

Chapter Six

You got pretty hair," Jamie said, staring at my wet curls with red-tinted eyes. "Can I touch it?"

I ducked underwater in response, swiftly swimming away from his compliment as my hair did its own floating, ethereal choreography in the blue that surrounded me. I swam with my hair loosely tied, my shirt on, and my eyes wide open, never wanting to miss a moment or someone's foot kicking my way. I sought refuge underwater because I didn't know how to receive a compliment from a boy I liked. Down below, I touched the bottom of the eight-foot-deep pool, hoping to find comfort in the clear blue vision of the water.

It was spring break 1994, and "Whatta Man" was the only song I was determined to memorize before I had to return to school at the close of the week. The Dallas sun had made me three shades darker, and my week at Auntie Wee Wee's apartment had introduced me to Jamie, my latest crush. He lived in the building adjacent to Auntie Wee Wee and Mechelle. Jamie was a year older than I was, with a nearly shaved head of dark brown fuzz and matching thick eyebrows. His skin was smooth and all the more golden from the sun.

Swimming to the edge of the pool, I unwound my purple scrunchie and let my drenched curls drop over my shoulders. Wet and full, my hair glistened while soaking up the heat. Jamie placed his golden hands against my black hair. My heart raced as I sat shin-deep in water. Though kids were splashing around us and screaming "Marco! Polo!" I felt as if Jamie and I were all alone, the hot cement under our butts. His eyes twinkled under the reflective light of the moving water. I wanted to kiss him and ask him to be my boyfriend, but I knew that would be taking it too far.

"The food's ready," Mechelle called from just outside the gate. "We gotta go."

She had stopped swimming on day three of our break, weary of dodging the splashes from the pool. "They too wild," she complained during her final swim, adamant not to get her fresh just-permed edges wet. I told Jamie I'd be back outside after dinner as I pulled my hair back with both palms, tying it with my scrunchie. My tank top and shorts stuck to my skin as I walked over to Mechelle, who pursed her lips at me.

"Pinkie-swear you won't tell your mom," I told her as we made our way up the stairs to her apartment. It was probably the fourth time I'd made her promise not to blow my cover. She finally relaxed her pursed lips, smacking them in defeat as her pinkie met mine. I knew she thought the Keisha game had gone on too long, but I also knew she'd keep my secret because I was her favorite cousin, and she was mine.

Keisha was more real to me than I was to myself. There was no doubt when I was in the moment as Keisha. She was fully me, the me I knew myself to be in those quiet instances when all I had to do was merely be. But I was certain the falsity of Keisha, no matter how real she felt to me, would result in a whipping or something worse. The boundaries of gender, I was taught, were unmovable, like the glistening white rocks that surrounded Grandma's crawfish ponds. Keisha proved, though, that self-determination—proclaiming who you were to others—wielded the power to lift those rocks toward a more honest place.

Mechelle and Auntie Wee Wee's apartment was the only quiet place I remember in Dallas. It wasn't filled with gossip or cluttered by the noise of children running around. My aunt, willowy and sweet, created this home for mother and daughter. There were bursts of purple and green throughout their apartment, resembling a ripe eggplant at a farmer's market.

I admit that I was envious of Mechelle's life, which probably fueled my snap decision to introduce myself as Keisha to her friends. I didn't consult Mechelle. She followed my lead. I longed to wear her barrettes, to shake her pom-poms, to bask in a boy's attention, to call Auntie Wee Wee Mom. Mechelle had a room of her own, a sacred space that I wouldn't have well until adulthood. Her room was occupied by Barbies, a Lite-Brite, an Etch A Sketch, coloring books to fit any mood, and videotapes of *Free Willy*, *Aladdin*, and my favorite, *Beauty and the Beast*. I wore that tape out to the point where the ballroom scene played through a layer of permanent static. I see Belle clearly now, spinning on that dance floor in her golden gown as everyone looked on. I yearned to grow to be as beautifully bookish as Belle.

The usual vanilla scent of the apartment was dominated by a fishy odor. It was pungent and alluring to me, the kind of aroma that hit notes of a home I longed for. Auntie Wee Wee crumbled Ritz crackers between her hands, topping her tuna casserole, which she made because it was my favorite. Tuna reminded me of Mom; I could see her reading a book, just like Belle, and spreading tuna over crackers, white crumbs collecting on her lap. Like Mom, Auntie Wee Wee had a calm presence, one that made me feel safe to be just as I was. She acknowledged my tenderness in big and small ways without reprimand or rehabilitation. I'll never forget the time she took me to Kmart and bought me a sleeping bag for my sleepovers. In the aisle, she asked me to pick out the one I wanted. Skipping my eyes over the burgundy, the blue, and the green bags, I pointed at a lavender sleeping bag that called loudly after me. It *had* to be mine. My aunt didn't bat a mascaraed lash as we carried it to the checkout.

