

The Corrupting of the Redeemer

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Chapter 1

The ancestors of Black Americans had lived on the continent of Africa for millenniums without the influence of Christianity. Black people were mostly adherents of indigenous and animist beliefs, Islam, and Judaism. Throughout their existence, civilizations were formed and thrived. Black people lived in harmony except for the occasional conflicts that normally occurred between differing peoples. If it had not been for the intervention of Whites into their affairs, Black people would not have suffered from the atrocities that were committed against them. They would have prospered, and not had to experience the dysfunction that resulted from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and colonialism.

White people entered Africa with a Bible in one hand, and a gun in the other. Religion was used to disarm Blacks, and make them easier to conquer. Although the White people who arrived in Africa were Christians, they were also hypocrites who did not live their lives according to the peaceful teachings of Jesus. Rather than viewing the Blacks of Africa as their brothers, they saw the darker people as their subhuman enemy. Such distorted thinking resulted in them enslaving Black people, and raping the African continent of its mineral wealth. Their actions were partaken upon to increase the prosperity of Whites, and Christianity was used to accomplish that goal.

Even though Black people had been freed from slavery in the year 1865, they were never able to achieve equality in America. The reason for that was because non-Black people continued to govern the country, and most often refused to remedy the lingering effects of slavery. After slavery had ended, segregation and the racist actions of White people ensured that the majority of Blacks would not attain controlling positions in American society. Those actions also made it more difficult for successful Black people to triumph than it would have been for equally qualified White people to succeed.

All of the actions that had been used in America to repress Black people had resulted in Blacks becoming ignorant of who they were. They were no longer aware of their history, spirituality, nor

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societal structure and practices. Their ignorance was reinforced by the tyrannical conditions under which they were forced to live.

During slavery, Christianity was used by White slave-owners to make Black slaves behave properly. They were taught that it was the desire of the White man's God – who was therefore their God – for them to live in servitude to White people. They were also told that they would be rewarded with eternal happiness in a place called heaven after they died. Throughout slavery and the period after it had ended, Black Christian preachers were always considered the leaders of the Black community by Whites. White people felt more comfortable speaking to the Black people who had adopted the system of beliefs that they had sanctioned, even if others were viewed as legitimate leaders by the masses of Black people.

Nearly 150 years after Black Americans were supposedly freed from physical slavery, the majority of them remained mentally enslaved. Those Blacks remained faithful adherents of the White man's religion of Christianity, because they feared liberation. They had been taught that if they questioned Christianity, they would be sent to a mythical and miserable place called hell. That prospect scared them into being obedient to the religion and dictates of White people.

Fear kept Black people from rejecting the enslaving religion of Christianity. It also prevented them from searching for and embracing the truth about their people. The traditional values of Black people had been forgotten, and replaced with the treasures of White America. In that environment money became the true God. And the anointed Black Christian preacher was able to manipulate his poor Black flock into subsidizing his life of luxury.

Church of the Redeemer was founded by Joseph Barnett, and later operated by his son Damian. Joseph was a righteous man who felt that he had been ordained by his God to spread the Gospels amongst the Black population of Charlotte, North Carolina. After discussing his mission with his wife Margaret, he began preaching to a small gathering of friends in his apartment. It did not take long

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for other people to hear about an honest man of their Lord being sent to save the Black community in Charlotte. And with his newfound notoriety, Joseph and Margaret's small apartment could no longer accommodate Joseph's growing congregation.

To expand his ministry, Joseph enlisted the services of his friend Paul Johnson. Paul handled the publicity for the church, and secured donations to support its expansion. With Paul's help, Joseph was able to collect enough money through tithing to secure and refurbish a dilapidated building in Charlotte's inner-city of poor Blacks.

With their new building, Church of the Redeemer's congregation quickly grew to include several hundred members. That enabled its revenue to increase, so that the monies could be used to support its ministry. The ability of the church to raise money enabled Joseph to create social programs that were used to alleviate the pain and suffering within the Black community. He was motivated by a strong desire to fight poverty, promote education, and encourage the goodwill between people that Jesus had preached.

Unlike many pompous, arrogant Black preachers, Joseph was not an exclusionary minister. He did not behave condescendingly towards people who were less fortunate than he was, or who lived a life that he disagreed with. Everyone was welcome to attend Church of the Redeemer, including criminals, thieves, pimps and whores. Joseph felt that it was only through the salvation of those people that the uplifting of the Black race could be accomplished.

Many White people felt that Joseph was their enemy because of the love that he had for his people. They unreasonably feared that successful and unified Blacks posed a threat to them. That belief had been consistently perpetuated throughout American history. White people knew that members of their race had committed horrible acts against non-White people. They feared that their actions would be avenged, even though the majority of Black Americans had no desire to harm them. And Joseph was one of those Blacks.

When Whites were not involved in an activity that was organized by Black people, they placed a negative connotation on what Blacks were doing. That often resulted in them wanting to destroy Black organizations, and the people who were involved

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in those groups. Despite the danger that reality posed to Joseph's life, he continued to help his people. He knew that if strong Blacks feared helping other Blacks by fighting against the problems that had been created by racism, the Black community would continue to deteriorate. The result would be Blacks forever remaining in bondage.

Damian had been the pastor of Church of the Redeemer for nearly 10 years. He assumed leadership of the church upon the Sunday night murder of his father. Joseph was killed by his White political enemies, who were angered by the fact that a fearless Black man refused to be controlled by them, as he represented his people.

The day before Joseph's murder, he had met with Henry Lincoln, a White city councilman. Lincoln wanted to appease his White constituents by persuading Joseph to be less vigorous in speaking publicly about civil rights issues, and to be less vigilant in unifying local Blacks. They felt that it was tarnishing the reputation of the City of Charlotte. As an incentive to get Joseph to soften his rhetoric, Lincoln offered Joseph government funding for his ministry. Joseph refused because he considered the offer of public monies as a way for White people in government to monitor his activities, with their goal being to destroy all that he had created. The city council was insulted by Joseph's refusal, and Lincoln told the minister that his refusal was a mistake that he would regret. Joseph then left the councilman's office.

On the night of Joseph's murder, he preached a sermon about honesty. He told his congregation that honest people would make many enemies in life, but despite being disliked, they should never feel compelled to compromise their integrity. The loss of integrity was the reason for the decay of society, and for the worship of false idols, such as money.

While still standing before his congregation, Joseph thanked Margaret for supporting him steadfastly throughout the years. She had provided him with the emotional support that he needed to cope with the problems that he had encountered, and given him a stable

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home in which they raised their family. Joseph also thanked Paul for his loyalty and dedication to the ministry. The pastor said that without Paul's help, Church of the Redeemer would not have been as successful as it had been. It would also not have been able to rescue as many people as it had from lives of despair.

Feeling content, Joseph kissed his wife good-bye. Since he planned on staying later than everyone, Damian told him that he would drive his mother home. Joseph then exited the building, feeling proud of all that he had accomplished in his life.

