

**I Shall Not Want:
Chapter 3 Forsaking all Others**

May 1

I awoke looking forward to the day. A prayer of gratitude was in my heart as I brushed my teeth. I walked down the hallway to check on Mom. I stood there for a minute until I heard her softly snoring. Then I went into the kitchen to make some coffee and to prepare her breakfast.

I opened the living room window and enjoyed my coffee in my favorite chair—Dad’s favorite chair. For the first time in years, I enjoyed the fresh air and sunshine. Birds were chirping a delightful song, and the pink, purple and white hyacinths Dad planted many years ago filled the air with the soft sweet scent of spring.

“Terri.”

“Hey, Benny.”

“How’s everything?”

“Okay, I guess. Why?”

“Well, it’s just a thought, but if your Mom was up to it, I was thinking about going out to dinner tonight. I know she likes the Red Lobster, so I thought, maybe...”

“Oh, Benny, that’s a wonderful idea!” I jumped up and kissed him.

“I have to get some laundry done today. I’ll have Mom ready about five.”

“Take it easy. It’s only eleven o’clock.”

“Hey, Ma!” I yelled.

“Yeah, Terri?”

I ran up the steps. “Do you feel up to going to the Red Lobster tonight for dinner? Benny’s treat!”

“Lawd have mercy, we gonna have a storm. This Meathead is taking us to dinner?” Mama said, laughing. “You know I’m always up to having some seafood.”

Benny winked at me and said “I’m having lobster. I’ll give you the shell!”

Mama laughed “I’ll let you have my potato skin!”

“All right, you two. Mama, I want you get some rest so you’ll be ready to enjoy yourself tonight. I’ll be in the back room if you need me.”

“Don’t close my door!”

“You gotta turn that T.V. down!” Benny protested.

“Mom, I’ll leave it open. Nobody is sleeping so we’ll deal with it.”

“Is it that loud?” Mama wondered.

“Yeah!” Benny and I said at the same time.

“All right! Lawd knows you young people are something.”

I was ready to help mom get ready for dinner and, to my surprise, I found her almost dressed. Mama had washed and dressed herself.

“Mama! Look at you,” I said.

“I’m feeling so much better, Terri, and I’m ready to go out and have a nice dinner.”

“Oh, this is great,” I smiled all over myself.

“See what your love and care has done.”

“All right, you two, break it up. Let’s go. You know we’ll have to wait an hour before we can get a table,” Benny stated.

“C’mon, Meathead. Help me up and get me to the car,” Mama smiled all the way downstairs.

We came home with bellies full with seafood. Benny carried our leftovers while I helped Mom into the house and settled her down.

“Oh, Terri! I enjoyed this evening. I’ve missed going out dinner. Your father and I used to do it all the time.”

“Yeah, Mom I remember. Any evening you two were off to someplace to eat after an afternoon drive.”

“I miss your father so much. We used to do all kinds of things together. We would go way up in Pennsylvania or upstate New Jersey. We would get on some country road and had no idea where we were, but we didn’t care. We had a good running car and a tank full of gas. We just enjoyed a day out.”

“I remember how you two would laugh and sing during trips when I was little. I loved that song you sang to me about the trees talking too much.”

“Oh, you’re talking about *Whispering Grass*. It was by the Ink Spots. It was about people who run their mouth too much.”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Can you sing it to me?”

“I’ll try.” Mama sat quiet for moment to catch her breath.

*Why do you whisper green grass?
Why tell the trees what ain’t so?
Whispering grass, the trees don’t need to know.
Why tell them all your secrets
Who kissed there long ago?
Whispering grass the trees don’t need to know
Don’t tell it to the breeze....*

“Beautiful, Mom! Absolutely wonderful.” I clapped.

“Terri, this is why I tell you to live your life. Do something with yourself. When you get older, nothing will take the place of memories and you want to have something worth remembering.”

“Mama, I enjoy your company and hold your wisdom dear. This moment, right now is worth remembering. I’ll carry it with me always.”

I reached to hug Mom. She hugged me back. It was another tender moment that will always be remembered.

July 21

As Mom ate her breakfast, I read my latest poems to her. She nodded her head in approval and, at times, released her bountiful laugh that I had begun to miss. She was so proud of me. Nobody made me feel a bigger queen than my mother. Her smile was filled with love and support. Her eyes shined with high spirits as she gently clapped her hands. The telephone rang. It was the block captain.

“Hello?”

“Terri, I’m so glad you answered the phone. I didn’t want to tell your mother, but our neighbor Norman Jones passed away today.”

