

Everything I Couldn't
Tell My Mother



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Written by
Pauleanna Reid

MERAKI HOUSE

P U B L I S H I N G

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to every dreamer, believer, doer and thinker—the little girl inside us all. Despite our past mistakes and any poor decisions we've made, we still have it in us to become great women.

PREFACE

I can feel the muscles of my vaginal wall contract around the doctor's index and middle fingers while he makes a counter-clockwise motion inside of me. Instantly, an arch creeps up my spine from the involuntary arousal I experience while he methodically fingers the soft interior of my body. The clear, jelly substance the doctor squeezed onto his latex glove before penetrating between my thighs allows him to swiftly perform the pelvic exam. He then injects me with a chemical that will partially numb my cervix.

The operating table is cold, rigid and uncomfortable. One bright spotlight shines from the ceiling onto the centre of the operating room, where I lay flat on my back with my legs spread wide. My feet are firmly held in place by metal stirrups. The thin slice of paper-like fabric that is draped over me does nothing to protect against the chilled air in the room. I shiver, feeling vulnerable and embarrassed because both my private area and dark secret are completely exposed in the harsh florescent light.

A blank expression masks the surgeon's ghostly face. He adjusts his thick glasses with deep concentration then instructs the nurse to engage me in conversation as a distraction from the pain that he anticipates I'll soon feel. A short, grey-haired lady, who has been quietly standing in the corner of the room, steps towards me. Her skin is pasty and wrinkled but that doesn't camouflage her warm smile. Once she reaches my bedside, the nurse gently interlocks her fingers with the fingers on my left hand as if to reassure me that everything will be okay. I hear her utter a few words of consolation but her flat delivery gives me the impression that she has repeated the same spiel many times.

I ignore the nurse, lifting my head slightly above my shoulders so I can focus on the interaction between the funny-looking tool in the surgeon's hand and the motion he makes towards the cusp of my vagina. As I watch the small cylinder-shaped object slowly enter my body the discomfort reminds me of the sensation I felt when I had sex with Dreon. I rest my head back on the operating table and flashback to the passionate kisses, desperate hands and primal moans—the night that brought me to the abortion clinic in the first place.

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SYNOPSIS

Everything I Couldn't Tell My Mother is a coming-of-age story for any woman who has ever questioned her sexual maturity and readiness, stayed silent at a time when she should have spoken up or accepted treatment that was less than what she deserved.

Aaliyah Panarese is the teenage daughter of successful, overprotective parents who want the best for her but rarely consider her hopes and dreams. Under the matriarchal rules of her abusive mother, Aaliyah is expected to, without question, follow in her footsteps and attend law school after she graduates from high school. Frustrated and too cowardly to express her dreams of becoming a writer, she escapes life's harsh realities by journaling heartfelt letters to her mother inside a diary, hoping that one day they will be the keys to rebuilding trust and strengthening the emotional connection that is lacking between them.

In a desperate attempt to find her voice, and feel accepted and loved, she befriends Stacy, Tonja and Manny—the most rebellious girls at her school. Aaliyah follows the crowd, breaks her parents' rules and is quickly thrown into a battlefield marked with peer pressure, self-loathing, sexual discovery and broken friendships. Her journey takes dramatic twists and turns while delivering a cautionary tale that is grounded in the reality of what it is to be a teenager in today's instant-access generation.



Chapter One

Oreo: A childhood nickname that has been attached to me since the fifth grade, when I was too young to understand why my classmates always referred to me as one of my favourite bedtime snacks. I even recall asking my parents what it meant to be an Oreo. All they said was instead of worrying about what other kids thought of me I should live up to the definition of my name—Aaliyah, meaning “high exalted one”. I would later learn the ridicule I endured from my peers was actually because of my dark skin tone and what was considered a whitewashed personality. By then I had already developed a low self-esteem that affected many of my interactions and choices.

The thing is, to truly understand me, as I am today, you have to know my past and all the particles, atoms and processes that make up my little world.

I am of Trinidadian and Italian descent. When I was a kid, my parents always told me how lucky I was to be biracial and that I should embrace the two cultures that made me unique. But the way kids teased me everyday made it hard for me to believe I was special. Sometimes, I prayed to God to make my skin colour lighter and most mornings I woke up hoping to look different. But, of course, nothing ever changed.

