

IS THE BITCH
DEAD,
OR WHAT?

The Ritz Harper Chronicles Book 2

WENDY WILLIAMS AND
KAREN HUNTER

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Drama Is Her Middle Name

The Wendy Williams Experience

Wendy's Got the Heat

The beige Nissan pulled slowly down 213th Street. It was a quiet, tree-lined neighborhood where most people had manicured lawns and minded their own business. That's what Jacob Reese loved immediately about the neighborhood and that's why he decided to rent a one-family home on the block. Here he could blend into the background of the clapboard- and aluminum-sided homes, with their playing kids, their azalea bushes and maple leaf trees. Jacob was ready to start a new life.

But what happened just a few hours before could possibly upend all of his plans. He pulled into the driveway of his home. With the engine still running, he just sat in his car. Beads of sweat were still forming on his brow, threatening to run streaks down his face.

The adrenaline rush was beginning to dissipate, and Jacob was tumbling down— crashing down. It was like coming off a crack high. He sat motionless for a moment, then grabbed the steering wheel with both hands, squeezing it so hard he started to feel pins and needles running up his forearms. He embraced the sensation.

As he gripped the steering wheel, Jacob shut his eyes as hard as he could. He wanted to stop the shaking. He wanted to squeeze out the guilt that was rushing through his body like a roaring rapid.

“That bitch! That bitch! That fucking bitch!!!!” Jacob cried out at the top of his lungs.

One neighbor next door turned off the light to his front room and peeked out the window through the blinds to see what the screaming was about. In typical New York fashion, he decided the screaming was not quite piercing enough to rate a call to 911. He closed the blinds and went to bed.

Jacob put on the black baseball cap that was in the passenger seat and prepared to get inside. He sat for a minute and reflected on what he had just done. He already regretted it. But it was over. He was mad at himself, but he was FURIOUS at Ritz Harper for being such a dumb bitch— such a smarmy, money-grubbing bitch— that people would gladly pay to see her dead.

He hated being so desperate that when the call came and the money was offered he jumped at the chance. Jacob Reese was a lot of things, but he was no killer.

He decided to do the thing he did best. He buried the thoughts he was having. Jacob was cursed with an uncanny ability to be totally delusional. He could fool himself into thinking anything he wanted. As a result, he didn't have many friends and he hadn't achieved anything in life.

Jacob wanted to be a megaproducer in the music industry. He believed he could be the next P. Diddy or Rodney Jerkins. He could see it. He knew it. Of course he could.

He was delusional.

The closest Jacob had ever come to living his dream was when he contributed eight bars to a new artist's first single. The first time he heard the finished product, Jacob convinced himself that he was the next Quincy Jones.

Jacob was always “on the scene”— hanging in the right places, going to the right parties

trying to hobnob with the right people. He partied like he owned Motown in 1968. He dressed the part. He looked the part. But the fronting was wearing thin on his psyche and his wallet. A woman can tell if a man is broke— it's in her DNA, like the mothering instinct— even if you give her all the X she can handle. Jacob had a steady supply, but not an eternal supply. One day, the keg of ecstasy would run dry, and he knew it. That was why he was desperate.

Jacob was determined to get to “the top”— whatever that meant— but he wasn't going to get there by being on the bottom of some powerful man. He was not going to be that new bitch; he was going to scratch and claw the hard way and make it on his own. Being a new bitch in the record industry wasn't much different from being a new inmate in a small cell at Rikers Island. If you come into Rikers without a rep or street credibility or much muscle or hustle, or without somebody watching your back, you are open to being eaten for lunch— literally.

In the music business, if you come in new without any rep, or anybody who will stand up for you and have your back, you are subject to being the next Bentley the Butler, with an emphasis on the bent part, as in bent over and drilled in the butt by any mega rapper/rapper mogul. There are lots of Bentley the Butlers in the music business, and very few of them actually get to be anything but. Very few of them ever get that career in the business outside of being a *Bentley*. In the record industry, just like in jail, you either bend over and take it hoping for the best, or you find another way. Jacob was determined to find that way. He already had an asshole that worked just fine. He didn't need to be ripped another one.

Jacob, in his delusional mind, had other ways to succeed....

He got out of the car and scooted discreetly into his house. He smiled as he looked at the copy of *Confessions of a Video Vixen* on the floor of his bedroom, a book about one of those “star fuckers” whose claim to fame was that she knew how Shaq's, Jay-Z's, Vin Diesel's, and Ja Rule's dicks tasted— just like chicken!

A good read, he thought. *When I make it, I will have to look that bitch up.* He also wondered when the male version of that book was going to come out. Video hos weren't only females.

Jacob flipped open his cell phone and dialed. This particular number wasn't stored in his phone and it never would be. It was a number he was to use only once, and he had to memorize it. He hesitated before dialing the number. He couldn't remember the last time he had to remember a phone number by heart. The person on the other end picked up on the second ring.

“Yo, what's good?” the voice spoke.

“It's done,” said Jacob.

“Good!”

Jacob heard a click on the other end of the line. He knew that things were set. This was his first hit and he hoped it would be his last. He wasn't cut out for real shooting. He had threatened a few people but never carried it out. He had broken a few arms and legs, cracked some ribs, but he had never killed anyone. He never had a real good incentive to do so. Not even rage could bring Jacob to actually shoot somebody. But desperation and money could. He was promised two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash.

He had plans for his money, big plans. He was going to buy real estate and become the ultimate slumlord. He would sit back, collect fat rent checks every month, and pursue his music career.

