. Pop had taken forever to get it done. Patrick let himself cry for about 10 minutes, and then went back to the proposal. Pop wouldn't have wanted him laid up at home not working. Grief or no grief.

"Family is everything, son," Pop had told him one of those days they watched golf together.

Family was much easier back then. After Pop died, Mama became his only concern. Patrick moved her, Junior, and Katrina to New Orleans East. Pat needed them closer to him. He rented St. Phillip Street to a nice family who eventually got their credit together and bought the house. Grace already took good care of herself and Sienna since the car crash. Pat only had to write a check whenever Grace asked for it and sometimes when she didn't. Junior kept up steady construction work. A triumph in itself. Junior barely helped with the house bills, but Pat never counted on Junior's for that. Junior took care of Mama in his own way. Doing things around the house that Patrick never had the time to do. Junior's money was for Katrina. Spoiled her rotten, too. Katrina had clothes, food, a car, gas, and whatever else she needed. She didn't have to get a job until she wanted one. Katrina's job was her books.

"My baby's gonna be somebody's CEO," Junior used to brag to whoever would listen.

Fucking Junior. Hard-headed for no damn reason. He just had to stay in that house. Junior never talked about those days right after the storm. Patrick never asked. He had seen the attic. Piss and shit and heat and blood and dead rats. Patrick knew. He knew he had left his brother to die in that house that day. Pop would've been so disappointed in the both of them.

Mama placed the small container of gumbo on the coffee table and sat down next to Patrick on the sofa.

"You talked to your sister?" she asked him.

"Not this week," he said.

"I'm surprised."

Grace and Mama must've had one of their fights. Mothers and their daughters. They'd start fussing over something like Mama teaching Grace how to make spaghetti and meatballs, and Grace wanted to do it her way. Grace never did it the right way. Mama tried to control Grace's life. Grace was just hard-headed. They'd stop talking for about two days, and then Grace would call and ask Mama how to do something else. After Patrick got an earful in separate hour-long conversations with his sister and mother.

"Y'all never call Junior with this mess."

"I'm not gonna bother him with Grace and her foolishness," Mama said. "Girl's not wrapped too tight."

"She's your daughter," Patrick said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mama asked. "Huh?" She poked his side.

"I'm just saying."

She picked up sofa pillow and hit him in the arm with it.

"Go bring your favorite son his gumbo," he said as he tried to duck. "You cooked it in the middle of June just for him anyway."

"Poor, poor Pat," Mama said as she stood up. "Nobody loves Pat anymore." She pinched his cheeks.

"Hurry up," he responded.

God had been on his side the day he found two apartments in the same complex. In Metairie of all places. Mama needed Junior close to her, and two bedroom apartments went to

families of six. After she left, he grabbed the newspaper from the table and scanned the front page.

"Meet Trisha Salazar—Advertising's Freshest Face has Homegrown Roots"

What?

He read her pedigree. Trisha Salazar grew up in Gretna. Graduated from Edna Karr High School. Completed her undergraduate degree and MBA from Stanford. Assistant Vice President for one of California's leading advertising agencies. San Francisco's "Young People to Watch."

Trisha Salazar was a child. What the hell did she know about New Orleans? He wrote her off as an outsider and put down the paper. Turning his attention back to the U.S. Open, he tried to ignore the words in his periphery.

"When I saw the utter devastation," the article quoted her, "I knew I had to come back home. Back to the place that made me who I am today."

"Back to the utter opportunity to make money," he said to Trisha Salazar's picture and picked up the paper again.

"It's our way of saying we understand."

Patrick rolled his eyes.

"It's hard enough for these small businesses to pay for what they need to keep their doors open," the article stated. "They're not worried about advertising to anyone. This is where we come in. We're showcasing these businesses on a national level, something most of them have never experienced."

Hampton Enterprises was New Orleans famous. Good enough for a black-owned advertising agency in the 80's. He worked with the Mom and Pop's. Corner stores that did one

or two low-budget commercials a year. Used car dealerships. Non-profits. He'd get a law firm, but they only came to him when they started out or struggled. Except for a few accounts like Baker who remained loyal to Pat until the storm pushed them to Houston, the rest left Hampton Enterprises the minute the big boys started paying attention. Trisha Salazar came to do what he has always wanted to do because her company needed a tax write-off.