My mother's genes are very dominant in my physical appearance so I have her mud-brown complexion and so many freckles on my chubby cheeks and bottom lip that if you came close enough, you could play Connect the Dots. We look so much alike people assume I'm fully black instead of mixed, and that my dad isn't related to me.

I know it makes my dad sad that there are no traces of him when he looks at me. One time when he picked me up from school, my teacher actually questioned him until she was convinced that he was who he said he was. I was so embarrassed and

ashamed in that moment but more than anything, I felt sorry for my dad because he doesn't deserve to be treated that way—no one does. Incidents like that happen all the time. Either people think that my dad has kidnapped me or that I'm adopted. It really upsets me that they can't tell I'm his daughter because I love my dad and we have a very close relationship.

At times, though, our differences are even too much for me to handle and although I don't mean to hurt my dad's feelings, I purposely walk a few steps behind him to avoid curious glances and whispers. It's just easier to escape if we aren't seen walking or standing closely together. What I love about my daddy is that no matter how many people doubt who he is or how many times I pull away from him, he is a proud father and has never made me feel anything less than special.

I have an eleven-year-old brother who, unlike me, resembles both of my parents and has skin the shade of French toast on Saturday morning. Everything about him is perfect. He was the only kid in his school to skip Grade one, he's a self-taught musician who has mastered the piano and flute, and he's already decided to follow in my

mother's footsteps by becoming a lawyer. Connor has even been showered with gifts and money for his achievements. I envy him because he is everything that I am not: smart, light-skinned and my mother's favourite child.

My dad is from a village in Italy whose name I can't pronounce. Since moving to an even smaller suburban city in Canada twenty-five years ago when he was nineteen, he has worked as a free-spirited oil painter. I admire my dad for following his heart and living out his passion. He is the reason I've always been such a big dreamer. One of my favourite childhood memories is of daddy allowing me to stay up late to watch him create the most beautiful oil paintings. As he added intricate details, we would talk for hours and hours about things we love, which pretty much includes anything creative like art and music. He would also share stories about his travels around the world. Our father-daughter time was special. We haven't shared a moment like that in a while because he's always so busy but it hasn't hurt our relationship because our bond cannot be broken. At his last art show, I overheard some of his rich, snobby clients say that he is one of the best in the world. But to me, he is just daddy.

My mother, on the other hand, works on the corporate scene and is the only woman partner at Charles, Panarese & Martin, a successful downtown Toronto law firm. Having been an entertainment lawyer for the last twelve years, she has built a highly respected reputation across the country and abroad. It has granted her opportunities to work in New York, Atlanta and Los Angeles with A-list celebrity clients, all of whom she has on speed dial. My father even jokes that when my mother was in labour with me all she talked about was how anxious she was to get back to work and settle another case.

I've always wanted to live in New York or Los Angeles because my mother flies out there so often, but my parents preferred to raise us outside of the media circus to which my mom has grown accustomed so we could have a "normal" life.

Any girl in my position, whose mother rubs shoulders with some of the most powerful people in the world, would consider herself lucky. But being the product of such seemingly perfect parents makes me question if I have what it takes to match their success. One of my biggest fears is disappointing my mother. I get a lot of anxiety just thinking about it. The words "I'm proud of you" are what every kid

wants to hear but I have yet to experience what that feels like.

My mother and I fight because we have different definitions of success. To her, it means money, power and influence. To me, it means happiness, and the confidence to follow your heart and live your passion. Ironically enough, it is probably the most important life lesson my dad has ever taught me. But my mother just doesn't understand. It's an argument that will never die and I doubt we will ever see eye to eye on it.

My mother may be a tyrant but she comes from humble beginnings and has always told me that if I work hard I can also achieve all that she has. She grew up in a single parent home, is the last of four children and the only one who graduated from university. She uses her achievements as leverage over her siblings whenever they ask for favours and faults them for not working as hard as she did. This has caused a big rift in our family. I haven't seen my aunts or uncle in years, and the few times we have gotten together for holidays there was always an argument over money and success, and how my mother has changed because of both.

I'm afraid I have to agree. I would, of course, never tell my mother this because she'd probably put me on her hit list like the others but the facts are there. Her long list of accomplishments (not to mention her long hours at work) has forced her to sacrifice any family time we once had so she can break through the glass ceiling she always talks about. Even after receiving much recognition and many awards, nothing is ever good enough for her. Come to think of it, my mother has played an inconsistent role in my life since I can remember. The only time I really see her is sometimes at dinner, on weekends and during family vacations, which are now far and few in between.

In Grade five, thanks to my mother's humble beginnings and go-getter attitude, I was transferred from private to public school. I begged my parents to allow me to go back to my old school but they refused to listen, insisting that the public system provided a healthier environment because of its diversity. But it was for that same reason I found it harder to adjust.

The white girls didn't understand why, even though I'm half white, my skin was darker than theirs or why my hair was curlier and a lot thicker.

No matter how many times I explained it, they couldn't grasp the concept of a mixed girl who looked black so they called me a liar and alienated me on the playground. No one wanted to play with me after that and I often ate my lunch alone on a swing or park bench. Sometimes, I'd talk to imaginary friends who became my only company. I know it sounds sad but the alternative wasn't much better because the black girls constantly followed me around yelling out, "Oreo! Oreo!" and telling everyone at school that I was pretending to be half white because I thought I was better than them.

When word got out that I live in Crescent Hill, an upper-middle class suburban neighbourhood tucked away in a far-east corner of our city, I lost the little respect they may have had for me. To them, it meant that my family was rich—something many of them were not. I wasn't the only girl at school who lived in Crescent Hill. The difference between the others and I was the Valley girl stereotype, which they played up to an extreme by turning their noses up at everyone—especially me.

By the end of fifth grade, most of the girls had already developed a full chest, baby pushing hips and fuck-me thighs. I, on the other hand, walked around

with a body like a little boy. While the popular girls spent recess adoring their reflections in compact mirrors, I was busy playing captain of all the unisex basketball, volleyball, badminton and soccer teams. It was no secret that I was a tomboy but I tried to fit in wherever I could—until I got turned down by one of the cutest boys in my sixth grade class.

It happened the summer my friend Kimmy, and I use the term “friend” loosely, had a huge party for her eleventh birthday. Kimmy was the kind of girl who smiled in your face one minute then turned around the next and, without exhaling, talked behind your back. Even her friends knew to keep their distance or they could be at the centre of the next big rumour. Kimmy stood out, not only because of her big mouth but also because she was taller than everyone in our grade. She was also very pretty with dark-brown, almond-shaped eyes, a gorgeous smile with a beauty mark directly above her lip, and smooth, olive-toned skin. For a long time I secretly envied her beauty mark because I read in some beauty magazine that only supermodels were blessed with such a feature.

When I arrived and saw the enormity of the party, I knew that I wasn't going to stay very long

because I was too shy to talk to anyone. From the looks of it, Kimmy must have invited the entire school because there were kids everywhere—bouncing around in a blow-up castle, swimming in her L-shaped pool and chasing after the animals in a petting zoo that her parents rented. Kimmy’s backyard was like a nightmarish circus. The animals smelled like week-old feces and when a marching band tooted its horns along to the “Happy Birthday” tune, my eardrums vibrated until it felt like they were about to pop.

With aching ears, I decided that I had enough before I even joined the festivities. Unenthused, I walked aimlessly around the backyard for a few minutes then wandered into the house to say goodbye to Kimmy. After stepping inside the kitchen, I peeped into the living room, dining room and her dad’s office but couldn’t find Kimmy anywhere. Her house was as big and confusing as a maze. Just as I was about to give up, I heard giggling from behind the slightly open basement door.

I tiptoed down the creaky stairs to find Kimmy and five other kids sitting in a circle with a beer bottle strategically placed in the middle. I felt left out even though they had no way of knowing that I

had showed up. I guess it was such a familiar feeling by then that I couldn't help it. Lost in my self-pity, I stepped onto the third step, which released a painful, whiny noise that caught everyone's attention. They all looked up at me with wide, frightened eyes.

"Aaliyah, is that you? Shut the door. We don't want the adults to see us down here," Kimmy whispered softly.

I had witnessed the same scene in some romantic comedy that I wasn't allowed to watch but secretly did anyway one rainy Saturday night while my parents were away on business. While I couldn't remember the name of the movie, I recognized the game as Spin the Bottle.

