



B. Hollidae

LITTLE THINGS

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Things *Trilogy*

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Plans Duology

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A Note from the Author

Thank you for reading *Little Things*. As an independent author, I rely heavily on reviews and word of mouth to promote my work. Thus, if you enjoy the book, please leave a review and share on social media so I can keep writing novels like this one. Once again, thanks for reading!

--B. Hollidae

1

Real talk? It's bad enough that I'm nineteen and in my junior year of high school. The last thing I want is my older sister dropping me off at my first day of school in three years like I'm some kind of kindergartener. Besides, I was taking care of myself a long time before she found me and took me in, and I could still do it now if I needed to. I'm not going to say that to Perla, though. It would just make her feel guiltier. She already feels bad enough as it is if the way she's been going out of her way for me since she approached me two and a half months ago is anything to go by.

"You have everything you need. Pens, notepads, your school schedule?"

"Yes."

"Your cellphone with my number in it?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you want to walk to school? I can give you a ride until we find you a car. I promise I'm working on--"

"Perla!" I say, interrupting my sister's rambling. "I'm good. I got this."

She nods, looking at me apologetically before saying. "I know you do... just... You sure?"

"I'm fine, Perla."

She nods and lets me go, allowing me to leave. I only make it to the sidewalk before she comes out the house and shouts from the doorstep, "Call me if you need anything."

I raise my hand in a peace sign without stopping to turn around and keep

going. If Perla holds me up any longer, I might need that ride.

It's not a long walk. Even if I did have a car I probably wouldn't drive it to school. I like the limited exercise since I haven't found a gym since I got here.

Even though I was here Friday with Perla to get my schedule during the peak of the school day when everyone was in the hall or running to class, they still haven't gotten over the apparent novelty of a new student—one who obviously isn't a part of the freshman class, who, with a week into the new school year, have already started to meld into the humdrum of high school life; nor am I a kid who grew up in the local middle schools with them. Not to mention I tower over just about everyone. Fuck, why do I have to be so tall? While I'm very aware of their stares and very uncomfortable with the attention, I act nonchalant as I go to my locker and take out the math book that I left inside it Friday.

I hear whispers to my right and look out my peripheral vision to see three guys talking to each other and periodically glancing and pointing to me. My first thought is that they all might be gay, and they think I'm hot. It sounds vain even as I think it, but I spent most of my teenage years in a fighting gym lifting weights and practicing martial arts and boxing because it was better than being in the same house as my mother and Quincy. I'm long used to guys and girls ogling at me, even if it makes me uncomfortable.

One of them, the short stocky one with walnut-colored skin, gets the nerve to come over to me, and it's only when he's right next to me that I see he's wearing a letterman jacket with the school's mascot and a football on it. So that's why they were fangirling over me.

“Hey bruh, what's up?” he says holding out his hand to me.

I take his hand and shrug in response to his question before asking in return, “What about you?”

“It’s you that’s up,” he replies and then says, “I’m Devonte.”

“Rafael,” I reply. “Nice to meet you.”

“Even better to meet you. You must be new because it’s the only reason you’re not already on the football team. There’s no way coach would have let you get away built the way you are.”

“It’s my first day. But I’m not interested in joining the football team.”

“Why not?” Devonte insists as though the idea is incomprehensible. “With you on the team, we’d be unbeatable.”

Because after living on the streets for the better part of three years, high school football is far from even near the list of my priorities or anything that teenagers think is important nowadays. I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Perla made me promise not to act like I wasn’t a normal teenager, but even I can’t pretend to care about the high school football team.

“It would just take away my focus from school. I really need to pick up my GPA if I want to get into a college,” I reply.

“That’s too bad,” Devonte says. “Still. Think about it. And come watch us practice after school. Maybe you can hang out with the team.”

I pretend to be open to the idea, if only so he’ll leave me alone. He does, and I head to my first class of the day. Math. Pre-cal to be exact. It’s not as hard for me to fall back into the groove of school as Perla thought it was going to be for me. Just because I dropped out of school and was homeless doesn’t mean I’m dumb. I was in advanced classes before I dropped out. It still didn’t keep Perla from worrying, even after I passed the placement test.

Devonte shares a lunch period with me and forces me to sit with him. Much to my dismay, we also share a gym class. We’re outside today, and while our teacher tells us what we’ll be doing, Devonte decides that in between whatever the teacher wants us to do, he’s going to test skills that would be conducive to the football team.

“I told you. I’m not joining the team,” I insist.

“And you don’t have to, but I just want to see what we may be dealing with.”

I actually do roll my eyes this time while simultaneously shifting my shoulders in an effort to loosen my shirt. The school ordered the wrong size uniform and now my shirt feels like an ill-fitted muscle shirt. They assure me that by next week they’ll have the right size.

I hear giggling behind me and turn to see two girls standing next to each other. One a dark chocolate skinned black girl with her dark hair in two cornrows on either side of her head and the other a tawny-skinned Latina with her dark hair pulled into a ponytail. The Black girl catches my eye when I glance at them. She smiles at me causing me to turn around. She laughs and mutters something to her friend who makes a loud snort of laughter, and when everyone turns to look at her, she covers her mouth and looks at the Black girl.

“Is there something you want to share with the class Akilah?”

Some of the class snickers at Akilah’s expense and her sharp brown eyes glare at everyone before she looks at the teacher and says with a sigh, “First? It’s Uh-key-luh. It’s not that damn hard to say. Second, she’s the one who laughed. Why am I the one you called out? That said, yes. Yes, I absolutely do have something I’d like to share with the class and because I want to share it I’m going to ignore the blatant colorism at the fact that Blanche is the one who laughed and who everyone heard, yet I’m the one in trouble.”

Akilah then looks at me and breaks out into a wide grin. My stomach drops to my feet with sudden nerves while my blood pressure undoubtedly soars, if the sudden tightness in my chest is anything to go by, as I naturally get ready to act on instincts that I used to need when dealing with my stepdad and while living on the streets.

Akilah turns back to the teacher and says, “How the fuck am I supposed to concentrate around that?”

As she says this, she points a finger and nods her head in my direction. Before I can even try to predict where she’s going with this, she says, “I mean look at him. The shirt is so damn tight it’s practically bursting at the seams every time he moves. Every time he so much as twitches, I notice a muscle flex. Put that together with those dark grey eyes and that long wavy dark hair and that flawless golden-brown terracotta-ish complexion and my ovaries are practically screaming at me to go make babies with him because he can provide for and protect offspring no matter how true or untrue that could be, which makes it extremely difficult to pay attention to your instruction. All that said, can you please get the dude a bigger shirt because there is no way you expect all of us to concentrate otherwise.”

“Miss Ghaliya,” the teacher says in a warning tone.

“Look, just last week you made one of the girls put on bigger shorts because her ass was supposedly distracting the boys. All I’m saying is that there needs to be some gender equality around here, and if the boys can’t be blamed for being distracted, neither can I be blamed for not paying attention because of those guns. And if that’s the case, he needs to put on a bigger shirt. Unless we want this to be made into a viral social media post. I really don’t think the school needs the bad rep.”

“Akilah,” the teacher says in a tone that undoubtedly means she’s crossed a line.

“It’s fine,” I suddenly cut in. “I have a shirt in my bag.”

“See how easy that was,” Akilah says, and she grins in my direction again.

I take the time to notice that she’s missing an upper canine. To be honest, it’s barely noticeable but I’m trying to focus on anything other than the part of me that wants to throttle her for humiliating me like this, like I’m just

some fucking sexual object, while another part of me just wants to run off and die. She grins wider all of a sudden, and I get the feeling that she's well aware that she's pissed me off.

"Would you also like to apologize to Mr. Ortiz?"

"For what?" Akilah asked. "All the girls can name at least five occasions where one of the guys have done the same thing to us."

"It's fine," I add just wanting this whole situation to be over. "I'll go put on another shirt."

"I'll go with him to make sure he doesn't get lost," Devonte offers and before our teacher can object, he catches up with me to go to the locker rooms.

When we're far enough away I snap, "Who the fuck is she?"

"That's Akilah Ghaliya. She's usually pretty quiet, but when she talks expect it to be loud and opinionated and pointing out the elephant in the room. She can talk herself in and out of anything," Devonte says shaking his head. "It's why a lot of the guys are afraid to date her. Not that she's ever been interested in anyone. You ought to be flattered, really."

"Well, I'm not. She didn't have to be so..." I trail off, unable to find the word for what she was.

"Don't be offended. She's always had an aura of owning the place and being able to do and say whatever she wants if she decides she needs to."

I don't say anything in response as we make it to the locker room. I grab my t-shirt out one of the lockers and put it on. And even though I have half the mind not to go back because I'm so embarrassed, I go back anyway because I won't let a girl that's hardly over five feet have that kind of power over me.

Neither Akilah nor Blanche spare another glance at me for the rest of gym, though that doesn't stop everyone else from paying attention to me now. It

was bad enough I was the new guy. Now I'm the new guy who was humiliated by that outspoken girl.

Once gym is over, I have one last class for the day and that class can't end fast enough. As soon as the bell rings I get out my chair, strategically chosen to be in the back corner of the class so I can be among the first to leave, and all but run out of class wishing myself invisible so that no one sees me. It's in this manner that I manage to walk right past Devonte without him noticing. When I get outside, I think I've succeeded until I hear my name.

I try to ignore it and continue to walk off the premises, but the person is insistent, and I hear them running behind me until they're blocking me from the front.

It's Akilah.

"What do you want?" I snap.

"Rafael. Right?"

"What do you want?" I repeat.

"Just wanted to say I wasn't trying to embarrass you back in gym. To be honest, you're probably the only guy I know that wouldn't have been flattered by it."

"Well, thank you. But I wasn't."

"And I'm saying sorry for it. Even if I'm baffled by it. By the time that story gets around school and everyone gets a look at the guy that Akilah Ghaliya called out in gym, girls will practically be throwing their panties at you. Not that you needed help."

"Not something I'm looking forward to."

Akilah raises her eyebrows at me and then asks, "Are you gay? If so I can-
-."

"No. I'm not gay."

"Then why..."

“I’m just not that kind of guy, alright?” I say and walk past her.

She simply falls in step next to me and says, “Not that kind of guy, huh?”

“You know this can be counted as harassment, right? All things you’ve done today considered.”

“That’s probably true,” Akilah admits. “But even if you told or tried to do something about it, they would take one look at you and one look at me and then laugh. Not that I think they should. Just an unfortunate reality of the toxic masculinity and gender stereotypes that permeate our society.”

“You know by now most girls would figure out I’m blowing them off.”

“I know you’re blowing me off. I don’t care,” Akilah points out and then says, “We should hang out sometime. Doing anything this weekend?”

“Are you seriously asking me out on a date?”

“Not a date. I just want to hang out. There’s a three-month probationary period before I decide if I want to date a guy,” she says. “Most guys don’t get past it. But I wasn’t lying when I said I thought you were hot. Wouldn’t hurt to see if you’re actually a jerk on the inside or not.”

“Fuck off. There. I’m an ass. Now you know.”

“You’re angry at me right now. Waiting until the weekend will give you the chance to cool off. If you’re as shy as you were acting in gym, I bet you’re actually pretty sweet.”

I stop walking and so does she, not faltering even as I just look at her for a while. She’s pretty quick-witted and has shot down everything I’ve done to try to hurt her feelings and make her back off so far. I groan finally. She’s not going to back off until I give in and, admittedly, I’m a little intrigued.

Finally, I say, “You’re pretty forward for a girl.”

“You’ll find I defy most gender stereotypes and general social norms and oddities. Actually, most girls do. But I’m not going to get into that,” Akilah assures as she finally turns to go in the opposite direction as me. “I’ll meet

you here. Saturday. Around noon. Give you a tour of the ATL.”

“How do you know I need a tour?” I ask. I don’t particularly have a discernible accent.

“You’re from Miami,” she says.

“And you know that how?”

She grins at me and says, “I’m good at finding out things about people.”

Then she turns away from me and says, “See ya’ later, Raf.”

I cringe. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why not?”

Because my stepdad called me that. But Akilah’s a stranger. A stranger who seems to know a lot more than I’ve said to her and asked me out, but a stranger still.

“Just don’t,” I mutter.

“You’re going to have to give me a better reason than that, Raf,” she yells back.

I watch her retreat for a while and then turn back to go home. Perla is going to get a kick out of this.

2

“You got a date on your first day to school? Way to go,” Perla says later that evening as I prepare dinner, long since tired of Perla’s apparent takeout diet. Our mother would be appalled that a young Latina woman like Perla never bothered to learn to cook. She’d also be appalled that Perla is happily unmarried at thirty-two years old—as of a month ago—and has no intentions of finding a husband.

“It’s not a date,” I say. “I don’t even like her.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“I know enough,” I say. I didn’t tell my sister about the girl’s proclamation in gym class. She probably would just laugh.

“Then how’d you end up with a date?”

“It’s not a date,” I grumble. “And she kinda told me without giving me the chance to say no in the name of showing me around the city and seeing if she might want to date me.”

“Good enough,” Perla says with a shrug. “If you marry her in the future, I just want to say right now that’s not bad for a first day back in high school.”

“I am *not* going to marry her,” I say firmly to which Perla only laughs.

“We’ll see about that,” Perla assures.

“Besides, she’s sixteen, maybe almost seventeen. I’ll be twenty in December. I could get arrested for that shit.”

“Meh. It’s not that big of a difference. My dad was twenty-three and mom was fifteen when she had me.”

“Your dad was a pervert. If not a pedophile,” I say bluntly.

“Fair point,” Perla says. Then she asks, “Has Ma tried to get in touch with you? I gave her your number. She said she was going to call you.”

“No,” I lie. The woman called about a week ago. I didn’t answer the phone. I have no interest in starting a relationship with her again. As far as I’m concerned, that particular bridge is burned.

“Well you know ma. She gets caught up in things.”

“Don’t we all,” I say. And then I ask, “You said her and Quincy are still married, right?”

“Yes,” Perla says and then quickly adds as I roll my eyes, “But he doesn’t hit her anymore. They’re in a good place now. I was thinking maybe we can go down for Christmas and attend Mass with Ma and—“

“No.”

“Rafael. It’s been three years. I know it was rough for you down there, but a lot has changed. And I’m not asking you to stay, just to go visit.”

“I fucking said no,” I yell, stabbing the knife into the wooden cutting board and causing Perla to jump. I sigh and take the knife out the board. Hopefully, I didn’t pierce through to the counter. Then I add calmly, “I’m never going back to Miami.”

Perla doesn’t say anything else about it. Eventually, she comments on how she finds it hard to believe that the little boy she left when he was eight is so big now—how she always thought I’d stay short, lanky, and scrawny and not grown tall, broad and so muscular, her own words.

“This is nothing. I used to be about twenty-five pounds bigger, but I lost some weight over the years. Guys at the gym were bigger than this though,” I say and from there we get into a conversation about my weight and muscle training, about how I used to box and take martial arts in Miami and my need to find another fighting gym to join. She immediately offers to pay for it. But

my sister has done enough for me as it is. I'll figure it out.

But no matter what we talk about, no matter how calm I act now, I can't lock away the thought of being back there with my stepdad. Of being trapped and unable to fight him no matter how big and strong I got. And not for the first time since Perla found me, I dream about being back there again though it never feels like a dream. Maybe because at one point, it was very real to me.

"Where were you?" Quincy asks me.

I shrug as I drop my bag in the corner of my room, trying to stay as far away from him as possible, though the room being so small makes that a difficult feat, especially when he's sitting on the edge of my bed.

"I was out," I finally say.

"Doing what?"

"Things."

I'll never tell him about the gym. That's the one thing I get to do around here that has nothing to do with him or my mother. Everyone else he's charmed into thinking he's an upstanding citizen and turned against me by making them think I'm a delinquent. And when a charming white Hispanic man tells a person that a tall strong Black boy (because it's hard to see my Latino ancestry on the surface) is a delinquent, they almost always believe the white man. But he's never met the people at the dojo. He never will.

"Why do we always have to go through this?" he asks me.

"I don't know," I reply. "But let's get to the chase. What the fuck do you want?"

"You know."

I press my lips together. Of all nights, when it had been a good day for me, he has to ruin it tonight. Why couldn't tonight be one of the nights he just left me alone? At least if today had been bad already his request would have just

been icing on the cake. But now he's taking a good day and shitting on it.

"Can we not do this tonight? I'm tired."

"So is your mother," he points out.

I could fight him if I wanted to. I've gotten strong enough to at least cause some damage and he knows it. But my mother can't fight him. And I can't always be here to protect her from him. Especially when she doesn't want protecting from him. Otherwise, she would have left with me a long time ago. This is the only way he won't kill her.

I suppress the anger welling up in me, the urge to punch him and throw him out. But that will just lead to a lot more problems. I only have to deal with it until I'm eighteen anyway. Two years seems like forever, but when I look back on it one day, it'll seem like no time. I can make it until then.

Resigned to Quincy's whims, I close the door behind me.

When I open my eyes, I'm disoriented because only a few moments ago I was sucking my stepdad off, and now he's not here, and I'm not in my room anymore. It takes me a while to remember that this is my room. My new room. The one Perla gave. I take a moment to take it in with all my senses. See the smooth neutral colors of the interior design. Hear the sound of the crickets and a cat mewling outside. Feel the soft mattress with no lumps. Smell the light, fresh, flowery, and feminine scent of my sister's house. Anything to remind myself that this is real. That I'm long gone from Miami, long gone from that hell house and Quincy. That my nightmare was just that. Even so, my heart is racing, and I'm hot with sweat.

I kick off the covers and lie there, slowly managing to calm myself down by mentally going through training exercises in my head until I'm calm enough to at least doze since I won't be falling into a restful sleep tonight.

I wait thirty minutes before Akilah shows up on Saturday. It didn't occur to

me throughout the week to get her number to better coordinate our meeting, mostly because I didn't want to spend any more time with Akilah than was strictly necessary. That said, I can't deny I'm not at the very least curious about her. Based on what Devonte told me about her and what I've gathered through the high school grapevine, Akilah is not just quiet. She's completely introverted. She never goes to the parties, never goes with the crowd, isn't very social, and the only friends she has are the ones she had been forced to interact with and then decided were worth keeping around, though she's mostly with her best friend, Blanche. And when she is forced to be social, she's usually the girl who sits in the corner and watches everything unfold; hence why in elementary, anytime something happened and she was around, she was always called on to tell what happened. Her honesty hasn't bought her many friends or much popularity either as much as it's brought her notoriety amongst her peers, though most will admit she's a generally nice person. So, what in the world prompted her to want to talk to me?

When she shows up, wearing jeans and a t-shirt with her black hair pulled back in a sleek high bun, I stand from the sidewalk with a scowl and say, "Took you long enough. Do you know how dangerous it is for a Black kid to just be standing out in front of a school looking like he's doing nothing?"

"Yeah. I probably should have gotten your number this week. I kept forgetting. But I said around twelve. It's twelve thirty. Around twelve," Akilah adds.

"Do you have an answer to everything?"

"Generally, yes."

I take a moment to consider backing out. Everyone else says she's quiet and observant, but my first impression of her was overbearing and overwhelming. I don't know how much of that I can take. But I'm already here. It's only one day.

“So where are we going?” I ask.

“You’ll see,” Akilah says. “I’m waiting on our Uber.”

“Uber?”

“That’s how I always get around on weekends,” Akilah says.

“Akilah. You’re a stranger. Sorry if I’m not about following you blindly in a city I hardly know.”

“Big strong guy like you afraid of lil old me?” she asks with a coy smile. When I’m not fazed, she rolls her eyes and says, “Fair point. We’re going to the mall.”

“The mall?”

“Yeah. You can learn a lot about a person by the stores they shop in at the mall. You’ll like Arbor Place. We can get food, go to the movies, do some shopping.”

“Seen one mall, you seen them all,” I say.

“Agree to disagree,” Akilah says as a car pulls up.

She gets in first and I follow behind her, careful to leave space between us. She seems content not to bother me during the twenty-five-minute car ride, and I’m glad for it. I don’t feel comfortable talking about anything in front of our driver, even though he’s only doing his job. He drops us off right in front of the food court.

“It’s crowded,” I point out when we go inside.

“Of course, it is. It’s Saturday after twelve. It’s the best time to come. Part of the experience is the people you encounter,” Akilah explains.

“Agree to disagree.”

“And people call me an introvert.”

Real talk? I have a love-hate relationship with public places. Love because in public my stepdad had to, at the very least, act like he was a civilized and respectable human being. Hate because of the close proximity it forces me to

be with people. Not in a social sense, but in a physical sense. Shaking hands, passing a payment, exchanging an item? The thought gives me anxiety but I'm usually okay if I can prepare my mind for it. Even worse though is the accidental touches—people bumping into me, brushing shoulders getting through a tight space. That's the stuff I can't really prepare for, that I can't predict how I'll react to.

“So where do you want to go first?” Akilah asks breaking my train of thought.

“You brought me here. Where were you planning on going?”

“Well I was trying to be considerate but if you insist. Come on. I need to get something out Victoria's Secret.”

Is she fucking serious?

My expression must say what I'm thinking because she laughs and says, “Just kidding.”

She leads me to Forever 21 where she stocks up on clothes for the upcoming winter and when I offhandedly mention that my sister lent me her credit card to buy new clothes, Akilah leads me to a men's store to shop. She may be quiet and introverted, something I've yet to witness, but she's certainly not shy. She doesn't hold back her opinion either.

“Those jeans make you look like you dropped out a spaceship and landed in Kansas,” she says when she looks at a pair of jeans I'm thinking about getting.

She's right. But I go to try them on anyway just because I don't want her to think I care about her opinion. After we're done, she leads me into some chain beauty supply store. My sister likes this place and their expensive makeup. Akilah does look at the makeup and grabs some type of cream and lipstick but spends most of her time with the hair items.

She's looking for some particular heat serum and checks down the aisles

three times before giving up. I don't know if she's noticed, nor do I know if she cares, but we've garnered the attention of one of the workers who has suspiciously been arranging the same shampoo near us since Akilah and I started walking down the aisles. Finally, she settles on getting some conditioner even though she didn't find the heat serum she was looking for and goes to check out.

Once we leave, I point out, "That woman on the aisle was watching us."

"Oh really?" Akilah asks. "I didn't even notice. I usually mind my own business, and they can do what they want."

That's a confident way to look at it, but for me, minding my own business and not noticing when people are watching or uncomfortable around me can get me killed. That was especially true when I had nowhere to go in Miami. Rather than saying that, I say, "I don't know how shopping has helped you get to know me."

"Oh, trust me," Akilah says, turning to me with the same grin she gave me in gym. "I've learned quite a bit about you."

As she speaks, she tries to poke me in my arm, and I dodge her. She frowns and says, "Don't move when I'm trying to poke you."

She tries again, and this time succeeds but only because I let her. She doesn't mean anything by it I don't think. She doesn't know that forcing herself into my personal space is potentially triggering. She's just being friendly because, for whatever reason, she's comfortable around me.

"I'm hungry. Want to eat here or go somewhere else?"

"It's up to you."

She gets another Uber to take us to a buffet style restaurant, and I experience what people would call a culture shock for the first time since arriving here. The food is... different. Akilah keeps looking at me out the corner of her eye as we go through the buffet and I continue to skip over food

that I'm not familiar with being cooked in certain ways.

Why are green beans and cabbage cooked in ham and look so greasy? Doesn't that defeat the point of vegetables? And why are all the pizzas made to be half pepperoni and half cheese when they could just do them separate. And I'm not used to not having access to good seafood. Finally, I decide on something relatively safe. Rice without the gravy, to Akilah's dismay, some kind of stewed chicken that looks the most familiar to something I'm used to eating, and a salad.

"So, what do you think?" Akilah asks when we sit.

"Is all southern cooking like this?"

"You're from the south."

"I'm from the south-eastern part of the United States, but not *the south*," I emphasize.

"What's different about it?"

I tell her some of my initial observations and then add, "And macaroni and cheese is okay, but a lot of the buffets down there have different kinds of rice and stuff."

"That's not surprising," she says. "There's a large Latin American community down there isn't there?"

"Yeah," I say.

"What else? Besides the weird food."

"Down there a lot of the stores have signs in Spanish and English since a good portion of the people in Miami only speak Spanish."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Being up here is like being in an entire different country."

Akilah looks at me with a piercing gaze like she wants to ask me a question but isn't sure if she should ask it or is just trying to confirm something before she says it out loud. It turns out to be the latter.

“Are you part Latino?”

“My mother,” I admit.

“I knew there was something about you. I noticed your name, but anyone could have just liked a name and given it to their baby. I think it was the hair. A Black guy with no other type of ancestry doesn’t have sexy, wavy, curly hair like yours. You like it long like that? You don’t think it makes you less of a man?” she teases.

I know very much what it feels like to be made to feel like less than a man. My stepdad made sure of that. So, my hair has never concerned me.

“It’s easier to let it grow than worry about keeping it cut,” I say. I’ve found that it’s easier to lie and hide things when it’s partly true. And it is true that I find it easier to keep letting it grow until it gets so long that it’s more trouble than it’s worth. Then I’ll cut it. Right now, it’s just past my mid back. “And don’t go around saying that. It’s not how you look that makes you Latino or not. I could just as well have hair kinky as yours and still be Afro-Latino.”

“I know. I was just teasing.”

“You like to do that a lot.”

“Only because you take things way too seriously. It’s too much fun to resist.”

She’s right. I do tend to take things too seriously. Instead of admitting that she’s right though, I ask, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You have a good habit of keeping people talking about themselves without saying anything about yourself.”

“That’s only because I figure out things about everyone else and ask them about it, and they tell me. So, you tell me? What have you noticed?”

“Is this that profiler thing you were talking about?”

Akilah shrugs, and I roll my eyes and say, “To think people say you’re

introverted and shy...”

“You don’t think so?”

“I never pegged you as shy.”

“Why not?”

“You openly admitted that my apparent hotness was distracting you and making you want to make babies with me to prove a point about gender equality,” I say dryly, trying not to crack a smile. Looking back on it, it was pretty funny.

“Fair enough,” she agrees.

“I haven’t seen the introvert either.”

“Because it’s just you, and you seem like that kind of person I can kick back with without judgment. But trust me, I’ll go home and go to sleep because even this is pretty exhausting for my spirit. I go home and go to sleep every day after school when I don’t have to work because being around all those people drains me.”

I ignore the part about her apparent introversion, though I keep it in mind because it seems like it’s something good to know about her. Why? I’m not sure. But I do ask, “What made me so special you thought you could kick back with me?”

Akilah leans back in her seat and looks at me as though trying to figure something out again. This time though, I get the sense that it isn’t me she’s trying to figure out.

“I don’t know. Just a feeling. My spirit was guiding me to you, so I went with it.”

That sounds like something my Catholic mother would say.

“Religious?” I ask.

“Religious?” she repeats, and I nod. “No. Spiritual? Yes.”

I don’t think I would understand her explanation if she tried telling me

what it is she means so I don't bother to ask. When we're done and as we're waiting on the Uber that will take us back to our meeting place, Akilah looks at the cream she bought and groans.

"Damn it," she says. "I bought the wrong complexion."

Some way or another Akilah has managed to drastically lower my guard and get into my comfort zone because I say without thinking, "I don't know why you even need it. You're hot without it."

As soon as the words have left my mouth, I suck in a sharp gasp as I think about what I actually said after the fact. Akilah turns to me, looking just as surprised by my words as I am, and for a while neither of us says anything. Unsurprisingly, it's Akilah who speaks first by saying, "So you think I'm hot?"

That grin that I have a feeling I'm going to be getting very acquainted with in the future spreads across her face illuminating her already warm features, and I fight to suppress the heat I feel rising to my cheeks. I thought I'd mastered masking my humiliation. Quincy forced me to. But this is a different kind of humiliation and embarrassment. It's also the second time in a week that Akilah is the cause. Fuck my life.

"I didn't mean it that way," I blurt out.

"Then how did you mean it?"

"I meant... I meant I don't think you need the makeup. I mean you were sweating out in the sun with your shirt sticking to you, and I thought you were pretty then... Fuck. I'm really not helping my case, am I?"

Akilah's outright laughing at me now, and I mutter under my breath about how she seems to enjoy getting humor at my expense. She casually bumps her shoulder into my arm, and while I don't particularly mind, I still touch the area to erase the lingering creepy feeling.

"You opened yourself up to this. But it's good to know I wasn't the only

one doing the checking out in gym.”

“I was not,” I say even though she’s never going to believe me. I really wasn’t. I didn’t check her out until after she asked me to hang out.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “Now we’re perfectly even.”

We are far from even, but by that time our Uber has arrived, and I don’t get the chance to tell her. I let her sit a little closer to me during the ride since her physical proximity, overbearing and overwhelming as she still is to me, doesn’t seem so much like an invasion of my personal space. As we’re getting out the car, she manages to slip my phone out my back pocket without my notice until she demands that I unlock it for her when we’re both out the car.

“For what?” I ask, even as I unlock it for her anyway.

She doesn’t answer, but it’s apparent she’s saving her number into my phone. She hands it back to me and begins to run off while shouting over her shoulder, “Text me. Call me. Whichever. You know, if you want.”

I’m sure she already knows I want to.

3

Being with Akilah has put me in a good mood and so the next morning, after texting her for most of the night, I decide to look into finding a gym to join. The first thing I do is set up my location on my phone and search through my social media and Google for recommendations and suggestions. I mostly rely on my social media, though, because the best way to find a place is through word of mouth.

I start by reconnecting with some of my contacts in Miami, some who are no longer in Miami. I scroll through some of the pictures, feeling a sense of nostalgia now knowing that I'll never be back there. A picture of one of the guys I used to train with comes up, and I see that he's one of the ones who has moved from Miami. He left a little while after I ran away, and by the time I went back to the gym after that, he'd been long gone, and I hadn't asked where he went.

Of all the place he could have gone, he went to Atlanta and according to the many pictures on his page he'd gotten together with some people to start a fighting gym. There are no hours of operation online but if I know him he's probably spending his time there today to sweat out whatever shenanigans he got up to the previous night.

"Perla," I say, coming down the stairs.

She's sitting on the couch in her pajamas with her hair in a braid thrown over her shoulder and watching Netflix with a bowl of Fruit Loops.

"I didn't expect you to be awake so early. You stayed up all night talking to that girl," she says.

“I didn’t stay up all night.”

“I heard you up laughing at 3 a.m. You must really like her,” she says without turning away from the television.

“She’s.... interesting,” I say carefully. I don’t want my sister meddling.

“Translation: You really like her,” Perla says with a smile. “Bring her around one day. When you’re ready.”

I doubt it’s even going to get that far, but I don’t comment on the subject any further and ask instead, “Can I borrow the car?”

“Where you going?”

I’m not used to anyone being concerned about where I’m going or what I’m doing anymore after so long of looking after myself by myself. Even though I’m in high school, I’m not sixteen. My first instincts are to tell Perla just that, but I stop myself. It’s her car. And she’s bent over backwards to get me here. She’s not trying to be like Quincy.

“A fighting gym. I think I know the guy who owns it,” I say.

“Cool,” she says. “Drive safe. Car insurance for you is already going to cost my whole left arm. The last thing you need is an accident on your record.”

“Will do,” I say as I grab her keys off the kitchen table.

My phone’s GPS leads me to an old shopping center in a spot that looks like it may have once been a bookstore. Next to it are an organic health food store, a beauty salon, a beauty supply store, and an old department store. The sign says that it’s closed, but I see people inside. Maybe one of them is the person I’m looking for.

A woman inside looks up and sees me and then turns to someone and nods in my direction. A tall bald and bulky man a few shades darker than me looks in my direction, and I instantly recognize him. Hopefully, X will recognize me. Through the window I see him grin, distinguished by the two gold teeth

in his mouth.

He comes to the door and unlocks the bolt before pushing it open to let me in.

“Rafael. My nigga!” he says opening his arms to embrace me.

“Long time no see, X,” I say returning his hug.

“Fucking right. Where the hell have you been?” he asks, letting go of me and putting his hands on my shoulder.

“Around,” I say.

He laughs and says “Obviously. You fucking disappeared man.”

“I came back,” I argue.

“Not often according to the guys, and then you show up at my gym 700 miles away! Bruh! We’ve got to catch up. You got a place to stay? A job?”

“I’m fine. Staying with my sister. She forced me to go back to school,” I grumble.

“She’s givin’ you free rent. It’s the least you can do,” he says with a shrug and then turns to the other three people in the room: the woman who first noticed me and two other guys that I saw in pictures with X online. “You all can finish up here. Lock up for me, will you?”

“We got it,” the woman says, and then X and I leave.

He insists that we have to go to this restaurant, one of the best places for soul food in the city. Hopefully, I’ll recognize the food and won’t be as put off by it as I was by the food at the buffet that Akilah took me to. It turns out to be only better. Still not what I’m used to but at least they have more types of rice for me to choose from and some type of Cajun seasoned fish that smells something similar to what me or my mother might have cooked. And I manage to find vegetables that don’t look like they’ve been soaked in grease.

“So, when did you get in town?” X asks almost as soon as we sit down.

“About two and a half months ago.”

X sighs. “We’re not starting that shit where you only very specifically answer what I ask you. Tell me everything. Are you really staying with your sister?”

“Yes,” I say, rolling my eyes and then promptly go into as much detail as I’m comfortable with about what happened between the last time I saw him and now. He stops to ask questions in between, even prying some when I’m reluctant to answer. Normally, I’m not comfortable with anyone prying into my life at all. But this is X.

He’s the one who started my training in the gym back in Miami and convinced the owner to let me train there in exchange for helping him clean up around the place and running errands for him after school. I also think that X helped pay part of the cost to train me, but he’ll never admit to it. At twelve years old, I thought the then twenty-one-year-old was superman, and part of me still probably does. Regardless, he’s like my older brother and took care of me to the degree that he could back in Miami. I owe him at least a few more details than others.

“How long were you out there, man? On the streets like that?”

“Officially?” I ask “Almost three years. Just at the start of what was supposed to be my junior year.”

“Fuck man. I knew your home life was bad but not bad enough where you’d rather be on them streets. It’s rough out there. It’s a miracle you ain’t dead somewhere. If I had of known it was that bad, I woulda dragged you to Atlanta with me back then.”

“So, my crazy ass stepdad would have charged you with kidnapping and had you all over the news as some kind of pedophile or something?” I ask. “Nah. It was better this way.”

“Your mom still with him?”

I nod, not particularly wanting to talk about Quincy.

“Does he still beat her?”

X was the only one back in Miami that I’d confided in about my stepdad’s abuse of my mother. And the only reason I had was because he was getting too close to the real truth about why I delayed going home as much as I could. Even so he still almost called the cops on my stepdad, but I’d convinced him not to because they might put Quincy in jail for getting rowdy for a couple of nights, and then he’d be right back because my mother would believe him yet again when he apologized, drop the charges, and take him back. I don’t think X ever truly believed that was all, but there wasn’t much he could ever do if I wouldn’t be completely honest with him.

“According to my sister,” I finally answer, “my mother claims he’s changed but I don’t care about it. Her life. She can do what she wants as long as she stays out of mine.”

“You only get one mother, man.”

“I’ll live,” I say with a tone of finality that makes X back off. He’s looking at my hand, and I follow his gaze to realize I’m holding my glass so tight in a shaky hand that I may shatter it. I let go of it and put my hand in my lap.

Finally, he asks, “Does your sister know?”

“It’s why she left. My mother made her leave because she got in the middle of one of her and Quincy’s fights and was going to kill him,” I say. I was eight when it happened, but the image of my older sister with her hair in disarray, skin red from exertion, holding a long sharp kitchen knife in her hand and ready to stab my stepdad if not for my mother standing in between them isn’t an image I’ll ever forget.

“Well I hope she’s got you in some kind of therapy because you certainly need it,” X says.

“I don’t need a shrink. I passed the psych evaluation they did before they admitted me into the high school,” I say.

“Right,” he says skeptically. Probably with good reason. It’s easy to fake being okay. I’ve been doing it most of my life. Still am.

X doesn’t argue any further and leans back in his seat and abruptly asks, “Do you have a job?”

It’s the third or fourth time he’s asked me that, so I lean back, mimic his posture, and ask, “Are you offering?”

He immediately goes into how they need another teacher to come in for after school hours three times a week to work with the children. He’s gotten it into his head that I’d be a good role model for them. I doubt it, but he also adds that they need someone with my flexibility because while he hopes to make his fighting dojo his business and only source of livelihood, they still mostly run on donations because some of the parents can’t afford the fees, and he takes in children who have nowhere else to go but the streets.

“Paying you isn’t a problem of course. I just can’t pay what the fulltime job some of my guys need yet,” X says.

Honestly, he had me after he said he needed a teacher.

The owner of the fighting gym I used to go to in Miami at one time wanted me to teach there too, but I was too wrapped up in my own issues to commit to it back then. Regardless, X is the second person to ask me this favor, and it makes me wonder what it is they see in me. If they really knew everything I’ve dealt with, would they still think so highly of me?

I start the next day after school. When I ask Akilah if she wants to get something to eat later after I’m done, she agrees without asking me what I’m doing. At first, I guess she’s just that trusting, but then again, judging by the way she seems to put pieces together and figure shit out, she doesn’t ask because she already has an idea. She has an after-school job too, though I haven’t asked her where.

The class I'm teaching doesn't start until four, but I get there around 2:30 so X can give me a short tour and then brief me on the kind of students I'm going to be dealing with. A beginner's class of children ranging from about eight to ten attending their first class and the first class of a new school year.

"How do you want me to start?" I ask.

"How ever you want," X says.

That's the type of trick freedom teachers used to give me in elementary when they asked me how I thought I should solve a problem only to proceed to tell me I was totally wrong. But when X says how ever I want, he means it. While the door is open for anyone to see, no one watches to see what I'm doing. I agonize on where to start first, even as the children begin filing in. And when I do decide where I'm going to start, it's by accident more than planned.

Not even a minute into the beginning of class a boy gets to fighting with the only girl in my class. I'm not sure how that happened because while X has told me they have more boys than girls, about a fourth of the kids they train are girls.

"Hey," I say pulling the two apart. "What in the world is going on here?"

"This bitch called me ugly," the girl says.

"Hey," I say immediately. "Watch your language. Now say it again."

The girl rolls her eyes and crosses her arms and repeats, "*He* called me ugly."

Undoubtedly, she's been somewhere where the adults around her don't censor their language even with her in the room. Using this kind of language when she's this young is usually an indication of what kind of life she might have, what kind of environment she's grown up in that she thinks saying bitch is okay for her. But on the other hand, she looks well taken care of. She has sandy brown hair in a plait at the back of her head, clean and relatively

clear desert sand colored and lightly freckled skin, and bright amber brown eyes. No sign of any recent trauma or a bad home life. Maybe she heard it on television.

“Okay,” I say to the whole class holding onto her hand in particular, more than the young boy who offended her, because she looks like the minute I look away she’s going to lunge at the boy again. “Everyone sit on the floor.”

“I thought we were going to learn how to fight!” one of them whines.

“We are,” I assure. “This is part of it.”

I make the girl and the boy sit on opposite sides of me much to the girl’s dismay as she looks over at the boy with her eyes narrowed.

“Stop that,” I say to her.

She rolls her eyes, but relents and then I say, “You know out of all the people you’re going to fight in the world, all the people who are going to want to hurt you for whatever reason they want to do it, you know who your biggest opponent is going to be?”

“What’s an opponent?” a boy in the back asks.

“Someone you fight against,” I clarify making a mental note to water down my vocabulary.

A hand in the front shoots in the air and when I call on him, Raheem he says is his name, he responds, “I know the answer to this. I saw it on that movie, Creed!”

“Oh yeah?” I ask.

He nods and then continues, “Yourself.”

“That’s right.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” the girl says loudly next to me.

“Yes, it does,” I insist.

“How? Tell me,” she demands.

“What’s your name?”

“Zenobia,” she says clearly and proudly, daring anyone to make comment on it. Thankfully, no one does.

“Answer this? Now he,” I say looking at the boy she was fighting and then raise my eyebrow at him in question.

“Alex,” he says.

“Alex,” I continue, “Called you ugly. Now yes that was wrong. And Alex owes you an apology and me a one-minute wait sit later, but do you think you’re ugly?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“If you answer the question, I’ll tell you.”

She pauses as though to think about it and then says, “No.”

“Then why did you get so upset that you wanted to fight him?”

She blinks and finally, she’s unable to give me an answer to something.

