

AFTER ALL

LYNN EMERY

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In 2000 Black Entertainment Television (BET) produced a movie based on this novel. [After All](#) starred Holly Robinson Peete.



Chapter 1

Michelle watched the blinking red light in fascination. Years of hard work and sacrifice had lead to this moment. She thought of her days slogging away at a small town newspaper editing copy; the day she finally got a byline; then the first time she went on the air at a local radio station reading headlines fed from a news service. Every step she had taken in her career was with an eye on one goal, television news reporting. Still, her stomach muscles tightened as the camera moved closer. Was she ready for this?

“Just got a hot tip from my source at the police department. Councilwoman Wilson's son just got arrested for possession of pot. At least we've got something hot to lead with now. So dump that snoozer on the new community center opening.” Jason Brett, the producer's assistant, spoke in rapid fire delivery as he lifted the top sheet from the neat stack in front of her.

“Give me that back!” Michelle snatched the paper from his hand.

“Thirty seconds,” Bob, the cameraman, barked at them.

“You kids play nice now.” Even with most of his face hidden behind the camera, his impish grin was visible.

“What do you think you're doing?” Jason's face turned several shades of red.

“Those people sold chicken dinners and washed cars to get that center open and I'm going to see that they get recognized.” Michelle's large brown eyes glittered with ire as she stared him down.

“Fifteen seconds,” Bob called.

“Why you--”

“Ten seconds.” Bob stuck his head clear of the camera. “You planning to make your debut on the six o'clock news, Jason?”

A fuming Jason scurried out of view but stood glaring at her. Bob raised his hand as he silently counted down. Within a split second, he pointed at Michelle. The red light winked out and a green light came on.

“Good evening. Welcome to Channel Twelve, the News Leader. I'm Michelle Toussaint filling in for Steve Stroder who's a little under the weather. Leslie Gravier has the night off. Among our stories tonight, through hard work and without government assistance, folks in the crime ridden community known as Easy Town provide an alternative to the streets for neighborhood kids. And our school board grapples with a serious budget shortfall. But first, our lead story. Randall Wilson, son of local councilwoman Hazel Wilson is again in the news--”

Michelle concentrated on her delivery and poise, determined to appear as though she had been born reading the news in front of thousands of television viewers. Yet when Fred Cambre began his weather report, she couldn't refrain

from taking a deep breath. It was as if she had been under water for the first fifteen minutes of the broadcast. The rest would be easier than having to carry the whole load. Just her the luck the chance she finally got to co-anchor in Leslie's place, Steve came down with the flu.

“And that's it for sports. Join us later tonight for Sports Spotlight at eleven. Michelle.” Gary Twill, dapper in his deep green jacket, nodded crisply. The former college football star flashed his famous smile at her.

“Thanks, Gary. Finally, a grassroots effort by parents and several small churches pays off. After a lot of hard work, residents in one of the toughest neighborhoods here in Baton Rouge finally opened the doors of renovated house that had been a haven for drug dealers and users.

Now that house will provide services to uplift young people. Channel Twelve salutes the Highland Street Community Center as the newest beacon of hope in place that sorely needs it.” Michelle rapidly read the story omitting several lines since time was short. Bob even rolled twenty seconds of the video tape.

“That's it for the news at six, join us at ten o'clock for a complete update on these reports and more.” Michelle felt comfortable and relaxed.

“Smooth, Michelle. Real smooth.” Bob winked at her. All three cameras were now off. “Uh-oh, shark approaching,” he said in an undertone.

“Jason tells me you have the idea that *you* decide what stories get on.” Weston Lockport, tall with gray touching the temples of his black hair, walked up close to Michelle as she stood sipping from a tiny paper cup of water.

“I read the story on Randall Wilson.” Michelle knew better than to smile or make excuses. Fighting the urge to step back, she merely tilted her head up to gaze into intense black eyes.

“But you don't argue with the news producer.”

“I didn't argue with you.”

“Jason acts on my instructions, something you know very well.”

“I didn't refuse to do the story. Do you think I'm crazy? I just told him I had enough time to do the community center piece, too.” Michelle kept a straight face. She knew that an anchor had little if any say so in what stories got on and to buck the producer or news director was professional suicide.

Lockport arched his thick eyebrows at her. “That's not exactly how he described it.” The studio went quiet while he studied her for several moments. “Solid presentation though.” He nodded curtly before he strode off. That was high praise indeed from the usually taciturn producer.

