

**The
Best
I Have
To
Offer**

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CHOICES 
WITHIN, LLC

Houston

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DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad

R.I.P.

Prologue

Dark Secrets

She broke one of her truisms, *some things you need to go to your grave with*. She sat in the low back contemporary-styled Italian leather chair, cigar in hand, right leg crossed—never inhaling—blowing circles into the air, her five-inch black patent-leather stiletto rhythmically swinging from her foot.

“They both were laid out when I left. She was sprawled out on the chaise-lounge and he went down after the gun went off.” She paused. “Hit his head on the wall.” She looked down, then back up. “He should have known, I am not to be messed with. I told him that, several times. I told him that I learned how to shoot—I’m licensed to carry—self-defense. You name it, and he still tried me. Damn fool. You know, I’ve been told that I’m just like my grandmother. I must say, people will learn, one day.”

She sat up straight, tapped the cigar in the ashtray, crushed it, picked up her wine glass, took a slow sip, and allowed the taste to linger on her palette for a moment. She swallowed and leaned back again, took a deep breath, exhaled through her nose. Her breast rose and fell. She stared at the ceiling. All of the feelings and memories of that dismal evening crowding her mind like the fans at Cowboys Stadium to see the Dallas Cowboys play. She fidgeted in her chair as her heart sped up. Though she tried to pretend she was confident and cocky, she was scared.

“His wife came in acting all crazy, had a knife in her hand waving it like a fool. He started acting like a damn wimp. He suddenly charged at her, took the knife and took her down, then had the nerve to try the same thing on me and I stopped him, dead in his damn tracks. It was that simple, but just too much drama that I didn’t expect. I felt like I was moving in slow motion. You know, I never heard anything about them again, absolutely nothing about the story. I guess because they covered it locally and I left immediately, and went back to Dallas; though I thought about it every minute or every day for months. Nevertheless, I’m past that now. That was years ago when I first moved to Dallas. I dabbled with that for a short time against my better judgment; suffered minor consequences and scars, and moved on. Dealing with him was hazardous for my health.”

She stood up, looked down, smoothed out the wrinkles in her black pencil skirt, and started her casual and slow stroll toward the door. She stopped and turned around. “You know what? I’m never smoking again.”

She gave her signature wink and walked out, leaving so many unanswered questions.

Part One

IGNORANCE

IS

BLISS?

Chapter 1

MIA

I was standing in my office window on the thirtieth floor, looking over downtown Houston. The sun was forcing its way between two buildings, onto the expressway and directly into my face. What a beautiful sight.

Thank you Jesus, I thought. I sure was going to miss this view. I sat back down in my chair amid all of the boxes in my office, leaned my head back, and meditated for a few moments. This had been my morning ritual and now interrupted by my cell phone ringing. I sat up straight, inhaled, and exhaled, before picking up my Blackberry. I smiled when I saw the picture displayed on the screen. “Talk to me, talk to me!” I sang into the phone.

“What’s going on, girly?” It was Dena Thomas, one of my very best friends.

“Good Mernin’, Good Mernin’,” we both said in unison, mocking Dena’s great-grandmother.

“Hey, I want you to meet me at the park for lunch, on the swings. I feel like being a little girl today and I need to talk to you,” Dena requested.

“Okay, I’m down for that.” I sat up straight and continued to put more of my personal items into the boxes. “Today is my last day here. So I’m out of here early. I’m done with recruiting, policies, and procedures. I have recruited my last college student, from this position anyway. I have a few things to wrap up and then I can meet...”

“Yeah, that’s right,” she interrupted. “Today is your last day over there.”

“Yes indeed.” I thumbed through a few papers before tossing them in the trash. “I’m ready to do what you taught me and try this entrepreneur thing. Learning and Development here I come! It is about time I utilize my hard-earned education from Associate’s Degree to Ph.D. It’s a little unnerving, but I’m ready.”

“Yes, girl you are. You lined it up because you knew the lay-offs were coming. You said they were discussing it three years ago, right after they promoted you to run the place.”

“I know.” I dropped into the chair. The guy from the mailroom knocked on the door and pointed at the boxes. “Hold on for a second, Dena.” I rolled my chair closer and pointed at the labels to guide him to the boxes that were going to storage because they were outsourcing my entire team, including me. “Okay, go ahead.”

Dena continued. “Girl, they just gave you that gentle push that you needed to get started on your dream, with a ninety day notice and a nice severance.”

“Thank the Lord and I am not complaining about that.” I stood to look out the window.

“You’ve spent two years planning and focusing on the right things, breaking that entrepreneur dream down to little manageable pieces. What’s that board you created?”

“A vision-board,” I added as I paced back and forth.

“Yes, the good ol’ vision-board, you sacrificed and saved, you will be okay. I assure you, Mia,” she encouraged.

I needed to hear that again because a hint of fear had landed on me this morning like a heavy weight. My company, ACC had given me a heads-up in early January that lay-offs in the recruiting division were imminent. I had eight recruiters on my team covering forty cities across the U.S.

“Whew! Thanks, Dena.” I fanned myself with a folder as I scanned the office to make sure I wasn’t about to leave behind anything important. “You always know what to say and when to say it. You are the angel on my shoulder encouraging me keep moving my feet and I thank you.”

“Yeper. That’s what I’m here for. You can do it, girl. I got your back! But, one thing you will miss is the nice bonus in the spring. Umph.”

“And I know it. So keep my bedroom ready over there just in case. But anyway, enough about me, what do you need to talk about?”

“Didn’t I say meet me at the park?” She huffed, jokingly.

“I know, but I wanted to get my mind ready for the conversation. And pray and meditate and all of that good stuff.”