As Joseph drove home, he noticed that he was being followed. He made several precautionary turns to see if the car behind him would go away, but he was unable to abandon his pursuer. The preacher then approached an intersection, where he was forced to stop for a red light. Sensing the impending danger, he began to pray to his God for his safety. But that God was unable to protect him.

At that moment, another car stopped perpendicular to his. Two White males exited the vehicle with guns drawn, as two more exited the car behind him. The preacher began to panic as the men assumed positions at the front and driver's side of his car. All four gunmen then began firing into the vehicle, riddling Joseph's body and car with bullets, thereby inflicting mortal wounds upon him. In order to ensure that their mission was complete, one of the White men approached Joseph's dead body and fired two additional bullets into his skull. Joseph's mutilated body remained in the car as all four of his assailants entered their vehicles, and drove off into the night.

When Damian found out that his father had been murdered, he knew the reason for the execution. His father was killed because he was a strong Black man who had been unafraid to speak the truth to people in influential positions – a class of people that included racist Whites who worked within the government. The pain that Damian experienced emboldened him to continue his father's mission to rescue Black people, despite the danger. And his resolve was strengthened when his mother died three years later from cancer, after having been a cigarette smoker for many years. He felt that he was obligated to continue the work that his parents had begun, particularly because their untimely deaths prevented them from accomplishing everything that they had envisioned.

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After assuming leadership of Church of the Redeemer, Damian greatly expanded the congregation. The rapid growth of the church was due to Damian's flamboyant style of preaching, where he used his charisma to entertain his congregation. Because of the church's success, Damian became one of the most prominent Black Christian preachers in America. But without the help of Paul, along with Damian's closest friend James Edwards, Church of the Redeemer would not have expanded in the manner that it had. As a team, they worked together to increase the size of the church. Additionally, Paul was Damian's godfather. That created a special bond between them, which was a motivating factor in Paul's desire to help Damian.

Church of the Redeemer needed a larger building to accommodate its growth. Through extensive tithing and donations over a 5-year period, a multi-million dollar house of worship was built. The new building included a large sanctuary that was able to seat its congregation; on-stage facilities for the band and choir; a broadcast studio for its telecasts; and a bookstore that sold copies of Damian's sermons, along with other Christian material. Additionally, it was a modern structure with elegant trappings, which was aesthetically pleasing, and helped attract new members to the church.

The main reason for the phenomenal growth of the ministry was because of Joseph and Damian's differing styles of leadership. Joseph did not feel the need to compete with other ministers. Therefore he lacked the desire to have a megachurch with thousands of members. He was also unwilling to enter into partnerships with the government, because he felt that it would eventually corrupt the institution that he created.

In contrast, his son Damian was part of a new breed of Christian preacher. They did not want to just preach, but also to entertain their audiences. Those preachers hollered, sang and danced, and they considered the size of their congregation as something to be proud of. As such, they believed that material gain was something that Christians should strive for.

The appreciation for money caused Damian to develop different priorities than his father had. Joseph used tithes and personal donations to focus on helping people who truly wanted to improve

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their lives. However, Damian abandoned his father's abhorrence for government funding. He accepted public monies, which was used to expand social programs. That resulted in politicians having leverage over his activities. Whenever they wanted him to behave in a particular manner, they could threaten to stop supporting the activities of the church monetarily.

Since the death of his father, the congregation of Church of the Redeemer had grown to include many noteworthy new members, including Black politicians, famous athletes, and business leaders. The desire to hear Damian preach led to the church's services being broadcast on television, radio, and the Internet. That allowed people throughout the world to witness Damian deliver his colorful sermons, in addition to the average of 6,000 members who regularly attended Sunday services.

Chapter 2

Summers in Charlotte were extremely hot, humid, and sticky. Anyone who wanted to feel comfortable, and not sweat constantly, needed to wear light, heavily vented clothing. Garments such as those would allow air to circulate around the body, and keep its temperature low. But Damian Barnett was unconcerned with being comfortable – he wanted to look cool. The flamboyant megachurch pastor felt that because of his position, he was obligated to wear flashy attire.

Damian's charisma played a large role in attracting new members to Church of the Redeemer. People liked the way that he used dramatic gestures to emphasize the things he said, and they were impressed by his ability to articulate the Bible in ways that they could relate to their own lives. And even though he was married, his tall, physically fit physique, and handsome looks, attracted many female fans.

The pastor's engaging personality attracted a following of insecure people. People with low self-esteem wanted him to be their leader because he possessed qualities that they lacked. As such, they were not bothered by Damian's extravagant lifestyle, nor the audaciousness of the church's facilities. To them, a minister of their Lord was entitled to expensive worldly possessions. Damian's excesses were therefore befitting his position as the leader of a megachurch.

In addition to his flashy clothes, Damian drove around in a shiny red Cadillac. His appearance was therefore more akin to that of a pimp than a Christian minister. On a summer day, as he entered the building that housed his church, he wore a bright red suit with a crispy white shirt; a colorful tie that matched the handkerchief in his breast pocket; and red dress shoes that were made of alligator skin. Some denominations of Christianity would consider the manner in which he chose to dress himself as being sinful, but he was unconcerned with their opinions.

Upon arriving at the suite that housed his office, he was met

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at the entrance by his secretary, Tamika Richardson. Tamika had been Damian's secretary for several years. She had worked for him in some capacity ever since they first met, nearly 10 years prior. Although she was employed by the church, she never felt the need to become a member. One of the main reasons for that was because, among other things, she had experienced so much misery in her life that she questioned the veracity of the Christian faith. The secretary believed that if Jesus truly loved her, then he would have protected her from the trauma that she had endured.

Up to the point at which she met Damian, Tamika had been a prostitute who was suffering under the dictatorship of an abusive pimp. At the time of their meeting, she was in her 20s and had a 3-year-old son. Her child was living with her mother, due to her inability to provide a suitable home in which to raise him.

One Friday night after leaving his office at the church, Damian had been driving home intending to take his family out to the movies. But his plans were derailed when he witnessed an unusual occurrence. As he happened to drive through an area that was known for prostitution, he saw a man beating a woman. The man repeatedly, and brutally, punched the woman in her face, and was attempting to rip the clothes off of her body. Seeing no police around to intercede, and nobody else willing to intervene, Damian decided that as a Christian, he was obligated to help the woman.

As he stopped and parked his car near the curb where the attack was occurring, Damian properly surmised that the quarrel involved a prostitute and her pimp. Respectable women were unlikely to be outside at night in that area wearing the extremely tight, very short dress that the man was attempting to relieve Tamika of. And the flashy, colorful, dressy clothes that the man was wearing contrasted with the dreariness of the decaying, dilapidated buildings that surrounded them. His attire provided evidence of his chosen occupation.

The pimp was named "Sweetie," due to his ability to sweet talk any woman into believing his lies. He was a charming individual

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who weak-minded, insecure women were attracted to. His charisma resulted in him having five prostitutes who rented their bodies for sex. They risked contracting diseases, being harmed physically, and being sent to jail, so that they could provide him with money to live on.

