

AUNT CHLOE

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GRAMERCY PARK IS CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC

PROLOGUE

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In her stacked heel pumps Mabel marched away from the pew directly after service and headed toward the front of the sanctuary in a hurry to get to her work and finish it. Her granddaughter was with her and the child would be still for only so long. As Mabel set foot into the tiny treasury office just past the pulpit, a clamorous thump banged behind her.

The noise turned her back into the large room.

Of course it was Luna. She was up on the platform the pastor had just stepped down from moments ago. Nobody told the girl to jump up there.

“Precious Lord . . .” Luna sang.

Have mercy, Mabel thought. Her granddaughter wasn’t what she’d call vocally gifted. The little girl could carry a tune but merely staying on pitch wasn’t nearly enough to mess with gospel songs.

“take my hand . . .

Well. Poor thing didn’t know, and Mabel wasn’t about to tell her she sounded as vanilla as an uptown “A” express before it hits 59th, changes flavors, and heads to Harlem.

“Lead me on . . .

The congregation had never heard Luna sing. For good reason. And yet, as Mabel stood in the office doorway looking back into the sanctuary what saw next made her squint at her fellow congregants and tighten her lips. The nerve.

“Let me stand . . .

Many of the Sunday-best-dressed folks Mabel sat in church with every week were trotting down the aisle, past the pews, and out the double doors like they were fleeing flames! Even the pastor rushed out. Now, granted, service was over, and it was time to go, but the urgency of this exodus felt mean-spirited.

“I am tired . . .”

Luna sounded *happy*. Clearly, she hadn't a clue of the song's meaning. But she was doing her best. Folks didn't have to be rude. Mabel thought *maybe* people were hurrying out so fast because of the heat. It *was* hotter than the inside of a big gal's thighs in a too-tight dress. Certainly *everyone* couldn't be rushing off because of the way the child was flattening the flavor of the song.

“I am weak. . .”

Quite a few of them were cringing, though.

Luna was light, bright, and pretty as she could be. Her long ponytails were sleek and smooth as silk. Her vocal style might've won some fans downtown, but neither her looks nor her sound helped a lick with folks up here. Heads full of pressed hair, natural hair, cloth-wrapped, wigged, waved, weaved, and no hair at all took a look back at Luna, and shook in dismay. Mabel watched them close their eyes and cover their sweaty ears as they turned and left.

“I am worn . . .”

“Lord Jesus,” Mabel said quietly, as she finally sat down in the wood-paneled office. She leaned forward to peer through the doorway back into the sanctuary. One heel bounced up and down under the table. Nerves. Mabel really didn’t want to have to cuss out anyone for saying something mean. Luna was only nine.

Baldheaded Leo, the treasurer, was already seated, sorting the day’s offerings. With his fine ass. He arched one of his black, shiny brows as if to scold Mabel: *you’re late*.

And Luna kept on singing like a little Doris Day, though not nearly as good. “Through the . . . storm. . .”

Mabel began separating bills into piles.

“Through the night.”

She bit back the urge to drop her head to her manicured hands. *Please, have mercy*. The child was belting out the lyrics like a show tune for the entertainment of the non-melanated. “Precious Lord” is about grief. Struggle. Being broken, barely able to hang on, asking God to get you through. What’d that privileged little girl know about struggling? She lived downtown in a fancy, white neighborhood and came to church with Mabel only once or twice a month.

“Lead me on . . .”

Mabel sang with choir and had done for decades. She was also secretary to Leo, who was sitting opposite her pressing his mouth closed, lips twitching like he was holding in a laugh. She was mortified by his amusement, and despite two table fans in the office, she began to sweat through her green satin dress. She set some bills down to pull a Jean Naté spray bottle from her purse and she spritzed a bit on her face.

Ever since her grandbabies were born, Mabel had worried for them. Her son was a winning provider but he shunned the church and took his community for granted. Where would Luna and Sonnie be welcome?

“To the light . . .”

Sounded like a marching song now. Mabel sighed quietly.