“Oh, no. This is the third death we’ve had on the block this year,” I answered.

“Yeah, I know. And I know you just lost your father and your mother isn’t well, but I have to let the block know. I’ll be sending a card around with an envelope later, you know how we do.”

“Yes, of course. We won’t be able to attend the services, but I’ll be sure to put a little something in the envelope and I’ll stop by the house when I get a chance.”

“Okay, I’ll probably see you there sometime. You take care.”

“Bye.”

“Who was that on the phone, Terri? What happened?”

“Oh, Mom, it was Mrs. Heyward, the block captain. She just informed me that Mr. Jones down the street passed away today.”

“Oh no, Terri. Good Lord, what is happening to our neighbors? First it was your father, then it was Joe Thomas and now Norman. Go out later on today and get a card from both of us.”

“I will, Mom, as soon as you’re okay to be alone for a few minutes.”

“Oh, I feel pretty good right now. Get me over to my bed and I’ll be set for a few.”

“Do you want anything while I’m out?”

“Yeah, get me some chocolates. I got a taste for them.”

“You got it, baby. All right now, upsy daisy! Let’s get to bed.”

“Remember when I used to say that to you? My, how the tables turn. The Book says you’re once a man and twice a child,” Mama said.

“Yes, so true. Now, as your mother, I telling you to get into bed and get some rest,” I laughed.

“Yes, Mama,” Mama laughed.

I managed to slip outside for a moment to a slow bake. The heat was about to kill us all. As soon as I opened the door, raw heat slapped me down. The fierce snowstorms we had just a few months ago were now an answer to prayer for relief from this singeing heat plaguing the northeast corridor. My grass had turned to straw. I didn’t see any birds, not even flies. I wanted so much to have a few days at the beach. I would have given anything to relax in the sand and feel the ocean toss me around. I sat on the patio and dreamed about Benny and I leaving the beach at sunset, taking a nice hot shower and spending some loving time together. Then we’d have a delicious dinner at one of the casino restaurants. We would take a stroll on the boardwalk and enjoy some of the Chicken Bone Beach festival and ending the evening with a taste of White Zinfandel on the balcony of a hotel room. The next day we’d have a splendid breakfast at the Country Kitchen in the Days Inn Hotel. As I imagined the ocean roar in one ear, I heard Mom calling me in the other. At least I got away for a few minutes. I ran up the steps in crisis mode to see what Mama wanted.

“Terri!”

“I’m coming, Mom!” I caught my breath at the top of the steps.

“How are you, Mom?”

“I’m fine. Where were you?”

“I was sitting outside for a few minutes.”

“Hot as it is! I was calling you and you didn’t answer. I got scared.”

“Scared of what, Mama?”

“I was afraid you left me. I was afraid I was all by myself.”

“No, Ma. I wouldn’t leave you. You should know better than that.”

“I don’t know. You know how people are sometimes. They mean well, but they get tired of old sick people. Don’t stay sick too long. Either get well or die.”

“Oh, Mama! Don’t say that.”

“Well it’s true. I know you love me dearly. I know that. But sometimes you get tired of me. I know that too. That’s why you were sitting outside. You needed to get some peace for a little while.”

“Mom, I’m not tired of you, but I am tired.”

“You can rest after you get me something to eat. I’m hungry,” Mama said as she smiled at me. “I know you love me baby, but you’re flesh and blood. This is hard on you. Your father is

dead and I'm half dead. You have had to deal with it all. But you're strong. I see how you do. You're strong and I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom. That means a lot to me," I said and kissed her cheek.

"Now go scratch up something for me to eat."

Mom fell asleep while I prepared baked flounder and wild rice. I carefully picked her up and placed her in bed. My shoulder cracked again and the sensation of pins and needles tingled throughout my arm and shoulder. I was so thankful for quiet and peace I didn't pay it any mind. I used my time to finished writing my collection of poetry, *Midnight Alley*. I should have been resting, but my mind wouldn't let me. A quiet house is a writer's sanctuary. I sympathized with all the single mothers who try to wrestle with caring for loved ones and satisfying the burn in their soul for something more. The sweetest hours for me, considered unholy for some, brought peace and delight. A full moon at three a.m. was the peak time for my creativity and spiritual connection. I felt in touch with myself—my spiritual voice could speak and I could finally listen. I compiled my poems as I basked in the rapture of accomplishment.

July 25

"You know, it would be nice if we could get away for a weekend sometime," Benny stated.