If that didn't work out, he would focus on buying more real estate and making more money, which would give him the lifestyle he felt he deserved. He didn't want to be greedy. He didn't want to go to jail. He just wanted to have the last laugh when the semisuccessful crew he occasionally hung out with ran through all of their money and he was sitting on his a mini Donald Trump, minus the comb-over, wallowing in dough.

Money, hos, and clothes all a nigga knows.

Jacob had a year of college under his belt, so he knew he would also have to get some sort of job to make it all legitimate. He needed to make his quarter of a million dollars clear before he tried to use it. He needed benefits. He had some dental issues that needed attending to. All those years wearing gold fronts had compromised his bottom teeth. He had at least four cavities that needed filling, and he wanted to get that Zoom whitening treatment that would make his teeth ten shades whiter, or so the advertisement said.

Jacob, in his delusional way, was very sharp when it came to knowing what women liked. He knew that women liked men who smelled good, had nice arms and circumcised dicks.

He also knew that women LOVED men who had good teeth. Once he had the money, he had to find a dentist. Tight balls were always trumped by lousy teeth!

He walked over to the pull-up bar in his bedroom doorway and took down the new suit he had hung there while he was in a rush to get to Manhattan for this job. It was a black Hugo Boss suit, shirt, and tie, still in the garment bag. It brought a smile to his face. He always wanted a nice suit. So he splurged before this job and got it in anticipation of his big payday.

“I want to look fly when I pick up my money,” he said to himself. “I want to look like new money.”

He hung the suit up in his tiny closet that was filled with mostly oversized polo shirts, khakis, and jeans. He promised himself more suits and more adult clothes soon.

“Hell, I'm in my thirties now. It's about time I start to look like a grown-ass man.”

There was nothing childlike about his body. He didn't have a gym membership, but he regularly did calisthenics in his home. He reached up and began to do pull-ups unconsciously, losing count of how many he did, thinking only of his money—the money that would buy him his freedom, and his new teeth, and his new clothes, and the world, and all the wonders in it.

“Maddie! Maddie!”

Cecil Robinson hung up the phone and screamed for his wife, who was in the bathroom.

“What?!” Maddie responded, somewhat annoyed. “What's going on?!”

“It's Ritz, honey. Ritz has been shot! It's on TV!”

Madalyn Robinson looked haggard. She had been spending more time than she cared to in the bathroom lately. She had been on the treatments for less than two weeks, but she felt like she was killing her—literally. Chemotherapy affects people in different ways, but it makes just about everyone nauseous. Chemo had hit Maddie hard. She was constantly sick. She vomited so much that her throat was raw and hoarse from the stomach acids ripping through it. She couldn't keep any food down. She lost ten pounds in less than two weeks.

“This is one diet I never wanted to be on,” Maddie tried to joke with Cecil one evening. “I have been trying to lose weight my whole life, but not like this. Richard Simmons would be proud of me!”

Cecil didn't find it funny. He felt helpless watching her go through this. But he was there every step of the way for her, like he always was, like he always would be. In heaven, there is a special place for men like Cecil—quiet, dignified, hardworking, strong, responsible MEN—men who accept their responsibilities without complaint, men who take care of their own no matter what it costs, men who love their women until the day they die, men who are like rocks that cannot be moved, because they are the rocks that are the foundation on which a family is built.

Men like Cecil need no great monument, or tomb, or tacky eternal flame dedicated to them when they die, because men like Cecil do not die. They live eternally in their health, their children, and their children's children, and their children's children's children, and on and on...

When they were “courting” back in the 1940s, Cecil and Maddie used to write each other “love letters,” and Maddie of course kept them, in a little cedar box, tied in a blue ribbon, stashed in her closet. Every ten years or so, she took them out and read them.

They were so young, so innocent, so naive. Cecil wrote about how he would be satisfied to spend his life just “holding her hand”!

Maddie was very touched by that sentiment at the time, but she and Cecil quickly learned that there was a lot more fun to be had than just “holding hands.”

And that is what kept her going through the pain of the chemo. She wanted to be ready again for her baby. She wanted to look good for her man.

The real truth is never seen. The real truth, God knows, is never broadcast over the airwaves. Sexy is all about how you feel inside. It cannot be achieved through liposuction and botox. Sexy clothes don't make you sexy. Feeling good about yourself makes you sexy. And right now, Maddie didn't feel so good.

Despite that, she was still sexy to Cecil. He loved the roundness of her belly. He even loved her stretch marks. He said they made her look like a tiger, and he loved to lick them.

The thought of him doing that again— hell, just the thought of him— was what was going to keep Maddie alive, no matter what, no matter what.

The chemo had made all her hair fall out, including her thick pubic bush. Cecil had always said that her bush turned him on the most, even more than her dark erect nipples or her firm ass.

When he saw her bald pussy for the first time, he got down there, examined it, and kissed her newly exposed clit.

“You look like a tropical plant!” he said. “A Venus Flytrap! But I feel a little funny about you though.”

“Why?”

“Look at you. You look like a nine-year-old. I feel like a child molester!”

“Well, I can be your baby, Mr. Child Molester,” Maddie said, toying with him. “Don't make me wait all night!”

And he didn't.

Maddie and Cecil loved to laugh and they loved making love. That's what they had been doing for forty years, behind closed doors, just the two of them. No one else knew what they did together, and no one would ever know.

Maddie was ready for another forty years, and maybe she would spice it up a bit when she beat the cancer and keep her pussy shaved. Or maybe she would get a Jackrabbit vibrator and do herself in front of her man. That would be something new. He would like that, she was sure.

