

Chapter 1

Dear Journal,

Let me paint the picture.

There I was in full wind down mode. My little happy gummy had kicked in.

The jazz lo-fi playlist was doing its thing.

I was feeling good, right?

Perfect vibes.

My eyes started getting heavy. Sleep was inching closer and I wasn't trying to fight.

Then, BAM! There I was... back at Millbrook.

Imagine!

Me, Maya Calloway, inside that place. Again.

And a voice kept screaming my number while I ran around like a damn maniac trying to get back to my cell in time.

"Four nine one seven eight! Four nine one seven eight, check in!"

The dosage wasn't even high enough for the mental trickery.

I'm running down this bright, endless hallway and the voice just kept getting louder and louder.

"Four nine one seven eight! Four nine one seven eight, check in!"

Now that I think about it, the voice sounded a lot like Officer Barnes.

Who hated me as much as I hated him.

Needless to say, I will be switching to a different brand of happy gummies!

Honestly though, I feel a little betrayed by my subconscious.

Clearly, I still have more cords to cut.



Scenes From A Chrysalis

Bachata filled the air as Maya Calloway hurried down the escalator steps of the 15th Avenue subway station, her coral kimono wrap trailing behind her like a flowing cape. Every second and fourth Tuesday of the month, she facilitated a writing group at the Roseland Youth Center.

Journaling had been Maya's therapy while serving time at the Millbrook Women's Prison. Her words provided a freedom that transcended the slate-grey cage that held her physical body. Inmates were always aware that the actual fight while inside was to keep the current circumstances from capturing one's mind.

"Hey, Chocolate! You on the move today, I see ya! Got those knuckleheads writing Shakespeare? Toni Morrison?"

Bernard, the perpetually inebriated, self-appointed watcher of the block, yelled out to Maya as she briskly walked from the subway station to the entrance of the Roseland Center.

"Hi, Bernard. Don't call my scribes knuckleheads. Bye, Bernard."

Maya's words dripped sweet as syrup despite everything being said in one rushed breath before she breezed through the center's front entrance.

Greetings of "Hey MC" went up as Maya said her hellos to everyone sitting at the receptionist station as she quickly made her way to the conference room.

"Hey Maya," a smooth, Southern-accented baritone called from the doorway, "I was hoping to catch you before class started."

Maya's eyes and focus remained on the desks she covered with blank sheets of loose leaf paper and sharpened pencils.

"Well, it seems you caught me," she responded dryly, clearly focused on the task at hand.

The man with the muscular build took a few more steps into the room. "Well, I remember you said the kitchen didn't have enough storage to your liking. So...I made you some shelving to help free up some counter space. Or cabinet space. Whichever."

He leaned his head against the room's whiteboard, awaiting Maya's response.

"I could come through and mount them if you'd like."

Like Maya, Eric was from North Carolina. His people hailed from the western part of the state, to be exact. Mountain folk for generations. A tried-and-true Eastern North Carolina girl, Maya thought she and Eric were as different as night and day.

She was the woman about town. A city-living type. Eric, on the other hand, was the quintessential hunting, fishing, "living the woods and building things with his hands" brand of man.

"That's real sweet of you, Eric."

Against her better judgement, Maya made eye contact with the man who had her by about five inches, which didn't happen too often considering Maya stood slightly over six feet. The second tallest of her mother's three children.

"I have some events coming up for work. Evening things, you know? But I'll text you the next time I'm free."

Eric nodded but continued leaning against the wall, as if waiting for more conversation. By this time, all the desks were prepared for that night's session.

Maya looked up at the clock. Usually, a few of the writers would be there already.

"Roseland got the regional youth shelter of the year award." Eric spoke as if reading Maya's thoughts. "There's cake and punch in the conference room. That's probably where everyone is right now."

"That's right." Maya tapped the side of her forehead as if dislodging a memory. "I remember seeing that mentioned in the newsletter. Well, it's definitely well-deserved. Love to see it."

