

## Chapter Fifteen

**“He raped me....”**

Floyd was still for a moment in the quiet of the morning. He wanted Vivian to fix him some eggs and toast with honey, except he was too tired and hung over to demand it of her. Before long, he slipped back off to sleep.

Mary slept soundly under her mother’s arm, and Vivian was content. She didn’t know Floyd was there until 10:00 a.m., when he woke her up to tell her to fix him a bite to eat. She gasped at his nerve to enter her bedroom with the impudence that he expected her to cook for him. He explained to her puzzled look that he came with Lee last night.

“I ain’t fixing you nothing, boy.” She leaped out of bed, happy now that the chill from the dawn had cautioned her to wear her robe to bed after her husband had gone. She placed the still sleeping Mary gently in the center of the bed. “But I think I’ll have something.” Walking past him, she smiled innocently on her way to the kitchen. He followed her with uncertainty. Surely, she was just playing about not giving him any food! He watched her grab the last biscuit from a basket on the kitchen table and topple it down her throat in practically one gulp. She also slurped the remains of what was in the cooler in a pitcher that smelled like lemonade, not bothering to get a cup. She looked at Floyd, smiling passively at him. Then, she stretched her arms out and yawned. “I guess I’ll go back to sleep with my baby. Please don’t wake me up no more.” She started past him.

He blocked the kitchen doorway. “You ain’t gonna get me nothing to eat? Not even a sandwich?” Vivian didn’t mean he couldn’t find himself anything, she simply couldn’t stomach doing anything nice for him. He gave her goose bumps by his mere presence.

“Not even a butter milk biscuit. You tried to ruin my engagement party.”

“You gonna hafta come up off o’ that old story. Me ‘n Lee cool, now.”

“I don’t care if Lee is supposed to be your friend...you don’t mean nothing to me, therefore I ain’t cooking you no meal.” She didn’t understand why they were having the conversation. They glared at each other.

“Vivian, why you always gotta treat me like I’s some low down dog?” He begged. “Cause that’s what you are,” she answered with raised eyebrows.

“What? You think you better’n me o’ something?” She looked at him with disapproval from head to toe, and then she turned her nose up and sniffed at him. She tried again to go through the narrow passageway that he blocked, but still, he grabbed her arm and pulled her up into him.

“Ugh!” Vivian screeched. “If you don’t get your dirty, funky, crusty hands off of me, you better!” He backed her into the wall and came against her. Right away, she went into a panic when she recognized the wild look in his eyes. The rush of her blood throttled her as she felt herself sinking to the floor. Everything turned dark in the whirlwind that encompassed her. She tried to escape but something clutched at her legs, pulling her back into the spinning river. She tried to scream, yet she could not find her breath. She was drowning. Searing pain raced with intensity until it tore into her. She felt the urge to shriek at the top of her lungs, yet she could not, would not allow herself to be discovered in such a position.

“What you got . . . to . . . say . . . now, what you got to . . . say, princess?” She cried silently. Everyone was always treating her like she thought she was some sort of princess, when she didn’t feel that way about herself. She wanted the ordeal to be over as quickly as possible. Defeated, Vivian gave up the fight and let the tears roll down her face. She felt as though she was suffocating. He was practically cutting off her airways with his flabby, sweaty body. Little did he care, though. He would teach her a lesson for rejecting him in her sidity and uppity manner. He loved the feel of the power he had over her now, as he violated her. Never again could she look down on him or sneer at him as though he was nothing. He would make certain that she knew she was nothing. He groped and clawed at her mercilessly.

Vivian’s cries were inaudible, but her body shook loudly. Mary’s wails came from the bedroom once she awakened to find herself in an empty bed. Mary sensed that something was amuck in her home. She had a keen sense of awareness of the times her mama and papa fought, since those times created such anxiety in her. Even as an infant, loud voices and tension-filled tones agitated her. She could tell the difference from the times her parents fought between their loving whispers, and the soft tender words murmured near her or to her.

She sensed now that there was a stranger in the house; another man who was hurting her mama. She knew it was of the male persuasion, like her daddy, and she had it formulated in her mind that males always win, and that males liked to fight. What was fighting? Those thunderous voices and shrill screams. Fighting was the pounding of fists, the separation of bodies, the

forceful joining of bodies, and the rapid heart beat that echoed in her ear when she cuddled on her mother's chest. Fighting was muteness, crying, and sleepless nights.

Fighting was now. Mary could discern her mother's muffled cries because her anguish shook the house. She wanted to be fed and comforted by her mother's breast. She wanted to consume her mother's pain. Mary liked the soft way her mother smiled at her, and her kindly hands, how they reached for her, cuddled her, loved her. She screamed for her mother and hollered when she didn't get a response. This was abandonment to Mary. She had no confirmation that her mother would ever come for her. She cried for the relief a kiss or a hug could give. Vivian's greatest pain now came from the inability to go to her daughter. She closed her eyes tightly and imagined that in a few moments, she'd be able to hold her screaming baby and feed her to ease both of their pain.

Vivian didn't know she was already feeding her child the ingredients of psychological pain and torment that Mary would have for the rest of her life. Every time she yelled at Lee, or Lee yelled at her, every time she was sorrowful, Mary recognized the despair in her mother's shaking arms, and she tasted the suffering in the chemical produced by that despair in her milk. Since she was a baby when these ingredients came to her, she would never know or understand from whence they came, or that these ingredients of her make-up were even there.

Mary would live her life repressing her psychological trauma. She would never seek help for her hardship because she would learn to sweep things under the rug, to pretend the horrors of her life didn't exist. Ignoring the problems would become progressively easy as the years passed and as the damage took on the "snowball" effect, increasing in intensity and frequency. Yet, soon, the time would come when Mary no longer noticed the dysfunction, and she would no longer cry during arguments. Violence, gambling, drinking, fornication and adultery, and overall mental anguish would be the norm for Mary. And for her children, And for her children's children.