Leo finally let out a chuckle. He stuck his seventy-year-old neck out and cupped a hand 'round one ear.

“Take my hand . . .”

He dipped his baldhead in displeasure grunting, “Mmh, mmh, mmh.”

Mabel stopped separating the singles from the fives and tens, and looked him dead in his eye. The man had nerve he had no business having.

“*WHAT?*” she said with a crisp “t” and in a tone that wasn’t a question at all.

“Precious Lord . . .”

She’d be damned if she’d let him talk smack about her grandbaby, even if the child couldn’t sing. And even if his old ass *was* appealing. After Cyril passed she and Leo had had a couple of dates down the hill at St. Nick’s Pub and he’d hinted at getting frisky. Mabel was flattered, but please, gossipy as the church biddies were, she’d have had to find another place to worship if she wanted to be more than friends.

“And lead . . .”

Leo took too long to answer her “what.” Mabel picked up her spray bottle.

“Sure that child’s related to you, Mabel?” he said, laughing.

And she spritzed him, hard, right in his face.

“ . . .me on. . .”

“S’wrong withchu?” he exclaimed. “Tryin’ to blind me, woman?”

“It’s water. ’Cause you need to *cool it*, y’ol coot.”

Leo patted his baldhead. “Girl, you gon’ muss up my hair.”

Mabel wanted to laugh, but she didn’t. Rude so and so. He could count the damn cash himself.

She snatched up her purse and bottle, and huffed out of the office.

As Mabel stepped into the sanctuary, Luna’s smile sparked with confidence. She leapt down from the lectern, landing right in front of her.

“How was that, Grandma?”

Mabel took Luna’s hand and walked her down the red-carpeted aisle toward the mahogany doors. “Well,” she paused, considering how to put it, “y’sound . . . *fine*, baby.” She smiled insincerely. “You just don’t know a thing about being tired, weak, or worn. *Yet*. You just don’t know.”

Luna knew she was being insulted. She threw her grandmother the same crinkle-nosed frown she’d had as a toddler when she didn’t get her way.

Mabel ignored that. The silky ponytails caught her eye. The girl’s hair was *not* naturally straight. And that was part of her problem as far as Mabel was concerned.

They crossed the threshold of the white-marbled, neo-gothic church. Mabel sometimes called it a castle, because that’s what it looked like. As they descended the numerous steps to the sidewalk, she flipped open the brass latch of her crocodile bag and pulled out the Jean Naté bottle.

“Sure is *hot* out here, huh baby?” The sun was glaring down from the sky like it was mad at somebody. She fanned her face with one lady-like hand. “Whew.”

Luna squinted up just as Mabel aimed the bottle and began spraying the silk right out of those ponytails.

“Stop it, Grandma,” she screamed, and took off running toward the subway station.

On the hot, dingy A-train, Mabel touched Luna’s head. “Your curls are beautiful, baby,” she said. “Don’t let anybody tell you different, y’hear?”

Luna looked at her with eyes narrowed thin as a subway token. “My mother blew-dry my hair this morning. Now it’s going to be frizzy. It’s *my* hair, Grandma, and I have a right to wear it the way I want.”

Mabel didn’t speak. What could she say? The girl wasn’t wrong. Well, she *was*. *And* she wasn’t. It was complicated. She could try to explain it, but Mabel knew Luna wouldn’t grasp the point in one day, or even several days. Only through living could she learn why she should value her real self, and why she didn’t.

After taking the downtown A, the cross-town shuttle, and the **downtown 6-train**, they exited at 23rd and Park Avenue South, and climbed the stairs with a crowd of white people, most of whom were casually dressed in shorts and T-shirts, or dungarees, and who didn’t seem to be coming from church.

Luna eyed them longingly. Like she wanted to *be* them. Like she felt out of place in her Sunday dress and her kinky curls. The child kept her arms crossed and her lips sealed. When they got ready to cross the street Mabel reached out her hand and Luna refused it. Mabel grabbed her fingers and damn near squeezed the sweat out of them.

