

## PRELUDE

Once upon a time after a long and nefarious civil war was fought that ended in 1964, there survived a land where a gargantuan Golden Dome sat at its center. Its settlers were frequent visitors of the huge, beautiful park where forbidden lovers openly danced and children played with joy. Exotic birds of prey roamed free. Hawks soared through the air while Falcons glided on the surface. Brave gladiators defended their title as the toughest adversaries while Bulldogs protected the terrain with a rich history of total domination. It was called *The Land of Opportunity* and a new movement had begun.

Hidden in the outskirts lived a Nubian child who dreamed of greatness. She was the hardest working girl in school and knew one day she would triumph amongst the elite. All of the other children were jealous. They knew she was deserving of greatness so they tried every distraction they could to convince her she was not worthy of such – scandalizing her name, exposing youthful indiscretions, and even unfairly politicizing her world views. But the Nubian child's thinking stood out from the rest, and therefore, she often stood alone. She paid no attention to such antagonism and just kept working harder and harder.

Then came the day she waited all her life for. She went to the ruler's palace with a satchel full of accolades. With confidence in her stride and a huge smile on her face, she stood in front of the ruler and his servants and boldly stated, "I have come for my opportunity."

The ruler looked over her proof as his servants held their breaths and patiently waited for him to respond. He scanned document after document taking notice of how she excelled to the top of her class in everything. Her academic scores were that of a genius, she set new standards with regards to community service, and her refined stance and beauty could only be matched by that of angels. He then raised his head staring intently at the Nubian child for what seemed like an eternity.

Giving her a glimmer of hope, the ruler began to smile. It soon turned into roaring laughter. He pierced into the Nubian child's eyes and lashed out, "How dare you try to enter my kingdom with your dreams of grandeur! How dare you come to my face and ask me to grant you opportunity! Have you not looked into a mirror all your life? Do you not see that I am of pure white flesh while your flesh is muddied like dirt?"

He continued to taunt, "You think because we allowed that one muddied King to excel we will allow the same for you? Why he was just a fluke!" His eyes pierced even deeper as a more disdainful smirk appeared on his face, "And as for you...go back to the jungle where you belong."

And they all laughed and laughed as the ruler raised his scepter and pointed it in the direction of the exit. Huge golden doors opened to display the most spectacular view of the land. The Nubian child looked across its rich acreage knowing she was unfairly denied the opportunity to frolic amongst the elite. She lowered her head in anguish.

Suddenly, after a burst of crackling thunder, a dark cloud appeared. It hung seemingly over only the Nubian child's head. Rain drops the size of fairy pebbles could not compare to the tears drops that tumbled down her sculptured cheeks. As she turned around in despair, she slowly walked away and proclaimed to herself, "*Vengeance shall be mine...and vengeance shall be sweet*".

And as told by the conservators of the land, this is her story.

## CHAPTER 1 – CORPORATE CREED

*Just like all great and powerful women before me,  
I shall rise above these peasants to take my rightful post.  
And from whence this throne, I shall rule them all.*

Gladys St. Clair would flip in her grave if she'd seen her only child in that drab green uniform working for chump change...though it probably would've been for the best. Since passing away several years ago, she's done flipped so many times that this one may have turned her right-side-up again. But not *her* baby, not the daughter she groomed into Charlotte, North Carolina's Miss Pre-Teen before she even needed a training bra. Not the same little princess she taught to always stay focused, be driven, and expect greatness. But it was what it was - the ending of another tedious shift.

Essence stormed into the massive, yet vacant break room to refill her water bottle for the trip home and was stopped dead in her tracks. Her nose held her hostage as she inhaled that familiar scent. She knew Wella was downstairs in the lobby waiting for her, but was no longer on a quest to be on time. Instead, she leaned on the counter with her back arched up against it, her hands grabbing tightly to its edge.

With her lips pouted and slightly moist after a seductive lick, she closed her eyes and took her time as she breathed in...and breathed out. In...and out. In...held it a bit longer...then out. Her firm double d's keeping the same rhythm as they towered above her tight abs.

