



**BULLDOG BURTON
AND THE WAITRESS**

A RAGS TO ROMANCE BOOK

**MALLORY
MONROE**

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BY
MALLORY MONROE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

CHAPTER ONE

One Month earlier

“Do you have a boyfriend, Miss Fisher?”

“A boyfriend?”

“That’s what I asked you.”

“What does that have to do—”

“Your Honor, please direct the witness to answer my question.”

“Answer the question, young lady.”

“But I don’t see what that has to do—”

“Why can’t you answer that simple question, Miss Fisher? Do you or do you not have a boyfriend? Or do you have so many that you can’t keep count of how many you actually have?”

“Your Honor! Please direct opposing counsel to stop badgering the victim.”

“I’m not badgering anybody. Miss Fisher is accusing my client of a heinous rape. I have every right to ask a simple question.”

The gavel went down before the prosecutor could respond again. “Okay gentlemen, that’s enough!”

The judge then turned to the young lady on the witness stand. “Miss Fisher, it is not for you to decide what question is relevant or is irrelevant. That’s my job. That’s why they pay me the big bucks,” he added with a smile. The lawyers at the prosecution table, all jockeying for favor, laughed. But Ronnie Burton, who stood with his arms folded in the well of the Tampa, Florida courtroom, didn’t even flinch. When he was defending his client, his intensity was unparalleled.

The judge continued: “Unless there is a successful objection, you will answer any and all questions the Defense asks of you, young lady, and you will answer them to the very best of your ability. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Then he turned to Ronnie Burton, the most successful criminal defense attorney in the country, and reminded him that he was not in charge of that courtroom. “And you, Mr. Burton, knows better. Please remember that this is a cross

examination, not a torture session. You will operate within the parameters of normal jurisprudence or I'll slap sanctions on you so fast you won't know what hit you. Understood?"

"Of course, Your Honor."

"You may continue. But you are under caution, sir," the judge warned.

Ronnie knew the judge wasn't going to do a damn thing to him. He was too big to be sanctioned. Better judges than him had threatened all kinds of actions against the powerful defense attorney as he continued to push the envelope in all of his court cases, but none of them have ever pulled the trigger. Ronnie was certain the judge seated before him now didn't have the balls to be the first. That was why he proceeded as if no caution had ever been given, and continued to press the young lady even harder.

Only nineteen years of age, Heather Fisher was a stranger to courtroom proceedings and was easily intimidated by the big man in the fancy tailored suit that stood in front of her. The prosecutors told her how to comport herself on the witness stand, and how to answer questions, but all of that knowledge flew out the window under the defense attorney's withering cross. She felt lost.

“Since you’ve been reluctant to answer my question,” Ronnie said to her, “then I’ll answer it for you. You don’t just have one boyfriend, do you, Miss Fisher? Nor two. Not even three. You have twenty-seven boyfriends, don’t you, Miss Fisher, and every one of them have to line up and pay dearly just to be with you!”

The courtroom erupted in gasps and shock. “Your Honor, this is outrageous!” the prosecutor decried as he jumped up from his seat.

But Ronnie kept hammering away. “Isn’t that true, Miss Fisher?” he yelled out before the judge could silence him. “Pay to play?”

But the gavel had already gone down. Ronnie knew it was outlandish. He had no such proof of his harsh accusation against the young lady whatsoever. But he also knew, even as the judge angrily ordered the lead prosecutor and Ronnie to approach the bench, that the damage was already done. Those jurors would forever look at Heather Fisher as nothing more than a slut. As a woman who had it coming to her. As a woman who got what she deserved. And despite the fact that all investigations Ronnie commissioned to get dirt on the young lady reached the conclusion that there was no dirt to

get, and if anybody was as innocent as the driven snow it was Heather Fisher, he still made her look dirtier than mud. Because his client didn't hire him to lose. Because he was prepared to win by whatever means necessary, and with whatever false accusations he could hurl. That was why they paid *him* the big bucks.

After court was adjourned, Ronnie stood in the corridor outside the courtroom with Dalton Ellsworth, his twenty-year-old client, and Dalton's billionaire father, and the father-son duo couldn't be happier.

"That's what I call a great opening day," the father said cheerfully. "Now I see what my friends have been going on about. Now I see why they called your ass Bulldog Burton. You don't let up, do you?"

"I win," Ronnie said unapologetically, "by whatever means I can get it done."

The father, a ruthless man in his own right, shook Ronnie's hand. "Keep up the good work. I'm impressed."

"I owe you one, Mr. Burton," Dalton said happily as he shook Ronnie's hand too. "The way you're going at it, we can't lose."

But then Heather Fisher, the young woman who accused Dalton of violently raping her, came out of the courtroom escorted by the lead prosecutor. And as soon as they walked out, Heather's anger unleashed and she ran toward the three men. "Miss Fisher, no!" The prosecutor reached out and tried to stop his client. He knew Ronnie Burton would use her anger against her if she laid a hand on Dalton Ellsworth.

But Heather didn't have Dalton in her crosshairs. She had Ronnie Burton himself in her crosshairs. "You lie!" she cried as she ran up on Ronnie and started beating him as hard as she could with her fists. "You lie! You lie!"

Ronnie held up one arm and allowed the young lady to flail away. Because he knew her onslaught would be one more bomb he could toss at trial against her. "A temper like you wouldn't believe," he would say. "You even attacked me. Didn't you, Miss Fisher?"

It took the prosecutor, along with the bailiff who ran out of the courtroom after hearing the commotion, to pull the victim off of Ronnie. But again, the damage was already done. The prosecution knew it too. That was why the prosecutor looked angrily at Ronnie. "You are such an

asshole!” he yelled at him as he escorted his sobbing victim away from the scene.

“You’re okay, Mr. Burton?” asked Dalton, who was grinning from ear to ear. “I told you that girl’s crazy.”

“There’s nothing crazy about that young lady,” Ronnie shot back. “And you know it.”

Dalton’s smile disappeared.

“Court resumes tomorrow, nine am sharp. Be on time,” Ronnie said as he straightened his suit. “We’ve got a lot more blows to land before you’re out of trouble.” Then he frowned. “And knock that smug grin off of your *gotdamn* face. Who do you think you’re dealing with? I hate that shit. You think you can manipulate me the way you do your father?”

Dalton was offended. “I wasn’t trying to manipulate you.”

Ronnie stared at him. They both knew what the real deal was. “Be on time tomorrow,” he said again. And then he walked away.

He knew a billionaire’s son wasn’t accustomed to anybody talking to him that way, but he also knew he had to

keep that kid in line. His old man paid him to win that case. Not to do his best. But to win. Ronnie was a winner *par excellence*. It wasn't about the kid. Or even that girl. It was all about winning for Ronnie.

And that next morning before court, when he stopped by *Burton and Yates*, his mega-rich law firm, he was still thinking of imaginative ways to defend his client. Word had already gotten around that he had had a good first day of trial yesterday, and many of the attorneys in his firm were congratulating him. Far too early for that, in Ronnie's estimation, but that didn't stop them from doing it anyway.

His law partner Dan Yates was waiting in his office, not to congratulate him on a good first day because he knew better, but to notify him.

"Get out of my chair," Ronnie ordered as he made his way around his desk. Although Dan was a partner in the firm and his name was on the marquee too, he only had a two-percent stake in the company. Ronnie held the other ninety-eight percent. Which meant Dan, for all intents and purposes, was Ronnie's employee too.

That was why Dan quickly stood up and moved around to the side of the desk as the big man sat his thick attaché case

on top of the desk and began removing piles of papers from out of the case. Ronnie knew Dan well enough to know that he wasn't in his office first thing in the morning for his health. He wasn't there because he wanted to be there either. They were so-called law partners, but they weren't friends by any stretch of the imagination. Dan Yates was as intimidated by Bulldog Burton as their lowest associate. "News overnight?" Ronnie asked him.

"I'm afraid so."

There was a hesitation on Ronnie's part. He always hated that *afraid so* line Dan always prefaced whenever there was a snag in any of the cases. He had narrowed it down to two possibilities: Either the prosecution turned over evidence overnight that pointed directly to his client's guilt, or their own investigators uncovered something equally unflattering about one of their clients that could not be ignored. He didn't know which one it was or what the issue might be, but he knew it wasn't good news.

He continued to remove papers from his case. "Hit me with your best shot," he said to his partner, which was his way of saying that he wanted Dan to tell him the worse of the news first.

And Dan obliged. “Heather Fisher committed suicide this morning,” he said bluntly.

Ronnie stopped all movement. He almost stopped breathing too. He hadn’t even begun to destroy the young lady the way he had planned to destroy her. She was accusing a billionaire’s son of rape, what did she think was going to happen to her? And for her to have pulled the plug already? Ronnie was floored. He was a great read of character. He was so good he had a two-minute rule. Give him two minutes with anybody and he usually knew exactly who he was dealing with. He knew she was an innocent. That much he knew. But she never came off to him as *that fragile*. Not the woman that tried to beat the shit out of him in the hall. He was stunned.

Dan placed his hands in his pockets. He was still getting over the shock of it too.

“How?” Ronnie asked.

“Overdose. Fentanyl.”

Ronnie looked at him with a frowned look on his face. “Why would they automatically conclude suicide when young people are accidentally overdosing on that crap every day of the week?”

“She left a suicide note.”

When Dan said those words, Ronnie’s heart dropped.

“A note?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“What did this note say?”

“It said she was not the person she was made out to be on that witness stand. It said she only had one boyfriend in her entire life, and he left her for another girl three years ago.” Then Dan folded his arms. “She named you specifically.”

Ronnie held onto his attaché case for support. “Did she now?”

“She said she hated your guts and all the other rich bastards like you for how they ruined people’s lives. She said you destroyed her good name when you claimed she was a whore. She said you killed her with your words. And then she spoke glowingly about her parents.”

Ronnie continued to stare at Dan, but with those hard, glassy blue eyes that Dan knew meant that he was looking through him, beyond him, as if he wasn’t even there. Dan was used to that too. Ronnie Burton always stared when he was

sizing up, not the person he was staring at, but the situation he found himself in.

That was why Dan kept going. “The press is going to have a field day with this, there’s no doubt about that. You’ll be blamed, especially after that suicide note leaks. That’s why our PR department is recommending that you get ahead of this with the kind of unequivocal response that’ll make clear our position. You give your condolences, quite naturally, but you have to say that if there was anybody responsible for that suicide, it was Heather Fisher herself. You didn’t have anything to do with her mental health or substance abuse issues and you have to make that absolutely clear. But the vast majority of your statement should be about the exoneration of your client. Bring it back to the client, as you always say. You can’t lose that way.”

Then Dan actually smiled. Which puzzled Ronnie. How on earth could that man be smiling after news like that?

But Dan continued to smile nonetheless. “I’m just glad it happened to you and not to me or any other attorney in the firm. It happens to me or any of the others, then we would have serious clean up to do for weeks on end. This story will gain traction and won’t quit. But you’re Teflon Ron. Nothing

sticks to you. The press will move on once you forcefully and unambiguously make your statement.”

It wasn't the press moving on that Ronnie was concerned about. They always moved on to the next big story. But that child was only nineteen years old. She had her entire life ahead of her. And now she was *dead*? And she mentioned him as the reason? That she did it because of him? And Dan had the nerve to *smile*?

“Give me a minute,” he said to his partner.

Dan looked at the man that he'd always looked up to. They were the same age: Both were pushing forty. But Ronnie Burton bought the fire with him. He was a force to be reckoned with even in law school, where they first met. He was a man's man even then. That was why Dan couldn't understand his reaction. The girl's fate, though bad for her, wasn't the end of the world for anybody else. Although they'd never had a suicide this early in a case, they've had suicides before after a client lost to the firm. It went with the territory. It wasn't like Heather Fisher was the first time for anybody at that firm. They played hardball. That was why guilty-as-sin billionaires hired them. What was Ron's problem?

But when the big man said get lost, you'd better get lost. Dan knew that better than anybody else too. He left the office.

As soon as the door closed, Ronnie stood there a moment longer, and then he plopped down in his chair. What Dan didn't know was that the news he had just laid on Ronnie wasn't affecting him like all those other times there was a suicide. He was never the attorney of record those other times. It had never happened to *him*.

And now that it had, and to a girl so young, it hit him inexplicably hard. It hit him like a sledgehammer.

He'd never felt more guilty in his life.

CHAPTER TWO

One Month Later

“Alana, let’s go. I’m not playing with you now. We’re gonna be late!”

They had eaten breakfast in a hurry, the way they did every morning, but Alana was still in her bedroom putting the final touches on her makeup, the way she did every morning. But Shayla “Shay” Pearson, her big sister, was tired of the close calls every single school day. “Come on, Lana,” she yelled again as she got up from the kitchen table and got her cereal bowl and the bowls of her little sister and little brother and took them over to the kitchen sink. “It’s late!”

“Can we go to the park after school?” asked twelve-year-old RaRa as he grabbed his bookbag. Short for his age, he had that pretty boy face little girls loved. “We haven’t been to the park in weeks. Can we go, Shay?”

Shay was quickly cleaning out their bowls. “Only if she agrees to take y’all.”

“Take them where?” asked sixteen-year-old Alana as she walked into the kitchen tossing her makeup kit into her bookbag. She was the beauty of the family and knew it. But Shay was determined to keep her in school and on the straight and narrow. “I don’t have time to be taking them everywhere.”

“They just wanna go to the park after school. And after they do their homework,” added Shay.

“It’s the last week of school,” said RaRa. “There’s no homework anymore.”

“Oh right.” Shay had forgotten.

“Will you take us?” RaRa asked Alana. “Please.”

“Please, Lana,” added eleven-year-old Jasmine, the cute baby of the family.

But Alana rolled her eyes. Jasmine might have been cute, but Alana hated when she played on that cuteness. “I thought grandma and grandpa were coming to get ya’ll tonight.”

“Not until Thursday night,” said Shay, “after grandpa gets off work. And they aren’t even packed yet.”

“We will be,” said Jasmine.

“That’s what y’all say every single year.”

“Do we have to go to grandma and grandpa’s for the whole summer again?” RaRa asked Shay. “It’s boring in Ocala.”

“Yes, Ra, you have to go. They could have taken y’all for the whole year when mama and daddy died in that car crash, but they didn’t. They didn’t wanna break us up.”

“They didn’t want us for no whole year anyway,” said Alana.

“Whatever the reason, they didn’t take y’all. But the courts would have sided with them if it went that far. I was just twenty-two years old when mama’nem died, and they gave custody of all three of y’all to me? That was a miracle.” It happened seven years ago. Alana was only nine. RaRa was only five. And Jasmine was four. But they didn’t split the siblings apart.

“We wanna stay home with you for the summer too,” said RaRa, as if Shay had said nothing at all.

“You have to go Ra,” Shay said as she finished washing the cereal bowls. “I don’t wanna hear nothing more about that. They love having you guys for the summer.”

“I like it too,” said Jasmine. “Me and grandma bake cookies and brownies and cakes too.”

“See what I mean?” said RaRa. “I don’t wanna do no baking!”

Alana laughed. She remember when she had to spend her summers with the grandparents too. She hated that racist town too.

“But back to the park,” said RaRa. “Lana, will you please take us after school?”

“Whatever,” said Alana.

“No whatever,” said Shay. “Let them know if you’re going to take’em or not.”

“I said okay,” Alana responded irritably even though she hadn’t said any such thing. “Dang!”

“Don’t you *dang* me,” Shay shot back. “I’ll knock the spit out of you!”

Alana knew Shay would. That was why she didn’t argue with her.

Shay hated being the disciplinarian. But if she didn’t put her foot down and put it down hard, Alana would have brought two, three babies in that house by now. She would be

out there with no restraint. “And cut the attitude,” Shay added. “It don’t look good on you.”

Alana rolled her eyes at her big sister, but she did appease her younger siblings. “I’ll take you,” she said to them. And it was enough. Both RaRa and Jasmine ran over to Alana and hugged her. “Thanks Lana,” said little Jasmine.

They were Alana’s soft spot. She smiled and hugged them back.

“Okay, let’s go,” Shay said as she grabbed her pocketbook and keys and began heading for the exit.

“But Alana hasn’t had breakfast yet,” said Jasmine.

“She’s too pretty to eat breakfast,” said RaRa.

Alana smiled again. “You got that right,” she said, and they all headed outside.

Shay loved that her three younger siblings were close like that. Ever since their parents died and she had to step in as mother and father to all three, she made it her mission to keep it that way. She used to be close to them too. But that ended when she had to become the family boss. That ended when she was no longer their cool big sister, but, in their eyes, their slavedriver.

But so be it, she thought, as they all piled into her little Buick Encore. None of them were disrespectful to her authority. Alana had no babies out of wedlock like a lot of those fast-tail girls in their neighborhood. They all got As and Bs. It was her job to keep them on the straight-and-narrow and that was exactly what she was determined to do. That was her satisfaction.

She backed out of the driveway of the small three-bedroom house in the *sho' nuff* hood that her parents purchased before they died. She was barely able to afford the mortgage payments, but she somehow managed to pay and pay on time every single month. She was proud of that too.

Alana, who was seated on the front seat alongside Shay, looked at her big sister as RaRa and Jasmine sat in the back looking out at the Tampa neighborhood they've known all their lives. "You gotta work tonight?" Alana asked her.

What kind of question was that, Shay wondered. "Of course I gotta work tonight. I work every night."

"Maybe Otis will give you a break and let you take the night off."

"He'll give me a break alright. He'll fire my butt. That'll be my break. And why would I take the night off?"

“To spend more time with Ra and Jass before they leave for Ocala. You work all the time.”

Shay knew it too. “Bills have to be paid,” was always her stock answer.

“I don’t know why you don’t let me come to work with you. All you be doing is cleaning offices and you’re paid based on how many you can get clean. I can help you make more money. Besides, I need a job to get the things I wanna have too.”

“You have a job,” said Shay. “Your job is making As and Bs so you can get scholarships to college. Them grants not gonna pay everything.”

“Who says I can’t do both?”

“I say so,” said Shay. “I know you. I say so!”

“But school is out this week for the summer. Can I at least get a summer job?”