Fuck you, Cancer!

There was a bigger malignancy in Maddie's life than the tumor that was eating away at her breast, and Maddie knew it.

Her niece, her dead only-sister's only child, had not spoken to her in more than a year. In many ways, Ritz was dead to Maddie, too. The little, sensitive, precocious child whom Maddie and Cecil loved to pieces had turned into a self-centered, vile, insensitive, malicious bitch. Maddie hoped the time away from her family would soften Ritz, help her to realize what she was missing. But it seemed to do just the opposite.

Ritz never called. Her friend Tracee did call from time to time to check up on them. Tracee had spent a weekend at Cecil and Maddie's a few years back and had such a blast that she had adopted them as her own aunt and uncle. Tracee's family had moved from Jersey to California and she didn't really get along with them much. There was a story there, one Tracee never shared with anyone.

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Tracee loved the down-home feel of the Robinsons'. She loved Aunt Maddie's mashed potatoes, whipped to perfection with just the right amount of butter and salt. She loved her sweet tea, which you only got south of the Mason-Dixon line unless you made it yourself. Tracee never understood why they never served sweet tea up north. She loved sitting on the

porch after dinner in a swing chair and hearing the crickets and actually getting to see the stars in the sky, a rare sight in New York City. Being at the Robinsons' in Virginia was one of the reasons that made Tracee want to head even farther south to Florida. That felt more like her roots. While the big city, the biggest of them all— New York— had its appeal, with its opportunities, fast pace, and wall-to-wall people, the South gave you room to grow. For Tracee, who had conquered New York and made enough money to last her a lifetime, she wanted to take some time to smell the flowers, and be still, and listen to God's voice.

Tracee and Aunt Maddie often talked— just the two of them— on Saturday morning when Cecil would be gardening in the yard and Ritz was still in bed up in Jersey. Ritz loved to sleep, so Tracee kept Maddie and Cecil abreast of what was happening in Ritz's life while Ritz got her beauty rest.

It was Tracee who tried to get the two to reconcile, but Maddie was firm that Ritz needed to apologize and Ritz was firm that she would never apologize.

The ancient Greeks used to wonder what would happen if an irresistible force met an immovable object. Tracee wished they had discovered the answer so she could go online and look it up. She could use the solution with Ritz and Maddie.

Maddie never told Tracee that she had cancer. She knew that news might bring Ritz running back to her, but Maddie didn't want Ritz to come back like that. She wanted Ritz to change. She wanted Ritz to see herself, to see what she had become.

Years ago, Maddie and Cecil had seen a movie called *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It was the story of a man who sold his soul in return for eternal youth, the same way Ritz had sold his soul for Arbitron ratings.

In the movie, Dorian Gray never ages, but his painted portrait does. (Back in that day, they didn't have cameras.) Every time Dorian Gray hurts someone, his portrait ages: It grows another wrinkle, it becomes more and more grotesque and ugly, until his face in the painting is nothing more than a bloated, wrinkled mask oozing pus and blood. Dorian hides the portrait in his attic and covers it with a cloth. He cannot bear to see what he really is.

Maddie wondered if Ritz had a similar covered-up portrait in her home— a picture of herself swaddled in furs and diamonds, but if you looked closely, the fur was teeming with lice, and the diamonds were just cheap glass. And her nose would look strange, too. And what about that nasty “butterfly rash” spreading across her face?

And did those once-pearly-white, thirty-five-thousand-dollar teeth now look brittle and stained and yellow?

Maddie also wondered if Ritz was aware that she had gained the world but lost her soul.

The soul... that was now seeping out of her life.

Maddie had to get to New York— immediately.

“Is she... is she...” Maddie couldn't get the words out as she looked at her husband.

“I don't know, Maddie,” said Cecil. “Tracee called from the hospital. No one can get in to see her. We are her next of kin. We have to leave now.”

Maddie gave him a puzzling look.

“I know you're not in any shape to leave now,” he said. “But, Maddie, Ritz needs you.”

"We're all she's got."

Madalyn Robinson dug down deep and found some strength that she didn't even know she had. She went to the bathroom, took some antinausea medicine her doctor prescribed for her, took a quick shower, put on her brand-new wig and some makeup, and was waiting in the living room for Cecil within an hour.

"I'm ready, baby," she said. "I'm ready."

They could have gotten a flight out of Richmond that would put them in New York by the morning, but then they would have to catch a cab or rent a car. Cecil hated being at someone else's mercy. While everyone in New York seemed to catch cabs and ride the subway, Cecil preferred to get around in his own car. He didn't care how much it cost to park in the city. Besides, they also didn't know when they would be returning. Would they have to make funeral arrangements and go through settling Ritz's affairs and then head back to Virginia, or would they have to stay in New York for the long haul to help nurse their only niece back to health?

Madalyn also didn't know how the flight would be for her. She hadn't had a calm stomach since she started chemotherapy. In the car, they could stop at will. So Cecil threw a few things in a couple of bags for them, locked up the house, put on the alarm, left a note for Mrs. Baker next door to retrieve their papers every day, and then they hit the road.

"Maddie, no matter what we find when we get to New York, we can handle it," said Cecil. "You can do this. We've been through so much."

"Yes, baby. I know. I just pray that Ritz is alive. We should have never let all that time pass between us. Nothing should have kept us from speaking. Life is too short to be small."