She paused for a moment and then said, “I just want to go to the park and swing and chill.”

She was not telling the truth and although I didn’t know what was going on, I had planned to hang up the phone and continue my morning ritual, which now included a longer prayer for her. I knew my friend very well and when she wanted to go to the park, on the swings, and become a little girl all over again, something was bothering her. Sitting on the swings allowed us to go back, if only for a moment, and relieve some stress. I prayed she didn’t have an impending confession because she had done something to that deadbeat boyfriend of hers. Because Lord knows, they have had enough drama for everybody.

I conceded with no pressure. “Okay, I’m down for that. I have some things that I must do today so I need to skedaddle and get to them. I’ll probably be ready by eleven-ish.”

“Okay, well, we can eat and then go to the park or have a picnic. I’ll pick up some food. Hopefully we won’t get hit in the head with a golf ball.”

“I can see it now, in the headlines—DENA THOMAS, HOUSTON’S FINEST EVENT-PLANNER EXTRAORDINAIRE, KNOCKED OUT AT THE PARK WHILE EATING A BOLOGNA SANDWICH.” I moved my hands dramatically as if she could see me.

“Yeah, and right beside that, DR. MIA NIXON, HOUSTON’S MOST ELIGIBLE BACHELORETTE WAS EATING SARDINES,” she laughed.

“Now that’s disgusting! Yuck!” I pretended as if she grossed me out. Truthfully, I had never tasted sardines and had no plans to ever do so.

“You are so silly,” she giggled, “I’ll be out there by eleven. Your clubs in the car? Maybe we can either hit a few buckets at the range or play nine holes.”

“We’ll see.” There was no commitment from me. It was hot! Swinging on a swing under a tree in the shade was one thing, but swinging a golf club in the Houston humidity and heat was a different story.

“Okay, holla bay-beh!” she yelled into the phone and hung up before I responded.

Gosh, I love that girl and all her drama, crazy and all. I prayed, finished packing more boxes, loaded my car, ran a couple of errands, and was at the park by 11:15 ready to hear what she wanted to talk about.



It was eighty-nine degrees. The park was beautiful as always at the beginning of spring. A golf course next to it, the grass looked like thick green carpet, sand boxes with fallen and half-constructed sand castles adorned the area, which was evident that happiness had visited the spot. The flowerbeds and trees were placed strategically throughout the park, an allergy nightmare.

Dena enjoyed sitting in the swings, staring at nothing. It was a great stress relief to go back to childhood, enjoy the outdoors, listen to the birds, and just be thankful.

I had seen Dena handle tragedies from a young age. I believe that was the reason for many of her demons, despite her success professionally.

My mind went back to the summer of 1985 when Dena and I met in elementary school. Dena was walking on the sidewalk in Queens with one of her friends, Tory, a car drove onto the sidewalk and hit him, then just kept going. Tory died on the sidewalk. Dena's mother found out that Tory had been hit on purpose so she sent Dena to Arkansas to live with her grandmother as the "investigation" took place. We were at recess when I invited Dena to join my friends and me on the swings. At the time, she appeared very shy. All of the swings were full, so I volunteered my swing to her, and pushed her until she got her momentum going. From that day on, she joined in our daily competition of who can swing the highest. She really enjoyed it. Sometimes the two of us would go to the swings and just sit, we did not talk until she was ready to talk. She was going through her grieving phase of losing her friend and being taken away from the environment where she was most comfortable. We would always go to the swings when we needed to talk and that has been our tradition ever since.

I pulled into a parking space beside Dena's Lexus and spotted her already sitting on the swings in her golf attire. I hopped out of the car and walked toward her. I noticed a woman standing at a distance with a camera that had one of those long lenses on it, like the professional photographers use.

"Hey Dena." I reached for a hug. "How are you doing Missy? Did you notice if that lady was snapping pictures of you or was she just taking pictures of the park?" I motioned my hand in the air and walked over to the blanket that Dena had spread on the ground, dropped my bag, and returned to plop down in the swing next to Dena.

"What woman? I wasn't paying attention."

"My gosh, Dena, please pay attention. That woman over there." I moved my head toward the woman, trying not to be obvious as I thrust my legs forward to get a slight momentum of my swing.

Dena lowered her sunglasses to get a better view of the woman. "She's too far away, I can't see her."

"You're not under surveillance for any reason are you?" I joked.

"I'd better not be. But there's no telling who Monty's dumb self has hired. Oh no, wait. He's broke and hiring anybody to do anything would require money, huh?" she scoffed.

"Well, that camera is aimed in this direction for some reason and it's making me nervous. Why would Monty hire somebody?"

“Because he’s trifling, broke, about to be homeless, and accused me of cheating this morning,” she blurted out.

“Umph. Glory,” I mumbled.

I decided to wait to see if she would elaborate before I made any comments. I knew all about Monty and his tricks, but for him to be on the homeless track, he had really pissed her off.

She remained quiet and kept her eyes on the woman with the camera. She stood up and stretched as I struggled to stop my swing because I knew she was getting ready to do something that she had no business doing.

“Who is this woman? She is really bold standing here just snapping away. I know she’s not taking pictures of the scenery,” she muttered.

“Dena, uh, maybe she’s uh...” I stood beside her.

Dena ignored me and started a brisk walk that turned into a sprint, in the direction of the woman. The woman saw Dena coming toward her, lowered her camera and rushed back to her convertible Volkswagen and drove away.

“Damn it!” Dena declared when I caught up to her. She rushed back to the picnic area, dropped to her knees and rummaged through her things until she found a pen. “I’m not gonna chase her ass, but I can write those license plates down.”

My eyes followed the direction of the Volkswagen until it was out of sight.