She made a mental note to purchase Noelle, Roseland's brilliant and amazing director, a gift. Hands down, Noelle was the engine who made that place run. She also provided the clearance for Maya to serve as a center volunteer.

A vote of confidence Maya would always remain sincerely grateful for.

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Eric leaned forward as if he were getting ready to say something else when a booming, high-pitched voice came from the hallway.

“MC, sorry we’re late! They had something sweet in the conference room and we brought you a plate!”

“Why, thank you, Denver.” Maya smiled as the writing circle began making their way into the room.

Another voice, this one scratchier in tone, spoke, “They had mac, um...it was called maca...um—”

“Macarons.” Denver came in with the assist.

“Yeah, those. We set some aside for you too, but we think Tony ate them. Sorry, MC.”

Denver and Jamir often could be found completing each other’s thoughts. While Denver was the more outspoken of the pair, it was Jamir’s introspective and philosophical thoughts that often gave the writing circle something to ponder long after class had ended.

Maya clapped her hands as the room continued to fill with writing circle members.

“Alright y’all, we’re going to start in about five minutes. And thank ya much for the cake—because a sister did need a sugar boost—and yes, I will be eating it while we write this evening.”

Another voice spoke. “You’re not watching your waistline, MC?”

To this comment, Maya quickly looked down, as if assessing the lower portion of her body.

“Yup, waistline is still there,” Maya responded without missing a beat.

“I know that’s right! Don’t do MC!” Denver turned in her chair to face the offending observer.

“Alright folks, let’s begin, shall we? Ten-minute free write, let’s see what comes out. And remember the rule—write the first thing that comes to mind. Don’t self-edit. Loosen up, be free.”

With the writing circle officially in session for the evening, Maya pressed play on the lo-fi music channel, which served as

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the background sounds. She then sat down at her desk to put her thoughts to paper.

After the time had passed, the call for any shares yielded the usual group of unafraid scribes. Ahmad, a young man who'd arrived at the Roseland Center after leaving his midwestern hometown because of unrelenting gang pressure, spoke first:

*Lock in. Lock in. That's all I really have to do. Make these
dreams
of mine a reality. I determine if they come true. Lock in.
Lock in.
I really can have this. Just got to turn my back to the
haters like
I'm Miles Davis.*

The circle clapped and gave finger snaps as Ahmad covered the bashful smile that formed on his deep brown, heart-shaped face.

"Turn my back to the haters like I'm Miles Davis, okay! We love a creative reference!" Maya clapped her hands.

"You're so creative, friend," Denver said with genuine admiration in her voice.

"Yeah." Ahmad's voice was back to its usual whisper tone. "I remember learning that Miles Davis would play with his back to the audience sometimes. I always thought that was cool."

"Sounds like social anxiety," a girl wearing a knit cap with a large fuzzy ball on top noted.

"Regardless..." Ahmad shrugged off the observation.

"Well..." Maya knew it was time to move things along. "It was good writing. I'll say that much. Thank you, Ahmad. Anyone else?"

With a beaming, dimpled smile, Denver shot her hand to the sky and Maya gave her the nod to begin.

"Okay, y'all, so this is a rap and I need everybody to either clap their hands or stomp their feet like this." Denver both

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clapped and stomped the beat for the group to follow. After she confirmed everyone understood the assignment, she began:

*Denver been that girl since two thousand and three
Never ride someone else's wave, that's just never
been me
My time is coming, trust I'm going to shine for
everybody to see
And if you on that hatin' ish then get from round here
Cuz I don't have time to spare
I'm seeing blessings everywhere
Because I'm God's child
Protected and never neglected
My steps are always directed
and they're headed to the top just watch*

A chorus of “ays” and finger snaps went up in the library after Denver finished, which made the exuberant young woman erupt into giggles.

“You all came out the gate active tonight, I see.” The creations of the group always impressed and amazed Maya. They inspired her more than they knew.