Cecil let silence hang in the air. He didn't want to contemplate the brevity of life, not with his Maddie fighting for hers and now his niece, the girl he raised as his own daughter, lying in a hospital room, perhaps dead. It was almost too much for him. Cecil was never big on emotions. He was an old-school man. He provided for his family and was the pillar of the household. He was a God-fearing man of little words.

But the events of the past year— from not hearing from or seeing Ritz to Maddie's cancer to now the shooting and possible death of Ritz— was so much more than Cecil thought he could handle. He was a strong man. He had to be as the oldest boy in a family of twelve growing up on a farm in South Carolina. He picked cotton. He milked cows. He hauled hay. Back then, children were treated more like slaves. He never talked back to his parents because the consequences were too great. They didn't have child welfare agencies back then, and if they did, no one was going out to the sticks and backwoods of Columbia to check on some Negro kids. And there wasn't a phone to call 911. So Cecil learned to work hard, keep his head down, and not expect too much.

He met Madalyn, this elegant, beautiful woman who gave him hope that he could have more out of this life. He left his life in South Carolina and embarked on a new adventure. He still worked hard and kept his head down, but with Madalyn he got to play. Madalyn loved to travel. Cecil had never been north of North Carolina or west of Tennessee until he met Madalyn. Together they went to Vegas, all along the strip. They went to Los Angeles and Arizona. He saw the Painted Desert and the Grand Canyon. Madalyn loved the islands, which

Cecil grew to appreciate. Having worked in the hot sun most of his childhood, the idea of sitting in the hot sun didn't appeal to him much. But doing things with Madalyn made it all right. He climbed Dunn's River Falls, got on Jet Skis, and once even took a helicopter ride.

"Life is for living!" Madalyn would say. "So let's live, baby. Let's live!"

To watch her now, slowed down by sickness, broke Cecil's heart. And when her sister Gina died and little Ritz came to live with them, it gave him another source of fulfillment. He knew Madalyn could never have children and he married her anyway. He told her he grew up with enough children that the idea of fatherhood was kind of beaten out of him. But that wasn't exactly true. He loved Madalyn enough to sacrifice his desire to be a father. And while the sadness that brought Ritz to their home could not be overlooked, the joy little Ritz gave them more than made up for it. Cecil thought Madalyn was a bundle of energy. Ritz just about wore him out— but in the best way possible.

As Cecil drove up I-95, he looked over at Maddie, who was napping, with her head on a pillow against the window, and he wondered if either of his girls would ever be back to their old form. He hoped so.

Detective Tom Pelov grabbed Tracee gently by the arm and led her to a waiting area in a out-of-the-way part of the hospital. Pelov had investigated more than five homicides in the last six months out of this hospital and knew every nook and cranny in it. He motioned for Chas to follow.

Tracee was on the brink of hysterics and couldn't hold herself together.

"Is she... is she..." Tracee managed between shrieks of tears. "Is she dead?!"

"Please, ma'am. Please calm down," said Detective Pelov. "If we are going to find out who did this to your friend, I need you to be calm and clearheaded. I need to ask you some questions."

"Don't tell me to calm down! My friend has been shot! No one is giving us any answers! We can't get in to see her. And now you— Detective *Homicide*— want to ask us some questions? I think you better give us some answers first! Is Ritz dead?!"

"No...."

"Good!"

"But... she's not out of the woods, either," said Detective Pelov. "I'm on this case because we believe that the goal of the shooter was to kill Miss Harper. We believe that person is still out there and that they will try again. I need you to help me. Now, I'm sorry, what are your names and what is your relationship to the victim?"

"The *victim's* name is Ritz Harper!" Tracee said, sniffing. She was sick and tired of all of the Jane Doe, victim stuff. "I am Tracee Remington, her best friend. I just came in town from Florida. Ritz was supposed to pick me up at the airport. Then I call got a call from Chas here at the hospital. I have no idea what's going on or who would do something like this to Ritz."

Chas was standing next to Tracee with his arms folded. He was remarkably calm and collected. He didn't want to talk to the detective. He didn't want to be at the hospital. He had business to attend to, but he couldn't look like he had someplace to go.

Detective Pelov had flipped open his notepad and was jotting down notes as Tracee spoke. He didn't look up when he asked Chas what his relationship was to the victim.

"I'm the executive producer of Ritz's radio show," Chas said.

"Do you know who may have shot Miss Harper?"

"I can't say that I do. You know her show is very provocative. She gets threats all the time. She's made a lot of folks mad."

"Who threatened her and when?"

"Wow," said Chas, looking up in the air as if he were counting those who had threatened Ritz. "That list is long. But I don't think any of them were serious."

"Obviously, at least one was serious. We need to follow all of the leads. Now, where were you when Miss Harper was shot?"

"I was in the studio, finishing up some business."

“Is that your normal routine?”

Chas hesitated. His weekday routine was to walk Ritz to her car. The two would often hang out after the show and plan the next day or the next week.

“Um, yeah. I sometimes stay behind and make some phone calls, books some guests, things like that.”

“Were you alone?”

“No, our intern, Jamie, was there,” Chas said.

“Okay. I need the names and contact numbers of everyone who works on the show. I also need some copies of the last week of shows. Perhaps there will be some clues in that. And you can give me the contact information for the guests from the last couple of weeks, that would be very helpful, too.”

“Do you have any leads?” Tracee butted in.

“There were some witnesses. We may have a partial plate and description of a vehicle. But that's it. Miss Harper's level of celebrity and notoriety actually makes this case harder.