"Bullshit," Patrick said and flipped to the inside of the front-page. Once he finished reading more "I heart New Orleans" quotes, he walked into the kitchenette and grabbed the scissors from his mother's utility drawer. He cut out the article making sure he had her contact information. He folded the pieces and stuffed them into his wallet.

Patrick Hampton had been here. He'd put twenty years into helping small companies in New Orleans when no one else would touch them. He'd be damned if some out-of-town company pretending to care about New Orleans ran him out of his business.

He pulled out his Blackberry from its holster and scrolled through the numbers. He needed to call that builder. Patrick's Uptown apartment worked well for him while he catered to a limited list of his old clients. No major campaigns, just helping them slowly put their names back out there. He made enough money to supplement the savings, insurance, SBA loan, and any other assistance he could find in order to pay everyone's bills.

That had become a little more difficult than he'd ever admit to his family. He needed a long-term client to put him back into his financial comfort zone. Louisiana Recovery Authority. He started courting them over a month ago for their marketing business. Old man Baker had introduced Patrick to the guy. Baker's way of easing the blow that came with the firm's move to Houston. The LRA was in the pre-planning stages for their Road Home program. Patrick knew the LRA still needed to get the word out to the displaced people in other cities.

Patrick thought about moving his pitch meeting with the LRA up to Wednesday from Friday. He could lock in the account before this Trisha Salazar started talking her pro-bono mess. He thought better of it. A half-cocked pitch meeting was not the way to go. Patrick Hampton never rushed business. He'd run slow, deliberate circles around Trisha Salazar and the company that sent her ass down here. He knew New Orleans, even Louisiana, well enough to know his people didn't trust outsiders either. Regardless if she grew up in Gretna.

He put his phone back on his hip and returned his attention to the TV. Tiger slipped further down the leader board. "Next time, kid."

Mama opened the door and walked inside from her visit with Junior.

"Can we eat now?" He gave his mother a Kool-aid smile and waited for her to say something back.

"You eat," she said. "I'm gonna lie down for a little while."

"Mama," he called after her, "Mama, what happened? What Junior do?"

"Nothing happened," she responded. "Go eat." She closed the bedroom door behind her.

Patrick grabbed his keys and opened the front door. He heard the music thumping through the concrete platform and steps.

"Jesus," he said and walked down the outside hallway to his brother's apartment. He had to get Mama out of Metairie. How could she sleep with all this noise? He made a mental note to start looking for two-bedroom places in Uptown. He loved his privacy more than most people, but this was getting ridiculous.

He knocked on his brother's door. No answer.

"Junior." He pressed his left ear against the door. "This mother fucker, here."

Patrick separated the key to Junior's apartment on his key ring. He inhaled. Junior had to do better, but Patrick busting in his apartment barking orders wasn't the way to accomplish that.

"Shit!"

Patrick rushed over to the chair. Junior's chest didn't move. Laid out in his recliner. A half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels leaked brown liquid onto the carpet. Patrick smashed two of his fingers into Junior's neck.

Nothing.

Patrick opened one of Junior's eyelids. White. Patrick smelled the familiar mix of Kool's cigarettes and Jack Daniels coming off his brother. He slapped Junior's face. Hard.

"Wake up."

Junior's face moved with force of Patrick's slap. Stayed in that position. Patrick grabbed Junior's shoulders.

"Wake up," he screamed. "Wake the fuck up."

Patrick pulled his cell phone from its holster. He tried to call. He couldn't get the numbers right. 9911. "Shit." 91111.

His brother was dead. He felt it. The worst had happened, and he let it happen.

Patrick ran out of the apartment.

"Mama, call 911," he shouted. "Something's wrong with Junior. Call 911."

One of the hall-way neighbors opened his door. Dressed in basketball shorts and flip-flops. "What's going on, man?" he asked.

