

Chapter 1

“I don’t have any Secrets”

Kareem grabbed a pair of readers off the kitchen island as he checked the mail. A nearby silver letter-opener revealed an out of state letter from Atlanta. “Babe, check this out!”

“What is it?” Marie asked. She looked away from a steaming pot of broccoli and Salmon that cooked simultaneously. When she turned to him, his behind caught her attention in tailored slacks. She smiled to hide her stare.

“I got this letter from my alma mater. They want to interview me,” he read more, “It’s one of those, *where are they now pieces*,” Kareem said with pride. His thick locs fell past his chin as he held the letter.

“Oh, that’s interesting, after all these years,” Marie said.

“Well, you know they have to wait until you become accomplished or fail miserably before they can follow-up with an accurate depiction.”

“You should have plenty of glowing reviews,” Marie told him and continued... “Black youth wins college lottery scholarship to Georgia State University known for their stellar law program. He graduates with honors, lands at a prestigious Atlanta law firm, becomes the golden boy for years and then chucks it all at the height of his career to commune in Africa.

After spending months in the Motherland, he surprisingly moved to a small town, Oakridge, where he hung his shingle at The Law Offices of Marie Perry, where he practiced with a renewed sense of judgment.

“Mr. Johnson is no stranger to wins. He investigated and tried his first case in Oakridge within a few months of living there. He was successful at solving a 30-year-old murder, for which he prosecuted unsuspecting criminals who were regarded as pillars in the community. Coincidentally, the culprits owned the most prestigious law firm in the county.

In the end, Mr. Johnson married the plaintiff, Marie Perry, who won the title to the law firm (now, Johnson and Johnson Attorneys at Law) in her suit, making him the co-owner. They are currently raising a family and living happily ever after. What a story that will make!” Marie said, proud of her account of events.

“That was a mouthful,” Kareem laughed. “Anyway, it’s pretty cool.” He nodded with pride.

“You know they’re going to vet you,” Marie said with a raised eyebrow.

“Didn’t you hear *your* rendition of my life? Not a problem. I don’t have any secrets. I’m straight,” he replied confidently.

Marie put her arms around his neck and gave her husband a congratulatory kiss. She looked into his eyes with sex appeal, paused and said, “Don’t forget to take out the trash.”

“Way to bring me back down to earth, but that’s David’s job.”

“It *was* David’s job. Now that he’s working at the restaurant and has school, and, I don’t think he has the time. Neither does Jai!” she spoke of their children.

“Well, he better make the time; and before bed!” Kareem was not joking. “They have drivers to take them anywhere they need to go, they should have plenty of time for their chores.”

The Johnson’s seemed like a normal family but their astounding wealth took them to new heights that was unreachable by most people. They had law degrees, Marie worked in their firm helping families with living trusts, while Kareem ran the office.

The children attended fancy schools with extracurricular activities. Thirteen-year-old David was a budding chef with exceptional skills for his youthful age. And Jai, only eleven, was a gifted student who excelled academically, and she loved to write.

While the Johnsons were wealthy beyond one’s imagination, they strived to raise their children to be unpretentious, giving praise to God for all their blessings.

Kareem grew up in the South, Georgia to be exact; it was a humble beginning with two older brothers, Curtis, and Jamal. His baby sister, Nicole died of SIDS shortly after she was born. His mother, Janet blamed her husband for the sudden death because he made it clear he did not love their *female* newborn. Arthur had been unreasonably cruel to Janet throughout their marriage with an aversion to all women for that matter. She

referred to him as a chauvinist. It was a hard life, for which she held strong.

After the death of Nicole, Janet allowed bitterness to fester; she could no longer pretend to be his dutiful wife. She prayed for deliverance from the hostility and loveless marriage. She also prayed for Arthur, who she thought didn't deserve to be mentioned to God.

As Arthur was transitioning to the other side from prostate cancer, Janet attempted to recite the sinner's prayer, but he refused to hear it. She left a tract by this nightstand and then left the room. She was not at his side when he took his last breath. It was a decision she did not regret.

Kareem vowed to be a different type of man, one who loved and respected women, especially his wife. He kept his promise.

Marie grew up as an only child who wanted for nothing. After a middle-class couple, the Perry's adopted her, they never let on she wasn't related by blood. Years later, a paternity lawsuit proved she belonged to another family, and was heir to a massive fortune.