She clasped her hands together and turned her body sideways in the chair.

“I’m going to switch it up tonight. Originally, I was going to set up another prompt for us to work on, but since Roseland Center recently received the Shelter of the Year honor, I thought we could write our thoughts about how this place makes us feel.

What it represents for us. And any other elements you may want to add. Feel free to write this in any form—prose, a poem, a brief skit, or anything else—and be honest with it.”

The group sat in silence contemplating their thoughts about the Roseland Center, a youth shelter that served around three hundred houseless youth and young adults. A significant

number of those served were LGBTQIA youth seeking refuge from dysfunctional home environments.

Maya had started the writers' group at the Roseland Center two years earlier, and being a part of the organization, even on a volunteer level, had enriched her life so much.

It was a space where, even in the face of dire circumstances, flowers bloomed.

Toward the end of her sentence, Maya had become a voracious writer. It was as if her consciousness received a surplus of thoughts and she had to get them out before she had a breakdown. It was the beginning of a journey she trekked daily.

A practice that allowed her to process and make sense of her life.

Therapy and her time at the Roseland Center were keeping Maya afloat mentally. She was curious to hear how the others felt about Roseland and its place in their lives.

"Alright, folks, according to the clock behind me we have about fifteen minutes left. I can start the sharing with some of my thoughts and anyone else is free to jump in behind me until it's time to call it a wrap."

Maya spoke about how her love for writing saved her and continued to steady her mind daily. She talked about her younger years and how powerless she felt. The Roseland Center enabled her to share the empowering impact of words. Especially to those the world may have preemptively written off.

"Preach," someone piped up after Maya finished while a few others snapped or nodded in support and agreement.

"I can speak." A quiet voice came from the left side of the circle of desks.

Natalie, a young woman who had been a part of the group for a handful of sessions by this point, began sharing her thoughts.

"Natalie is my born name. The name my father gave me before he was killed five months later. I've always liked my name. It was fun and girly to me. One day, when I was fourteen,

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my name went from Natalie to Porsha. I didn't like that name but it's the name I had to answer to or else I would be beaten.

I have terrible memories attached to that name. A name I suspected would have gotten me killed one day."

Only the sounds of the ticking clock could be heard as everyone sat, riveted, listening to Natalie's words.

"One day I went to the corner store for a pack of condoms, a pickled onion, and a strawberry kiwi juice. I took a backpack stuffed with as much of my things it would carry and I kept going.

"And going.

"I made it to the library before they closed. I asked if there was a place I could go for help and shelter. They told me about the Roseland Center. Thankfully, one of the librarians drove me to the bus station and gave me twenty dollars. She told me she would pray for me.

"I had enough money on my card for a bus ticket to leave town and get to Roseland. While I waited, I prayed and prayed. I was so scared that the goons were going to get me and kill me. There were twenty-five text messages on my phone and forty-two missed calls. I just sat in the corner of the station rocking and praying.

"Finally, the bus came and I got on without looking back. I was free. It was around ten at night when I finally arrived here. Ms. Noelle and Mr. Garvey were the first faces I saw and I just wanted to cry.

"I completed emergency intake and they assigned me a room. For the first time in forever, I could breathe.

"When I walked into the dorm room, I saw a ladybug on the edge of one of my pillows. That's when I finally broke down and cried because I remembered what my grandmother used to say about ladybugs. How they were good luck and they represented transformation.

"I knew it was a sign that I was going to be okay.

"And I guess that's what the Roseland Center means to me. A place for me to be someone new."

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The clock struck nine p.m. just as Natalie finished. There were no shouts, snaps, or claps. Instead, everyone sat quietly, as if absorbing the profundity of the young woman's words.

Maya leaned forward to speak. "Thank you, Natalie, we honor your story and we thank you for sharing it with us. Sincerely."

Maya thanked everyone for being there that night as the young people got up to head to their rooms for bed. She and Denver shared their usual hug goodbye before she darted out of the room with Jamir not far behind.

