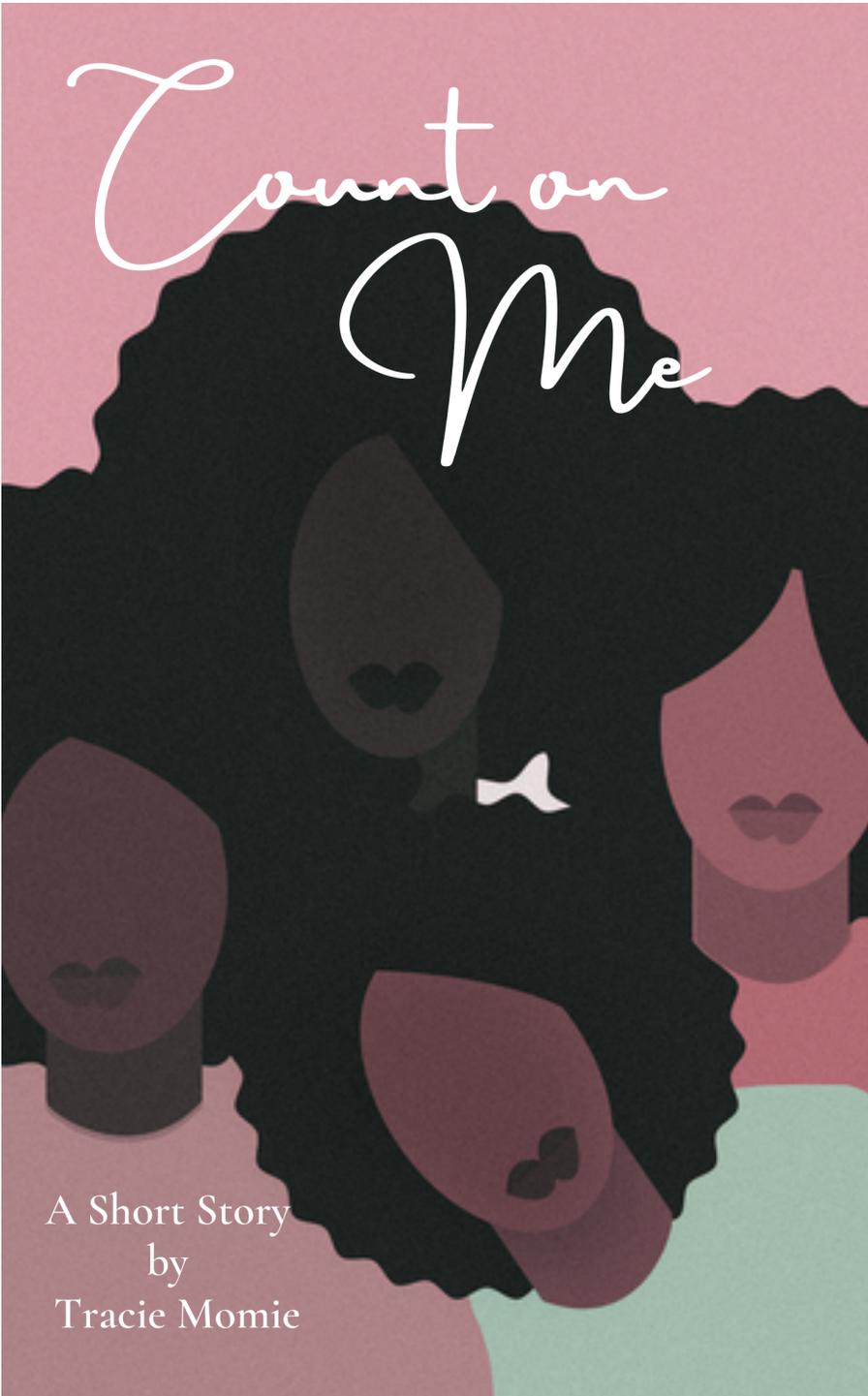


# Count on Me

A stylized illustration featuring a large, dark afro hairstyle in the center. Within the afro, there are several smaller, simplified faces in various shades of brown and red. The background is a solid light pink color. The title 'Count on Me' is written in a white, cursive font across the top of the afro.

A Short Story  
by  
Tracie Momie

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## Lisa

I hesitated at the front entrance of the mortuary taking a few calming breaths before the door swung open and caught me off guard. My hand automatically flew to my chest, and my eyes widened.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to scare you. I thought you couldn’t get the door open.” A black man with gray at his temples smiled at me.

“Oh! No, you didn’t scare me,” I lied.

He looked at me expectantly. “Are you coming in?”

“Of course,” I cleared my throat and willed my feet to move. I stepped inside the foyer of the mortuary and smiled at the man, “Thank you.”

“No problem. Are you here for Janet Taylor’s services?” he asked solemnly.

I nodded as a lump formed in my throat. He wore a gold name tag with the mortuary logo at the top, and what I assumed was his name at the bottom— *Randall Thompson*.

“Okay, here you go,” he handed me a folded booklet. I glanced down at it, it was a funeral program.

“Right now, the viewing is happening in the main room down the hall. The service will start at eleven-thirty,” he commented as he led me from the lobby.

I stared at the image on the program. It was a picture of Janet I remembered liking on Facebook a few years ago. She looked so pretty, but she had always been pretty. Her hair was up in a curly puff, which made her look more like her younger self. People were shocked by the hashtag on the photo: #fiftytwothere. Time had snuck up on us. Being in your fifties was nowhere near old nowadays, which is why I was devastated when I got the news Janet had died at fifty-five years old. Pancreatic cancer. By the time she was diagnosed, she was already close to Stage 4.

