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A gigantic explosion rocked the neighborhood for blocks, shattering the quiet solitude of the early morning. The deafening sound shattered windows for blocks and shook the high-rise buildings to their foundations. Sirens blared; fire raged and quickly engulfed the façade of the downtown courthouse. Witnesses near the explosion said the blast sounded like a freight train, but fortunately, there were not many casualties. There would have been more injuries if the explosion occurred two hours later in the middle of rush hour. City officials were thankful the blast was contained at the courthouse. Any proceedings would have to be postponed until further notice.

A crowd gathered to witness the aftermath of the explosion. Debris was everywhere. Speculation as to what or who caused the blast ensued. Car alarms blared as the sound wave echoed through the shattered windows, and debris rained down from the sky. Some of the people were crying, while others were cursing the unknown terrorist. One man stood behind the police barricades and looked on with personal satisfaction. The local police were doing all they could to keep the people back.

“Back please, stay back. We don’t know if there may be another explosion,” one officer said. The man just stood there staring at the fire. “Sir, you got a problem? I asked you to move back.” The man glared at the policeman and at his nametag. “Hey, you look familiar. Do I know you?” the policeman inquired.

“Oh, forgive me Officer Callahan...I am not from around here. Came from the Midwest, and I haven’t been around here that long,” responded the man with a hint of disdain. “Who would do something like this?”

The policeman ignored the question and hesitated for a moment as if the encounter with the man sparked a memory that would reveal the man’s identity. The policeman continued on without another thought. The man watched the policeman as he disappeared into the chaos. They did know each other or at least they had crossed paths. The man would never forget the day of their chance meeting, which changed his outlook on life forever. Darryl Lundreaux’s memories of that day only sparked outrage and anger.

Days elapsed and the local police had no clue to who planted the bomb. Fearing a terrorist may be in their midst, the local authorities decided to seek help from the federal agencies. The Federal Bureau of Investigations dispatched their leading field team headed by J.B. Pendergrass.

“I never thought it would come to this; that is questions of my sanity, character and most of all questions about my love for my children. I’ll show them! Who the hell do they think they are? How dare they try to equate my gender as a reason why I am not capable of raising my children? I’ll show them! I’ll prove them all wrong and then maybe someone will listen to me. I won’t return until this Godforsaken system is changed. I must do this for my children. It is the only way. I’ve thought this thing through and I must do what is best for my children. After all, they are my children, too, aren’t they? Some people would have you to believe that I am now worthless. Bahh!! It is time to drag those naysayers into the 21st century.”

It is late fall and the leaves painted the ground a beautiful auburn orange. The wind howled as the

engine of the black sports car whirred and sliced through the early morning air. Rest would soon be needed. After all, this journey began some nine days ago, and there was only enough time to pack a few clothes, fill the gas tank, and point the car in any direction away from what was once considered 'home'. It all seemed too easy and no one suspected a thing.

"Did the court and my ex-spouse really expect me to take my legal medicine and not stand up for those, which I love the most...my children? I decided to take the step no one expected and rescue my children from the very system that has victimized my people throughout history. I would not let the system now victimize my children by ripping away their father's love. Damn society. I love my children and I don't have to prove that to any crusty old fool in a black robe who thinks he is the only person worthy of determining who the best parent is." Malik Coleman was angry as he pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

He glanced over the seat to look at his son, Khari. He marveled at the likeness they shared right down to the hairline. Malik let his mind continue to wonder while he reminisced about the past years, remembering the day when Rhonda first told him she was pregnant...

"What is the special occasion?" Malik asked as he and his wife pulled into the circular drive at the Royal Plaza Hotel. The couple rarely went out unless it was for a special function with her friends. Now, here they were at the Royal Plaza. They had not been here for years and as Malik looked at the marquee; all the wonderful memories came flowing back into his mind.

"Oh nothing, I just wanted to come back to the place where we've had so many good times." Rhonda had a different look in her eyes and was exceedingly beautiful. Not much had changed since he first gazed upon her beauty over the kiwi fruit at the local grocery store.