Now, standing in an empty library, Maya allowed herself to cry at Natalie's story. And the fact that she'd felt comfortable enough to share with the circle. There were days when Maya felt absolutely aimless, but moments like this evening and stories like Natalie's reminded her that her presence and contributions to the world were valid.

Maya turned the library's light off and closed the door behind herself.

"Excuse me," a voice called from behind Maya.

She turned to see a young lady wearing a powder blue sweatsuit and blue and gray tennis shoes. Her hair was in long black and electric blue braids.

"My name is Harmony Michaels and Ms. Noelle told me to come to your writing class and I was going to start tonight but when I got here you guys had already started and I didn't want to interrupt so I just sat out here listening...and writing too."

She handed Maya a sheet of paper.

"Here. That's what the Roseland Center means to me."

With that, she turned and headed back upstairs to the dorm rooms.

Chapter 2

Maya stared up at her bedroom ceiling, partially covered with colorful fabrics and gold beading. Each room in her modestly sized apartment had a different style inspiration, with her bedroom décor having a “Casablanca After Dark” feel.

“...because, from the outside, people believe that all wood is the same, but so much depends on the tree. But you know who has the real good wood? Florida. Yellow pine and Rosewood trees. Real woodworkers know that’s the top of the line stuff.”

Next to her, Eric waxed on about the quality of wood products and the various factors that contributed to it.

“...and don’t even get me started on the termites...”

Eric had come over to mount the spice rack he had made for Maya. It was nicer than she expected, with intricate designs carved along the front and sides. She cooked a meal of chicken pesto pasta for the two of them, which led to the pair getting reacquainted in her bedroom.

So there Maya found herself. Recovering from a rapid succession of sheet-gripping orgasms. Listening to Eric talk about how casuals didn’t truly understand the business of picking the right type of wood for their projects.

“I never thought about it like that before, Eric. Who knew?” was all Maya could say.

There was a time when the two of them had been an actual couple, but Eric was a father of two, and somewhere along the way it seemed as if the spark had been rekindled between him and the mother of his children.

And Maya absolutely refused to be anyone’s third wheel.

Eric was an attractive, enterprising man, and Maya liked him well enough, but there was something about how he’d handled that situation that forever left a part of her cold. Yes, the

sex was phenomenal; she would always give him his praise on that one, but she knew she likely could never fully trust Eric again.

At last update, the two parents were back off and had been for some time. Maya knew Eric wanted another shot with her, but she also knew he was the type of man who could be snatched up by someone else in a heartbeat. He had a magnetism like that. So to protect her heart, Maya kept her distance emotionally. Occasional sex was enough for her at the moment.

And, truthfully, even that was too much.

"You're a Scorpio, right? I remember that." Eric finally came up for air from his introspective wood ponderings and turned to Maya. "Y'all are wizards, man...like real, true sex masters. All that stuff they say is true. I'm not an astrology person, you know, I'm just saying. But it's true. Real bedroom masters."

This brought a silly giggle out of Maya. "I didn't even know you remembered my sign like that. Let me find out you were keeping mental notes."

"Always." Eric turned to face Maya directly. "I try to know as much as I can because I think you're fascinating. And I know you know I feel this way. I love everything about you."

The giggles and smiles went away as Maya sank further into her royal purple and gold pillows.

"Don't overextend yourself, Mr. Morrison."

"I need you to let me back in," Eric whispered into her ear. A statement that could be taken both literally and figuratively.

"You consume my thoughts, Maya. Seeing you at Roseland isn't enough. I need—"

"What's going on with you and Gabby?" Maya cut straight to the gristle of the wing. The post-orgasm fog was quickly wearing off.

"You know what's going on. Our connection is the children."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yup. Okay."

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"Maya, we're not together."

"But you two tried to get that old thing back while the two of us were together, did you not? You wanted to have your cake and eat it too, Eric."