I followed behind Randall and gripped my purse strap tightly, I needed something to ground me. I felt a strong sense of déjà vu walking down the hallway. Two years ago, I was in a similar place for a similar reason when my husband, Anthony died. I say *died*, but it was technically murder—vehicular manslaughter. A drunk driver had hit him and kept going. He was fifty-four at time.

And now here I was at the funeral of one of my closest friends. Well, we used to be close until she wrote a best-selling

book, which got optioned for a Netflix movie. The demise of our friendship had nothing to do with jealousy or the fact she got really busy or famous. No, what had unraveled our relationship and dismantled our “clique” was the book Janet wrote was about us.

Of course, she changed the names and other details, but it was so obvious. She’d basically pulled a Harper from the movie, *The Best Man*. We’d all asked her not to do the movie because we knew other people would figure it out too, and she had put *all* our dirty business in the streets, the ‘streets’ being her book. The most mind-boggling thing to all of us was why Janet hadn’t revealed any of her own secrets!

When we confronted her, she was angry because none of us bothered to read the book until it got optioned almost a year later. She said if we had supported her from the beginning, *maybe* she would have felt inclined to make some changes. But in the end, Netflix wanted the story as-is, no changes or edits. All hell broke loose after that! And even with the threat of litigation, her book still managed to become a movie. I think we’d actually made it worse by admitting it was based on real life events. In hindsight, I doubt anyone outside of our circle would have even known. That had been the end of the

friendship/sisterhood we'd established almost twenty-five years ago. It broke my heart we'd never gotten the chance to reconcile.

Randall, the mortuary man, extended his hand like a church usher when we arrived at the room where Janet's body lay at rest. I nodded my thanks and entered the room; it was only half full. I slowly made my way to the front to view the body but chickened out at the last minute. I didn't want to see her lying lifeless in a coffin. Janet had always been the life of the party. The joker and comedienne who made us all laugh. Always smiling and happy. Well, until everything fell apart. But I wanted to remember her the way she used to be. The Janet from my memories. Not to mention, if I walked up to that casket, I would probably see Anthony's face and pass out cold.

Instead, I slid into a pew a few rows from the front. I gasped when I saw Angie sitting at the far end of the pew. She turned her head in my direction and gave me a faint smile. I tried my best to return it, but I couldn't get the muscles in my face to cooperate. I walked halfway down and took a seat; thankfully, a man and woman sat between us, which created a barrier.

Less than thirty minutes later, the funeral started. I glanced around and was pleasantly surprised to see the entire room now filled to capacity. There were even a few people

standing against the back wall— including Pam, she was always late to everything. Some things would never change. I turned my attention back to the front of the room and wondered if Nicole was also in attendance. The funeral director asked us to stand as the family entered. Tears immediately filled my eyes upon seeing Janet’s younger brother Greg holding up their mother, Miss Jackie. She’d been a firecracker back in the day. She had Janet at seventeen, so she always appeared to be youthful, more like a big sister than a mom. But right now, she looked like a frail old woman as she leaned against her son.

I wiped my tears and cursed inwardly, I’d forgotten to bring tissue. I stared down into my lap and suddenly a pack of tissue appeared in my line of sight. I raised my eyes to the man sitting next to me, and he pointed towards Angie. I mouthed, *thank you*, and opened the package. My head remained lowered for most of the service and when it came time to read the obituary, I hesitantly opened the program.

I was shocked to see all the pictures of our group, but then again, we had been closer than family for almost twenty-five years. It was hard to believe we had ever been so young. But it was even harder to believe the women who knew me sometimes better than I knew myself were no longer in my life. The thought

brought a fresh round of tears to my eyes. I closed the program as a tear plopped down on a photo of us in Cancun. I thought Janet would outlive us all. Or at least be around until we all became friends again.

I dabbed my eyes feeling my false lashes about to give way. My heart thudded in my chest as Janet's brother walked up to the podium and cleared his throat.

“This is hard. I never in a million years thought I'd be standing here preparing to say words about my sister. Janet was always the life of the party— funny, smart, beautiful, and the best big sister you could ever have. The world just became a little darker now that her light has gone out,” he closed his eyes as his voice broke and then cleared his throat again to continue. “I am going to miss her so *very* much. She lived a good life, a solid fifty-five years on this Earth. It wasn't nearly long enough but we're glad God gave her to us for as long as he did. We are so proud of you Jan and love you so much, rest easy big Sis,” he sighed, glancing at the casket before joining his mother on the front row.

After the service ended, people milled around the lobby of the mortuary and in the parking lot. Janet's body would be cremated later in the day, so there wouldn't be an interment. I'd

never attended a cremation ceremony. It seemed so unfinished. I hurried through the crowd hoping to give Miss Jackie and Greg a hug before leaving. The last thing I wanted was to run into anyone else and make things awkward.

I spotted Miss Jackie being consoled by a woman I didn't know and made a beeline for her, but Nicole appeared out of nowhere and got to her before me. Nicole's husband, Leland hovered nearby.

"Oh, my goodness, Nicole? Oh, Nicole, I haven't seen you in forever," Miss Jackie hugged her. "My baby, she's gone! Oh, Lord!" she began to wail. Her eyes opened and landed on me.

"Lisa? Is everybody here?" she started looking around the lobby. "Angie! Pam! Y'all get over here." she cried.

We all hesitantly made our way over to our deceased ex-friend's grieving mother and made sure we only made eye contact with her. Once we were all gathered, our arms formed a tight circle around her. It made me want to puke.

