

CHAPTER I

ON THE BUS

PITTSBURGH SEEMED LIKE 20 DEGREES as I waited for the bus, 71A Negley. It was late winter 1990, and I just wanted to be at home in my new apartment. Warm, comfortable, and safe. When it arrived, I quickly got on. Tucking my long, black, wool coat around me, I nestled myself between two other passengers. I removed my burgundy leather gloves, placed them inside my matching Coach purse and looked down at my wet mahogany boots. In this outfit, I felt like an African-American career girl from *Essence* magazine. As a 23-year-old corporate marketing database manager, I was *That Girl*, from the 1970s TV show, which portrays a woman who chooses to have a career first instead of getting married and starting a family. So between *That Girl* and *Essence* magazine, I had grown up to be—That Black Girl.

As the bus drove to the next stop, I wiped the steam from my glasses, and suddenly tears crowded into my eyes. The “ding” from the stop-requested bell transported me back to a scene from my past.

I am five years old. My father comes home from being out late. The door slams shut, and just like the “ding” that started the Ali-Frazier fight that I’d watched on TV, I’d hear a ding inside my head, signaling that the fight in my house was about to begin. All night I listen to my father beating my mother. The next day I see her black eye peeking out from behind her dark sunglasses.

Even though I was looking down, I knew that we were passing the Kaufmann department store building with its spring fashion collection in the window, an image I’d see twice daily, month after month, as I rode the bus back and forth to work. Again, I heard a “ding.”

I am eleven and sitting beside my paternal grandmother. She pulls bright shiny brass knuckles from a brown paper bag. Drunk, she whispers, “Your grandfather uses these on me. Don’t ev-ver let a man hit you.”

I looked toward the bus driver, then out of his partially defogged window. The round dormitory buildings belong to the University of Pittsburgh. “Ding.”

I am thirteen and my mother has just thrown a sewing box filled with sharp needles, scissors, thimbles, and thread at my younger brother. It misses him.

Head hung low, teeth grinding, hands shaking, I pulled the cord, hard. “Ding!” Inside my head, I yell “Stop! I want to get off.”

At Negley and Ellsworth, I staggered off the bus, wondering why I was suddenly having these horrifying memories for the first time.

My legs shook as I walked across the street toward my apartment. Blinded by my tear-speckled eyeglasses, I fumbled for my keys.

Emotionally exhausted, the small flight of stairs left me winded. I opened the door to my apartment, took off my coat, and sank to the floor, back against the wall. I looked around at the empty rooms, bare walls, and curtainless windows, seeing only a futon mattress for sleeping, an expensive All-Clad cooking pot, a professional chef’s knife, and a secondhand four-piece Mikasa fine china dish set.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t afford to begin furnishing my place. The truth

was that I wasn't sure I wanted to. I didn't want to fill it up with the should-haves from the latest TV commercials. It was my first place, and I wanted to decide what furnishings best represented me. Part of me liked not having furniture. It gave me the feeling of building a new life from the ground up.

I started to cry again, and my salty tears came down like a monsoon with snot hanging from my nose. I sat on the floor like a four-year-old, hugging my knees. Then I heard the voice of my mother inside my head.

"What are you crying for? I was the one who suffered all those beatings. Girl, you'd better go on and be happy. You got a 'good' job. You make almost three times more than I do. You have a college degree, and your own apartment. You are not one of those single, black mothers raising babies. Just go on and be happy. You made it."

I cried even harder.

Had I made it? Did I want for me what society, black America, and my mother, wanted for me?

I continued to sit on the floor, and more violent images appeared in my mind's eye. My body flinched each time I remembered a scream or loud thump from my childhood. But it was the memories of the long periods of silence from childhood that were the scariest. I never knew if the fight for the night was over. So my eyes would shift back and forth in the darkness of my bedroom, waiting.

Even though Pittsburgh seemed like 20 degrees that day, the memories of my past were just beginning to thaw out.