



Expired

Evie Rhodes

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EVIE RHODES

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CHAPTER 1

SHE WAS WHAT SHE WAS, and to that end she would be. “Go! Go from this place. Nothing good can come of this for you,” said Anita, the bourgeois psychic phenomenon of Harlem’s teeming streets.

Anita stood on the sweltering sidewalk brimming with people. It was one of the hottest summers Harlem had ever seen. It was so hot, the sidewalk was buckling.

However, the heat and the world around her faded away as she stared at Tracie Burlingame, who had stopped at her table for a reading from her crystal ball.

Anita had not even touched her, but the instant Tracie stopped in front of her table, she had transformed into a spiritual quilting right before Anita’s very eyes.

Tracie Burlingame was a patchwork quilt, a live patchwork quilt. Just like the ones Grandma used to make to throw on the bed, from every piece of material that ever existed in the family. Except in this case what Anita was looking at was an exact replica of a quilt in the

spirit. Some of the patches were black, while others were hollowed out.

Anita had never seen anything like it in her seventy-plus years of peering through the layers of human beings. She had inherited the ability as a child, from a long line of Louisiana seeresses. A seeress was what was known as a woman prophet or a clairvoyant.

Never had she seen what she was looking at on Tracie Burlingame. Somewhere in the recesses of her memory an ancient religious myth was knocking around, but she couldn't recall it in detail. Anita did not like the black electrical current that swept through her body at the thought.

The hollowed-out patches of the quilt were raucous with activity, almost like a multitude of human hearts, many of them beating as one.

Then there were voices. The hollowed-out patches contained voices that spoke on their own. There were multitudes of them. In unison they screamed loud, almost deafening. Anita was sure everyone on 125th Street could hear them screeching.

In reality no one heard them but her. "RELEASE US!" they begged, agonized. "RELEASE US!"

The black patches were seekers. They had the characteristics of humans in search of something. They were being hunted. They were also a symbol of death.

Anita peered into one of the black patches, trying to determine its origin. A sharp, lizardlike tongue whipped out, swallowing a host of people with one lap.

It was like watching the Titanic sink.

A symphony of screeching, crying agony rang out in one collective voice. Then there was silence. Anita jumped away from Tracie Burlingame, gasping. She made the sign of the cross; then she blessed herself.

Had she possessed holy water, she would have thrown it on Tracie Burlingame, the whole lot of it. What this woman contained in her spirit was unnatural. It was downright ungodly.

“There will be hell to pay,” she muttered, not realizing that she had spoken the words aloud.

Anita Lily Mae Young backed away from Tracie Burlingame. “Don’t come back, you hear, girl?” she spat. Her jaw was swollen with a wad of tobacco. She promptly swallowed it.

She pointed her finger in Tracie’s face to make her point clear. “Don’t you be coming back here to me, girl. I mean it.”

She glowered at Tracie through beady eyes, which glowed with a strange light. Then the petite, turban-headed, brightly dressed woman turned away, abandoning her table on the street.

Anita sprinted through the crowded street.

She muttered words Tracie didn’t understand. The words Anita had spoken earlier were the ones that echoed in the chambers of Tracie’s mind. “Don’t you be coming back here to me, girl. I mean it.”

What had Anita thought she’d seen? She’d been a fixture on Harlem’s streets for twenty-five years, peddling her psychic predictions. Never had she been known to act this queer. Besides, no one ever really took her seriously.

Did they?

Stupid old bag, Tracie thought to herself as she fumed at the audacity of the woman pointing her finger in her face.

She looked at the crystal ball, which strangely enough was emanating a black stream of light. It should have been reflecting the colors of the rainbow on this sunny day.

She ignored it, turning her attention to the cards that Anita had left behind on the table.

Through no will of her own, unable to stop herself, she flipped one over. It was the ace of spades. The card beckoned to her. It throbbed with life.

Tracie shivered, although the heat was oppressive. The humidity was as thick as a blanket. She blinked and looked down at the card again.

There it lay placidly on the table. Tracie knew that the ace of spades represented death. She was not by nature a superstitious person. This was ludicrous.

It was ridiculous, she told herself. She was just paranoid. That stupid old woman must have spooked her. Maybe she wanted to get more money out of her by getting her to stop by again. But she'd told her not to come back.