“I have never stopped you from getting a summer job, Lana, and you know it. You just been too lazy to get one. Yeah, you can get a summer job. I hope you do get one. But it won’t be working with me. Otis too fresh and stupid. I don’t want you around that.” Shay and all the other ladies that

worked for Otis Kline had to fend off his advances all the time. It went with the job and Shay could handle it. But no sister of hers was going to go through that too.

Alana didn't say any more about getting a summer job, which Shay knew she wouldn't. Alana, instead, pulled out her phone and began texting the rest of the way to school.

When the Encore pulled up to the middle school, Alana began getting out too because the high school where she attended was right across the street.

"Bye Shay," said Jasmine as she started getting out.

"Bye Shay," said RaRa, getting out behind Jasmine.
"What about the end-of-term field trip tomorrow?"

Shay hated disappointing him, but the truth was still the truth. "I told you I don't have it, Ra."

"But all of my friends are going."

"Where am I going to get a hundred dollars for a fun day field trip? Out of my ass? You know I don't have it."

"But," RaRa started to say, but Alana cut him off.
"She don't have it, Ra. Now go on to class."

RaRa was resigned to the reality of their poverty, but that didn't mean he liked it. He slammed the car door behind

him. Jasmine, his baby sister and best friend, put her arm around him as they walked toward their middle school's entrance. Shay watched them walk. They were shabbily dressed compared to the other kids that wore their designer everything, although Ra and Jass were neat and clean. And she hated telling them no. She'd give them the world if she could. But she couldn't even give them a fun day field trip.

"He'll be okay," Alana said, seeing her sister's anguish.

"Yeah, I know. I just wish he didn't always have to be just okay." Then she looked at Alana. "Don't forget to take them to the park today, Alana. That's the least we can do."

"*We*? What you mean we? You aren't the one that's gotta take'em. But whatever," Alana said as she closed the car door and began walking toward her high school across the busy highway.

Shay shook her head. She wondered if she was like that when she was a teen too. It was a while ago. Shay was twenty-nine years old. She was almost thirty. She wasn't a kid anymore. But the difference for her was that her parents were still alive when she was a teen. She had solid backup. Alana only had her. Which, to Shay, was the short end of the

stick for Alana. But what could she do about it? She was working two jobs and still barely getting by. She was doing the best she could, she knew, as she drove away.

Once Alana was certain that her sister had driven away, she hurried across the busy highway to get to her school. But as soon as she crossed the street, instead of going into the school she began running toward a Chrysler 300 that appeared to be waiting for her further down the street. She got in on the front passenger seat, sat her bookbag on the floor in front of her feet, and leaned over to give the driver a kiss.

But the driver, Jimmy Mayweather, leaned away from her. “We got company,” he said to her and looked through his rearview.

“Company?” Alana asked, confused. But when she turned to look on the backseat, she saw a woman sitting there. Like Alana and Jimmy, she was black too. And like Jimmy, she appeared to be in her thirties too. But unlike Jimmy, who always had a smile for Alana, that woman looked angry as hell.

“So you’re the bitch been messing around with my husband,” the woman said.

Alana was genuinely shocked. Jimmy never said he was married! “Husband?”

“Oh so you dumb now,” said the woman. “You stupid now.” And before Alana could get another word out edgewise, the woman had jumped from her seat and began punching Alana with the kind of punches that had no intentions of going easy. That woman went hard.

Alana tried to fight back. She tried to grab the woman’s hair and get out of that car at the same time. But that huge woman had grabbed her hair and was punching away. This wasn’t her first fight.

And Jimmy, instead of letting Alana get out of the car the way she was begging him to do, put his car in gear and sped away.

CHAPTER THREE

With John Coltrane jamming in the background, Ronnie listened to his voice mail messages as he stood in his expansive bedroom and put on his dress shirt and cufflinks. But the messages were all a variation of the same theme: One woman after another woman wanting his attention.

“Why haven’t you called me lately, Ronnie?”

He deleted that one.

“Ronnie, where have you been keeping yourself?”

Deleted that one.

“Miss you.”

Deleted that one before the woman could get another word out. She was not his cup of tea at all!

“Call me, Ronnie. You’ll be glad you did.”

He smiled, but deleted her too.

“Ronnie, it’s Sylvia. Call me please. I shouldn’t have to beg you to give me a phone call.”

According to the media, she was supposed to be his main lady. But he didn't have a main lady and even if he did, Sylvia wouldn't be the one. Because she was just like the rest of them. Just a bunch of spoiled, super-rich socialites looking for a trophy they could proudly put on their arms and have in their beds as if they had it all. As if they weren't miserable drunks and sluts who always had to have more. Never satisfied, they wanted what they wanted and expected him to fall in line too. But he didn't fall in line for anybody.

Then he let out a harsh exhale and leaned his head back, his face unable to shield his increasing weariness. *Is this all there is to life*, he found himself wondering almost daily lately. *Is this it?*

Such a meticulous dresser, he thought, as he put on his tailored suitcoat, but his life felt as if it was all in shambles. He would grow old alone. He accepted that fact years ago. So why was it suddenly bothering him now?

Because you wasn't pushing forty until now, dick head, he reminded himself.

Then he didn't want to be reminded of any of it as he put his freshly pressed handkerchief in his coat top pocket, put on his Rolex and college football championship ring, then

grabbed his wallet, his phone, and his keys and hesitated no longer. He got out of there.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shay grabbed the tray filled with burgers and fries and two upsized drinks and made her way to the table near the condiment stand. She worked day shift at the truck-stop café and all the truckers that populated the place knew all the waitresses by name. Many of those truckers slept with many of those waitresses. But Shay, they all also knew, wasn't having it.

“You're too young to be so pious,” said one of the truckers as she sat his burger plate in front of him. “You can't be more than thirty-five, but you act like an old lady.”

Shay was actually twenty-nine, but she didn't care if they thought she was ninety. “Dealing with you guys on a daily basis, I feel like an old lady,” she said, and the three truckers at the table laughed.

“The other waitresses don't have no problems having some fun with us old guys,” said another trucker. “You need to have some fun too. And I'm just the man to give it to you,” he added, and they laughed again.

“Burgers and fries,” Shay said with a smile she didn’t feel as she put the last of the burger plates on the table. “That’s all you get from me.”

“You’re missing out,” said the first trucker. “Ask any of the gals in this place. That’s why many of them work here to spend some time with us. What’s your excuse for being here?”

“Oh nothing much. Just a roof over my head, food in my belly, gas in my car.” They laughed. “Enjoy, gentleman,” Shay added and made her way back behind the counter over by the pickup window to wait for her next order to come up.

She leaned against the wall and folded her arms. Everything was funny to them. Everything was a hoot to them. But just being in that place was becoming a burden to Shay. Just a dead-end job that was steady enough, but not enough to pay the bills. That was why, as soon as her shift ended at four-thirty, she had only two hours to drive home, change clothes, cook dinner for herself and her younger siblings, eat quickly, and then make her way to her second office-cleaning job. And then, seven-thirty tomorrow morning, she had to do it all over again.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

She hated it.

“Nice boobs,” a trucker said as he passed by the wait station. And then he walked away laughing as if that was supposed to be funny too.

Shay wanted to scream. She'd been taking care of her siblings even before her parents died, since she was always the babysitter, and she'd been working dead-end jobs so long she didn't know how to even go about doing any other kind of work. She never once had a chance to be selfish or feel carefree or do anything for herself and herself only. God first. Her siblings second. Her job responsibilities third. There was no time left for anything else. She sometimes felt as if she was going to explode.

But she never did. The cook called her table number, she grabbed the burgers and fries hot off the fire, and then hurried back out into the flames with a big, fat smile on her face the entire time. It was a routine she was used to, and she tried her best to stay on schedule.

That was why she was highly pissed when she knocked off work, had made it home, had changed and cooked dinner, and her siblings were just coming in from the park with only a few minutes before she had to leave for her second job.

“Shay!” they both were yelling as the front door flew open and they were running toward their older sister. “Shay!”

“Y’all knew to be home by five so we can have dinner together. Now I got to leave in a few minutes.” But she immediately noticed a problem. RaRa was there, and so was baby sister. “Where’s Alana?” she asked. She was the one who supervised them and was supposed to have taken them to the park. She was the one they were to stay close to until she got home from work. “Alana not with y’all?”

“They took her,” RaRa said.

Shay frowned. “Who took her?”

“The Police.”

Shay’s heart dropped. “What you talking about, RaRa?”

“We were standing outside at her friend’s house when the police came up, told her she was under arrest, and then they put handcuffs on her and put her in the back of their police car.”

“Then they drove away,” little Jasmine added.

Shay could hardly believe what she was hearing. “What did they say she did?”

“They didn’t say nothing,” said RaRa. “They just took her away.”

Shay thought she was going to pass out where she stood. But she knew that would help no one. “Okay, listen to me, Ra. I want you and Jasmine to stay in this house until I get back with Alana, okay?”

“Kay.”

“Lock the door behind me and don’t you dare let anybody come up in here unless it’s me. You understand me?”

“You know I do.”

“Okay,” Shay said as she nervously grabbed her purse and her keys and hurried out of the door. RaRa quickly locked it behind her. And she hopped into her Buick Encore and drove as fast as she could to the police station. But even her little compact SUV, fast as it was going, couldn’t keep up with her heartbeat.

CHAPTER FIVE

Two men were coming out and Shay had to step aside to wait for them to pass. Then she rushed through the revolving door of the juvenile detention division of the police department. The white duty officer, a big-belly sergeant, was seated behind the big information desk. He was on the phone. Shay hurried over to that desk.

“Excuse me, sir. Excuse me.”

“Don’t you see he’s on the phone?”

Shay had been so focused on the first cop she saw that she didn’t even realize another officer was seated behind the desk too. She turned to him. “I’m here to get my baby sister.”

“Your baby sister?” The young white cop looked her up and down. She was dressed in jeans and a tucked-in t-shirt, the clothes she normally wore to go to her night job, and her thick hair was in a loose curl style all over her head. She wasn’t bad-looking, he decided, but he still looked at her with contempt in his eyes. “What your baby sister doing in a jail?”

“I don’t know what. They just took her and brought her here.”

The sergeant hung up the desk phone. “What’s your baby sister’s name?” he asked her.

“Alana Pearson.”

He began typing that name into his computer. “Is it Pearson with an I?”

“No, sir. No I.”

“I see her here. She’s still getting processed in.”

“For what? What they saying she did?”

“And who are you?”

“I’m Shay. Shayla Pearson. I’m her big sister. I’m her legal guardian.”

“You don’t look all that big to me,” said the other officer and they both grinned.

“Show me some I.D. before I give out any information.”

Shay quickly pulled out her driver’s license and showed it to the sergeant.

Satisfied, he looked at her. “She was arrested for murder.”

Shay was putting her license back in her purse when she heard that word. She stopped midway and looked at the sergeant. “For *murder*? What you mean murder? My baby sister didn’t murder nobody!”

“That’s not according to the arrest warrant. She’s alleged to have stabbed her boyfriend sixteen times.”

Shay frowned. “What boyfriend? Alana don’t have no boyfriend.”

“According to you she don’t. But that’s not according to her and none of the witnesses of the crime.”

“She’s saying she killed somebody?” Shay didn’t believe it for a second.

“She’d denying it. Every bit of it. But the witnesses aren’t.”

What witnesses? Everything he was saying sounded foreign to Shay. “This must be a mistake. When can I see her? How long before they process her so I can take her home?”

“Take her home?” asked the younger cop as if she had to be nuts.

“That gal ain’t going nowhere tonight,” said the sergeant. “Her bail hearing isn’t until tomorrow at nine and even then she’s unlikely to get out.”

Shay couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “What can I do?”

“Get a lawyer, all I can tell you. But unless he’s the caliber of a Ronnie Burton-type lawyer, her chances of beating the rap are slim to none.”

The young cop grinned. “I know that’s right.”

“Who’s Ronnie Burton?” asked Shay.

When she said that, both officers looked at her. “You can’t be serious,” said the sergeant.

But she was serious. She’d never heard of him before.

“He’s only the best attorney in America. He got a serial killer off once. He’s ruthless. He don’t play.”

He got a serial killer off, and that was supposed to make him great? “And you believe he can get my sister out of jail?”

The young cop was laughing now, as if she was the dumbest broad he'd ever seen.

“If anybody can get her out,” said the sergeant who understood Shay was probably unfamiliar with the criminal side of life, “Burton can. But if you aren't a billionaire, he's probably not going to take your case.”

Shay's heart sank. Were these men toying with her or were they telling her the truth? “So I won't be able to see my sister tonight?”

“No ma'am.”

“But what if she's scared? Will they let her call me?”

The sergeant exhaled. His heart went out to Shay. “No ma'am.”

“But I thought you get a phone call if you get arrested.”

The sergeant looked at the computer screen. “It says right here that she already exercised that privilege.”

Now Shay was puzzled. “What do you mean? She didn't call me.”

“She called somebody. Talked the full five minutes too.”

Shay had no idea who Alana could have spoken with. Her grandparents? She would have been too ashamed, and they already told all of them that if they ever got in trouble with the law, never call them. There was nobody else that Shay knew she could have phoned. “I don’t understand,” she said.

“What’s there to understand?” asked the young officer. “She’s in jail. Gonna be all night long no matter what. There’s nothing else to understand.”

Him Shay didn’t like. She, instead, looked at the sergeant. “What time you said her bail hearing is?”

“Tomorrow at nine. That doesn’t mean her case will be called at nine, but she’ll be on the docket.”

“And what did you say that lawyer’s name was again?”

The young officer grinned and shook his head.

“Ronnie *Bulldog* Burton,” said the sergeant. “But like I said, he rolls with the billionaires. Me and you and anybody else in between don’t stand a chance to get represented by him. Don’t waste your time, young lady.”

Shay understood. Her back was against the wall. But it had been against it before. She wasn’t going to rest until her

sister was back home where she belonged. “Thank you,” she said, and left that station.

But she wasn't about to go home. She Googled the name, found the address, and then headed straight for Ronnie Burton's office.

CHAPTER SIX

The Tampa Bay skyline was a combination of skyscrapers, fast cars, and tree-lined streets as Ronnie Burton stood at his floor-to-ceiling room-sized window and stared out at the view. On the top floor of Burton and Yates law firm, he had the perfect view. But it wasn't the view that had him mesmerized.

It was Heather Fisher. It was that young woman's mortified face as she sat in that witness box in shock at what he was doing to her good name. And then she killed herself specifically because of how he treated her on the stand. Why didn't he see the signs? He usually could see the signs a mile away and know when to back off. His two-minute rule was no joke. Give him two minutes, and he accurately could size you up.

But that time, his instincts failed him. He didn't think for a moment that his grilling of Heather Fisher was earth-shattering bad, especially since it was day one of the trial. But now, looking back and knowing what he knew about that young woman's innocence, he realized it was bad.

“Ronnie?”

It was Dan Yates. But Ronnie didn't turn around.

“Why aren't you answering your phone?”

“Last I checked I still ran this joint.”

Dan rolled his eyes. That man could be such a bastard sometimes. “You own this, that's very true. But what's also true is that you have a very beautiful, high-maintenance, very impatient lady downstairs that you likewise own and that has been trying to call you.”

“Own?” Ronnie turned around. “I don't own that bitch,” he said as he began walking back toward his desk. “And don't want to own her either.” He'd never known a woman that he ever wanted to call his own.

“At it again, I see,” Dan said, shaking his head. “Why is it that you can't get along with any lady for longer than a few months? I thought you said Sylvie might just be a keeper.”

“I never said that,” said Ronnie as he began putting papers into his thick attaché case. “You said that nonsense. You was more smitten with her than I ever was.”

“And I still am, in a platonic sense of the word in every way. But why aren’t you still smitten?”

Ronnie briefly closed his eyes, revealing lines of stress all over his face. He was lead attorney on far too many cases and Dan knew it long ago. But what could they do? The billionaire big boys only wanted him to handle their criminal cases. Not his partner. Not his senior associates. Him. They probably knew, like Dan knew, that his so-called partnership was nothing more than a token, tiny-percent ownership just to have another big name on the marquee. Just to make clients feel as if they were getting, not Ronnie’s equal, but the next-best-thing when Ronnie was unavailable to handle their cases. It was how Ronnie Burton survived: He took the rules and bent the hell out of them.

Ronnie reopened his eyes and continued packing up case files to take home with him. “I’m going to put an end to it.”

Dan was amazed. “Are you serious?”

“Take her out of her misery. All we do is argue anyway.”

“But Ronnie you can’t. Not yet. We haven’t made a decision about the senate seat.”

“What senate seat?”

“The one everybody wants you to run for.” But Dan had a vested interest too. If Ronnie ran for the United State Senate and won, Dan would become the titular head of *Burton and Yates*.

But Ronnie wasn't about to run for any public office whatsoever and all those pundits and bloggers who kept putting his name in the midst were probably paid to do so by Dan himself. “Phone Sylvia,” he said as he snapped close his attaché case. “Tell her I'm on my way down,” he added as he grabbed his case and began walking from behind his desk.

“But Ronnie, please think this thing through before you cancel that lady. You need a woman on your arm to be considered a viable candidate. And there is no eye candy alive that looks better on a man's arm than Sylvie. She'll win you votes by her great looks alone.”

Everything was calculated. Everything was transactional. “I will never run for public office as long as I live. Is that clear enough? Now do as I said and get out of my office,” Ronnie ordered, as he walked out of his office too.

When he caught the elevator and finally made it downstairs, he could see Sylvia standing all the way across his

massive lobby talking on her phone. That was all she did all day long: shop and talk. Shop and text. Shop and whatever else she did during the day.

He sat down in one of the elegant chairs against the wall and watched her. Although it was just after seven pm, his lobby was bursting with people and activity. *Burton and Yates* didn't shut down until well into the night, sometimes ten or eleven at night as young guns were doing all they could to win that one big case that would put their own names on the legal map just like the boss had done nearly a decade ago when he defended the vice president of the United States in a hush money scheme. Nobody went home early. Including Ronnie. Because it was even harder staying on top as it was getting there.

As he sat there watching his so-called main lady, and as he wondered if she would ever bother to stop with the phone business and look across the room for two seconds and see him sitting there, Shay Pearson entered the lobby and hurried over to the reception desk. Although she walked right in front of Ronnie, he didn't notice her among the swirl of people coming and going and she didn't see him because her

eyes were glued on finding out if the man she came to see was even still in the office.

