

Rumor

Daughter of Lies

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Chapter I

Cold World

Most people can't remember the day of their birth, but somehow I can. At least, I seem to think that I can. Maybe it was some sort of dream. I'm not sure, but what I do know is that it was a beautiful day. It was a Sunday morning and the Mississippi sun was as bright as ever; but from the depths of my mother's womb, none of that mattered. It was warm and comfortable inside. I slept to the steady sound of her soothing heartbeat. I was a part of her. Everything was perfect, but then something happened. It was no longer comfortable. My perfect home was now tightening in and around me. I felt restricted. There was an enormous buildup of pressure. It was the most frightening feeling I had ever experienced. I was being forced from my home. I had no idea where I was going. With each passing second, her womb grew tighter. Her heart raced louder. It was only a matter of time before my perfect home ruptured and sent me swimming towards an extremely bright light.

I remember shielding my eyes and screaming for help. I didn't want to see anything. I wanted to return to the warmth of her womb. The hospital room was so cold. Chilly hands gripped me from all sorts of directions. They cut the cord that grew from my navel. I had no idea who they were or what they were doing to me. It was frightening. I was scared out of my mind until I once again felt the warmth of her embrace. I opened my eyes for the first time while lying in her arms. I took sight of her beautiful eyes and wide smile. Those beautiful eyes and that wide smile belonged to the woman I would forever know as my mother, Alieza Arden. She took one look at me and started to sing with the most beautiful voice. The tone of her voice was even more soothing than her incredible heartbeat.

*If the truth's gonna hurt,
Then I gotta tell a lie.
I said I'd rather fake a front
Than see a tear in your eye.
Lightening never strikes in the same place twice,
So take your fragile heart,
And put your pain on ice.*

*It's a cold, cold world,
Be careful who you love, baby girl.
You never know when it's your turn.
Protect your heart or watch it burn.*

After she finished her song, I could hear her whisper the name, Rumor. This is what she called me, her Rumor. Within minutes, I returned to sleep. Her arms quickly became my new home. They were a home that I thought I'd never have to leave; but with time, even that would change. Eventually I grew to become a lost and mother-less child. Just as her song so boldly claimed, "It's a very cold world." I am Rumor Arden and this is my story.



"Rumor, wake up chile," a loud yell suddenly consumed my thoughts. That yell belonged to none other than my Aunt HoneyBea. My bedroom door opened as Aunt HoneyBea stood tall in the midst of the Sunday morning light. Aunt HoneyBea was a woman of large stature, but she was as sweet as honey. Everyone loved Aunt HoneyBea. She was the type of woman who would move the world just to save a simple fly; but just like the bumble bee, Aunt HoneyBea didn't play when it came to her family. Any sign of a threat and she didn't hesitate to show that her sting was mean.

"Dang, Auntie, it's 6 in the morning," my 16-year-old cousin, Gia, who slept on the other side of our bedroom complained while shielding the light of the sun from her eyes.

"Don't sass me, girl. You went to sleep last night without doing them dishes too, so if I were you I wouldn't try me." Aunt HoneyBea snatched Gia's comforter from across her bed.

"It was Rumor's turn to do the dishes. I just got my nails done. They wasn't about to go in no dish water." Gia shot me a dirty look. Gia always acted as if she hated me, but Aunt HoneyBea told me to pay her no mind. She always said Gia loved attention and hated having to share it with any other girl, even her own cousin.

"I ain't ask you whose turn it was. I just spent all morning cleaning this kitchen and cooking these hotcakes. Ya'll better come eat before I get my belt," Aunt HoneyBea warned. Gia rolled her eyes, but she didn't dare speak another word. She knew better than to cross Aunt HoneyBea.

I watched as Aunt HoneyBea stomped out into the hallway and pounded against the basement door. “Darryl Junior, come up now, boy. It’s time for breakfast.” Darryl Junior was my other cousin. He was six years older than Gia. Darryl Junior was a smooth talker. He worked as a nightclub promoter in Biloxi. Every night he drove an hour into the city for work and an hour back in the mornings. He couldn’t have slept even one hour, but that didn’t matter to Aunt HoneyBea. It was Sunday morning and everybody who lived in her house was going to church, regardless.

“Where my sister at?” The ringing of Uncle Champ’s keys preceded him as he walked into the front door of the house.