## Nicole

**I** took a few shaky breaths as the arms of four women who had been my best friends— sisters— for almost twenty-five years encircled me. Well, they weren't hugging *me*, but it still felt nice to be this close to them even if it was for such a tragic event.

I still couldn't believe Janet was dead. That didn't even sound right. Sure, I had been angry at her for the secrets she revealed in her book but I never, *ever* in a million years would have wanted her dead. Leland didn't understand why I was so distraught since I hadn't talked to her in three years. I knew he had been relieved when my relationship fell apart with The Girls (as I called them). He never really liked them, didn't feel they were appropriate friends for a pastor's wife. Had he known the *real* reason for the fallout, he probably wouldn't have kept me on the pedestal he often placed under my feet.

The Girls had been my family. Always loving, caring, protective, and supportive. Which is why I didn't understand what had possessed Janet to write that book. She'd revealed things about me from another life that could destroy my marriage and ruin my name in the church. I still remembered the

look on her face the night we'd all shown up at her house. She was shocked that it had been *my* idea to call the meeting. I don't think she'd ever seen me that upset. Thinking back to the night, I now regretted my last words to her, *"If you were really as talented as you seem to think you are, you wouldn't need to base your book on the lives of your friends. Is that what you were doing all these years? Collecting material? Is that why it took you damn near twenty years to finally do something with your life?"*

As the arms around me fell away, I was brought back to the present. Miss Jackie kept her grip on my hand as she addressed us.

"Y'all are coming by the house, right?" she asked, her tone pleading.

Four pairs of eyes darted back and forth to each other as we tried to come up with individual excuses. I felt I had the best excuse,

"Leland has a pre-marital counseling session in a few hours," I smiled, looking over my shoulder at my husband. He was busy on his phone.

"You can ride with me— I'll drop you home later," Angie spoke up. My eyes widened.

“I-um-that’s not–,” I stuttered. I definitely did not want to be in a car going anywhere with Angela Keith.

We’d all had our nicknames back in the day. I was Nerdy Nicole. Hyper-focused on school and studying. My mama had dropped out of high school at sixteen, and so had my grandmother. I studied hard and graduated both high school and college eventually becoming a registered nurse.

We called Janet the Joker, God rest her soul. She was the prankster and funny one, always able to make us laugh. Lisa the Leader, was the glue and tactful diplomat of the group. Popular Pam (although sometimes we would be catty and call her Promiscuous Pam) she liked the guys, and the guys *definitely* liked her.

Then there was Angie. Or Angry Angie. She had a temper like no one I’d ever met in my life. The Incredible Hulk had nothing on her. Nine times out of ten whenever we went to a club, Angie got into a fight with someone. And Janet was usually the only one who could calm her down. We’d all become friends at some point in our early twenties. Lisa and I went to TSU together, Pam and Lisa had gone to high school together, Angie and Janet worked together at Sear’s, and Lisa and Janet’s

younger brothers had played on the same neighborhood baseball team.

I looked up to find all eyes on me after Angie's offer. I cleared my throat.

"Let me check with Leland, right quick," I excused myself from the group.

"Hey, you ready to go?" he asked with a hint of relief. He had been bothered because Janet's funeral services weren't held in a church.

"Miss Jackie wants me to go to her house for the repast," I whispered.

He immediately shook his head. "I have a counseling session, I can—," he started.

"I know. I told them and then Angie offered me a ride and said she'd bring me back home but—,"

Before I could tell him to help me come up with an excuse, his eyes widened and he nodded his head.

"That's perfect. I needed to make an additional stop anyway."

I narrowed my eyes at him as he made his way over to the group. I hadn't known anything about an 'additional stop'

before now. He extended his hand towards Miss Jackie, and she put on a brave smile before placing her hand in his.

“Ma’am, my condolences on the loss of your daughter. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:18. May the Lord be with you and guide you during this difficult time. I, unfortunately, will not be able to accompany my wife to the repast but thank her friends for offering her a ride, so she can be with the family.” I noticed how The Girls were all giving him the same side-eyes that had become the norm over the years.

Leland turned his attention to me and smiled, “I’ll call and check on you in a couple of hours.” He kissed my cheek and with that, he was gone.

“Well, I guess that settles it!” Miss Jackie was thrilled. “I’ll see y’all at the house.”

She didn’t need to specify which house or an address. We all knew it was the same stately home in Rice Village where we’d attended many parties and gatherings over the years. We cast wary glances at each other as we followed Miss Jackie out the front door of the funeral home. Once we were outside, I let Angie lead the way to her car. I was shocked to see her open the door to a silver Toyota Prius. Three years ago, Angie drove a

black Ford Excursion. She joked (at least I think it was a joke) she needed a big vehicle just in case— and I quote— “she had to run over a bitch.” I guess she noticed my shocked expression.

“Trying to do my part for the environment,” she shrugged with a slight smile.

After I buckled my seatbelt, Angie carefully pulled out of the driveway and onto the street.

“How’ve you been? You look good,” she complimented.

I wasn’t used to her being so *friendly*. Even with me and The Girls, she could be guarded and a little short. But she was also the one person we all knew we could count on.

“I’ve been good, thanks. You’re the one who looks amazing. Like you’re aging backward.”

And she did. Her skin glowed and her body hadn’t changed much at all. Unlike the extra twenty pounds I carried. She probably had a consistent fitness routine, but I bet a large part of it was because she’d never had kids. That was the reason her second marriage hadn’t lasted. He ended up wanting kids after saying he didn’t before they got married. Angie was vehement about not having kids. Janet had said it was because Angie had a rough childhood, which was the reason she was so

angry. Her anger issues had destroyed her first marriage. The violent outbursts had eventually become too much.

