

The DAWN
OF NIA



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I DON'T KNOW how much more of this funeral I can stomach. The minister is eight minutes into the eulogy and still begging for a thunderous hallelujah or soulful amen. "Ain't no party like a Holy Ghost party," he screams. Obviously, he doesn't know a damn thing about Pat.

She would look him squarely in the eyes and say, "I didn't ask for this party, fool."

Aside from an occasional cough, the congregation is as lifeless as Pat's body while the minister is in the pulpit hovering over her closed casket, pleading to souls to rejoice in her death. The organist tries her best to follow his highs and lows, adding crescendo whenever he falls flat. His efforts, however, are subpar to the energy Pat radiated on any given day.

I admired Pat, especially in her last days. Although I was with her almost daily as she fought cancer, nothing prepared me for the night she lost her battle. As a nurse, I witness the debilitating stages of dying. But no amount of experience or preparation could have made her passing easier for me. My mornings have been absent and the evenings long. I'm already missing her understanding and infectious laughter.

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I tune the minister out with memories of Pat, holding back tears as I recall our last conversation. “Don’t cry for me,” she said, her arm resting on mine. “We’ve had too many good times for you to cry. I should make you smile.”

Jacoby takes my hand as mascara blemishes my cheeks. I almost laugh out loud at the idea of the eulogy boring me to tears. The humor fades when I notice Pat’s sisters peering over their shoulders to the rear of the sanctuary. I look back, with dozens of eyes, curious to see who just walked into this homegoing service almost an hour late. A woman stands before the closed sanctuary doors, clutching her purse and scanning all eyes that meet hers.

“Can I get a amen?” the minister pleads for our attention.

Friends of the Carter family turn their heads back to him, apparently unfamiliar with the woman. The eldest women of the Carter family keep glaring with disapproval under their wide brimmed church hats.

Are their hostile stares due to the woman’s tardiness or white dress? The lightweight material trails her like smoke as she makes her way up the center aisle and checks the cramped pews for a place to sit. She passes my row unconcerned with probing eyes, her dress sweeping the carpet.

“Who is that?” Jacoby whispers.

I shake my head. I don’t know. But she looks like a family member. Her high cheekbones and blush lips resemble Pat’s and her sisters’.

She stops four rows ahead and waits as a mourner creates barely enough space for her to squeeze onto the

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pew. Then she sits down and disappears from my view. I'll definitely ask about her later.

With the temporary distraction over, I look at the memorial program in my lap and read her name again: Patricia Ann "Pat" Carter. I turn the page to the obituary and focus on the sentence that soothes my grief. PAT CHERISHED HER STUDENTS AND WILL BE FOREVER LOVED AND MISSED BY NIA ELLIS. At first, this sentence surprised me because I'm the only non-relative identified by name in the obituary. I'm grateful that the Carters acknowledged my friendship with Pat.

At the minister's closing remarks, two funeral directors push the service along. They move the lavender standing sprays away from the casket and proceed down the aisle. The pallbearers follow in their footsteps, marching to the pulse of the piano, swaying to the hum of the choir. I drop my head as they approach with the glossy black casket atop their shoulders. It's a procession suitable for royalty. I find comfort in Pat's spirit and the adoration that so many attendees share for her. I lift my head as the bereaved family approaches. Pat's mother and three sisters walk proudly and greet me with smiles. As proprietors of a long-established funeral home, they spared no expense on Pat's homegoing service.

Row by row, the pews empty, and the woman in white walks by as expressionless as before. Jacoby and I join the slow-moving line through the vestibule to the parking lot. I lose sight of the woman due to the crowds and commotion of cars.

I step from the pavement into a patch of lush grass

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that's shaded by a tree while waiting for Jacoby to return with his overpriced gas-guzzler. I feel lighter in the shade, like I can finally breathe without cries tugging at my throat. The short breeze and alone time are calming until Pat's aunt assaults me with a hug.

"It'll be okay," the over-dressed woman says, squeezing my hand too tightly.

What the hell is okay about never seeing Pat again? This is why I didn't ride to the funeral with the Carters; why I didn't sit in the front rows with them; why I'm not riding to the burial with them. Condolences irritate me. When I don't respond, she drops my hand and compliments my dress and heels.

As Jacoby pulls up, I step aside and watch the Carters load into three family cars, just as dark and immaculate as the casket. I open Jacoby's heavy SUV door, almost free from the discomfort of my aching feet until someone calls my name. "Are you riding with us?" Pat's youngest sister, Cookie, asks.

I politely decline and climb inside the SUV.

"Are you sure?" Jacoby says.

"They'll smother me. And Kayla may be in there."

He pulls into the procession without further question.

I latch the seatbelt and tug at my A-line dress. Though the hem stops right at my knees, I feel sparsely dressed. I replace my heels with flats and smile. Pat begged me to "gussy up" sometimes. "You're too cute and young to look so drab all the damn time," she'd complain.

Today, I'm honoring Pat's wishes.