Luna allowed her hand to be gripped; yet her silence told how she felt. Mabel wasn’t bothered. Luna could stay mute as she pleased. She was mad now, but one day, *someday*, she’d

understand what her grandma was trying to do for her. She tugged Luna along Gramercy Park North, past the well-kept brownstones.

Luna's feet hurt in her patent leather shoes, and her frizzy hair embarrassed her. She didn't like being so hot and looking disheveled. She grit her teeth and watched Grandma Mabel stare through the gate into the park. Grandma always called it "*that snooty park my son insists on living beside.*" It was filled with trees, flowerbeds, shrubs, and a smattering of white people. Grandma never told Luna she didn't like white people, but Luna could tell she didn't. Grandma was almost never nice to her mommy. And she couldn't think of one time she'd seen Grandma Mabel smile at a random white person, or call one "baby" the way she seemed to do with everybody uptown.

Grandma Mabel let out a sigh and muttered, "Um," in a way that sounded like she'd tasted something spoiled.

Luna frowned at her because a few weeks earlier, Grandma had made that same noise and she'd added: *look at all these white folks.* And Luna asked her not to say that. It wasn't nice. If Grandma didn't like white folks, then Luna thought Grandma couldn't like her either, because she was just as much white as she was anything else.

They turned onto Gramercy Park East, then again onto Gramercy Park South, where Grandma stopped in front of Luna's house. Luna yanked her hand away and ran up the front steps. She banged the brass knocker and then pounded the door with both fists. "Mommy," she yelled. "Moom-myyy!"

Mabel stood at the bottom of the stoop, folded her arms, and watched this foolishness. The child hadn't even reached puberty and already she was carrying on like the empress of drama.

Lillian opened the door. The porcelain-skinned woman looked malnourished to Mabel in khaki shorts and a pink T-shirt. The clothes were probably from one of those stores on Madison Avenue where security followed anyone darker than a slice of pound cake. Lillian's hair shimmered in the sun like long gold chains. Mabel hated to admit she was attractive. She was, *if* skinny and blonde was your cup of cocoa. It wasn't Mabel's. But at least the woman made pretty babies.

Luna hurled herself into Lillian's body and sobbed. Emaciated as the woman was, it was a wonder the impact didn't knock her ass over. Lillian stroked Luna's kinks and peered down at Mabel with an expression that was like a sigh and a tongue suck at the same time.

"Why do you do that?" Lillian said. "You know she hates it."

"Why does she think there's something wrong with her natural hair, Lillian?"

Luna let go of her mother and pushed her way inside the house.

Sonnie's kinky-curly head wiggled itself past his mother. The way the boy squeezed through the doorframe and Lillian's hip reminded Mabel of a baby pushing into the world. When he popped his ten-year-old self all the way out he said, "Grandma!" And with a grin, he hopped his beanpole body down the steps two at a time, barefooted in long shorts. He wrapped his arms around Mabel's middle. He smelled sweet and clean like soap and baby powder.

"My turn next week," he said. "Right?"

"Got y'self a date, sugabuga." Mabel kissed him, and wanted to nibble the boy's face. Both the babies were delicious, even when they worked her nerves. She wiped the lipstick off his caramel cheek, and then waved coolly at Lillian.

"Can't you stay longer?" Sonnie whined.

Mabel kissed him again and rubbed the nubby curls on his head. They felt as satisfying beneath her fingers as bubble wrap. “Hang tough, Afro-fluff,” she said, and then turned and trotted toward the train.

Later, Sonnie and Luna parked themselves across kilim pillows on the parquet floor in the family room. Lillian gazed at them from the kitchen as they munched peanut butter sandwiches and watched a music show on TV.

Luna’s hair was in two braids now. Lillian didn’t want to badmouth Cole’s mother but of course their daughter should be able to wear her hair the way she wanted to. This was one of those issues she wasn’t equipped to spar with her meddler-in-law on. He should do it.