“Thanks. I’ve been plant-based for the past year and a half, and I teach yoga.” She smiled.

“Oh, wow. That’s different.” I said dumbly.

Angie used to be a big meat eater back in the day. She and Janet both loved a good, juicy steak.

“Yeah.” She blew out a breath. “I can’t believe Janet’s gone.” She murmured, almost reading my mind.

I didn’t want to do this with her. Not now. I didn’t want to go down memory lane in her little clown car and pretend like it hadn’t been three years since we last saw each other. Three years since we’d talked. Three years since she’d hurled those nasty words at me.

I simply nodded and looked out the passenger window.

Angie sighed deeply. “Look, I know you don’t want to hear it, but I’m sorry for all the stuff I said that night— and all the stuff before then. It was never—,”

I cut her off. “You’re right. I *don’t* want to hear it. It’s water under the bridge.” I said sharply.

She’d been pretty docile so far; I hoped she didn’t snap. I was definitely going to need to find another ride home. I didn’t

want to spend any more time in the car with Angie than I had to. I said a silent prayer when Miss Jackie's house came into view. Thankfully, she didn't live too far from the funeral home.

Angie slowly pulled into the driveway but hesitated after parking the car.

“Even though you don't want to hear it, I apologize. I never meant to hurt you with my words or actions. And I never, *ever* judged you despite how it may have seemed. Out of all of us, Nicole you were the only one who had the courage back then to be yourself. Your *true* self.”

My eyes widened and I frowned at her before flinging the door open and getting out of the car. It was too much. I couldn't think about the past. I was a different person now. A preacher's wife. A mother. I was happy. *Wasn't I?*

## Pam

I sipped from my glass while my eyes roamed around the living room. There were at least fifty or sixty people inside and more outside. Not to mention it was standing room only at her funeral. I didn't realize Janet had been *that* popular. I guess I never thought about her life outside of the five of us. We were in our own bubble, for the most part.

I noticed Lisa talking to someone on the other side of the room. I laughed into my glass. Five or six years ago, I would have made my way across the room and rescued her because it was painfully obvious by the fake smile on her face and the way her body turned away from the person she talked to— she was looking for an escape. Her eyes found mine, and I smirked at her. She gave me a pleading glare. I turned and walked in the opposite direction. That's what happened when you were always so damned nice!

As I made my way through the rest of the house, I smiled thinking about all the times we'd spent in these rooms over the years. I grinned wickedly remembering the guy I'd snuck in when I was supposed to be checking on Miss Jackie's dog, Titus. The entire time me and— *I forget his name*— were bumping and

grinding on Miss Jackie's couch, Titus was on the patio barking like a maniac. I hated that little mutt. God rest his mangy soul.

I had a reputation for been promiscuous back in the day. It didn't bother me since it was sort of true. What bothered me was how people saw it as such a bad thing. First off, I'm not entirely sure we (human beings) were meant to be one hundred percent monogamous, if so, sex wouldn't feel as good as it does. Instead, it would be awful and we'd dread it and only do it to procreate. Speaking of— I always, *always* made guys use condoms. My motto was 'no glove, no love.' Never had an STD or pregnancy scare. Unlike a couple of others in our little group.

But I'd eventually slowed down and tired of having multiple lovers. Actually, one lover in particular made me realize I needed to stop sleeping around altogether. I'd taken my encounter with him as a sign it was time to settle down and get married before it was too late. I met my husband, Warren six-weeks into what I thought would be a longer celibate journey. In the beginning, the sex was unreal. I recanted everything I'd ever said about married people and their non-existent, boring sex lives.

Warren was *very* adventurous in the bedroom and kept me more than satisfied. A year after we got married, I got

pregnant with our first child. I was thirty-five-years old. The next two children would follow within the next three and a half years. At one point, I had a one-year-old, three-year-old, and five-year-old in my damned forties! Our sex life was never the same after that. Eighteen years and one hysterectomy later, I couldn't tell you the last time my husband even looked at me in that way.

But recently, someone else *had* started looking at me in that way. I was proud to say I never cheated on Warren. But Devin, a younger guy I'd met at work had me contemplating it. I'd started feeling like things were coming back to life *down there*. We'd only been flirting up so far, but he flat out told me a couple of weeks ago he wanted to make me scream his name. I almost told him it would be the other way around, but I didn't want to be too cocky since it had been a while.

However, I'd avoided him ever since his declaration because I knew it wouldn't take much for me to give in to his challenge. I still had three kids at home- fourteen, sixteen, and eighteen. And I didn't want to put them through a divorce. My original plan was to stay married for four more years until our youngest daughter graduated high school. But I wasn't so sure

anymore. Life wasn't promised. Time wasn't promised. What if I was the next one to die?

"There you are." Miss Jackie popped up out of nowhere and startled me. "I wanted to introduce you to somebody," she grabbed my hand and I followed along like a child.

I always liked Miss Jackie. She used to be so fun and vibrant. She was also gorgeous and fine! Men always flirted with her. That's how she got this big ass house— she married a white man almost twenty years older than her. He was Greg's dad. He died eight years after they got married and left Miss Jackie very well off. I used to say I wanted to be like her when I grew up.

I was so jealous of Janet's relationship with her mother. My relationship with my own mama was strained, to say the least. I'd never completely forgiven her for not standing up and protecting me when I told her one of her boyfriend's (Dirty Jack) had grabbed my ass when I was sixteen. He called me a liar, and she said I shouldn't be walking around in short shorts in front of him. After that incident, I left home and moved in with my grandmother.