Patrick stopped. "It's my brother," he said. "Call 911."

As if not saying that Junior was dead would change anything.

"Fuck it," Patrick said. "Help me carry him to my truck."

"All right, bruh," the neighbor said as he slammed his door behind him.

The nosey woman on the other side of Junior's apartment opened her door. "What happened?"

"Get my mama." He and the neighbor guy ran into Junior's apartment.

Patrick kicked the Jack Daniels bottle out of his way. Alcohol sprayed the carpet with more brown.

"Get his feet." Patrick stood behind the recliner and put his hands under Junior's armpits. They lifted Junior up and shifted his body to the side of the chair.

"Damn it," Patrick said. He put his knee in Junior's back to reposition his brother. Patrick thought to check his arms for marks. Junior couldn't have. Not after all this time. The other guy backed out of the apartment and almost knocked Mama over.

"Pat," she shrieked.

"Mama, move," he said, "and get my keys off the floor."

"Pat?"

"Get my keys."

"Is he dead?"

"We gotta get him to the hospital."

"Is he dead?" she screamed.

He stood there. If he said it, then it would be real. Patrick wasn't ready for this to be real. He had to get Junior in the truck and to the hospital so God could prove him wrong. The neighbors milled around outside, and the nosey woman pushed people out of the way to make room. Junior's head bobbed against Patrick's stomach through the crowd of confused, judgmental faces.

Patrick had parked his black Ford F-150 truck right by the walkway. Mama rushed behind them and clicked the truck open. Patrick and the neighbor guy slid Junior into the back seat. Patrick ran around to the driver's side of the truck as the neighbor guy helped his mother into the passenger seat.

"Thank you," she said to him.

"Y'all better hurry," he responded.

Patrick turned the truck on and slammed it into reverse, then drive. As he sped out of the parking lot, he saw the neighbors talking to each other. Could only imagine what they said about his brother. "Not like we didn't see that one coming."

He weaved between cars on Veterans Memorial Boulevard. Mama mouthed prayers with one hand on her rosary beads and the other on Junior.

"Hail Mary, full of grace."

"The Lord is with thee," Patrick said along with her. He felt guilt pressing through his head, but he couldn't give it any time. Later. He almost flipped the truck over as he turned into the ambulance bay of the emergency room.

"Help, please," he yelled as he opened the door and parked the truck at the same time.

A male paramedic rushed over from the ambulance in front of them.

"He's not breathing," Patrick said.

"For how long?" the paramedic asked. He put his stethoscope in his ears and listened to Junior's chest.

"I don't know," Patrick said.

"Jesus, what was he drinking?"

"Jack," Patrick responded.

A nurse came outside from the emergency room, saw what was going on, and ran back inside. She, a doctor, and a female paramedic rolled out a stretcher.

"Sir," the nurse said to Patrick, and he moved out of her way to the other side of the truck to help Mama. He grabbed Mama's hand as she braced against him and stepped down onto the pavement. They watched as the two men pulled Junior out of the truck and onto the stretcher. Like a dead animal. A buck ready for cleaning.

Mama broke in Patrick's arms. "Lord," she said in between sobs, "save my baby, please." She kissed her rosary beads. "Lord, please."

The nurse ran back outside. "We need to ask y'all some questions."

Patrick nudged his mother who still cried, and they walked into the emergency room. He saw them working on Junior in one of those curtained rooms. One of the paramedics slapped Junior's cheeks while the other set up an IV in Junior's left hand. Like an episode of *ER* starring his brother as the addict and him and Mama as the unsuspecting family members. Patrick couldn't move.

"How much did he have to drink?" the nurse asked.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but there was a half-empty fifth on the floor when I found him."

"And two more empty bottles in the trash," Mama said as she began to calm down.

The nurse looked at his mother. "Fifths?"

"One was a liter."

Patrick looked at his mother. "A liter?" he asked. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"He was talking to me," she said to the nurse. "When I saw him, he was talking to me."

"Poisoning like that always happens so fast," the nurse said and grabbed Mama's hand.