Tracie laughed at the absurdity of the situation. Standing on a crowded Harlem street, she suddenly felt very alone.

“What a bunch of nonsense,” she uttered.

Gathering her wits about her, she finally left the table. She tossed her hair back, held her head up high, and strolled down the street, donning her black Fendi sunglasses. Those who had witnessed the fiasco watched her strangely.

Tracie Burlingame was a mythical, ancient, haunting patchwork quilt. She passed along Harlem's crowded sidewalk with the past, the present, the future, and multiples of black patches cast and gathered together in her being. But only those with the vision could see it.

* * *

The dim streetlights cast shadowy, blurry streaks of light in the small room of the decaying Harlem building. The air was tight, humid, sweltering. It smelled like old mildew mingled with the smell of human feces.

A strangled, gurgling sound caused the small child to cover its ears. The sight and smell of death layered itself over the room, a thick coating of it.

The beaten, withered man in the corner coughed. He looked at the child he could not help. He beheld the child for a last time as the light of life drained from his eyes. All over a horse and a dollar bill.

The men who had been sent to administer the beating laughed. They were small-time street hoodlums. The dying man was a notorious gambler who had ducked out on one debt too many.

Grayson Mounds, who controlled all the gambling activities in this part of Harlem, had ordered the hit after discovering he was not to be paid once again.

When he spoke it, was done. So Joe had played his last horse. They kicked him a last time for good measure. Briefly they considered the child. Then they discarded any idea of dealing with the child themselves.

They left the room. There was no threat-the child was too young to tell anybody a thing.

The whimpering child crawled over to the leftover carnage of the human being on the floor and put out a small hand to touch Joe's face.

Instantly the small hand was covered in a red, slippery substance. That was when it happened. It was a tiny, rushed explosion of a microcosm, splitting off into different beings an open vessel for the domination of spirits.

The child could no longer emotionally inhabit this space where it had witnessed a man being beaten to death, tortured, and torn apart. No. It would leave this place for safer ground. Take flight and journey into a different realm.

It was a realm the average human being would never cross. Along the way it would satisfy its hunger and lust for the red, slippery substance.

Three days later, when the child and the remains of the man were found, the child sat happily slurping from a bottle of soured milk.

The child was a true orphan now, because its mother had died sometime ago from poverty and a broken heart. It was just as well,

because this child's existence would not be predicated on human emotions.

The scene the child had just experienced would mold and create its future. It was the last nail in a coffin that would cripple as well as rule what would become a shell of a human being on the outside, and nothing but pure black malevolence salivating on the inside. In the absence of spirit there would be only darkness.

* * *

Tracie Burlingame. Her eyes were like a chameleon. They could change from a clear brown to shades of green and sometimes gray, depending on her mood, in the flash of a second. Occasionally they looked like pools of midnight black.

Tracie Burlingame was not your ordinary around-the-way woman. Nope. She walked to the beat of a different drummer. He played a rhythm that only she could hear, and she never missed a beat.

Tracie Burlingame was born and bred in Harlem. She was thirty-eight years old, sometimes going on the age of two and sometimes going on ninety. It all depended on which way the wind was blowing at the time.

On this day it was blowing due east as an agile, sensual, arrogantly proud Tracie ran alongside the traffic with a weight in each hand. On her right side the water stretched beneath the parkway. Her hair was windblown. She had a controlled, determined look on her face.

A few days ago she had visited and toyed with the old psychic up on 125th Street, but she refused to let that witch Anita crawl underneath her skin with her dour predictions. She should never have stopped there anyway. She had been raised in Christianity, though she was not a regular practitioner.

Heck, she wasn't an attendee in any sense of the word these days. But she knew better than to sample and frolic with the devil's wares.

However, she had been bored. She thought it would be a kick to toy with the old woman and play her games. Now she wished she hadn't. Still, she wasn't going to let it get to her.

Nor would she let the fact that she had drawn the ace of spades on her own bother her. It was just a card. Her life was a happy one with her boys. Well, maybe with the exception of Rashod. He had spread his doom. But still, she was happy and she intended to keep it that way.

The devil be damned.

Tracie halted, breathing deeply. She warmed up with her calisthenics. She stretched and pulled with the agility of a colt. She ran again when she was done with the brutal mechanics of her workout regime. Her workout was enough to knock out a horse.