I liked sex, but I'd be damned if someone would take it from me, especially an old perverted man! My body was *mine* to give. And I could tell Jack was cooking up a plan to get me

alone. Mama and Jack broke up a few months later but I stayed with my grandmother, and me and Mama never really mended our relationship. She was in her seventies now and a decent grandmother to my kids, but she was still just as stubborn as she had been when I was younger. She never apologized or even said she believed me. That's the thing that still hurt even after thirty-seven years. But it was no secret I wasn't her favorite child. My sister, Renee, held the title from the day she was born.

“Pammy—,” Miss Jackie called my name and brought me from my thoughts of the past.

“Sorry, yes ma'am?”

“I was saying my neighbor's son, Robert, just moved back from California. Had a bad divorce,” she whispered over her shoulder.

“He's an engineer. I told him you were in Human Resources and—,”

*Shit.*

This was why I hated telling people I worked in Human Resources. They automatically assumed I could hook everybody up with a job.

I gently pulled my hand away from Miss Jackie's.

“We actually have a hiring freeze going right now. Plus

the economy is so bad,” I responded.

“Well, maybe you can take his number— Bobby!” She called out and a tall man with a receding hairline and paunch ambled over towards us. When he looked at me, my eyes widened. I’d recognize those gray eyes anywhere. *It was couch guy!*

He squinted at me. “Hi, I’m Robert. But everybody calls me Bobby. Have we met before?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.” I lied.

“You look so familiar.”

“You may have met her with Jan. They were best friends. This is Pam. I need to go say goodbye to some folks. Y’all exchange numbers or something about the job.” Miss Jackie encouraged before leaving us alone.

“Sorry about that. I just got back in town last week and my mother is on a mission— I knew it was a bad idea to stay with her.” He grumbled.

“No worries. But like I told Miss Jackie, Chevron has a hiring freeze on at the moment. The best thing to do is go online and check out when positions become available and—,”

“Wham bam, thank you, Pam,” he said suddenly. “I knew I recognized you!” He laughed. He stepped closer to me, and I

took a step back.

“It’s been over twenty years, but I’m really good with faces amongst other things,” he said suggestively. “I remember me and you went to town on the couch in the parlor while Jackie’s dog was barking outside,” he laughed.

He licked his crusty lips. “How have you been?” he smirked at me.

I held my left hand up to his face flashing the substantial diamond in my wedding ring.

“Married. *Happily.*” I frowned as I turned and walked away from him.

*The nerve.* I guess he thought because he had pretty eyes, he was still fine. Or that I would melt at his feet. He needed to take his ass to the gym and sit down somewhere. Preferably on a treadmill!

“Hey, Pam,” I heard a familiar voice behind me. I turned to see Angie smiling at me. I debated whether or not to walk away from her too, or be the bigger person.

“Hey,” I decided to reply. I felt bad I’d left Lisa hanging earlier. Running into old gray eyes had been my instant karma.

“How’ve you been?” she asked.

I tilted my head and stared at her. “Fine. What’ve you

heard?” I hardly recognized the woman before me. I mean physically she looked like she hadn’t aged a day (*bitch!*) but her demeanor was totally off. Where were the frowns, scowls, and eye rolls she’d been known for over the past twenty-five years?

She laughed. It was rare for Angie to laugh but when she did, it was always genuine. Head thrown back, complete with a gut-deep chuckle. It made me smile.

“I haven’t heard anything. It’s not like I’ve talked anyone we both know in a while.” She said with a hint of sadness.

“Same,” I assured her.

However, I did send a condolence card when Lisa’s husband died. I wondered if she ever found he’d cheated on her? Not with me! But I did know the person. We all did.

“I’m headed to the patio,” she smiled with a glint in her eye.

I knew what that meant. She had weed. I couldn’t believe Angie still smoked marijuana. The only reason we didn’t give her a bunch of shit about it in the past was because it mellowed her out. But we were old ladies now. Were we really going to smoke weed?

*Hell, yeah.*

On our way outside, I saw Nicole talking to Janet’s

brother, Greg. She looked in our direction and raised an eyebrow. I continued following Angie outside and we walked over to the far side of the massive backyard near a fire pit area that wasn't occupied.

“You still buy your weed from Guapo Petey?” I laughed as we sat.

She laughed as well. “Now that’s a blast from the past. I haven’t seen Petey in years. I sell CBD products, so this is from *my* private stash,” She winked.

She took two skinny, short cigarettes from a slim, silver case and handed me one. *Was this how joints looked now?* I frowned.

“Will this get you high?” I questioned eyeing the rolled paper in my palm.

She grinned and nodded before producing a lighter.

A few minutes later, we had a good fade going and Angie had to go and ruin it by talking.

“I wish I could go back to that night,” she said out loud.

“What night?” I asked, already knowing.

“At Jan’s when we all ambushed her,”

I rolled my eyes. “You make it sound so dramatic.”

“It was *very* dramatic. Four against one. We didn’t even

listen to her side of the story.”

“There was no need to listen. It was all there in black and white,” I frowned. “Here comes the pastor’s wife. Hide the weed.” I joked as I saw Nicole approaching us.

“I heard that,” she said, coming closer. “I should have known I’d find the two of you out here.” She shook her head.

“Please, no sermons.” I groaned.

“That’s Leland’s job, not mine.” She grumbled.

I raised an eyebrow and wondered if there was trouble in holy paradise.

“Want some weed?” I smiled, deviously.

Nicole rolled her eyes. Even before she married Leland, she never smoked. We managed to corrupt Lisa and Janet every now and then but never Nerdy Nicole.

