

*"Thank you Jesus for waking me up this morning, but hey, Lord, my bed is still empty."*

Kara looked over at the white, satin-covered pillow lying next to her. Kara Nicole McDaniels was a complex sister, torn between spirituality and sexuality. Over the years, she couldn't decide which to do first—get her freak on or get her shout on. Kara had nightmares about losing herself on Sunday mornings in the First Baptist Church choir stand. In her dreams, she jumped to her feet with the intention of yelling, *"Hallelujah, praise Jesus."* But instead the congregation heard, *"Say my name-say my name."*

But the past few years had calmed her down. Life had mellowed her out a bit. Nowadays, she prayed for God to send Mr. Right, right now. "My spirit is strong, but my flesh is getting weak. And you did say marry or burn, Lord. Marry or burn!" Kara would say as if HE needed reminding.

Kara's split personality to some seemed a byproduct of her wild, Lucifer-filled mother she never met. Growing up, Kara's grandfather, the Reverend Leroy McDaniels, never missed a day telling Kara about her mother's wickedness and lustful demon ways. However, when The Good Reverend's back was turned, Kara's grandmother reassured her that she was a good girl and instructed her not to pay any attention to The Reverend's nonsense about being "damned."

Sister Marie McDaniels tried to give Kara a normal childhood and a little freedom, not the life of strict discipline and constant prayer that forced Kara's mother, Kathleen, to flee and never return.

It had been three years since Sister McDaniels had passed. Kara could still hear her soft, comforting voice and smell her Sunday dinners of pot roast, mustard greens, mashed potatoes and thick crust peach cobbler. God, Kara thought, how many times she had needed her grandmother in the past three years, but as always, The Good Reverend was still around to assure Kara of her fate with his words of hell, fire and brimstone.

It was an oddly cold day in Houston. Kara clicked the remote to turn on the television. The weatherman promised an even colder night.

"Damn! Damn! Damn! As Florida Evans would say," Kara joked as she stretched her long legs and extended her hands over her head in the air. She walked over to the oval, full-length mirror in the corner of her bedroom. The mirror reflected a slim, shapely, 5'8 woman who didn't look a day over twenty-five years old. Mother Nature had been good to Kara. She was also graced with good genes. All the McDaniels women looked young. Sister McDaniels' Creole blood ran strong through Kara's veins. She had what folks called *good hair*. Kara always wore her sandy brown hair pulled back in a conservative ponytail that formed a single Shirley Temple curl down the middle of her back.

Kara's figure was not what people noticed first when meeting her. They couldn't get past her grayish blue eyes. Kara's copper-bronze complexion magnified her eyes, setting off a moonlight glow; giving her a strange mystical look. To limit stares, Kara hid her dreamy eyes behind small rim corrective glasses. She never wore contacts like most people and Lasik was out of the question.

She took a critical look at her body through the hot pink teddy she wore the night before. Kara twisted from side to side, stretching her body, but wasn't quite satisfied. Shaking her head, she let the teddy fall to the floor. Now that's much better, she thought to herself. Again, Kara maneuvered her nude body from side to side, never taking her eyes off the reflection in the mirror. Kara ran the palm of her hand down her torso.

"Tummy still flat—not bad for a woman in her thirties," she said. She then took inventory of her breasts. She caressed each one and smiled. "Perky and Georgia peach size, perfect! Exactly a mouth full; anything more is a waste," she assured herself.

She faced her back to the mirror and twisted her upper body half way so that she could get a good look at her butt in the mirror. "Now that's an ass, rump roast, little brown caboose—whatever the brothers are calling it these days." She looked up to the ceiling.

"God, do you see this—all this?" She asked grabbing her behind firmly with both hands. "And still no man; what's a sister gotta do?" She walked away from the mirror with an apologetic grin, her way of telling God that she knew she had stepped out of line.

Yes, it was indeed a chilly morning. Kara's nipples hardened and goose bumps formed on her arms. She reached for her white terry cloth robe with red and pink hearts, one of her many personal-pampering purchases from Victoria Secret. As she adjusted the sash to keep her otherwise naked body warm, she took a few steps towards her bedroom window to take a quick peak at the day. Kara opened the blinds slightly. She watched people bundled in coats and scarves jogging, walking their dogs and couples dallying in the newness of the day, seemingly unconcerned about the cold wind that made the branches on the trees dance. Kara questioned what was keeping them warm.

She spotted an older couple holding hands. The woman's happiness drew Kara in. She watched the way the woman's shoulder-length hair moved as she walked. The woman was beautiful. She seemed to enjoy her man, laughing with an innocence that made her look seductive as each word rolled from her male companion's tongue. Kara wondered if his words would have the same affect on her. She stood gazing out the window at the couple, daydreaming that the woman could be her mother, Kathleen. The woman was beautiful and although Kara had never seen her mother in person, she knew in her heart Kathleen was gorgeous.

As a child, Kara was not allowed to inquire about her mother. The Good Reverend considered the sheer mention of his daughter's name an act of blasphemy. There were no stories, no pictures, nothing. There weren't any answers because Kara wasn't permitted to ask questions. It was like a black hole. Many nights Kara had cried herself to sleep on her knees while praying her mother would come home. She made up stories to explain to her friends the reason for her mother's absence.

"My mother is traveling the world," Kara would say.

Sister McDaniels tried to give Kara what she needed, but nothing could fill the void of Kathleen. She understood, because Kathleen's leaving left her with the same void. In her heart, Sister McDaniels knew her husband, as stubborn as he was, missed

his only child as well. Sometimes, she would find him in complete darkness in his study sitting in silence. Sister McDaniels knew that her husband was at that inner place where he longed for Kathleen and the smile that she once brought to his face and heart. She dare not disturb him, but prayed that the *Good Lord* would mend her husband's broken heart before his time on earth ended.

After Sister McDaniels' death, Kara found a chest in the attic. Her grandmother had saved all of Kathleen's belongings. The chest was full of clothes, letters, report cards, pom-poms and pictures. Kara left everything as it was except for one picture. There among all the misplaced memories was a picture of a young girl with a single braid resting across her shoulder. The girl was holding close to her bosom a baby in a white lace blanket. When Kara turned the picture over, she read in an unfamiliar handwriting—Kathleen and Kara 1969. This one she kept. It was hers and she had every right to it. She never asked The Good Reverend. Kara didn't feel she needed to; Kathleen was her mother and that was all that mattered.

Kara traveled back from her daydream and found the couple she had been admiring was no longer in sight. She walked away from the window and picked up the empty wineglass from the night before. As she left the room headed for the kitchen, she could hear the weatherman once again promising a freezing night ahead. Kara looked down at the empty glass that reminded her of the Chardonnay she had enjoyed the previous night and said, "not tonight, definitely hot cocoa instead."

After Kara placed the wineglass in the sink, she headed to the bathroom. It was her favorite place in the entire house. She loved it. She had no regrets; she'd allowed the contractor from Miller and Robinson to recommend Monroe. He'd turned her bathroom into a heavenly haven. Kara lit jasmine incenses and turned on the CD player hidden in her ivory-antique bath cabinet with aged brass handles. It had once belonged to Sister McDaniels' great grandmother (Madea). The cabinet was a family heirloom and one of the few things The Reverend permitted Kara to take when she moved out against his will.

Sade's Remix from Red Hot Riot "By Your Side" belted from the speakers strategically placed in the upper corners of the ceiling. Kara stepped into the shower. The hot water was soothing. The scent of jasmine and steam filled her haven. She relaxed, danced with herself, enjoyed herself and once the mood was right she brought pleasure to herself.