

CHAPTER 1

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Mom was leaning over the sink, her hands submerged in soapy water. “Maxine, what are you talking about?”

I tightened my grip on the cordless phone. “You know exactly what I’m talking about!”

Her head snapped up. She spun around so fast, suds flew from her fingertips and splashed against my face. “How dare you use that tone of voice with—”

“My tone of voice?” I tried to stop myself from shaking. I didn’t know whether to laugh or scream. Instead, I hurled the phone against the wall and watched its plastic pieces scatter across the linoleum.

“Girl, what the hell is your problem?” Mom screamed as she charged toward me.

“Why didn’t you tell me my father was still alive?”

She froze. “What—what are you talking about?”

“Who do you think that last call was from?”

Wrinkles shot into my mother’s mahogany-colored skin. Suddenly she looked a lot older than her forty-two years. “He called?”

“I see you’re not denying it now.” I turned and began to march out.

“Maxine Edrice Phillips, don’t even *think* about walking out of this room.”

I jerked to a stop. As much as I hated to admit it, Mom’s voice always had a certain power over me. It was like a leash, yanking me back to reality.

“Let me explain,” she said, in a softer voice.

I crossed my arms. “Yeah Mom, please explain how in eighteen years, you couldn’t find the time to tell me he was alive.”

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“I was only trying to protect you.”

“Protect me? Don’t I have the right to know who my father is?”

She frowned. “Don’t raise your voice at me.”

“The hell with my voice—”

Her hand was across my face before I could finish my statement. The slap was cold and quick, and so strong I almost lost my balance.

A quiet iciness settled around us. Mom stared at me, in the loudest silence I had ever experienced. Her hand lingered in the air as if she was going to hit me again. Her eyes were so intense, I couldn’t bear to look at them.

For the first time ever, I felt uncomfortable around my mother. Of course, maybe she wasn’t my mother after all. My mother would never lie to me or slap me.

I couldn’t take the silence any longer. I stormed toward the door.

“Where are you going?” she yelled after me.

I didn’t bother to turn around. “Out!”

A cool summer breeze struck my hot cheek as I headed toward my magic carpet on wheels, a lime green hatchback Hyundai. I started the car and tried to ignore Mom’s gaze as she stood in the doorway.

I could still feel her eyes on me, as I pulled out of the driveway and sped down the street.



Deke’s mother opened the door and stared at me. I hated to imagine how I looked. I could feel my cherry-brown, frizzled hair pointing in all directions. In my too-old, too-baggy sweats, I probably looked like Medusa in an aerobics video.

“Maxine, come in,” she said as she ushered me inside. Suitcases and bags were scattered across the den. Deke’s stepfather was in the process of trying to force one of the suitcases to close. He looked up as I entered the room.

“Maxine,” he said. “How much do you weigh?”

“What?”

“Never mind, just come over here and sit on this suitcase.”

Great—not only was I ugly and crazy, but I was also fat.

“Jason, will you leave Maxine alone? I’m sure she didn’t come here to help you pack.” Deke’s mother wrapped her arm around my shoulder and gave me a small squeeze. “Deke is in his room.”

I left Mr. Ashland struggling with the zipper and walked down the hallway to Deke’s room. I could hear him mumbling from behind the door. I tried to press down my hair before knocking.

Immediately the talking stopped and he opened the door. Deke’s frame took up most of the doorway. His dark, chocolate skin was like the photo negative of my own khaki-toned complexion. Deke always joked about me being the only girl that reminded him of a pair of pants.

A seemingly concerned frown came to his face. He pressed his lips together and looked me up and down, like he was checking to make sure I was okay. His gaze hovered at my face, on my cheek.

I shrugged.

He nodded as if he understood everything, and let me into the room.

I pushed the pillows off his bed and collapsed onto the marshmallow mattress. “You won’t believe the day I’ve had.”