Upon seeing Damian exit his car, Sweetie chose to confront the stranger. It appeared that he was willing to attack Damian using the same manner of violence that he had used against Tamika. “You want some nigga?” Sweetie asked Damian while reaching for his waistband, as if he was carrying a gun.

“No Brother,” Damian said as he approached Sweetie with his arms slightly spread. He wanted to convey the subtle message that he was not a threat. “I’m a minister of the Lord, and I can’t allow you to destroy the Sister like that.”

“What the fuck you gon’ do ’bout it?”

“We can pray together, and I’ll help you change your life,” Damian said, hoping that he could salvage Sweetie’s soul.

At that moment, Tamika stood behind Sweetie. Her left eye was severely swollen from the punches Sweetie had delivered; her upper-lip was split open and bleeding from other blows that she had received; and her torso was bare, due to Sweetie having ripped apart the upper portion of her dress. Tamika’s face showed that she was a scared young woman who hoped that the stranger would truly help her, yet she appeared to be skeptical. People in that area did not get involved in the affairs of others, but she was mistaken.

“I like my life. I don’t need your help you ho ass nigga. And you betta get the fuck outta hea befo’ I beat yo ass too,” the pimp told the preacher.

“I won’t leave here without her. She’s hurt, and she needs medical attention. I don’t want to fight you. You can hurt me if you want, but you’ll have to answer to a higher power on judgment day.”

“Yea, whateva nigga. I’ve heard that bullshit befo’. And she don’t want you noway.”

“Let her answer that.” Damian then looked at Tamika, and spoke directly to her. “Would you like me to take you to the hospital?”

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Without saying anything, Tamika nodded her head affirmatively, which angered Sweetie.

“Fuck you then bitch,” Sweetie said as he forcefully pushed Tamika towards Damian. “You probably just wanna fuck her anyway, fake ass preacher.”

“Let’s go. I’ll take you to the hospital.” Damian removed his suit jacket and helped Tamika into it, so that she would be clothed. He then opened the passenger side door for her, and helped her into his car, before he entered the car and drove away.

“What’s your name?” Damian asked after he and his guest were safely away from the abusive pimp.

“Chocolate,” the woman responded softly.

“What’s your real name?”

“Tamika.”

“My name is Damian. I’m the pastor of Church of the Redeemer. I’d like to help you turn your life around, because you’re on a one-way path to death and destruction. Jesus loves you, and there’s nothing he won’t do for you if you ask for his help.”

“I want help; I can’t live like this.”

“Who was that guy?” Damian asked, knowing he was her pimp. He asked because he did not want to offend her by presuming that she was a prostitute.

“Sweetie, my daddy.”

“Daddy?” Referring to that monster as her daddy confused Damian.

“Yeah.”

“Is he your biological father, or stepfather?”

“No.”

“Then why do you call him your daddy?”

“That’s what we call our pimp.”

“Who is we?” Damian wanted to see if Tamika would admit to being a prostitute. Damian felt that in order for someone to accept help and truly seek to change their life, they needed to admit to having a problem. If she did not admit to being a prostitute, and acknowledge that she could be doing something more productive with her life, then she would likely relapse into living a destructive life.

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“Prostitutes.”

“He’s not your daddy! The only father that you have is Jesus Christ. He is the Father of all mankind.” Damian continued. “Can I help you find a real job, so that you can be proud of the life you live?”

“Yes,” Tamika replied. She then looked down and began crying, ashamed at how she had been living, and wanting her circumstances to improve.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Damian then grabbed her hand, recited a prayer, and cancelled his family outing to the movies. Since he was confident that he would be able to salvage Tamika’s wayward soul, he did not need a movie to pacify him.

For the several months following that night, Damian allowed Tamika to live with him and his family. He also placed her in a church group that taught her job skills, and helped her become a productive citizen. It had always been her desire to regain custody of her son. She was able to accomplish that, when her mother allowed her to live with her and her child. Prior to that, Tamika would only visit her mother’s house when she was fearful of something that she had encountered while living her worldly life. But that life had ended with Damian’s intervention into her affairs.

“Congressman Crook’s chief of staff just called and said they’d be here in 15 minutes,” Tamika said as Damian entered his office.

“Alright. Let me know when they get here,” the pastor of Church of the Redeemer responded.

Damian’s office was large and ornate. His desk was composed of expensive ebony wood. It was situated in front of a matching cabinet on which pictures of his family rested. And between the desk and the cabinet was a large, comfortable leather chair.

In front of the desk were two more, less expensive leather chairs. They were used to seat Damian’s guests. Several feet behind them was a small conference table, which rested below a large-screen, plasma TV. Several more leather chairs surrounded the table.

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After entering his office, Damian sat in his chair. His closest friend and head deacon, James Edwards, was already seated in one of the chairs that was across from him. James had been awaiting Damian's arrival.

"What's up?" Damian greeted his oldest friend. He and James had grown up together on the same street, attended the same schools, and Damian considered James a trusted advisor. The relationship between them was akin to that of true brotherhood. James's parents were also among the first people to join his father's church. The Barnett and Edwards families had been close friends longer than Damian and James had been living.

"Nothing man, just waiting for you and the politicians to arrive," James responded.

"Do I detect some cynicism?"

"Of course! The congressman is just another in a long line of White politicians who come to talk at Black churches when they want to get elected, telling us what we want to hear. Then they ignore us after we vote them into office." James had always been interested in history. By using the past to predict the future, he felt confident that very few – if any – White politicians were sincere about helping Blacks. He also knew that Damian was more trusting of people than he should be. The deacon feared that the lack of skepticism that Damian had for others would lead to his demise.

"Have faith; if not in Crook, then in God. The Lord will protect us, and ensure that our interests are served."

"Amen." James felt guilty for lacking faith in his God.

"Let's watch TV while we wait," Damian said as he reached for the remote and turned on the television.

At that time of day, only the news and soap operas were on. And rather than watch depressing news stories that showcased everything negative in society, Damian decided to watch a soap opera. He and James would continue that activity until Crook arrived with his chief of staff.

After several minutes of watching a popular soap opera, Damian realized that such programs were not any less negative than the news. Instead of focusing on the positive things about American life, soap operas portrayed Americans as treacherous sex addicts with

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a lust for money. Considering that there were few Black characters in soap operas and other television programs, Damian wondered what White adults taught their children. Whatever guidance they provided had resulted in them deflecting negativity away from them, and onto Black people. That form of denial led to Blacks being viewed as the scourge of the earth.

The majority of the characters in soap operas were White people who were involved in numerous acts of deceit, treachery, and thievery. Their deceptive acts were committed against people that they knew, and cared about. And because of this, one would think that viewers of soap operas would be afraid to interact with Whites, because they feared being mistreated and abused by them. But instead of that fear being prevalent in America, many Whites and immigrants feared Black people. That reality existed despite most crimes being committed by White people; most welfare recipients being Whites, and White people having committed many atrocities in order to conquer the landmass referred to as America.