“Champ, don’t be tracking that oil on my floor. I just mopped, fool.” Aunt HoneyBea gasped as Uncle Champ wobbled into the house. Uncle Champ ran an automobile repair shop out of Aunt HoneyBea’s garage. Everyone in our small town of Hurley, Mississippi, used Uncle Champ’s shop.

“Sorry bout that Sis, but I could smell your famous hotcakes from out there in that garage. I swear them pancakes the only smell I know that can overpower motor oil.” Uncle Champ laughed as his round stomach shuffled with excitement.

“You bet not touch nothing in my kitchen with those nasty hands. Go on back out that door. I’ll bring you your breakfast,” Aunt HoneyBea exclaimed while shoving Uncle Champ out the front door.

“Hey Uncle Champ.” I waved at my uncle before Aunt HoneyBea completely ushered him out the door.

“Mornin’ Rumor and Gia,” Uncle Champ yelled back through the screen door.

“Yeah, whatever.” Gia patted against her freshly relaxed hair while reluctantly heading towards the dining room.

“Any mail from my Mama, Auntie?” I asked Aunt HoneyBea.

“Rumor, you know mail don’t run on Sundays,” Aunt HoneyBea answered.

“Yea, unlike yo’ mama’s legs, some places have to close from time to time.” Gia spitefully spoke beneath her breathe.

“What you say, girl?” Aunt HoneyBea exclaimed.

“I didn’t say anything, Auntie.” Gia smiled.

“Gia, don’t make me pop you in your fast tail mouth.” Aunt HoneyBea put her hand on her hip and pointed the spatula at Gia’s head. Gia immediately went quiet. “Rumor, baby, the mail man

comes Tuesday morning. You know yo' mama loves you more than anything in this world. Nothing could stop her from getting one of them letters to her baby."

I smiled as Aunt HoneyBea flashed me a look of reassurance.

"Now ya'll finish your breakfast and get ready for church. I'm about to go down in this basement and get your cousin out of that bed," Aunt HoneyBea said while turning her attention towards the basement door. "Darryl Junior, I'm not gon keep telling you to get out that bed, boy."

I could feel Gia's stare burning a hole in the top of my head as she annoyingly tapped her fork against her glass plate. As I looked up from my plate, I could see her face flexing with mischief as she aggressively chewed away at a bite of pancakes. I could only imagine what horrible thoughts were flowing through her hateful mind, but I didn't dare ask. I only lowered my stare back to my plate of freshly cooked breakfast food.

"You do know that Aunt Mildred hasn't eaten, don't you?" Gia continued to add unnecessary tension to the moment by tapping away at her plate of food. "How selfish of you, Rumor. You should take our dear old auntie a plate."

"Why don't you do it?" I said desperately trying to avoid eye contact with my manipulative cousin. Gia knew that I was afraid of Aunt Mildred. This was just another one of her sick attempts to torture me. Aunt Mildred was our oldest aunt. Her mind was ruined by a severe case of Alzheimer's. Advanced osteoporosis combined with a series of debilitating strokes left her disfigured with a hunchback. She was a frightening sight to witness, and I made it my mission to stay out of her presence.

"Really, Rumor? It's Sunday. Are you really going to let our aunt starve on the Lord's Day? What did Pastor Bernard preach last Sunday? Ah, yes, it was love for your fellow man."

"Shut up, Gia. I'm not gonna let you bother me. Aunt HoneyBea will feed Aunt Mildred. She always does."

"Not if she forgot to turn down the fire beneath the hotcakes. It would be such a shame if they burned before our sickly Aunt is able to eat any."

"The stove is off. The pancakes are fine."

"Are they?" Slyly Gia leaned back against her chair and stretched her arms wide as if she was yawning. Without looking, she nudged her fingers against the stove dials, turning the heat to a high temperature.

"Gia, stop. I'm telling Aunt HoneyBea."

“We share a room, Rumor. Aunt HoneyBea can’t protect you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Tell and I promise I’ll make your life hell.”

“Why are you so mean?” I cried.

“As far as you’re concerned, I’m a saint. Just call me Saint Gia.” Gia beamed with satisfaction while watching me squirm uncomfortably. Gia knew that my conscience would get the best of me.

The screech of loose floor boards never seemed so loud before that moment; but as I slowly approached Aunt Mildred’s room, each screech sent torrents of fright down my spine. The smell of old cabbage and Bengay filled my nose. I looked down at my hands as they trembled around the plate of hotcakes. I wanted to turn and run so badly; but every time I looked back, I faced Gia’s menacing stare.