“I’ll pass,” she smiled and shook her head.

She stood with her arms folded gazing around the backyard. I exchanged glances with Angie, who looked from me to Nicole with an expectant glare.

“This is so fucking unreal.” Nicole suddenly blurted.

My eyes widened. I wasn’t used to Nicole dropping f-bombs.

“Janet is *dead*. Gone. *Forever*.” She shook her head as

her breathing became labored.

“Won’t we see her in heaven?” I asked. I wasn’t trying to be funny but that’s the kind of thing Nicole was known to say. I tried to provide some comfort even though I was a little high.

She turned and scowled at me, but then her expression softened. “What if there isn’t a heaven? Or what if– what if we don’t all make it in?” she asked as her voice cracked.

“Are you sure you don’t want some weed?” I asked unsure what to say.

“No! I don’t want any weed! I want to know how this happened? How women who were closer to me than my own family are practically strangers now! And how one of them is dead! She died without our forgiveness; she died without us reconciling. Doesn’t it make y’all feel like shit?” Nicole asked. Tears began to stream her face.

Angie cleared her throat.

“I um- I actually talked to her a couple of months before she died. I didn’t know about the cancer, but I did tell her I was sorry and forgave her.”

My head almost detached from my shoulders as I swung around to look at Angie.

She shrugged. “I’ve been in therapy.” Was all she said

before the missing member of our estranged group stepped over to us.

“Thanks a lot, Pam. I just spent over an hour listening to some random woman, who knew Janet when she was in elementary school tell me stories about how creative she used to be.” she scowled.

I smirked but didn’t say anything. I was more intrigued by Angie’s admission. But before I could ask her about it, Nicole spoke up.

“So, what– you’re doing like a twelve-step program trying to make amends to everyone in your life you hurt?” she frowned.

“Something like that,” Angie admitted.

“You’re in a twelve-step program? Are you an addict?” Lisa gasped.

I started to laugh, but it died in my throat when Angie replied,

“Yes.”

## Angie

I glanced around at the shocked faces of my friends, which is what I still considered them even though they probably felt otherwise. I'd just admitted to being an addict. But my addiction wasn't what they were thinking.

"Are you supposed to be smoking weed? Did I mess up your recovery?" Pam asked, genuinely horrified.

"Y'all were smoking weed?" Lisa frowned. I could tell her indignation was mostly because we hadn't invited her to join us.

I smiled and relaxed back against the cushioned chair I sat in.

"I'm not addicted to drugs," I announced.

Nicole sat on the edge of the fire pit and glanced at Pam before bringing her attention back to me. "Is it sex?" she whispered.

"Why are you whispering? We can all hear you, and why did you look at me?" Pam frowned.

I rolled my eyes. Pam had definitely been addicted to sex, but I decided not to deflect.

"It's emotional addiction." I clarified.

“What is that?” Lisa asked, confused.

I’d felt the same way when my therapist made the diagnosis.

“When you are addicted to certain behaviors without regard for consequences because of how they make you feel. For me— it was anger. I clung to it and wielded it like a sword and shield because I felt it protected me. Kept people from getting too close, which meant they couldn’t hurt me.” I took a deep breath feeling exposed under all of their gaping eyes and mouths.

Since I had their attention, I decided to continue.

“Being angry all the time eventually took a toll on me. My mind, body, and spirit. It was like, I didn’t even know *how* to be happy. Or sad or anything in between. Anger was always my go-to emotion and with the anger came the need to also be destructive both physically and verbally.”

I really hated I’d attacked so many people in my life who hadn’t deserved it. But back then, I derived a sick satisfaction from it.

“So, you and Janet made up before she died?” Nicole was the first one to speak.

“What? How long have y’all been out here?” Lisa asked

exasperated.

“I don’t know that we made up– but I apologized. She also apologized and we accepted those apologies. We didn’t start hanging out or anything. Like I said, a few months later, she died.”

“Damn,” Pam muttered.

The joint I’d smoked had cleared my mind to do something that should have been done a long time ago.

“I know we all felt like what Jan did was wrong–,”

“It *was* wrong!” Nicole asserted.

I nodded. “You’re right– she had no business putting *our* business in her book. But I think if we’re being honest with ourselves, what we were really upset about was the appalling behavior we exhibited, which we hoped would stay buried.”

“Is that what your therapist told you? Sounds like some psychoanalyst bullshit,” Pam frowned.

“I agree with Pam. Out of all of us, Angie, *you* should’ve been the most concerned. What you did could have landed you jail!” Lisa admonished.

I raised an eyebrow. It was times like these when trying to be the bigger person, finding my center, and suppressing the urge to strike was *extremely* hard. Ten years ago, Lisa would

have been flat on her ass and the look of panic on her face let me know, she knew it too.

“You mean for the fire I set to Andre Harrison’s apartment in a fit of rage? The fire I set because he was *talking* to another woman? The fire that burned down two other units and killed somebody’s dog. Is that what you’re referring to Lisa? If so, say it! Let’s give a name to our crimes and sins. I felt horrible about what I did regardless of how I may have acted on the outside. I cried and prayed about it every day, and asked God to forgive me. I bought that lady another dog. And it was me who led the fundraiser to help replace some of what those people lost. I know it was wrong, and some things were irreplaceable, but I did at least try to atone for my sins. I still thank God no human lives were lost.”

My blood had started rolling and bubbling beneath my skin. I wanted to lash out and hit something or someone. But instead, I placed my trembling hand in my purse and pulled out another joint. I lit it and took a long drag before looking back up at Lisa’s shocked face.