Full of tuna and fresh out of the shower, I went back outside alone to the playground, just as the sun was retiring for the day. I found Jamie, at one with the gray-blue sky, swinging, the soles of his Jordan-clad feet parallel to the gravel I stood on. The little follicles on my forearms rose as I joined him up there. My hair flirted with the wind, and in the air with Jamie, I felt like the only girl in the world. Soon we settled down, lazily swaying from side to side in our adjacent swings. He leaned in toward me and fingered a ringlet with his right hand. Soon my coarse curls struggled to make their way between his golden fingers. It was the first time someone had admired me. My hair, the only mark of my girlhood, was being touched in a way I had never been before.

Sunday soon came, marking the end of my springtime retreat. Keisha would remain here as I returned to life as Charles. I was mourning her end as I gathered my stuff in Mechelle's room. Dad sat in the living room watching TV with Auntie Wee Wee, waiting to take me home. Then I heard an unexpected sound: Jamie's voice. "Are Keisha and Mechelle here?" he asked from the front door.

"Hold on, baby," Auntie Wee Wee said. "Mechelle?" she called toward the back.

I hadn't planned on saying good-bye; I thought we'd just pick up the relationship over the phone. Mechelle looked at me and clucked her tongue as she crossed the threshold of her bedroom.

"Hey. Where's your cousin?" Jamie asked Mechelle.

"Let's go outside," she said, hurrying out of the house.

"Uh-uh, little girl. Don't you leave this house. You got company," Auntie said.

"Where's Keisha?" Jamie asked again.

Mechelle just shrugged.

"Who's Keisha?" Auntie asked, pressing Mechelle for answers.

Mechelle was only in the fourth grade and had probably never lied to her mom. She didn't know what to say, so she began crying. That was when Dad shifted his gaze from the TV to the door. My heart beating rapidly and my fingers interlocked and twisted, I walked out of Mechelle's room. My hair was tied in a ponytail, low at the back of my neck, as Jamie smiled.

"Hey, Keisha," he said, making Dad stand from the couch.

I didn't get to say good-bye to Jamie and explain to him who I was. I didn't have the words as an eleven-year-old to explain who I was to anyone beyond myself. All I knew was that Keisha was real to me, and under the glare of my

father, I feared for her survival. Dad wrote Keisha off as some bad joke I was playing, one that had gone on way too long, one that he ensured I wouldn't play again. He talked nonstop on our way to Denise's house, his words packing the car.

"You're not gay, are you?" he finally pleaded, defeated after his fifteen-minute diatribe. Dad's face was glowing red, reflecting in the spotlight hovering before us. His voice was sweet as he asked the question, one he was sure I had the answer to. He hoped that my answer would assuage his concerns about me, his *sissy* boy, the one he gave his name to—the first of his children he held in his arms—as he said, "I saw you come out of your mother, man. I was there!"

I didn't know if *gay* was the right fit for me. The label hovered over me for years like the red glare settling over my father's face. I'd been called *gay* and *sissy* and *faggot* ever since I stepped foot on playgrounds in my earliest youth. My father's thoughts filled the car: *My son is an effeminate boy pretending to be a girl in front of other boys, so he must be gay, right?* Uncertainty rode shotgun in our conversation.

As a tween, I was living in the murkiness of sexuality and gender. I knew I was viewed as a boy. I knew I liked boys. I knew I felt like a girl. Like many young trans people, I hadn't learned terms like *trans*, *transgender*, or *transsexual*—definitions that would have offered me clarity about my gender identity. For example, a trans girl who is assigned male at birth and attracted to boys may call herself gay for a short time—a transitional identity on her road to self-discovery. In actuality, though, since her gender identity is that of a girl, and she is attracted to boys, then her sexual orientation mirrors that of a heterosexual girl, not a gay man.

Regardless, gay was foreign enough to my father—a proud black man raised in a Southern Baptist home—that I can't imagine proclaiming that I was trans would've put him at ease. For many parents, having a gay or lesbian child is a lot less daunting than having a trans child, especially in a culture where gay and lesbian people are increasingly becoming more accepted, whereas transgender people, especially trans women, are still stigmatized.