“Whew, you dodged that bullet.” Kate, the short, plump production assistant, waited until Lockport was off the set before approaching Michelle. They walked to the newsroom together.

“I know. That little weasel Jason really grates on my nerves. Every time I've tried to get on a story that's positive about our community, he slams it with Lockport.

“Listen, I'm just a lowly production assistant, but I say be careful. Jason can be a spiteful weasel, and Mr. Lockport listens to him for some reason,” Kate warned.

“Yeah, well. It was worth it to see him change more colors than the fall leaves in New England,” Michelle snickered.

“He was so steamed, I swear he was whistling like a tea kettle.” Kate covered her mouth to smother a giggle. The amusement left her round face. “Uh, I gotta go. Hello, Jennifer.” She hurried off.

Jennifer Callaway, tall and blonde, never even glanced at Kate let alone acknowledge her greeting. Ruthless in her pursuit to win more awards than any other reporter, she had little time for those who could not further her career. Wearing a blue pant suit that showcased her fabulous figure, she did not enter a room as much as she took possession of it.

“Well, you didn't screw up. This time.” Jennifer gave her a frosty smile.

“So gracious in defeat. An attitude befitting a former Miss Dunghill, 1984.” Michelle made a small curtsy.

“Miss Springhill,” Jennifer hissed at her with a scowl.

“Whatever. And no, according to Mr. Lockport I definitely did not screw up as you so delicately put it.” Michelle strolled to her desk.

“Don't get too used to it. I mean affirmative action can only take you so far.” Jennifer followed her.

“What?” Michelle whirled around.

“You heard me. Lockport has his marching orders, sugar. Having you on screen is politically correct. But that's only a fad. Real talent and ability will win out.” Jennifer tossed her hair.

“You're right. So where does that leave you? I know, Bingo the clown is up for grabs on the afternoon kiddie show. You can handle that. They print his cue cards in words of three syllables or less.” Michelle's eyes smoldered with anger.

“Ha-ha. We'll see if your smart mouth doesn't get you in big trouble. If that stunt you pulled tonight is any clue, all I have to do is wait until you self-destruct.” Jennifer flounced off.

“Damn her.” Michelle slammed a desk drawer. Hard as she tried, the suggestion that she was being given breaks for anything but her ability really touched a nerve.

“I heard. She's just green with envy and willing to say anything to hurt you.” Gracie gave her shoulder a pat.

“But she could be right. For years this station has been lily white. With all the industry emphasis on diversity, token gestures are being made all over the country.” Michelle stared at the computer screen in front of her morosely.

“Listen, you're good. We know it and they know it. So what if their motives aren't pure. Success is the best revenge I always say.”

“You know, for a red-head you're all right.” Michelle smiled mischievously.

“Hey cuz, us Irish gotta stick together.”

“Shoot, I never should have told you about that distant branch of my family tree.”

As Michelle joked with her friend, she began to wind down from the tension of her debut. Though they rarely saw each other after work, she and Gracie were close colleagues. With her easy going style, Gracie was a perfect balance for Michelle who tended to take herself too seriously. Though only four years older, Gracie had more experience under her belt and none of the ego usually found in the business. She had helped Michelle with valuable advice during her first year at the station.

The news room still hummed with activity as the evening shift of reporters bustled in and out gathering material for the late newscast and stories to be presented on Monday.

“Look who's here.” Gracie tapped Michelle on the shoulder and pointed.

Michelle felt a hard thud in her chest. Even six years later, the sight of Anthony Hilliard made her heart beat faster. But now she was twenty-seven and should have better since. Still, Anthony the man brought on the same reaction now as he'd caused when they met at age fourteen in the lunch room at Glen Oaks Junior High.

“Mr. Hilliard, it's so nice to meet you.” Jennifer purred as she held the hand of the tall handsome man in a somewhat less than businesslike handshake.

“This could be a new horror movie, Lizard Man meets the Incredibly Annoying Woman,” Michelle snorted in disgust before turning back to her computer.

“With that face and body he could stick his tongue out at me anytime.” Gracie sighed.

“Take a cold shower,” Michelle retorted. “Thought you were so in love with your husband, Hal the hunk.”

“Just 'cause my plate is full don't mean I can't look at the menu.” Gracie winked.

"I ought to call your reverend daddy. And a Black man at that." Michelle shook a finger at her.