Damian's realizations caused him to marvel at how White people had successfully demonized Blacks. They had been able to transfer the fear that their atrocious acts had engendered onto a race of people who where guiltless. And others were so foolish that they aspired to be like White people, which resulted in them being disrespectful towards Blacks. Their behavior was a misguided attempt at seeking the favor of the people whose actions they were mimicking.

The pastor knew that his friend James did not believe the hatred and mistrust of Black people by non-Blacks was coincidental. He felt that it had been part of the wicked plan of white supremacists. Congressman Crook wanted to speak to Church of the Redeemer because he said that he wanted to improve the lives of Black people, and help them overcome the negativity that they had been stigmatized with. It was Damian's hope that the congressman was sincere, and that James's concerns would not be confirmed.

"The congressman's here," Tamika said over the intercom.

"Here I come," Damian responded. He then turned off the television, leaving James at his desk, and entered the lobby area to his office. It was there that he met Congressman Roland Crook, and

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his chief of staff Thomas Washington.

Congressman Roland Crook had been a public servant for nearly 35 years. He had begun his career with the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office after he graduated from law school. As a prosecutor, he developed a reputation for vigorously pursuing criminals, which included cases that often resulted in the imprisonment of poor Blacks. During that period he was considered an opportunist, who would knowingly violate the law in order to win a conviction, even if it meant that the rights of a Black person would be violated. That led to him being labeled a racist by many Black people.

After 15 years of working as a prosecutor, Crook entered politics. Upon becoming an elected representative, he spent 10 years as a state assemblyman before becoming a congressman, which he was for another 10 years. Since he did not consider the office of United States Congressman prestigious enough to pacify his ego, he entered the election to become the governor of North Carolina.

The congressman's chief of staff was Thomas Washington. Washington was a tall biracial man of about Damian's age. He had been working in politics since graduating from law school. Now that he had become the chief of staff for a prominent politician, he took comfort in knowing that his career prospects in politics were extremely promising.

Washington was the middle child of a Black man and a White woman, who raised their children in an affluent White neighborhood. In that environment, the mulatto children were protected from the social ills that plagued poor Black neighborhoods. Their seclusion also kept them from experiencing the rich Black culture that had been stolen and imitated by non-Blacks throughout the world.

The behaviors and mode of thought of the chief of staff were more similar to that of ignorant White people, than to those of knowledgeable Blacks. That reality would surprise Washington's White friends. White people often requested information about Black people from those who were biracial, and from Blacks who disliked being Black. But the insight that they received was often inaccurate, because their teachers were illegitimate. Washington's loyalty was ultimately to White people, and that played a role in his

career progression.

“It’s nice to meet you Mr. Congressman,” Damian said as he shook Congressman Crook’s hand. “This is my head deacon, James Edwards.”

“I’m delighted to meet you sir,” Crook said as he shook James’s hand. He then looked at Damian again. “And you know Thomas Washington, my chief of staff.”

“Yes I do.” Damian and Washington then shook hands. “Let’s step into my office and talk.” Damian then led his guests into his office, and seated them as Tamika closed the door. James sat in a chair that had been placed beside Damian’s desk in preparation for the meeting. “So you’d like to speak to my congregation?”

“Yes,” Crook began. “You lead one of the largest churches in North Carolina, and I’d like the opportunity to speak to a distinguished group of politically conscious African-Americans, and let them know how I plan to help them.”

“Specifically, what are your plans?” Damian asked sternly. The reason for his candor was because his father had taught him that he should always be skeptical of politicians. He had been instructed to always speak sternly to them, making it obvious that they needed to respect him, and would have to work to gain his support. That would help prevent them from taking his assistance for granted.

“The congressman plans to increase the amount of jobs for African-Americans, and fight against racial profiling,” Washington interjected. He was protective of his boss, and he did not want Crook to make promises that he would be unable to fulfill.

“I’d like the congressman to answer that,” Damian said with a smile on his face. The preacher wanted to hear how the congressman truly felt, rather than being told things that would increase Crook’s standing in political polls.

“As Mr. Washington said, I want to decrease the unemployment rate for African-Americans by creating more jobs. I plan on fighting racial profiling by collecting data on police encounters involving African-Americans, so the results can be analyzed and used to find solutions to discriminatory police practices.”

At that moment, Washington became visibly nervous. He feared the congressman had begun to say things that depended upon

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the support of other politicians. Some of those elected representatives were against fighting racism. Washington's anxiety was noticed by James, who wondered whose side Washington was on: Black or White; right or wrong.

"I'm pleased to hear that," Damian said calmly. "What about state funding for programs we use in the church to help people?" Now that Crook had spoken about issues that Blacks sought assistance with, Damian wanted to know whether the Congressman was willing to prove his support, by providing funding.

"It's good that you brought that up. I believe the government has done a bad job of running social intervention programs, and I think that regular people should be entrusted to handle those things. Upon being elected, I'll give ministers like yourself who run organizations that help African-Americans, all the money you need to do your thing. You'll get all the resources you need to fight the problems that plague your communities."

"Good, good," Damian said, nodding his head. "Mr. Congressman, I think that you're sincere, and I'm sure that my congregation will agree with me. And now that we've covered the issues, I'd like to discuss the specifics of your visit, if you don't mind."

"That's fine."

"Congressman Crook has a busy schedule, so we'd like to know exactly when he'll be allowed to speak. We would like to arrive immediately before he goes on," Washington said. His interjection was unsatisfactory to James, which earned the intervention of the man who oversaw protocol for Church of the Redeemer.

"With all due respect, if the congressman is to speak at our church, he has to arrive at the beginning of the service. If he wants to leave after that, he can," James said emphatically.

"But the congressman has a busy schedule, and Church of the Redeemer isn't the only church that we'll be visiting." Thomas was slightly irritated by James's stubbornness. He considered James's demands to be an affront to the prestige of his position as Crook's chief of staff.

"I'll reiterate. If the Congressman wants to speak at our church, he has to arrive at the beginning of the service. If he came just

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to speak, and didn't spend any other time with us, our congregation would be insulted, and probably wouldn't vote for him. If you'd like, he can speak immediately after we conclude our praises at the beginning of the service, and then leave. But regardless of when he speaks, he has to arrive at the beginning of the service!" James then looked directly at Crook, wanting to convey the message that his chief of staff would not dictate how Church of the Redeemer was operated.

"That's fine," Crook said as he motioned his hand towards Washington, who looked as if he would raise another objection. "I'd be honored to praise the Lord with you; I'll just leave immediately after I speak. It won't be a problem for us to arrive at the beginning of the service."

"Will you be contacting the media?" James asked Washington.

"Yes. Do you have any specific instructions pertaining to their appearance?" Washington asked with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"Just that the cameras be located in the back of the church. Reporters will also be given some space in the back—our congregation always comes first!" James said. Damian and Congressman Crook then looked at each other, amused at the interaction between their assistants.