“May I help you?” The receptionist was a kind, older woman who smiled when Shay walked up to the desk.

“Yes ma’am, you can help me. I need to see Ronald Burton.”

Ronnie looked over at the reception desk when he heard his name. A master at sizing people up, he could only see Shay from the back. And what he saw of her was hardly impressed. Looked like she worked a job that had her constantly on her feet because her shoes were scuffed and runover. Her shoulders were slumped and her hair was a tangled mess all over her small head, which probably meant she had too many stressors at home to take care of herself. She had a great body, he could see that, but she probably had no time for men. Might even be a lesbo, but he wasn’t certain about that. A disaster of a woman was what he saw when he saw Shay.

“Do you have an appointment with Mr. Burton?” the reception asked as she began to look her up on her computer screen.

“No ma’am, I don’t have any appointment. My baby sister just got arrested for murder and they said the only person that can help her is Ronnie Burton. That’s why I came straight here.”

The receptionist’s heart went out to Shay and she found herself glancing over at the boss. But Ronnie shook his head. He didn’t do pro bono work at all. And even if he did, he was booked solid and wouldn’t be able to take her baby sister on anyway. His headshake was an emphatic no. He even got up and began making his way across the massive lobby to where Sylvia was standing.

“I’m sorry,” the receptionist said regrettably, “but Mr. Burton is no longer on the clock.”

Shay was desperate. “Is there somebody else I can see? Other than him, I mean?”

It was the receptionist time to shake her head. “There’s no one else,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Shay was devastated. Not only was her sister all alone in some jail cell, but she had no clue how she was going to get her out of that mess. And what was she doing in a firm like this one, she thought as she looked around at the cathedral

ceilings and the glass and marble everywhere. She wouldn't be able to afford a cupcake in that place.

But she knew she had to face facts. Alana was locked up and was going to have to stay locked up until tomorrow morning, although Shay had no idea how that was going to work either. If only Alana had phoned her when she first got arrested, then she would have felt so much better knowing she was okay. But she phoned somebody else, which shocked Shay. Who would she have phoned? Shay already called their grandparents just to check, but they hadn't heard from her either. It made no sense.

But that wasn't that receptionist fault. "Thank you," she said, and then she made haste getting out of that building she had no business being in to begin with. She just as Ronnie walked up on Sylvia.

When Sylvia turned and saw him, she was livid. "Where have you been?" She ended the phone call she was having without bothering to tell the person on the other line goodbye. But that was Sylvie. "I've been calling you ever since I got here."

"My office hasn't moved," responded Ronnie. "And you still have two good feet."

“I’m not going all the way up there for your butt. You knew we had a dinner date tonight. You’d better be glad I allowed my driver to bring me here at all. You should have been downstairs waiting on me, not the other way around.”

“Wait on that if you want,” said Ronnie dismissively.

Which only angered Sylvia more. “You are such an asshole.”

“Takes one to know one baby.”

Hate filled her eyes, but she didn’t take the bait. She actually cared about the joker. “You know how I hate to wait,” she said.

“Then why do you wait? You’re this gift to men, let you tell it. You’re a billionaire’s daughter. Why are you bothering with a joker like me?”

“Sometimes I wonder.”

Ronnie exhaled. “What are we doing, Sylvie?”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s pack it in. Let’s call it a day forevermore. Let’s put an end to whatever this is once and for all.”

Sylvia stared at him. Her defiant demeanor now had a fearful look. Every woman wanted Ronnie Burton. She had him. She wasn't about to lose him. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Sylvie."

"Are you telling me. . . Do you mean to tell me that you're breaking up with me? That *you're dumping me*?"

"That's what I'm telling you, yes."

"You can't dump me!"

"I can't?" He smiled as if he liked being challenged. "Watch me."

Sylvia became so angry when she saw that smirk on his face that she took her open hand and slapped Ronnie hard as she could across his gorgeous face. People in the lobby, especially Ronnie's associates, saw the slap and looked over at the boss in total shock. Because they knew his temper was legendary.

And it flared as soon as he felt that lick. A man like him, who never took a confrontation lying down, couldn't take that. He slapped her right back. And he slapped her so hard that her head and long hair jerked backwards with a hard jerk. He didn't hold back either.

Sylvia couldn't believe it. She held the side of her face in utter shock. Nobody had ever touched like that before. Nobody! "You hit me!" she yelled out. "You're a man and you hit me!"

"You're a woman and you hit me. Don't ditch it out if you can't take it, honey," Ronnie shot back.

Appalled at him and at the fact that people were watching her and filming it all on their cell phones caused her to hurry from that building in shame and anger and tears. And the people, all of whom saw her hit him first, started laughing and applauding her humiliation. They also applauded Ronnie's response.

But Ronnie hated that it ended that way and he despised people who took pleasure in other people's pain. It was a contradiction, he knew. Especially coming from a man whose stock and trade was to inflict humiliation every time he cross-examined a witness. But that was his job. Outside of his job, he never went out of his way to humiliate anybody. But somehow he still managed to do so anyway.

Feeling like the asshole he knew he was, he left the building too.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gabe Lucan, a fat cigar between his fat fingers, sat at the counter of the bar he owned and checked the text messages on his phone. His kid brother, Carlos, walked in and headed straight in his direction. It was three in the morning. The bar had closed an hour ago. The bartender and staff were just cleaning up before they left too.

“Where the hell have you been?” Gabe asked.

“Hanging,” said Carlos as she sat beside him. “Where you think? I’ll take a beer, Jake.”

“Bar’s closed,” said Gabe. “Don’t give him a damn thing.”

“You’re a wonderful brother, you know that?”

“How much is her bail?”

“Who?”

Gabe gave him a cold look.

“Won’t know till tomorrow.”

“Make sure you’re in that courtroom. But sit all the way in the back. Don’t let her see you and draw attention to you. But whatever the bail is, see if we can handle it.”

“Will do.”

Gabe looked at her. “You love her or what?”

Carlos shook his head. “We kickin’ it. That’s it.”

Gabe nodded. “Good. Just make sure you make it clear to that bitch that her mouth is her enemy.”

“She already know that. Didn’t she call you? I told her to call you after she got arrested and called me.”

“She called me. I laid down the law, you feel me? But them police be listening in on them phone conversations. I couldn’t talk to her like I wanna talk to her. When she get out, you make sure you talk to her ass. Make sure she understands that she’d better keep her mouth shut or she won’t have one to shut.”

“She knows.”

“She better know. I got some of my bitches already locked up gonna give her a good talking to tonight too. But she’ll listen to you.”

“Stop worrying, Gabe. She’s good for it. She won’t let you down though.”

“That’s what they all say,” said Gabe. “But remember this little brother, it’s never the big bald eagle that brings you down. It’s always that little tweety bird you don’t even pay attention to.” Then a hard look came over Gabe’s face. “Shut that bird or I will,” he warned. Then he got up and left the bar.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A couple nightmares later, one of which was Heather Fisher pushing him over a cliff, he got up at the crack of dawn. He removed the bedding, moved his legs out of bed and sat up on the edge of the bed. His silk pajamas were filled with sweat from another fitful night's sleep. He was tired before he even began his day. How was his body going to be able to keep taking this beating day after day, night after night? But he had obligations and responsibilities, including attending a bond hearing on behalf of one of his clients: a billionaire's daughter whose drug arrest might fall under the three-strike law if Ronnie wasn't able to come up with a novel way to get her off. The State wants no bail. But her father made clear that she had to make bail. As if Ronnie had a magic wand that could make the judicial system do whatever he wanted. But that was how his client's viewed him: less as a lawyer practicing his skill. More as a magician with tricks up his sleeve.

He got up and walked over to the full-size bar in his bedroom and poured himself a drink. Not even seven in the

morning and he was already taking a nip. Not quite forty yet and already going down the same path his old man went down before he drank himself to death.

He looked at the mirror directly in front of his bar. He was beginning to look exactly like his old man, even down to the lines of age all over his face. Even down to the charisma. Usually the best-looking guy in any room, he could kill'em with charm any time he wanted. Just like his old man. That charm got two scoundrels like them into many a lady's bedrooms down through the years. His old man was dirt poor so usually those bedrooms were in doublewide trailers. Ronnie grew up and got away from poverty and preferred bedrooms in mansions. But it was all the same. Pleasure filled momentarily, and to loneliness they returned. Because being a Prince Charming when he was a scoundrel in the end took its toll on the old man. Now it was taking its toll on Ronnie. *Dog piss is better than your father*, his drunk mother used to love to say, *and you're just like him. You'll follow right in his footsteps just as sure as the day is long. Mark my words*, she added, as if it was going to be her pleasure to be proven right.

He could never let that happen.

He poured the rest of his liquor down the drain. He had too many problems as it was. Problem drinker wasn't going to be another one.

CHAPTER NINE

Shay arrived at the courthouse early. As soon as she dropped RaRa and Jasmine off at school, she drove straight over. When she called Otis last night and told him why she didn't show up on her second job, she expected him to fire her over the phone. But he didn't. He actually took compassion on the situation and gave her a pass. "But don't push it," he said, and ended the call. But it was some relief for Shay. She couldn't afford to lose that job. And especially now that Alana was in trouble.

When they opened the courtroom doors, she sat as far up front as they would allow her to sit. And soon the gallery began to fill up, mostly, Shay noticed, with black and Hispanic defendants and white attorneys, although there were a splattering of black attorneys there too.

But what she didn't notice was when Ronnie Burton came into the courtroom and sat on the front row on the opposite side from where she sat. It was where the attorneys with cases on the docket sat. What she did notice was that many attorneys were coming up to Ronnie to shake his hand,

as if congratulating him or something, but she couldn't see his face to make out who he was. In truth, she wasn't thinking about who he was, or who anybody else was. All she knew was that her kid sister was in the kind of trouble she never even thought to teach her to steer clear of, and she had no clue how to get her out of it.

If Alana's bail was set in the hundreds, she'd sacrifice the mortgage money and her car note too and get her out. If it was more than that, Alana wasn't about to get out. Shay didn't have more than that.

The judge finally sat on the bench and gaveled the session to order. And one by one the black defendants were called up and their bail was set. A few of them had some of those black attorneys representing their interests. A lot of them got more favorable bail outcomes, as if those black attorneys were defending them harder. And a few of the white defendants had some of those white attorneys representing them, and they got better outcomes too. Which made Shay realize that in the criminal justice system, representation was everything. And then they called Alana's name.

Shay sat upright in her seat when her sister's name was called. This would be the first time she saw Alana since she

heard about her arrest. And as soon as she entered the courtroom from a backroom, Shay's heart sank. Alana had what looked like bruising on her face, and a small black eye.

Shay jumped up from her seat. "What did they do to you?" she yelled out.

"Sit down," the bailiff angrily yelled back, "or you'll be escorted out of this court room. Sit down!"

Ronnie continued to read over his court brief for yet another one of his cases and didn't bother looking up. He was accustomed to folks in the peanut gallery yelling out about the treatment of their loved ones. It went with the territory.

But Shay knew nothing about the territory as she sat back down. She knew she was out of order yelling out like that, but it was just so shocking to see. And the way Alana was looking over at her with agony on her face. Did somebody beat her up inside that jail? Did the cops do it? Shay was as angry as she was upset. But she knew she was powerless to do anything about it.

"Do you have an attorney present?" the judge asked Alana.

"No sir. Just my sister."

“Your sister?”

“That’s me,” Shay said as she stood up from her seat again, but the bailiff ordered her to sit back down.

Ronnie looked over at her this time. When he looked, he realized immediately that she was the young lady that was in his lobby last night asking to meet with him. He didn’t even see her face last night the way he saw it right now, but he knew instinctively that it was her. She mentioned last night that her kid sister was up on a murder charge.

So that was her kid sister, he thought, as he looked over at Alana, sizing her up too. And only one word came to his mind as he stared: whore. No doubt about it. Her kid sister was a whore.

“State recommendation,” the judge asked the prosecuting attorney who stood at the podium.

“Two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars, Your Honor,” the prosecutor said.

Shay’s eyes stretched to disbelief. Did she just hear what she just heard? Were they talking about bail for *Alana* at that amount?

“Why so high for a minor?” even the judge had to ask.

“She will absolutely be charged as an adult, Your Honor. And it will be a first-degree murder charge. She stabbed her boyfriend sixteen times right in front of his kids. They were screaming for her to stop, but she kept right on stabbing him. She has shown no remorse whatsoever and was seen in the jail last night laughing with some of the other inmates. We feel the amount is well justified.”

Ronnie looked over at the poor girl who had sought to hire him. She looked so bewildered that she looked unwell.

Shay was past-bewilderment. She couldn't begin to wrap her brain around any of it. A quarter of a million dollars for bail? *For Alana?* She stabbed her boyfriend sixteen times? *What boyfriend?* She stabbed him in front of his children? *What children?* This was beginning to sound like a nightmare. Like this couldn't possibly be true. Like this couldn't possibly be happening!

But it was true. And it was happening. Alana was crying hysterically. Ronnie could see her looking back at her big sister, as if she could get her out of this when she could barely sit up. And although Alana was losing it, she didn't interest Ronnie as much as her big sister did. Because he could tell that the young lady was in shock. She was

mortified. And the strangest thing in the world happened to him. That look on her big sister's face, that mortified look, broke his heart.

It broke his heart? Was he kidding himself? How could that be? He didn't even know that chick!

But it was true.

He felt Shay's pain.

Shay felt nothing but sheer panic. She was devastated beyond devastation and didn't know what to do or where to turn. Until she heard a voice in that wilderness.

"I apologize, Your Honor," Ronnie said as he stood up on his feet, "but I'm representing the young lady during this court appearance."

The attorneys actually gasped when he said those words, and Ronnie and the judge knew why. Ronnie Burton never defended anybody whose net worth wasn't in the highest millions or billions of dollars. It just wasn't done. But this slip of a girl was as poor as poor could get. Anybody could see that. What in the world was going on?

But Shay didn't view it as the weirdest thing ever at all. She viewed it as a prayer answered. Because she prayed

all night long.

Ronnie began to walk into the well of the courtroom where Alana was standing, and stood beside her. Even the prosecutor was amazed. “You represent Miss Pearson?” she asked him.

But Ronnie didn’t even respond to her. Prosecutors were his adversaries and he never played nice with them. His focus was on that judge that had the power to lower that bail.

But the judge asked the same question. “Are you telling me, Mr. Burton, that you are the attorney of record for Miss Pearson?”

“Yes, sir. As of right now I am, sir.”

Burton? It was only then did Shay realize that the man standing next to her baby sister was that so-called *miracle-working* lawyer Ronnie Burton. The one those cops acted as if was too big for her to even consider. The one that owned that fancy law firm she went to last night to try and get his help. Because she wanted the best for her sister. Now he was offering his help for free? Without even being properly asked? She was stunned.

So was the judge. “Well,” he said, unable to hide his surprise, “this has to be a first for you.” All the lawyers in the courtroom laughed. Nobody else in the courtroom got the joke. Even Alana was confused.

Ronnie did feel a bit of embarrassment, considering why he stood up, but it was what it was.

“I take it you’re here to argue that her bail should be reduced?” the judge asked him.

“Reduced? No, sir.” Ronnie knew that girl’s sister was not going to be able to afford any bail whatsoever. “I am asking that her bail be eliminated entirely, sir.”

“Eliminated? Your Honor that is ridiculous,” the prosecutor said as the lawyers laughed again.

But Shay saw a determination on Ronnie’s face that made her believe him. Despite the laughter, he looked dead serious.

“And might I ask why I should eliminate her bail altogether?” asked the judge.

“One moment please.” Ronnie placed his hand over the microphone at the podium and leaned over to Alana. A pretty girl with big, powerful gray eyes, she was as scared as

her big sister. He whispered: “Do not lie to me or you will be in serious trouble,” he said. “Do you have any priors?”

“What’s that?”

“Have you ever been arrested before?”

“Never, sir.”

Ronnie looked at her and decided, as he had already concluded, that she was telling the truth. Then he looked at the judge. “I make that request, sir,” he said, “because my client has no priors. She is not a flight risk. She has strong family and community ties, sir, as she was born and raised right here in Tampa.” He glanced at her, as if to confirm his suspicion. Alana nodded her head.

Ronnie continued. “She is no flight risk whatsoever,” he said again. “This poor girl has never even been out of the state of Florida.” Another glance. Another vigorous nod of agreement by Alana. Shay was wondering how did he know all of that.

“And, on top of that,” Ronnie said, “she’s a minor, she’s a kid in school, and she’s dirt poor. If she were to be given any bail at all, it will be nothing more than penalization for the fact that she’s poor. No more. No less. Your Honor, it

is my contention that she should be released on her older sister's recognizance with no bail attached. This girl is going nowhere. Where's she going, Your Honor? She can barely afford to go across town. The no bail rule is designed specifically for defendants such as this. No priors. No flight risk. No issue. No bail is the only equitable outcome, Your Honor."

Shay and the entire courtroom quickly looked from Ronnie to the prosecution's podium. And as expected, the prosecution would have none of that. Only problem? The prosecutor argued the same reasons for granting the high bail that she argued before. But this time she was up against the master. Against a man who got privileges because of his reputation alone. And that judge was no exception.

He looked out into the gallery. "Are you her guardian?"

Shay immediately nodded her head. "Yes, sir."

"Stand up when you're addressing the judge," the mean bailiff said.

Shay quickly stood up. "Yes, sir," she said.

"Your name?"

“Shayla Pearson, sir.”

“How old are you, Miss Pearson?”

“Twenty-nine, sir.”

Ronnie was surprised to hear that number. He had pegged her to be a little older. It was the way she carried herself. The way she dressed. The way she seemed so burdened down in her demeanor.

“This is my ruling,” the judge said. “Your sister will be released into your care. But understand this: she must show up when she is instructed to show up for every single hearing. She cannot leave this county. She cannot contact any witnesses or anybody else related to this case. Fortunately it’s the end of the school term so there’s no need to worry about her education at this point. But she had better stay out of trouble, or bail, significant bail, will be invoked. Do I make myself clear, Miss Pearson?”

“Yes, sir. She won’t miss a thing, sir. And she won’t get in any trouble. I promise you that.”

Then the judge looked at Ronnie. “And she’d better show up, Mr. Burton, or I’ll hold you personally responsible.”