"I thought he drank those a long time ago," Mama responded. "That trash was so high in his place. I should've known better. I should've known." She kissed her rosary beads.

"What about drugs?" the nurse asked.

"No, Miss," his mother answered before Patrick could say anything.

The nurse looked towards the curtained room where they worked on Junior just as the doctor came out. "We had to pump his stomach," the doctor began to explain, "but he'll make it."

Mama almost fell out of Patrick's arms, but he held onto her.

"Thank you, Jesus." Mama clapped her hands together over her rosary.

"Can we see him?" Patrick asked.

"Not yet," the doctor responded. "You can see him after he's moved. We want to keep him for forty-eight hours so he can begin detox."

Mama darted towards the curtained room anyway and hugged the paramedics walking away from Junior's section. Junior tried to hold her back, but the doctor let her go. Guess he couldn't say no to the woman either.

"Another minute or two," the doctor said, "and we'd be having a completely different conversation."

"He's been having a tough time since the storm, you know?" Patrick had to defend Junior to someone.

Another set of paramedics burst through the doors with an elderly woman who screamed about her chest being on fire. The doctor and nurse rushed off before Patrick could shake their hands for saving Junior's life.

He walked outside of the emergency room. His truck sandwiched between the two ambulances. He didn't have to see any track marks. He needed to call Grace. This was Vietnam all over again. Worse.

"I see you, Pop," Patrick said to the air, "but now what?"

Patrick had followed Sienna so closely. He almost tapped the back of Grace's SUV twice as they inched away from the East Baton Rouge parish sign. Two in the morning, and they still drove five miles per hour. Contra-flow was a bullshit-ass idea. He wiped sweat from his face with a towel. They wouldn't reach the hotel, only twenty more miles, it for at least another hour at this rate.

Hurricane season. Each year taught him something different. Andrew taught him to never go and sit on the Lake with his father and watch the waves. Hurricane Georges taught him to watch the weather before loading up the car. Ivan, got damn Ivan, taught him to book hotels before the hurricane made it to the Gulf of Mexico. Also, never evacuate with a woman that wasn't his wife. Regardless if she gave good head. An entire day on the road after Grace called his girlfriend a gold-digging ho to her face equaled no head whatsoever.

After the storm sucker-punched Florida, he booked those hotel rooms in Baton Rouge. Felt validated Saturday night when the Category 3 Hurricane Katrina turned right towards New Orleans. Maybe, just maybe, Patrick got it right this time.

"We're leaving in the morning, Ma," he had said into the phone that night.

"Why are you worrying me with this?" his mother had asked. "It's gonna turn at the last minute. They always do."

He knew he had woken her up. She could sleep in the car. "I'll be there to help you pack your stuff."

"Stop panicking," his mother said. "Everything will be fine. Junior's here."

"He needs to come, too," Patrick said. He studied the projected track of the hurricane on the National Weather Service's website. Where was Nash Roberts with his map and black marker when you needed him? A Weather Channel reporter held onto a tree as the storm beat him up. Had to be the most dangerous thing a person could do for a job, but Pat thanked the man for risking his life to warn Patrick to save his own life.

"Pat, sweetheart," Mama said, "we're gonna be fine. This house is safe."

"Ma, this isn't like St. Phillip," he said. "You live in the East, remember?"

Had they kept the house on St. Phillip, Pat might've stayed. That house survived every storm. It was just built that way. The crawl space alone elevated the house out of the reach of most floods. This one-story house in the East, existing at the bottom of the bowl called New Orleans, was no match for any kind of hard storm. Let alone a Cat 3 hurricane. They just didn't build houses like that one on St. Phillip anymore.

"We'll be fine," she said again. "Good night, baby."

"I'll be there in the morning."

"Don't bring any of those lil' girls you run around with this time," she said. "We don't need a repeat of last year."

He busted out laughing. The only person in his life worth that kind of drama was married and should've already evacuated with her husband. Deanna Austin. Patrick still had the ring she threw in his face the night they broke off their engagement for the third and final time.

