

## Prologue

It was an overcast October evening in New Orleans, 1937. Noticing the darkening sky, if the young teenage girl did not get a move on, she would miss the last ferry from Algiers. The boarding house she snuck into to lay her head was a mile long walk away from the Canal Street port on the other side of the water. If she missed the ferry, she would be stuck in Algiers for the evening with nowhere to go.

Actually, there was one place. She had a “friend” that stayed not too far away. This friend also happened to be a grown man. He was a struggling artist, musician, and photographer but she really did not want to bother him. She did not like the way he made her feel or the things he made her do, she had also taken from him the last time she visited. Unsure if he was aware, there were just too many reasons why asking for his help was not an option.

With less than five minutes to reach the ferry port and a ten-minute route to get there, the girl made a run for it at top speed. Her long dark tresses blew in the wind while her knapsack smacked her back. Gunning it down the road to her destination she inescapably knew she would not make it on time but it was her small bit of faith that rationalized anything was possible. At last, she made it to the port just in time to see the ferry depart. Miscalculating how much time she had to panhandle left her officially stranded with nowhere to go. This was not the first time she had to find somewhere on the streets to hunker down in and, she was sure it would not be her last. What was worst was the cold rain that ensued right as the realization of her predicament set in.

Though familiar with the area, she still was clueless where to go. After years on the streets alone, she made it a habit to remain vigilant with her time no matter where she went. This was the first time in a long time she slipped up and now the negative thoughts that often plagued her crept into the mix. The toxicity she spoke into herself was a learned behavior. No matter how positive she tried to stay, her mother’s voice still rang loudly within. She was a mistake and because of this her life would never amount to anything, she would face nothing but turmoil no matter what she did because God did not favor mistakes. She did not want it to be true but it seemed her entire young life was in shambles, she could never catch a break.

The girl tried to shake the doom and gloom that threatened to consume her while briskly traveling the rainy, darkening streets. As her mind willed to concentrate on the task at hand, there was an evil lurking about. In every shadow, the same dark cloaked figure was lurking and observing the young, orphaned, teenager, waiting on the opportunity to corner her. After days of stalking the oblivious girl, the figure that stayed a few steps behind would finally confront her.

On the backside of a butcher’s shop there were two tall, aluminum, trash receptacles cattycornered in a way that left a small diamond shaped space open for the girl to fit into. It wasn’t ideal but the spot was mostly covered by an awning over the back door of the shop. After squeezing into the hiding spot, she stooped down and held her knapsack over her head to help shield her partially exposed left side from the cold drizzle. The cloaked being stood in the shadows watching as she settled in attempting to make herself as hidden and comfortable as the situation would allow.

Between her awkward crouched down position and the extremely strong odor of rotting animal innards, it was not too hard for her to stay alert in the unfavorable circumstances but she eventually dozed off. Moments later a loud thud on one of the aluminum trashcans left her jarred.

Her eyes popped open just in time to see two rats running across the barrier in front of her. Disgusted, she let out a shriek and immediately covered her mouth.

“The jig is up missy! I know you are back there. Come on out!” The figure in the shadows commanded in a calm but intimidating voice. Shaking with a hand covering her mouth, she tried to keep quiet but the voice called out to her again. “Come now girl, I won’t bite. Not tonight anyway!” Tears began to stream down the teenager’s frightened face. The knapsack she used as a makeshift umbrella was no longer effectively shielding her from the rain, the combination of the two left her face dripping wet. “Come! The sooner you show yourself the sooner we can be out of this rain and onto somewhere, much more suitable I assure you. Please do not make me ask again!”

Literally backed into a corner, she took in a gulp before slowly rising from her hiding place, standing, and preparing to greet whomever was calling out to her, but saw no one. She frantically looked around while shivering in the cold and steady drizzle. Slowly emerging from the dark shadows directly in front of her was a tall being face unseen, cloaked in a red, hooded robe with long, finely manicured nails. Mouth agape, the young girl quivered in fear not knowing what to expect next.

# One

## The Inevitable

Kimberly Mitchell was mid-jog when she received the untimely news. Having ignored the first three unknown calls, she finally answered the relentless ringing. “Who is this?” she asked, panting.