Of all the men at the firm only one could've left that enticing scent so it meant one thing, Dex Dunnivant must've been in the break room shortly before her arrival.

Still lost in his aura, "A penny for your thoughts," the sexy voice startled her eyes open and back to reality. But was this still part of the fantasy or was the six-foot-five Adonis with the hazel eyes, smooth brown skin, and a beautiful smile that highlighted his one dimple actually standing less than two feet in front of her?

Eight months she worked at the prestigious financial services firm of Duke & Bowers LLP and not once has she seen, or ever heard of, him conversing with a normal. As he towered over Essence reaching behind her to grab a paper towel from the awkwardly-placed dispenser, she could feel his breath. Ohhhh yeaaaah, it was the real thing alright.

Essence let go of the counter and used her left hand to press up against her chest as if that would actually stop her heart from racing. Her voice cracked as she blurted, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't think anyone was still here. I was just getting..." She nervously motions towards the water cooler, "...just getting some water." For the first time in a long time, Essence was actually flustered in the presence of a man.

His exotic eyes met hers once he finished wiping his hands. "No need to apologize." Then he held one of them out to greet her. It was soft and masculine at the same time. "By the way, I'm Dex Dunnivant." his voice somehow matching his seductive scent.

Essence wanted to give him more than just a cordial response. She wanted to show her true appreciation and taste him right there on the spot, but it would have to wait. She wasn't ready to show *the* Dex Dunnivant what she was made of.

She knew what men like him wanted. Every time you seen his fine-ass he was in the face of one of the elite. Essence had much more work to do and as her now deceased mother always said, "You have

to become the person who you want to be with wants to be with.” It took a while for that aphorism to make sense.

With her lady parts still tingling from the encounter, Essence had to take her time making her way towards the elevator. As she walked down the stylish hallway filled with urbane portraits and exotic sculptures elegantly displayed, she smiled girlishly. Essence was always smiling. Another aphorism mother proclaimed long ago was “People would much rather interact with you when you’re wearing a smile as opposed to wearing a frown. Frowns drained the energy of those around you...etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.” and she wouldn’t get the promotions she was angling for if she was thought wicked.

She kept the good vibes going as one of the elite accompanied her for the ride down from the 48<sup>th</sup> floor. Only he didn’t share her enthusiasm. He wouldn’t even fix those pale, thin lips to acknowledge her presence. “*Screw you too*,” she laughed to herself not allowing him to steal her glory.

The elevator doors opened. To no surprise the elite didn’t allow one of the normals to exit the elevator first even though she was a lady. Essence then wished she could be there the moment his mutated heart stopped beating while he clutched his chest grasping for life. It was bound to happen to his old ass much sooner than later.

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Wella stood near the security desk playfully tapping her wrist as if she was sporting a watch. Funny thing is two weeks ago, she was. But just like all other nice things Wella’s possessed over the years, they seem to disappear following her husband’s weekend excursions to the Wind Creek Casino in Montgomery, Alabama.

When Essence got nearer to Wella she could tell there was yet another black eye under all that foundation that also seems to coincide with the weekend excursions, but she didn’t trip. Hell, if Wella didn’t trip off the fact she was getting her ass kicked every so often, then why should she? They just made their daily voyage to the MARTA station.

“What’s with the big ole grin? I see you sharing the elevator with one of the elite but I know he didn’t put it there,” Wella managed to playfully ask even though her nerves were on fire believing she was running late.

Essence strutted out the large, glass doors and bounced down the stairs, “Girl, it’s the last week of the semester. It’s summer time. What’s not to smile about?”

"I don't know why you even wasting your time trying to go to school. With this fucked up economy and the corporate elite against you, that degree ain't go do shit for you."

