

A Father's Love

DESPITE THE WARMTH of the summer day, a veil of gray clouds hung low over a dreary morning.

Eerie silence filled the apartment. Le'Taxione sat alone at the kitchen table, eating his breakfast and thumbing through a file. In a few hours, he would be speaking to a group of young men from a local gang that had been embroiled in a terrible series of reciprocal murders. The police reports were long and riddled with the kind of stories that reminded him of his own haunted past.

The refrigerator compressed clicked and began to hum. Le'Taxione looked up and stared at the room, the emptiness a painful reminder of last night's events. Normally a morning like this would be humming with youthful noise: Clarissa singing songs to Ma'at; Ma'at giggling at a YouTube video; Clarissa repeating one of her stepfather's history lessons to her sister.

That morning there was nothing but the dull, robotic thrumming, and the rasp of Le'Taxione's nervous breathing.

He checked the time on his phone.

9:14.

He rose and stood by the door, watching out the peephole. Then he opened it.

Immediately, little Ma'at ran inside and clutched her dad's leg. Behind her, an oval-faced woman stood, her long straight hair framing both sides of her head.

"Thanks, Constance," Le'Taxione said, bending down to scoop up his little girl. She wrapped her thin arms around his neck and buried her face in his neck.

Beside Constance, Clarissa stood with her head bowed.

"It's okay, 'Rissa," Le'Taxione said. "Mommy isn't here right now. You're safe."

Clarissa's eyes darted through the interior of the apartment, searching for any signs of her mother. Le'Taxione let out a grief-filled sigh.

If Beth was there, Clarissa would never want to come back.

Seeing her apprehension, Le'Taxione closed his eyes for a moment, offering a silent prayer to Ra that this all could be safely and peacefully resolved.

He reluctantly asked Clarissa, "Do you want to stay with Aunt Connie?"

The girl nodded. "Yes," she whispered.

"I overstand," he said. "I'll do everything I can to take care of this."

With that, Constance and Clarissa left, leaving Le'Taxione and his toddler daughter alone back in the apartment.¹

IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT CLARISSA chose to stay with her aunt and stay away from her mother.

According to Spokane County Sheriff Deputy Justin Materne, Clarissa was dreadfully afraid of her mother.

Writing in his official report, Materne asked if she felt safe at home with her mother. Clarissa answered, "No, absolutely not."²

The young woman also stated that Beth had threatened to stab her with a fork or stick a fork down her throat for various offenses.³

One day later, Clarissa would report that she "feels safe with her step dad." Speaking to social worker Shelby Yada, Clarissa also said "[My] mom will tell other people that [my] step dad hits her, but [I haven't] seen any physical violence in the home, they just get into arguments."

Yada could immediately tell that staying with Beth was not a good option for Clarissa. Writing in her own official report, Yada declared, "[Clarissa] stated that if she can't be with her step dad, she would rather be at her aunt's home."⁴

So as Le'Taxione sat with Ma'at on the couch to sing to her, read her a book, and try to restore some semblance of peace, he hoped that

Clarissa's decision to stay with Constance wouldn't reap any unintended consequences.

AN HOUR OR SO LATER, there was an expected knock on the door. Le'Taxione gave Ma'at a game to play and he welcomed his guest, a colleague with N'STEP[®], into the apartment.

They clapped hands and backs and sat at the table.

The work ahead wasn't easy. Despite its relatively small size, Spokane was home to more than 24 gangs and the criminal mindset was always at work within them. A series of drive-bys had recently claimed two lives; a police officer had been shot and critically injured in another incident.

It was all due to the flow of drugs into the city, almost exclusively through the rival gangs.

Le'Taxione knew the hustle all too well. Despite being more than 20 years in his past, the muscle memory still quivered within him whenever he heard news about a drug bust, a hit, or an all-out battle to take back valuable territory.

Yet it brought chaos into the city. Not only were lives lost, but the pervasive stereotypes about dangerous Black people seemed to grow in the minds of every citizen. News coverage zoomed in on Black faces, scowling sneers and vacant eyes, gazing hatefully into the camera.

Le'Taxione knew the pain behind those bitter looks. He knew the alienation young and poor Black Americans lived through. He knew the potential for love, compassion, and great deeds within these young people. And he knew all the ways that gang culture presses these character traits into the nether of one's soul, oppressing one from within while a crooked injustice system oppresses from without.

Settled down to their work, Le'Taxione and his colleague began analyzing the reports on the gang members they were about to meet with. If everything went well, they could see incredible returns on their efforts—a significant drop in violence, deaths, and criminal outbursts.

If he was being honest with himself, Le'Taxione was feeling incredibly optimistic. Yes, last night's drama had been disruptive. Yes, Beth was a volatile force, her addictive behavior erratic and unpredictable.

But she was gone. Ma'at was safe with him, and Clarissa was at least with someone she trusted.

And Beth?

Who knew where she was. Probably hooking up with one of her dealers and passing out while he gave her even more hickies on her neck.

Flipping a page, Le'Taxione smiled and said, "I think we've really got a chance with this."

Then the apartment door opened.

Every head in the room turned.

It was Beth.

And in her hand, she held a crisp, official-looking document.

Then she smiled.

BEFORE HE READ IT, Le'Taxione knew exactly what the paper was.

He just couldn't believe it.

How could she do this?

On what grounds? With what evidence?

Staring in disbelief at the No Contact Order, Le'Taxione took out his phone and dialed the Crime Check hotline.⁵

"I can't believe this," he murmured.

Beth just stood with her arms crossed in front of the door, smiling.

The hotline picked up.

He told them about the order.

He told them about the events of the prior night.

He told them everything he could, his words a stream of hurt and fury. His voice shook and he fought to keep his speech even, steady, and unhurried, but the emotions had taken over and he found himself gasping for breath between statements.

The response was crushing.

Comply.

Officers would investigate. Social workers would interview.

But for now, comply with the order.

He hung up and his arms hung dead by his sides.

"Please, Beth," he said. "Don't do me like this."

Beth continued to stand like a mannequin by the door, smiling with sinister delight.

"Beth, you can't take her...."

Beth snapped her fingers. "Ma'at."

Wide-eyed, the little girl peered over the back of the couch at her mother.

"Beth, don't do this...."

He felt tears pushing their way through his eyes. He rarely cried. He never cried in front of old homeboys.

But now they would all see him weep because of what was about to happen.

"Beth, no."

"Ma'at!" she barked.

Le'Taxione turned back to his daughter. She didn't nod or shake her head; she was frozen, the sight of her mother paralyzing like the face of Medusa.

The father stared at the Order again. His eyes flew over the paragraphs, searching for a way out. Some clause or byline—if *the mother is a drunk with injection lines under both her tits*—but there was nothing.

No one was moving. Beth sneered, then pulled out her phone.

"Wait, wait," Le'Taxione said, holding up a hand.

He knelt in front of Ma'at, his arms open and hands extended. "Come here, baby girl."

She glanced nervously at her mother. Then Ma'at let her father take her into his arms.

Beth lowered the phone but continued to stare hatefully at him.

"Listen to me," Le'Taxione said, his face an inch from the precious, soft face of his daughter. "*Mimi upendo we we*. I love you. I will take care of you, no matter what. I promise."

He walked around the couch, past the dining room table, and to the door. Every step felt like it might be the last time he would get to hold his little girl.

Le'Taxione met Beth's gaze.

"Please," he said, sniffing back his tears. "Don't do me like this."

Beth didn't answer. Instead, she reached out, plucked Ma'at from his arms, and stepped out.

The last thing Le'Taxione saw was Ma'at's bright eyes, watching him in total confusion as her mother marched away.

The father sat at the table and buried his face in his hands.

What am I going to do?

His daughter was gone. His stepdaughter in the custody of a racist, and now he was an accused abuser.

What the hell can I possibly do!?