Hesitantly, I knocked on her door. At first there was no answer. I followed with two more knocks, both more firm than the first, but still there was no answer. “I tried, Gia. She’s probably sleep.”

“Try again,” Gia demanded. I turned my attention from Gia back to the door as it finally swung open.

Aunt Mildred stood before me with her arms spread wide. Her dingy bathrobe flew open beneath her arm span. Her old, wrinkled skin hung loosely from her nude body as she swiftly reached for me. Before I could react, she grabbed my arm and pulled me close to her face. The horrid smell of her breath was indescribable as she screamed, “Knock. Knock. Who’s there...? Lies.”

My vision blurred with tears as I yelled for dear life. I yanked my arm from her grasp, dropping the plate of hotcakes onto the floor. The glass plate shattered just as I turned wildly running away from Aunt Mildred’s bedroom door. Aunt HoneyBea ascended from the basement just in time for me to collide with her bosom. I cried and screamed frantically as she held me closely.

“Rumor, what happened?” Aunt HoneyBea asked as she hugged my trembling body. She then looked up to see Aunt Mildred standing nude in her bedroom doorway. “Mildred, honey, tie up your robe.” Aunt HoneyBea pulled me aside, raced towards Aunt Mildred over broken glass, and closed the bedroom door behind them.

I dropped to the floor just across from the basement door as Darryl Junior's shadow stretched across me. "What's going on up here?" Darryl Junior asked, first looking down at me then over towards Gia.

"Beats me. You better get some of these pancakes. They're the bomb. Mmm, mmm good." Gia pretended to be innocent while stuffing her face with hotcakes.

Only my mother's embrace could provide me with the comfort that I needed, so outside on the front porch steps, I sat silently facing the sun. My hair was freshly braided into one of Aunt HoneyBea's signature designs. I wore my favorite dress, a white satin floral gown with a silk bow around the waist. It was a hand-me-down from my mother's teen years. Wearing it always made me feel like she was with me. The warm rays of the sun dried my tears as if my mother was wiping them herself. It was very reminiscent of the moment in which she left. I was only four years old at that time. Tears streamed endlessly down my face as I watched her standing with a large duffle bag in hand. Aunt HoneyBea held me tightly while I fought to join her. My mother stood, staring back at me as the sunlight illuminated her frame through the opened doorway. A single tear escaped her right eye. She cupped her mouth with her free hand as her entire face frowned with pain.

"Mommy, please don't leave me." I remember crying desperately.

"I'll come back for you, baby. I promise God will see us through this."

"Mama."

"HoneyBea, please take care of my baby." My mother sobbed before turning and fading into the sun's rays. I cried and reached for her but she was already gone. All I had left of her was my satin gown and the Sunday morning sunlight.

"You feeling better, Cuzzen?" Darryl Junior joined me on the front porch steps. Darryl Junior was like the big brother I never had. He provided the perfect balance to Gia's hatred.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

"You do know your mother's coming back for you, right?" Darryl Junior put his arm around my shoulders and watched me with the most easing pair of eyes.

"It's been eight years. Every day is a struggle just to remember her. I don't know, Darryl Junior. I'm starting to think I should just let her go."

"Don't ever let her go. My mother is dead. I miss her so much and Gia never even got a chance to know her. Not only is your mother alive, but she's in Africa doing missionary work. She's dedicated her life to helping little boys and girls just like you to survive. You should be proud."

“But I’m not proud. I know it’s selfish, but why can’t their mother’s help them. I want my mama, Darryl Junior. I need her.”

“I know, Cuz. Do you trust me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then believe me when I tell you. I can feel it. She’ll be back a lot sooner than you think.”

“Thank you Darryl. I love you.”

“I love you too, Rumor,” Darryl Junior said before hugging me.

“Why ya’ll out here sitting around? Darryl Junior, I told you to go start that car. Rumor, baby, get up off that dirty step with that pretty white dress on, and Gia come out that house, girl,” Aunt HoneyBea fussed while racing for the car.

“I’m curling my hair,” Gia yelled.

“If you don’t come out that house, I’m gon curl your behind,” Aunt HoneyBea threatened while cranking her Cadillac. Darryl Junior and I hopped in the car as Gia ran out of the house with a head full of curlers.