He held his finger up. “Hold on for a second,” he said. He picked up the phone receiver lying on his desk. “Yvonne, can I call you back?” A frown came to his face. “Yes, it’s her.” Another pause. “What do you mean, don’t bother calling you back?” By now, I could hear yelling on the other end of the phone. “Of course you’re as important to me as—Hello?”

Deke sighed and hung up the phone. “What were you saying?”

“Listen, I can come back later—”

“She’ll get over it,” he said as he dropped beside me on the bed. “Tell me what happened.”

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Good old Deke. Just sitting next to him made me feel calmer. He was the closest thing I had to a best friend; probably the closest thing I had to a friend at all.

It had been almost thirteen years since I first met Deke. Mom and I had recently moved from New York to Columbia, South Carolina. I remembered being dragged to my new kindergarten class in an ugly pink dress I didn't want to wear. As the teacher announced my name and as I walked to my seat, all the other kids laughed and pointed at me. I was pale and awkward, with a funny-shaped head, rust-colored hair, and that abominable pink dress didn't help. Later that day, I saw Deke reading a book in the corner. He looked over at me and frowned as if he didn't know what I was. Finally he came over and handed me a book. We had been inseparable ever since.

I looked at Deke. "My father is alive."

His mouth dropped open. At least I wasn't the only one surprised. "Are you sure?"

I nodded.

"What do you know about him?"

"Nothing much," I said. "Just that he and Mom split up when I was about a year old."

Deke became quiet, and I knew he was thinking about his father. Not Jason Ashland, the man who raised him, but his biological father—the man who ran out on Deke and his mother years ago.

"I wish I knew why he left," I said. "I mean, I'm sure there's a good reason." I ignored the grimace on Deke's face. "Anyway, he's pretty much stayed out of our lives until now. He would sometimes call every few years, but that was about it. But a few weeks ago, he called Mom and said that he wanted to meet me."

"After all this time?"

I nodded. "Mom didn't think it was a good idea, so he decided to call me himself. Unfortunately, I hung up on him before we could really talk about anything."

"Why did you hang up on him?"

"I was nervous. I didn't know what to say, what to think, or what to do. I didn't even believe he was telling the truth until I confronted Mom."

Deke paced the small room. "You know, your mother called for you. She told me about the...altercation y'all had." He picked up the phone. "You have to call her."

"I don't *have* to do anything." I fought the temptation to rub my tender cheek. "Are your parents ready for their trip?" I asked.

He nodded. "Beginning tomorrow night, I'll have two whole weeks to myself."

"You mean, you and Yvonne will have two whole weeks to yourselves," I said with a smirk.

"Nope. I'm taking a break from everyone, including her."

I smiled. For any ordinary eighteen-year-old, two weeks without any parental supervision would be an everyday prom night, without the dinner and fancy dresses. But knowing Deke, he would spend the entire time watching cartoons and eating cereal.

"Stop trying to change the subject." He still had the phone in his hand. "Are you going to talk to your mother?"

"She slapped me, Deke. Am I supposed to forget that?"

He sighed, and his voice grew quiet. "Maybe you deserved it."

I jumped from the bed and got in his face. "I know you didn't say that."

He took a step back. "Maxine, she's your mother. She deserves a certain amount of respect."

I pouted, but I knew he was right. I had never cursed at my mother before. I never had any reason to, until today.

Wait a minute. She was the one who hit me. Why did I feel guilty? I finally rubbed my cheek. She must have knocked something loose with that slap.

Again he extended the phone to me. "Call her."

I shook my head. What did he want me to do, thank her for slapping me?

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“Didn’t you and Yvonne break up a couple of weeks ago?” I glanced around the room for pictures of her, but there were none. There was one of Deke and his family, and one of me. That was it.

“I see there’s no point in arguing with you.” Deke dropped the phone back on his desk. “Yeah, we broke up, but we got back together.”

“You know what your problem is?” I didn’t wait for a response. “You need to have sex.”