"Well, it looks like everything is settled," Damian said smiling. To conclude the meeting, he stood. Everyone else followed his lead by standing in unison, before shaking hands. "It was nice meeting you, and we look forward to your visit on Sunday."

"It's been an honor to meet you, Reverend Barnett, and we'll be here," Crook replied. Damian then escorted his guests out of his office, before returning to speak to James.

"So, what did you think of them?" Damian asked James.

"He's just another politician to me. The things he said were good, but we'll have to wait and see if he's a man of his word." James continued. "I didn't like his half-breed chief of staff though." That comment made Damian chuckle.

"What's your problem with biracial people?" Damian asked while smiling.

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“It’s not like I have a problem with half-breeds because they’re mixed. I just don’t like them acting Black, calling us ‘Brother’ and ‘Sister’ and talking badly about White people. Then, when they have something to gain by being half-White, which they claim to dislike, they’ll abandon us and be White again. If they want to be Black, they need to always be with us, and not abandon us when it’s convenient for them.

“The reason I don’t like Thomas Washington is because he’s arrogant, and thinks he’s better than us, as if we’re just some stupid, ghetto Negroes who are beneath him.”

“I sensed that too. I didn’t like him trying to tell us how to operate our church, when they’ll be our guests. The thing about people like that is the Lord may allow them to rise, but when the Lord says it’s time for them to experience hardship, Mr. Washington will have to deal with the same people he felt superior to.”

“Amen.”

“And the interesting thing is, when he falls, and White folks abandon him, Blacks will be waiting to support him!”

Chapter 3

Damian arrived home from his meeting with Crook in the early evening. His house was located in the suburbs of Charlotte, where most of his neighbors were White. It was a large, modern, expensive home that appeared to be beyond the means of a preacher. The home contained seven bedrooms, six bathrooms, and was furnished with leather furniture that was situated on expensive carpet; the floors were composed of marble.

The garage was large enough to hold three cars, which the Barnetts used to house Damian's shiny red Cadillac DTS, and his wife's Mercedes Benz. In the front and back of the house were expansive, grass-strewn yards, and the backyard contained a large swimming pool.

Although Damian's preaching had made him a recognized figure amongst Blacks throughout the United States, he was relatively unknown to many White people. Some of those Whites were Damian's neighbors, and their ignorance of him, along with their racist notions, caused them to assume that he was either an athlete or drug dealer. Beliefs such as those were commonly directed towards Blacks, because many White people believed that Black people were too stupid to attain material wealth without resorting to illegal methods.

Damian was aware that some of his neighbors thought lowly of him. And because he was a Christian, he felt obligated to pray for them. He also considered their opinions humorous, since insurance payouts from the deaths of his parents had provided him with the capital to purchase his home. That fact provided another example of how Whites negatively stereotyped Blacks for engaging in the same activities that they participated in.

"Daddy," Rashonda said as she ran to the door to greet her father upon his entry into their home.

"How was your day today?" Damian asked as he bent down to hug his 9-year-old daughter. He also kissed her on her forehead.

"Fine."

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“Where’s your mother?”

“In her room,” Rashonda replied before returning to her seat in front of the television. She continued to watch cartoons.

After leaving his daughter, Damian walked towards his bedroom. He decided to speak to his son later, since Antoine was a teenager who had probably isolated himself in his bedroom. As Antoine neared adulthood he was becoming more independent, and less interested in socializing with his family.

Damian entered his own bedroom and was greeted by his beautiful wife, whom he loved dearly.

“How was your meeting?” Jehyra asked before hugging her husband and kissing him on the lips. Damian relished her expressions of love and warmth. “Is the congressman still going to speak at Sunday’s service?”

“Yes. He seems like a nice guy, but James doesn’t trust him.”

“You should be careful because you know what happened to your father when he got involved with the wrong politician,” Jehyra said. She distrusted White people, and was concerned for her husband’s safety.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be alright. All politicians aren’t racist,” Damian replied, wanting to reassure his beloved wife.

“All politicians may not be racists, but you should watch White politicians closely. They care more about doing what rich Whites and corporations want them to do, than making decisions that’ll help poor Blacks.”

“Have faith. The Lord will make sure that everything turns out alright.” Damian hoped that his response would prevent an argument from erupting between him and his wife. But despite that desire, he was unable to resist the temptation to tease Jehyra. She was an Atheist, which was something that had always bothered him. That caused him to make a sarcastic remark. “Maybe if you prayed sometimes, you wouldn’t worry so much.”

“Whatever. When we die, everyone winds up in the same place: the cemetery!”

Jehyra’s parents were also Atheists, and they had raised her to believe that no omnipotent God existed. They also informed

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her that the existence of that mythical God had never been proven, and that people believed in him because they lacked the inner-strength needed to deal with the rigors of life. Her parents were also intellectuals who valued learning. And instead of giving her books that were written by popular White writers, they provided her with material that had been authored by Black scholars.

The books that Jehyra received from her parents enlightened her about the great history of Blacks. They spoke about how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were based upon beliefs that had been stolen from Africa by Whites, and mixed with European mysticism. The combination of Black truth and White myth resulted in the formation of the religions that had become the most pervasive belief systems throughout the world. Those faiths, particularly Christianity, were also responsible for the atrocities that were committed by Whites throughout Africa, Asia, and the Americas. That history caused Jehyra to despise Christianity. It developed and strengthened her resolve to awaken the brainwashed Black people who remained slaves under the white supremacist, Christian belief system.

Dinner at the Barnett home was served with everyone seated at the table as a family. That was done intentionally as a means of preserving their unity. It had become common for American families to eat their meals separately, which might have been an indirect cause of the eroding social norms. Damian's father had always mandated that everyone sit at the table while eating, and that nobody leave until everyone was finished with their meal. The dining room table had been a place where important family matters were discussed, and Damian wanted to pass that tradition along to his children.

"Dinner's ready," Jehyra shouted from the kitchen. Upon hearing her, everyone walked towards the dining room. They then seated themselves, and waited for Damian to bless the food.

"Lord, we thank you for the food we're about to eat, for the nourishment of our bodies, and for blessing us with a loving family that provides us comfort, amen."

"Amen," Antoine and Rashonda said in unison. Jehyra

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remained silent because she did not believe in the power of prayer.

The meal consisted of macaroni and cheese, baked chicken, broccoli, and apple juice. Dishes were passed around the table, as everyone filled their plates with the food that they considered the most desirable.

Nearly 10 minutes after everyone had begun eating, Antoine finished his meal. He was slim – as was his father – and he usually did not eat a lot. Damian was the second member of the family to finish his dinner, and he decided to converse with his son

“How was your day son?” Damian asked.

“Alright.”

“Is that it, just alright?” The preacher was tiring of the sarcasm that plagued American teenagers.

“What am I supposed to say?” Antoine asked annoyed.

“I don’t know. Maybe you could say ‘Hi dad. Today I went to school and we learned about the Roman Empire. How was your day?’” Damian replied playfully.

“Well, today was just another day. We didn’t learn anything special, just more about White history, and hard math that I’ll probably never use. What did you do today?”