Her biological father, William Franklin Lord III, took advantage of her mother, Sandy, when she was a house cleaner for his prestigious family. Sandy became pregnant, and to keep the scandal a secret, Mr. Lord sent the child away for adoption. Elizabeth Ann Lord (AKA Marie) was ripped from her mother's arms moments after she was born. Sandy didn't lay eyes on her daughter again for 40-years.

Kareem's investigation uncovered her adoption which reunited Sandy and Marie. He was with her for the discovery, devastation, and healing process throughout the trial, eventually the two could not deny, they had fallen in love.

After the winning verdict, Marie and Kareem lived on a blank check to do whatever in the world they wanted. With enough money to create generational wealth, they settled on a gated mansion atop sprawling acres, so majestic passersby's had to get a glimpse.

"So, when is the interview?" Marie asked.

"I have a few months; I'm going to need to review my old cases. Got to be prepared," he said. Kareem was pleased about being selected for the interview. Not for vanity, but to show his people that they can be successful if they put forth the effort. He felt a sense of duty to lead by example.

He headed upstairs; his hand glided up the 100-year-old oak banister that was polished to perfection. Carpet-laid stairs led him to wide halls with expensive art that hung on the walls from *The Gallery*, where Marie's sister Sharon was the proprietor. Other pieces came from their travels around the country and abroad.

Relaxed on their king-sized bed, Kareem padded his back with pillows and crossed his ankle for comfort. He flipped the laptop screen. Before he began to search for old case files, he decided to have a look at his previous firm's website.

It was nicely done, he thought. The firm looked to be upscale in every way. As he scrolled, Kareem enjoyed seeing familiar faces, and the firm had doubled in size since he parted.

The two attorneys he started out with had bought the firm from the previous owner and became partners. The Grady & Morehouse brand looked strong. He figured he'd familiarize himself with them since he planned to visit when he flew out for the interview.

Perusing the site, he wondered what his protégé Layla Matthews had done in her career; and there she was, a senior attorney, still at the firm. She looked great, he thought. A woman now, not the fresh-out-of-law-school twenty-two-year-old he remembered. She wore natural curls and a fresh face. Her blue blazer gave her power, while her silk blouse (with a hint of cleavage) softened her look. Her bio was laced with accomplishments and accolades. He noticed a phone number and an email address at the bottom of the page and decided to message her.

Kareem

Hi Layla, It's Kareem Johnson your mentor from back in the day. It's great to see you have thrived at the firm. Hit me back when you get a chance. I will be in Atlanta soon. Would love to catch up.

Moments later, she responded.

Layla

Hey Kareem, nice to hear from you. Look forward to seeing you. I assume you are coming because of the lawsuit.

Kareem

What lawsuit?

Layla

Then you don't know?

Kareem

Fill me in... wait, I'll call you!

Layla picked up right away.

“Hey there, Miss Senior Attorney. I taught you well,” Kareem said with pride.

“Yes, but you should have taken your own advice,” she answered, eager to shell out the scandalous details about the firm being sued.

“Come again?”

“It has to do with that deal you guys made with Mr. Jefferson.”

Back in the day when Kareem, Justin, and Lavell, were new attorneys at the firm, a client asked them to lie on a financial affidavit (required in every divorce case) about his true net worth. Not only did the client want to withhold a true accounting of his net worth from his wife and the court, but he also wanted his attorneys to stash a portion of his wealth in offshore accounts. The attorneys were fully aware that lying on a declaration of facts or testifying falsely in court was considered lying under oath for both the client and the

attorneys. Fines and jail time could be applied if caught, and the attorneys could lose their licenses to practice.

With all that was at stake, they agreed to engage in the scheme for a huge payday after the clients' divorce was final. These types of underhanded dealings were not only illegal, but unethical for any firm, yet, after hearing the details of the closed-door meeting, the attorney's and their client hashed out the details and then shook in agreement.

In the days that followed, Kareem's conscience spoke to him. He realized it wouldn't be prudent to move forward. While he was not a true man of God back then, being crooked wasn't sitting right in his spirit. He didn't want to go down a road of no return. The law meant something to him. It wasn't *just* about getting rich; it was about justice. He thought better than to turn his back on his principles and considered the ramifications if he were found out. His family would be devastated. It would end his career *and* he could be prosecuted. In his deliberation, Kareem considered his reason for accepting the deal in the first place; a lofty goal of becoming a millionaire before the age of forty.