The caller’s voice was stern and unfamiliar. “Hello, yes, this is Mr. Edward Lezaza. I’m calling to speak with Ms. Kimberly Mitchell.”

Still jogging in place to maintain her heart rate, she was ready to end the call. She hated interruptions during her morning run. The day never seemed to go favorably whenever she was unable to get her goal mileage in. “Uh, yeah, this is she. Is it possible for me to give you a call back? I’m kinda in the middle of something.”

As agitated as Kimberly was, Mr. Lezaza was that times three. “No, I’d actually like to proceed with these matters as quickly as possible. I’m the attorney in charge of the estate left by your grandmother, Mrs. Lillianna Guidry, and I wo—”

“Wait! What? Her estate? Where is she? What do you mean?”

“As of September 17, 2017, Mrs. Guidry has passed on. Several calls have been placed to the number on file as well as a few postings in the local paper but to no avail. My assistant happened to find your current number through several alternative searches. We decided to give that a try, and well, here we are, Ms. Mitchell. As I was saying, I need to meet with you and the remaining living members mentioned in the will. It looks like Mr. Timothy and Mr. Anthony Mitchell. To your knowledge, are they living?”

Kimberly was no longer jogging or pacing; she was stunned in place. She had not seen or spoken to her grandnana in what felt like a lifetime. The last she remembered, the woman was certainly aging and fading having turned ninety-five that year. Her death really should not have been too much of a shock; it was more guilt that blew Kimberly away.

“Yes, they’re alive, but wait! Where is she? Was she buried? Can I see her?”

Mr. Lezaza was quick to advise that the trio could pick up their grandmother’s ashes at his office Monday morning. He said that Azealia, his assistant, would be in contact the day prior to the hearing to coordinate the pickup of her and her brothers. The last detail he provided before rudely disconnecting was that the three surviving individuals of sound mind, body, and soul named in the will had to be present for the hearing to take place.

The run that Kimberly looked forward to and desperately needed every morning to clear her head turned into a slow, solemn walk filled with grief and guilt. It had been more than three years since she had been in contact with her grandnana. She left her alone in her massive home to be taken care of by live-in assistants. The staff had done an exceptional job, and the woman had her wits about her, but Kimberly was sure the woman died lonely and afraid. It was inevitable; Father Time had caught up with the matriarch of the family, and she was gone. With still over a mile to go, Kimberly decided to walk it out, processing an array of emotions along the way.

She remembered being a happy, loving, six-year-old when her parents were taken away from her in a car accident. With not much family around, the only living relatives suitable and

available were her grandnana Lilly and g-pop Hayward. Besides their grandparents, the children had a suicidal aunt no one had seen in years and a wayward uncle she never recalled meeting. At ages sixty-eight and seventy-five, the couple had taken in Kimberly and her brothers, Timothy, eleven, and Anthony, three.

Timothy never liked the rules of the household. Transitioning into the home was way too much for him to handle. With Timothy—Tim, being the outcast, Anthony—Tone—and Kimberly—Kim, or Mickey as her g-pop affectionately named her as a child due to her high-pitched voice, were much easier to handle. Prior to moving in, the children did not have much of a relationship with their grandparents. What they knew of the pair came in the form of birthday and Christmas gifts they sent; at times, they received gifts for no reason. Tim, the oldest of the three, was actually the most familiar with them, and he oddly had a few vague but blissful memories of times spent with the entire family during holidays, but things started to change when he was around eight.

Tim and Kim grew up around Alex, an older cousin, their Aunt Jeanine's son. He was older than Tim by six years, but Kim remembered him a bit. He and Tim were like brothers for the years Tim had him until out of nowhere Alex began to get sick and his younger cousins saw less and less of him. He died in his sleep on his fifteenth birthday. No one ever said what he had died from, and Tim did not like to talk about it, so he never asked. Shortly after Alex's passing, his mother was committed to a mental institution. Most assumed she'd lost her mind, unable to handle the loss of her adored only child.

Two and a half years later, tragedy struck the family again. That time, the children lost their parents in a terrible car accident. It was said that their father, Isaiah, had been the cause. After drinking excessively at a dinner party and getting behind the wheel alongside his wife, Jennifer, the two met their end when their car veered into oncoming traffic and collided head-on with a sixteen-wheeler. The accident was horrific, so much so that the couple's remains were cremated, as there was not much left of them for a casket burial.