“Words have power. But only the power that you give them. So, Alex can call you ugly all day and as long as you don’t believe it, those words have no power. But when you reacted, you gave his words power which means you gave him control over you. And even if you did think they were true, even if you did think you were ugly, and you’re not Zenobia,” I say firmly because I don’t entirely believe that she doesn’t think she’s ugly, “you don’t want to give him the key to beating you by giving him control.

“And that is one of the most important rules of fighting. Don’t ever let anyone get into your head. Don’t give anyone’s negative words power. Because no matter how much you’ve trained, how much bigger you are, if you do, you put yourself at risk of losing every time because you gave them control over you. So, in order to do that, you have to battle and fight against all the negative things you think about yourself. Because if you know their words aren’t true, if you think about all the things you can do or the good things you are, the negative doesn’t matter. Got it?” I ask.

Everyone nods, except Zenobia who asks, “Has that ever happened to you?”

“Has what ever happened?”

“Have you ever given someone control over you because you gave their words power?” she asks.

She’s a perceptive little girl. And already I can see I’m going to have my hands full teaching her, especially judging by how she just spit my own words back out at me without faltering.

“Yes,” I say simply.

“How?”

Quincy immediately comes to mind, but I shove it back into the dark recesses of my mind because it’ll just distract me if I dwell on it too long.

“That is none of your business. The point is we all have, and we’ll all be tempted to, but we shouldn’t,” I say. “Any more questions.”

“Yes,” Zenobia immediately says as all the boys roll their eyes and groan.

“Yes, Zenobia.”

“What’s *your* name?”

I probably should have started with that anyway.

“Rafael. Any other questions?” I ask specifically to Zenobia.

“Nope. Alex doesn’t even have to apologize. His words have no power,” she declares, turning her nose up in the air.

I laugh out loud at her this time. Definitely a handful.

4

I've only been in Atlanta for almost five months, and, already, I'm now positive that Perla getting me out of Miami has been one of the best things that ever happened to me. It's the only way to describe how seamlessly I've made a place here when for most of my life I've found it so hard to fit in, find friends, and generally do something with myself. Maybe because in Miami I was so focused on getting through one day at a time, worrying about if Quincy was going to beat my mother or force me to have sex with him, and, once I finally left, wondering if I was going to be able to find someone to let me sleep a few nights on their couch, what I was going to eat, and how not to get killed on the streets in general.

Akilah just calls it destiny. I haven't told her the details of why I moved up here with Perla, nor has she asked. But what she does know is that I had a rough time. And it's her theory that I was meant to have a rough time in Miami so that'd I'd be forced to leave because what I'm meant to do is here. That everything I went through was a step closer to where I was supposed to be even though I didn't know it. She looks at everything that way.

I'm not sure how it's possible that after only a couple of weeks a person can get so engrained in your life that you can hardly comprehend the fact that at some point you managed to live without them. That's the simplest way to describe how quickly Akilah has just become part of my day to day life and not entirely by her own persistence, though I'll never admit that to her.

Our relationship is progressing much faster than any I've had before, mostly because I don't have to keep her at a distance to protect her from my

stepdad. Our developing relationship is one of the many subjects of gossip in the high school rumor mill. And more than once we've been called out for making eyes at each other across the room. Eye sex, Devonte calls it. I thought after I made it clear I didn't want to be on the football team, he'd ditch me, but he still keeps me company, and one of these days I think I'll invite him to the gym.

For once neither of us have anywhere to rush off to after school and finally Akilah asks, "Where do you work?"

"Work?"

"You have a job, right? That's where you go after school most days."

"I work in a gym."

"A gym? Like planet fitness?"

I snort and say, "Planet fitness is not a real gym. And not that kind of gym, though we do have the equipment and train like that. A fighting gym."

"Oh. Like boxing and martial arts?"

"Yeah."

"What do you do there?"

"I just told you."

"No," Akilah persists. "I mean like is it just teaching or competitions or what?"

"According to X, he has a few that are in the amateur boxing competition circuits that he trains. But I don't do any of that. I work with the kids three days a week, and while I also get paid, I can use the gym to train whenever I want."

"You wanna be a boxer or something?"

"No. It just gives me a way to channel my energy."

More than that. It kept me going when I was too afraid to leave home. It kept me from trying something stupid with Quincy and possibly hurting my

mother when my anger and resentment became too much. Some days I'd spend all day training until I could barely lift my arms. Back then, X tried to encourage me to get into the amateur boxing circuit, but I wasn't looking to make it a profession. Just something to keep me from going crazy.

"What do you want to do? With your life I mean," Akilah asks. "You're pretty smart. Heard through the grapevine you're a math wiz, and you're good at science. Doctor?"

"I don't know. Haven't decided. What about you? What job do you run off to every day?"

"Bookstore," she says. "Not nearly as exciting as boxing, but if it's slow and no one needs help, they let me read as much as I want so I don't complain."

"Not shocking," I say and then grin at her. "I bet I know what you plan on doing."

"I thought I was the profiler and the one who figured things out."

"That's part of why I know what you want to do. Lawyer, right?"

She stops walking to look at me, blinking her eyes. One thing I've learned about Akilah is that she's rarely surprised and the strangest things surprise her, the things that you'd think wouldn't surprise her.

"Blanche told you that didn't she?"

"I don't even talk to Blanche."

"You're lying. She did tell you," she says, punching me in the arm playfully.

"I swear. I didn't. It's obvious. You like politics, all you do is read, and anytime someone wonders if you could legally do something you've looked up some law or loophole. You just do it without even trying," I say laughing at the way her brown and dark pink lips turn.

"I don't."

“You explained why it’s discriminatory for the school to say guys had to tuck in their shirts and explained how you could argue it in court and win a lawsuit the other day,” I remind her. “And you have an argument for everything. It’s pretty obvious.”

At that point, I notice we’ve been walking but haven’t decided where we’re going. I stop and ask Akilah to which she responds, “We can chill at my house.”

“Your house?” I repeat.

“Yeah. Unless you have somewhere else you want to go?”

“No.”

“What? Never been to a girl’s house before?”

I have. When I didn’t have anywhere else to go I coned more than a few girls into giving me money and a place to stay. Well, if I’m honest with myself, it wasn’t conning as much as I pretty much whored myself out. It was older girls mostly that I had known in high school or women in their early twenties from around the neighborhood just getting out on their own. It was one of the easiest ways to find a place to stay. Slept with all but one of them, and that was because she was religious and genuinely wanted a relationship with me.

“Yes,” I finally reply.

“Then no big deal, right?” she says more than asks and begins to lead the way.

I follow her all the while trying to come up with some excuse not to, but by the time she’s walking up the path to her house, I’ve come up with nothing. It’s in an older neighborhood and is pretty small like when I lived with Quincy and my mother, but the atmosphere is totally different when I walk in. From the entrance, we walk right into the living room where there’s a couch, a television in a wooden entertainment system, and a matching coffee

table that all look like they came from IKEA. In a room behind the living room to the left, I catch a glimpse of the dining area and to the right and probably connected to the dining area I also catch a glimpse of the kitchen.

“Want something to drink? Eat?” she asks.

“No,” I reply as she goes into the kitchen.

“Just leave your bags by the door. You can sit on the couch. Turn on the television if you want.”

I sit on the couch and start to grab the remote off the coffee table until a newspaper and CD she has lying on the table catch my attention. I instantly recognize them.

“You with the Nation?” I ask when she comes back and sits next to me on the couch.

“No. But I always get their papers and CDs from them. I don’t always agree with them and am never going to join them, but the Nation is dope,” she says.

“Their brothers were always trying to get me to go to the mosque,” I say. “One of them always gave me money when he knew I needed it when I was living on the streets but was too proud to ask anyone for it.”

“You lived on the streets? Like homeless?”

I start to ask what makes her say that when I backtrack and realize I did just say that. I can’t lie about it now, so I say, “For a while.”

I hope she leaves it alone and that she doesn’t pry and ask the right and wrong questions to trick me into revealing more than I already have to piece the story together. Thankfully, she seems fine with my answer. Instead, she moves the paper and the CDs to a shelf designated for books on the entertainment center and turns on the television. It’s the middle of the day and nothing is on, so she turns on a random movie on Netflix.

Real talk? I pretend not to know what she’s doing. I pretend to sit back

with her and watch the movie while she sits a bag of chips between us. I know about Netflix and chill. I was around fifteen or sixteen when that first started becoming a thing. And while I know all that assuming what a girl wants or what her intentions are is part of rape culture and all that other stuff I learned from social media movements, Akilah only brought me to her house for one of two reasons. Either she really just wants to chill and watch a movie with me or something else.

It turns out to be the something else. First, she moves the bag of chips from between us and sets them on the table. Then she scoots over and closes the gap between us so she's sitting right next to me. I can't say I try to discourage her or that I even want to. Eventually, I wrap my arm around her and pull her closer to me until she's practically sitting in my lap, her head resting against my chest, and I wonder if she can hear my heart racing. Finally, she stops any pretense that either one of us is paying attention to the movie and reaches across me to grab the remote and turn off the television. Then she sits on her knees with her legs on either side of my lap.

"I thought there was a three-month probationary period," I tease.

"There is. But you've passed with flying colors early," she says, and without saying anything else, she leans in and kisses me.

I kiss her back. It's like the first high of a drug even though this isn't my first time kissing a girl. But this is the first time it's with someone I care about just because I want to, without the fear or worry that if I don't reciprocate, I might be starving and sleeping on the sidewalk. This is the first time sexual contact isn't for the sake of survival.

Akilah proves herself not to be shy once again as she changes the angle of her lips and opens her mouth and licks my lips with her tongue. I oblige and open my mouth to her. I try to slip my tongue into her mouth first, but she beats me to it and touches the inside of my cheek. I groan into her mouth as

the touch sends a jolt all the way down to my dick. Instinctively, I grip her left thigh with my right hand tightly, trying to shift under her to release some of the strain and tightness around my groin. My shifting causes her to pull away.

“You okay?” she asks, looking concerned.

“More than okay,” I manage to breathe. Who knew a kiss could be that intense? In the past, it’s always just been a necessary prelude to sex. God, this girl is going to get me in so much trouble. And I don’t give a fuck about it either.

“Was that your first kiss?” I ask suddenly

It’s the first time I’ve seen her blush. Her whole face alights dark red.

“Was it obvious?” she asks.

“No. Just remembered someone told me you didn’t date anyone.” Then with a grin, I ask, “How many videos did you watch to learn how to do that?”

“A thousand!” she exclaims, and I throw back my head in laughter because that’s so her. She has a very clinical and methodical approach to everything even something as primal as kissing.

When I tilt my head back forward she’s looking at me again, and I feel my skin beginning to tingle with need for her to be against me again. I’m in trouble all right. Whether good or bad remains to be seen. We lean back in at the same time, this time harder, hungrier. I grip both her thighs in my hands, and she rests her arms around my shoulders and starts playing with the hair at the nape of my neck with one hand and buries her other hand in my hair, and that’s when it goes downhill.

Alone, either touch is fine. But together they suddenly take me back, and this isn’t Akilah kissing me but Quincy forcing me to kiss him with one hand in my hair holding my head in place, so I can’t move and the other playing with the nape of my hair like he was so fond of doing. The flashback only

lasts a second, but it's enough to make me push Akilah away suddenly, to totally push her off my lap as I gasp for breath and my heart races in terror now instead of passion.

"What's wrong?" she asks immediately because clearly something is.

I grasp for an excuse. Anything so that I don't have to explain, to throw her off, something that might be reasonable to her.

"I... Have we talked about how old I am?" I suddenly ask.

"Does it matter?" Akilah asks slowly, and I get the feeling she doesn't buy it but she's going with it anyway.

"Yeah," I say. "You know I'm not quite your age, right?"

"You're what? Eighteen?" she says with a shrug.

"No. Nineteen. Twenty in December."

"Okay. I figured you were older than the rest of our class. You still won't get in trouble. Who's going to tell? Even if they did, I'm over the age of consent, and I turn seventeen at the end of December. And the consent thing only really matters if we were having sex and we're not. You didn't think we were—"

"No," I say quickly. "I just.... Wanted to make sure you knew what you were getting into. I forget how old you are sometimes. You act older."

"I've been told I have an old soul," she says with a shrug. Then her lips turn down again and she asks, "You sure that's all?"

"Yeah," I say. "That's all."

She doesn't look convinced, even as I lean over her and cover her body with mine. It doesn't matter to her anymore once I'm kissing her again and rubbing my hand on the outside and inside of her thighs through her jeans.

Except for twirling the ends around her fingers and accidentally tangling her fingers in it when she holds onto my back when I rotate my hips into hers, she doesn't put her hands in my hair again.

5

“Rafael,” Perla calls to me one morning before I go to school. She has one hell of a habit of wanting to talk to me right before I’m walking out the door.

“Yes,” I say dryly.

“Are you going to be late tonight?”

“I don’t know. Just depends,” I say carefully because Perla hasn’t made a habit of asking me when I’m coming home. In fact, she was always urging me to get out the house when I first arrived.

“On what?”

On if I go to Akilah’s house after I finish training today. Depends on how tired I’m feeling, but Perla is getting at something, and I’m going to be late if she holds me up much longer, so I ask, “What are you getting at?”

“You’re with that girl, aren’t you?” she asks bluntly.

“Yes.”

Perla sighs and rolls her eyes before saying, “You all are being careful right? Do you have condoms and all that stuff? Is she on the pill or something?”

Are you fucking kidding me?

“Really Perla! We’re not having sex. I can’t believe you asked me that,” I say laughing because what else can I do.

“I have to make sure. You’re just getting back acclimated. The last thing you need is a baby. And she’s probably from school and younger than you which brings a whole bunch of other problems with her parents with you being over eighteen.”

“Actually, she’s over the age of consent so anything we did would be legal,” I say parroting Akilah. “And I don’t need you to give me the safe sex talk. I left Miami without any STDs or getting any girls pregnant. I’m good, Perla.”

“That’s what all teenagers say until something goes wrong,” Perla says.

“I won’t be a teenager in December.”

“You’re a teenager until you graduate high school.”

“Is that all?” I ask. “I need to go.”

“I wanna meet her,” Perla says quickly. “Your girlfriend. I don’t even know her name, but you’ve been spending all your spare time with her almost since school started, and you’re hiding her from me.”

“I’m not hiding her from you. I just didn’t think to bring her by.”

“Why not?”

Because it wasn’t safe to bring a girlfriend or any kind of company to the house back in Miami. Quincy had one hell of a jealous streak, and if he thought I were interested in or spending more time with anyone except him, he would have ruined all my relationships both romantic and platonic. Perla seems to read my mind.

“Rafael, I’m not Quincy. You can bring your girlfriend by. Any of your friends really,” she assures and reaches over to hold my hand in hers.

“Thanks. Good to know,” I say making my way out the house as quickly as I can without running before my sister can come up with anything else.

Today is one of the days I don’t share any classes with Akilah, so I don’t get to tell her about Perla’s request until later that night after I’ve trained and am way too tired to do anything but lie next to Akilah on her large bed with my eyes closed.

“My sister wants to meet you,” I say.

I hear her book fall into her lap as she puts it down.

“Oh yeah,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“Well isn’t this moving pretty quickly? Already I get to meet your family.”

“It’s just my sister.”

“Isn’t she your only family?”

“No,” I say and then add, “She may as well be though.”

Quincy was never family, and my mother is still with him so that puts her in the same boat as him. I don’t know who my dad is. He left when I about three. And I’m not sure exactly where the rest of my mother’s family is. So, Perla really is my only family.

“What about you? You never seem worried that your mom or dad is going to walk into the house and catch us. You never even talk about your family.”

“Most of my extended family lives out of town, but in the city? I’ve got an aunt and uncle who live in Gwinnett County, and I’ve got another couple of aunts and uncles with some cousins that live near the airport. I talk to them every now and then to assure them I’m not dead,” she says.

“What about the family that lives here with you?”

“They’re dead,” Akilah says, and I feel her shrug her shoulders next to me.

I open my eyes then and roll over to look at her. She doesn’t seem particularly bothered by the train of conversation, but she doesn’t seem particularly eager to talk much about it either. I decide there’s no harm in prying a little.

“Dead?”

“I was the result of a one-night stand, so I have no clue who my dad is. My mom died of cancer, and my brother died in the military,” she says.

“You live by yourself?” I ask

“I’m an emancipated minor.”

“A what?”

“The courts gave me all the rights of an eighteen-year-old,” she says.

“Why? Couldn’t you have lived with your other family or something?”

“Why do that? My mother worked all the time anyway until she got really sick. And when my brother was deployed my mother couldn’t do anything for me because she couldn’t get around a lot. I was taking care of myself anyway,” Akilah says with a shrug. “So, I got a teacher, my social worker, and my therapist to vouch for me and proved I had the means to take care of myself, and they gave it to me.”

“So... your after-school job pays for your living?” I ask skeptically.

She doesn’t address my skepticism and replies while looking at her book, “No. It’s just something I like to do. Gives me extra cash to get stuff I really don’t need but want, and it’s a good way to throw people off. I live off the money the military gave me since I was my brother’s next of kin. And he had accidental death and dismemberment insurance, so I got that too. And what little retirement fund my mother had is mine too. That and her life insurance policy. Most of it is sitting in the bank collecting interest. The house is long paid for. It’s just me so the utility bills aren’t that much.”

“You live by yourself?” I ask again just to be sure.

“Yes,” she says with a laugh this time and then looks at me with a passive expression. “Don’t go broadcasting that. Only Blanche and a teacher know. I keep it quiet for a reason. And don’t you get any ideas about taking advantage of me either now that you know no one is going to come home and catch us. Or about touching my money either. I plan on sailing at least through college and law school with it. You try anything stupid, and I’ll shoot you. Seriously. I have a gun. And once I shoot you, my dog will tear you to pieces.”

“You have a dog? Where?” I ask and when she doesn’t find it funny I roll my eyes and say, “First, I know how to take guns from people. Second, don’t

worry. I'm not going to take advantage of you. You don't have to be so serious about it. I was just curious."

"I'm seventeen, five foot three or four and one hundred twenty pounds or so. I have to be serious about everything. Crazy even. If people don't think I am, they'll try me."

I don't respond and instead lay back on the bed processing everything she's told me. Then I say, "Why are you telling me? A guy you met only three months ago. If that?"

Akilah shrugs and says, "I've profiled you. You don't fit the typical nineteen-year-old guy persona in a very good way. And my spirit says it's okay."

Her spirit helps her dictate a lot of things. It makes her seem spontaneous sometimes when it's really not in her personality. Most of the time, she's admitted to me, before she does something she's been thinking about it and planning it in her head for a long time which makes her seem spontaneous when she does it. I wonder exactly what her spirit is leading her to believe about me that she's so easily let me into her life and that I've so easily let her into mine.

Instead of asking her, because I don't think I'm ready for the answer she'll give me, I roll over and look at the clock. It's almost eleven. I sigh and say, "I should go."

She looks at me and then at the clock and then back at me and says, "Why don't you stay?"

"Stay?" I ask.

"Yeah. It's too late for you to walk home, and I don't feel like getting you an Uber," she says. "You can sleep in the other bedroom. Some of my brother's stuff is still in there. He was smaller than you, but something may fit."

I don't remind her that getting an Uber literally takes the click of a button on her phone but follow her to one of the other bedrooms anyway because I really don't feel like going anywhere. She tells me where the towels and washcloths are if I decide to use the bathroom and then makes a point to go back to her own room after she kisses me goodnight. Almost everything Akilah does has a deliberate purpose, and she's clearly setting a boundary. I'm not mad at her for it. I have my own boundaries. I'm not a fan of sleeping in the same bed with people. That was ruined for me. I can't remember how many times I woke up in the middle of the night to someone slipping behind me in my bed whether it was to fuck me or stroke my dick. Quincy, in particular, took some sick pleasure in forcing me to come, as though it was proof that I was a consenting participant in our sexual encounters, part of his fucking mind games I guess.

I don't know what it is, but that night I dream about one particular encounter with Quincy when I was fourteen. Not only did I go through a sudden growth spurt, I started gaining muscle from training and the strict diet I was doing my best to keep to. Quincy commented on it, stood behind me and started tracing the lines starting to form on and define my abdomen and kissing my neck while I focused on the stew I was cooking and not on the knife next to us. We heard my mother's voice enter the room, and Quincy slowly pulled away from me. When we both turned around to greet her, she was standing just inside the kitchen. I caught a fleeting look across her face before she tiredly greeted us and came up next to me to ask what I was cooking.

I wake up after that and glance at the clock, noticing that it's six thirty. I won't be able to go back to sleep but at least it's not three or four in the morning. I go to the laundry room and grab the clothes Akilah let me wash last night and then get a towel and cloth to take a shower. I turn it as hot as it

will go, and steam fills the bathroom. Eventually my body gets used to the heat and I no longer feel it, but I can still feel Quincy's body against mine, his hand playing with my abs, his lips on my neck.

Compared to my other dreams and flashbacks, this one is relatively tame, but it stays with me. I think because my mother was in it. Because that was one of the few close encounters Quincy had with her almost finding out what was going on. I frown. She wasn't just stepping into the room when we turned around. She was there. She had to have seen how Quincy was pressed against me or maybe she didn't look up until we turned around.

It was one thing for her to take beatings from my stepdad, but she couldn't have known what was really going on between us and turned a blind eye to it. It's something I've wrestled with in my head dozens of times when I know there was no way she didn't see something but doesn't mention it. A voice in the back of my head, maybe this spirit thing Akilah is always going on about, tells me the answer, but I'm not in the right headspace to accept it.

Once I'm showered and dressed, I start to go through the dining area to go to the kitchen and am surprised to see that Akilah is already awake. She's wearing long pajama bottoms and a loose fitting short sleeve top, but her hair is already brushed back and pulled into a bun at the top of her head, and she has on her large gold hoop earrings.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," she mutters.

I start to ask her why she's up so early, but she cuts me off abruptly and says this is her morning meditation ritual. I look on the table and see she's got books spread out in front of her and a notepad and pen. I don't say anything else and go to the kitchen to make breakfast. Since I'm not sure what she eats, I cook a little of everything she has in the fridge. Eggs, waffles from scratch, turkey bacon, and a cantaloupe. She comes to join me in the

kitchen when I'm done.

I ask her about her meditation time to which she shrugs and says it's just something she does. Then we have breakfast, and after that she introduces me to her Rottweiler, a female named Emma, her spirit animal Akilah calls her. Turns out I've heard her barking outside sometimes, but I thought it was a neighbor's dog. By the time we've done all this, it's eleven o'clock, and I mention that my sister is probably awake and wouldn't mind having her over. Akilah agrees and goes to her room and comes out in roughly five minutes with a pair of jeans on and a sweater.

When we get to my sister's house, I find her in the kitchen getting chips and guacamole, one of her favorite snacks.

"Hey Rafael," she says. "I didn't think you'd be home until later this evening."

She starts to say something else but stops when she turns around and sees I'm not alone.

"Oh. Who's this?"

"This is Akilah," I say.

"Akilah," Perla mutters in confusion, and then her eyes widen as it dawns on her. "This is the girl you've been talking to."

Perla looks at me in annoyance and says, "Really Rafael? You could have told me you were bringing her."

"You said I could. You said you wanted to meet her."

"Well yeah! But to get to know her. To spend time with her too. I don't have anything planned for us," Perla says and then starts rambling in a combination of English and Spanish.

"That's okay," Akilah says. "We don't have to do anything special. I'm a homebody anyway when I don't have to be anywhere."

"But you're Rafael's first girlfriend. That's a big deal!" Perla insists.

Real talk? I haven't even said Akilah's her name around Perla because I made a point in Miami not to say the names of people who were important to me so Quincy wouldn't find out who they were, wouldn't have someone to use against me. And I certainly haven't called Akilah my girlfriend. We haven't discussed it, and I'm a little apprehensive about how Akilah is going to react to that.

Before Akilah can say anything though, Perla says, "Give me twenty minutes. We'll go do something like... How about the aquarium? It's really nice."

She makes her way upstairs without waiting for an answer, and when she's gone, I turn to Akilah and say, "I promise she's not always that high strung. She's just excited for me I guess. She's been bending over backwards to make sure I'm okay, and she's glad I've seemed to find my way."

I grab a tortilla chip from the bowl that Perla abandoned as I wait for Akilah to say something. When she does, she asks, "I'm your first girlfriend?"

"You would pay attention to that," I say casually, though I'm secretly glad she seems to be fine with the title. I never know with Akilah. She's so... untraditional in some things, like she'd be the type to not want to be called that.

"No really. Am I?" she asks.

I don't immediately respond because there's no simple answer to this. After thinking about it, I say, "In the traditional meaning of the word girlfriend as in exclusively dating and in a relationship with a girl, yes."

"What's the other sense?"

"You know."

"I have an idea, but I want to make sure that's what you mean."

Sometimes I wonder if Akilah's reservations with revealing what she

suspects or knows is a game she likes to play or just her personality. Probably a little of both. Regardless, she's not going to say what she thinks until I say what I mean.

"In the sense that... we had nothing in common outside the bedroom type girlfriends," I say carefully. I don't want to reveal too much. And I rather her just think I was a real fuck boy than to really know what was going on.

"Oh. They were your fuck buddies," she says bluntly.

No. They were a way to survive. But she's made the assumption I wanted her to.

"Way to put it in layman's terms."

"You don't have to sugarcoat things with me. I'm a big girl," she says and then adds with a grin, "And you're so shy."

I try to deny it, but the heat I feel coming up to my cheeks tells a different story that only causes Akilah's grin to become wider.

6

Real talk? It's one of *those* days.

When people typically say that, they mean to say it's one of those days where nothing seems to go right and even the smallest annoyances bother them. For Perla, those days always fall on a Monday, when she has to go back to work after a weekend of doing what she wants. But when I have those days, it's much different. It's not relegated to one day of the week. It can happen anytime and for a thousand reasons and when it does happen, I don't know if the next day is going to be better or if it's going to be much worse.

When I was living with Quincy and my mother, every day was usually one of those days, and every day I forced myself out of bed, to school if I felt like it, to the dojo, tried to take it one day at a time and convince myself that if I could get through one day, I could get through the next, trying to ignore the whispers that death would be better than this, than listening to the voices in my head that tell me I'm a waste of space, that I'm worthless and then hearing Quincy reinforce it by saying the only thing I'm good for is a good fuck. And my mother not coming to my defense. The worst times, though, were when the days blurred together, and I lost some of my grip on time and reality.

Losing track of time is the first indicator of one of those episodes this time around. Time seems to speed up as I get ready for school. I don't even leave the house until my first class has already started. When I get to school, time seems to slow down, and every minute seems like five. I try to be optimistic.

I could just be having a normal bad day like people who don't suffer from trauma, but things just get worse. I nearly knock Devonte's head off when he sneaks up on me and grabs me from behind, and since that's a common thing for us to do when fooling around in gym, I decide to skip it too.

I'll probably skip training today too. The best thing for me to do when I feel like this is lie down and sleep. Otherwise, I start playing mind games with myself that just make me even more depressed. Akilah catches me before I leave, and I try to pretend I'm excited to see her when I was actually trying to avoid her. She doesn't keep me long. She thinks I'm going to train, and she has to work, but she asks if we're still on for the movies tonight. I want to say no, but even in as bad a place as I'm in, I find it hard to deny Akilah as she looks at me with her sparkling bright brown eyes, a look that I've noticed she mostly only reserves for me and sometimes Blanche. So, I pretend I'm okay and agree like I haven't forgotten, tease her about what this movie is about by saying that it better not be some lame rom-com to which Akilah rolls her eyes and says she only goes to see the good ones in theaters. Then she kisses me on the cheek and runs off to go to her job.

I go home. Perla's not off work yet so I can go straight to my room without her pestering. I drop my stuff in the middle of the floor and lay down on the bed to go to sleep. I come to eventually regret that. It used to be that sleep was my respite from the world because there was nothing I could dream up that was worse than what I was going through. Now, that's no longer true.

I see my mother in my dreams with a cigarette in her hand after a long day at work, lashing out at me and taking my stepdad's side when he's mad at me for no reason or I did something in retaliation to something he did or refused to do something he said do. Being at home was a constant battle, which was why I avoided being there any longer than I needed to be.

I manage to wake myself out my sleep, but it feels like I haven't slept at

all. It feels like I haven't slept in days actually, but I won't go back to sleep. So, I simply lie on my bed wondering if there's a way to escape this depression.

There is, a voice whispers in the back of my head.

I shake my head to try to empty my mind of the thought, but as always, it's not that easy not to think of suicide, especially when no matter what I do it seems like my past is always going to be right on my heels.

Finally, nine thirty rolls around, and I get out of bed and head downstairs. Perla is on the couch going over some papers and jumps in surprise when she sees me.

"I didn't know you were home," she says.

"Off day," I reply. "Can I borrow the car?"

She nods her head to her keys on the table, and I leave without her even bothering to ask where I'm going. Most days if I'm leaving the house this late or not home by this time, she assumes I'm with Akilah—and that's if Akilah hasn't already texted her. They really hit it off when they first met a few weeks ago, and though Akilah will never admit it, I think she's a little mesmerized by Perla in the way a little girl is mesmerized by an adult woman who they think is much more sophisticated than they are.

"I didn't expect you so early," Akilah says when she gets in the car after locking the door to the store. "Did you finish at the gym early?"

"Yes," I lie because I don't feel like dealing with her thousand questions and curiosity.

Akilah is in a talkative mood, a mood she's only in when a lot has happened because she's not one for small talk. Usually if I come get her from work, she'll sit there with the light on her phone to read and warm up to talking later after she's wired down from working. Normally, I'd just tease her about it and engage with her but today I'm not in the mood. Observant as

she is, she notices but doesn't say anything until I've parked at the movie theater.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

I sigh and say, "Yeah. I'm fine. Just a little tired."

"Are you sure?"

Her questioning is beginning to irritate me, and I roll my eyes and say, "Positive."

She takes it for now, and we get out the car and head into the theater. Now aware of my sullen mood, Akilah's not as talkative and is in what I call her observatory mood. Still, she reaches out to grab my hand and instinctively, I pull it out her reach. It's not until right after that I realize what I've done, but it's too late now. And there's no way to explain to her why I don't want anyone touching me right now, so I don't even try. We get tickets for some fantasy movie related to some really popular fantasy series that apparently everyone has read.

"I still can't believe you haven't read the books," she says. Apparently, she's forgiven me for earlier. "What were you doing as a kid and in your early teens?"

Being fucked by my stepdad, neglected by my mother, trying to keep my grades up, and trying to talk myself out of suicidal thoughts is what I was doing. The only thing normal I did was at the gym and even that in some ways tied back into my fucked up home life.

I shrug in response to her, not allowing my mind to dwell too much on that. I don't need to be in a worse place than I'm already in, and the reason I dragged myself out the house was to distract myself. Unfortunately, the evening just gets worse.

With it being the late-night premiere, the theater is loud and crowded which just makes me more tense than I already am, and in hindsight, coming

to the movies probably wasn't the best idea even if I had promised Akilah weeks ago that we'd go. Everyone is too close, there's too much sudden movement, and to combat it, I sink into my chair and cross my arms trying to make myself seem as small as possible. Periodically during the movie, Akilah keeps asking if I'm okay because I'm obviously not, and finally I snap at her that I'm fine and to watch the fucking movie. She does without argument, and I get the feeling I've probably crossed a line with her, but I'm too wound up to care.

Then ending of the movie can't come fast enough. As we exit the theater, neither of us says anything to each other. Only when we're in the car do I ask, "You wanna get something to eat?"

"No. Just take me home," Akilah snaps.

"What's gotten into you?"

"The same thing that's gotten into you I guess."

"What do you mean by that?" I ask as I pull out the parking lot.

"Don't act dumb. You've been a jerk all night and you keep saying nothing's wrong when it's obvious there is. You wouldn't even let me touch you for God's sake."

"It's not you."

"Well I'm the only one here for you to take it out on, so what am I supposed to think?"

"Just leave it alone, Akilah. You're starting to irritate the fuck out of me."

"You don't get to act like an asshole and then say I'm irritating the fuck out of you."

"Well, you are."

"And now you know how I've felt all night," she says.

"Oh please," I scoff. "You have no idea."

"Don't invalidate my feelings like that," Akilah says raising her voice, and

if I were in a better mood, I'd tease her because only she would say "invalidate her feelings." She continues, "And I'd have an idea if you'd just tell me."

"Well, I don't want to tell you," I say, raising my voice to match hers. "I've dealt with it by myself before, and I don't need anyone's help with it now, least of all from some girl that I've barely known for all of three and a half months."

Akilah's lack of response is louder than any response she could have screamed at me.

"Fuck," I say, hitting the steering wheel. Once again, I don't realize what I've said until I've said it. And while before I could just leave things hanging in the air, I can't leave this one. "Akilah—"

"Let me out the car," she says.

"Be reasonable," I say trying to reign in on my temper. "It's after midnight."

"I'm being very reasonable thank you. You're the one being unreasonable. Now let me out," she says.

"No."

"I'll scream."

"No one will hear you."

"This is kidnapping."

"I'm taking you home. That's hardly fucking kidnapping. And when I take you home, then I'll let you out," I say.

"I took care of myself before I met you. I didn't get to be an emancipated minor being an idiot. I don't need you to take me home because it's dark. I've done it before. I can do it again."

I don't reply because it would be completely pointless. Akilah sits back in her chair with her arms crossed, and I get the feeling that if she really wanted

to get out this car, she would. I've barely brought the car to a stop in front of her house before she gets out without any greeting. I wait outside the house long enough to watch her get inside and hear Emma barking to greet her before I pull off and head home, all the while berating myself for—and not the first time in my life—potentially ruining a good thing.

The next day is no better than the one before it, but I tough it out and try to pretend I'm fine for the sake of teaching my class. Zenobia reminds me a little of Akilah in the sense that she's strangely perceptive to my mood even though I try to act like everything is alright. Her questioning is nowhere near as prying as Akilah's though. Zenobia simply asks if I'm okay as we wait on her grandmother to come get her, I say yes, and she takes my word for it.

The bell at the front door rings, and both me and Zenobia turn to look expecting it to be her grandmother. It's not.

It's Akilah.

X greets her and asks her if he can help her with anything. She immediately looks behind him and looks directly at me. X looks back at me as though to ask if I know her. I nod my head, and he moves out the way and directs Akilah my way.

"Hey," she says when she gets to me.

"Hey," I say not sure if she's still angry at me. I haven't shared any classes with her today, but she hasn't texted me all day either, and I didn't feel like trying. I had decided I would put my energy into dealing with Akilah this weekend and was focusing on getting through today. I should have known she'd come to me first.

"Can we talk? Somewhere?"

"Now?" I ask.

She nods.

Before I can reply, Zenobia says with her face scrunched up in a frown, “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” Akilah asks back with her eyebrows raised.

“Zenobia.”

“Akilah.”

“And?” Zenobia demands.

“Zenobia,” I warn. For whatever reason Zenobia has become very protective of me.

Akilah doesn’t seem to mind though. With a grin, she says, “That’s okay. She has a crush on you. I would too.”

“I do not have a crush!” Zenobia says though her face turns totally red in mortification. She proceeds to run off, and I roll my eyes at her antics.

Akilah laughs after her and then looks back at me. “So where can we go?”

“There should be an empty classroom we can use,” I say and lead her toward the back, ignoring the look on X’s face that says he’s going to grill me about this later.

“How did you find this place?” I ask when we’re in the classroom with the door closed.

“I looked it up,” she says.

“I never told you the name.”

“I looked through your mentions and tags on Facebook and found Xavier and then found his fighting gym and got the address.”

Of course, she did. Akilah’s resourceful like that. Why did I even ask?

“I just... Last night,” Akilah starts.

“I’m sorry,” I say quickly. I may not have the energy, but I might as well since she came to me. “I shouldn’t have taken out my bad mood on you.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” I insist.

“Yeah. It’s not,” she agrees. “But I could have handled it better and not kept prying knowing you weren’t in a good mood.”

She’s got a strange look on her face, one I’ve never seen before. If I had to take a guess she looks like she has something else that she wants to ask but is unsure if she should ask it. That’s certainly a first. Akilah says and asks what she wants.

Finally, she says, “I have something to ask you. But I’m not sure if you’ll admit to it. Even if it’s true.”

“Okay,” I say slowly.

“I was watching you. Not just yesterday but just observing little things about you. Especially when we’re...God I, hate this phrase—but when we’re making out,” she says. “At first I just thought you were really shy but... I don’t think you’re that shy.”

“What are you getting at?” I ask, not sure where she’s going with this or what this has to do with our fight last night. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Akilah purses her lips as though she can’t find the words for what she wants to say, which is another first. Akilah always has a word for everything. After a few moments, she says, “You’re not touchy with me.”

“Touchy?”

“Or pushy about sexual stuff. I mean I talk to other girls who have boyfriends. Some older like you and in college, and they always have to tell their boyfriends to keep their hands to themselves all the time,” she says and not once since I met Akilah has she ever looked or sounded more like the sixteen-year-old she is as she shifts her weight back and forth on either foot and motions with her hands. She continues, “And there are some ways that you won’t even let me touch you. And I... I was curious. So, I talked to someone, who doesn’t know who you are, mind you, and not at school, and

she said either you're just one of those guys who's really respectful of girls and their boundaries but that doesn't make any sense because you're like that even when I encourage you and that doesn't explain the ways you won't let me touch you. Then she said you may be gay and... I watch you, so I know you're not attracted to men. Or..."

"Or what?" I ask.

"Trauma. Sexual trauma. She says it manifests in different ways and when I told her some of the stuff you do, she said it could be it, but it would be hard to know without talking to the person about it. But... it makes sense with you," she says.

I'm silent, not for lack of anything to say because my mind is telling me to deny it. But Akilah's the first and only person who not only just suspects, not only just thinks she's figured it out and not said anything, but she's the first person to confront me about it.

"What things?" I ask against my better judgment.

She takes a step closer to me and says, "I have to be careful the way I touch you and run my fingers through your hair because otherwise you tense up or get thrown out the mood. Some days, like yesterday, you won't even let me touch you at all. I thought it was because you were sore from working out, but some days you were finicky about me touching you, and you hadn't trained. And sometimes... sometimes you just zone out. Not the normal zoning out, but the kind where your body is here. One moment you're literally fine and talking to me, or I'm talking to you, and all of a sudden you just check out like you've gone to another place or something. And usually I can bring you right back or you snap out of it. And... Raf don't just let me sit here and ramble and look stupid if this isn't true. Say something," she demands.

I don't, but she doesn't continue. And then I realize my silence might be a

giveaway and that I should say something. When I do say something, I don't deny it. I don't tell her that she's looking too much into something that isn't true. I don't make up some kind of lie to throw her off the trail like I've done everyone else who ever came close to putting the pieces together. I just give her more ammunition.

"I'm not sure what to say," I admit. Because Akilah has mentioned a few behaviors that I'm not even consciously aware of. I know I'm fucked up. I know I have issues. But I didn't know they were that bad.

"So, I'm right? Aren't I? Did someone... do something to you when you were younger? Was that why you ran away from home? Did they live with you?"

She's saying too much, but it's too late to deny anything, because in taking so long to deny it, I've all but confirmed that she's at least partially right. Even if I tried, she wouldn't believe me.

"Just.... Just stop," I say, turning away from her because this is a really bad time for her to be confronting me with this.

She does for once. I suppose even she understands when she's dealing with a delicate situation. A million thoughts are going through my head, a million things I could say to her, but I'm not sure which to choose. I suddenly have to brace myself on the wall because now my legs don't want to hold my weight, and it's only when I do that I realize my arm is trembling. Fuck.

"Raf," Akilah says as she slowly closes the distance between us. Carefully, she stands right behind me and then wraps her arms around me. "Is this okay?"

"You're fine. I just don't wanna talk about this right now," I finally decide. As right as Akilah is, I don't want to talk about it with her. This was a secret I planned on taking to my grave.

"So, I am right," she says. Her voice vibrates through me and sends

warmth through my entire body, and I focus on that rather than answering her. She adds, “You don’t have to talk about it. But I’m here if you... if you decide you want to.”

She doesn’t say anything else after that. We simply stand there, with her arms still wrapped around me and me still bracing on the wall in silence until Zenobia bangs on the door wondering what’s taking us so long. I don’t think I ever will take Akilah up on her offer, but it’s good to know.

7

“So what do you have planned for your birthday?”

“My birthday?”

“It’s next week, isn’t it?” Devonte asks.

I glance at the date on my phone and realize he’s right. My birthday is in a week and a half, and I’d forgotten about it. Not shocking since my birthday has never really been much of an occasion to celebrate. My mother and stepdad didn’t care, and I spent most of my birthdays as a teen wishing I were dead. On my sixteenth birthday I even swallowed a bottle of pills and spent the entire day and part of the next knocked out. It was a nice reprieve.