"That's not how it was, Maya."

"What do you mean? That's exactly how it played out."

"Maya...you were having troubles." Eric spoke the last word as delicately as possible. "You were mad at me for no reason. When I told you she had moved up here with the kids, it's like something switched off in you toward me and it never got back right."

"It's because I knew you were weighing your options, Eric. I went from being your woman to being part of some roster."

Now it was Eric's turn to sink into the soft fabric covering Maya's bed.

"I'm always going to care about you and I'm not going to let you freeze me out like you probably do others."

"What does that—"

"I'm just saying, Maya. This ice wall from you is only temporary as far as I'm concerned. It won't stop me."

Eric, fully naked, got out of the bed and walked toward the bathroom. He was as divinely chiseled and carved as the wood he loved to handle so much. A genuinely beautiful man. Maya rested her eyes on him as he walked.

"To answer your question, Gabrielle has a new friend now. A lady friend. And from the looks of things, it seems pretty serious. Which is good. I'm happy for her. Everyone deserves to find their love."



The next day, while on the subway to work, Maya made a mental note that she had enjoyed her last rendezvous with Eric.

Something about him conjured feelings of unease and paranoia in her, which she absolutely hated. Maya needed to feel in control of herself. She already had her own personal

battles, and the last thing she needed was the extra drama that came with insecure connections.

Maya looked down at her phone. There was a good morning text and accompanying silly meme from her mother, Sheri. Being in multiple group chats—family, her friend group, ladies from the inside who stayed in contact with one another, coworkers, her Roseland youth—kept Maya’s phone perpetually jumping and buzzing.

A World War Two era building housed the offices for Metropolitan Community Enterprise. In a previous iteration, the building served as housing for families who had recently emigrated to The States, as well as families migrating north during the Great Migration. The space was frequently cold and drafty, and plumbing issues were always constant.

Also, over time, Maya discovered there were also visitors from the other side roaming through the building that she caught glimpses of occasionally, but that was neither here nor there. They minded their business and she minded hers.

MCP funded community-based organizations around the city, and as a contracts coordinator, Maya provided support for a vast and eclectic portfolio of programs. She considered it rewarding work, even though the salary could have been higher.

“New tea,” Chad, Maya’s co-worker, whispered conspiratorially as she entered the office and walked toward her desk.

“Herbal or verbal?” Maya smirked, one eyebrow dramatically raised higher than the other.

This caused the two work friends to erupt into laughter as Maya turned her computer on to start the day.

Chad – short for Chadwick – Francis was the eyes and ears of the organization. He was almost always privy to any updates on who was about to be let go or which programs were on the funding chopping block. As well as other juicy tidbits and other miscellaneous observations.

Impeccably dressed despite the thin wages, Chad hurried over to Maya and leaned against the divider that separated Maya’s space from her always absent coworker.

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“Your friend may be up out of here soon.” Chad tilted his chin toward the empty workspace. “Said she plans to work remotely by hook or crook, honey. The big wigs seem to be getting the paperwork ready for Ms. Sis.”

“Yeah, I’m not surprised.” Maya leaned back in her seat. “I figured something was up. Remember that day she came in and was stomping around the office huffing and puffing. Was in here blasting Alanis Morrissette real loud too. Had to ask her to turn it down. What a weird day that was.”

“I know, right? Just bizarre.” Chad clutched the invisible pearls that stayed around his neck. “Came in here just raging. Disturbing our peace while we were just trying to do an honest day’s work. What she needed to do was head on down to one of those bars where you can throw axes and things. Let that anger out on your own damn time. Leave us out of it.”

A few staff members who had resigned when the office went from fully remote to hybrid to back onsite five days a week. The employee currently being discussed appeared to be locked in a battle of wills with senior leadership and was finding loopholes to remain working primarily from home. Maya gave her credit for having the nerve.

“Yeah, Sam from legal is in Brian’s office now.”

“Dotting Is and crossing Ts I’m guessing.”

