

## **Listen**

**Deatri King-Bey**

Jillian tipped into the room, tossed her crimson silk robe toward the ottoman in the corner of her bedroom then slid under the covers with her husband. Troubles trapped on the opposite side of the door, she planned on keeping them there. Her husband cupped her into his body. As always, she felt loved and secure in his arms.

“Would you be angry if I sold the children?” she asked.

Paul chuckled. “Depends on how much you get for them.”

She turned in his arms. Moonlight seeped between the curtains, showcasing his sparkling, dark eyes and mischievous grin. Eighteen years of marriage, two children, a dog and several fish hadn't dimmed the feelings they shared for each other.

“What did the Too Bad Crew do this time?” he asked.

“Same ol' same. They don't listen. Remind me to record myself. I'll pop in the tape next time.”

“You know it's against the rules of 'Teendom' for them to actually listen. We survived and so will they.”

“Times are different. The world's more dangerous.”

“Bet our parents had a similar conversation. I'll talk to them tomorrow. They can ignore me for a change?”

“Hate to break the news to you,” she thumped him in the chest, “but they already ignore you.”

He kissed her forehead. “I need to get ready for work. Look at it like this. They can never say we didn't tell them.” He stepped out of bed and turned on the nightstand lamp to its lowest setting. “I'll give the reinforcement talk on my way out. What am I reinforcing?”

“Don't waste your breath.” She watched as he selected an ironed set of scrubs out of his closet. “You should have seen Karen when I explained why she had to wait until she was sixteen to have a boyfriend. Her eyes glazed over, and her face took on that ‘The only reason I'm sitting here listening to you is because I know you'll knock the snot out of me if I walk off’ look.”

He laughed. “Is it that bad?” He opened the dresser drawer in search of fresh underclothes.

“Worse. Amber asked if she could baby-sit Susan this weekend. When I told her that I refuse to care for the child she is being paid to baby-sit, she said, ‘Sure, Mom.’ You know what that means—she wasn’t listening. Now you know I won’t allow a four year old to be neglected, but Amber is in for a rude awakening if she believes I’m letting her off the hook again.”

“What kind of person would leave their child with her? I love my baby girl, but she has a short attention span. She’ll be bored with the kid in less than five minutes.”

“Her parents know I’m home to supervise. I worry about the girls. In two short years Amber’s leaving home and Karen’s close behind. I don’t think they’re ready.”

“You’re a great mom. If they aren’t ready, there’s nothing you could have said or done to prepare them. Try not to worry so much, my sweet.”

Heart warmed, she watched him ready for work as she slowly drifted into sleep.

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Jillian looked at the clock on the dashboard—7:50 a.m. Her daughters should have been out of the house five minutes ago. She cut off the Camry, grabbed her purse, and walked into the house. Their pet miniature pinscher ran to her. “How’s my little monster?” She carried the puppy into the kitchen.

Amber slapped a peanut butter covered slice of bread onto a grape jelly covered slice then tossed the butter knife at the sink. The knife glided a good three feet but fell short, smacked the edge of the counter and plopped to the floor. Jillian saw her husband’s devilish grin cross her eldest daughter’s face.

“I’ll get that, Mom.”

“Where’s your sister?” She set the puppy on the floor, her keys on the wall hook, and her purse in a chair.

Amber yanked a paper towel off the roll. “Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who’s the vainest of them all?”

“Thanks, sweetness.” She stood in the doorway of the kitchen and peeked up the stairwell. The bathroom light was on. “Karen, get out of the mirror and come here.”

“I’m coming. I’m coming.” The bathroom went dark and Karen hopped down the stairs. “Okay,

I'm ready to go. Sorry I'm late." She straightened her blue jean jacket and blue jean skirt then stuffed her laces into her blue jean tennis shoes. "Mom, do you think they make blue jean shoestrings?"

Amber wrapped her sandwich in a paper towel. "Are you sure you brought the correct baby home from the hospital, Mom? She can't be one of us." She took her book bag off the back of the chair and flung it over her shoulder. "I'm ready."

Karen glared at Amber. "I don't like you."

"And your point?"

Jillian enjoyed watching the girls' daily sparring match, but they were running late. "Have a nice day at school today." She kissed both of her daughters on the cheek and went to her bedroom.

The girls followed closely behind. "Uh, Mom," said Amber as she stepped into the room. "Didn't you forget something?"

"Yeah, forget something?" Karen motioned between herself and Amber as if she were Vanna White showing the letters on Wheel of Fortune.

"Nope," answered Jillian as she disappeared into her walk-in closet.

The girls stared at each other.

Karen rolled her eyes. "Awe, man! It's Saturday, isn't it?"

"You guys better hurry before you're late for school," called out Jillian from the closet.

"But, Mom, you're our ride," said Karen.

Jillian stuck her head out of the closet. "What did I tell you yesterday, girls?"