“I guess,” I say.

“You guess?” says Blanche. “Your birthday only comes once a year.”

“Exactly. Odds are I’ll have another one,” I point out. “Besides, my mother is Catholic. My birthday always got lost in the Christmas celebrations and going to Mass and all other things related to it.”

That’s not necessarily true. My mother stopped doing all the big Catholic Christmas celebrations by the time I was ten, but if I don’t give them something they’ll keep asking like they’ve been doing since we sat down for dinner together at this Italian restaurant that Blanche likes.

Blanche turns to Akilah and says, “Please tell me you have something planned for your boyfriend’s birthday.”

“Not particularly. Every time I ask him if he wants to do something, he says no,” Akilah replies.

“How about a party?” Blanche asks. “If we spread the word at school, we

can have this lit up by Saturday.”

“No thanks,” I say. “Besides. Christmas, remember? Aren’t most of them gon’ be out of town and with family?”

“Shit, I be looking for something to do around then to get away from my family,” Devonte says. “Half the school would be running to this party.”

“Don’t even think about it,” I say.

“Well at least make sure you do something, Akilah,” Blanche says and then adds with a grin, “even if it’s a party late at night for two if you know what I mean...”

Blanche and Devonte fall out laughing at mostly my expense because Akilah just rolls her eyes not at all bothered, while I try to fight the heat rising to my cheeks.

“Wait a minute,” Devonte suddenly says. “Would that even be legal anymore? I mean you’ll be twenty. She’s sixteen. Well, she’ll be seventeen right after but still.”

“We’re not even having sex,” Akilah says as a matter of fact. I look at her incredibly because whether we are or not is none of their business, but she only shrugs and then adds, “Besides I’m over the age of consent in Georgia.”

“You’re still a cradle robber,” Devonte teases.

He’s unknowingly comparing me to my stepdad, and I glare at him for the comparison. Quincy was a cradle robber. Akilah and I are simply three years apart. An age difference that won’t even matter once we’re in our twenties and thirties. I stop myself. I’m supposing we’ll still be a thing by then again.

Real Talk? People will probably say I’m crazy for it. That this is just puppy love and eventually we’ll get over it and go our separate ways, but I’ve been in enough awful relationships and even some pretty decent relationships (if you can call them relationships) to know a good thing when I see it. Perla joked about me marrying Akilah, and I dismissed her, but she’s right. If

Akilah decides to stick around and continue to put up with me, I'll end up marrying her.

I used to think it was crazy to be so sure about something so big after knowing someone for such a short time. One of the few good teachers I had as a teen said he asked his wife to marry him after only knowing her a month, and they were married a month later and going strong thirty years later. I was convinced that would never happen for me, but here I am. I won't ask her until maybe after college. And I won't even bring it up to Akilah for three more years or so. Mature as she acts, I think I might just freak her out.

"Raf."

I blink out my thoughts and turn to look at Akilah. We're in the car, about to head to her house. "What?"

"You did that thing where you spaced out," she says.

"Did I?"

"Yeah. When we started talking about sex," Akilah says bluntly.

I get the feeling she's trying to a reaction out of me, and she does. I quickly say, "Yeah. My sex life or sex in general isn't something I just bring up in normal conversation like we're not talking about sex."

"Why? It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"For you, sure."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing," I say as I start to shift the car into drive.

She puts her hand over mine and says, "No. Really."

I say nothing for a few moments as I look at Akilah. Sometimes it's hard for me to separate her from people I've dealt with in the past. I always had to look for the ulterior motive, always had to look for the trap, the way someone was trying to take advantage of me or get me in trouble. I don't think Akilah's like that, not to mention she has nothing to gain from me telling or

not telling her. I've tested it lately, just let a few things slip that I'm usually so careful to guard. She raises her eyebrows, frowns sometimes but otherwise doesn't use it against me or try to throw the matter back up in my face.

Finally, I say, "Yeah it's nothing to be ashamed of when you're talking about it as just another thing you do. But for me, it was a necessary evil to survive, one that I hated for the most part."

Akilah furrows her eyebrows, hand still staying mine on the shift as she asks, "So you've never done it just to... to do it? Like because you really wanted to with a girl?"

"No," I admit curtly.

"So, does that make you still a virgin in a way?"

I actually laugh at that. "Akilah, I am far from a virgin. Lost that when I was like thirteen."

"I said in a way. Like in the sense that you've never had sex because you really wanted to?"

"Not really," I say and then ask, "Why are we discussing this?"

"Because I really just want to know. I want to understand what makes you who you are," Akilah says finally letting go of the shift.

Somehow, I don't think so. And then it occurs to me...

"You really don't have something like Blanche said planned, do you?" I ask, leaning back to look at her.

"No," Akilah says.

Maybe not, but the high octave in which she says it tells me that she has something planned. By the time I do find out though, I've forgotten about my birthday again altogether. I'm actually headed to the gym to meet X. Every third and fourth Saturday, X holds free self-defense classes. For whatever reason, he can't teach it this month and asked me weeks ago if I could run the class for him. I don't know why he just didn't cancel it with it being around

the holidays, but I don't argue with him. I have nothing better to do.

No sooner than I've opened the door and turned on the light do I see there are a bunch of people in the room and all of them shout, "Happy birthday, Rafael!"

I lay eyes on Akilah first. Then I laugh and drop my bags at the door as she comes up to me and wraps her arms around me.

"I told you I didn't want a party," I say.

She shrugs.

"I told you he wouldn't suspect anything," X says to Akilah as he comes up behind me and claps me on the back.

Truth be told, I wouldn't have suspected it if the evidence had slapped me in the face. It wouldn't have occurred to me that anyone would want to do something like this for me. Sure, I figured Akilah had something planned the one time I did think about it, but I thought it would be something like dinner with her and Perla, and then Perla would surprise me with some too expensive gift. Never something that would take so much coordination and time.

About an hour or so into the party, Akilah sashays up to me after running around making sure everyone is good and talking to the DJ about the music and after I've talked to a few people from school, from the dojo and received a few gifts already. Or maybe she's not sashaying up to me—maybe it's the burgundy dress she's wearing. It doesn't show much skin but hugs at her curves and the pumps she's wearing with it elongates her legs. It's very different from the normal t-shirt, jeans, tennis shoes or flats she usually wears, but she still looks like herself.

She reaches to take the beer out my hand, but I pull it away.

"You're not even twenty-one."

"Never stopped me before."

“You’re killing your liver.”

“I’m only having one.” One more, that is, and I think Akilah is aware of this judging by the scowl on her face. But I was frequently chugging back multiple beers and a bunch of other types of alcohol by the time I was fifteen. She’s not going to make me feel bad about one or two beers during my birthday celebration. Rather than continue to argue about it, I change the subject and ask, “Did you plan all this?”

“Perla helped. And so did X,” Akilah says.

Once again Akilah has managed to weasel her way into the hearts of the people I care about. Perla first. And now X. I don’t know what she said to him, but she’s had him wrapped around her finger since they met, and I don’t know if it’s because he’s genuinely liked her since they met or because she’s the first and only girl that I’ve brought around him. He was pretty angry that I’d never mentioned her to begin with.

“Both of whom I distinctly remember telling I didn’t want to do anything for my birthday. You’re just trying to get up next to everyone to turn them against me,” I say to her.

It’s supposed to be a joke, but Akilah doesn’t laugh as she says, “I’d never do that.”

“It was a joke,” I say because sometimes I have to spell out when I’m playing with Akilah. Some things go right over her head.

“I know. But really you’re not.”

“What are you talking about, Akilah?”

“You told me your stepdad used to get close to people you liked and turn them against you, and I’m telling you I never would.” She reaches to grab my free hand and squeezes it as she says while looking me in the eye, “Okay?”

“Yeah,” I say quietly. Her eyes have me momentarily mesmerized, and then my gaze goes from her eyes down to the curves of her breasts to her

waist, her hips, her legs, and for the first time she's stirred a hunger in me I wasn't sure anyone would ever be able to naturally stimulate in me. For the most part, it's Akilah that keeps what little physical part there is to our relationship alive. Today though, I don't need her encouragement.

"My face is up here," Akilah jokes.

"I know exactly where it is," I say, suddenly needing her body pressed against mine. I don't know what's gotten into me. Maybe it's the alcohol. While it's a pretty strong brand, it usually takes a more than just the two I've had to make me start feeling the effects, even if I haven't had the chance to have a drink in at least a year. I finish off the beer and set the bottle down and say, "Come on. Let's dance."

Akilah gives me a skeptical look but agrees and lets me lead her to the middle of the room where I pull her to me pressing her hips against mine and wrapping my arms around her as we move along to the beat of a Beyoncé song. She's learned to prefer holding me around my waist or upper back with her head laying on my chest while every now and then twirling her fingers in my hair. I thought it would help, but having her this close to me is only starting to make me aroused, and I start to wonder if it would be too obvious if we left for a little while.

Akilah must decide it wouldn't be because suddenly she pulls away from me and intertwines her hand in mine and without anyone noticing, we find our way to the hall. I lead her to a room in the back that's like a small lounge. It has a sofa that doubles as a bed when flattened and rearranged, but the sofa will do for Akilah's and my needs right now. I close the door and lock it behind us and then Akilah's lips are on mine.

The alcohol has loosened me up. Not enough that I'm not coherent and can't consent to anything, but enough that I'm a little more handsy with Akilah than I usually am. I place both my hands on her ass and squeeze,

causing her lips to part against mine when she gasps in surprise. I plunge my tongue between her lips and thrust it back and forth between them. She lets out a sound that's between a gasp and a squeak and then a moan. The vibrations of it travel through my body and straight to my groin. I'm so hard for her I have let go of her ass with one hand to make my jeans less uncomfortable. I guide us to the sofa and push her back on it while I lie on top of her without our lips breaking contact.

Her dress hikes up to her hips as she wraps her legs around me, and I press my lips harder on her hers at the same time as I press my arousal into her heat. It occurs to me that this might be too much for her, that I could be scaring her because she's never seen or been with me this way before, but that worry is alleviated when she just presses her hips back against mine and rotates them in return.

When I finally pull away from Akilah to look at her, her cheeks are flushed, her chest is heaving for breath and the edges of her hair, previously slicked back smooth and straight with the black gel she's so fond of, are starting to curl again.

"Thank you," I say breathily because I'm just as out of breath as she is.

"For the party?" she pants and then shrugs. "No big deal."

"It is," I say. "You're the first person who actually cared enough to make a big deal out of my birthday. I've spent most of them wishing I was dead and hadn't made it through the year."

"What about now?" she asks.

"Things are better," I say. It's not a lie. They're better, but one party isn't going to erase all the bad days I've been more and more prone to having lately. Before Akilah can reply I say, "Mind if I do something?"

"Do what?"

In response, I remove her legs from around me and slide my hand up her

thigh to where the hem of her dress is hiked up at her hips. Then I slip my hand underneath to touch the bare skin of her upper inner thigh. She jerks her thigh a little in surprise at the touch and I stop to ask, "Is this okay?"

She slowly nods.

"I'd prefer you say yes or no," I say but take her silent approval anyway and continue to slide my hand up and down her thigh, slowly caressing higher and higher up her thigh until I've hiked her dress up all the way to her lower waist. I splay my hand on her stomach and then play with the waist of her panties.

"Can I?" I ask.

"Yes," she manages to breathe. Her breaths are shallow in anticipation, her eyes focused on the hand playing with her panties.

"Relax," I say as I slip my hand in her panties and first play with the coarse patch of curls beneath before reaching further down. I slide a finger all the way down her clit and the length of her sex to her entrance before sliding it back up. Her thighs tremble around my hand, and I continue to stroke up and down, her folds getting wetter and wetter every time and short gasps escaping her.

When I'm sure she's gotten used to my touch, I find her entrance and slip one finger inside, carefully watching for her reaction. Her legs jerk again, and her eyes widen as I begin to pump my finger back and forth in her and experiment with different angles. She begins to make moaning and whimpering noises.

"Not so loud," I say with a grin, though I don't really expect her to quiet down. Hopefully, the music is loud enough that no one will hear her.

She's tight even around just my finger, but then when I feel like she's gotten mostly comfortable with one of my fingers, I add another.

"Oh fuck," Akilah says as she clenches her thighs together suddenly. I wait

for her to open them back up to continue pumping them into her while at the same time I begin to rub my thumb against her clit.

“Raf,” she breathes. “I need... I...”

It’s fascinating to see the girl who can always find the words to say she what wants and needs suddenly not having the words for what she wants and needs in this moment, and I can’t help but be proud that I’ve managed to bring her to this state.

“I know,” I whisper to her and thrust my fingers harder and rub her clit faster.

I can tell when she’s coming. Her thighs clench around my hand again and her walls clamp tight around my fingers, even tighter than when I first penetrated her. She lets out a groan and her body vibrates with her climax. Eventually, her body stills under me, and she’s lying languid under me with her eyes half-lidded like she’s about to fall asleep.

“How’d you like that?” I ask with my hand still in her panties even though I moved my fingers out of her.

“You’ve been holding out on me,” she breathes.

I laugh at her and kiss her once on the lips and then again as I totally remove my hand from her panties to hold her pressed against me as I kiss her. She’s the one that pulls away this time to ask, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

Her gaze quickly drops to my crotch looking at the bulge in my pants that is my erection.

“This was for you,” I say. It’s the first time I’ve done this for anyone without them asking for it or forcing me to do it. The first time I wanted to bring someone to pleasure just because.

“But I can,” Akilah says putting her hands on the waist of my jeans. “If you tell me what you want. What to do.”

I grab her hands and just hold them before shaking my head and saying, “I’m not ready for that yet.”

As I was hoping, Akilah backs off, no questions asked. She’s more than likely properly assumed it has something to do with my past traumas and isn’t going to push any boundaries I’m uncomfortable with no matter how much she wants to.

If we stay back any longer, someone is probably going to come looking for us, so I stand up and find some hand sanitizing wipes to wipe my hands. By the time I’m done, Akilah has stood to her feet and adjusted her dress but keeps shifting her thighs.

“If you keep doing that, everyone is going to know we were up to something,” I say.

She turns a pretty shade of dark red that makes her already flushed skin glow brighter as she scowls at me before leaving the room while I just laugh behind her.

8

“Rafael.”

I’m silent. It’s been over three years since I’ve spoken to my mother, so hearing her voice again is surreal. Though my party was Saturday, today, Wednesday, December 21st, is my actual birthday and while the dojo is closed for winter break, Akilah still has to work. Well, she doesn’t have to. Not only could she have gotten off, she doesn’t need the money even if she was offered time and a half. But Akilah wants to anyway. Regardless, it’s the only reason I happen to be home when my mother calls, and Perla is able to convince me to talk to her just to let the woman wish me a happy birthday and to assure her that I’m safe and sound.

“Rafael.”

“Hey, Mom.”

She starts speaking exclusively in Spanish after that, as she’s prone to do when she’s very happy. I’m silent as she rambles. First wishing me a happy birthday and then asking me a thousand questions about my life. I don’t really want to tell her anything out of habit more than anything. But she’s seven hundred miles away, and I’m twenty years old. There’s nothing she or Quincy can do to interfere. So I tell her about school, about working at the dojo. I even tell her that I have a girlfriend, though I make sure not to tell her Akilah’s name. She doesn’t notice, too excited about the fact that I have a girlfriend at all.

“Maybe you all can come down for spring break, and I can meet her.”

“I don’t think so. We have something else planned for that week,” I say.

It's a lie. Me and Akilah haven't planned anything yet, but even though our relationship is estranged I'm still aware I'm talking to my mother, and I don't want to be outright mean to her.

"Well maybe in the summer?" she suggests.

I was hoping she'd get the point without me having to explicitly say it, but she's not going to back off, so I ask bluntly, "Is Quincy going to be there?"

My mother doesn't immediately answer, so I ask again, "Is he?"

"Yes," she finally admits.

"Then you know the answer to whether I'll visit you," I respond.

"Rafael. He's changed."

"There are some things you can't forgive," I say. I don't know if she really knows how bad Quincy was, but I'm not going to mention it if she doesn't.

"Maybe one day," she says.

I'm positive there's nothing that will make me forgive Quincy, but I don't argue with my mother about it. She then mentions that she's going to Mass at church and hints at me that she'd like if I'd do the same. I'm not going to. I stopped celebrating Christmas at all years ago. Instead, I say, "That's good. Have a Merry Christmas."

"You too sweetheart. I love you. I'll talk to you later."

I don't know about that—about the loving her in return or talking to her later, so I don't say anything save for telling her goodbye before hanging up the phone.

"See," Perla says as I pass by her to put the home phone on the charger. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Easy for you to say," I snap on the way back to my room.

If she says anything, I'm long gone by the time she says it. I don't know what I was doing before, nor do I care because suddenly all I want to do is get under the covers for a few hours. I only sleep for a little while. For the

most part, I'm in a weird state between waking and sleeping, and I briefly wonder if that's what death is like, if it's not quite being sleep but not quite being awake. That's a pretty good feeling. It's a few hours later that Akilah is next to my bed shaking me to full consciousness.

"Hey," I say without moving from under the covers.

"Hey," she replies as she takes off her jacket and crawls under the covers with me. "Perla said you'd been up here all day."

"Yeah," I say as I wrap my arms around her and pull her back to my chest. "What else did she tell you?"

"She said you spoke with your mother."

"Did she?"

"Yes," Akilah says. She doesn't ask anything else though I know she's burning to do so. And I actually want her to ask the questions because I really want to get the pressure of this burden off my chest.

Finally, after laying there for twenty minutes or so I blurt out, "It was my stepdad."

"Your stepdad?"

"Quincy. He's the one that raped me. For years," I say.

"Did your mother know?" she asks, as always knowing just what the heart of the matter is.

"I don't know. It seems like she should have known. There were so many close calls where she almost caught us, where she just walked into the room after a kiss or after he'd jerked me off or vice versa. No one could be that oblivious to something going on right under their own roof, especially because it was no secret I hated Quincy. I'm afraid to ask her, though."

"Why? Because you think she knew?"

"And she stayed with him anyway," I add.

"You don't have to go back there," she says.

"I hope not," I say.

"Is that why you ran away?"

"The biggest reason."

We lie in silence once more until Akilah asks, "Have you ever gotten any kind of... therapy for this?"

"No. You're the only one who knows."

"You should ask Perla," she says and then hastily adds, "You don't have to tell her everything. You could tell it's because of what you saw and did living on the streets or whatever. But I think it might help, just having someone to talk to who has nothing to gain and more likely everything to lose by revealing anything you say and whose judgment doesn't matter because they don't know you."

"I passed the psych evaluation the school made me take," I point out.

"I think you're smart enough to make them think you're fine when you're really not. You do it to me all the time even when I notice weird things about you."

"What are you saying? That I'm a little psychotic."

"You act like it sometimes."

I should have expected her to give me such a blunt answer.

Then she adds, "Case in point, you don't want me to touch you in certain ways that will remind you of your stepdad. So much so I thought you were asexual."

I laugh at that. "Asexual? Really?"

She turns around in my arms to face me under the cover with an incredulous look on her face as she says, "You really don't know how disinterested you act like you are in sexual contact for the most part, do you?"

"I'm not disinterested," I say. It's a lie. For the most part, I am. I sigh and say, "I'm more so disinterested in meaningless sexual contact."

“So, you’re demisexual,” she says.

“If you think so, I guess,” I say, not bothering to ask her what that means.

“Do I mean something to you?” she asks.

She means the world to me, but I’m too insecure to admit that yet.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“What do I mean to you?”

For a person who seems to judge people more by their actions than she does their words, Akilah sure likes to make me put into words what my actions seem to indicate. Maybe I don’t have to tell her she means the world to me yet, but I can meet her halfway.

“You’re the best friend I thought I’d never have,” I admit.

Her eyes sparkle, and she grins that grin she gives when someone finally tells her something that she likely knew or at least suspected all along. Then I feel her hand between us on the buckle of my jeans, and I try not to flinch away from her.

“Is this okay?” she asks

It takes me a while to be able to say yes to that because at first it was certainly not okay because like Akilah correctly guessed earlier, Quincy flashed before my eyes. He used to crawl into bed with me just like this and touch me. But then I remember this is Akilah, and I can say no to her, and she’d stop if this truly wasn’t okay. Without breaking eye contact with me, she rubs my dick up and down its length through my jeans. Slowly the tension leaves me, and I allow myself to focus on the sensation of her hands rubbing me through my jeans. Underneath my jeans my dick becomes hard, and Akilah squeezes on it. I groan at the jolt of warmth that sparks through me. Suddenly she stops.

“Do you trust me?” she asks.

“Mostly.”

She's not offended by the response. One of the things I like about Akilah is that she appreciates blunt honesty, so I can say things to her that most people would find offensive.

"Do you trust me doing this right now?"

"Yes," I breathe.

She doesn't respond with her words. She responds by undoing my belt, unbuttoning and unzipping my jeans, and then slipping her hands underneath my boxers. Her hands through my jeans felt like skin on skin, so there are no words to describe how her hand feels directly touching my dick, and it gets harder than I know it's ever been in a long time. She rubs it firmly up and down with her hands first. Then she closes her entire hand around me and begins running her hand up and down creating a sweet heat and friction that has my entire body on fire.

I close my eyes as she slips her other hand inside my boxers to play with my balls at the same time as she scoots up to kiss me on my lips. I groan into her mouth and buck my hips into her hands when she begins to rub her thumb in a circular motion over the head of my dick.

My body tenses as I feel myself starting to come, my dick throbbing in her hand which only encourages her to move her hand up and down faster until I come into her hand, a jolt of ecstasy going up my spine and spreading through the rest of my body.

"Fuck, Akilah," I groan pulling my lips from her.

When I've managed to come down and have control of my body again, I say, "Damn, you're good with your hands."

"You like that?" Akilah asks coyly.

"Fuck yes," I gasp. Even when I eventually slept with older women for a myriad of reasons, it wasn't like this.

She giggles and then wipes her hand on the edge of my shirt before turning

her back to me once again, just in time for Perla to push open the door that I hadn't realized was only cracked by now. Fuck my life if she heard us... well, me.

"You two hungry? I was thinking we could order pizza or whatever the birthday boy wants to have," she adds.

"Sure," Akilah says getting from under the covers like she hadn't just given me a hand job. I don't have the luxury. I'm a mess.

"You coming?" Perla asks.

"He will in a minute," Akilah says. "He's stiff from lying down all day."

She shoots me another one of her grins before leading Perla back downstairs.

9

Real talk? Akilah and I have a serious issue with keeping our hands to ourselves after my birthday. I have no idea what it is that she's awakened in me, but whatever it is I like it. A lot. I've even seen Perla give me disapproving glances now and then when she knows I'm going to Akilah's house, telling me to make sure we're careful and not for my sake anymore. She's more concerned about Akilah nowadays.

I always dismiss her. We're not even having sex. That's the most careful we can be. Perla still rolls her eyes, even more so when I tell her about the trip Akilah and I are taking in a couple of months during spring break. It's technically a really late birthday present. Akilah's birthday is ten days after mine, on New Year's Eve, and rather than try to coordinate doing anything special besides going to Blanche's New Year's Eve party, she made me promise to take her somewhere on spring break. It's the least I can do for her.

"I am under no illusions about what the two of you are going to get up to with a whole week to yourself. Make sure you use condoms and ask Akilah what kind of birth control she's taking," Perla adds.

She's not taking any birth control. Her aunt tried to put her on it when she was fourteen, and she had a bad reaction to it so Akilah stopped using it. She could have gotten another prescription or the copper insert that's hormone free (the fact that I know all this shows I really hung out with too many women while growing up), but honestly, I think Akilah is afraid of getting cancer like her mother did, and so she rejects anything that looks like it's making her sick that way. I don't point out the hole in her argument, though.

Even if we were having sex, I'm not opposed to wearing a condom like I've heard someone like Blanche's boyfriend is. I'm not telling Perla all that though. She might try to put her foot down and not allow us to go. Not that she can. It would just be annoying.

At the gym, everyone notices I'm in a relatively good mood. I don't see how. I don't feel like I'm acting any different than normal.

"You're less brooding than normal," X says to me. "And you've always been a little spacey, but now you're spacing out with a stupid smile when you think no one's looking."

Then, because he likes to bother me he says, "Only some good pussy can get a guy acting like that."

I punch him in the arm for that one before going to teach my class, but he may have a point about me spacing out and looking too happy. The first thing Zenobia asks me is why I look so happy after which she grins and asks, "Is it that girl?"

"Shut up," I snap, but it doesn't make Zenobia stop smiling at me like she knows exactly why I'm in such a good mood. And she asks me even more questions after class as we're waiting on her grandmother to get off.

It's a normal occasion for me to be waiting on the girl's grandmother to come get her long after class has ended. Her grandmother works in an insurance call center and some days gets stuck on phone calls or takes overtime. If not that, she's stuck in traffic. Most days Zenobia follows me around as I either train, clean up, or do something or another for X. We even sit together and do homework. Today her grandmother is taking longer than normal though, and I'm starting to get a little concerned. We both hear the bell signaling the door opening ring, and we turn together to see if it's her grandmother.

It's not.

But almost instantly I know who the woman is. Zenobia is her spitting image save for the fact that Zenobia's lighter.

"Zenobia, honey," the woman says.

I look at Zenobia who seems to recognize the woman and is scowling in her direction.

"You know her?" I ask.

"Unfortunately, she's my mother," Zenobia grumbles with her arms crossed.

Her reaction to her mother says enough. But her reaction to the man that walks in behind her mother tells volumes more. Without needing to talk to her, I know I'm not letting Zenobia go with the woman.

"Come on," I say.

Zenobia doesn't even pack her things. She stays carefully hidden behind my legs as I approach her mother.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm here to pick up Zenobia. I'm her mother. Sandra," she says reaching out her hand.

I shake it and say, "Rafael."

"Nice to meet you," she says.

I don't reply, because that remains to be seen.

"Come on honey," Sandra says to Zenobia. "Let's go."

"Grandma told me not to go with you if you ever came to get me," Zenobia says quietly from behind me.

"Don't be silly. It's momma. Pack your stuff," Sandra says.

Zenobia shakes her head, but it's not her mother that her eyes are on, but the man standing behind her mother. A boyfriend I guess. I see none of Zenobia's features in him.

"Zenobia," Sandra begins firmly, raising her voice.

“With all due respect,” I begin, “You’re not on the list of people approved to pick her up. And her grandmother didn’t say anything about you coming to get her, so I can’t release her to you without talking to her grandmother.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Sandra says, rolling her eyes. “I’m her mother.”

“So, you’ve made clear. I have her grandmother’s number. We can call her,” I say, starting to do just that when Sandra throws a fit.

“Bullshit. She’s my child. You can’t keep her from me. You have no right,” she yells.

Zenobia completely hides her body behind me at this point, and I strengthen my stance to be ready for anything the woman may happen to throw at me.

“Something going on here?” X asks me as he comes over.

“She claims to be her mother,” I say. “Zenobia doesn’t want to go with her.”

X doesn’t ask any more questions. He takes my word for it and says, “Unless you can get in contact with her grandmother so she can tell it’s okay to let her go with you, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Sandra looks ready to fight back but then X adds, “If you continue to resist, I’ll have to call the police.”

She looks like she wants to fight anyway, but the man behind her grabs her arm and shakes his head, saying something about another time. Sandra huffs and shoots me and X a nasty look before snatching her arm out her boyfriend’s hand and leaving. Once she’s gone, a tension that I wasn’t aware had filled the room dissipates as everyone goes back to what they were doing. That’s what happens when an incident like this takes place in a fighting gym. Everyone gets ready to intervene if needed. Happened all the time in Miami. There were a lot of gangs and drug dealers in that neighborhood.

“Have you been able to get in contact with her grandmother?” X asks.

“No,” I say.

“Well, we’ve got to do something. It’s getting late.”

I know. Usually, by now, I’m getting ready to leave and either head home or to Akilah’s house. And most people follow after except those who like to train late in the evening, but those are few. I decide to make a judgment call.

“I’ll take her home with me for now,” I say. “I’m sure her grandmother doesn’t want her here by herself.”

“You sure about that?”

“The only reason I’m even suggesting it is that her grandmother seems reasonable enough not to call the police on me for kidnapping,” I say and then turn to Zenobia. “Pack your stuff up. We’re going to Akilah’s house.”

Zenobia does so quietly, a rarity from her, while I also pack up my things. Then she silently follows me to my car, a nearly brand new Nissan Altima that’s a birthday present from my sister that she paid outright cash for. I didn’t want to take it, and the only reason I ended up taking it anyway was that she agreed to let me pay my part of the insurance on it.

“Nice car,” Zenobia says as she crawls into the backseat.

“Thanks,” I say. “Hungry?”

She nods her head, and on the way to Akilah’s I stop to get pizza, stuffed crust at Zenobia’s insistence, for Akilah and Zenobia, a salad for me, and Zenobia a milkshake to drink on the way to Akilah’s house. While we’re getting the pizza, I text Akilah to let her know we’ll have company and that I’ll explain what I know when I get there.

“Zenobia, who was that guy with your mother?” I ask on the way to Akilah’s house.

“I guess her new boyfriend,” she grumbles with a roll of her eyes.

“He’s never done anything to you? Touched you wrong or hit you or anything like that?”

“I’ve never met this new one. But none of her other boyfriends did. They’re usually just really mean and shout a lot.”

That explains where she picked up her language from. I still have to remind her to watch her mouth.

“You live with your grandmother, though?”

“Yeah. Since forever. I only go with my mother when my grandma lets me go. She’s nice sometimes, but I still don’t like going to her house. I like when she comes to my grandma’s house and brings my little brother and sister,” Zenobia says quietly.

I don’t ask her any more questions about her home life. She looks uncomfortable, like she doesn’t want to talk about it. When we get to Akilah’s house, Zenobia gets out the car and stares at the house. Then she starts her array of questioning like she always does, starting with asking whose house we’re at, does Akilah live by herself, and a myriad of other questions. The one she doesn’t ask is where her grandmother is, likely because she senses I don’t have an answer to it.

“Hey, Raf,” Akilah says from the couch as I come into the house. Then she looks at Zenobia and says, “Hey, Zenobia.”

“Hi, Akilah,” Zenobia says and then she hears barking and her eyes dart to Emma. But rather than be afraid, her eyes light up, and she runs to the dog and wraps her arms around it and says excitedly to Akilah, “You have a dog! I want one, but my grandma won’t let me have one.”

Emma stops barking honestly looking a little confused that Zenobia isn’t afraid of her but then begins to relax as Zenobia begins to scratch her behind the ear and talk to her. With Zenobia distracted by Emma, now is as good a time to fill Akilah in.

“Where’s her mother?”

“Alive, apparently,” I say rolling my eyes. “She tried to come get her today

but Zenobia lives with her grandmother, and we wouldn't let her mother take her without talking to her grandmother first. Zenobia didn't want to go with her anyway."

"So, you brought her here?" she asks.

"I didn't have a choice. I don't know where her grandmother is, and I couldn't stay at the gym all night."

"Did you all call her grandmother's job?"

"We tried but she's got her cell phone listed as her work number and all I know is that she works for a call center. That could be anywhere," I say.

"Fair point," Akilah says as she looks at Zenobia. "I don't mind her staying here."

"That's why I brought her."

Akilah nods and goes back to where she was sitting on the couch and begins to dig into the pizza. Upon seeing Akilah open the pizza, Zenobia's attention turns away from Emma, and she crawls over to get some while yelling at Akilah not to eat it all. Akilah turns her away to wash her hands first. I go with Zenobia to do the same and when we come back, Zenobia sits on the floor and grabs a slice of pizza before going to Akilah's DVD and Blu-ray collection to choose a movie. It's decided upon when Zenobia asks what *The Lion King* is much to Akilah's horror, and she decides that they have to rectify Zenobia's apparent ignorance. Through the course of the movie, I learn that Akilah knows every line, and she admits it's her favorite cartoon movie.

By the time it's over, it's almost eleven o'clock, and I still haven't heard anything from Zenobia's grandmother. I decide that it's time for Zenobia to go to bed even as she protests that she's not tired. Admittedly, she looks like she could go for another few hours but no sooner than I've put her to bed in Akilah's guest room, she's nodding off.

“Have you heard from her grandmother yet?” Akilah asks when I meet her in her room.

“No.”

“Guess she’s staying the night then.”

“I guess so.”

We lay in silence after that. Normally, as of late, by this time I’d have the long t-shirt she’s wearing for bed hiked up below her breasts or she’d have her hand down the front of my night trousers, but I think we’re both too conscious of Zenobia just in the next room.

“You’re good with children,” Akilah says suddenly. “Not just with Zenobia, but with the ones at the gym too.”

“That’s what everyone says. A lot of the parents say that every other word out their kid’s mouth is my name apparently.”

Akilah is silent again before she asks, “Do you want children?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just wanted to know.”

“You don’t just ask a question like that. Something made you ask.”

“Just answer the question, Raf.”

“No,” I say honestly.

“Oh yeah?” Akilah asks in that nonjudgmental way that she has about her but that still makes me feel like I need to justify the answer.

“It’s not for some dick reason like wanting to stay a bachelor or not wanting to be tied down to responsibility like that.”

“Then what is it?”

“Don’t act like you haven’t read the statistics. There’s a good chance that victims become the abusers when they get older, and I’d rather not risk it.”

“The fact that you actively worry about that shows there’s a good chance you won’t be.”

“You can’t always control it,” I say. “You’ve said it yourself that sometimes I seem disconnected from reality. I don’t need that to happen and then I end up hurting my own kid because my stepdad hurt me.”

“I also told you there’s therapy, but you won’t go.”

Akilah’s starting to frustrate me even though I know she doesn’t mean to. The way she has an apparent answer for everything sometimes makes it seem like she’s oversimplifying matters when she’s not trying to. But in this case, I don’t know if she comprehends not just my fear, but my horror that I might be able to do something like what my stepdad did to me to another child. That I could manipulate a woman into possibly ignoring her child’s apparent pain because she’s so desperate to have a man and someone who can provide a semblance of security in her life. That I’ll wake up one day and be a rapist or a pedophile. Yet another reason it’s taken me so long to get used to the sexual side of me and Akilah’s relationship. With older women, I knew I wasn’t the predator. I knew they knew exactly what they were doing, even if they knew I was only doing it for the temporary roof over my head. With Akilah, I wasn’t sure, and sometimes I’m still not.

Finally, I say, “It’s not something that I wouldn’t ever consider or is off the table or that I wouldn’t embrace if it did happen. I just... I wouldn’t make plans for it. That’s for sure.”

Akilah seems satisfied with the answer, and it’s not until she’s fallen asleep against me an hour later that it occurs to me that she might have been asking because I might not be the only one who thinks that we are each other’s forever.

Before I can ponder it further, my phone vibrates. I expect it to be Perla making sure I’m at Akilah’s because I forgot to tell her, but it’s not. It’s Zenobia’s grandmother. The woman’s number at the very least. When I pick up, it turns out to be her coworker on the other line explaining how Zenobia’s

grandmother fell out at work. They think it was her blood pressure as a result of stress, but she's fine now. Awake and they just released her provided her coworker takes her home. In the chaos, no one thought to ask about her granddaughter, mostly because while they knew about Zenobia, they didn't know her grandmother was her primary guardian. They'd left her grandmother's phone at her job and were just able to get it so they could call me.

I text them Akilah's address and then get up to wait for them in Akilah's living room. Akilah eventually follows me out and sleepily sits next to me as we wait. When we see lights pull into her driveway, causing Emma to bark loudly, Akilah goes to get Zenobia while I open the door.

"Thank you so much," Akilah's grandmother says.

She's in her mid-forties, with a small frame, reddish-brown skin, and brown eyes. Her hair is mostly black with strands of silver, and she has a t-shirt on with the name of the insurance company she works for.

"No problem. It wasn't any trouble."

"Oh. Here," the woman says, taking twenty dollars out her pocket. "For having to go out of your way."

I don't want to take it, but she insists on it, and I won't argue with her in front of Zenobia, who is being led out by Akilah. Instead, as I take Zenobia's backpack to hand it to her grandmother's coworker, I slip the bill in one of the side pockets. What I really want to know is more about Zenobia's mother, but it's too late to talk about it right now. I'll ask next week when Zenobia's grandmother comes to get her again.

When they've pulled out the driveway and I close the door, I turn to see Akilah staring at me with a weird expression.

"What?" I ask.

Akilah shakes her head and mutters "nothing" under her breath before

heading back to her room. I shrug. She'll eventually tell me what was going through her head at that moment.

10

Perla pulls Akilah aside right before we leave to go to Tampa. Akilah actually wanted to go to Miami, but I have no intention of ever going back there so she decided on Tampa, not to mention it's a shorter drive. I don't know why Perla chose right before we leave to talk to Akilah about whatever, but it's time to get on the road. So, I honk the horn.

Both look my way, and then Perla says one last thing to Akilah, and Akilah nods before heading to the car.

"Be careful," Perla says to us as Akilah gets in the car. "Don't speed that way. Especially through Tifton and Valdosta. They don't typically like young Black boys down there."

"I know, Perla," I say. I've been patted down many a times by the police simply for daring to exist while being Black in Miami.

"Let Akilah drive if you get tired," she adds.

"I will," I say.

Perla nods and backs away from the car before going inside. I gassed up the car the previous night so we're able to hit 285 to I-75 south and get on the road. When we're finally cruising down the latter highway, I turn down the music and ask, "What did Perla want?"

"She gave me a sex talk."

"A sex talk," I repeat.

Akilah nods. It always amazes me how she talks about these subjects like she's talking about the weather.

"She said she's under no illusions what we plan to get up to for a week by

ourselves. I told her that obviously she doesn't know you that well when it comes to that department and that we had no plans for it," she says. Then she turns to look at me and asks, "You didn't, did you?"

"No," I say quickly, letting my loose hair fall in my face. "Did you?"

"No," she says lightly. "Would you want to?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly. Akilah and I have fooled around a lot lately, but never outright sex. Nor have we actually talked about it. "Would you?"

"Maybe. I think we'll know when it's right," she says, grabbing the hand that's not on the steering wheel and kissing it.

"Would you be ready for it?" I ask suddenly.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you're seventeen. I keep forgetting you're so young."

"I'm not that young. Why are you so hung up on my age?"

"I'm not hung up on it. I just want to make sure you know what you want is all," I say. It's a safe answer, and Akilah seems to sense it and waits patiently for more from me. I sigh and add, "I just want to make sure it's your choice. I got that taken away from me when I was too young to make the choice to begin with and didn't realize it until much later. I don't want to do that to you."

"Then I think the better question is whether or not you're ready for it."

We don't talk about the subject anymore after that and instead go through each other's playlists as we drive. Akilah isn't a big fan of rap but is in love with Kendrick Lamar. She prefers R&B. I, on the other hand, like anything with a catchy beat. The one thing we both agree on, besides Michael Jackson, is the Hamilton Original Soundtrack, and we sing and rap the songs through the last leg to Tampa.

We're staying at a hotel near the airport, right next to a mall with a movie

theater in it. We'd originally planned to go straight to the beach, but we're too tired to go. Instead, once we check into the hotel, we go to the mall where Akilah does some shopping, grab something to eat, and head back to the hotel room.

We decide on the Clearwater beach the next day. Using a trick from online, Akilah digs a hole in the sand, puts a bucket in the hole, puts things like our phones, wallets, and keys inside, puts the top on the bucket, and then covers it with sand so no one can easily steal anything. Then I guide a timid Akilah into the water.

"Do we have to go this far?" she asks.

I laugh and say, "I gotcha."

"I know that, but I can't swim."

"I can. I won't let you drown."

"But—"

"Akilah."

"What?"

"Trust me. I gotcha."

She nods and lets me lead her all the way into the water.

"My feet aren't touching the sand anymore," Akilah says looking slightly panicked.

I grin. "I know. If you relax, your body is naturally going to float."

She nods and allows herself to relax, and slowly I let go of her hands.

"See," I say. "Nothing to it."

"Easy for you to say. And that doesn't mean I plan on swimming any marathons any time soon," she declares. Then she says, "You're a good teacher by the way. I see why the children at the gym like you so much."

I shrug. "If anything, I'm a good copycat. It's how my mother taught me how to float."

“Oh yeah?”