Nothing had changed since the last time they were here. The faces were different, but as Malik surveyed the lobby and replayed their last visit, the luxury waiting area with velvet red seats trimmed in brass, the early American motif with the waterfall cascading down from the ceiling made him appreciate the creativity God placed in the minds of man. At one time, this place was a horse barn some one hundred years ago. Legend has it the barn was used as a stop on the now famous Underground Railroad. The property on which the Royal Plaza stood was deeded to ex-slaves at the turn of the century. The locals considered the property a gift after the slaves helped save the city during a ferocious fire. They were probably the only group of slaves who received their forty acres and a mule. This barn had taken a historical beating: The elements, numerous fires; planned and unplanned; court challenges to the deed, and who knows what else. Finally, the city attempted to tear the building down by declaring eminent domain, but the anonymous owner refused to budge, and through some miracle, the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Progress passed this little corner by until ten years ago when some wealthy developers decided to use the facade and build a one hundred and fifty room luxury hotel. Malik and Rhonda took pleasure in staying here due to its historical significance.

The couple followed the bellhop down the hall to their suite, continuing to marvel at the plush red carpet accented by brass and glass fixtures. "I would hate to be working for hotel maintenance," Malik thought.

Finally, they made it to their suite, which was the same suite they used during each of their visits. The couple always used the same room whenever they visited because that was the room in which they first made love.

The bellhop opened the suite door to reveal flowers, candy and champagne strategically placed in the room and Malik was taken aback. From the doorway, he could see the two-person hot tub, filled to the rim with soap bubbles. His eyes toured the room, while he read the congratulatory cards written

specifically to him.

“What had I done or what did she want?” Had he forgotten something, an anniversary, birthday, and Groundhog Day? Engulfed in his curiosity, Malik did not notice when Rhonda disappeared into the adjoining bathroom. In his peripheral vision, he noticed her silhouette, standing in the bathroom door. The lights were dimmed and only the glare from the bathroom vanity light cascaded around her gorgeous svelte body. The silk lace trimmed negligee had no business holding her that way. He was her man and only he deserved to hold her that way. Whatever the occasion, Malik was going to make passionate love to his woman tonight.

“Daddy? Daaaddyyy?!” A small voice interrupted Malik’s thoughts.

“Uhh. HMM. Yes baby girl,” as he gazed in to his first-born’s beautiful brown eyes.

“Um hungry. When are we gonna stop? Um tired of ridin’ and I want to sleep in my bed!” She frowned at her father. “We’ll stop soon baby girl. I just want to get to this next town before the sun comes up. We’ll be there soon.”

“But I can’t wait that long.” Her face became contorted.

Malik had seen the expression many times before. He was stricken with panic as he glanced down the highway looking for a sign, a place, anywhere. He attempted to avoid any bumps in the road so not to shake the car too much.

“Hang on baby girl! We’ll be there in a moment!!” Malik glanced at his daughter from the corner of his eye. Her face became more contorted.

“Hurry Daddy!!”

The sun was just breaking the morning clouds as Malik scanned the highway ahead of the car. Finally, Malik saw the familiar glare from the bright red and green sign of the 11 to 7 quick stop. He pressed the accelerator and whirred into the driveway praying no other car would be leaving because it would be a sardine can. Athena grabbed the door handle as her father pressed the button on her seatbelt. In her haste to exit the car, she had forgotten her seat belt as usual, and as usual, dad was waiting to hit the button to keep her from nearly strangling herself. Lord knows at this crucial moment, he did not want to add any unnecessary pressure on her now very tense moment.

As she bounded out of the car and into the bathroom, Malik checked the seat for any moisture. He was relieved and proud Athena was able to retain her water. He felt guilty making her suffer like that, but at the time he had no choice. He didn’t want his baby girl going to pee over a hill, behind a tree, in the woods. After all she was too cultured for that, or at least that is what she thought.

Malik glanced over the back seat to check on Bear. The boy was staring directly into Malik’s eyes and smiling as if he knew what was happening. Apparently, all the commotion awakened him. His smile was the second rising of the sun today. The door slammed as Athena climbed back into the car. Her eyes were as bright as brand new quarters and she was definitely relieved.

“Baby girl!” stammered Malik. “How many times have I told you not to wait ‘til the last minute before you have to use it? One of these times, we’re going to be on the moon and there won’t be any place to go; then what will you do?”