They both released exasperated breaths. "That if we weren't in the car by 7:50, you weren't giving us a ride," drawled Amber. "But we didn't think you were serious."

"Yeah, you didn't really mean it did you?"

"When was the last time I said I would do something then didn't do it? You two have been around me over fifteen years now. You should know that when I say something I mean it.

You'd best get going. Did you forget what I said about your cell phones if you're late for school?"

Both children bolted out of the room.

Jillian searched through the clothing racks for the least wrinkled outfit. She'd been on the children since the beginning of the school year about their timeliness. They didn't want to ride the bus because they wanted the extra thirty minutes of sleep. Jillian didn't mind giving them a ride. This was a matter of principle. Each day they arrived at the car later and later, until they were actually late to school a few times. They didn't care that she took her time to do them a favor. Rather, they kept her waiting as if her time were not valuable. Plus, Jillian refused to give them a ride to school only for them to be late. That didn't make any sense.

She picked through her slacks. Episodes such as this morning's didn't bother Jillian. Tardiness was easily fixed, and pushing limits was part of being a kid. What worried her were the life's lessons they'd tune out whenever she spoke.

Thinking black went with everything, she selected a pair of black slacks.

She heard her husband walk into the room. "Hey, babe," she called out. "How was your night?" She sorted through her blouses.

"Too long." He kicked his loafers off. "Did I just see our kids running down the street?"

"Yep." She exited the closet with her slacks and a green silk blouse.

"They were late again, huh?" He laughed. "I should sign them up for track or something. They were really moving out. Are you taking their phones from them?"

"Yep. Every time they're late, they lose their phones two days."

"And it's the weekend. They picked a rotten time to test the waters."

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Jillian parked her Camry in the driveway next to her husband's Durango. A day of strategy meetings at the office had passed, but now was time for the real work. From the inside of the car, their home looked peaceful: colorful leaves from the neighborhood trees were carried across the yard by the breeze, burgundy mums lined the walkway to the house, ghost and goblins

peeked out of the upstairs windows, and a witch was splattered against the front door.

She took time to enjoy the beauty and prepare for what lay inside the house. The children were home and would have plotted a way to keep their phones. She smiled thinking about how the girls thought they knew it all. As a child she'd thought the same thing; as an adult she wished she knew a quarter of what she'd thought she knew back then. She grabbed her briefcase and purse then headed for the house. Summer had decided to make an encore performance. If she played her cards right, she'd have time to sit on the porch swing and read before the evening chill nipped the air.

"Do I smell chicken, greens, and..." Jillian closed her eyes momentarily, "...real cornbread?" She shut the door and walked fully into the house. She'd taught the girls how to cook over the years, but they acted like they were allergic to the stove. The only time they'd cook dinner without being told was on the fifth Sunday in February.

Karen ran out of the kitchen. "Hey, Mommy. How was your day?" She took her mother's briefcase and purse.

"Thanks, darling." Jillian hugged her daughter. Karen called her Mommy whenever she wanted to portray the baby girl role. "My day was great. Would you let the windows up for me? We might as well have fresh air while we can."

Karen ran off to do her mother's bidding. Jillian followed the wonderful aromas into the kitchen. Every fall they'd raid the garden then spend three days cooking, packaging and freezing vegetables. The greens this year were particularly nice. "Dinner smells fantastic." She hugged Amber then washed her hands in the sink.

"I learned from the best." Amber took the cornbread out of the oven and placed it on the stove. "Everything's done."

After dinner, the girls helped Jillian clean the kitchen. At this point the children usually disappeared, but not today. Today they stuck to their mother like the IRS on Al Capone.

"Mommy," said Karen. "We're really sorry about taking so long to get ready in the morning. We learned our lesson."

A smile touched Jillian's lips. "I'm glad to hear that, darling."

"Well um. Since we learned our lesson, um..." Karen shifted her weight from foot to foot. "Can we keep our phones this weekend?" She spoke faster. "I have a lot of really important calls."

And faster. "I know you and Daddy don't want us tying up the house phone. We promise never to be late again."

"Slow down and take a breath before you faint," said Jillian.

"Can we please keep our phones?"

"I'm glad you've learned your lesson, but now you must suffer the consequences of your actions."

Karen's head dropped backwards. "Aw, man. We won't be late anymore. I swear."

Amber stepped forward. "Sheesh, girl, give it up before you get our phones taken for a week."

"Well I have calls to make before I'm thrown into the Ice Age. Can I sit outside, Mom?"

"Sure, darling."

Karen walked out of the room with her lips poked out.

"Y'all should have stopped having kids after me," said Amber.

Jillian stifled a grin. "Don't be mean to your sister. When is Susan..."

Susan bolted into the house. "Mama Jill!" She ran to Jillian and wrapped her arms around her. "I go ta school now. Im'ma big girl. I can write my name. Wanna see?"

Jillian's eyebrows rose in exaggerated disbelief. "Wait a second. You're only four. You can't write your name. You're trying to trick me."