"And leave mom with whom?" I asked.

"Maybe your cousin would come and stay. I just think you need a break. Besides, we haven't had any time together in a long while," Benny said.

I knew what he meant and I couldn't agree more. But the thought of leaving Mom with someone else was too unsettling for me. I meant those marriage vows when I took them, but another side of me couldn't forsake my mother for anybody.

"I don't know about a weekend, Benny. That means somebody else would have to give up their weekend. The last thing I want to do is be a burden. I'll see if maybe my cousin can spend the night," I responded.

"At least think about it. Summer will be over before you know it," he said.

"I understand how you feel, but I need you to understand what I'm going through. Right now I have to get ready for tonight. I'll be ready in about an hour." I said.

"Yeah, okay." Benny sulked.

I prepared for the Summer White Night at the African American Museum. I was scheduled to present some of my prose and I was looking forward to connecting with people and a have a few hours out of the house. After I showered and dressed, I checked on Mom.

"Come on in here and let me see you." She said. "Oh yes. You look lovely. Turn around." Mom beamed. She loved the elegant flow of my lavender sundress.

“Oh, Terri, I’m so proud of you. I want you to go and have a lovely time. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be okay. You gave me dinner and left my snacks and cool drinks. Thanks to you, I don’t need anything.” Mom smiled at me so sweetly. I didn’t want to leave her.

“You have Benny’s cell phone number. He put it in the memory of your phone. Just press pound one.”

“Pound one. Which button is that?” She asked.

“It’s the button that looks like tic-tac-toe.”

“Oh. All right, I got it, you run along. My nature show is coming on. I like my animals.” Mom reached for her favorite chocolates.

Benny walked in. “Okay. Let’s go. I’ll check back home after I drop you off, so stop worrying. She’ll be fine for a little bit.” Benny grew a little impatient. I kissed Mom and we went out.

I arrived at the museum bubbling with anticipation. I met fellow entrepreneurs who had found their niche—who had left the corporate world—just like me. They were struggling to find their place and create an outlet, just like me. Middle-class African Americans strolled through the museum indulging on sumptuous cuisine. Live jazz music echoed throughout as people meandered from one display to another, looking at African potions and oil, conscience-raising literature and specialized cosmetics. I was somewhere between a representative of my collection of works and a spectator at the event. I smelled the faint scent of pretense, one I recognized from other events. A woman with a display not far from mine introduced herself. I saw her teeth before I saw her face. She was a rather large woman draped in African attire. She took her time to investigate my works, pointing out everything I done wrong. She introduced herself as a writer, poet and publisher. She offered her advice about the publishing, most of which alluded to considering her for my next project, but her relentless grin told me otherwise. I had written a poem warning about such grins. Perhaps I judged too quickly, or perhaps my ancestors were ruling from their graves. In either case, the burn in my gut implored me to be kind while deflecting her propositions.

Customers kept me optimistic. A small crowd gathered around as I shared my spiel on my biographies; *Take it from the Top* and *Let Me Tell You What Mama Said*. I sold enough copies of each book to be satisfied with the evening.

I was happy to see Benny’s face among the crowd. He found his way over to me and stood by my table.

“I ran home for a minute and checked on Mom. She was doing fine.” He said as he looked onto the crowd.

“Was she hungry?” I asked.

“Naw, I asked her if she wanted anything to eat. She said no. She was sitting up in bed watching something on television. She said she’d be fine. I think she just wants you home.”

I shook my head. “This will be over soon. I can’t wait to get home. It kills me not being there with her.”

“You gotta get out sometime. This is a pretty nice crowd here. Get any sales?”

“Yeah, about six *Mama Said*, five *Mood Swings* and two *Take it from the Top* and seven *Midnight Alleys!*”

Benny nodded his head. “Not bad.”

We watched the crowd which was slowly winding down.

“Stay here for just a second. I want to go downstairs,” I said to Benny.

I went downstairs to a woman who was selling exotic soaps and creams. They were supposedly made from the essence of African herbs and emollients to rejuvenate the skin. I bought a bar of soap and a couple of small jars of cream with cocoa butter. I thought maybe I could give Mom a special treat with her next bath.

As soon as Benny parked the car, I bolted into the house. I kicked off my shoes on the way upstairs to see Mom. She was resting comfortably. Her eyes opened as I walked into her room.

“Baby! You’re home! How did it go tonight?”

“It was good, Mom. I sold a few copies, made some connections, but most of all I enjoyed the people, you know, just being among the crowd.”