So there the three children were, moving in with their elderly grandparents whom they barely knew in an oversized home they were unfamiliar with. Kim and Tone took to their grandparents immediately, especially Kim to her grandnana Lilly. She remembered every interaction she had with her from the time she was welcomed into their residence. Showered with love and whatever else she wanted and needed. Kim quickly became the favorite. The valuable life lessons taught by her grandnana were greatly appreciated, but knowing was half the battle; applying that knowledge had her stumbling from the time she hit adulthood.

She had disconnected from her grandnana for two reasons. It was a lot for her to deal with, being around the aging woman while proving to be a failure in her own life. She attempted the task for years, trying to help care for her grandnana, and initially, all was well. Kim felt somewhat successful in her role as a caregiver, though there was not much to do in the beginning. Sure, she made appointments, provided pickups and drop-offs, completed medical paperwork, made a few calls, and filled a few prescriptions. But then the reality of caring for an aging loved one kicked in. Those appointments turned into hospital stays. Paperwork turned into sponge baths. Filling prescriptions turned into babysitting a stubborn old woman while she cooked because most times she did not want anyone else's cooking.

Kim was beyond overwhelmed. Even with a full staff of hired help, she felt obligated to stay by her grandnana's side daily, to nurture and take care of the woman who had been there for her when there was no one else to depend on.

Kim was not sure that the second reason was really a reason at all. She tried to pass it off as a tale heard from a sleepwalking elderly woman that she had allowed to get into her head. It was actually an entire day that weirded her out and pushed her away.

Kim came downstairs for breakfast around ten. Steps away from the kitchen door, she heard an argument going on between her grandnana and one of the staff. That was not unusual; Lilly despised the dietary restrictions imposed on her meals, and she felt the selections were far too meager. She claimed a woman of her caliber should have a spread to choose from even if most of it went to waste. The frail but firm woman hurled expletives at the man charged with making her meals and accused him of being someone else and trying to trick her.

Kim rolled her eyes and braced herself for the madness she was about to walk in on. Entering the kitchen, she ducked just in time to avoid being smacked in the face with a glass flying across the room. She was used to her grandnana's venomous mouth, but throwing things and becoming physical were unlike her.

"Oh no, Grandnana! What's going on in here?" Kim asked while hurrying to the woman.

"Mais cher!" the elderly woman said to her.

Kim stood in between the chef and her grandnana to prevent anything else from being thrown. The woman continued to scream and shout, refusing to calm down. Kim apologized to the man for the melee, excused him for the day, and assured him that her grandnana would be much more civil when he returned the following day.

Once he left the house, Grandnana Lilly calmed down. She was still agitated and kept saying she didn't want to be in the house, but she no longer acted as if she were ready to participate in fisticuffs. She insisted that it, whomever it was, was still lurking around listening and watching. Kim finished making breakfast and tried her best to reassure her grandnana that everything was safe and sound in the home.

To soothe her further, Kim suggested they eat out on the terrace. It was a beautiful day, and she thought that some fresh Georgia air and a little conversation would take their minds off the eventful morning. Kim prepared the table, and they sat across from one another eating in silence. Kim's grandnana spoke first.

"Why are you always so sad, Mickey? You always look lost. I can tell you're not getting any sleep. Those bags under your eyes and dry skin are a telltale sign, ya know. When you ain't looking sad, you actin' like ya got a bug in ya bonnet."

"I'm not sad or mad about anything, Grandnana. I'm just trying to find my way. Some nights, my thoughts keep me up, but do you really think I'm sad? How can I be sad or worried when I get to spend every day right here with you?" Her grandnana was right. It was true; she was sad among an assortment of other depressing emotions. She thought the brave and pleasant face she put on daily for the woman hid her desolation. Obviously, she was wrong.

"No spouse. No friends. No children. No career. No land or possessions of any real value. It's like you're a walking, talking, nothing, girly. You neva' pass a good time. I see why you're the way you are. It's just you didn't have to be." The woman placed her hand on Kim's. Kim stared out at the landscape not caring that the sun was in her eyes; she refused to look at her grandnana. This topic of talk was sure to bring her to tears if it didn't change course quickly.