The shooter could be literally anyone— a fan, a disgruntled guest, a friend or family member of a caller, or even someone she worked with. From what I hear, she wasn't very nice.”

Tracee shot him an angry look.

“You don't know her. And I would appreciate it if you would keep your opinions to yourself!”

“It's not my opinion, ma'am,” Detective Pelov said. “These are just the facts. You asked me a question. I simply answered you.”

“Is there anything else we can help you with?” said Chas, looking at his watch. “I have a few things to tie up.”

“Okay, that will be all,” said Detective Pelov. “But please keep your cell phone on. I may need to contact you with some follow-up questions. Thank you both for your time.”

Pelov put his notebook in his jacket pocket and walked away. Chas gave Tracee a hug and told her that he had to head over to the studio to prepare some sort of program to put in Ritz's time slot.

“You're leaving me here?” she said.

“I'm just a phone call away,” said Chas, holding his Treo up. “If you need me, just call me. Besides, Ritz's family will be here soon.”

Tracee's eyes were bloodshot from crying and lack of sleep. She was tired from the inside out and confused. She grabbed Chas's forearm.

“Do you have any idea who did this?” She looked him in his eyes.

“Baby, I wish I did. Don't worry, the cops will find whoever it is. And look around at the security. No one is getting in here to do it again.”

Tracee hadn't noticed, but there was a police officer at every entrance and exit of the hospital. No one could get in without having their bags checked and signing his or her name.

in a book. But was it enough? Would the shooter come back and try again?

The building that housed WHOT was abuzz. Reporters from every single news outlet— from television to print— flooded the lobby. They couldn't get by security in the lobby because everyone needed a pass to reach any floor. A few clever reporters managed to sneak the way to the thirty-eighth floor of the building with the hopes of finding a staircase leading to the thirty-ninth floor. It was a good plan, except that WHOT was prepared with its own security on the thirty-ninth floor, providing a dead end.

Many of the reporters even tried to bribe the security officers, hoping to just talk to anyone about the notorious Ritz Harper. They had already combed the neighborhood looking for witnesses, or anyone who could shed light on what happened the night before— the night Ritz Harper was shot on a New York City street.

“What are we going to do, Ernest?” asked Abigail Gogel, the station manager of WHOT. WHOT was started by Abigail's grandfather. The Gogel family was black but had passed for white until very recently. Abigail's grandfather was able to build an empire as a white man. Abigail was about five-three and very plump, with pale, white skin. She dyed her hair a reddish color that looked very unnatural. She could pass for a Jewish *bubuLa*. But every now and then, when it was convenient, Abigail would let people know she was black— like when there were minority grants or awards to get.

The station her grandfather built was bought out eight years before by a major media conglomerate that had affiliates in fifty markets. The one stipulation of the sale was that there had to be a Gogel in a well-placed position in the company. Abigail had been married twice to white men and had two sons, but she had never changed her last name.

“My family worked hard for this name and I am never going to give it up,” she said to her second husband. That marriage lasted only three years. She had been single for twelve.

Abigail wasn't the most bright or savvy businesswoman. She had power because of her family legacy. The only hope of restoring any dignity to the Gogel name would be her son Jonathan, a recent graduate of the New School who was working at the station in production. He wanted to learn the business from the bottom to the top. He wisely wanted to understand every aspect of radio. But for now, his mother was in charge. Well, sort of.

“Ernest, what are we going to do?!”

Ernest Ruffin, whom everyone called Ruff, had the title of program director, but he was really the general manager. He handled the day-to-day issues, from the sales department to dealing with the interns to making sure the transmitter was functioning.

“Miss Gogel, don't worry. Ritz's producer has put together two weeks' worth of *Best* shows,” said Ruff. “Those will do very well, because there's so much attention right now around Ritz and the shooting that her fans are salivating to hear her voice. We have a meeting planned for later today to discuss what happens after the two weeks.”

“What's her status? Is she expected to make it?”

“Um, we don't know. But it doesn't look good,” said Ruff. “She took a lot of bullets in some vital places. We have a few prospects who can take her spot if that's what needs to happen.”

“To be honest with you, she always made me nervous. And now with the shooting, even she survives, perhaps we should think of replacing her,” said Abigail. “She's got too much—what do the young people say?—drama around her. My grandfather built this station with dignified vision, and I'm not about to let some loose cannon take it down. Let's seriously look for her replacement. What about Vivica Fox? Or Mo'Nique. I saw her filling in on The View and she was bold and had a lot to say. She has a name, and I think she could handle this job.”

Ruff didn't show any expression. He was a master at wearing masks. It's why he was able to survive for the last fifteen years as program director. That was considered a lifetime in the business that was changing quickly and where program directors were beginning to take the backseat to “the talent.”

Ruff was firmly in power. Everyone thought he was on their side and confided in him. He knew where all of the skeletons were buried at WHOT. That alone made him invaluable to Abigail Gogel. Ruff was also smart enough to never let her know how powerful he actually was. He pretended to defer to her on everything.

“Yes, Miss Gogel. That's a great idea,” he said. “I will contact Mo'Nique's agent and see if she can fill in. If she rocks it, we should move forward with your plan. As a matter of fact, let's have Vivica Fox do one week, Mo'Nique do another week, and that hot-ass columnist Michelle Davis, the one they use as a correspondent on Fox all the time, let's try her on for a week. She's feisty. I think she and Ritz are friendly, too. She did a couple of pieces on Ritz, so I know she'll do Ritz a favor.”