Looking out of the backseat window at the wooded area surrounding the quiet Mississippi roads evoked memories of so many morning rides with my mother. Alieza and I would cruise up and down Interstate 10 with no real destination in mind. She loved the blowing wind that accompanied a morning ride. She would wear her hair down so that it flowed freely with the breeze. I recalled watching her as she harmonized with the tunes of the radio. She was an old school rhythm and blues fan. Whitney Houston, Chaka Kahn, and Donna Summers belted memorable tunes from the speakers. She would glance over at me while pulling back at her wildly blowing hair. I remember looking up at her with the most adoring eyes. She would flash the most beautiful smile; and then with one hand steadying the wheel, she would tickle my side as I giggled with excitement. The road ahead of us would seem so endless, but within my mother’s car, none of that mattered. As long as we were together, we proudly anticipated whatever adventure awaited us.

She was such a fun loving woman. Her actions were almost child-like as she mashed heavily upon the gas begging for stronger gusts of wind to enter the car. We both laughed as the road around us melted into a blur of what was once black top and yellow paint. Red and blue lights swirled into view covering us completely. The vision of my mother dancing amidst the lights like the disco queen, Donna Summer, filled me with so much elation, but the imaginary festivities came to an abrupt halt as I realized Aunt HoneyBea was being trailed by a police car.

“Rumor, chile, put on that seat belt,” Aunt HoneyBea yelled as I realized the police lights were not just a figment of my memories, but actually current happenings. I scrambled to get into my seatbelt as Aunt HoneyBea quickly parked the car along the side of the road.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Does the whole world have to see me with these damn curlers in my head?” Gia quickly attempted to pull the curlers free of her hair as the police car came to a stop behind us. As I looked forward into the rear view mirror, I quickly realized why Gia was in such a panic. It was Deputy Ron Mack, the son of Sheriff Mack, and the brother of Gia’s boyfriend local rapper, K Mack.

“Lil girl, if you curse one more word on the Lord’s Day, I will slap you in your mouth so help me God.” Aunt HoneyBea turned to face Gia.

“Everybody calm down. I got this. Just let me do all of the talking, Auntie,” Darryl Junior whispered as Deputy Ron Mack stepped to the passenger door window.

“You know why I pulled you over, Ma’am?” Deputy Ron Mack peered over his shades as Darryl Junior lowered the window.

“Ma’am? Ronald Mack, don’t act like you don’t know me boy. I’m the one who slapped your lil ashy booty the day you were born back when I used to mid-wife for this town. Now I was doing 45 in a 50. Please tell me why you making me late for church before I get upset.” Aunt HoneyBea said completely ignoring Darryl Junior’s plea to let him handle the situation. Aunt HoneyBea wasn’t the sit- back-and –observe type of woman. She was used to being in control of every situation.

“My apologies, Miss HoneyBea. I was just trying to keep it professional. Papa Mack’s kinda coming down hard on the deputies since we’re facing a new election and all. You know how that can be. I just wanted to let you know you’ve got a busted tail light. You may wanna get that fixed. You can never be too careful, especially with your beautiful granddaughters in the back.” Ron Mack slyly smiled and winked at Gia as she successfully removed the last curler from her head.

“Well, thank you baby. Now if you’ll excuse me, we really are late for church. Why don’t you and your daddy come by the house later for some of my famous cobbler? I’m cooking after church.” Aunt HoneyBea smiled with her sweet southern charm.

“I think I’ll take you up on that Miss HoneyBea. Ya’ll be careful out here and say a lil prayer for me in church,” Ron Mack said while still shooting a series of flirtatious glances at Gia. He was very smooth with it. If I hadn’t been in the backseat alongside Gia with a perfect view of her googly

eyes, I would've never noticed the deputy's flirtations with my underage cousin. Clearly Aunt HoneyBea and Darryl Junior had missed the flirting, because Aunt HoneyBea barely tolerated Gia dating K Mack let alone his adult brother.

"Bye Ron." Gia gushed as Ron Mack returned to his police cruiser.

"Bye Ron? What was that?" Darryl Junior inquired.

"Mind your business. I'm just being polite." Gia snapped.

"Save that polite talk for somebody who don't know your mean a—" Darryl Junior quickly caught his tongue at the sight of HoneyBea rolling her eyes in his direction.

"I want the both of you to shut up. I'm making all three of you go up for alter call today. I don't know where you chillen get all that fowl talk from." Aunt HoneyBea fussed non-stop for the rest of the ride to church.