I didn't have answers for myself or my father, so I cried. I was hurt and afraid. By the time we got home to Denise's, Dad was talked out, and he wearily whispered to me, "Get in the bathroom."

I had pulled the vinyl polka-dot shower curtain back and begun taking off my shirt to prepare for my shower when Dad opened the door. He had a stool in one hand and his clippers in the other. I didn't see this coming, and cried harder in protest. Dad didn't say a word as he plugged his clippers into the outlet by the sink. I kept my eyes closed and opened them only when containing my tears stung. With the sound of each buzz, my curls fell against my bare shoulders and back before finding their way to the floor. When the buzzing stopped, the black-and-white-tiled floor was covered in tendrils and tears. The mirror reflected a hard truth: *You are a boy. Stop pretending.*

By the New Year, when every television was tuned to the proceedings of the O.J. Simpson trial, my curls had returned thicker and wilder. They were no longer silky, choosing to grow up rather than down and demanding more room. The only thing to tame them was Blue Magic grease, which I lathered on my hair after every shower, waking up with an oil-stained pillowcase and consistent dreams of Mom.

Though her phone calls and birthday cards halted after my eighth birthday, I held tight to the day that she'd rescue us. I extended blind optimism to Mom. I expected the best from her because my image of her, despite her actions, was untarnished. Instead of facing the reality of rejection, I made excuses for her: Mom was busy; she had a career; she just needed a little time to build a new life that would include me one day. My optimism won out in 1995 when Auntie Wee Wee's phone rang as the news commentators discussed the latest from the courtroom. "Baby, it's for you," she said with the widest smile.

"Hello?" I said into the receiver.

"Charles? It's Mom."

When I heard her voice, the opportunity for better emerged, and I immediately forgave her years-long absence because she was a dream come true. I can't remember what we talked about, but I remember the feeling that things would be better, that Chad and I would have the life we deserved. Auntie Wee Wee had gotten ahold of Mom through Grandma Pearl, who was listed by the operators in Honolulu. Our aunt didn't tell us about her search because she said

she didn't want to get our hopes up. I realize now that she didn't trust Mom to follow through and call back; many on Dad's side of the family didn't understand how a woman could leave her children. Abandoning us broke some golden rule in the motherhood guide, an invisible set of laws that they all silently abided by.

Over a series of conversations, I learned that Cori was eighteen and had two little girls. I learned that our baby brother, Jeffrey, was in kindergarten and couldn't wait to meet us. Most important, I learned that Mom wanted us back, something she and Dad would debate for months. Dad later told me that he fought hard to keep us but knew that Mom would give us the stability that we needed.

Dad didn't drink during the weeks leading up to our flight to Honolulu in May 1995. He didn't say much as he drove Chad and me to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, where they had two Continental tickets with our names on them.

The sun was shining through the windows of the gate, where we stood looking in awe at the plane that would take us to Mom. My anticipation of my reunion with her didn't allow me to think about how this move affected Dad or Chad. This moment was what I had dreamed of since the day Mom sent me to Oakland so I could have a proper male influence. I felt I had done my time and my move was long overdue. I thought Dad had taken his turn, done his part, and now it was Mom's shift. I didn't give my father much credit and didn't take his heartbreak into account.

As we were readying to board, Dad squatted down in front of us. He looked unblinkingly into our eyes; his were teary and sullen. "Y'all gotta take care of each other, man," he said. "And never forget that if you have no one, I mean no one in this world, that you feel loves you, remember that your dad will always love you."

He wrapped his arms around us, cradling us in his grasp. I kissed his ear and held on to him in a way I never had before, because I knew that this time, when I let go, I would run into the arms of my mother. My father bid farewell to us with a kiss as we followed the lady in the blue uniform and sensible pumps down the Jetway. Unknowingly, I would evolve beyond the boy he had raised and greet him nearly a decade later, in 2004, in that same airport, as my own woman, his daughter, at age twenty-one.

Dad would dance toward me with his golden grin, his contagious zest for life, and his new wife, Auntie Wee Wee, and Auntie Linda Gail and Uncle Bernard in tow—a welcome party designed to ease all apprehension.

"I told you I was bringing *everybody* to see *my* baby," he told me in my ear as he hugged me. "You *my* baby—no matter what."