"Now, daddy has mellowed these past few years. Why he even invited a Black pastor to worship at his church. Hello, good-looking man at two o'clock," Gracie whispered.

Anthony Hilliard moved across the room with the same agility he was famous for on the basketball court and the track field. His six foot two frame formed a triangle, with broad shoulders narrowing down to his trim waist. Though clothed in an expensive brown suit, it was still easy to see that his arms and legs were thickly muscled. With skin the color of brown sugar and dark brown hair, he caused female heads to turn. Anthony flashed a winning smile that melted almost everyone. Michelle folded her arms. Her expression meant to convey she was not bowled over by his mere presence.

"Hello, Michelle." His deep baritone voice rolled out like a velvet carpet. Anthony extended his hand.

"My, my," Gracie breathed.

"Oh, grow up," Michelle hissed in her ear. "Hello, Anthony." Michelle gave his a hand a weak shake before pulling hers back.

"Congratulations on a fantastic job. You haven't lost any of your style when it comes to public speaking. You didn't ace Speech class in our senior year for nothing."

"Thanks. Oh, this is Gracie O'Hannon. Gracie--" Michelle began to straighten the teal jacket then stopped. Why should she care what he thought of her appearance?

"I know," Gracie broke in. "Pleasure to meet you Mr. Hilliard." She pumped his hand all the while grinning widely.

"Good meeting you, Ms. O'Hannon. That story you did on our church last week was outstanding."

"Gee, thanks. It was great learning it's history. A hundred and twenty-five years and still going strong. Christ the King Baptist Church is something you can all be proud of."

"We are. And thanks to your story, we've gotten more support to expand our after school programs for kids."

"Oh, wow. That's just wonderful." Gracie blushed.

"So, what brings you here?" Michelle tried not to make a face at her friend. She would not be taken in by his cheap attempts to win brownie points.

"I'm being interviewed for the Sunday Journal show."

"Really? Isn't that-- nice." Michelle kept shifting her gaze from those intense dark brown eyes. But she found herself staring at his shoulders, then his broad chest.

Finally, she decided she was better off looking at his face. She shuffled her weight from one foot to the other.

"I... just thought I'd say hello since I saw you." Anthony's eyes held a question. "I've been back in town almost two months now, you know."

"Yes, I knew." Michelle had spent those first weeks taming the urge to call him. But she had been determined not to give in.

Looking from one to the other, Gracie began to back away from them. "Goodbye, nice meeting you, Mr. H--." She bumped into Kate who was startled out of staring at the scene before her.

"Anthony, please." Anthony's smile lit up his handsome face.

"Anthony." Gracie gave a short laugh. Turning she bumped into Kate again. "Isn't that your desk over there? Move." She spoke through tight lips as she pushed Kate ahead of her.

Anthony turned back to Michelle. "Like I said, I've been back home for awhile now. Working in Atlanta was a great experience for me."

"I heard you were working for Darryl Beshears. Pretty impressive learning from one of the top African-American architectural and construction empires in the country." Michelle was sincere. Darryl Beshears was as famous for building community centers and youth sports gyms for a song as he was for making million dollar deals to build large corporate structures.

"It was invaluable. I learned more about the business than I could ever learn in a classroom. But it was demanding. I had little or no social life." Anthony raised his left hand to smooth his hair, even though it was perfectly in place.

"Really?" Michelle noticed that he wore no wedding ring. Her pulse quickened.

"What about you? I suppose your career has kept you very busy, too."

"Pretty much, yeah." Michelle was careful to keep her face blank, her arms still folded.

"But I guess you have to eat dinner sometime, right?"

"Mostly on the run."

Michelle allowed herself to take him in from head to toe for the first time. Being this close to Anthony again brought back a rush of memories and, disturbingly, old feelings. Their separation and the demands of her career had done much to dull the ache caused by their breakup. But now, with him so near she found it hard to feel the rancor that had sliced through her six years earlier. Here he was, just as handsome but with a confidence that made him even more attractive. She smiled in spite of herself seeing his tie a tiny bit crooked.

"Pull it a little to the left." Michelle tugged at her own collar.

"Still happens from time to time. You always did have to get me straight." Smiling, he arranged the silk paisley tie.

"How's your mama?" Michelle asked. Unfolding her arms, she leaned against her desk.

"Better. She's taking her medicine now. I see to that." Anthony's face softened into an expression of tender affection.