“Yes, sir,” Ronnie said with that electric public smile, although he and the judge both knew the judge’s warning was unenforceable.

“Let it be so ordered,” the judge said and then brought the gavel down to signify the end of that particular case.

Alana looked at Ronnie. “What this mean?” she asked him.

“Go with the guard. They’ll process you out. It means you’re going home.”

Alana smiled a wonderful smile and left with the guard.

“Now,” the judge said to Ronnie, “let’s get to the case you’re really here about.” And Ronnie, realizing the judge knew he was representing that girl on the fly, couldn’t help but smile too.

But Shay was still bewildered. “What I’m supposed to do?” she whispered to the black man sitting beside her.

“It means she’s free to go,” he whispered back. “They’re processing her out now. It may take a few hours though, but she’s free. Best thing you can do is wait outside

this courtroom for her lawyer to come out when he finishes his other case. He'll tell you what to do.”

“Okay thank you,” she said with a big smile on her face. And she left the courtroom. But she didn't go far. She waited right outside the courtroom door, just like she was told, for her sister's surprise attorney to come out.

CHAPTER TEN

It was a long wait. Nearly an hour long. So long that Shay had to go to the ladies room. And even when she got back, she still had to wait.

And then the man of the hour, with a white girl around Shay's age by his side, came out of the courtroom.

Shay stood up from the bench as the young lady gave Ronnie a big hug, asked if he ever wanted to hang out sometimes he knew where she was, as if she was flirting with her own attorney, and then she ran toward a group of girls waiting at the end of the hall. "It took you long enough," Shay could hear one of them say.

But what surprised her was that Ronnie didn't come up to talk with her at all. He started leaving too. Shay, confused, hurried up to him. "Mr. Burton? Mr. Burton?"

Ronnie didn't bother to turn around. So many people knew his name in that courthouse and was always angling to get his attention that he kept on walking. But when he felt somebody touch his arm and then move up beside him stride for stride, that did get his attention. Nobody was that bold.

He looked at the small, brown hand on his arm, and then he looked at the young lady walking beside him. When he realized who it was, he stopped immediately. It was Big Sister. Why was she still here?

But when he turned and looked at her up close and personal, something shook deep inside of him. It was even more pronounced than that feeling that came over him when he decided to represent her sister. She had a look about her that from a distance seemed hard as a rock. Like a tough lady with every one of those ninety-nine problems Jay-Z rapped about. But up close was an entirely different story to Ronnie. He didn't see tough in those big, gray, eagle eyes. He didn't see a problematic individual either. He saw vulnerable. He saw fragile. He saw a young woman in desperate need for somebody to love and honor and protect her. To take care of her. And for some out-of-body reason, he saw himself as the only man for the job. Which was insanity on top of insane! What the hell was happening to him?

Shay was wondering the same thing. It was the way he was staring at her. As if he could see right inside of her. But it didn't feel uncomfortable at all. She could have stood there staring at him all day as if she was frozen in place too. It was

his eyes. The bluest blue eyes she'd ever seen. It was his hair. So thick and black and so well-groomed. It was his face. So strong and beautiful that it could make great looking guys seem plain. But she wasn't trying to go all goo-goo over some man. She just wanted her sister back.

Ronnie understood that, too, and shook himself out of his stupor, although he knew he didn't make that shit up. That young lady was affecting him. And in a way that no woman, young or old, had ever affected him before. "You're still here?" he asked her.

Shay thought his question was as strange as his behavior. "Yes, I'm still here. Where else was I gonna be?"

"Have you signed her out yet?"

"No, sir. Was I supposed to?"

"Of course you were supposed to," he snapped at her. "Did you not hear the judge order her release into your custody?"

Shay could have got angry at the way he snapped at her, but she'd been treated worse her whole life. And it wasn't about her anyway. It was about him helping Alana. "Yes, I heard what the judge said, and I thank you for helping my

baby sister. But I was told that I needed to wait for you to get her out.”

He couldn't help it. He was staring at her again. But this time he was looking beyond her face. He was looking down at her nicely-packed, slender but curvaceous body, and he made no bones about it. He was getting a serious boner just looking at her.

Shay had tamped down those feelings she felt when Ronnie first looked those unusual eyes her way, too, because she had bigger fish to fry than him. She had a sister to think about, not her own raw needs.

But when he started looking down the length of her body like she was a side of beef he couldn't wait to get his mouth on, it awakened feelings inside of her that she hadn't felt in years. Because he didn't remind her of those truckers who came into that truck-stop café where she worked, and on a daily basis was always propositioning her. The motel where they were holed up for a few hours' sleep before they got back on the road again was next door to the café, and they wanted her to spend at least a few minutes with them. They didn't give a damn about her as a person. It was her body they were after. She knew that much from experience. The one time she

gave in, thinking that a certain trucker she fell hard for wanted her and not just her body, was the one time her heart was broken so completely that it nearly destroyed her. Now she hated that look men gave to her. She just hated it. But the look Ronnie was giving her, though just as sensual as their looks, actually made her feel warm inside. As if, instead of hating it, she was loving it. Which was just weird to her.

And why did he keep staring at her? Shouldn't he be telling her what to do or what the next steps need to be? But he was just staring at her! "What should I do?" she asked him. "I don't know what to do."

When she said those last words, it broke Ronnie out of his stupor again. This woman needed help and he was getting a hard on? Was he for real? "You know where the jail is located?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll need to sign an ROR promising to have your minor sister attend all court dates, missing none."

"Okay, I will," she said, nodding her head.

"Okay," he said, nodding his head too, knowing that he had to leave to get to a different courtroom for a different case,

but was stuck in place.

“But I mean,” said Shay, not understanding this man at all, “after I sign her out, when can we meet with you to go over her case?”

“*Me?*” Ronnie was shaking his head. He might have been mesmerized, but that didn’t change the fact that he was booked solid. Couldn’t take on another case if his life depended on it. “No ma’am. I’m unavailable. Just let the court know that your sister needs a public defender and one will be appointed for her case.”

Shay was confused. “I know you got that bail canceled for my sister. And that’s a big deal. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. But they didn’t cancel those charges. She’s still got to deal with that murder charge. She’s gonna need the best lawyer to fight charges like that.”

“There’s no way I can take on another case.”

Now Shay was gravely concerned. “So you lied to the court?”

“Excuse me?”

“You told that judge you was her lawyer. He expects you to be her lawyer. I know what you did was a great thing

for her, by stepping up. But getting her out of there until her court date is just the first step. She needs you.”

The way she said those last three words cut Ronnie short. Because his instincts told him that yes, her sister needed him for sure. But she needed him too. Maybe needed him more. Somehow he knew she did. And his two-minute rule kicked in hard and he sensed something about this lady that was exactly what he needed as well.

And for the first time in his professional career, he knew he had to do it. He knew he had to take on this pro bono case if it was the last thing he did. “Bring her to my office,” he said.

Shay felt pure relief. “Today?” she asked excitedly.

“Tomorrow. Eleven am. And don’t you dare be late because I’ll only have a few minutes to give.”

Shay smiled. “Yes, sir. We won’t be late. I promise you that.”

Her smile lit up her entire face. And that captivated Ronnie too. “Don’t try to discuss the case with her at all,” he warned her. “Don’t even ask her where those bruises came from. Wait until she meets with me. I don’t want her telling

you one thing and then when she gets in front of me she'll feel obligated to stick to that lie. Let me get the story out of her. And it will have to be the true story because that's what the prosecution will have."

Shay was nodding. "Yes, sir."

"Okay," he said. But he was still unable to leave her. He was still staring at her.

While he was still there, Shay decided to just ask it. She was afraid to do it, but she knew it had to be done. "How much do you charge, sir?"

"Three-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars per hour," Ronnie said without skipping a beat.

It was Shay's time to stare at him. Only her mouth was wide open. She just knew he had to be joking.

Ronnie realized she now understood the value of his time. "Don't be late tomorrow," he said.

Shay was about to say *but I don't have that kind of money*, but she knew that man knew that. And since her parents taught her that whenever somebody gave you a gift that you should accept it, thank them, and move on, and that you should never look a gift horse in the mouth, she held her

tongue and pretended like it was no big deal to her. “Lord willing, we’ll be there, and we’ll be on time,” she said with such a brilliant white smile. “Thank you.”

It was such a beautiful smile that Ronnie found himself smiling right back at her. Which was not like him at all. Which alarmed him to such an extent that he no longer felt hesitant in the least. He left that time. He had to get away from her before he found himself doing much more than just smiling. He didn’t look back.

But he didn’t have to. He’d already given Shay hope. She felt as if she was walking on air as she began hurrying for the jail. She knew Ronnie Burton was the real deal. Those cops who mentioned his name like it would be impossible for her to get him on her sister’s case knew that too.

But even she had no idea just how impossible to get he was. *Three-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars every hour he worked the case?* And that kind of lawyer was her *sister’s lawyer?* That was insane! But it was true. He said so himself. Her sister had the best of the best!

And for the first time since she heard the news, she was beginning to believe that an egotistical, arrogant, mean man like Ronnie Burton just might be able to set her sister

free. He certainly charged people like he knew what he was doing. Maybe he did.

“Thank you Jesus!” she said out loud with nothing but joy and gratitude in her voice. And even though people were looking at her like she was crazy as she walked down the halls of that courthouse praising the Lord, she didn’t care. Let’em look! Because she had Ronnie Burton on her sister’s side as if he just might be her answered prayer.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Shay hardly slept at all last night. It was a small, three-bedroom house that her parents worked their butts off to own. But they still had twenty years of mortgage payments left when they died. Shay had to take over those payments. And although there was enough room for her and Alana to have their own rooms, and for her two younger siblings to share a room, all three of them, one by one, found their way into Shay's bed overnight. Now all three of them were piled around her bed fast asleep like little angels. She was in that bed too. But she barely slept a wink.

Ronald Burton. She had Googled the mess out of him last night. She read all she could read about that man. And it was a mouthful. He was almost forty years old. Had never married. Had no kids. Seemed to have a new girlfriend every few months. Was commitment-phobic and believed fervently in open relationships. Broke many ladies' hearts like he just didn't care. He seemed just terrible to Shay.

One article even said he was a man with a very low moral compass who believed in winning at all costs. That he

loved annihilating the accusers of his clients whenever he got them on the witness stand as if destroying people was his passion. He was quoted in that article saying that destroying *liars* was his passion. They didn't lie on his clients, then they wouldn't get destroyed. But that was semantics to that article writer. She even mentioned how one girl, named Heather Fisher, committed suicide after Ronnie Burton got finished with her. Which stunned Shay.

But even that article writer and everybody else on the internet seemed to agree that despite his questionable ethics and take-no-prisoners style, he was still the best criminal defense attorney in America. *The billionaires lawyer*, they called him, since all of his clients seemed to be the highest dollar millionaires or outright billionaires. They nicknamed him *Bulldog Burton* because of the way he would take the prosecution's argument, rip it apart like he was ripping apart a prey, and he wouldn't let go until he won every battle. *Tenacious* and *audacious* were the terms many of those articles called him.

But also according to those articles all over the internet, he was different in another way too. Unlike other successful lawyers like him, he made it his business to never

take *pro bono*, or *free* cases for the public good. His firm did pro bono work all the time. But he personally never did. He said he was never giving away his God-given talent for free, or for menial money. But yet he agreed to be Alana's attorney? Why?

But Shay would be lying if she wasn't thrilled that he did agree. And the fact that he pulled out all the stops to win his cases thrilled her too. Because that was what her sister was going to need. Because for once it wasn't going to be her and her siblings against the world. For once they just might have a bulldog in their corner fighting for them, not against them, for a change.

Shay's phone alarm rang and her sleeping siblings slowly began yawning and stretching and waking up. Because they knew, when it came to school, that Shay didn't play.

"How did all y'all end up in my bed anyway?" she asked them.

"We wanted to be with Alana," said Jasmine in the midst of her yawn.

Alana gave them a smile. She was extra all the time, but she loved her siblings.

“Do we have to go to school today?” RaRa asked.

“Yes, you have to go,” said Shay, “and you know that.”

“But grandma and grandpa are coming to pick us up tonight to take us to Ocala with them. We’re gonna miss the last day of school tomorrow anyway. Why can’t we miss it today too?”

“We wanna stay home with Alana,” added Jasmine.

“Alana won’t be home. We’re going to see her lawyer.”

“What she did that she need a lawyer?” asked RaRa.

“She didn’t do anything. I told you that already boy. Didn’t I tell you that? What they’re accusing her of isn’t the truth. Now get up and go take your shower so the rest of us can get ready too.”

They all got out of Shay’s bed. But before Alana could follow her siblings out of the room, she turned back and looked at her big sister.

Shay looked at her. She was a very slender girl who looked even younger than her sixteen years. She so wanted to ask her about this boyfriend and this boyfriend’s children and all of that stuff the prosecution mentioned in that courtroom

yesterday, and how she got that bruising on her face. But she was going to follow every word Ronnie Burton told her. She wasn't going to discuss the case with anybody. Especially Alana. "What is it?" she asked.

"Did Otis fire you last night? RaRa said instead of going to work you went to check on me."

"He could have fired me, but he didn't."

"That's good. He said I could come to work with you sometime and make some extra money to help the family."

Shay frowned. "When did you talk to Otis?"

"I don't remember when. That's not the point. The point is I can help you pay some of these bills 'round here, Shay."

"How many times did I have to tell you that your job is getting the best grades you can get in school so that you can get as many scholarships for college as you can get? I can't pay for your college and those grants can only take you so far. You gonna need scholarships too. That's your job."

"Yeah, but I been arrested. Who's gonna give me a scholarship with an arrest on my record?"

“You been arrested but you ain’t been convicted of any crime. That’s all they wanna know. And with a man like Mr. Burton on your case, you’re gonna be just fine.”

“But everybody knows I’ve been in jail.”

“Who’s everybody? They talked about what happened to that man on the TV, but because you’re a minor they couldn’t mention your name. So stop worrying about that. Just go on and fix breakfast for RaRa and Jasmine and then get yourself dressed too. After I drop them off at school, we’ll go on to his office.”

“But it’ll be like eight in the morning. I thought our appointment isn’t until eleven?”

“That man charges people three-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars an hour when he knows I can’t pay a dime of that. Oh we getting there early. We gonna wait right in his lobby until time for us to see him. I don’t want no backed-up traffic or broke down car or any other reason that’s gonna stop us from being there and being on time.”

“But we can go to the diner where you work and you can work for a couple hours, and then we can go over to his office.”

“You ain’t going nowhere near those truckers. How many times I got to tell you that too? Now do what I said, Alana. I’m trying to protect your fast tail from all that garbage I have to put up with because I didn’t go to college and I didn’t get the kind of education that you’re going to get.”

“Am I going to prison?”

That question startled Shay. Shay knew her sister was waiting for her to ask her if she did it or not, so that she could tell her the story Ronnie Burton didn’t want her to tell anybody but him, but Shay was sticking to what Ronnie told her to do. “Nobody’s going to no prison,” she said.

“How do you know?”

“Because we have a great attorney.”

“If he’s so great, why is he representing me? We can’t pay him squat.”

“Stop looking a gift horse in the mouth and just be grateful.”

Alana frowned. “You always saying that. What does stop looking a gift horse in the mouth even mean?”

“It means God answered my prayers in the form of this no-nonsense lawyer that’s going to get you out of this mess.

That's what it means. Now thank God and keep it moving."

Alana rolled her eyes.

"You heard me? Thank God."

"Thanks," Alana said with as much conviction as a rock, and left the room.

Shay let it slide. Her sister was growing up faster than she could manage, and she wasn't sure if she could handle it. But that was a different conversation. She'd worry about that tomorrow. She had enough to worry about today. She removed her covers, kicked her feet out of bed, and sat on the side of the bed.

She knew Alana wanted more from her. She knew the little she said wasn't what Alana wanted to hear. It was like she very much wanted to tell her sister the story she had concocted in her head.

But Shay wasn't playing along. She had to tell her lawyer the God's honest truth, not some concoction, or he might refuse to take her case. Which would be a disaster.

Shay laid straight back on the bed and covered her face with her hands. The stress of that arrest was killing her. Despite having a great lawyer on her side, and despite all the

hope she had for a good outcome, just the thought of what they were accusing Alana of was taking a toll on her. Somebody died. And they were saying her kid sister was the person responsible. That was a load. That was a lot. Her case hadn't even gotten started good, and it was already too much to bear.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Two and a half hours after they were seated in the fancy downstairs lobby, an assistant came down to escort them upstairs. Shay and Alana wore their Sunday best: a black dress for Shay, a blue dress for Alana, and heels for both of them. Shay also made sure their hair were well-styled too. They were clean, neat, and ready. But that didn't mean they weren't intimidated by their surroundings because both of them were.

“This place too fancy for us,” Alana whispered to her sister as they rode up the elevator with the assistant. “This man ain't gonna take my case.”

“Just tell him the truth and he'll take the case,” said Shay. “Hold nothing back. You hear me?” She had to look at her sister to get a response. And even then it was just a grunted out *yeah*.

When they got off of the elevator, they were escorted down a long hall that led to a huge office at the end of the hall. *Ronnie Burton, Founder and Chairman*, was written above the door. Shay braced herself. Alana did too.

“You may go in,” the assistant said, and then walked away.

“This is a waste of time, Shay,” an irritable Alana said. “We don’t belong here.”

“Just stop that negative talk, now I mean it. We belong wherever we are. And since we’re here, this is where we belong. Come on,” Shay said, although her own nerves were frayed too, as she opened the door.

The office was so large that they had to walk around a corner to find the desk. When they saw the desk, they saw Ronnie. Seated behind the desk, he seemed to be typing furiously on his desk computer. He also had on eyeglasses that made him look entirely different than Shay remembered him looking. With his suitcoat off and hanging over his high-back chair, he had on very stylish-looking suspenders for one thing. And those glasses made him look even older. Which was intimidating too. Although Alana seemed to be shrinking under that intimidation, Shay held her head high, placed her arm on her younger sister’s back, and forced her forward right alongside her.

“Good morning, Mr. Burton,” Shay said when they arrived directly in front of his desk.

“Hello Shayla. Alana. Have a seat, ladies,” Ronnie said without looking away from his computer screen. He continued typing furiously as they sat down.