She paced herself through makeshift hurdles, over rocks, tree stumps, and over turned garbage cans. Anything Tracie could hurl herself over was fair game.

Then she ran, full speed ahead, eyes focused, adrenalin pumping. The muscles in her legs worked like a mountain climber's.

Her feet dashed through the streets of Harlem as though she had a victory to reclaim. Sweat glistened on her tight, lean body. The more she could feel the heat of it gliding down her body, the more she pumped.

Finally, satisfied with her effort, she slowed her pace to a gallop, then to a walk. Tracie spotted the ice cream truck. A smile lit up her face. Yeah, frozen refreshment.

"Hey, Anthony. How ya doing?" Tracie said. Anthony could always be counted on to be in the right spot at the right time.

"I'm fine, Ms. Burlingame." Anthony beamed at the sound of her voice. Little did she know, he made it his business to be in the right spot whenever she worked out. He had her schedule down like a timer on a turkey. The man was infatuated.

"Give me a frozen yogurt. Strawberry."

Anthony shook his head in disdain. “Now, why you gonna play a brother out like that? You know I know your flavor.”

Tracie smiled. While she waited, she took off her backpack and tossed the weights inside. Anthony handed her the frozen yogurt. She put the dollar in his hand. “Thanks, Anthony.”

She left, slurping happily. She gave Anthony a dazzling thousand-watt smile as her well-coordinated body glided away. She was honed to perfection.

Anthony watched as she walked away. She was what he considered one classy lady. She had a style that you didn’t come across every day. She walked as if she knew a secret that no one else was privy to. Black grace, that’s what she was. Simply, black grace. Anthony watched Tracie until the next customer arrived. She disappeared around the corner.

Tracie watched the balloon vendor hand a string of balloons to a little girl. She walked over, intrigued by the array of beautiful, vivid colors. They put her in a good mood, so she bought a string of balloons.

She strutted down the street, the balloons in her hand. Having second thoughts, she circled back, walking up to a little brick encasement that overlooked the dirty river.

Tossing her sleek sheen of hair back out of her face, she released the balloons in the air. She watched the separating colors as the balloons floated out over the horizon.

For a brief moment joy swept through her. She inhaled. Her beeper sounded; a car backfired in the distance. Tracie turned at the sound of it.

* * *

Screams ripped through the late afternoon, slicing through the stillness of the day, as a young man was hurled from a rooftop. His body hung suspended in slow motion for a fraction of a second, and

then he plunged straight down, hitting the concrete with a dull thud. He lay with his neck broken and twisted.

When the screams sliced through the air, Sinead Watson looked up to see a body hurtling toward her with startling speed. It landed directly at her feet.

Sinead found she couldn't breathe. She reached for her inhaler to control the oncoming asthma attack. She fumbled to get it to her mouth, then took long gulps.

The body lay at an odd angle on the sidewalk. The neck was twisted, the eyes wide open. The expression was frozen in helpless terror. Sinead trembled violently.

Suddenly 135th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard was alive with confusion. People ran. Traffic was stopped in the street. A symphony of screams sang through the late afternoon air.

Across the street, in front of The Schomburg Center for Research In Black Culture, Souljah Boy watched the unfolding scene. His right eye twitched rapidly. Whenever something bad happened or was about to happen, his right eye always twitched.

A screaming, noisy crowd gathered around the body. A young man pushed his way through the confusion. Souljah Boy glanced up at the rooftop. He caught a glimpse of a profile, but it was barely discernible.

He shaded his eyes from the bright sunlight. Still he couldn't make out who it was from where he was standing.

Police and ambulance sirens sounded nearby. Andre Burlingame, Tracie's eighteen year old son, better known as Dre the Image Maker, for his outstanding shots in photography, stepped in the middle of the action. Souljah Boy spotted his approach from across the street.

Dre was an intensely serious young man who exuded raw male confidence and a sort of graceful nonchalance in his tall, lanky frame. He had a camera case slung over his shoulder. He wildly clicked off pictures of the scene.

Excitement and adrenalin raced through his body. He loved it when he was in the right place at the right time. He would capture the image that had set 135th Street on fire. He would add another history-making shot to his already bulging portfolio.

