

# CHAPTER ONE

Shayna sighed, rolled over on her stomach, and pulled the sheet halfway up her back. With eyes pressed shut, she buried her head into the pillow and breathed deep, savoring the total disconnect of the moment. One hand hung down the side of the bed, fingers almost touching the floor. It was a low-platform bed with a single thick mattress, the kind of bed she favored since her introduction to futons in college.

A minute went by and she sighed again; the disconnect was over. *Time to deal with it, she thought, wonder what it is this time?*

She focused on the sensations that were sweeping through her body, sensations she knew well. They told her that something big was going to happen today. She had felt the telltale tingling soon after she woke up. The tingling came and went in a warm rush through her body. It would start in the pit of her stomach first then spread up and out, enveloping her heart, her face, her head, and then spreading through her limbs to the very tips of her fingers and her toes. For one sweet moment, it would hold her entire body in its grasp then she would feel it receding, pulling back into a final tiny tingle in her stomach before it was gone.

It lasted no more than ten seconds.

Shayna had implicit faith in these “gut alerts,” as she called them. She was eight the first time she could recall this experience. She was tingly all morning. At breakfast, she told her mother that she felt funny—“all prickly and tingly and warmish,” she said. Her mother felt all around her neck, made her stick out her tongue, pulled down under her eyes, then announced that she didn’t have a fever and wasn’t sick.

“You’re probably overexcited about that jump rope competition today,” her mother said, as she gave her a quick hug.

Shayna didn’t think so, but she didn’t argue. That afternoon, her best friend Pixie collapsed and died while they were doing their double Dutch face-off against those snotty girls from St. Phillipa’s two streets over. Heart attack, the nuns whispered, thinking none of the children could hear them.

The tingling stopped the moment it sank in that Pixie was dead.

That's when Shayna began to believe in her gut alerts. Lying in her bed the very night Pixie died, scared of this terrible thing that hearts could do to little children, she pressed her hand over her own heart and begged it not to attack her and take her away forever like Pixie's heart did to her.

"I'll be good," she whispered into the darkness. "I won't bother those St. Phillipa girls like I did with Pixie."

And then she realized that she was not tingling any more. She lay stiff and still for a long time, waiting for the rush to start again, but it did not. She fell asleep waiting. It wasn't long—the next day, actually—before she figured out that there was a connection between the strange tingling she had felt all day and Pixie's sudden death. From then on she began to pay attention to her gut alerts.

"What are you telling me now?" she wondered aloud now, as she felt another gathering in the pit of her stomach. Her mind raced back in time, searching yet again for reassurance that she was not crazy. There were times when she truly thought she was. But her gut alerts never lied. They heralded good news and bad, but it was always big news. *Really* big ... like the day she met Reginald Sears, her first love. She was eighteen then. *What a self-absorbed idiot he turned out to be*, she thought, rolling her eyes. And that day during her senior year at college, when she learned she'd been accepted for a coveted internship at the *American Business Journal*. That Alicia Warren was soooo jealous! Remembering the look on Alicia's face when she heard the news made her giggle even now.

She stopped giggling as her mind took her to another gut alert day: the day the Apollo space shuttle blew up after takeoff, killing all the astronauts on board. The first black crewmember on an American space mission died in that explosion. He was a close friend of her family. She had known him all her life.

And there was her mother's first ambassadorial appointment, which meant Shayna would have to go to boarding school. It would be her first separation from her mother.

All these events were foreshadowed by her gut alerts. She was not crazy.

Reassured, Shayna rolled over on her back again and sighed. She stared at the ceiling, moving one hand gently back and forth across her chest, now and then drawing a circle around her heart with her fingers. *I suppose this is what spiritually connected folks call a quickening*, she thought, as more rushes came and went.

Mentally she began to scan the "BIGDEAL" file she kept at work

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on her computer's hard drive. Suddenly, the phone rang. Her heart thudding, she reached for it before it rang again.

"Hello?" Her voice was filled with apprehension.

"Don't sound so worried, baby. It's only me."

Shayna sighed with relief. She grinned widely.

"Mommy!" she cried, snuggling into the phone. "And how is America's number one emissary?"

"Couldn't be better. This is just a quick call to wish you good luck, baby. It's today, isn't it?"

"What's today?"

"I don't believe you! How could you forget? Are you all right?" Janice McWright sounded genuinely concerned.

"Yes, I'm all right, Mommy. But what's supposed to happen today? I know something is supposed to happen because I've been getting gut alerts all morning."

"I knew it! You won the Pulitzer Prize, baby! You won it! Today's the day they make the announcements. That's what your gut alerts are all about!" Janice's voice rose with excitement.

"Of course, the Pulitzer! God, I forgot all about that! Oh Mommy, do you think that's what it is? Could I have won?"