“That’s good, Terri. You need that. It’s not good for you to be stuck up around me all of the time. It’ll set you nuts. You needed to get some air. I’m so glad you’re home. Bighead came in while you were gone, to check in on me.”

“Yeah, I know. He told me. I’m still glad to be home with you. I got you a little something.”

“Yeah? What?”

I reached for the soap and creams and showed them to Mom.

“Oh, Terri! This is so sweet!”

“I was thinking about you the whole time I was gone. I wanted to get you something to make up for the time I was away from you.”

“Oh, Terri...”

“Mom, don’t you start with those tears.”

“I love ya so much.”

“I love you too, Mom. Now you have something extra for your next bath, just a little something sweet.”

I hugged Mom. I felt her tiny feeble little hand, so strong with love, rub my back.

August 9

I didn't feel very well when I awoke. As if by a power not my own, I jumped out of bed to see about Mom.

"Hey, Mom, how are you today?" I asked

"I'm hungry. I need something to eat right now."

"Okay. Just hold on. I'll be back." I went downstairs still half asleep to the kitchen.

Scrambled eggs and toast was the only thing I could make in less than five minutes. I started the coffee and took her tray upstairs. Mom was sitting up on the side of the bed with her head down.

"I have something for you to eat, Mom. Let me help you to your chair."

I lifted her from her bed and walked over to her chair and pulled up her tray.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said as she was still trying to catch her breath.

"It's okay, Mom, we'll get there."

I got her up from her chair and slowly walked her to the bathroom. When she began to pee, it reminded me I had to do the same.

"Mom, I'll be right back. I have to go too."

"All right. But hurry back. I need you."

When I returned, I got her off the pot and brought her back to her chair.

"I hope your eggs aren't cold by now."

"Terri."

"Yes, Mom?"

"I can't eat right now. I have to lie back down."

"I thought you were hungry?"

"I am, but I can't eat. Help me back to bed."

I pulled her up from her chair and walked her back to her bed. She sat on the side thoroughly exhausted.

"Just a minute," she said. "I'll be ready to lie down in a minute."

I stood by her side and watched her struggle. She looked up at me and I knew that meant she was ready to lie down. I tucked her in and sat on the side of the bed.

"I'll be all right soon. I'll eat later."

“All right, Mom. Just take your time. I’m going to take your tray back downstairs and get a little something to eat myself.”

“You go ahead. I’ll be all right.”

I took her tray down to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee which I desperately drank. I wasn’t in the mood for breakfast food. I decided to slice some turkey with lettuce and tomato. As I went into the refrigerator, Benny came into the kitchen.

“Terri.”

“Yeah Benny, what is it?”

“I heard your mother calling you.”

“I just left her.”

“Well, she’s calling you loud and clear now.”

I left the turkey on the counter and ran upstairs to her room.

“Terri!” Mom hollered.

“I’m right here, Mom.”

“I need to eat. Get me to my chair.”

“But Ma, I just…”

“Yeah, I know Terri. Please help me!”

I got her up on the side of her bed where I knew we had to wait for a moment. She began to inch up as I lifted her from the bed and guided her back to her chair.

“Okay, Mom. All I have to do is heat up your food. I shouldn’t long.”

I went downstairs and heated up her food and poured some ice water. I brought her tray up and set it in front of her. I was already exhausted.

“Where’s my jelly?” Mama asked. Without a word I went back downstairs and grabbed her jelly.

“Did you pour her coffee?” Benny asked me on my way toward the steps.

“No! I forgot.” I felt like I was losing my mind. Beads of sweat trickled down my back all the way to the crack of my behind. “Benny, turn the air conditioning on. I’m melting.”

I went back into the kitchen and poured her coffee with cream and sugar and started for the steps again. I put her jelly and coffee on her tray and sat down next to her.

“What took you so long?” Mama asked.

“Benny reminded me I forgot your coffee, so I went back to make you a cup.”

She didn’t answer. She just looked at her food and reluctantly began to eat. I spread some jelly on her toast and put the half slice in her hand.

“Turn the television on,” she commanded. I grabbed the remotes and turned on “The View.”

Benny brought my coffee up to me.

“How are we doing today?” Benny asked.

“I dunno Benny. I’m trying to hold on,” Mama said.

“Terri, do you need anything from the store?”

“No thanks. Everything’s good. Take that basket of laundry downstairs for me please.”

“Sure,” Benny said softly.

Mom continued to slowly eat and watch T.V. I sat down next to her and watched her. I watched her fight to eat—fight to live.