"That's good. High blood pressure is nothing to play with, especially for us. And make sure she eats right."

"I do. Speaking of eating, maybe we could grab a bite sometime. Lunch or dinner?"

"I don't know. I keep really busy and--" Michelle looked down at her pumps.

"I would very much like us to get together. Please, Chelle." Anthony moved closer.

Michelle felt a rush of warmth hearing him use her nickname in a way only he could.

"Wednesdays I finish up early, around four."

"Anthony, here you are. Sidetracked by a beautiful woman, eh? I understand." Ike Batiste strolled up.

Michelle stiffened at the appearance of Anthony's uncle. The thud of her heart now signalled a very different reaction, one of loathing and suppressed wrath.

"Uncle Ike, you remember Michelle Toussaint. We went to school together. McKinley High and Southern University." Anthony placed a hand on the arm of the tall man who joined them.

"Ah, yes. Our star reporter. How are you, honey?" Tall and distinguished, Isaac Batiste was handsome in a hard way. His hair was a salt and pepper gray. His tan brown skin shone as if polished. Leaning forward to kiss her he blinked when she stepped back.

"Mr. Batiste. Of course you remember me. I'm sure you remember my father, too."

Michelle's expression hardened.

“Of course. Well, Anthony they're waiting for us, son. Hurry along. Bye, now.” Ike smiled at a point over her shoulder before walking away.

“Be there in a minute.” Anthony turned back to Michelle. “So Wednesday is a good day, huh?”

“I don't think so. I forgot I'm working on a big story that's going to keep me tied up for quite a while.” Michelle stood erect and unyielding.

“Come on now, Chelle.”

“I said I'm going to be too busy.”

“Listen, this is about us, not Uncle Ike.” Anthony's jaw tightened.

“He's still the same. Still oozing greasy charm.” Michelle grimaced as though the taste of something sour was on her tongue.

“Michelle, don't start that again. Uncle Ike is a good person. He's been like a father to me, more than my own father.” Anthony's tone was a plea to forget the past.

“And you still have on those blinders don't you? You think I can just forget the past? After what he did to my family? Not likely. You breeze in here asking me to have dinner with you after the way you slammed me when I was down. Man, you both have egos the size of the Grand Canyon. Forget it.”

“Talk about people not changing. You see only what you want to see. It was all in your mind, Michelle. I cared about you. You pushed me away.”

“I was sick of hearing you be a one man cheerleading squad for that slime bucket. He tried to ruin my father.”

“Your father was having financial problems that had nothing to do with Uncle Ike. You know that.”

“What the hell do you know about my father's finances? Look, I'm not going to debate this with you. We went through this six years ago. Goodbye.” Michelle picked up a stack of files and stormed off. She almost crashed into one of her best friends.

“Whoa! Don't run over me, child.” Laree's eyes grew big as she looked past Michelle. “Hey, there's Anthony. Hi-- he's leaving. Man, I didn't get a chance to speak to him.”

“So what? You're late, Laree. If you'd had your butt here on time I'd have been outta here.” Michelle's pursed her lips in annoyance. She threw the files down on Earl's desk, then realizing she still needed them, picked them up and marched back to her desk.

“Get up off my back, girl. You said eleven. It is now ten minutes past the hour. I was on time. It just that you was into your thing with Anthony. Don't take it out on me.”

“What's up? Let's celebrate. Girlfriend did a job on the news. Go on with your bad self, Chelle.” Shantae did a little dance in front of Michelle.

“Careful, honey. She just dumped on me,” Laree sat on the edge of a desk.

Laree Holland and Shantae LeJeune had been Michelle's best friends since the fourth grade when all three jumped rope in the playground. Laree was the office manager at a local plumbing supply business. Shantae a sales manager at a local department store with an ambition to become a buyer. They had planned to treat Michelle to dinner in honor of her Saturday debut as anchor.

“Say what?” Shantae eyed Michelle. “Why is your mouth all stuck out. We're supposed to be on our way to par-tee, and you look like somebody sucking on lemons.” Shantae flipped back her long red braids.

“Anthony's here.” Laree said, her eyebrows raised almost to her hairline.

“Oo-wee, you mean I missed the fireworks? Damn!” Shantae snapped her fingers.

“There were no fireworks. I don't want to discuss it. Let's just go and have a good time. Now come on.” Michelle unlocked her desk and jerked her purse from a bottom drawer.