“The moon daddy? What will we do on the moon?” She began to laugh because she knew her dad was joking. “Daddy, if we are on the moon, I won’t be thinking about the bathroom. I’ll be thinking about eating all that cheese. I love cheese daddy. Isn’t the moon made of cheese, Daddy? And how will we get there? My teacher said you need a rocket ship to fly to the moon. Do you have a rocket ship, Daddy?”

“Baby girl, how many times have I told you to stop asking so many questions at one time?” He was

trying to sound mad, but she knew better.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Baby girl.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t wake up in time, but I was sleeping so good. I was dreaming about my toys. I had all my dolls and we were outside playing pretend. Did you ever play pretend, Daddy?”

“Uh huh,” he mumbled.

“Anyway,” she continued. “I was a famous fashion model. All the neighborhood dolls and teddy bears were there and…” She turned up her nose as a foul pungent odor filled the car. “Whew!! Bear!! You really let loose this time,” turning and pointing to Khari’s obviously soiled diaper.

“It’s a good thing we hadn’t started out again,” said Malik. “We can get all this mess taken care of in one stop. Bear, I’ll be glad when you get old enough to start taking care of your own business. Come here boy and be careful. I don’t want you dripping all over my car. Baby girl, reach back there and hand me Bear’s diaper bag.”

The bag was located behind the driver’s seat, so she unbuckled her seat belt and climb into the back seat to get to the bag.

“Daddy, there are only two left. We need to get to the store in a hurry,” she said matter-of-factly. “And get some breakfast,” she quickly added.

While Athena lounged in the back seat, her father used her spot in the front seat to change Bear’s diaper. Malik was very proficient at this task. He used to marvel at how women could whip out the baby powder, baby wipes and diapers almost anywhere and have the child clean and smelling good, all in one felled swoop. It was almost second nature for them. Growing up as a young man, Malik often wondered was this something they acquired naturally or what? Now, he was proud of himself because he was quick and good. This act just took practice and a lot of it. Bear was ready to go in no time flat. Man, did he feel like a pro.

“OK Bear, back in your car seat. We gotta get moving so we can get breakfast and a motel,” Malik said.

“Brefus,” he attempted to repeat. To be a two year old, Bear was getting pretty good with phonics.

“Yes, that’s right, Breeaak faast,” repeated his father.

“Daddy, he sounds so funny trying to talk.” Athena giggled.

“Don’t laugh, Baby girl. You didn’t do much better at that age; now I can’t keep you quiet. By the way, I thought you were my co-pilot? What are you still doing back there? I need you up here so you can help me look out for the restaurant and motel. Look in the glove box and use the air freshener. Bear has this car smelling like a bear.”

“OK daddy, I’m still your co-pilot. Daddy, what’s a co-pilot?” as she filled the car with fresh aroma of coconut. By this time, Malik was back on the highway clocking sixty, but he kept hearing little squirt sounds. He glanced at Athena and sure enough, she was using the air freshener as underarm spray.

“That’s enough, Baby Girl. Stop wasting my spray. That stuff is not deodorant and it’s very expensive. Do you have money to buy me some more?”

“But daddy, it smells sooo good,” she replied smiling.

“I know it smells good, that’s why I bought the stuff, and if you don’t stop squirting my stuff, I’m going to put you out of my car and you’ll be walking the rest of the way.” He looked at her, trying to be serious but she knew her father was only kidding.

“Uh, UHHH, daddy. You always say that,” she responded flashing a big smile at her father and bearing all of her beautiful teeth.

“Well, one of these days, I’m gonna do it.” Malik retorted. “You’re gonna go, if you don’t stop spraying my air freshener and Bear is gonna follow you if he cuts another one like the last one.”

By now, they all were in hysterical laughter. Bear was laughing because he laughs at everything, Athena because she loves the way her father teases her and Malik because it does his heart good to make them both happy. Too bad the judge couldn’t see him now. The three of them often shared these tender moments, but the court proceeding made it sound as though Malik was an uncaring father who immersed himself in his work and never paid any attention to his children. The fact was it was his wife who was the workaholic, but during court her attorney portrayed her as the loving mother and the judge bought it hook, line and sinker.