As she wiped sandwich crumbs from the marble countertop, the kids sang along with Don McLean to “American Pie.” They were cute. And the song was interesting, catchy even, but so ubiquitous Lillian had had her fill of it. The tune was in rotation on the radio at least once every hour. She heard it in department stores, groceries, and in restaurants. Now, it was invading television too. She wanted to escape upstairs to her sitting room for some quiet time, but she did like looking at the kids, and she knew it hurt their feelings when she preferred being alone to spending time with them.

They knew every word to “American Pie.” And as usual, they were competing, each trying to drown the other out, while fighting the added challenge of peanut butter weighing down their tongues.

Cole’s deep voice sang along with the kids as he came up behind Lillian and squeezed her around the ribs.

Both kids turned from the TV. “Daddy!”

Cole's touch sent a shiver of pleasure up her spine. He kissed her earlobe and sucked it gently. Her cheeks and the back of her neck went hot as the kids ran into the kitchen bringing hugs to their dad. Lillian rarely inspired this level of enthusiasm in them, and yet she wasn't jealous because when Cole entered a room she came to life too. In his presence, everyone brightened and bloomed.

"That was fast," she said, staring up at him. His eyes were deep and dark like manholes, and he was still in his scrubs. Something wasn't right. Her pulse quickened. She watched him pick Luna up with one arm, and wrap the other around Sonnie. Lillian loved the way Cole loved their children. He beamed warmth at them even when he was having a bad day. A cloud dimmed his smile. "Did something happen, honey?" she asked. "On the table?"

He shook his head and closed his eyes for a moment.

Luna was humming along with Don McLean, oblivious to Cole's mood as he held her. Sonnie, however, gripped his father's free hand and scrutinized his face with curiosity and concern.

"My patient's spouse saw me for the first time," Cole said. "He requested another surgeon."

Luna continued humming and turned back to the TV. Sonnie's worried eyes remained on Cole.

Lillian's heart stung. He didn't have to explain. It wasn't the first time and likely wouldn't be the last. Cole was the most brilliant and accomplished man Lillian knew: Bronx Science High School, and Harvard undergrad, where they met when she was at Radcliffe. He'd gone on to Columbia Medical School, then a surgical residency at Mt. Sinai, and after that a

cardio thoracic fellowship at NYU. But small, bigoted minds only saw what they'd been brainwashed to envision.

"I'm sorry, love," she said. The words felt inadequate. She was more than sorry. She simmered with rage. Lillian wished she could sock that patient's husband in the face and knock the racist ideas from his head like dislodged teeth. She kissed Cole and breathed in his airy scent.

He returned the kiss and seemed to shake off his sadness. His eyes twinkled. "It happens," he said. He tickled Luna, which mercifully stopped her humming, and he winked at Sonnie. "Who wants to go to the park?"

They both sang, "MEEEE!"

A short while later, Lillian kissed Cole again in the front doorway. He tasted minty now, and his shoulders were sturdy in the Izod shirt he'd changed into. She wanted to grab his butt, round as cantaloupe in his Levi's, but the kids didn't need to see that. She watched the three of them file out and down the steps.

Luna followed last. She frowned at the dusty old book her daddy cuddled under his arm. "*Uncle Remus Tales?* Blech," she said.

He glanced back at her. "Stop complaining."

Sonnie took their father's hand.

Luna caught up and walked beside them as they crossed the street and walked in the shade heading to the park's entrance. "I hate those stories," she said.

"They'll grow on you. My father read them to me and Auntie June."

"No. I don't like the yellowed pages, and I don't like how the characters talk, Daddy." She frowned up at him. "They sound dumb."

“They’re not dumb. It’s a dialect. Enslaved people from different tribes with disparate languages were all together. To communicate, they spoke a version of English that also combined common elements of their native tongues. And they weren’t permitted an education the way whites were. If they did learn proper English they couldn’t speak it around their captors. There were consequences for sounding too smart. Too uppity.” He looked at her. “You know what uppity means?”

Luna shook her head and kicked a pebble on the sidewalk.

“It’s how *you* sound when you act like you’re too good to experience things your daddy tries to show you.”

“What’s *consequences*?” she asked.

“The results of something that happens. Often, *bad* results. Like getting whipped.”