“Not this again, Wella. And by the way, very lady like,” Essence harshly whispers while turning around and scanning their immediate surroundings making sure no one else was privy to Wella’s embarrassing outburst. Especially that of foreigners who were just a hop, skip, and jump away busying themselves in local tourist spots. As a world traveler, Essence knew how foreigners view Americans, especially black Americans, and didn’t appreciate Wella acting such the stereotype.

Essence gave Wella every opportunity to think beyond her menial world, but it was always to no avail so she just continues with her testimony, “...but you heard what Kevin said this morning. The firm is growing and if we do what we need to do, we can grow with them. Besides, what about Ciara Brown? She’s black and a recent college graduate who got a high paying job at the firm.”

“What you smoking? Do you even know who her mother is?” Wella rolls her eyes then quickly lowers her head when she realizes she was putting her blackened eye on display. “She’s only a state representative who just happened to be a partner here before she got into politics. Besides, rumor has it she’s fuckin one of the executive staff in HR.”

Essence couldn’t believe she was still surrounded daily by people who had no idea who she was or what she knew as she thought to herself, *Hell, if only this trick knew my family blood line*. But there was no way Essence was about to let the firm lush in on her secrets. Besides, it was exhilarating living a double life though it was about to come to a long-anticipated end. She brushed off Wella’s words with what she thought was the final comment on the issue, “Well, I’m not worried. Those bleeding heart liberals running the firm love proving just how diverse the firm is. It’ll be a walk in the park.”

As they continue their stroll down Peachtree Street, Wella nonchalantly pulls a dark, leathery flask out, openly takes a gulp then puts it back in her purse. Apparently her rant wasn’t quite over, “Girl let me tell you...that firm has been,” using her forefingers as invisible quotes, “‘growing’ since the beginning of time. They talk that shit every Staff Appreciation Day. I been there eight years and all those black folks are still doing what they was doing when they first got there – kissing whitey ass for a two percent annual pay raise. Just take that funky-ass gift they call a token of appreciation and go home,” Wella sarcastically spewed.

To really bring her point home, she took the t-shirt the firm gifted out to its staff that morning and politely dropped it on top of an already overstuffed trash can outside the MARTA Peachtree Center station.

Not really paying attention to the standard venom spewing from Wella’s mouth Essence eyes widened, “Wella! No you did not just pull a flask out of your purse. Have you lost your mind?!”

“Shit, it’s after five. What I do after five ain’t nobody’s fucking business but mine.” Wella was already starting to slur so she must’ve gotten her party started before they hooked up. On several occasions Essence busted Wella taking a sip or two behind the tall, stacked shelves in the Records Room where they both worked so she knew it was plausible.

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Once inside the busy MARTA station, they rounded the first flight of stairs with no problem, but that was only about fifteen steps. After turning the corner and being faced with the escalator that had to be the length of about five steep stories, Essence warned Wella to take her time. She couldn’t bear to witness another episode like before.

Weeks prior, trying to catch an approaching train knowing another one was five minutes down the tracks, Wella wasn’t using all the senses God had given her. Sometimes Essence wondered if God had given her any sense at all. Before Wella got bold with the flask, she would carry her drink around in a water bottle or a convenient store fountain cup.

One day she was enjoying her preferred potion – usually Vodka and cranberry juice though most times she’d skip the cranberry juice altogether. She lost her balance with less than a quarter of the escalator to go. Wella stumbled all the way to the bottom. When she got there, her jacket was trapped in the grip of the escalator almost being sucked in by its powerful force, but her drink was still in her hand right-side-up – didn’t spill an ounce. An act worthy of applause if it weren’t so sad.

But Wella needed to be at the College Park station before or exactly 5:30 p.m. to meet Eric or he would’ve straight up left her. Actually, if he wasn’t already there waiting, it meant he wouldn’t be there at all regardless of what time she arrived.

Fortunately for the past semester, it was also Essence's destination so Wella was never left stranded – just embarrassed every now and then. It was why Wella clung to Essence. Her last stooge got hip to the game and removed herself from Wella's drama. You just never knew when Eric was in one of his moods and his strike zone had no boundaries.