I nod. “No amount of swimming lessons in school on the planet could get me to do it. So one day, she took me out to the beach and walked me all the way into the water, and she kept saying ‘*Relájate. Te caché.* Relax. I gotcha,’ until we were all the way in the water, and I didn’t even realize I couldn’t touch the sand with my feet anymore. Then she smiled and said, ‘*¿Lo ves? No fue difícil,*’ and it was easy to learn from there.”

We sit in silence for a moment as the waves continue to come in, and I’m careful to make sure Akilah continues to relax and doesn’t panic when they do. She’s fine though, looking contemplatively into the distance. Then she says, “You miss your mother.”

“In a way,” I say, parroting her favorite phrase to use when something can be seen from more than one point of view. “I miss my mother from before she met Quincy. But that was thirteen years ago so I haven’t had that version for a long time.”

“So, you actually do speak Spanish?” Akilah asks, as always going from one question to the next. I used to think it was random. Now I think it’s her way of moving away from subjects that could be sticky for the person she’s talking to. That’s only if she cares about them though. She’ll stay on a difficult topic for someone that doesn’t matter to her.

“Fluently,” I reply.

“No wonder you always ace the Spanish tests! You already know the material.”

“Most of it. The textbooks teach us formal Spanish. But no one speaks like that or writes it exactly like the books for that matter. Not where I come from. And there are different dialects to Spanish.”

“So, you can’t understand other forms of Spanish?”

“It’s not that bad. I can understand it all, but it’s kind of like we say trash

and the UK says rubbish or damn and bloody.”

“That’s not so different then.”

“Well more like someone speaks English in the country south and someone speaks English in the New England states. Or saying y’all verses you or gotcha verses got you. It’s the expressions and the slang and how you use some words and how the different cultures change the language.”

“Cool. Then while you’re teaching me to swim, teach me Spanish. I’m in my third year and can only remember enough to pass a test but don’t ask me to have a conversation.”

I laugh at her again, and we spend the rest of the day either in the water or on the beach laying out in the sun while I teach her conversational Spanish and some of the different expressions and slang. By the time we leave the beach and take our beach stuff back to the car, we only have the energy to eat at a nice pizza restaurant Akilah chooses and to head back to the hotel. We decide against going to the movies, and all we do that night is fall into the king-sized bed and sleep. The next few days are much the same, particularly for Akilah who’s not used to all the sun and the walking everywhere in the places she googles online that she wants to go, including a historical district and the Dali Museum. For all Perla’s warning, it seems like they’re going to be for naught until Wednesday, our fourth day in the city.

It’s at what I’d consider the most unromantic and unsexy place we go to. The Zoo. Somehow, neither of us have ever gone, and Akilah decides that we should make up for missing the experience in our childhood.

I don’t know what it is about today, but I can’t stop looking at her in her red strapless sundress that stops just under her knees. She’s wearing a halter bikini top under it because we plan to go back to the beach yet a third time since we’ve been here.

“Look at that bug. It looks like a vikavolt,” she says.

Yet another thing we have in common. For all her smarts, Akilah is a closet geek and is an absolute fanatic over the Pokémon video games. And those games are also part of the few happy memories of my childhood. We first discovered this similarity when Perla took us to the aquarium, and I compared some of the fish to Pokémon. Akilah then pointed out that many of them are based off real animals, and then we proceeded to talk about battling, training and continued to compare the sea life to different Pokémon while Perla looked at us like we were speaking another language. Since then we've spent many times in my room or her house playing the games together, especially since the new ones came out.

After a suggestion like the one she just made, we normally end up in an animated conversation as we compare the animals to different Pokémon. Today is no different except my gaze keeps falling to her lips, painted a matte deep red to go with her dress, or they go to her hips, particularly when she poses as Lopunny, a Pokémon that reminds me of the playboy bunny. It's not until we're back in the car that I realize that this sudden sexual longing for her isn't sudden. It's been building up all week and not just because we haven't fooled around lately either.

Somewhere this week I realized how much we actually do have in common and even the things we don't. Like when we're in the historical district and at the art museum, while I couldn't have cared less about the history, Akilah makes it interesting anyway, and she in return seems genuinely interested in the things I talk about even if she doesn't know anything about it. I've never really had the chance to get to know someone like this. I had to keep a distance from the few friends I had, and I never clicked like this with other girls even when I had the chance.

"You okay?" Akilah asks as we're driving to a seafood restaurant to introduce her to some authentic seafood. She places her hand on my thigh

and adds, “You spaced out there.”

“Yeah,” I say absently because just that casual touch sends a jolt through me, and I feel it as though she actually put her hand on my dick.

She notices my lewd stares at the restaurant as she’s sucking the shrimp cocktail sauce off her fingers and says, “Okay. Spill. You’ve been acting weird all day.”

“I just really want to fuck you right now,” I say.

Her eyes widen, and it takes me a moment to realize I said that out loud instead of in my head as I was trying to come up with some excuse.

“Shit,” I say as I feel heat rising to my cheeks again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“So, you don’t want to fuck me?”

“No! I mean I do. But I didn’t mean to tell you that,” I say.

“What did you mean to say then?”

“I...” as I trail off, I see the corner of Akilah’s lips twitching. She’s teasing me and having a hell of a good time doing it. “You’re awful. You know that?”

She starts laughing at that point and says, “I know very well. So really? Is that it?”

She goes from teasing to serious just that quickly, and it throws me off yet again.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. “I wasn’t trying to... come off so hard on you. I didn’t scare you, did I?”

“Why would I be scared?”

Because that was my first instinct when Quincy started coming onto me like that. That young I didn’t really know it was wrong so much as I knew I didn’t like it. It was an unknown that I really shouldn’t have known anything about at that age.

“I don’t know,” I lie.

“You didn’t scare me,” she says. “I was just surprised. You said you weren’t ready.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You act like it. That’s as good as saying it to me.”

Sometimes I wonder if I’m really dealing with a seventeen-year-old. She seems so old sometimes, so savvy, deals with things much better and with a more level head than people three and four times her age. And then her age will show like it did when she admitted to me I was her first kiss.

With the question of whether I’m ready, like I’m the virgin pondering being deflowered, I’m not so sure anymore.

Akilah doesn’t say anything more about it during dinner, and I follow suit, suddenly very uncomfortable with my own sexual desire even though I’m sure that wasn’t Akilah’s objective. When we’re done at the buffet, we head back to the beach. It’s pretty quiet in the evening compared to during the day. Most people have left with only a few stragglers. Akilah doesn’t want to get in the water, not yet anyway. She just wants to hold my hand and walk with her feet in the sand along the edge “like the movies,” she says with a grin.

“You know,” she says eventually, “my mother would have loved you.”

“Oh yeah,” I reply. It’s best not to say much when Akilah starts volunteering information. She has a very funny way of saying a lot without saying anything at all. I’ve seen her have entire conversations doing it, only giving back to the other person what they gave to her. It’s rare Akilah shares information that’s just her.

“Yeah. She raised me to be very independent. Not on purpose, I don’t think. She didn’t really have a choice. She worked three jobs and was never home and my brother took care of me when he could, but she didn’t want taking care of me to interfere with his education. So, I cooked dinner, cleaned

the house, made sure all the bills were paid because my mother would forget to pay them from being so tired. And nothing changed when she got sick. Just my brother joined the army because he didn't see any other way to take care of us when my mother couldn't work," Akilah says.

"How old were you when your mother got sick?"

"Thirteen. That's when we noticed the signs anyway. She didn't have insurance though, so she didn't go to the doctor until I was almost fourteen and by then it was too late to do anything, and she didn't want to do anything. The doctors gave her a few months. She hung on for a year. And then a few months later my brother died."

"Sorry," I say.

She shrugs it off like she does everything else and says, "Shit happens."

"When did you start staying by yourself?"

"Not long before you came. January of last year maybe. Officially when my emancipation was signed off in March. My grandmother wanted me to come live out in Colorado with her, but I didn't want to leave Atlanta. I was supposed to be staying with the only aunt here that was willing to take me in, but she's dysfunctional and totally irresponsible, and I'm the black sheep of the family anyway, and I hated it. I had money technically and my aunt was trying to get official custody of me which would have meant she would get access to it when I couldn't until I was eighteen, and I was smart enough not to let that happen because she probably would have used it to try to pay off all her debts.

"So, my brother's friends, a teacher, my therapist, and my social worker helped me petition for emancipation. Wasn't hard once I proved that it was in my best interests to stay in Atlanta and that I could take care of myself and stay in the house my mother and brother left if I just got the right to sign the contract to own it and put the utility accounts to my name."

To think all that happened not too long ago. I was still sleeping on the streets when that happened. If she weren't so mature as it was I'd be concerned that just a few months later, she invited a practically grown man who she'd hardly known anything about into her life out of loneliness or something.

"I wasn't lonely—not desperate lonely—if that's what you're thinking I was when I met you. I was okay by myself. I just had a feeling about you, and when I have those feelings, I go with it. Haven't steered me wrong before."

"Is this that spirit thing you have?" I ask

"You have it too," she says. "You just don't know it."

I laugh at her. "Yeah, right."

"Oh yeah? What made you decide to meet me at school that day I asked you to hang out? You could have just not shown up. I didn't have your number."

"You would have seen me at school and pestered me anyway."

"Probably, but still."

I shrug. "I was just curious. You seemed interesting and I... just went with it. A gut feeling I guess."

"See?" she says.

"So what do you mean? All of this was fate?"

"Fate is just a bunch of possibilities based on the choices we might make. We have to make the choices."

And that's what it all boils down to. A choice. It's a luxury I've never really had in my life. Not if I wanted to survive. But now I do have a choice. And that choice is to go with what I'm feeling right now, whether I think I'm ready for it or not, or ignore it and lose this moment to preserve whatever it is my instincts are telling me to protect. Certainly not my virtue or innocence.

That's long gone.

I walk in front of Akilah and stare at her for a while before I lean forward and kiss her. She immediately returns the kiss and comes forward to press her body against me. Even through our clothes, I can feel every inch of her and still, it's not enough. I want her. In every way. From late night conversations about random things to teaching her Spanish to her teaching me about words and law to screaming at her as we play against each other in video games to slowly opening up to each other about our traumatic pasts to what I want the most right now.

"I think I love you," I say when I've pulled away from her.

"I think I love you too," Akilah replies.

"I want you."

"How?"

I lean over and whisper the things I'd like to do to her in Spanish. She probably doesn't understand most of it and can only catch a few phrases that I taught her over the last few days because the first words Akilah asked about were about cussing and sex. It still has the intended effect. For once, Akilah is the one blushing instead of the other way around. Amazing how easy it is for me to fall back into that mode after so long of not being in tune with that side of myself. I used to hate myself for it. This time I don't. Maybe because now I really want this.

"Is that the only way?" Akilah asks, not backing down despite her bashfulness.

"Right now? Yes."

"Okay," she agrees.

11

The ride to the hotel is the longest thirty minutes of my life. Or at least it feels that way. It probably isn't. On the way back during traffic stops, Akilah keeps leaning over to kiss me and like with everything that comes to her, I'm slow to discourage her. Finally, I do make her stay in her seat because it's distracting me from driving. She falls back in her seat and crosses her legs and arms and pouts her swollen lips in impatience.

"Always in such a rush," I say to her and grab her hand in mine the rest of the way.

No sooner than we're in our hotel room and the heavy door closes behind us does Akilah take me by surprise, push me into the wall and press the length of her body against mine. I could easily reverse our positions but for now, I let her think she's the one in control.

When she leans up and kisses me, I put my hands under her ass and lift her off the ground. Her sandals fall off her feet, and she wraps her legs around my waist. I slip my feet out my sandals and carry her to the bed, where I drop her.

She sits up on her knees and for a moment all we do is look at each other, looking for any traces of doubt, any sign that this isn't right even after all the dancing around it and talking about it for months. Finally, I pull my shirt off, and Akilah's gaze falls to my naked chest. After a few more moments, she looks back up at my face and follows my lead by lifting her sundress over her head and tossing it to the floor so she's only in her bikini. While carefully watching her, I push my trunks down my hips. My dick springs out and once

the trunks are past my thighs they fall the rest of the way, and I step out of them.

Akilah's breath audibly catches, and for once, she's unable to hold her poker face and her expression is easy for me to read. Her eyes widen in surprise as she takes in my naked body for the first time, and her lips purse as though she's trying to decide whether to just follow her instincts or follow the methodical approach she uses for anything she's never experienced or encountered before. I let her, long used to having people leering at my naked body, and Akilah doing so isn't much different except for the fact that it's much more interesting and entertaining.

Since she seems unsure, I reach behind her and undo the strings on her bikini top. It falls off of her and onto the edge of the bed. She doesn't reach up to cover herself, but she looks off to the side, not quite able to meet my gaze. I then undo the strings on either side of her bikini bottoms and the flimsy piece of fabric falls off her body and then off the edge of the bed with her top.

I close what little gap there is between us and tilt Akilah's head up to kiss her lips again. She eventually responds by kissing back and suddenly the shyness that had been there just a few moments earlier is gone, the conflict that I had seen on her face before resolved as she seems to decide on instinct.

She shifts so that she's sitting on the bed and pulls me down over her, forcing our upper bodies together. The heat of her skin against mine seeps all the way to my bones, and I feel myself get harder for her than I already was. I bump my hips into hers and get a feel of the wet heat of her sex against the length of my dick. Fuck, I hope she's ready for me because I can't wait this out any longer.

Neither can she apparently because she suddenly pulls her lips away from mine and manages to pant, "Condom."

“Right,” I say as I lift myself off of her. I reach into the drawer I’d hastily thrown the box of condoms Perla packed herself in my bags so that Akilah wouldn’t see them. I grab one, put it on, and then walk back over to the bed, motioning for Akilah to scoot back so I can climb on the bed. She then spreads her legs for me, and I position myself between her legs.

I slide into her wet sex for the first time, focusing on my breathing because, fuck, I can feel the heat of her all over my body and if I don’t focus on something else, I won’t be able to make this good for her first time.

I look at Akilah’s face again, and her mouth is open, eyes wide, and I ask, “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she says, though she does suddenly crease her eyebrows and squirm beneath me. My breath catches this time as I feel my dick pulse inside her. God, Akilah doesn’t know what she’s doing to me.

“It just feels... different... In a good way. Go,” she urges, and it’s the only encouragement I need as I pull out of her and thrust back in.

I have to restrain myself because she’s so hot and wet and tight that I feel like I could come in her right now. I thought I had more control than this. It used to take quite a bit of effort to get me to come. I used to even fake it to get it over with. Maybe because I’d never *really* been into it. But I want Akilah so badly and being inside her feels like she’s touching me everywhere at once even though her hands aren’t even touching my body. To help her, I slow down and then reach over to grab a pillow to put under her ass.

“Good,” I ask.

“Yes. Please...”

“I know.”

I experiment with different angles until I find a way to thrust that strokes a sensitive spot on her that causes her to lose her breath and her to wrap her legs tightly around me. It’s still going to take a little time to make her come,

so I slow down my thrusts and lean down to kiss her face, lips, shoulders, anywhere I can get my lips on including her breasts. The angle which I have to bend forces me to slow down even more though I make up for it by thrusting harder. I'm able to take her whole breast into my mouth, playing with her nipple with my tongue and then sucking hard on it. In response, she groans and arches her body into mine, lifting her hips and rotating them into my next thrust.

"Shit, girl," I say because that almost made me come. I can't drag this out much longer, so I lean back and say, "Relax for me, girl. Let me make you come."

Akilah relaxes her legs from around my waist and tries to even out her breathing. It's good enough. I thrust into her faster, at the angle that caused her to lose her breath earlier, and suddenly I feel her sex clenching around me in a vice grip, and she cries out as her release comes. I pulse inside her and then let out a similar guttural sound as I come after her. I thrust back and forth a few more times until I've completely come and mostly gained my bearings again.

I pull out of her and let myself fall on my side next to her. She's staring in a daze, her legs still open and shining with the evidence of our sex. After I take the condom off, I lay my arm over her torso and pull myself over so I'm lying right against her on my side.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah," she pants and then turns to look at me. "Are you?"

"You're the virgin whose maidenhood I just took," I joke. "Why are you asking me that question?"

"It's your first time too, remember? In a way. It wasn't something you had to do to survive that is."

She's right. This is my first time in that way. I didn't have much of a

choice before. If I'd denied a partner in the past it might have meant living on the street.

"Can we just not go anywhere tomorrow? Can we just do this? Stay in bed. Preferably with no clothes and order pizza or something?" Akilah asks suddenly as though there's no better option in the world. There probably isn't.

I laugh and lean over to kiss her forehead.

"I'm not arguing with that."

We spend all of Thursday just like Akilah suggested. In bed, naked, and having sex for the most part while watching Netflix in between. The only time we get up is to use the bathroom and when I go downstairs to get our pizza, soda, and some ice. To be honest, I think both of us could have spent the rest of the weekend just like that. It's new and exciting and neither of us has ever had this with anyone else before.

By Friday, we're debating going to the beach again and maybe finding a Jamaican restaurant but that's later. That morning though, she insists on Starbucks and sends me out to get it for her. On the way to the car, I get a call from Perla.

"Hey," I say.

"*Hey*," she replies. She must hear the wind in the background because she adds, "*Are you outside?*"

"Headed to Starbucks for Akilah."

"*Oh. So you two are finally leaving the bed?*"

"What are you talking about?"

"*Akilah texted me. I know you two had sex, so you don't have to be coy about it.*"

"She told you?"

“I was going to find out anyway. And it wasn’t to brag or anything. She had a lady question that she couldn’t quite find the answer to on google. I helped her out as best I could. Had to ask a friend considering I’ve never had sex before.”

“You haven’t?” That’s news to me. Perla is almost thirty-three years old. I thought she would have had a few boyfriends by now.

“I’m asexual and aromantic,” Perla says. *“That means—“*

“I know what it means. I just didn’t know that about you.” In hindsight though, it makes a lot of sense. “But you didn’t call me for that. So, what’s up?”

“You and Akilah,” Perla begins. *“You’re moving pretty fast. You’ve been inseparable since you met, and it’s been a whirlwind from there. I just want to make sure you two have talked about your intentions towards each other.”*

“You say that like we’re getting married today or something.”

“You may as well. You act like you’re married already as it is. You practically live together. You’re having sex. I just want to make sure no one ends up heartbroken out of this. Better to know what everyone wants before it gets too far into the game. Like, I know you, Rafael. And you’re older than her so you see things differently and have lived a different life. You’re twenty with the jadedness and experience of a thirty-year-old. So, I think this means a lot more to you than just short term. But does she think that this is just going to be a high school fling and when she goes off to college, you’re over or is this more for her too? Is she even old enough to know that yet?”

She’s right about that and as I walk back into the hotel what’s on my mind is apparently on my face because after I hand Akilah her Frappuccino and strip naked to crawl back in bed with her, Akilah asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just talked to Perla.”

“What did she say?”

I shrug and lay down and wrap my arms around Akilah's waist while she sits up against the pillows and drinks her frap. Then I say, "She's just concerned about how fast we're moving. Wanted to make sure we're both on the same page."

"She told me the same thing when I texted her about... you know," she says turning red.

Amazing how she spent all of yesterday encouraging me to see and touch all of her body in ways that no one else has, how right now we're both naked, and now she wants to act shy.

"What do you think? About us?" Akilah asks.

"What do you think?" I ask.

"We can play this game all day, and you'll never win," Akilah says as she grins down at me. "So you may as well go ahead and talk."

She's right. I think it may be some sort of defense mechanism on her part to get the other person talking first before she says anything that might make her vulnerable. For all her toughness and shruggish nature, Akilah really is a sensitive soul and isn't going to open up without knowing she won't be stabbed.

Finally, I say, "I don't know. Perla's right though. We're in high school. What do you plan on doing afterwards? Where do you plan on going? Is it going to take us away from each other?"

"You know what I plan to do. I'm going to Georgia State and majoring in something, not sure what yet, and then going to Emory Law School. What about you?" she asks.

"I don't know. Maybe something to do with health and fitness since it's the only thing I really like."

"Oh my God. So you can become even more of a health nut?" Akilah teases.

“I am not,” I say. But it’s a lie. We both know I’m particular about what I eat and how it’ll affect my training and, right now, maintaining my current muscle mass. I haven’t been as particular about it since we’re on vacation, but I have been careful not to overeat. So while Akilah has been eating fries and ice cream every day on the beach, I stick to my normal eating times and indulge during dinner.

“We live in Atlanta,” Akilah says. “Not a small city where we’re lacking any sort of opportunity and one of us would absolutely need to move away to do what we want. Even if we did, married couples do it all the time. Compromise is part of relationships, right? As long as it’s not holding us back.”

“How do you make everything seem so simple?”

“Because it is. The execution isn’t always that easy, but the answer is usually very simple at its core.”

“Do you see us getting married?” I ask suddenly.

“Do you?”

I don’t even bother to point out that I asked first and say, “Yeah. I see that. One day. With you.”

Akilah hums and sips on her drink before saying, “I can too.”

“You sure about that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Akilah says.

“Because—and don’t say I’m so hung up on your age because I’m just being realistic—you’re seventeen. You don’t have enough world experience. I’m you’re first everything and of course you wanna fantasize that I’ll be your only everything. But you don’t know.”

“No one does. Twenty and thirty-year-olds don’t, and they get married every day and sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn’t. Just because we’re young doesn’t mean we’re wrong or that we won’t last past high

school. Besides,” Akilah adds, “we do everything married couples do. Only thing different is a piece of paper that makes it harder to just walk out on each other and holds us accountable to the state and everyone else.”

I close my eyes and ask, “Where do you come up with all this stuff?”

“I read a lot of everything.”

That’s true. One day I caught her reading about the cam girl industry simply because someone posted on Facebook about it, and she thought it was an interesting perspective.

“So if I asked you one day, you think you’d be willing to marry me?”

“I’d marry you today if you wanted to.”

I laugh. “Today? Really?”

“Yeah. If you wanted to, would you?”

“Yeah,” I say without hesitating. It’s one of the only things in my life I’ve ever been positively sure of.

“Good,” Akilah replies and then adds seriously, “Let’s do it today then.”

I pause at that, because there’s no way she just said what I think I heard.

“What?”

“I said, let’s do it today. Get married.”

“You’re serious,” I ask as I let go of her and sit up to look in her face. Not that looking at her would help if she was wearing her poker face.

“Yeah. Why wait?”

“We’ve only known each other for eight months,” I say.

“There was this woman on the radio who said her husband laid eyes on her for the very first time, and the first thing he said after he greeted her was that something was telling him she was meant to be his wife. She went home and prayed about it with her mother and six months later they were married and are still together thirteen years later. The way I see it is that we don’t plan on going anywhere anyway. Why wait?”

I'm speechless but not very opposed to the idea. For one thing, Akilah isn't this spontaneous so that means she's been thinking about it anyway. Not to mention I've known for months that she's the girl I'm going to marry eventually but... not this soon.

"But you don't... I could be anyone Akilah. You can't just up and decide you want to marry me now. You don't know everything about me."

"There are people who have known each other for years and don't know everything about each other. People married for decades don't. So that's not going to change. That's the fun part."

She's made up her mind. Her eyes are lit up in excitement at the idea. So I don't need to make sure she's sure about it or not. It's me trying to make sure... I don't know.

"But you... What if things change?"

"That's going to happen anyway. Technically our brains aren't fully set into adults until we're twenty-five, but our base personality is pretty much set from birth. And I like yours. And I've pissed you off a dozen times, and you don't have anger issues or have ever acted like you might hit me. You know about my money and have never asked for it. And you're so concerned about being kind and not being a child molester that I know you have pretty good character and morals.

"And the children at the dojo adore you, and children don't just like bad people. They know better than adults when people have bad intentions when they're around them all the time. Besides, my spirit tells me this is right. It would tell me if this was wrong for me like it has a dozen times before. And when I don't listen to it, things turn out badly."

I don't know if I'm flattered or ashamed that she thinks so much of me when I have a hard time thinking much good of myself. Is that really what she sees in me?

“What about you? What do you think of me?”

I don't have to waste time thinking about it. The words fall from my lips, “I can see myself spending the rest of my life with you and not getting tired. Or bored for that matter.”

She sets her drink down on the nightstand and then turns to me and grins, “Then let's do it. Let's get married.”

“Let's get married,” I agree.

12

Perla is more shocked than she is pissed about it when both Akilah and I return to Atlanta with not just nice tans but matching wedding rings. They're not real. Cheap things we got out of a jewelry store in the mall because Akilah is nothing if not practical. She doesn't see the point in spending a bunch of money on a piece of jewelry. One day I plan to get her a real ring, though Akilah insists she doesn't want anything so valuable that someone would cut her finger off to get it. Once she sees them though, Perla starts asking a thousand questions in Spanish, each of which I calmly answer in English, while Akilah holds onto my arm looking more amused than worried.

"When I said that you all do everything a married couple does, I wasn't trying to put ideas in your head," she exclaims as she switches back to English. "How did you even manage that? She's seventeen."

"She's an emancipated minor," I say just as Akilah says the same thing. We turn to grin at each other. It's going to take us both a while to get over the newness of all this.

"And since my only known parent is dead and I have no guardian, I didn't need anyone's permission in Florida anyway. Once I showed them the notarized proof and the proof that we were out of state, so they could waive the waiting period for the license, it was easy," Akilah says.

"She's an emancipated minor? You didn't tell me that."

"It never came up," I say with a shrug.

"You got married," Perla says softly and then huffs and says angrily, "You could have told me! I would have taken off work and driven down to be

there.”

“It was a spontaneous thing,” I add.

“Not really,” Akilah corrects. “We’d both already been thinking about it.”

“But you’re both so young and still in school and...” Perla sighs. “What am I even doing? You already did it. Too late now. Oh my God, mom is going to freak when she finds out you did this without her.”

“I had no intention of telling her anyway,” I say with a shrug. I don’t want Perla to tell my mother either, but she’s going to do it anyway. Regardless, my mother’s not finding out from me.

We don’t tell many more people than Perla. X and the rest of the staff of the fighting gym know. And of course, Zenobia had to loudly ask what the ring on my finger was during class when we came back. Akilah tells Blanche, and I mention it to Devonte under the oath of absolute secrecy. She also tells her ex-psychologist, the same one who helped her on her case to get her emancipated and who checks on her from time to time. She doesn’t bother telling any of her other family because she, and I quote, “doesn’t want or need them invalidating [her] life choices as though their own were so much better.”

Besides that, Akilah is right as always. Things don’t really change. We meet up at school like we always have, talk at the end of the day before going our separate ways for work and sometimes I’ll go to Perla’s house, and some nights, most nights, I’ll stay with Akilah. The only things that change are that sometimes we have sex and every now and then when I can beat her to it, I pay a utility bill or so or even buy groceries to cook dinner because she eats out entirely too much. Akilah doesn’t like it, insisting that she can, and she has taken care of everything by herself for years. I insist that I’m not going to be her freeloader.

It’s not perfect. She still pisses me off sometimes, and I do the same to her,

but it's more perfect than my life was in the past.

I should have known it was too good to last.

Akilah and I have just gotten out of school for the summer, and Perla took the day off. They are both insisting on stewed chicken, spicy rice, beans, and vegetable stir fry for dinner, and I find myself hard-pressed to deny either of them.

"So, I know this isn't anywhere near you all's concerns right now, but when are you having kids?" Perla asks while she and Akilah sit at the counter and watch me cook.

"If we have any, it'll be after we finish undergrad," Akilah says tactfully as ever. Undoubtedly, she said it because she knows my feelings on the matter and hasn't taken for granted that I'll change my mind about it or that she can even talk me into it.

"So, you've talked about it?" Perla asks.

"We talk about everything," Akilah says simply.

Before Perla can ask anything else, the doorbell rings and while muttering that she wasn't expecting anyone, she goes to get the door.

"You really want kids after undergrad," I ask because while Akilah didn't lie—we do talk about everything—we haven't specifically talked about this like Perla thinks.

"That's when I always planned it, but we don't have to if you're not comfortable with it. I don't have to have children," Akilah says.

"But you want to," I say.

"It would be nice. But if that was a deal breaker I wouldn't have married you."

I believe her. I'm sure down the line this won't be a reason for resentment or something between us or her wanting to leave me because she would have said so before and wouldn't have so spontaneously done something so

permanent.

“What’s taking Perla so long?” I ask noticing that my sister has been gone way too long.

“I’ll go check on her,” Akilah says leaving the kitchen, but when she doesn’t come back soon enough either, I turn everything on low and make my way to the front door.

I stop in my tracks at the sight before me when I get there. Akilah is standing next to Perla with a distinct frown and looking a little confused as Perla argues with one of two people that have entered the house. Actually, I only see the person she’s arguing with. But if that person’s here, so is another. I only have to walk a little further into the room to see the other person. Almost immediately we lock eyes, and it takes everything in me not to back out the room and run away like I did when I was sixteen. Suddenly, that doesn’t seem so long ago.

The person arguing with Perla suddenly spots me, and her eyes light up as she exclaims, “Rafael!”

She pushes past Perla and wraps her arms around me. I don’t return the gesture, but she still holds onto me. When she pulls away, she’s crying and says, “My baby. I haven’t seen you in so long.”

“Hey, mom,” I say in an even tone trying to reign in my temper because I am absolutely not happy to see her.

She hugs me again, and when she lets go this time she’s obviously mad and doesn’t hesitate to tell me why.

“How dare you get married and don’t invite me to come and then don’t bother to tell me? As soon as your sister told me, I told Quincy we were coming up here to see you and meet this girl,” she says to me and then turns to Akilah who no longer looks confused but is looking at both my mother and Quincy with a frown, her eyes lacking their usual soft warmth.

Thankfully, she seems to be following my lead on this and when my mother goes to hug her and welcome her to the family, Akilah awkwardly hugs her back, thanks her, and says that it's nice to meet her no matter how untrue that may or may not be.

While my mother is greeting Akilah, I meet Quincy's gaze again. He smiles at me and extends his arm and says, "Long time no see, son."

"I would have liked to have kept it that way," I say without grabbing his hand because he doesn't get the privilege of me being polite to him.

"Rafael," Perla warns.

"I'm not going to sit here and pretend I'm excited about this," I snap at her. "I told you I didn't want to see them."

"I'm just as shocked that they're here as you are," Perla says. "Why do you think I was out here so long? I was trying to get them to go away so I could tell you they were here."

"Now you all," my mother says, attention turned away from Akilah who for once looks like she has no idea what to do about a situation, "I know there's a lot of hurt between us. I think we all could have done things much better in the past. But that's just it. It's in the past now. I think it's time we move on and forgive each other."

I roll my eyes and say, "Don't come here with that Catholic bullshit."

"Rafael, don't talk to your mother like that," Quincy warns.

"You are the last person on the planet that gets to reprimand me about how I treat anyone," I snap at him. "She may have forgiven you, but I haven't. And I have no intention to."

"You haven't even given him a chance," my mother says.

"She has a fair point," Perla agrees. "Maybe this is a good time."

"Haven't even been here five fucking minutes and already people are taking his side, and I'm the bad guy because I don't want to deal with an

asshole,” I snap.

“Raf.”

It’s the first time Akilah has spoken during all of this, and I look in her direction, ready to snap at her too if she decides to side with my sister. But the way she looks at me stops me, her eyes shining with warm concern, a stark contrast to how she was just looking at my mother and Quincy.

“Let’s go. We can do this later,” she says reaching her hand out to me.

She doesn’t wait for me to reach back out to her. She grabs my hand, picks up her bag which has the car key in it and pulls me out the front door. Akilah obviously doesn’t think I’m alright to drive because while normally she goes straight to the passenger side, this time she gets right in the driver’s seat. It’s a strange sight. I knew she had her license, but I’ve never seen her actually drive.

She holds my hand the whole way back to her house. I keep calling it her house because that’s whose it is. Hers. She’s agreed that we can find a new place after we graduate, a place that’s ours, and she’ll rent her house out.

I don’t even realize when we’ve pulled up to the house until Akilah calls my name and asks, “Are you getting out?”

“Yeah,” I say as I get out the car and then follow her into the house.

Emma barks at us as we enter, and Akilah goes to tend to her while I go straight to her bedroom and lie on the bed because it’s the only thing I can do right now. When Akilah comes into the room, she silently lies next to me so that she’s facing me and wraps her arms around me. It’s in her arms that I finally break. I start shaking in her arms and a sob escapes me. I’m too shaken to be embarrassed about it. In less than an hour, the life I thought I’d left behind has come back to literally haunt me and all the feelings about it that I’d buried away have come back to the surface.

“It’s okay,” she finally says.

“No. It’s not.”

“He can’t hurt you anymore. No one can.”

“You don’t get it.”

“Then make me get it. Tell me why you’re so terrified of him.”

I’ve never said it out loud because there’s never been a need to. Akilah’s the first person that knows what’s happened, so it actually takes me a moment to find the words to express what I’m feeling.

“If it were as simple what he physically did to me it would be so much easier to deal with. But it’s... how he plays games with people around me. How he manages to convince them that I’m the bad guy, how he convinced my teachers that I was the delinquent or thug and could turn people against me so that even if I wanted to get him in trouble, no one would have taken my side,” I say. “When I would try to even hint at it, everyone would dismiss it.”

“Everyone?”

“Well, X suspected something, but I think he assumed it was just him hitting on me. But X was just one person. An ex-felon at that, even though it was a non-violent crime. No one was going to believe him over a white man,” I say rolling my eyes.

“I’m sure if you told Perla she’d believe you. She left because of Quincy’s violence. Tried to kill him too, right?” Akilah asked.

I sigh and say, “I’m not putting Perla in the middle of that. Unlike me, she spent a longer time with my mother when she was actually pretty decent, and I think she misses that more than she’ll admit.”

“You think she’ll choose your mother over you?”

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“You think too little of yourself.”

“You think too much of me.”

“You’re my husband. I’m supposed to.”

Akilah rarely calls me her husband, and I don’t think it’s because she’s ashamed of it as much as she’s still getting used to it. It’s not typically normal to be seventeen and have a husband, at least not in cultures belonging to the north-western hemisphere of the world as Akilah would correct me and say. Even at my age, most guys aren’t rushing to the altar unless they believe sex is reserved for marriage, and the sooner they get married to legalize sex the better. So, the rare times Akilah does call me her husband really means something to me in words that I don’t know how to express.

I close my eyes and kiss her in her hair even though she’ll probably fuss at me later for contributing to tangling it. It’s something she wasn’t sure how to deal with when we first started having sex. If her hair was out, it would get tangled and the ponytails and buns that she’s so fond of would get messed up. So, she’s taken to wearing it in a French braid or two, what she calls, goddess braids at night, and that only helps if we don’t get up to anything in the middle of the day. She bought silk pillowcases and sheets as a backup.

“We left the stewed chicken at Perla’s,” she suddenly says in a mournful tone.

That causes me to laugh.

Then she adds, “Maybe Perla can bring us some. Or maybe I can go back and make two plates to go.”

“I don’t want you going over there by yourself.”

“It’s Perla. I’m over there without you all the time.”

“But now my mother and Quincy are there. And they could be right. Quincy could have changed, but maybe he hasn’t. Either way, I don’t want you over there and risking getting into any confrontation with him.”

Akilah huffs and mumbles something in resigned compliance under her breath. I know all too well that though Akilah for the most part stays to

herself, she's more than happy to pick a fight when she needs to. She's actually scarily good at finding the right button to press to bring out the worst in someone all the while maintaining her innocence. In that way, and I hate to admit it even in passing, she reminds me of my stepdad. I had one of my days the first time I realized that. Then I figured out the difference between her and Quincy was that her intentions when she decides to play that game are always based on her strong sense of justice and what's right and wrong even if that sense is sometimes... misguided or uncompassionate. Quincy's are always for his own selfish purposes and were usually to my detriment, and I'm afraid of what he'll do if Akilah tries to play his own game against him. Akilah may be confident enough in herself that she feels like she could deal, but I think she might get in over her head.

"We have everything here. I'll make you more. It's not hard," I say as I get up, still feeling awful, but better than I was before.

"Raf."

I turn to look at her and her jaw is set, her eyes as hard as they'd been when she first set eyes on my mother and Quincy.

"What?" I ask carefully.

"If he does anything to you while he's here. If he so much as tries anything and I find out, I'll kill him," she says very plainly with no reservations about it.

I believe her. Akilah doesn't say things that she doesn't mean and if she says she'll kill my stepdad, I know she will. Just like she threatened to shoot me and send Emma after me if I tried to take advantage of her when she first told me she lived by herself. It's scary how cold she can be and one of these days I'm going to ask her who it was she had to fight and defend herself or, more likely than not, her mother from when she was pretty much running the house by herself while her mother was working and getting sick.

I only nod and head to the kitchen trying to ignore the sinking feeling, or as Akilah would say, my spirit, telling me that something is going to happen to make her want to make good on that promise.

13

The last thing I needed right before heading out to school was to be naked on my hands and knees while Quincy fucks me and simultaneously gives me a hand job, but that's where I'm unfortunately at right now. I didn't argue with him when he came back from an overnight shift at work demanding I undress just after my mother left for work, not that my mother being here would have stopped it. He just would have closed the door, and she wouldn't have asked any questions about what we were doing.

The only thing I stipulate is that he makes it fast because it's the last day of school and my sophomore class has something or another planned. It's a lie. We don't. And if my class did, I wouldn't participate anyway.

For the most part I, detach myself from the moment. Ignoring my body building up to an orgasm as I think about how even though I aced all the class assignments, tests, and quizzes, I'm still going to have C's, maybe some B's, because I almost never have my homework, and that means in my junior and senior year I'm going to really have to buckle down to bring my grades up if I want a chance at scholarships for colleges out of state. How I'm starting a new training regimen with X today to take my gains to a new level, whether I'm going to come home and make dinner or just get something out to eat. It depends on how tired I am from this new routine.

Still, Quincy is taking too long, and I realize he's not going to finish until I do, so I reluctantly bring myself back to the moment and concentrate on the sensations in my body and force myself to come. I let out an involuntary groan and once I've done that, *finally*, I hear Quincy finish behind me.

As soon as he lets go of my hips and is out, I stand up, grab my clothes, and head to the bathroom to clean up and get dressed again, ignoring Quincy as he slaps my ass and asks about how much I liked it.

Once I've closed the bathroom door, I grip the counter tightly and let my head fall with my eyes closed. When I open them, I see Quincy's razor in the corner of the sink and it crosses my mind that I can end this today, that my suffering ends if I'm dead. My death wouldn't matter to anyone except maybe my mother, Quincy, and the guys at the gym. And they'll get over it.

When I open my eyes, it takes me a while to realize where I am, and at first, I panic, thinking Quincy has taken me somewhere I can't escape until I hear a voice say, "Raf! Raf! Calm down. I'm here."

"Akilah," I say slowly while looking at her. She's crawled to sit on my lap to mostly keep me in place and is cupping my face in her hands. How she's not afraid I'll throw her off of me when I'm very capable of doing so is beyond me.

"Yeah," she says. "I'm here. No one's going to make you do anything you don't want to, okay?"

I nod and slowly she drops her hands and gets off me. I fall back onto the bed, and Akilah carefully lies next to me.

"I didn't accidentally touch you wrong in my sleep or anything, did I?" she asks.

"No," I say.

She learned very quickly that I'm not fond of wake-up sex a couple of weeks ago when she tried to wake me up with a hand job. I didn't give her any details when I snapped at her and then went to the bathroom, but she very quickly filed it away as things not to do with me. I lied and said it was something Quincy did, but Quincy actually isn't guilty of that offense. It's one of the first of many women I fucked into letting me stay with them for a

few weeks at a time. Waking up with a woman riding or sucking your dick and then them telling you they deserve it for letting you crash there with the underlying tone that they'd put you out naked if you didn't comply would ruin the idea of wakeup sex for anybody pretty quickly.

"What is it then? Do you... are you prone to nightmares about..."

"Sometimes. It'll go away. Quincy and my mother being here has just spooked me," I say as I sit back up and swing out of bed.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"To the gym. I need to hit something," I say. "I won't be gone too long. Remember. No going over to Perla's.

"I won't," Akilah promises.

As soon as I get to the gym, X knows something is wrong. I don't make a habit out of working out on Saturdays. When he asks though, I dismiss him and say I just want to do some boxing today. He's got nothing better to do today. No classes to teach, no one to train until later in the evening, so he agrees to train with me. I take out everything, my fear, my anger, even my slight disconnect from reality out in my workout. These were the emotions I channeled back in Miami when X first started training me and wanted to get me in the amateur boxing circuit. And even now, seeing that I haven't lost that drive, X still does.