"Robert, you're up next," Kimmy said.

I closed the door then quietly sat on the steps and watched Kimmy, the ringleader, closely. To her left was Robert Hammen, tightly holding the bottle in his right hand. He was the cutest and most popular boy in school, who also just happened to make me so nervous that I'd lose all sense of speech, balance and feeling every time he walked into a room. I liked him, of course, but did not want anyone to know because of the stiff competition. Every girl in our grade had already fallen madly in love with his

golden complexion, flirty smile and long lashes. We were in the same class two years in a row and had a friendship I did not want to ruin with gushy feelings that I had no idea what to do with anyway.

Just as I was about to wave hello, Robert twisted the bottle in a clockwise motion. As if in a trance, every pair of eyes focused on the floor. The bottle slowed and then rolled to a stop in my direction, right through a little pocket of space between two kids I didn't recognize. The small crowd looked up at me, their mouths agape.

"Aw, man! Aaliyah? She's not a real girl. Kissing her would be like kissing one of the guys. Hand me the bottle and lemme spin again."

Everyone burst out laughing while my eyes welled up like sinking boats. I looked down at my chipped lime green nail polish, a weak attempt to be girly. "I wasn't even playing your stupid game anyways," I said, storming up the noisy steps to let myself out.

I spent the rest of the day in my room practicing kissing my hand so I would be ready if a boy ever decided I was a "real girl".

The following September, Kimmy's dad got a promotion at some big shot corporation and she

moved to New York with the rest of her family. I never saw Kimmy again and her absence didn't faze me because we weren't really that close, but Robert and I still laugh about the party.

That seemingly innocent incident, which Robert finds so hilarious that he snorts with laughter when we talk about it, has followed me around like a shadow since elementary school. For years, I slapped on a plastic smile and pretended as if I wasn't insecure and depressed but it wasn't until I hit puberty that I discovered how much that particular moment in Kimmy's basement stunted my confidence.

I approached my teenage years convinced that I was ugly. Every morning, as I got ready for school, I looked into the mirror and hated the reflection that stared back at me. I tried my best to pick up the pieces of my low self-esteem and put myself together even though my bushy eyebrows paired with big, dull-brown eyes, a broad nose, thick lips and a boyish figure didn't give me much to work with. I found it hard to see the beauty in any of these traits, and desperately craved to be accepted by my peers and relieved of the social awkwardness that followed me everywhere.

Beside my body-length mirror, on my dresser stood a statue of a regal Caribbean woman. My aunt gave it to me as a collective symbol of strength, beauty and power. Having stared at the sculpture, and studied her curvaceous frame and strong facial features many times, I came to realize that we shared a few similarities. I adored her cocoa complexion and the way that her wild mane flowed in waves down her back, like mine. Looking at her always made me smile because I knew there was at least one other person in the world who looked like me, even if she wasn't real. I fell in love with the way she stood on the wooden surface, proud of her beauty. And although I always questioned why I wasn't able to experience the same convinced feeling, every time I looked into her eyes my potential was reflected back at me. It was a little glimmer of hope.

To the right side of the hand-carved sculpture, sat a ruby red plastic picture frame containing a photograph of my family. The four of us stood closely together with big, toothy smiles, trying to capture a moment worth remembering.

Since my brother and I were born, every year around Christmastime my mother dressed us up like

dolls and hired some overpriced photographer to take our family photo. On weekends, she would spend hours at her craft table, carefully positioning snapshots into hundreds of handmade cards that were tied with shiny red ribbons. She then shipped these delicate masterpieces to every person she knew, just in time for the holiday season. I always knew my mother did it because she loved the idea of being perceived as having a picture-perfect family. None of it was genuine to me.

But ever since she made partner at the firm what was once a dedicated tradition—even if it was a façade—has become a distant memory. All the family photos that collect dust on my dresser are a constant reminder of the expectations that come along with being a member of the Panarese family.

Each morning, the first photograph that stares back at me is a print we took during Christmas of '92. I was only seven but I remember fighting with my mother up until the second before we all said, "Cheese." She made me wear a dark blue denim one-piece jumper with a big green bow on the front to match the little one I had in my hair. The entire outfit was hideous and made me look like a big loser, so I tried to pout and complain my way out of

wearing it. When my mother could no longer handle my persistence, she slapped me upside the head and told me to act like a lady. She looked me in the eyes, pointed her finger in my face and said, “Good girls do as they’re told.” My head hurt a lot but the pain in my heart was even worse because no matter how often she talks down to me, I feel worthless. It’s a feeling you can’t ever get used to.