We were very late for church. As we walked into the front doors of the sanctuary, the praises of the gospel met our ears with the banging of the drums. As usual, my attention immediately went to the many church lady hats bobbing back and forth on the heads of the church women. They were always so elaborately styled that even now I think there was some sort of competition and I missed the memo. People shouted and raced up and down the aisles and in between the pews. The choir sang and danced as Deacon Hamilton directed them excitedly. He threw his hands up and down. As if he were a puppeteer, they followed his commands exactly. I stuck close to Aunt HoneyBea as we made our way up to our usual spot in the second pew. Aunt HoneyBea was taken aback to see Sister Emmagene and her family peacefully clapping while sitting in our usual spot. The irritation on my Aunt's face could be seen from across the sanctuary.

"Sister HoneyBea, why don't you all follow me. I saved the perfect seat for you and your family," Sister Janice, the head usher, quickly intervened. Aunt HoneyBea stared at Sister Emmagene with eyes so mean I was surprised she didn't burn a hole in her head; but being the woman of God that she was, she quietly followed Sister Janice to our new seats. Sister Emmagene turned and waived at us as we took our seats towards the back of the church.

"That woman is working my nerves this morning. Lord, please, bridle my tongue," Aunt HoneyBea gasped. She tipped her own church hat to one side completely blocking the sight of Sister Emmagene as she stood to join in praise and worship.

Within five minutes of us sitting down Darryl Junior leaned back and fell asleep. Gia secretly texted her boyfriend, K Mack; and I stood to lean against Aunt HoneyBea's hip as she swayed with the rhythm of the music. As praise and worship concluded Pastor Bernard Johnson

and First Lady Silvia Johnson walked out to the church's applause. They walked in the sanctuary with their routine entrance, waving and smiling at the people of the church. Pastor Bernard walked First Lady Silvia to her seat in the front row and then made his way up to the podium to preach.

Before Pastor Bernard could utter one word, Sister Mary Gibson screamed, "Halleluah." She stood in a pair of the highest heels I'd ever seen and leapt into the air. Sister Gibson leapt twice more before twirling and waving her hands wildly. She jerked back and forth as the deacons stumbled to catch her, but every time it seemed she was falling she would jerk forward and continue to dance. Sister Gibson could always be depended on to provide a good show. Her performances were always overtly dramatic and poorly timed. I nearly burst out with laughter when she swung and slapped poor Deacon Booker in the back of his balding head; but when she finally fell out and her mini-skirt flew backwards over her waist revealing a small white thong, I could've cried.

Sister Janice raced up the aisles of the church so fast, I could've sworn she was Jackie Owens himself. The deacons were all wide eyed as they stood speechless staring at Sister Gibson's "unmentionables." First Lady Silvia immediately rose and eyed Pastor Bernard with a look so stern that his dark brown face flushed slightly red. Sister Janice then covered Sister Gibson with silk cloth temporarily ending the morning's spectacle. First Lady Silvia tugged on the hems of her pant suit attempting to regain her self-righteous composure before returning to her seat. I glanced up at Aunt HoneyBea as she shook her head from side to side acknowledging the ridiculous situation. Aunt HoneyBea always said, "Anything and everything you need can be found in the church" and that morning in particular, the church was everything.

"Let Him use you, Sister Gibson. God is moving in this house today," Pastor Bernard shouted, demanding the attention of the congregation. "I don't think ya'll hear me. God is moving in this house today. Can I get an Amen?"

"AMEN," the church shouted as Brother Willie Douglass chimed in on the organ.

"See, I still don't think you heard me, church. The Lord said upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Can I get an Amen, church?" Pastor Bernard quoted the Bible.

"AMEN," the church shouted again as Brother Malcolm Sanders added the beat of the drums.

Within a matter of minutes, Pastor Bernard had successfully gained the attention of the entire congregation. It was as if Sister Gibson's peep show never occurred. Pastor Bernard was a

charismatic speaker and he gave off a vibe that could brighten the darkest day. I could think of no words to describe his magnetism. Aunt HoneyBea always said it was the Lord's anointing. Whatever it was, the man was amazing. Sunday after Sunday I watched with admiration as he astounded the church. I could sit and listen to him speak all day. He was the only person who could demand my attention even half as much as the memories of my mother.

After the church service concluded and the offering baskets were full, the afternoon sunlight dimmed beneath the weight of the clouds. "This old hip is hurting. Rain is coming. Darryl Junior, baby, gon' pull up the car for your dear old Auntie." Aunt HoneyBea's hip was better than any news forecaster.

