

Chapter 1

Marvin Barclay flicked on the light switch in the foyer and tossed his keys on the table next to the door. He crept into the living room, reached over the arm of the sofa and planted a slippery wet kiss on his wife, Cynthia Barclay's pouty lips. The smell of cigarettes and vodka leaped out of his pores.

Cynthia rose from the seat she'd occupied most of the night. "Where have you been, Marvin?" Cynthia inquired with her arms folded across her chest and the curve of her hip jutting out as far as it could.

"Are you for real? I came home looking for some loving, and this is what I have to deal with," he said, licking his lips and rubbing his work-worn hands along Cynthia's sides.

Cynthia contorted to get out of her husband's tight grip, backed up a few steps, and peered into Marvin's bloodshot, hollow brown eyes. "Where have you been?" she asked again.

"Don't start with me tonight," Marvin said, tossing his jacket onto the couch.

"Marvin, I'm not trying to start anything with you. I'd just like to know where you've been," Cynthia responded emphatically.

Marvin turned his back on Cynthia and walked up the hallway toward the bedroom.

"Marvin," Cynthia called to him marching behind him, "don't you dare walk away from me or-"

"Or else what?" he asked, stopping mid-stride, casting a side-eye stare full of malice in Cynthia's direction.

“Answer me. Where have you been?” Cynthia cried as Marvin turned the knob on the bedroom door.

In one quick step, Marvin was standing over Cynthia in the middle of the hallway. His warm breath scratched against her skin. “You don’t want to know where I’ve been.” His voice cracked. “Don’t start this nonsense tonight. Where my boys at?” He begins calling out his son’s names. “Keith! James!”

“They’re not here.”

“Where are they, Cynthia?” He asked. His voice was marked with a slight hint of distress and his bulging eyes revealed his concern.

“They’re at Sean’s house waiting for you to pick them up.” The kids often had play dates at their friend Sean Dillinger’s house after their karate class on Saturdays. “Sean’s mother called me more than two hours ago.” She jumped back to the subject matter at hand. “Where have you been, Marvin?”

Marvin wrapped his thick, hard-knuckled hands around Cynthia’s neck in response to her question. “Woman, you’ve been sitting here waiting to fight with me instead of picking up my sons?”

Marvin’s grip tightened around Cynthia’s neck. She clawed at his hand with her delicate fingers, trying to pry them from her neck as he lifted her from the ground. She flailed her legs in the air, sending one lancing kick to his kneecap. The kick pulled Marvin out of his blind rage. He looked at Cynthia dangling from the palm of his hand and released her. She hit the floor with a thud and shrank against the wall in the hallway lined with family photos that portrayed them the way she wished they were: happy, united, and at peace.

“Go and get my boys.” Marvin tossed seven dollars at her.

“This is only enough for one fare.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Maybe you forgot we live in New York City,” she murmured gathering the sweaty, crumpled bills that had fallen around her.

Stooping down with his lips curled into a ferocious scowl he asked, “What did you say?”

“Nothing.” Cynthia bowed her head waiting for Marvin to at least be an arm’s distance from her face. That would give her a second or two to dart out of the way if he was going to punch her in the face.

“What do you want me to do—carry you to 118th and Lenox Avenue from here?” Marvin hiked up his pants leg, returned to an upright position and kicked her in the knee. “Figure it out.” He then walked away, leaving his wife in a position he’d left her in on more than one occasion.

“Thanks, Barbara, for letting Keith and James come over,” Cynthia said as soon as Barbara Dillinger opened the front door of her brownstone. “Marvin got tied up at work.” Lying, Cynthia fidgeted nervously on the stoop while waiting for the boys to come out.

“Looks like he’s not the only one that got tied up,” Barbara said her hazel eyes filled with horror. She pointed at the welts Marvin’s hands had left around Cynthia’s neck. “Why don’t you come in and relax for a moment?” Barbara opened the door wide enough for Cynthia to slide through. “The boys are upstairs playing—karate chopping and body slamming each other. A few more minutes of play isn’t going to hurt them.”