Deke frowned. “You know I can’t do that.”

“Why not? It’s not hard to do. Just get naked and—”

“I don’t need lessons.” He picked up the two pillows I had pushed to the floor and returned them to the bed. “Anyway, at least I have a girlfriend. I don’t see any guys beating down your door.”

Good point.

“No guy in his right mind would ask me out. I mean, look at me. I’m a skinny black girl with gray eyes and hair that has a mind of its own.”

My skin tone was what some people called “high yellow.” My hair had been a bane my entire life, always pointing every which way except the way I wanted. It constantly changed colors during the year, from an almost respectable reddish-brown hue in the winter to an embarrassing strawberry-red, burnt-orange, cherry-brown mix in the summer. Deke would try to make me feel better by describing me as “exotic.” I just considered myself a freak of nature.

“Why are you so hard on yourself?” Deke asked. “You’re very pretty.”

Yeah, easy for him to say. Deke had the physique of an overpaid pro-football player. Half the girls in town had a crush on him. The other half was either blind, stupid, or insane. I included myself in the insane category.

“So when are you going to talk to your mother?”

I smirked. “The day after never?”

“You have to go home eventually.”

I ran my fingers through Deke's thick, curly hair and leaned close to his ear. "I figured you and I would just run off, shack up, and have a couple of illegitimate children."

Deke crossed his arms.

"Or, maybe not."



It was almost midnight by the time I returned home. I gently unlocked the back door and crept into the house. I hoped Mom was asleep, because the last thing I needed was to get into another argument with her. I was doing fine until the floor squeaked underneath me.

"Maxine, is that you?"

Mom appeared from her room and walked down the hallway. Katherine Phillips was, by far, the most beautiful woman I knew. Where I stood awkwardly, she stood gracefully. Where I stuttered, she sang. Her eyes were a soft hazel, not a hard gray, and her jet black hair looked like it was spun of silk. Her smooth, brown skin shimmered in the artificial light of the kitchen.

"I see you're finally home," she said. "I was worried about you."

"I'll bet."

Mom seemed to ignore my comment. She pulled out a chair from the table and sat. "The way you ran out of the house, I—"

"Don't you understand? I don't want to talk to you."

Mom's face became long. "You probably think I'm the most evil person in the world, but believe me when I say my intentions were good."

"So lying is okay now. I knew those Ten Commandments weren't all they were cracked up to be."

"Maxine, you can't possibly understand—"

"No, I understand. You were so wrapped up in your feelings, you couldn't bother to tell me that my father was alive and that he wanted

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to meet me,” I said. “And when I did ask about him, you slapped me. I think that’s about all I can stomach for tonight.”

Before she could respond, I ran into my room and slammed the door shut. In my mind, I could still see Mom sitting at the table with that same expression on her face. I thought yelling at her would make me feel better. I was mistaken.

I looked in the mirror. There was still the slightest hint of redness to my face. One of the downfalls of having light skin was that it bruised extremely easily.

I heard a chair scrape along the kitchen floor and footsteps travel down the hallway. They stopped in front of my room.

I walked back to my door and placed my trembling hand on the knob. I was unsure whether I should open it or leave it closed. I listened. Finally, the footsteps moved away. After a few more moments of silence, I opened the door. All that remained in the hallway was a small note. It had Jack Phillips’s name on it. And his number.

As I picked the note up and walked back to my bed, I couldn’t help staring at the faded slip of paper. After taking a few deep breaths, I picked up the phone. I hurriedly dialed the number, before I lost my nerve.

The phone rang.

What if I’m making a mistake? He could be asleep. Or what if he’s married and I wake up his wife? Or what if—

“Hello, this is Jack.”

I paused, trying to force the words out of my mouth.

“Hello?” the voice said on the other end of the phone. “Is anyone there?”

“Um...hi,” I stammered. “This is Maxine Phillips, your daughter.”