

## Chapter 1

James could taste the sweat as it trickled past his eyebrows and down his lips. He pulled the string to open the wooden blinds, looked around outside, then closed the blinds in less than two seconds. The street was empty just as he had hoped. Once again, his timing was perfect.

He had his neighbors' schedules memorized. Mrs. Edison and the twins left for their walk at approximately seven forty-five each morning and returned fifteen minutes later. The retired couple across the street tilled their garden each day, rain or shine, starting at seven and finishing forty-five minutes later. By seven-fifty, the school buses and car pools all arrived and departed. To be sure to avoid all of them, he needed to pull his Tahoe into the garage at eight-ten sharp, each morning.

The tension in his body eased a bit as he took a long gulp of his fourth cup of coffee in less than two hours. He needed to relax; he had made it through another morning. James had not seen anyone, and it appeared as if no one had seen him.

His hideout was a convenience store with a restaurant attached to it. He waited there each day until he was sure Raquel and the kids had left and his neighbors had dispersed for the morning.

He practiced his speech again. "Baby, I don't want you to worry, but I kinda lost my job." He tried to prepare himself for Raquel's objections. "Of course, I know it is less than a month before our wedding. Yes, I know we just purchased our dream home. Yes, I did say I was finally going to do right by you and our kids."

James had been having imaginary conversations, sneaking into his own house, and consuming obscene amounts of coffee for the last week. He didn't like the way the words were leaving his mouth today. Instead of coming out soft, like satin, they seemed explosive, like bullets. He was growing more terrified that he would make things worse by rambling incoherently. He couldn't remember the last time he felt the need to write a letter. But he suddenly recalled hearing on a talk show that writing was the best way to deliver bad news. This way, he could take his time and word things carefully.

James's hands trembled as he wrote, *Dear Raquel, You know I love you and the kids with all my heart. But my love has caused me to keep something from you. I am very sorry. It has been so hard to keep up this lie.*

James slammed his cup on the counter. He wanted nothing more than to be able to concentrate on Raquel and write this letter. But then a silhouette of another woman appeared in his mind, interrupting his thoughts. He tried to stop thinking about Joan Dallas, but the closer he drew to his wedding, the more he couldn't help but wonder if he had made the right decision choosing Raquel over her. It hurt him to do it, but he finally stopped dating Joan, the perpetual other woman in his life, and mother to one of his children. He wanted to prove to Raquel that he was finally serious about being a responsible father and husband.

James's mother once told him he needed to pick one woman and settle down, because as much as he would like it, he was never going to be able to create a "Joquel." Raquel was beautiful. Joan was ordinary-looking. Raquel graduated from beauty school. When James met Joan, she was managing several professional offices. Joan also held a college degree. Raquel was loud and could be embarrassing, but she was also spontaneous, with a fiery streak that ignited passion in James. Joan was more reserved, well spoken, and fit in perfectly when James needed a date for an upscale function.

In regard to physique, Raquel couldn't compete with Joan. The bad thing was, she didn't seem to realize it. James asked Raquel repeatedly to wear clothes that complemented her plus-sized frame. Raquel just ignored him, continuing to dress as if she still had the body she had in high school. On the other hand, Joan had the body Raquel had in high school, which is why he couldn't stop meditating on her curvaceous silhouette in his head.

What brought Raquel to the finish line was the fact that she had been fully committed to James; no man had ever touched her, but him. James certainly couldn't say that about Joan. James smiled. Raquel was pure, lovely, and faithful. That's why she won him over. He started to work on his apology letter again, with a new enthusiasm.

Days ago, all James could think about was how he was going to surprise Raquel. He had planned and paid for an over-the-top honeymoon orchestrated to leave her speechless. Instead of shopping for their beach attire, he needed to figure out how he was going to tell Raquel the truth without losing her forever.

James told everybody he was finished with his lying, manipulative, and womanizing ways. He was finally going to be the man his family needed. At their engagement party, he tore his little black book to pieces to the delight of all 200 of their guests.

The poster-sized high-school picture of Raquel on the wall in their den caught James's attention. It was his favorite photo of her. It wasn't the type of photo a person hung up and never noticed again. He took a good long look at it every time he had the chance.

He meditated on her honey brown skin, slightly slanted eyes, and thick wavy hair. She had her majorette leotard on, with those legendary white high-heeled boots. Her figure was svelte back then, 140 pounds of hourglass perfection. James walked into Mrs. Hunter's eleventh-grade history class and knew he had to have Raquel. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Raquel could have married anybody, but she chose the guy who did not know how to appreciate her. The guy who cheated on her consistently for over a decade. The guy who made her feel inferior, because after having his two children, she no longer looked like the shapely majorette in the picture.

He thought back to his first apartment, nestled right in the middle of the wrong side of Houston. He used to joke about how the rats were as big as cats. Now he was living in a five-bedroom luxury home located in a suburb, miles outside of Houston. Everything was finally going to be perfect. That was until he lost his job of over fifteen years. James had been a constable ever since he graduated from college with a degree in criminal justice.

Kenny G's saxophone buzzed from James's cell phone. His first thought was to not answer it, but a quick check of his caller ID made him change his mind. He paused a moment, then swallowed hard before taking a deep breath. "What's up?" James hoped he sounded like himself.

"Hey, it's Miles."

James instantly knew something was wrong. His younger brother never identified himself when he called. "Hey, bro, what's up? Why are you calling so early?"

"I need to talk to you," Miles said. "What time do you get off duty?"

Lies were accustomed to flowing effortlessly from James's mouth. "I took off today. I needed a break. I'm at home."

"Are Raquel and the kids gone?"

"Yeah, why?" James tried to sound calm. He didn't like the fact that he couldn't read anything in his brother's monotone voice.

"Good, I'm on my way over. I'm about fifteen minutes away."

James wanted to ask another question. He glanced down at his phone. He would have to wait. Miles ended the call without the words that had ended all of his phone conversations since he read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in middle school. James wondered why his brother chose this morning not to end their conversation with the words he always said, "Peace be with you."

When Miles wasn't golfing, he was obsessed with finding the one thing that would allow him to be alongside the founders of Google, Myspace, and Facebook. He and one of his law school dropout buddies had gone through several ideas, each failed. Their latest venture was to form an Internet-based company where men could discreetly get paternity tests on their alleged children. He said they were seeing case after case where men were paying child support for children who did not belong to them.

A man just could not ask the woman in his life for such a test, without causing a major catastrophe. He needed to be able to get results discreetly, and the discretion was what their mail-order DNA business provided.

James had no doubts he had fathered James Jr., his son by Joan, and Morris and Alexis, his children by Raquel. He was only trying to help his brother when he gathered his children one weekend and met Miles and his associate at a restaurant. They secured the swabs they needed from the children without them realizing they had been tested.

James remembered something Miles had whispered to him as they were leaving the restaurant that day.

“The results will be back in two weeks.”

James glanced at the date on his cell phone. It had been exactly two weeks.