Mom had been calling me all day. I must have been up and down those steps at least twenty times before lunch. I felt pounds falling from my body. It seemed I couldn't do anything to comfort her. Lord knows I loved her more than anything in this world, but if she called me one more time....

It was just after midnight when Mama called me. She was propped up in bed when I got to her. Her spirit was growing tired, but I knew that if I could get her spirit back up, I could keep her alive.

"Terri, I can't take this. I gotta go to the hospital," she moaned.

"Okay, Mom. Just take it easy. Let me get your booties on and then I'll get you to the car."

Slowly, I got her downstairs and placed her in the chair to rest. Then I got her up again. We made it outside to the patio. I sat her down once again.

"Wait a minute. I need to rest. I can't go any further," Mom sighed.

"Sit tight. I'll get you some ice water." I went into the kitchen to get her water and when I returned, she looked at me with some relief in her eyes.

"You know, I feel a little better now that I'm outside. Maybe I just needed some fresh air."

"Fresh air never hurts anybody, but you still need to get some medical attention. I have all of your cards in my purse. We need to go."

"Just wait a second. I'm not so sure yet. Sit down with me for a few."

Benny arrived home from work and went in the back door.

"Hey! Anybody home?" he asked.

"Out front, Benny!"

He came to the door.

"Catching this nice breeze huh?"

"Benny, I'm sick. I asked Terri to get me to the hospital. But after sitting here, I feel a little better."

"Maybe you've just been in that room too long," Benny answered.

"Yeah, maybe that's it. I do feel a little better."

"Maybe so, Mom, but you can't sleep out here. I need to get you there. Benny, I'm on my way. I know you need time to get it together, so don't bother coming along. I'll talk with you later."

"I'll be there. Just let me change my clothes."

"Mom, c'mon, let's go."

"Okay, Terri, wait a minute. Help me get up."

"Terri! Wait for me!" Benny shouted. But I got Mom into the car and headed off to Chestnut Hill Hospital.

The hospital waiting room must be the hardest room to in which to keep still. I found myself pacing the floor and looking out the window into darkness. I tried to read and I tried to write. I said a prayer in my heart for Mom to survive. She was getting tired of holding on, but she didn't want to let go. As I stared out the window again, I couldn't help but reflect upon the years gone by. I had images of Mom on stage in her beautiful gowns and Dad leading the band; of when they took me to New York for my sixteenth birthday to see *The Wiz* with Stephanie

Mills. I grew hungry for the times when the three of us sat in the living room, laughing and talking, listening to music or enjoying a television program together. Mom and Dad would fill me in on the events of an affair where they had recently performed, or a party they'd attended.

"Ms. Lyons?" a voice jolted me out of my night dream.

"Yes. Here I am."

"You can come back and see your mother now. She's in room six."

I was weary from the smell of antiseptic and the sound of beeping monitors.

"Hey, sweetie. How's my girl?" I asked softly.

"Terri," was about all she could say.

"I'm right here, Mom."

"I'm back in here again, Terri," she whispered.

A handsome white man pulled back the curtain and walked in.

"Mrs. Lyons?" he said to Mom.

"Yes?"

"Feeling a little more comfortable now?"

"A little."

"You must be Terri, Hazel's daughter."

"Yes, Doctor. That's me."

We discussed Mom's condition and medications. It was the second verse to the same song, for me. He said he was going to admit her to keep an eye on her stability. The orderlies came in as we were talking to roll her up to her room.

"Mom, I'll be back to see you tomorrow. I have to get some rest."

"You go on home. I'll be all right. There's nothing for you to do. They have me all drugged up."

I kissed her on her forehead and saw her tiny fingers wave good bye as she was carted away. I saw the clock down the hallway. It was almost five o'clock am.

"Doctor, thank you for everything. I really appreciate it."

"You may want to think about having a visiting nurse. Taking care of her has got to be putting strain on you."

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a card.

"Here's a number to call. They'll come to the house to help you take care of your mother and they offer support to caretakers."

"Thank you, Doctor."

I walked down the hallway toward the waiting room and the exit door. When the huge double doors opened, Benny was sitting in the front row, eating pretzels.

"Benny."

"How's she doing? Are they going to keep her?"

"Yeah. She's on her way to her room now. I'm on my way home."

"You were back there for a while. I've been here for an hour," Benny said.

"And how was I supposed to know that? You should have let me know you were here."

I looked at Benny and he looked at me.

"C'mon, Benny. Let's go home."