The deal kept him up at night, but he finally regained his honor and bailed before any money was transferred to a secret offshore account on their clients' behalf.

Although the attorneys agreed with a handshake, Kareem felt the need to prepare a legal document that would make his part in the deal invalid. It wasn't enough that there would be no traceable evidence that he had entered into an illegal partnership since he had not signed anything or made any

financial moves. Still, he was so adamant about protecting his good name, that he drew up a document for them to sign that would release him from any liability.

On the next business day, Kareem met with Justin Grady and Lavell Morehouse to tell of his decision. Justin argued about his backing out and tried to convince him of the lucrative deal that would net dividends. He cajoled, even told him it was what the client wanted and that no one would be the wiser. While Kareem stood his ground, they still refused to sign his release of liability.

“Let me tell you how this is going to go. You both sign my release and I keep your deal a secret. Don’t sign and I have a meeting with the senior partner exposing the whole thing,” Kareem said.

“What changed, Kareem?” Justin asked. “You were all over this the other day, and now you have a sudden change of heart. I don’t get it?” He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his expensive suit coat.

“You said it, Justin. I reconsidered. Anyway, I don’t have to explain myself to you guys. Either you sign or I go next door,” Kareem warned.

Lavell picked up the document, began to read it in its entirety aloud. When he finished, Justin and Lavell whispered amongst themselves; they had seemed to come to an agreement.

“I don’t want any parts of it,” Lavell said.

“You running scared too?”

“I just can’t afford to get caught up,” Lavell said and then walked out of the office.

“Okay, Justin, it’s on you, man, but before you sign it, I want to ask Layla to come in as a witness,” Kareem said.

“Are you crazy, man?” Justin asked. “She can’t know about this!”

“She doesn’t have to know what’s in it. She just needs to witness that you signed it,” Kareem said. He then called her in the office.

“Hey guys, what do you need?” Layla asked.

Justin eyed the pretty young lady with lust.

She ignored his obvious interest in her.

“We just need a witness on this document. It should only take a minute,” Kareem said. He pushed the paperwork toward Justin who scribbled his name and threw the pen on the desk, as though it meant nothing to sign.

Then Kareem handed Layla the pen. She did not ask any questions. Afterward she left the gentleman to themselves.

“Okay. So, it’s done,” Kareem said after he signed it.

“I need a copy,” Justin said.

“No problem.”

“More money for me,” Justin said as if Kareem and Lavell had made a mistake by not going through with it.

Two days later, Kareem gave notice to the firm. He resigned, by letter, stating he wanted to take a break from the law. The next day, he flew to Africa to get his mind right.

“So, Layla, you *do* remember signing the release of liability letter as a witness, right?” Kareem asked.

“Actually, I had forgotten all about it until recently. At the time, I had no idea of what the letter entailed; I was a newbie, simply there to witness the signing, but last week I was delivering a file to Justin’s office when right on his desk, in plain sight, I recognized my signature on the document. He must have had it out for review since the lawsuit had surfaced. I quickly snapped a pic of it on my phone and jetted out of there.

“When I got back to my office, I was shocked to read about the deal. I had thought of you as a mentor back then and since those guys became partners over the years, I regarded them as strictly legitimate, but I was wrong about all of you. I was really disappointed that you would agree to do anything illegal in the first place. It’s a good thing that I was only a witness of the signatures. I bare absolutely no liability in this mess,” she told Kareem on the phone.

Layla was weary about her position. The accusations of impropriety were already casting a bad light on the firm. There was the threat of potential fines, and Justin could do jail time. It would be impossible for them to keep the firm if they were found to have engaged the firm in a crime. She had invested ten years and her reputation there, she could not afford the bad publicity.

“I hear you. That’s the reason I couldn’t go through with it. I changed my mind, hence the signed letter to absolve me of any wrong doing,” Kareem reminded.

“You are not absolved, Kareem. There was intent *before* you changed your mind. I’m pretty sure that’s the way the prosecutor will spin it,” she said.

“I didn’t go through with. The letter proves that!” Kareem defended. “I’m a different man now. I’m a Christian.”

“You know the old saying, *tell it to the judge.*”

Kareem was surprised by her reaction to his defense. “So, how did the lawsuit come about anyway? Is the client suing the partners?”

“Aside from the obvious, it turns out the money he wanted to hide had nothing to do with his wife,” she whispered. “The client, Mr. Jefferson, was stealing money from his *own* clients.”