“First off, you shouldn’t tire of math because you’ll use math as an adult more than you think. And to answer your question about my day, I met with Congressman Crook.”

Rashonda, who had been listening to the conversation, had a question of her own to ask. “Was he tall?”

The question elicited a chuckle from both Damian and Jehyra. “No he wasn’t sweetie. He wasn’t short, but he wasn’t as tall as he looks on TV. He’s a little shorter than me.” Satisfied with the response, Rashonda allowed her father and brother to continue their conversation.

“Do you think that he’ll be better for us than other White politicians who make promises but forget about us when they get elected?” Although he was still in his teens, Antoine was skeptical of the sincerity of White politicians. He was bitter that a White politician had deprived him of spending time with his grandfather, who had died when he was a toddler.

“I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt, but I expect him to

deliver on his promises!”

“And regardless of whether he’ll help us, Blacks should never be dependant upon Whites. We should be entirely self-sufficient, making us capable of determining our own future,” Jehyra told her son. She wanted to convey the message that Blacks will be forever in bondage if they wait for White people to help them improve their lives.

“Indeed,” Damian said disingenuously. He attempted to give the impression that he agreed with Jehyra. But everyone at the table knew that Damian was the only one who felt that Blacks needed assistance from Whites in order to be successful.

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Chapter 4

On Sundays, the schedule for the Barnett Family was filled from sunrise to sunset. The entire family awoke before sunrise, and prepared themselves for the Sunday morning church service. Damian and his family usually arrived at Church of the Redeemer approximately an hour before service began. That afforded Damian enough time to prepare for his sermon, and deal with any other issues, should they arise.

As Damian tended to his duties, Jehyra would ensure that Rashonda attended Sunday school, and that Antoine went to interact with his teenage peers in the Youth Ministry. The morning service for adults would then proceed. After it ended, Damian and Jehyra mingled with lingering members of the congregation before retrieving Antoine and Rashonda. They would then have a Sunday afternoon dinner at an upscale restaurant.

After dinner, the Barnetts returned home to relax for several hours, before returning to church for the evening service. The evening service was more subdued than the morning service, and church members usually dressed casually. That resulted in the increased attendance of younger, worldlier Blacks, who felt uncomfortable attending the morning service. The reason for their discomfort was because of the way that others dressed.

Church members dressed exquisitely: men wore their finest suits, dressiest shoes, and most colorful ties with matching handkerchiefs; women wore their most expensive dresses, and took pride in wearing the largest, most unique looking hats that they owned. Even though Church of the Redeemer had no official dress code, Damian suspected that congregants monitored the attire of the Barnett Family for guidance on how they should dress. Joseph Barnett wore suits for every service, from the inception of the church until the day of his murder. And under his leadership, every church member also dressed nicely for every service.

Upon Damian becoming pastor of Church of the Redeemer, he continued to dress nicely during the morning service, but chose

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to dress casually during the evening service. He then noticed the congregation following his lead. The change in dress annoyed some church elders, who considered it disrespectful to dress casually during a religious service. That is the reason why some attendees preferred the evening service to the morning service. Additionally, the fact that some people felt uncomfortable attending the morning service disappointed Damian.

He wanted everyone to feel welcome in his church, regardless of how they dressed. The reason for that was because he believed that Christians should focus solely on praising the Lord, rather than being concerned with dressing nicely. It was also silly to expect everyone to dress as if they were affluent, since the church was in the ghetto, and many people were unable to afford nice clothes.

The rituals of the Barnett Family on Sunday involved a compromise, due to differing beliefs between the various relatives. Since Jehyra was an Atheist who felt that the belief in God was a sign of mental illness; and that Christianity's contradictions made it a false teaching; Antoine resented being forced to attend church. He and his mother thought alike in many areas. And while he was willing to attend church because she did, he did not want Christianity to be forced upon him. Rashonda's mind had not yet developed to the point of her being able to decide what she wanted to follow, therefore she did whatever she thought would make her parents happy.

With Damian – a preacher – being the only member of the Barnett Family who was a dedicated Christian, everyone else was forced to play a role to support him. Jehyra, Antoine, and Rashonda acted in ways that would give the appearance that their family was god-fearing, and loved the Lord of Christianity. But in actuality, they were members of a secular family that was bonded together by love for one another, absent the influence of any deity.

The ride to church was an extension of the familial atmosphere that was present when the Barnetts ate dinner. As they traveled to church, they discussed events that were occurring in their lives, and

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what expectations they had for the upcoming week. Damian had a loving family, to whom he was extremely devoted. He was grateful to his Lord for having been blessed with such a family, where all members enjoyed the company of one another.

As Damian drove into the parking lot of Church of the Redeemer, he saw that news vans were already present, even though the sun had just begun to rise. The presence of White politicians at Black churches had become common during political campaigns. Their visits attracted a lot of media attention. White politicians used the media to promote themselves as being born-again Christians who were friendly to Black people. Damian considered that hypocritical because many of those politicians lived decadent lives, with a lot of their decisions being unholy.

Another reason White politicians visited Black churches, was because they mistakenly believed that the majority of Blacks who voted attended church. That resulted in many non-religious Black voters being ignored. Damian embraced the visit despite being aware of that reality, because he hoped that Crook was sincere in his commitment to helping Blacks. He hoped that he and Crook could form a partnership that would be beneficial to Church of the Redeemer, and to the Black community.

“Reverend Barnett, does Congressman Crook’s visit mean that you’re endorsing him for governor?” A reporter asked Damian as he walked to the entrance of the church with his family.

“I think the congressman is sincere in his desire to help African-Americans, and we’re giving him the opportunity to share his views with us.”

“Is that an endorsement?” The reporter was now attempting to pressure Damian into saying something that would make a news headline.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves! Now, if you’ll excuse us, I have to prepare for the service,” Damian said, ending the interrogation before the reporter distorted his responses. He did not want anything he said to be misconstrued.

After passing the reporters, the Barnett family entered the church, and prepared for the morning service.

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“As your governor, I plan on giving you hope so that you can achieve the American dream,” Crook said. He was standing at the podium addressing the congregation of Church of the Redeemer. Damian was seated behind him, watching him speak.

“Amen,” the congregation responded.

“I will eliminate the bigotry of low expectations, so that you can compete equally with Whites in school and employment, and not be permanently relegated to second-class citizenship. Life for African-Americans will not improve until we, the elected representatives, begin to treat you as equals, and eliminate discrimination in all its forms.” Upon hearing that, some church members began to stand and shout in agreement, as others allowed their arms to sway in the air.

On either side of Damian sat Paul and James. They presented a contrast between hope and cynicism, with Damian being the unifying force between the two. Paul smiled and nodded his head as Crook spoke, while James sat quietly with an expressionless look on his face.