“I love it!” Abigail said. “We can promote these divas to death.... I mean, you know what that means. We can get some real publicity for all of this. The best thing Ritz Harper could have done for us might have been getting herself shot.”

“That's cold, Miss Gogel. That's cold.”

Ruff had a smile on his face, but he didn't like Abigail. In fact, he couldn't stand her. He thought she was a dumb, fat bitch. But she never knew it. He had no intentions of replacing Ritz. Unless she died. He wanted his star back in her seat, making him look good. He knew that if Ritz ever did come back, she would be bigger and better than before. He was pulling for her full recovery.

As Ruff retreated to his office, he noticed that a huge box had been delivered. He opened it to find twelve bottles of

George Vesselle champagne. It was a rosé that sold for two hundred and fifty-nine dollars a bottle. A note inside read:

Sorry to hear about your loss. Here is something to help you soothe your pain a bit. Feel free to share it with the folks at the station. And if you need anything, a fill-in for Ritz Harper in particular, I am available.

*Keep in touch,
Michelle Davis*

Michelle Davis? Speak of the devil!

“What a classy lady,” Ruff said to himself. “Now if she's half as good on the radio as she is on television, we may be onto something.”

And *what an opportunist*, he thought, shaking his head. Michelle Davis already had Ritz dead, buried, and replaced— by Michelle Davis.

Ruff hadn't really thought that far in advance. He was just hoping Ritz would make it. They had enough material to do *Best of* shows. But for how long? They would need a fill-in— maybe a replacement if Ritz didn't pull through.

Michelle Davis?

Ruff tucked her card into his daily planner, put one of the bottles of George Vesselle in his office refrigerator to chill, and smiled.

She was definitely more than a possibility.

Tracee was on hour number twenty. Twenty straight hours of no sleep, no food, and very little information.

The first two hours, Tracee hadn't even seen Ritz. She wasn't allowed in because she wasn't next of kin, but she called Ritz's aunt and uncle and waited for them to drive up from Virginia. Chas was with her for a bit, but he disappeared. Then there was the detective—homicide detective—who scared the shit out of her, having her think Ritz was dead. He was, however, one of the few bright spots in her evening, because he came back to the hospital and stayed with her and comforted her. At least he was trying to get to the bottom of the mystery.

No one knew anything, and if they did, they weren't telling Tracee anything about Ritz's progress or condition. It was frustrating.

When Madalyn and Cecil arrived, Tracee immediately noticed how haggard Aunt Madalyn looked. She gave them both a huge hug and they sat down in the waiting area, hoping the doctor would come by.

“How was your trip?” asked Tracee, straining to make small talk to keep her mind and theirs, too, off the serious issues before them.

“Oh, it wasn't too bad,” said Cecil. “There wasn't much traffic. We made it in just six hours, which is pretty good.”

Aside from Madalyn's appearance, another strange thing that Tracee noticed was the silence. Ritz's Aunt Madalyn was known for having the gift of gab. She could talk twenty-four/seven about any- and everything, but she hadn't said more than two words since she arrived. At first Tracee thought that Aunt Madalyn was taking the shooting really hard. But there seemed to be something else.

“Are you okay, Aunt Madalyn? What's the matter?”

“Oh, nothing, baby. Nothing for you to worry about,” Madalyn said, seeing the lines of concern etching their way across Tracee's brow.

“I'm going to go find a doctor, but I think you guys need to go someplace and rest. Ritz is going to need your strength,” Tracee said. “You're more than welcome to stay at my loft. I have plenty of room and I would love to have you. It may be a bit dusty, though. I haven't been there in a while.”

“Oh, we're just going to check into a hotel around the corner,” Uncle Cecil said. “No need to put you out.”

“You two could *never* put me out. I would be honored if you stayed with me. Really. I love the company.”

“You're so sweet, Tracee, but I want to be close to Ritz in case she needs us. I want to be minutes away,” Madalyn said.

The truth was that Madalyn didn't want Tracee to see her morning treatments and the sickness that followed. There was enough going on, and Madalyn wanted to make sure that everyone focused their attention and energy on Ritz, and Ritz only.

Tracee found a doctor and the three of them tried to see Ritz through a glass, but they really couldn't see anything behind all the machines and curtains. Dr. Paul Greivous didn't want anyone in the room. Not until she was out of the woods. It was too risky. Since they weren't able to spend any time with Ritz, Aunt Madalyn and Uncle Cecil decided to make their way around the corner and check into a hotel. Against their wishes, Tracee accompanied them to the hotel and insisted on putting the room on her credit card. She made sure they were comfortable and told them that she'd check on them later.

"Please get some rest, you two," Tracee said. "I love you."

"We love you, too," Aunt Madalyn said. The three exchanged hugs and Tracee headed back to the hospital.

Tracee was determined to get in and really see Ritz. She needed to see for herself what was up. Tracee staked out Ritz's room and waited for the nurses' shifts to change. When a nurse finally left her post, Tracee saw her chance and took it. She slipped into Ritz's room.

What Tracee saw made her instantly burst into tears. Ritz was totally unrecognizable.

Her entire face was swollen. She looked like Mitch "Blood" Green after Mike Tyson busted his ass one night outside of Dapper Dan's clothing store in Harlem. She had tubes going in and out of what seemed like every orifice of her body. One of her eyes was swollen to three times its normal size and there was purple all around it. She was on a breathing pump and all kinds of gadgets monitored her heart and blood pressure. Ritz didn't just look bad, she looked dead, and that was what had Tracee spooked.