“Embezzling?”

“Yes, from their money-market accounts. He’d been undetected for the last ten years until now,” Layla said. “Justin was helping him hide money that wasn’t even his, it was stolen!”

“This is too much! Did Justin know that?” Kareem inquired.

“Yes, and he claimed you knew too!”

“Oh no. No, no, no! I knew nothing of the sort. I backed out before anything transpired, and it was under the auspices that Mr. Jefferson was hiding money from his wife, not stealing from his clients. I wrote that letter just in case something like this happened. I’ll admit I had a lapse in judgment by agreeing, but I immediately changed my mind, and I left the firm,” Kareem argued.

“The charges aren’t only for hiding Mr. Jefferson’s money and for embezzling funds, they also want to revoke your license for entering into an illegal agreement knowing fully that it was just that!”

“How many times do I have to repeat myself? I never entered into the agreement.,” Kareem said. He felt a lump in his throat.

“It was a verbal agreement that Justin will say you masterminded and solely benefited from,” Layla replied.

“Where is your information coming from? Did you discuss this with him?” Kareem asked.

“Yes, they wanted me to represent the firm, but I refused. I wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot pole. These walls have been talking since this whole thing started, Justin is telling the lawyers it was all you,” Layla said.

“You do realize what is happening here, I’m being framed! All I have to do is produce the letter that exonerates me!” Kareem said.

“Well, the letter might prove to be an admission of guilt. It will show that you contemplated and entered into a verbal agreement to break the law even though you recanted. Right now, if you are telling the truth, he can’t link you to any monetary transactions or paper trails, so he only has your word against his. Did you get a notice to appear?” Layla asked.

“Not, yet,” he answered, feeling defeated. “You might be right about the letter. I don’t even know where it is, it’s been years; I’ve moved around since then. Can send me a copy of yours?”

“Mine? I don’t know about that,” she said reluctantly.

“What’s the problem?”

“I don’t want to get any more involved than I have to, Kareem. I’ve got to run, got a call coming in; look me up when you get here,” Layla said before hanging up.

Kareem was nervous. While he knew he was innocent of all charges, except for *contemplating* breaking the law, it would be a monumental task to see his way out if Justin was lying on him. Mr. Jefferson would say he met Kareem at the first meeting which would prove his involvement. He wondered if Justin even told Mr. Jefferson he had backed out.

Kareem still wanted a copy of that letter for his own records and to recall every word in it. He was shocked that Layla didn’t send it, she used to do anything he asked; she had a serious crush on him back then.

He began to pray, asking God for direction and to get him out of the lawsuit. He thought this was his price for agreeing in the first place. He recalled the scripture, Matthew 5:28 that said, “*But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” Could his plan to commit a crime equate to have committed the crime in his heart? he wondered.

After prayer he went downstairs to check for the summons in the rest of the mail. Sure enough, Marie was holding it.

“I was about to call you down. Looks like you’re being summoned by the court in Atlanta,” she said with curiosity and handed the package to him.

Kareem read the complaint. He was flabbergasted by the lies that were told on him. He knew Justin was disappointed by his backing out of the deal, having him sign the release of liability, and even more for leaving the firm, but he never thought he would frame him for the entire crime that he never committed to.

“Well?” Marie asked with anticipation.

He explained what happened, including his conversation with Layla, but held to his innocence.

The summons charged that he orchestrated an illegal scheme to embezzle money from unsuspecting clients and then hid said funds in offshore accounts, breaking the law and violating his position as an officer of the court.

“I won’t lie, I’m disappointed in you,” Marie said, as she set the table for dinner.

“You know I was tripping back then, just wanted to be more, make a name for myself and make that paper,” he said.

“But you weren’t trying to *make it*, you were trying to *take it* unlawfully.”

“I know I was wrong; I admit to that, but I changed my mind before anything transpired,” he said trying to garner sympathy.

“So, I guess meeting *me* was the golden ticket,” she said.

“Come on, now, that’s not fair, you know better, Marie!”

Marie didn’t answer. She wouldn’t even look at him.

“Babe, babe,” he pleaded.

Still nothing from her.

He knew it was bad. Saying nothing said everything. It was the first time he had experienced disappointment from her. “So, I’m going to skip dinner tonight,” he told her and headed upstairs.

Marie remained quiet.