"I gotta get my baby," Vivian begged. Floyd was behaving ferociously in his fit of rage. He grunted and panted like a wild, stray dog in her ear. "Let me go now, Floyd," she pleaded tearfully. He was triumphant. He gnawed at her flesh repeatedly until he tasted her peeling skin. Contemptuously, he rolled onto his side. She was afraid to move, lest he notice her and attack again. He reached over and squeezed her thigh before standing to put his pants back on. He looked around the room to make sure he wouldn't leave anything behind, and then he left.

Vivian lie frozen cold in indignity for what seemed like an eternity. Mary had stopped crying because she was simply too exhausted. Vivian wanted to see about her, yet she was anesthetized. The thing that made her finally stand was the paranoia that Lee might walk in unexpectedly. She wasn't sure what Lee would think about her if he saw her like this. She imagined his accusing glare, his unsympathetic arms crossed over his chest, the profanities flying from between his teeth. If her father-in-law would come, she would throw herself in his arms and wail in displeasure over what had just transpired. He would understand and know that it wasn't entirely her fault.

She was too ashamed to tell anyone because she believed that everyone thought she was unvirtuous, anyway. Her mother, she believed, thought she had been spoiled years ago. How could she explain to her mother that no boy had touched her before Henry? Henry! Even he was surprised to learn that he was her first. She felt dirty to think of what she'd volunteered to do with him, knowing that her sister loved him.

The words to describe what had just happened tasted like sewage on her tongue. Vivian was sure that if she uttered such words, her mother would never believe her. Fornication and adultery were both played out in her house, making them acceptable examples of lifestyles. Her self-accusing spirit told her fornication was wrong, nevertheless, she loved and respected her mother, who had been her main teacher. Carol role modeled adultery for her three budding daughters, thus, the society Carol provided challenged the core of Vivian's moral being.

Vivian was confused about her identity. She pictured herself as cheap and undeserving because she used men as the measuring stick to her self worth. Before Wali Eli came around, no decent men had ever given her, her sisters, or her mother the time of day, except to display to them how to take abuse and live in unhealthy relationships. Mr. Anderson was decent, but he was busy with his store and his own personal life, so Carol and her family were merely a backdrop in his life. Uncle Jack spent his life out to sea, loving the fish and the water as Vivian wished he would have loved them.

The fact that Carol showed Vivian how one could commit adultery with a married man for all the years of her life was proof to Vivian of her own lack of virtue. Carol showed her daughters how to disobey God without so much as a conscience about doing so. They went to church every Sunday, but Satan reigned from the pulpit. Before and after church, Satan ruled their lives.

When the stranger would creep in and out of Carol's bedroom, she came out behind him to face her daughters as though everything was normal. Vivian saw how men took advantage of her mother, yet her mother continued to live in these relationships. How then, could she tell her mother or anyone that someone had violated her against her will? Those types of things didn't happen to decent people.

Vivian didn't have the emotional fearlessness to tell anyone about what crime Floyd had just committed. Deep down, she felt she deserved to have her body contaminated by Floyd's rape because she shouldn't have acted like she was too good for him. She knew she wasn't doing right by God, so she felt it was God's punishment that Floyd had just raped her. That is why it was easy for her to suffocate inside of the affliction, all alone.

"If Henry could come today, he would comfort me," Vivian thought. Vivian believed that Henry wouldn't let anyone defeat her, including Floyd. All Henry had to do was show up and embrace her tightly, and everything would be okay. She rubbed her arm that ached from Floyd's roughness. "Oh, Henry!" She mourned. Holding on to the walls for support, she made her way to Mary and lifted the child gently in her arms. Mary rested her precious head on her mother's chest and sighed. At that moment, Vivian realized in her time of duress that the only physical comforter who would do was Henry. She wanted to be held tenderly and reassuringly, yet what she pined for would feel too weird coming from her father-in-law...but Henry could hold her and his tenderness would heal her. She sank in her seat when she finally considered that she loved him. "Oh, God! I've always loved him, but I can't love him! He—it was always wrong. But I need him so much." Mary looked curiously at her.

"I'm gonna give you a middle name, child," she said in a shaking voice. "I'm gonna call you 'Henri-Anna'. We gonna put that down in writing for Pixie when she comes to make me sign the papers. You gonna be my comfort, and I'm gonna be yours." Mary Henri-Anna Johnson smiled up at her mama. Her lovely child gave her the strength to wash herself, get dressed, and get on with the day. Her main concern about what happened to her was what she would do if her husband got too close to her tonight. If necessary, Vivian planned to cover up the crime by telling him it was still too soon after the baby had been born.

There was no time for Vivian to wallow in self-pity. As a defense mechanism, she repressed the horrifying details of her injury. She could never forget what happened, but she could

camouflage the memories or “pretend” it never happened. She borrowed a piece of her heart and stored the bereavement there. Still, she didn’t know how to prepare to combat the internal injuries sustained or how to prevent it from reoccurring. She didn’t delve into how the tragedy made her feel as a woman. She didn’t stop to consider that she would never be the same because she had been viciously raped. It just added to her low self-esteem and negative self-worth. She told herself that it was her fault for being too careless, and that Lee would be right to blame her if he ever found out what happened. This negative self-talk helped in silencing her.

When she scraped herself off of the ground with the support of the wall, she packed her catastrophe in a bag, and carried the luggage with her for the rest of her life. She thought she could handle it on her own, and she could—on the surface. However, raping a woman is like raping a nation, for women have the capacity from their wombs to give birth to pain and suffering, or peace and quiet of mind. It was a woman who nurtured Jesus.