



Anytime Soon

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O N E

The sound of my parents talking woke me out of my sleep. I sat up and looked around my bedroom. It looked like the room of a twenty-four-year-old college senior, but lately, it didn't feel like I was in college. I often had to remind myself of why I made the decision to live at home instead of on campus. Granted, at the time that I made the decision, it had seemed like a good idea. Living at home was comfortable and affordable. Once I started school, however, I often questioned my decision to continue living at home. Shortly after I decided to get my own place, my only brother, Andrew, was killed. We were a close family and devastated at his untimely death. At that point, there was no way I was going to move out. I thought my parents and sister needed me home with them. But, as time passed, I realized they really didn't need me at all—I was the one who needed them.

Andrew and I were as close as any two people could ever be and when he died, part of me died too. He and I had gone to a house party one night and we separated at some point—me hanging out with some friends and Drew going outside for some air. I was still talking with a friend when I noticed everyone headed outside. I followed the crowd and gasped, only to discover my beloved brother lying on the ground, bleeding. It was frustrating because no one stepped up to say they knew anything. It was a mystery then and, over a year later, it remains a mystery. There were different rumors going around. One was that some guys were walking by and got into a verbal altercation with Drew and shot him, but none of the stories were ever corroborated. It was hard

for my family to deal with the loss and even more so because of the lack of clarity surrounding his death. We all grieved, but we grieved differently. My mom ate, my sister Ava fasted, my dad drank, and I sank into depression. As time moved on, however, so did my family. I, on the other hand, still struggled with losing Drew and my mom “gently insisted” that I see a therapist. Some woman named Dr. Judy. I was resentful at first, but I eventually learned to appreciate having Dr. Judy sit for an hour and listen to me gripe and pontificate. Mom paid for it and, depending on my mood, sometimes she got her money’s worth and other times she didn’t.

Some days, I enjoyed the comforts that home had to offer. Other days, however, I would have shaved off my eyebrows to have my own place. Between my overbearing mom, and the issues of my extended family and friends, there were days I struggled just to hear my own thoughts.

I showered and dressed before heading downstairs. On the way down, I peeked into my sister’s room. Ava was buried under her comforter, with one foot hanging off the side of her bed. I shook my head at the chaos. Given that my mom and dad were the tidiest people I knew, Ava’s sloth often caused me to question her paternity.

I walked into the kitchen, where my dad, Roscoe, was fussing at my mother. He was bent over, looking in the cupboard. I sat down at the table quietly.

“When did you start buying *Diet Dr. Pepper*?” he complained. “And, Anita, where are the cinnamon rolls?”

“The cinnamon rolls are at the store, where they belong,” Mom replied, not bothering to turn away from the cantaloupe that she was cutting.

“Wrong answer,” he told her. “Where they belong is right here in this kitchen, so I can pack them in my lunch.”

Mom turned and rolled her eyes at him. She had battled the

bulge for as long as I'd been on the Earth, probably even before that. This means I grew up on every diet known to humanity. When she dieted, we all dieted with her—whether we wanted to or not.

“Come on, Roscoe, you know I don't have that kind of willpower,” Mom explained. “You don't need those cinnamon rolls. Take some of this cantaloupe to work. I'm taking some with me. You'll like it. It's sweet.”

“I don't want cantaloupe, Anita. I want a cinnamon roll.” Roscoe kissed Mom on the cheek, picked up his lunch off the counter, and kissed me on the forehead before walking out of the kitchen.

She called out to him, “The banquet is in a month, and I need to fit into my dress. I can't fit into my dress with cinnamon rolls lurking around the kitchen, taunting me.”

She looked over at me. I was still sitting quietly. I looked over at the small television on the counter. I wanted to avoid a conversation about food and eating habits. There were many things that Mom and I didn't agree on, and weight management was at the top of the list. I'm size two, but I'm healthy. It seemed that my mom had developed a rare form of amnesia and forgot the countless diets she raised me and my siblings on. Now she thought I didn't eat enough.

“Where are you headed?” she asked me.