"Beatrice, honey, when are you goin' to come by the shop. My beauticians can do wonders for you, girl." Sister Emmagene glided towards my Aunt as we were leaving church. Sister Emmagene ran Imagen Beauty, the largest beauty shop in Hurley, Mississippi. Her clients always left styled to perfection even though she often looked like a circus clown. Aunt HoneyBea always said that Sister Emmagene wore her make up so thick that airplane pilots could land planes with just the sight of her blush.

"It's HoneyBea, Sister Emmagene, and as much as I would love to chat, I've gotta get home and get started on my collard greens." I could barely hear Aunt HoneyBea speak as the loud roar of rap music filled the air. We all turned to see a lime green and yellow old model Monte Carlo on 22 inch rims.

"Lil' hoodlums. You'd think their mothers would teach 'em to respect the church. Ugh. I'd just die if one of my daughters brought something like that home." Sister Emmagene curled up her nose into a stink face at the sight of the flamboyantly designed automobile. Before Aunt HoneyBea could comment, she noticed Gia running to lean against the passenger side window of the car. "Sister Beatrice, isn't that your niece?"

"It's HoneyBea." Aunt HoneyBea fumed as she watched Gia converse with the car's passenger. "Rumor, go get your fast tail cousin before I burn a hole in her behind out here in front of this church."

Before I could even budge an inch, the boy hopped out of the car and hugged Gia tightly. By the sight of his nappy short corn rows, low hanging baggy pants, and the array of unnecessary tattoo art that covered his dark skin, I immediately knew it was Gia's boyfriend K Mack. K Mack and Gia walked hand in hand towards us. I watched as Aunt HoneyBea breathed deeply, anticipating the confrontation.

“Hey, Aunt HoneyBea.” K Mack grinned exhibiting a row of golden teeth.

“Lil Boy, I am not your aunt. If I were, I’d beat those braids off you for coming to this church with your pants hanging below your waist like that,” Aunt HoneyBea scolded.

“No disrespect, ma. That’s just my swag.” K Mack grabbed the crotch of his pants and pulled them up as they again drooped beneath his thighs.

“Gia, take Rumor and go get in the car with your brother,” Aunt HoneyBea commanded without removing her contempt filled stare from K Mack.

“Auntie, I’m gonna ride back with K Mack. I’ll be home later.” Gia flashed a false, innocent smile.

“You goin’ where? With who?” Aunt HoneyBea screamed.

“Well, Beatrice, I’ve gotta go find my daughters. Too many thugs on the church grounds this morning.” Sister Emmagene rolled her eyes with disgust before turning to leave.

“It’s HoneyBea,” Aunt HoneyBea raged, still without removing her stare from K Mack.

“Ay Gi Gi, talk to your aunt. I’ll be in the G ride with my boy, Toomp.” K Mack kissed Gia on the cheek before firmly groping her butt. Aunt HoneyBea’s face flushed blood red. At that point if looks could kill, K Mack’s obituary would’ve already been printed in bold type ink.

“Ok, Boo.” Gia giggled as K Mack wobbled back towards the Monte Carlo.

“Gia Chantelle Arden, I know you done lost your mind parading that lil’ gangsta in front of the Lord’s house like some lil’ hoe with no home training.” Aunt HoneyBea fumed with anger.

“Auntie, he’s a good guy. He just pretends to be hard. He’s on the honor roll at school.”

“Good for him and his mammy, but I’ll tell you where he won’t be,” Aunt HoneyBea continued.

“Where?” Gia asked.

“On my niece.”

“Ugh. Why are you trippin? That’s my boyfriend.”

“Lil girl, question me one more time and you will be riding back home with my high heel in your behind.”

“He’s a musician, Aunt HoneyBea. He’s playing his first gig, tonight. I just wanna support him.”

“Gia, I’ve said all I’m gon’ say about it.” Aunt HoneyBea spoke with a stern but calm voice that sent chills up my spine.

The loud beep of a car horn blasted from the extravagant Monte Carlo. “Ay, Bae, you coming or not? Ladies free before 10 tonight at the Cabana.”

“The Cabana?” Aunt HoneyBea exclaimed.

“Yea. It’s this cool teen spot downtown,” Gia said with hesitant hope that Aunt HoneyBea would change her mind.

“I didn’t know that was a teen spot. Maybe I can go too. I’ll ride with Darryl Junior. I know he works there some nights.” I beamed with excitement.