Alana was busy looking around the office. Shay was busy looking at Ronnie and wondering how he remembered her name from that one time she spoke it in that courtroom, especially with all of those other client names he had to remember. But she didn't obsess over it. She just waited for him to finish whatever he was doing.

And they waited. And waited. He answered three different phone calls. He answered questions from two different attorneys. Secretaries went in and out of his office with papers for him to sign, as they waited. Shay knew he wouldn't have treated his paying customers that way. They'd have his undivided attention. But since she had only her mortgage money and her car note to give to him, which she knew she would have to make up by working double hours at both her jobs, she waited patiently.

And Ronnie finally stopped typing and looked at the two young ladies sitting before him. And as soon as he laid eyes on Shay again, it happened again: That shock to his system. That feeling that he somehow had a connection to her

when he didn't know her from Adam. That heavy need to help her, to protect her, to be with her! It confounded him in that moment the same way it confounded him at the courthouse.

When he looked up from that computer and Shay saw those unusually-blue eyes even through those glasses he wore, it did something to her too. He made her feel as if beneath that tough, mean exterior he projected, he was really a good man.

He leaned back in his chair, staring at the two young ladies before him. Both were very pretty with beautifully dark-toned skin and slender bodies. But Big Sister had curves too, which he liked. And to which Shay and Alana both saw him do a quick assessment.

Alana became jealous when she realized he was assessing Shay and only gave her a quick look. All men, no matter what their ages, always gave Alana much more than a quick glance.

It was easy for Ronnie to see that they were sisters. It was also easy for him to see that little sis, the one he'd already pegged as a whore, was going to be a tough nut to crack.

“You're accused of stabbing Jimmy Mayweather sixteen times. Was it one stab for every year you've been born?”

Alana and Shay both frowned. “*What?*” asked Shay.

“I didn’t stab him at all!” decried Alana.

It was the rise he was hoping to get from the kid. He wasn’t at all sure if he believed her, but it at least got her juices flowing. “Was he your boyfriend?” he asked her.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” was Alana’s kneejerk response. But Ronnie kept staring at her with that hard, no-nonsense look. It was an answer, but not the one he was going to accept.

Alana was nervous enough. Why did he have to be so good looking, she wondered, when good looking bad boys were her thing. And all that money he charged his clients, and that huge office they were sitting in, made it clear that that white bad boy was filthy rich. If he didn’t look so mean, she thought, he would stand a chance with her.

But he kept on staring at her. Shay didn’t understand why: she answered his question. But Ronnie knew why and his stare-down was unrelenting.

So much so that Alana gave in. “He used to be,” she finally admitted.

Ronnie glanced at Shay. She didn't look at the defendant, although he could tell she wanted to. She probably warned her incessantly about fooling around with boys too soon. Probably told her to focus on her education, not boys. Probably told her a lot of things, and baby sister probably said she was doing as she was told. But Ronnie had already established that Big Sis was a hardworking young lady who probably worked all the time just to pay the bills and keep a roof over their heads. But she was nobody's fool. He saw that too. She knew her kid sister was no angel.

“When did you two break up?” Ronnie asked Alana.

“A few months ago.”

“Why?”

“There was no reason. We just broke up.”

“Why?”

“I told you why. We just broke up.”

“Why?” Ronnie asked yet again.

Alana rolled her eyes.

“Roll those eyes at me again and you won't have any to roll,” Ronnie said bluntly. “You feel me little girl?”

Even Shay was surprised by his firmness with Alana. Not that it wasn't needed. She knew it was. Although she was thirteen years older than Alana's sixteen years, she was still just her big sister, not her mother. And Alana never failed to remind her of that fact. "Answer him," she said to Alana.

Alana looked at Shay. How could she take his side? But she knew Shay was practical if she was anything. They needed this asshole to get the charges dropped. "Yes, I feel you," Alana responded begrudgingly.

"How old was Jimmy Mayweather?" Ronnie asked her.

"I don't know."

Ronnie continued staring at her.

She almost rolled her eyes again, but caught herself.

"Thirty-five."

Shay looked at her that time. "*Thirty-five?* He's older than me!"

"Only by six years, dang!"

"What would a thirty-five-year-old man want with a sixteen-year-old child?"

"I'm not a child."

“You are a child!”

“You treat me like one, but I’m not one,” Alana said defiantly.

Her true colors finally bursting forth, thought Ronnie. “Who did you phone when you got arrested?” he asked her.

Shay looked at him. He apparently did his homework on the case, which surprised her.

It surprised Alana too. How would he know that she phoned anybody after her arrest?

“You heard me,” said Ronnie. “Who did you phone after you were arrested?”

“Carlos,” she said.

Shay frowned. “Who’s Carlos?”

“Just somebody I know.”

“Your boyfriend?” Ronnie asked.

Alana hesitated. “Yeah.”

Shay looked at her. “I thought this man that got killed was your boyfriend.”

“He wasn’t my boyfriend. He used to be somebody I was messing with.”

Shay couldn't believe she said that. "Messing with?"

"Hanging with. That's all."

But Ronnie was staring hard at Alana now. He was about to grab at straws, but he had a feeling he was going to be right on the money. "Who else did you phone?"

"I didn't call nobody else!"

She was too defensive and quick with that response. He was on to something. "Who else did you phone?" he asked again, still staring hard at her as if he knew she was lying.

That was certainly the way Alana took it. That was why she answered him. "Gabe," she said.

"His last name?"

"Lucan."

"Another boyfriend?"

Alana hesitated. "No."

"Then who is he?"

"Just somebody I know. Dang. What's the big deal?"

Shay was floored. All of these men! She looked at her sister as if she was seeing her for the first time. She was way over her head trying to raise a sixteen-year-old. And it

showed. Shay looked so bewildered, in fact, that it bothered Ronnie. Why was she responsible for raising this trick anyway, he wondered. “Where are her parents?” he asked Shay.

“Both of our parents died in a car crash,” Shay answered him.

“How long ago?”

“Seven years ago. I had just turned twenty-two. But Alana was only six.”

“And you became the parent?”

“I had no choice. We have grandparents on our father’s side, but they weren’t willing to take anybody in full time. They were willing to let them come for the summer, though, to give me a little break.”

But Ronnie was still staring at Shay. “Parents dying,” he said. “A definite dream killer.”

He and Shay exchanged a glance. He wasn’t wrong, and he knew Shay knew it.

Ronnie suddenly stood on his feet, causing them to stand too. “I’ll be in court the remainder of the day,” he said

as he grabbed his suitcoat from the back of his chair. “We’ll meet this evening and work on strategy going forward.”

Shay didn’t understand. She had to work tonight or Otis would surely fire her. “You want us to come back here this evening?” she asked him.

He was putting on his suitcoat and staring at her, as if he was trying to decide himself. “No,” he said. “I’ll come to you. Leave your address with my secretary.” He began walking from behind his desk. When he got beside Alana, he stopped and began buttoning his double-breasted suitcoat. “Did you kill Jimmy Mayweather?” he asked her.

“No!” she said firmly and directly, staring him dead in the eyes.

Ronnie continued to stare at her. Shay couldn’t tell if he believed her or not. But even behind those glasses he wore, she could tell he was giving it his best guess.

“I’ll be at your house around eight,” he said, and left the office.

Alana looked at Shay. “I don’t think he believed me,” she said with a worried look on her face. “I don’t think he believed me, Shay.”

“If you’re telling the truth he does. If you’re lying, why should he?” Then Shay looked at her sister with anguish in her eyes. “You aren’t lying, are you, Lana?”

Alana was upset. “You don’t believe me either.”

“I just wanna know the truth,” she said, reaching her hand out to touch her sister’s arm.

But Alana jerked that arm away from Shay and walked out of that office.

Shay, deeply concerned that there was way more to the story than Alana was letting on, left too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Her house was located deep in the heart of what Ronnie could only describe as a rough neighborhood. He drove his 2-seater, baby-blue Bentley Bacalar down the bumpy road that led to his client's house as if he wasn't driving a nine-hundred-thousand-dollar car, but a standard-issue Jeep Wrangler. And as he drove, he was stunned by the view. Not that he should have been. He wasn't *to the manor born* by any stretch of the imagination either. He was born in a trailer park on a street worse than the one he was now traveling on. He was born dirt-poor too. He didn't just know what poverty looked like, he knew what it felt like. But it had been a long time since he had to be bothered with that feeling.

He pulled into the driveway of the house his navigation said was his client's house and parked behind a small Buick Encore. It was a modest white, wood-framed, cottage-style home with beautiful lilacs planted around the front porch. He got out, grabbed his suitcoat flapped over the passenger seat, and stood there looking around as he meticulously put on the suitcoat.

Although the outside of Shayla's house appeared quite clean, it was such an oddity on that street that the aura of the rest of the street stunk it up too. There was just no looking nice when you were surrounded by trash littered everywhere and ladies drinking on stoops and men arguing and hanging out as if they'd been hanging all day, and dogs roaming around freely without a collar in sight. Why did poor people always have so many dogs? Even Ronnie's family, in their rundown trailer, had a slew of dogs too. They could barely feed themselves, and his folks did nothing but fuss and fight and drink all night long, but the dogs always stayed.

Just as he stepped up on the porch, and before he could ring the bell, the door flew open and two small children, a boy and a girl with those same beautiful gray eyes Shayla had, stood before him. "Good evening," he said.

"Who are you?" the little boy asked as he moved the little girl behind him.

"Did I tell you to open that door, RaRa?" Ronnie could tell it was Shayla's voice yelling at them from inside the house. He actually had her voice on his brain! But he was waiting to see if it would happen again.

She came to the door. And as soon as he saw her, it happened again. His heart felt as if it was awakening from hibernation and seeing an angel. And that angel was yelling at two inquisitive kids.

“Didn’t I tell you to never open this door without knowing who it was?” she was saying especially to the little boy. “Haven’t I told you that time and time again, RaRa? You know better than that!” Then she looked at him. “Hello, Mr. Burton, come on in. Don’t mind these two nosy-heads.”

“Are they yours?” Ronnie asked as he attempted to walk across the threshold.

“I don’t have any children if that’s what you mean. That’s my baby brother Rashan, and my baby sister Jasmine.”

“We aren’t babies,” RaRa said.

But Ronnie was oddly pleased to hear what Shayla had said. She had no children. For some reason that pleased him. But what worried him was the thought that she was saddled with even more responsibility: two small children.

But Shay was moving her siblings aside. “Get out of the man’s way, Ra, what’s wrong with you? You too, Jass. Move.”

They moved out of Ronnie's path and he made his way into the house. But he still had to squeeze past Shay because the children barely moved, and he had to fight a sudden urge to pull her into his arms. Which almost made him smile. Since when did he become so touchy feely? It was all new feelings for him. All *strange* feelings for him.

And he didn't want to deal with those feelings. That was why he decided to keep it entirely professional. He saw his client seated on the sofa. He made his way to her.

"RaRa, you and Jasmine go finish packing," he could hear Shay saying behind him as he walked toward the sofa.

"Can we get a popsicle?" Jasmine asked eagerly.

"No you cannot. Go finish packing. Grandma and grandpa gonna be here any minute to pick y'all up. Have y'all finished packing?"

"Yes, we have."

"No they haven't," said Alana.

"You and Jasmine go in that room right now and finish, RaRa," Shay made clear. "Every year y'all make those old folks wait until you grab this and grab that. Have it all ready when they come tonight, I mean that now."

“Yes ma’am,” said RaRa. “Come on, Jass,” he added as he grabbed his sister’s hand and they hurried for the back room.

Ronnie looked over at the two youngsters as they ran out of the living room. They were good kids, was his initial impression. But Alana, he thought as he sat beside her, was another story. “Good evening.”

“Hi.” She was all smiles, considering the predicament she was in. He also noticed she had on fresh makeup and a rather revealing lowcut blouse. Just for his visit, no doubt. Oh that kid had been around that block even more than he suspected earlier, was his conclusion. “Would you like something to drink?” she asked him.

“No, nothing. Never drink on the job.”

Shay came and sat down in the chair by the sofa. Ronnie noticed that she wore shorts as well. And although she wore a black t-shirt with *can't adult today* written on it, there was nothing suggestive at all about it, and her shorts were a decent length unlike her sister’s. And although Shay did nothing special whatsoever to get ready for his visit, she was the one that was turning him on. Big time. The fact that she didn’t have on makeup, and that she didn’t put on fancy

clothes to get his attention, pleased him too. Shay seemed to be checking every box. Although, until he met her, he didn't know he even had a box for a woman to check!

He'd always been a man who faced reality. And reality for him was that he was too much for one woman to handle. That he'd grow old alone. That ten years from now, when he turned fifty, he'd still be a single man. And despite the feelings he experienced whenever he was around Shay, he still didn't see anything in his future but aloneness.

“Now,” he said as he leaned back and crossed his legs, “let's get down to business.”

And Alana and Shay both tensed up. He was a man who didn't beat around the bush. They already knew that. But what did he think their chances were? Could he get the State to drop the charges like he got that judge to eliminate her bail? Or was that too much to ask? He never said either way at his office.

But just as he began to ask her questions, Alana's cell phone rang. And to his shock, she gladly answered it. Then, when she finished that call and he began again, her phone rang again. But this time, when she was about to answer it as if he wasn't even there, his temper flared and he angrily grabbed

that phone and violently threw it across the room where it smashed against the wall and then crashed to the floor in pieces. “You think this is a *gotdamn* game?!” he angrily yelled at her.

Alana and Shay both were shocked.

But Ronnie was relentless. “Your freedom is on the line, little girl, don’t your stupid ass understand that? The State has already announced that they’re going to try you as an adult. Do you understand what that means? You could go to prison for life. And I’m talking the rest of your natural life. But you want to joke around with your friends? Are you out of your mind?! Do you think I have time for this?”

But Alana, seeing her phone destroyed, was angry too. “Why are you here then?” she yelled back at him. “You don’t care nothing about me. Why are you bothering with people like us anyway, Mister High and Mighty? Why?”

Even Ronnie knew it was a great question. Shay knew it too. But she wasn’t about to let Alana’s foolishness look that gift horse in the mouth and lose the gift. “Whatever the reason,” Shay said, “we’re grateful. Aren’t we, Alana?”

“But look what he did to my phone!” Alana cried.

“Bump that phone!” Shay shot back. “This man trying to save your life. You’re a teenager in a world of trouble. You’d better give him some respect and pay attention to what he’s saying to you. You hear me?”

“But why is he here?” Alana decried. “He doesn’t care nothing about us! Why is he here?”

“I can leave if you prefer,” said an angry Ronnie. He could be petty too. “Just say the word and I’ll happily leave..”

“Then leave!” Alana cried out. “Leave!”

And Ronnie, completely unaccustomed to this level of treatment, got up and began to move toward the exit.

But Shay panicked. She jumped to her feet. “Please don’t go,” she said with nothing but pure pain in her voice.

He turned when he heard her voice.

“Please don’t leave,” she said again, moving toward him. She’d get on her knees if she had to. “My sister needs you,” she added. “*We* need you.” She had tears in her big eyes on behalf of her foolish sister’s predicament.

And it broke Ronnie’s heart. Why did she have to bear everybody else’s burdens? How much more did she have to

take? “You don’t have to beg me to stay,” he said to Shay. “Don’t you ever feel as if you have to beg me.”

A singular tear began to travel down Shay’s beautiful face. It was as if he represented the world beating up on her and her siblings again. And she was tired of beating back.

He hurried over to her, and to his own shock he pulled her small body into his big arms.

Even Alana didn’t see that one coming. And she immediately understood why he was there. It wasn’t about her or her case. It was about Shay. He had a thing for her sister!

But why, she wondered. Why would a man like him want Shay? Even Alana never got a rich man like him to pay her any attention, despite how hard she tried. But boring Shay was able to do it? *Shay?* It stunned Alana.

Shay didn’t see that hug coming either, but she welcomed it as if she was drowning out at sea and his arms was a lifejacket. A rope. A boat to safety. She wrapped her arms around him too.

And for several seconds they held onto each other. Both of their hearts were pounding. Both felt feelings that they believed they shouldn’t be feeling, but they couldn’t

deny. Those feelings were there: as raw and real as they were unexplainable. That was why it was Ronnie, who was in such unfamiliar territory that it was beginning to alarm him, who was first to release.

When they stopped embracing, they at first stood there awkwardly. Then Ronnie, who could conceal his awkwardness better than most, sat down in the chair Shay had stood up from, and Shay went over and sat next to her sister. And Alana, realizing how close she came to going it alone, did come back down to earth. "I'm sorry," she said to Ronnie, even if she said it begrudgingly.

But if she expected an apology from Ronnie, she didn't know that bulldog at all. He wasn't about to apologize, although he was sorry too. He wasn't sorry about breaking her phone. Her stupid ass deserved that. But he knew it wasn't easy for Shay to afford a phone for her sister, and that was probably another new stressor in her life. He'd replace the phone, of course, but that would be between him and Shay.

But the bigger problem for him was that he was sorry that Shay had to see him in his rawest state. It was who he was. He didn't suffer fools well, and most times not at all. But it was still a bit too exposing of himself. Especially when

he pulled her into his arms. That was a little too much too soon for his liking.

That was why he moved away from the drama, and focused on the case.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“How long did you know Jimmy Mayweather?”

“I don’t know. Three or four months.”

“Did you know he was married?”

“Married?” Shay looked at her sister. “That man was married?”

“I didn’t know he was married. He told me they were separated.”

Shay shook her head. The stupidity of youth. “That’s still married, Lana.”

“But he said it was over. He said he hadn’t seen that woman in years. How was I to know he was lying?”

“What happened in that car?” Ronnie asked her.

Shay and Alana both looked at him. It was the first Shay had heard of a car. And although Alana knew exactly what he was talking about, she looked as though it was her first time hearing about it too. “What car?” she asked, playing dumb.

But Ronnie continued to stare unrelentingly at her. He had that intense look of a man who wasn't going to take a lie for an answer. Shay realized it too. She had no idea what he was talking about, but she could tell he had definitely done his homework on this case.

Alana realized it too when his stare wouldn't let up. And she came clean. "He pick me up sometimes before school. Then he'll bring me back around lunch time."

Shay knew her sister was no girl scout, and she was probably doing things at school she had no business doing, like cutting class every now and then. But she always figured she'd cut class and hang out with the girls. Not with guys! She never dreamed her sister was that loose. She thought she was smarter than that. And the burden of the reality of it, that Alana had her snowed, weighed heavily on her.