“I have an appointment with Judy,” I responded.

“Okay,” she said, still cutting the cantaloupe. “Are you going to complain about the cinnamon rolls, too?”

“Nope,” I said, heading to the cabinet for oatmeal.

“That figures,” she said. “You don't eat enough anyway.”

Here we go.

“I eat, Mom. Just in moderation. Healthy weight management, remember?” I said.

“More like weight obsessed,” she said, pouring a cup of coffee.

“I'm not weight obsessed, I'm healthy,” I said, instantly regretting the comment. I should have just kept my mouth closed.

“Bulimia isn’t healthy, honey,” she said.

“You’re right, Mom. Bulimia isn’t healthy. It’s an illness—an illness I don’t have.”

She glared at me over the top of her glasses. “You need to eat more,” she said, putting the cantaloupe in the refrigerator. “You’re as thin as a rail.”

I wanted to tell her that she needed to eat less, but I didn’t. I wanted to live to see the end of the day.

Roscoe walked back into the kitchen before I could defend myself. He was wearing his work uniform and still had his lunch in his hand.

“Remember, I have my meeting tonight after work,” Roscoe has worked for the electric company for at least twenty years. He loves his job and has often said that he has no plans to retire. He said working kept him out of trouble. Although that could be true at times, there were plenty of other times when he almost lost his job because of his drinking. That’s why he frequented a sober support group. As hard as he tried to stay on the wagon, there were times when he slipped up. Too many slip ups, in my humble opinion.

“Okay,” Mom said. “See you later.”

Mom sat down and started watching a news report about a black business executive who had been indicted for fraud.

“Surely they know he wasn’t behind it. There’s more to it,” Mom said.

“Yeah,” I said sarcastically. “Greed.”

“No. He was under somebody’s direction,” Mom said.

“So that makes it okay?” I asked. “He did it because he wanted to, because of greed.”

“He did it because he wanted to keep his job,” she said.

“He did it because he was greedy,” I repeated.

Mom glared at me. “Anaya Goode, how in the world do you go to college smart and come out stupid?”

“Mom,” I said, “you think everything is a conspiracy, but this is not someone else’s fault. The man is guilty, plain and simple. They have e-mails of him admitting his wrongdoing.”

“So I’m a conspiracy theorist?” she asked.

“I didn’t say that,” I argued. “It’s just that sometimes you sound a little . . . paranoid.”

“Don’t start that,” she exclaimed. “Don’t you call me paranoid until you’ve lived a day in my shoes. You couldn’t have survived one day in the life I had when I was your age.”

Not this morning, Mom; not the story about the twelve-mile walk!

“Do you realize that my sisters and I had to walk twelve miles to and from school in the heat of summer and in the dead of winter, and after school to help my mama clean houses? You need to respect the struggle.”

“Mom, I *do* respect the struggle. I’m just saying, everything that happens to Black people is not a conspiracy. People make choices, knowing there is a consequence, and it’s no one’s fault but their own.”

She looked at me as if I had grown a third eye.

“People do what they have to do to survive. And there are always two sides to a story.”

“I get that, Mom. But at some point, we have to be accountable for who we are and what we want to be. We have the same opportunities for education, the same opportunities for prosperity, and the same opportunities to raise our families. But what is happening?” I gestured at the television as if to prove my point. “We have more black men in prison than in college. So who’s teaching young boys how to be men? Who’s showing girls what kind of man to look for? We need to wise up and get educated. We need to move forward. Heck, it would be nice if we started voting.”

Mom stared at me a long time before she finally stood up and spoke.

“There’s a story in the Bible about Jesus and a blind man,” she began. “The blind man comes to Jesus and asks to be healed. Jesus spits on some dirt, mixes it up, and puts it on the man’s eyes. Then he tells the man to go to the water, rinse his eyes out, and come back. When the man returns, Jesus asks him what he sees. The man says he sees men as trees. Jesus spits on the dirt again, rubs it on the blind man’s eyes, and tells him to go and rinse his eyes a second time. When the man comes back, Jesus asks him what he sees now, and the man says he sees men as they are. You, Anaya, see men as trees, and I see them as they are.”