“Oh yeah, I can see we're on our way to havin' a real blast.” Shantae shook her head as she and Laree followed Michelle out.

“You've been mighty quiet for the last hour, son. Anything you want to talk about or ask me?” Ike Batiste wheeled the big midnight blue Lincoln onto the interstate highway.

“Nah, I'm just thinking about some stuff I've got to take care of at work.” Anthony stared out of the car window at the tops of buildings sliding by.

“That Michelle is pretty as ever. Thick curly hair, big brown eyes you can get lost in, just like her mama. A real lovely lady for sure.” Ike glanced at Anthony sideways.

“Yeah.” Anthony had thought of little else since learning he would be at the station where Michelle worked. And seeing her had crashed through all his defenses, making his reassurances to himself that he was over her a joke. But he had been a fool to hope they could... what? Be friends, or more? Michelle had made it clear what she thought of him. He flinched remembering the cold, distance in those beautiful eyes.

“Don't let it get to you, boy. With everything you've got going for you, there are beaucoup women waiting to get next to you.” Ike seemed to read his thoughts.

“She simply can't forgive me for defending you. Michelle is so damn stubborn.” Anthony fists were clenched in his lap.

“I tried to help the guy, but he fell on his face because of his own bad judgment. Then he tries to ruin my reputation. Forget it.” Ike reached out to give his arm a quick squeeze. “Tell you what, let's stop off at Luther's Bar-B-Q. I'm starving. Okay, champ?”

“Sure, why not.” Anthony gave him a forced smile. Uncle Ike was right, it was best to forget it. He set about trying to repair the damage to the wall he had built around her memory. The wall that kept her from dominating his thoughts and helped him make through so many long, lonely nights.

“Hi, mama. How have you been?” Michelle planted a kiss on her cheek.

Michelle had cut short her dinner with Laree and Shantae pleading the need to turn in early. Though it was after ten, she'd promised to visit her mother before going home. Annette would sulk for days if that promise was not kept.

“Your father isn't home yet as usual. Working late.”

Annette refilled her glass of wine.

“How are you?” Michelle insisted on steering her away from familiar complaints.

“Fine. Your father embarrassed me as usual. Marvin Cato phoned to ask why Thomas hadn't paid his alumni dues for Alpha Phi Alpha. I mean for God sakes, all the balls are coming up. You know what your father said when I asked him about it?” Annette plunged ahead before she could answer. “He said he was tired of putting out that kind of money and he needed it for some business expenses. Now I have to face Carolyn and Shirley at the Delta meeting Thursday. Oh they won't say anything, just give each other significant looks. Damn that man!”

“Maybe he's right. I mean, he's had a rough time these last few years.”

“Now you're defending him to me? You of all people. Knowing what he's put me through.” Annette took a deep gulp of her drink.

“Yes, Mama, he's kind of cold and stays away a lot. But this won't help.” Michelle gently pried the wine glass from Annette's fingers.

“Well, he mistaken if he thinks I'm going to take this. I've got the money, I'm going to pay the dues. That'll show him up for the cheapskate he is. He'll do a slow burn for days then give me back the money. Ha!” Annette threw back her head.

“Mama, please...”

“Don't bother trying to talk to her. By noon she's knocked back so much wine she sloshes when she moves. There's no reasoning with her.” Thomas came into the large den and shrugged off his coat. Powerfully built, Michelle's father look easily ten years younger than his age at fifty-five.

“Home before two in the morning. My goodness and it's not even a school night for little Gloria,” Annette said.

“Go sleep it off, Annette. I'm not in the mood.”

“Go to hell, dear.” Annette walked out on unsteady legs. “Michelle, come to my room before you leave?” Her voice was plaintive.

“Be there in a minute, mama.”

Thomas rubbed his eyes with a weary gesture. “She gets worse every year.”

“Why can't you at least try to treat her with some respect?” Michelle chided him.

“Who do you think you're talking to, girl? What's between your mother and me is personal,” Thomas snapped.

“Staying gone all the time doesn't help whatever your problems are. And your ongoing battles didn't do much to make things easier for Brian, Dominic and me.” Michelle tried to maintain her bold tone but withered under his scrutiny. Even to her own ears, her voice took on a little girl sound.

“You don't understand, and I'm not going to explain. Thomas held up a hand to forestall her. He started up the stairs then stopped. “I hear Anthony is going to be on Channel Twelve. He's done well with his business. Have you talked to him?”