"You would dominate in the boxing circuit. We could get you in a few amateur fights, so you can get a feel for it and then get you into the pro matches. Once people know how good you are, a bunch of people will be wanting to fight you, and we can make a pretty piece of change in the end, especially from all the bets they'd make against you," X says once we're done.

"You know I'm not interested," I say.

X sighs and says, "Such a fucking waste of talent."

I shrug. He's been saying that since I was twelve.

"So, are you going to tell me what the hell has got you in here on a Saturday morning instead of spending the day with that pretty lil wife of yours?" he asks.

"It's nothing."

"Bullshit," X says. "You're acting the same way you used to in Miami when you were going through whatever shit you were going through at home."

I roll my eyes. I don't think it's a giveaway but apparently it is to X who says, "So it's something to do with that, huh?"

It's no point hiding it from him. He's going to find out eventually.

"My mother and stepdad are here," I mumble.

"The same stepdad that beat on your mother?"

"Yeah. That one. She claims he's changed."

"Has he?"

"Well there are no bruises or dark circles under her eyes, so maybe. But excuse me if I'm not so willing to forgive him or believe him that easily."

"What he do to you?"

"What makes you think that?" I ask. He's much less shrewd than Akilah is and easier to deal with and steer in the wrong direction, but X has known me since I was twelve so it's important I'm careful.

"Seems kinda personal whatever it is. And this anger also goes to your mother, and I don't think you'd be mad at your mother for being a victim. I think your stepdad did something to you, and you angry she ain't stop it. Besides, outside of training and boxing, you're very finicky about who you let in your personal space and how they do it. It's kind of a dead giveaway," X explains.

"He might've done something to me a couple of times." More than a

couple of times, but X doesn't need to know much more than that.

"Then talk to him about it."

I laugh. I damn near had a fucking nervous breakdown when I saw the man and he said two words to me. There's no way I'm initiating a conversation with Quincy.

"You should at least try it."

"You wanna know what usually happens when I try to talk to my stepdad?" I snap and then close my mouth because I've almost said too much.

"If he's really changed, he'll be sorry for it."

"And if he's not?"

X shrugs. "Then you've got to move on like he has. Let it go and move forward."

"Fuck that," I say grabbing my boxing gloves because now I need to punch something again, and I don't need it to be X.

"Rafael," X begins.

"It's easy to say move on, to say let it go, to point out that the person who fucked you over has moved on, so you should too when you're not the one who was fucked over. But it's not that easy. I have to live with that shit in my head. Things that are fucking normal for most people I can't do because it reminds me of when someone fucked me up even when I know that the person doesn't mean it that. Akilah has to be careful how she sleeps next to me or touches me because I might have a flashback or wake up out of my sleep thinking I'm back there.

"But I tried anyway. I left everything I knew and moved seven hundred fucking miles away for a fresh start, and it was going okay until my mother and her motherfucking husband walked in the door, and the thing I'm trying to move past is standing in front of me like a fucking brick wall. So, you can tell me all day to let it go and move forward, but I'm telling you it's not that

fucking easy.”

I’m too worked up to get my boxing gloves back on and decide to fuck with them and to punch the bag with my bare damn fists. I’ll be sorry for it later when my hands are stiff and sore, but at the moment I don’t care. I need to work this out more before I go home.

“Rafael, I think you may need more help and therapy than boxing can give you,” X says.

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” I snap.

“Man, I think— “

“I really don’t give a shit what you think right now X. Are you gonna keep helping me train or what?” I ask.

X sighs and picks up the boxing gloves in a gesture to help me put them back on.

I train for a few more hours until X puts his foot down and says he’s not helping me anymore. I don’t argue with him. I’m too tired to. I grab my stuff, take a shower, and head home. Akilah is there when I get back, with her head in an LSAT prep book. She’s not going to be taking it for another five years or so, but she figures she may as well start prepping and getting ahead now.

“Hey,” she says, not turning to look at me as she’s prone to do when she’s engrossed in something.

“Hey,” I reply falling out on the couch next to her.

“Have a good workout?”

“Yeah. X really wants me to get into the boxing circuit after today.”

She puts her book down and grins at me while saying, “You’re still not going to. Are you?”

“Nope,” I say in reply, returning her grin.

She laughs and goes back to her book, and I sit silently next to her for a while until I say, “I talked to him a little about what’s going on.”

“What does he think?”

“He thinks I should give Quincy a shot or at the very least confront him about everything and find a way to move past it.”

“Does X know *everything*?”

“No,” I say, even though I’m not sure if that’s all the way true anymore.

“I’m sure he’d reconsider his advice if he did. I think you need to get past it too, but I don’t think it should be in the way X thinks. Some things are simply unforgivable. Personally, I think you need some counseling. Badly,” Akilah adds, still without looking from her book.

“X said that too,” I say. “But I don’t have any kind of insurance that’ll pay for it.”

“Some therapists have free spots and sliding scales based on your income. There’s state-funded programs and volunteer stuff you may qualify for too.”

“Maybe,” I say just to pacify her. It’s honestly not something I want to do. I’ve dealt with it without outside help this long. I’ll be okay. “What do you think I should do?”

Akilah puts her book down and says, “You already know what I’m going to say. I’m all for cutting all ties and giving them the proverbial fuck you and moving on. I don’t even talk to most of my family, and that’s just because they’re dysfunctional and very different from me which is much less than what you went through with your family. I’m also all for you telling Perla what really happened because I’m sure she wouldn’t have let your stepdad in the house if she knew based on her Facebook posts about rapists and child molesters. But at the end of the day, I’m down with whatever you decide, though I won’t let you hold me responsible for what I do to anyone if they decide to harass or hurt you, and I find out about it.”

“So, you’d made clear.”

“Just thought I’d throw that disclaimer out there.”

“That was both frightening and arousing. If I weren’t so tired and sore, I’d probably be trying to get in your pants right now.”

“Good. Because that would take away from my studying.”

“You’re talking to me now. How much studying could you really be doing?”

“You’ll eventually fall asleep like you always do when you settle down after a really hard workout. I give you about ten more minutes. Having sex would ruin it, and I probably wouldn’t get back in the groove until my meditation in the morning.”

She knows me too damn well. She’s right, I am about to fall asleep and likely would have already if I didn’t have so much on my mind.

“Sleep on it, Raf,” she encourages. “You’ll probably be able to make a much more informed decision when you’re refreshed because Lord knows you didn’t get a decent sleep last night. You kept tossing and turning.”

I take her advice and allow myself to go ahead and drift off. It’s the most peaceful slumber I’ve gotten in a while and the last I’m probably going to get in the next few weeks.

“You sure about this?” Akilah asks me for what is possibly the tenth time since I made this decision.

“Yes,” I say. “Would you stop asking?”

Akilah shrugs and says, “I’m just making sure.”

“You would think after the tenth time, you’d get it.”

“And after the tenth time, I’m not sure I believe it. It’s hard to believe when I keep having to wake you up out of nightmares at night.”

She’s a little snappy, though I can’t really blame her. She’s gotten about as much sleep as I have the past few days waking me up out of bad dreams. Normally, she can function on very little sleep, but I think she’s more worried about me than she lets on. Not to mention that even though she’s willing to follow my lead dealing with my trauma, she has her own opinions on what I should do, and none of those opinions have anything to do with spending time with both my mother and Quincy. She’s all for me spending time with my mother if that’s what I want to do, but unfortunately, as it always has been, my mother and Quincy are a package deal no matter how toxic I think their relationship might be.

After giving me a few days to cool off, Perla called and said our mother was insisting on seeing the botanical gardens and wanted Akilah and me to go with them. I think Perla was just as surprised that I said yes so simply as I was.

Perla, my mother, and Quincy are already there waiting for us and

immediately my mother rushes up to Akilah and hugs her and talks Akilah's ears off while Perla, Quincy, and I pay for our admission. Once it's clear to go through, my mother promptly ushers Akilah into the gardens.

"She's been very eager to get to know her new daughter-in-law," Quincy says to me and Perla. "It's all she would talk about on the way here."

"I see," I say simply and go to catch up with Akilah and my mother. I really don't know how I'm supposed to act around my stepdad.

When I get to the two of them, my mother is telling Akilah about some of the different plants we're starting to see, the types of soils and conditions they grown in, how she wishes she could grow some of them in her garden back home but the different humidity and climate in Georgia and Florida makes it difficult for her to grow some plants.

"When did you get into gardening?" I ask finally.

"I've always been into it. I just never had time to do it, but I've got all the time in the world now that I don't work," she says. "Don't you remember all my plant books?"

It's hard to remember something so mundane when most of my memories of that house consist of yelling, screaming, and being raped, but vaguely I can recall that my mother did have a lot of gardening and plant books lying around the house. She would read them in her spare time with a cigarette.

"I enter contests too, every now and then, and sell some of my plants to the neighbors, but for the most part it's just very soothing. Quincy even comes out there to help me now that he's retired," she says. "By the way, we bought some of the mangoes from the tree in the yard. They fruited early this year and just started to ripen enough to pick before we left."

I make a note to get some from Perla's house later and continue to follow my mother and Akilah through the gardens, aware that Perla and Quincy are talking behind us. I can't help but wonder what he's telling her because any

time he got close to anyone that had any influence in my life, he was always sure to twist the narrative, make it seem like I was the one with the problem, and rarely did anyone ask my opinion or corroborate the story with me. I laugh to myself. Akilah's definitely having a lot of influence on me. "Corroborate" is one of her words.

"So now that I've got you both, let's talk about you two," my mother insists. "How'd you meet? When did you start dating? What are your plans?"

Akilah eagerly tells her our first encounter with the same grin she shot me that day in gym while I fight the urge to blush as my mother bursts into laughter.

"It's not funny," I say.

"It really is," my mother insists, her accent even more distinct with her laughter. "You would pick a girl who has as much spice as this one."

"More like she picked me," I say.

"You're the one that texted me not even an hour after our first date."

"That wasn't even a date. We were hanging out. You said that yourself."

"Only because I knew if you thought it was a date, you would have said no and been super awkward about it because you're so shy. I was trying to let you get comfortable with me," Akilah admits.

"He's always been like that. I always was trying to get him out his little shell. He wouldn't play any sports. He never talked about having any friends. He'd just stay at school and go to the library and study all day and then come home to lock himself in his room for a few hours before leaving right out again," my mother says. "I thought I'd never get a daughter-in-law at that rate, let alone this soon."

I try not to glare at my mother because even though I wanted to do and have some of those things, I couldn't. She's talking like I grew up in a functional household and not one where her husband wasn't abusing us every

day, like I didn't have a good reason beyond shyness to never come home and never come out my room and never talk about any friends or the things I was interested in. I was scared out of my mind that if I mentioned any of that, Quincy would get angry and find a way to keep me locked in that house or find a way to fuck it all up.

Before I can say anything that might ruin this effort, my mother asks, "So when do I get grandbabies since I'm certainly not getting them from Perla."

"Not any time soon," Akilah assures.

Even if we do ever get to the point where I would agree to it, I'm not sure I would let my mother come see them, not so long as she's married to Quincy.

My mother says something about us making her keep waiting in Spanish to which Akilah looks at me for translation. Upon seeing this, my mother hits me on the arm and says, "What have you been doing? Why haven't you taught her Spanish yet?"

"We've been working on it," Akilah says and then looks at me. "I didn't even know he was fluent until a month and a half ago."

"I don't know how you missed that Miss Profiler when Perla goes into rants in Spanish at any given time when she doesn't want anyone to know what she's saying," I point out. "You just want to get me in trouble."

We stay at the botanical gardens a few hours longer and then head to the Cheesecake Factory for dinner. Akilah orders both artichoke dip and mozzarella sticks off the appetizer menu, and while everyone else eats off of it, even though Akilah could probably finish off both by herself with her love for all things with cheese, I don't bother it, something that doesn't go unnoticed by my mother. Then when we order, while everyone else orders rich entrees, I stick with a large salad with grilled chicken and tell the waiter to bring the dressing on the side.

"You're not eating enough, Rafael," my mother says. "It's a wonder you're

so big with the way you eat.”

Before I can answer, Perla says, “It’s part of his training diet. He eats really healthy during the week and lets himself cheat on Saturdays and Sundays. Still, he can really pack it away. He’ll probably go home and eat later.”

“Training?” my mother asks. “What training?”

“You didn’t know?” Perla asks. “He’s really into all that fitness stuff. He was training back in Miami since he was twelve.”

Perla is oblivious to the look I’m giving her. There’s a reason Quincy and my mother know nothing about that.

“Well that explains why he got so big so quickly. I thought it was genes. Your father was a big man you know. Even taller than you are now, Rafael.”

“Taller than Raf?” Akilah asks looking over at me. “Raf is six four.”

“His dad might have been oh... six seven, six eight or so. But Rafael was always so little as a boy. And he wasn’t even this tall at sixteen. I thought he was done at five eleven or so. I never thought he would get this big. His dad liked little women too,” my mother jokes.

Akilah is small, but nowhere near as short as my mother or as small as my mother used to be before I left home. Akilah is five three or four with naturally big arms, a tiny waist, relatively narrow hips, shapely legs, and a large ass that she’s constantly complaining about on a medium frame. I’ve been trying to get her to come train with me at the gym for months now at not just mine, but X’s insistence because he practically drools at the thought of entering her into a woman’s body sculpting competition, but she constantly refuses.

“X was telling me at Rafael’s birthday party that he’s been wanting to get him into professional boxing for years,” Perla says.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” my mother asks. “We could have put you into some competitions and everything. I always thought you needed a good

outlet and to think you already had one. Quincy could have helped too. He used to do some boxing when he was younger. Didn't you, sweetheart?"

"I dabbled in it."

"I'm sure you did. You used my mother as a punching bag to practice on."

The table suddenly goes silent, and I take a minute to pause before realizing I did that thing where I say something out loud that I meant to only say to myself. Akilah's eyes are alight with anticipation because, as I know very well, she loves to address the elephant in the room, and this is one elephant she hasn't brought up because I asked her not to.

"Rafael," Perla says.

I sigh. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that out loud."

"But you did," Perla chides.

"Well excuse me for finding it hard to sit here and pretend that we were a functional family when everyone at this table knows we damn well weren't, most of the reason being because of Quincy," I say. Now that I've started, I may as well go with it.

The waiter comes back with our entrees, and everyone is silent as he hands everyone their food and refills everyone's drinks. When he's gone, my mother is the first to speak.

"Rafael, baby, I know that was a difficult time for you, but Quincy has changed. I promise," she says.

"Not the first time you've promised me something and it wasn't true," I snap but keep my voice down. "You say that like it wasn't so bad that I ran away and was more comfortable living on the streets at sixteen."

"We looked for you. We couldn't find you."

"That was the point."

"Raf, son," Quincy begins sternly.

"I am *not* your son."

“Rafael,” my mother gasps. “He took care of you like his own.”

“You would delude yourself into thinking that.”

“Raf,” Quincy says a little less stern than before. “I know it was a difficult time for you. I know I did some things that I regret and that if I could go back in time and change it I would, but if you at least don’t believe me, believe your mother.”

“Been there. Done that. A thousand times over.”

“Raf, your mother and I were just young and— “

“You are not about to use the fact that you were young as an excuse as though we’re talking about something that happened ten or fifteen years ago. It hasn’t even been four years since I left. You were a fucking ass from the beginning, and I’m not sorry if I’m not convinced you aren’t still one yet,” I say.

No one says a word, not even Akilah who I know if needed would go to bat for me. But she’s not one to jump into someone else’s fight unless she thinks they can’t handle it.

“I need some air,” I say as I get up from the table and head outside.

When I’m out in the cool spring evening, I throw my head back and then sit on a bench outside and drop my head into my hands. I knew this would be difficult. I knew things would be tense, and I might eventually say something that is only part of my burning fury, but I didn’t think it would be like this. Sitting back there with my mother, Quincy, and Perla reminded me of back when I would sit with teachers and family friends, and Quincy would always have everyone charmed, gaining their sympathy for having to deal with a difficult child that wasn’t even his own.

“Raf.”

“I’m okay, Akilah.”

“Sure,” she says and sits next to me. “We can go home.”

“No, I just... I just need a little time. Everything was going okay. I’ll be fine in a minute.”

“Is it even possible to be fine while sitting at the table with your rapist?”

“I used to live with him. I’ll be fine for one evening. Go back in. I’ll be back soon.”

Akilah shrugs and goes back inside. I imagine the only reason it was that easy is that I’m going home with her, and she plans to bother me more about it there. I sit for a few more minutes before I’m again interrupted.

“Raf.”

“Akilah, I told you—” I begin before realizing that’s not Akilah’s voice.

I look up to see Quincy standing in front of me. I’ve so associated being called Raf with Akilah the last nine months that I had forgotten that Quincy used to be the only one that called me that on a regular basis. What in the world is he doing here? And how the hell did he get outside to talk to me without Akilah noticing where he was going?

“What do you want?” I ask while crossing my arms.

To my dismay, he sits next to me on the bench and then takes out a cigarette. He offers me one, and I decline to which he shrugs and then lights his. I would go back inside, but I’m not going to let him have the satisfaction of knowing he still has power over me any more than I’ve already demonstrated tonight.

“Your mother was devastated when you ran off, you know,” he says. “And when no one could find you, she really thought you were dead until Perla found you and said she was bringing you up here.”

“Can’t say I’m sorry for it. I’m glad I ran.”

If I hadn’t I would have tried to kill myself again with those razors I’d eyed so hungrily that morning as I cleaned myself up and got dressed after Quincy fucked me, and I probably would have succeeded. It was either die or run.

So I ran.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“You would be. You lost your little fuck buddy that day too.”

“Look, your mother and I worked things out. We talked about it. And if you had stayed I would have liked to think we could have worked what we had out too.”

I frown at the way he phrases that.

“What do you mean what we had?” There’s no way...

“What we were doing behind your mother’s back? I tried so many times to tell you that we had to stop it. To tell you no but—”

“You’re out your fucking mind. *We* weren’t doing anything. *You* raped me. Since I was fucking twelve. Before I really even comprehended what the fuck was going on!”

“You know it wasn’t like that.”

“You know it was, and you are not going to sit out here and gaslight me into thinking it was anything else or that I was trying to seduce you. Even if that were true, you were the fucking adult. You’re the one supposed to have the self-control, and we both know that’s something you lack,” I accuse.

“Raf.”

“*Stop* calling me that.”

“Calm down.”

I start to say something else until I feel his hand on my back, stroking my hair. In an instant I’m back in Miami, back in that house, sitting on the couch before he goes in for an overnight shift about an hour before my mother comes back from work on the rare nights I get home early. And he’s running his hands through my hair, muttering about how soft it is, a prelude to him forcing me on my knees and sucking him off while he wraps my hair around his hand and forces me to swallow his come.

“Don’t touch me,” I say standing up and slapping his hand away once I snap myself out the flashback.

“Raf, be reasonable.”

“Did you tell her?” I ask suddenly.

Quincy looks at me confused and then asks, “Tell who what?”

“Did you tell my mother about this supposed ‘thing’ you think we had when you two talked everything out? You’re a changed man, right? Did you tell her about your problem with wanting to fuck her son? That you still might want to fuck him?” I ask.

His long silence is enough of an answer for me and proves what I’ve known all along.

“That’s what I thought,” I say and make my way back into the restaurant.

15

“You cut your hair,” Akilah observes the next morning after her meditation period when she comes back in the room.

“Yeah,” I say.

“I mean it’s still pretty long for a guy but it’s weird. I’m so used to seeing it so long,” she says as she carefully touches the ends of the thick wavy deep brownish-black strands that go just past my shoulders now.

“What prompted this?” she asks.

“Nothing. I was long overdue for a cut. It’ll be back long again in a year.”

I’m not sure if she believes me or not, nor do I really care.

“Does that mean you won’t be using as much of my shampoo and conditioner now?” she jokes.

“You’re the one that likes to use mine,” I scoff.

We look at each other and then both fall out laughing. I fall back on the bed and pull her on top of me. While still laughing, she leans down and kisses me before leaning back up with a grin. Then she leans down back down and kisses me again, her hands going toward the waist of my trousers. I reach down and grab her hand and say simply, “Not in the mood for that right now.”

She sighs impatiently, yet patiently, and asks, “Still?”

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“Don’t be. It’s just... frustrating,” she admits as she rolls off of me and lies next to me on the bed.

She doesn't have to tell me. I haven't been in the mood for sex since my mother and Quincy popped up a week ago, and I'm certainly not in the mood for it after talking to Quincy when we went out yesterday. I'm not going to tell Akilah about that encounter though. For whatever reason that I still haven't asked her about, I have no doubt she'd shoot my stepdad with no qualms about it.

"You could charge him," Akilah says. "The statute of limitations for a criminal charge like that are indefinite in Florida according to the law websites I looked up. You could put him in jail and never have to deal with him."

"And who's going to believe me?"

"I did."

"Akilah. Look at me. I'm six four and even if I go six months without training I clock in at two ten of muscle easy and when I'm training at two twenty-five. People would laugh at me."

"You were a minor when it happened. If anything, the public would think you were brave for defying gender norms and stereotypes."

"Akilah."

"Fine. What about a sexual abuse civil lawsuit for damages? If you told X and Perla, I bet they'd testify for you. And how many people do you think you could get back in Miami to speak for you?"

Oula immediately comes to mind. Her family is Egyptian Muslim, and she's the only girl I stayed with who wasn't in it for the sex considering she believed that sex should be saved for marriage. She was ready to throw that out the window for me though. She was only a couple of years older than me and really did like and want to help me. But at the time she had too much going for her, and I didn't have a thing going for me, and I wasn't going to ruin that for her no matter how much we were both feeling each other.

I left one day without telling her I was leaving before we could get to the point of discussing a real relationship. It worked out for the best I guess. Perla got hold of me a few months later and from what I've seen after stalking her Facebook one day, Oula is now engaged to some guy she met while pursuing her engineering degree. She'd probably be angry with me to start with, but knowing her, she'd happily help.

I dismiss the idea.

"For every one person I can get to speak for me, Quincy can get five to speak for him. There's no point. Besides, what damages? Any injury that I might have had is long healed."

"You have flashbacks if people touch you a certain way, and you went from being a super freak in bed to not wanting to have sex at all since your mother and stepdad came to town. That's damages," Akilah says bluntly.

"A super freak? Really?" I ask.

"You get my point," Akilah says with a shrug. "No amount of money could change anything but at least you'd get some cash out of it and probably take his retirement fund if he doesn't have an umbrella policy or something."

I laugh and ask, "Is everything a business transaction to you?"

"No. But if there's a way to get money that won't make you miserable and it's perfectly legal, why not take it?"

"I can't afford a lawyer."

"You win the lawsuit that's how they get paid, and you can hire a good therapist."

"If I won it," I remind and then say, "No. I'll be fine. I'll get over it like I always do. They won't stay here forever. Once they're gone, things will be good again."

Akilah gives me a side-eyed look and mutters, "If you say so," as though she knows perfectly otherwise.

I can't blame her. She's just concerned. If she wasn't she wouldn't be giving me all these solutions and answers to mask it. Sometimes I wonder what I did to deserve Akilah, for her spirit, as she calls it, to lead her calling me out in gym back in August and then to ask me out. She's everything I never could have imagined deserving and then some. I didn't even think I'd live to be twenty at one point let alone get married in my lifetime.

I grab her hand and say, "I'll be fine. I promise. "

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Since both my mother and Quincy are retired, they don't have to be back home any time soon and decide that they'll be staying the entire summer at my mother's insistence to get to know Akilah and to make up for lost time with me. Despite my feelings on my mother being with Quincy, I can't know for sure if she was aware of what was going on in her own house, and I never told her about his abuse so I'm more or less okay with her request. But Quincy is always with her. For the most part, we don't say anything to each other, and we certainly haven't had anymore one on one conversations but just his presence unsettles me.

Akilah notices and insists she has no problem being with my mother and Quincy on her own. But not only do I not trust Quincy, I don't trust Akilah not to figure out a way to hurt him if he does do or say anything wrong. She already illegally owns a gun, one of the things her emancipation doesn't allow her to do before eighteen. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd illegally conceal it in public, and the last thing I need is Akilah going to jail right now for pulling a gun or shooting someone with it.

The only reprieve I get from it all is at the gym. Between training, teaching my class and the additional things I'm doing for X during the summer while I have time, some days I leave in the morning and don't get home until nine or ten at night.

“Rafael.”

“Yes, Zenobia,” I manage while in the middle of my jump roping.

“This is confusing.”

I stop in the middle of my jump roping to look at what she’s doing. On first glance, it looks like some kind of pre-algebra.

“They teach you that in school?” I ask.

“No. I just do them when I’m bored, and I left my logic puzzle book at home,” she says.

While out of school, Zenobia has nothing better to do so she comes to the gym every day. No one minds. All she does is sit in the corner with a bunch of books from the library and some workbooks I’m pretty sure belong to her school but that she somehow manages to have anyway. She’s supposed to be in daycare or have a sitter, but her grandmother can’t afford it and none of us are reporting the woman to CPS for it, but we do make sure to tell Zenobia to text us when she’s leaving the house to make her way here, and I usually drive her home after her grandmother gets off work.

“It’s proportions,” I say as I look at the book.

She gives me a dry look and says, “I know that. I don’t understand how to do them. This cross-multiplication thing. They explain it really weird.”

“You’re right. They do,” I say as I read over the page. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

She skips to the counter at the front where she’s set up for the day, and I sit with her to explain how to do the work. She catches on quickly as always. In a lot of ways, she reminds me of Akilah in her brilliance except, unlike Akilah, Zenobia’s strengths are in math and sciences as opposed to words and language.

I’m so engrossed with Zenobia that I’ve forgotten about my workout. By the time I look up, I’ve spent fifteen minutes with her, and I probably would

have spent longer if not for the bell on the door ringing as someone comes in.

I look up and press my lips together, the grip on Zenobia's pencil becoming so tight that it snaps.

"Rafael! Really!" Zenobia exclaims.

"Sorry, Z," I mutter.

"Ooo. This is a nice place, Rafael."

"What are you two doing here?" I ask my mother tightly.

"You seem to put so much time into this job that I wanted to see what it was."

"How did you find it?" I ask.

Quincy answers, "Perla said your boss wouldn't mind us dropping by and told us where it was."

"He probably won't. But I do mind," I snap.

Akilah would have known not to give my mother or Quincy the address but seeing as Perla doesn't know the reason for my level of hatred for my stepdad, I can see why she wouldn't have seen the big deal giving it to them. I'm relieved that I never told Perla where Akilah lived and she never asked either, otherwise my mother and Quincy would have long showed up there.

My mother rolls her eyes and says, "You've always been so secretive and closed in Rafael. We just want to have a little part in your life, especially now that you're married and starting your own life."

"The feeling isn't mutual," I say.

"Everything okay," X says coming over with Zenobia at his side. I hadn't even noticed she'd left.

I look at my mother and Quincy and then at X and say, "Not really. But there's nothing you can do about it."

X raises his eyebrows at me, and I roll my eyes and say, "This is my mother and my stepdad."

Both X's eyebrows shoot up even higher, and then he fixes his expression and turns back to my mother and Quincy and says, "Nice to meet you. Heard a lot about you."

"Only good things I hope," my mother says with a giggle as she shakes X's hand.

X doesn't reply and just shakes Quincy's hand.

"Nice place," Quincy says as he walks further inside. "Reminds me of the place I trained in a little, but the place I went was a little hole in the wall."

"Feel free to show yourselves around," X says.

My mother and Quincy do without hesitating, and once they're out of earshot X says to me, "You okay, kid?"

He hasn't called me that in a while which makes it clear to me he's concerned.

"I guess," I mutter.

"I can ask them to leave if you want, come up with some excuse."

"So they can just ask about a good time to come back?" I ask. "No. It's better to get it over with now."

"If you say so," X says.

Even though I would like to stay as far away as possible from Quincy, I'm even more uncomfortable letting him roam in what has always been my personal sanctuary and not knowing what he might be saying or suggesting to someone about me to corrupt that. So I join my mother and Quincy on the tour. It's the most I've talked to Quincy since he got here, and I'm not altogether uncomfortable with it. I know for a fact a lot more intimately than I should that he works out and keeps himself in shape, but I didn't know he was as smart about it as he's proven himself to be.

For the first time in a while, I think this is what I wished our relationship could have been. It's not that I want to hate Quincy. It's really a lot of stress

and energy, but how else am I supposed to feel about the man all things considered.

I stop that train of thought before it can get any further. No use for wishful thinking. It's only going to depress me.

"I keep trying to tell him he should get into pro boxing," X says eventually, joining my conversation with my mother and Quincy. "But he's dead set against it."

"I wish I had known before," Quincy says. "I bet between you and me we could have convinced him."

If he'd been anything of the stepdad he should have been, I wouldn't have felt like I had to hide what I was doing from him, and they might have convinced me. I don't feel like starting fights today though, so I make sure to simply say, "Maybe you would have."

"Wanna see him in the ring?" X offers. "Maybe we still can."

"I am not sparring."

"You would have done it anyway. You were in the middle of a workout before Zenobia asked you for help," X says.

"Well I'm done with it now," I say while looking over to see where Zenobia went. She's back at her place at the front desk. "I'll start back up tomorrow."

"Can you do it tomorrow?" my mother asks.

"No. I told you, I'm not doing competitive. That's that."

Quincy looks at X, and they both exchange a look. Then Quincy says, "And this is the stuff I had to deal with when he was growing up. It hasn't changed. It's a wonder that little wife of his can deal with him."

"She's just as hardheaded is what," X replies.

I want to point out that the reason I was so hardheaded with him is because he was fucking me as a teen, but I really am trying to let things go for now, to

just deal until they leave at the end of the summer, so I just shrug in response.

“Well since you’re done, why don’t the three of us go home and have dinner? Just us three, like we used to?” my mother asks.

She’s been practically beaming at the fact that after so long of only disdain and tense tolerance of each other, me and Quincy have found something we have in common. I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were her. But my mother’s been through enough, and I’m not going to upset her if I don’t have to so reluctantly I agree. I take Zenobia home first and then head to Perla’s house. As long as Quincy doesn’t try anything, I’ll be fine. I would have texted Akilah and told her to meet me here, but she’s closing up at work tonight.

My mother insists that all three of us cook together, and me and her get a good laugh watching Quincy try and fail to do even the most basic cooking task. In the end, he gives up and settles for bothering and being romantic with my mother.

“I’m right here,” I remind them every now and then.

“No one bothers you and Akilah when we’re out, and you get into your own world,” my mother points out.

“The difference is you don’t mind. I do,” I reply. She scowls at me but makes Quincy back off.

I have conflicting emotions about their relationship still. I don’t know if I’m glad they’re functional now, and he’s not beating her anymore, and my mother is happy or dismayed because if I want a relationship with my mother—and I do as much tension as there has been between us in the past—it means I have to put up with Quincy. I still haven’t decided if I can put up with him yet.

After dinner, my mother remembers she has to check her blood sugar and take her insulin and assures us she’ll be right back.

“Since when has she had high blood sugar?” I ask Quincy as we wash

dishes, not because I particularly want to talk to him but because I can't stand to be in the silence with him. It makes me feel like he's a predator about to pounce, and he very much may be.

"Since she quit smoking and decided sweets were a good replacement," Quincy replies.

"Oh," I reply and continue washing the pots while he dries and puts them away.

There's a familiar tension in the air, the tension I would feel as I wait in anticipation for whether Quincy is going to leave me alone or not. I pause washing the pot in my hand and as soon as I feel Quincy's hand on my back, I turn around with a knife from the sink in my hand. I point it at his stomach with my eyes narrowed.

As much as things have changed between him and my mother, predictably, nothing has changed between us even though we were able to fake it.

"Back the fuck off," I say.

"Raf," he says patiently putting his hand over mine to try to stay the knife.

"I said—"

He forces my hand down to my side and puts his lips on mine. I try to push him off. I should be stronger than this. I am stronger than this. I could probably throw him off, but like always when it comes to Quincy, I'm powerless.

When he lets go of me and pulls away, I gasp and move away from him, to the other end of the counter, the knife still in hand but mostly forgotten.

"Raf."

"Get away."

He doesn't. He puts his hand on my back and begins to rub in circles, but I don't have the energy to push him away.

"Your mother doesn't need to know."

“How many times do I have to tell you there was nothing mutual about us?”

“Hard to believe that when I can remember very vividly making you come. Bet I can make you hard in no time,” he says using his other hand to touch the front of my trousers. “You know you wanted it. You still want it. I do too.”

I round on him with the knife again and take a deep shaky breath, “You wanna know what I wanted from you.”

I don’t wait for him to answer as I continue, “I wanted that fucking farce at the gym earlier to be real. I wanted you to be the great family man you pretended to be to fucking strangers when I couldn’t comprehend what made me and my mother different. I probably would have told you about the boxing instead of hiding it because I was afraid you’d turn everyone against me like you always did, even my own fucking mother. That’s what I wanted. Not to be touched and fucked by you on a regular basis.”

Before Quincy can say anything, my mother’s voice gets both our attention. I put the knife down on the counter and Quincy moves away from me. My mother pauses to look at us and asks, “Are you two okay?”

Quincy and I look at each other and then back at my mother. I grab the knife again and put it in the drainer as Quincy says, “We’re good.”

And like always when my mother almost catches Quincy, she shrugs it off and starts rambling. And again, I wonder what she knows and what she doesn’t, and I can’t stand being around my mother or my stepdad any longer.

“I’m going home,” I say suddenly.

“Why?” my mother asks.

“If you don’t know by now it could slap you in the face and you’d never know it,” I growl as I grab my keys and leave.

16

“Raf.”

Akilah’s voice jolts me out my sleep, and I remove the covers from over my head to glance at the clock on the nightstand to see it’s almost eleven.

“Raf,” Akilah says again as she comes into the room. She turns on the light, and I groan as I put the covers over my head again. I hate when she does that.

“You okay?”

No. I’m not. I’m angry. Humiliated. Depressed. Everything but okay, but I lie to Akilah anyway and say, “I’m fine.”

“My spirit tells me you’re not.”

“Damn you and your spirit,” I snap. I’m not in the mood for Akilah’s prying right now, and if being mean to her will get her to leave me alone, I’ll do it and make it up to her later.

“What’s your problem?”

“I didn’t have one until you assumed I had one.”

“Because you did.”

“No. I didn’t.”

Akilah rolls her eyes and says, “If you want to be an ass, then go ahead. I’m sleeping in the other room.”

“It’s your bed. If you want me to leave. I’ll leave.”

“It’s *our* bed. We’re married now if you haven’t forgotten.”

“I haven’t. Trust me,” I mutter.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I didn’t mean anything. Would you just turn off the light and let me sleep?”

Akilah groans. “I don’t feel like dealing with your mood swings right now. I’ll get you to tell me in the morning. Goodnight, Raf.”

I don’t reply, and she closes the bedroom door behind her. About twenty minutes after she leaves and after trying to fall back asleep to no avail, I get up and head to the other bedroom. I really was being an ass to her when all she was trying to do was help. I slip into the full-size bed behind her and wrap my arms around her. She’s already asleep, and the movement doesn’t disturb her. She must be tired if that’s the case because she’s usually a very light sleeper.

I still can’t fall asleep, but I feel better here next to Akilah than I did earlier. I don’t want to sleep anyway. Not when there’s no difference between sleeping and waking now. At least awake I can control myself and get away. My flashbacks, my nightmares, they control me.

I had honestly thought for a while that my encounter with Quincy earlier was a dream, and it wasn’t until Akilah called my name that I was sure I was awake because I don’t dream of Akilah. In some ways that makes everything better and much worse. Even after so many years, even now that we’re both adults, and I’m bigger and stronger than I was at twelve or even sixteen, he still has the power to make me freeze, to make me submit to him, to make me not stab him when I should have. After so long, I’m still his perfectly groomed slave. Even after he leaves and I don’t have to deal with him anymore, everything he’s ever said or did to me dictates my every move. And I hate living this way. I hate that Akilah has to put up with this no matter how patient she is with it. She deserves a lot better than me.

Two hours later, I’m still awake, and she’s still fast asleep but suddenly I need her in a way I haven’t been able to stomach myself to want in over a

week.

I lift the shirt she threw on to sleep in and reach between her thighs to stroke her sex. I may not like wakeup sex, but she might not mind. She hasn't told me otherwise.

She shifts in her sleep but doesn't wake up, but I'm patient. Eventually, she'll awaken. She starts to moan quietly, and it's at this point that I slip two fingers into her sex and thrust at an angle I know is sure to wake her. Sure enough, Akilah gasps out her sleep, her thighs snapping shut around my hands.

"Raf," she mutters sleepily.

"I can't finish you off if you don't open your legs back up," I say.

"What are you doing?"

"I think you can feel what I'm doing," I say as her thighs relax again and I thrust my fingers inside her again.

Her hips buck to meet my hand in the process, and she says through gritted teeth, "This is what I mean by the sex freak thing."

I ignore her and continue to thrust my fingers into her. Her sexual frustration must really be pent up because it doesn't take long for me feel her walls clamp down on my fingers, and her thighs clamp around my hand again as she cums for me.

"Fuck I needed that," she says.

I kiss her and say, "I know."

She must have glanced at the digital clock because she says, "About three hours ago you were being an ass and now you're treating me to wakeup sex. What put you in the mood for that?"

"Sorry. Just, some days are worse than others. But I don't want to talk about that right now," I reply. It's not a lie. Some days are. But if she really knew why I was in such an angry mood, why I'm in the mood for sex right

now, she'd probably want to talk. By giving her a little of what she knows is the truth, she'll back off and let me do this.

I remove my sleep pants and then instruct her to take off her top and lean forward while on her knees. Then I lift her by her hips towards my dick and slide into her. She grips the sheets and gasps as I thrust back and forth hard and slow. A torturous pace for Akilah, who is a fan of me going as hard and fast as I can because she's so impatient. And the fact that she's turned away from me, unable to touch me at all, is making it worse for her.

"Raf," she groans in the bed. "Stop playing."

"I'm not, just wait. You'll thank me afterwards," I assure.

Her walls begin to clamp tighter around my dick in a sort of mini orgasm that makes her sigh at the relief, but that's not what I'm going for. It happens twice more before I hear her let out a long moan as she arches her back and finally her walls clamp so tightly around mine that I can't even finish because I can't even fit in her. Forced to pull out of her, I finish myself off with my hand and come on her back.

"How in the world did you learn how to do that?" she asks when she can talk again.

"You probably don't want to know the answer to that," I reply honestly as I lay next to her, even though I can recall exactly when and with who.

She pauses and then agrees, "You're right. I probably don't."

She lies on her stomach while I lie next to her as the sun starts to rise. Then she turns her head to look at me and asks, "You going to tell me what's going on with you?"

"Just one of those days?" I say.

"You sure?" she asks. "I can just not go into work today."

"Don't let me be an inconvenience on your life. Go to work. I'll be fine."

Akilah turns all the way onto her side with a frown as she says, "I don't

think you're an inconvenience. You don't think that, do you?"

I can't even bring myself to lie to her.

"Raf," she begins.

"Akilah, just don't," I plead. "I'm fine. I'll be good once my parents leave."

She presses her lips together as if she wants to argue but instead sighs and leans forward to kiss me. She barely pulls away as she whispers, "You're not an inconvenience."

Then she draws close to me and settles against my chest. She falls asleep again and even though the sex has made me tired, I don't want to fall asleep for fear of what I'll see when I close my eyes. So every time I doze off, I force myself awake again, careful not to disturb Akilah.

When I open my eyes again, I don't immediately recognize where I am until an average sized girl with her hair in defined tight curls walks in front of the bed in a white blouse, black pants, and black flats.

"I'm headed to work. Clean the apartment for me, will you?"

I roll my eyes and say, "I'm not a fucking slave, Cami."

"As long as I pay the rent and give you a place to stay, you are," she says.

"I thought that was why I gave you good dick because Lord knows you can't get someone to give it to you outside of me," I say viciously.

"Take it back," she demands.

"Or what?" I mutter as I swing my legs over the side of the bed.

"Or I'll put your naked ass out on the street right now."

I'd honestly like to see her try. But I don't feel like fighting with Cami today and then having her blame me for making her late and having to eat out her pussy to make it up to her later. Besides, it's her apartment.

"Whatever," I mutter.

"I don't have time for you right now. I'm already on a fucking attendance

warning at work. I'll lose my job if you make me late again," she says as she grabs her bag. "See you later."

I don't reply and neither does she care as she walks out the door. I have no intentions of seeing her later. I'll be long gone with the fifty bucks she keeps in her drawer so she'll have cash on her by the time she comes back. Until then, I lie back down to get some rest. I'm going to need it.

