

## CHAPTER ONE

She bolted upright, riding the terror of red dreams. Sweat between her breasts, teeth clenched against a jagged scream, Taffy tossed bedcovers aside, struggling to breathe.

She needed to sit an eternal minute—head cradled in hands, calming a raging heartbeat, dissecting a blood-soaked dream and resituating herself in perfect peace. But Taffy Bledsoe Freeman had sense enough in her twenty-three-year-old self to know heaven had spoken, setting fire beneath her feet.

Snapping on the lamp, Taffy quickly consulted her timepiece atop the bedside table, gray eyes squinting. She could make the early train. Barely.

She sprang from bed, smoothing linens over loneliness until order was restored. Straightening, propping, Taffy rushed about her room taking great pains to ensure her true self wasn't left behind. Heart never invested in this, Alfredo's arctic abode, Taffy assessed her finished handiwork without sorrow or sentiment. Strategically, she'd planned her disappearance after the festival next week. But if the red dream was God speaking, then her day of salvation had come. Staying a moment longer would feed Taffy's seven-year battle against sluggish death. Leaving was life.

*How will Mr. Al react?* she wondered without truly caring.

*Like the hellion he is.* Certainly, Alfredo Freeman—an unwanted husband of seven years—would pull-the-fool when learning of her desertion. But his antics would stem from power's departure, not the loss of non-existent love.

Taffy nearly smiled, imagining Alfredo's destroying the door lock that prevented his taking what she wouldn't give. Storming his young wife's chambers, the fifty-year-old undertaker would find a façade of normalcy, much like their marriage. Upon closer inspection Alfredo would see value was absent. Clothing Taffy hadn't worn since entering

their forced marriage and coming Up North when just sixteen, hung limp in her chifforobe. Possessions of importance had been covertly shipped, bit by bit, to Cousin Gracie in the Windy City where stolen freedom waited. Now, only near-empty perfume atomizers and worthless cosmetics lined Taffy's bureau. Ghostly props whispering of a broken past, the useless and unwanted remained.

Alfredo named her both. Worthless. Unwanted. Claimed the dead in his deep freeze held more warmth. Preferring their company, he charmed cold corpses wholly submitted to his control. Unlike the 'dry-hearted, iron-backed wife with ice between her thighs'. So he constantly spewed—perverse words landing like bricks against Taffy's back. But Taffy never broke. Alfredo's estimation didn't matter. Never had.

*Still, he won't let me go.*

Despite her alleged failures, Alfredo ignored repeated pleas, refused Taffy's leaving. God was perfect; matrimony need not be. As long as Alfredo breathed there'd be no terminating Taffy's mandated misery.

*I ain't dissolving no marriage so you can lay up with some nigga somewhere! You ain't no use to me but I'm keeping you on account of holy vows.*

"Alfredo wouldn't know holy from hell," Taffy quietly bristled, recalling this response to her most recent request for resolution. Seven years of begging hadn't appealed to his immoral senses. She'd stopped pleading and took to praying, planning.

Taffy snorted. "And nobody said nothing about 'laying up' somewhere." It was a constant accusation, Alfredo's falsely projecting his own unfaithfulness onto her.

Looseness wasn't in her. Taffy wasn't dumb or numb to a Colored man's charms. Most knew she was Freeman's wife. Knowledge didn't keep some from making lusty interests known. Just the same, Taffy kept her legs together and came home.

Pushing trouble aside and reaching for her robe, Taffy cocooned herself in silk. Fastening her robe belt at her waist, she unlocked her bedroom door. Quickly, she stuffed the key to self-preservation back into the valley of her full breasts where it dangled on a slim, silver chain. It was her nightly assertion—this locked portal—Taffy's way of resisting connubial bondage and keeping what she could.

Stealthily, Taffy slid suitcases into the cool, dark corridor where

she was greeted by darkness before dawn. Struggling to secure bulky luggage beneath her arms, Taffy cautiously proceeded as if her cat-like eyes were truly feline.