Paul was hopeful that the congressman would help Blacks, and finally give them the equality they had been seeking in America for several hundred years. However, James was skeptical. He felt the congressman only wanted the votes of Black people, and would do nothing to improve their lives. Damian knew that his closest friends viewed Crook differently. But he shared Paul’s optimism because he knew that if elected, Crook could create new opportunities for the ministries of the church.

When White politicians spoke about eliminating discrimination and the bigotry of low expectations, they usually meant that they would eliminate affirmative action programs. Their verbiage was evidence of the racist inclinations of many White people. Although affirmative action programs had been created to remedy the lingering effects of slavery, the distorted White mind saw it as a form of reverse discrimination, which it was not. James was sure that Crook was subtly expressing his disapproval of affirmative action, but he seemed alone in his observation. Damian

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and the congregation seemed oblivious to any disingenuous ideas the congressman may have had, which disappointed him.

As James questioned the honesty of the congressman, Damian scanned the crowd. He was pleased by the smiles that he saw on the faces of his congregants. During his exploration, he noticed a woman sitting near the front who he had never seen before. She was seated next to Kimberly Davis, who Damian knew casually, which led him to presume that she was a guest of Kimberly's.

The woman's physical appearance contrasted with the congregation of dark-skinned southern Blacks. She possessed extremely light skin, which was practically white; her eyes were green; and the bone structure of her face contained the features of White people, which Damian found attractive.

Her hair was long and curly which, in conjunction with her complexion, made it obvious that she was no more than half-Black. That was an unusual occurrence among the members of the congregation. Their southern roots and socioeconomic status hindered their contact with Whites, which effectively prevented their joint procreation. Because of that, the appearance of the woman was exotic. Damian planned to introduce himself to her after the service ended, and welcome her to Church of the Redeemer.

"The government can't be allowed to terrorize you, and I will put an end to racial profiling," Crook said. He pounded his fist on the podium for emphasis, which attracted widespread applause. "Violating the rights of people based on their skin color is a crime, and I will make sure that whoever stereotypes African-Americans as criminals, and targets them based on their race, will be forced to account for their actions." That comment drew a standing ovation. As the members of the church stood and applauded, Crook saw Washington signal that it was time for them to leave.

"In closing, I will be an advocate for you. I will fight for your rights and ensure that you aren't discriminated against, and I ask for your vote on Election Day."

When Crook finished speaking, Damian stood and walked to the podium. "Everyone, give our next governor a round of applause." The congregation gave the congressman another standing ovation, which increased in volume when Damian hugged Crook. The media

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began taking pictures, and the flashes from their cameras illuminated the stage.

“Thank you all.” Crook then walked down the steps of the stage, and rejoined his chief of staff. He waved at the members of Church of the Redeemer before exiting the building.

After pausing for several seconds after Crook had exited the church, Damian spoke from the podium. “I believe that Congressman Crook is an honest man. The Lord has given him insight in how to effectively govern the people, and God has brought him before us for a reason – that reason is to gain our support so that he’ll become the next governor of North Carolina.”

“Amen.”

“Our votes won’t be in vain if we use them to support Congressman Roland Crook. God wouldn’t make fools of us by allowing us to be deceived by a politician,” Damian said. Some of his congregants chuckled upon hearing his comment.

Now that the politician’s visit had ended, the church service proceeded as normal. Damian ordered his congregation to open their Bibles for the day’s sermon, and he began to preach.

“Lord, we thank you for the presence of an honest statesman, and we know that you’ll help him win this election for governor. We pray that you’ll guide him in his decisions so that everyone’s lives can be improved. Even though slavery has ended and we’re free, Black people still need assistance in overcoming the obstacles that racism has placed before us. We pray that Congressman Crook is all that we hope he’ll be, and will ensure that society treats us as equals.”

“Amen,” the congregation said in unison.

“God bless you, and I’ll see you tonight,” Damian said, ending the church service.

The congregation proceeded to exit as Damian began to look for the woman who had captivated his interest as Crook spoke. He noticed her as she walked slowly towards one of the rear exits of the sanctuary with Kimberly. The pastor felt that moment was the

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proper time to make her acquaintance.

As Damian maneuvered through the congregation, he exchanged hugs, kisses, and handshakes with church members. His presence in the sanctuary after the service was not unusual. It was welcomed by many of his female congregants, who relished the opportunity to speak to their handsome, charismatic minister. But Damian was not deterred by their interest; he did not stop walking until he reached Kimberly and her guest.

“Ms. Davis, did you enjoy today’s service?” Damian asked upon reaching Kimberly. “What did you think of Crook?”

“Hi Pastor Damian.” Kimberly was pleased that Damian had taken the time to speak to her. “I enjoyed listening to the congressman speak. I just hope that he’s sincere about helping us.”

“I’m sure he is.” Throughout the exchange, Kimberly’s visitor had been pleasant, but had not shown any particular interest in Damian. The preacher glanced at the visitor, and upon seeing that, Kimberly decided to introduce the unknown woman to her pastor.

“Pastor Damian, this is my cousin Ashley Davis. Ashley, this is our pastor, the Reverend Damian Barnett.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Damian said as he shook Ashley’s hand. He was enchanted by her beauty.

“I’m pleased to meet you.” Ashley considered Damian attractive – finding him tall, dark, and handsome – but she knew that he was married. She also wondered whether he was usually that friendly with strangers, or if he had taken a particular interest in her.

“My cousin just moved here from New York. She’s a social worker, and I was thinking that she could get involved in one of our ministries,” Kimberly told Damian. She wanted to get Ashley involved in church activities, so that her mind would be distracted. It might help her forget about the problems that her cousin had recently endured.

“That’s a good idea. There can never be too many volunteers to do the Lord’s work,” Damian replied. He then addressed Ashley. “Give me your contact information, and I’ll have my secretary call you to arrange a meeting. I can tell you about some of the things we do, and how we can best use your skills.”

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“I’d like that,” Ashley said. She then wrote down her phone number on a piece of paper that she retrieved from her purse, and she handed the paper to Damian.

“I’ll see you soon, and welcome to Church of the Redeemer.”

“Thank you.”

Damian then walked back towards the podium, as Ashley and Kimberly exited the sanctuary of the church.

Ashley had just moved to Charlotte, and she was happy to be quickly building a social network.

Kimberly and Ashley Davis were both born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and had always been extremely close. Their level of closeness caused them to behave like sisters, even though Ashley was several years younger than Kimberly. Kimberly’s father was the older brother of Ashley’s mother. The reason for the bond between the women was due to Ashley lacking any siblings, and Kimberly being the youngest, and only female child of her parents.

Ashley was the product of an interracial sexual affair between a Black woman named Stephanie Davis, and a White man, Wilford Turner. At the time that Ashley was conceived, her mother was a young, teenage maid to the Turner Family. They were prominent White liberals in Charlotte. The family had been involved in the civil rights movement, and had fought for equality for Blacks.

Throughout her employment, Stephanie had been pursued by Wilford, who was the 26-year-old son of the Turners. Due to her position as a servant, Stephanie assumed that her employment would be terminated if she did not succumb to Wilford’s flirtations. Because of her fear, a sexual relationship began that culminated with her pregnancy.