"Well, at least you didn't have to be." Lillianna paused drawing her hand back from Kim's. She added a sugar cube to her tea, stirred it, and took a sip. "All that studying and hard

work all for naught. We had it all mapped out for you. Doors were opened for you that others would have killed for. All thrown away for a man! A man with nothing at that! And I told you time and time again take care of yourse—”

“I know, I know, I know. I could have been a very well-off woman by now between the trust and a medical practice. I could have many accolades under my belt and a loving husband and children. I could have had it all, I know. I still intend to have it ... all. Just as soon as I shake this dark cloud that’s constantly looming over me.”

“Soc au’ lait! That is bull jive and you know it, girly. How old are you? If you’re gonna start from scratch, you need ta start now. That look you have. I know that look of despair. You can smile, laugh, and portray this kind, shy act as much as you want, girly girl, but it’s all in the eyes. The eyes are windows to the soul. I’ve told you that before, haven’t I?” Lillianna said while burying her grits in salt and cayenne pepper.

“Whoa, Grandnana! Would you like any food to go with your salt and pepper?” She chuckled at the amount of seasoning the woman was putting on just about every piece of her breakfast including the fruit.

“Seriously, that’s way too much salt, Grandnana. Yo’ blood pressure finna’ be doing numbers for the rest of the week if you don’t cut that out.” Kim was truly concerned with the woman’s sodium intake, but at the moment, she was trying to divert the topic of conversation away from her life.

“Do you think I give a flying hootenanny about some damn blood pressure? Let me tell you something, girly. I’m ninety-two. For the first fifteen years of my life, I was deprived of a meal with a grain of salt and a speck of pepper! I’m fix’n to eat the way I wanna eat!”

Kim laughed at the exaggeration. She was sure times had been tough for the woman growing up in the thirties and forties, but she actually had no knowledge of the life her grandnana had lived. The matriarch never shared any details of her upbringing or made any mention at all of her life prior to meeting Hayward.

“That is not funny, girly. Don’t laugh at me. It’s not funny at all!”

Kim was confused. The conversation was seemingly taking a turn for the worse, but she was unsure why. “Grandnana, I’m not laughing at you. Just at the words grain of salt and speck of pepper. Is everything okay with you today?”

“Well, I myself most certainly ain’t laughing, so it’s impossible for you to have been laughing with me. Which means you were laughing at me!”

Kim put her head down and sliced up the avocados and tomatoes on her plate. No longer enjoying her food, she was just pushing it around kind of nibbling here and there. The rest of breakfast continued in silence. She waited patiently for her grandnana to finish before clearing the table and offering to help the woman to her bedroom to prepare for her afternoon, but her help was declined. Instead, the elderly woman opted for one of the nursing assistants to aid her, and she canceled her Wednesday afternoon bridge game, which she had never done since the inception of the standing date three years earlier. Of course, Kim felt some type of way. Her grandnana had chosen one of the staff over her. Not only that; she had talked down on her and basically called her a nothing, a failure. The very thing Kim suspected and feared was her grandnana’s disappointment in her, and after the conversation they just had, Kim felt it was confirmed. It was evident to her that the woman she loved unconditionally thought there was no redemption for her and that any chance to live a successful life had come and gone.

Her depression and anxiety tugged away at her causing her to overanalyze and replay the entire conversation over and over in her head. A dark cloud began to brew in her psyche, and she felt it. She

wanted nothing more than to heavily medicate herself into a lethargic haze and curl up in bed with the covers over her head, but instead, she stepped out to get some fresh air. She ran some personal errands, filled a few prescriptions, and took the opportunity to breathe after her stifling morning. She spent a majority of the day out and about in no rush to get back to the animosity in the home.