Sunday morning, he woke up to the Weather Channel. The storm, which had turned into a damn 5, reached towards the city. He texted Grace. “Be at Mama’s by noon. We’re getting out of here.”

He called the hotel to confirm his reservations. He refused to drive all the way to Baton Rouge only to go to jail behind cancelled reservations.

He looked at the windows of his house. Boarding up those windows took extra effort he didn’t have in him today. He and Junior spent half the day boarding up the house before they left for Ivan, and Junior cussed him out the minute the storm had turned. Patrick refused to waste that kind of time again. He moved all of the patio furniture into the garage and lined the bottoms of the windows and doors with blankets and towels just in case. If this one was the one, then he’d just deal with it when he got back.

He turned off the TV. Peeking at the Weather Channel as he went from one room to another didn’t help him think. He had to keep a clear head. He had to remain in control. His family relied on him to be that way.

If he ever made it to Heaven, he’d ask God to quit it with the hurricanes. Patrick rushed throughout the house. The family had to leave as soon as possible to avoid evacuation traffic. He loaded empty gas cans onto the bed of his truck, packed every battery he found for flashlights and radios, and then grabbed the cedar box at the top of his closet. His pistol. Mama hated that he even kept one in the house, but as his daddy used to say, “People is crazy.” As if it mattered that he’d escape the imminent danger of the hurricane. Crazy times were ahead.

Couldn't leave without that picture. He had found it behind the sofa in the house on St. Phillip the day Mama moved out. Pop, dressed in contractor khakis, Patrick, Junior, and Sam sat on the porch of the old house. It must've been the day they painted Hampton Enterprises to

freshen the building up. White and tan splotches of paint on their clothes and bodies. Someone, Sam no doubt, had told a joke or said something stupid. Grace caught the men in mid-laugh. Junior's mouth gaped open as he hung his head back. Sam flashed his I-ain't-lying face. Pat held his stomach as he laughed.

Pop just smiled. Creases in his face happily pronounced, Pop looked like he wanted to keep this laugh going for as long as possible. As if he knew the shit would hit the fan soon. Sam died a month later. Head-on collision with a woman looking to end her own life.

Patrick shielded his eyes from the sun as he surveyed the concrete slab on the corner of Crowder Boulevard and Dwyer Road deep in New Orleans East. Although the street signs and damn near everything else on the block had disappeared, he knew his land. Hampton Enterprises existed in that spot for close to twenty years.

Old man Baker had offered to sell his downtown space to Pat when the law firm moved to Houston. Near the French Quarter in the heart and money of the city. Patrick refused before he made up his mind about opening the business. Didn't matter if the rest of the city wrote it off as green-space, New Orleans East was New Orleans, too.

He'd grown content with working out of his Uptown apartment in his marketing consultant role. A full-fledged marketing and advertising firm seemed like too much work for him. Employees, payroll, contracts, insurance—his head hurt just thinking about it.

Early that Tuesday morning, he stared at the concrete foundation waiting on the builder. Patrick wanted to do things differently this time. Yes, black businesses needed someone like Patrick Hampton on their side, but it couldn't be at the expense of his own life anymore. Money, success, reputation. Such fickle, temporary things. The storm made sure of that.

He had Trisha Salazar to consider. The girl-wonder of advertising with her promises of resurrecting the poor, less fortunate New Orleans businesses and the means to make good on those promises. Patrick had to compete for business for the first time in too long of a time.

"Patrick Hampton?" she had asked when he called to set up the meeting yesterday. "How does eleven sound?"

He couldn't wait until he sent her ass back to California.

Got damn builder. Patrick pressed the talk button on his Blackberry. He didn't have the time to wait on the builder's late ass this morning.

"You forgot?" he asked.

"Damn," the builder said, "give me fifteen."

Patrick knew a hangover when he heard one. On a Tuesday?

"Look," he said, "I've got another appointment. Call me this week when you get it together."

He hung up the phone before the builder had a chance to respond. He didn't have time for this shit, but this one promised to hire Junior. The guy had complained about not having a good carpenter when they exchanged business cards months ago. Pat would write that into the contract if he had to. After what happened this past Sunday, Patrick knew Junior would surely kill himself if left to his own vices.