Barbara took Cynthia’s black, leather jacket from her and escorted her from the steps of her brownstone into the living room.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to get over here—I walked,” Cynthia said, soaking up the place. In the two years that the boys had taken karate with Sean, Barbara’s son, the two women had never actually been inside of each other’s homes. Pickups and dropoffs were usually relegated to a switch at the doorstep of the parent supervising the play date or a meeting at the subway station.

“Please have a seat.” Barbara swept her arm around the room inviting Cynthia to take a seat.

Cynthia looked to her left and then her right, trying to decide whether she wanted to take a seat on the mustard quilted leather sofa or the spoon-shaped zebra-print chair that faced the picture window.

“Would you like a cup of coffee or tea?” Barbara offered.

“Barbara, there’s really no need in going through all of that trouble,” Cynthia said settling herself into the spoon shaped chair.

“And there’s no need for you to go through all of that trouble either,” Barbara chirped pointing at Cynthia’s neck.

“Barbara, I’d rather not discuss this.” Cynthia craned her neck toward the spiral staircase and called for her sons. “Keith...James,” she shouted into the air

“But I want to discuss it. Come here.” Barbara grabbed Cynthia’s hand and dragged her over to the full-length mirror that rested against an exposed brick wall near the window.

“Look at yourself.” Barbara gathered Cynthia’s burgundy shoulder-length hair back as if she was about to put it into a ponytail. “This isn’t right, Cynthia,” she said, tracing the welts on Cynthia’s neck with her French-manicured fingernails.

“Marvin is just going through something right now. He’s trying to open his own business; he has me and the boys. It’s a lot for him to handle.” Cynthia fingered the welts herself wishing she’d tied a scarf around her neck.

“I don’t think he’s dealing with more than you are. You don’t have to go home if you don’t want to. You and the boys can stay here,” Barbara offered, releasing Cynthia’s hair.

Cynthia massaged her face with her hands. “We can’t...I mean, I can’t.”

“You can’t stay there either,” Barbara interjected. “I know we don’t know each other well, so this might seem strange or feel a wee bit uncomfortable, but if you won’t stay here, at least let me take you to a shelter,” Barbara begged Cynthia earnestly.

“And this might seem strange to you because we don’t know each other well but I took a vow, for better or worse. Now there’s a reason those vows say for better or for worse—some days are going to be better and some days are going to worse. It just so happens that today was one of the worst.” Recalling the days when Marvin was sweeter, gentler, romantic even, Cynthia massaged the welts around her throat. “Marvin isn’t all bad, and I’m not all good, so it would be wrong of me to turn my back on my husband. I’m going to fight for this marriage until we get back to better days when we held hands and slow danced to Marvin’s old records.” Cynthia’s high cheekbones rose as she smiled, lost in the memories of the days when the phrase *I love you* did not come after a bloody lip or bruised eye. “He wasn’t always like this.”

Cynthia touched the princess-cut diamond of her engagement ring, which rested over a simple gold band. She could still hear Marvin say in his rich baritone as he presented her the ring while they were seated by the waterfall in Harlem’s historic Morningside Park, “A simple ring for the woman I simply want to spend my life with.”

Cynthia held onto that memory as Barbara presented her with reality of her situation.

“So how long do you plan on suffering through this? What about you? What about Cynthia? What do you want for your life? Forget your marriage. I mean you. What do you want?” Barbara cocked her head to the side and stared at Cynthia’s reflection in the mirror. Her hazel eyes felt like acid searing right through her skin. It seemed like she could see Cynthia’s thoughts.

“Do you think all I have is all I want? Anyone who knows me will tell you I love to cook. That’s the one moment of peace I get throughout the day. I wouldn’t mind doing it professionally, but if I have no one to share my success with, what good would that do me? You know, when I first came to sign up at the dojo, Sensei Kelly told me it was full for the semester and there was a waitlist for the next semester, but I came at least twice a week to check if anyone had dropped out until one day sensei just said, ‘Mrs. Barclay I have room for your boys.’ If I didn’t give up on a karate class, how can I give up on a marriage?”

“What good would being in a graveyard do you or your sons? What does your pastor have to say about this?” Barbara retorted without hesitation.

“My pastor?”

Barbara spun Cynthia around so that they were face-to-face. “You haven’t told your pastor about what’s going on?” Barbara said, wagging her finger. “That’s a big no-no. You can’t try and fight this battle on your own when you’ve got Satan right up in your house trying to kill you.”