“I *like* the stories, Daddy,” Sonnie said.

Luna scoffed at the way their dad smiled at Sonnie like he was a good boy.

They were approaching the gate.

“When we finish these we’re going to read Zora Neale Hurston. She wrote in dialect, too.”

“Uuugh,” Luna moaned.

Her father laughed. “Would you stop? I’m exposing you to literature, Luna. You don’t have to like everything but try to listen. Be open.” He dug in his pocket and took out a key.

Luna stared at the bronze plaque beside the gate’s entrance that read: “Gramercy Park is closed to the public.” A paragraph followed explaining the history, and that only residents could enter.

Their dad opened the lock. He handed the key to Sonnie, who smiled and waved it in Luna's face as if to say, *I get it and you don't.*

She gave him a shrug. *Whupdeedoo.*

When they were seated together on a bench near a white rose bush, Luna looked around as her daddy read aloud. His breath smelled like peppermint Certs. She sat on one side of him, Sonnie on the other. She wished their mom had come. It was different coming to the park with their dad, but Mom said she needed alone time. When Luna was with her mom people either didn't look at them, or if they did, they smiled. With her dad, almost no one smiled. They stared.

She saw ladies pushing little kids in strollers, couples holding hands, old people walking small dogs, and a bearded man sitting by himself reading.

“Well, expect I got ya dis time, Brer Rabbit, maybe I ain't, but I speck I is,” he read aloud. *Too* loud for Luna.

“That's improper English,” she said.

Irritation swelled in Cole's chest, rose to his throat, and then to his mouth as his teeth clenched. He'd never spanked his children, but this kid did test his patience. He peered down at her with a stern glare. “You're being uppity, Luna. Be quiet.”

Sonnie grinned at him. “Keep going, Daddy.”

Cole returned the smile and continued. “You been runnin' roun' here sassin' after me a mighty long time.”

“Ugh,” Luna said.

Cole aimed a finger in her face, “ ‘But I speck you done come ta da een' a da road!’ ”

“That's good!” Sonnie said, laughing.

“You been cuttin’ up yo capers en bouncin roun’ in dis neighborhood until you come to b’leave yo’ self da boss a da whole gang— ” Before he could continue, the book was knocked from his hands.

Cole and the kids looked up to see a wiry, blue-uniformed police officer holding the brown billy club he’d used to strike the book. The officer was young, probably in his early twenties, with light brown hair and icy-blue eyes. Another cop, dark haired and young as well, stood a few feet away.

With the sun in his eyes, Cole squinted at the one with the club. His heartbeat accelerated. The children huddled against him on either side. “What’s the problem, officer?”

The cop took a step back. “You know what the problem is,” he barked. “How’d you get in here?”

Cole could see that the cop, who’d moved and now blocked the sun, had a pustule on his chin. Maybe that’s put him in a foul mood, he thought. He kept his tone friendly and non-threatening. “I live here, officer. I’m a resident. I’ll show you my I.D.” He stood.

“SIT THE FUCK DOWN.”

Cole glanced at Sonnie and then at Luna, four enormous brown eyes brimming with tears. “Look,” he said, “there’s really no need for that language.” He was already lowering himself back to the bench when the other cop spoke up and stepped closer.

“Sit down and put your hands behind your head,” he yelled.

Cole heard Luna whimper. His pulse throbbed in his ear as he sat and clasped his long-fingered hands, *surgeon’s* hands, *insured*, motherfucking hands, behind his head. His palms were sweating against his neatly trimmed Afro. “It’s okay kids,” he said quietly. This was the

same goddamned humiliating shit he'd had to deal with back in the day hanging with his boys in Riverside Park.

The dark-haired cop leaned in and patted Cole down with smacks on his chest and back. The pimpled one watched while also peering around, his head making tense, jerky moves.

Sonnie sniffled. "Why are you doing that to my dad?"

