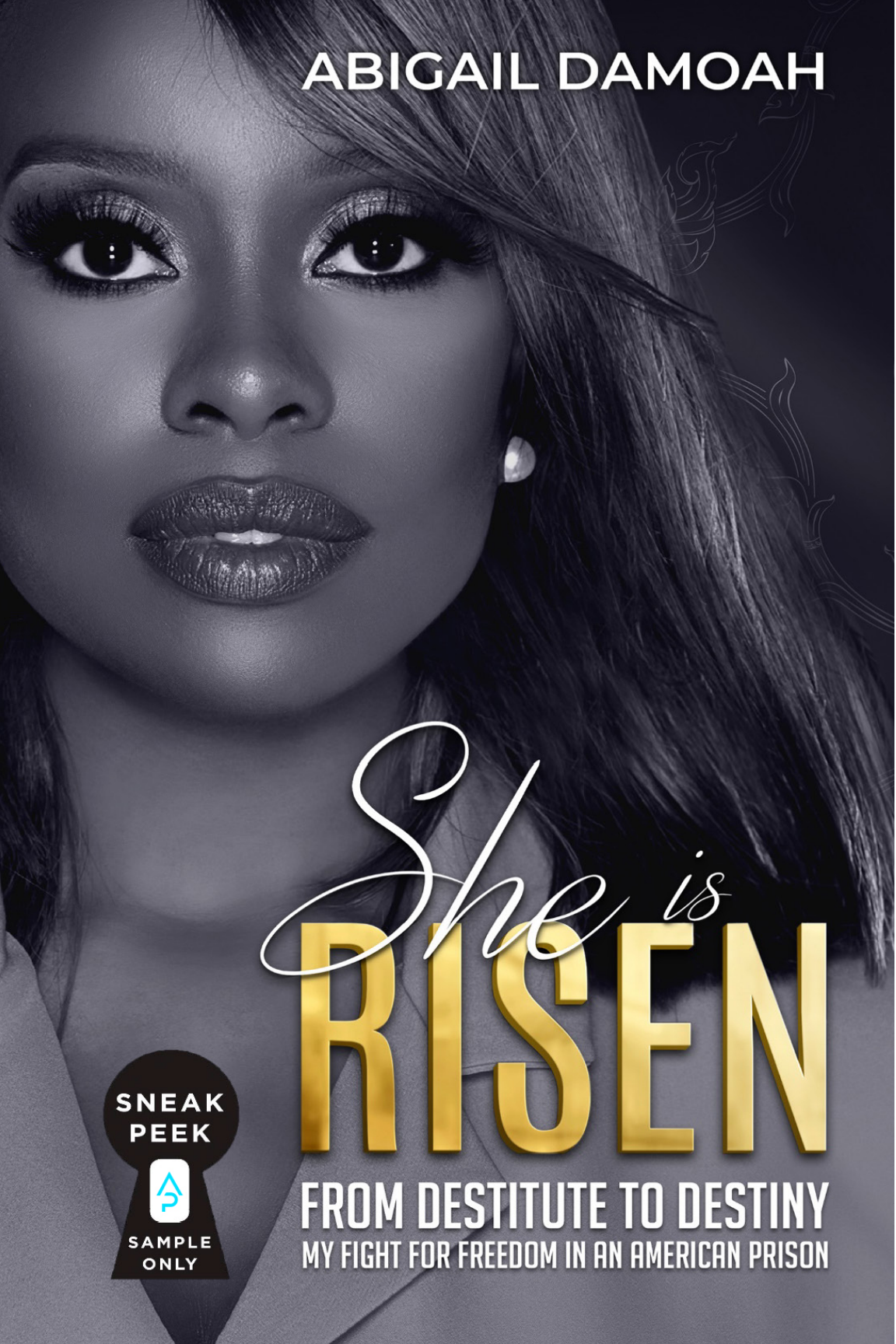
ABIGAIL DAMOAH
She is
RISEN
FROM DESTITUTE TO DESTINY
MY FIGHT FOR FREEDOM IN AN AMERICAN PRISON
SNEAK PEEK
SAMPLE ONLY

SHE IS RISEN

From Destitute to Destiny:
my Fight for Freedom in an American Prison

ABIGAIL DAMOAH

ARISE PUBLICATIONS
GIVING A VOICE TO THE VOICELESS


LOWELL
CORRECTIONAL
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We Never Walk Alone

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Arise Publications Ltd
152 City Road, London, EC1V 2NX

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First published in Great Britain in 2022

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
ISBN: PB: 978-1-7397795-9-7; HB: 978-1-7397795-1-1;
EB: 978-1-7397795-2-8

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I give thanks to God; You are a shield for me, my glory, and the one who lifts my head. You put gladness in my heart, for You alone make me dwell in safety. In You I put my trust, I have set the Lord always before me; and because You are at my right hand, nothing can move me!