She let out a wail, and a moment later, a nurse came scurrying into the room.

"What are you doing in here?!" the nurse said in an angry voice.

"That's my best friend. Is she going to make it?" Tracee said through uncontrollable sobs. "She looks so bad. She looks so bad."

"Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Please come this way."

The nurse grabbed Tracee by the arm. Tracee pulled away and got closer to Ritz's bedside. She just wanted to touch her to see if she was alive. Tracee grabbed Ritz's hand.

"Please, God, spare her life," Tracee cried out. "Please, God, pleeeeeeeeeease!"

As the nurse was trying to pull Tracee away, Ritz's heart monitor began to quicken its pace. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!

The nurse became a little more physical, pushing Tracee from the room, and then doctors and orderlies and nurses came rushing in with all kinds of equipment and trays and needles.

"Oh God, no! No! No!" Tracee screamed.

What the fuck?

That was all Ritz Harper could muster in her mind, which was racing at a million miles per hour. Amid the cacophony of thoughts, only one thought kept resounding, only one thought rang out like a gong inside her head: *What the fuck?!*

Ritz could not feel a thing. There was no pain. But if she strained, she could hear a faint beep that seemed to be far off in the distance.

Ritz Harper, who had worked her way to the top of her game, who was the undisputed queen of all media, the most talked-about woman in America, now was flat on her back and silenced.

“Okay. Okay. Okay!” Ritz screamed. Only, no sound came out of her mouth. The beep was becoming more rapid.

Where am I? She was trying to gain some kind of control.

Make some sense of this confusion. Her thoughts were lucid, but she battled consciousness. Was she conscious? Was she even alive?

Beep. Beep. Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!

A bright light appeared out of the corner of nowhere. The light was surrounded by rings. The rings looked watery, like the rings made when a pebble is tossed into the center of a pond. There were translucent ripples around the light.

A figure appeared through the ripples. It was a feminine figure. The figure was saying something, but to Ritz it sounded like a record slowed down on a turntable. It was like seventy-eight recording played at forty-five speed—slow and warped. Then, just as suddenly, everything was in sync.

“Ritzy?” The voice had sped up to flow with real time. “Ritzy? Sweetie.”

“Ma?!” Ritz could feel a lump build in her throat that almost choked her. In that moment Ritz was ten years old again. “Mama?”

“Yes, baby girl. It's me.”

“Oh, Mama! I— I— I've missed you so much.”

“I know, baby. I know.”

“I've needed you so much!”

Was she dreaming? Ritz wasn't sure and didn't care. She had always heard of people contacting the dead and vice versa. Hell, *Ghost* was one of her favorite movies, even if she felt that Whoopi should have won her Oscar for *The Color Purple*.

But Ritz lived in the real world where things like that never happened. She even had a friend in college who said she could see spirits. But Ritz didn't believe any of that. Because if people could see spirits, then why had she never seen her mother? Why didn't her mother try to contact her? So spirits couldn't be real.

But here she was looking at her mother in a surreal environment with funny light. She

could almost see through her mother, but she was there, standing in front of Ritz. She was so close that Ritz reached out to touch her.

“Ritzy, believe it or not, I've always been there,” her mother said. “I've always been watching over you.”

“How?” Ritz said. “Where? Why didn't I know it? And if you've always been there, why didn't you warn me, tell me to run or duck before I got shot? Why didn't you stop this from happening to me? Why didn't you stop so many things from happening to me?”

Ritz was mad at her mother. More than twenty years' worth of anger and other emotions came flooding back.

“Baby, it's not that simple. I could only watch. I've seen it all. Everything.”

Ritz felt a little heat of shame rise up in her. She could literally see her life passing before her eyes, and she didn't like what she was seeing: the night she slept with Jamie's boyfriend Derek; the night she destroyed Delilah Summers; the day she outed a successful rapper, ruining his career; the day she outed a minister, throwing his family and congregation into tizzy; the time she made an up-and-coming actress admit on the air that she had herpes, reducing her to tears and all but destroying her future in films.

But to Ritz, those were minor incidents. What really stood out was a flashback to the argument she had with her Aunt Maddie, the woman who raised her after Ritz's mother died. It was a nasty argument. It should never have happened. It had spun out of control.

Ritz had been wrong. She knew that now. If she was honest, deep down, she always knew that.

“Wrong and strong!” her mother used to tease Ritz when she would get in trouble, because Ritz never backed down when she was wrong, even when she knew damn well that she was wrong. Ritz felt bad for the things she said to Aunt Maddie, who only showed her love and always wanted the best for her.

Her aunt had only questioned why Ritz wanted to destroy her former friend, Delilah Summers. Aunt Maddie simply couldn't understand Ritz's ambition, her desire to be on top at any cost. Aunt Maddie and Uncle Cecil hadn't raised her that way. Maddie couldn't understand Ritz's level of envy and injustice that someone like Delilah could have so much success— success that Ritz believed should have been for her. Why couldn't Aunt Maddie understand? Ritz's envy stemmed from a sense of injustice; Delilah's success should have been Ritz's, and she didn't understand why Aunt Maddie just didn't get it.

Why did she push me like that? Ritz thought. *She should have understood.*

Wrong and strong. Strong but wrong. In other words, wasted strength— strength that could have been used in such better ways.

All Aunt Maddie knew was that Ritz wasn't raised to be like that. Ritz was raised to be a lady, not a diva. Aunt Maddie wasn't even quite sure what a diva was— to her, a diva was a fat woman who sang at the opera— but she didn't like it, and she knew that Ritz's mother would not have liked it, either.