Ronnie could feel that shift in Shay's mood. She went from okay, her little sister was a tad worse than she had thought, to the truth of it: her sister was a whore. He hated for Shay's sake that it was true, but Ronnie called it like he saw it. He didn't care who it offended because the truth was the truth. How could it be offensive? "What happened when he picked you up on the day in question?" he asked Alana.

A sadness came over Alana's big, gray eyes. "His wife was in the car. And she jumped all over me, accusing me of sleeping with her husband."

"Thus the bruises," said Ronnie.

Alana nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Where did you go?"

"He dropped me on the side of the road when his wife finished with me. It was like he was scared of her too. I called a friend, and went to my friend's house."

"What friend?"

"Shateka. She lives in this apartment complex not far from our house, and not from the school. I stayed there until time for me to pick up my little brother and sister. I knew I couldn't go back to school looking like I was looking. Me and Teka were able to put enough makeup on my face to hide most of the bruising, but I still didn't want to be seen."

"So you didn't go to school at all that day?" asked Shay.

"No."

Shay frowned. "How in the world do you still manage to be an A-B honor student with all of this cutting class and

everything else you been doing? I don't get it."

"It's easy," said Alana. "They teach us like we're morons. I miss a day or two, I can easily catch up."

"You didn't see Mayweather again?" asked Ronnie.

"No, sir. I never saw him again, not once. I took my sister and brother to the park after school, and then we walked over to Shateka's house. That's where the Police found me and arrested me."

Ronnie continued to stare at her, as if he was making a determination. Then he exhaled. "Okay. That's all I need for now."

"You mean that's it?"

"For now, yes," said Ronnie, and Alana didn't have to be told twice. She was glad to get out of the hot seat. She hurried to her room, picking up the pieces of her phone first, as she went.

Once she left, Shay looked at Ronnie. "What does it all mean?" she asked him.

"It means somebody set her up," said Ronnie, "or she's lying through her teeth."

"Which do you think it is?"

“Too early to tell. There were witnesses. I’ll get investigators to get a statement from each one of them. And from her friend Shateka. And once the wife consents, I’ll interview her.”

Shay shook her head. He could see the distress all over her face. “I knew she had an attitude problem and liked looking good, but I had no idea she was that far out there.”

“You work a lot,” said Ronnie.

“All the time. Two jobs,” Shay added, although Otis had already fired her earlier when she told him she had to meet with Alana’s lawyer tonight. “I don’t know. I guess she’s just being a teenager.”

“Were you like that when you were a teenager?”

Shay didn’t have to think long about that. She wasn’t that far removed from her teenage years. “I think so,” she said. “Weren’t you like that too?”

“I’m still like that,” Ronnie said, and Shay laughed.

But then her laughter eased. “I’m sorry about the way she told you to leave. That was uncalled for.”

“Smashing her phone was uncalled for too. She had her reasons. I’ll replace it.”

Shay considered him. “You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

But Ronnie was staring at her again, and she could tell it had nothing to do with their line of conversation.

And then he asked her. “How about dinner?”

Shay had never expected that, even after he hugged her. “Dinner?”

He realized he was alarming her. “To discuss the case,” he added. “But just between us two adults.”

“Oh. Okay. But not tonight, right?”

“Not tonight. I’m meeting with a client at ten tonight. How about two weeks from now? I’m leaving tomorrow for Texas. I’ve got to try a case in the Longhorn state, and it’s a complicated one. But I’ll be back in town in a couple weeks. Let’s set it up for two weeks from tonight, which is the eighth of June. How about it?”

“Alana won’t have to appear in court before then?”

“Nothing’s on the docket for her before then. How about it?”

Shay nodded her head. “Okay. I’ll try my best to make it.”

“Don’t try your best. Make it,” he said as he stood up. “Two weeks from tonight. The eighth of June. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

Shay stood up too.

“And don’t discuss anything with Alana about the case. I don’t want her lying to you and then feel obligated to lie to me. That won’t help.”

“But you believe the part about her not stabbing that man, right, even if you don’t believe everything she says?”

“We’ll see. Too early to tell,” he said. And then he moved over to her and gave her another hug. He was going to miss her when he left town. But he made it his business to not linger. He released her quickly. “I’ll see you in a couple weeks,” he added, and left the house.

Shay just stood there. The way he hugged her, even in just saying goodbye, felt so good to her that it felt weird. She was beginning to wonder if that man actually liked her. But why would he? What did she, an overworked waitress with nothing really going for herself except her work ethic and her siblings, have to offer him? It was something she knew was going to consume her thoughts because she just couldn’t see it. Until she realized RaRa and Jasmine had come back up

front, and they had apparently saw him embrace her, and they were now staring at her.

“That your boyfriend?” RaRa asked her.

It was absurd on every level! Of course that man wasn't her boyfriend! But then why didn't she answer him? Why didn't she dispute it out of hand? “Y'all better be packed,” was all she said in response.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

On the night of Ronnie's date with Shay, he had been in court all day on a different case and was now attending the annual meeting of the *Burton and Yates* first-year associates determination session. And although the meeting hadn't wrapped up, Ronnie, who sat at the head of the massive conference table, had grabbed his cell phone and was leaving. Dan hurried out of the board room behind the boss.

"Ronnie, you can't leave."

Ronnie kept walking toward the elevators.

Dan hurried up to him. "What are you doing? You can't just leave. You've got to make a decision on who stays and who hasn't been productive enough to stay. Those young lawyers are in that board room sweating bullets. You haven't told them your decision."

"They all stay," Ronnie said as he pressed the elevator buttons. "That's my decision."

Dan didn't understand. "You've never kept *every* single one of the first-year associates in the entire time I've

been at this firm. Which is the entire time you've owned this firm. Why this year?"

He was tired of being the heavy, that was the reason. But even he didn't know how to verbalize that to his partner. "Tell them they all get to stay, and adjourn the meeting."

"Okay. You're going to have some very happy young lawyers. But here's the deal: Are they all worthy?" Dan knew Ronnie would tell it to him straight.

"No," Ronnie said easily. "But I'm giving them another year to prove their worth."

Dan nodded. He could live with that. But he was curious too. Something was different about the boss. "Where are you going anyway?"

"I have a date." Ronnie inwardly smiled. He was kind of excited about it actually. He'd been away from Shay for two whole weeks, and he missed her the entire time.

But Dan didn't get it. "You have a date? You always have a date. So what?"

"So I'm leaving to pick up my date."

Now that was a switch. Did he hear that right? "*You're* going to pick her up? *You?* Not Bulldog *I'll meet you*

at the bar Burton? *You're picking up a date?*"

Ronnie smiled. "Don't you get tired of being shocked by me?"

"It is shocking. You've never picked up a date before. They've always had to meet you here at the firm or at the bar or at the club. But you're going to pick up this particular date? This chick I've got to meet. Who is she? An heiress to what fortune?"

Ronnie was inwardly offended by Dan's insinuation. He knew that was his reputation, that he only fooled around with rich chicks, but it was an unfounded one. "She's no heiress," he said as the elevator doors opened.

"She's a member of our country club then?"

"No." He stepped onto the elevator.

"But surely she's a member of our social circle?"

Ronnie barely could stand his *social circle*. "No," he said, as the doors began to close. He could hear Dan say *but*, as if he wanted to ask more questions only to find that it was too late. He was closed out, and Ronnie was closed in.

And suddenly Ronnie's good feelings became kind of an embarrassment. Because Dan was right. He never went

out of his way for anybody, let alone some girl he just met. But he was going out of his way for Shay. It felt strange. He felt as if he was behaving like some teenager in heat for a girl who was too young, too poor, too everything nobody in his so-called social circle would believe he'd ever fall for.

Not that he had fallen for her, he thought, as he got off of the elevator and walked into his building's parking garage. But despite his Heather Fisher misread, he still had an excellent track record judging character. And he judged her character to be of the highest quality. Somebody he could trust. And he liked her. That was all there was to it, he told himself as he hopped into his Bentley Bacalar sportscar and sped away. That was all.

And even after he made his way to Shay's house, he still couldn't believe he was doing this. But he'd never been more excited about a date before in his life. And that was what it was, if he were to be honest. A good old-fashioned date with a good old-fashioned girl. But he liked her. He couldn't explain why. It wasn't as if he looked at her and decided she was the best-looking woman he'd ever been attracted to, or the sexiest, or the smartest, or any of those reasons. There was just something different about her that

caught his attention and wouldn't let it go. He liked her. He just did.

But when he drove up to her house and didn't see her Buick on the driveway, he was a bit concerned. He told her he'd be there by seven. But she wasn't home? He'd already concluded that she was too smart to let that sister of hers drive anywhere in any car she owned. But he was concerned.

He got out without bothering to put on his suitcoat and went across the porch and rang the bell. It was Alana who answered the door. Since she wasn't expecting company, she had on no makeup and no suggestive clothing. Which, in his view, made her look prettier. "Good evening."

"Hey, Mr. Burton. Wanna come in?"

"Where's your mother?"

Alana seemed let down that it was about Shay and not her case. "She's not here."

Ronnie was floored. It had never occurred to him that she might stand him up. Or did she forget since it was two weeks ago when they agreed on the date. No woman had ever forgotten a date with him before. But she had? Or was she playing hard to get? Either way, he didn't like it.

“Where is she?” he asked Alana.

“She’s working double shift at the truck stop. But you can come in.”

At the truck stop? At what truck stop, Ronnie wondered. “Excuse me?”

“She’s working double shift tonight on account of Otis fired her two weeks ago for not showing up.”

Otis? Who was Otis? “We had a ... an appointment tonight.”

“She called your office, but they wouldn’t let her talk to you or anybody on your staff. So she left the message with the receptionist.”

Who probably thought she was a crackpot. Ronnie got his share of those too. “Where can I find this truck stop?”

“It’s a diner called *Bertha’s Stop*,” Alana said, and proceeded to give Ronnie directions.

Ronnie got back into his Bentley, sped out, and took off to this truck stop café. But to say he was upset would be an understatement. It was already stupid crazy for him to even be considering this “date.” Now she stood him up in the name of grabbing a few extra hours at work? He was pissed. He

couldn't even lie. He even considered taking himself home and getting some much-needed rest. He had planned to do just that, but with Shay in his bed right beside him. And because he wanted her just that badly, he didn't go home. He drove to the truck stop.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He pulled off the highway and into the parking lot of *Bertha's Stop*. The front of the café was all glass and he could see Shay hard at work through the glass. He parked there and just watched her work. She seemed so light on her feet, like she could wait on those big, burly men all night long. And that was what the few customers were inside that café: almost all male. They were truckers no doubt, and he could see many of them taking peeps at Shay's tight ass.

Which just crystalized for Ronnie the absurdity of his attraction. He and a truck driver found the same girl hot? On what planet? It made no sense! He'd always been attracted to well-schooled and well-refined women. Ladies of background and breeding who would know how to handle themselves in that rarefied air in which he traveled. Ladies from families who were as rich, if not richer, than he was. Heiress, as Dan loved to call them, and which Ronnie always denied was true. But it was true. Those were the women he fooled around with. And Shayla Pearson was none of those things. Which

begged the question that Alana had asked him. Why was he doing this? Why was he even there?

But just because he was questioning it, didn't mean he could just leave. He couldn't leave. He wanted to be with her tonight. Not some refined girl. Not some heiress. He wanted to be with Shay Pearson tonight. Her and nobody else. And he was going to be with her.

He got out of the car and made his way into the café. The door chimed when he walked in and he could see Shay not even bother to look over there, but go and grab a menu. He took a seat at one of the tables and within seconds she was coming over to his table with a drink in her hand. She wasn't looking his way. She was looking at the table three tables over from his. "Here you are, Herb," she said as she sat his drink in front of him.

"Thank you, little lady," Herb responded. "Now how about you and me going over to the motel when you knock off?"

"Forget it, Herb. You're wasting your breath. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"No more times if you just do it."

“Not a chance,” said Shay with a smile as she moved away from his table. Ronnie watched Herb, and although he was smiling, Ronnie could tell he was pissed too. He didn’t like that rejection.

But Shay was over it already and began heading Ronnie’s way. But he noticed that she still wasn’t looking at him. She was too busy looking away from him, as if to see if anybody else needed a drink refill or anything else. She was still distracted when she got to his table and pulled out her pad.

“Welcome to *Bertha’s*. What can I get –” She finally looked his way. And when she finally did, she looked puzzled. “Mr. Burton? What are you doing here?”

“I thought we had a date.”

“But I called your office. Your receptionist didn’t tell you?”

“There are twelve receptionists in my building. Which one?”

Shay couldn’t say which. She assumed it was the lady that sat in the lobby. “I didn’t get her name when I called,” she said. “So she didn’t tell you?”

A receptionist was not going to have access to him, or even indirect access through his staff. They would have put a call like Shay's into the looney bin and utterly discarded it. "No, she didn't tell me."

"I'm so sorry about that. She said she'd let you know."

Ronnie had already moved on. "Did the grandparents come and pick up Rashaun and Jasmine last night?"

Shay smiled. "You remember their names."

"I remember everything."

She nodded. "Yes. They're with our grandparents for the entire summer. It's a part of the agreement."

"What agreement?"

"My grandparents agreed to let my siblings stay with me during the school months, and they'd keep them during the summer. Alana used to go to Ocala with them, until she got older and stopped. But Ra and Jass still has to go. It's a part of the agreement."

"That's good. Are these grandparents rich?"

"Rich? Why would you ask that?"

Because he was hoping she had somebody who had her back in case of need. “Just curious,” he said.

“No, they aren’t well off at all. My grandpa is a janitor and Grandma don’t work. They’re barely getting by like the rest of us.”

Ronnie was sorry to hear that. He wondered how she was managing with all those kids to support. “When are you off?”

He changed the subject so quickly that Shay had to take a moment to adjust. “Um, not until ten. I worked double shift today.”

That did concern Ronnie. “Tired?”

“Not really. I’m alright.”

“Can you leave early?”

She was already shaking her head. “No way. I need these hours. If I left early Veena won’t let me work double ever again. But I do get a fifteen-minute break in about an hour. We can sit out back and discuss the case then.”

“An hour? I can’t wait around here for an entire hour.”

Shay was hurt. She wanted to talk to him more about Alana’s case. And she would have liked to spend time with

him. She thought about him a lot while he was gone. “Oh. Okay,” she said.

Ronnie got up. She had pissed him off. He was done with this nonsense! He told her goodbye and left the café.

Only his heart actually felt anguished. And once outside he even glanced back to see if he had hurt her, something he never wanted to do. But she had already gone to assist another customer at another table. She glanced back at him, worried that she had upset him, but by then he had turned his back and was heading for his Bentley. He hopped in and sped away.

But he couldn't even make it out of the parking lot before he slammed on brakes. Who was he kidding? He could find fifty women that would gladly come over to his place if he'd only ask, but none of them would be the woman he wanted to be with. None of them would be *Shay*.

He turned back around, and like a dog with his tail between his legs, he waited that full hour.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When her break arrived, they sat at a table outside near a side entrance into the café and ate ham sandwiches with a coke. It was the simplest date Ronnie had had in decades. But that gesture alone, when she handed him that sandwich and that canned coke, made him happy that he had stayed. She was worth it. He knew it all along, but he especially knew it when she considered him. When she actually brought him food to eat too. That was unusual in his life. Women took from him. None gave back.

“The main thing I want you to know about your sister’s case,” he said as they ate, “is that I have an entire team of investigators and lawyers working on it. Working overtime on it. They’re trying to get the witnesses on record, and as soon as the wife of the victim is willing to talk, I’ll get her on record.”

“They videotape the conversations?”

“Oh absolutely. They also get them to sign an affidavit.”

“What have they been saying so far?”

“That Alana and Jimmy Mayweather got into it, and that Alana stabbed him sixteen times.”

“Nobody tried to stop her?”

“Nobody.”

“Lana didn’t stab that man, Mr. Burton.”

“Call me Ronnie. And I tend to agree with you.”

Shay was about to bite into her sandwich again, but his words astounded her. She looked at him instead. “You agree with me? I thought you said you didn’t believe my sister.”

“I said it was too soon. And I still don’t believe everything she told me. But I’m certain she didn’t kill Jimmy Mayweather.”

Shay smiled. “Oh, Mister, I mean Ronnie. That’s great news!” She jumped up, hurried over to him, and hugged him. “That’s wonderful news!”

Ronnie was taken by surprise when she hugged him, but he embraced her as vigorously as she embraced him. And when she stopped hugging him, and their mouths were so close they were nearly touching, something happened within both of them. They wanted desperately to kiss. They had

such strong feelings in that moment that it suddenly overwhelmed them. But they both let go.

And Shay went back to her side of the table, and sat back down. “Thank you,” she said, to take it back off of them and back onto Alana. “I knew my sister wasn’t capable of what they were accusing her of. But why are all of those witnesses lying like that?”

“To protect somebody. Fear. I don’t know yet. But we’ll find out.”

“You think his wife might have done it?”

Ronnie looked at her. “Why would you suspect his wife?”

“She already gave Alana a beatdown when she had to know she was just a kid. A fast-ass kid, but still a kid. She’s already shown she can be violent. She might have been smart enough to know that she was mad at the wrong person. It was her husband that had betrayed her, not Alana. And maybe she got her revenge.”

Ronnie nodded and continued to eat his ham sandwich. “Good observation. We’re working on the who. Once we find that out, we’ll ask the State to dismiss the

charges. If that doesn't work, we're petition the court for a summary judgement. But either way, she won't stand trial. I guarantee you that."

It was what Shay wanted to hear. "Really?"

"Really."

"But how can you be so sure?"

"Because the State's story isn't adding up. They know it, and I know it. And if you put me in a room with them, they know they wouldn't stand a chance. We need to get more evidence, but once we do, those charges will be dropped."

Shay smile again. "You're the best," she said.

Although Ronnie smiled, Shay could tell he was embarrassed by her saying that. "Does what I said bother you?"

"No. It's just that ...I get that a lot. I don't want that from you."

"You don't want what from me?"

"Hero worshipping. I'm no hero. And only God deserves anybody's worship."