But Essence was nobody's dummy. She always found it entertaining how hood rats thought they were more clever than the rest of the world. Those who just happen to make more money than them, are more educated, and live ten times better lives – but yeah, they knew something the rest of the world didn't know that makes them so much more acute.

Essence knew from the moment Wella approached her trying to pretend like she was interested in a business degree that she was desperately after something more sinister. It took a mere two seconds to figure that out. Not only was Essence insulted that Wella would dare get her anywhere near that kind of drama, thinking she was going to get away with it unscathed gave her more reason to turn the tables.

Essence was using Wella for something far more valuable than a ride home once every few months. Why else would she been seen in the company of such an uncouth foul mouth if she wasn't getting something out of it? Essence was studying Wella the entire semester and thanks to her ghetto-ass, she received a perfect 100 on her sociology term paper she titled "Nature versus Nurturing: Which Is the Missing Link in Lower Class African-Americans?"

Now that she was done with her, Essence didn't nix words a few days prior when she informed Wella her routine would be changing. Negative distractions were the one thing Essence learned to not tolerate. Besides, summertime called for Wednesday Wind Down at Centennial Park or going out for drinks with other young, rich, beautiful singles. Not babysitting some drunk who didn't have the good sense to rid herself of a run-of-the-mill abuser.

After Essence made her announcement Wella got quiet. The distant look in her eyes gave her thoughts away. Meaning it was once again time to get her hustle on. She had already started befriending Cathy from the newspaper stand in the lobby a couple months ago. Now it was just a matter of putting her plan into motion. But it was cool. Wella was a born hustler. By the time she'd be done she'd have Cathy thinking it was all her idea to be her standby.

Wella sensed early on that Essence wouldn't last. Perhaps it was the way Essence turned her down for every invitation to hang out. Essence never gave a simple "No, thank you." It was always something more boogie like slinging back what Wella still couldn't tell whether or not was a weave because it was so fuckin' fierce, then giving her a look like "oh no she didn't" just before responding with a sneering, "I don't think so. I got things to do." Not too big a deal. Wella thought she was a bitch all along.

It was no secret to Essence as well. Everybody in her department was hating on her. What they didn't know was how much Essence loved haters. Not just loved...but loooved haters! She embraced them. Essence knew haters were good for at least two things. Number one, they hate because they know you're on to something and simply can't handle how far that's going to take you. Number two, haters spend so much time focusing on hating that they closed doors for themselves. And the more doors they closed for themselves, the more doors that were opened for Essence to step in without so much as a knock.

Finally reaching the bottom of the escalator, Essence took out her Burberry wallet to let it hover over the surface of the card detector. She was careful not to allow it or her perfectly manicured hand to touch any of its features. MARTA stations didn't fit the opulent surroundings she was used to.

Luckily the Peachtree Center station was one of the few she didn't mind boarding or departing a train at. Its atmosphere reminded her of past travels through the grandeur of a London's Heathrow Airport. You could do so with very few people bogarting vying for the same space. Lord knows once you get to

stations like Five Points it was a different story. Most times Essence would just pretend like she was in New York where even the sophisticated took public transportation as a means of convenience.

As the train approached with warning of its overly resounding horn, Essence scrambled to the front of the platform to get a seat in the first car...another one of her idiosyncrasies. Trying to keep up, Wella's frail frame was nearly knocked down by the wind of the rusting blades as a huge fan spun vigorously keeping the underground facility cool. She stumbled behind Essence when the train doors opened. They sat in two empty seats that were next to each other.

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Small talk always ended the moment they sat down.

An intoxicated Wella always escaped to an even more distant zone compliments of the iPod she was obviously able to keep hidden from Eric. It seemed to be the only time she had to herself so she made the best of those twenty to twenty-five minutes.