What?

“I don’t know anything about men looking like trees,” I said, “but I do know that we live in a society where we can do anything we want. This is not the old days, Mom. We can move forward. We do not have to hold on to the past, singing old Negro spirituals all the time.”

She stood up, and I ducked.

“Old Negro spirituals? Where’s the child I birthed into this world? Girl, you don’t have a clue. You millennials are privileged and ignorant. You think this family is struggling because we have only one premium cable TV package instead of two. Your two best friends drive cars that are worth more than most people will earn in a lifetime. You aren’t doing so badly, either. Get a clue. One day you will see for yourself.”

She walked out of the kitchen. I followed behind her, but not too closely.

“See you later,” I called out.

I was five minutes late for my appointment with Judy. I’d been seeing her since Andrew died, and she never gave me grief about being late. I sat down in the obnoxiously massive leather chair in her office. She sat across from me, looking like The Joker; she had small red lips, over-arched eyebrows, pasty skin, and heavy black eyeliner.

“So what’s going on?” she asked me. “Have you made the decision to move out of your parents’ house?”

“No,” I said.

“Why not?” she probed.

“I keep thinking that my family needs me there,” I said, surprised to have said it so bluntly.

“For what purpose would they need you there?” Judy asked, writing on her little yellow pad.

“I don’t know.”

“Have you talked with your parents about moving out?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. My mom still hasn’t cleaned out my brother’s room. I think she needs closure.”

“What do you think that has to do with your gaining independence?”

“Nothing.”

“Have you spoken with her about cleaning out your brother’s room?”

“No. I don’t think she’s ready.”

“Has your mom said that to you?”

“She doesn’t have to. I know her.”

“Say more,” Judy encouraged.

“It just doesn’t feel like the best time. Things feel strange in my house. Mom is not herself, my sister spends all of her time in church, and my dad seems oblivious. Things just don’t seem right.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“Sad. Insecure. Lonely.”

“What can you do about that?”

“Drugs.”

“What else?” She asked, ignoring my sarcasm.

“Move out.”

“Alone?” Judy asked.

“I thought about moving in with one of my friends, but she’s going through something. I know she’s using drugs, and I don’t know what to do.” I let out a heavy sigh before I continued. “Life is turning upside down right in front of my face, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You feel like life is hard for you right now?”

“Yes. Home is in turmoil since Andrew died. My extended family is overwhelming me with their issues, and even my friends seem to be leaning on me pretty hard right now. Lately, I don’t even recognize my life, and it doesn’t feel good. I thought I knew exactly what I wanted to do after college. I had my entire life planned out. Now I have no idea what I want to do.” I started to cry.

The session drained me. But when I left, I suddenly realized that somehow, in the rich chaos of my family and friends, I needed to find my own voice. The question was—who was I, apart from them? What did I want to do with my life?

When I got home, I found my best friend, Sophie, sitting in my room, waiting for me.

“Hey,” I said, surprised to see her. “How long have you been here?”

“Not long. I was in the kitchen talking to your mom for a few minutes. I had to make a phone call, so I came up here. That’s okay, isn’t it?”

“Of course, it’s fine. You are family, anyway. You practically used to live here when we were kids.”

When she smiled, I noticed that she looked different. I couldn’t put my finger on why she looked different, but she did. Even though we grew up like sisters, there was a growing distance between us. A big part of it had to do with her not returning my calls and her newfound coke habit. I wasn’t into drugs and didn’t tend to entertain the company of those who did. Sophie was my friend though, and I needed her just as much as she needed me. I wasn’t going to abandon her, but I wasn’t going to pretend her drug use was okay. Lately, it had become a source of tension.

“I’ve been calling you,” I said. “Why haven’t you called me back?”

“Busy,” she said.

Sophie was beautiful, with her dark eyes and small, button nose. Her naturally curly hair was a wild mixture of dark- and light-brown highlights. She had full eyebrows and thick, pouty lips.