Michelle twisted a lock of hair, more than ever feeling like a child caught being naughty. “Yes, but only for a minute. I don't want anything to do with him,” she said with force.

“He was a fine boy, and he's become a fine young man. Got a good reputation as a fair businessman. Like I told you six years ago, don't judge him by what his uncle does. His mama's done a fine job balancing Ike's influence.”

“He thinks Ike hung the moon. No way do I want any part of either of them. Since Ike ruined your business, you and mama have--” Michelle bit her lip. The dark look on her father's face stopped her.

“You have no right to interfere, Michelle. I will not discuss my marriage with you.”

Michelle looked down unwilling to let him see how close she was to tears. “I'm sorry, Daddy. It's just I hate to see you so unhappy.”

“I know,” Thomas spoke softly. He stood for several seconds looking as if he wanted to say more, then seemed to decide changing the subject was better. He started back up the stairs and spoke over his shoulder. “By the way, I saw you tonight. Not bad, but don't talk so fast next time.”

“Thanks for your support,” Michelle mumbled at his retreating back.

She chafed at the grudging compliment. Just once she wished her father could unbend, give more of himself than in small doses. But Michelle was as tough as Thomas. She minded more for her mother whose stinging remarks masked her deep need for constant reassurance she was loved. Once she was in her car driving home, she felt relieved to be out of the tension filled house. Then she felt guilty for feeling relieved. Had her parents ever been happy together? Seeing them now, it was difficult to believe. Yet Michelle remembered those times, years ago, when they shared laughter easily. Those precious days when they were all together as a family, before Ike Batiste almost destroyed her father's business. Michelle gripped the steering wheel thinking of his arrogance. Worse still, she could hear Anthony's voice, his defense of what she saw as something indefensible. No handsome face or ingratiating smile could make her forget. Anthony Hilliard had no place her in her life. And she would never allow herself to weaken again.

“I just got a call from a source in the DA's office. There's something fishy going on with the Housing Authority. Some big names have come up.” Nathan, the assignments editor, sat forward frowning in concentration, his bushy white eyebrows an unbroken line above his blood shot blue eyes.

Ten reporters sat around the table in the conference room. Every day at ten in the morning, it was Nathan's job to decide who followed up on what story. A task that some days won him friends, other days earned him scorn. But he was good at his job. His decisions almost always proved to be on target, even if the admission was made grudgingly. And he had the right temperament. It was seldom he cared what the reporters thought of his decisions.

“Didn't you talk to some angry housing project residents last year, Michelle?” Gracie spoke around the donut in her mouth.

“No, they lived in houses with subsidized rent. It's this program where landlords get a portion of the rent paid by the government and the renter pays whatever they can afford based on income,” Michelle said. “But they're administered by the Housing Authority.”

“The Section Eight Housing Program.” Wayne, the reporter who mostly went after white collar crime reports, spoke up.

“Right. Anyway, they were complaining that the landlords weren't following the rules for repairing the houses or keeping them up. After a couple of interviews minor repairs were made, but nothing really changed. The staff at the Housing Authority clammed up.” Michelle got up to refill her coffee mug.

“Have you still got contacts there?” Nathan rubbed his chin.

“Yeah, a couple of the women have left. But I think at least one guy is still there. What was his name?” Michelle tapped a polished nail against the ceramic mug. “I'd have to look at my notes from back then.”

“Nathan, I interviewed the Mayor's Human Services

Department Director only a few months ago. We even met with Charlotte Kinchen, the Executive Director of the Housing Authority,” Jennifer said.

“For a story on the Arts and Humanities Council's Annual Gala,” Gracie snorted. “Not exactly the same thing.”

“The point is I have access to the powers that be. If this thing is big, then you need someone who can talk to them.” Jennifer stared at her coldly.

“Gracie's right, Jennifer. This story starts with the people who have to live in these low rent houses and apartments. And the staff who deal with them every day. Those are the important contacts right now.” Earl, a short wiry Black man, tilted his chair back on two legs.

“Sure, you build it from who gets hurt the most.” Rexanne Chauvin peered at them over her large round eyeglasses. She was older than most, in her early forties, and a respected investigative reporter.

“Michelle, get to work on it. Now, the chlorine leak at Shaw Chemical--” In his customary style, Nathan listened then made his ruling quickly before moving on.

“Nice going, Chelle. You scored on poor old Jennifer again.” Gracie wore a malicious grin. They sat at their desk again after the meeting.