Even in his laughter, his heart was dying. Malik felt he had to do what was best for his children. He refused to let the system steal them from him. He had seen that very thing happen to all his friends and someone had to take a stand. He’d given up fighting a losing battle in the biased court system. He decided to take his children before the courts could take them from him. Malik decided to do the very thing most men never think or dream of doing. After all, men are not supposed to have feelings for their young, are they? That’s the women’s role!

“I’m so tired of hearing that whine I could die. I hope it doesn’t come to that,” he mumbled. “Men love their children as much or more than women. Society just refuses to let men be fathers. By the time a man lives down the stigma of being Mr. Mom, usually work or other necessities force him away from his young.”

Malik’s thoughts continued to ramble as he began remembering why and where they were headed. His thoughts transported him back to the Royal Plaza hotel...

...He reflected on the surprising news and was still a bit shocked and yet happy because he had just spent a wonderful night with his wife, and she had given him the news about her pregnancy. Malik was worried about timing because after all, he and Rhonda were not doing too well. No need to worry now, they had a son on the way and he knew it was a boy because he could just feel it in his bones. Malik knew God was going to bless him with an heir, but Rhonda was acting very strange after she gave the news about the impending birth. Malik felt vibes from Rhonda suggesting she was not very happy. She did a lot of crying and spoke about plans being ruined. Malik tried to comfort her but after a while, they both fell asleep. The next morning, Malik asked about her comments, but she just blamed it on hormones. He thought nothing else of it until the divorce papers arrived six months later.

The next morning, the lovers were greeted by a beautiful spring morning. There was nothing like early spring. The sun shined through the clouds and Malik felt as though every beam of light was directed at him. His shirt was popping its buttons as he walked to the car thinking about the news received the night before. After all, he was going to be a poppa’, again.

As Malik strolled to the parking deck, he noticed someone had placed bright yellow and green flyers on all the cars. “Those cult people are at it again,” he thought. Car alarms were going off everywhere. He too, had a flyer on his car. Normally, Malik didn’t even bother to read the printed material on the flyers because most of the time, it was so outlandish. This time he read the flyer because of his wonderful mood. Nothing could spoil his disposition. Nothing!! The flyer read...

ATTENTION!!! ALL REAL MEN. ARE YOU TIRED OF BEING A BANK FOR YOUR FREELoading EX? HAVE THE COURTS GIVEN YOU THE SHAFT? ARE YOU TIRED OF BEING A WEEKEND FATHER? ARE YOU THE NURTURER THE COURTS REFUSE TO SEE YOU AS? IF YOU CAN ANSWER ANY OF THE ABOVE QUESTIONS WITH A “YES” THEN MAYBE WE CAN HELP? CALL 1-800-FATHERS. WE ARE A NEW BREED OF MEN WHO

LOVE AND CARE FOR THEIR CHILDREN. CALL US 24 HOURS A DAY. SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. MAYBE WE CAN HELP YOU WITH YOUR PROBLEM. THOSE MEN TRYING TO AVOID THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR CHILDREN NEED NOT RESPOND.

“Um, that’s interesting,” he mumbled aloud. “Probably some lawyer trying to make some extra cash.” Instead of crumpling up the flyer and tossing it to the deck floor, Malik neatly folded it up and placed it in his shirt pocket and thought nothing else about it. He laughed at the irony of getting the flyer, considering his main job was prosecuting irresponsible parents.

“Daddeeee!!!! I’m hungreeee. Let’s stop for breakfast,” Athena fashioned her plea into a whine. Malik knew that sound, and fortunately, he saw a motel sign looming in the distance.

“OK, baby girl. There’s a motel and look, a Mickey D’s right across the street. Will that make you happy?”

“YEEEEAAHHH!!!!” Both she and Bear seemed to be thrilled at the sight of the familiar golden arches.

The sun was rising and soon the streets would be crawling with nosey people. Malik pulled into the drive-thru as usual, so not to arouse suspicion. As they pulled away from the drive-thru, Malik was in deep thought. They passed the giant billboard welcoming visitors to Apple Springs, Tennessee; he glanced upwards prayerfully...“Help me please. Help me. I need your guidance.”