“And by the way, the statute of limitations for arson in Texas is seven years.” I blew the smoke through my nose.

I’d set the fire almost fifteen years ago.

“Give me one of those.” Lisa extended her hand to me.

“I’ll take another.” Pam grinned.

We were all silent for a few minutes before Pam spoke.

“Why do y’all think Janet left out her own secrets in the book? Like when she intentionally wrecked her step-dad’s vintage Mercedes,”

“Or when she got that nasty STD from her professor back in college?” Lisa added bitterly.

I shrugged. We were all angry about Janet sharing our secrets, but it was magnified by the fact she hadn’t included her own dirt, and she never told us *why*. But since she was no longer here, we would have to learn to live with that unanswered question.

Pam sighed before speaking again, “I remember when Renee first introduced me to Nathan. The first thought that went through my mind was— *he’s no good*. But she would go on and on about how perfect and sweet he was, and how he treated her like a queen. I tried to tell her he was only a man.” Pam rambled on about her sister’s husband. We all knew where the story was headed.

“She thought I was jealous. Shit, looking back— maybe I was. But when he proposed, I couldn’t stand it. I wanted to show

her he wasn't who she thought he was and prove he would hurt her. My plan had been to flirt with him, but it *escalated*. After we had sex, I think we were both stunned we'd taken it so far and we knew it would devastate Renee— so, we never told her. My relationship with my sister was never the same, and to this day, she doesn't know why. That's the real reason I stopped sleeping around and settled down.” She remarked softly.

That was another thinly veiled backstory of a character in Janet's book. Based on Pam's real-life story.

Lisa chuckled. “I was furious Jan had mentioned my abortion – or Lela's abortion.” She rolled her eyes. “Could she not have been more creative with those character names?”

We all laughed. In addition to our real-life drama, Janet had given the character's eerily similar names. Lisa became Lela. Pamela was Tamala. Nicole was Nichelle, and I was Evangeline instead of Angela.

“My real reason for not wanting the abortion to become public knowledge wasn't just because I didn't want Anthony to find out,” she hesitated at the mention of her deceased husband. “But because it wasn't his baby.”

Nicole was on her feet. “What?” she asked, echoing the gasps from me and Pam.

I was surprised. Lisa seemed loyal to a fault. But deep down in the recesses of my soul, my inner mean girl did a fist pump. At least she'd gotten payback on him for cheating even though she never knew about it.

“And just so the two of you know,” Lisa pointed at me and then Pam. “He told me about Yolanda.”

I choked on the smoke I'd inhaled.

“Well damn.” Pam remarked, patting me on my back a little too hard.

“Yolanda? Yolanda Griffin? What about her?” Nicole asked looking around at the three of us.

Pam and I had gone to see a movie and noticed a couple making out in the back of the theater. We thought it was two teenagers but were stunned to see Lisa's husband and Yolanda Griffin—one of Lisa's sorority sisters emerge from the seats.

“Anthony had a little fling with her.” Lisa shrugged nonchalantly.

“What? Are you serious? When? For how long?” Nicole questioned.

“He said it was only a few weeks. But he was probably lying. He's dead now, so. . .,” Lisa swallowed a few times to get her emotions under control.

Pam sat up straight in her chair. “You had some side dick, didn’t you?” she accused before cackling loudly.

Lisa smirked before taking another puff from the almost burned out joint.

“I ain’t mad at you!” Pam announced. “I’m thinking of doing a little something-something with this young tender who keeps flirting with me. A woman can only take so much.” Pam groaned.

“Have you ever cheated on Warren?” I asked. I’d always wondered how she’d been able to give up sleeping around to be with *one* man.

“No, I haven’t. And I don’t want to, but he hasn’t touched me in over a year.”

Nicole gasped again.

“I had a hysterectomy two years ago—,”

“What? Are you okay?” Lisa asked, concerned.

“I’m fine. Afterward, though, I lost my desire. But it’s back with a vengeance, and now Warren is the one uninterested. I think he’s probably having an affair as well.”

“Why not get a divorce?” I questioned.

I’d been married twice. Neither worked out. I took most of the blame for those relationships ending the way they did. But

I also take credit for not settling into that unhappiness because I'd taken vows. I wasn't happy and neither were either of my husbands. I regret being so hard on number two— Victor was a good guy. But it didn't mean we should have gotten married. Sometimes it's not about holding on, but letting go of something you never should have grabbed in the first place.

I was dating someone now. We'd been together for over a year. He was the first person, other than my friends, who made me feel safe. Safe to be me. I'd learned in therapy a lot of my anger came from my mother dying when I was ten. My father had been so distraught, he checked out and sent me to live with my grandmother. Then when I turned eighteen, she pushed me to leave her house and learn to take care of myself.

I'd internalized all of this to mean no one loved me because no one wanted to keep me. Instead of acting out like most girls who tend to 'look for love' (like Pam), I was mad. Mad at my mama for dying, my daddy for leaving, and my grandmother for pushing me away. But because I couldn't take it out on them, I took it out on anyone else who dared cross my path. I also became insanely independent never wanting to depend on anyone again. I still had serious issues asking for help.

“I know a divorce sounds like an easy solution but I’m trying not to be selfish and think of my kids. In four more years, Anaya will be eighteen and-,”

“Life is too short.” Lisa interrupted. “You’ve got to live your life for *you*. And no one else. Not even your kids. Trust me, Anaya’s going to grow up and get her own life, and you’ll rarely hear from her. Ask me how I know.” Lisa pursed her lips tightly. She had a twenty-two-year-old son who had moved to Los Angeles after graduating high school.