When I open my eyes again, it's to Akilah shaking me awake and telling me she's headed to work. There was a time right after I started spending the night regularly where she would assume I knew her schedule and would leave without saying anything. She didn't do it on purpose. I'm sure she couldn't help it since she was used to coming and going from the house as she pleased without anyone being home to care where she was going since long before she ever met me. But once I told her that it bothered me she makes a point to try to actively let me know or at the very least give a shout.

"See you later," Akilah says leaning down to kiss my forehead. "And then you're going to tell me what the hell is wrong with you."

I don't reply, and she dismisses it as me still being half sleep with a roll of her eyes and a grin before leaving.

Her words from the night before have stayed with me. She insists I'm not an inconvenience to her, yet the evidence proves otherwise. I live in either her house or Perla's, and Akilah's got a lot more going more for her than I ever have and probably ever will. She's going to be one hell of a lawyer, probably fighting civil rights and social justice cases, and I don't even know what I plan to do. The only thing I'm good at is training but I don't particularly want to do that for the rest of my life.

Never mind not knowing what I want to do. What makes what I have with her any different than what I had with those girls in Miami? What makes what I'm doing with her any different than what I was doing with Cami?

Except that I actually have a lot in common with Akilah outside of sex and like her as a person? What about this even proves anything Quincy has ever said about me wrong? That I'm not good for anything other than a good fucking. Hell, I turn into a fucking pussy when he even says two words to me. I'm not even good for protecting myself, so Akilah certainly doesn't need me for that.

I should have pushed her away when I had the chance, before we became so intertwined into each other's lives. I sure as hell shouldn't have let her talk me into marrying her. No undoing it now though. Nothing in the world could make Akilah leave me. And I'm too selfish to leave her knowing we're both alive and well.

That thought crosses my mind again. Not that it hasn't in while. Die, a voice always whispers. When Akilah first embarrassed me in gym, when I started dreaming of Quincy again, when Akilah first kissed me and I had a flashback and wondered if I'd ever be able to have a normal intimate relationship with a girl, when my mother called on my birthday, when Quincy came onto me yesterday, and every other hellhole of a day where it seemed like the depressing haze that came over me would never leave.

Back during those times I'd manage to talk myself out it, told myself that it won't last, that it'll end. But every time I think it ends it comes back to me one way or another. The truth is that it'll never end. And Akilah is always going to be in the middle of it.

Die, that voice says again, but this time it's not a whisper. It's the only way to end all this. After I've showered, I go to my room. No. I go to *Akilah's* room and reach into the top drawer I keep my underwear in and grab a prescription drug bottle out the back of the drawer. They used to be Quincy's painkillers for some surgery he had on his back. They're actually way too strong, and I remember his doctor telling him to just take half a pill. I took

the filled, but unused prescription the night I left home in Miami just in case I changed my mind about dying. When I think I might wanna swallow the whole bottle, I grab them and play with them in my hands and every time I've put them away right after.

Not today.

I close the drawer and walk into the living room to sit on the couch. I turn the television to some cartoons and absently mindedly watch while tossing the pills back and forth in my hand. Then I open them and one by one, I toss them back, like candy. I've just popped the last one back when the door opens. Everything is starting to get blurry, but I manage to make out Akilah walking through the door.

"What are you doing back?" I ask.

"You really worried me this morning. And I felt like I needed to come home. We need to talk about some things," she replies and then asks. "Raf, why are you talking like that?"

"Talking like what?"

"All slurred. Like you're drunk or something."

She crosses the room pretty fast for someone who was just so far away.

"I'm not drunk."

"What's that in your hand?" Akilah asks snatching the bottle from me.

I lean back on the couch as she looks at the label, about to close my eyes until she's suddenly shaking me and asking, "What is this?"

"Leave me alone. I'm trying to sleep."

"No! No sleep! Raf, how many of these did you take?"

"The whole bottle."

"The whole bottle! Was it full?"

"Why are you yelling?"

"Raf, was it full?" she yells in my face.

“Yes,” I say closing my eyes.

“Don’t fucking go to sleep you bastard,” Akilah yells shaking me again as she reads the label again and then says, “Fuck. Where’s my phone?”

She leaves and then comes back with it on her ear as she yells at me to stay awake again.

“Stop yelling.”

“No. I won’t stop yelling,” she yells and shakes me again while saying, “Raf, don’t go to sleep. Raf!”

I stop understanding what she’s saying after that. Finally, I don’t hear or see her at all.

I feel almost as bad as I felt that first time Quincy fucked me, if not worse, when I open my eyes again. So bad that I close my eyes again hoping to fall back asleep, but I'm too aware of how much... discomfort because it's not really painful—I'm too aware of how much discomfort I'm in to fall back asleep. Something's on my face, and I instinctively reach up to try to take it off. My arms feel like one hundred pounds are pressing them down though.

I stop for a moment and then try again and with some effort, I managed to lift my arm to my face to take off what turns out to be a mask.

"I don't know if you should do that."

I look to my left side and see there really is one hundred pounds of dead weight on my other arm. A little more actually. Akilah.

"You were having trouble breathing, even when they stabilized you but not enough for a ventilator, so they put that on."

I don't feel like I'm having any trouble now, so I take it off anyway. Doing so agitates the awesome headache I have. What the hell happened to me? I decide Akilah probably knows the answer to that.

"What— "

I have to stop. Talking is even agitating my headache.

"Fuck. This headache is a bitch," I whisper lifting up my hand to rub my head.

"I think that might be a side effect of the overdose."

"Overdose?" I ask.

“I’ll let you think about it,” Akilah says leaning her head back on my chest.

It takes a minute to put it all together. Between realizing I’m in a hospital and the last thing I remember being Akilah’s voice shouting my name.

That’s right. I swallowed a bottle of painkillers. And I survived it. Again. Even though these were much stronger than the ones I took when I was sixteen. I don’t know if I’m happy about that yet.

“Oh. Yeah,” I say.

“That’s a relatively calm reaction for someone who just remembered they tried to commit suicide,” Akilah says.

Trust Akilah to get things out in the open.

“Well what do you want me to do, apologize?” I say.

“Telling me why would be a good damn start,” she replies.

There’s no bite or malice to her tone. I don’t know or care if that’s a good thing or not.

“I don’t know.”

“So you just thought it would be fun to die?”

“I’ve got a headache, Akilah. I’m not doing this with you right now.”

“No. You don’t get to bottle everything up like this. No more half-truths. That’s why you’re here right now. Raf—

“Don’t call me that,” I snap.

“Don’t call you what, Raf?”

“That! Don’t...” I start to shake, and my breath suddenly catches in my throat. I swallow to try to get rid of the lump there, but it’s not working, and I feel like I can’t breathe. Maybe I shouldn’t have taken off that mask. “Just don’t. I can’t do this right now. Just stop.”

“Okay,” Akilah says hastily as she sits up. “Okay. I won’t call you that. Okay, Raf—ael? Calm down,” she adds rubbing my chest with both her hands.

The motion is soothing and helps me even out my breathing again. Akilah moves one hand to grab the discarded oxygen mask and hands it to me. I grab it and hold it to my face.

“Thanks,” I say.

“You’re welcome,” she says simply, and all over again I’m reminded of one of the reasons I was trying to kill myself in the first place.

“Why did you call 911?” I ask.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because I’m just dead weight to you. I don’t do anything for you but give you good sex when I’m not too fucked in the head for you to touch me, but you keep me around anyway. You married me for God’s sake. You can’t get rid of me. You of all people should have just let me die.”

I’ve never seen Akilah look anywhere near as close to tears as she looks now but stubborn and tough as always, she won’t let them fall. Instead, she stares at me with a hard look, a look I know isn’t directed at me as much as it is her attempt to keep herself from crying.

When she’s finally pulled herself together she asks, “You really don’t know?”

“No. I don’t,” I snap. I’m not particularly irritated with her. More so bewildered, but my headache hurts like hell.

“Why do you think so little of yourself?”

“Why do you think so much of me?”

She’s silent again looking at me with a gaze that makes me feel like I’m naked, but a different kind of nakedness than the one I’m used to when we’re having sex.

Finally, she says, “You wanna know what I need from you? You wanna know what I need you to give to me?”

“What?” I ask.

“For you to fight to stay alive so you can have the time to figure it out yourself,” she says firmly.

She doesn’t wait on an answer. Instead, she curls back up next to me and lies her head on my chest. I don’t think she wants the answer either, because of all things, I’m not sure what she wants is anything I can give her.

Real Talk? The worst part about a failed suicide from overdosing on painkillers is probably the aftermath. I’m constantly nauseous and though my headache lessens, it still irritates the hell out of me. And until all of those effects are gone, I can’t talk to the psych for an evaluation because there’s no way to mask this as an accidental overdose after Akilah told the 911 dispatcher what happened because you don’t need to swallow a whole bottle of painkillers to get high. But the hospital can’t, or rather won’t, keep me for long without health insurance even if the psychiatrist diagnoses me with something. Still, by the time I leave, I’ll probably have racked up a few thousand dollars in hospital bills.

I get a few visitors in the meantime. X and some of the other staff at the gym, who bring a basket and card signed by everyone and my whole class.

“Zenobia wanted to come see you, but we told her it was best to wait until everything was more stable,” X says carefully.

Everyone’s afraid to outright say the reason I’m here because I’m pretty sure Akilah told those who needed to be told. It’s getting annoying, but I’m not broaching the subject either because I don’t feel like talking about the whys and the why nots. Devonte and Blanche are a welcome relief from the somber attitude of most of my visitors. For once I appreciate Devonte’s ability to make a joke out of anything—even my attempted suicide, though judging by Akilah’s expression it’s not something she finds funny. She doesn’t do anything besides glare and look back at her phone or book though.

And then, of course, Perla, my mother, and Quincy visit. I don't mind Perla, and as clueless and overbearing as she is, I don't mind my mother. But Quincy's the reason I'm in here to begin with. Part of it anyway. No one has to tell me that he didn't force me to choke back an entire bottle of pills, that if I had died he'd still be alive and then what? That's my fault. But I probably wouldn't have convinced myself to do it without his years of reinforcement that I'm not worth shit. Wouldn't still be thinking about it if he hadn't gotten stuck in my head because by the time I figured out that it was in my head, it was too late to reverse it.

Quincy keeps his distance though, staying in the far corner of the room near the wall with the television on it. Every now and then, when he thinks I'm not paying attention, he turns to glare at Akilah who only glares right back. Undoubtedly Akilah said something to him, maybe even going as far to admit that she knows what he did to me. I hope she didn't because Quincy hates being challenged, and if that's what she did, he may try to find a way to knock her down to prove he's superior to her.

After two days, I'm determined to be stable and forced to take a psych evaluation. I thought I was pretty reserved, and no matter how many times and how many different ways they asked me, I made sure they understood I felt safe and that no I don't want to hurt myself again. I have Akilah to thank for knowing how to recognize when people are asking the same question in different ways to prompt a different answer and catch a lie.

After a few hours, it's determined that I'm safe to be released, and we all pretend that the reason for that isn't partly because even if they wanted to keep me in the psych ward, I have no insurance, and I sure as hell can't afford treatment out of pocket. Still, the psychiatrist diagnoses me with PTSD (no shit), clinical depression (I can see that), and anxiety (that one surprised me) and gives me some recommendations for therapy that's useless because

again, no insurance, and a prescription for the depression and anxiety. I kinda wonder the wisdom of giving prescription drugs to someone who little more than four days ago tried to commit suicide with a prescription drug, but I take it anyway, even though I have no intention of filling it. I'm not that unstable... I don't think.

By the time all of that's over, I'm more than ready to go home.

Akilah insists on driving, and I don't have the energy to argue with her, so I get in the passenger seat. It's the first time since I woke up in the hospital that we've been alone together without family, nurses, or visitors to overhear so I ask, "What did you say to Quincy?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that whenever my mother and Quincy were there, Quincy stayed in the corner of the room and you two kept glaring at each other. I know you said something. What was it? Don't try to lie. I know you did."

Akilah sighs. "I didn't say anything... I just blew up at him at the hospital."

"Akilah. That's saying something."

"You were out for over a day. And when we were all waiting for them to let us see you, he was acting so worried and devastated, and I just couldn't help it."

"What did you say?"

"I just told him to stop pretending he was so upset when if he really cared he would have left you alone and not come back, and then this wouldn't have even happened. He wasn't too happy about that and tried to tell me I was wrong and that I'd known you less than a year and talked you into marrying me and that if it weren't for me putting ideas in your head about him, none of this would have happened. And that just because I was your wife didn't mean I cared about you more than everyone else and it just... escalated from there

until I told him to leave which was within my rights as the wife. That's why they didn't come right away when you woke up."

"Akilah."

"Look. I know what you told me," Akilah finally snaps.

"If you're going to be mad at anyone, be mad at me. I took the damn pills, alright. I fucked up."

"You're in a delicate situation so I have to be somewhat patient with you, but I'm still plenty angry at you. You don't have to tell me to do that. But people can say all day no one's at fault for a suicide except the one who tried it, but the fact of the matter is you wouldn't have even gotten to this point if it weren't for your stepdad because contrary to popular belief, there is some suffering worse than death. So yes, Raf—ael, I get to be mad at and blame Quincy because he may as well have poured those pills down your fucking throat."

There's nothing I can say that can make her see any sense, so I don't say anything else for the rest of the ride and neither does she until, to my surprise, we pull up to Perla's house.

As though reading my mind, Akilah says, "You can't be by yourself for a while, so me and Perla figured it would be easier for someone to be with you all the time if we were in one house."

"So I get to be babysat for the foreseeable future?"

"If you're going to try it again, you're most likely to do it in the first three months. So yes. That's exactly what me and Perla are doing."

"At the same place where Quincy and my mother are staying?" I ask.

"Trust me. I don't like it either. But wherever we were your mother was insistent on being there."

I roll my eyes as I get out the car. I wish my mother had been this insistent when I was younger and actually wanted and needed her. Now it's just

annoying. Once we're inside, I find my mother in the kitchen with Perla trying to teach her how to cook. After thirty-three years, if it hasn't stuck by now, I doubt it's going to in the future. But still, my mother tries.

Quincy is absent, and it figures the one time I want to talk to him that he is. When I ask, my mother says that he's upstairs watching television. I wait until Akilah is distracted by my mother who, after learning that I'm the one who does most of the cooking, decides that Akilah needs to learn how to cook too despite Akilah's protests that she can cook when she wants to. When they're all turned towards the stove, I slip out the kitchen and make my way upstairs.

This is probably the first time in my life that I've gone out of my way to find Quincy, but until now, I've never needed to.

Like my mother said, he's sitting in the bedroom Perla gave my mother and Quincy watching daytime television. He looks up when he sees me.

"Raf," he says.

"Don't call me that," I say calmly ignoring my racing heart.

"Need something."

"Not really. Just needed to make sure you know something," I say.

"And what's that?"

"I know Akilah said something to you, challenged you really, at the hospital. And I'm not sure how much of it she left out or changed when she told me what happened, but I don't really care. What I do know better than anyone else, though, is that you hate to be challenged and that even though you pretended to cooperate, even now you're seething at the fact that a little girl had the nerve to stand up to you and you're probably trying to plot your revenge," I say.

I don't give him a chance to respond and continue, "So let's just make it clear, while I won't kill you for the shit you've put me through over the

years, while I don't have the courage to protect myself from you, nothing on the planet will stop me from killing you if it looks like you're going to try anything with Akilah. And I'll gladly go straight to jail for it."

"You threatening me boy?" Quincy asks standing to his feet.

"Fuck yeah, I am. You've ruined a lot of good things for me in the past, and I've let you. I'm not letting you ruin this one," I say while standing my ground.

The last time I stood up to him like this was when I was fourteen when I brought a girl, who I'd honestly just liked as a good friend, to my house thinking Quincy would have the decency to behave with a guest in the house. Long story short, he hadn't. And when he acted like he wanted to exercise his control over me by intimidating her, I stood in his way and made him leave her alone. That gave her enough time to leave. She'd asked me to come with her, but I assured her I'd be fine. I wasn't. I paid for it after she left and even though she tried, I never talked to her again until recently where we reconnected on Twitter.

Right now, Quincy looks like he wants to make me pay for this, but the door's wide open, and though I was crazy enough to seek him out, I wasn't crazy enough to move much farther from it.

"You'd risk your neck over some girl you haven't even known for a year?" he asks.

"She's treated me better in a less than a year than you and my mother have in twenty."

He growls and sits back in his chair to look at television. Then he waves me off and says, "Get the fuck out of here."

"Don't have to tell me twice," I say as I start to back out of the room. "Just remember what I said."

Real Talk? Between the fact that I tried to commit suicide, that Quincy is seething mad at both me and Akilah, and the initial strain between me and my mother and Quincy, to say the least, the house is tense.

Realistically, Akilah, Perla, and my mother understand they can't watch me for every second of the day, but damn do they try. If I'm in the bathroom too long, they come knocking. If I go outside, someone's there with me. I can't close the door to my room unless it's to get dressed and if that takes too long, they knock on the door. I can't even get up in the middle of the night to get water or even just sit and watch television when my nightmares keep me from sleeping without someone, usually Akilah, checking to see what I'm doing. And anything that I can even think about hurting myself with is out of reach or hidden. Even if I want to cook, I have to wait for Perla or Akilah to get the knives out the cabinet in the garage that they've locked them in.

They have literally thought of everything that I could possibly use if I wanted to try to kill myself again. I have no one to blame but myself for it, but it doesn't mean it doesn't annoy the hell out of me, nor does it mean I haven't snapped and thrown my share of dignified temper tantrums (as Akilah calls them) over it, though I'll never admit that to anyone.

Then there's the escalating tension between me and Quincy. We don't even try to pretend anymore. We don't exchange even one word. When we're in the same room, we're glaring at each other, and neither of us hold our tongue for each other anymore much to my mother's bafflement who thought we had

made so much progress after they visited the gym a couple of weeks ago. Perla isn't at all secretive about wanting to know what's going on between me and him even pulling me aside to ask about it.

"Quincy has told me one thing," Perla says. "But I don't believe him. We both know the man's a liar."

"I thought you had forgotten," I say dryly. I haven't been holding my tongue for anyone lately.

"I'm only putting up with him for mom's sake. She never did anything to the two of us except have bad tastes in men, and he hasn't tried anything since he's been here, so I can't really punish either one of them for something that happened in the past."

If only she knew how wrong she was on both accounts.

As though reading my mind she adds, "That I know of anyway. I feel like there's something else, something that you told Akilah, but you didn't tell me. So are you going to tell me your side of the story, everything that happened, or not?"

I want to. Even when she moved out, Perla has always had my back. She'd send money for my birthday to the gym so Quincy and my mother couldn't get their hands on it, call when she could, wanted to get custody of me when I was sixteen but I convinced her that by the time she managed to fight the courts to get me, I'd be eighteen, and then hired a PI to find me when I disappeared and the police and even my mother were going to write me off as dead. So, I could tell her. I know she'd believe me. But then she'd feel guilty that she didn't do more than she's already done when it wasn't her job in the first place.

"Ask Quincy," I say.

"I did. He's lying. So, I'm asking you to stop hiding it and tell me. Did he beat on you too?"

“No,” I say.

“You’re lying.”

“If that’s what you think, then why don’t you do something about it?”

“Because I can’t if you won’t back me up on it. Whatever it was, he did it to you. So, I have to hear it from you to do anything.”

“Don’t get yourself in trouble for my sake. You’ve done more than enough as it is,” I say as I leave.

Now Perla is agitated which only adds to the tension in the house. Sensing this tension, my mother eventually calls a family meeting.

“Are you serious?” I say as I sit on the couch in the living room with Akilah beside me. “We’re not teenagers. What are you calling a meeting for?”

“She’s a teenager,” my mother says pointing to Akilah. “And everyone in this house is acting like a teenager so family meeting.”

Perla mutters something in Spanish that I don’t quite catch before sitting beside me. My mother sits on the love seat across from us on the other side of the coffee table and Quincy sits in the armchair.

“Can we hurry up and get this started?” I ask.

“I think we need to talk. Let whatever it is bottled up out because this air is getting stuffy and not because of the heat,” my mother says. “So, who wants to start?”

“I will,” Perla says. “I want someone to tell me what the fuck went on in that house in Miami that has Rafael so fucking angry at you two besides the fact that Quincy used to beat the shit out of you.”

“Perla. Language.”

“I really don’t give a shit,” Perla says honestly. “Something happened in that house, and everyone knows about it except me.”

“Mom doesn’t know,” I say even though more and more lately, I’m not

sure about that.

“So, it is something,” Perla says.

I don’t reply.

“I’m with Perla,” Akilah says. “Raf—ael was okay, if with a few issues, before you two showed up. Maybe we should talk about what went on in that house.”

“We are not going to play the blame game in this meeting,” my mother says firmly. “That’s in the past.”

“You obviously haven’t watched *The Lion King*,” Akilah says. “Because it’s that past that’s the reason we’re here right now, and we can either run from it or learn from it. I say let’s learn.”

“Akilah,” I say in a warning tone to which she rolls her eyes and crosses her arms.

“Whatever Raf—ael.”

I try not to smile at her conscious efforts to say my full name. It hasn’t just rolled off her tongue once since I asked her not to call me Raf, but she keeps trying anyway.

“I think what’s really bothering everyone is Raf’s suicide attempt. And no one seems to want to talk about that,” Quincy suggests.

“I agree with your father,” my mother says.

“He is not my father,” I snap at her and then say to Quincy, “And I told you not to call me that.”

“Okay,” Perla says. “If we’re really going to sit here and pretend nothing happened in Miami and act like the reason for all this tension is that Rafael tried to kill himself, and we’re all fucked up for it, which is partly true for the record anyway, I’m going to have to do it over some wine. Akilah. Help me get the glasses, will you?”

Akilah gets up and follows Perla into the kitchen leaving me with my

mother and Quincy. My mother seems not to care that they're missing and continues to talk, "I just don't understand Rafael. Why would you want to do something like that? Why would you want to hurt yourself when you have all these people who care about you? Why would you want to do that to me?"

She's crying now, but forgive me if I have no sympathy for her. It's hard for me to come to grips with the fact that she wants to care for me now when I don't need her anymore, when she wants to cry for me now, but she never cared or cried for me when I needed her to.

"I wasn't thinking about you. I wasn't thinking about anyone really," I say. Except Akilah and how she escaped one dysfunctional family only to join a worse one.

"Exactly. You weren't thinking about anyone but you. That's the reason for anything that's ever gone wrong in your life because you didn't think about anyone else," Quincy has the nerve to say.

"Takes a selfish ass to know one, so I guess you would know what you're talking about. Besides, even if I didn't think about anyone else as a kid, it's because no one else was thinking about me for anything good except for the guys at the gym," I say just as Akilah comes back to sit next to me.

"Where's Perla?" I ask.

Akilah's eyes dart in the direction of the kitchen as she says, "She's bringing the wine and the glasses. She found her tray, so she didn't need my help."

Akilah can be an expert liar when she wants to be, another thing that scared the hell out of me when I realized it was a similarity she had to Quincy. But again, her lying is very different than Quincy's. She lies to help people, to surprise people (like my birthday), rarely for her own gain because she's surprisingly honest about her own actions, unlike Quincy, who never was.

But there are some giveaways this time that normally aren't present when

she's lying. Like the way her eyes keep darting towards the kitchen or the way she keeps fidgeting like she's nervous about something.

"Akilah. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you nervous?"

Before she can answer Perla is suddenly back in the living room and is swinging a steel bat at Quincy's head. Quincy manages to move out the way, and she hits the lamp, but Perla only swings again, this time while shouting in a mixture of both English and Spanish. I can't make out what she's saying over my mother's yelling.

"Perla," I say getting up from the couch to try to contain her. "What the hell?"

"Move, Rafael," she demands, and I lose my grip on her arm as she swings the bat at Quincy again. This time she cracks her window.

My mother gets in front of Quincy, and I manage to dart in front of Perla who doesn't look at all deterred that she may hurt our mother in her rage. Everyone starts yelling at once in both English and Spanish and no one can hear what anyone is saying, and it doesn't look like any of that is going to stop anytime soon until a loud popping noise and the sound of glass shattering catches our attention.

Akilah is standing in front of the couch with her gun aimed at the ceiling.

"What the fuck, Akilah?" I ask not even bothering to ask where she was hiding that thing. She probably bought some kind of holster to conceal it on her.

"I was trying to aim at the ceiling. Sorry about the light," Akilah says looking at the fixture in the ceiling fan that she hit. "This thing has some serious recoil."

I'll have to take the time to take Akilah to the shooting range to learn how

to shoot because if she's going to have and use a gun, she at least needs to know how to use it right. But that's something to worry about later.

I turn back to Perla and say, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What the hell is wrong with me?" she repeats. "What the hell is wrong with him? He raped you!"

Her words have the same effect that Akilah's gunshot had in silencing the entire room.

"Who told you that?" I ask, but there's only one person who could have.

"She did," Perla says nodding towards Akilah.

"You believed her," Quincy says glaring at Akilah. "Only been a what? Less than a year and that girl has gotten into your head so much that you'd take it at face value when we raised you both."

"You didn't have a damn thing to do with raising me, and apparently you were too busy fucking my brother to raise him, and no shit he hates you by the way," Perla yells. "And of course, I believe her. When you two were ready to declare him dead, I'm the one who found him, and you didn't see him when I did! He was a god damn train wreck. It's a wonder he hadn't killed himself already. Wouldn't say anything to me outside of one-word answers for days. Took weeks to get him to trust me and have a real fucking conversation with me all because of what you did to him. And then she came around and if there is a God, I'll thank Him every single day for her because between her and bringing him here, the light finally came back to his eyes. And it was all going fine until you showed up. So, fuck yes. I believe the girl who's been here for less than a year, and if she's gotten into me or Rafael's head then thank fucking God because we're much better off for it than we were when it was you.

"Now you," Perla says to me. I've long since gotten out of her way, but she hasn't made a move to hit anyone yet.

“What?”

“I believe Akilah. But she only knows because you told her,” Perla says. “So goddammit, tell me. No lies. Yes or no. Did Quincy rape you?”

I have two options here. To lie and say it’s not true or to go with it since it’s out in the open now. There’s really no choice. If I lie, I make Akilah seem like a liar, like she made the whole thing up for kicks. I have to tell the truth. Besides, I don’t think Perla would believe me if I lied, and I have a feeling if I try to lie I might be the one dodging a bat from Perla swinging it in her anger.

“Yes,” I say finally.

“Was it more than once? Did he keep doing it?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that why you ran away?”

“Yes.”

“Fucking bastard,” Perla roars and is back to trying to knock the hell of out Quincy.

“Perla,” I say getting in front of her. I hold the arm with the bat in one hand and restrain her with the other. “Perla. It’s done. This isn’t worth going to jail for.”

“The hell it’s not. Here I am trying to figure out what the hell is wrong with you, and I bring the reason for it right into my house.”

“Perla. If you want to help me, then this isn’t the way. I don’t need you in jail. You can’t do anything from jail.”

She struggles against me for a while but finally stops. By now tears are falling down her face, and she’s shaking but I don’t think she’ll try to attack anyone again. I back away from her, but still keep myself at an angle where I can stop her if she changes her mind.

“Did you know?” she croaks.

When no one answers Perla points the bat right at my mother and says, “Yeah, I’m talking to you. Did you know? Did you know and just didn’t say a damn thing about it? Did you to pretend to be an oblivious idiot all this time with your talk about forgiveness and what’s in the fucking past?”

“I never thought. I didn’t...”

“You either knew or you didn’t. Yes or fucking no!” Perla screams.

“Yes,” my mother says quietly.

Real Talk? It’s one thing to have suspected that my mother knew what was going on between me and Quincy. At least then I had no proof, and I could still tolerate her because I was unsure. But it’s another thing to know that she was well aware that her husband was hurting her son, that all those times I thought there was no way she hadn’t seen us, she had. And she didn’t do a damn thing to stop it. That hurts more than if someone would have told me she died. Hell, she might as well be dead at this point. I back up and fall onto the couch because my legs feel like someone swept them from under me.

“Get out,” Perla says. “Right now.”

“I thought it was only one time, and he told me he wouldn’t do it again,” my mother begs as she breaks down crying and tries to approach me and Perla.

“I said get the fuck out! I don’t care who you are. I don’t care that you’re my mother. You knew, and you chose that motherfucker over your own damn son and had the nerve to cry when you thought he’d managed to kill himself. Now get the fuck out. It’s my house, and I can tell you that, and if you don’t, I’ll call the police and put on my best white girl voice and tell them I have intruders in my house,” Perla shouts. “I’ll ship your shit to Miami.”

“Perla,” my mother tries again.

“Go,” Perla screams swinging the bat sporadically and knocking a picture off her fireplace.

My mother doesn't try again. She grabs Quincy's hand and walks out the door, her body shaking with sobs that no one except Quincy has any sympathy for.

No one says anything, even long after we've heard my mother and Quincy's car crank up and leave. Finally, Perla drops the bat on the floor and comes up to me.

"I'm sorry. If I had known, I would have come and gotten you and brought you here. I wouldn't have even let them into the house."

"It's okay Perla," I say.

"It's not okay. How can you even say that?"

"I've gotten good at lying to myself," I admit.

"Apparently so," Perla says as she stands. She goes and grabs the bat and takes in the damage before sighing and saying, "Fixing damage to my house is really not what I planned to do with my next paycheck, but I guess I have to."

That said, Perla goes upstairs under the pretense of calling someone she knows to give her a quote on how much it would cost to repair the damage. Really, she's probably going to get drunk, and I can't blame her. When she's gone, I look at Akilah and sigh.

"You told her."

"She didn't give me much of a choice. She's been nagging about it all week. She knew something."

"I'm not mad at you, Akilah." Initially I was, but it's probably for the best, and I'm too emotionally exhausted to be mad.

"You okay?"

"All things considered when you take into account that I just witnessed my sister try to kill my stepdad again, and I just confirmed my suspicion that my mother knew all along what her husband was doing? Yes," I reply and then

look at Akilah, really look at her. Her eyes are dark and tired, and her smile doesn't quite reach her eyes, and she looks like she'll tip over at any second. "I think the better question is are you okay?"

"I'm fine... It's just been a lot with your mom and stepdad and when you tried to kill yourself. You almost died you know," Akilah begins to ramble. "They said you flatlined twice, and all I could think was that I was going to be a widow at 17, and you promised you'd be okay, and then you weren't—"

She can't talk anymore. For the first time since I've met Akilah, she breaks down into tears. I pull her into my arms because what else can I do, especially when it's my fault to begin with.

"I keep thinking what would have happened if I had ignored that feeling, that voice telling me to go home, or if I had left two seconds too late."

"Akilah. I didn't die. I'm here," I say holding her face in my hands.

"Right now. But you still think about it, don't you?"

Yes.

"No. I'm not. I promise. I'm not going anywhere. You told me to stay alive until I figure out what it was you saw in me that I couldn't see in myself, and I said I'd do that, okay?" I assure. Anything to get her to stop crying.

"Then I hope you never figure it out."

There's nothing I can do after that except wait for her to calm down, so I lift her into my arms and carry her upstairs. Perla is already asleep on her bed. And it probably wouldn't hurt for Akilah to do the same.

"When is the last time you slept?" I ask as I lay Akilah on the bed.

"I don't know," she says. She's stopped crying.

"No wonder you look like you can hardly keep your eyes open," I say. Then I kiss her forehead and say, "Go to sleep."

"I can't. Someone has to watch you."

"You and Perla have every knife, pill, and potentially dangerous object in

the house locked away, if I go outside, you'll hear the alarm, and I'm too heavy to hang myself anywhere because it would break under my weight," I say hoping she's not alarmed to alertness at the fact that I'm aware of that and realize I did think about it. "I'll be fine for a while."

She doesn't really have a choice right now because her eyes continue to flutter. Finally, she dozes off, and I arrange the covers over her. Somehow without either of us noticing, Akilah still has her gun in her hand. I reach over and take it from her. I could shoot myself right now, and that would be it.

I shake the thought from my head, unload the clip, and put the pieces down on the nightstand. I'm far away from the point where I could actually talk myself into doing it even if I really wanted to. I also don't want to be the one to make Akilah cry again.

19

Real Talk? It's really hard to fend off depression when you find out that your own mother, the one person that's supposed to be willing to do anything to protect you, to die for you, to kill for you, thought her ass of a husband was worth so much more than her child that she didn't do any of those things to protect said child from said man. I was in too much shock after finally confirming the suspicion I'd always had but didn't want to believe. But after the shock, after the relief that Perla believed me even though I knew she would, after the relief that she put my mother and Quincy out the house—after all that wore off, it all finally sank in.

If I've made any progress since leaving the hospital, it's undone and within a couple of days, I've fallen into one of the worst depressions I've ever had. The fucked up part is that I know it's bad, that I know I need help pulling out of this or I'm going to be able to talk myself into suicide again even, but I don't care. Why the fuck should I? The woman who gave birth to me didn't care, and if she didn't, why the hell should I care?

For the next few days, I do little more than try to sleep and watch television. I don't even get mad at Akilah and Perla for watching my every move anymore. It's so bad that they don't even pretend to be discreet when they're talking about me, sometimes talking about what to do with me on the other side of the couch while I sit and stare into space or watch television.

Finally, one day they both drag me to the kitchen table for dinner after both of them spent hours in the kitchen. Briefly, I feel surprised, the first emotion

I've felt in days other than empty nothingness. They've cooked all my favorite foods.

"What's this for?" I ask.

"Just... thought we'd try to do something other than takeout," Perla says.

"By cooking all my favorite foods?" I ask.

"Glad you noticed," Akilah says. "You haven't seemed to notice anything else in days."

"Akilah," Perla whispers firmly.

Akilah sighs and then says, "You haven't eaten in days. We thought this might help."

I really have to stop and think about how long it's been since I ate. The days have just been blurring together, but it's been at least four... maybe more.

"Starvation is a really painful way to kill yourself, by the way, if that's what you were going for. Eventually, your instincts would take over, and you'd go on a binge and probably make yourself sick," Akilah says. "So, you can thank us later."

I crack a smile at that and decide to try to eat. After only a few bites though, I decide to give up. It tastes good, but it feels like lead in my stomach.

Without saying anything to warn Akilah or Perla, I start to get up to... I'm not sure what I plan to do. Probably get in bed.

"Wait," Akilah says putting her hand over mine at the table to stop me from leaving.

I sit back in my chair, and Akilah looks at Perla, who shrugs.

When Akilah looks at me she says, "This has to stop."

I open my mouth to ask what and then stop. I know what she's talking about. But it's not exactly something I think I can help. If it were that easy to

pull myself out whatever dark abyss I've managed to fall in, I would have. I don't exactly enjoy being tired all the time and unmotivated to do anything.

"I can't," I finally whisper.

"We know you can't. Not by yourself anyway," Akilah says, and she takes on that tone of voice she always takes on when she's about to present her findings on something.

"I'm not getting therapy," I say.

"But it can really help," Akilah persists.

"Akilah."

"And I get it. I didn't want to do it either when my mother and brother died within a year of each other, but it's good to get things out in the open. Things you can't talk about with me or Perla."

"There's nothing to talk about. Everything's out in the open."

"I think there's more you're not telling us."

"So you're calling me a liar now?"

"If it means getting you to admit that you need to talk to someone, yes."

"I won't even talk to you about shit. What makes you think I want to talk to a stranger?"

"A professional stranger who's trained to get you to talk about certain things you wouldn't normally talk about."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine."

"I am."

"Raf...-ael, you're not."

"Akilah," Perla interjects. "I think you need to calm down."

"I'm perfectly calm," Akilah snaps. "He's the one being unreasonable."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not sitting here."

"I wouldn't if you would admit something's wrong with you," Akilah says

raising her voice now.

“There’s not,” I say matching her voice.

“The fuck there isn’t! You’re not sleeping. You’re not eating. You’re not doing anything except wallowing in your fucking misery and trying to keep talking yourself out of suicide until that doesn’t work, and you try again. We’re trying to help you!”

“I don’t want your fucking help.”

“Then what do you want. Do you wanna die? Do you wanna be put out your misery? Do you want me to do it?” Akilah asks.

She walks over to the counter. I don’t process what she’s doing until she’s standing over me and fighting instincts that even my depression can’t suppress take over as I reach up to stay the hand with the knife in her hand and hold her back. I process it faster than Perla does, who sits in her chair, mouth opening and closing in shock until she gets up and puts her hand on the handle of the knife in Akilah’s stayed hand.

“Akilah, let it go. Let go of the knife.”

She doesn’t.

“I thought you wanted to die? You wanna die, don’t you?” Akilah shouts at me.

“You’re acting crazy,” I shout.

“I didn’t try to kill myself,” she spats back.

“Akilah, let go of the fucking knife,” Perla shouts.

I feel Akilah’s muscles loosen in my hand as she lets go of the knife. Perla immediately takes it and backs away. I let go of the hold I had on Akilah to stay her, and she backs away, chest heaving as she glares at me looking like she’s torn between bursting into tears or wanting to attack me again.

“You two need a timeout,” Perla says as she puts the knife back. Then she turns to Akilah and says, “Go home for a couple of days. Get some rest. I’ll

keep him alive until then.”

I can't figure out if I'm glad or worried that Akilah wordlessly takes my sister's advice as she grabs the keys to my car off a basket on the counter and leaves the kitchen. After a few seconds, we hear the front door open and slam shut and then the car as Akilah leaves. At least I know she's coming back. She has to bring me back my car at some point even if I'm not using it for the foreseeable future.

“Perla,” I begin, but she cuts me off.

“Nope. I'm not getting in between you two. You and Akilah have to work that shit out on your own. But she is right. You can't just sit around here wallowing in your misery. You know you're not fine. You know you need help. And all we're saying is, before you shoot it down, to hear us out and try it because obviously whatever you've been doing all these years, boxing, drinking, drugs and God knows what else you did out there on those streets to forget, hasn't been working.”

I've underestimated my sister. I didn't know she had any idea about the drinking and the drugs. When I came to Atlanta, the distance from Miami was liberating enough that all the vices I'd had back in Miami I left there in the name of starting a clean slate because what did I need them for when I was away from the people and the city that drove me to them in the first place.

While not as shrewd as Akilah, my sister is definitely smarter than I give her credit for. Perla shoos me upstairs to my room before I can ask how she knew about any of that, and by the time I get to my room, I remember that she hired a private investigator. No telling how long the guy was spying on me before he reunited us.

Two days later, Akilah comes back. I'm sitting on the couch watching television again and wordlessly, she joins me. My sister comes down dressed

for work and tells us that she'll see us later and gives Akilah a firm warning look before leaving the house. Probably a warning not to pull a knife on me again.

Once Perla is gone I break the silence and ask, "Were you really going to stab me?"

Akilah doesn't immediately answer. I don't take it as either a confirmation or denial. It could mean anything with her.

Finally, she says, "I was pretty sure you would stop me."

"And if I hadn't?"

"I wouldn't have."

I believe her.

She grabs the remote and turns off the television. Then she turns to me on the couch and leans her head against her hand with her arm resting on the back of the couch.

"It's just... I've never seen you look so defeated. Even on your worst days with me this far, you always pushed back and fought back against... whatever it is going through your head because I'm not going to sit here and pretend you've told me everything or that I can even guess at it. But this time it's like you're just giving up, and I had to make sure there was some kind of fight in you still left like I should have done with my mother because when she just didn't want to fight it at all..."

She trails off as her voice breaks.

"Akilah."

"And you know, it wasn't really her fault. It was just more important to her that she left me something behind than the off chance expensive medical treatment would help, so she didn't fight it but... I don't want to see you that way. Because you know, maybe my mom was too far to be helped but you aren't."

I never thought that when Akilah looked at me, she saw her mother. I never really thought she was close to her mother. From what little I know about the woman, Akilah did a lot of taking care of her mother in her childhood rather than the other way around, and sometimes Akilah seems almost relieved that she died.

Now though, maybe she does a lot of pretending too. She brushes off losing her mother and brother back to back, but maybe it bothers her a lot more than she lets on. I didn't think about that when I swallowed that bottle of pills—that if I had succeeded, I would have been the third person she lost within three years. For the first time since I swallowed that bottle of pills, I start to feel guilty about what I did. Quincy was right. It was selfish of me.

“I know I need help,” I admit out loud for the first time. “I know I can't... I can't keep doing this. But I don't know where to start.”

Akilah reaches into her pocket and takes out a prescription bottle. It's the one for depression that I didn't fill from the hospital.

“I filled it for you,” Akilah says.

“Those won't work.”

“You don't know that.”

“Actually, I do,” I say as I take the bottle from her and read the prescription. “I used to pop these in Miami all the time. That and copious amounts of alcohol. And you don't have to tell me how stupid it was. I figured that out on my own. Anyway, they're not a permanent fix. Just a temporary one and the depressing crash is always worse afterward.”

“You probably bought them off some street vendor who made them in a makeshift lab in their basement, so they probably weren't working the way they were supposed to anyway. But even if they're not a permanent fix, it's a start,” Akilah says and all the despair, the fear, the anger that had been in her eyes and expression moments earlier all goes back to wherever she hides it

all. “And if they make you feel bad, we’ll try another prescription, or we’ll try something else. But you have to try. The whole nine yards.”

I don’t know if I want to commit to this, but Akilah’s waiting for an answer, and after making herself vulnerable like this to me in a way she never has, I just can’t say that I don’t want to. And that’s not true anyway. I want to. I just don’t think there’s a point because nothing I ever did worked. Then again, the things I did before weren’t exactly healthy.

“Fine,” I finally mutter. Even like this, I find it hard to say no to Akilah.

“You okay?” Akilah asks me with her hand on my arm as we stand outside the door.

“No,” I say.

“I’m glad you’re getting used to admitting you’re not okay,” Akilah says with a grin. “It’s not getting you out of this.”

“I hate you.”

“Love you too,” Akilah says as she opens the door.

A black woman with maple colored skin and dark hair in one of those wash and go styles is sitting at her desk in the warm office. She looks up, and her red glossy lips curl into a smile when she sees Akilah.

“Hey, Akilah. Haven’t seen you in a while. You sounded good on the phone, but you look good too,” she says.

“Thanks,” Akilah says and then says, “Jackie, this is Rafael. Rafael, Jackie.”

“Hi,” I say quietly as I reach out to shake her hand.

“Nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you,” Jackie says. “Wanna know a funny story?”

“Jackie,” Akilah whines.

Jackie continues anyway without waiting for an answer from me.

“One day not too long ago, this young lady called me and said she met a guy and insisted that he was going to be her husband. Mind you, Akilah comes up with a lot of ideas that I have to talk her out of, but I have to hear her out first. So, I ask her how she knows, and she says, ‘My spirit told me.’”

If Jackie is as skeptical about this spirit thing as I am, it doesn’t come across in her tone. I don’t even necessarily disbelieve Akilah’s claims, and for the most part, I’m fine with Akilah going with it so long as it’s not harming her.

“So, I asked her,” Jackie continues, “What did you do? Did you talk to him? Did he ask you out? And then she says, ‘Honestly, Jackie, I think I might have pissed him off in gym by a sort of not accident. But I talked to him afterward, and he agreed to go on a date.’ After that, you were just about all she’d talk about, and I thought that maybe she was right about the husband thing though I was under the impression this would be in like, close to another decade and not two and a half months ago.”

“It was an impulsive thing,” Akilah says with a shrug though her face is a pretty red. Then she looks at me and says, “It’s not funny.”

“It really is,” I say, still laughing. “Really? You said that the first day, and you had done little more than piss me off and ask me out a couple of hours later?”

“I told you, my spirit knew,” Akilah insists. “Anyway, I have to get to work. My boss has been very understanding about my job but when I say I can be there, he expects me to be there. See you later Rafael.”

Akilah tries to pull her hand away but I won’t let her. She sighs patiently and turns to me and says, “Just an hour. That’s all she’s paid for. And if you have any... legitimate objections you don’t have to come back.”

“What’s a legitimate objection and who do you have lined up behind her if I don’t like her?” I ask.

“Rafael,” Akilah says as though I’m a petulant child. It’s too bad I don’t want children. She’d make a good mother.

“Fine,” I say finally letting go of her hand.

She smiles and shakes her head before kissing me on the cheek and leaving the office.

“Okay Rafael, have a seat right there. Let me just grab some things and then we’ll get started.”

I sit in the seat she points to with my arms crossed. I’m still not sure how the hell Akilah and Perla roped me into this. I gave in to taking the anti-depressants consistently (which either Akilah or Perla administer during the times I’m supposed to take it) and admittedly, they have started to make me feel better, but I’ve been pretty dead set against the counseling thing since I got to Atlanta. The most I’ve ever consented to was a psych evaluation. I’m not sure what they were looking for the first one I took when Perla was trying to help me get back enrolled in school, but I passed it. And at the hospital, being a suicide patient, I was forced into that one if I wanted to leave.

But Perla and Akilah have been insistent for the last couple of weeks about me getting real therapy. The medicine helps me not feel so depressed, but it’s not a magic cure-all. Every time I flinch from one of their touches on a bad day, every time I make a coping joke that to them is nowhere near funny, every time I’m up at night when I can’t sleep from a nightmare, they make sure to remind me that therapy can help. X is also on their side too. He’s banned me from coming back to the gym until I get some kind of therapy besides taking it all out in my training.

But that’s not even what convinces me I don’t think. It was probably seeing Akilah cry over me and being so terrified what I might do when she’s not looking, pulling a knife on me to see if I had any fight left—that’s what convinced me. Akilah is fearless. That’s one of the things I like about her.

But to think I instilled that kind of fear in her...

Once I admitted to being open to the idea, Akilah went through the process of eliminating all my other excuses. She already had a couple of people in mind for me, all of whom run practices on a sliding scale, some who even offer services for free. I'm skeptical of anyone who's willing to offer therapy for free, but if Akilah thinks it's a good idea, I'm down for it.

"So, tell me a little about you," Jackie says once she's sat across from me.

Already she's jotting something down, and I wonder what it is considering I haven't even said anything yet.

"You already know," I say. "You know Akilah."

There's no doubt in my mind that Akilah has probably shared some personal things about me with Jackie. But that doesn't count as telling anyone to me. Jackie can't do anything with the info because I'm sure trying would violate some patient confidentiality thing.

"Yes, but that's from Akilah's point of view. I want to know about you from you."

I shrug. "What's there to say?"

"Anything you want."

"I don't want to say anything."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because Akilah and Perla think I need it. They thought I needed it before, but they definitely think so now and anything to keep them from nagging me about it."

"Why do they think you need it?"

"Don't pretend you don't already know," I say rolling my eyes. "I know Akilah told you."

"From her perspective. I want to hear yours."

"Because I tried to fucking kill myself. There. Happy. I said it. That's why

I'm here," I snap shifting in my chair to get comfortable. Then I roll my eyes and say, "Sorry."

"That's okay. I don't want you to restrain yourself when you're with me," Jackie says as she writes something down. "Do you think you need therapy?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's stupid. Going back and forth with you about everything isn't going to be any different than going back and forth with myself about it."

"About what?"

I start to answer when it occurs to me that there are two ways to answer this question. She could be referring to suicidal thoughts or she could be talking about everything that could have led to those suicidal thoughts to begin with. Either way, I'm not sure how to answer. I don't want to answer honestly.

"Things," I say. "Can we talk about something else?"

She makes a note on her pad. She already has a full page.

"Let's talk about me," she says. "Ask me anything?"

"Anything?" I ask, and she nods. "Did you offer Akilah the same thing? Because if you told her that, I can only imagine what she asked you."

"I offer it to all my clients. Some don't want to ask, but you're right. Akilah was one of those who asked me anything and everything. Very observant. Would make a good therapist herself," Jackie says.

"She's too opinionated for it. She doesn't think she knows everything, but when she thinks she has the answer she won't let anyone tell her otherwise. She's better suited for a lawyer." Then I ask a simple question, "What made you want to be a therapist?"

"It's my calling. I have always believed that people know the answers to their problems if they could just sit down and talk it out with someone who

would listen. And I was always good at listening. Then I learned that there were disproportionately more white therapists than any other minority group, and while that's fine, I feel that there are some experiences that are unique to black people and people of color so that was a motivating factor," she says as she sets her pad aside.

"And therapy or any kind of professional psychological help is such a taboo in those communities. You don't talk about your problems. You pray your problems away. Turn a blind eye to them and hope God will fix them and then wonder why we're so fucked up, you know? And don't even get me started about suicide. That's just one of the ultimate sins, and no one asks why someone would do that except to assume they didn't have God in their life."

"That sounds exactly like my mother," I say rolling my eyes.

"Your mother?"

"Yeah. She's Catholic. Her whole family has been for generations. She would have never suggested this," I say.

"Does she know that you came here today?"

"No," I say curtly as my body tenses at the thought of just seeing my mother again, never mind talking to her. I don't think I'll ever get over her betrayal. "She's not... She doesn't have a place in my life anymore. And some people say that you only get one mother and we should ignore her sins or faults or whatever you want to call them because she gave you life and took care of you when no one could and all that good stuff, but there are some things you can't just ignore."

"What did she do?"

"More like what she didn't do."

"And what was that?"

Somehow, we've circled back around to the meat of most of the issues in

my head, and I still don't want to talk about it.

"Don't want to talk about that either."

"Okay. What other questions do you have for me?" she asks.

We go back and forth like that the remainder of the hour and actually are a little over by the time she's done. She thanks me for coming and asks how I felt about our time, to which I don't have an answer yet, and if she'll see me next week. If Akilah has anything to do with it, she will. Just as I'm walking out the door, she calls me back.

Once I turn to her she says, "You know that anything confidential that you say in this session I'm not going to discuss with Akilah? And anything she tells me in confidentiality I won't tell you. Consider this a safe space."

I nod at her and leave. Since I let Akilah take the car to work, I catch the bus home. Perla's not back yet, so with nothing better to do, I go into the kitchen to make dinner only to remember that the knives are locked away until either of them gets back. Perla should be back soon enough though. Her and Akilah coordinated their schedules so that there's no time I can be home by myself, and they've just started letting me go out by myself without nagging the hell out of me about it.

Like I guessed, Perla comes back less than fifteen minutes after I've arrived home. No doubt she's itching to ask me about what I thought about the therapy, but she doesn't ask and instead gets the knives out for me. Akilah gets back about an hour after I've finished dinner and together we sit in the kitchen to eat. Like always, Akilah isn't one to miss an opportunity, and she's the one to ask about the session.

"So? How was it?"

I shrug. "It was fine."

Akilah and Perla exchange a look and then Akilah looks at me and asks, "What's that mean?"

“Exactly what it means. Fine.”

“I’m going to need you to elaborate.”

“There’s nothing to elaborate on. We just talked about basic shit, and she wrote notes.”

“Let me rephrase this,” Akilah finally says. “Do you like her?”

“I guess she’s okay.”

“Are you going to keep going?”

“Maybe,” I reply. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Well if you do, she’s certainly got her work cut out for her if you answer her questions like you just answered those,” Perla says dryly.

The doorbell rings, and I go to answer it if only to avoid talking about this therapy for a few minutes. No sooner than I’ve opened the door does someone collide into my legs and wrap their arms around my waist.

“You’re not dead!”

It takes me a minute to get over my surprise at seeing the freckled, sandy-brown-haired girl but once I do, I ask all the important questions because really—how the fuck is she here alone?

“Zenobia. What the hell are you doing here by yourself? Where’s your grandmother? How did you know where I live?”

“I’m here to see you. My grandma is working overtime. She’ll be home later. And I looked in your file at the gym for the address,” she says.

“How did you get here?”

“I took the bus.”

“By yourself. It’s 9 o’clock Zenobia!”

“I took my grandma’s extra mace.”

“You’re fucking kidding me right now,” I say as I let her in the house and close the door behind me.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I texted you back a week ago,” I say.

“That doesn’t mean it was you. Someone else could have been texting.”

“Why didn’t you just call?”

“After they told me you were in the hospital, no one would tell me where you were or why you hadn’t come back. I just wanted to see you to make sure. I thought you were dead,” Zenobia says as she buries her head back in my legs. She’s obviously crying, but she’ll deny it for everything she’s worth even as tears are falling down her face as she does.

I sigh. I can’t find it in me to fuss at her now. So instead I ask, “Have you eaten yet?”

“I had some leftover spaghetti.”

“That’s it?”

Zenobia nods.

“Come on,” I say as I walk her into the kitchen.

“Hey Zenobia,” Akilah says like she’s not surprised to see her. She probably isn’t. She probably heard us from the living room.

“Hey, Akilah,” Zenobia says as she makes herself comfortable in the seat beside mine while I make her a plate.

“Who’s she?” Perla asks.

“Girl from the gym,” I say as I sit a plate in front of Zenobia.

“Is this your sister?” Zenobia asks. “Perla, right.”

Perla nods and looks between me and Akilah. We both shrug while I text Zenobia’s grandmother under the table to let her know she’s here. She texts back immediately, and I offer to let Zenobia just stay the night. It’s too late for the girl’s grandmother to come this far out the way.

For once, Zenobia’s quiet as she eats like she hasn’t had a decent meal in a couple of days. She probably hasn’t. From what I know, her grandmother makes a pretty decent paycheck but is saddled with debt because of loans

Zenobia's mother took out in Zenobia's grandmother's name. Whatever's left from all that and regular bills doesn't leave room for shopping for a balanced diet.

"Want more?" I ask.

"Not right now," Zenobia says and then asks, "Why were you in the hospital?"

If I weren't expecting the question, I wouldn't be prepared to give her an answer. But I've been expecting it since she said it in the living room, so I'm not taken off guard.

"I was sick."

"Sick how? Is it sick like my grandmother gets sometimes?"

"Your grandmother gets sick?" I ask.

"Yeah," Zenobia says. "Sometimes it's so bad she has to take days off work. Is it like that?"

"Not quite," I say making a mental note to ask her grandmother about whatever this sickness is. "I... It's like I got sick in the head."

"How though?"

I look to Akilah for help who shrugs even though I'm sure she can come up with a way to answer Zenobia without bluntly telling her I tried to kill myself. I don't think she's ready to know what that means. I look back at Zenobia who's still waiting for an answer.

Finally, I say, "You remember your first day of class where I explained to you all the greatest opponent you're ever going to face is yourself? And if you let someone get into your head, it's because you let the part of yourself that you have to fight win?"

"Yeah."

"That's what happened. I got knocked out in that fight."

Zenobia nods in understanding. I don't know if she took that literally or if

she knows it's figurative. Either way, she accepts the explanation.

"But you got back up, right? You're fine now, right?"

"I'm... getting there," I say honestly.

"Are you still fighting? Whatever it is in your head? Do you still want to?" Zenobia asks.

Like with Akilah, the answer was never a matter of wanting to, but whether it was even possible to. I still don't know if it's possible, so I just answer Zenobia's question.

"I want to."

I decide to go back to Jackie the next week, even though Akilah still has to walk me to the office less I talk myself out of it on the way there. The next session follows much like the first and so does the third until Jackie forces me to talk about events we keep circling around but that I don't want to talk about. Particularly my mother, my stepdad, living in Miami in general. Somehow it seems like everything I talk about takes us back to something to do with those three things. The fact that it defines me so much bothers me a lot more than I try to let on to Jackie, though I'm sure she knows because anytime I talk about it I blow up. It's the reason I swallowed those pills in the first place—because I knew it always would, and I was tired of the daily battle to get past it knowing that there could be worse days ahead.

When I tell Jackie this, she asks me what it is I look forward to in my life. Career? Not even sure what I want to do and as a teenager I didn't think I'd live to twenty let alone have to worry about it. Growing old with Akilah? Sounds nice, but I don't have a lot of, if any, examples of healthy relationships in my life. They all start good and end badly, and I'm afraid what Akilah and I may look like in ten or twenty years. Will I be like Quincy? Will she be like my mother?

Then Jackie asks about kids, and I say under no uncertain terms is that

happening. There's too big of a chance I'll become like Quincy. That I'll wake up one day and want to fuck my own kids. How does that even happen? How does someone even develop that kind of unhealthy desire? I've heard that rape and sexual abuse is more about the power than the sex, and I can see that with Quincy. But at what point does a person wake up and think it's a good idea to hurt someone like that as punishment or to assert their power? Until I figure it out or I can be sure that won't happen to me, kids are off the table and Akilah is fine with that.

Jackie jots a note down after that, and I'm sure we're eventually going to get back to that but before that, she takes a plain brown leather-bound writing pad out and hands it to me. Then she instructs me that anytime I do something that makes me feel happy or content or do something that I might look forward to doing again, she wants me to write it down in this pad, no matter how big or small it is. The idea is to get me out of the cycle of just taking things day by day, to eventually go back and read it and see all the things I'll look forward to doing if I ever get to a point where I feel like I can talk myself into trying to kill myself again. To see a future for myself.

When I get home, Akilah's sitting on the couch in her pajamas watching old cartoons on the Internet app on television. It's a coping thing for her, I've noticed. Makes her feel like she's a kid with no pressures or responsibilities, and she was unaware of the shit storm that life can really be.

I feel like I've been neglecting her the past few weeks being so consumed with my own problems while Akilah patiently deals with it. If she's tired of it, the closest thing she got to showing it was trying to stab me a couple of weeks ago. Other than that incident, she's had the patience and tolerance of a saint. I'm going to have to do something for her one of these days. Treat her to something. If she insists on sticking around because there's something special about me that I can't see in myself, I can at least make it worth her

while. Speaking of that...

I sit next to her and ask, "Remember back in Tampa when you told me your mother would have loved me?"

Akilah doesn't turn away from her cartoon as she says, "Yeah."

"You never told me why you thought that."

She pauses the cartoon and turns to look at me with her eyebrows raised and asks, "What makes you want to know that all of a sudden?"

"You just never told me why. And I forgot to ask you about it. And now I'm asking you about it while I remember. Besides, maybe it'll help me figure some things out."

Akilah shrugs and begins, "When my mother had me it was the result of a one-night stand with some likely married rich guy from out of town that she met at the end of her shift at the Whole Food's Market. He took her out on a date, made her feel good about herself when she was in a bad place, treated her well, took care of her, just paid attention to her and listened to her without pretending he had all the answers to her problems but gave her a chance to take a step back from them. There's a picture of him somewhere in my mother's stuff with his name on the back if I'm ever brave enough to look him up. She always spoke well of him because they both knew they were from two different worlds and that it was only going to be a onetime thing and said that while I don't really look like him, I got my skin color and eyes from him. She gave me his last name too.

"Anyway, she always used to tell me to find a guy like my dad was that night to her. Someone who would make me feel good about myself and pay attention to me and treat me well and take care of me and not pretend he knew all the answers but help me take a step back from my problems and not just do that for one night but would do that all the time for me. She always told me it won't be perfect. That we'd fight and that he may come with his

own problems. But that if he could do that for me all the time and I could do that for him in return, I'd made a good choice and I should stick with it once I found it."

"Wasn't she speaking into the future when she said he's going to come with his own problems," I say.

Akilah shrugs again and says, "Everyone does. That's not just exclusive to you. Maybe not what you're dealing with and not so readily apparent, but everyone has problems."

After another pause, I add, "So you thought you found it when you met me."

"Found what?"

"What your mother was talking about?"

"Oh that," Akilah says. "Yes. I think so."

"You think?"

"I mean like sometimes you can just be a right ass, and I wonder what the hell I was thinking, but for the most part, yeah," she says. Then she blushes and says, "I don't just click with many people like I did with you and definitely not in the way we did."

"Oh yeah? What way?"

"You know," she says as her face turns redder.

"No. You're going to have to tell me like you make me. Go ahead," I tease.

"I don't love anyone the way I love you. That's the part that's different," she finally says and for once she's the one acting shy and embarrassed. "Fuck you. Got me over here talking about my feelings."

I laugh and lean down to kiss her once, then again, and then more. Before we can get much further than that, we're interrupted.

"You can't do that in public."

"Remember that when you have a partner one day," Akilah says to Zenobia

who's coming down the stairs. Now that she knows where I live, she takes the bus to come here on the evenings her grandmother is working.

"Ew. I'm never having a boyfriend. Or getting married," she says as she sits next to me and then points to the television and asks, "What's that?"

"Avatar, The Last Airbender," Akilah replies.

As we sit together and watch it with Zenobia, it occurs to me that this is one of those moments Jackie was talking about.

Later in the week, I decide to spend some time with Akilah that doesn't revolve around her staying around the house with me—or Zenobia or inviting Blanche over—so I don't try to commit suicide again. It will also give her something more to say than the fact that she babysat her boyfriend—husband—the entire summer to make sure he didn't off himself again when we're back in school in a couple of weeks and everyone is exchanging and asking about each other's summers.

I decide to take her to a gun range to teach her how to really use that gun she keeps. It's right up her alley of trying new things that are interesting to her but that she's never done before. Technically, to use the handguns I'm supposed to be 21 and with Akilah, there's supposed to be a guardian over 25, but X knows the guy and has assured him that I absolutely know what I'm doing.

“When did you learn to shoot?” Akilah asks as I adjust her basic stance.

“It was part of our training at the gym in Miami.”

“Was it?”

“Yep. What's the use of knowing how to take a gun from someone if you don't know what to do with it when you have it?”

“Have you ever had to use one? A gun I mean?”

“Once. After I ran away in Miami. I got caught up in some gang violence. To this day I have no clue how I got out of that mess alive,” I say.

“Did you have to kill someone?”

“You would ask that,” I say and then add, “No. I scared the shit out of them though.”

“Do you have a gun?”

“No. I used to have too many run-ins and encounters with the police as it was being tall, male, and black and hanging out on the streets. That would have been giving them another reason to make me a suspect and shoot me for no reason,” I say rolling my eyes.

“You don’t need it anyway if you know how to take the gun in the first place.”

“My point. Okay,” I say after I’ve adjusted Akilah. “Now don’t pull the trigger too fast. You don’t have experience with it yet. Do it slowly.”

“Why slowly?”

“Because if you do, you may cause it to jerk and miss your target. Now shoot.”

She follows my instruction and pulls the trigger slowly, only to flinch when it fires, causing her to jerk and to miss the target altogether. She also stumbles backwards from the recoil.

“Fuck,” she says.

“You did a lot of things wrong.”

“Why thank you,” Akilah says as she holds the gun up again.

I place my hands on her shoulder and say, “Relax. You’re too tense.”

Her shoulders fall, and she rolls her neck to ease the tension out.

“Lean forward some. The recoil from the gun is going to push you back some and you don’t want to lose your balance,” I say, pressing my chest against her back and forcing her lean forward just slightly. “Make sure you’re holding the gun tight.”

She doesn’t say anything, but her grip on the gun does tighten.

“Now aim like I showed you to earlier,” I say as I slowly step back from

her. “Okay. Shoot.”

She pulls and although she still jerks when it fires, she does hit her target this time. We practice a little longer until Akilah is at least more comfortable with the gun than she was when she aimed it at the ceiling when my mother and Quincy were here. When we get home, she insists on me showing her how to take a gun from someone. We move the furniture in Perla’s living room aside and use one of those toy dart guns.

“Okay,” she says holding the dart gun to my head. “What would you do?”

“Depends on the situation. There are a lot of things to consider.”

“More to consider than the fact that there’s a gun to your head?”

“Yeah. In Miami, we had two different teachers show us how to disarm a gun. One was a martial artist. One was a cop with more practical experience. Both are good. It just depends on if I want to take the gun or just get it out their hand.”

“Okay. So, what would you consider?”

“Who’s around me. The idea is to walk away from this with the least amount of casualty possible. Say it’s you and me and someone comes up to us with a gun. Before I do anything, I want to see where he’s aiming it. If he’s aiming it at me, then I want to make sure however I disarm him, he doesn’t accidentally pull the trigger and hit you. If I even decide to disarm the guy,” I say rolling my eyes. “I mean if he’s a common robber and just wants my wallet it would probably be a lot less trouble just to give it to him and freeze my cards and go get a new license. They probably wouldn’t even want to shoot me.”

“But what if they do want to shoot you?”

“Then I have to consider if I decide to take the gun, should I shoot him. Because if that’s the only weapon he has and I call the cops and I have the gun, they’re going to assume I’m the bad guy first. Especially if I’m in an

altercation with a white guy. And we both know how that's going end. Unless it's in my house or something and he's trespassing, and that still might not end well. If I don't want to take it and I just want to knock it out his hand, then I have to wonder if he has another weapon on him. I didn't carry a gun, but I carried a switchblade until I moved here, and you don't want to be close range with someone who has a blade. But your run of the mill guy probably isn't going to have the instincts to react that fast. Still, you have to make sure," I say.

"So in reality, there's never a situation where you would disarm a person," Akilah says dryly dropping her arms to her side.

"There is," I say laughing. "But once you start learning how to fight, you start learning that the best thing to do is do everything possible to not have to fight. The idea is to deescalate the situation."

"Okay," Akilah says. "So once you've done all that, and you decide the person really is going to shoot you no matter what you do, and it's worth taking the risk, how do you disarm the gun?"

"Nine times out of ten, you just want to knock it out the person's hand, preferably without touching it. If the other person's prints are on it, you know who the one with the gun was. So, go ahead. Point that at me."

Akilah holds the plastic toy with both hands to my chest and before she knows it, I've moved to one side and knocked her hands to the other, causing her to lose grip on the gun. She looks to where the toy went, and in the time it takes her to look back, I've got her pressed back against the wall with her arms secured.

"How the fuck did you do that?"

"You were distracted by me knocking the gun out your hand and most times, for petty everyday criminals, that's what going to happen. They aren't trained. Most are like you and don't even know how to use the gun they

have.”

“Okay,” Akilah says as she goes to get the toy again. “What if I have it at your head like this with one hand?”

“Depends,” I say. “If it was someone my height, I’d probably move their arm up and go for their throat. With you, since you’re shorter, I’m probably just going to do this.”

I knock her arm outward and yank her towards me to have access to her neck.

“Have you ever had to disarm someone before?” Akilah asks when I let her go.

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“One of the women I was staying with had an on again off again boyfriend, and he was coming to get back on again and pulled a gun on me when he caught us together.”

Akilah starts laughing and I say, “That was so not funny. Even now. That nigga really was going to shoot me. Needless to say, I got the fuck out of there after that.”

“Okay,” Akilah starts when she’s done laughing “what about if I have you backed against the wall?”

“Same principle,” I say as I back up against the wall, and she points the toy gun at me with both hands. I knock it out her hands and then maneuver us so I have her pressed against the wall.

“Again,” she says sighing.

“If you weren’t so damn disinterested in training, you’d know how to get out of this hold,” I tease.

She’s squirming beneath me, shifting her legs back and forth and I frown, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Akilah says, her voice an octave higher than normal.

“Yes, there is. You’re being weird.”

Akilah rolls her eyes. “You’re either so serious about this training stuff that you aren’t aware of other stuff or I’m going to have to reconsider my assessment that you’re not asexual,” she says.

It takes me a while catch on to what she means and then I’m laughing at her and saying, “Akilah, are you horny?”

She blushes the prettiest shade of dark red which only causes me to laugh more as she says, “It’s not funny. Can you please let me go now? All you’re doing is prolonging how long I have to stay in these damn wet panties.”

“Let’s see how wet then,” I say as I back off her and begin to undo the snaps of the linen jumpsuit she has on.

She reaches up, though, and covers my hands with hers, stopping me. Her forehead is creased as she looks at me with concerned uncertainty. Not for herself though. It’s for me.

“Are you sure about this?” she asks.

“Am I sure?”

“We haven’t... since...”

She doesn’t say anything else, but I get her point. We haven’t had sex since I tried to commit suicide and that was over two and a half months ago. It doesn’t seem that long. Damn. We’ll be back in school in only a couple of weeks.

But she’s right to be apprehensive. I am too. This isn’t the first time we’ve had the chance. Every time it seems like we may get close, I find a reason to back out of it or because we haven’t had the house to ourselves in a while, someone interrupts. A few days ago, it was Zenobia.

“I know,” I say as I continue to undo the snaps on her jumper. She watches me as I do until I’ve undone the last button that stops below her bellybutton.

I push the jumper off her shoulders and then down her hips, taking her panties with the jumper as I slide it down her legs and lift both feet out. I stand back up and unclasp her bra. It falls down her arms and to the floor, and she covers her breasts with one of her hands as she says, “Your sister...”

“She won’t be back until late. We’ll be done by then,” I assure her.

She blushes again, and I move her arm away from her breasts as I kiss all over her neck before moving to the top of her chest. With every kiss, I suck, making sure to leave hickeys that Akilah is going to have one hell of a time hiding later. I continue down her torso, paying special attention to her breasts and her thighs. She wasn’t lying when she said she was wet.

I kiss her thighs up to a point, avoiding putting my lips directly on her sex. I don’t do oral sex, whether it’s giving or receiving it, and I don’t think being forced to do it has completely everything to do with it. It’s more a tactile thing. Then again, maybe that does have everything to do with my early sexual experiences. Regardless, Akilah doesn’t complain about it. I’m better with my fingers anyway. Her legs are trembling as I kiss her thighs, and I put my hands on her ass, squeezing and making her groan. I stand up and put my lips on her hers and cup her sex with my whole hand causing her legs to buckle. Figuring we shouldn’t finish this in Perla’s living room of all places, I pick up her jumper off the floor and then lift up Akilah and wrap her legs around my waist as I carry her upstairs to my room. I close the door behind me, drop her clothes on the floor and set her on the bed. I take off my shirt and start to unbuckle my jeans before Akilah says, “Wait.”

She sits up on the bed and ushers me to sit on the edge.

“Let me pay some attention to you. You’re always paying so much attention to me,” she says.

“You don’t have to.”

“Raf, trust me,” Akilah says, as always knowing exactly what my problem

is.

For so long I haven't had control over what I did with my body that I have hang-ups when it comes to relinquishing control to Akilah when it comes to sex, eager as I know she is to take it. And while I trust Akilah with a lot of things, I don't know if I'll ever be totally ready to just let her have her way with my body. I rather it be the other way around, and Akilah does so much for me as it is anyway, it seems like the least I can do is put in the work when it comes to sex. But Akilah won't back down. She wants to do this. After everything she's put up with and done for me, how could I deny her?

I lean back and gesture for her to go ahead with whatever it is she wants to do. I tense as she starts to kiss me on my neck and chest.

She notices.

"Relax, Raf. I gotcha," she says, much like I told her when we were in Tampa and I was teaching her how to float.

It's the way she says my name that convinces me. She's been very conscious to call me by my full name since I told her not to call me Raf. This is the first time she's used it and not corrected herself right afterward, and for the first time, I'm able to separate the way she says it and the way Quincy used to call me that. Quincy used to say it like he owned me, as a way to remind me of who was in charge whether I liked it or not. When Akilah uses it, it's gentle, like she's handling glass and might break me if she says it too harshly, and that has nothing to do with how much higher her voice is than Quincy's.

Akilah says my name like she's in awe of me, as though she worships me. So I finally relax and let her treat my body the same way she says my name. I let her kiss all over my body, each touch sending shocks to my dick, getting harder and harder in my pants, like I'm already in her. I tense again, and Akilah mistakes it for me being wary again and once again tells me to relax.

But really, it's because now I'm so hard it's painful, and I feel like I could burst any second now.

Finally, Akilah reaches down and pulls my pants and briefs down allowing my dick to spring up between us. When she has them off, she crawls back up my body and grabs it with one hand while reaching into the drawer next to the bed to grab a condom.

Once she's put it on, she says, "I'm going to ride you. Is that okay?"

Another position I hate, but right now I couldn't care less. I just want to be inside her.

She sinks down on me, and if not for the slow pace that she rocks up and down on me, I might have come with only a few motions. I grab her thighs to urge her to speed up but Akilah grabs my hands to stop me. It's a torturous pace as my dick gets harder and harder, the coil right behind my navel getting hotter and tighter, and while she's not touching me, more focused on our conjoined hips as she tries to maintain a rhythm because she's never done this position before, it feels like she's touching me all at once.

I urge her to lean down to kiss me and as I do, I grab and squeeze at her breasts until the pressure building in me bursts, a sharp jolt goes down my spine and then I'm coming hard as Akilah continues to ride me. I've totally let go of my control, allowing myself to focus on the intensity of the sensation until finally I just lay there in numb relief yet feeling everything at the same time.

Akilah has stopped moving and is now just lying against my chest. I don't know if she came or not. For once I was too focused on my own feelings to care. I doze off and wake up what must not be too long later because Akilah is still lying on top of me though she's must have gotten up to get rid of the condom at one point. I slowly raise my arm up to stroke her back and say, "Thank you."

“You deserve it,” she assures me.

I still don’t know why she thinks that, but I’m not going to argue with her.

“My family,” Akilah says suddenly. “One of my cousins is getting married, and my grandma wants me to come, and she’d like it if you came. She really wants to meet this guy people keep showing her pictures of on my Facebook,” she adds with a short laugh.

“Okay,” I say making shapes on her back.

She sits up to look at me and says, “Are you all the way awake?”

“Yes,” I say.

“I didn’t expect that to be so easy, even after the sex.”

I shrug. “You put up with my rapist stepdad and my co-conspirator mother. I think I can put up with your family.”

“It’ll be a lot of us,” she warns.

“How many?”

“My mother had six older siblings. All of them have spouses, girlfriends, boyfriends, baby mamas, baby daddies, children and some of the children are old enough to have that too.”

“Ok.”

“They’re very different from me.”

“Are you trying to prepare me or yourself?” I ask.

“A little of both.”

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Akilah is right about one thing. She has a lot of extended family. By the time we arrive at the wedding, most of the guests are already there.

“God, I don’t feel like anyone telling me I’m too young to be married today,” she grumbles as we get out the car.

“You can just tell everyone I’m your boyfriend if you want,” I say.

“That makes it sound like I’m ashamed of you. No way. I just have to deal with it for today, and then they can beg me to come to the next gathering.”

A small well-dressed older woman with dark grey hair in big wavy curls wearing a bunch of bracelets and big gold earrings spots us first.

“Akilah! I’m so glad you made it. I haven’t seen you in such a long time,” she says as she embraces Akilah. She steps back with a frown, “I ought to whoop you for not keeping in touch enough.”

“You need to learn to text and use the internet,” Akilah responds.

“Oh please, child, I’m way too old to be fooling with that,” she says and then turns to me and asks, “And who is this?”

“This is my husband, Rafael,” Akilah says without preamble. “Rafael, this is my grandmother.”

Her grandmother?

“Nice to meet you,” I say extending my hand.

“Nice to meet you too,” she says in a way that tells me she isn’t so sure about that. “Call me Miss May. That’s what everyone else calls me.”

Miss May turns back to Akilah and says, “Lucky for you I have to behave, but we are going to talk about this later.”

Akilah rolls her eyes to which her grandmother says, “You don’t want to go there with me, young lady. Your mother went and made sudden choices in men and look where she ended up.”

When she’s out of earshot, Akilah says, “The only difference between my mother and the rest of her children is that the rest of them waited until college to get into dysfunctional relationships and start popping babies from them, and they have money to cover all that shit up.”

“That was your grandmother?” I ask.

“Yep.”

“How old is she?”

“Eighty.”

“You’re serious.”

“Yep.”

“Damn. Black really doesn’t crack,” I say.

Akilah laughs and guides me into the wedding hall where an usher guides us to our seats. Akilah runs into a few cousins, all of whom assume I’m her boyfriend and make jokes that make me a little uncomfortable. Akilah warned me in advance about how her family was loud and liked to make jokes, especially sexual ones. Akilah warns them off though, and we get to our seats. The time for the wedding to start comes and goes, and I start to get restless, especially being surrounded by so many people I don’t know.

“That’s normal,” Akilah says when I mention it. “I’ve never been to a wedding that started on time.”

“I’ve never been to a wedding, so I wouldn’t know,” I say.

“Never,” Akilah says. “So, our wedding was your first wedding?”

“It wasn’t even a wedding. Not like this.”

“Fair point,” she says. Then she says, “Maybe we can have a wedding later, like in ten years after I’ve finished law school, and we can maybe afford

one.”

Her suggestion causes me to picture it in my head for the first time because it's never occurred to me that we could do it. Her walking down the aisle in a dress, not necessarily white because she would be the type to wear whatever she wants, that's simple yet stylish in that classy and timeless way that she prefers in fashion. She'd probably flat iron and curl her hair in some half-up style with silver and gold clamps and beads or something like that and maybe wear some makeup, not that I'd care if she did or didn't.

Blanche would be her maid of honor, and X would probably be my best man, and both of them along with Perla would jokingly, but also very seriously threaten to kill me if I didn't spend my every waking moment trying to be the best husband I could ever be to her even though at that point Akilah's talking about, we'd have been together for years already...

“I can see it,” I say and then add as the wedding finally starts, “If you want.”

After the wedding, while the wedding party takes photos, everyone goes to a different room for a cocktail hour where I'm able to meet more of Akilah's family. Apparently, word is getting around that she's here, and a lot of her family is coming to find her. Word has also gotten around that she brought me with her and more than just trying to see her, they're trying to get a glimpse of me. Akilah greets them all with varied reactions depending on who greets her. Some she's curt but polite too. Others, she rolls her eyes as soon as she sees them approaching, and very few does she seem to genuinely like. One of them is the bride herself who strolls into cocktail hour and grabs a couple of pieces of sushi as she makes her way straight to us.

“Only you could come to my wedding and steal the god damn spotlight from me without even trying by bringing your own god damn husband,” she says with a southern accent that's way stronger than the one I think Akilah

has. Akilah keeps saying she doesn't and that since I'm from Miami, I think everyone in Georgia has an accent but whatever.

Looking at her cousin up close, she looks a lot like Akilah except for her warm tawny beige colored skin. Then she reaches her hand out to me and says, "I'm Mecca."

"Rafael," I say.

"It's really getting around huh?" Akilah says.

"You better damn well know it," Mecca says. "Some good gossip and conversation going around about you too. You're not pregnant, are you?"

"No," Akilah says.

"Of course, you're not. You're more responsible than that, and you of all people certainly wouldn't get married because of it. And you didn't get blackout drunk one night and marry a stranger, right?"

"Really?"

"Hey. It could happen," Mecca says. Then she adds, "All I know is that there are some people who owe me some fucking money because I always said you would be the one getting married by the time you were eighteen because you would know who your husband was at first sight and wouldn't let go once you were sure."

"That's pretty much how it went," I say.

"See," Mecca says. "Regardless, I'm happy you found someone who meshes right along with your eccentrics. Looks like congrats are in order to both of us."

"What are you even doing out here? Aren't you supposed to be taking pictures?" Akilah asks.

"My feet hurt, I'm tired, and I was starving. I got more than enough photos and there's video," Mecca assures. "But you're right. I better be getting back. Don't sneak out of here without me seeing you again. You're about the only

cousin I really like.”

“Same,” Akilah says as Mecca walks back out the room.

By now, a good few of the guests have gone back into the wedding hall, and Akilah and I follow. It’s been transformed into a reception hall with a dance floor. Akilah and I are about to sit at a table in the back when her grandmother waves us over to two seats at her table. Akilah sighs as we make our way over.

“You are not getting away from me that easily young lady,” Miss May says as we sit down.

She does wait until after the wedding party has been introduced and the bride and groom have had their first dance as husband and wife to say anything though.

“Now I’m curious,” Miss May begins as we wait to be served dinner, “And I’m sure I’m not the only one at the table who’s wondering this, about just who this young man is and how you met, got engaged, and got married all in the course of less than a year and didn’t think to tell any of your family about him during that time?”

Two of her aunts are sitting at the table, an uncle, as well as two or three older cousins, and they all nod in agreement with her grandmother.

“We met at school,” is all Akilah says.

“Your mother met your brother’s dad in school and look how that turned out,” one of her aunts says.

“You got married after college and after you had a nice paying job and look how that turned out,” Akilah says in return.

“Even more reason for you to have slowed down and thought about what you were doing before jumping into a marriage. You’re so young. You don’t even know what love is. You barely have any idea what you want out of life let alone out of a husband. Speaking of which, I remember there was a time

where a young man would ask for the blessing of a young woman's family before he asked for her hand in marriage," Miss May adds.

"If he hadn't already gotten her pregnant like grandpa did you," Akilah points out. "Speaking of which, you were fifteen."

"That was a different time. Back then young men were much more responsible than they are now. Now you've jumped into this and you barely know anything about him," her grandmother says with a sigh. "Are you pregnant dear? If so you had other options."

"I'm not pregnant," Akilah snaps. "And even if I were, that's my choice. Not yours."

"Did you tell him about your little inheritance?" Miss May asks.

"Yes. He knows."

"See this is what happens when you let a child get on the internet and watch the news and form their own opinions about things. Allowing a child to have an opinion and her own choices at all actually. If your mother had more consistently taken you to church like I told her to, we might not be here," Miss May says as we're served our dinner.

"That has nothing to do with any of this," Akilah says rolling her eyes in obvious agitation now, though for once she seems to be trying to hold her tongue.