She need only deposit the luggage downstairs and call for a cab before dressing quickly. But approaching the stairwell, Taffy paused outside the closed bathroom door, arrested by the sound of feminine humming within.

Obviously, Alfredo had kept company last night, and company hadn't quit. Taffy was unmoved by her husband's endless infidelities. *Better them than me*, was Taffy's philosophy. Still...Alfredo's dalliances were usually gone before the crick-crack of day. When had he become bold enough to allow such evidence to keep?

The commode flushed. Sink water flowed. The bathroom door opened, pouring a young woman into view. A symphony occurred as a piece of Taffy's luggage and the young woman's sheet plummeted simultaneously, noiseless and crashing. There was a responsive shuffling behind Alfredo's closed door as the young woman stood naked, mouth moving frantically yet wordless and empty. Naked and backlit by bathroom light, she was an eerie angel of interrupted innocence.

Taffy's heart lurched realizing the young woman was a mere child with breasts beyond her years. They eyed each other silently until Taffy—conscious of a frenetic haze of color bathing the child—spoke, her recognition dawning. "You're Miz Truly's girl...Janie?" Taffy's rich alto hummed softly.

"Y-y-es...but no, ma'am...I'm Jonnie Mae...Janie Rae's my 'lil sis..." Jonnie Mae stuttered, peering up at the chocolate-skinned woman known for her sunshine smile and ladylike ways, whose infamous eyes now glowed ghostly gray.

Retrieving the fallen sheet, Taffy smelled the girl's fear, born of rumors and this early morning encounter. Careful to keep her gift to herself since living Up North, Taffy had still been dubbed a 'witch.' Inhaling Jonnie Mae's panic, Taffy knew the girl itched for her mama, and was intentionally gentle when wrapping the fallen sheet about Jonnie Mae's trembling nudity. Taffy intended calming words, but a bedroom door flew open and the undertaker emerged, cursing the girl for making noise enough to wake his wife.

Indeed, there his wife stood.

Alfredo and Taffy locked eyes.

"Miz Freeman..." Struggling with pants tangled about his ankles,

Alfredo emitted lurid smells of liquor and lust. “Why y-y-ou up at this ungodly hour?”

“The hour’s not the only ungodly thing here,” Taffy shot, stormy eyes curious and shifting. She’d never seen her husband naked. Doing so now left her disinterested.

Yanking up and fastening pants about a swollen paunch of a belly, a cornered Alfredo turned on Jonnie Mae. “Told you, don’t be stomping ‘round like you scaring snakes in route to no outhouse! Learn yo’self to approach an indoor toilet quiet-like!”

The frightened girl stuttered useless apologies under Alfredo’s menacing advance.

Taffy quickly planted herself between husband and lover, levying a look that could wither leaves. “Don’t you touch her,” Taffy warned, knowing Alfredo had already done more than. She turned to the girl. “Get dressed and come with me.”

“No, thank you, ma’am,” the girl timidly replied beneath Alfredo’s volcanic objections.

“You can’t stay here,” Taffy insisted, trying to maneuver the child towards the stairs, but Jonnie Mae planted her young feet like a tree, stiff and unyielding.

Knowing firsthand the perplexities of living bound, Taffy delved the eyes of a child perched at maturity. Taffy saw familiar entrapment, the weight of undesired alliance, and the futility of pleading. Still, she did. “Jonnie Mae, *please...*”

The child quivered at the tenderness in Taffy’s voice. Studying the hardwood floor, she shook her head, refusing aid and choosing to stay. “I’ll be okay, Miz Freeman.”

Sick of dwelling with death and deception, Taffy breathed into Jonnie Mae’s ear a truth the child had yet to perceive. “God made you better than this.” Unable to afford the luxury of time, Taffy grabbed her luggage and rushed downstairs, wondering who to call to remove a child from her husband’s unholy house.