By the time Kim returned home, it was close to nightfall. She let herself through the massive front doors and noticed something was off. It didn't take long for her to realize it was the lack of delicious aromas coming from the kitchen. It was definitely dinnertime, and normally, the house would be filled with the smells of various dishes being prepared to create a spread for her grandnana's evening meal. *Oh, fuck! How could I have forgotten! Shit!* Kim thought. She remembered that all meals were her responsibility since dismissing the chef for the day. *That woman finna' chew my head off! She's definitely gon' have something to say about this. Fuck!*

Kim ran up the winding staircase to her grandnana's room to check on her and get her order for dinner. When she got to the door, she heard sobbing on the other side. Her heart sank thinking her grandnana was crying because she had forgotten about her. She burst into the room and saw the woman sitting in the middle of her bed, her face red and visibly upset. Photographs surrounded her, and balled-up tissues were piled next to her. Kim pleaded with the sad woman, assuring that she had not forgotten about her and made up lies about being stuck in traffic and the pharmacy having the prescriptions wrong, but Lillianna was oblivious to her granddaughter's words.

Staring at the photos before her, Lilly blubbered on about missing Hayward, her husband. Kim looked at the pictures. Some were aged in a yellow hue, each capturing different moments of the couple's life together over a vast stretch of time. The photo Lilly was holding was of them at the first Annual Hawkinsville Harness Festival in Atlanta in 1976. In it, she was wearing a white blouse with light-pink polka dots and a small, tan straw hat. Her hair was tied in a low, messy bun, and she was wearing sunshades. Hayward had donned a tan, linen button-up, linen khaki pants, and dark shades. The couple sat close; their body language suggested they were enjoying each other's company.

"He wasn't perfect, but he was my protector and provider! My fixer. And he loved me! He was the only man, the only person who never tried ta take from meeeee!" the woman cried out.

Kim did not know what to say. She'd never seen her grandnana in that much of an emotional state before even after her g-pop's death seven years earlier. Sure, she had grieved; she was more of a walking shadow of herself not really speaking or interacting with anyone, but a week after the funeral, she appeared back to her normal sassy self.

Kim looked again at the sea of pictures and spotted the only black and white photo. She picked it up preparing to examine the baby-faced man and woman who sat shoulder to shoulder, but Lillianna swiftly snatched it from her leaving Kim disconcerted. "Grandnana, why'd you snatch that from me?"

The woman grabbed the photo box and put the black and white photo in it facedown along with another photo unseen by Kim. She began putting the other photos on top all without offering any explanation for snatching the photo from Kim. Kim thought that was weird but attributed it to her grandmother's sorrow. She attempted to console her.

“Grandnana, you know you’ll see him again someday. I know it hurts now, but one day, you two will be reunited in the kingdom of heaven and you’ll have your protect—”

What happened next was more than shocking to Kim. The woman let out a horrific scream conjured from the depths of her core. She flung the box of pictures across the room with as much might as she could muster. Next went the pillows and everything else on the bed. She flung it all across the room in a frenzied fit.

Kim was horrified as she watched the small woman break down. “Grandnana, stop! Oh my God, stop! What the hell! What’s going on with you?”

“Get out! Get out, girly! Kite m ’pou kont mwen! Leave me be!” The woman screamed out in Haitian Creole, one of her three native languages.

Kim rushed out of the room. Her heart was pounding, each beat thumping loudly as she headed for the kitchen. It was just after seven, and Kim needed to get the woman fed, bathed, and in bed. Mentally drained by her grandnana’s bizarre behavior, she contemplated passing off the duties to the night nurse. There was still another hour or so before she and her assistant would arrive, so Kim sucked it up and began to rummage through the fridge for something quick to throw together.

She settled on salmon and broccoli. She stuck the salmon in the broiler and put the broccoli in the steamer. She rubbed her eyes while plopping on a chair. I hope this shit cooks quick. My damn head hurts. She folded her arms on the granite countertop and laid her head atop them. Closing her eyes, she told herself she was just going to rest them for a second hoping maybe it would help alleviate the tension building in her forehead.

Minutes later, Kim’s eyes opened to see her parents and grandparents standing over her. Their eyes were pitch-black and oozing a tar-like pus, and her parents and G-Pop were in a deep decomposed state with maggots and flesh falling from their decaying bodies. Grandnana moaned, “The eyes are the windows to the soul!” As g-pop opened his mouth, a humongous rat crawled out and fell onto Kim’s face. She screamed as she swatted away at her face and awakened to the sound of the stove timer going off. She rushed to the stove to turn it off.