"Shh, Sonnie. It's okay," Cole whispered. From the corner of his eye, he saw people backing away. A bearded, middle-aged man in a yarmulke whom he knew in passing from the hospital, stood from the bench where he'd been reading nearby. The white Lacoste shirt he wore was identical to Cole's. This man's expression wasn't fearful or suspicious like the other bystanders.

Cole spoke through clenched teeth, "I'm a cardiothoracic surgeon at Beth Israel Hospital. I own a townhouse across the street." He gestured with his chin.

"Yeah, and I'm Sammy Davis Jr.," the cop with the pimple said.

The other one continued patting Cole down; pushed him forward to feel his lower back, and then ran his hands along his denim-covered thighs and down his calves. When he was through he stood and nodded to his partner who said, "Now get up and get the fuck outta here. Don't let me see you again."

Cole's jaw was tight as he thought of the years he'd been paying a mortgage and taxes, as well as the maintenance fee he paid toward the park's upkeep. This wasn't the first smug asshole to assume he was trespassing. "I have identification. My family's entitled to be here. Look at my driver's license." He stood to get it.

The officer drew his gun. "Are you fucking deaf?"

Cole blinked at the pistol. A bead of perspiration slid down the side of his face. He stared the cop in the eye.

“You’re not *entitled* to be here,” the cop said, in a mocking tone. “This place is for residents. Not their employees.”

Sonnie began to sob on the bench behind Cole. “Quiet down, son,” he said. “Officer, our address is on my driver’s license. If you’ll just—”

“Don’t make me tell you again,” the cop shouted.

“We have a key,” Sonnie said, holding it up.

The officer aimed the gun at him.

“That’s a ten-year-old boy!” Cole shrieked. To see his son shaking and gaping at a firearm less than two feet from his young face tore open a wound inside him that was quite possibly worse than any he’d seen on an operating table.

The bearded man in the yarmulke approached. “Those are our neighbors, officer.” He raised his voice. “That man is doctor. He lives across the street. Why are you harassing him?”

The cop’s eyes stayed with the man for several seconds. Finally, he holstered his gun, ran a hand across the bump on his chin, and then glanced at his partner. The two of them walked away.

Cole leaned over, with his hands on his thighs, his head low. He was immobile, noosed by a gripping anger he could not express in front of these neighbors. No one spoke. When he finally stood straight, he nodded to the man in the yarmulke. What was his name? Saul? Seth? The man returned the gesture. Cole’s eyes then landed on the book lying on the graveled ground. He wanted to look at his children; he needed to see that they were okay. They *couldn’t* be okay, and he knew that seeing even the slightest anguish on their faces would break him.

The man in the yarmulke took a step closer. “If you want to go to the station and file a complaint, I’ll go with you,” he said.

“Thank you,” Cole whispered, without looking at him. “Not right now.” He wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of one hand. “C’mon, kids,” he said, as he walked away.

Luna didn’t move from the bench. Her heart was still beating fast from fear as she stared at the lousy book on the ground, shocked that her father had left it. He loved those stupid stories and their embarrassing language.

Her brother bent over and picked it up. Luna watched him stand and hug the book to his chest, and then turn to see their father heading toward the gate. Sonnie reached back for Luna’s hand. She didn’t take it.

“If we were with Mommy,” she said, “that never would’ve happened.”

Sonnie’s head whipped toward her. A storm darkened his eyes. He raised his empty hand and slapped her, hard, across the face.

It stunned her. The pain radiated to her nose and lips and her eyes flooded. She raised a hand to her cheek.

Sonnie ran toward their father. When he reached him, they left through the gate together without looking back.

She rubbed her throbbing face.

Everywhere she looked people were gaping—staring at her—with pity. She got up, hung her head, and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Gray and white gravel crunched under her leather sandals. *Stop staring* she wanted to tell them. *You don’t need to feel sorry for me.* As she neared the gate she began humming the chorus to “American Pie.” Luna understood it to be a farewell. To *something*. She didn’t know exactly what. She felt soothed *and* saddened

by the song at the same time. She walked out with its melody in her mouth, singing bye-bye to this thing she couldn't name. Whatever it was called, it slipped her grasp, and she left it behind in the park.