"Well, what else could it be, Shayna McWright? What can be bigger than that? You just refuse to accept how good you are. Oh, Shayna, I'm so proud of you. But I have to run now, baby. I'll call you later. Love you," she said and hung up.

Shayna hung up the phone. With an ocean between them, she cherished these unexpected, hurried phone calls from her mother. They always left her feeling that everything was right with the world. She glanced at the clock: six a.m. Her mother would be well into her day now. Shayna's heart swelled with pride as she thought of her mother: Janice McWright, the United States' first black ambassador to Belgium ... *Belgium!* Not an African country or some island in the Caribbean where they always parked blacks in the Foreign Service. This was Europe, the political capital of Western Europe at that!

There had been articles galore about Janice McWright when she got the appointment a year ago. *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times Magazine*, the *Economist*, *Time*, *Business Week*, *Newsweek*, and of course, *Ebony* and *Black Enterprise*. Even her own *American Business Journal* ran a profile of her. All of them had declared her the perfect choice. This month's *Essence* carried a four-page spread about the single mother, tragically widowed early in her marriage to Dillon McWright, Atlanta's glamour-boy, founder of McWright Enterprises:

a high-profile architecture firm that had designed some of the most famous buildings in cities across the southeast.

“Janice McWright is a woman of gorgeous looks and regal bearing. She’s a grad from Spelman, black America’s elite women’s college in Atlanta, Georgetown post-grad. She’s the author of three critically acclaimed books on American foreign policy, with a star reporter for a daughter. Her brilliant foreign service career is capped by this ambassadorship. God has blessed our people with this jewel.”

The *Essence* writer had been shameless in her adoration.

But Janice McWright had her detractors. Shayna frowned as she recalled the harsh criticism her mother received from the Caribbean-American community and from Caribbean ambassadors in Washington when that ridiculous fight broke out between the United States and the European Union over bananas. “*Bananas*, for God’s sake,” she raged. “How could countries be independent for 30-odd years and still depend so totally on sales of *raw bananas* to keep their economies going? Couldn’t they do other things with the damn bananas? Couldn’t they build a *real* banana industry and produce everything you could possibly make from the damn plant and the damn fruit and sell all that to the whole world, for chrissake!”

Janice McWright was all over “Nightline.” She defiantly told Ted Koppel and the American people that the European Union was discriminating against American banana producers by giving Caribbean fruit preferential access to its market. That was a violation of the free trade rules the Europeans themselves signed off on in Geneva under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, she argued.

Yes. Janice McWright was the stuff that made black folks beam with pride. *Well, the black folks I know*, Shayna thought with a shrug.

The phone rang again and she grabbed it, thinking it was her mother again.

“Mommy?”

“Fraid not, sugar. It’s your man.” His voice was deep and seductive.

Shayna lay back in the bed and purred. “Hmmm. Hello there, man of mine. What gives so early?”

“Let’s not go there. Called to say I’m rooting for you, my sweet. Today’s the day, isn’t it?”

Shayna let out an exasperated sigh. “Am I the only one who forgot all about the Pulitzer? Mommy called just a few minutes ago with the same thing.”

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“Hey! We’re the ones who love you. You may not love yourself enough to remember such things, but we’re here and we remember.”

Shayna chuckled. She decided not to tell him about the gut alerts and what her mother had said about them. She would not want him to feel sorry for her if she did not win the prize.

“I love you too, Hilton,” she said seriously.

“Aha! So you *do* remember that. And you *do* remember that we’re meeting for dinner today, don’t you?”

“Yes, Hilton, at Londel’s.”

He ignored her “yes, master” tone. “Okay. Are you naked?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“So my imagination can run wild.”

“Don’t you have to be at your office by seven?”

Hilton groaned. “You’re cold.”

“Warm me up tonight.”

“You got it... later.”

Shayna hung up the phone just as her alarm went off: 6:15. She stretched and lay back against the pillows. It was fifteen minutes earlier than her “get-out-of-bed-right-now” time, fifteen precious minutes she used as personal, alone time before she took on the day’s assault. Sometimes she prayed during those fifteen minutes. “Maybe *you* wouldn’t call it prayer,” she said wryly to her mother once when they were talking about religion and God and all that mind, body, spirit stuff.

“Lord, this is your day, your life; you choose, you decide.” That was it. That was all her mind could muster to the great “IT” most mornings, before other thoughts invaded.

Sometimes she would revel in the sweetness of her last date with Hilton. They had been dating for three years now. Marriage definitely wasn’t in the works and that was just fine with her. She liked her life. Hilton liked his. She liked her Battery Park City apartment with its Hudson River view. He liked his brownstone with its original oak woodwork on Striver’s Row in Harlem. Her career was just taking off in journalism. His was just taking off in finance. He was a Harvard MBA on the fast track to senior management at Citibank. She had her gym and yoga. He had his squash and karate. They did lots of nice “couple” things with other couples at very nice places around New York City. And they made crazy love on silk designer sheets at his place, or at hers, or at some back-to-nature resort during their many weekend getaways.