Patrick walked over to the foundation and squatted over the front-right corner. He touched one of the eight sets of concrete-handprints with his forefinger. The entire Hampton family back in 1986—Pop, Mama, Junior, Patrick, Grace, Sam, Sienna, and Katrina. Pop's idea. Tracing over the indentation his father's wedding band made in the concrete, Patrick smiled. He

remembered that he and Sam held Katrina and Sienna's hands apart to keep them from smearing concrete all over each other's faces. High-pitched giggles infected the entire family that day.

Man, he really missed his father. He missed his brother-in-law, Sam. The four men would've had the building framed in less than two weeks. He and Junior with a reliable crew could rebuild this building in no time if Junior wasn't so fucked up. With Pop gone, however, Patrick no longer cared for that kind of work. That was Junior's thing, and Junior was the best. Impeccable woodworking skills. Real old school stuff these so-called master carpenters couldn't touch.

More so, he missed the life he had back then. Patrick had time to sit on a pile of bricks and drink beers after hanging sheet rock. Now, he took care of everyone. They needed him just as much as he needed to take care of them.

He placed his fingers on his lips and touched his father's palm print again.

"Always take care of your family, son."

He got into his truck and turned up Crowder Boulevard to get on the interstate. He wanted to get across the river and deal with this Trisha Salazar so he could get back to dealing with everything else.

Patrick looked over at the New Orleans skyline from the Crescent City Connection bridge. Hit or miss as the rest of the city. It would take a lot of time to get New Orleans back to its "*Laissez Le Bon Temp Rouler*" self once again. Even more time to make it a city that wasn't just good for feeding you and getting you drunk. Damn near a year later and still no real plan, no real vision, no real direction for the city. Didn't stop Mardi Gras, though. He never cared for Mardi Gras, but he understood the need for it this year more than any other year. New Orleans had to self-medicate.

He turned off the Westbank Expressway into a strip-mall parking lot. Trisha Salazar's office looked out of place surrounded by a nail salon, a beauty-supply store, and a Chinese buffet restaurant. Only four open businesses in the entire mall. Shocked the hell out of him. He expected this side of river to have businesses sitting on top of each other since the storm had spared the Westbank compared to the rest of the city. He felt himself going into uncle-mode thinking about her being here working late. Why didn't her company set her up Uptown or in the CBD? That wasn't smart of them to have her out here by herself. Outsiders.

He parked his car and walked towards the store-front. She looked like an intern instead of an Assistant Vice President. She looked like Katrina. The vein in the middle of his forehead that throbbed in times of war began to soften as he opened the door.

"Yes, I'll work on it," she said into the receiver. "My eleven o'clock just walked in. I'll call you back."

"Trisha Salazar?" he asked.

"You must be Mr. Hampton," she said. She extended her arm and shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you, young lady."

She motioned for him to sit down in the folding chair in front of her plastic picnic-table desk.

"Just moving in?" he asked.

"My real office furniture is supposed to be on its way." She sat in her own folding chair. "We'll see when that happens." She chuckled, and Patrick heard nervousness in her voice.

"It's just you in this office?"

"For now."

"Doesn't look too safe around here to be working late," he said.

"My dad doesn't like it," she said, "and he calls me as soon as the sun begins to set."

"I'm sure." He tried to dislike her. This girl held the potential to keep Hampton Enterprises closed for good. Trisha Salazar reminded him too much of Katrina.

"Ms. Salazar," he began, "the reason why I asked to meet with you..."

"Before we continue, there's something I'd like to propose," she said.

Just like Katrina with that talking before listening.

Patrick folded his arms across his chest.

"My company wants to buy Hampton Enterprises from you."

"Excuse me?"

"You've done very well with it." Trisha Salazar leaned forward. "My company's willing to offer a very handsome amount."

"You've got to be kidding me." He unfolded his arms and placed his hands on his knees.

"The agency will pay whatever you ask," she said.

"You got the company check-book in your purse over there?"

"We could have the funds wired into your bank as early as tomorrow afternoon."

"Hell no," he said.

"I'm sorry, but..."

"You must be sorry," he said, "for thinking you could waltz your ass down here from California and write off my twenty years with a fucking check."

"Mr. Hampton," she said, "I apologize if I offended you, but talk to me like that again, and I'll ask you to leave." She flipped her long, black hair over her ears.

He wanted to continue yelling at her. Throw some more curse words in her face. The way she offered to buy his entire career like sifted-through junk at a garage sale. He probably

scared the poor girl with his barking. Not professional at all. She didn't deserve it. Patrick should've saved his profanity for the people that sent her to New Orleans. The mentality that came with her filled with misconceptions and delusions of grandeur. We can do it better than you because we're not from here.

"My apologies," Patrick said after he composed himself, "I'm just not interested."

"May I ask why not?" she asked with hesitation. "I have to tell my superiors something."

"This is my life's work," he said. "My life's not over yet. Besides, this city's on the verge of a breakthrough."

"There's so many opportunities to bring this city to the next level," she said. "We have to start with the economic side of things."

"Create the jobs and the people will follow," he said.

"Exactly," she said, "and the focus should be on the small businesses already established here. Expose them to state-wide, national or even international markets."

"Be careful with that," Patrick said. It was nice to have someone to talk shop with. Junior was half-dead, and Mama just tuned him out.

"You'll give them all this exposure," he continued, "and some of them might crack under the pressure to perform. These aren't the cookie-cutter types of businesses you might be used to. Their accountants could be a school-teacher mother or a 16-year-old boy who is good enough at math."

"Not a reason to stop trying," she said.

"True," he said, "but you can't just bounce down here, throw some money around, and then leave. You must spend time with them. Learn what makes them run. You've got to damn near take a part-time job. Totally different from San Francisco. I'm sure of that."

"Tell me about it," she said. "I've learned way more than I care to know about trout and catfish since I've been here."

"Just wait until you deal with personal injury lawyers," he said. A seafood account already, hmm. Trisha Salazar wasn't playing.

"You can keep the lawyers."

"I thought you were trying to put me out of business."

"We want you to come work for us," she said.

He let out a gut-busting laugh. "I'd answer to you?" he asked.

Blank stare. "Only until you get acclimated," she answered, "and then I'd leave to go back to California."

"Make your money off of New Orleans and leave."

"It's not like that at all," she said. "Let's be honest with each other. You have the experience and the passion. We have the money."

Semi-retiring on someone else's dime? He wasn't a youngin' anymore. He could still do what he loved and have a life. Sort of. Get some national attention for a change. He did the self-employed thing. He had made something of himself. A successful business for twenty years that caught the attention of California. Not the meeting he had in mind, but it sounded wonderful.

He knew he couldn't. It pulled at his heart. The city. ReNew Orleans. He saw it on a T-shirt in the French Quarter. Even in its infancy, the new New Orleans burst with potential. Her offer was the out he had needed but didn't want. The idea of competing with this California agency gave him that second wind he thought the storm had taken from him. Re-Hampton Enterprises. Time for this city to step up and do better. Take what already made New Orleans

great and mix it with fresh ideas that poured in from elsewhere. New Orleans teetered on the edge of a renaissance, and Patrick Hampton had to be there to help tip it over.

He heard Pop in his head, too. "Family is everything."

They needed him, and he needed them to need him. That was his life.

"Miss Salazar," he said, "as sweet as your offer sounds to this old man, I can't."

"I was looking forward to learning from you." She stood up and held out her hand.

"Oh, but you will," he said and stood up to shake her hand.

Trisha Salazar and her California company had to stick around New Orleans for a little while.

As Patrick walked back to his truck, the to-do list raced through his mind. Call the builder, check on the web designer, confirm the meeting with the LRA, finalize the marketing plan, put Junior in rehab.

Vita:

Danielle Gilyot was born and raised in New Orleans. She's been leaving and running back home ever since. After she graduated from the University of Miami, she ran back home. After Hurricane Katrina, she lived in Houston and ran back home again. This is where you'll find her today.