Abuse, whether emotional or physical, was her answer to every problem—and still is. My mother also had this habit of using “good girl” references to get her point across. She was always saying things like, “good girls don’t swear” or “good girls don’t play sports.” As I got older, her rules intensified: “good girls are supposed to know their way around the kitchen” and “good girls don’t have sex before marriage.” No matter what I did, I always heard her stern voice in the back of my head. It sounded like an alarm buzzer—only there was no snooze button to shut her up.

Having realized there is no point in arguing back, I recently started writing in a diary to deal with my frustration towards her. It is a McIntosh apple red book, small enough to fit in the palm of my hand. I fill it with all kinds of artwork, sketches, interesting

quotes and letters to my mother—all of the things I would say to her if she ever took the time to listen.

When I write, I picture myself writing the pages of my first novel. I have dreams of becoming a famous author who enjoys a simple life in New York City. I'd live in a tiny, organized apartment that I'd only visit in between travelling around the world on my book tours. I'd use all of my candid life experiences as inspiration to write intelligent novels. Somewhere along the way, I'd meet the man of my dreams, settle down and have two children.

One boy and one girl, just like my parents.

My mother keeps asking what I want to be when I grow up. The answer never changes, and she always laughs dismissively and immediately shoots down my dreams with her judgement. She would much rather have me attend law school instead of writing “silly” stories. My mother has planned the rest of my life for me and if I really didn't care about my future, I'd go along with it. But, I do. She refuses to understand that writing isn't just a hobby. It is my escape from insecurities, a place of peace where life is easy and wonderful. I am meant to be a writer. In fact, I am a writer. I may not be published yet but, despite what she thinks, I know that

someday it will happen.

In that ruby red-framed photo, my right arm rests strategically on her shoulder. It is placed in a way that won't wrinkle her cream-coloured Chanel blouse. Her outfit flatters her petite frame and compliments her beautiful complexion and her big, bold, brown eyes. Her body is rigidly posed on the stool, creating an intimidating presence. When the photographer instructed me to stand beside her, little did he know that we couldn't have been more emotionally distant.

That emotional distance has been an unspoken norm between my mother and I since I can remember. But if I had to pinpoint a moment when the bridge to any sort of connection totally collapsed, it was a few years ago.

I was playing tag with my little brother in the playroom and accidentally pushed him too hard when I tagged him. He bumped his head on the wooden toy chest and began to cry. In a desperate attempt to stop him from wailing at the top of his lungs and disturbing my parents, I wrapped him in my arms and held his head close to my body to comfort him. I had seen my mother do this before to shush him. The walls seemed to vibrate with the

sound of her angry footsteps. She ran into the room, grabbed me, almost ripping my shirt off my body, and shoved me so hard that I tripped and fell onto the floor. I looked to her for help as I tried to stand back up, but she pushed me down and straddled me so that I couldn't move. She repeatedly slapped me, her breath also hitting my face while she screamed. As he watched her hit me, my little brother stood in the corner of the room yelling, "Mommy, please stop!" I remained silent, lying tangled in her arms and out of breath from having her body weight on top of mine.

My father, whom I often refer to as my guardian angel, overheard the commotion from his studio down the hall and ran to pry my mother off of me. Ironically, in the moment I stopped feeling an emotional connection to my mother I also figured out why my dad married her. I could see that my father's gentle spirit complemented my mother on many levels. He accepted her, flaws and all, and knew exactly what to do to calm her down within seconds.

"Honey, your behaviour is unacceptable. She's only a child. I'm sure Aaliyah didn't mean to make Connor cry," he said softly, as he winked at me

while tightly holding my mother in his arms. Even though I wished he were hugging me, I knew my mom needed his arms wrapped around her more than I did.

The golden sunrays that beamed through the window highlighted the love in their eyes and the beauty of her brown complexion next to his porcelain white skin. I have never forgotten that day or anything else that happened in my childhood. These memories will always be etched in my mind as a reminder of the complexities that make up the girl I am.