Dre knew he would have the first shots, which would be shown on the evening news as well as in the Amsterdam newspaper. As luck would have it, he had been right there. His would be the first shots they saw.

His heart raced at his good fortune. The camera whirred. He clicked off shots in quick succession. Before a person could say, “Boo,” Dre had snapped up the entire unfolding drama.

The streets were pure madness. People were screaming, hollering and crying. This only served to pump Dre to his peak while he clicked away, storing the horrifying portrayals on film.

Elbowing his way through the crowd, Dre reached the body on the ground for the supreme close-up. One click, the bulb flashed, and the camera slid down from his eyes as he looked down.

Shocked disbelief flashed across his handsome features. Slowly he dropped to his knees next to the body. A wail of electrifying pain burst forth from his lips. It echoed through the crowded street.

“Randy!”

An icy coldness replaced the excitement and adrenalin pumping through his bloodstream. Randy Burlingame was his brother. This wasn't some news item lying on the ground, broken and crumpled. This was his brother, his baby brother.

The only frame Dre could capture was the frozen expression on Randy's face. It swam in front of his eyes, as if encased in water. Dre's body had become statuelike. It was as though someone had thrown him into wet concrete. He couldn't move.

Souljah Boy, on hearing Dre shout out Randy's name shot into action, running across the street. He was Dre's best friend. It couldn't be. That could not have been Randy's name that Dre had called out.

He made his way through the crowd until he reached Randy and Dre, who was kneeling beside him. Without a doubt this was Randy Burlingame lying broken on the dirty sidewalk.

Souljah Boy glanced once more up at the roof. His right eye twitched even more wildly now. Finally, he returned his attention to the two boys in front of him. His good eye roamed over the body on the ground, down to Randy's shoeless feet.

Two things struck him fast: Where were Randy's boots? And why wasn't there any blood on the ground?

Souljah Boy locked gazes with Dre. He knelt down, putting a hand to the pulse in Randy's throat. He knew it was in vain. Randy's eyes had no life in them. But he felt compelled to check anyway, he couldn't stop himself. His fingers reached out, hoping to connect with a spark of life. There was none.

He glanced at his friend Dre. Slowly he shook his head. "He's dead, Dre."

Dark, black, searing terror engulfed Dre on his hearing Souljah Boy's words spoken out loud. It was as if, because Souljah Boy had spoke it, that made it real.

"No," Dre said.

Souljah Boy's shoulders slumped. He bowed his head and whispered, "Yes."

Souljah Boy lifted his head to look at Dre. His throat was swollen in grief. His eyes pooled over with tears.

Dre stared at Souljah Boy across an ocean of pain, the waves of it tangible in the air. Their eyes locked in twin tunnels of disbelief and grief.

From the roof, the hysterical sound of high-pitched laughter could not be heard on the street. It had been three days since Tracie Burlingame had visited the old woman psychic and drawn the ace of spades, the card that represented death.

CHAPTER 2

HUBERT NOSKOG, MD, WAS A seasoned veteran. He had jowls like a hunting dog's. Craggy lines ran through his face. His eyes looked as though he'd seen it all and then some. By the year 2004, when Tracie Burlingame's son was murdered, he was the chief medical examiner in New York City, having worked his way up through the ranks.

He'd been on staff for thirty years, so his having seen it all was pretty close to the truth.

Two NYPD police detectives surrounded him. Monica Rhodes was a young, bright, tough, and ambitious detective. She was saucy, hip, and extremely intelligent. An average-looking girl, but what she didn't have in looks she made up for in sharpness.

Detective Alonzo Morgan was a tall, streetwise, fascinating specimen of male sleekness. He had a head full of long dreadlocks that were captured behind his head with a band. The dreads lay in neat locks and hung down his back, almost to his waist. He looked more like a reggae artist than a detective. Everyone called him Lonzo for short.

The two detectives were in sharp contrast as partners, but together their work was efficient. So far, they had managed to pardon what they each considered the shortcomings of the other.

Hubert stood at the head of the sheet-covered corpse. It was laid out on a slab of steel. The two detectives stood on either side. Lonzo's cell phone rang. He removed it from his back pocket. "What's up? Lonzo here." He nodded his head. "Yeah, we're on it."