Upon hearing that Wilford had impregnated a Black woman, the Turners fired Stephanie, and forbade their son from seeing her. They felt that even though they had supported civil rights for Black Americans, Blacks and Whites should not intermix sexually. Wilford’s parents were incensed that their son had become involved

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sexually with a Black woman. Additionally, they had no desire to be involved in the life of their biracial grandchild.

After giving birth to Ashley, Stephanie sought to escape the stigma and embarrassment of having an illegitimate child. To accomplish that, she and Ashley moved to New York City, where they stayed with relatives. It was in that diverse city that Ashley was raised, although she was exposed to her southern roots through regular visits to Charlotte.

In New York City, Ashley was raised in the ghetto. Living amongst the poor forced her to experience many of the social ills that existed in America's less prosperous areas. And rather than succumb to the negative aspects of her environment, she succeeded. She maintained good grades in school, never became pregnant, nor did she get involved in criminal activity.

Upon graduating from high school Ashley went to college, where she excelled and received a bachelor's degree in the social sciences. After graduation she worked for several years as a social worker. During that period she fell in love with a man named Michael Jenkins, with whom she had expected to spend the rest of her life in matrimony.

Michael was tall, dark, and handsome. Because of her affinity for dark-skinned Black men, Ashley was immediately attracted to him. Michael treated her kindly, issued compliments that she wanted to hear, and seemed to value her for her inner qualities. She welcomed that attention after having been pursued throughout her life by men who only wanted to have sex with her. Those men were infatuated with her because of the physical features of White people that she possessed. Michael's interest in her soul caused her to think that he was unlike other men, and their courtship resulted in their engagement. But that ended when she discovered that her opinions about Michael had been wrong.

Being a social worker was exasperating. The reason for that was because ensuring the safety of vulnerable children exposed Ashley to the horrible things that many adults do to children. And one evening after having endured a stressful day of performing her duties, Ashley arrived home to find her fiancé in bed with another woman. They were fully engaged in sexual intercourse when she

discovered them.

Rather than get violent as many women would have, Ashley calmly walked away from the apartment that she shared with Michael, as tears filled her eyes. She was deeply hurt, but she fought her inner inclinations in order to maintain her composure. Her mind was filled with feelings of anger and sadness. Ashley wondered why the man she loved would betray a woman who had always been good to him.

Upon discovering the affair, Ashley immediately moved out of the apartment and began living with her mother. That occurred over the objections of Michael, who said that he was sorry for his indiscretion. He said that he had never before been intimate with another woman during their relationship, and he promised that he would never cheat on her again. But Ashley refused to believe Michael, since his affair explained why he had been working unusual amounts of overtime, and would be unreachable for hours.

Wanting to eliminate the pain that her daughter was experiencing – Ashley was clearly heartbroken and bitter over the breakup – Stephanie suggested that Ashley move to Charlotte. That would allow her to escape her trauma, and join many Blacks who were leaving the northern and western areas of the United States, in order to reconnect with their southern roots. After hearing about her cousin's plight, Kimberly offered to share her home with Ashley. Knowing that her emotionally damaged cousin needed some spiritual uplifting, Kimberly told Ashley about her handsome, charismatic preacher. She hoped that Church of the Redeemer would fill the void that existed in Ashley's heart.

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Chapter 5

While Jehyra lay in the bed as her husband prepared to join her, she remembered seeing him speaking to a female at the morning service. She had never seen the woman before. “Who was that woman with Kimberly Davis that you were talking to earlier?”

“Her cousin, Ashley Davis,” Damian responded. “She’s a social worker who just moved here from New York, and she’s looking to join the church.”

“I saw you exchange numbers with her. What was that about?” Jehyra asked suspiciously.

“Since she’s a social worker, I was thinking she could serve the Lord and the community, by getting involved in one of our ministries. Are you jealous?” Damian was amused by his wife’s questions.

“I don’t have anything to be jealous of. I was just curious. I trust you, but I don’t trust other women. It isn’t like other women haven’t tried to get with you before.”

Jehyra had become accustomed to church-going, Christian women, flirting with her husband. The audacity of those women was one of the reasons that she despised Christianity. Those active seductresses were hypocrites because they pursued her husband, knowing that he was married. They participated in that activity even though they would chastise others for engaging in acts that they felt would send non-believers to the mythical place called ‘hell.’

The Atheist wife of the preacher did not believe that hypocrisy was limited to those women. She felt that it was representative of an attitude that was prevalent throughout American Christianity: the commission of ‘sins’ by Christians who knew they were engaging in activities that were forbidden by the laws of Christianity. Said people would pray for forgiveness so that they would not go to hell, before committing the act again.

Such behavior represented a lack of discipline that Jehyra felt was laughable. But it proved to her that she was more righteous than most Christians. The reason for that was because she lived her

life according to the edicts of Christianity, as Christians failed to. That caused her to resent the way that Atheists were considered evil, even though they were often more honorable than many Christians. And despite self-righteous, mean-spirited women, disrespecting her by trying to steal her husband, she took comfort in knowing that Damian had always been faithful to her.

“I would never betray you. I love you, and that’s all that matters!” Damian said. At that moment, he was expressing his true feelings for Jehyra, who he was extremely devoted to. He then kissed his wife on her lips, and crawled into bed beside her.

“I love you too.” As Jehyra and Damian lay side-by-side facing each other, they stared into each others eyes affectionately. They then realized that they were not ready to go to sleep. The sexual tension between the couple had risen, and it needed to be released.

Damian lightly brushed his hand across Jehyra’s head, which elicited a smile and a sigh from his wife. He then reached down towards her thighs, and lifted her nightgown and removed her panties. The light of the bedroom shone down on the smooth, dark skin that covered Jehyra’s physically fit, and well-maintained body.

As Damian admired the naked form of his lover, his excitement began to increase. Many men dreamed about having a woman who was as beautiful as Jehyra. But they often settled for women who they were not entirely attracted to. That caused them to cheat on their wives in order to fulfill the lustful desire they had for someone they were not with. Damian was happy that he had been able to find his ideal woman, and he planned to express his pleasure in the manner that he felt his God had proscribed.

After removing Jehyra’s garments, Damian was assisted in removing his own clothes. Once he and Jehyra were naked, he began to straddle his wife. The preacher connected his mouth with that of Jehyra’s, exchanging warm kisses with her as he inserted his penis into her vagina. They then romanced each other in a passionate session of sexual intercourse.

Once they had finished making love, Damian and Jehyra took a shower together. After that, they returned to their bed and prepared to sleep. As Jehyra awaited her trip into unconsciousness, she smiled with contentment, happy that she had a loving husband who was

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able to provide for her and their two children. Her happiness was rooted in knowing that many other Black women lacked the family and wealth that she had. And she was grateful that she had married a good man and not been forced to experience the stress that was associated with being a single mother. But what she did not know was that the dynamics within her family would soon change. Events would occur that would forever change her life, and the lives of her family members.