Shay didn't expect to hear that from a man with his reputation. "I didn't think I was going that far. But if I was, I apologize. You don't deserve worship. That's for sure. But you're our hero, I don't care what you say. If she had to have a public defender or some other lawyer without the resources you have, there's no telling what would happen to her."

"There's no question what would happen," said Ronnie. "She'd be convicted and sent away to prison for the rest of her life."

"Then why don't you do more cases for free if you know the poor isn't getting a fair shot?"

"Because I'm already stretched too thin. And my paying clients deserve the best of me. I order attorneys in my law firm to handle pro bono work. I just can't find the time to do so."

"You took my sister's case," said Shay. "You found the time for her."

"That had nothing to do with your sister."

Shay wanted to pursue it, but she didn't. She wasn't sure if she was ready for the answer.

“Anyway,” she said, putting the rest of her sandwich in its wrapper for later, “I’d better get back to work.”

“It hasn’t been fifteen minutes.”

Shay looked at her watch. Realized she did have a few minutes left. “You’re right.”

Ronnie continued eating. “How about I pick you up when you get home tonight?”

Shay was confused. “Tonight?”

“Absolutely.”

“But I thought we discussed the case.”

“Not about the case. About us,” he admitted.

Shay stared at him. She couldn’t deny her attraction. Who wouldn’t be attracted to a man who was as good looking as Ronnie Burton was? But where would going down a road with a man like him lead? Or, she thought in horror, did he feel she owed him something? Did he feel she was obligated to him because he was helping her sister? She couldn’t pay him in money, but she could pay him in bed? Was that what he was thinking???

But strangely enough, she didn’t believe so. He was a good guy. She just had that feeling about him. But she needed

to know so.

Instead of outright accusing him, she sought to simply ask him. “What are you looking for, Ronnie?” she asked.

Ronnie continued eating. He understood very well what she meant. “I’m not looking for anything.” Then he looked at her. “I just want to spend more time with you. That is all.”

Shay gave a smile that didn’t reach her eyes at all.

“What?” he asked her.

She decided to go there with him. “Last time a man told me that? He broke my heart.”

Ronnie frowned. “Who broke your heart?” Ronnie hated to hear that.

“It was just this guy. A trucker.”

“Is he in that café now?”

“No,” Shay said, shaking her head. “I haven’t seen him in years. I got pregnant and he got lost.”

Ronnie was confused. “I thought you said you had no children.”

“I don’t. I had a miscarriage. Telling my siblings first that me, an unmarried lady, was pregnant, was the hardest thing I ever had to do. They all looked up to me. But after I told them that I had messed up and became a statistic just like I begged them to never become, they kind of lost a little respect for me.”

Ronnie stared at her. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“It is true. They looked up to me. I failed them. And then, when I lost the baby, it was even worse. Because they were looking forward to have a niece or nephew just as much as I was looking forward to being a mother. But it didn’t work out.”

Ronnie reached out and touched her hand. “I’m sorry about that,” he said, heartfelt. “How long ago was it?”

Shay could feel the heat from his hand on her hand. But she kept her composure. “It happened four years ago. I was twenty-five. I really thought he loved me. I loved him. But as soon as I told him I was pregnant, he was gone. He even said it wasn’t his baby, like I was some kind of hooker or something. That’s when he told me he was a married man.”

A pain appeared in Shay’s eyes. “Men can be so cruel with ladies’ hearts. They can be so cold.”

Ronnie squeezed her hand. It was then that she looked into his unusually blue eyes. “I won’t break your heart,” he said to her. “That I can assure you.” Then his look turned anguished, and lines of age appeared on the side of his eyes. “But will you break mine?”

Shay was shocked that he would have even thought to ask her that. But she realized he was just getting to know her too. “No,” she said. “I would never break anybody’s heart.”

“Then if neither one of us have that intention in mind, what do we have to lose?”

When he said it like that, it did make her smile. “Good point,” she said.

And suddenly a surge of need washed over him. “Let’s go out tonight when you get off. We can still have our date.” He bordered on desperation, which shocked him. What on earth was going on with him?

Shay didn’t know, because she didn’t understand what was going on with herself. She liked Ronnie when there shouldn’t have been anything to like about him if she believed what she read about him. But she genuinely liked him. And he was helping Alana too? How could she turn him down? “Sure,” she said as she began getting up. “That sounds great.”

Ronnie was relieved. At least she didn't tell him to get lost. He stood up too. "Oh! I almost forgot. I'll be right back."

He walked around the building and to his car. When he came back, Shay's manager had already warned her that she was pushing past her break time. But she waited on Ronnie.

He returned with a box in his hand. He handed it to her. "What's this?" Shay asked him.

"A new iPhone for Alana. But please tell her you were the one who purchased it for her."

Shay wasn't about to lie to her sister. "Why would I tell her that?"

"Because."

Shay didn't understand. "Because why?"

"Because I don't want her to take it as an apology."

Shay smiled, and then laughed. "She's only sixteen, Ronnie. You can be very petty, you know that?"

"You call it petty. I call it competitive. I never give an inch," he said.

"Not even to a kid?"

“Not even to a baby,” he said, and they both laughed.

Then the laughter eased. “I’d better get back inside,” Shay said. “My manager already gave me a warning.”

Ronnie didn’t want her to go. But he understood. “See you later, alligator.”

“Afterwhile, crocodile.”

They both smiled. Ronnie moved up to her and gave her a hug. Shay was beginning to like his touch too much. And that was beginning to scare her.

But just hugging her wasn’t enough for Ronnie. He wanted all of her. And in that moment, at her job, he couldn’t resist. He kissed her with a kiss that brought the heat to both of them. But it was the wrong place and time. They both backed off.

“See you later,” Shay said, still feeling his lips all over hers.

“Absolutely,” said Ronnie. “Now go back inside before I leave.”

Shay smiled. He sounded like her father used to sound. “Yes, sir, Mr. Burton, sir,” she said with a salute that

made Ronnie laugh. But she did as she was told and went inside. And it was only then did he finally leave.

But as soon as Shay got back inside, Veena, her manager, came up beside her. They both were watching Ronnie leave. “Don’t do it, girl,” Veena said. “That white man only got one thing on his mind.”

Shay frowned and looked at her. “How would you know that, V? You don’t even know him.”

“You don’t either,” Veena shot back. “He ain’t no different than every one of these truckers that come up in this place looking for a little food and a little sex. He’s a man. They’re all the same.”

But Shay knew those truckers. And she knew Ronnie Burton was nothing like them. They were drive-by lovers: just wanted to hit it and quit it. But if Shay knew anything about that man, she knew that Ronnie didn’t have to drive by anybody. He could get any woman in his bed with a snap of his finger. But he came all the way to her job when he found out she wasn’t able to keep their date. Then he waited for her to go on break. Then he asked if he could come pick her up and take her out on a real date, not a *talk about Alana’s case* date, after work. Why would he go to all that trouble when he

didn't even have to lift a finger to get it elsewhere? He wouldn't have foregone hundreds of thousands of dollars per hour if that was all he wanted. He might want *that* too – she was not naïve – but it had to be more than just that. It had to be.

“You’ll see what I’m talking about,” Veena said, “after he breaks your heart like Jerry did. But nobody can tell you nothing anyway. Get back to work,” Veena ordered and Shay, not at all comfortable discussing Ronnie with her anyway, gladly got back to work.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“That dress is way too short for you.” It was Alana standing at the door of Shay’s bedroom.

Shay was checking out the red dress she had just put on. Sleeveless and skintight, and with black highlights on the sides and down the front and back, it fit Shay like a glove. Her flat stomach and shapely legs topped off by a pair of black heels, all worked together to give her that sophisticated look she was going for. She wasn’t going out with just some anybody, and she wasn’t going to pretend she was.

“You heard me?” Alana said as she leaned against the doorjamb. “That dress barely covers your butt.”

“At least it covers my butt. Which is more than I can say about some of those dresses you be wearing.”

“I’m just trying to tell you the truth because I know whatever piece of dirt you’re going out with won’t tell it to you. That dress is too short for you.”

“Girl bye. What’s your problem anyway? Did Ra and Jass call?”

“It’s after ten o clock at night. They’re sleep by now. But they called earlier.” But Ra and Jass weren’t on Alana’s mind. “Who’s your date anyway?”

Shay didn’t respond. She put on a small black jacket and began putting her phone, keys, and a few bucks in the unzipped pockets.

“Who are you going out with?”

There was no point in hiding it. He was going to pick her up and Alana, she knew, would be all eyes. “Ronnie.”

Alana frowned. “Who’s Ronnie?” Then she realized who she meant and her eyes grew larger and she stood up straight from her leaned position. “You must be joking! *Him?* Why would he wanna go out with you? I thought you said y’all talked about my case at the truck stop?”

“This isn’t about your case.”

“What’s it about then?”

Shay looked bewilderedly at her younger sister. “Is it so impossible for you to think that a man just might wanna go on a date with me?”

“*That man*, yes!”

It was the same thing Veena was saying at the café.
“Why, Lana? Why can’t I go on a date with a man like Ronnie?”

“Because he’s a rich lawyer who think he’s God’s gift to women and you ain’t got nothing going for yourself.”

That hit Shay hard. Because she knew, deep down, her sister was telling the truth. But she didn’t thrust herself on that man. He showed interest in her. He went out of his way for her. Not the other way around.

Alana could see by the changed expression on Shay’s face that she was getting through to her. “He’s just using you, Shay,” she said. “He could be with the most beautiful women in the world. Why would he wanna be with you? He’d wanna be with me before he wants to be with you.”

Shay looked at her sister as if she’d just lost her mind. And the frown on her face was deep. “What?” she asked, unable to believe what she’d just heard. “Why would that grown-ass man wanna be with a minor child?”

“I’m not a child!”

“You’re sixteen years old. Ronnie Burton is pushing forty.”

“Uh hun. They’re the main ones.”

Shay had had it. She hurried over to that door, grabbed her sister by the arm, and then flung her onto her clothes-filled bed.

“What’s wrong with you?” Alana angrily asked her.

“I promised Ronnie not to discuss your case with you, but you and all this talk about these grown men is crazy, Lana. The man that was killed was in his thirties too. And you mentioned these other guys you been hanging out with. Are they grown men too?”

“No.”

“I’ll bet!”

“Why I go to lie? They’re just friends from my high school.”

“Why would you call friends from school after you got arrested? What were they going to do for you?”

Alana had no answer for that question. Which only made Shay know it was because she was lying again. “What’s happened to you, Lana? Mama and daddy raised you better than this. I raised you to be better than this.”

“You didn’t raise me, and you aren’t raising Ra and Jass either. You work all day long. We only get to see you early in the morning, that little time in the evening, and late at night when you come home from that second job you had before Otis fired you. I’m raising RaRa and Jass. They see me way more than they see you.”

Alana knew how to get to Shay. And reminding her of her neglect of them was a surefire way. But Shay wasn’t going to let Alana rain on her parade. She worked and came home and provided for them the best she could provide. That was her whole life. There had to be more to her life than this. There just had to be! She did the best she could for those kids. If she could have done better, she would have done better. She gave them all she had. But Alana never made her feel accomplished. She just made her feel depleted. “If I didn’t have to work two jobs just to make ends meet, you think I’d be working all the time anyway?”

“That’s no excuse,” said Alana. “I could have easily got on that night shift too.”

“And who would have kept RaRa and Jass if you had done that, Lana? Who?”

“RaRa’s twelve years old. And Jass eleven. They could have kept themselves. All they had to do was keep the doors locked.”

But Shay wasn’t trying to hear that. She zipped up her jacket pockets and headed toward her bedroom door.

“Can I at least get a job now?” asked Alana. “It’s summertime and all my friends are gonna get jobs.”

Shay stopped walking and looked at Alana. “You’ve been accused of killing a man, Lana. Who’s gonna hire you right now?”

Alana knew it too. “When is this gonna be over with?” she asked irritably. “I’m tired of this.”

“It just got started and you’re tired already? You fooled around with grownups. Now you got grown-up problems when I told you time and time again that’s what would happen. But you never listen.”

“Whatever,” said Alana. “At least we got a good lawyer.”

“Finally she acknowledges that,” said Shay sarcastically. Then she began walking up the hall.

“When will you be back?” Alana asked as she followed her.

“I have no idea.”

“Are you coming home at all tonight?”

That had never even occurred to Shay. But what if she didn't? “I have no idea.”

“Don't mess it up for me.”

Shay looked at her sister. “Mess what up for you?”

“That man helping me. If you don't give it up to him he might not help me anymore.”

This little girl! Shay was upset now. She stopped walking and looked her sister in the eyes. “Do I look like a prostitute to you?”

“I didn't say you did.”

“Is there anything about me that would make anybody think that I was that kind of person?”

Alana said nothing.

“Is there?”

“No! Dang.”

“Then don’t you ever go around here talking about me giving it up to some man just so he can keep helping you. Don’t you ever even suggest a thing like that about me. You hear me, girl?”

“Yes, I hear you. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Sure you didn’t.”

“I didn’t,” Alana said as the doorbell began ringing. “But if you took it that way, then that’s your problem.”

Shay was too tired to argue with her. “Don’t let anybody in my house while I’m gone,” she said as she headed for the front door, “or you’re gonna be the one with the problem.”

“Whatever,” said Alana. But Shay kept on walking out of the house.

When she got out onto her porch, Ronnie was at the door waiting. He smiled when he saw her, as he looked down at the way that skintight dress hugged her curves. She needed that smile. “Hey,” she said as she closed the door behind her.

“Hey again,” said Ronnie. “I’m glad you didn’t stand me up this time.”

Shay smiled too. “It wasn’t my fault you have a sorry receptionist. Or, I should say, twelve sorry receptionists,” she added, and they both laughed.

Ronnie placed her arm over his arm as he walked her to the passenger door of his car.

“I didn’t know Bentleys were two-seaters.”

“Most of them aren’t.”

What kind is this?”

“A Bacalar.”

Shay shook her head as she got in. “The names they give these cars,” she said, and Ronnie laughed at that too. She was so genuine that it warmed his heart. He buckled her in, closed her door, and walked swiftly around to the other side. It wasn’t a ride neither one of them was certain they wanted to take, but they were taking it anyway.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It might have been almost eleven that night, but when Ronnie drove up a long line of people were still waiting to get into the popular club. Shay thought that he would go somewhere else. Who wanted to wait in a line that long? But he got out of the car, opened the passenger door for her to get out, and handed his keys to the valet. And without so much as a *who are you* they were able to walk right past the long line and into that club without anybody even asking for ID. Shay looked back at the people in line. They were staring daggers back at her. But what could she do? It wasn't on her name that got them in. She was with Ronnie Burton. She assumed that name carried some weight. And then they were escorted to a VIP table in the middle of it all.

Although the music was loud, it wasn't outrageously so. People were able to communicate without screaming out conversations. Shay found that she liked the atmosphere in the place. It had been years since she'd been in a club. And she'd never been in one that upscale.

Ronnie pulled out her chair and pushed it in once she sat down. Then he sat down beside her. “You look fabulous by the way,” he said as he sat down. “Nice dress.”

“Thanks.” Shay wondered if he would find her too countrified for his taste. But apparently not, if the way his eyes kept looking down at that dress was any indication.

“That red brings out the gray in your eyes,” he added.

Shay didn’t know what to say to that. How red could “bring out” gray was a mystery to her, but she got his point. He liked what he saw. That was enough for her.

“You look nice too,” she said to him. And he did. He wore a pullover shirt with jeans and loafers. “You look different casually dressed.”

“Good different or bad different?” Ronnie asked her.

“Just different,” Shay said.

It was a country and western type club so she was getting a lot of music she’d never heard before. Or, in many instances, never wanted to hear again. But Ronnie was digging it as he poured champagne that the wait staff immediately brought over.

“You must come here a lot,” said Shay as he poured.

“Every now and then. The only thing I do a lot of is work.”

Shay held up her hand. “Same here.”

For some reason, Ronnie didn't understand that. “Pretty lady like you?”

“I don't know about all that, but I do know every grown woman has bills to pay, pretty or not. And I don't just have myself to take care of.”

Ronnie stared at her. “Why did you do it? Your grandparents seem involved in your siblings' lives. Why didn't you let them shoulder that responsibility full time and you got them part time.”

“Truth is,” Shay said with a sad look in her eyes, “I kind of wish I would have done it that way.”

“But?”

“But I couldn't do that. My daddy used to tell me to always look out for my brother and sisters. He said men and friends come and go. Your family is forever.” She took a sip of champagne. “I couldn't do it. Besides, my grandparents wasn't trying to get them full time anyway, and I didn't want us to split up. But that don't mean it was the best decision.”

Ronnie was studying her. “They needed you.”

She nodded. “But I think I needed them too. If they had gone, I would have been all by myself. And I never liked the sound of that.”

Her comment piqued Ronnie’s interest. “The sound of what? Being alone?”

Shay nodded again. “Exactly,” she said and began looking over at the dance floor where it was getting louder and rowdier.

Ronnie never had any issue with being alone. If it became daunting, all he had to do was call one of his numerous female “friends” and he was not alone anymore. Or was he, he wondered, as he stared at Shay. Here was a lady that felt guilty about showing the least bit of selfishness, even though it was nowhere near selfish. He’d never known a lady like her. Selfless. Devoted. Loyal. What in the world did he have on his hands? And how in the world could he think he deserved somebody like her?

“I know you said that trucker broke your heart,” he said to her. She looked away from the dance floor and over at him. “But you also said that was years ago. Who have you been seeing lately? Or have you given anybody a chance?”

“I dated a few guys, sure.”

Ronnie would have preferred if she said no guys. But who was he to talk? “How did that work out for you?”

“Terrible. Just a bunch of immature guys looking for one thing. A bunch of dead ends. So I just said forget it.” She said that with a distressed look in her beautiful gray eyes.

“You gave up?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

And before he knew it, he had to reassure her. “I’ll never break your heart, Shay.” He said it once before, now he was saying it to her again. It was as if he didn’t want to give her a moment’s anguish. Or was it instinctive? He always trusted his instincts. Were his instincts screaming to him that he’d just found a gem as precious as the Hope diamond, and he’d better hold onto it?

Shay was touched that he said that to her again, but how could she believe that? This man might have been so smooth and manipulative that even that was one of his pickup lines. Because that was another word all those articles she read about him said about him. That he was a master manipulator. *Watch out ladies*, was the title of one of those

articles, *Bulldog Burton is on the prowl again!* That article was written after he broke up with yet another girlfriend. He knew how to get'em. But he never seemed to know how to keep'em. Shay didn't know how to take this man and his smooth talk.