He clicked off and looked at Monica. "Tracie Burlingame, Randy's mother." He lifted his chin in the direction of the corpse. "She's here to identify the body."

Monica cleared her throat. She glanced at the medical examiner. "I'll start the procedure. This isn't going to be easy for her."

The standard procedure was to show the family of the deceased a photograph. However, they were always prepared in case a family member requested to view the body in person.

Monica walked out the door with an air of authority. She was an extremely svelte young woman, brimming with confidence.

Outside in the corridor, Tracie Burlingame stood ramrod straight, arrogant and proud. She looked both beautiful and ravished, as though someone had invaded her secret territory.

Her light cocoa-brown eyes stared at Monica from a face hauntingly at odds with the pain engraved across it. Even in grief, Tracie Burlingame was an extraordinarily stunning woman.

Tracie's sons Michael Burlingame, seventeen years old and Dre, stood supportively on either side of Tracie. Michael was an athletic basketball wonder.

Monica recognized his face from the newspaper. He was known as "Rebound" because of his extraordinary leaping abilities on the basketball court, and his incredible wristwatch timing.

Michael was an ambitious, shy, and compassionate young man. His heart was breaking for his mother and for the loss of his brother Randy, who had been the other basketball star in the family.

Raw pain glittered from his eyes. Dre who had had time to compose himself, was much more laid-back. His face was an unreadable mask.

As Monica approached, Tracie pulled herself up a fraction of an inch taller. She tilted her head slightly in the air. The two women's eyes locked in an invisible battle. Opposition sizzled in the air between them.

"Mrs. Burlingame?" Monica asked.

Tracie's eyes flickered. "Miss Burlingame. But you can call me Tracie. These are my sons Dre and Michael."

Monica nodded a greeting, suddenly put off by the icy haughtiness of Tracie's tone. She handed Tracie a standard photo of her son, following the usual procedure for identification.

Tracie barely glanced at it, handing it back.

"I'd like to see him in person," she said in clipped tones furious at the audacity of the City of New York in daring to hand her a standard photograph of her dead son.

"This way, please," Monica said, leading the way through the morgue doors. Tracie and her sons trailed behind her.

Tracie slowed her steps as she spotted the metal slab with the sheet-covered mound in the middle of the floor. Dre gripped her arm.

He tilted his head arrogantly in the exact mannerism of his mother. Michael's face became a picture of pain so raw it shot from his eyes. It held those who glanced at him.

Lonzo stared at Tracie for a long moment. He looked at her sons. Then his eyes found Tracie's face once again. To Lonzo's eyes, Tracie was a ravishingly beautiful young woman with a hint of smoldering sensuality, gazing into his own dark liquid eyes.

The touch of a shadow on the beautiful features quickly vanished under his scrutiny. In the space of a second, Tracie's cocoa-brown eyes flashed to gray, hazel, back to brown, and finally settled on midnight black. Lonzo felt as though he'd been hit with a sledgehammer.

Tracie took one step closer to the table. Monica crossed her hands behind her back. She positioned herself next to the medical examiner.

Lonzo gave an imperceptible nod of his head. The medical examiner silently removed the sheet from the victim's face.

The only sound in the room was the audible gasp that escaped Tracie's lips. Michael grimaced. Tracie tightened her grip on Dre's hand. Her long, colored nails cut into his skin, drawing blood, but Dre didn't flinch.

Tracie took another step closer to the table. The other perfectly manicured hand reached out to stroke the dead boy's cheek.

The medical examiner had been kind enough to try to clean up the body, knowing that the mother would have to ID it. He was just a sixteen year old child. But even this kind courtesy could not erase the extensive damage to the body.

Nor had he been able to erase the terror frozen in the features. The one good thing was that the boy's eyes were closed, so she would never have to witness the stark fear along with the terror that was frozen in his eyes.

While examining him, the medical examiner had had a queer feeling. He'd dealt with a lot of deaths, but this one made him uneasy. The look in the boy's eyes had made him wonder, what the hell had he seen?

Slowly Tracie removed her touch. She gazed into Lonzo's eyes with a clawing, biting pain. Sparks of dark chocolate brown sprayed from her irises. Lonzo returned her stare unflinchingly. Tracie crossed her hands in front of her. She bowed her head.