“Mmmhmm.” Chad nodded. “No one’s above the program. Good luck, I guess.”

Maya shook her head and turned her attention back to her computer, which now displayed the endless pit that was her inbox. She began responding to some emails directly and forwarding others to her supervisor with her customary “for your review” tag.

An email from New Vision Collective caught her eye. The community-based organization provided shelter, case management, as well as other wraparound services for formerly incarcerated women to provide stability to get back on their feet.

A week earlier, an NVC client had been found dead in their apartment. According to the notes, the woman had discussed

suicidal ideations in the group therapy sessions. Her closest relatives were over a hundred miles away and the deceased had had no contact with them for years.

Maya received the incident report in her inbox the following Monday and had been obsessively ruminating over the horrible news. It triggered memories of a former life she worked diligently to bury for good.

What had been the woman's final thoughts? What had been the final straw? The one thing that made existence on Earth no longer a worthwhile option.

Maya didn't know this woman outside of an emailed incident report summary, but it had been enough to take the air out of her lungs.

Maya got up to go to the restroom. Despite the building's age and otherwise outdated design, the bathrooms were sleek and modern to ensure ADA compliance. There was a closed-off seating area Maya would occasionally frequent to decompress after long meetings. She sat there and stared at herself in the gold-framed mirror.

Maya's thick, chestnut brown hair was styled in a chic, layered cut. She wore a blush pink blouse, a black pencil skirt, and a cute pair of polka-dot, peep-toe pumps she'd nicknamed her Minnie Mouse shoes.

She didn't look like what she had been through. There was still light in her eyes. The circumstances of life hadn't broken her. She considered the years that had been taken from her. Some would say it was her own fault. Loving a violent, reckless man and refusing to practice self-preservation.

Maya's thoughts went back to the deceased woman. What had she been in for? Had she been horrible in life and her punishment truly balanced the scales of justice or had she been an unlucky soul caught in an unfortunate web of fate?

Closing her eyes, Maya lightly massaged her temples with the tips of her fingers. She took deep breaths and parted her nude, gloss-stained, full lips to let out a slow exhale. These self-soothing exercises lasted a few more minutes before Maya felt balanced enough to return to her desk.

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Maya felt Chad's eyes on her as she hurried back to her seat but he remained silent. She picked up the phone to call Saeeda El-Amin, New Vision Collective's founder and executive director who, over time, had become a dear sister-friend.

"Emergency Budget Amendment" was the subject title of Saeeda's email. She requested a line item adjustment that would allow her to bring in a grief counselor. "Many of our participants carry histories of trauma and this loss has heightened the need for immediate and ongoing grief support," the justification read.

Maya slipped on her headset and called Saeeda's office number. At that moment, the cheery tone of the phone ringing felt especially irritating.

Saeeda answered and Maya could hear the sadness in her usually upbeat, heavily Los Angeles-accented voice.

The two exchanged greetings, and for a few seconds, sat in silence.

"We finally reached a family member last night. The body... ugh, I hate saying that... is still at the morgue and we're getting money together to help with travel costs for her people to come here."

"Saeeda, I'm so sorry." Maya was at a genuine loss for words.

"We're numb right now, to be perfectly honest with you. It's like we have to turn our emotions off to get through this. Shana, her case worker, is the one who found her. That's why I sent that budget adjustment request. We need someone trained for this type of thing ASAP. For the staff and for the clients. We're going to need someone to process all this with."

"I forwarded it to Brian with the high priority flag," Maya assured her. "We have some things going on here that appear to be eating up a lot more time than anticipated but I'm going to do my part to move this along."

"I appreciate that. Really..."

"Anything I can do to help, please let me know, I mean it. The work NVC does is invaluable. We want you to know that you're supported."

Jana Jones

“I appreciate this more than you realize, and Lord knows we need all of the help we can get right now.” A deep melancholy saturated Saeeda’s words. “Just keep us lifted.”