“Where have you been?” I asked her.

“Just around,” she murmured evasively. “Been busy doing . . . stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Just stuff,” she repeated vaguely. “What’s been up with you?” she asked, changing the subject. I didn’t want to fight. I walked to my closet and pulled out a bouquet of roses.

“Whoa. Who did those come from?” she asked, startled.

“Someone sent them to me.”

“I can see that. Who?”

“Guess,” I said, with my hands on my hips.

“Okay, Ny, I’m not trying to be funny, but I don’t have a clue. Have you even dated anybody since Justin?”

I looked at her and smirked.

“Justin sent these to you?” she said, incredulous.

I nodded my head.

“What the hell for?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t talked to him in ages,” I said. “Well, you know, we dated a few years ago. After he cheated on me three times and broke my heart, I finally broke it off. Hadn’t heard from him since. Then yesterday, this bouquet of roses shows up at my house.” I waved the roses around in a flourish. “Justin—the love of my life, the scum of the Earth.”

“Wait. Justin is gay,” Sophie said.

“No, he’s not.”

“You sure?” Sophie asked, chuckling.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“What does he want?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Well maybe you can start hanging out with him again. I mean, you haven’t been out with anyone since you broke up with him. That’s not really normal, Ny.”

“I have been out since Justin!” I exclaimed, defending myself.

“Really?” she countered. “Name two people you went out with since you and Justin broke up.” She looked at me with her arms folded across her chest.

“Remember that guy that used to be in Jack and Jill with us?”

“What guy?”

“The tall one.”

“Really, Ny? The tall one? That could be anybody. What’s his name?”

“Reggie,” I said.

“I don’t remember him,” Sophie said.

“Well, I went out with him.”

“Sure you did,” Sophie said, pulling a compact out of her yellow Chanel tote.

A silver vial fell out of her bag. Sophie hurried to put it back in her bag, but I had seen it already.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Just a little powder,” she said defensively. “Don’t start on me today. I told you I only use it when I party. It helps me to stay awake.”

I looked at her sharply.

“I have it under control,” she said.

“Are you on your way to a party?” I asked.

She looked at me blankly.

“Are you going to a party?” I repeated.

“No.”

“So why do you have it, then?”

“I said, don’t start, Anaya, okay?”

“According to what you said, you only use it when you are

going out. So, if you have coke in your purse, you must be going to a party.”

“I went out the other night. I forgot to take it out of my purse.”

I didn’t want to look at her, because she was lying to me. Lately it was hard being her friend. She was moody, didn’t call when she said she would, and canceled plans. I had always admired Sophie for having famous parents, a fancy wardrobe, and the best things life had to offer.

We’ve always envied each other. She always said how wonderful my parents were, and I was impressed at how rich and sophisticated her parents were. Sophie likes that my mom cooks dinner almost every night, and I like that she has a live-in cook. She always wanted a younger sister, and I wanted to give mine away.

Before the conversation about her coke habit got heated, my other best friend, Catie, breezed through my bedroom door, smelling like flowery perfume.

“Hey, you guys,” she said.

“Hey, Catie,” we both chimed.

She gave me a big hug and handed me a large shopping bag before plopping down on my bed.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“What do you mean? I can’t come visit my very best friend in the world?” she asked with mock hurt.

“Yeah, but you normally don’t just pop up,” I said.

“My car got towed,” she said. “I had to get a ride downtown to pick it up. It’s a few minutes away, so I decided to come and see you.”

As I looked through the bag, I felt astounded at the stuff Catie gave to me. I pulled out a pair of jeans that I had recently seen on a fashion blog. Catie rolled her eyes at me when she saw me smiling. I walked over and tried to hug her, but she backed away. She reminded me so much of my mom. I immediately tried on the “Young, Rich, & Skinny” jeans in front of the mirror.

“Girl, you gonna have your mama’s hips,” Catie said.

I cringed.

“What’s up, Sophie?” Catie said, playfully punching Sophie on the arm. “When is your dad having another party?”