Yes, she and Hilton Pierce III, were perfect just the way they were.

Surprisingly, their mothers were okay with that, too—at least that’s the way it seemed to everybody. Each had broached the subject of marriage to her child just once and had never brought it up since. Comparing notes later, they found out that Shayna and Hilton’s responses were almost identical.

“Why are you rushing me, Mother? You’re the one who’s told me time and time again to get my career going before I even think of marriage. Well, that’s what I’m doing. Taking your advice and getting my career going. We’ll let you know when we start to think of marriage, *if* we ever get to that point.”

And that was that.

“They don’t have to bring it up again. They’re praying real hard, so they figure it’s a done deal. They just know we’re no match for God,” Shayna said to Hilton with a chuckle on one of those lazy days when they were talking about nothing and everything, wondering why their mothers were so blasé about the freeze from their children on the subject of marriage.

Other times Shayna would spend her last fifteen minutes in bed homing in on a feature she was struggling to find the rhythm for. She was now a staff reporter at the *American Business Journal*. The paper was an upstart daily that blasted its way to the upper ranks of America’s journalism hierarchy in the 1980s with its coverage of the flight of America’s big corporations to cheaper and less union-influenced production sites overseas and the resulting decline of the country’s smokestack communities.

Shayna’s beat was market access: America’s fight to freely sell American goods in foreign countries, particularly in developing countries that were protective of their own emerging industries. “We’ll pry them open with a crowbar if we have to,” the U.S. trade representative vowed—or something to that effect.

But Shayna soon realized that not every country was eager to buy processed American food and cigarettes and cars with the steering wheel on the wrong side. Some wanted to manufacture the products they consumed on their own and they fought hard to keep cheaper American and European imports from knocking out their fledgling industries.

Shayna’s beat was rife with stories of battles that pitted these forces against each other. When she wrote them, she always showed how American consumers, taxpayers, and Wall Street investors ended up holding the short or long end of the stick, depending on which of the two forces won.

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Every now and then when she traveled, she would do a “think” piece, or an offbeat “color” feature for the front page. For these she had won a few minor journalism prizes—not that she was not grateful for them, but she was aiming for *the big one*: the Pulitzer. She was obsessed with winning a Pulitzer Prize. It was journalism’s most revered prize, a journalist’s highest honor. She *knew* she could do it.

Even so, there were times when she just could not get her story together. “A story has to sing,” her editor drilled into her when she interned for the paper.

“Having all the facts is fine. Putting in that nut graph to tell the readers what it all means to them is fine too. But you’ve got to tie all that up with a rhythm, one that sucks the readers in and keeps them sucked in all the way to the end,” the editor said.

When she didn’t feel like thinking about Hilton, their mothers or work, and when she was really tired, she would allow herself to succumb to fifteen minutes of that deep, delicious, second sleep. The kind you awake from feeling as if you had slept for hours, but also feeling a little guilty because you knew you stole that sleep from something important you should have been thinking about or doing.

This morning, Shayna surrendered her fifteen minutes to the rushing inside her. In spite of her mother’s conviction that she had won the Pulitzer, she was haunted by an unsettling thought that this particular gut alert had to do with something much bigger. Maybe it was because she had learned to read the subtle differences in her gut alerts, so that she could almost tell when the news would be good or bad. She shivered. *Cat walked on my grave*, she thought automatically. Aloud she said, “Do yourself a favor and get out of bed right now, Shayna.” Without hesitating, she took her own advice and jumped out of bed. Even if it was bad news, it would be all right in the end, she told herself firmly. Her mother taught her that.

“Things happen for a reason and they happen at the right time, Shayna,” said her mother, consoling her when she cried her heart out about some disappointment or the other. “Every disappointment is an opportunity, baby. Every disappointment is an opportunity. All you have to do is look for that opportunity and seize it. Look for the lesson and learn it.” Her mother had always emphasized the word “learn.”

Shayna stood for a moment in front of her antique mirror with beveled edges and hugged herself. She thought how lucky she was to have a mother like Janice McWright.

Hilton was wrong. She loved herself a lot. Looking straight into the eyes that stared back at her from the mirror, she whispered, “Love

you, Shayna. Love you, Mommy.” Just before noon, in her tiny cubicle in the newsroom at the posh Wall Street headquarters of the *American Business Journal*, surrounded by pictures thumb-tacked to the wall of herself and her mother, her mother and the nation’s chief executive, herself and Hilton, herself and very important people, herself in very important places, herself receiving important awards, Shayna went to pieces.

She had read the gut alerts right. They had nothing to do with the Pulitzer Prize.