Barrette tipped ponytails flapped wildly with the shaking of the child's head. "Ah humm. I really can!" She skipped into the living room and sat at the bookshelf. The coloring books, fairytales, sketchpads and colored pencils on the bottom shelf were for children that visited the house.

Jillian kicked off her shoes, sat on the floor and then watched Susan write her name. The 'a' was backwards, but the little girl did a great job. She showed the child how to write an 'a'. "Sit at the coffee table and color a bit."

"Okay, Mama Jill." She set the writing tablet and the X-Men coloring book on the table.

Jillian searched for Amber. As suspected, she was in her room on the cell phone. “Amber, aren’t you supposed to be watching Susan? You didn’t even say hi to her.”

“I’ll call you right back.” Amber hung up. “She’ll color until she gets tired then find something else to get into. We have the most child proof house in the world.”

Jillian crossed her arms over her chest. “No one made you take Susan. You asked for her. Now get your butt out there and take care of your responsibilities.”

“But, Mom, my friends are coming over and Susan gets bored around them. Would you watch her for a few hours? She’ll be ready to fall asleep by eight—nine at the latest.”

“You should have thought of that before you said you’d take care of her. I told you I’m not watching her for you. She is your child this weekend, your responsibility. Why not call your friends and tell them you’re a mother this weekend. Unless they want to play auntie, don’t bother coming over.”

“Well what should I do with her?”

“You’re a smart girl and a heck of a lot closer to four than me. I’m sure you’ll think of something.” Without allowing Amber to comment, she returned to the living room bookshelf. She had a whole row of novels that begged to be picked: mystery, romance, suspense, science fiction and fantasy. She smiled. So many wonderful choices.

“Hey, Susan.” Amber sat on the floor beside her. “What are you coloring?”

Susan pointed at a picture of her favorite X-Men character. “I’m gonna be Storm when I grow up.”

“Oh really,” said Amber. “I think I’ll be Wolverine when I grow up.”

Susan sucked air through her teeth. “You can’t be Wolverine. He’s a boy.”

Amber laughed. “I see your point.” She cleared the table then held her hand out for Susan. “Let’s go into the basement and find something to get in to. I’m sure your Mama Jill would like some peace and quiet.” They left hand in hand.

Jillian curled up on the couch with a murder mystery. Halfway into the first chapter, the crime scene was interrupted by Karen’s voice. She leaned on the back of the couch and looked out the

front window. Sure enough, Karen was standing in the front yard speaking with a young woman as if the poor child was three doors down.

It seemed as if Jillian was forever telling Karen the whole world wasn't interested in her conversations. She was about to tell her to keep the noise down when Karen's words registered in her mind.

"Didn't I tell you to stop messin' with these knuckle headed boys? Now look at you. How many times your heart been broken this year?"

Karen rotated her neck and plopped her hands on her narrow hips. "At least three, and it's only October. What are you doing to yourself? We're kids. We're supposed to be having fun. Not man trouble." She held her hands up. "Wait a sec. I mean boy troubles."

"I know you're right, but it's hard."

"Hard my foot. You'd better do like I do. Say your mama will kill you if she even thinks you have a boyfriend before you graduate from school."

"You told me Mama Jill said you had to wait until you were sixteen."

"She did, but they don't know that." Both girls laughed.

Jillian's heart swelled with pride. Karen had obviously been listening and learning more than she'd shown. "Karen," she called out the window. "It's getting late. You guys come into the house."

"Okay, Mom."

Amber and Susan hadn't made a sound since they left the living room. Jillian set her novel on the coffee table then went to the basement to check on them. She heard a Richard Scarry Busytown video playing as she descended the stairs. She hadn't seen one since Karen was five and thought the videos had been thrown out years ago.

"Look what we found, Mom." Amber held up a gingerbread man puppet. Jillian had made puppets of the children's favorite fables when the girls were around Susan's age. "I used to love these. Tomorrow can you show me how you made them? Susan wants to take some home." She sorted through the Five Chinese Brother's set of puppets. "I know it's silly, but I don't have the heart to give these away."

“You’re not being silly, sweetness. I’d be glad to show you.”

Amber turned to Susan. “Did you hear that, sweetness? I get to make you your own special set.”

Susan squealed her happiness.

“Is it too late to bake cookies?” asked Amber. “I mean from scratch.”

“First dinner, now this. I’m scared of you. Do you need help?”

She organized the puppets. “Nah, you’ve had a hard week. I can get this. Help me clean, Susan, then we’ll bake cookies.”

“Yeah, cookies!” cheered Susan.

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Jillian tipped into the room, tossed her crimson silk robe toward the ottoman in the corner of her bedroom then slid under the covers with her husband. Their children were fine young ladies headed down the correct path, and she planned on keeping it that way. Her husband cupped her into his body. As always, she felt loved and secure in his arms.

“Would you be angry if I said I want another child?” she asked.

Paul chuckled. “Depends on how much you’re paying me.”