Dre spotted Randy's clothing on a nearby table. His eyes lingered on a small gold cross lying forlornly against the stainless steel next to Randy's wallet.

Tracie finally lifted her head. Tears glistened in her eyes like jewels, but didn't fall. Lonzo was staring at her, completely awestruck. She was causing a deep animal stirring to rise up in him.

The medical examiner slowly pulled the sheet back over Randy's head. Monica broke the silence. "Is this your son, Randy Burlingame?"

"No."

Startled looks ran rampant around the room. Tracie reached into her pocket. She pulled out her own photograph of Randy, handing it to Monica. It was in stark contrast to the one the City of New York had taken of the dead Randy Burlingame.

Monica looked at Tracie, then down at the photo of young, handsome, smiling Randy.

“That’s my baby. He kissed me good-bye when he left this morning.” Tracie shrugged. “I prefer to remember him this way.”

Monica took a deep breath. “Miss Burlingame, you’re aware that somebody might have pushed your son from the roof?”

“Tracie. Call me Tracie. I am aware that Randy may have accidentally fallen from the roof.”

Monica tugged on her earlobe. She swallowed hard. Sarcasm crept into her voice. She did not like this woman. Tracie Burlingame rubbed her the wrong way. The woman was grating on her nerves for some reason.

“And he decided to remove his shoes before he fell? Which, by the way, were not found at the scene of the crime.”

Dre stepped in. “That’s enough.”

Monica reached for her badge. She stepped forward, flashing it, up close and very personal, in Dre’s face.

“I’ll say when it’s enough. Monica Rhodes, Harlem Homicide Division. Official business.”

The medical examiner glanced at Michael sympathetically. Michael smiled his appreciation at the man. At least somebody in this room had the decency to show some sympathy.

Monica’s voice sliced through the air. “So tell me, Tracie, what was Randy wearing on his feet the last time you saw him?”

“Footwear.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“Karl Kani boots. Gold and black hiking boots. Black hardware. Gold strings. Kani emblem on the side.” The light cocoa-brown eyes

shed a couple of teary jewels, which spilled and glistened on Tracie's high cheekbones.

"Excuse me. Hardware?" Monica said.

As though explaining to a child, Tracie said, "The eyelets in which you lace up the boots."

"You're a fashion expert?" The sarcasm dripped from Monica's voice without disguise.

"No. I'm a mother."

Dre gripped Tracie's hand. He glared his hostility at Monica. "My moms is tired. So, you're gonna have to do this another time."

Monica nodded at the arrogant young punk. She smiled. "Count on it."

Tracie looked at the medical examiner, her eyes filled with anguish. Her voice was barely a whisper. "What time did this happen?"

The medical examiner reached for his chart, consulting it. He looked up at Tracie gravely. "Randy expired at approximately two p.m."

"Expired...I see." Tracie smoothly turned her back on them. She headed for the door with her two sons right behind her. Her heels clicked sharply against the floor. She sailed through the door. It slammed behind them.

Lonzo looked at the sheet-draped body. His eyes grazed the now empty space left by Tracie.

Hubert glanced at his chart. "There was one other thing I wanted to discuss with you." He looked at the two detectives.

"What's that?" They both said in unison.

"The blood, or perhaps I should say, the lack of it."

"Yeah," Monica said.

"It was on our list to ask you how he removed it. It's the strangest crime scene I've ever been on. I kid you not. This boy is thrown from the roof, and there's barely a trace of blood on the ground, plus, his shoes are missing. Weird stuff."

"Have you determined how the blood was removed?" Lonzo said.

The medical examiner peered over his glasses at him. “The old-fashioned way. He stuck a needle in his arm and simply drained his body of the blood supply. Maybe your guy has embalming skills. He barely left a trace as to his entry.

Lonzo laughed. “Stop it, Doc. This is serious.”

The medical examiner didn’t budge.

Lonzo’s eyes widened a bit. “Seriously? You’re kidding, right?”

Dr. Noskog’s expression never changed.

“You’re serious,” Lonzo finally stated.

“I am. Very.”

Monica sucked in her breath. “What’s he doing with the blood?” she wondered out loud.

Both Lonzo and Hubert looked at her, but there was no answer forthcoming.