“Barbara, I don’t have a pastor. I don’t even go to church,” Cynthia mumbled her cheeks aglow from embarrassment.

“Huh?” Barbara inhaled and clutched her chest as if she was about to have a heart attack.

“No, I don’t go to church. We can’t all be the picture of perfection that you are,” Cynthia sneered.

Barbara grabbed Cynthia by both wrists and pulled her to the nook in front of the picture window. Both women took a seat in the nook.

“*‘Except the Lord build the house they labour in vain that build it.’* I am not perfect but I rely on the one who is to keep everything afloat for me. How is your marriage supposed to stand without the Lord’s divine protection? Why don’t you spend the night with the boys and come join me tomorrow at Cornerstone Baptist Church?”

“Thank you, Barbara, but no thank you,” Cynthia said, rising from her seat in the nook. “Marvin is expecting me back this evening. I could never stay out overnight, especially with you. He already thinks you’re a bad influence with all your makeup and fancy clothes.”

“There’s a church on every other block in Harlem. Just promise me you’ll find one to attend tomorrow.” Barbara clutched Cynthia’s hands and pleaded with her eyes.

“I’m not going to promise you anything, but I will think about it. Now could you please send my sons downstairs while I hail a cab?”

Cynthia let herself out. She took a deep breath of the evening cool crisp autumn air that signaled the arrival of October in New York. With each breath Cynthia tried to purge her system of the words she’d heard.

A few minutes later, the boys bolted through the door and did their best imitation of a dog pile on Cynthia’s back, breaking her train of thought.

“What took you so long, Ma? I thought you forgot about us,” James said, wrapping his arms tightly around her waist. For a nine year old he had a strong grip thanks to all those karate lessons.

“Did you have a good time?”

“Yeah,” James said smiling up at his mother

“No,” Keith said, stomping his foot. Cynthia already knew what was coming next—a complaint. Since turning twelve last month Keith wanted nothing to do with James. “This little punk was in the way all the time. Can I leave him at home next time?”

“Don’t call your brother a punk. We’ll see about that next time,” Cynthia said, holding the cab door open for her two little men.

By the time Cynthia got the boys in the bed, her body felt like it had been run over by a street sweeper. She climbed into the king-size bed she shared with Marvin and rubbed her body against his to conjure up some warmth between the two of them. Marvin rolled over to face her and began to kiss her neck. He wrapped his hands around her slender waist and drew her into him.

“You know I love you, don’t you?” he asked Cynthia, brushing her hair out of her face.

“I don’t know. Do you really love me?” she whispered to him.

“Now why would you go and say a thing like that, baby? You’re my number one.”

Marvin kissed her all over her face, stopping at her lips.

“Marvin, you don’t treat me like you love me,” she sighed

Marvin narrowed his eyes. “Where are you coming from with all this, and where are you going with it? Who you been out there listening to?” Marvin drew the navy blue sheet back and sat up. “You been letting that bourgeois girl fill your head up with nonsense?” he said, mushing Cynthia in the head. “What did she tell you, to leave me? That you don’t deserve this? Where is

she at now, Cynthia? I'll tell you where; she's at home alone with no man and you're going to listen her?"

"It wasn't like that, Marv," Cynthia said, sitting up.

"You're dumber than I thought. You're actually gonna take advice from a lonely chick who just wants someone to join her. Ever heard the saying misery loves company? Did she tell you how it feels to sleep all alone at night?"

Cynthia shook her head.

"Well, you're going to find out tonight." Marvin twisted to the side slightly, drew his knee back and kicked Cynthia out of the bed. She bumped her head on the bedside table as she tumbled out. "Let's see if you're still talking that women's rights mess tomorrow morning," he said, throwing her pillow at her.

Cynthia collected her pillow and a light blanket from the trunk at the foot of their bed. She tiptoed down the hall and collapsed onto the couch, hoping her sorrow would get sucked up like a vacuum does loose change between the folds of the cushions. With her hands folded behind her head she stared up at the ceiling and asked herself over and over until she fell asleep, *Is this marriage really all in vain?*

The next morning she woke up with a stiff neck and an even greater question looming in her mind, *What will I do if it is?*

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