Though not born into their generation, Wella was an old soul. She could only stand to listen to those powerful voices that just didn't tell a story, but spoke to the heart. Lord knows only a true diva can express how a man can torture your soul and at the same time render you captive to his will. Sistas from the Etta James, Aretha Franklin, and Anita Baker eras could always bring it – a source of serenity needed to get through the unpredictable evenings that would await her.

Essence used the trips to either study for tests or the observance of black America. Being from a prominent family and pursuing a bachelor's in business administration, but a minor in public policy left her constantly curious of how the other side lived. She stayed in research mode.

But since it was the last few days of the semester, she could relax. All term papers were professionally packaged and handed in. Nothing stood in the way of another semester at Georgia Tech she could close the books on.

MARTA was about to be history as well. Essence could only take so much. She always understood how her family's wealth far exceeded that of the typical black family. And she never expected much of those who relied on public transportation to make a great impression, but this ish was ridiculous.

How can any woman leave her house without combing her hair when a simple ponytail would do? And what was up with wearing pajamas outside? So now we put our cell phones in our bras and let it hang halfway out. Black women too often forget we're queens – we decent from the most resilient women in the history of this planet. Yet we still allow other races to keep us from taking our rightful throne. Essence found it disheartening.

Just then yet another brother made his phone conversation all kinds of public. This fool is talking to his public defender telling him he's not interested in taking a plea. What kind of idiot would make a conversation like that so public? In front of him sat another selfish asshole who probably couldn't afford a pot to piss in but wants to claim two seats. Apparently his entourage had the day off and expecting to hold one's own bag was simply asking too much.

Then there were the men who were engaged in casual conversations on their cell phones. Something about that was so unappealing to Essence – sitting there listening to a man talk on the phone like some gossipy high school chick.

The truth of the matter is the further back you sit on MARTA the worst it got. What really blew Essence away was the sheer casualness of it all. Everyone who appeared down on their luck seemed to

accept it. As if this was God's plan. She often visualized their tombstones: "Here lies Such-n-such." Yeah, it was time for her to get back to life as she knew it. She no longer needed that convenience of a quick commute between home, Georgia Tech and the firm.

MARTA was also starting to get depressing. Riding it was like taking a daily trip on the train ride of the damned. So many passengers seemed so defeated. They rarely smiled as if they just stopped hoping...afraid to dream...surrounded by sadness.

Too much to bare, Essence closed her eyes and allowed her thoughts to go back to Dex Dunnivant. He definitely stood out from every other brother at the firm. And he was undeniably feeling her vibe back in the break room. Essence spent all of her life around refined men to not know when one was interested in her. Even after only the briefest of encounters.

She sat there wondering what they would name their first-born and would they choose Atlanta or North Carolina as their place of residence. Then Essence got a grip and remembered what happened the last time she surrendered to temptation so readily. It seemed long ago but with it being something she never wanted to re-live she was determined to be more cautious.

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They reached the College Park station where MARTA unloads any remaining blacks on board. Since it was between shift changes at the airport, the only passengers left after College Park are white folks with luggage on their way to the next stop – the last stop – the airport. As if only *they* were entitled to travel the world. But once you got off the train and the doors shut, it was always a treat to turn around and watch them all exhale. Essence always sneered, *Damn right you should be afraid of us because one day the script will flip!*

Looked like it was a good day for Wella. Eric was sitting in their worn down Ford Escort wearing a do rag on his head with music blasting from his stereo – right in front of the MARTA entrance for all to see. Judging by the way he was sucking down his cigarette one long drag after another, his patience must've been weighing thin. Wella opened the passenger door to let herself in. Before she was able to get the door closed, Mr. Unemployable barrels out of the parking lot burning rubber like he had some place to be. The music was still blasting, but you could hear him scream "What the fuck took you so long"?

As she walks over to her BMW, Essence reminisces about the time she had to take Wella home. When they pulled up in the driveway, Eric was sitting on the porch chillin' as if his chores were done for the day knowing damn well he didn't accomplish shit. Essence just shook her head and vowed she would never become some man's chattel.