Sophie’s dad, Terry, is a music producer. He used to throw huge parties and invite all of his celebrity friends. Sophie always invited me and Catie. Among the three of us, we had pictures with some of the biggest names in the music industry. But Terry hadn’t thrown a party in a long time. In fact, I hadn’t seen him in a year. Every time I asked Sophie about him, she said he was traveling.

“I’m not sure,” Sophie said to Catie. “I heard you’ve been to some pretty good parties lately.”

Catie smiled with satisfaction. She stood up and smoothed her skirt. Catie was a five-foot-nine beauty. She had thin, straight hair that hung down to her waist, sharp features, and flawless skin. “Actually, my favorite Oakland Raider is throwing a party tonight,” she said. “You guys wanna go?”

“I’m down,” Sophie said softly.

I looked over at Sophie, surprised. She hated going out with Catie, because Catie was too high strung and loud, and that didn’t mesh with Sophie’s low-key persona.

“Sweet,” agreed Catie. “You got something to wear?”

“I have something,” Sophie said.

“Of course you do,” Catie grinned.

“What time and where?” Sophie asked.

“It’s at his house. Invitation only. So we roll together. Got it?”

“We can roll together,” Sophie said, “but I’m not staying at a party until four a.m. I’ll take a cab home if I have to.”

“Shut up, Sophie. Just call me when you’re ready, and I’ll come swoop you up. What about you, Ny?”

I opened my mouth, but I didn’t get a chance to answer.

They both groaned in unison. “We know. You need to study.”

“Girl,” Catie said, pointing at me, “you’re gonna wake up one

morning, realize you're forty, and wonder what the hell happened to your youth."

With that, she grabbed her huge, red, patent-leather purse, which probably cost more than my Honda.

"You act as if I've never been to a party before," I said. "I don't have to go to every party I'm invited to."

"Pu-leaze!" Catie exclaimed. "I can't remember the last time you went to a party."

"Did you tell Catie about the roses?" Sophie asked.

"No," I said tightly.

"What roses? Someone sent you roses, Ny? Who on Earth did that?"

"Excuse me?" I countered. "You act as if I'm not worthy of roses."

"I'm not saying you aren't worthy. I'm saying in order for someone to send you roses, you have to give them the time of day. So, who is the lucky gentleman?" Catie asked.

"Justin," Sophie blurted out with a grin.

"Justin? The guy you used to date?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Wait. He's gay."

"He's not gay!"

"Ny, the boy wore a thumb ring and arched his eyebrows. Now I love the gays just as much as anyone else, but he wasn't into you. He was gay."

I sighed.

"What does he want?"

"For me to call, but I'm not," I said.

"That's fine, he's not for you anyway," Catie said firmly. "I will say that you need to hurry up and get your groove on. I mean, give that little kitty cat some action down there. Those little toys you have can be fun, but you need real stimulation. You know what I

mean? Like a man? You don't want your coochie to shrivel up and fall out, do you?"

Sophie smiled, as if the demise of my private parts amused her.

"Leave her alone, Catie," Sophie said. "She's got her priorities right. There's nothing wrong with that."

Catie frowned.

"Just trying to help."

"What are you wearing for the party?" Sophie asked Catie.

"I saw this pink Narciso dress that hugs every curve I have . . . and creates some I don't."

Her cell phone rang, and she took it in my walk-in closet.

I looked over at Sophie. We both shrugged.

"Why does she need to go in the closet?" Sophie asked.

"That's a good question," I said.

Catie came out of the closet and grabbed her purse.

"I thought we were going to a party tonight?" Sophie asked.

"We are," Catie replied. "I'll be at your house by eleven. We should get to the party by eleven-thirty. Anything earlier looks desperate."

She blew us a kiss as she disappeared out the door.

But then, peeking her head back in, she said, "And, Sophie? Do something with that hair, will you? You look like Carrot Top, for goodness sakes."

"Hooker!" Sophie called after her, before Catie closed the door completely.

"Sophie!" I exclaimed.

"What?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders.