



*Gravity*

AshleyNicole

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ASHLEYNICOLE



# Contents

[Thoughts and thangs...](#)

[Trigger warning:](#)

[About this book](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[♥My Catalog♥](#)

[Contact Me](#)


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## Thoughts and things...

It took a minute, but I came back. Lol. I did not intend for five months to pass before putting out something new. My mind couldn't nail down what it wanted to write. However, here I is, back with another one.

This story took me a lot of places I didn't want to go. It is not the typical AshleyNicole tale. That's intentional. Sometimes, I need to switch things up, so I stay on my toes. Thank you so much for picking this up, and I hope you enjoy it. Please consider leaving a review, and please, please, please don't give away spoilers.

Special shoutout to Angelique and Chencia. You know what you did.

*Trigger warning:*

This book contains references to suicide, domestic violence, child abuse, and mental illness. Please read with caution

## *About this book*

*Something always brings me back to you...*

Cevyn has more responsibility on her shoulders than should be legal. It's fine because she was built for this. She's the strong one, and she'll carry the world on her shoulders alone if it means her sister is okay.

Cevyn and Kas have been jumping in and out of each other's beds for years. Up to now, they've enjoyed a string and love-free affiliation. No matter what happens, though, they always end up back in each other's beds.

Tragedy strikes, and she's no longer able to bear the brunt of the world alone. Suddenly, her friend with benefits is starting to look like her knight in shining armor. Can they help each other through this dark, painful time and come out the other side as something more?



# Prologue

## CEVYN

THE WARM HEAT churning between my legs intensified as he lapped at my sex like it was the last meal he'd have before going to the pearly gates. I pressed up on the balls of my feet with my hips in the air, trying to get closer to his pillaging tongue— Not that that was at all possible. His face was pressed so deeply into my pussy, I wasn't sure he could breathe. His nose was smushed against my pubis bone, and his mouth was attached to my clit like it was a suction cup.

Down below, his thumb was making all kinds of illegal turns inside me, aiding his tongue in its mission to drive me insane.

“K-K-Kas,” I panted. Not because I thought either of us was going to forget his name, but it didn't seem right to say any other words. He was the one slinging me around the multiverse, so why not praise him while he worked?

“Mmmhmm,” he hummed between my legs, replacing his fingers with his ridiculously long tongue. His name should have been Venom because their tongues seemed to be similar in length. I kid you not, sometimes I didn't even need the dick. I'd been telling myself I was going to pull it out one day and measure it, but I always forgot.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I grunted, rocking steadily against his face. I was so close. It was right there. I could practically see it. Wanted to reach out and grab it, but it wasn't for me to grab. It was for him to give me, and he was walking it right up to my door. Step by step, he brought it closer.

An obnoxiously loud, high-pitched tune began to play somewhere in the room. When he moved to take his talents from between my legs to grab it, I slapped both hands to the back of his head, forcing him to stay in place.

I could faintly hear him chuckle as he reached back to remove my hands. “That's your phone, Cev.”

I made sure to enunciate each word clearly. “Fuck. That. Phone.”

Again, he chuckled but went right back to his plate: me. Once again, we were walking up that path to completion. The phone’s incessant squawking ended, only to start right back up. Again, fuck that phone.

I groaned but still had no intention of touching it until I came. More heat arrived at the party as an opening to my orgasm. It rose and rose and rose— the fucking phone was ringing yet again. The voice in my head told me it was after 9pm and ringing like crazy, which meant it could have been an emergency. Another voice reminded me that I was constantly picking the phone up and getting a message telling me they were trying to reach me regarding my car’s extended warranty, as well. That voice won and told the other voice to shut the fuck up and let us get our nut.

Kas’ tongue sped up as he inserted two fingers in my pussy and went further back with his thumb.

“Ooh,” I huffed. We’d never talked about backdoor play, but I also didn’t shy away from it. It was a hole. My other two holes got a lot of play; why leave that one out when it had just as many orgasm-inducing nerves as the others? I could be as nasty as I wanted with Kas. He could put as many knuckles up there as could reach. “Right there. Right there. Right there.” I began to see stars as he bobbed his head up and down on my clit. “Just like that. Just... Just like that. Don’t change. Please.... Dooooon’t...” I never got to finish my sentence because I was engulfed in a plasma ball of heat and pleasure, radiating throughout every inch of my body. He kept going, too, not stopping until I begged him to.

When he moved away, his white smile was glistening with a whole bunch of me. Before either of us could speak, the phone went off again.

“Oh, God,” I groaned as I leaned over the side of the bed. Looking at the screen, I didn’t recognize the number. I tapped the screen and immediately put the phone on speaker as I

leaned back and spread my legs once more. Now, I wanted dick. “Hello?”

“Good evening. May I please speak with Cevyn Braddock?” Oh, I guess they had the correct number.

“This is Cevyn.”

“Ms. Braddock, my name is Alicia. I’m a nurse at Yale. Your sister asked me to call you.” The second she’d said she was a nurse, I knew what it was about, and all thoughts of dick went down the drain. I was instantly out of bed, scurrying around for my clothes. “She’s in labor and—”

“In what?!” I roared, dread filling my belly.

She hesitated briefly, probably taken aback by my tone. “Uh, labor, ma’am. She’s asking for you.”

“I-I...” I didn’t know what else to say but, “I’m on my way.” I ended the call and resisted the overwhelming urge to fall out on the floor. My sister was having a baby. “God, no.” I groaned, fighting back the urge to cry. I was startled when the phone rang once again. I didn’t hesitate to answer this time, hoping she was calling back to say she’d made a mistake. “Yes?”

“I’m so sorry, Ms. Braddock. She also asked that you call the father.”

“I didn’t even know she was pregnant, ma’am. I don’t— Never mind.” I sighed. “I know who to call. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Oh—Ms. Braddock, one second. I’m so sorry. Could you please give us her name and date of birth?” I almost asked how she didn’t know, and then I remembered she was dealing with my sister.

I tried to hide my frustration, “Ayte Braddock. A-Y-T-E. Her date of birth is August 1, 1986.”

I waited as she spelled the name out, guessing she was writing it down.

“Okay, perfect. We’ll see you shortly.”

The call ended, and I just stood there.

Strong hands rubbed my shoulders and moved to help me back into my clothes.

“Come on, Cev. I’ll drop you in your car and get a ride home.” Kas’ calm voice commanded. This wasn’t the nature of our relationship, but damn, was I glad he was there. Eventually, I got my ass in gear and helped him redress me. I assured him I was okay to drive, but he insisted.

The truth was I was afraid of what was awaiting me at the hospital. My sister had run out of that same hospital seven months ago and hadn’t said a word. There was no telling what condition she was in.

This was the third time she’d disappeared in three years. The first two times, I scoured the damn state to find her. This time, though, I had to give up after the first four months. She hadn’t wanted to be found.

At the hospital, he parked the car on a side street and walked me to the door, wishing me good luck.

“You got this, Cev.” He assured me, sounding like he had complete confidence in my ability not to have my own emotional break. Confidence I didn’t possess.

“Thanks, Kas,” I told him weakly as I walked into the hospital alone, leaving him outside the door waiting for one of his brothers to come pick him up. My feet felt like lead weights. I stopped at the information desk to get directions to the labor and delivery ward, and a visitor’s pass.

“Cevyn!” A deep voice called as I waited in front of the elevator, interrupting a fervent prayer I was sending up to God.

I turned to find Omere, my sister’s boyfriend, speed walking towards me, looking just as flustered as I felt.

“Pregnant?” He asked, even though I’d already confirmed it three times during the brief phone call we’d had as I was leaving Kas’ place.

“Apparently, “I mumbled, jabbing the button for the elevator a tenth time.

“She can’t take care of a baby, Cev,” he huffed. His shirt was wrinkled and crooked, and his socks didn’t match. He looked like he’d gotten dressed in the dark, which he probably did. He knew the routine. You had to get to her quickly when she popped up, or she’d spirit away.

“She can’t take care of herself, O,” I responded, even though he knew that just as well as I did.

I liked Omere. He was a good guy. A lot of guys had ditched my sister after finding out exactly what they were in for, but he’d stayed. Now, he was about to be a father and barely had a second to absorb it.

Finally, the elevator arrived, and we were whisked up to the fourth floor. The glass doors were locked, so we had to press a button and identify ourselves by intercom. A clicking sounded right before Omere reached out for the door handle. This time, it gave, and we were able to walk inside. I followed him as he followed the room numbers to her room. I expected to see a nurse approaching, but the hallway was empty.

I slowed as he came upon the door and tossed up another prayer. Omere went straight in without pause, but me, I hesitated. Of all the scenarios I’d thought up since AYTE went missing, her turning up pregnant and in labor was not on the list.

“Where’s Cevyn?” A familiar, anguished voice cried out. My brief reprieve was over before it started; my sister needed me. Ignoring all the noise in my head, I forced myself inside the room.

My stomach dropped at the sight before me. My sister was on the bed in a blue hospital gown, and she was absolutely filthy. There was literally dirt all over her face, arms and legs. Her hair was matted and filled with some kind of red clay. Her teeth were a golden shade of yellow, and her eyes were hazy. “Cev,” she sighed when she saw me as if just the sight of me was calming. “Hey, girl, hey.”

My chin trembled as I fought the tears. I couldn’t react; if I did, she’d freak out. So, once again, I pulled it together, bringing a smile to my face. “Hey, girl, hey,” I mimicked. I

rounded the bed to get close to her, ignoring the strong odor coming off her body.

“I’m pregnant, Cev.” She grinned hard, revealing more of her dirty teeth. “I’m having a baby for us.” She tittered excitedly. There was no need to correct her; this would indeed be our baby.

“I see,” I told her as I reached out to rub her face, then stepped back, “Uh, let me go see what the nurses are saying. Okay. I’ll be right back.”

“Cev,” the smile slipped from her face as she gripped my arm with a surprising amount of strength, “You’re gonna leave me.”

“No, I’m not,” I soothed, stepping back over to the bed, hoping she released my arm. Just that quickly, my fingers were goin numb. “I want to find out how you’re doing.” More than anything, I wanted to find out if I could help her get a shower.

“You sure?”

“I am. You know I wouldn’t leave you. I’m gonna let Omere stay with you until I get back. Okay?”

Her worried gaze shifted to him, and she grinned as if just seeing him, “Okay.” The death grip on my arm loosened, and I was able to leave the room. A nurse was headed for the door as I stepped out.

“How did she end up here?” I asked after we exchanged pleasantries.

“She was brought in by ambulance,” the woman replied. “From what I gathered, they found her out at Lighthouse, and she was acting a bit out of it. They brought her in this morning to the ED. She wouldn’t give her name and refused all treatment but was having Braxton hicks. Then, she gave us a name that turned out to be fake.”

“How’d you get my information?”

“That was the only information she gave up.” She shrugged. “She told us her name was Aisha Bradshaw. I

looked for an Aisha Braddock when she gave me your information, but obviously, that was wrong too.”

“Yeah, this isn’t her first rodeo. She’s been missing for months.” I rubbed the palm of my hand over my forehead, “you’ll see she has an extensive history with this hospital. Dr. Eocoin on the psyche floor should be notified as well.”

“Oh, okay. The ED did order a psyche eval, but once she started having contractions, they bumped her up here.”

“Am I able to give her a shower? Or is she too far into labor?”

“Uh, no. She’s not that far along. Her water broke, but the contractions haven’t been coming that regularly. She refused a shower, though.”

“I’m not worried about her refusing me. You guys have shampoo, right?”

“There’s some in the...” Her voice trailed off, and she shook her head, “I’m not about to make y’all use that cheap mess the hospital has. I have some Mielle in my locker for when I need to wash it out here.”

“Oh, I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking. Plus, it looks like she’s been through a bit of a tough time.” Her smile was sympathetic. “If I can do anything to help, I will. Go on in the room. I’ll get some extra towels and whatnot.”

“Thank you so much.”

I returned to the room to find Ayte trying to leave the bed and Omere trying to keep her there.

“I’m fine, O. Let’s go to your house. I feel like you haven’t been letting me come over a lot lately.”

I had to look away from him as a familiar shard of pain ran through his handsome features.

“I always want you at my place, Ayte. You know that. But you gotta stay here. We’re about to have a baby.” He was putting her legs back up on the bed.



“A baby?!” she peered down at her distended abdomen, “Oh, wow. I keep forgetting. I hope you brought a car seat.”

“I didn’t, baby. But we’ll get—”

Just that quickly, her temperament changed, “Why the fuck would you come up here without one? We can’t bring the baby home on your back seat, stupid.” She spewed that with so much vile, you’d think he was an enemy.

“Ayte.” My voice snapped through the room like a whip, causing her to jump to attention. “Stop,” was all I said.

Obediently, she climbed onto the bed.

“We’re gonna help you get cleaned up,” I continued. “The nurse is gonna bring some shampoo so I can wash your hair too.”

“Ooh, I love when you wash my hair, Cev. Remember when you used to do it in Mommy’s shampoo chair in the basement when we lived in Bridgeport?”

“Yup, I do,” I assured her as I stepped up to the bed. “Let Omere help you into the bathroom so we can get you all clean to meet this baby.” This time, when she looked at him, it was with a smile full of love.

It took two full bars of soap and five washcloths to get her clean. Not to mention half the bottle of shampoo to get her hair clean. The nurse was a godsend. She even had conditioner.

I’d just finished putting her now shoulder-length locs in two French braids when the contractions worsened. Over the next 16 hours, they got more and more intense and much more frequent.

My nephew Omere Quest II came into the world a little after two in the morning. As happy as I was that he was healthy, I couldn’t shake the ball of anxiety growing in my belly.

One

KAS

FOUR YEARS LATER...

“YOU’RE NOT GOING to like me if I have to come in there again, Kas,” I called to my son as I passed his bedroom on my way back to mine. I’d already tried to wake him up gently twice. If I had to do it one more time, he was going to wake up on the floor.

“I’m up,” his ridiculously deep voice replied. Damn boy’s voice was deeper than mine. Way deeper. Shit was so bad, I made him whisper to me most days. If not, I’d feel like I was the kid, and he was the father.

“I better see you in the next ten minutes,” was my warning as I went towards my bed. With a hot cup of coffee in hand, I lowered down to a spot on the carpeted floor and leaned back against the foot of my bed. The remote was right where I left it when I’d gone to bed the night before. I used it to switch the tv on and change the channel to the news.

Ten minutes later, Kas lumbered into the room and dropped down beside me, leaning his big teenage body against mine. Big in height only. He was wafer thin with the early bulges of muscles. Next to mine, they looked like nothing.

“Morning,” he grumbled.

“Morning, man,” I pressed a kiss to his forehead. “How late were you up?”

He cleared his throat before replying, “Just til one.”

“Mmm, I got no sympathy for you then.”

“Can I stay with you a little longer?”

I turned my head from the tv to peer down at him. His eyes were closed like he thought I was going to let him fall back to sleep on me. “You can stay as long as you want, you know

that. Need to call and let your mom know before she starts making her way here.”

“Oh, yeah.” He mumbled, sitting up and patting the pockets of his basketball shorts. “My phone is in my room. Can you call her?”

I eyed him curiously; this kid didn’t walk an inch without that phone being in his hand. No way he’d just woken up and had accidentally left it in his room. I didn’t say anything, however. Just pulled mine from the pocket of my shorts and offered it to him.

“Can you call her,” he repeated.

“I’m not the one asking her not to come get you.”

“Okay,” he frowned but accepted the phone. He found his mom’s contact and placed the call on speaker.

She picked up after the first ring, “Good morning.” Her tone said she thought it was me calling.

“Morning, Ma. Daddy said I could stay with him a few more days.”

My head whipped his way, confused. I mean, technically, I did, but the way he posed it made it seem like it was my idea. I had no problem with my boy being with me—legally, that’s where he was supposed to be— but...

More than his little omission, his mother’s silence grabbed my attention. His worried eyes bounced up to me. “...Ma?”

“I’m already on my fucking way, Kas.” She barked into the phone, causing both of us to jump. He immediately looked to me for help.

“My bad, Vick.” I wanted to smooth things over. “How close are you?”

“That’s irrelevant. There are things around the yard I planned for him to do today.” She replied, tone a little softer but still prickly.

“Alright, umm...” I peered down at my son, who was begging me with his eyes not to give in. I didn’t know what

that meant, but I wasn't gonna make him go. "How about this? I'll come help him do the yard and whatever else you had planned for him, so your plans don't get messed up. Cool?"

She was silent for a spell but ultimately gave him. "What time should I expect you?"

"Uh... I don't know. Give us a few. We're still on my floor having our morning coffee. Let me get some food in him. You wanna just text him the list and go on about your day?"

"That's fine. Bye." She hung up without giving me a chance to respond.

"I'm gonna go pull everything out for breakfast," Kas mumbled as he climbed to his feet in a hurry to leave the room. Probably expected me to fuss at him for putting me on the spot like that, but I wasn't going to. If Victoria was acting like that, I wouldn't want to be around her neither. Hence the reason for my divorce. Not about to get into that, though.

I stayed in my spot until my coffee cup was empty. By that point, I could smell bacon cooking in the oven, so I knew it was my turn at the stove.

Sure enough, the bacon was in the top oven, and a pan of biscuits was in the bottom, minutes away from browning. Kas was at the juicer making his famous carrot-orange juice. I made sure I always had both ingredients. I don't know where he learned to make it, but the shit was amazing.

I got busy with my contribution to breakfast: cheese grits and scrambled eggs. If his mother hadn't been in such a foul mood, I would have invited her over for breakfast, but it was clear something was going on with them. I figured it was typical growing pains.

Victoria had a lot of trouble accepting Kas growing up. She took offense every time he branched out to do anything independent of her. They managed well without me intervening, but sometimes my son needed me behind him, like today. Things usually would even out on their own. We governed our houses differently, but Kas adapted well to both.

At 15, he was a good kid. I'd yet to have any trouble out of him.

"What do you think she has for you to do?" We were seated at the kitchen table across from each other. My parents worked like crazy when I was growing up, so sitting down for full family meals wasn't something we could do regularly. When Kas was over, every meal was done at the table. I wanted to make sure he had ample opportunity to be heard. It was also a way for me to make sure he was good. It's tough to lie when you're having to look me in the face for two-plus meals a day for five days in a row.

"Chores and stuff, I guess." He shrugged as he shoveled eggs into his mouth. Apparently, I made the best eggs he'd ever tasted. Literally wouldn't eat anybody else's. "I don't know." Half a biscuit followed the eggs into his mouth.

"When are you planning to go back to your mom's?"

He looked up then, "Tuesday?"

"What's happening on Tuesday?"

"There's no school Monday for Columbus Day. I can go to school from here Tuesday, then go home after."

I wiped my mouth, "You know I still have work Monday?"

He nodded, "I know." His eyes moved around the clean kitchen.

"Alright. I'll text your mother later." I had a feeling if I texted her right then, she'd find some reason or another to blow up.

After breakfast, we drove to their house. The list she sent on the way could have been done any day of the week. She wanted him to take the trash out of all the rooms in the house and put it out—there was just the bag in the kitchen, and the only thing inside was an empty strawberry container. Also, she wanted the yard raked. There was a grand total of thirteen leaves in their yard, and we literally picked them up by hand.

I had to stop myself from calling her to find out what her real issue was. We handled it and left. Two hours later, she

sent more things she needed done, and when I responded to let her know we'd already been there and wouldn't be back, she stopped responding.

CEVYN

“Hey, Harlowe.”

“Hey, girl,” Harlowe, a friend of my co-worker Ghost, bid as I stepped off the elevator in the lobby of my job. “How are you?”

“Good and busy,” I huffed. “You?”

“Super good,” she grinned, readjusting the plastic bag that smelled heavenly in her hand. “Taking ole boy some lunch.” She playfully rolled her eyes.

“Girl, I wish I had friends like you. I gotta go out to meet mine to have lunch with them,” I glanced at my watch.

“Yeah, he knows he’s lucky.”

I chuckled, “I won’t hold you. I’m actually meeting a friend for lunch.”

“Oh, okay. We gotta catch up. I’ll bring you lunch sometime next week. Just don’t tell Kaspar.”

“It’s a date. Later, Chica.”

“Later,” she called as the elevator doors swooshed closed.

My friend Mindy was already seated when I arrived. I’d known her since college. I wouldn’t call us best friends, but she would. I mean, she was kinda my only friend— outside of Ayte.

We were like night and day, though. Mindy’s sole purpose of going to college was marriage. Not the degree. Marriage. Her parents set up a college fund before she was even born, so there was enough for her to pay for Yale out of pocket by the time she graduated high school.

She didn’t end up at Yale, of course. She went right to Central, where we met. She stayed on campus all four years; I only did the first year. Too much went on with Ayte, and living 45 minutes away all week was too much. So, I commuted the majority of my college years.



Anyway, I successfully got my degree in Computer science, and she was successful in finding a man to marry her.

“Heyyyy,” I called as I weaved my way through the tables to reach ours.

“Hey, girl.” She greeted, her attention steadfast on the lit screen of her phone. I didn’t even have to ask what she was so enthralled in. I knew and didn’t want to open the door for conversation about it. Mindy had her ways, and I had mine.

I didn’t understand why she was the way she was or the things she did, and she’d said as much about me.

As I slipped out of the cardigan sweater I’d slipped into before leaving the office, a waitress approached the table to take my drink order. Mindy already had something iced and brown in front of her. She couldn’t eat a meal without an alcoholic beverage.

“Ice water, please,” I didn’t feel the same way. I ignored the loud teeth sucking that came from my companion. “I’m ready to order if that’s okay,” I told the waitress instead.

“I’m not,” Mindy rudely held a finger up at the waitress without lifting her face from the phone. “Give me ten more minutes.”

“Give *her* ten more minutes, but I’m ready to order,” I made a face at the waitress, and she hid a smile.

“Dang, you can’t wait—”

“No, I can’t. May I please have the braised short ribs and mash...Annd... Mmm, what are the seasonal vegetables this week?”

“Today’s is a lemon sauteed broccolini.”

“I’ll take it. Thank you so much,” I offered the leather menu I hadn’t even peeked at. I’d been dreaming about those short ribs for weeks. I paused to peer over to see if Mindy had picked up her menu yet, but she hadn’t. I told the waitress she could go.

“Mindy,” I snapped, careful to keep my voice down, “Pick up the damn menu and decide what you want to eat. My god.

This is why I never meet you for lunch.”

“Okay, okay,” she groaned, literally not taking her eyes from the phone until it was down on the table. Even then, she glanced at it every other second while holding the menu up.

“What is the damn point of leaving the house if you spend every second you’re away watching to see what your husband is doing, Mindy?”

She was one of those people who clocked their partner’s every move. There were cameras everywhere in their house. The last time we were together, her husband received a call from a private number– which she could see because of the tracking app she installed– and left in the middle of the meal to make it home to try and catch him on the phone, so she could hear for herself who it was.

“When you and Malik get here, you’ll understand.”

“You were like this before you two were official, Mindy. Also, I’m not marrying Malik; we broke up. You need to calm the fuck down before Lance leaves your ass.”

“Oh, please. His entire life would crumble without me.”

“How so? He makes the money. Pays the bills. Cooks. Cleans. Does the laundry and everything else. YOUR life will crumble without him.”

“Not in the least bit. That alimony check will set me up nicely.” The menu was back down on the table, and she was cyber stalking her own house. “And when did you break things off with Malik? Or did it have something to do with your sister? I told you you’ll never find a man who’ll deal with that shit.”

“That shit, as you put it, is my fucking sister,” I snapped. We tended to stay away from topics surrounding my sister because I was always two seconds from popping her in the mouth for being disrespectful. I didn’t require her to understand the relationship and responsibility, but I also wasn’t going to allow her to bad-mouth it. “Move on, Mindy. For real. And for your information, I ended things. It had nothing to do with AYTE.”

“You say that, but— “

“Let’s move on from my sister before you piss me off, kay?” It hadn’t had anything to do with Ayte...directly. It was his inability to understand my situation. I didn’t push my sister off on anybody. I was very up front when I got into relationships about my availability. I don’t know if he hadn’t been listening that day or what.

“You kill me getting pissy because I care about you being happy.”

“Being attached to a man is not the pinnacle of my happiness,” I mumbled, managing to leave off the “un-like you.” Hell, I don’t even think being married makes her happy. It’s just something to brag on.. along with the ring. The house. The *Range Rovers* and vacations in Greece or Paris or Dubai.

“How would you know? You’ve never allowed it.” She argued, her face pinched at the screen. “Where the hell is he going?” she asked under her breath before tapping the screen a few times and putting it up to her ear. A few seconds went by before she screeched into the phone, “Where the fuck are you going... There’s milk at the house... You didn’t think to check to see if it was spoiled before you went grocery shopping yesterday... You claimed you were so tired, but you have energy to run to the grocery store. Who are you meeting at the grocery store?”

I dropped my head, shaking it at this ridiculous ass conversation. I don’t know where she found the energy to know his every thought.

If I hadn’t wanted those damn short ribs so bad, I would have left. Instead, I zoned out and shot off a message to Ayte, checking in. She responded immediately.

**Ayte: Reading. How about you? How are you doing today?**

**I’m out at lunch with Mindy.**

**I’m doing good, though.**

**Ayte: What did you do that you felt you needed punishment?**

Ayte wasn't a fan of Mindy's.

**Hell if I know.** 🙄🙄🙄

**Ayte: She on the phone going off on hubby for going down to the basement bathroom to piss so she can't watch?**

I snorted. That wasn't an exaggeration. That had happened before. There were four bathrooms in their house, and all of them had cameras. However, suspiciously, the one in the basement was always malfunctioning. She forbids him from using it, which resulted in a nasty blowout one day during another lunch with her when she couldn't find him in the house.

Beside me, she'd forced him to switch the call to a facetime so she could see what he saw. Of course, when the waitress returned for her order, she was shooed away again. I texted back and forth with Ayte until my food came.

I popped an Airpod in, found a video to watch on youtube, and managed to ignore her as I enjoyed my meal. Ultimately, we left the restaurant without her eating. She didn't like how the cashier asked how Lance was doing, and she raced from the restaurant to go try and confront somebody.

"Never again," I promised myself on the drive back to work. The longer they were together, the worse she seemed to get. There was no rhyme or reason to it either. Initially, Lance was so in love with her that he ignored all of it. Now, I don't know if it was love or fear. Having somebody clock you like that had to be the most annoying thing ever.

I always attributed Mindy to V.I.K.I. from *I, Robot*. She saw everything and orchestrated the rest. Most importantly, her logic was undeniable— in her own head.

I wanted Lance to stand up to her one good time just to see what would happen. I wish I could tell him to, but of course, she'd see. She could tell me how many texts he received a month off the top of her head. Primarily because she was the only person who texted him. It didn't take long for his family and friends to fall back when Mindy started running things. He'd even missed his grandfather's funeral because nobody in

the family wanted her to come, so he didn't find out until after it was over. Even then, she had a heart attack the first time he went to the gravesite because he wouldn't allow her to intrude on that moment. To my knowledge, that was the only time he'd gone. I hoped he woke up soon. It would suck to give all of your good years to the wrong person, and friend or not, Mindy was the wrong person.

Two

## CEVYN

I EXCITEDLY RAN to the bathroom. My self-imposed two-week wait time was officially up. I stripped out of the t-shirt and biker shorts, dropping them in the dirty clothes hamper before stepping to the glass shower case. I slid my phone into the eye-level, waterproof pouch that hung from one of the sprayers.

After adjusting the water temperature to my liking, I reached for my container of cranberry body scrub and got to work, paying extra attention to my elbows, knees, and ankles. Oh, my butt too. I'd suffered from butt acne for years before figuring out I needed to religiously exfoliate that thing to keep it smooth. Everything got a good polish before I rinsed off and reached for my body wash that just further intensified the cranberry smell. I hated using products that smelled good, to only be able to smell them for a few minutes. While I washed all over, I ran my feet back and forth over an exfoliating mat.

Once I hit thirty, it seemed my heels decided that they needed a layer of extra skin to survive. Between the weekly pedicures and my daily shower scrubs, I'd gotten them right as well.

Once I rinsed the body wash off, I reached for a washcloth and a bar of natural soap I purchased religiously from my neighbor across the street and got to work on the intimate areas. Once that task was done, I moved on to wash my face. I figured since everything else had been exfoliated, I might as well get my face glistening.

I went about doing that, letting the face wash sit on my face for a few minutes. Right as I went to wash it off, a notification popped up on the phone. It was from my camera system. Apparently, somebody was walking up to my door.

I reached up to tap into the phone and swipe into the camera app, grinning hard once I saw who was sauntering up my stairs. I pressed the release button for the front door lock before he could even ring the bell.

He didn't hesitate to step inside. Quickly, I rinsed the soap from my face. I opened my eyes, and he was already in the bathroom. He'd taken a seat on the padded vanity bench and was looking me over.

"This shower is for you, you know," I told him as I rubbed down my arms and belly, trying to make sure I was soap-free.

"Oh, word?" Was all he said before rising to his feet with the hem of his black shirt in his hands. He quickly lifted it over his head, revealing dulce de leche skin, and went for the button on his jeans. His socks were the last thing to go, and then he was in the shower with me.

He dropped straight to a crouch, easily lifting my right leg over his shoulder and pressed his face all up in my sex. My back hit the warm, tiled wall, and my left hand went to the back of his close-cut head.

It had been six months since I'd last seen him, and God, that was too long. It was the longest we'd gone without seeing each other in the five years we'd been doing this "fuck buddy" thing.

I reached out to brace myself on the shower dial because there was nothing else to hold on to that could hold me. There were shelves in the shower, but I knew I'd just rip those down.

He ate and ate and ate, licking, sucking, and fingering until I found my release—my first but most certainly not my last of the night— and I leaned over on him. He didn't give me any time to recuperate as he rose to his feet, bringing both my legs up around his waist as he pressed me back against the wall and slid inside me.

I wished I could let my head fall back between my shoulders, but the wall prevented it. God, I was so full. Instead, I dropped my lips to his, which had initially gone to my collar bone, but nah, I needed a kiss. I needed his hands on me. I needed his dick in me. I needed all of him all over me.

I swear this was the only time I could clear my mind. I'd tried meditation and yoga, but my worries regarding my sister always broke in. But not when I was with Kas. No, he was the



one thing in my life I'd apparently subconsciously decided was my corner of peace. Which meant I hadn't had a moment of peace for at least six months. Damn, did it feel good after so long.

He widened his stance and pumped into me faster, slightly changing the angle of his lunges, which put him in the perfect position to get at my G-spot. And that's precisely what he did.

Water rained down on us as our tongues danced together to the beat of our wet bodies coming together. I was cumming again soon after. Then, he walked us out of the shower stall and back into my room.

He brought us over to the bed and turned to take a seat at the foot with me on his lap. I pulled away, though, and slithered down to the floor, to my knees. Then, I reintroduced the tip of his dick to my uvula. His groans of appreciation spurred me on as I gagged a bit. Air rushed through his slightly parted lips as I did it again, this time, holding it in my throat for a few seconds longer. His big hand went to the back of my neck to gently massage the area— his way of letting me know he appreciated the light work I was putting in.

I pulled out so that just the tip was in my mouth and let the extra spit run down the entire shaft, using both hands to jerk and twist it as I paid a little extra attention to the tip by swirling my tongue around it. Pretty soon, his balls were in one hand, the shaft was in the other, and I'd caught a good rhythm. I'm sure the "gawk gawk" sound filling the room was music to his ears. My focus was pleasing him because he'd damn sure done the same for me in these short minutes, and we hadn't even really gotten into the best part.

He let me have the floor for a little longer, then gently tapped my cheek, telling me he was ready for the rest. I would have gladly gotten him to the end goal, but who was I to deny good dick? I wasn't a fool; I'll tell you that much.

Instead of pulling me up on the bed, he joined me down on the floor with his back against the bed and his legs stretched out in front of him. Swinging a thigh over his legs, I straddled

his lap, coming up on my knees, and reached between my legs to grab his dick and hold it in place as I slid down onto it.

Once he was fully in me, I leaned forward, pressing my face against his warm, hard shoulder, absorbing the moment. It didn't make any sense how much I missed this. It wasn't like I had been celibate either.

I averaged probably twice a week with Malik. But Malik didn't feel like Kas. Malik wanted sex so Malik could nut. Pleasing me was an afterthought, and most times didn't happen. I could count on one hand the number of times we'd had sex, and I didn't have to sneak away with my vibrator before the night was over. Kas would have me so beat up after sex, I didn't even want to hear the word sex.

"Unh, Unh," he murmured, kissing the shell of my ear, "You got work to do." His hands went to my hips and gently massaged, his way of urging me to move.

"Oh, you're in a rush?" I jeered as I lifted my head. With my feet planted and my hands gripping his meaty shoulders, I began to bounce. "Being pushy after putting in a little work in the bathroom."

His brows hiked to his impeccable hairline— that edge up was so crisp, it had to be less than 24 hours old. "Six months, and this is how you act?" I giggled as I felt his legs bend slightly beneath me.

The next time I went to drop my hips, his came up to meet me, and may I just say, HELLO. It was like a clap of thunder boomed through my room. I shrieked in surprise and punched him in the shoulder.

"Jerk."

Before I could say anything else, he palmed my chin and pulled my face in for a kiss. We rocked together, kissing like we loved each other until another orgasm worked its way through me. He released my lips then, talking me through the release, which seemed to extend it even longer.

I rode it out with my head back and my hands planted behind me on his thighs, rocking into him with force. Then his

mouth was on one of my nipples, and I was vibrating again.

Pushing off his thighs, I wrapped my arms around his neck, bringing me flush against his moist chest, and bounced on his dick until his movements beneath me turned spastic, and he was slushing out air as he released.

We stayed like that— me resting against his chest, his face against my shoulder— feeling each other’s racing hearts until the race ended.

Eventually, I left his lap and “helped” pull him to his feet. We shared a shower where we both stayed in our respective corners, pensive. He left the shower before I did, wrapping a black towel around his waist and exiting to my room.

I wasn’t in much longer. I dried off with a towel then slipped into my black cotton robe, tying the sash as I traced his steps back to my bedroom, where I found him at the foot of the bed leaning back against it.

I copped a squat next to him, reaching out to gently rub my thumb over his lips. “Hey, freeen.” I sang, earning a chuckle from him.

“Hey, friend,” he returned, his baritone moving right through my body as usual.

“How are you?” I looked him over, checking for anything new I may have missed. Kas was a work of art. Tall, stocky, and solid with caramel skin. He had the juiciest lips I’d ever kissed, and when they stretched into a smile...my God. Like I said, a work of art.

“Good. You?”

I lifted a shoulder, “I’m doing. How’s the baby?”

He made a face and chuckled, “The 15-year-old baby?”

I laughed, “Yup. The 15-year-old baby who still likes sleeping next to his daddy and watching TV with his head on your shoulder. That baby.” I’d never met Kas, but I felt like I’d watched him grow over the last five years. There were so many pictures of him in his dad’s house, you couldn’t miss them. We didn’t spend too much time talking about family, but

I knew about his son, his pride, and joy. And, of course, he knew about Ayte.

“He’s good.”

“How’s football going?”

“Mmm,” he grunted, “Tore his shoulder pretty bad skydiving with his uncle at the beginning of the summer. Doctors won’t clear him to play.”

I gasped, “Oh, no. I know that’s devastating.”

“Not as much as you’d think. Initially, he was hurt. You know, his friends are all playing. He thought he could get by, went out one day and tossed the ball, and spent the rest of the night in my bed crying because he’d reinjured it. After that, he got over it.”

“I bet he did. You didn’t kill him too much for trying, did you?”

“I didn’t need to. The pain and having to go back in for surgery did. He couldn’t stand the effects of the oxycodone, but he also couldn’t deal without it for the first week. Said he didn’t want to go through that again, so he gave up. Goes to PT twice a week. He has two more years to play; he’ll be fine.”

“Aww. I hope he finds something else to do in the meantime. I remember when I dropped out of volleyball freshman year, I thought the world was ending.”

It was my choice, but it still hurt. Ayte was starting to really go downhill, and my parents never took it seriously. They’d always say she was faking just to get attention. That was until she practically burned the house down. Even then, they put her in the hospital and told them to keep her as long as they could. That was when I realized I needed to look out for her. For real.

The first suicide attempt was soon after, and Thank God, I was home when it happened. She was angry with me for months for saving her, though.

“Yeah, he’ll bounce back. That kid is too damn popular not too.”

“Oh, well, that’s good.”

“What about you and yours? How’s Big Sis doing?”

“Maintaining... at the moment,” I admitted, bringing my legs up to cross. “The seasons changing are kind of starting the clock, you know.”

“Seasonal depression?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I was over there the other day. She said she could feel it coming. So, I’m gonna get the baby and go spend the weekend over there. Figured we could go up to the orchard and pick some apples. Omere loves when she makes apple pie for him. So, I know that’ll put a smile on her face for a little bit.”

“She still refusing to see his dad?”

I nodded. “Won’t even consider it. And he’s just sitting there waiting for her to let him back in. I want to tell him to move on, but I know it’ll tear her apart if he does. It’s such a bad situation.”

“Yeah. I hate that for them.”

“Me too.”

“What about *you*, though?” he asked, nudging me with his smooth elbow. “I wasn’t expecting all I got when I got here. Thought you were *busy*.” “Busy” was a term we coined when referencing being in a relationship.

“What were you doing in my neck of the woods, sir?”

“I told you Victoria was buying a house the last time we spoke. Literally two blocks over from you. I’ve driven by a few times but didn’t stop if there was another car in the driveway. It was just yours today, so I took a chance. I wanted to come check you and see how you were. Even planned to keep my pants.” That made me smile.

“Oh, well, either way, you were going to be seeing me. Like I told you, that shower was for you. Even had my outfit

picked out,” I thumbed behind me to the barely-there dress lying on the bed.”

“What happened to dude?”

“Dude happened to dude,” I explained. “Nah, let me not say that. He didn’t *do* anything. Which was partially the problem. I liked him, but I was never excited to see him, you know. I was fine if we went all day without talking. Hell, I was fine if we went a couple days without talking.”

“No passion,” he guessed correctly.

“Not a drop. No passion, but all the bullshit of a relationship. And I thought to myself, why deal with that shit when I –potentially– could have you with the passion minus the bullshit multiplied by exceptional dick and amazing kisses.”

His head fell back against my mattress as he howled with laughter.

“I’m serious.” I bumped him with my shoulder.

“I do strive to provide a bullshit-free environment, so I’ll take the compliment.”

“Exceptional dick and amazing kisses meant nothing?”

“I was going to thank you by giving you more of both in a little while, but I appreciate the compliment,” his big lips reached out to gently kiss my bare shoulder.

“Anytime.” Him providing a bullshit-free environment was an understatement. I’d never gelled so well with a man in my life. I attributed it to us having clearly set boundaries and expectations. It really was perfect.

“Truth moment...” he offered, continuing once I nodded, “I thought we were done.”

“That never crossed my mind.”

“Well, you had the inside scoop on the passionless and the restless. From the outside, all I could see was that we hadn’t talked in six months.”

“That six months flew by,” I ran a hand through my hair. “I swear I told myself to break things off with him at two months. But I hadn’t heard from you. You know, usually one of us will put out feelers to see what’s going on with the other. When you didn’t, I figured you’d gotten into something yourself.”

His head shook gently, “Nah, nothing serious. I was talking to somebody for a few weeks, but then I found pictures of her taking selfies in every room in my house and had to dead that. I don’t even know why she was doing it. Didn’t ask. Just stopped answering the phone.”

“Dang, so we’ve had a summer of bullshit, huh?”

“Seems like it.”

Coming up on my knees, I once again found myself straddling his lap, “I’ll take the blame for it.” I told him as I pulled at the edge of his towel to untuck it.

“There’s no reason to blame.”

I leaned in and kissed him, silencing him, then moved down his body, “Shut up and let me apologize.”

A couple of hours later, we were drifting off to one of those *Marvel* movies, when his phone rang. He groaned as he reached over me to silence it. This was the third or fourth time it had rang since he’d been there.

“You sure you don’t need to get that?” I asked, my words muffled against his neck. Kas wanted me all up on him all night. I loved that. Malik wanted a pillow between us because he got hot at night. My foot couldn’t even touch his. Kas would pull me over his chest, arranging me exactly the way he knew I liked, and I had no problem falling asleep to the sound of his respirations.

“I guess,” he mumbled, bringing the phone up so he could see the screen. I didn’t look. I don’t know who was calling. Wasn’t my business. I was too busy soaking up the energy that had been missing from my life.

He may not have been my boyfriend or even on the path to be, but he was vital to my sanity. He was something just for

me.

“Yeah?” he asked in a low voice with the phone up to his ear. “I’m not home, but we talked about that when it happened. We’re not doing that...Vicky, can we not? I answered your question. I’ve answered before. We’re good where we are... Am I– Nope...That’s what we’ve been doing, so yeah, I want things to continue that way because we’re not going back the other way... You sure?... We cool... Alright, cool. Well, have a good night. I’ll pick him up from school tomorrow... Goodnight.” He tapped the end call button and tossed the phone to the other side of the bed.

“You okay?” He was tense all of a sudden. I’d never seen that.

His hand cupped the thigh thrown across his waist. “Yeah. Just... shit.” He wiggled a bit beneath me, probably trying to find that perfect spot he’d had before moving.

“*Victoria’s* giving you shit?”

“A bit.”

“Does she want what I’m lying on top of?” I asked in jest. In the time we’d known each other, he’d never told me anything about them being intimate since their divorce. They co-parented well together and didn’t cross that line.

“Yup,” his answer shocked me.

“Wait... Whaaaat?”

He sighed, “Man, I... gave in twice.”

I came up on my arm, resting my face in my upturned palm on his chest, “Oh, shoot.”

“Nah, it’s more of an *oh shit* situation. It was around the time Kas got hurt.”

“You needed an outlet– inlet. Hole?”

He cracked up, “Shut up. Nah, it wasn’t me. She was all upset. We were spending a lot of time going back and forth to the hospital. When he came home, we didn’t want him moving between our places so much. We asked, and he wanted to be



with me. But, she was there every day. I didn't see a point in her wasting the gas when I had enough room for her. So, she moved in for a few weeks." His fingers tittered over my thigh absently. "I was fucking exhausted. It was almost like having a newborn again."

"Why?"

"We couldn't get his pain under control. The meds would knock the pain out for about an hour, then start easing off. By the time we hit the two-hour mark, he was in agony again. They went back in two weeks after the first surgery and did a few things. That worked. So, um, the first night he slept through the night—"

"She came in your room," I asked, hoping my tone didn't reveal how weird I thought that was.

"No. He was in my bed."

"Of course," I snickered.

"I didn't want to disturb him, so I went down to the couch, you know. Hoping to basically sleep while he slept." I felt him shrug beneath me. "She came down there talking about how stressed she was. And... it happened. Happened one more time before I told her we weren't heading where she thought. She went home, then." Sounded like the only reason she was there in the first place was to get his attention, not to help keep an eye on her son.

"Wow," I murmured. "Question, though, you wouldn't get back together?"

In no uncertain terms, he declared, "No." That was my cue to drop it, but he continued. "We had our time. It ended for a reason."

"I can't say I blame her."

He sucked his teeth, "Here you go."

"I'm just saying, you're tough to get away from."

"Oh really," he scoffed, lifting his head to peer over at me, "Is that what you've been doing for six months?"

“No, I wasn’t– Not intentionally. I wanted to try the whole relationship thing. It didn’t work. I like what we have too much–Like what you’ve been blessed with even more. Personality included.”

“That’s why Vick doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Why?”

He leaned up to kiss me, “Because I like all of that too.”

Three

## CEVYN

“THERE’S MY BOY,” Ayte excitedly squealed as Omere ran into her room and jumped up on the bed.

“Hi Mommy,” his little voice greeted, giggling as she gave him kiss after kiss. She quickly wrapped him in the covers, making the giggling continue.

I loved seeing her with him. No matter how hard a time she was having, she could always find a smile and a laugh for him. She might run out the second he was gone, but for however long he was in her sight, she had her joy.

“How are you?” she asked, rubbing a hand down his cheek, scanning him as if there’d be major changes. It had only been a week since she’d seen him.

“I good. I got new cars, Mommy. I show you.” He wiggled from the bed and ran over to get the case his dad made sure to hand me before we left.

“Let me see. Let me see.” She told him as she pushed the covers back to meet him on the floor where he dumped out the massive case. “Oh, wow, baby. This is a lot.” She used both hands to push her coily mop of hair out of her face.

“Uh, huh.” He took out car after car, lining them up in front of her.

Ayte listened attentively as he explained whatever he wanted her to know about each of them, not looking away once.

The disappearing acts ceased as soon as Omere was born. It took a couple weeks for her meds to regulate her mood post-partum, but she stuck it out and stayed—Well, stayed *around*. She moved out of Omere’s place before the baby turned six months old. However, as far as being grounded in one place, her little person had done that for her.

I peered around, noting the dishes around the room. I’d peeked into the kitchen on the way in, and it was even worse.

Quietly, I went to work, grabbing everything I could at once and carting them off to the kitchen. It took three trips, but I removed all the dishes. Next, I stripped her bed and took the sheets and blanket down to the washer.

I used the state of her apartment to gauge how she was feeling, and by the looks of it, she was definitely ramping up. I'd just been there to clean on Tuesday. I searched all over the apartment before I rolled up my sleeves to tackle the massive stack. There were stages to her mania.

This was pretty early. She'd use a different dish for damn near every bite of food. A different plate. A different bowl— if it was ice. A different fork. A different spoon. Hence the mountain of dishes. This wasn't alarming enough to warrant a call to her doctor, though.

Sometimes she'd get here and go right back to baseline. If I came over and found bowls of raw spaghetti with sauce and cheese all over, she needed to go inpatient.

My nerves were bad because I knew this was not going to be a time where she calmed; I knew in my heart that this was going to come with a storm, and I hated that for her.

She tried so hard not to spin out. Once the smoke cleared, the fallout was a heavy depression that hurt my heart.

It took about an hour to get the kitchen clean. Then, we were off for a day out.

"I know that look." Aye was walking beside me as we followed Omere through the apple orchard. So far, the season had been pretty mild, but today, it called for a jacket.

I turned my head, offering her a questioning gaze. "What look?"

"That look that's been on your face all morning," she smiled. "That look that says Malik is old news, and Kas is back in the driver seat."

"Ah," I turned my attention back to the little boy running ahead of us, "that look." We giggled.

"So, you went back?"

“We kinda met in the middle. I was on my way to see him, and he was in the neighborhood.”

“That’s so good,” she told me with a genuine smile before bringing her gaze back to Omere. “I wish you’d just get together. I mean, I know your arrangement works well for y’all, but I can’t help but think making it more would be even better. You clearly get along well. No matter what happens, you keep finding your way back to him— Not even finding, you take your ass back. Willingly. Not evening being pulled by gravity, you willingly walk right back into that man’s arms. And I can’t help but think if y’all pushed the envelope a bit, it’d be great.”

I knew she was right. I meshed with Kas like a perfectly placed puzzle piece. There was no maneuvering needed. No bending backward. No folding. Just a perfect pairing of personalities. However, I didn’t have the space or time needed to do more than we were doing. I’d never tell her this, but I was terrified of getting caught up in Kas and losing sight of her. I’d never be able to forgive myself if something happened to her because my gaze was elsewhere.

It was a hard pill to swallow, but I made sure I washed it down with plenty of water. I took my responsibility for my sister very seriously, to the detriment of my own personal life, and I didn’t regret it. Nobody protected Ayte growing up. Not until I took control. Yes, I missed out on a lot of things, but my sister took priority.

If it were up to my parents, she’d have been institutionalized. They wanted nothing to do with her. We never spoke about it, but I knew that hurt her. It was rejection. Rejection hurts. They’d never even met Omere.

“Maybe,” was all I said in response. I didn’t want to go further down that path, so I switched the subject. “Do you have everything you need to make Omere’s pie?”

“Just enough,” she chuckled. “I know I’ll be out of a few things after this.”

“It’s time to put an order in any way, right? It’s been about two weeks since the last.” I asked as I did the math in my

head.

She nodded. “I just want to get a little at a time. No big orders for a little while.”

“Okay.”

Limiting the food in the house was a way she tried to stave off episodes. The previous winter, I’d come over one day, and not only were there bowls of dry pasta everywhere, but she’d literally gone through the cabinets and emptied everything out. Every can was opened. Every box. Every bag. The cabinets, fridge, and freezer were empty. I’d had to walk a tightrope of space to find her in the back talking to herself. It was like she was in another world. No matter how many times I called her name, she didn’t respond. I got right in her face, and still nothing. Even shaking her elicited no response.

It took days for her to come out of that—In the hospital, of course. Even then, she wasn’t herself for more than a month. That had never happened before, and thankfully, it hadn’t happened since.

After our walk through the orchard, we stopped in the open market for cups of hot apple cider. We tried to get Omere to try the fresh apple crisp, but he refused. He only wanted his Mommy’s apple pie. So, that’s what he got.

*Four*



## CEVYN

“TWO HUNDRED PERCENT?” I questioned, my eyes bouncing from the paper in my hands to my work husband, Kaspar, a.k.a. Ghost sitting behind his desk peering at his computer.

“That’s what it looks like.” Ghost was big, broad, and beautiful. We’d been working together a little more than six years.

“That is wild.”

“It really is.”

I began gathering my papers to leave, “Welp, that’s all I came in here for.”

He laughed. “Alright.”

When I pulled his office door open, Kas was standing there preparing to knock. His big energy damn near knocked me off my feet.

“Well, hello,” I bid, grinning at him as I slid out of the door.

I returned to my own office and woke my computer back up. It wasn’t weird for Kas to be there. Ghost had actually introduced us. They were first cousins. If you saw the two of them from behind, you’d think they were twins. They’d didn’t favor that much, but there was definitely a familial resemblance.

One day, after work, Ghost invited me out for drinks with him and his friends. That was also when I met Harlowe. Kas just happened to stop by. He was out celebrating a milestone in his own life and pulled up on us.

I’m not ashamed to say he came home with me that night; that was pretty much the opener to our relationship. Five years later, and I still felt going out with them that night was one of the best decisions I’d ever made.

I was finishing up a call when a gentle knock sounded on my door.

“Yup. I’ll get with you tomorrow morning...Okay. Bye, bye— come in.” I called as I placed my office phone back in its cradle.

Kas stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He was in his black work uniform but still looked good to me.

“Hey,” I grinned as he strolled around my desk to lean down and kiss me like we weren’t at my job.

“What’s up,” he asked against my lips while running his hands up my thighs.

“It’s about to be you,” I told him as I reached for his belt. I was always down for office sex.

There were so many benefits to working for an internet start-up, and people leaving you the fuck alone all day was number one on the list. I worked closely with Ghost, so we were back and forth constantly, but he probably knew what was up. Not that we’d ever discussed Kas and me, but he knew we talked. So, if I wanted him to wreck my insides on my desk in the middle of the day, we had space and opportunity.

His low chuckle sounded as he stopped my hands, “As much as I would love— *love*— that, I gotta get back to work. I only came to drop my grandfather’s birthday present off to Ghost.”

“Oh, is that where he’s going?” I knew Ghost was heading out of town, just didn’t know the details. But I knew their grandfather lived down south with Ghost’s dad and one of their aunts.

“Yeah. I was gonna mail it but decided to save some money.” He straightened, stepping back from between my legs. “Uh, what are you up to this evening after work?”

I shrugged and tossed my hands up, “Not a thing. I stopped in to check on Ayte before coming in this morning. Was just gonna go home and lay around.”

He reached out to tug my earlobe, “Well, come do that at my place for the evening.”

“It’s a date,” I told him with a grin.

“Catch you later,” he backed away with his hands in his pockets before turning around to stroll to the door.”

“Later,” I called, enjoying the view of him walking away.

I shook the cobwebs from my head after he left. Couldn’t sit there daydreaming about what he was going to do to me later, all day.

I went straight home after work and packed my overnight bag. It pretty much stayed packed, but I hadn’t refreshed the contents in months since I’d stopped seeing Kas. Malik always came to my place. I hadn’t minded, but I had paid attention to him keeping his space for himself but being willing to invade mine all the time. I’d never spent a night at his place. He’d been at mine so much, I’d almost started charging him rent.

I pulled the clothes out, tossed them in the laundry, and added new stuff. All of the toiletries were trashed. I replaced all of those and added a pair of fluffy slippers. I walked around barefoot in his place in the summertime, but Kas’ place always held a chill in the cooler months. We weren’t quite in winter yet, but it was cold enough that my feet would be cold.

I tossed in my spare curling iron and comb, and I was set to go. I showered the day’s work away and slipped into a sweatshirt I’d purchased over the weekend.

As I was at the bathroom vanity brushing my hair up into a ponytail, I called Ayte to see if she needed anything.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Ayte.”

“Hey, Cev. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Getting ready to go over Kas’. You have a good day?”

“Wasn’t good. Wasn’t bad.” She mumbled.

“Just a day,” I asked as I secured the hair at the back of my head with a black elastic.

“Pretty much. You?”

“Same. A regular, degular day.”

“It’s about to go out with a bang, though. Aint it?”

“That’s one way to put it,” we giggled.

“I miss sex,” she muttered, sounding sad.

I caught myself from telling her Omere was waiting for her to say the word. That would have triggered her. Instead, I said, “We can get you a toy whenever you want.”

She spit out a cackle, “Nah... I’m alright.”

I didn’t want to push, but I had to say something. “Why don’t you think you deserve pleasure, Ayte?”

She was quiet. So, I waited her out. I’d been thinking for a while that she felt that way but had never come right out and asked.

“I need to get myself together before I can think about pleasure, Cev. I mean... I’m not even raising my baby, you know. How do I look out here being happy when I won’t even let my son spend the night alone with me?”

“Ayte, you can’t control your illness. You gotta enjoy each day as it comes.”

“I don’t deserve it, Cevyn.”

“You deserve to be happy, Ayte. You deserve peace. You deserve pleasure. You have to stop punishing yourself.”

“You really want to talk about this before going to Kas’?”

“I really do,” I assured her. “Hell, I’ll cancel on Kas and talk about it all night if it will get it through to you. I want you to be happy, Ayte.”

“You can’t control that, Cevyn. Hell, neither can I, for that matter. We’ve been trying my whole life.”

“And we’ll continue to try until we get it right. There’s no end date. I’m in this forever... You hear me?”

“Yeah, Cev. Forever.”

“Cevyn, Ayte...”

“Nyne, Tyn.” She finished. I could hear a smile in her voice. “Enjoy your night, Cev. Love you.”

“Love you too, Ayte.” The familiar “boop boop” of the call ending came next.” I couldn’t shake the feeling in the pit of my stomach that things were about to get out of hand with Ayte. No matter how I tried to mitigate what was coming, I never could. I just needed to stay vigilant and be there when the shoe inevitably dropped.

I sprayed all my good points down with perfume and moisturized my hands once more before leaving the bathroom, shutting the light before closing the door. I grabbed the bag from the bed, shut the light off, and left the room. I slipped into my all-white sneakers at the door, and I was out.

Fifteen minutes later, I parked my car next to Kas’ in his two-car garage. As I stepped from my car, the door leading into the house opened, and he was standing there in a white t-shirt and basketball shorts.

“You know you missed Halloween, right?”

“What?”

“You look like you’re auditioning to be the Great Pumpkin.” He laughed way harder than I thought was necessary. Then, I looked down at my orange sweatsuit and busted out laughing as well.

“Shut up,” I went into the back seat for my bag, “I thought this color would be cute on me.”

He reached out to relieve me of the bag when I was close enough, “It’s cute and loud.”

I giggled, “Whatever.” He led the way inside, bypassing the small mudroom off the kitchen.

“I’ll run your bag upstairs. Food is in the living room.”

“Hold on, I need to get my slippers out of the bag.”

His stride never broke, “Look in the mudroom.”

“The mudroom,” I questioned under my breath. I turned to go back in there, and sure enough, there was a brand-new pair of fuzzy slippers waiting on me. “Oh, you trying to get some.” I joked, even though he couldn’t hear me. I toed out of my sneakers and socks, and slid my feet right into them, sighing appreciatively at how comfortable they were. “Where’d he get these from?” I wondered aloud. I needed to get a pair for my house.

Then, I happily skipped my ass into the living room to see what was up for dinner. He’d ordered it, and it smelled fried, heavy, and heavenly. Beside the food was a bottle of my favorite wine, a stemless wine glass, and a few beers for him.

I went to sit down but hopped back up and went to wash my hands in the half-bath in the kitchen. I was coming back, drying my hands when he returned.

His eyes went to the slippers on my feet, “Do they fit well?”

I nodded, “Super comfortable. Thank you so much.”

“No problem. Got tired of you dogging my place, talking about it’s cold and shit. Like I don’t pay for oil and shit.”

I cracked up. “Boy, whatever.” He let me choose my seat before taking a spot up beside me. “What’d you order?”

“I had a taste for you, but you refuse to give me a price. So, I ordered fish.”

“That’s not comparable,” I sputtered, laughing hard.

“Yeah, I didn’t think that through.” He chuckled lightly. “Nah, I’d been wanting fried fish for a few days. I was going to make it but couldn’t muster the energy to stand over a fryer. So, I ordered some with fries, okra and macaroni, and cheese.”

“Is there cake?” I asked, hopeful. My sweet tooth never took a day off.

“There’s something sweet in there. Gotta finish your food first.”

“Let’s eat then.”

I watched him tear the bags open, laying out the food so we could eat right out of the container. That was one of the things I loved about Kas. There were no pretenses, no pomp. I could be as comfortable as I wanted to be around him. If I wanted to sit there in my panties and eat with my hands like a caveman, he'd be fine with it.

"Have you watched without me," I asked as a forkful of macaroni and cheese hovered by my mouth.

"I wouldn't do that to you. You sure you and ole boy ain't watch without me?" he asked, which caused both of us to laugh.

"Nah, he wasn't into sci-fi stuff."

His eyes went wide, "Mmm, how'd that work out?"

"I'm back on your couch, aren't I?"

"Well, damn." He chortled, then dropped his fork as he crossed the room to grab the remote from in front of the tv. "We need to rewatch the last two episodes as a refresher, or you're good?"

"Definitely need a refresher," I said before popping three pieces of fried okra into my mouth. "The last two should be good. Just need my memory jogged a little."

He dropped back down beside me with the remote pointed at the huge screen. Moments later, the familiar large red N shown on the screen before the full name typed itself then made that loud boom-boom sound before the squares with their accounts showed. There was one that said Daddy, another that said Kas, and a third generic one for Kids.

He scrolled down until he found the thumbnail for the show we liked, *Van Helsing*. I was a goner if it had anything to do with Vampires or Werewolves. Kas didn't watch much tv, and when he did, it was sports or the news— before I came along.

I enjoyed a good weekly tv binge. I'd turned him on to the joys of just laying around getting lost in a show with nothing else to do and no idea when you'd come up for air. We'd started this show, *Van Helsing*, right before things cooled

down for us earlier in the year. I refused to watch it with Malik. He talked too much and spent most of my tv time talking. I was relieved as fuck to hear Kas hadn't watched without me. I'd been fully prepared to never watch it again if he and I didn't reconnect.

He hit play and tossed the remote aside to retake his fork up. We made our way through the food, not feeling an ounce of guilt. When we were finished eating, he paused the show, and I helped him bring the refuse into the kitchen. I stepped into the bathroom to wash the grease off my hands. When I stepped back out, he was pulling a container from the refrigerator.

"What's that?" It had better be the "something sweet" I needed.

"My mother was in a baking mood this weekend. Popped off a half cherry-half apple pie."

"Oooh," I groaned excitedly. "Please tell me you have ice cream?" Again, I was hopeful.

"There's a brand-new carton in there for you."

"You know me entirely too well," I fake grumbled while pulling the French vanilla ice cream from the freezer.

"I know a thing or two," he chuckled, cutting the pie in half, so we got a bit of both flavors. Then, he placed the plate in his fancy little steam oven.

When everything was plated up, we were back in the living room with our dessert and the show going. We ultimately gave up on rewatching the last two episodes we'd seen because we both remembered them fairly well.

It was close to midnight when we decided to turn in— well, not turn in. I was there for dick, and I had plans to get said dick before fully turning in for the night. I lifted from my spot leaned across his lap, stretching my lower back as I came up on my knees. He stayed put, watching me with interest.

He knew what time it was. Especially when I swung my leg over his lap and sunk down, gently grinding my covered middle against his.



“Down here?” his hands were easing beneath the hem of my sweatshirt, running over my skin and easing beneath my bra, where he gently ran his thumbs over my nipples.

I leaned forward to put my lips on his, “Right here.”

“The way you go, I might not have the energy to get us upstairs afterward,” he kissed me deeply then.

“Good thing you just fueled up on all that protein-rich fish, then, huh?”

His chuckle was the only response I received. We broke the kiss long enough to get the sweatshirt over my head. Then, he was right back at my mouth, with his hands now cradling my ass.

Between his thighs, the sleeping snake in his shorts was letting it be known he was up and *DTF*. I reached my hand between us, lifting slightly so I could get it into the leg hole of the shorts, giving me direct access to it.

Skin-to-skin contact was Kas’ downfall. His head fell back as he broke the kiss. I cupped his balls, massaging them gently as I leaned forward and ran my tongue from the base of his neck and straight up and over his Adam’s apple, then up his chin until it found its way back into his mouth. He moaned into my mouth, then brought his hands up to grab either side of my face and pull it even closer to him. I slid my other hand up the other leg hole, where it grabbed onto the shaft, causing air to slush from his nose. I moved the other up a bit, so I was gripping it like a baseball bat and gently jerked and twisted. I didn’t lean in when his head fell back this time, I watched him breathe through the intensity with his gorgeous features pinched in welcomed agony. I loved seeing him in the throes of ecstasy just as much as I loved him putting me there. I knew I needed to back off when I felt his hips buck gently. That meant it was feeling too good, and he couldn’t control the ride.

“Not yet,” he groaned, reaching down to peel my fingers from around his dick. That was all well and good, but I wasn’t finished with him. After removing my hands from inside his shorts, I slid to the floor between his legs.

“Cev...”

“This is what I’m here for, Kaswell.” I hooked my hands into the waist of the shorts and yanked them towards me, not getting anywhere because he was still sitting. I yanked again, staring him dead in the eye, daring him to keep hindering my process.

He sighed in defeat, chuckling as he lifted a bit, just enough for me to get them past his hips. His dick immediately sprang up, almost as if being exposed to the air was all it needed to jump right off his lap.

I went right in with my tongue, keeping my eyes locked with his. The air down there was fragrant with his natural body scent and the soap he used. Kas always smelled like a snack. Any time of the day. Before and after a shower. It was a wonder I wasn’t addicted to his scent.

I ran my tongue from tip to base twice before enveloping the WHOLE thing in my mouth. Breathing was overrated when a man like Kas was in your mouth. I’d literally give up the act entirely just to keep his taste on my tongue for the rest of my life.

His low murmurs of appreciation spurred me on. Kas was always ready and willing to talk me through each and every act of this play. We rarely– if ever– needed an intermission. I don’t care if I was half-paralyzed and bone dry; if he had energy, I wanted to keep going. He could hold my legs up and add water. Sex with him was just that good. Hell, everything with him was that good. Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. R.E.M.

Thoughts like that were dangerous in something you weren’t trying to turn into a full-fledged relationship. However, if I was anything, I was honest. And Kas was everything I wanted in a relationship, but everything I couldn’t have. He deserved a woman who could give him her full attention, and I couldn’t.

I relaxed my jaw so all the spit forming in my mouth could leak out to drip down his balls. I know he was thankful he put *Scotchgard* on that couch because it’d smell like breath the next day. Once I was satisfied they were perfectly lubed up, I

reached down to restart my juggling. I used the thumb of my free hand to deeply massage the area just beneath his balls, and he about came off that couch.

He let loose a groan so carnal and rough that I felt the vibrations in his balls. With the shaft perfectly wet, I removed my mouth and let my hand do all the work as I went down to run my tongue up and down the seam of his sack. That made him cough. Especially, when I applied even more pressure to the finger that was still rubbing his little airstrip.

“Cevyn...,” he cried before pushing out a heavy whoosh of air, “Fuck!” I don’t know if he thought that was supposed to make me want to ease up, but it just spurred me on. I turned everything up a notch, going back and forth between sucking the tip and gargling his balls.

A minute later, he was begging me to stop. Whining for me to let up. He was practically crying for a second of reprieve, but I wasn’t feeling very merciful right then. So, I continued my ministrations until warm liquid tapped my tonsils, and he grunted out his submission. Only, I didn’t stop then. I kept going, letting the fluid slide down my throat. I sucked, jerked, and swallowed until he had to physically remove me because I refused to stop.

“Cevyn,” his voice rumbled as he held my hands away from his groin. “This ain’t no shit you do during the week. We both have to get up in the morning.”

“Well, what did you think I was coming over here for?”

“A piece of dick.”

“Oh, yeah.” I scoffed, waving that notion away, “You’re mistaken. Get yourself together because we’re not done.” I pulled my hands from his and took down the rest of the wine in my class, watching him sit there with a semi-erection, watching me through half-lidded eyes.

“Take your clothes off,” he ordered, then, “Matter of fact....” He sat up and reached for the waistband of my pants, yanking me up from the floor and onto the couch next to him.

Then, he yanked them along with my panties, down and off, tossing them behind him on the couch.

This was the part I loved. The part where he returned the favor as intensely as he could because he refused to be outdone. And boy, did he return the fucking favor. Somewhere along the way, he poured the liquid from the melted ice cream on my clit and sucked that thing so clean it squeaked— Okay, it was me. I squeaked. Then squealed. Then my body shook like the speakers at a reggae concert. The difference was, I couldn't remove him when he wouldn't let up.

He planted a forearm on each adductor muscle while holding both wrists firmly out of his way, effectively keeping me from closing my legs on him and pushing his head out the way. He was too damn strong. Right along with his powerful tongue that was so deep in me that I knew he could tell me what my cervix tasted like. Then he was closing his lips over my clit, pushing me into a release that made me mirror a maraca this time.

Finally, he let up, kissing his way up my mons pubis, up my belly, and all the way back to my mouth. With his hand around my right ankle, he wasted no time sliding right into me. I wrenched my mouth away so I could breathe because, for some reason, my nose holes weren't doing the job sufficiently. I panted against the side of his face as he swirled his hips into me, literally bringing tears to my eyes. Eventually, he pushed both legs over my head. I could never figure out the mechanics of this position but was always glad he seemed to understand all the specs. Then, I felt it: a light slap levied against my already engorged clit.

“God—” No, that wasn't who I was supposed to be calling, “Kas! What the fuuuuuuuck?” My throat was raw after that wail, and his cute ass laughed and did it again.

“Hold your own legs,” he ordered, watching as I took possession of the heavy limbs. Something told me not to do it, but I was never one to listen to my guardian angel. He reached out and slid his pointer finger between my lips, gently pumping it in and out like he was doing to my pussy. Then, he pulled it out and reached low...Yeah, down there and easily

eased it in. If I thought things were intense before that point, it became clear I was sorely mistaken. Especially once realized he planned to continue the clit slaps.

I don't know how he expected me to efficiently do my job of holding my legs when he was throwing all kinds of — welcomed— curveballs at me.

I really regretted letting him bust that first one off in my mouth. If this was his first nut, I'd be able to gauge how long he was going to torture me. However, since I was greedy and literally ate that one up, I was stuck dealing with a roll of the dice of how long he was going to last. The answer was too damn long. Too. Damn. Long.

It was after two when we finally crawled ourselves up to his room for a shower— there was no way we could get into his bed without washing all of the night's fluid away— then fell out in his bed. I knew I'd be running on a handful of espresso shots once I got to work in the morning.

But for now, I had no complaints.

*Five*

KAS

“KAS, SOMEBODY’S DOWNSTAIRS.” A feminine voice was over me. I cracked an eye open to find Cevyn dressed for work in a green blouse and black skirt that hugged her hips and stopped at her knees, with a dusting of make-up on her face.

“What?”

“Your front door opened.”

I sat up, prepared to go check when my son’s voice flowed up the stairs and through my door. “Daddy!”

“What the hell?” I checked my watch as I went to the dresser for a pair of sweats. He was supposed to be on his way to school. Next, I pulled out a grey shirt and pulled it over my head as I went to my bedroom door.

“Should I wait?” Cevyn asked, paused in the doorway of the bathroom. I was stuck for a second. Cev was gorgeous. With or without makeup. But she’d gone a little heavy on the eye shadow, which enhanced her already feline-like eyes. Her lips naturally formed a pout that was hard not to constantly kiss. My eyes traveled from her face down her body to really take in the way the skirt hugged her hips, and the shirt sat against the black bra peaking from underneath.

She held up a finger, telling me we didn’t have time as I advanced on her. I didn’t kiss her too much; I hadn’t seen a toothbrush yet. “You look good,” I murmured against her sweet-smelling neck.

She giggled as she tried to wiggle out of my grasp, “Thank you, Kaswell. Now, bye.”

I groaned, hating that I had to let her go, then backed towards the door. “You don’t need to wait,” I told her, finally answering her question. “I know you have to get to work. I’m not hiding you.” She snorted, smirking a bit, “Come out when you’re ready.”

“Could you hit the warmer on my keys please,” she called as she disappeared back into the bathroom.

“Mmm, hmm.” I left the room, shutting the door behind me. “Good morning,” I called out as I trotted down the stairs. Kas was pulling leftover lasagna from the fridge. The bigger surprise was Victoria standing off to the side dressed for work— Well, not a surprise, I guess. It made sense that she was there since she dropped him off daily when he was with her.

“Morning,” my deep-voiced son greeted, placing the container on the counter to come hug me. “How you?”

“Good.” I clapped him on the back and kissed his temple. “You?”

“Same.” He grinned as he went back and grabbed the container, stuffing the entire thing in his bag. The only reason I let it go was because he was good at bringing my containers back.

“What do I owe the pleasure of this early morning visit?” I moved past him to tap the button on Cevyn’s car key that would initiate the temperature control feature. She drove a Tesla, so it didn’t technically “start.” After driving hers, I knew a car like that wasn’t for me, but it was nice. I’d been with her the day it was delivered, and we drove that thing all night. It was a smooth, quiet ride, but I liked a bit more power and noise.

“Your son forgot his biology book this weekend,” Vicky replied, looking me up and down. I didn’t acknowledge it.

“I would have dropped it off to you, dude.”

“I told her that, Daddy.” He defended around a mouthful of pie. I hadn’t even seen him take it out of the fridge. Luckily, Cev and I had our fill the night before. My son and his appetite were about to house the rest of it without coming up for air.

“You told *her* that?” Vicky snapped, startling both of us. *The fuck?* “You mean me... Your mother. Don’t refer to me as *her*.”

Kas’ features dropped, and his nervous eyes went to the pie in front of him. My gaze went to Vicky, who was glaring at



him with a bit too much ire for my liking. She and I needed to have a conversation. I didn't like how she'd been talking to my kid. But I understood the importance of not undermining her in front of Kas, so I'd hold off for now.

"Why don't you go on to work?" I offered, wanting to dispel the tension in the room. I didn't want Kas going to school with all that on him either. "I can drop him off on the way in."

"I don't have a problem taking him to school, Kas. My issue is him being thoughtless and leaving things everywhere. He's not a baby anymore. I shouldn't have to be—" She immediately stopped talking when her gaze shifted to the archway behind me.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Cevyn was saying when I turned around. "Just need to get through here. Don't mean to interrupt."

"You're good, Cev." I pressed a hand to her lower back, "Let me introduce you to my baby."

"Daddy," Kas groaned, slapping a hand over his face

"My bad. Cevyn this is *my son*, Kas. Apparently, I can't call him my baby anymore. And this is his mom, Victoria. Kas and Vick, Cevyn."

"It's so nice to meet you guys." She smiled at both of them, although only one returned the smile. "I gotta get out of here. Hope you guys have a good day." She spoke as she moved across the kitchen, then turned a smile on me.

"You too, baby," I called before she left through the garage door, closing it behind her. I reached out for the button to lift the outer door so she could pull out.

"Daddy, you can't be calling me a baby in front of girls."

I busted out laughing, ignoring the scathing glare his mother had on me. I knew she was going to have something to say. "I guarantee you," I placed a hand on either of his shoulders and squeezed as I went to the fridge for juice, "You don't have a chance in hell with that one, bro."

"She got a daughter?"

We didn't even have time to laugh before his mother was screeching his name. "Have you lost your fucking mind?"

Once again, my son's face fell. I couldn't keep letting this shit go.

"Take the pie up to your room, Kas. I'll call you when your mom is ready to leave." He didn't ask any questions. Didn't look at either of us. Just took the pie and MY cup of juice out of the room. I didn't say anything until I heard his bedroom door close.

"What's going on, Vick?"

"You introducing my fucking son to random women you're fucking is what's going on." She snapped, dropping her purse on the counter and facing me with a hand on her hip.

That wasn't what I was referring to, but if she wanted to discuss it, we'd discuss it. Then we'd get into the other shit.

"First off, I didn't introduce a *random woman* to my son."

"What the fuck do you call what you just did?"

"Introduced a friend to my son and his mother. I didn't have Kas come over here and have them meet and hang out behind your back. If she hadn't come downstairs, their paths probably would have never crossed. I don't know what world you think I'm from, but I'm not rude like that. I wasn't about to make her feel uncomfortable by not introducing her."

She sneered when she asked, "A friend?"

"That's what I said."

"How long have y'all been friends?"

My brows dipped, "Why?"

"What?"

"Why?" I repeated. "What does that have to do with you or this conversation. You said I introduced a random woman that I'm fucking to my kid. I'm telling you that's not what or who she is. You're asking how long I've known her so you can decide if she's random or not, and it's not up to you, Victoria."

“We were just together—”

My hand came up, “Let me stop you right there.” She was not about to put that shit on me. “Let’s be clear: you and I haven’t been *together* for seven years. We stopped being together long before the courts recognized it. And if you’re going where I think you’re going, let me just let you know, she was around before that.”

“So, what? A year?”

“Longer— and before you start counting, that’s all I’m telling you. She came over on a night when I didn’t have Kas. Y’all obviously showed up this morning— which isn’t a problem. So, I introduced her. End of story.” I told her, not giving her time to say anything. “Anyway, the what’s going on was directed at you and how you’ve been acting lately.”

Her arms crossed over her chest defensively, “Excuse me?”

“You went off that morning Kas wanted to stay with me, citing all of these chores that you had for him to do. There were ten leaves in your yard and a piece of paper in the trash. That was bullshit. I’ve heard you being unnecessarily aggressive with him on more than one occasion.

“Like just now, snapping at him for saying he told you I’d bring the book, then the “have you lost your fucking mind” question. If he’s genuinely fucking up, you know I’m behind you a hundred percent. But I don’t see where that’s happening.”

“That’s because he’s different with you. He knows he can’t get away with shit in front of you, so I’m stuck dealing with it.”

I knew my son like the back of my hand. And the shit she was trying to put on him wasn’t even in his character, but I’d play along for now. I could see that things were going to have to change soon. Kas was getting closer to manhood, and his mother couldn’t handle it.

“Alright,” I told her, “I’ll talk to him. You go on to work. I’ll make things clear to him on the way to school. If you’re

still having issues with him, we'll address them together. If he's frustrating you too much, he's always welcome over here."

"How are you going to be able to manage him with your harem slipping in and out of here?" She snatched her purse from the counter.

"I asked you before we ever crossed that line again if it was going to be an issue."

"It's not an issue. You clearly had another bitch waiting in the wings."

"Another bitch?" I scoffed. "You don't know her from a can of paint."

"Exactly." She screeched. "Yet you stood here and introduced her to my young son."

I had to bite my tongue to keep from calling her deluded. "Young son? He's fifteen years old, Victoria. And she's the first woman he's *ev-er* met. He's not a toddler who'll get attached. He's three years away from being an adult. Give him some credit."

"And if he sees his father rotating—"

"I'm not rotating anything, and you're worried about the wrong shit." She needed to get off Cevyn and didn't seem to want to do it on her own. "As I said, if he needs to come live with me full time, he can."

"I'll keep my son with me."

"Let's not forget that him being with you is a decision *I* made." I knew that was going to rankle her, but things needed to get put into perspective.

"Wow, Kas. You're allowing me to raise my son? Oh, how magnanimous of you."

"You can twist this however you want, but the truth still stands. If I start seeing too many things I don't like, I'll pull him, Victoria. Quickly. Because in the end, *he's* what matters. Please don't forget that."

“Fuck you,” she stormed from the room, slamming my front door as she left out.

“Sheesh.” I reached up to rub the tension from between my eyes. “And the day started out so well,” I grumbled as I left the kitchen to jog up the stairs.

Kas peeked out his door when I reached the landing, “Is Mommy ready to go?” His eyes shifted behind me.

“I’m taking you to school. Twenty minutes,” I told him as I disappeared into my room.

He was waiting for me in the kitchen when I came down after getting dressed for work.

“Daddy, you mind if we stop for a sandwich from the deli? I could call it in now, so you don’t have to wait.”

“Whatever you want, man.” I grabbed my coat from the mudroom and slid into it. “You have a little time before school starts.”

“You want one? I’ll pay for you.” Wide eyes that matched mine stared at me expectantly.

I chuckled, “Keep your money. Get me one and the home fries.” He got a good allowance, but I was working on teaching him to save. Daddy could afford eating out; Kas couldn’t. I ushered him out of the house, making sure to lock up behind me.

“What’s going on with you and your mom?” I asked on the drive to the small sandwich shop.

“Nothing.” He mumbled.

“Kas...What’s going on with you and your mom?” I pushed. “She said you’re being disrespectful.”

“I don’t do nothing, Daddy. I swear to God. She just...” he cleared his throat, which made me look over at him. He reached up to wipe his eyes like he was trying to hide tears from me.

“She just what?”

“She just like... I don’t know. She’s always mad with me. Everything I do, she gotta yell.” The tears were in his voice now. “I was cooking a burger yesterday, and she came downstairs just screaming. Like...Like, I don’t know. Not like normal. It’s like it doesn’t take nothing for her to get mad at me. I just stay in my room now, but she be coming in there looking for stuff to be mad at.”

“When did this start?”

He sniffled and wiped his face, “I don’t know, back in the summer once I went home. That’s why I’ve been trying to stay with you more. I don’t know what to do so she won’t yell. But it’s like I can’t do nothing right.” He reached up to swipe more tears away, trying to stabilize his breathing.

“You need to come be with me for good?” It sounded like it. I knew just how bad things could get with Victoria. My son had no idea, and I didn’t want him to find out. I wanted to pull him, but I wanted his input.

He dropped his head at my question and sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t want to leave her. She always talks about that when I stay at your house too long. I’m leaving her. I’m treating you like I love you more.” He was borderline hyperventilate-crying. “But I love y’all the same.” He’d finally turned towards me, letting me see exactly how affected he was.

I pulled into the parking lot of the sandwich shop and cut the engine.

I wanted to listen to him, but I also wanted to call his mother to go the fuck off on her. “I know you do, man.” I reached out to help clean his face. The kid was on his way to school and damn near having a breakdown. “I think I’m gonna keep you with me for a few days. I’ll call her and talk to her.”

His eyes grew to twice their size like he was afraid, “I don’t want her to think—”

“It’s gonna be all on me, dude. Alright? I’m not gonna say you said anything. Maybe you two need some time apart, and

neither of you wants to say it. I don't mind being the bad guy. Okay?"

He nodded. "Okay." His shoulders sagged with relief.

"Kas, when you go back, if it gets this bad again, you gotta tell me early. I don't like you feeling sad and nervous like this."

"Okay," he softly agreed. "Thanks, Daddy." He reached across the console for a hug that I returned.

"You want a hug now, but you didn't want me to call you my baby earlier." I teased as we separated. "And before you ask, no, she doesn't have a daughter."

"Daddy, she's pretty," that slick smile I knew was back on his face. "That's your girlfriend?"

I couldn't tell my fifteen-year-old I had an FWB relationship, so I just said, "Something like that."

"Mommy asks about that all the time too."

"Asks about what?"

"If you have girls over. I told her I've never seen anybody." He shrugged. "You don't play that."

I didn't even want to touch on that. Victoria was worried about the wrong shit. I reached for my wallet and slid the card out to extend to him, "Get the food."

"Okay," he accepted the card then left the car to go order our breakfast.

I fished my phone from my pocket and shot a text off to Cevyn. We'd never even discussed her meeting Kas or Victoria.

### **Was that too weird?**

I peered around the parking lot as other cars began to fill the other spaces. We'd apparently gotten there just in time to beat the morning rush. It was a bright morning. Thankfully, it wasn't too cold.

**Cevyn: No. Not at all.**

**Cevyn: Kas is so freakin cute. I mean, I knew that from his pictures, but he is gorgeous in person.**

I laughed as I typed back:

**He feels the same way about you. Asked me if you had a daughter.**

**Cevyn: 😊😊😊**

**Cevyn: Like father, like son, huh?**

**Apparently.**

**Cevyn: Are you okay with us meeting? I know you said it was fine, but you were kinda put on the spot. I wouldn't have been offended if you didn't introduce me.**

**Well, if I run across you and your people and you don't introduce me, I'm cutting all the laces on your sneakers.**

**Cevyn: 😊😊 I wouldn't do that. I'm fine with them meeting you, but your situation differs from mine.**

**Cevyn: Victoria looked like she wanted to blow my head off.**

**That's on Vicky. Not me. You've been around long enough to have already met my son. It makes it better, just in case you have to come over one night while he's there. He'll be over for an extended period of time. And not seeing you isn't an option.**

**Cevyn: You sure? I don't mind easing back.**

**Didn't we just do that? Didn't it suck? I have no intention of redoing the summer.**

**Cevyn: I'm just being agreeable.**

**You don't have to be. I can manage you and my fatherly duties... You'll just have to put your head in a pillow.**

**Cevyn: Don't threaten me with a good time.**

My head fell back against the headrest as I laughed. I wanted to tell her how much of a balm she was in my life, but we didn't do that. I knew I could tell her, but I didn't want her



to feel like she had to reciprocate. We walked a tight line because of our situations. She was used to people not understanding the situation with Ayte, and I understood better than she knew. Which was also why I needed my son with me for a while.

I was really worried about how things with them—correction, with Vicky—were going. I hoped this little break she was about to get would do the trick and snap her back into her normal self. Although I had the authority to, I never wanted to keep him from her for good. That didn't mean I wouldn't.

Six

## CEVYN

IT WAS after Thanksgiving that things really began to spiral with AYTE. I started getting phone calls in the middle of the night from her just to talk about nothing. She had no concept of day or night. She was either exhausted or hyperactive.

Even seeing Omere wasn't enough to stop this train. I was about at the point where I couldn't bring him around her because her behavior was so erratic.

Then, I stopped by one morning before work, and there was a line of bowls that led from the front door straight through the back of the apartment. Raw spaghetti, topped with cold red sauce and crumbly, white parmesan cheese on top. I found her in the kitchen making more. The apartment was dark because she'd closed all the blinds and curtains. The apartment was so cold, I wanted to step outside to warm up. It was 37 degrees out. I stepped over to the thermostat to see it was switched to Ac and set at 58 degrees. That air mixed with the cold outside felt like the inside of a sub-zero freezer.

She was talking so fast, she could give Six on Blossom a run for her money. She whipped around the apartment, placing bowls everywhere.

She didn't even have that many bowls the last time I was there. We'd given most away with last year's episode. But a box by the front door with the Goodwill logo on it was my answer. I couldn't figure out how she even got out there.

Ayte didn't manage her own money— she couldn't. However, she did keep a little bit of cash on hand. And you could get a lot of shit from the *Goodwill* with a little bit of money.

“You hungry?” she asked, popping up out of nowhere with her face almost pressed fully against mine. “You think Omere wants some? I have so much food, Cev. I don't know who I thought was coming over.”

“I'm good, hon.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I have some friends in the back. And they can come eat. I told them I wasn’t gonna share with them, but it’s too much for me to eat. I’m gonna go ask my friends in the back if they’re hungry. Since I have so much food, they can eat.” She repeated that circular dialogue all the way back to her bedroom, where she did, in fact, ask “somebody” if they were hungry.

There was nobody else in the apartment.

The hallucination must not have answered correctly because a bowl went flying. Then another. And another. On top of that, she was cursing like a sailor.

I searched her doctor’s name in my phone and placed the call. He picked up on the first ring. “I have to bring her in,” was all I said.

Fortunately, he was on shift at the hospital and would meet us there. I sighed as I slid the phone back into my pocket and walked towards the back of the apartment where Ayte was still going off. No matter how badly I wanted to cry, I couldn’t. I couldn’t let her see me upset.

“Ayte,” I called as I approached the door.

She bounded out of the room with childlike energy, “Hey, Cev.”

“We gotta go see Dr. Eocoin.”

She grinned, “Oh, okay. I thought I had an appointment today. I knew I was forgetting something. Cev, I love you so much. My head would fall off if I didn’t have you. You’re so perfect. I love you so much. If I didn’t have you, my head would fall off. Oh! That’s right. I have an appointment. Let’s go.”

“Hold on, Ayte.” I gently reached out to grab her shoulders, “You gotta put some clothes on. It’s cold out.” She was in a pair of shorts and a bra.

“Oooh, okay. I have that yellow sundress you bought me that I never wore. That’ll be cute.”

“It’s too cold out for that, baby. Maybe some sweatpants and your UGGS. Kay?”

“Okay.”

I managed to help her get dressed and out of the house without getting spaghetti sauce on either of us. I would call a service to clean it up once I got her settled. I’d usually do it, but my nerves were shot. I hated this for her.

She had no idea what was going on right now, but when things leveled out, she’d be upset.

As promised, Dr. Eocoin met us in the ER. I stood back as he assessed her. She was so happy and so bubbly as she talked to him. Totally comfortable with what was going on. As he went through his questions, her answers became more and more outlandish.

She didn’t know the day, time, or year. The only things she knew for certain were that I was her sister, Omere was her son, and her name. He’d repeat certain questions, and her answers would change each time.

Ultimately, it was decided that she needed to be put on a 5150 hold. They let me walk with her up to the floor she’d be staying on, but I couldn’t go inside, which was fine. Ayte never fought us when she had to be put on a hold. She’d told me quite a few times that the structure of the hospital was a comfort.

I sat speaking with Dr. Eocoin in the long white hallway while they got her settled. He expressed his frustration with her medication regimen not being enough to stave off this episode. Ayte took her medicine religiously. I knew that for a fact. It was the only medicine she would take. She’d suffer through a headache and cold, but she took her medicine.

Most people assumed she had a drug or drinking problem, but she’d never touched either.

Dr. Eocoin promised to keep me abreast of her treatment and to call me the next day.

Out in my car, I fought the ugly cry that tried to bubble up. Fortunately, my phone rang with a facetime from Kas, helping

stave off the breakdown.

He was smiling when the call connected, but it slipped right off when he saw me. “What’s wrong?”

“Ayte’s in the hospital,” I told him, my voice hollow. I didn’t want him to know I was about to cry. Didn’t want him to know I did that. I couldn’t. I had to always be strong for me and my sister.

“She’s not hurt, right?”

I shook my head. “No. Got there before she got to that point. I just... I hate this for her.”

“Where are you?”

“In the hospital driveway.”

“Meet me at my place.”

“Don’t you have to go to work?”

“I have a lot of PTO to use. Meet me at my place. You don’t need to be by yourself.”

“Kas, it’s okay. I’ve done this a million times.” My voice cracked. “I can handle it.”

“You don’t have to handle it alone this time, Cevyn. Either meet me at my house, or I’m coming to yours. Stop trying to shoulder everything. We don’t have to talk about it. We don’t have to talk at all. Maybe you just need me to hold you. It’s fine. But... just take a break from shouldering the world for a minute.”

“Okay.”

“You coming to me, or am I coming to you?”

“I’m closer to your place. I guess I’ll come there.” He was in his car, probably on the way to work.

“Alright. I’ll see you in a few.”

He was just pulling into the garage when I pulled up. I didn’t park my car inside this time, just parked in front of the doors.

He stepped out in his black work uniform and waited for me to reach him.

“You need a hug?” I wanted to say no, but he’d already called my bluff on being able to handle this alone, so I nodded.

I stepped into his big arms and pressed my forehead to his chest. The coldness I’d been feeling since stepping into Ayte’s place finally began to ease out of my bones.

“She’s gonna be okay,” he assured me. I’d never had anybody to tell me that. Ever. That was always something I found myself telling Ayte. Or Omere. Or anybody who tried to make me feel like my sister was a lost cause. But nobody had ever used those words to comfort me. And it was too much—Way too much for my mind to handle, so I broke down. I cried right into his chest, hard. In a way, I don’t think I’d ever cried.

As I said, I never gave myself permission to feel any emotion when Ayte was going through an episode. She was the one having to fight her own mind. She was the one getting trapped in there and having to have medication to break free but knowing that inevitably, she’d end up right back there. What the hell did I have to cry about, right?

Well, apparently, I had a lot to cry about. I only know that because I cried a lot. Right there in Kas’ big arms in his big garage. And he let me, murmuring comforting words the whole time.

I gotta be honest, that was the best feeling in the world. Support! That’s what it was. Support. The thing I was always giving out. The thing I’d never had. It was amazing.

Eventually, I got quiet. Lulled into a few minutes of peaceful silence.

“Feel better,” he pulled back, bringing both hands up to thumb my eyes dry. I nodded. “See, it’s cool to have help sometimes.”

“You might be on to something,” I told him softly, letting him take my hand to lead me inside.

“You don’t even want to give me my props.”

“Excuse you, I am very generous with said props.”

“Sure, chief.” We stepped inside and closed the door before toeing out of our shoes.

I giggled as I slid my feet into my slippers. I know I’d seen them before, but it was just so sweet that he’d bought me a pair.

“Kas is here,” he informed me. “The electricity is out at his school. They’ve been unable to get it back up and running for a few days.”

“Oh, wow. Is it—”

“There’s no point in finishing that question because I’m not dignifying it with an answer.” He pulled me into the kitchen and released me to go to the archway. “Kas, make sure you have clothes on if you come out of your room.”

I cracked up. “Ooooooh. Clothes-free zone at Daddy’s house, huh?”

“He thinks so. His little bird chest is always on display—You hungry?” I shook my head. “When’s the last time you ate something?”

“Last night.”

“So, you’re hungry. Cool.”

I chuckled. “How am I just finding out how bossy you are?”

“Haven’t been paying attention, sweetheart.” He unbuttoned the black shirt with his name sewn on the left breast pocket. Kas was the maintenance manager at a local college.

According to him, he didn’t actually do anything but tell other folks to fix shit. As he pulled the shirt off, the younger, leaner version of him entered the kitchen, one arm in a blue shirt as he slipped the other in, then pulled it over his head.

“Why I gotta wear clothes—” he asked, then caught sight of me, “Oh. Good morning, Ms. Cevyn. How you doing?”

“I’m good, sweetheart. How are you?”



He dropped his head bashfully, “I’m good.” He went and hugged his dad good morning, and my heart about busted. “Morning, Daddy.”

Kas returned to pulling breakfast items from the refrigerator after hugging his mini-me. “Morning, man. You been up?”

He shook his head, “Just got up.”

“Alright, well, get yourself together. You have schoolwork, right?”

“Mmm, hmm.” The boy leaned against Kas’ arm like a sleepy toddler. “Want me to help you make breakfast?”

“You can if you want. Go put a toothbrush in your mouth, though.”

I tried to hide my snort, but Kas cracked up. “Okay, don’t cook without me.”

“I won’t.”

Kas ran from the kitchen and bounded up the stairs.

“Y’all are cute,” I chuckled as I moved deeper into the kitchen, coming up beside him at the counter. “He cooks?”

“Yeah, we have a bit of a routine. He’ll put the bacon and biscuits on. Then I do the eggs and grits.”

“Oh, that’s y’all’s thing?”

“Yup. Anytime we make breakfast, that’s it.”

“That’s so sweet. And you don’t think that’s a baby?”

“Nah, I’m more accepting of that title than he is. He’s been in my bed every damn night, hogging it.” He grumbled, “He thinks because he’s a beanpole, he doesn’t take up that much space. His damn legs are almost as long as mine, and he sleeps like a starfish.”

“Did he sleep like that as a baby?”

“Yes, damnit. But I could put him on his mother’s side, then. That gave me about 45 minutes of restful sleep before he crawled over her to find me again.”

I cracked up. “That boy is gonna be thirty years old in your bed with his wife and baby.”

He looked up from the eggs he was whisking, “Don’t do that. Then, I’ll have to come move in with you and bring them.” We both laughed.

“Have y’all always been closer than he and his mom?” I figured we were veering into uncharted territory; I might as well start asking questions.

“Uhhh, yeah. She didn’t bond with him right away when he was born.”

“Oh, so he’s been your baby.”

“Right. I stayed home for a month when he was first born. She had to bond with him when I went back to work. But the kid was still attached to me.”

“Yeah, he’s gonna be up under you forever. He’s fifteen years old and still wants a hug from you in the morning. That’s unheard of.”

“Not in my family. I’m close with both my parents. Still hug my pops every time I see him. Doesn’t matter if I saw him yesterday.”

“Oh, wow. So, your entire family is affectionate. Ghost is a hugger too. I noticed that with Harlowe.”

“Oh, well, you know they’re together now.”

“Whaaaat?” I’d always wondered if she’d end up with one of them. Hell, I envied the five of them. They all got along so well. I had fun any time I’d hung out with them over the years.

He nodded as he set the eggs aside, “Yup. Told me a few weeks ago.”

“Well, that’s cute. Did the other guys take it well?”

“Not Tree.”

“Oh, no. That was his best friend, right? Since they were kids?”

“High school. But yeah. Um, I guess he’s held a torch for Harlowe since the beginning. There’s some bad blood there now.”

“No, way. But Tuck and Country are okay?”

“Yup. Tree won’t talk to any of them. Said he even slammed the door in Harlowe’s mom’s face.”

“Damn. I’m sorry to hear that... but then I’m happy for them at the same time. I guess.” I chuckled. “Maybe he just needs some time. They’re too freaking close to fall out like that.”

“It’s not sounding like there’s going to be any type of reconciliation. They fought twice.”

“Sheesh. Well, hopefully, they all can find happiness.” I said as I walked around the kitchen. My eyes landed on the coffee pot on the counter, and I figured that was the one thing I could help with since the menfolk had breakfast handled.

“We’re probably gonna have to park down here on the couch. He worked out of my room yesterday, and I don’t foresee that changing.”

“That’s fine,” I laughed. “It’s not like I would do anything with him here. We could probably finish the third season of the show, though.”

“That’s fine.”

I was just sitting down with my cup when Kas came back smelling minty. He was a sweetheart. And funny as hell. The two of them took my mind off my sister long enough for me to enjoy my breakfast. Kas sent him on to do his work as we cleaned up the kitchen, then shared a blanket on the couch as we settled in for a *Van Helsing* binge.

I’d let Omere know about Ayte. He liked to stay abreast of what was going on with her, even if she wasn’t talking to him. It also helped him know because Little Omere had been asking to come over. The likelihood of Ayte being out by the weekend was slim to none. I received a call from the nurse taking care of Ayte that they’d gotten her to sleep, which was good. I prayed she found peace in slumber.

Eventually, Little Kas came and joined us. He'd apparently started watching the show after his dad told him about it. He was further along than we were but still came down and watched. He and I went back and forth, guessing what different things meant and who'd ultimately end up dying. He stepped away for a call with his mom, and when he returned, his energy was different. He was quiet. Sad even. Beneath me, I could feel the tension rolling off his father.

He'd told me Victoria hadn't been happy about their son staying with him. I wasn't anybody's parent, so I had nothing to say about the situation. Between the two of them, they'd do what was right.

Seven

KAS

I FOLLOWED my son up the long walkway in front of my parents' house. Tiny lights lined either side, leading the way to the front door. Kas walked right in, calling out to let them know we were there.

We'd just left his physical therapy session, which he didn't love. The shoulder was improving, but he couldn't stand doing the exercises. On top of that, his mother called as we were leaving.

The call was on speakerphone, so I heard all her madness. She was trying to manipulate the hell out of my son. Gone was the snippy attitude he'd been dealing with. She'd been acting like she had no clue why I thought he needed to be with me. It was so bad, Kas was starting to question himself. He was starting to rethink all of their interactions. She had him wondering if he'd just been too sensitive.

Ultimately, I took the phone and told her we'd talk later. I switched it off speakerphone when her tone changed. I didn't want him to hear the bullshit. He knew what was up, though. His head hung a little lower by the time I hung up. I figured a stop to see his grandparents would lift his head back up.

Of the 8 grandkids spread between my siblings and me, he was the only grandson. He was spoiled as fuck.

I shut the door behind me and followed him around to the kitchen. My father was there standing at the stove, stirring what smelled like a pot of chili.

"Hey, Grandpa." Kas hurried over to throw an arm around my father's shoulder.

"What's going on, man?" My dad switched the spoon from his left to his right hand to place an arm around Kas' waist.

"Nothing. I had physical therapy, and we wanted to stop and see you and Mema." Kas told him, "I want some chili too."

“Well, there’s more than enough.” My dad replied as he placed the spoon on a saucer beside the pot. “You okay?”

Kas nodded as he removed his arm, busying himself with a bowl of fruit on the counter, “Mmm, hmm. Just tired, I guess.”

My dad patted his back before moving away, “You’ll be good after a hot shower and something to eat. I think your Mema has a coffee cake in there too.”

“Yeah, that’ll be good.” He said softly as he left out of the kitchen.

“What’s up with him?” My dad asked as I stepped up to hug him, “His mama still not acting right?”

“Nope.” I sighed. “Trying to give her time to get herself together, but it doesn’t seem to be working.”

“Well, as long as he’s with you, I know he’s safe. We won’t have to worry about an episode like that last time.”

I stepped aside as he went to the fridge. “That’s exactly why he’s with me.”

The door leading out to my mom’s greenhouse opened, and she stepped in with an armful of tomatoes and cucumbers. “Hey, Kas.”

“Hey, Ma.” I moved to relieve her of the vegetables, careful to place them on the counter, then turned to accept the warm hug she offered. “How are you?”

“I’m good. My garden is finally growing something we can eat,” she chuckled, kissing my cheek before she released me. “What are you doing over this way?”

“Your grandson had PT and wanted to stop by.”

“Oh. My baby’s here?”

“Mmmhmm. I think he went upstairs looking for you.”

She left the kitchen in search of her pride and joy. My parents lived out of the way, but my mom was one of those people you needed to be around when you felt bad. I swear she was psychic or something because she could always tell. Whether I was trying to hide my frustration or anger or

whatever, she could always sense it, which was exactly why I agreed when Kas asked me to stop by.

He wasn't bouncing back the way I hoped. I knew that was because Victoria's anger wasn't turning off the way we'd hoped. I had to bring out the big guns and bring him to see his Mema, so he could get that warm, loving feeling that only she could provide.

My dad continued with the conversation, "She didn't straighten up even after you spoke to her?"

"She doesn't see anything wrong with what she's doing." I went to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair to drop into it. "She keeps trying to manipulate him into telling me he wants to go back home—"

"Hell, no," he snapped as he leaned down to pull a cast iron pan of cornbread from the oven and set it on a trivet.

"I know, Pops. I'm not even considering it. I make sure to drop him off and pick him up because I don't want her to show up and force him to go with her. You know him; he's respectful. Regardless of what's going on, she's still his mom, and if she tells him to do something, he's going to do it."

"Maybe you should get the school involved."

"Not right now. She hasn't reached *that* point yet." I stretched my legs out beneath the table. "I'm also trying to be sensitive to what he's feeling."

"Torn," he asked knowingly.

I nodded. "Yeah, he doesn't want to admit she's making him feel bad to her."

"He also doesn't understand what's happening."

"Right, and I don't want him to know."

"That's the good person in you. She probably doesn't even appreciate it."

"Not right now because she's spinning."

"She can spin all she wants as long as my grandson ain't caught up in it." He expressed angrily. "We took him before,



and we'll do it again. She don't know that?"

"I hope so, because I really don't want to do it again."

He tutted as he left the kitchen. I followed to see where Kas and my mom were, not at all surprised to find him laid out in her lap on the couch getting his face rubbed. She was wiping his eyes as well, which didn't surprise me. Like I said, she'd get whatever was wrong out of you.

"You're staying for dinner, right?"

"I wasn't really planning on it, but we can." I dropped into the armchair across the room.

"Stay. Let my baby get something to eat. I can feel his bones through his little chest."

I snorted, "Ma, this boy is eating me out of house and home. That's metabolism that has him that skinny. Believe me, he ain't missing no meals."

"Either way, let my baby eat."

"He can eat, Ma."

"Daddy, we should bring Ms. Cevyn some of Grandpa's chili."

"Who?"

"A friend of mine," I supplied. Cevyn was still at my place. She felt better about her sister being in the hospital, but I wanted to keep her close to me. I'd made sure Kas was cool with her being there. They got along well. He wasn't a fan of sleeping in his own bed, but he let it slide.

"A woman?"

My head hit the back of the chair, "Ma."

"Fine, Kaswell. I won't ask any questions. There's more than enough for you to take to your *friend*." Her eyes dropped to Kas, "Is she pretty?"

"She's super pretty, Mema," he grinned. If I could get it off without hitting my mom, I would have popped him in the head with a pillow.

“She nice?”

He nodded. “Mmmhmm.”

“That’s good,” she winked at me, “That’s all I want to know.”

We ate dinner a little while later. Kas wanted to stay, but he left his bookbag at the house and didn’t have a change of clothes. My dad promised to pick him up from school the next day, so he could spend the weekend over there. That worked. I planned to get a bit of overtime in.

“You feel better?” I elbowed Kas as we pulled onto my street.

He nodded. “Yeah, Mema always makes me feel better. She’s magic or something.”

“It’s something,” I agreed, “I think it’s the hugs.”

“For real. It’s like... I don’t know.”

“Love, dude. She’s learned how to cover whoever she’s hugging in her love and make everything better.” I turned the car into the driveway, reaching up for the clicker to open the garage door. I was glad to see Cevyn’s car still there as we pulled in.

He was out of the car before I was, grabbing the containers my folks made sure to send us home with. My mom really just knew I was starving him over there. She sent us home with more than half the pot like he wasn’t coming back the next afternoon.

I trailed him inside, stopping behind him to kick out of my shoes in the mudroom.

Cevyn was sitting on a barstool at the kitchen counter on her work computer.

“Hey, Ms. Cevyn.”

“Hey, Kases.” We laughed. She’d called him Little Kas that morning, and he about fell out.

“Kas made sure we brought you some,” I told her as I handed her the container and aluminum foil square of

cornbread.

“Thank you, Kas. You didn’t have to.”

“My grandpa’s chili is so good. You had to have some.” He held up the container of cake pieces to show her, “We got cake too.”

“My goodness. I might have to come over here more often.”

“Been telling you that for years,” I murmured, trying to keep my voice low.

The utter look of horror on my kid’s face as he hightailed it from the kitchen showed how much I failed. Cevyn cracked up.

“He is too cute.”

“It’s subjective,” I reached out to massage the back of her neck. “How are you?”

“Better. Um, I spoke to the nurse again. Ayte’s doing alright. Still a bit manic, but it’s slowly getting better.”

“Need a hug?”

“Is that one of those warm, touchy things where you kiss on me?”

“Give or take a squeeze.”

“One of those would be amazing right now.”

“Oh,” I hummed as I slid out of my coat and tossed it on one of the chairs around the table, “Amazing?” She came to me, wrapping her arms around my midsection and pressing the side of her face to my chest. I wrapped my arms around her, leaning back against the counter as she leaned all her weight into me.

Her head tilted back, putting her lips at the perfect angle to receive the kiss she clearly wanted. I was a giving guy, so I obliged.

She held the kiss for a few moments, then kissed around my cheek, pressing hers against mine as she pushed up on her

tiptoes and moved her arms up to my neck.

“Thank you for letting me impose on you. I didn’t realize how alone I felt until I didn’t have to be. I appreciate this so much.”

I lifted my head to peer down at her, “What are you imposing on?” I held tight when she tried to step out of my arms and repeated the question.

“You,” she softly answered.

“How?”

“Kas... this isn’t what we’ve been doing all these years. Up until recently, it was sex— which is perfectly fine— maybe one of us would sleepover, but our lives didn’t intertwine. It seems we’re intertwining, and it wasn’t a part of the original deal. You have your son here because he’s going through something, and you’re allowing me to be here. I’m just saying I appreciate it is all.”

“I don’t care how we look at it; our lives have been intertwined for five years. Maybe the degree has changed, but that doesn’t constitute an imposition. We’re *friends*, right?” She nodded. “Friends help one another out. End of story.”

“Either way, thank you.”

“Either way,” I mimicked, “You’re welcome.”

Eight

## CEVYN

AYTE WAS RELEASED on Christmas Eve. Gone was the bouncy, bubbly, busy person I encountered the morning she went in-patient. In her place was the person I hated seeing.

She was always super depressed after a hospital stay. No matter how much I tried to help pull her out of it, it was something she ultimately did when she was ready. And that damn sure wasn't the first day.

At her place, she went straight for the shower. The place was spotless, I was glad to see. The cleaning company I hired just happened to be owned by a co-worker of Kas.' She didn't ask questions, just got rid of everything.

I turned the heat up as she disappeared into the bathroom. Three weeks without movement, and the place was as cold as the lowest point of Antarctica. She'd freeze to death in the shower for sure, without the heat on.

I returned to my car for the groceries I'd purchased before picking her up. I knew she'd refuse, but we had to eat. And typically, we cooked together for the holiday. She loved that. So, whether she helped her not, we'd be having Christmas dinner. I even had a little visitor coming over. Omere would spend the night with us along with the entire next day. If there was one thing that would lift her spirits, it was that little person.

After I put the groceries away, making sure I had everything I needed for the fairly small meal, I went back to her room to pull the fake tree from the back of her closet, dragging it up to the living room. Shit was heavy as hell. I hadn't been lifting anything lately. Between the Kases, I'd been spoiled.

I hadn't spent Ayte's entire hospital stay with them. Regardless of him saying I wasn't imposing, I didn't want to usurp all his time. Little Kas was still dealing with whatever was going on with his mom daily and needed his dad more

than I did. I stayed the first full week, then returned to my regularly scheduled program.

Kas was actually back with his mom, though. She'd done a 180 and apologized to their son, asking if he'd come spend some time with her. As far as I knew, things were working out fine. They'd be splitting Christmas between. That left me to my own family.

I really missed the two of them. After growing up with parents who didn't know the meaning of affectionate or support, I liked watching Kas give both to his son constantly.

I got a little sad wondering how much better things would be for my sister if our parents had just a drop of what Kas had. So many of Ayte's issues came from being rejected by the two people who brought her into the world. That was why it was so hard for her to accept Omere's love. She didn't think he could love her. She couldn't fathom him choosing to love her and all her troubles.

“What are you doing?”

I'd been so deep in my thoughts, I hadn't heard Ayte come out of the shower or her bedroom. Thankfully, the heat was moving around the apartment well, so she shouldn't have been cold. She'd slipped into a pair of sweats, a long sleeve tee, and a pair of thick socks.

I paused as my eyes ran over the open box with the folded tree pieces. “Um, your little person will be with us for the next two days, and if he comes here and doesn't see a tree, there's going to be hell to pay.”

She smiled but just as quickly frowned. “Cev, I don't want to take him away from his family for the holiday.”

“Ayte, I love you,” I began sweetly, adding more bite on the tail end, “More than anything in this world, but you're pissing me off.”

Cev—”

“We're his family too, Ayte.” I snapped. “He wants to spend Christmas with you. Omere is perfectly fine with it. You've had a hard month, and we know how happy your baby

makes you. Stop. We're gonna wrap his gifts. Then, I'll go get him. Then, we'll put the tree up. You and him will make a pie. We'll make cookies, then we'll cook dinner for tomorrow and have a good day. You deserve to have a good Christmas. You deserve to spend it with your son. You haven't done anything wrong that you deserve to sit here by yourself on a family holiday."

Seeing the unshed tears in her eyes made my eyes start leaking. She came over and sat beside me on the floor.

"Cev," her voice croaked, "I'm so tired of feeling like this." She broke down, which tore my heart up. "I fucking hate it. Every second of my life, I'm fighting to crawl out of this fucking maze in my head, and it's so hard. I just want to feel better. I want to be able to control my own life, but I can't." She pressed her hands to her face, sobbing uncontrollably.

"And this time," she gurgled, "It was hard to get out. I could... I could see it coming as clear as day. I knew things were getting out of control, and I tried to let you know, but it's like this force just kept me inside. I felt like I was locked in a closet. I could see everything. Hear everything, but I wasn't in control. It's like a prison. And it's so hard to fight that every day. I take my meds, Cev. Religiously. They don't make me feel good either, but I take them. And it still happens. How am I supposed to live the rest of my life like this?"

I hated not having an answer for her. I didn't know what it felt like to live like that, so how could I offer her any advice?

"Like, my whole life is wrapped up in this illness. I can't raise my son. I can't work. Can't even get my driver's license."

She'd had two jobs in her life, and neither ended well. The stress of each environment tipped her into a tailspin that took months to stop. One of the places had her arrested. The charges were dropped after the prosecutor was made aware of her medical history, but still. She was put on disability, which barely covered her bills.

Luckily, we'd been fighting a lawsuit against one of her doctors since she was a teen. A malpractice suit, to be specific.



Long story short, Ayte won enough money to live comfortably for the rest of her life. So, money wasn't an issue.

And driving? It wasn't an option. She knew how to drive, but like with Omere, she didn't trust herself to be alone in a car.

"I'm sorry, Ayte." I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, pulling her against me, hoping to comfort her some. "I wish I could take it all off you. I really do."

"It's like constant torment, Cev. Constant. The-the... The shit that rolls around in my head all day is crazy— even to me. But I can't control it, and I just want it to turn off. Even on days where I seem good, I'm battling it, Cev. It's just that on those days, I'm winning. But I'm so beat up at the end of the day. I want to be better."

I held my own sobs in, but my chest quivered with the silent cries. Ayte had never explained to me how she felt. Of course, she'd told me she just felt wild and out of control and generally bad, but never that her mind was fighting her every second of her life.

"I don't even remember what it was like before things got bad."

Puberty was her trigger. I'm younger, but I can clearly remember the day things started going downhill. She got her first period, then somewhere between the first and the second, she snapped. She couldn't sleep. She would be up all night walking around the house. Teachers started calling home from school because they said she was acting up. My parents ignored it, then she was expelled from middle school. Then they took her to see a psychiatrist. After that, it was like she had a new doctor every week until they nailed down what was going on.

I didn't fully understand at the time. All I knew was my big sister was going through something. Then came the suicide attempts that my parents ignored because they thought she was looking for attention, and I had to step up and protect her. I never thought it was for attention. Especially not after walking

into the house one day and finding her with a rope around her neck.

“I feel like I’m holding everybody back,” she said, her voice low. “Omere. Hell, you can’t even live your life.”

“I’m living my life the way I want, Ayte.”

“Cev, you turned down a six-figure position with *Google* for me.” She pulled out of my arms to look in my face with her apologetic eyes. “Fuckin *Google*, Cev. You lost so many boyfriends in high school and college. Like, come on. You have to admit that I’m—”

“You’re my fucking sister, is what you are. And none of those people meant shit to me over you. I don’t regret any decision I’ve made to stay and help you. If it’s for me, I’ll get it, Ayte. I always do. And if I have to somehow sacrifice you for it, it’s not fucking for me. It’s that simple. Don’t mourn for shit for me that I don’t even want. *Google* would have been an amazing opportunity, but *Feed In* is just as amazing. I love my job.

“Does this get difficult at times? It sure does. But not because I’m tired of dealing with you or mad I missed out on something. It’s tiring because it hurts my heart to see you hurting. It hurts my heart to see you sick, knowing what it does to you. I’m tired of you feeling like you need to apologize for existing. I’m tired of you being unhappy. Wish I could give you a break or something.”

“It would be nice to be able to go away, huh? And leave these thoughts here in Connecticut.” She finished softly, running a hand back and forth over the prickly tree tines.

*Lightbulb.* “Why can’t we?”

Her head came up, “Huh?”

“Why can’t we get away and leave the thoughts here?”

“I was joking, Cev.”

“I’m not,” the more I thought about it, the better it sounded. “Let’s go.”

“What— where?”

“Somebody’s island.” I reached over into my purse and pulled my phone out. “I have enough airline miles from my job that we can go to Saturn if we choose. Pluuuuuus,” I scrolled until I found the email I needed, “my boss has these properties that employees can stay at for free. It’s almost like *Airbnb*... Let me see what’s available.” I swiped through the list of locations until I found the perfect spot, then turned the phone towards her.

She leaned in, to peer at the screen, then looked up to me, “You want to go to Curacao?”

“We’re going to Curacao,” I corrected, turning the phone back around to put my information in to reserve the cute little villa. There was a nice private walled-in pool behind the house too. It was perfect.

“You have to take time off—”

“If I did, so what? However, we get two free holiday weeks, and I planned mine for January anyway. So, I have the time off. We have somewhere to stay, and as soon as I find flights, we’ll have transportation. So, we’re out of here, babycakes.” I had the flights booked within ten minutes. “See how easy that was.” I danced in my seat, excited.

She laughed a little, but there was still a bit of doubt in her eyes.

“Come on, Ayte. We’re gonna have a good time. Get excited about it, please. We’re getting on a plane the day after New Year’s, and we’re gonna spend a few days getting tanned, eating, and having the time of our lives. Please.”

“I’m excited, Cev.”

“Good. Now, help me get this tree up.” I told her as I pushed to my feet, bringing the bottom of the tree with me.

“I don’t want to put the same ornaments from last year.” She eyed the tree thoughtfully.

“Even better, we can run to Target and see what they have—It’s gonna be a madhouse in there, but whatever.” I was down to do anything she wanted. She wasn’t crying, which was all I wanted. “We’ll stop off and get Omere, and he can come help.

He's with the babysitter," I hurried to explain. She would never ride with me to pick him up, too afraid to see his dad.

"Okay."

As expected, Target was packed. The lines were longer than Shaq's legs, but we didn't care. I prayed the entire walk to the Christmas section that we'd find stuff. They weren't too cleaned out. I stayed back and let Ayte get whatever she wanted. She was super chatty now, switching topics between the decorations and the trip.

She'd just put two glass star ornaments in the carriage when she stopped, her face falling.

"What's wrong?"

"I didn't get Omere any presents," the tears were instant. "Shit, Cev."

"No, nope, no. I got you, Ayte. You had the list in your kitchen. I ordered everything you said you wanted to get him. They're in the spare room. I figured we could wrap them tonight. We're good."

Her shoulders sagged in relief, and she sighed a heavy breath. "Cevyn, you're a fucking miracle."

"I do what I can," I teased, hoping this shifted back to a good time. It did.

Once she had everything she needed for the tree, we headed for the front of the store.

"Cevyn," a deep voice called.

*Oh, God.* I stopped and turned to speak, "Hey, Malik."

"I thought that was you." Obviously.

"It's me. How are you?"

"Good, good. You?" his eyes passed over Ayte; just that quickly, he dismissed her. He knew who she was because he'd seen her pictures at my place. I was tempted to pull my stun gun out and shoot his ass.

"Same. Doing a bit of last-minute shopping."

“Yeah. My mom needs heavy cream, and I’ve been to four different stores to find it.”

“No luck here either?”

“Not for the cream, but I think running into you is kinda lucky.”

I chuckled to hide my irritation. I tripped over my words when a bigger frame passed by him, heading for the front of the store, covering his mouth to hide a laugh. “Depends on who you’re asking. Merry Christmas.”

Ayte sputtered as we moved on. “Wow, Cev. That’s how you’re doing these dudes?” She was cracking up.

“There was no point in getting his hopes up, Ayte.” I pushed the cart towards the front of the store, trying to see where Kas disappeared to. He wasn’t in any of the lines, though. *Damnit.*

“You just ruined his Christmas, Cev.”

“*He* ruined his Christmas.” He’d reached out since we went our separate ways, telling me he’d had time to think and realized he was insensitive about my situation and wanted to try again. I’d left him on read.

I eased the cart into the shortest line. *Oh, well.*

“I’m excited to get new clothes for the trip,” Ayte admitted, pulling my attention from our surrounding area. “Like, really excited.”

“That’s exactly how you should feel, boo. Hell, I’m excited too. I have two bathing suits I bought over the summer and never took out the package. I’m about to put some mileage on those.”

We went on vacation one time together. It was right after Omere was born, and she spiraled. Right before she moved out and refused to go back. That vacation hadn’t gone well. She was still getting her meds regulated after having been off them for a month, and they weren’t giving her a high enough dose because she was breastfeeding.

I was confident that this one would be better. For her sake, I needed it to be better. She deserved it.

She lowered her voice and whispered, “You know what I need?”

“A waxing,” we busted out laughing.

“Exactly.”

“Yeah, I need one as well.”

“You’re not looking like a wooly mammoth like me, Cev.”

“You’re absolutely right.” We cracked up again.

When I inhaled, I got two lungs full of Kaswell Mosely.

Even Ayte stopped laughing. She peered behind me and smiled a little before turning the right way. She must have caught eyes with him. She’d never seen him, though, so she was probably just being polite. I turned around, and his eyes shifted to me.

“Are you stalking me?” I asked in jest.

“All I have to do is send you a “come over” text to get you where I want you, Cev. There’s no need.”

Beside me, I heard Ayte whisper, “Well, damn.”

“Shut up,” I laughed. “I don’t need my sister knowing I don’t have any self-control.” I motioned to Ayte, “Ayte, this is Kas. Kas, Ayte.”

His smile was big and genuine as he said, “Nice to finally meet you, sweetheart.”

“You too,” she grinned.

“What are you doing out in Target in the middle of the day?” There was a medium-sized box beneath his big arm. The other hand was free.

“Man, Kas casually mentioned these headphones he’s been dying for last night.”

“Oh, that spoiled baby you have?”

“That’s exactly what he is,” he grumbled. “But the progress reports were just released, and there were too many A’s for me to ignore. So, I had to. These shits are sold out everywhere, but one of my co-workers knows somebody who works here, and he held them for me. This is it, though.”

“Where are y’all spending Christmas?”

“Over Ghost’s folk’s house. My grandfather and aunt came up too.”

“Do you have a big family?” Ayte asked. If she was asking questions, he’d made her feel comfortable.

“Huge,” he rolled his eyes, “I’m one of 5 kids. Then my dad’s family has more kids than I can count. So, yeah. It’s cool, though. We always have a nice time.”

“That’s good.”

“What are y’all’s plans?”

“We’re gonna cook at Ayte’s place. We’re picking up the baby when we leave here. Gonna decorate the tree, make pie and hang out.”

“Oh, that’s right. I’ve heard about your pie, Ayte. My mom’s is the best I’ve had, so, you know, if you want to slide me a piece and try to dethrone her, I’m not gonna say no.”

Ayte giggled, “I’ll take that challenge. I’ll make sure Cevyn brings you a piece. But don’t try to lie just to stay loyal to your mom.”

“I would never. I don’t play about pie.” They laughed.

The customer before us was being handed her receipt, so I motioned for Kas to go ahead of us. “I know you have to get back to work.”

He hesitated, “You sure? I don’t want me going ahead to somehow be used as a reason Ayte’s pie didn’t beat my mom’s”

Ayte cracked the fuck up. “I won’t need an excuse.”

“Suuure,” he winked at her as he moved around us, handing the box to the cashier. He waited for us to cash out

after making his purchase, then walked us to my car.

“Ayte, it was dope as fuck meeting you, baby. Hope you have a good holiday,” he told her as he put all of our bags in my trunk.

“You too, Kas.” She told him as she moved over to the passenger door.

With a hand curved around my waist, he dropped his face to mine and offered me a few kisses. “Talk to you later?”

I nodded. He kissed me one more time before releasing me. “Have a good day.”

“You too, baby,” he called as he strolled down towards his truck.

Ayte’s eyes were wide with wonder as she turned to me once we’d both climbed in. I giggled, trying to ignore her. Kas was a lot to look at.

“Cevyn fucking Braddock, why did I not know that man looks like that?”

I cracked up, “You never asked.”

“And man, do I regret it. That is a tall glass of dick, Cevyn. Sheesh.”

I fell back in my seat and cackled. Ayte could be so expressive when she wanted to. “Yeah, he is that.”

“Dang, he’s cute,” she said as she buckled her seatbelt. “And his energy is... is... I don’t even know how to describe it, but he has amazing energy. You know, I didn’t want you to introduce me to Malik. But I’m glad I met Kas. He didn’t make me feel invisible, or... you know how Mindy did when I first met her. Um, acted like I was a bother or anything. He just seems like a genuinely nice person.”

I hated that Mindy made her feel like that but was for sure glad Kas didn’t.

“He is. He’s a very caring person.”

“I like that for you, Cev. You have somebody to take care of you— I know you don’t need it, but I’m glad that he’s what



you go to when you're not dealing with me."

"Ayte—"

"I know what you're thinking, and I'm not saying that. I just mean... I'm glad you have him. Regardless of what you like to hide from me, I know caring for me is a lot. And sometimes, I worry that helping me makes people treat you a certain way. Like Malik. But I think I can be confident that Kas doesn't do that. He told me it was dope to meet me, Cev. Probably didn't really mean much to him to say, but that made me feel good."

"He meant it."

"Yeah, well, make sure you give him some as a thank you for me."

I laughed so hard I couldn't breathe. I was going to do it any way but was glad she was on board.

Omere was elated to see Ayte when he came out to the car. He was so excited to spend Christmas with her. She climbed in the back with him and listened to him rattle off everything she'd missed. He didn't know she'd been in the hospital, of course, just thought she was away. So, he made sure to let her know every detail of his month. He didn't have any new toys to show her because Santa saved them to drop off on Christmas morning. But when he got them, he was gonna show her all of them.

Back at the house, we laughed through setting up the tree. He'd put the one up at his house with his daddy and was tickled pink that he was putting Ayte's up. She told him she'd waited for him because only he could make her tree special. We lifted him so he could put the star on the tree, then stepped back to survey our work. It was gorgeous. Ayte went the traditional route and only used red, green, and gold decorations. The only deviation was a blue ornament Omere made at school for her. There was no way she wasn't putting that on her tree.

Then, it was pie time. I stayed in the living room because that was their thing.

We stayed up late into the night with hot chocolate, Christmas movies, and pie. I waited until Omere was in bed to start my cooking. It was my time to unwind. Of course, unwinding included facetimeing Kas as he lay in his bed listening as I prattled on. I made sure to show him his piece of pie, safely sitting in a small container.

I told him about the trip. He agreed it was a good idea. I made sure to thank him for making my sister feel welcome. He waved me off, of course. It was just who he was.

He drifted off somewhere after midnight, and I couldn't bring myself to end the facetime. He was so cute when he was asleep. Ayte came in to help clean up and saw him and mouthed, "Oh my God..." I eventually hung up because we had a mountain of gifts to wrap for Omere and didn't want to disturb Kas' sleep.

It took about another hour, but we got it done, neatly arranging them under the tree. I thought I would get to sleep in the guestroom alone, but Ayte insisted I slide in her king-sized bed on the other side of Omere.

Thankfully, he didn't wake up too early. But when he did, the whole house was roused. He squealed excitedly as he shook Ayte, telling her Santa had come. He must have snuck out of bed and went to check before coming back to wake us up.

Ayte told him he had to brush his teeth and wash up before he could open his presents which cracked me the hell up. I giggled from my spot in the bed where I hadn't moved, listening to Omere sing, "I'm gonna open pwesents," over and over as he brushed his teeth.

I thought I'd be able to stay in bed while he opened his gifts, but Omere wasn't having it. He helped Ayte drag me out the bed, holding my hand to make sure I followed them out to the living room.

"He ate the tookies, Auntie." He told me, pointing towards the empty plate beside the tree. It was filled with thumbprint kiss and sugar cookies when he went to sleep. Ayte and I tore those cookies up during our wrapping party.

“Wow.”

“Santa left you a note, Mere,” Ayte announced, pulling the sliver of red construction paper from beneath the plate.

He gasped, “What does it say?”

“It says these were the best cookies he’s ever had, and thank you so much for cooking them.”

“I told you!” he jumped around excitedly. “I told you, Mommy. My tookies are the bestest ever.”

“You did.” She waved him over to the tree, “Open your presents.”

I dropped down onto the couch with my phone out, recording a video for his dad. My ears were ringing by the time he got through all of them. That boy squealed every time he ripped the paper off a new one.

“Woo, Jesus,” I chuckled on my way into the kitchen after wading through the mountain of discarded wrapping paper. If we were going to have dinner at a decent time, things needed to get moving.

I was reaching to turn the oven on when my phone buzzed with a text from Kas. It was a voice memo.

I smiled when it started playing, and it was the younger Kas wishing my family and me a merry Christmas. I sent one right back, wishing him the same and thanking him.

Midway through the day, my mother’s phone number popped up on my screen, but I ignored it. She was calling to wish me a merry Christmas, but only me. I didn’t feel like arguing about how they treated Ayte on the holiday. Didn’t want her to catch wind of it and start feeling bad either. We had such a good day.

Omere went home the next day, but I stayed with Ayte. She wasn’t ready to be by herself, which was fine. I stayed with her all the way through New Year’s.

I had to go home then to get everything packed for the trip. Then, we were off.

Nine

## CEVYN

WE LANDED at noon the next day. A car service was waiting for us outside the airport, but there was a car we could use at the property if we wanted to drive. Which, of course, I did. I liked to explore places myself. I didn't want a tour guide. I wanted to uncover the island's secrets in my own way. Ayte agreed.

The villa was big enough to host a group of ten, which meant we didn't have to be all over each other if we didn't want to be.

I let Ayte pick her room first, then took the one across the hall. I showered the trip away, then went out on the balcony to look around. I expected Ayte to take a nap after her shower, but she was already down in the pool wading around in a red two-piece.

"It was calling you?" I asked from my spot, leaning on the banister.

She looked around, confused, then looked up and found me. "It was, Cev. I laid down for barely a second and then got into my bathing suit."

"Is it warm?"

She nodded, "There's a bit of cool, but it's perfect."

"You want to be alone, or can I come down?"

"Of course, you can come down. Even if I did want to be alone, this pool is big enough that we won't even run into each other."

"True. Alright, let me get into my suit, and I'm coming."

I screamed when I reached the first level, and a man was in the kitchen.

"I'm so sorry, ma'am. I'm the chef this week, Anton." An older black man with a slight accent and a deep tan apologized.

“Oh, Jesus.” I pressed a hand to the center of my chest. I waved his second apology off. “It’s okay. I did see that you’d be here.”

“I apologize for not being here when you arrived; they had your arrival time as this evening.” He returned to his place beside the 6-burner range, where he’d been chopping vegetables.

“That’s my fault. We switched the flight and didn’t update the groundskeeper. It’s cool, though.” Luckily, I’d put a swim-shirt on over my suit to come down. If not, he would have gotten an eyeful of my thong-covered ass. The only male’s eyes I wanted on my naked ass was back home drooling over the picture I’d just sent him.

“I’ll have something ready for you and your sister in just a little bit.” Anton went to the refrigerator and pulled out a glass carafe of reddish-orange juice. “Fresh fruit punch?” He offered, “Not from Minute Made.”

I cracked up, “Yes, please.” I watched as he poured two glasses of the fruit juice, then handed them to me.

Ayte was sitting on the side of the pool with her head back and her legs moving through the water when I brought her drink.

“Oh, wow. We have a whole chef to ourselves?” She asked after I warned her about Anton.

I nodded. “Yup. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And anything else we want.”

“This is so nice, Cev.”

“For real.” I went to sit in one of the sunchairs that allowed just my lower body to be in the water. “Do you want to plan anything, or are we pantsing the whole trip?”

“Let’s pants it. We have time.”

“I like how you think, Ayte Braddock.”

After a meal of the best freakin fish I’d ever tasted and fresh vegetables, we went down to the beach behind the property and walked the meal off.

Ayte was so happy and talkative, my heart swelled. We'd be there for ten days, and I wanted her to be like that every second of it.

\* \* \*

One night later that week, after dinner and showers to wash the day's activities away, I sat across from Ayte out by the pool under the pergola. The sun was setting, the breeze was sweet, and it seemed that finally, the world was quiet.

I didn't want to push her, but I wanted to get the answer for Omere. He wanted his family together, and I knew she wanted to be with them too. I hoped that starting a dialogue about it could help start moving them in some direction. Any direction.

"Ayte," I called.

Her quiet regard lifted from the still pool to my face. "Hmm?"

"Is it cool to bring up something heavy?" I always wanted her consent before these conversations. I don't care how good a day we had, only she knew what she could handle. She nodded.

I brought my legs up onto the padded bench, "So, you and Omere have been living separately going on four years now, right?" Another nod. "I know part of it is you not wanting him to deal with the day-to-day things you go through. But, out of your own mouth, every day isn't bad. Outside of your recent hospital stay, you've been doing really well. What else is holding you back?"

Her eyes began to water, and she began frantically wringing her hands, her facial features fighting a total breakdown.

Immediately, I felt like shit and tried to end the conversation. "Don't worry about it, Ayte. I'm so sorry for bringing it up."

"No," she croaked, "I... I need to-to tell you. "

“Tell me what?”

Her wet eyes came to me, pleading for forgiveness, “Cev, I... I just... I don’t want you to think bad of me. Please. I...”

I left my side of the couch and moved over to be next to her. “Ayte, I’ve never thought bad of you. I can’t. You know I don’t judge you. I love you and want to help you be happy. That’s it.”

She didn’t say anything for a long time, but the myriad of emotions dancing across her face said she was struggling, bad. She closed her eyes and swung her head back and forth for what seemed like forever.

Finally, she opened her eyes, aiming them down at the ground. I was not prepared for what came out of her mouth. I was stunned, but that quickly morphed into sympathy for my sister. So many things that had taken place over the last four years made perfect sense now.

Ultimately, she broke down, crying against my shoulder until there were no more tears. I didn’t ask her anything. Didn’t even want to talk about it anymore.

I honestly didn’t know what to do with the information either. It wasn’t my place to tell Omere what she’d said. Even if I wanted to. I knew, like me, he loved her and would understand, but Ayte had a hard time accepting Omere being as good to her as he was. She didn’t think she deserved it. Didn’t deserve him.

All he wanted was to marry her and spend his life proving how much he loved her. But after hearing her why, I knew there was little to no chance of Omere getting his happily ever after with Ayte. The worst part was even though she couldn’t be with him, him getting into something with another woman would probably kill my sister. Which he knew. Which, outside of truly loving my sister, was a reason he’d kept to himself.

On the final day of the trip, I rented a boat that would take us snorkeling and parasailing. I enjoyed the boat ride and the snorkeling, but parasailing was not on my list of shit to do



before I died. Ayte was the more adventurous of us and practically hopped into the harness when it was time.

“Stop looking at me like that, Cev.” She giggled as the captain’s assistant buckled her in.

“How am I looking at you?” I asked with raised, skeptical eyebrows. She had a beautiful mahogany tan from ten days being in the sun.

“You got that, ‘better you than me,’ look on your face,” she said with a cackle.

“Oh, that’s exactly what’s running through my mind.” I sputtered a nervous laugh. The only flying I did was in an airplane. In a first-class seat. With a seatbelt. I left the rest of that wild shit to the professionals. My sister was not a damn professional, so I was nervous as shit for her.

She, on the other hand, was super giddy about getting up there.

“Ready?” the sun-tanned man asked her with a pretty white smile.

She nodded excitedly, grinning brighter than I’d seen in some time.

He checked to make sure her life vest was secure, helped her get hooked up to the wing. He instructed her to drop down to her butt, where he once again checked the harness. Then he reached back for a lever, and she started floating.

“Cevyn, Ayte...” she yelled as she began to rise.

“Nyn, Tyn,” I answered.

Ayte waved as she floated higher and higher. The boat zipped around the water, towing her until she reached the maximum height the long cord would allow. At that point, she was too far up for me to clearly see her features, but she looked like she was fine. I probably would have been freaking out.

I wanted her to have her time up there, so I turned my attention to the rapidly passing water around us. Every so often, I’d get hit with a slight spray of water, and I loved it.

The trip had turned out to be exactly what we needed. The only thing that probably would have made it better was if Kas could have come— Not that I invited him. Hell, we hadn't been anywhere together. Ever. Not even a restaurant. So, an island vacation was for sure out of the scope of our relationship.

“Still would've been nice,” I made sure there was little to no volume to my declaration. Didn't want the captain and whoever side-eyeing me.

I looked back to Ayte to find her head leaned all the way back and all four of her limbs spread out like she was soaking up every bit of the moment she could.

I had to quickly reach up and swipe an unexpected tear from my eye. Seeing her so at peace made me happy. I just wished this was an experience she could share with her Omeres.

The smile on her face as they reeled her back in was so serene. I don't think I'd ever seen her look that way.

“How was it?” I asked as soon as her butt hit the back of the boat.

She grinned, “Oh, my God, Cev. It was the most peaceful thing I've ever experienced.”

“Peaceful?” was my dubious reply. “With all that air in your face?”

“No, it wasn't like that, Cev.” She said as she stepped out of the rig, then rushed over to sit next to me. “It was so quiet and still up there, Cev. I don't think I've ever felt peace like that. I just... I sat up there and talked to God.”

“Oh, yeah?” I smiled at her. “He say anything good?”

She nodded, but when I thought she'd elaborate, she turned to peer out at the water. I didn't push. Whatever conversation she had with God was clearly a good one, and if keeping it to herself prolonged the peace I saw emanating from her, that was fine with me. We went back to snorkeling for a good while before the boat returned to the beach.

After spending all morning out in the water, we were both badly in need of a midday siesta. We separated at the top of the stairs and disappeared into our rooms. I took my time scrubbing everything clean, not wanting a single grain of salt or sand left behind. I oiled up after, cranked up the AC, and dove into the king-sized bed.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed when I felt my body rocking from being shaken awake.

"Cev," Ayte called.

"Hmm," I grunted, trying to burrow deeper into the pillows.

"Cev, could we run to that post office so I can drop my postcard off for Omere?"

"Oh, shit," I shot into a sitting position, "That's right. I almost forgot. Give me five minutes." I told her after glancing at my watch to see we had time. I'd forgotten she'd asked to do that before we left.

She sent Omere letters all the time. He loved getting mail from her, and I knew he'd be tickled to get a letter all the way from "the ocean," as he called it. It would arrive way after we returned home, but that would trip him out even more.

We went right back to the beach, swimming and eating until it closed for the night. After another round of showers and getting everything packed up for our early departure, Ayte suggested we stay up so we could enjoy every last one of our final minutes on the island. So, we did.

Ten

## CEVYN

WE BOTH SLEPT the entire plane ride home. That staying up all night shit ain't no joke. Even after the four-hour nap, I was still exhausted. I also couldn't wait to get to Kas'. But on the drive home, Ayte shocked me.

We were maybe fifteen minutes from her house when she asked, "You think Omere would come see me?"

I turned my head to eye her curiously before returning my full attention to the road, "What kind of question is that? He's probably dying for us to get back. I'm sure—"

"No," she interrupted, then explained, "Not my baby... his dad."

I didn't have to think about my answer, "Of course, Ayte. He hasn't seen you in four years. He's been dying to... but what's going on?"

She shrugged, "I want to see him, Cev. I just... parasailing really opened my eyes. I don't know how to explain it, but—"

"You don't have to explain it, Ayte." I reached for my phone down in the cupholder. "When do you want him to come over?"

"Right now," she answered softly. "I don't... Maybe they could come spend the day with us." She nervously glanced at me, then looked down at her hands.

"Okay," sleep, and Kas could wait. I wasn't sure what was going on, but this was huge. She hadn't come right out and said it, but I knew she needed me there. Hence the "us" in that last sentence.

"Please don't do it on speaker," her hand shot out to grip my wrist. "I... Please. I don't want to hear if he says no."

"He's not, Ayte."

"I just... Please."

I nodded, then tapped to connect the call, ensuring it didn't hit the Bluetooth. The phone rang and rang and rang until Omere's heavy voice came on saying he was unavailable and to leave a message that he'd return expeditiously.

"Voicemail," I told her as I dropped the phone back into the cup colder. "He'll call back. He always does—" The phone was ringing before I could finish my sentence. I smiled over at her, "See." I picked it right back up and tapped to answer, once again making sure it didn't hit the Bluetooth. "Good morning." I greeted as I pressed the phone to my ear.

"Good morning, Ms. Island Girl. How's it going?"

I chuckled, "It's going good. We just got back, and um... I wanted to see what your plans were for the day." I could see Ayte's hands roving over each other. Her nerves always showed in her hands.

"I need to run a couple of errands. You want the boy?"

"Yes," I paused, then continued, "Both of you." Silence. I waited, understanding he was processing what I was saying.

"You— What— Wait... What?"

"Ayte wants to know if you guys are available to come spend the day with her— us." The exit for Ayte's place came up, and I steered the car down the ramp, blowing through the green light.

"She wants to see me?" he asked softly, confused.

"She does, but we understand if you have things to do."

Ayte's head dropped forward, her shoulders drooping.

"No, I... everything can wait. We can... We can be there." His voice cracked, "As long as she wants."

I swallowed the blob of emotions that tried to clog my throat. I knew this was huge for him too. He'd been begging her to see him since the day she moved out, and Ayte hadn't budged. Until now. "Okay, good. Perfect." We're a few minutes from her place. Come when you're ready."

“Yeah,” he cleared his throat. “Of course. We’re getting ready now.”

“Alright. See you in a few.” I ended the call and smiled over at Ayte. “He’s coming.”

“Good.” She didn’t return my smile, which I didn’t understand, but I could understand this was a heavy undertaking for her, especially after that conversation in Curacao. I wasn’t sure what God said to her down there, but I was glad she was listening.

We unloaded her luggage and brought it inside once at her place. She immediately went to take a shower to wash the flight off. I wanted to do the same, but she was too nervous they would arrive while I was in there. So, I’d have to wait.

“You can do this, Ayte,” I assured her after having watched her pace the living room for twenty minutes. “Omere loves you. You know that. He didn’t even hesitate when I asked him to come.”

“Then how come you said we’d understand if he couldn’t. It sounded like he had to think about it.”

“He didn’t hesitate, Ayte. He was confused. You know? This was sprung on him after being shot down every single time he’s asked over the years. It came out of nowhere. He was trying to process what I was saying.”

“But he wanted to come?” She needed that clarity. “Like... I’m not interrupting his life or anything. You know... I... Everybody always acts like me being sick is somehow an imposition to them and...I don’t want to do that anymore.”

“What do you mean?” That made me stand up. What the hell did that mean?

“No, I just want to make sure he’s coming because he wants to.”

“He is, Ayte.”

“Okay,” she said, going back to pacing. That continued for another fifteen minutes. Then, I received a text letting me know they were outside.

“They’re here.” I checked in with her once more to ensure this was what she wanted. “Still good?”

She answered with a nervous nod.

“Take a few deep breaths. This is your baby who you know loves you beyond reason and his father who feels the same way. Don’t let your mind start running. Stay in this moment, okay?” She was nodding and breathing.

“I’m gonna open the door. You coming?”

She shook her head, “I can’t... I...”

“Breathe, Ayte.”

“I need a minute, Cev.” She pleaded with worried eyes.

“That’s fine,” I told her as I helped guide her down into the chair I’d vacated. “Sit here, close your eyes, and breathe for a minute. I’m gonna go get your boy and bring him in. Then, you can let me know if you’re still good with seeing Omere, cool?”

“Yes,” she choked out.

I left her in the chair and went to the door. Omere was unbuckling Little Omere from the car seat.

“Hi, Auntie!” He called excitedly, running to me as soon as his feet hit the ground.

“Heeey, little boy.” I scooped him up and twirled twice before stopping. “How are you?”

“Good. I got a new toy to show, Mommy.” His grinning face nodded.

“You always got a new toy to show Mommy,” I giggled. “I think she has some good stuff for you too.” I placed him on the ground, “Go on inside and show her.”

“Okay.” He shot past me and straight inside.

I sighed as I turned back to Omere, who hadn’t moved from beside the car. He straightened up with his hands tucked deep in his pockets, “She changed her mind?”



I didn't want to lie to him. "I don't know yet. I'm giving her a minute."

His head bobbed as he nodded sadly, "I don't want to stress her out."

"She asked for this. We didn't discuss it at all. She, just out the blue, asked if I thought you'd want to see her. Then said she wanted y'all to come spend the day with us. Both of you."

"I want to see her. So bad."

"I know you do. And I want that for both of you. So, let me go see—"

"You think something's wrong?"

"I don't know," I told him honestly. "She had a moment of true clarity— her words, not mine— while we were down there, and something is different. Haven't put my finger on it yet."

"Was she okay down there?"

I nodded, "I think it was exactly what she needed. We had such a good time."

"Good." He sighed. "Even if she doesn't end up letting me come in today, maybe this is her opening the door to it happening soon."

"Right. Her bringing it up is huge."

"Right. Cause I have to tell you, I fucking miss her, Cev. It's not waning. I'm not mad at her. I just... I love her, and I miss her like you wouldn't believe. This shit has been so hard. And I can't... I can't move on for some reason. I'm stuck here waiting for her, you know."

"I do. We'll get y'all there." I reached out to gently rub his arm. "Let me go check, though. That little boy is a happiness bomb for her, so maybe he'll help."

"Okay."

I turned to go back inside, bracing myself for her highly probable refusal. As much as I would have liked to push, Ayte needed to do this in her own time.

Inside, she was on the floor with Omere, showing him everything we'd brought back for him.

"Auntie, it's a shark teeth," he squeaked excitedly.

"I know, baby. You should have seen the rest of the shark." I joked.

"You saw a shark, Mommy?"

"We did," Ayte answered, "We were on a boat. It was a big one."

Omere gasped. "I saw a shark at the acarium, Mommy. But it was little. I touched it."

"Oh my God," she feigned shock, "and it didn't eat you?"

"Nope." He giggled. She smiled, reaching out to run her hand over his head and face.

"Ayte..." I called softly. Her eyes lifted to me, shining with tears. I nodded back towards the door, silently asking about Omere. Her chin trembled.

"Okay," I told her, preparing to go let him know.

"No, Cev." She hopped up. "I... Yeah, he can..." she couldn't finish the sentence, so she just nodded.

"Are you sure? He understands if not."

"No, I... I need to see him today."

"Okay." I watched her for a few seconds, earning another nod of confirmation before I went to let him know. He was still at the car, leaning back against it with his gaze up the street.

"O," I called, causing him to turn his head. His eyes said he expected to have to leave. I waved him up to the stairs.

"For real?"

I nodded. "Come on."

I went back inside and went to the floor to sit with Little Omere. I didn't want to be in the middle of this.

Ayte stood off to the side, wringing her hands with her eyes on the door. Omere stepped onto the porch and paused. He couldn't see her, just his son and me. His next step brought him to the doorway. Finally, their gazes connected.

"Hey, baby," he softly greeted, eyeing her like she was one of the wonders of the world.

Ayte's shoulders lifted as she inhaled deeply, then dropped just as quickly when she exhaled. "H-Hi."

They simply stared at each other for the longest time. The tension was palpable. Then, he opened a hand to her.

Her gaze dropped to the hand and stayed there as her face twitched with emotion. Her voice was small when she asked, "Are... Are you mad at me?"

"No, baby. Never."

"Not even—"

"Never, Ayte," he told her with conviction.

Finally, she smiled and placed her hand in his. Then, they were hugging and sobbing. I took the baby into the kitchen before he noticed.

I was so proud of Ayte. Proud and happy. Obviously, nothing had happened beyond that moment, but I knew part of the reason she wouldn't see him was her fear of his anger. Her fear that at some point, he'd reject her. Fear of what his rejection would do to her. Now, she could see for herself.

When she said the whole day, she meant the whole entire day. I couldn't even be angry. My sister was happy. I mean, truly happy. Even if it was a split moment in time, she was happy. She had her family in arm's reach and was taking every opportunity it offered.

I'd sent out my text informing Kas I was home and to expect me before the day ended. He told me he was waiting with bells on. I needed to go home first, drop off my luggage, and get a shower and clean clothes. I mean, we'd washed everything in the Airbnb, but those skimpy clothes would have

me catching hypothermia in this single-digit weather we came back to.

Ayte once again surprised me that evening when she told me I could leave while Omere went to get dinner.

“Are you sure?” I asked in a whisper. Little Omere was asleep on her lap.

She nodded. “Yeah. Just when he comes back. I know you have things you want to get into, and I’ve held you up long enough.”

“Ayte, stop saying stuff like that.” There was more bite in that sentence than I anticipated. “If I had an issue, I would tell you. I’ve enjoyed myself today just as much as y’all. I love this for you.”

Her reply was a petulant, “You wouldn’t tell me, Cev.”

“Huh?”

“If you had an issue with me. You wouldn’t tell me.” I wasn’t going to lie and tell her she was wrong.

“You’re not holding me up, Ayte. I miss seeing you guys together.” I nodded towards the baby on her lap, “Omere’s never seen it, and I wouldn’t have missed it.”

She nodded, “I love you so much, Cevyn. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to convey what your support means to me.” Her face trembled. “I’m supposed to be the big sister. It’s supposed to be me helping guide you through stuff. And... And I could never do that for you. But you do it for me, and you’ve never made me feel like a burden. Mommy and Daddy,” she sighed, “... they refused to acknowledge me the second you started taking care of me. It wasn’t fair to you, but again, you’ve never complained. You protect me from so much,” she hiccupped a sob, “I can’t ever repay you.”

Two sentences into that profession, and I was wiping tears from my own eyes. I moved to sit beside them on the couch.

“I love you too, Ayte. Fuck everybody else. Except for your Omeres, because both of them love you just as unconditionally as I do.”

She smiled down at the little boy in her lap and rubbed his back. “Yeah, they do. That’s why I wanted y’all here today.”

“Turning over a new leaf or something?” she’d been saying little things that I was having trouble interpreting all day.

“Or something,” she answered softly.

The doorbell rang before I could push further. I hopped up and went to open it, finding Omere there with a box of pizza and two smaller bags.

I ate two slices before once more confirming that Ayte was cool with me leaving. She nodded, then followed me to the door to say goodbye.

“Thank you, Cev,” she pulled me into a long hug. “I appreciate you so much.”

“I appreciate you too, Ayte.”

“I’m so glad we took that trip.”

“Me too. Next time, hopefully, you can bring your boys.” Her response was a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Alright, let me get on out of here. Call me in the morning.” Again, all I got was a small smile.

“Love you, Cev.”

“Love you too.”

“Cevyn Ayte...”

“Nyne Tyn.” I finished.

I left my sister’s house and went straight home. I unpacked, then showered. As badly as I wanted to race over to Kas’ place, I needed a damn nap first. Our flight landed at 9, and it felt like I’d been going non-stop since. I knew if I went to see Kas now, I’d fall asleep before he got it in. And that was no bueno.

It was just past 6 when I laid down and a little before 9 when I woke back up. I hadn’t planned on napping that long, but there was no use crying over it.

I brushed my teeth, then got dressed, packing a few things for an overnight stay.

“Where the hell is my watch?” I wondered, a hand wrapped around the wrist it usually sat on. I checked my luggage but, of course, it was empty. I gathered my things to leave, then checked the car before I got in. “What the hell? Did I leave it down there... No, I had it on this morning.” Just as I was starting the car, the loud shrill of a phone ringer sounded. I glanced down at the screen and answered immediately.

“Hey, Ayte.”

“Hey, Cev,” she sounded out of breath.

“What’s wrong?” My nerves instantly went to shit, my mind running over every scenario it could think of. The visit with Omere triggering a break being at the top of the list.

“N-Nothing. Um, I’m getting ready for a bath. Your watch is here.”

“Oh, good. I was just looking for it. Umm, could I come grab it now? I’m on my way to Kas,’ and I have to ride right by you.”

“Of course.”

“Did your boys leave?”

“Mmmhmm, about an hour ago.”

“How do you feel?”

“Good and solid.”

“Solid? Wow, I love that.”

“Yeeaaah,” she sighed. “So, you’re coming right now?”

“Yes, ma’am. Should be there in ten.”

“Okay.” She hung up before I could get my “see you soon” out. I switched to my nighttime glasses before pulling off. Without those, I’d find myself in somebody’s tree trying to drive. As I pulled off, the phone rang again. This time with Kas’ name on the screen.

“Hellooo.” I sang, excited about that part of my night already.

“Well, hello. Just checking to see if you were still coming.”

“Yeah, I’m on my way now– Well, I gotta stop at Ayte’s to grab my watch, then I’m all yours,” I promised as I pulled up to a red stoplight.

“Mine tomorrow, too?”

“You offering brunch?”

“You won’t know until you get here.”

“Woow. I leave for a week and come back to this. Scandalous.”

“Shut up,” he chuckled.

“How are things, sir? You have a good week?” We hadn’t texted much while I was away. Outside of a handful of bikini pics I sent as torture.

“It was a week,” he chuckled. “Keeping an eye on things with Kas and Vicky.”

“Oh, dang. Issues already?” I pulled through the light when it changed, pressing down on the gas to accelerate.

“I’m not sure yet. I don’t know if I’m being hypervigilant or what. I don’t think he’ll tell me until it gets too out of hand.”

“How’d you find out before?”

“She got nasty with him in front of me a few times. Then, when I asked him, he broke down and told me. If he has to come back, I’ll do it.”

“I know you will,” I chuckled.

“Was your nephew happy to see you guys?”

“Was he?” I laughed. “Ayte even let Omere come.”

“Wow!” he exclaimed. “That’s huge. Right?”

“Bigger than that,” I confirmed, taking the turn that would put me on Ayte’s street. “She even told me to leave earlier—well, not told me to leave. But you know, said I could go.”

“That’s amazing.”

“It really is. He was so choked up to see her. It was beautiful. Seeing them as a family for the first time since Omere was five months old. My heart just about exploded out of my chest. I’ve wanted that for all of them for so long.”

“I’m glad she was able to accept that. Having somebody who truly loves you is a blessing, man. Even more so when you’re not related, you know. This person didn’t grow up having to love you because y’all share blood. They’re choosing to. That shit is powerful.”

“Well, damn, Nostradamus.” We laughed. “Not you dropping true gems when I’m on the way to ride you like a mechanical bull.” His hearty laughter made me cackle.

“Whatever.”

As I pulled up in front of Ayte’s place, I was surprised to see Omere stepping out of his car. “Ooooh,” I sang into the phone.

“What?” Kas wanted to know.

“Omere is back... sans the kid.”

“Well, I guess they had a really good day, huh?” he laughed.

“Would seem that way,” I murmured as I stepped out of the car with the phone up to my ear. “Am I interrupting something?” I asked Omere, who’d immediately come over to my car.

“I’m not sure why I’m here,” he told me. “Ayte called me a few minutes ago and told me you needed me for something.”

“Huh?” I was just as confused as he was. “I’m picking my watch up. I don’t... Could she have been trying to get you here for other reasons?”



He laughed. “If she wanted that, Cev, there was no need for subterfuge.”

Kas’ deep chuckle sounded in my ear.

Omere let me precede him up the stairs since I had a key. “She said she was about to get into the tub, so maybe that’s exactly what she’s doing. Where’s Omere?”

“The girl across the street came over to sit with him until I get back.”

I slid my key into the lock and turned before pushing the door open, “Oh, well, if you’re here for....” All of the lights at the front of the space were off, which was odd. And the distinct sound of water overflowing filled the space.

“What the hell?” I hurried towards the back of the apartment with Omere on my heels. I hit every light switch I passed, illuminating the path to the bathroom. “Oh my God,” I gasped when I noticed the crimson red water rushing from the bathroom.

Omere pushed me out of the way and kicked the door in, recoiling so hard he fell against the wall. “Fuck!”

The sight that greeted me will forever be ingrained in my mind.

Eleven

KAS

YOU ALWAYS HEAR THE TERM “BLOOD-CURDLING” scream. They say it all the time on tv. But until you’ve heard one, there’s no way to know how on point that name is.

I’ll never forget the sound of Cevyn screaming in that bathroom that night. She dropped the phone, so I couldn’t hear clearly what was going on, but it was clear: something bad had happened to AYTE.

I hung up and called the police, hoping and praying an ambulance could get there in time to help. I didn’t actually know AYTE’s address but had an idea. Cev had mentioned a few times how she lived in between the two of us and the street name. I told the operator the street and to have them look for Cevyn’s blue *Tesla*.

I called myself waiting, but I was entirely too antsy. I hopped into some clothes and shoes and drove over there myself. It wasn’t hard to find since the police, paramedics, and firefighters were there, lights flashing. I heard an officer radio in for the coroner as I walked up, and my heart broke for Cevyn.

The front of the house was cordoned off, so I waited down by Cevyn’s car. I knew she’d have to come out eventually. I know that this wasn’t what we did for each other, but there was no way I could go home and go to bed knowing she’d just found her sister’s body.

People were starting to come out on their porches to see what the fuss was. I stayed in my own area; I didn’t want to be asked shit.

Eventually, the police led Cevyn, and who I assumed was Omere, out. Both were completely soaked in blood. Up to this point, I had no idea what exactly they’d walked into, but I no longer had to wonder. One of the paramedics approached her, then gently led her over to the back of the ambulance, where he helped her sit on the bumper. A grey blanket was draped

over her shoulders as he went about checking her vitals and asking her questions about how she was feeling.

“Just take it easy,” the older woman advised softly as she removed the blood pressure cuff from Cev’s arm.

I walked over, stopping a few feet away. I wasn’t sure if she’d want me here. This was a super pivotal moment in her life, and I wouldn’t blame her for lashing out. But when her empty eyes drifted over to me, there was relief. Then a smile. A smile that worried the shit out of me.

I walked closer, nodding at the paramedic.

“Ayte’s gone,” she told me sadly, the smile slipping away as tears flowed. Then her eyes were everywhere. “I don’t... I don’t know what to do, Kas.” She pushed the blanket from her shoulders to angrily stare down at her blood-covered clothes. “I... My sister...” She sighed and looked back over at the house. “There was no note. She just... She planned it, Kas. And I missed it. I fucked up so bad,” She finished, sounding defeated.

I couldn’t even figure out how to respond. She let me pull her into a hug, where she burrowed into my coat like she was cold.

“I’m so sorry, Cev,” I whispered against her temple, unable to imagine what she was feeling. She hugged me tighter. Then, she was shivering.

“Let’s get in the car for some heat, Cev.”

She shook her head, gently disentangling from me. “I can’t,” she looked back to the house. “I gotta be here for her. I can’t... I can’t leave her. I don’t want her to be alone.”

“Will they let you back inside?” I didn’t think so.

“Probably not. It’s a crime scene, so they made us go, but I can’t... I gotta be here.”

“Okay, so do you have a change of clothes in the car? You’re soaked, Cev. It’s three degrees out here, baby. You have to change.”

I retrieved the overnight bag from her car so she could change in my truck. Her car windows weren't tinted, and mine were as dark as the law would allow. I even had an extra jacket in the car for her.

Her hands began to tremble when the coroner's van pulled up. She and Omere briefly spoke with the two attendants, then they allowed her to accompany them into the house.

I didn't know Omere, and he didn't know me, but I stood there with him as he cried. Dude was hysterical. I couldn't imagine what he felt. He had to go home and tell his son his mom was gone.

Cevyn stepped from the house a few minutes later and walked over to us.

"They're bringing her out," she told him, reaching a handout to rub his shoulder. He snorted all the fluid in his throat up and swallowed, nodding. I guess that was his way of letting her know he was staying.

As she turned to face the house, a stretcher with a black body bag eased out the door, with one person guiding the front and one guiding the back.

Cev's hands were pressed together up by her mouth as she silently watched her sister's body wheeled down the walkway. Quiet tears raced down her face as Omere sobbed beside her. The body was gently placed in the back of the nondescript minivan and carted away.

I waited as Cevyn talked to Omere. They hugged tightly and promised to talk the next day. He climbed in his car and slowly drove away. She had to spend a little more time talking to the police, then she brought her sadness back to me, stopping right in front of me to peer over at the now empty house sullenly. "I don't even have anybody to call who really cares."

"What about your parents?" They were both alive and well, as far as I'd last heard.

She shook her head, "Not tonight. If I call and hear relief or excitement, I don't know what I'd do. I need tonight to deal

with my own feelings.”

“That’s understandable.”

She turned back towards me, smiling faintly, “How did you end up here?”

I shrugged, “I... I knew something bad happened when I heard you scream and...” I hesitated, unsure of how she’d take it. “I wanted to be here for you. As whatever you needed.”

“I can’t even tell you how much you wanting to do that means to me.” She looked back up towards the house. “I don’t even know what to do right now.”

“I think the first thing we need to do is get you out of the cold. We can go back to your place—”

“No, let’s go to yours. I need to be somewhere neutral tonight.”

“That’s fine. You cool to drive, or you want to get in the truck with me?”

“Ummm,” she reached up to scratch her scalp, “I’ll drive. Just... If it’s cool, we can just stay on the phone until we get to your place. I know it doesn’t make sense, but I—”

I interjected with, “It makes perfect sense, Cev. If it helps you, we’ll do it.”

So, that’s what we did. I talked the entire ride, filling the space with random musings until I was standing next to her again.

It was after midnight, but she refused to lie down. She didn’t even want to go upstairs to sit in my bed. So, we— correction, I— camped out on the couch with a blanket. She couldn’t stop moving. I tried to hang, but I drifted off. By the time I woke the next morning, the entire funeral was planned.

Twelve

CEVYN

“OKAY, PERFECT.” I sighed, fighting back the frog in my throat that signaled another bout of tears, “As long as everything clears with the coroner, we’ll plan for service on Saturday.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The funeral director assured. “You mentioned you wanted to assist in dressing her, so I’ll let you know once she’s here, and we can plan accordingly. Do you anticipate a big turnout for the family viewing Friday evening?”

“No,” I managed in a hoarse voice. “It’ll be less than five people.” Less than three.

“Okay, you’ll have all the time you want.”

“I guess that’s everything,” I said on a shaky breath, “I should be finished with the obituary shortly. I’ll send that over as well.”

“Perfect. Please let me know if you need anything between now and the service. And once again, I am so sorry for your loss and am praying for you and your loved ones.”

“Thank you so much. Have a good day.”

“You, too, Ms. Braddock.”

I ended the call and let the phone clatter to the desk.

I was home. Alone. Where I’d been since I left Kas’ place Sunday night. He told me I could stay, but I knew I was encroaching. I told him I’d be fine, and I needed to get home and just be alone for a minute.

But man, was I regretting that. The last thing I needed was to be alone, especially after informing my parents about Ayte.

Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t expect them to be as affected as I was. But I expected something. A tear. A sob. Something. Any outward expression of grief that would prove to me that they loved her. There was nothing.



I waited until I left Kas' to place the call. Waited until I was safely in my home. I thought about calling during the drive home to get it over with quickly, but then I probably would have driven over there.

The phone rang maybe three times before my mom's voice came on. "Oh, it's Cevyn- Hello?"

"Uh, hey, Ma. Is Daddy around you?" I don't know where I pulled the strength to keep my voice level. I was about ready to start crying all over again. Especially when my eyes hit the picture of Ayte and Omere on my mantle. It was his third birthday. Omere planned a party, but Ayte obviously wouldn't go. So, he let him spend the night before with her, so we had a breakfast party. They both had faces full of buttercream, grinning and laughing.

"Yeah, he's right here. You want him?"

"No, both of you." My hand was pressed against my forehead. I'd had a headache for two days. "Just... put it on speaker."

"Okay... Alright."

"What's going on?" My dad's voice came through clearly.

"Ummm...Ayte...Ayte died last night." My tone went up a few octaves as I fought the rising sob in my throat. Saying it out loud slapped me with what Omere and I walked in on, and I wanted to vomit.

"Killed herself, huh?" was my dad's emotionless, matter-of-fact response.

Wait... "W-W...I tell you your child passed away, and that's where your mind goes?"

"Well, Cevyn, your sister has been sick for years. Let's just be honest; the only reason she lasted this long was that you kept stopping her. It's what she wanted. You didn't say no to my question, so I can only assume I'm right."

"You're fucking child is dead!" I barked, no longer able to control my tears. "A person you brought into this world and failed every fucking day of her life. Yes, she took her life."

Does that make you feel better? Does it absolve you of some type of guilt? Do you feel anything?"

"Of course, we feel something, Cevyn." My mother's voice broke in, sounding anything but hurt. "What your father is trying to say is it's obviously what she's wanted for a while—"

"Stop talking." I barked. "I don't need to hear anything else. My sister is gone. I just wanted to let you know."

"When will the funeral be?"

"If I decide I want y'all there, I'll let you know." I spewed, wishing I could spit in both of their faces. This was exactly why Ayte thought she was an insignificant bother to everybody she came across. They weren't even hurt.

"Excuse me? If you decide?"

"What do you need to know for? You wouldn't go see her when she was alive. What will seeing her when she's dead do for you? Give you some sick sense of pleasure?"

My father sighed, "Cevyn, you're being irrational."

I rolled my eyes. "My sister just died. I think I'm allowed."

"You're talking like we didn't care. Just because we loved her different than—"

"You didn't love her at all! You didn't give a damn about her. From the second raising her got too hard for y'all, you gave up. You literally cast her aside and acted like she didn't exist. I looked in her phone, and she called you three times before ...before she killed herself. I know you saw it. You didn't give a damn about my sister, and she knew. So, like I said, if I decide to invite you, I'll let you know when it is." I ended the call and went up to my bed to cry.

There was nobody else to notify. Well, I did need to let her doctor know, but it wasn't like there was anything he was going to do except mark her chart as deceased. A part of me wanted to be angry. She clearly had not been well enough to leave the hospital. We'd missed something.

I'd paced all night running down every second we'd been away, to coming home to that last phone call. She'd clearly wanted me to find her. She'd even called Omere for support.

I was on the phone flirting with Kas, and my sister was dying in her bathtub. She'd taken a steak knife and rammed it into her neck. The paramedics said she mostly likely severed her carotid. She was in a tub full of running warm water, which helped increase the blood splatter from the powerful artery. The rest dripped into the tub and ran over the sides.

That was why there was red water on the floor when we walked up. After Omere kicked the door in and recoiled, he shot straight into the bathroom with me on his heels.

The sight of my sister's lifeless eyes staring straight at me as her body sat slack in the tub brought forth a scream so powerful, my throat was still hurting more than 24 hours later. The slice in her neck was still leaking, but the arterial pressure had done its job. The knife was in the tub, hidden beneath the murky water.

Omere hauled her body out of the tub, screaming—begging her to stay with him.

“Please, Ayte. No! Please. Please.” Once on the floor, he pumped her chest to do CPR, but all it did was force more blood from the wound. She was already turning blue.

I got down beside him, reaching out to cover his hands, and told him she was gone, and pumping her chest was only causing her to lose more blood. He wouldn't listen, though. Just kept pumping and asking her not to leave him.

Next thing we knew, we were being pushed aside by paramedics that neither of us called. They didn't work on her long because, as I said, it was clear she was gone. There was no pulse. No respiration... She'd done exactly what she'd set out to do.

The police came in next, asking us a million different questions. Omere was inconsolable. He couldn't put two words together. I told them what I could, but in truth, I don't

know how much sense I was making. Ayte's empty eyes were watching me from the bathroom floor.

It didn't make sense. I'd just left her. I'd just... I'd just spoken to her barely ten minutes before I arrived. And I knew she couldn't have already stabbed herself when she called me. There would have been no way she could be as calm as she sounded.

Yes, she seemed a bit out of breath, but not to the point where it would make sense that a knife was sticking out of her neck.

I must not have been making sense because the paramedics brought me out to their truck to check for signs of shock.

Then I saw him: Kas. He came out of nowhere. I don't even know how he knew where I was. I couldn't even think of how he knew where Ayte lived. I just... I was so happy to see him. Seeing Ayte laid out like that had smacked me with so much emptiness. I felt so alone in the moment, even with Omere there next to me. He wasn't there for me. I wasn't his responsibility. I wasn't anybody's responsibility. But somehow, Kas was there. Offering his arms in the weakest moment of my life. I'd never had that. And it felt so right.

He'd said he wanted to be there for me. He wasn't sure in what capacity; he just wanted to be there. And I appreciated it.

But now, I needed to get centered by myself. I needed to prepare to say goodbye to my sister.

Thirteen

KAS

CEV PULLED AWAY in the days after Ayte's passing. Didn't take it personally. How could I? I'd called a handful of times, and she hadn't answered. She always sent a text back letting me know she was okay, though. I wasn't so sure.

I only found out when the funeral was after seeing the obituary in the newspaper. I waffled on if I would go or not. Like I said, she'd pulled away. Maybe she wanted to do this alone. Then my protective nature kicked in, and I knew I'd go. I wasn't going to let her do it alone. I'd go and stay at the back, but I'd be there for her.

The service was being held at the funeral home, in their chapel. There were less than 30 people in attendance when I arrived. Up at the end of the red runner was a gold casket flanked on either side by huge flower arrangements. Right in front of the casket was a beautiful picture of Ayte. She sat at a table with blue ocean water behind her and a pink orchid in her hair, grinning.

Two monitors on either side of the room played a slideshow of pictures that looked to go in order from birth to the present. That song *Missing You* with Tamia, Brandy, Gladys Knight, and Chaka Khan was softly playing as well. When the slideshow started over, that Sam Smith song *Lay Me Down* started playing, and I had to blink back my own tears. I was fortunate enough to have never lost anybody close, but I knew it was an indescribable pain. I hated that Cevyn was feeling it.

I hadn't noticed how much she looked like Cev the day I saw her. Of course, they favored, but they almost looked like twins in this picture. I sat at the back of the church, waiting for the ceremony to start. It was so quiet, save for the softly playing music. Eerily quiet. I saw a few people go up to the casket and press a hand to it. One older gentleman bowed his head as if he were saying a prayer for Ayte. Others moseyed in

and quickly found seats when it was clear the casket wouldn't be opened.

An usher came down the aisle, handing out the programs. That same picture was on the front of the little booklet. I read through the obit and order of processional before turning the page. In the center of the program was a collage. Pictures of her and Cev. Pictures of her and her son, and Omere.

I looked up when a heavy hand tapped my leg and told me to move down. I was prepared to curse somebody out, but it was Ghost, with Harlowe right behind him.

I stood to hug my cousin and drop a kiss on Harlowe's cheek before returning to my seat with them right beside me.

"Have you seen Cevyn?" Harlowe asked from between Ghost and me.

"Not for a few days. I was... I was there that night."

"Oh, God. Well, I mean, I guess that was a bit of a good thing. I can't imagine what she's feeling— well, I guess I can. Probably exactly how I felt when my dad passed. That's a pain you can't get away from. Sleep ain't even a reprieve."

"Last I checked, she wasn't doing that either."

"Ugh, that poor girl." She pressed her hands to her chest. "I hope she can take a good amount of time off. Trying to work and having this on your head and heart is hard."

"HR put her out on indefinite paid leave."

"Shit," Harlowe and I twinned.

"Indefinite, *paid* leave?"

He chuckled a little. "Yeah, Boots."

"I really need to come work with y'all. Your boss is like the most generous billionaire ever."

"He is, but um, he lost his mom, dad, and brother in a plane crash a few years back, and it took him damn near two years to bounce back. So, they updated the bereavement policy. There are a bunch of things put in place that you have to qualify for. But everybody at work knows how important

Cevyn's sister is to her. I don't even think Cevyn put in for leave. Justice did it for her."

"That's good." I'd been wondering about how she'd fair once she had to get back to work. I know she had PTO, but she'd already been gone for two weeks because of the vacation, plus an additional week since Ayte passed.

A little while later, one of the ushers came through and asked everybody to stand as the family walked in. I slid to my feet and turned towards the door. The music was switched to a gospel song as their parents entered first. I'd never seen either of them, but it made sense. Also, their daughters favored each of them.

The dad's arm was around the mom, who was wailing into a handkerchief. I wasn't sure how real it was. There were no tears, and neither of them was looking up towards the casket. Too interested in the faces around them.

Behind them, was Omere, who was flanked on either side by who I assumed were his parents. I didn't question his tears. His father had an arm under his shoulders, helping keep him upright. Behind them, walking all by herself, was Cevyn. She wore a simple black dress and matching coat. Her hands were clasped at her waist, and her eyes were on the floor in front of her. I couldn't tell if she was crying, but I still wanted to hold her.

There were three sections of chairs in the room. Their parents sat in the front row of the center section, directly in front of the casket. Omere sat next to them while his parents took the seats directly behind him, both keeping a hand on his shoulders. Cevyn sat in the front row of the section I was in, to their left, like she didn't want to be near them.

It didn't take long for her shoulders to start shaking. I told myself to stay in my seat. But I couldn't. She was alone. I couldn't let that ride. Even Harlowe and Ghost were pushing me to go up there. So, quietly, I left my seat and went up to the front row, taking the seat directly beside her and placing my arm around her shoulder.



The second she felt me, she crumbled against my side, using her right hand to try and muffle the painfilled sobs she couldn't control. And she couldn't stop. She cried and cried the entire service, using me as comfort. Across the aisle, Omere was no better.

At the end of the service, the pastor prayed, asking for strength for the family and asking that everybody keep them in their prayers as they moved through this difficult time. There was no mention of going to the cemetery, so I figured the burial would probably be private.

Cevyn stayed with her face pressed to my chest as people began to leave. Damn near everybody came up and gently tapped her back or rubbed her shoulder, but she wouldn't move.

The funeral director cleared everybody out of the room except the family, then came over to Cevyn.

"Ms. Braddock, we'll do the final viewing whenever you're ready." She moved then, wiping her face as she lifted her head.

She huffed a quivering breath as she leaned over to look at Omere, who had gone up to the casket, standing there rubbing a hand back and forth over the smooth metal. She nodded, then leaned back against me.

Omere's parents went to him when they saw the top being lifted. The grief coming off him was like a thick cloud. He moved closer to the now open casket and reached out, placing his hand over hers.

I brought my attention back to Cevyn. She wasn't looking. Her eyes were on the floor, and she was gently rocking back and forth.

I kept my attention on Cev until there was a slight commotion at the casket. We both looked up. Her mother had fallen.

"Give me a fucking break," Cev groaned.

Of course, the funeral workers rushed over to help the now screaming woman. Cev began bouncing one of her knees in

irritation. I gently rubbed my hand up and down her arm. “Take it easy, Cev.”

She took a shaking breath and looked up at me. “I’m gonna go off,” her strangled voice promised. “I swear to God, I’m going to lose my shit on her if she doesn’t just go. It’s a damn act.”

“I know, baby.” I was surprised when she leaned up for a quick kiss.

Her mother was helped out of the room by two funeral staff, with her dad on their heels.

It was Cev’s turn.

It took her a few minutes to get up and over to the casket. I stayed where I was. She tilted her head to look Ayte over as she approached. Like Omere, she reached out to touch her. In a low voice, she began speaking. I couldn’t make out anything that she was saying.

Finally, she lifted her head. With a hand gently cupping Ayte’s face, she said, “Cevyn,…” her voice broke, so she tried again after clearing her throat. “Cevyn, Ayte…Nyne, Tyn. See you later, Ayte.”

She looked at her one more time, then came back over to me. I stood up, and she placed an arm around my waist and pointed us towards the door.

The funeral director stopped us to let her know they’d call her once everything was completed with cremation.

Out in the hallway, her parents were waiting.

“What the hell do they want,” she groaned.

As soon as they saw her, her mother hurried over. “How did you plan a funeral without a repass, Cevyn?”

“I’m not fucking feeding people who didn’t give a fuck about my sister. Go to McDonald’s.” Shit. We moved around her mother and out the front door. The funeral staff must have cleared everybody from the building because there was no one outside.

“Did you drive?” I asked once we were out in front of the building. She shook her head.

“No, we rode in the family car, but I’m not getting back in there.” She peered up at me, “Can I ride with you?”

“Of course,” I took her hand and led her to where I’d parked.

“Thank you for coming, Kas. I... I know I’ve been weird and will probably be weird for a little while, but you being here meant a lot to me.”

“I couldn’t let you do this alone, Cev. I know that’s how you’re used to dealing with things, but I’m trying to show you, you don’t have to.” We’d reached my truck.

“I appreciate it.”

“Mmmhmm,” I helped her into the car, then rounded the front to get to my side. “You eat today?”

She shook her head, “Haven’t been doing much of that lately.”

“That’s understandable, but you need to eat. Where do you want to go?”

“My place.”

“Cool.”

She let me stay with her that day but needed space after that. Which, again, I completely understood. I left her the next morning, letting her know she could call for whatever whenever she was ready.

*Fourteen*

## CEVYN

IF KARMA IS A BITCH, she learned it from grief. Grief is a BITCH. A strong bitch, at that. She was kicking my ass. Had been on me heavy since I saw my sister's lifeless eyes. She was choking me constantly. Stomping on my heart like it was a roach, and she was wearing combat boots. I wasn't fast enough to run from her. I wasn't strong enough to fight back. If I thought I could fall asleep to get away from her, she popped up my dreams like, "Surprise, Heaux!" I just wanted peace.

I could never understand what Ayte meant when she said her mind was constantly taunting her. It took her leaving me for me to understand. Even then, there was no way for me to fully grasp it. I'd been dealing with it for barely two weeks. My sister suffered through it for more than twenty years of her life. Shit, even that made me cry.

I found myself wanting to talk to her so bad, which was why I only told Omere about the private viewing the night before the funeral. He was the only person grieving as bad as I was, and I couldn't deny him that. But I wanted that time with her so I could talk to her. So I could ask her why she did this? Why had she given us hope that last day to literally shatter it as soon as we left? She'd said the Omeres had only been gone an hour.

Omere got to the viewing before I did. That was on purpose. He was there by himself when I arrived, sitting in front of the casket, asking his own questions.

I knew I felt bad, but he felt worse. She'd held him away for four years, then gave him hope that last day. Literally brightened up his world and shattered it twelve hours later. He'd been so hopeful that day. So happy to be there with her. And then she shut the door in the most finalizing way possible.

I came in and quietly took a seat, letting him have his turn.

My parents called on my way there, asking if there would be a funeral. I told them it'd be the next day and hung up. They'd already caused their own drama. I'd received a call from the funeral home director asking that I reach out to the company Ayte's life insurance policy was with because there was an issue. Turns out, my parents called the day after Ayte passed, trying to get it paid out. Initially, they bought the policy. They paid the premium until she turned 18. Probably hoping she died before then.

She started paying it— I set up automatic payments— but they were still the beneficiaries. That changed when Omere was born. That was something I took care of as soon as his official paperwork arrived.

However, my parents had called and raised all kinds of hell and had the damn lady thinking she was crazy. It was a local company. A friend of theirs owned it. So, they bullied this woman into thinking her records were wrong. Then, I called and went off 17 ways to Sunday and faxed her over the proof that it had been changed. Needless to say, things smoothed out after that. I left calling my parents back, up to her. If she had just called me when they first called her, she would have been fine.

I knew I'd have to deal with them at the service, but I wanted the viewing to be a quiet affair. I hadn't quite decided if the funeral would be open casket or not. Ultimately, I told the staff to keep it closed during the service. My sister trusted me to protect her down to her dying moments. I knew she wouldn't want people gawking at her in the casket.

I sat there for over an hour before Omere finally looked around and noticed me. He wiped his face and came back to sit next to me.

“Hey, Cevyn.”

“Hey.”

He opened his hand with the palm up, asking for mine. We clasped hands and stared up at Ayte.

“I don't think I'm bringing Omere to the service.”

“No, don’t.” I readily agreed. “I’m not in the right mind to be able to explain it yet. I know it’s coming, and I’ll be there if you need me, but I don’t want him to see her in a casket. Let his last memory be you guys playing as a whole family.”

He turned his phone over and woke the screen to swipe around before showing it to me.

“Oh, my God,” I whispered. They must have been taking pictures after I left that night. It was a picture of the three of them hugging and grinning at the camera.

“I’ve been going back through these, trying to see if she gave any indication that night. Like, what the fuck did I miss? I mean... when you called to say she wanted to see us, I thought it was weird. My first instinct was to be worried, but...I was just so fucking happy to be able to see her.”

“I’ve been doing the same thing. The harder I think, the more things I remember that stand out clear as day, but I interpreted them as her turning over a new leaf. You know. She had such a good time in Curacao. I thought she meant she was going to try harder or something. It never crossed my mind that she’d do that. It’s been years since she’s said anything about wanting to die. I thought all that changed when she had Omere.”

“So, did I.” he sniffled and turned the phone up to check the time. “I gotta get back home. Omere is with the babysitter. My parents are coming in tonight.”

“Oh, good.” His parents were sweet people.

“Yeah, I... I gotta be honest, Cev: I’m struggling so much right now. I don’t know which direction is which. I’m trying to keep it hidden from Omere until I have to explain, but I’m struggling.”

I squeezed the hand I still held, “You’re not alone. I’m struggling too, but if you need something, we can come together to figure it out. You know?”

“Thanks, Cev.” I accepted the side hug he offered before standing. “You good in here by yourself? Want me to stay a little longer?”

I looked back towards the casket and shook my head. “That’s my big sister. I know there’s nothing to be scared of.”

“Right. See you tomorrow.”

“See you.” I didn’t move until I was alone. Standing took way more effort than I was used to. This wasn’t my first time seeing, either. I’d come in the night before and helped dress her. I’d done her hair and make-up as well. She was my responsibility down to the end. But this was the last time I’d be alone with her.

The walk to the front of the room that seemed so long, took mere seconds. Before I could fully comprehend it, I was standing over her. She looked good. Like she was sleeping.

“Hey, Ayte...” I stood there and talked and talked and talked. The attendant who ushered me in said I had all the time I wanted, and I took it. It was almost like I couldn’t leave her. The thought of her laying out in repose like that in a room all by herself all night was fucking with me.

Like I said, grief is a nasty bitch. It had me thinking things that my logical mind knew couldn’t happen. Like, what if I left and she woke up alone in the funeral home and couldn’t get out to tell me she was okay. I knew that was preposterous and impossible, but my mind still went there.

The thought that she’d wake up during cremation had me so sick after leaving the night before that I’d had two entire bottles of wine.

It was close to midnight when the woman came in to check on me. I explained how I felt about not wanting Ayte to be alone, and she assured me she wouldn’t be. There was always somebody in the funeral home. She assured me she’d be there all night along with her husband, and she wouldn’t leave her alone.

There was no way for me to know if she was just blowing smoke or what, but it was enough to convince me to leave. Besides, I’d be back in less than twelve hours to say my final goodbye.



The ride home was tough. So tough, I had to pull over. As I was leaving Ayte, like we always did, I said our, “Cevyn, Ayte...” and for the first time in my life, I didn’t hear “Nyne, Tyn,” and it fucked me up so bad. I almost called Kas to see if he could come and get me. I don’t know how long I sat on that street crying or what time it was when I finally walked into my house.

I was still up on time the next morning. The family car would be to my house by ten am. It would just be me, Omere, and his parents in the car.

The ride to the funeral home was about as good as it could be. His mom sat beside me and held my hand, praying with me the whole way. Shit like that always made it hard to keep things together. I was so used to having a mother that couldn’t pull her head out of her own ass to offer any sort of comfort, so when I experienced it from other people, it fucked with me.

She asked if I wanted her to walk with me when we went inside, and I told her no. Omere needed both of his parents. He was worse today than he was the previous night. I could understand that. This would literally be the last time we’d see Ayte.

My parents were waiting out in the hallway when we walked up. I told the funeral director to get things moving. I didn’t want to talk to them, didn’t even want to see them. I was sure they were just there for attention. Neither looked like they’d been losing any sleep. Dressed up like it was a party instead of their daughter’s funeral. They hurried to go first, and I didn’t argue. I wasn’t there to be seen. I almost turned around when I heard my mom start that fake ass crying. I told Omere and his family to go next because he was so distraught, I wasn’t sure he’d be able to stay on his feet. Then, I walked in alone.

I didn’t look up or around as we entered the viewing room. I didn’t care who was there. At all. I went the opposite way when the usher tried to put me in a seat between my parents and Omere. Absolutely not.

Then it was my turn to break down. I was sitting there, struggling to keep it together, when Kas' big body sat beside me, and I folded like a lawn chair. It was him. His damn energy made it okay to cry. And not just a few silent sniffles, either. I was ugly crying like I had been in the car the night before. I wasn't alone this time, however, and it felt so good to have him to lean on.

I don't know why I kept letting myself forget that. Every time he caught me when I was falling, it felt amazing. The fall didn't hurt as much. There was a reprieve. Even from that funky bitch grief. So, why the fuck did I keep pushing him away?

He came home with me after the funeral, and I slept in his armpit all night, then woke up the next morning and told him he could go. As soon as he walked out the door, the shit started hurting. Especially once I pulled the funeral program from my coat pocket.

This was the last picture I took of Ayte. We'd stopped at a little beach restaurant for lunch. Her hair looked so good framing her face with the blue waves crashing against the beach behind her and the sun hitting her perfectly. A man had given her a pink orchid for her hair earlier in the day, but she hadn't been able to get it to sit in her hair right. It went perfectly with her turquoise t-shirt, so I wanted it for the picture. It took some doing, but I was able to get it to stay in her mass of ringlets.

"Cheese, Ayte," she grinned broad and brought a shoulder up, then turned her head to line her chin up with the shoulder.

"Cheeeese."

It was one of the cutest pictures I'd ever seen of her. Nowhere in my mind did I think I'd be using it for her obituary a week later.

Right after I took the picture, she'd said something odd, but again, it hadn't hit me what she was doing then. But now, I knew she was telling me what she wanted after she was gone.

*"It would be amazing to be here forever, huh, Cev?"*

*“Like move down here,” I asked.*

*“No, like literally to be a part of the island forever. You know, like have your ashes spread somewhere and just be absorbed by the island.”*

*“Haven’t thought that far in the future, AYTE.”*

Now, I know she was preparing me. I knew in my heart she’d decided what she was going to do while up on that parasail. She was different after coming down, and she was so sure she’d spoken to God. But God wouldn’t have told her to do that. If something did speak to her, it was something else.

“Doesn’t matter now,” I whispered, rubbing my fingers over the picture. I sighed, thinking about everything I needed to do to get her affairs in order. “Need to make a list and knock it all out,” I mumbled. But I didn’t; I went to bed. For an entire week.

*Fifteen*

KAS

AFTER A WEEK of not hearing from Cevyn, I grew impatient and went over there. I parked out front, worried because her car hadn't moved since I'd last been there. Also, the mailbox was filled to the brim with mail, and there were at least 10 packages hidden on the porch.

I tried the doorbell first, waiting a minute before ringing it a second time. When there was no movement behind the front door, I knocked like I was the police.

"Come on, Cev," I urged, hoping she was okay. When none of that worked, I went into my phone to find the combination on the lockbox hidden in the front stairs to get the spare key.

Took no time at all to get inside after that. I went through the entire first floor, but she wasn't there. Upstairs, I went straight to her room. The door was shut, and it was silent inside. I pushed the door open and was greeted by a big lump in the bed. There was a bottle of water on the bedside table beside a half-eaten stack of saltines.

"Cevyn," I called as I rounded the bed. Once I was standing over her, I could see her head was out of the blanket a little bit, and she was sleeping. "Cevyn," I called, louder this time, untucking the thick, down blanket from around her. Underneath, she was wearing the same green shirt and black leggings she'd been in when she sent me home the previous week.

The rush of cold air—Oh, yeah, the house was so cold, I could see my breath—must have seeped into her bones because she hopped up quickly, with wild eyes and hair.

"Kas, what are you doing?" she reached for the blanket, but I moved it out of her reach.

"Getting you up." I stepped back. "I'm going to turn the heat on. Make your way into the bathroom, take a shower, put

a toothbrush *with* toothpaste in your mouth, and brush vigorously.”

“But—”

“I’m not interested in anything you do or don’t want to do, baby. I can look at you and guess all that. Go get yourself cleaned up while I bring in all the shit on your porch and find something to eat.”

She sat up, placing her feet in the slippers beside her bed.

I took the blanket with me for good measure. I found the thermostat and cranked that shit all the way up. She’d turn into an icicle trying to shower in here.

I went into the fridge to see if there was anything I could turn into something, but then remembered it had been about a month since she’d probably been to the store. They left right after New Years for the trip. AYTE passed the same day they returned. I know she didn’t cook the week in between, and she clearly had barely moved this past week.

I pulled my phone out and ordered soup and grilled cheeses from this specialty shop right at the corner of her block. There were three edible arrangements in the fridge that had gone bad.

“Could have left these on the damn counter, and they would have fared better,” I grumbled as I found a trash bag and dropped them in, clearing out anything else that looked less than fresh in the fridge.

I removed the bag in the trashcan and lugged those out to the big trashcan on the side of the house. The furnace was doing a good job of warming it up in there.

I meandered back through the kitchen to the front door and went out to clear everything on the porch and bring it all inside. I stacked the mail on the coffee table and dropped the packages on the couch. I was going to bring them up to her room, but she needed to come out of there.

“Cev, I’ll be right back,” I called as I left out. The walk to the soup shop took less than ten minutes.

She was just coming down the stairs when I returned. I waited at the bottom, “Feel better?”

She nodded. “Much better. Definitely warmer.” She’d changed into a pair of jeans and a pullover sweatshirt.

“I figured.” I pointed towards the kitchen, “Go on so we can eat.”

“Yes, Drill Sargant Mosely.”

I followed her through the hallway and over to the kitchen table.

“Chicken noodle and grilled cheese,” I explained as I removed the food from the bag.

“It doesn’t matter what it is; I haven’t seen anything but a saltine cracker for a week.”

“Good, because if you refused, I was going to chew for you.”

She chuckled, running a hand through her hair that she’d definitely run a brush through.

“How are you?” It felt weird asking since she’d obviously been too down to get out the bed for a week, but I needed to hear it out of her mouth.

A heavy breath prefaced her response, “It’s harder than I could have ever imagined, Kas. I... I feel so lost. I wake up in the morning and reach for the phone to call her, and it smacks me again. Then, I just roll over and go back to sleep. I cannot believe my sister is gone—dead. I can’t make sense of it. Then, I haven’t been to see my nephew all month. I can’t face him right now, and I know Omere is having such a hard time. But... I don’t have anything to give. For the first time in my life, I really feel empty, and I don’t have the strength to take care of anybody else. I feel guilty as fuck.”

“You took a blow, Cevyn. A heavy, heavy blow. There’s nothing to feel guilty about. Your whole life just changed, baby. Don’t let that shit creep in on you.”

“I get that, but I think about how it was my idea to go on that trip. She decided to kill herself because—”

“Even knowing her as little as I did, I know it wasn’t because of anything you did. I can’t allow you to put that on yourself. That’s something you don’t deserve.” I motioned towards her food and told her to eat.

She picked the spoon up, then took the lid off the soup, then leaned on her elbow towards me. I leaned in too and kissed first her forehead, then her nose, and finally her lips.

“I missed you,” she softly admitted.

“Why you think I’m here?”

“Came to make sure I was still in the land of the living.”

“It didn’t cross my mind that that might be an issue until I walked up and saw all your mail.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t do that. Just having some trouble making sense of all this and didn’t want to see or talk to anybody. I muted my doorbell and camera. Then, the phone died altogether, and I saw that as a blessing. You know I wasn’t ignoring you... like that.”

“Cev, I get it. I’m not offended.”

“Good.” She leaned back into her seat and finally began tearing through the soup. “This isn’t going to be enough.”

I cracked up, “I know. I needed to get you something to knock the edge off.”

“That’s all it’s doing.”

“We can grab something. You need to get out and get some vitamin d.”

“My tan is gone?” She peered down at either of her arms.

“That’s probably the only reason you’re not pasty.” I chuckled.

“How are you doing?”

“Coolin.” I told her after taking a bite of my sandwich, “Was trying to wait you out, but nope.”

She chuckled. “I’m glad. How are things with Kas and his mom?”



“We seem to be on the up and up. We’ve been back on our swapping schedule. Nothing to report.” I cleared my throat. “He’s actually been looking for you.”

That made her smile and sit up taller, “Oh, yeah?”

“Yup. He won’t watch the show *without* us now. Dying to finish it.”

She cracked up. “Gotta fix that.”

“I know you said your phone is dead, but he called and left you a message.”

“He is so freakin sweet.”

“He gets it from his daddy.”

She leaned over for another kiss, “I can’t argue with that.”

After we finished eating, I helped her open the packages. There were so many sympathy gifts, she’d need to build a shelf just to house them.

She was flipping through the stack of letters when she gasped, dropping the others. “Oh my God.”

“What happened?” Before I could get to her, she was crying.

She held the envelope up and croaked, “It’s from AYTE.”

“What?”

She covered her face and cried silently before wiping her face to gaze down at the letter. “The last day we were on vacation, she asked me to take her to the post office because she needed to mail Omere a postcard.”

Shit...

“I don’t... I can’t read this right now.” She dropped her head again, chuckling wryly. “She really planned this. My God.”

I sat down beside her and reached over to rub her back.

She turned her body to face me, “I... Could I please come to your place?”

She didn't even have to ask. "Of course."

"This is going to sound so cliché, but you make all this shit hurt less. And I've known that since she was in the hospital, but I'm so used to having to be somebody else's rock that it's hard for me to accept it myself. But I need somebody to lean on for a little while." She reached up to angrily swipe an errant tear."

"As long as you need, Cev."

She nodded, chewing on her bottom lip as she gazed down at the letter thoughtfully.

"I'm gonna go pack a bag. I need to get out of here."

She'd charged her phone some by the time we left the house. She wanted to ride with me; we'd come get her car in a few days.

As I pulled out of the driveway, Kas' voice came through her phone speakers. "Hey, Ms. Cevyn. I wanted to call and tell you I'm sorry about your sister. I'll give you a hug when I see you, and you can come be with me and my dad if you get lonely. Feel better." He stole my phone while I was in the shower to leave that message.

"Ugh, this kid and my heart," she groaned, tears in her throat. "Kas, where did you get him?"

"Something in the genes," I joked.

"I see." The next message was from Ghost.

"Yo, Cev. Just calling to check in on you. I miss my partner in work crime. Harlowe and I came to the funeral, but we didn't want to bother you, so we hung back. We're praying for you, baby. Give me a call when you feel better."

"Thanks, Ghost." She smiled. "Dang, I didn't see anybody at the funeral—I didn't want to." She snorted.

"I figured."

The next message was Omere. "Hey, Cev. Um," he still didn't sound like he was doing too well, "I, uh... I got letters to me and Omere from Ayte, and I'm tripping out. I can't... I

haven't read them. But um, he's starting to ask for her. My mom is still here, and she's tried explaining it, but I think he needs to hear it from you... Cev, I can't explain it to him— I'm not rushing you; I know you're hurting just like I am. Whenever you're ready. I'll call and check on you in a few days. You know you're always welcome here. I hope you're not over there alone. We love you."

She went through the rest of the messages silently, then cleared the box.

"You know who I haven't heard from?"

"Mmm?"

"My supposed best friend."

"Oh, what's her name...Mandy? Minnie?"

"Mindy," she supplied. "I know she didn't come to the funeral because she would have made a big deal out of being my best friend. I know she knows, because her husband sent those two big flower arrangements that sat next to the casket. Hell, he called me to tell me how sorry he was. And her sorry ass hasn't even reached out."

My eyes were on the road as I said, "Wow. How long have y'all been friends again? Since college?"

"Freshman year, to be exact." She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I mean... I'm not all that shocked. She wasn't very understanding when it came to Ayte, but damn, you can't reach out to at least see how I'm doing." She dropped the phone in the bag at her feet and folded her hands in her lap. "Crazy."

I reached over, letting her hold my hand between hers. "Times like this show you who's actually in your corner."

"I knew she wasn't in my corner. Mindy's all about what Mindy wants, but my fucking sister passed away. Not even a text? It's cool. Whatever."

After stopping for pizza, we headed for my place. Inside, we parked ourselves up in my room. I had to take advantage when the kid wasn't here.

Since we had to wait for Kas, we found a documentary to watch instead of *Van Helsing*.

“God, I have so much to do,” she said out of nowhere a little while later.

“Like what?”

“I need to get a crime scene cleaner to do Ayte’s place. Then, I have to get rid of all her things. I’m sure I’ll be hearing from her landlord soon. The month is almost over. I need to talk to Omere about a trust for Little Omere. There’s her lawsuit money, plus what’s left over from one of the insurance policies on top of a second policy.”

“So, he’s set for life?”

She nodded, “she made sure her baby was taken care of. I wasn’t sure the policies would pay out, you know, because it was suicide, but she’s had them all for years. There’s a clause that they won’t pay if something happens within two years of getting the policy. So, yup. Omere will be well taken care of.” Then, she sighed, scooting closer to me, “I need to call the funeral home to see when I can pick up the remains.”

“You gonna keep them in the house somewhere?”

“Absolutely not. I... I love my sister, but that’s too much for me. No, she told me what she wanted me to do. Said she wanted her ashes spread in Curacao.”

“What?”

She explained a conversation she had with Ayte right before she passed.

“Yeah, I need to do a bit of research and see what the steps are to do that. I have two urns. One for Omere’s place, then a smaller one for Little Omere, if he decides he wants it when he’s older. The rest is in a wooden box waiting to take a flight.”

I pulled her tighter against, “Let me know when it’s time.” There was no way I’d let her do that alone either. We were about to be joined at the hip for a good long while.

Sixteen

## CEVYN

I'D AVOIDED this long enough. It was time to face it. My gut told me this would be just as difficult as saying goodbye to AYTE.

I thought if I waited long enough, Omere would figure out how to tell my nephew that AYTE wasn't coming back, but that wasn't the case. He was handling his own demons. His mother had taken a leave from work to be there with the two of them because he was taking it so hard. Then, I woke up one morning to a voicemail from a little voice asking if his Mommy was feeling better. Asking if I knew where she was. I wanted to ignore it so badly, but he deserved some peace above all of us.

So, here I was, walking into Omere's house. His mom let me in and stopped me for a long hug that I resented. I was tired of people hugging me. I knew it was for good reason, but all it did was remind me of who I'd lost.

"How are you doing, sweetheart?"

"It's a roll of the dice, Mrs. Quest. I can guarantee you I won't be any good after this conversation I'm about to have."

She nodded, her expression sympathetic, "We've tried explaining it to him, but he doesn't get it. He said we only think she's gone because we don't know how to find her. He said you can always get her. I tried so hard because I know the pain you're already going through. I wanted to take something off your plate, but he won't hear it."

I pulled in a heavy breath, "Yeah. I kinda knew it was gonna be me. I've been putting it off because... I don't want to break his heart. You know? I've been trying to think of a way to explain it without scaring him. I hope it works."

"Me too." She gently rubbed my back. "He's back in his room."

"Okay."

My walk to the back of the house was slow. I was still turning over what to say to Omere. He was 4 years old. He couldn't grasp the concept of death—and I didn't want him to. He just needed to know that his mommy was gone.

Omere's back was to me as I reached the door. He was down on the floor racing his toy cars around a racetrack. His dad was sitting against the wall across from him, watching him play, gaze filled with sorrow. He tried to smile when he saw me, but it was like he couldn't do it. I nodded, letting him know I understood.

I inhaled deeply and blew it all the way out, then called out, "Hey, little boy." I was unprepared for the rush of emotions that washed over me when he turned around. Somehow, in the ensuing weeks, I'd let myself forget how much he favored Ayte. It was like staring into her eyes again. That was enough to push me out of the house and back into my car, but I needed to do this.

"Hi, Auntie!" With the cars forgotten, he shot to his feet and jumped up into my arms. "Auntie, I missed you."

I swallowed the traitorous tears that tried to out my emotions to my nephew, "I missed you too." I hugged him tighter and longer than I ever had in his life, gently running my hand over his little curls. "How are you?"

"I okay," he assured me. "I want to go to Mommy's house. I got apples for her so we can make a pie. Daddy said she not here, but I told him you could find her. You always know where her at. You know, right?" He asked as he pushed back from the hug so he could see my face.

"Yeah, sweetheart," my shaky voice told him, "I know where she is."

"See, Daddy," he giggled excitedly, and Omere dropped his head into his hands. "I told you Auntie knows how to find my mommy. Can we go, Auntie?" He wiggled down to the floor and went directly to his shoes. "I got new shoes to show her and toys, Auntie."

“Omere,” I called as I lowered myself to the floor, crossing my legs.

“Huh?”

“Can you come sit right here with me for a minute?” He nodded and ran over to me, taking a seat right in front of me with his legs crossed like mine. “I gotta tell you something about your mommy.” His eyes blinking back at me were literally tearing a hole in my fucking soul. “Baby, you remember how Mommy was so tired before?”

“Yeah,” his giggle was silly, “Her is always sleepy, huh?”

“Right. She’s always sleepy. Um, so she...she went to sleep with God.” Omere’s family was relatively religious. They were in church every single week. So, I knew he had an understanding of the concept.

“At church?”

“No, baby. She’s...” I swallowed, “... sleeping in Heaven.”

His eyes grew in wonder, “In the sky?”

“Yeah. All the way up in the sky in Heaven... with God.”

“Her gonna come back? We can get a plane to get her, Auntie. That’s how you go to the sky.”

Woo, shit, this was harder than I thought. He was so innocent. All he wanted was to see his mother and was trying to figure out any way to do it.

“No, sweetheart. We can’t get there on a plane.”

“So, how we gonna see her?” Ugh.

“Well, we won’t... see her anymore, baby.”

That hit something because his eyes instantly began to water, “W-why not? I want to see her.” Grief walked right up to me and kicked me in the chest like it was a Clydesdale, but I fought. I could not break down in front of my nephew. I didn’t want this grief for him. I didn’t want him to think of his mother and cry.



“Because you don’t come back from Heaven, baby.”

His little face trembled as he pleaded, “But I want to talk to her.”

“Well, the good thing about Heaven is she can hear you all the time.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah,” I reached out to clear the tears from his face, “Even though she can’t talk to us anymore, we can talk to her. She’ll always be able to see you and hear you. She’ll always be with you—”

“But I can’t see her, right?”

“No, but you’ll feel her sometimes. When you’re playing with your toys, and the wind blows, that’s your mommy letting you know she’s playing with you. You want her to see your new toys, just show her and talk to her about them. And if you want to hug her... just hug your daddy really, really tight, and she’ll hug you back.”

He shot up and jumped right into Omere’s arms and wrapped his arms around his neck. That was too much for him. He hugged his son to his chest and sobbed against his little shoulder.

“Daddy, it’s okay. Don’t cry.” Omere leaned back and wiped his dad’s eyes, “It’s okay, Daddy. Auntie said we can talk to Mommy. It’s okay.”

His dad nodded, taking in a shaky breath that I knew hurt a little, because I’d been doing the same thing for days. Omere climbed from his arms and went back to the race cars.

“Mommy, you see my new racetrack....”

I had to leave the room. *Had to*. If I didn’t, it would have been me he was reassuring. There’d obviously come a day when he realized that his mother had passed away and what that meant, but it didn’t need to be today. I knew his feelings were hurt that he wouldn’t see her anymore, but at least he had the comfort of knowing she was always with him. That thought didn’t do anything for me, though.

I locked myself in the bathroom and walked in a circle, doing some breathing techniques I'd seen on youtube. I stayed in there for about 20 minutes. It was the whitest, most bland little bathroom I'd ever seen and, for that very reason, was doing wonders to calm my nerves. I don't know the science behind it, but I felt better when I walked out of there.

Omere Sr. was waiting outside the door. "You okay?"

"As okay as I can be. You?"

"Pretty much the same. Thank you so much for that. I couldn't figure out what to say, and as you can see, I don't really have any control over my emotions these days. My four-year-old just comforted me about his mother's death...that's not how it's supposed to go."

I reached out to squeeze his shoulder, "That's your piece of Ayte, Omere. She's in him. That's her comforting you through y'all's baby."

He reached up to drag a hand first down his head, then his face, "I feel like he looks more like her now than he ever has."

"I feel the same way. So, love on him. Raise him right. And make her proud."

"You can't disappear on us, Cevyn."

I reached up and scrubbed a hand down my face just as he had, "I'm trying not to. I'm moving through this as well as I can."

"Believe me, I get that. I know you need distance now; I just mean in the long run."

"Never," I promised. "Ever. Even if you didn't have a piece of my sister, I could never ditch you. You loved her the way she needed to be loved— The way she wanted to be loved. I remember in the beginning Ayte doing some wild shit to get you to leave her alone, and you never did. You stood strong and were there for her in ways even our parents couldn't be. You're stuck with me." I playfully swatted his arm. "We're family."

He offered me his fist for pound, and I obliged.

“You read your letter?”

I shook my head, “Not yet. I’m kinda scared. You?”

“I did.”

“Bad?”

“She answered a lot of questions. In the end, I’m glad she asked for me that day. If she’d passed and I didn’t get a chance to let her know we were good, I don’t know what I’d do. It sucks so bad, and it hurts infinity times worse, but she was happy that day. I refuse to acknowledge her last moments, but the last few hours of her life were filled with the people she loved the most. That’s what she wanted.”

“I love that you have that clarity—I don’t have it yet, but I’m glad you have it. Maybe I’ll get it after reading mine. Whenever I decide to.”

He bobbed his head, then asked, “What about her place? You need help clearing it out? Or is it already done?”

“No, I haven’t been back. I paid two more months of rent because I haven’t been able to get there. I could pay somebody to pack it up, but I want to do it. I did have a...a crime scene cleaner go in. But that’s it.”

“Well, let me know when you’re ready. I don’t mind helping.”

“Cool. I reached out to an attorney about Ayte’s money. He should be getting in contact with you to discuss setting up the trust for him. Ayte’s living will said both of us, but I’m fine. I want him to have it all.”

“Cev—”

“She only wants—Jesus— *wanted* me to have it because she felt she owed me. My sister didn’t owe me for looking out for her. I want him to have it.”

“Thanks, Cev.”

“Of course. I gotta get out of here, though. Need to go crawl back in my hole and continue my grieving.”

“You’re not by yourself, right? I only spoke to Kas for a second, but he seemed like a good dude. He takin care of you?”

“Yeah, I’ve been staying with him.”

His smile was full, “good.”

After saying goodbye to my nephew and avoiding another breakdown, I returned to Kas’ place. He was at work, but just being in his space was enough to calm the constant toil of agony in my heart.

\* \* \*

I’d walked by Ayte’s letter so many times—too many times. It was in Kas’ room on my side of the bed leaned against the glass vase lamp on the nightstand. I put it there to torture myself into reading it. Every morning, the first thing I saw when I went to leave the bed—if I left the bed— was my sister’s handwriting on the front of the envelope.

I told myself it was time to face it, just like I’d done with Omere. It wasn’t going to feel good—would probably cause more hurt. However, it needed to be dealt with. What if there were instructions for me in there? I had to do it.

Early one cold, snowy morning, I found the courage. After a shower and two cups of coffee, I returned to the bedroom for the letter. Kas was out cold, snuggled deep in his covers. He’d gotten up early to clear out the driveway before the plows blocked us in with the heavy, hard snow from the street. When he was done, he returned to the bed and went right back to sleep.

I wanted time alone with the letter, so I made sure not to wake him. I took it down to the living room and curled up in the corner of the couch, setting it on my legs. I peered out the large window behind the couch, wishing my life could be as peaceful and quiet as the city is during a snowstorm. On the contrary, my life as of late was as loud and violent as a hailstorm.

When the silence got too loud, I returned my attention to the letter.

“Fine,” I huffed as I lifted it, sliding a finger beneath the flap to open the envelope. I pulled two tri-folded sheets of paper from the envelope and was smacked in the face with her perfume. My mind immediately went to us sitting beside each other under the pergola at the villa, watching the rainfall. The pool and green shrubbery surrounding it danced as raindrops pelted them. My sister’s head was on my shoulder as she hummed *Summer Rain* by Carl Thomas. “Damn, Ayte.” I pressed my hand to my face, hoping to stave off another breakdown. I breathed and breathed and breathed some more, until I felt stable enough to open the page.

**Cevyn,**

***Please don't be mad. I know that's hard to ask considering what I've done, but I couldn't think of anything else. I didn't do this to hurt anybody. I actually did it for me. Cev, I told you I've never known a moment of peace. Ever. Even before things were noticeably bad when we were teenagers. The voices started way before then. I liken it to that part in Bruce Almighty when he receives God's powers and constantly hears everybody's thoughts and prayers. It was constant.***

***Then, I went on the parasailing ride, and oh my God. It wasn't just the world that quieted Cev; it was my mind. It's like the closer I got to God, the more peace I had. And I know what it means. I need to be with God for peace. I know you Cev, I know you're probably obsessing over not figuring it out before I did it, but you weren't supposed to stop me this time.***

***If it worked out the way I planned, you should be the one to find me. Hopefully not by yourself, but still you. I'm sorry to do this to you, Cev. I really am, but I know you'll take care of me. I don't know if this will reach you in time, but I don't really want a service. I don't want anybody looking at me. If you***

***need to do something super small for you and Omere, I understand. Regardless, I know you'll do right by me.***

***Obviously, I want you and Omere to have all my money. I don't want Mommy and Daddy to get anything. They couldn't even stand to look at me for the past few years. I get that they have their own problems, but it wouldn't have killed them to stop by. I never told you because I didn't want to stress you out, but I'd call them from time to time. They never answered. Most times, I could handle the rejection. Some days it hurt like hell. I didn't ask for this. It's so hard walking around knowing people don't like me for something I can't control. But, if you're reading this, that's no longer a problem for me.***

***I hope you can find some peace now. I've held up so much of your life. After meeting Kas, I see that you have somebody who could make you happy. Could keep you happy. You guys could be married with kids by now, but you keep yourself closed off because of me. Let him make you happy, Cevyn. Don't spend too long grieving me. I know it's going to hurt for a while, but don't let it take over your life. This is what I want.***

***I told you in Curacao that I left Omere because I had thoughts of hurting them. That wasn't the whole truth. I was too embarrassed to tell you the full truth to your face. But it wasn't just thoughts. I acted on it, Cev. The day I freaked out and left. My mind was so out of sorts after having Omere. Nothing made sense. I kept thinking that I was the wrong person to be raising a baby. I'd been living on the streets for all those months. I couldn't make decisions for myself, let alone a baby. Then, the thoughts started. If we all died, we could be together in Heaven, and everything is perfect in Heaven. Cev, that train of thought took hold of me and dug itself so deeply into my mind. It was like it was embedded in my***

**forehead. When I looked in the mirror, I could see the words all over my face. I couldn't get away from it. They needed to die, and so did I.**

**So, that night, Omere put the baby to bed. I went into the nursery, and he was laid out on the little couch next to the crib, and Omere was on his chest. Both sleeping so peacefully. I went into the kitchen and grabbed a butcher knife. I went back into the nursery, and I raised the knife. I told myself I could stab it straight through my baby and into his father's heart. I was gonna do it, Cev. I lifted the knife and brought it down, but I fought to stop it. I told you, it's always a fight. I've been fighting myself for so long. But this, this was the hardest fight of my life. The tip of that knife was so close to my baby's back. Somehow, I managed to leave. But I knew I could never live with them again. I knew if it came down to it, I wouldn't be able to fight it off a second time. So, I left them.**

**The thoughts never stopped, Cev. I still have them. All the time. That's why you have to spend the night when Omere's at my place. That's why I won't let you leave me alone with him. The thoughts are always there, waiting for me to slip. Hopefully, I was able to spend my last day with them.**

**More than anything, I want you to know that you've helped make my life bearable. You worked so hard to help me find my happiness, and if I don't know anything else, I know you love me like I love you. It's genuine, and it's real. When people talk about soulmates, it's always in the romantic realm, but I believe it can be anybody. You're definitely my soulmate, Cev. God knew what he was doing when he made us sisters. He knew you were strong enough to help me, and I've thanked him for you every single day. I love you so much, Cev. Please be happy. Open yourself up to everything you had to push away because of me. I'm not sad or scared**

***about what's to come. I'm welcoming it. I want to go.  
The peace I felt in the air was too inviting.***

***See you later***

***P.S. Oh, the page behind this is for Kas. Don't  
read it. Just give it to him, please. Love you.***

***Cevyn, Ayte...***

“Nyne, Tyn,” I whispered.

I don't know how long I sat there, just staring out the window. Plows moved up and down the street every so often, pushing the sand-colored snow towards the curb. It was still coming down, though not as heavy as it had earlier.

She'd pretty much confirmed everything I'd been thinking, minus the part about almost killing the Omeres. That had to be a torturous thing to walk around with on your already fragile mind. Almost killing your boyfriend and newborn baby.

She only lived there five months after giving birth. Then, one day, she'd called me to come get her. I remembered her being quiet. Too quiet. It never crossed my mind that she was running from them. She asked me to help her get her own place a week later. No matter how much I tried to talk her out of it, she wouldn't budge. Wouldn't talk to Omere. Wouldn't even let the baby come around to nurse. Knowing she was dealing with that on top of the post-partum stress and her usual demons, my God. Ayte liked to call me strong, but the battle she was fighting was way more intense than any battle I'd ever fought. And she'd kept her head above water as long as she could. That was real strength.

I wanted to read Ayte's letter to Kas, but I respected her.

Kas' heavy footsteps bounding down the stairs alerted me that he was up. He was no longer in his pajamas. Matter of fact, he was dressed to go out: Jeans, socks, and a long-sleeved shirt.

His eyes immediately went to the letter in my hands. “You okay?”



I shrugged. “Trying to figure out how I feel.”

“Alright. Well, I won’t push, but you can figure it out while we go grab food. Been cooped up in here too long. We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to, but let’s get you some air.” He was prepared for my refusal, but I didn’t have one. He was right.

“Okay,” I acquiesced, scooting to the edge of the couch to stand, “Let me get changed.”

Seventeen

KAS

IT DIDN'T TAKE Cevyn long to come back down. My truck was prewarmed and waiting for us. I took a chance and asked what she wanted to eat. She hadn't been much help lately, but she told me exactly where to go this time. Some restaurant that made short ribs she loved.

The drive there was slow. The streets were clear enough to drive, but they were anything but clear. I had to pull out of the way of a few plow trucks to avoid my shit getting damaged. Fortunately, the restaurant's parking lot was cleared, and they'd even shoveled a good path to the front door.

We were greeted by heavy warmth and delicious aromas when we stepped inside.

"Two?" The cheery hostess asked as we cleaned our feet on the mat in front of the door and removed our coats.

"Two," I confirmed.

"Right this way."

I allowed Cevyn to go ahead of me, following her to the back of the restaurant, which was fairly busy for a snow day. But, I mean, as a northerner, you learn not to let snow stop you. I didn't start canceling plans until the weatherman started talking about feet instead of inches.

The hostess stopped at a table right beside a roaring fireplace. "Is this okay? Or do you prefer to be further away from the heat?"

I looked to Cevyn. "I'm good with it."

"It's fine. Thank you." She told her politely.

"Perfect. Your server's name is Wilhelmina; she'll be right with you. Enjoy."

I reached around Cevyn to pull a chair out for her, waiting for her to sit before seating myself across the table.

“Could you sit next to me?” she patted the metal-backed chair beside her.

“Of course,” I slid around into the chair, placing my arm over the back of hers, not at all surprised when she leaned against me.

“You know exactly what you’re getting?”

“Yeah, I always get the same thing. Short ribs, mashed potatoes, and whatever the seasonal vegetable is.”

“You get more than one short rib?” Usually, places like this give you an entire bowl of mashed potatoes and half a short rib. If I needed to order something else, I wanted to know. It was a small cozy spot that seated less than forty, with candle wall sconces and a chandelier in the center of the room.

She snorted, knowing it was a valid question. “Three good-sized ones. A very generous portion of the best mashed potatoes in the world and the same for the vegetables.”

“Oh, I’ll follow your lead then. Are they as generous with the drinks too?”

“Mmm,” she hummed as she considered the question, “I really don’t know. I usually come here in the middle of the day for lunch and opt-out of the liquor.”

“Are we about to find out?”

“We sure the hell are.”

After the waitress came to take our orders, she finally spoke on the letter.

“She said she did it for peace.” She peered over at me, eyes red-rimmed. “She made sure to say it had nothing to do with me, but then she went on to say how much she knows I’ve sacrificed for her. Told me to open myself up to things I’ve been missing out on. I don’t know how that’s supposed to convince me I had nothing to do with it.”

“So, she doesn’t want you to walk around carrying all the guilt she knew would come with her passing, right?”

“Right.”

“You’ve spent your entire life trying to do right by your sister, even down to basically what was a dying declaration. This last thing that she’s asking you for is more for you than her, right?”

She nodded.

“So do it for her. Stop letting the guilt weigh down on you. I know it’s easier said than done, but she wrote you that letter, knowing how things would turn out. She pre-emptively released you from this hurt that’s weighing on you. I’m talking about the guilt, not the grief. Grieve your sister as long as you need to, Cevyn. But don’t make it worse by holding onto the guilt.”

“It’s so hard, Kas. It feels like I failed. I was able to be there for her every other time.”

“How weren’t you there for her this time? You were exactly where she wanted you to be, right? Literally.”

“Yeah... Yeah, I was. And you’re making sense. You are. I just have to heal a bit more, then maybe I can see it differently.”

“And that’s fine. I won’t be kicking you out.”

She giggled a little and laid her head against my shoulder. “Kas wouldn’t let you anyway.”

“He really wouldn’t.”

“She wrote something to you.”

“Me?”

She nodded, “Told me not to read it. I put it on your dresser.”

“What the hell could it be about?”

“Probably telling you to take care of me and threatening to haunt you or some shit.” She cracked up for the first time in days. “That’s probably exactly what it is.”

I laughed too, then reached over to turn her lips to mine for a kiss. “It’s a good thing I’m already doing that, huh?”

“For your sake, at least.” She pressed her lips to mine a little longer, then nuzzled my nose. “You have been doing a bang-up fucking job at that, though. Definitely have to give you your props.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, look.” An unfamiliar feminine voice that grated across every one of my nerve endings exclaimed, “I told you she wouldn’t be sitting at home moping. Already got a new man and everything.”

Cevyn’s head whipped towards the voice, and mine wasn’t too far behind.

A couple stood in front of our table— well, the man stood in front of the table, looking like he was two seconds from dragging his female counterpart, who’d taken it upon herself to sit down next to Cev, out of there.

“Hey, Cev. Who is this?”

Cevyn stared back at her, her lips set in an angry line.

The man reached out for the woman’s hand, “Mindy—”

She pushed his hand from her shoulder and ordered him into the seat across from me.

Ah, Mindy. Cevyn’s “best friend” who hadn’t reached out to even check on her. That made ole’ boy her husband, Lance.

“I apologize, y’all.” He said in frustration after taking the seat across from me.

“What the fuck are you apologizing for? This is my best friend.”

Cev finally found her words, “Best friend?”

“Yeah, bitch,” she snorted as she shrugged out of her feathered coat. “Did something change? Your sister died, and I lost the title?” Cevyn stilled beside me.

“Mindy,” Lance chastised. “Cev, I’m so sorry.”

“Listen, she’s obviously doing fine. I told you, once it hit her that she was free, she’d be good.” *My God.* She turned to

Cev. “You’re seeing how good things are without having to run every time she pops a screw, huh?”

Cevyn stared at her in utter disbelief.

“I mean, you must. You’re sitting here all hugged up with this nice-looking gentleman– Mindy, by the way. And you are?”

“Kas,” I supplied. I didn’t know her, but I already didn’t like her. No wonder Cevyn never talked about her.

“Oh, Okay. And how long have you been seeing my girl? A few weeks, right? Since her sister went on to glory.”

“Mindy, you’re being inconsiderate and inappropriate.”

“How?”

“Mindy, get away from me, please,” Cevyn ordered, not looking up from the table. Her breath quivered as she inhaled and exhaled.

“Cevyn, I know you’re not still walking around crying over that shit. She clearly wanted to die, baby. She went ahead and did it, and now you can live your life. It’s a win-win situation.”

It was my turn to look at her like she’d lost her mind. What the fuck was she on that she thought that shit was okay to say to her supposed best friend?

“What’s win-win about my sister being dead? That’s why you haven’t reached out? That’s why you didn’t come to the funeral? Because you thought I was out here happy to have lost my sister?”

Mindy had the nerve to sound offended when she responded, “Well, obviously, you have been doing well.” She pointed to me. “It didn’t take you long to find a man.”

I wasn’t going to join in, but her trying to put that shit on Cev didn’t sit right with me. “Five years– almost six.”

“What is that? How long you went to college?”

I swallowed the disrespectful retort that first popped into my mind and instead responded with, “No. That’s how long

we've been in each other's lives."

Her expression said she didn't believe me, "You've been in her life for six years, and I've never heard of you? Not likely."

"Well, clearly, y'all aren't the friends you think you are. I've been here. I was here before Ayte passed. When she passed. And I've been here since she passed. There's nothing new about me or my feelings for Cev."

"So, what were you? A friend dying to smell her pussy, then jumped on the opportunity when she killed herself?"

"Mindy, stop," Lance jumped in before I could say what was on the tip of my tongue. "Let's go. Cev, I'm sorry about this."

Cevyn turned her attention to him, "You know what, Lance? It's not for you to keep apologizing for her. If she can't see how fucked up this so-called friendship we had was, it's on her. Not you. Just like it should have been her calling me to check on me when she found out Ayte passed, not you— I appreciate you for that, by the way. The arrangements you sent were beautiful."

"Wait, what?" Mindy's eyes bounced back and forth between Lance and Cevyn.

He groaned and rolled his eyes before saying, "I called her to offer my condolences because—as you know— her sister passed. I also bought two arrangements for the funeral. I didn't ask you."

"How the fuck did you call her?"

My jaw dropped. Of everything we'd said since they sat down, that was what caught her attention.

"How did you call her?" she asked again, clenching her jaw. Was he not allowed to have a phone? Cev never spoke about her, so I didn't know anything about their dynamics.

"From work, Mindy."

"I knew you made calls from your office. You fucking liar. Give me the number. I want the call log. And how the hell did you pay for these flower arrangements?"



This woman was a few marbles short of a dozen. What?

“Mindy, get up and get away from this table.” Cevyn croaked. “I’m-I’m-I’m trying really hard not to put my hands on you, but you’re pissing me off. I can’t deal with you right now.”

Mindy held a finger up in Lance’s face, basically telling him he better not move, and turned to Cev. “Cevyn, come off this shit. You should be relieved that she’s—”

Cevyn leaped from her chair and popped her in the mouth two good times before I reached her. As I pulled her away, she took her booted foot and kicked her in the stomach like she was aiming for a field goal.

The waitress chose that moment to arrive with our entrees. “Can we get that to go,” I asked as I held onto Cevyn. “I’ll be right back.”

With Cev firmly wrapped in my arms, I managed to get her out of the restaurant and into my car. “Stay here, Cevyn.”

Her face was pinched as she nodded, tears streaming down her face.

“Damn,” I breathed as I returned to the restaurant. Neither of us had our coats because—well, I wasn’t about to chance grabbing coats when Cevyn was trying to kick a hole in that girl’s chest.

Lance was in his seat looking over the menu when I returned. Two of the wait staff were down on the ground with his hollering wife. She had a handlebar mustache made of blood dripping from her nose. I didn’t even want to think about what her ribs would feel like in the morning.

“Sorry about that, man,” Lance told me as he stood from the table.

I held my hands up, letting him know he was good. “It ain’t on you, dude, but thanks for the apology.” I nodded towards Mindy, “You gon’ be good?”

He nodded. “Yeah, things are about to start looking way up for me.”

“Well, it was good to meet you.”

“You too, man. Take care of Cevyn. She’s special.”

“Way ahead of you,” I assured him as I walked away. The waitress was waiting by the kitchen for me. I paid in cash and left with the food.

Cev was out of the car pacing when I returned. The sobbing had returned. I secured the food on the back passenger side floorboard, then went to her and helped slip the coat over her shoulders.

“How could somebody think it’s a relief my sister is gone, Kas?” She whined. “That’s exactly why she took her own life because people made her feel like her existence was an inconvenience. Ayte didn’t bother a soul. She was practically a hermit because she was so nervous about coming out and what people thought of her. She met Mindy twice, Kas. *Twice*. And then refused to come out with me if I met up with her. Then, she has the gall to sit there and tell me TO MY FACE that I should be happy she’s gone. I swear to God, I could kill her. I could stomp her fucking face off. I knew she was a piece of shit. I did. But I dealt with it because...,” she paused and peered down at the white snow beneath her feet before continuing, “The truth is I don’t know why I continued interacting with her. I should have stopped years ago. I knew she disapproved of my dedication to Ayte, but...that shit she just did,” she angrily flung an arm in the restaurant’s direction, “Ugh. I could... My poor sister.” She walked in a circle, wiping her face. “She didn’t deserve people treating her like that. My fucking parents. Teachers. Doctors. That bitch. All of them just... she didn’t deserve that shit.”

“I know she didn’t, baby.”

When she looked over to me, snowflakes were in her eyelashes, “I want to walk back in there and strangle her until she turns blue.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

With angry, pouted lips, she sized me up. I swear, I almost laughed. “Why the fuck do you have to be so big?”

We both busted out laughing. She used her coat sleeve to wipe her face, laughing as she ambled over to me.

“Let’s get you out of the cold, baby. This snow is getting heavy again.” The windshield had been covered when I brought her out.

“Yeah,” she sighed, “I want my food before it gets cold.”

Eighteen

## CEVYN

MY DAYS STARTED RUNNING TOGETHER. I only knew what day of the week it was if it was the weekend and Kas was home. Other than that, there was a 90 percent chance I didn't know what day it was.

My parents called daily to check on me. And just like they did when Ayte would call them, I chose not to answer. The thought of them checking on me was laughable. Not once in her life did either of my parents check on my sister. They were too ashamed. Too embarrassed.

The hurt was giving way to anger. Immense, powerful anger, and I didn't know who to unleash it on. There was nobody to unleash it on. I'd gone off on my parents. Busted Mindy's nose and broke two ribs. There was nobody else. At some point, I needed to start healing.

I do have to say, the support from my boss and co-workers was overwhelming. Everybody was constantly checking on me. Not to mention my indefinite paid leave. I'd spoken to my boss, and he said whenever I wanted to come back. If I came back and wasn't ready, I could go back out. He literally told me to take a damn year—I had no intention of doing that. I knew once I handled all Ayte's business, not working would start working against me. I'd need it to stay busy. But right now, being able to stay in bed all day wallowing in grief was working for me. At least until one or both of the Kases came home.

I swear the younger one was pushier than the older one. He'd come home from school calling my name the same way he did his dad when he arrived from his mom's house. He'd come and talk to me before going off to do his homework. If he didn't have any, I was immediately dragged down to the living room for my daily rec time. If he did, there was a reprieve, but only until he was finished, or his dad came home. Whichever was first. He'd do any and everything to make me smile.

Then, there was the big one. He'd sit up holding me all night when my dreams weren't kind. He'd used a lot of PTO to stay with me on days the pain was too intense. I don't know for sure when I fell in love, but I was so in love with that man.

I tried so hard to focus on that. Focus on how happy he made me, but it didn't always work. The truth of the matter was nothing could outrun grief. Not only was she a nasty bitch, but she was a fast one too. Can't forget strong. It felt like she'd never leave me alone. Like she'd forever be standing on my heart with stiletto heels. I was assured it wouldn't last forever, but it felt like it.

KAS

“Morning.” Kas’ voice was deeper than usual as he sluggishly ambled into the kitchen.

I chuckled as he leaned against my side for his usual hug and didn’t move. “Tried to stay up with the big dogs, huh?” I asked before bringing my mug of coffee up to my mouth for a sip.

“I don’t know how people do that.”

He’d gone to a lock-in at a local arcade after school Friday night. Let out time was Saturday morning at seven. He’d been awake for more than 24 hours. He fell asleep the second he climbed into the truck that morning. I almost had to carry his lanky ass in the house. It was Sunday morning, and he was just waking up.

“I don’t know either, man. I take my ass to bed.”

“That’s because you’re old, though.”

“Get off me,” I moved away from him, making him chuckle.

“Daddy, you know what I was thinking?”

“Hmm?”

“I think you should let Ms. Cevyn meet Mema. You know, like we said, she makes everybody feel better. Maybe she can help her too.”

“That’s a good idea.” Although I hadn’t thought about introducing Cevyn to my folks, I wasn’t averse to the idea. We were long past the “just fucking” label we’d tacked onto ourselves before. Meeting my parents was a logical next step. “I’ll talk to her about it and see what she says, but I think you’re on to something.”

He grinned as he pulled a carton of juice from the fridge, proud of himself. He had a big soft spot in his heart for Cevyn. Their connection was damn near instantaneous. He worried

when she was having bad days and did anything he could think of to make her smile.

“Good morning, gentleman.” Cevyn greeted as she entered the kitchen. “Welcome back, Kas.”

He cracked up. “Thank you.”

“Did you have a good time?”

“It was fun until about three. Then I started getting tired, and my eyes hurt. Had to keep walking around to stay awake. I don’t even remember being picked up.”

“Wow. Never doing that again?”

He shrugged, “Nah, I won’t say never.”

“I bet you’ll take a nap after school like I suggested,” I murmured.

He grinned sheepishly as he returned the juice to the fridge. I’d been on him all afternoon on Friday to take a quick nap. I warned him he’d be so tired it would hurt, but he brushed me off. Told me he wasn’t a baby. He’d be good. Tuh.

“Oh, Daddy.” He came over to me and tapped my arm. “Guess what.”

“Hmm?”

“A girl asked me on a date.”

“Oh, yeah?”

His little bird chest puffed up in the black shirt he was wearing, “Yup. But I turned her down.”

Cevyn sucked her teeth, “What, why?”

“I told her, baby, I’m a man. You don’t ask me out. Then I asked her out. Next Saturday.” He grinned proudly.

I cracked the fuck up, and Cevyn did the same.

“I really don’t know where you came from, dude.”

“Oh, please,” Cevyn came and stood beside me at the counter, “That’s all you.”

“Is that how y’all met?”



We both froze. There was no way I was telling my kid, I'd walked up to her, and she'd told me she wanted to fuck, and I'd told her the same.

She broke first, cracking up some more, "Nope."

"Oh..." he looked between us, clearly confused, then, "Oh, ill." He quickly exited the kitchen, dry heaving the whole way.

"I can't stand him," I shook my head as I pushed off the counter to look her over. She'd had a tough night, which meant we had a tough night. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I was crying all night and kept you up. A.K.A. guilty."

"You feel guilty for nothing, Cev. You're just going through the natural mourning process. It'll get better."

"I hope so." She stepped into my arms and hugged my midsection. "Because this shit is tiring."

"It will," I reached down to gently rub up and down her sides. "I, um... I think you should talk to my mom."

She leaned back quickly to look up at me, "About what?"

"Your grief. My mom is like... I don't know how to explain it. She's amazing at reading people and even better at helping them through hard times. Kas suggested it, actually. But I agree. If it's weird for you, it's fine, though."

"No, it's not weird to me. I mean, as long as it's not weird for you. Um, things have obviously been changing for us, so I'd need to meet her eventually, right?"

"For sure, and I think now is as good a time as any. She knows of you, but not much."

"Okay."

I raised my arm to check the time on my watch. "She's at church now. But I'll shoot her a message and let her know we're stopping by for breakfast."

"No, Kas. I don't want to ambush her."

“Baby, believe me. It’s not. The point is to help you feel better, and I’d like you feeling better sooner, rather than later. Once you get there, she might pop me over the head for not bringing you sooner. It’s cool, I promise.” She was unsure but nodded anyway. Then glanced at the clock over the oven before bringing her eyes back to mine. “It’s 7:20 in the morning. She’s already at church?”

“Yup. She’s goes to a big church. Three services.”

“Oh, well, damn. That’s convenient.”

“Yup. 7, 9, and 11:30 if I’m not mistaken.”

“Oh, I see. She gets in and gets out.”

“Exactly.” I pulled her into me by her lower back, so I could kiss her brows. “So, we’ll leave in about an hour. And hopefully, you can start feeling better. I know not fully, but on the course.”

“If she can help me do that in one day, I’m buying you a ring.”

I cracked up, “Size 11 ring.”

My mom was excited about our visit. I didn’t tell her anything about Cevyn, only that she’d be stopping by for breakfast with us. She was bubbling to meet her. Cev, on the other hand, seemed nervous. Even the kid picked up on it.

“Ms. Cevyn, Mema is the nicest person in the world. I swear. You don’t have to be nervous.” He told her from his spot in the back seat behind me as I maneuvered the car into my parents’ driveway.

“I believe you.”

After I parked and we exited the truck, Kas led the way inside. I’d told him we needed to make ourselves scarce while they talked. Hopefully, the food was done, and we could disappear down into my dad’s man cave. He was out having breakfast with his hunting club. Cev had been worried about being a crying mess the first time she met him, so I was glad to report he wasn’t there.

Kas bounded straight inside, letting his loud presence be known as usual.

I could hear my mom directing him to the food when Cev and I walked inside the house. I shut the door behind us and took her coat. She was nervous as hell. She hadn't stopped wringing her hands the entire drive out.

"It's cool, Cev." I reached out to break her hands apart, wrapping my hand around one to lead her towards the kitchen.

My Mom was coming out and stopped in her tracks. Her eyes instantly watered as she pressed a hand to her chest and stepped over to Cev. "Sweetheart, I don't know what has you in so much pain, but...I feel like you could use a hug."

Cev's eyes went wide with wonder, then her expression faltered, and she was choking back a cry. My mom immediately pulled her into a tight hug that Cev accepted. They were both sobbing by the time I made it into the kitchen.

I didn't think I'd need to introduce them. That hug was all the introduction they needed. I rushed Kas through fixing his plate so we could leave them to their conversation.

Nineteen

## CEVYN

SEEING what I was feeling mirrored in Kas' mom's eyes when she first saw me was one of the most jarring things I'd ever experienced.

I don't know how she knew or what divine gift God had given her, but without a single word from me, she took on what I'd been feeling. And that hug? Man, I don't even know how to explain it. I'd just met her—I didn't even know her name—and she'd offered me more sympathy, more comfort in that hug than my own mother ever had.

Now that I think of it, I don't know if I'd ever hugged my mother or my father, for that matter. Even if I had, it wasn't like this. She hugged me like I was one of her children, and she wanted me to know I was loved.

This is what Kas grew up with? No wonder he was so affectionate. Truth be told, I didn't want the hug to end. I wanted to stand there and let her hug all my hurt away.

I stood there, hysterically crying into a virtual stranger's shoulder for I don't know how long. And she let me. She just kept repeating how sorry she was for whatever I was going through and that it would be okay while gently running her hand up and down my back. The craziest part is I believed her. I'd been questioning if I'd ever be okay for over a month, and the answer was always a resounding no. But after one—very long—hug, Kas' mother made me reverse my thoughts. Sheesh.

Eventually, we did break the hug, with me apologizing profusely about crying on her shoulder.

“It's clearly what you need, sweetheart. No need to apologize.” With an arm around my shoulder, she led me into the kitchen. “Let's get you something to eat, and then we'll talk. Okay?”

“Yes, ma'am.” I washed my hands at the sink and dried them. “I'm Cevyn, by the way.”

“My grandson filled me on you a while back,” she winked at me. “I’m Opal.”

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Opal.”

“Same here.” She motioned to the biscuits, sausage, eggs, and grits set out on the center island. “Go ahead and help yourself.”

I found myself spilling my guts about my entire life all the way up to my sister’s suicide over breakfast. I told her about my recent isolation and how I was drowning in guilt.

“Are you mad at her?” Kas looked just like his mother. Same eyes. Same mouth. Same broad nose.

I shook my head so hard, it was a wonder my brain didn’t come loose. “No... I could never be.”

“Why not?” With her elbows on the table, her hands were folded in front of her face, above her half-eaten plate.

“Because... she couldn’t control certain things.”

“Logically, you’re right. However, matters of the heart are never logical. Ever. You keep using the word “guilt,” and it’s because you’re mad at your sister, and you can’t accept that. You were her protector for as long as you can remember. You probably never let yourself be irritated with her. Even if it did happen, you never let her see it, right? You did everything in your power to make her feel wanted and welcome. Right?”

I nodded.

“You said yourself you missed out on a lot of things, but you just shrugged them off and found something better. You gave your life to your sister, and she took her own life in the end. On the most basic level, you sacrificed for your sister, and it was all for nothing because she went ahead and did the one thing you’d been fighting to prevent. Every other time you saved her, it validated your place in her life. It gave reason to why you missed out on all these things. But this last time, you didn’t. And you’re mad at her for not allowing you to try.”

My voice broke, “It’s not right to be mad at her.”

“Whether it’s right or wrong, it’s what you feel. You need to acknowledge it. Is it going to change where you are in your grief? Not at all. But I don’t think it’s the grief keeping you in bed. I think it’s the guilt. You carry a lot of guilt for your sister. Guilt because your parents rejected. Guilt because society rejected her. Guilt that she was born with this illness. You’re holding onto a lot of guilt that isn’t yours, and you need to release it. Once you let the guilt for all of these other people go, you’ll see that yours, in comparison, is nothing. You loved your sister and, from what I can tell, helped make her life as good as it could be. She knew she was well taken care of. Her last days were spent on an island with her soulmate. Right?”

I looked down at my empty plate. “Right.”

“Her last hours were spent with the three people she loved the most in the world and who she knew loved her. She passed in that cloud of that love. She lived all the life she could bear to live, then she chose how she would go. It’s macabre. It’s sad. It’s hurtful to us who are left here to mourn, but to your sister, she was walking towards peace. Isn’t that what we do in life? Work your behind off in your youth so that you can live your later years out in peace. That’s all life is: a race to peace. For some of us, it takes longer. You know. We live what folks like to call a “Full life,” and we’re okay with peace being this abstract idea we chase as we head towards death. For others, that journey is shorter. You know? Maybe death is peace for them. Who are we to say they’re wrong? It’s wrong because it hurts *us*. *We* don’t want to grieve. *We* don’t want to live with this pain. *We’re* understandably selfish.”

She was right. Ayte wasn’t suffering anymore. She’d suffered her whole life, trying her best to keep the blast radius small enough, so it didn’t affect others. When I’d wish I could take some of her pain off her and onto me, she’d fuss me out. That was her way of protecting me. And now, she was gone, and I was—in essence—wishing she could still be here suffering so that I could feel better. Selfish was damn sure the right word.

“And it’s not a bad thing. It’s the complexity of being human. We don’t want to feel bad. In the few significant losses I’ve suffered, I figured out to let the hurt go, you have to let it in. You can’t keep your foot on the door, trying to keep it out, because eventually, you’ll get tired, and it’ll still get in.” She dropped her eyes for the first time, a blip of grief washing over her features that were so much like Kas’. “Grief counseling helped a lot. I would go to group meetings weekly. Maybe you should look into that.”

“Can I ask who you lost?”

She nodded, pressing her lips into a tight line before answering, “We never had a problem getting pregnant. Making it to term seemed impossible, however. We had three miscarriages in two years. The first two were pretty early on. The last one was at seven months. That one was devastating. So, we waited a few years and tried again. This time, we got to bring her home. Two months later, she passed from S.I.D.s.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah, it was... tough. We gave up for a while. Then, we slipped up and got pregnant again. The anxiety almost killed me, but we made it. We were able to bring my oldest, Knox, home. Next thing I knew, there were five of them running around here.” We giggled. “So, ultimately, I was able to move beyond the grief, but it took a long time. I had my first miscarriage at 18. We didn’t have Knox until we were 29. Kas came ten months later. Becky a year after that. Stephy, a year after Becky and finally my baby, Kole, two years later. Knox slept on my chest the entire first year of his life. You want to talk about stress? My God.” She sat back in the chair, wiggling the tension from her hands, “I’m worried about him potentially passing in his sleep; meanwhile, I’m pregnant with Kas praying to God we didn’t have another miscarriage.”

“That sounds like a lot.”

“It was. I didn’t truly breathe a sigh of relief until I was halfway through my thirties because they’d all made it out of infancy. By that time, the oldest two were moving into that



stage where they were too foolish to realize how fragile they were.”

I chuckled, “My nephew is at that stage.”

“It’s not fun at all. Especially since Kole wanted to follow behind his brothers. There’s a four-year age difference between him and Kas and five from Knox. I literally had to pad him with clothes and a helmet because he absolutely refused to be left out.”

I was cracking up. “Did they let him be with them?”

“Oh, yeah. They loved bringing him along. I found out when they were adults that it was because he was used as the test dummy in whatever they did.”

“Wow.”

“Wow is right. I took a broom to all three.”

“That’s hilarious— how many grandkids are there?”

“Eight,” she grinned proudly.

“How many boys and girls?”

“One boy.”

That made me smile, “Just Kas.”

“Yup. Knox has three girls. Stephy has three, and Becky has one. Kole claims he’s not having any kids, so it’s up to you and Kas to give me another one.”

*Hold up.* “Huh?”

She laughed. “Huh, what? You don’t want kids?”

“Um...I... I’ve never considered it.”

“Oh, okay. Well, consider it. I’d like another baby.”

That made me bust out laughing. “Ms. Opal we’re not... We’re not even in love.” I tripped over my words. “I—He’s not in love with me.”

Her face told me she didn’t believe that, “If there’s one thing in this world I know like the back of my hand, it’s my children. You know you hear people going on about

somebody's love language. Might be touch, affection. It might be showering others with gifts. It might just be attention. Kaswell Mosely... my second son, his is acts of service. When he was little, he always wanted to help. *Mommy, I can help you do the dishes. I can help fold the laundry. Daddy let me cut the grass. I'll make everybody breakfast. I'll do this, I'll do that.*

“His love language is service. If he's willing to do for you and help you in any way, he's in love. And he brought you to me? My kids always say something about me makes folks feel better. And he brought you here? Baby, that boy's nose is so wide open you could fit one of those Oasis Class Royal Caribbean ships up there. Hell, the whole fleet.”

I sputtered a giggle.

“Maybe y'all ain't there yet to speak on it, but for him to take you in the way he has, he feels it.” She reached across the table for my dishes as she stood, “And so do you. Don't worry, I won't tell him.”

“You just told me.”

“Did I?” she winked as she took the plate over to the dishwasher. “And before you say you don't, it's all over you. It's rising from your skin like heat, baby. And of my boys, he's probably the best one to have.”

“Why do you say that?” I hadn't even known how many siblings Kas had before this conversation.

“Knox changes women more than he changes his underwear. And the boy takes three showers a day, so you do the math. He only stayed with his wife long enough for them to have kids. Kole isn't interested in any type of commitment. But Kas is the one who was made to be somebody's husband. He's a giver, and he's affectionate, and he sat in the kitchen with me enough to know how to make a meal or two.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

“I'm not telling you anything you didn't know.” True. “So, would you want to see about a grief group? They're literally seven days a week. Could probably find us one today.”

I was down for anything that made this shit easier. “If you can find one, I’d like to check it out.” It wasn’t like I had any big plans for the day. Before Kas told me we were coming to his parent’s house, I planned to stay in the bed as long as he’d let me, then move to the couch before ending right back in the bed.

“Oh, good. Let me get my phone and call my friend, Rebecca. She’ll know for sure.”

“Do they really do them every day?”

“Grief doesn’t take the weekend off, baby. I’m sure you know that. Weekends are hard for people because generally, you’re off work and have nothing to do but drown in your feelings.”

That made perfect sense. Although, mine was reversed. During the week, it was terrible because I wasn’t at work and tended to be by myself all day. The weekends were easy.

After speaking to her friend, she returned and let me know there was a meeting that afternoon we could attend.

The Kases eventually came looking for me. They were going to play basketball that afternoon, so it was decided I’d stay with Ms. Opal, and she’d drop me at the recreation center after the meeting. I was happy to also meet his dad. Kas looked just like Ms. Opal, but his build was all his dad’s.

I mentioned to Ms. Opal how cute I thought the three of them were, and she went for her phone, promising she had the cutest picture ever. When she handed it to me, there was a picture of Kas’ dad –Mr. Kaleb–, Kas and Kas from Christmas. Mr. Kaleb was knocked out on the far end of their sectional couch with his feet up, my Kas was laid out on the couch beside him, with his head resting on his shoulder fast asleep, and Little Kas was asleep against his father’s side. I sent the picture to my phone because that deserved to be printed and placed in a frame.

I was hesitant when we arrived at the meeting. I was terrified to go inside and see all of these people sitting there in pain. Although there were a handful of people still in the early

stages of their grief like me, most participants were well beyond that point. They shared things they'd learned to use to cope. Talked about how sometimes the grief would go away altogether, only to return with a vengeance and how they dealt with it.

Overall, my takeaway was that grief was different for everybody, and there was no right or wrong way to get through it. However, having a solid support system was one of the best tools to combat it. My mind immediately went to Kas. He may not have been an entire support system, but he was undoubtedly a support pillar.

I did feel better after the meeting. I didn't necessarily plan to come daily or even weekly, but it was comforting to know if I was having a bad day and needed a bit of extra support, I could go to one.

I was surprised when instead of dropping me off at the door, she parked to come inside the rec center.

"I don't have anything to do," she told me.

It wasn't hard to find the large gym in the center of the building. It was basically empty. We found our guys playing on the other end of it with another father and son that Ms. Opal said was a friend of Kas'. I was pleasantly surprised to hear my name and turned to find Ghost sauntering over.

"Oh, dang. Hey, Auntie." He leaned down to envelop Ms. Opal in a hug. "How you?"

"I'm good, Kaspar, baby. How are you?"

"Good." He grinned over at me and enveloped me in the same hug. "How are you?"

"I'm good, Ghost." He smelled too fucking good. No wonder Harlowe was smitten. "Well, good is relative. I'm okay."

He nodded, his lips set in a sympathetic frown when he pulled back. "I hear you. I gotta tell you, I miss you at work. They've paired me with Mary f—" his eyes shot to his aunt, who dared him to curse in front of her. I cracked up. "Mary freakin Magdalene, Auntie. I wouldn't disrespect you."

“Mmmhmm. You guys work together?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered. “Cev is my work wife.”

“Ooooh, is that how you met Kas?” I nodded. “Good looking out, Kaspar.” She winked, causing him to crack up.

“I knew what I was doing.”

“Wow, Ghost.” I bumped him with my shoulder. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“Played a few games with the fellas. Headed home.”

“Well, tell Harlowe I said hey. Um, I’m thinking about coming back to work a day or two a week to see if I’m ready.”

“Take your time, Cevyn. You took a hit. Get yourself right before coming back to all that.”

I nodded, knowing he was right. He kissed my cheek, then his aunt’s, and left the gym.

“Why are their names so similar,” I asked as we continued into the gym down towards the blue bleachers across from where the guys were playing.

“Kaspar’s mother named Kas. We were in the hospital at the same time. I wanted all my kids to have their dad’s initials. Kas was supposed to be a girl– Well, not supposed to be. We were told he was a she until the doctor pulled him out.”

“Whaaaat?”

“Mmmhmm. We had all of this pink stuff. The baby’s name was supposed to be Kassie. I was excited. You could have bought me for a penny when the doctor announced it was a boy. I was so upset I couldn’t even think of a name. So, from her hospital bed, she named him, and I let her.”

“Dang. What’d you do with all the girl stuff?”

“Saved it and used it for Becky a year later.”

That cracked me up. Clearly, she and her husband couldn’t keep their hands to themselves.

The game paused as we walked up. The four guys were absolutely drenched in sweat. Kas used his shirt to dry his face

as he sauntered over to us.

“Ladies,” he greeted, asking me how I was doing with his eyes.

I winked to let him know I was okay.

“You stayin for a while, Ma?”

“I figured I’d keep Cevyn company if you were going to be long.”

He hummed as he checked his watch, “We’re finishing this game up, and that’s it. Fifteen minutes, maybe.”

“Oh, that’s not too bad.”

“It’s not,” I assured her, “It’s about to get dark, and you have a little bit of a drive.”

“You sure?”

“I am. I’ve held up your entire Sunday.”

“I did exactly what I wanted to be doing today, baby. Don’t worry yourself.” She opened her arms to me for a hug that I stepped into and returned. “I’m so happy to have met you. I know this won’t be the last time we talk.”

“No, not at all. Thank you so much.”

“Get my number from Kas and call me anytime you need to talk.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She was still holding me in the hug, and I didn’t have a complaint. Her and her son gave the best damn hugs. She kissed my cheek before turning to do the same to her son. Little Kas ran over for his, then offered her his arm so he could walk her outside.

“How was it?” Kas asked as he led me over to the bleachers, where he grabbed a bottle of fruit punch *Powerade*.

“Not bad. It was nice not being the most pitiful person in the room for the first time in weeks.” I chuckled. “Are we getting food after this?”

“For sure. If I don’t feed that kid after running him up and down this court, he’ll start eating the crown molding.”

I busted out laughing. “Fool.”

“Maybe.” He leaned towards me, “Kiss for luck.” I pecked his lips three good times, then wished him luck as he returned to the court. Kas jogged back in, and they restarted their game.

I was all into the game. It was fun seeing the two younger boys try to outrun their fathers, who made up for the speed with skill. My Kas was moving across that court like a seasoned NBA player. The dads were beating the boys, which was why the boys were talking so much shit.

Two minutes in, Kas removed his shirt and tossed it towards the sidelines. I guess it was too soaked with sweat or something. I prayed he had another because it was cold as hell out. I mean, I knew he had his coat, but that wouldn’t help keep the cold air from rising up and freezing his nipples off like a shirt would.

Then, for the first time in weeks, I felt the stirrings of arousal. There was something about the sight of his big, broad back, glistening with sweat as he drifted around the court. Then, I saw his abs and felt the first slight contraction from down below. Immediately, I was hit with a very visceral vision of us intertwined in his bed, with those very abs grinding against mine as he pumped into me.

“Sheesh,” I pulled at my collar, hoping to release some of the heat building up inside my thermal. Where the hell was this coming from? I’d seen him naked countless times in the past week few and hadn’t thought twice of it. He hadn’t brought it up either. Now, here I was getting all hot and bothered in a gym because I liked the way the sweat was rolling down his back into his shorts. “Girl, get a grip,” I ordered, taking a deep breath to clear my thoughts.

There were kids around. I needed to control myself.

I was chuckling at my Kas getting dunked on by his son when something in my peripheral caught my attention. I

turned my head, surprised to see Victoria sauntering down the bleachers towards me.

I didn't know what to expect. The first and only time I'd met her, she hadn't been too pleased about my presence in her ex's house. Kas was very open with her about me staying there, and from what I understood, his son was too. Neither had given any indication of her feelings on the matter. To my knowledge, things were still going smoothly with her son and her.

I offered a soft, "Hey. How you doin,'" when she reached me. Surprised that she took a seat directly beside me.

"Good. Your name is a number or something, right?" Oh, okay. So, she was on some bullshit. "Two? Four? Just not number one, right?" She flipped her auburn, shoulder-length hair over her shoulder as she slipped out of the coat she was wearing, revealing a maroon body suit that was cute but impractical in single-digit weather. She had a beautiful face with almond-shaped eyes, a little button nose, and lips rivaling Kas'. But clearly, that beauty didn't reach her core. I could just feel nasty waves rolling off her.

I wanted to roll my eyes deep into the back of my head, but I managed to maintain my decorum. She really tried that corny shit. "Cevyn."

"Oh, that's right." She replied like my name was insignificant, adjusting herself on the bench beside me. "So, I saw you come in with his mom. You don't think you're meeting her way too soon?" Just jump right in, why don't you.

"Uh, well, it wasn't my decision to meet her. I didn't go and introduce myself. Her son brought me to her."

At this point, I'd arrived with Ms. Opal almost a half-hour ago. So, she sat out in the car, watching to see if I left with her. Also, why the fuck was she there?

"Exactly how long have you been with Kas?"

"Listen, any questions you have should be directed *to* Kas. I'm not in the middle of anything. I don't want to be inserted into anything. If there are things about our relationship that



you'd like to know, please ask him. I don't want any beef with you."

"You're the one getting all hostile. I just asked a simple question." She was trying to keep her tone light, trying really hard to hide her jealousy and make me look like I was being defensive.

"That question was anything but simple."

"I can't help how you interpret things."

"You're right. But you can help what comes out of your mouth, and I'd honestly appreciate it being nothing directed at me. You could have sat anywhere in this gym, but you came up here to sit beside me."

She continued speaking as if I hadn't spoken, "Did he tell you we were together over the summer? I'm assuming y'all broke up or whatever. I moved in with him for a little while, and we were together."

I snorted in response, continuing to watch the game. She was trying to goad me into a reaction, and she wasn't going to get the one she wanted. Even if Kas hadn't explained exactly what went on over the summer, it wouldn't have riled me.

"Oh, you think I'm lying?"

"No, I'm aware that Kas hurt his shoulder over the summer, and you moved into the *guestroom* to help with his care, and that y'all fucked twice with no promise of rekindling your marriage. Or— excuse me— a declaration that y'all would *ne-ver* get back together. Did I miss anything?"

The sneer on her face was about as vicious as a chihuahua preparing to attack. I held eye contact with her because I didn't want her to think she was about to jump. I'd whoop her ass up and down that gym if she so much as flinched at me.

"If you're okay playing second fiddle—"

Oooo, she was pushing my buttons. "Not sure who I'm playing second fiddle to besides your son. And I'm woman enough to be okay with that. As far as anybody else, I can't see how I'm second. I've been at his house, in his bed for the

past month, and he's been right there with me. The truth of the matter is you don't have a dog in this fight— which means there's no fight. You're pissed your ex is seeing somebody else. Fine. Deal with him. I'm going through entirely too much to add unnecessary beef with somebody I'm not competing with.”

“There would be no competition. And since you're going through so much, do you really think it's wise to be attaching yourself to a man and his kid right now? Wouldn't it make more sense for you to crawl into a hole and work on yourself?”

No, the fuck she didn't...

Twenty

KAS

I WAS curious to glance up at the bleachers and see Vicky sitting there with Cev. There was literally no reason for her to be there. I didn't even know how she knew we were there. Kas wasn't scheduled to go back to her place until the next night.

“Kas, you going back to your mom's tonight or something?”

He followed my gaze to the bleachers and turned back to me, shaking his sweat-drenched head. “No. I haven't talked to Mommy all day. I don't know what she's doing here.”

I didn't want to be an alarmist, so I didn't immediately run over there. But when Cev stood up, shaking her head and rolling her eyes, I knew some bullshit was said. Before walking away, I told Kas to let Brian and Todd know the game was done. They wanted to play another game, but I had a feeling I needed to get Cevyn out of there.

“You good?” I asked Cevyn as she came towards me, slipping back into her coat.

“Yeah, I'm great. Can I get the car keys? I'm gonna go wait in the truck. But, um... your son's mother is very interested in how long we've been together, and that's not information I'm giving her. So, keys, please.”

“They're in my coat, but just hold on a minute. I don't want you to walk outside alone. Give me two minutes to talk to her. Please.” I added when she blew out a frustrated breath and glared up at me.

“I'll be by the door,” she grumbled as she marched away.

With my hands in the pockets of my shorts, I ambled over to the section where Vicky was still seated, glaring at me like I'd done something to her.

“What's the problem now, Vick?”

“No idea what you're talking about.” She shrugged.

“Well, first, what are you doing here? Kas isn’t supposed to come home until tomorrow.”

“I saw on his phone he was here. I called him three times, and he didn’t answer, so I came to make sure he was okay.”

“You check his location often?” she wanted to know where I was, to be exact. Hence, the weird red jumpsuit thing she was wearing. There was no way that thing was keeping her warm. The coat sitting on the bench behind her was barely thick enough to block the wind, let alone bone-chilling temperatures.

“He’s my son. I like to know where he is.”

“He’s with me, Vick. What are you checking for?”

“I have every right to know where my kid is. This place was unfamiliar to me, so I came to check it out. End of story.”

It wasn’t the end of the story, but whatever.

“Okay, so you came and saw he was here with me. How did that transform into you asking Cevyn questions that I already told you I wouldn’t answer?”

“I just asked the girl how long y’all have known each other. It’s not that damn serious.”

“It is serious because, at this point, you’ve asked me. You asked Kas, and you’ve asked her. It’s a big damn deal to you, obviously.”

“Then tell me, Kas.”

“What is it you want to know specifically? Let me do this for you one time so you can get off this shit. What exactly do you want to know? But... I have to warn you the answer I’m about to give you is gonna fuck your night up.”

“Why? Because you were fucking her before we got divorced?”

“Ask the question, Victoria.”

“When did you start fucking her, or when did you meet? whichever”

“The good thing is I can answer both with one date: June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015.”

A sneer spread across her whole face. I didn't have to wonder if she knew the date.

“So, what'd you do? As soon as your lawyer called to tell you the divorce was finalized, you went out and found the first bitch who'd let you stick your dick in her?”

“I told you that you wouldn't like the answer. But no, that's not what I did. I went out to celebrate with Ghost and his friends. She works with him. He introduced us.”

“The day our divorce was finalized?”

“Why does that matter?” I snapped. “The divorce was finalized.”

“Kas, I'm still walking around with your last name—”

“You chose to keep my last name, Vick. Don't try to twist this shit up. You made a big deal out of keeping my last name. I didn't even ask for it back. That shit doesn't mean anything to me. We're not together anymore.” I couldn't believe I had to say those words to her. “Haven't been together longer than we've been divorced. You've never given a fuck about what I do in my private life. You had to know I'd eventually get into a relationship. What's the issue?”

“You have her around my son is the fucking issue. We didn't discuss this. You just dumped it on him.” She spat. “Didn't make sure he was comfortable or anything. Introduced him one day, and now from what I can tell, she's practically living with you. It used to be y'all's time, and now he has to share.” Oh, she wanted to try and make this about Kas?

“Kas,” I barked, not turning away from her. I didn't want to pull him into this, but if she needed to hear how he felt, she could. I knew he wouldn't be saying it or feel comfortable having this conversation if I wasn't there. She wasn't about to like this shit neither.

I could hear Kas' footsteps approach, then he was next to me. “Yeah? – Hey, Ma.” He offered her a hug, but she refused, not wanting to get sweaty.

“Kas, you have a problem with Cevyn being around?” I asked. “You can be honest.” His head whipped towards me with confusion. “I know it’s a weird question, dude. But I need you to answer. I want to make sure we’re all three on the same page. If you feel uncomfortable or anything, let me know.”

“No, Daddy. You know I really like Ms. Cevyn. She’s cool, and she makes you happy.”

“Do you feel like she cuts in my time with you? Do I ignore you? We not spending as much time together as before?”

“Nuh, unh. I think we hang out more—Well,” he paused, “I can’t sleep in your bed anymore, but I guess that’s alright.” He cracked up. I would have joined him if his mother didn’t look like she wanted to pounce on him. He noticed, too, and immediately stopped laughing. “It’s okay with me.”

“Alright. Go get changed so we can go.”

He nodded and bid goodnight to his mother before trotting away.

“So, basically, you’re over there playing house with my kid? She’s spending time with your mom. Your mother never took me anywhere with her, and we were married for eleven years.” What the hell?

“Vick, this is exactly why you and I are no longer together. You see what you want to see and distort it. I’m not playing house with *our* kid. I found somebody I care about and have found a way to merge her into my life seamlessly. Our kid is okay with it. That’s good enough for me. All of this bullshit you’re trying to manifest ain’t coming to pass. We’ve been good our entire divorce. Let’s not mess that up now, Vick. And as far as my mom, she’s *my* mom. I damn sure was not about to run introducing them by you. I can’t tell you anything about the relationship between you and my mother. You have her number. You can call and ask her. As for me, right now, I’m gonna get some food to feed the kid and turn in for the night. I don’t want to keep doing this with you either. Cevyn is around and will continue to be. It’s not for you to like or dislike.” I

turned to leave, then stopped and turned back to her, “You want to walk out with us, so you’re not alone?”

When it was clear she wasn’t going to respond, I bid her a good night and returned to my things. I pulled a dry shirt from my duffle and slid my arms inside before pulling it over my head.

This shit with Vicky was about to blow up. I could feel it. And it wasn’t because I was psychic. It was because I’d lived it. I couldn’t let my son go home the next day. I’d talk to him about it in the morning.

Cev was waiting by the gym doors when I reached them.

“You okay?”

She looked up from her phone and nodded. “Yeah. I was cool with deflecting her shit, but then she suggested I crawl into a hole and work on myself, and she was two seconds from ending up like Mindy.”

I slid my arm around her and turned her towards the outer doors, “I appreciate it. She can’t fight.”

That made her laugh. “What?”

“I’m serious. Absolutely can’t fight. That’s how we met in college.”

“Sheesh– Is Kas going back with her tonight?”

“Nah,” I peered behind me, “he went to change clothes in the locker room.”

“Oh, alright.”

We stepped outside and were accosted by frigid temperatures. The sun had gone down, and it was colder than it had been when we arrived.

“Damn. Should have had him warm the car up.” I complained as we speed-walked to my truck.

I opened her door first and helped her up before jogging around to my door and climbing in. With a foot on the gas, I pressed the ignition button, praying it didn’t take long to heat up.



“Any idea what you want to eat?” I directed at Cev. I didn’t have a clue. We cooked a lot, but we ate out just as much. It’d be after six by the time we returned to my place, and I knew neither of us wanted to cook.

“Mmmmm, some kind of soup would be good.” She hummed, wiggling in her seat. “Ooh. I got it: *Mecha*. Plus, they have those ribs Kas loved last time.”

“Works for me.”

“I think I can place the order online, and we can grab it before we go home.”

I leaned over for a kiss. “I like that you think of my house as home.”

With her eyes closed, she nuzzled her nose to mine. “It’s not your house. It’s you and that cute kid.”

I chuckled. “Speaking of that cute kid,” I peered out the window to see if I saw him coming. I pulled from the parking spot and parked in front of the doors he should have been exiting.

“Maybe he’s talking to his mother.”

Just as I moved to exit the truck, the doors opened, and Vicky came out, followed by a sullen Kas. She pointed him towards her car and walked around to my side. I pushed the door open.

“He’s coming with me tonight.” She told me as if it were a done deal, and I didn’t get a say in it.

“No, he’s not.” I stepped out of the truck and called for my son to come back, then turned to his mother. “What the hell are you doing?”

“You’re not about to sit up with the child I gave birth to and play house with this bitch.”

“Kas close the door,” Cev told me, sounding bored. I appreciated her not immediately jumping out of the car to fuck Vicky up. I pushed the door closed, then turned back to her, but caught sight of my son’s red eyes. He’d been perfectly fine when he walked away from us in the gym.

“What happened, Kas?”

She jumped in before he could respond, “Nothing fucking happened. I told him he needed to come home.”

I reached around her and pulled him to me by the lapels of his coat. He was holding his breath, trying not to cry.

I repeated my question, “What happened, Kas?” He wouldn’t look at me, but a tinge of red beneath his collar caught my attention. I moved his coat out of the way to reveal five red marks that perfectly matched up with a hand around his throat.

I moved aside and told him to get in the truck.

Vicky took a step towards us and grabbed the shoulder of his coat, yanking so hard he almost fell. “I fucking said he’s coming with me.” Kas tumbled into my door.

“Victoria, get your hands off my fucking kid. We’re done with this. He’s not coming to your place until I feel like he’s safe. Call whoever you want. Do whatever you want.”

“You don’t have the right to tell me—”

“I do. And I am.” I moved Kas out of her reach and blocked him until he was in the truck. “Vick, you put your hands on him. Are you out of your fucking mind? Why? Because you’re pissed I’m seeing somebody? Grow up.” I stepped back with my hand on my door handle, “As I said, we’re gonna stop visitation until you get yourself together. Don’t go to his school. Don’t come by the house.”

“I can see him when I want.”

“The judge from family court would disagree. Those papers I have at home say Kaswell Mosely has full custodian custody of the minor Kas Mosely. They also say I decide if or when he can see you. I have to be comfortable. I know you know what the court decree says; you’ve known this whole time. Here I am, being a nice guy and allowing him to see you whenever you want. And this is what you do? I’ve dealt with all the shit you’ve been doing to him for the last few months because I thought things would die down. I can see I was

wrong. You remember why I was granted custody? It was for this same shit.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you say. I’m going to see my kid. That court shit is more than five years old. I’ll take you back to court—”

“Try it, Vick.” I pulled my door open and stuck a leg in, “Let me know how it goes.”

I slammed the door and pulled away, sighing as I reached the edge of the driveway.

Cev turned around to check on Kas. “You okay?” I didn’t hear him respond, so I assumed he nodded. “Are you hurt?”

He cleared his throat to say, “Just my chest.”

“What happened to your chest,” I tried not to bark, but I could see him flinch in the mirror. I wasn’t barking at him; I was pissed the fuck off. His voice was so low, I barely heard his response. “Say that again?”

“Mommy punched me.”

I zoned out the rest of the ride. I felt helpless. If it had been a man, I would have committed murder.

Cev suggested we have the food delivered since none of us were in a good mood. I refused. I didn’t feel like waiting for a delivery. She went inside the restaurant to order, refusing either of us accompanying her.

I parked across the street from the restaurant, then cut the car to climb out and get in the back with Kas.

He broke down as soon as I put an arm around him. “My bad, man.” I should have made sure he was out before leaving the building. I thought she was going to leave out the other door.

“I didn’t even do anything,” he told me choppily, using the palm of his hand to clean beneath his eyes.

“Why’d she hit you?” In truth, it didn’t fucking matter why.

“She told me I was coming with her, and I said I wasn’t supposed to. She started yelling, and I told her I wanted to stay with you full-time, and she punched me.” His hand came up to rub the center of his chest. “So, I turned to try to get away, and she dug her nails in my neck. She told me Ms. Cevyn wasn’t my mother, and she wasn’t going to let me come to your house as long as she was there.”

I apologized again and hugged him to my side. Vicky was absolutely out of control. I was thankful Kas didn’t seem to remember the last time this happened.

Vicky never wanted the divorce. She fought me tooth and nail every step of the way. Something that should have taken six months, stretched on for two whole years. In the midst of the divorce, she’d turned on him. Thankfully, she never put her hands on him, but she’d tried convincing him I didn’t love him and would make him so nervous; he wouldn’t want to see me. His grades dropped. He started losing weight and feeling sick all the time. When I applied for custody, they required both of us to take a parenting class—Vick was also ordered to take anger management classes. She didn’t do either. Ultimately the judge gave me full custody. Then, things smoothed out. The divorce went through, and I agreed to share custody with her. We never went back to court, though. Things were fine until recently.

Obviously, us sleeping together over the summer triggered something. I knew I shouldn’t have let my guard down, but I did, and now my son was paying the price.

He was in better spirits once we got home, and he got some food in him and a hot shower. Afterward, he went up to his room, and I laid out on the couch down in the living room under a blanket. I pushed the shit with Vicky to the back of my mind. I knew I needed to reach out to the school the next day to let them know she wasn’t allowed to pick him up anymore. Knowing her, that’s exactly what she’d do.

I flipped through the channels until I found something I could watch without paying too much attention. Cevyn was up in the shower. She’d had her own emotionally charged day to

come down from. She'd come back down if she felt like being bothered.

I was glad when she did come back down. It didn't feel right watching tv without her sandwiched to my side. She climbed over my outstretched legs and nestled herself between me and the back of the sofa. She immediately slid a hand beneath my shirt to gently run back and forth over my abdomen.

"There's no ice cream," she grumbled against my side, causing me to laugh. "It's not funny."

I reached back to slide my hand down into her shirt, mimicking what she was doing to me. "You want me to run to the store to get you some ice cream?"

"Nah, there's something sweet here I could have."

I racked my brain, trying to think of what else we had that was sweet but came up empty. So, I asked, "What?"

Her hand slid from beneath my shirt and down into my sweats, making her intention clear. Oh... We hadn't done any of that in some time. I was not averse to the idea, but again, she'd had a bit of an emotional day, plus half a bottle of wine with dinner. I needed to make sure she wasn't about to spiral out on me too.

I turned onto my back to see her face, but that gave her way more access, and she gently began jerking me in my boxers.

"Cev," I groaned. "Hold up."

"Whyyyy?"

I reached down to stop her fingers from juggling my balls and shifted so I could see her eyes. "I want to make sure this isn't a response to what happened today?"

"Vicky?"

I shook my head, "The grief support group."

"Oh," she scoffed, "No— Not really. It wouldn't be the worst thing if it was, though. I mean, I feel like I've tried

every other coping mechanism except crack. This one is tame. We also haven't done it in a while, and I know you—"

"Cev, I can wait."

"You say that, but I can't really believe it. We go from sex three to four times a week for the last five years, down to not one in damn near two months. I know you have needs."

"Right, but I'm also not insensitive."

"Insensitive would be trying to force me to have sex with you while I planned a funeral. You haven't even tried to catch a whiff." Her fingers continued tittering in my boxers.

"Why you think I've been showering after you?" I joked. She cackled against my shoulder.

"Well, I'm offering you unencumbered access. Like I said, I've tried all the other coping mechanisms. I'd like to see how making love to my boyfriend fares." She lifted her face to peer up at me. "Wait, is that what you are? I don't have anybody else, so...."

"Yeah, Cev: I'm your boyfriend." I lowered my head, putting myself in range of her lips, and kissed her deeply. She pushed my hand away from hers, then gently began jerking me. I deepened the kiss, prepared to pull her over my lap, then my son called my name right before I heard his door open.

I broke the kiss to answer, "Yo?"

His heavy footsteps bounded down the stairs, bringing him into the living room. Cevyn surreptitiously removed her hand from my pants.

"Can I stay at Todd's tonight?"

"School night, my man," I answered, looking him over. Gone were the slumped shoulders and wet eyes from earlier. That was one of the things I loved about him. He didn't harp on shit and stay down.

"I know. His father said he'd drop us off in the morning. All my homework is done. I promise not to stay up all night. Please." He turned up the puppy dog eyes.

Cevyn chuckled at my side.

I studied my son while I considered his request. “Fine,” I acquiesced. “Get your stuff, and I’ll walk you around there.”

“Daddy, I’m 15. I can walk around the corner.”

“I’m walking with you, or you’re staying home with me. You pick.”

He grinned as he backed out of the room, “Make sure you bundle up. It’s cold out.” He turned and ran up the stairs.

I chuckled as I swung my legs around and placed my feet on the carpeted floor. “I’ll be back.”

Cevyn followed suit, “I’m walking too.”

“It’s cold, baby. Why don’t you stay here and stay warm? It’s gonna take less than ten minutes.”

“I’ll take Kas’ advice and bundle up.” She grinned.

“Fine.” I offered her my back to climb on since we both needed to put heavier clothes on for the walk.

Kas was waiting at the front door with his book bag on his back when we returned.

“You walkin with us, Ms. Cevyn?”

“Mmhmm. I didn’t get any exercise like you guys got today. I could use it.”

“Oh, okay.” He laughed. She went to the couch to slip her boots on and tie them up while I leaned back against the wall. Once we were done, Kas led the way out of the house.

My gloves were in the car, so I had to stuff my hands deep into my pockets. It took barely five minutes to reach Todd’s house. It was just two blocks over.

We waited at the base of the steps as Kas ran to knock on the door. Brian was the one to open it, limping out of the way.

“Tore you up?” I called, cracking up.

“Man, I wasn’t this old last week. I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

“I’m sure mine’ll kick in by morning.”

“Good luck,” he offered.

“Alright. Kas, mind your manners. Take your behind to bed at a decent time.”

“I will. Night, Ms. Cevyn.”

“Good night, sweetheart.”

I slung my arm over her shoulder as we started the short trek back, dodging the knee-high piles of hard snow on either side of the sidewalk.

“I swear it didn’t use to be this cold when we were kids.”

“I don’t know what state you were living in, but this cold is very familiar. Maybe you were hot in the ass when you were younger.”

“Woooooow, Kas.” She cracked up. “You don’t seem to mind that heat.”

“At all,” I stated emphatically. “If you’re still offering it, I’ll definitely take some.”

“Good, because now that I don’t have to worry about Kas hearing, I don’t really plan to show you any mercy.” *Shit.*

“Remember, I have to go to work in the morning. And I played basketball for three hours today. Don’t be trying to kill me.”

“Maybe you should take some aspirin, old man.”

“Excuse you, we’re not that far apart.” The white cloud of my breath mingled with hers as she giggled.

“Four years is far.”

“Not as far as your legs are about to be over your shoulders.”

“Oh, my,” she breathed as we reached my house. I let her lead the way up the steps and into the house. Beside the door, she kicked out of her boots quickly, then dropped to her knees, pulling at the front of my sweats.



“Cev—” My dick was down her throat before I could finish the rest of her name. I hadn’t even had time to kick my boots off. Hell, she was still in her coat and hat.

My back hit the door, and she took me in even deeper.

“Cev, it’s cold right here.”

She took her mouth off me long enough to say, “I know. Shrinkage is working in my favor right here.”

Then, she took me right back down her throat, one hand on the shaft and the other applying a whole lotta pressure beneath my balls. My eyes rolled so far back into my head that I saw everything I’d ever forgotten in my life.

There was only so long I could let that go on. I managed to unzip out of my coat and toss it in the general direction of the coat hooks on the wall in the entryway. Next went my hoodie and, after that, my shirt.

I don’t know when she shrugged out of her yellow and black *North Face* coat, but it was on the floor behind her.

I reached down and grabbed her underneath the arms, forcing her off my dick and picking her up into my arms. She didn’t complain like I thought she would. She was content to place a hand on the back of my head and kiss me as I brought us over to the couch. I managed to kick my boots off before bringing us down to the sofa, with her on the bottom.

I hooked a hand into the front of her leggings and yanked, pulling them smooth off her legs. I considered not having a taste for less than a second. Like she’d said, I hadn’t caught as much as a whiff in almost two months. I wasn’t about to rob myself of this delicacy.

As promised, I pushed her legs way back over her head, causing her pussy to tilt up to the perfect angle for my tongue. And she was already wet. Cev was the only woman I’d encountered who got aroused from sucking dick. It just made me want to eat it even more.

I speared my stiff tongue straight inside her, licking around in there before going up a few centimeters to her clit. Her right palm slapped the back of my head as she reached down to hold

me in place. I licked and hummed on that button until she started pushing me away.

I released her legs for the briefest of moments, then grabbed each ankle and spread them as far as they'd go, and let my dick guide itself into her.

Truth moment, she felt so good after not feeling her for so long, I almost wanted to shout. Well, no, I did want to shout. Fortunately, I was able to contain it. She felt the same way, apparently, but she was totally okay with hollering out her pleasure.

I pulled out and slid right back in, loving the way her stomach muscles contracted when I hit the bottom of her pussy.

“Reach down and touch it,” I ordered, nodding towards her hands.

“It’s sensitive,” she whined, but much to my liking, she reached down and began to gently swirl a finger around her clit. Her second orgasm of the night arrived on the heels of three more good pumps from me.

“Oh, this is a big one,” I taunted, slowing my hips down, enjoying the view of her body convulsing as she came. “There you go...Get it,” I encouraged. This one wasn’t stopping. I loved when that happened. She’d lose all concept of time or modesty and just fuck me back until she was spent.

She stuttered out her pleasure, calling my name in many different octaves. Then, I released her legs and went for her wrists, pinning them above her head as I kissed her, grinding into her until she stopped wailing.

Almost two months of abstinence was a bitch on my stamina—Hell, hers too. About halfway through, she stopped helping. Could barely lift her arms and was barely moving her hips. Couldn’t even get up and ride. Much sooner than I wanted—but not so soon that I was embarrassed—I was coming, HARD. Then, I was spent. Had just enough energy to roll off of her.

We were content to fall asleep naked until the heat went off for the night. I'd drifted off but came to when I felt her shivering against my side.

We got up and slipped back into our clothes. It was just after eleven, and neither of us felt like going up to get in the bed. We slipped under the blanket I'd brought down earlier and drifted back off.

\* \* \*

As a parent, the worst sound in the world is your child in any sort of distress. I was awakened by my son's loud, fearful cries, begging me to open the door. I moved from the couch faster than I'd ever moved in my life and yanked my front door open. I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't my son in a half-ripped t-shirt with a bloody face. He ran right into my arms, crying harder than I'd ever heard.

Before I could ask what was wrong, his mother came barreling up the porch. The shiny glint of a piece of metal caught my eye first, and I realized she had a knife. I pushed Kas behind me as she lunged, catching her wrist to twist the knife out of her hand.

"Victoria, what the fuck are you doing!"

"Move, Kas," she spat as she tried to get past me. This time, I pushed her back. I didn't know what the fuck to do. I wanted to go and check on my son to make sure she hadn't stabbed him. There was a good amount of blood on his shirt, but it could have been from his clearly busted nose and lip.

I tapped my pocket, looking for my phone. I needed to call her dad, but she lunged again, damn near knocking me off my feet. I didn't want to hurt her, but there was no real question if it came to me hurting her or her hurting my kid.

"Vick, stop before I put you on your ass." I had her by a few inches, but at 5'10, she was still a bit of work for me. I'd learned that right before I moved out. Kas was about 5'11, so they were damn near equals.

“No, fuck you and *your* son. He wants to come and live with you and your bitch, right? The bitch you were clearly fucking before we got divorced. That home-wrecking bitch. No. Absolutely the fuck not!” I did push her then, causing her to stumble back quite a bit. “What the fuck do you care? Just get that bitch pregnant and have another. But I guarantee you no child I gave birth to is gonna disrespect me and live to see another day. I don’t give a fuck what you say. You’re expendable too.”

I took a deep breath, then stepped outside and shut the door behind me, ignoring the bitter coldness that was hitting me. “Vick, Imma be honest with you. I’ll make sure you take your last breath before anything happens to my son. I promise you that. You’re his fucking mother.”

“Exactly!” she bellowed. “*I’m* his mother. *I* brought him in this fucking world, and I’ll take him the fuck out before I let this shit happen. I don’t give a fuck.”

“Well, I do give a fuck. You don’t even understand the restraint I’m showing right now. I want to ring your fucking neck for putting your hands on my kid, but I won’t. But that’s not for you. Get the fuck out of here before somebody calls the police. I’m calling in the morning to get a protective order for Kas.”

She stared at me, breathing heavily, almost as if she was weighing her options. I prayed she didn’t come at me again because it would not end well for her. I’d die before I let her get to Kas.

Before I could say anything else, the front of the house swarmed with red and blue lights as two police cruisers pulled up.

Todd and Brian were running around the corner when the first officer stepped out. Finally, I relaxed.

Although I wouldn’t have called the police on her, I was glad they took her away. Kas was in no condition to talk to the police right then, so the officer offered to come back the next day to talk to him. With Todd and Brian giving their statement and them getting a look at Kas, it was enough for them to hold

her for the night at least. Once Kas gave his statement, they'd potentially charge her with more.

Fortunately, she hadn't stabbed him. She'd hit him in the face pretty hard, though. The paramedics checked him out to make sure the nose wasn't broken. They checked the rest of him out, noting the bruise in the center of his chest. He wouldn't make eye contact with anybody, giving short answers.

When we finally went inside and closed the door, he broke down for the second time that day. All I could do was assure him things would be alright. I didn't know a date or time, but I knew they'd be okay.

Cevyn brought things down to clean his face along with another shirt.

He didn't want to let me out of his sight, so I had to go up and climb in his bed with him. He held onto me all night. Usually, if he slept in my bed, he was on one side, and I was on the other. This was different; he was basically attached to my side.

Sleep never came for me that night. I couldn't get comfortable. Couldn't believe Vicky. What if I hadn't opened the door in time? What if... What if she'd gotten to him? What the fuck was her problem? I couldn't even bear to think how different the night would have gone if she'd stabbed him.

As it was, I was probably going to have to keep him out of school for a few days and try to get him in to see a psychiatrist or something.

My parents were in bed, but I shot a text off letting my mom know. There was no doubt in my mind she'd be at the front door before dawn. The next message went to my job. I sent HR an email taking the week off for personal reasons. Then, finally, I shot a long email off to my attorney detailing everything that had transpired and asking that he get on the protective order.

I was surprised to see fifteen missed calls when I finally looked at my call log. The phone was right next to us on the

coffee table while we slept. The guilt I felt for not hearing my phone was eating me up. Then, I listened to the first of three voicemails he'd left, and the guilt was ratcheted up to infinite levels.

*“Daddy, please call me back.” His anxious voice pleaded. “Mommy is calling and texting me. She said she’s outside Todd’s house, and I better come out.”*

Brian left the second message. *“Yo, Kas. Um, his mom is here ringing my doorbell and knocking on the door like she’s crazy. He’s saying he’s not supposed to go with her, but... she’s his mom, and I really don’t know what to do. I offered to drive him around the corner to you, and she’s like it’s not necessary. If you could come around here or give me a call back.”*

Kas was a bit more frantic on the next one. *“Daddy, please call me back. Mr. Brian said I have to go because—”*

Vicky’s voice boomed through the phone like her mouth was pressed to the receiver, *“Let’s fucking go, Kas!”*

*“Ma, Daddy said not to go with you.”* His shaky voice told her before the message ended.

The final message was the one that broke me. I’m not sure if it was a butt dial or if Kas dialed me on purpose, but there was no sound at first.

Then, all I heard was Victoria going off, rambling about me and Cevyn.

Next thing I heard was, *“Kas get your ass in this fucking car.”*

My son was crying when he responded, *“Ma, I can’t go with you. I’m going home to Daddy’s. Please—”* then the sound of flesh hitting flesh filled my ear, mixing with my son’s hysterical cries for his mother to stop. I could hear Brian’s voice boom as he told Vicky to get off Kas, but it didn’t sound like he was as close as they were.

After that, he begged his mother to stop, his voice strangled as if his air was being cut off. He choked and coughed until he couldn’t talk. Then, Vicky screamed out like she’d been hit, and the call dropped.

I knew what happened next. Kas ran home, and his mother chased him with a knife.

I peered down at him asleep on my arm, noting the slight bruising already forming underneath his eyes. I'd never felt more like a failure as a father than in that moment. I'd fucked up twice that day. I should have never left him in the gym, and I should have made him stay home.

Twenty-One



## CEVYN

I WASN'T anybody's mama, but even I knew waking up to your screaming child was a nightmare. Then, to open the door and see him all bloody being chased by his deranged mother with a butcher knife? My God.

I barely got any sleep that night. I kept seeing Kas' terrified face as he backed away from the door his dad was blocking. We both heard Victoria vowing to kill Kas, and he was petrified. I got down on the floor and hugged him, telling him it would be okay, then the police arrived.

I woke the next morning to the smell of breakfast and was confused. I slipped into my slippers and a hoodie and peeked in on Kas, surprised to see both of them still in the bed. If both of them were up there, who the hell was down in the kitchen at 7am? Ms. Opal. Fully dressed and ready for the day.

She was pulling a pan of cinnamon rolls out of the oven when I stepped into the archway.

I wanted to turn and go back upstairs, but she knew I was sleeping at her son's house. I'd damn near told her everything, so there was no need to be embarrassed. "Morning, Ms. Opal."

"Good morning, sweetheart," her smile wasn't as bright as it had been the previous day, but the hug was just as warm. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. You?"

She blew out a breath, giving off a little shiver. "I woke up at four to go to the bathroom and saw a text from Kas. I couldn't go back to sleep afterward. My nerves are bad." She returned to the stove where she'd been scrambling eggs.

"Yeah, that's understandable."

She pulled the frying pan from the burner and immediately moved the eggs into a dish using a black spatula, "Had to come see about my boys."

“He was pretty shaken up last night,” I moved to the kitchen table to sit.

“I know he was. And what the hell was she that upset about?”

There was no use keeping her in suspense when the answer was literally standing in front of her. “Me.”

“She attacked her own child because you and Kas are seeing each other?”

“Pretty much— Well, she got it in her head that we’re over here playing house, and I’m somehow trying to be Kas’ mother.”

“The only reason she even pretends to be Kas’ mother is that she wants his father back.”

“That’s hard to believe. That is the sweetest freakin kid.”

“He’s sweet because he’s attached to his father. If you ask Kas, he’ll just say she had a hard time bonding with him when he was first born—Excuse my language, but he’s being too fucking nice. She only became pregnant after Kas suggested they separate. And I didn’t raise my boys to walk away from responsibility, so Kas stayed. When the baby was born, she handed him to his father like a grocery order. Then, when he went back to work, Kas’ sisters and I would rotate who’d help her while he was at work. If we didn’t, he’d sit in the same diaper all day. He’d be in the bassinet screaming his head off, and she’d be up at the front of the house with music on drowning him out. Then, when Kas decided he’d had enough, she started refusing to let him see him. On the rare occasion she’d let it happen, Kas was so terrified of us. It was like she was over there waging emotional warfare on her son. The final straw was one day, she’d gone to dinner with friends. She didn’t have a baby. She left Kas at home by himself.”

“How old was he?”

“Ummm,” she hummed thoughtfully, “I think their divorce was finalized right before he turned ten. But that took two years. Kas left her a year before that, so about 6 or 7. He was old enough to tell the judge she did it all the time.”

“How’d you find out?”

“The neighbor across the street. She called Kas saying she thought Vicky left him home alone, but she wasn’t sure. She just wanted to make sure, and sure enough, he was back in his room by himself. Kas took him and was granted full custody. This was even before the divorce was finalized.” I knew that because when I first met Kas, they’d already started swapping him weekly. I figured things must have smoothed out by then.

“Once we got him back comfortable with us, he told us she was over there torturing him. He never told us she put her hands on him, but she’d threaten to if he ever went with Kas again. Said she’d be standing there with a belt when he’d be on the phone with Kas.”

“How did they get back to where he was comfortable enough with him living there?” I wanted to ask why the fuck she was allowed around him, but that was in bad taste. Kas was a good guy. He wanted his son to have a good relationship with his mother.

“Baby, please know I asked the same question when he brought it up to us. I was adamant that she only have supervised visits. They did that for a while. She finally did the parenting and anger management classes. Since it took so long, the court wanted to wait a while before granting her partial custody. I guess there was never a need to go back since Kas started going back over there. I’m not sure if he even remembers what happened. We loved on that boy hard.”

“You still do,” I chuckled.

“True.”

“What about her family?”

“They don’t mess with her too tough. I can count on one hand the number of times we’ve seen those people. They came to the wedding, but she ended up fighting one of her sisters. They came to Kas’ first birthday, but she went off because they didn’t spend a fortune to shower him with gifts. I think that’s it.”

“That sucks. I know what it’s like to not have support from your family– deserved or not. Then, you have a man like Kas, and you lose him? That’s enough to make anybody flip out.” Vicky had called me one too many bitches, but I still felt for her.

“She had a few mental health issues, too, If I’m not mistaken. I think that’s why Kas stuck it out as long as he did. Didn’t want to abandon her.”

“That I definitely understand.”

“I’m gonna be honest, I couldn’t stand her from the moment I met her.”

“Why?” I didn’t want to laugh, but the way she said it was hilarious.

“I thought she was bad for my son.”

“Mother’s intuition?”

“Womanly intuition,” she corrected. “She treated Kas like she owned him. She didn’t like how close we were as a family. You saw the picture of him, my husband, and my grandson and thought it was cute. She would have found something wrong with it. Hated how affectionate we were. They first got together before all the grandkids came, and we would get together weekly for dinner. She hated that. She wanted him to run his schedule by her every week, so she could decide what he needed to do. Then, when it was clear he wasn’t going to push us away, she’d start fights whenever he was coming out to see us.”

“Jesus. No wonder she asked me why I was meeting you.”

“Huh?”

“She was waiting in the parking lot when we arrived. She saw us. Came in after you left and started questioning me.”

“That girl knows I ain’t ever liked her. When Kas was born, I wouldn’t go up there until he was in the nursery. I didn’t go see her and didn’t care. There are only so many times you’re going to slap me in the face before turning the other cheek stops being an option. I allowed her in my house,

and she showed her behind on multiple occasions. She's lucky she waited for me to leave. I would have told her about herself." I made a mental note not to get on Ms. Opal's bad side. "I'll give anybody a chance, but once you start messing with my family..." she let the sentence trail off, but I could fill in the blank.

"Anyway," she began after taking a deep cleansing breath, "Are they both asleep?"

"Yup. Kas got in the bed with him last night."

"That boy has been stuck to his father since he was born. When he first started walking, he'd walk up to him, then crawl up his body like a little spider monkey." She cracked up. "It was the cutest thing. He'd crawl right up his body and tell him he was sleepy."

"Aww." That visual was cute as fuck. Kas was huge to me, so I couldn't imagine being a little person and climbing all the way to the top of that mountain.

Speaking of the cute Kases, one of them was coming down the stairs. I was leaning towards it being the younger one because the footsteps were so light. It sounded like thunder when my Kas came down the stairs.

Sure enough, Little Kas walked into the kitchen. There was a big cut in the center of his bottom lip and bruises under both eyes. I'd left them with an ice pack the night before, so thankfully, he wasn't too swollen.

He went straight to his grandmother, allowing her to pull his head down to her shoulder and wrap her arms around him. He was a few inches taller than her but clearly had no problem bending down.

I busied myself with pulling plates and flatware out for breakfast. If he was up, his father wasn't too far behind. Ms. Opal pulled back as I walked by to grab the juice from the refrigerator, holding him by either side of his face, she softly told him he was okay.

I was glad to see he was no longer crying. Seeing that boy cry was enough to make me cry. He was such a good kid and,

unfortunately, was caught up in his mom's mess. I hoped this didn't dim his light in any way.

I knew it would be hard. Hearing your mother vow to kill you for something that had nothing to do with you was damn sure traumatic. He had a solid support system with his dad and the rest of their big family. I knew he'd get through it.

"You should ride down to see your great-grandpa with us." Ms. Opal was saying as she examined his face. "It'll be good to get away. You're on your February break next week, too, right?"

Kas nodded. "Yeah, but you gotta ask Daddy. I don't know if I can miss school."

She scoffed, "He'll let you go. We can get your schoolwork for the week. We're supposed to leave out tomorrow night. It'll be good for you. We'll take the drive stop at a few places on the way and have a good time—Just don't tell the girls. They asked if they could go, and my nerves can't take the constant chatter."

I giggled.

"Morning, Ms. Cevyn."

"Morning, Kas." I wasn't at all surprised when he came over to hug me. "How's your nose feeling?"

He reached up and gently touched the bridge of his nose, "It's throbbing a little."

"You need to take something," Ms. Opal suggested, "You'll have a headache soon. I wish you would have gone and gotten an x-ray."

"The paramedics said they didn't think it was broken."

"You could still have a fracture. Either way, take something."

He shook his head, "Nah, it's okay. It's not hurting that bad." I recalled Kas saying he hadn't liked taking the pain meds they'd given him after his shoulder surgery. So, his refusal made sense.

“Go take something, Kas. I don’t want you walking around here hurting,” his father ordered as he entered the kitchen. He was fresh out of the shower. “Go look in my bathroom. There’s some Aleve in there.”

“Alright,” Kas left the room and bounded up the stairs.

“Morning,” he reached his mom first, and she hugged him the same way she’d hugged Kas, rubbing his broad back like he was still a baby.

“Good morning. You okay this morning?”

“I’m mad,” he told her, still leaning into the hug.

“I know you are.” She leaned back with her hands on his arms to see his face, “But you protected your son, and things didn’t go as badly as they could.”

“They shouldn’t have gotten there, though, Ma.” He huffed, his mouth pulled into a tight frown. “Like I…” air pushed from his lungs heavily, “He shouldn’t have had to go through that.”

“He’s okay, though.” She spoke softly.

“Yeah,” He moved out of the hug, “When are y’all leaving to go down south?” He was moving towards me.

“Wednesday.”

“You wanna take your grandson? I don’t want him going to school with those black eyes, and then they have Winter break next week. I don’t want him around while things get in order with Vick.”

Her smile was wide as she said, “That is an excellent idea. I wish I would have thought of it myself.” I giggled as she left the kitchen to grab her ringing phone.

He crowded me against the counter with all his fresh smellingness and warm energy. “What’s so funny?”

“Your mom had already declared he was going.”

Half his mouth lifted into a smile as he continued encroaching on my space. “Oh, word?”

“Mmmhmm.”

Using two fingers, he tipped my chin back, doing his daily assessment of me. “Good morning.”

“Morning.” I pushed up on my toes and pressed my lips to his a handful of times.

“How are you,” he asked when I pulled back, slipping an arm around my waist. “How’d you sleep?”

“Not as well as I would have liked, but it wasn’t Ayte keeping me up.” His brows lifted in question. “I was worried about you and your mini.”

“He slept good, surprisingly.”

“What about you?”

“I was up all night. Must have fallen asleep for a few minutes this morning. I heard my mom come in, then I woke up, and Kas had left the bed.”

I reached up to massage his hard shoulders, “This shit is a lot.”

“Too much,” he grabbed one of my hands and pulled me over to the table. Ms. Opal returned with the phone to her ear, motioning that we could eat.

“I know you want to go, Morgan. But Mema and Grandpa are going down to help with Papa. We won’t have much free time, and you can’t go off by yourself. We’ll go down when you’re out of school...” She sighed, reaching up to massage her forehead. “Morgan,” she called softly, “why don’t you call me back when you’re done crying? I’m about to eat breakfast. I’m not home, baby. I’m at Uncle Kas’ house...Kas, Morgan said good morning.”

“Morning, Little girl,” he called loud enough for her to hear.

“My youngest niece,” Kas explained.

“How old?”

“Six, I believe...No, five. She was born right before I met you.”



“Oh, is that how you measure time?”

“Mmmhmm.”

By the time Ms. Opal hung up with Morgan, Kas was back and had brought his appetite. They were discussing the trip down south when Kas received a call from one of the officers that responded to Victoria’s attack. He asked if he could come talk to Kas to get his statement. Kas assured his dad he was okay to talk to them.

An hour later, I held my Kas’ hand as we listened to Little Kas’ account of what took place between him and his mom.

Just like she’d tracked him to the gym, she tracked him to his friend’s house. She forced him to come outside, and when he tried to walk back to his dad’s, she attacked him.

She beat him in the face, which is how his nose and lips were busted. Then, she started choking him.

Beside me, Kas dropped his head. His left foot tapped the floor as he pinched and stretched his features like he was trying not to break down. I wasn’t as strong as he was. Hearing this baby recount how he started feeling dizzy from having his oxygen cut off had tears running down both mine and his grandmother’s face.

Kas was apologetic when he admitted hitting her to get her off him. That was when she went into her car and returned with the knife. He took off running to get back to his dad’s house then. We knew how the rest of the night went.

The officer took pictures of his face and upper body. Kas didn’t want to press charges, but the officer explained that the state most likely would. She’d be arraigned that afternoon if they wanted to attend.

After the officer left, Ms. Opal took Kas out. She wasn’t satisfied with the paramedic’s assessment of his nose and wanted him to have an x-ray. His face was throbbing too much for her liking. He didn’t want to go, but she wasn’t accepting no for an answer. Kas looked to his father for help, but he told him he couldn’t beat her either.

Once they were gone, I helped Kas clean the kitchen, then he pulled me back into the living room for a couch cuddling session.

“I can’t believe how much shit has taken place in the last twenty-four hours.”

My back was to his chest as I sat between his splayed legs. “Twenty-four hours? Let’s try the four months since we’ve been back together.” Things started moving so quickly once we linked back up. Between the tragedy in my life and the drama in his, it was almost like we were the trigger. I asked Kas what he thought about that?”

“Was us getting back together the catalyst for everything?” I nodded. “Hell, no. I think you needed me, and I needed you to deal with what was about to happen in both of our lives.”

“I haven’t been much help to you, Kas.” He was being sweet, but I was being practical. I’d been a mess for months now.

A kiss hit my temple, “That’s not for you to decide. From where I’m sitting, you’ve been this solid rock in my life for a while now. Even before we took our break. You’ve been special since day one, Cev.” To bring that point home, he wrapped his arms around me, and I almost cried. Almost. “You know, I think about how many times we’ve taken these breaks over the years, and ultimately, something always brings me back to you and never takes too long.”

“Like gravity,” I added. “We can jump as high and as far as we want, but ultimately, we always find our way back down here.” He thought I was a rock? He’d been there for me through Ayte disappearing, popping back up pregnant, wiggling out on Omere, wiggling out period...and taking her own life.

“I think,” he reached down and turned my face up to his, piercing me with his steady gaze, “I like it defined as love.” Then he kissed me for what felt like forever and told me, “I love you.”

I just barely managed a whiny, “I love you too,” over the  
frog of emotions in my throat.

Epilogue

CEVYN

SIX MONTHS LATER...

“SEE YOU LATER, MOMMY!” Omere excitedly yelled as he and his father emptied the box containing Ayte’s ashes into the churning white-tipped waves of the ocean. “Happy birthday!” He then released the large bunch of pink biodegradable balloons he’d been holding.

I was a bit teary-eyed as I watched the balloons float higher and higher, but there was no need to cry. Almost eight months had passed, and luckily things were getting easier. Not better or less painful, but easier. Through a bit of counseling and monthly grief support meetings, I was learning to stand up to that wretched bitch grief. There were still days where she knocked me flat on my ass, but more where I moved her out the way.

I expected her to be wailing on me today, but I was holding my own. This was the second to last thing I needed to do for my sister. She’d be here in some form forever. I hadn’t wanted to do it without her boys, of course. Omere didn’t ask any questions when I told him the dates, just told me to book.

Of course, I had to bring my boys. One Kas was behind me, my ever-present wall of support, and the other was holding my hand. They were most certainly, my boys. I grew more and more in love with Big Kas every day. He’d gone from being this small corner of peace in my life that I coveted, to this... this universe of peace that made every day better than the previous one.

For the first time in my life, I was being taken care of, and let me just say, it’s lit over here.

Then, there was my bestie, Little Kas. He was a joy to be around.

Victoria was given a rather lenient sentence because neither Big nor Little Kas wanted to press charges. Something like parole for a few years and anger management classes. Kas left it up to their son to decide if he wanted her in his life, and he wasn't yet comfortable with her. He wouldn't even talk to her on the phone. He'd also been in therapy since the incident—was still going weekly.

“You ready?” My universe of peace asked as a speed boat zoomed towards us.

I was not ready. At all. This was the last thing I needed to do for Ayte. The last request she'd written in her letter, and I was scared shitless. But she said this was where she'd be. She said this was where I could find her. See her again.

I wasn't delusional enough to believe that, but what could it hurt—Scratch that question. If the rope snapped and I plummeted to my death, a lot of things could hurt. Anyway, I was going to face my fear, let myself be harnessed to a gym parachute, and go experience what my sister thought was the ultimate moment of peace.

“Doesn't matter if I'm ready,” I told Kas, “I gotta do it.” We were all doing it. Even Little Omere. He'd be strapped to his father, of course. But I was going first.

I purposely didn't rebook the boat that had taken Ayte and me out. That would have been too much. Minutes later, we were zipping through the water.

“You got this, Cev,” Omere told me.

“You gonna fly and see Mommy, Auntie?”

“I'm gonna try, baby.” He still thought going into the clouds would let him see his mom. He'd looked for her the entire plane ride down.

Once I was harnessed, I followed the man to the back of the boat, walking gingerly to make sure I didn't fly off. He hooked me up, told me to sit down, asked me if I was ready, and then I felt myself rising. I felt it, because my eyes were squeezed shut. I could hear the guys cheering me on, telling me to have fun, but I was scared shitless.

Then, everything went silent. I couldn't hear the wind. I couldn't hear the waves. I couldn't even hear the boat... And I swear to God, I could smell my sister's perfume. My eyes popped open, but of course, all I could see was the blue water, the bright sun, and the boat towing me along. She wasn't there, but she was. I could feel her.

I shut my eyes and let my head fall back, extending my limbs out the way Ayte did when she was up here. Then, I heard her. "See, I told you, Cev."

Behind my eyelids, I could see her. It was like she was up there next to me. Just like Omere said, we just had to get high enough to see her. She was in the yellow dress she'd wanted to wear the day I took her to the hospital. Her smile was the brightest I'd ever seen. Even brighter than when she'd see her baby. And I knew she was good. That didn't stop grief from poking her head out when they began reeling me back in, and Ayte started to fade.

Once again, I heard her, "Cevyn, Ayte...."

"Nyn, Tyn."

I kept my eyes closed until I felt the boat beneath my feet. I was trying to see if she'd come back, but also trying to keep my tears at bay. I knew once I opened my eyes I was a goner. I went straight to my Kas after stepping out of the harness. Luckily, the Omere's and Little Kas were able to ride up together, which left us alone. I didn't want them to see how emotional I was.

"She was up there," I whispered to Kas, expecting him to look at me like I was losing my mind. "I can't explain it, but she was...She was there."

Using the pad of his thumb, he cleared the moisture from my eyes, "She told you she would be, right?"

"Yeah," I breathed, "But... It's just... I don't know. I didn't see her like in front of me, but I know she was up there, Kas. I could smell her perfume, and...she talked to me."

“Maybe she’s been waiting for you.” He pulled me onto his lap. “And just like always, you showed up, Cev.”

I was too choked up to say anything else. I was a logical person. I needed things to make sense. This didn’t make sense. How could I see my sister? *She was happy, though.* I mused. And with that thought, the tears stopped. There was no way to really know that. It could’ve been grief playing with me, but I chose to hold on to that visual. My sister was finally at peace, and mine was holding me. The tears weren’t necessary.

“Are you going up?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Scared of heights?”

“No, not at all. I’m scared of falling.”

I wasn’t going to push. I’d felt the same way. I would have never taken that flight if my sister hadn’t asked.

After a very long and emotional day, we made it back to the house. Once again, I did not rebook the house where Ayte and I stayed over the summer. My boss didn’t own another property down there, but he knew someone who did.

I thought we were in for the night, but Kas made plans for a cute little dinner down on the beach, just the two of us. A simple table for two was set at the water’s edge. I hadn’t worn any shoes, so all I had to do was tuck my dress, and I was good. Kas had to remove his socks and shoes. The area was lit by tiki torches, their flames dancing in the salty ocean air. The waves that were white in the daytime now looked black as they crashed at our feet.

I reached across the table for his hands, holding both, “This is cute. When did you set this up?” He looked good sitting there beneath the torches. We’d only been there for a day, but he’d already tanned to a gorgeous mahogany tone. His lips were even darker. I didn’t have to wonder if they were sweeter, I’d sampled them before we left the house, and they were, in fact, sweeter.

“This morning.”



“This morning?”

He nodded, “Johan set it up.” Johan was the butler that came with the house.

“Well, it’s very sweet. Thank you.”

He eased back in the seat while gently pulling me from mine. I found myself straddling his lap, my feet dangling in the water. “I had an ulterior motive.”

“What’s that?”

“Wanted to ask you if I could do sweet things for you for the rest of our lives.”

I searched his face, trying to see if he was joking. I mean, I knew he wouldn’t joke about this. I’d just been thinking about how much I loved him, but this was really out of nowhere.

“You want to get married,” I asked softly.

“To you,” he emphasized, studying me as hard as I was studying him. “I didn’t just start loving you this year, Cev. I don’t need to think about it. I don’t need to consult anybody. I want you. With me. Forever.” He reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and extracted a piece of folded paper, and extended it to me. “Only say yes, if you think I’ve done right by her.”

Curiously, I took the paper. It didn’t take long to see it was Ayte’s letter to him. My eyes watered as I read my sister’s handwriting:

***Hey, Kas.***

***I know this is weird. I’m not going to draw it out any longer than it needs to be. Please love my sister. This is breaking sister code, but I’m pretty sure she already loves you. Make her happy. Give her the world because she deserves it. I’m trusting you with her, but I promise, I’ll haunt you if you hurt her.***

***Ayte***

I read it three times before I lifted my gaze to him. How could I say no, when even in death, he was including Ayte in the proposal? I wanted to tear up, wanted to cry, but again, I could hear her, “Go somewhere with that shit, Cev. You better say yes.”

I reached up to slip my arms around his neck, “Forever, right?”

“Give or take a few seconds.”

“I want all the seconds,” I demanded, moments before slipping my tongue into his mouth.

With a hand at the back of my head, he promised, “You can have them.”

“I’ll marry you.” I knew it was implied, but I wanted to make sure I was clear. I leaned back in for another kiss. I was ready to get back to the house, and we hadn’t even been served yet. “Do we have to eat this food?” I asked against his lips, earning a chuckle from him.

“Technically, no. This was just a way to get you out the house to propose.”

I hopped up with the quickness. “Good. Let’s go.” I was hot and bothered and needed a bit of cooling off.

He was cracking up as he rose from the table, covertly adjusting his erection. “Damn, Cev. You don’t even want the ring?”

“I want *you*.” I needed him to understand. “Also, since we’re getting married, your mother is going to want another baby.”

Ms. Opal had become the mother I needed. We hung out all the time. Her energy was so perfect, and I couldn’t soak up enough of it. My own mother, on the other hand, would still reach out arbitrarily. I’d taken to conversing with her solely by text. I couldn’t forgive her and my father for how they’d treated Ayte. No matter how often my therapist reminded me that being angry with them was hurting me more. I’d deal with

that hurt until the day I died. I lost the most important person in my life because they refused to love her. They didn't deserve access to me.

Speaking of losing access, I hadn't spoken to Mind since the day I kicked her ribs in. I'd heard from Lance, though. He hadn't left her, but things changed drastically. He was no longer allowing the stalking and tracking. I was glad he'd finally put his foot down.

Kas stopped in his tracks, "Is *she* getting pregnant?"

"We are," I emphasized, bumping my chest against his. "Me and you."

"*You* are." He corrected. "I'll help, for sure. It's fun making a baby. But when you're fifty pounds heavier, and your angles looked like the worms from Tremors 2, I don't want to hear, "you did this to me." I'm warning you now." We began the trek back to the house hand in hand.

"But you are going to do it to me, to... do it to me."

"As many times as you want," he promised.

**The End**

♥My Catalog♥

**Standalone**

You Make Me Better

Elevate Me

Home Again

Love in the Streets

Broken Heart Syndrome

I Didn't Mean to Fall in Love

Love on Deck \*\*

The Wrong Wicker\*\*\*

At Dusk

Just a friend

Gravity

**One More Series**

One More Night

One More Touch

One More Kiss

**For Your Love Series**

Play for your Love

Meant for your Love\*

Wait for your Love

**Mine Series**

Mine to Keep

Mine to Have

Mine to Hold

**Damaged Heart Series**

Studio Sessions

Director's Cut

**The Mason Family**

Meant for Your Love\*

Slipped up in Love

Words with Friends

An Ounce of Decorum

A Little Stuffing

My Soul's Reflection

Completely Stuffed

You're The One That I Want

**The Hale Girls Series**

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Graveyard Shift

**The Montgomery Girls**

The Closer I get to You

The Law of Attraction

## **Rook and Zenaida**

On Sight

Smash Into You

\*- Meant for your love is a part of two different series: For Your Love and The Mason family.

\*\* - Love on Deck is book 2 of a collaboration with 7 other authors entitled The Luminous Cruise Chronicles.

\*\*\* - The Wrong Wicker is book 2 of a collaboration with 5 other authors entitled The Boos & Booze Book Series.

## Contact Me

Please feel free to drop a line and let me know what you thought:

[Email – Authoringash@gmail.com](mailto:Authoringash@gmail.com)

[Facebook Author page – AshleyNicole \(Author\)](#)

[Facebook Group – The Crew](#)

Instagram/Twitter – Alwaysimpatient