To my parents: Thank you for your unconditional love and support. Thank you for giving me stability. Many of the women I met during my incarceration didn't have parents. Sincerely, from the bottom of my heart, thank you! I love you both dearly!

To my sisters: At a time when I should have been weeping tears of sadness, my sisters were making me cry with laughter! Thank you, I love you!

To my nephew: You came along just at the right time; thank you for making me happy on the days I didn't feel like smiling. I love you!

To all my supporters: Thank you for dancing in the rain with me! I love you!

To the women I was incarcerated with: I met angels in prison, you are forever embedded in my heart and soul, and I will never forget you! I love you!

To the officers: To those who looked beyond my blue uniform and treated me with dignity and respect, thank you.

To the Judge: Thank you for sentencing me to prison; it was the best thing that ever happened to me. There is a Judge who sits higher than you; you were nothing but a pawn in the game! May the Lord bless you and keep you.

To my Lawyers: To the ones who didn't do what they were supposed to do, thank you. To the ones who did what they were supposed to do, thank you for believing in me!

To the news station: Thank you for broadcasting a factually incorrect story; if it were not for you, I would never have written this book!

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." ~ Romans 8:28 NKJV

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although this book is a true story, I have chosen to change the names of friends, family members, and everyone else who is a part of my journey. The only real names in the book are those whose stories are already in the national news. Changing their names was a personal decision to protect the identities of some of the people I have mentioned.

DEDICATION

This book is in loving memory of Latandra Ellington and Yvonne McBride, whose lives were cut short by the department of corrections (D.O.C.) during my incarceration. To every man and woman who has been slain, or maimed while in D.O.C. custody. To the falsely accused and over-sentenced, I will continue to lift my voice like a trumpet and speak out against the injustice and culture of physical, sexual, and mental abuse in the American justice system until something changes.

PROLOGUE

As I lay on my back on top of a mattress so thin I could feel the cold metal against my skin; I wanted to know how I got here. Thirty years of age, two degrees, charged with vehicular homicide and facing fifteen years in a Florida state prison. As I cried out to God, I asked Him, "What happened?" I waited, listening to the soul-destroying silence of the jail that engulfed me every night, but desperate to free myself from the noise in my head. I was broken, trapped, confined to the brutal script stuck on repeat in my mind:

You won't get out of prison until you're forty-five years old. Everyone is going to forget about you. You might as well end your life; you should have killed yourself while you had the chance. Do yourself and everyone else a favour and just die. You're pathetic; look at what you've made of your life.

I wanted to stifle the voices, but I didn't know how. I had cried many nights, but tonight, a barrier broke. I pulled the putrid-smelling, light-blue blanket over my head, and the tears streamed down my face like rivers of living water. But then came an interruption; it was so vivid, I can only describe it as watching a TV screen playing in my mind.

I WAS SITTING in a living room with three other girls during the summer holidays. We began searching the house for some entertainment in our boredom and found a video. We quickly put it into the VCR recorder in anticipation and hit the play button. What I saw at that moment changed the entire trajectory of my life. At eight years of age, I was introduced to pornography, and it destroyed my innocence.

We didn't turn it off; instead, we sat with our eyes glued to the TV, trying to unearth what we were seeing. Naked men and women were having full-blown sex. My mind couldn't comprehend what I saw, but my body reacted

to it. Those images were seared indelibly into my subconscious mind. To this day, I remember with clarity what I witnessed, the actors, their hair colour, even down to the music playing in the background.

Pornography awakened my sexual desire and initiated me into a world of perversion. I often relived those scenes in my thoughts, desperately wanting to experience what I felt when I watched that video. When kids went to the corner shop, their main concern was badgering their parents for some sweets; mine was stealing a glance at the top shelf in search of the kind of stimulation I now craved. Deep down, I knew it was wrong; children didn't talk about what I had seen in the video; it was adult stuff. But my eight-year-old mind and body were now trapped in an adult world, and there was no escape. Little did I know, one five-minute encounter with a video I hoped would provide me with some relief from my boredom, would act as a defining moment in my life.

I DON'T REMEMBER when I fell asleep, but I know when I woke up. The lights came on, the officer on duty shouted, "Chow time, chow time." A string of starving inmates scurried out of their beds like roaches to the day room for breakfast. We lined up in a single file, and one by one, collected our unnecessarily large brown trays for the meagre amount of food on them: grits, jam, ham, two slices of white bread, and a cup of milk.

We had twenty minutes to eat, and depending on the officer and whether they felt like making us suffer, it was ten minutes. If you hadn't finished, the food went in the bin; like the other inmates, I had mastered the art of hoovering down every last scrap of whatever was on the tray; it was eat or starve.

CONTENTS

PART 1

PART 2

PART 3

PART 1

ONE

In the Beginning

All I can recall from my childhood years was a home overflowing with joy and laughter. We had exciting parties where our cousins, aunts, and uncles two-stepped to Ghanaian highlife and old-school funk music and ate and drank until the early hours of the morning. We went on trips to Margate Beach, Brighton, Newcastle, and France. There was never a dull moment in the Damoah residence.

I have an interesting family; both of my parents come from Ghana in West Africa; they arrived in England in the early 1960s, where they met and married. My dad is from a village in Northern Ghana called Berekum; my granddad had eight wives and fifty-two children between them! To this day, I still haven't met them all. I'm introduced to another brother or sister from the Damoah bloodline every couple of years. My mum is from a small fishing village called Gomoah Fetteh in Ghana, and she has eleven brothers and sisters. I've got two sisters; Allie is five years older, and Esther is eighteen months younger than me.

We spent the early part of our lives in Woolwich, South East London, and then moved to Welling in Kent in the late 1980s, where we still live up until this day. Welling is a quintessential, middle-class area, the type of town where everyone takes great pride in keeping their lawns perfectly trimmed and immaculate. My sisters and I were ecstatic when we relocated there. Our garden was vast, like an open field, and full of towering trees pregnant with gooseberries. As soon as we arrived, we went running, laughing and screaming through the grass, skipping around in circles as we took in the magnificence of our new home. We welcomed Welling, but Welling didn't welcome us.

Welling was the home of the British National Party, a far-right fascist political organisation. Their headquarters on Upper Wickham Lane was a ten-minute walk from our house. Their leader, John Tyndall, promoted that only white people should have citizenship in the United Kingdom. The party called for the removal of all non-Caucasian people from the country.

On 16 October 1993, an anti-racist march was held on Winn's Common in Plumstead, South East London. Just a stone's throw away from Welling, led by the Youth Against Racism in Europe, and the Anti-Nazi League, in protest for the closure of the British National Party's headquarters on Welling High Street. The march turned violent, and over seventy people were injured.

DURING OUR FIRST summer holiday in Welling, my sisters and I went to the park on Wrotham Road. We were excited to make new friends in the area. It was a bright, breezy day; we sat on the warm, dry grass and watched children push each other on swings as they squealed in delight. Ruddy young boys played football; some kids were even flying kites. We met a pleasant white girl called Kelly, and we spent the afternoon playing hide and seek. At the end of the day, we skipped to her front door, and she told us to remember her house. You couldn't miss it, it was the only one with two white pillars, and it looked like a mansion. My sisters and I went home brimming with joy; we had finally made a friend. We spent the evening planning games to play the next day with Kelly.

The following afternoon, we went to Kelly's house. We put on big smiles and rang the bell. Kelly opened the door, but she wasn't smiling. Her face was red; she put her head down and mumbled, "Sorry, my mum said I can't play with black people."

"Now shut the door," came an angry-sounding voice from the background.

Feeling dejected and hurt, we slowly walked back home in silence. That was my first recollection of racism. There was one black family on our street, Mr. and Mrs. Drummond, and their teenage son Winston; we quickly became friends. But tensions were high, and it was clear some of the residents were not happy with our presence. We were often chased home by groups of white youths calling us 'niggers' and telling us to go back to our own country. They never caught us; we were athletes. Like panthers, we would outrun them and leave them for dust.

My parents worked as hard as anyone else in England, and we weren't going to get bullied out of our new home. My dad enrolled us in judo and taekwondo classes. Over the years, I used my fighting skills more times than I care to remember because some of the locals were determined to make our lives hell, and I wasn't going to stand for it.

Mum and dad didn't discuss racism much; they told us to defend ourselves and ensured we got a good education to have the best chance in life. Their thought process was they came to England when racism was much worse, and they still managed to get somewhere. They didn't want us to grow up with a victim mentality. My mum started her career as a nurse, and many of her patients would tell her they didn't want a black person touching them. She had us watch the film Roots by Alex Haley, which gave us a better understanding of why things were the way they were. When we went to Ghana, we visited Elmina Castle, a chilling reminder of the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade for West Africans. But perhaps, my most traumatic recollection of racism in the United Kingdom was the day I heard of Stephen Lawrence's murder.

It was the weekend; my sisters, parents, and I sat eating fufu (a Ghanaian dish) in the living room while watching the evening news. We were all stunned into silence as we heard a group of white youths stabbed Stephen to death during a racist attack in Eltham, South East London. We went to school with Stephen, his brother Stewart (whom we nicknamed 'Nosey') because he was always jokingly butting into our business whenever he saw us, and his sister Georgina.

The Lawrence family lived around the corner from us in Woolwich during our early years. I didn't finish my meal that evening; I put my plate down and went to bed. But that day, as I'm sure it was for many black people in the United Kingdom, was a frightening reminder that some white people hated our skin colour so much they would kill us because of it.

THE RACIAL TENSION in Welling continued for many years after our arrival. But one Saturday afternoon, when I was thirteen years old, I put a stop to the bullying for good. "Nigger, nigger, nigger," whispered two white girls who lived on my street as they walked closely behind me, stepping on my heels. I was on my way to the corner shop; it only took five minutes, a right and a sharp left down the road. But I didn't make it because something

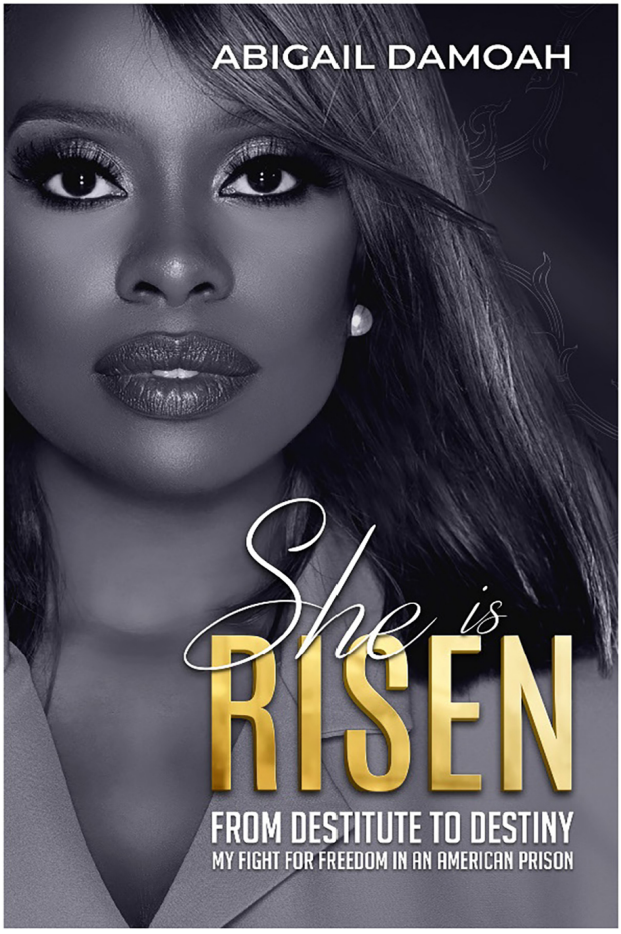
in me snapped, and I swung around and flipped the blonde girl onto the floor and started kicking and punching her as she hit the ground. The brunette jumped on my back; I tossed her over my shoulder on top of her friend. I saw red; I just kept kicking and punching them. Ironically, Winston, our black friend from across the street, ran over, pulled me off them, and sent me home.

No sooner had I got inside the house a group of white people came banging on the door. I was home alone and terrified; I didn't know whether they were going to force their way inside. I crouched under the dining room table, hugged my knees to my chest, held my breath, and tightly squeezed my eyes shut, wishing for them to go away. More than anything, I was afraid someone would come home and get attacked by the angry mob outside. I needed to get them away from the house. I mustered up all the courage I had, ran upstairs into the bathroom, opened the window, and screamed at them to get away from my house, or I would phone the police. They called me a 'nigger' and left.

I could breathe again. To make sure I was safe, I checked the locks on the doors and windows, put a chair against my bedroom door, and got into bed. I lay there shaking and waited for someone to come home. As soon as I heard a key in the door, I fled downstairs; it was my dad. Still trembling in fear, I told him what had happened. He made sure I was okay, but there was tension in the house for the rest of the evening, and each time I heard a noise outside, it startled me; I was scared they would come back.

The following morning, the parents of both girls turned up at our home and demanded to speak to my mum and dad. We all sat in the living room; apparently, they sustained multiple injuries, including black eyes and bloody noses. I let them know I don't go around beating people up for no reason, their daughters were racist bullies, and I stood up for myself. They vehemently denied being racist, arguing, "We've got black people in our family we can't be racist". I rolled my eyes in disbelief; I had lost count of how many times I'd heard this statement from some white people attempting to cover up their racism. To keep the peace, I apologised, and that was the end of it.

Defending myself worked because I was now free to walk through the streets of Welling as I pleased. The bullies crossed the road when they saw me, and I never heard the word 'nigger' again. I can only conclude they assumed I had superhuman strength, considering how I managed to take on two girls at the same time. Nevertheless, my fighting days were far from over.



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