“Cut that out. If Nathan hadn't thought it made sense for me to do the story, I wouldn't have been assigned. It's not about scoring on other people as you put it. It's about informing the public and doing the best job we can.” Michelle pulled out an old wire-bound notebook.

“Uh-huh. Go on,” Gracie urged.

“Okay, beating out Jennifer is the icing on the cake.” Michelle giggled.

“And how sweet it is,” Gracie agreed. She pointed to a folder. “What's that?”

“My trusty notes from last year. Ah, here it is, the maintenance supervisor was the guy I talked to. I always had the feeling he wanted to say more than he did.” Michelle began dialing the phone. “Yes, may I speak to Greg Matthews. Really? Do you know where he works now? Thank you.”

“Gone, huh?” Gracie began stuffing items in her bag in preparation for going out on her assignment.

“Yeah, but I've got his home number somewhere.”

Michelle spoke to his elderly aunt who proudly told her that Greg was working at a local real estate management company and would be home after five in the evening. Since she had plenty of other tasks, Michelle put a note on her phone to remind herself to call Matthews later. A busy day followed with background research at the library on several features coming up and chasing after people who would rather not be on camera but would give assistance on other stories. By five thirty that evening, she was back at the station.

“What a day.” Gracie half fell, half sat in her chair. “Two hours of having these really obnoxious little poodles climbing on me. Gee-whiz.”

“Anna Belle May, right?” Michelle kept writing without looking up.

“How did you know?”

“Because you've been working on that Historic Preservation thing for two weeks. Anna Belle has been in on beautification and restoration projects in this town since the dawn of time.”

“And you can't talk to her at their offices. Oh, no. You have to go to that huge old house where she holds court. What about that Housing Authority thing?”

“Just talked to him. I'm meeting him at his house in-- Oops, five minutes! See ya.” Michelle dashed out.

“Thanks for seeing me on such short notice, Mr. Matthews.” Michelle settled onto the flowered sofa her notebook balanced on one knee.

"It's okay. Look, I'm not sure how much help I can be. I left the place almost eight months ago." Greg Matthews was a compact five foot eleven with a barrel chest and muscular arms. His skin was the color of copper.

"There are some rumors floating around about under the table deals. Maybe connected to the maintenance of public housing or the rewarding of contracts for repairs. As the maintenance supervisor you would have been in a position to know a lot about how things were handled."

"I just sent men out to do the work. I didn't have nothing to do with that stuff." Greg shifted in his chair and rubbed his hands together.

"But you know who did," Michelle prodded.

"Charlotte Kinchen. But like I said, I didn't make none of those decisions."

"Charlotte Kinchen, right?" Michelle began writing.

"Now hold on. I don't want my name mentioned in this." Greg waved at her notes nervously.

"These will only be read by me. "

"Sure," he said derisively.

"Okay, I won't use your name just a code. Now tell me about Charlotte Kinchen."

"She coordinates daily operations like rent collection, calculating how much rent people pay, supervises the apartment managers, stuff like that."

"I see. So she decides what companies get the contracts?"

"There's supposed to be a bid process, but a company other than the lowest bidder can be used. For instance, if they trying to use more minority or women owned firms. Or if they feel the work done by a particular company is better and would save costs in the long run."

"So what companies usually get picked, Greg?" Michelle cut right to bone.

"Charlotte got some heavy friends, you know what I'm sayin'? And they got friends. I got four kids to feed."

"Who are her friends? Just tell me. I'll get the rest myself."

Greg twisted a key chain for several moments before answering. "James Bridges.... and Ike Batiste. She tight with them. People that you don't wanna get mad at you. That's all I can say."

Michelle fought to keep her face from showing the excitement she felt. Ike Batiste and James Bridges had been among the most prominent Black businessmen in Baton Rouge for over twenty years. James Bridges had a thriving janitorial business frequently hired by Ike Batiste to clean up his newly constructed homes and vacant properties. Greg was right, both had powerful connections locally and around the state.

"Close enough to break the rules?" Michelle looked at him.

Greg nodded. "Real good buddies."

"And they get a lot of business from the Housing Authority? Are you saying they get a lot of business because of this friendship?"

"I told you that's all I'm gonna say." Greg shook his head.

"That's enough, Greg." Hooking the ink pen through the wires at the top, Michelle slapped the pad against her palm. "That's more than enough."