“I cannot believe what I’m hearing right now. We’re advocating infidelity and divorce?” Nicole frowned.

I wondered when the saint would get on her soapbox. I was surprised she hadn’t chimed in before now.

“Calm down. Nobody’s advocating anything. We’re just catching up.” I smiled at her.

“Calm down? That’s rich coming from you!” she screeched.

“Really? Are you saying you’re the only one who can change Mrs. Pastor Leland Davis?” I asked. The weed had left me feeling a little blasé.

“Oh shit,” Pam chuckled next to me.

“Angie, *don’t*,” Lisa begged.

I stood and Nicole took a step back.

“How has life been for *you* the past few years, Nicole? Have you made amends and atoned for *your* sins?”

Nicole’s bottom lip trembled. “I knew it was all an act.”

“No, it’s not an act. But I am a work in progress. I know what I’ve done wrong, but I also know the kind of person I want to be. I’m just trying to get it right. And Janet’s death has only affirmed that for me. Time is not on our side, Nicole. We’re all in our mid-fifties and—,”

“I’m fifty-three, that’s not mid-fifties,” Pam pouted.

I shot her a look and she held her hands up. I turned my attention back to Nicole.

“Are you happy with who you are? Are you living the life you want to live? Or is this to please God and get into a heaven you just questioned whether or not even existed?” I asked.

Lisa muttered something under her breath.

“I don’t— I’m not, it was a *one-time* thing, in college! And I regret I ever told y’all! Especially Janet!” Nicole said as tears streamed her face.

“What about the chick at Tony’s thirtieth birthday party?” Pam asked.

“Or the girl in Cancun,” Lisa recalled.

Nicole began to sob as she resumed her place on the edge of the fire pit. I sat next to her. I hadn't meant to make her cry. I placed an arm around her.

"I want you to be happy, whatever that means regardless of *who* you're with. This is *your* life, Nicole. You only get this one. Live it on *your* terms."

She leaned into me and rested her head on my shoulder. Lisa sat down on the other side of Nicole and placed an arm around her other shoulder. Pam moved to sit next to me.

"I've always wanted to be able to tell people I have a lesbian best friend," Pam whispered.

I glared at her wondering if maybe she'd gone too far. But Nicole's giggles let me know she hadn't.

"That sounds like something Janet would've said," Nicole remarked.

We all agreed.

"To be honest, I don't know *who* I am anymore. My identity has been tied up in my marriage, being a mother, the church, and my job for so long it's like I don't even know what makes me happy. Every single thing I do is for other people. *Nothing* is for me," Nicole swatted angrily at her eyes.

"It's not too late to make some changes," I suggested.

Nicole looked thoughtfully for a minute. “I want to get your therapist’s number. I can see the changes in you Angie and if she was able to help you– not that you were, you know...,” she rambled.

“Girl, I was a hot, angry ass mess. I’ll text you her information.” I smiled as I looked between the four of us. “I don’t want to waste any more time or have any regrets. I miss y’all. I’m sorry for everything I’ve put y’all through over the years and putting you in a position to keep my secrets. I don’t want the next time I see either of you to be at your funeral.” I could feel the tears welling in my eyes. I didn’t want to start crying, I’d learned that I was an ugly crier.

“I feel the exact same way. Who knows how many years we have ahead of us, but I want to have y’all in my lives for these next chapters.” Lisa echoed.

“Me too,” Nicole cried.

We all looked at Pam.

“Hmm, let me see. I think y’all might be in luck since I don’t have any other friends.” She smiled and then became serious. “I really did miss y’all.”

I hated Janet wasn’t here for this reconciliation, and it took her funeral to bring us all together again.

“Did anybody actually watch the movie?” Lisa asked after a while. She was referring to the Netflix movie based on Janet’s book, *Acting Funny*.

Nicole shook her head indicating she hadn’t.

“I did,” Pam responded. “I didn’t like how she portrayed me but I wasn’t mad at the actress they got to play Tamala. She was gorgeous!” Pam smiled.

“Did Warren watch it?” Lisa grimaced.

“Nah, he’s not a big TV watcher unless it’s a game or if I call a movie night.”

“Did you see it?” Lisa asked me.

I nodded. “It was painful to watch. The whole time I was like, *damn is that how saw me?* After I watched the movie, I entered therapy two days later.” I confessed.

“Really?” Nicole asked, surprised.

“Yeah. It was eye-opening, I kept waiting for my character to turn green and go on a rampage ripping people’s heads off,” I groaned.

“You weren’t *that* bad— okay, you were but I feel you, it was definitely difficult to watch. I didn’t realize y’all thought I thought I was perfect,” Lisa said, sadly.

“I never felt that way,” Pam refuted. “I just think

sometimes you're too nice because you want people to like you.”

“Is that so wrong?” Lisa shrugged.

“Who gives a shit about what people think? Half the people you're worried about don't even like themselves. We are too old to waste time on people and things we don't want to be bothered with.” Pam asserted.

Lisa nodded thoughtfully.

“I hope Janet is resting peacefully wherever she is and I'm glad I had her in my life for as long as I did,” Nicole remarked, looking at the sky.

“I feel the same way. And heaven *definitely* exists and I truly believe Janet is up there. She had a good heart.” Pam remarked chokingly.

We all stared heavenward, quiet with our own memories of Janet playing in our head. I really hoped there was a such place as heaven because one lifetime wasn't enough with these crazy, beautiful, smart, flawed, and amazing women. I hadn't been able to count on much in my life except for them. My girls, my sisters— my family.