Almost as if she could read Ritz's mind, her mother said, “Don't worry, baby. No judgment. Everything we do in life, good or bad, leads to a lesson or a blessing. Some of us have

learn our lessons the hard way. That has always been your way. And everything we do, baby, everything we do has a consequence.”

Ritz took a minute to let that thought sink in.

“That sounds like it's my fault that I got shot. So am I here now because of something I did? And where am I exactly? Am I dead? Is this heaven? Where's God...”

“Slow down. I'll answer most of your questions, but some of the questions you will have to answer for yourself,” said Ritz's mother as she put her arm around Ritz's shoulder, a tender gesture that Ritz didn't actually expect to feel.

But Ritz could feel her mother's touch, hear her mother's voice. And the air where they were had a scent. It was sweet, with a light hint of lavender.

“First, you are not dead, not really. You aren't alive, either. You are able to see me because you have left your physical body in that hospital room. I wanted to make sure I was here to send you back.”

“So I'll live?”

“Yes, you'll live. But before I send you back, I need to tell you some things. Baby, you have to think about what you're doing with your life. You'll be given a second chance. But please make the most of it. You were put on earth to do some incredible things, Ritz. You're a leader. People will follow you. But with that comes a lot of responsibility. Remember when I used to tell you that your mouth would get you in trouble?”

“Yes, I remember... but you know I didn't mean anything bad when I talked back.”

“That's not the point, baby. Whether you intend for bad things to happen, your mouth makes them happen. Words are powerful. When you say something, it goes somewhere. And it usually comes right back. You have to learn how to control your words. Use them wisely. You can't say everything you want to say. You've hurt people. You've destroyed families and lives with your words. You don't see that? You don't see the tears and the broken hearts and the broken souls that you've caused? I see it and I cry. I cry for them, and I cry for you.”

“What about my tears? What about my hurt? What about my broken heart?” said Ritz.

“Baby, making others feel that way won't make your pain go away. It never does. It only brings more pain to you in the end. I didn't say you got what you deserved. Nobody deserves to be shot. Nobody deserves to be killed. Nobody deserves to be hurt, physically or emotionally—no one.

“I said that you hurt people, and now *you've* been hurt.

There's a relationship between what you've done and what's been done to you, and you have to examine that. You need to start asking yourself questions. You need to find out if it's more important to be what you think is a 'success' in this world, or is it more important to be a person worthy of the people who follow you? Which person is my Ritz? When you figure that out, you will know what to do.”

“I'm so confused, Mama. I am so angry. I'm angry at a world that tells you that you have to be a certain way to get to the top. I'm angry that when I was just good at my job, it wasn't good enough. When I was better than everyone and worked harder, it didn't get me ahead. I'm angry that it's a man's world and that I have to act like a man sometimes to get where

want to go. I'm angry that I can't find a man who completely understands me and accepts me. I'm angry that even my best friend doesn't get it. And I'm angry at you, Mama. I'm mad as hell that you left me all alone to try to figure this shit out for myself. Why did you do that? Why did you leave me?! Why?!!!”

Ritz broke into an uncontrollable cry. She cried as if her soul were dying. She had not cried like this since her mother died. She would whimper from time to time on occasion, when she would throw herself a small, but private, pity party. But those parties were infrequent. Ritz didn't allow herself to do much self-reflection or assessment. But she did believe in KIM Keeping It Moving. KIM was Ritz's favorite hang-out partner. KIM never looked back, never made any excuses, and never asked for apologies.

Ritz's sobs seemed to want to drown her, which was strange, being in limbo between life and death. She couldn't feel any physical pain, but her emotions were so raw, she felt like her insides had been shredded and alcohol and salt had been poured on her wounds.

“Why, Mama?!”

Ritz's mother held her like the little baby she once was, rocking her back and forth.

“Baby, you're asking me something people have been asking since the dawn of man. You're asking me why I died. I can't answer that. I don't really know why. What I do know is what I told you before— everything happens for a reason. You're either getting a lesson or a blessing. Ritz, my death didn't happen to you. I didn't leave you. I died. It wasn't me choosing, believe me. And I didn't leave you, because I've always been here. Right here.”

She spread her hand over Ritz's heart.

“I've always been inside of you. Everything I have ever said to you since you were a baby is all inside you. My DNA is in you. I never left you. But that was a lesson I guess you never learned. Maddie tried to tell you that when she said I didn't raise you to be that way. She was trying to get you to remember who you were. She was trying to get you to remember that I was inside of you, always.”

Ritz's spirit was heaving as she tried to regain control and process what her mother was saying. She still didn't want to hear it. Ritz wanted her mother to tell her why she abandoned her, and she wasn't getting the answers she was looking for.

“And believe this, baby girl. By the time I left the earth, you had the foundation to handle everything the world would throw at you. The things I instilled in you before I left were more than enough for you to build on. And I gave you my sister— one of the most incredible people ever born— to balance you out. Everything that I wasn't, Maddie is. There were things to learn from her that you ignored. But you have time. Not much time, but you will have time. You will have all the time you need.”

“Mama, I don't care about time with them! I want time with you! We didn't have enough time, Mama. We didn't have enough time!”

Ritz's mother smiled. “Wrong and strong,” she said gently. “We had enough time. Compared to so many, we had so much time. Maybe not as much time as you would have liked, but more than enough time. We knew each other. We loved each other. I rocked you to sleep in my arms. I heard you tell me that you loved me. We were so blessed.”

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