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The cemetery tent is too small to shelter everyone from the harsh July sun. I stand with Jacoby in intense heat, shifting from one leg to the other. We're in the middle of nowhere, suffering through day three of a suffocating Tennessee heat wave. The air is so thick and stiff that sweat is creeping down my thighs. The surrounding dead bodies bother me, a harsh reminder of the permanency of Pat's passing. I'm not the only one on edge, though. Children are whining. Men are fidgeting. Women are dabbing their sweat-smearred makeup.

The only person who seems content is the woman in the white dress. My curiosity about her helps distract me from the heat and folk's constant sniffles. I've watched her closely. I wonder why she isn't as antsy as the rest of us. She stands alone, arms crossed, on the opposite side of the crowd, a few feet from the tent. She's standing around like this is a pleasant day and occasion. Only two family members have spoken to her. Their interaction was quick and cautious. Even the family members with longstanding grudges briefly smiled and hugged one another at some point. But no one has touched her. Every few minutes the immediate family members swap whispers before cutting glances her way— like she's a mistress that overstepped her bounds. I've watched all of this long enough to know she's related to the Carters in some way.

“Stop staring at her,” Jacoby says. “She'll think I'm staring at her too.”

I use the handkerchief I stole from Daddy this mor-

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ning to wipe sweat from my chest. Then I bow my head for a painfully long prayer. After a wave of amens, I open my eyes to watch her again, until Pat's niece approaches and blocks my view.

I want to step away from Kayla. But where would I go? We're in a cemetery. There's nowhere to disappear. I roll my eyes and say, "I was hoping we would keep our distance."

"Given this is a funeral, I figured we could be cordial," Kayla says.

Me? Cordial to my ex? Cordial to a woman who lied and manipulated my reality for the majority of our three-year relationship? During my rocky break-up with Kayla seven months ago, Pat served as peacekeeper. With Pat gone, I don't have to remain civil. I'm ready to place as much space between us as humanly possible. But Kayla will not let go of our relationship. She won't accept that she's gone from lover to public enemy.

I need to set the record straight: we are not friends and there will be no more contact. But damn, I can't. This isn't the time or place.

"I'm so over this heat," Kayla says. "It's making me sick."

She's determined to make me talk. I don't want to engage Kayla, but she's the opportune Carter to probe for specifics about the mystery woman. I have to be flexible for a minute. "Well, she was smart."

Kayla follows my gaze to the woman, still standing alone.

"Guess we should've worn a light color, too," I add.

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“Ugh, she’s so wrong. We did not agree on white.”

“She didn’t get the family memo?” Jacoby asks.

Kayla rolls her neck in his direction. “Boy, please! I’m surprised her tacky ass is here.”

Tacky? This woman is far from tacky. The sleeveless white dress complements her camel-colored skin and nicely accentuates the contours of her frame. She is captivating. Feminine. Poised. She caught my eye at first glance. Only the blind or envious would deny her appeal.

I’m not going to share these thoughts. Besides, with Kayla riled up, I can pop the burning question. “Who is she?”

“Ladies,” an elder says to hush us.

Kayla hesitates out of respect for her great aunt, but she never retreats from blathering about someone else’s affairs. She’s a pampered princess whose only talents are gossiping, shopping, and gossiping while shopping.

After a moment she proceeds as expected. “Girl...” She leans forward. “She’s the best-kept secret in this family. That’s Pat’s daughter.”

The three of us exchange glances.

I’ve heard Kayla say some awful things to initiate and spread rumors. Still, I can’t believe she would make up something like this at Pat’s funeral, and then call it a secret. Jacoby has been my friend for seven years; he knows my history with Kayla. She isn’t credible enough for her words to stand unchallenged. So I look to him for assurance that Kayla is bullshitting, again. But he’s shocked speechless. He loosens his striped tie and stares at the grass. I study Kayla for a hint of dishonesty, except she’s still and si-

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lent—a sign of sincerity. Damn. Daddy always said funerals are a family’s worst enemy, an occasion where secrets are slain by death. I guess he’s right.

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” the minister says.

After Pat is lowered into the ground, I head to the car to avoid more hugs and chats. “Take me home!” I order at Jacoby.

“What about the repast?”

I turn around to address him so quickly that he accidentally bumps into me— one-hundred eighty pounds almost knocking me off my feet. He grabs my arm to break my fall. Then he notices the effect of Kayla’s words across my face and takes a step away from me. Loud and clear, I’m mad. I need some space. And I’m on the verge of crying. I’m not in the mood for food, conversation, or more condolences. I’m sweaty and conflicted, and I need a shower. I prefer to sort my emotions at home.

Pat was a second mother— the cool, younger matriarch I turned to when my natural mother was too set in her middle-aged, Baptist ways to provide unconditional support. I can’t fathom why Pat would omit someone as important as her own daughter from every heart-to-heart conversation we shared during our six years of bonding. How could she hide her for so long? And I don’t understand how a family that accepted me with open arms could cast out one of their own. Why is this woman in white their black sheep?