“Is that right? Darryl Junior works there, huh?” Aunt HoneyBea asked.

“Shut up, Rumor. Auntie, she don’t know what she talking bout. Darryl Junior ain’t never been to the Cabana.” Gia’s words were quickly accompanied by the low hum of Aunt HoneyBea’s car as Darryl Junior pulled up.

“What about the Cabana? Ohhh. That’s right. That reminds me. Auntie, I’m working tonight. We’re promoting some amateur rap concert at the Cabana.” Darryl Junior spoke through the rolled down window of Aunt HoneyBea’s car.

“The Cabana in Biloxi, right?” Aunt HoneyBea asked Darryl Junior. Gia frantically waived her arms signaling for Darryl Junior to say no, but he never glanced at her once.

“Yeah, Auntie. You know I only work in Biloxi.”

“Gia, get in the car, now. Me, you, and my belt will have a long conversation later about your lying.” As Aunt HoneyBea spoke a flash of lightening filled the sky. Within seconds, rain fell from the clouds. Aunt HoneyBea’s fiery anger was so boldly evident upon her face, that each raindrop met her head with vapors of steam. The ride home was the most quiet I ever remembered it being. Gia’s eyes sent threatening signals to me the entire trip.

The best part of Sundays has always been dinner. In a matter of hours, Aunt HoneyBea had concocted perfection from within the walls of her kitchen. The delicious aroma of macaroni and cheese, pork chops, collard greens, black eyed peas, corn bread, gravy, pecan pie, and Auntie’s famous peach cobbler flowed throughout the house. Everyone’s stomach was on fire with hunger. Our house was filled with guests who couldn’t wait to savor auntie’s food. Pastor Bernard and First Lady Silvia walked in to join the festivities just as Aunt HoneyBea pulled the cornbread from the oven fully completing her meal. As usual, Pastor Bernard wore the hugest, most handsome smile I had ever seen on a man. His dark brown skin glowed as he stepped into the dimmed lights of auntie’s living room.

“Lucky, is that you?” Uncle Champ rushed Pastor Bernard with a half hug, half handshake.

“Champ, I ain’t seen you in years. That’s hard to do in a small town like Hurley,” Pastor Bernard spoke.

“Well, you know you a big time reverend, now. You don’t come down here in the boonies with us poor folk, no more,” Uncle Champ jokingly replied.

“Oh now Champ, you know that ain’t the case. When the last time you been to church, old friend?”

“Well Reverend, it’s been nice catching up. I gotta get out here and finish Ms. Minnie’s carburetor.”

“Yeah, I bet you do.” Pastor Bernard chuckled.

“Champ, leave Pastor alone. Don’t be in here choking my guests with the smell of all that motor oil.” Aunt HoneyBea stepped from the kitchen.

“HoneyBea, you left church in such a rush that we didn’t get to speak to you this morning.” First Lady Silvia smiled at the sight of Aunt HoneyBea.

“Oh chile, you know how it is round here. These mouths ain’t feeding themselves.” Aunt HoneyBea snickered while greeting First Lady Silvia with a hug.

“Oh old Champ ain’t never a bother. I’m tryna see what I gotta do to get my old friend in church next Sunday.” Pastor Bernard smiled while hugging Aunt HoneyBea.

“Pastor, unless we switching to Malt Liquor and fried catfish for communion, I wouldn’t hold my breath.” Aunt HoneyBea playfully teased Uncle Champ.

“Alright then, Reverend. Don’t forget my plate, HoneyBea.” Uncle Champ quickly ran from the pressure of church talk.

“That man ain’t changed since high school,” Pastor Bernard laughed. “Now where is Miss Rumor?”

I sped into the living room and leapt into Pastor Bernard’s arms. For some reason, the smell of his cologne always reminded me of my mother. Mama always said Pastor Bernard was a great man. His work within the community was unparalleled. You could definitely feel that he was a true man of God.

“Good evening Rumor.” First Lady Silvia stooped low and barely patted me on the head. I never understood why, but she always seemed so uneasy whenever I was around. As she rose back to the elevated height provided by her extra high heels, the glint of a small, black, cat-shaped diamond tucked away beneath her blouse, caught my eye.

“I got a surprise for you, Rumor,” Pastor Bernard said as I pulled my stare away from First Lady Silvia’s unusual jewelry.

“Yay. Can I have it now?” I squealed with excitement.