"It has everything to do with it. If your mother had raised you properly instead of letting you read all that stuff about the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers and all those books about African Cultures and all these other young revolutionists coming up and other silly ideas she allowed you to get in your head like she let your brother's father do to her, maybe you wouldn't be so rebellious and listen to some common sense," one of her aunts says.

"What does any of my philosophical beliefs and interests have to do with me getting married because you don't agree with it?" Akilah asks tightly.

“Everything. The same thing your mother did when she was this age. Except she didn’t marry him, so at the very least it made it easier for her to dodge the bullet when he went nuts on her,” Miss May says. “At least we knew about that.”

“Can’t say I really blame her for not wanting to say anything to you about it,” I cut in.

Everyone turns to look at me. I’ve been silent the whole time, casually observing because on the surface her family seems like nice people, if not overbearing. But this short conversation has revealed a lot, and I can already see why Akilah doesn’t like to be around her family.

“What makes you say that?” Miss May asks.

I laugh because it’s really a ridiculous question.

“Because you’ve done nothing but insult and doubt her and tell her everything you think she did wrong since we sat down. It’s like you want her to fail,” I say.

“I’m just looking out for my granddaughter, and I’ve known her a lot longer than you have.”

“Then you would know that she wouldn’t do anything totally irresponsible. She’s not like that. Seems like if you were looking out for her, you’d be trying to encourage her to make her choices work not sabotage her. Do you want her to have a successful marriage or do you want her to fail and divorce me?” I ask.

“Well, she’s the one who showed up here today with a husband and not a boyfriend like we all thought she was. Excuse us for being a little surprised by how she brought you to us,” one of her older cousins says.

“Excuse me for not wanting to sit here and be insulted by you. Yeah. She probably could have told you, but would that have even made a difference? How about you try to understand her and ask her reasoning instead of

jumping to conclusions? And for the record, I don't have access to her inheritance. I don't know how much it is, and I've never asked. I have to fight her to let me pay a bill. So I'm certainly not after her money. And if you think I have a chance in hell at brainwashing her into anything that she doesn't want to be, then it doesn't matter how long she's been in your life. You sure as hell don't know her," I snap.

Miss May's head snaps back as though I've slapped her and just as she's about to say something, Akilah's uncle says, "Ma. He's right. You were being a little mean. We should all try to get to know Rafael and try trusting Akilah before we jump to conclusions."

I can count him as another relative Akilah likes because she sends him a genuine smile, and he winks at her.

Miss May rolls her eyes and is silent as our table is finally served dinner. The rest of the table is silent also. Eventually, the dance floor opens up and as the crowd heads towards it, Akilah grabs my hand and leads me out into the hall of the venue. As soon as I don't have to shout over the music for her to hear me I say, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gone off on your family like that."

"Are you kidding? My grandmother had that coming. If you hadn't. I was going to," Akilah says peaking her head into doors and playing with the handles before shaking her head and moving to the next.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Looking for a room no one will come looking for us," Akilah replies.

"Why?"

"Because," Akilah says as she climbs a set of stairs. "On a scale of one to ten of sexy, you standing up to my family for me was fucking one hundred, and if Mecca hadn't asked me to stick around, I'd be asking you to take us home."

"Akilah. Your entire family is downstairs!" I say after I've caught on to

what she has in mind.

“I know,” she says with a grin as she finds what looks like one of the rooms that the bridal party used to get ready.

“People’s stuff is in here,” I point out.

“Then we’re going to have to be quick,” she says as she reaches behind her to unzip the black dress she’s wearing.

“You’re taking off your entire dress?”

“It’s more practical. That way we don’t wrinkle them or get anything on them,” she says as she lets the dress pool around her feet.

Any other protest I have leaves me when I see the sheer lace bra and panties set she has on. Between that and the anticipation running through me at the thought that we could get caught, I’m hard for her already. Fuck.

“For the record,” I say I begin to unbutton the top few buttons of my dress shirt and then lift it and my undershirt over my head, “I think this is a really bad and risky idea.”

Akilah giggles as she walks up to me. She runs her finger down the middle of my chest and says, “Noted,” before pressing her lips to mine.

Twenty minutes later, Akilah and I are peeking out the door to make sure no one is coming after getting dressed again. She urges me to try not to look so much like I just got laid and then pushes me out the door first. She’ll follow me in about ten minutes.

I’ve just entered the downstairs hall right outside the main hall of the venue when Miss May spots me.

“There you are. I’ve been looking for you. Where were you?”

“Went out to get some air. Pretty crowded in there,” I say as she hooks her arm in mine.

“Understandable. I felt the same way. Walk with me outside, will you?”

I walk with her, not sure what Akilah's grandmother has up her sleeve after I essentially told her off at the table earlier. She's not in a rush to let me know either as she walks us outside toward the lake near the venue.

"You know, this place has been in our family for decades now. Used to be a farm that my family bought out, and then when most of the family got out and was done with the farm life, my husband converted this place into the beautiful venue you see now. We've renovated it and added on to it accordingly, but it's stayed ours. One of my sons helps us to rent it out for big parties and weddings and all of us have had our wedding here since then. A tradition if you may. We're a very traditional family as Akilah has probably told you," Miss May says.

"She mentioned it."

"Akilah, on the other hand, doesn't care for tradition. Especially if they make no sense. Do you know she refused to celebrate Christmas once she turned about nine because she read on the internet and in a book that it's not Jesus' birthday and that the celebration stems from pagan worship? Hurt me and your mother's little feelings and she didn't give two damns about it."

"Sounds like her," I say with a sigh. I can only imagine the time Akilah's mother had raising her.

"So, I don't know why I'm shocked that she waltzed right up in here with a husband and didn't give even one damn about how anyone felt about it. I suppose I just worry for her. She's always been a little eccentric compared to the rest of us, but she's been very distant since my daughter and grandson died, and she all but disappeared after she appealed to get emancipated. And the only reason I didn't fight to have her any harder was because, despite my youthfulness, it is not easy to up and catch a flight from Colorado to Atlanta for me. And I didn't think I needed to with my daughter assuring me she was taking care of it, but that's neither here nor there," Miss May says with a

shrug. “Akilah does what she feels is right regardless of what anyone thinks about it, so I have no doubt in my mind that she chose you because she thought you were right for her, and I think I can see why.”

Seems like everyone who really knows Akilah can see why except me.

“Even though I was initially angry, I have to admit I was very impressed by the way you defended Akilah in there. And if there’s one thing that tells a lot about a man it’s how he’ll come to his woman’s defense, even against his or her own family,” Miss May says. Then she grins and says, “Not to mention you’re a stud. If I were younger, I’d give Akilah a run for her money for you.”

My cheeks heat up at that, and she only pats me on the arm. I can see where Akilah gets her humor and bluntness from. Philosophical differences aside, she’s just like her grandmother.

“I still don’t know you though. And I would have liked to get to know you before Akilah decided to marry you, just to make sure you weren’t taking advantage of her longing for someone to understand her. But I do want to know you. The entire family does. Especially after you stood up to me back there. That’s gotten around in the last hour or so, and I’m not the only one impressed. For whatever reason, Akilah found a kindred spirit with you, and we’d like to figure out why. And as strange as Akilah is to us sometimes, we do want her around. She doesn’t have to be so distant. Try to get her to come around more for us, would you? We’ll try to be more understanding,” Miss May assures and pats me on the arm one final time before letting me go and turning to go back into the venue.

“By the way,” she says turning back around. “Don’t think for a second I don’t know what you and Akilah got up to. I dragged my husband off to do the very same thing when her grandfather stood up to our family for me when we were younger.”

She laughs as I feel my face heat up in embarrassment. I knew someone noticed me and Akilah's disappearance. As she's going back in, Akilah is coming out. Miss May grabs Akilah's hands and says something to her before laughing and kissing her on the cheek. By the time Akilah gets to me, she's still red from whatever her grandmother said to her.

"What did she say to you?" I ask.

"That I need to make sure I keep disposable wipes on my person for these types of occasions and to call her later to learn a thing or two about keeping a man interested. What did she say to you?" Akilah asks me back.

"That she was very aware of where we went," I say with a grin as I grab her hand to walk back into the venue.

As we're walking back, even though Akilah's grandmother gave me her approval, what she said sticks with me and I ask, "You don't think we rushed into it, do you?"

"Rushed into what?"

"Us," I say.

"We probably did."

"Not the answer I was looking for."

"I mean, maybe we could have waited until we were out of high school or after college. But trust me, my grandmother would be saying the same thing then as she is now. And then if we still hadn't when I turned thirty or something she would have been complaining about how I was getting up there and when we were going to tie the knot. There's no winning with her," Akilah says dryly with a roll of her eyes. "I'm glad we did though."

"You sure? I mean, you don't think we're too young to know what love even is?"

"The way I see it, does anyone?"

"Okay. I know you've got some philosophical and mystical way of looking

at this, so you're going to have to explain what you mean."

"It's not mystical," Akilah says swatting me on the arm. "I'm serious. Who does? If you ask a thousand people what it is, all of them will give you a different answer, and they'll have a hard time giving you that one. It's one of those things you can't describe because it's made up of all the little things and big things and moments people have together whether happy or sad and just makes it grow bigger."

"So, you're saying people create love? That's it's not really an emotion?" I stop and ask just to make sure I'm following.

"In a way."

It does make sense. I don't have a lot of experience with love, but I do with hate. And it's the same way she describes it. A bunch of little and big and seemingly insignificant things that turn you off from a person and makes hate grow. I guess knowing what hate is makes me know what love is when I witness it, makes me know what it is with Akilah even though I can't put it into words.

"Does your mother have any other family?" Akilah asks suddenly. "I always talk about all my extended family, but you never mention yours."

I shrug. "I wouldn't know. Her mother was an illegal immigrant and is long dead. If I have any other family on her side, they're back in Columbia. We should make sure to keep in touch with yours though."

"Do we have to?"

"Yes," I say firmly. "Your family is ok."

"You really think so?" she asks dryly.

"Compared to my family? Hell yeah."

With the start of the new school year, X agrees that I can finally come back to the gym. I have to get Jackie to sign off on it first though to prove that I've been seeing her regularly for most of the summer and that I plan to continue to see her. It's good to be back. Not like I haven't seen any of them all summer. Even though I was strictly prohibited from participating, I did go to the summer demonstration that X put on and got a chance to see my class outside of Zenobia. They've all gotten taller in the few months since I've seen them. It's also nice to be back in a gym to train to gain back some of the bulk I lost, though Akilah tells me not to get too big. She likes me to look a little leaner.

With school back in, we get back into the pattern we fell into before we got out of school except we're still staying at Perla's house, and Akilah has one extra class to take than me, so I leave earlier than she does. Most days I just head straight to the gym but today I'm going to see Jackie. It's part of the deal I have with X for being back.

"You seem like you've been doing better?" Jackie points out to me towards the end of the hour.

"It's just the antidepressants. Guess we finally got a prescription that doesn't make me sound like a robot," I say.

This is the second antidepressant that I've been on in the last four months. The first one that was prescribed to me back when I tried to kill myself did its job and pulled me up out the worst state of my depression but made me feel like a robot where I couldn't feel anything. Not even numbness. I felt and

sounded like a robot, so much so that I felt weird to myself and stopped taking them after a month and a half which made me irritable and moody.

Jackie noticed and, after talking to me about it, recommended me to a psychiatrist she works with regularly who prescribed me a new antidepressant. It isn't as powerful as the other one, and on my worst days makes me feel less depressed in the way that I feel depressed like a person who's more balanced than me feels when they're upset. But that I can work through.

"Anyone ever told you that you're too harsh on yourself?" Jackie asks.

"Akilah and Perla tell me all the time."

"They're right. But me telling you you're doing better means nothing if you don't believe it. Are you eating again? Have you been sleeping better?"

"Eating? Yes. I kinda have to since I'm working out again," I reply to her first question.

"And the sleeping?"

"Somewhat. I think it's more I've just adjusted to less sleep and learned to manage my nightmares better."

"Still haven't let up?"

"No. That's something that's probably never going to go away."

"That may be true. Or maybe it's time you start going into detail about what you're seeing. We've talked a little about your stepdad sexually abusing you and your feelings on that, the aftermath, about your mother knowing what was going on, and the time you were homeless, and how most of your nightmares stem from that, but we've never gone into detail about it," Jackie says. "Your nightmares. They're mostly memories, right?"

"I go into enough detail with them multiple nights a week. Why would I want to go into detail any more than that?" I ask.

"Your nightmares are a subconscious reaction because those memories still

stress you and give you anxiety, but you don't want to confront them. The idea is that if you confront it a little at a time while conscious, slowly you'll become desensitized to it and less overwhelmed by the memories, and it'll stop giving you anxiety which will help decrease the nightmares. In other words, instead of bottling it up and letting the pressure build and spill over, you're consciously releasing it," Jackie says. "Would you like to try that?"

"No offense," I begin. "I know I'm paying you to eventually help me through all my shit, but I don't know you like that. I'm not about to give you a play by play of what people did to me or forced me to do to you."

"Then how about this for homework?" she says. "When you have a nightmare this week, I want you to find someone, one person you're positive you can trust, and I want you to tell them about the nightmare. Not just general feelings like we've been doing but in detail. Just as a start. Then I want you to come back and tell me how it went. We'll go from there. Okay?"

I agree to it just because I don't want to talk about it any longer and her probing what makes me feel so uncomfortable with sharing my experience or whatever angle she's going to take it from. Even though I'm not sure about this particular assignment, I do think about what she asked me to do. It took me years to tell someone other than myself about everything that went on when I was in Miami. Telling someone that it happened is very different from telling someone *about* what happened. There's still a level of distancing myself from it by just stating it happened. Going into detail would put me right back in the moment, bring all those feelings of disgust and humiliation back in real time. Jackie may have explained it, but I still don't understand it. I feel like retelling my experience would make me feel worse, not better.

I don't put any thought into who I would tell. Akilah's the only person I would ever consider revealing this sort of thing to, but I still don't know if I trust her enough to. It would make me vulnerable in a way that might make

her see me in a much worse light than the grand esteem she seems to have for me. I may not know why or understand it, but if she's not going anywhere, then I plan to keep it that way.

It's not until Friday night that I have a nightmare. It wakes me out my sleep early Saturday morning. I give up trying to go back to sleep and instead go into the living room to watch cartoons like I always do when it's too early to get back to sleep or do anything else. I spend all of Saturday trying to figure out if I'm going to say anything to Akilah only to not say anything in the end. It's not until Sunday morning as we're both lying in bed that I get the nerve to go through with it.

It's one of those lazy Sunday mornings, and Akilah has just crawled back in bed after her morning meditation period. There's no rush to go anywhere so we can do whatever we feel like. Sometimes it's watching cartoons. Sometimes browsing through one of our Facebook and Instagram timelines. Sometimes just lazy weekend sex that has more to do with being together than reaching a climax. This morning, we're just talking.

"I was thinking we should go to senior prom," Akilah says. "Sounds fun. Blanche is on the committee and thinks they're going for an under the stars theme or something like that. What do you think?"

"Honestly? Seems like a waste of time."

"Oh, come on. It could be fun."

"If I were still seventeen or eighteen, maybe. But by the time prom comes around, I'll be twenty-one. Just seems trivial."

"But what about the after party? That'll be fun. And I won't be able to say anything about you having a drink or two because you'll be legal then."

"You act like I make a habit of drinking. I'm a social drinker, not a recreational one. Not anymore anyway," I add. "But if you want to go to prom, I guess it won't kill me."

Neither of us says anything after that. If I'm going to bring up my nightmare from Friday night, now would be the time to do it. I sigh and say, "I had a nightmare Friday night."

"I figured. I saw you go downstairs."

"Jackie wants me to talk about them with someone," I say.

"Isn't that what you're doing with her?"

"Not like that. She wants me to go into more detail as a way of letting it go so it doesn't bother me as much which might make the nightmares go away. She wanted me to do it with her, but I wouldn't so she told me to do it with someone else and come back and tell her how it goes," I say.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," I say. "Can I.... Do you mind if I tell it to you?"

Normally my shyness is something Akilah teases me about but sensing the solemnness of all this and probably some of my anxiety, she simply nods and says, "Go ahead."

I open my mouth to start but find that I don't know where to even begin and close my mouth again. After a while of doing this, Akilah decides to help me out and asks, "What was it about?"

"Quincy. I wouldn't come to you about the other dreams," I say.

"Other dreams?" Akilah asks.

"Yeah," I say and leave it at that. It's one thing to talk about Quincy. That was pretty clear-cut abuse, but she doesn't need to know about my exchanges with other women. Under some definitions, they probably did count as abuse and some of those relationships certainly bother me in hindsight, but they were more or less somewhat consensual.

Akilah leaves it at that too and says, "Okay. So Quincy."

"And my mother. It was... Fuck this is hard," I say.

After a long pause, finally, I say, "Quincy was always trying to find ways

to prove that he had dominance over me, that he could control me and humiliate me whenever he felt like it. I started giving him hand jobs and vice versa when I was twelve. He started fucking me at thirteen. But the one thing I wouldn't do was give him a blow job. I was always weird about what I put in or near my mouth. It's a texture and tactile thing, and I'm a bit of a germaphobe in some areas. So, the last thing I was going to do was put Quincy's cock in my mouth. For whatever reason, he didn't really push it. It was the one thing that I could tell him to fuck off on, and he'd leave it alone. All of a sudden though when I was around or going on fifteen, he didn't like me telling him no. Said some shit about me forgetting my place in the house, that he was superior to me. I just threatened to bite his dick off because even though I wasn't quite big enough or strong enough to fight him otherwise, that I could do.

"He didn't like that either, so he decided after we had been going back and forth on it for a couple of weeks to beat the shit out of my mother in his anger. Sometimes he went through phases where he was really violent to her, but never like he beat her that day. It was so bad I had to take her to the hospital. But I didn't witness it, so no one would take my word for it. And because she wouldn't tell them that Quincy did it even though they suspected, there was nothing anyone could do but take her word that she had a bad fall. Even if she had, all she was going to do was take it back and let him in the house again anyway like she always did.

"When I confronted Quincy on it, he said it was my fault. That if I hadn't been so rebellious he wouldn't have taken it out on my mother for not raising me right. I know it was all bullshit. He was just an asshole and playing games with me and wanted to force me to do something I didn't want to. But I was also scared to death that he was going to kill my mother. So when he told me to strip and get on my knees the next day and suck..." I pause because a lump

is building in my throat. I've never tried to talk about this out loud before. Even to Jackie, I keep myself as closed off as possible unless I explode in anger as I'm prone to do in our sessions.

Akilah doesn't encourage me to continue or to stop. She does turn around on her side to look at me though. I don't want her to. I put my arm over my eyes so I don't have to see her, but I don't close my eyes. If I close my eyes, I'll see it.

"I was having a pretty decent day up until then too, a rarity back then, but I didn't really have a choice. He got mad at me for choking on his dick at first, but what the hell did he expect jamming that thing in my mouth like that. Then when he was done, he came in my mouth and forced me to swallow it. I probably didn't eat for like a week after that, and the only reason I eventually did was that it was affecting my training, and X noticed," I finish with a mirthless laugh. "Now that I look back on it, I should have just let Quincy kill my mother. She knew what the fuck was going on and didn't stop it. It would have been a sure way to send him to jail and Perla would have been guaranteed to get custody of me. She was the only family I had, and she was doing pretty good back then and had just bought her house."

I laugh again, and I'm not sure why because none of this is at all funny. But people say you have to laugh to keep from crying. And once I can't laugh anymore, the tears fall, and I choke on the sob that the laughing was holding back as I begin to shake.

"Why the fuck would he do that, Akilah?" I choke. "Why the fuck didn't she try to stop him?"

Akilah scoots closer to me and wraps her arms around me, and I bury my face in her chest as sobs wrack my body. I don't know how long we stay like that, but I do know it's long after I've stopped crying.

It feels good. To be held like this. To have someone help hold you together

when you're breaking and can't hold yourself together anymore. I've never had anyone who would do that for me before, so I've never had the luxury of breaking down before. If I had done it before, someone would have taken advantage of my weakness. I don't know if this is what Jackie was talking about when she said talking out my dreams would be a good release, but even if it's not, it feels better. Like even if it still bothers me, someone else is willing to share the burden with me. I'll have to write this down later.

"Write what down?" Akilah asks.

"Did I say that out loud?"

"Yeah. You don't have to tell me if you didn't mean to."

I shrug. "It's just something Jackie has me doing. She says every time I experience something that makes me feel good and would like to do again, no matter how small, to write it down so if I ever feel suicidal again, I can go back and read it and see that I have a future."

"Oh. I have one of those," Akilah says.

"Do you?"

"Yeah. I wasn't suicidal but... people were concerned about how aloof and distant and anti-social I'd gotten from the rest of the world and how jaded and cynical I was becoming. So she told me that when I had positive experiences with people and the world to write them down as a way to encourage me to keep interacting with others," she says. "And I had to prove I'd been doing it in order to get her to agree to appear before the judge and sign off on my emancipation. She didn't read it, she just wanted to make sure I was adjusting the right way socially."

When she mentions being distant and aloof, I remember what her grandmother said about her. Miss May is right. I'm going to have to make sure she stays in contact with her family.

Suddenly Akilah says, "We should trade journals."

“Trade?”

“Yeah. I read yours, and you read mine.”

The significance of this gesture isn't lost on me. Akilah is even more closed in and secretive than I am with her inner thoughts and feelings. I can usually tell when she's in a bad mood, but Akilah's not about sharing why she's bothered for the most part even though I have gotten her to share things in her anger sometimes.

So even though I'm apprehensive about sharing my book, I'd be a fool to turn down such an obvious gesture of trust from her.

“Ok,” I say.

Akilah lets me go and gets up to go to her drawer while I sit up and reach into the nightstand and grab mine. She comes back and sits on the bed with hers in her hand. It's more worn than mine, and more pages are filled because she's obviously had hers longer than I have, but it's the same leather-bound journal that I have except hers is gray.

She hands hers to me first and then I extend mine to hers, and we take the journals from each other at the same time.

“Okay,” I say. “How are we going to do this? Do we get to ask questions or...”

“You know I'm going to ask questions. So if you want, yeah.”

Of course, Akilah is going to ask questions. I don't even know why I would ask.

She starts on mine, and I open the first page of hers. Her handwriting looks like she was writing fast, which she's prone to do when her thoughts move faster than her hands which is all the time. I start from the beginning. It's pretty straightforward just like Akilah is. She says that Jackie is making her do it and that while she thinks it's stupid, Jackie won't sign off on her emancipation if she doesn't. Her first entry is about Emma, her six-month-old

puppy, and how the dog barks and runs to greet her when she first enters her aunt's house after school.

After that it's Blanche, interesting strangers she meets in the bookstore where she works, other kids she meets when she goes to see her social worker to talk more about her emancipation. Akilah really does notice everything about everyone. After her emancipation, she mentions trying to keep in contact with her grandmother every now and then and even though she doesn't regularly go to Jackie anymore, she does call her regularly, and she adds Jackie to the list of people she likes and has positive interactions with.

There's a big month or so gap in the summer and the journal doesn't pick up again until August 12th.

I haven't written about anyone interesting or any positive interactions in a while, mostly because I spoke to and interacted with the same people this summer and thought it was dumb to keep writing about them, and I already got emancipated so whatever. But I met someone new today... Kinda. I saw him going into the administrative office with a woman. She looks too young to be his mother, but what do I know. She either had him young or she's older than she looks. Anyway, the guy. My spirit... told me to go talk to him. I didn't though. I'm guessing he's a new student though. So when I see him again I will. This counts as a positive interaction, right? I mean I didn't talk to him, but I felt like something good would have happened. God, I sound like I'm Bella in Twilight. Insert eye roll here. But really. I should have talked to him.

Then on August 15th, she writes:

Me and the guy are in the same gym class! And I accidentally pissed him off. I wasn't trying to, but I was making a point about the double standard between girls and boys when it comes to dress and covering up and... well, he was hot. I really would have been distracted if he hadn't put on a bigger

shirt. In hindsight, maybe I didn't have to announce it to the entire class, but I thought he'd be flattered. The other guys wish a girl would call them out like that. When I talked to him afterward, he claims he's not that kind of guy. Guess we'll see about that. I asked him on a "not date" Saturday. If he's that shy, I bet he's really sweet. I should get his number at school sometime this week, so he doesn't bail on me.

Oh yeah! His name is Rafael. I'm probably going to call him Raf.

The next couple of entries are centered mostly around me, and it's interesting to see what she was thinking around when we first met. Akilah thought I was really shy and even a little skittish on our first date though she later mentions that I loosened up and that she was right about me being sweet. About how much she likes my smile. She compares it to Michael Jackson's smile and says the way it lights up my face could compete with how the sun lights up the sky. About how she tricked me into Netflix and chill for our first kiss and then in later entries her concern that I'm not as physical as she would expect a guy to be, especially since I'm older. And many of her entries after that center around her finding out the reasons for my physical aloofness though she admits that's not necessarily positive.

She mentions my sister, X, and there's even an entry with Zenobia, and she adds them all to her list of interesting people and positive interactions. And then finally one, in particular, catches my eye.

It's official. I'm in love. My grandma would probably roll her eyes and tell me at my age I have no clue what love is. And maybe I don't know everything about it, but I have a clue. Insert me rolling my eyes here. Been doing that a lot lately. Rafael is everything my mother and my brother told me to look for. He's kind and loyal. Not just to me but to everyone even when they don't deserve it. Especially to children. Too bad he doesn't want them. I get why, but he'd make a good dad. And he works hard. And he listens to me. He

doesn't write me off or think my opinions are ridiculous (he probably does think a few are, but he doesn't say it) and even if he doesn't agree he asks me to explain it and lets me be as long as it's not hurting me. I didn't think there was anyone in the world who would get me like Raf does, someone that I can experience the world with, or a soulmate as my grandma calls it. I didn't think it existed until I met Raf.

P.S. We had sex! My God, I didn't think Rafael would ever want to. And now I'm wondering how the hell I didn't do this before because right now I don't think there's anything I can name that's better than sex. Definitely a positive social interaction.

She mentions that we got married in the next entry as an afterthought like she wouldn't have cared one way or another. There aren't a lot of other entries except for when my mother and Quincy visited. There aren't any entries for Quincy, and I guess that's because it's supposed to be a book of positive social interactions and knowing what she did about Quincy, there was no positive experience she could have had with him. She does write about my mother though. Akilah genuinely liked her and hoped that eventually she'd leave Quincy and move to Atlanta with us. However, all the parts about liking my mother and the other nice things Akilah wrote about her are crossed out. The last thing she writes about my mother is the only negative thing she's written about in her book.

I take everything back about Raf's mother. Fuck her.

There's not much more after that except for seeing some of her family members at her cousin's wedding, me again where she wonders how open I am to more adventurous sexcapades like the one she dragged me on at the wedding, and the advice her grandmother gave her about them.

Akilah's long done with mine. Not only is there more in hers, but she reads much faster than I do.

“So,” I begin. “There’s nothing you can name better than sex?”

“Better than sex with you? Nope,” Akilah says. “I’d still love you without it but it’s awesome.”

I shake my head at her and then ask, “You really think all that of me?”

“All what?”

“Everything you wrote in here,” I say lifting the book out my lap. “It was almost embarrassing for me to read. It’s like you think I’m a saint or something!”

“You’re no saint. Trust me. I know. I live with you and your temper tantrums.”

“I do not throw temper tantrums,” I say rolling my eyes.

“Yeah you do, but for the most part you are. You’re a good man, Raf. You’re not like Quincy or your mother or anyone else who has ever fucked you over. I promise. And if it looks like you’re going to act that way, you know I’d tell you,” Akilah determines. Then she adds, “And you’re talking about how I write about you. You write about me the same way. Half the time I have no clue if I’m doing the right thing with you. I just do what I think works and if it doesn’t try something else. I really need to call my grandmother and take her up on her offer. But you write about me like I was some kind of god sent savior to you,” Akilah says.

“You were.”

This is probably only the second or third time I’ve been able to render Akilah speechless. And that’s only because she doesn’t know how to take a compliment.

“Stop exaggerating,” she finally says with a blush.

I’m not. I’m not going to pretend that Akilah solved all my problems and made them all go away. We live in the real world, not the teen romance movies that she’s secretly so fond of. To be honest, her being in my life

made my problems more apparent. But it was her making them apparent, noticing my odd behavior and confronting me, trying to protect me from myself, my mother and my stepdad, telling Perla what happened when I couldn't bring myself to tell it, eliminating all my excuses for not getting professional help that forced me to deal with my problems head-on.

If it weren't for her I probably wouldn't have been able to make half the progress I've made by myself. I probably wouldn't have been able to make any. I can't put it all into words right now, so I go with the most obvious example to show her I'm not exaggerating.

"You are aware if you hadn't found me when I swallowed those pills, I might be dead right now."

"You wouldn't have even been at my house. You would have been at Perla's, and she would have found you. Or maybe your mom and stepdad," Akilah says.

"Perla works. And sure. The stepdad that raped me and the mother who knew about it would have found me or cared to check on me," I say dryly.

"Still."

"Akilah."

"What?"

"Just take the compliment," I say. Looks like I'm not the only one that's too hard on themselves.

She blushes—the same blush I'm sure she saw that I wrote about thinking was cute when it alights her face because she's so rarely embarrassed. I smile—the same smile she thinks lights up my face like the sun lights up the sky—and kiss her.

Epilogue

Although she promises to never forgive me for dragging her here, I think Akilah's secretly glad I did though she's never going to admit that to me. She's smiling a lot and laughing a lot as she talks with and messes around with her cousins while teasing her uncle about burning the first batch of meat on the grill to which he insists that nothing will taste right if the first batch doesn't burn.

"Rafael!"

I turn my attention back to the group of kids that I have gathered around me. All of them part of Akilah's large family in some way, fashion, or another.

"Sorry," I say. "Where were we?"

"Did you take your head medicine today?" Zenobia asks.

I scowl at Zenobia and ask, "Who told you about that?"

"Akilah. She says sometimes you forget to take it and to make sure you do on the days you're at the gym all day," Zenobia replies. "And she said when you start staring off like that to ask."

"It wasn't that kind of stare," I reply.

"Oh," Zenobia says.

For the record, I did take my head medicine—what Zenobia calls my antidepressants—as much as I hate taking it. My psychiatrist wants me to take them for at least a year in conjunction with my sessions with Jackie. After I argued with my psychiatrist for twenty minutes though, she agreed

that we could see where I'm at in February, which will be six months from when I stopped taking the first medicine and started taking the new one. I grudgingly agreed to it.

"You were teaching us this move right here," a boy around twelve reminds me impatiently as he steps in front of Zenobia. I forgot his name. It's going to take a couple of family gatherings for me to remember them all. Shorter if I follow some of them on Twitter and Instagram.

"It's not like that," Zenobia says. "It's like..."

She trails off, apparently not so sure of what the right move is either. She turns to me and says, "Show it to us again."

I laugh and show them the series of punches along with the correct foot stance once more. Then they all break into groups to practice with each other. I just hope none of them really hurts each other. That would be one hell of a way to get on Akilah's family's bad side. If it weren't for Zenobia, I would have stayed in my quiet little corner by myself with my baseball cap on under the gazebo.

Because she had nothing better to do on Labor Day with her grandmother working for a holiday pay bonus, Zenobia made the trip with Akilah, Perla, and I to Akilah's aunt's subdivision for their Labor Day cookout. Never one to be shy, she immediately made her way up to the group of kids playing tag and joined in the game while I didn't stray too far from Akilah, who went right up to the grill to monitor her uncle's cooking and make sure he kept all the different meats separate and cooked them on separate grills since there are both Muslims and Jews in her family.

About forty-five minutes later, two of Akilah's younger cousins ran over to me demanding I teach them how to do what Zenobia had done to them. If it hadn't been for the fact that no one got hurt and that they were more impressed than bruised, I'd have taken Zenobia aside and reminded her about

showing off and attacking people who didn't deserve it. But she's having a good time and getting along with kids her age for once, which is more than what I can say for how she gets along with her class at the gym.

"There's my grandson-in-law. I was looking for you. I would have thought you'd be helping my son on the grill or in the kitchen with the women by now," Akilah's grandmother says as she comes up to me. She hugs me and then kisses me on both cheeks like she didn't just see me last week.

Since Miss May is long retired, she had the luxury of not having to go right back to Colorado after Mecca's wedding. While she's here, she's made it her business to make good on her word to get to know me. She comes to the house at least once a week to see us. Sometimes she comes by more than once a week much to Akilah's dismay, but her grandmother's nice, and Akilah's just anti-social. Miss May is much better for company than my mother and stepdad were on any day.

"Darlings, I'm going to be stealing Rafael away if you don't mind," Miss May says.

A chorus of "aws" and "We had him first grandma/Miss May" comes from the children, and Miss May assures them they can have me back later after all the food is ready.

She leads me to her car to help her get food out and then leads me into the clubhouse.

"You're going to make a wonderful father one day, dear," Miss May says from in front of me. "Not any time soon of course. Akilah's too young to be having children in these days. But one day."

"What makes you say that?" I ask.

"It's a gift to be able to charm children the way you did back there. Especially ones you don't know. You'll be a wonderful natural father."

Jackie has told me that I shouldn't compare myself to Quincy anymore

because even if I had any similarities to him, I'm not my stepdad, but I can't help it in this case. Quincy was just as charming and good with children in public, but that never made him a good father to me. So as good as I've been told I am with kids hasn't convinced me I'll ever be a good dad, particularly the kind that won't want to rape his kid.

"Not to mention how you look after Zenobia. You'll probably be more of a natural parent than Akilah. Can't wait to see her with a baby. Maybe it'll teach her some patience and not to rush into things so quickly like she did with you. No offense by the way."

I shrug in response as we walk into the Clubhouse. Tables are set up where the food will eventually go, and Miss May directs me to put the covered aluminum pans she had me carry on one of them before directing me to the kitchen.

"Alright girls, I brought help," Miss May says patting me on the shoulder.

"Haven't met you before," says a woman with beige skin and red-brown hair.

"This is Akilah's new husband. Rafael. Really knows his way around the kitchen so I figured we'd put him to work. The more hands the better. You can let him fry the chicken. I don't know what seasonings he brought back from Miami and that Latina mother, but I have been frying chicken for over sixty years and I can't quite figure out what he does to make it taste so nice with the crispiest batter I've ever had," Miss May says guiding me to the stove.

I feel my face heat up under the skeptical gazes of all the women, the youngest of whom is at least ten years older than me. It's amazing how only a few weeks ago, Miss May was frowning and glaring at me and fussing at Akilah for marrying me in the first place, and now she's gushing over me every chance she gets.

After getting over my initial embarrassment, I eventually find myself right at home with the women of Akilah's extended family. They're a lot less intimidating than Akilah was to me when we first started dating and I didn't quite know how to take or deal with how opinionated and overbearing she could be. And by the time we're all done cooking and putting food out on the tables, they've all let their guard down and are getting a lot of fun out of teasing me about how handsome they think I am and how lucky Akilah is among other jokes that I think are going to make me have a permanent blush. It doesn't make me as uncomfortable or angry as it would have a few months ago like when Akilah did it in gym class though. It may also help that they're doing it in private and not in public with a bunch of strangers I don't know and am in no way related to.

"Mírate. Un verdadero donjuán," Perla says to me when she comes into the clubhouse when Miss May tells everyone they can line up for food. "Don't make me tell your wife."

"Tell me what?" Akilah says coming up behind her.

"How Rafael has just totally charmed the women in your family," Perla says.

Akilah shrugs and says, "Know what they say. Playa' for life. Reformed maybe, but he'll never forget the game."

"Were you really?" Perla asks. "The same guy who looked like he was ready for the Earth to swallow him whole when I asked him about safe sex when you two first started dating?"

Akilah grins. "You'd be surprised. Raf's a real freak. Look at him. Isn't that blush so cute?"

"Shut up," I mutter only causing both Akilah and Perla to laugh at me more as they take advantage of my place in the line and cut in front with me.

We find a spot outside under the gazebo to eat, and two of Akilah's

younger cousin's join us so they can sit with Zenobia. As Akilah is trying to get me to lighten up on my diet more than I already have today by trying to get me to taste her grandmother's macaroni and cheese, the song that was playing fades away and a new one comes on that I instantly recognize because Akilah's played it too many times in the car.

"*Privacy* is not a kid-friendly song," I yell back hoping the DJ will hear me.

"It's not like the kids don't know it," Perla points out and then nods to Zenobia, who's singing the words, to make her point.

"Zenobia, how do you know that song?" I ask.

"Akilah plays it in the car when she doesn't have to work and picks me up from school or the gym," Zenobia says.

"Akilah, really?" I ask. "She's not even ten yet. She doesn't even know what that means."

"Yes, I do," Zenobia says. "It's about a man trying to seduce a woman and how he wants to have sex with her. Oral sex actually. That's why he says—"

"Akilah!" I say cutting Zenobia off before she can finish.

"I didn't tell her that part!" Akilah says.

"I looked it up," Zenobia says.

"You looked that up!" I ask.

"I look up everything," Zenobia says matter-of-factly. "Don't worry. My grandma has a parental block so no nasty pictures or anything came up."

I turn back to Akilah who points her finger at me and says, "Nope! You don't get to fuss at me about this. You're the one who plays Kendrick Lamar with her."

She's got me there.

"That's different."

"I don't have to sit here while you two argue over this, do I?" Zenobia asks

as she's turning to get off the bench and follow Akilah's cousin back out to play.

"Go ahead," I grumble.

Miss May comes over to sit next to Akilah and laughs while saying, "Oh I can't wait to see you two become parents. I can already see you both have different ideas and styles when it comes to parenting. That is if you get that far."

"Grandma," Akilah says in the warning tone she always uses when Miss May has taken things too far. I guess it's because her grandmother has made the assumption, yet again, that we even want to have children. I may be slowly overcoming my trauma with my stepdad and my mother, but I still have anxieties about ever having kids. Akilah has made it perfectly clear that she's okay with that, being much quicker to correct people when they make the assumption than I am. If people ask, and it's not really any of their business, they take it better from her than they do from me anyway. From Akilah it's her being a seventeen-year-old girl or cute or good because kids would mean she can't focus on her own goals, and as a mother, her life would be over and all about her child or some other ridiculous sexist shit like that. When people hear it from me, I'm just a typical asshole guy who doesn't want responsibility.

"What?" Miss May says.

"Really? If we get that far?" Akilah says rather than focusing on the kids part at all.

Miss May shrugs. "Look as much as I think you got a good catch and as much as I adore Rafael, young high school love rarely lasts. The only thing you've done is make it harder to leave if it fizzles out. You'll see what I'm talking about once you get out this honeymoon stage."

Akilah opens her mouth to argue, but I gently nudge her ankle under the

table. She looks at me, and I give her a longsuffering pointed look. She rolls her eyes and frowns but doesn't say anything. Some battles just aren't worth fighting, and while Akilah knows that in theory, she can't resist starting debates or getting into arguments. She's gotten into multiple debates with her grandmother over one thing or another these last few weeks. I get the feeling both Akilah and Miss May like to argue with each other though, but right now I really don't want to witness yet another of their debates. It's easier to just let Miss May say what she wants, and then she'll eventually move on to something else.

Even though she doesn't say anything, Akilah's still annoyed. As her grandmother rambles on about a family member, Akilah listens in obvious disinterest as she now scrolls through her phone. Finally seeing that Akilah's in one of her moods, Miss May rolls her eyes and says she'll talk to us later. She leaves and takes Perla with her to introduce her to potential "life partners." Even though Miss May knows perfectly well that Perla is aromantic and asexual, she doesn't think it's right for Perla to live the rest of her life alone and is convinced there's at least a close life companion out there for my sister. My sister likes Miss May enough that she humors her.

When they're both long gone, I reach across the table and extend my hand to Akilah. She looks at it for a moment, still annoyed that I stopped her from arguing with her grandmother earlier. Then I grin at her and while she tries to keep frowning at me, I see her lips twitching until finally she's grinning back and reaches over to put her hand in mine.

I bring her hand to my mouth and press a kiss on it, causing Akilah's face to glow with a blush. Then I say, "You know what will be much more satisfying than arguing with your grandmother over this again?"

"What?"

"When we prove her wrong."

###

**Continued in
Uncertain Things**

A Note from the Author

Thank you for reading *Little Things*. As an independent author, I rely heavily on reviews and word of mouth to promote my work. Thus, if you enjoyed the book, please make sure to leave a review share on social media so I can keep writing novels like this one. Once again, thanks for reading!

--B. Hollidae

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