CHAPTER 3

AFTER LEAVING THE MORGUE ON First Avenue, Tracie had the driver drop her off at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue. She stood in front of Harlem Hospital, under the canopy with Dre and Michael. She stared up at the roof of the Lenox Terrace apartments, from which her son had fallen.

Her mind refused to accept any other explanation. This was just a tragic accident. Not even a murderer could commit such a horrific, brutal crime.

She had been after Randy since he was a small boy about climbing rooftops. He loved to sit up there, staring down on the world. A tragic accident was what it was. That was all.

Tracie squinted in the fading sunlight. She pulled her shades down from her hair to cover her eyes. Something across the street drew her attention. Slowly the shades came down to the bridge of her nose. She stared over the top of them.

Rashod Burlingame, Tracie's nineteen year old son, her eldest, was racing across the street. Black twists sprouted all over his head, looking like black spaghetti erupting from his scalp. He weaved his way across Malcolm X Boulevard toward Tracie.

Tracie's skin crawled a bit at the sight of him. Lord help her. The mere sight of him had a way of churning her insides.

In Tracie's opinion, Rashod had one of the nastiest dispositions this side of the river. He was an extremely weak and emotionally unstable young man.

Yet he possessed a sensitivity that most people never got to see. He was also a veteran crack addict. He loved crack more than life, and woe to anyone who got between him and one of his coveted vials.

Motorists were blaring their horns, weaving around Rashod and yelling out of their car windows at him as he decided to slow his pace to a leisurely crawl while he crossed the street on a green light.

One guy yelled out of his window, "Yo, man? Can't you see? The light is green. You color-blind? Get a life."

Rashod ignored him. He swiped at his runny nose with the back of his hand. His pants slipped a little too low. He pulled them back up while taking another swipe at his nose.

Finally, he reached the safety of the spot in front of Tracie, on the sidewalk under the canopy. His face glistened with sweat as he focused on her and blatantly disregarded Dre and Michael.

"Mommy dearest," he said to Tracie, the sneer obvious in his tone.

Tracie swallowed hard. "What are you doing here, Rashod?"

"I want to pay props and respect to my dead baby brother. Harlem's grapevine don't know no end, baby."

"Don't call me 'baby,'" Tracie said in disgust. "The only respect you pay is to that pipe you be hitting."

Rashod laughed. He leaned in closer to Tracie. "Wrong. I also pay my respects to the Destroyer." He swept a low bow in front of Tracie's feet, paying mock allegiance to her. He glared once at Michael, then at Dre.

Rashod reached into his pants pocket. He pulled out his blunt. He put it to his mouth, searched for his lighter, lit it, and inhaled, blowing smoke at Tracie before turning on his heels and sauntering down the street in the direction of Sylvia's Restaurant.

Dre reached out a hand to snatch him by the collar for punking and disrespecting his mother. But Tracie put a restraining hand on Dre's chest. She pulled her sunglasses over her eyes.

She watched the back of Rashod as he glided down crowded Malcolm X Blvd. Pain swelled in her chest as she watched the first child she had borne disappear into the crowded street. His hatred of her washed her onto the shores of failed motherhood and desolation.

Here she stood on a street named after a man who thought they should rise. Instead the street was full of boys, girls, men, and women who were sinking. It was as if some unseen force were swallowing their very souls whole. Rashod, her very own child, was only one of them.

Tracie shook her head at the thought. And that was only one of Harlem's disparities. A cruel twist of fate was laughing at them for daring to dream, on streets that possessed the whispering souls of a Harlem Renaissance long past. They were living in shadows. Rashod was her shadow.

The truth was, Randy wasn't the only child she had lost. In reality, she had lost Rashod a long time ago, in both body and spirit. He was as dead to her as Randy. Tracie let out a silent, wordless sigh.

Crack cocaine, the spiritless demon, had stolen him from her. The only difference was that she would not have to commit his body to the ground. No, he was a live ache that she would have to live with.

He was one of the living dead.

As Rashod glided through the streets that were like a second skin to him, his mother wasn't the only person who watched him.

The second pair of eyes not only watched, they absorbed him. Then they turned inward, swallowing the ghost of Rashod Burlingame whole.

After all, he was only one of Tracie Burlingame's black patches. Yes, she was a patchwork quilt, all right. She was full of black patches and hollowed-out places.