“Well, your auntie tells me you’ve taken a liking to writing poetry. You know your mother is a poet. She’s the best architect of words I’ve ever met,” Pastor Bernard continued.

“Best is such a strong word.” First Lady Silvia folded her arms and frowned.

“Silvia,” Pastor Bernard said nudging his wife.

“Yes. Best is such a strong word that it definitely exemplifies a strong woman like your mother. The church is so proud of her missionary work in Africa.” First Lady Silvia quickly smiled to correct her sour demeanor.

“Exactly.” Pastor Bernard reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small book. “This is a journal, Rumor. I know that mind of yours is filled with so many brilliant words and thoughts, and I know sometimes that it’s so hard projecting that brilliance without the guidance of your mother. She’s in you though, Rumor. I read some of your poetry. Your auntie brought it to me. It’s as if your words are straight from the heart of your mother. They are proof that she is in you. Write them down and keep them close to your heart. I mean real close to the same place that you keep your mother. That way she will feel each word herself as she sits beneath that hot African sun thinking of her beautiful Rumor.”

“Thank you, Pastor.” I grabbed the journal and again hugged him tightly. He was right. She was in me and I felt her presence every day.

That moment of love was soon interrupted by the presence of hatred. I turned from Pastor Bernard’s embrace as I felt a cold, menacing stare across my back. I turned to face Gia. Her eyes were swollen and red from hours of crying. “Really? I’m so sick and tired of everyone pretending that she is so damn perfect all the time.”

“Gia, lil girl, don’t start no mess in my house. Not today,” Aunt HoneyBea yelled.

“Oh no, Gia, don’t start no mess. Don’t put any holes in our perfect little picture of lies. No, don’t do that Gia. We’re a bunch of hypocrites and we wouldn’t dare have you expose that,” Gia sarcastically rambled.

“Gia, calm down,” Pastor Bernard urged.

“I am calm, Pastor. I’m finally calm, because I know that my soul won’t burn for this lie. I may be rude, nasty, and downright mean as hell, but with me people know what they’re getting. I

don't front for anyone, but everyone wants to make me the big bad wolf when I'm simply telling the truth."

"Gia, go to your room, now," Aunt HoneyBea commanded.

"Rumor, your mother's not in Africa doing missionary work. She was the whore of Hurley and she left you for big city men and fatter pockets to pick. She isn't some angel the way they want you to think. It's all a lie. Your mother is a slutty, whoring lie."

Gia's words hit my heart with overwhelming pain. My pupils dilated to the size of boulders as tears fell free from my eyes. The room around me went silent. All eyes were on me and I could see their mouths moving. I could see the expressions of pity in their eyes, but I could not hear a word. There was just the ringing in my ears. The loud ringing of anguish filled my mind. A large lump of nerves filled my stomach. The emotions were too much. I couldn't help but believe Gia. In that moment, I knew that she was speaking the truth. A part of me always knew my mother was a lie, but the most of me never wanted to accept it.

I screamed. I screamed so loudly that I hoped she could hear me. In whatever down trodden corner of shame my mother occupied, I prayed that she could hear me. I wanted her to know my pain. I wanted her to feel the hurt of her neglected daughter. How could she lie to me, her only daughter? She said God would see us through it all. I guess that sentiment never included her own lies.

The thoughts of betrayal were too much for my young mind to grasp. I ran past Gia, pushing her aside as I swiftly raced into our bedroom. I closed the door quickly locking it behind me. I continued to scream as I rushed across Gia's dresser. I threw all of her make-up, her clothes, her hair pins and her scrunchies, her stuffed animals, and everything onto the floor. I grabbed her mirror from her vanity and smashed it into the floor. Broken glass and blood were everywhere as I continued on a rampage across our bedroom. I yanked each of her drawers from the dresser and flung them into the walls. The drawers crashed with loud bangs causing huge holes in the drywall. I then fell to my hands and knees and wept uncontrollably. As I cried, I looked down at something that had fallen from Gia's dresser drawer. It was a pregnancy test. The strip was freshly wet with urine and the sight of the small plus sign brought me to the realization that Gia was pregnant.

Rumor's Journal (Entry I)

*I am but a fabrication,
the full blown daughter of a lie.*

*I can no longer deny,
No more than I can deny the bold melanin of my pigmentation.
I am confusion, I am regret, and I am the makings of a tumor.
I am the mark of shame, no wonder she named me...Rumor.*