That was why she decided to not comment and do a wait and see on that one. She wasn't thirty yet. She nowhere near had the kinds of experiences he had, which, she knew, made her vulnerable to smooth-talking guys like him. She had to protect the heart he declared twice already he'd never break. With a man like Ronnie, time would have to tell if what he was saying to her was the truth, or fiction.

Ronnie was a little hurt and surprised that she didn't respond to his very personal statement. Didn't she realize what it took for him to say those words? He'd never told another woman that he even liked her, let alone wouldn't break her heart. But he'd told it to this young lady twice already. And she ignored it?

But he knew it wasn't coming from a malicious place with Shay. She was just scared. He was too, if truth be told. He was in very uncharted waters too.

Then the music shifted and Ronnie started moving.
“Uh-oh,” he said, looking out on the dance floor.

“What?” Shay asked, looking too.

“They’re about to do the Git Up line dance,” he said
with the biggest smile on his face.

“The what up?”

“The Git Up by Blanco Brown. I love that song!
Come on,” he said to Shay, grabbed her by the hand, and all
but pulled her up from her seat.

“But I’ve never line danced in my life!”

“Follow my lead,” Ronnie said as he hurried Shay out
onto the already crowded dance floor.

It was ninety-nine percent white and they loved
themselves some country music. Everybody was so happy on
that dance floor that it was giddily fun. And when Shay
realized she wasn’t the only one who didn’t know how to line
dance, she relaxed and got giddy with it too. Even Ronnie was
messing up most of the time and laughing his heart out. Shay
quickly saw that it wasn’t about getting it right. It was all
about having fun. And she was having a blast.

But when they started doing a different line dance, and the dance leader told everybody to switch partners, something strange happened to Ronnie. As soon as the leader made the switch announcement, another guy who undoubtedly had been eyeing Shay was in her face immediately. A gaggle of women were in Ronnie's face too, hoping he'd pick one of them, but his eyes were on Shay and her new partner. And even as he grabbed a partner for himself, because anyone would do, and the new dance began, he couldn't stop looking at the way that guy had his hand in Shay's hand and his other hand on her back. And the way he was pulling her closer and closer. Shay was laughing and enjoying herself. But Ronnie, to his own amazement, had a feeling that he could only describe as pure jealousy.

Him? Jealous? That was a first. After hundreds of dates with hundreds of women, that was an absolute first.

And he didn't like it. He didn't like the feeling. He didn't like what it meant. He didn't like it at all.

It shook him to his core.

CHAPTER TWENTY

He was still shaken after they left the club. Even Shay noticed how he was driving much slower leaving the club than he drove to get there. And he wasn't conversational the way he was before. It was as if he was too busy thinking something through. As if he was trying to make up his mind about something. She wondered what.

Ronnie felt so out of his depth that he felt lost. Why would he have been jealous of a man just dancing with Shay? What was that all about? He'd been to that club countless times with countless females. Never once did he bat an eye when another man danced with any of those ladies. It was more like a sense of relief for him to be rid of her for a few minutes. But not with Shay. Not with this Hope diamond he had on his hands.

And he kept remembering: He'd better not lose it.

But he had never planned on owning any precious gem. He was quite content fooling with the kind of dime-a-dozen women who had no interest in any precious gems either. They didn't pretend to be prize catches and neither did

he. It was just satisfying needs without the baggage. That was what he was used to.

But Shay was so different, and she came with a lot of baggage. Did he want to take all of that on? No woman had ever been worth it to him. Was Shay?

He liked that she was no pushover. The way she came to his law firm that night seeking representation from the best without a dime to her name, and the way she insisted he continue to work her sister's case even after he did her that great favor at that bail hearing proved that. He wasn't going to run roughshod over her any day of the week. Which was fine by him. He needed a woman who could tell him no. But was she worth it?

He decided that she was not.

No woman was in his eyes. Why would she be any different?

That was why he made up his mind to do what he do: take her to his house, make love to her, and then take her home. And that would be the end of that. He'd continue to work her sister's case, but after bedding Shay he was convinced all of those weird feelings she had him feeling for

her would vanish. Because it wasn't love. It couldn't be. It was pure, unadulterated lust. It had to be.

Shay had no idea about Ronnie's plan for her. All she knew was that he suddenly turned down a road she had never been down before even though she'd lived in Tampa her whole life, and she wondered why. It certainly didn't lead back to her house. "Where are we headed?" she asked him.

"My place," said Ronnie, and then he looked at her. If she preferred that he took her home, he would be disappointed. He really wanted to see if she lived up to the hype in bed. But he never forced any woman to be with him. "If that's okay with you," he added.

It was okay with her. She was enjoying her evening out.

After driving several more miles, they pulled up to a house that was as long as it was high. A big, three-story, mid-century modern house, it blew Shay away. The fanciest house she'd ever been to was Veena's block house in the suburbs. But that was a shack compared to Ronnie's place. But she kept it together and allowed him to escort her indoors.

When they entered the massively tall double front doors with the long, black handles for doorknobs, Ronnie

closed her into the most luxurious home she'd ever entered. The ceilings towered over her small body, with chandeliers as large as her living room and pure white furniture that looked as if it had never been sat on. But those chandeliers fascinated Shay. She was looking up most of the time.

“Tired?” Ronnie asked after allowing her the time to peruse his undoubtedly different-than-what-she-was-used-to home.

Shay finally looked at him, and nodded her head. “I’m getting there,” she said. It was all so overwhelming for her. The stress was beginning to show on her face.

“You may be getting there,” Ronie said as he placed her hand in his hand, “but I’m there. Let’s go.”

Shay placed her small hand in his huge hand and he walked her up his spiral staircase.

It felt like she was walking in a movie. People actually did live like this, was her initial thought. She was so blown away by his house, and so distracted by it, that she failed to realize just where he was walking her to.

Until they entered the master bedroom.

She knew it would come to that. Why else would he bring her to his house and it was already after midnight? But she wasn't quite sure if she was ready to go that far with him. It wasn't just her own raw needs at stake. Alana's defense was at stake. She had to be careful.

But to her relief he didn't even glance at the big, four-poster bed. He instead took her over to the bedroom's sitting area, which was as big as a room in and of itself, and sat her down on the sofa. Then he pressed a button and soft jazz music started playing. The kind of music that mellowed Shay even more. "What would you care to drink?" he asked her.

"Wine if you have it," Shay said, then she scrunched up her face, realizing what a stupid response that was. Of course he had wine!

Ronnie smiled and walked over to the full-size bar in his bedroom, which was another shocker for Shay: she never knew people had bars in bedrooms. He poured them both drinks. Then he walked over and handed one of the two glasses to her.

He sat down on the sofa beside her, took a sip of his drink, and then leaned back, turned toward her, and crossed his legs. It had been a long day. He was practically dead on his

feet. But the feelings he felt for Shay that were so emotional that he didn't know how to manage them, wasn't lessening at all. Even with his plan to hit her and quit her, there was no easing up.

“This is a gorgeous home,” said Shay as he continued to stare at her and she continued looking around.

“Thank you,” Ronnie said as he sat his glass on the side table, removed his shoes, and then laid his head down on the opposite end of the sofa from where Shay was sitting. He placed his socks-clad feet in her lap just to see what she'd do.

Shay looked at him, but she wasn't offended at all. He was laying on his back, with his thick black hair now bunched-up around his forehead giving him a much younger appearance. But he looked bone tired to her. And he was flexing his toes inside of his fancy socks as if his feet was a big reason why. “Feet hurt?” she asked him.

“Yes they do.”

Shay had just the cure for that. She sat her glass on the side table beside her end of the sofa and removed his socks.

He looked at her as she began massaging his well-pedicured, large-sized feet. “I would tell you that you

certainly don't have to do that for me, but it feels so good. I don't want you to stop."

Shay smiled. "I used to watch my mama do it to my daddy's feet when he'd come home from work, and I remembered how wonderful it seemed to make him feel. It's my pleasure."

Ronnie smiled too. A Hope diamond no doubt about it because no other woman had ever done anything remotely as kind as a foot massage for him. The women he dated always took from him. They were never givers and were proud of never giving. Shay had giving in her blood.

And this was the woman he planned to hit and quit? This sweet lady? Had it been any other female he knew what that scenario would have been. He would have already had her in his bed, beneath him, and ready to get rid of her even before he finished the act. But as she massaged his feet as if it was indeed her pleasure, and as he continued to stare at her as if she baffled him still, he knew he couldn't do it. He just couldn't cheapen Shay that way. She was not just another one of his conquests, and although he didn't want to believe that, he knew it was true. Those feelings he felt for her were real. And they weren't weakening. They were intensifying.

“Want me to do your feet?” he asked her. He’d never even considered doing such a thing for any woman he dated before. “You’ve been on your feet all day too.”

“No, I’m good. I have young feet,” she said with a smile. They both knew it was a dig at his age, and they both laughed. And she finished her expert massage.

But as soon as she finished, she pulled her cell phone out of her jacket pocket.

“I know better than that,” Ronnie said. “You’re going to ruin the mood by making a phone call? Don’t make me do to your phone what I did to Alana’s phone.”

Shay laughed. “I want to call her and make sure she’s okay. She’s not used to me being out so late like this.”

“She’d better get used to it,” said Ronnie. “You have a life to live too. And I’m going to see to that.”

Although Ronnie was surprised he went that far, Shay was touched by his words. He certainly had a way with words. But she wasn’t going to be foolish either. Jerry, her trucker ex-boyfriend, had a way with words too. She began calling Alana anyway.

“You didn’t hear a word I said,” said Ronnie.

“I heard you. But I’m still going to check on my sister,” she added, as the phone rang.

Ronnie was a little pissed that she wasn’t the type to just do whatever he said, but he admired that about her too.

“Hey, Lana,” she said over the phone when her sister bothered to answer.

“I was sleep. What you want? You’re still with him?”

“What is that your business? But yes.”

“When are you coming home?”

“I have no idea.”

“Did he say something about my case?”

“I already told you what he said. Remember? He has a team of lawyers and investigators working on it nonstop.”

“Is that what he told you,” asked Alana, “or is that what you know?”

This girl! “Bye, Lana,” Shay said in disgust and ended the call. “She can be so ungrateful sometimes!” she blurted out.

“I’m glad you see that,” said Ronnie.

But Shay gave Ronnie a hard look. “Don’t you dare blame her. It’s not her fault. I was a kid trying to raise kids. I didn’t know what I was doing and I went about it the wrong way.”

“That’s nonsense!” Ronnie said with fire in his voice. “You keep them fed, a roof over their heads, and you make sure they get the best education they can get. You’re doing the best you can do, Shayla. There’s no shame in that. You’ve been phenomenal.”

Shay smiled. “Nobody’s ever complimented me like that before,” she said happily.

“You deserve it.”

Shay didn’t know if she *deserved* anything, but it was good to hear anyway.

And Ronnie suddenly had such a great need to hold her that he couldn’t wait another second. “Come beside me,” he said to her as he reached out his hand.

Shay took his hand and he pulled her, not beside him on that sofa, but all the way on top of him. Her stomach and his stomach melded together. They were face to face. Shay’s heart was hammering.

And their smiles were gone. Emotions were taking over. Their need for each other was taking over. And Ronnie placed his hand on the back of her head and slowly moved her tender mouth to his mouth. And they kissed. It was an achingly long, magnificent kiss that felt so great to both of them that they were immediately plunged into do or die territory.

Shay knew it would be a mistake to give her all to him this soon. It never worked out for her whenever she did go that far.

Ronnie was so close to that line that he could hear ESPN sports announcer Chris Berman in his ear: *He could go all... the... way!*

But he couldn't do that to Shay! That was his dilemma. That was why, despite the fact that his arousal was so thick and hard that he knew Shay felt it pressed against her, he didn't go all the way. To his own astonishment, he forced himself to pull back. And then he wrapped his arms around her, and she laid her head on his chest.

Shay was shocked that he didn't take her to bed, because she would have let him, but she was pleased too. Because it confirmed for her what she felt in her heart: he

wanted more from her than that. He wanted more. And that thrilled her.

They laid there, arm in arm, listening to each other's heartbeat, and Coltrane's soft saxophone sound. Until they both fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Shay woke up with a smile on her face. But when she realized she was no longer laying on top of Ronnie on his sofa, but was laying in his big four-poster bed under covers, she quickly kicked those covers off of her. When she realized that she was fully dressed except for her high-heel shoes, she relaxed again. But why was she in bed at all? *And where was Ronnie?*

She got out of his bed and went to the ensuite bathroom. He wasn't in there. Then she hurried over past the sitting room, where she saw her heels on the floor by the sofa, and looked out of the French doors onto his balcony. But he wasn't out there either. Then she hurried out of his bedroom and onto the landing, ready to go downstairs and see if he was even still in the house. But then she stopped in her tracks when she heard somebody snoring. Realizing that it was coming from a room down the hall, she went in that direction. As far as she knew, there shouldn't be anybody in that house but herself and Ronnie.

The door of the smaller bedroom was half-opened and half-closed so she was able to peep in without disturbing the door at all. And when she saw him laying on that bed, still in the same clothes he had on last night, she smiled. He actually put her in his bed and then went to sleep in a smaller bedroom. If that wasn't a gentleman thing to do, she thought, she didn't know what was. Even though he had the exact opposite of a gentleman's reputation. But she was going with what she was seeing, not what other people were seeing in him.

Feeling nothing but relief and satisfaction, she went back into the bedroom and decided to take a quick shower. That would be one last thing she had to do when he drove her home. She could change clothes and then go to work. Unless, she thought worriedly, he wasn't planning on taking her anywhere. Maybe he figured she'd wake up and call an Uber or Lyft or something and be out of his hair when he woke up. But if that was his plan, it wasn't going to work with Shay. He brought her there. He was taking her home.

Stop overthinking everything for crying out loud anyway, she reminded herself. Because she had to know that a man who thought enough of her to put her in his bed and not

take advantage of her, wasn't the kind of man that was going to leave her at his house to fend for herself. Her confidence in Ronnie was growing every time he showed her a little more of himself. So far it was all good. Instead of obsessing on some scenario that had no basis in facts, she went into the bathroom, used one of the unopened small toothbrushes he had in his medicine cabinet, used some of the opened Rembrandt toothpaste he apparently used, and then brushed and gargled with his Listerine. Then she got into the shower.

But less than ten minutes later, Ronnie had awakened and gotten up. When he walked into his bedroom to check on Shay, he could hear that she was in his shower. He went into his bathroom.

When Shay heard what she thought was a noise, she quickly opened the frosty glass door of the shower to see what it was. Maybe she and Ronnie weren't the only people in that house. But when she saw Ronnie standing there, staring so hard at her that it kind of scared her, she wondered if something had happened. Until she saw that his pants had tented. Until she looked down at herself where he was looking and realized just how completely exposed she truly was. But when she looked back into his eyes and he looked into hers,

she didn't feel ashamed. She didn't try to cover herself or hide.

Ronnie was inwardly pleased that she didn't retreat back behind that frosty glass door. Because there was no way he was going to be able to hold out another second. That was why, as they stared at each other, he began removing every stitch of clothing he had on. But she held all the cards. And he knew it. "May I join you?" he asked her. Amazingly, he was worried that she just might turn him down. She'd be the first woman to do so. But everything with Shay was a first.

But he knew she was watching his every move. And when he undressed, he could see her eyes roam down to his extensive and fully charged equipment. Which was what he was hoping she'd see. He knew it had been years since she'd been in this position, and he wasn't above relying on that tempting fact too.

But he had nothing to worry about. Shay wasn't about to turn that down. She needed it as much as he did. "Suit yourself," she said like it was no big deal to her either way, and moved further back into the shower.

He slowly and deliberately walked over to that shower, stepped in, and had barely closed the door before his need took

over and he was kissing her hard and overpoweringly on her mouth, on her neck, on every part of her body with a passion they both unleashed. And then he lifted her up, she wrapped her legs around him, and he joined her in a way she had never been joined before. Her head leaned back. Her mouth screamed out without making a sound. Because she never dreamed, in her wildest dreams, that it could feel that great.

It was so great to Ronnie, too, that they ended up in his bed, going multiple rounds, as he couldn't get enough of the lady he had in his arms. Because a man like him, with the kinds of experiences and escapades he'd been involved with down through the years, had never felt this way before. He never dreamed that being with a woman could feel so magnificent, and so pure and wonderful, that it felt as if this sweet, young lady was teaching an old dog like him a trick or two. He was taking class with Shay.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ronnie, fully dressed in a dark-blue suit and tie, was already downstairs in his kitchen, sitting at his center island drinking coffee and reviewing the many messages on his phone, by the time Shay came down in the same little red-and-black dress she wore last night. She had decided to shower again.

But she came down hesitantly. After the round they had in the shower and later the rounds they had in his bed, she wasn't at all sure if he would want to rush her out of his house because he now got what he wanted from her, or if he would remain the true gentleman he'd been with her so far. She was moving cautiously.

She cried afterwards, and he held her tenderly. What she loved was that he didn't ask why she was crying. It was as if he already knew. She wasn't crying in pain or in regret. She was crying because they had crossed a line. A line that was going to make them or break them. A line that was going to help their relationship along, or stop it in its' tracks. She could

fall hard for this man, and he could break her heart, was the real reason she had cried.

Now she just felt emotionally overwhelmed by it all, and wondered if he felt overwhelmed too. Not that he should be overwhelmed, a man with his experience. But she was just cautious.

Until she saw Ronnie staring at her as she walked toward him. That gleam in his odd eyes didn't scream overwhelmed at all. Especially when she glanced down and could tell he was getting aroused again.

And he was. As soon as she entered his kitchen, he nearly tented. Just thinking about the way she made him feel made him want more of her. She took the prize. The most inexperienced woman he'd ever been with was the best one he'd ever had.

Either that, or he was just madly in love with this particular lady.

Either that, or she was far more experienced than he was giving her credit for.

Either way were daunting realities. That was why he looked back down at his messages.

Shay was glad he looked away from her. Because he was reinvigorating those feelings in her again too. She, instead, looked at the trays of food on his center island. “What’s all this?” she asked him as she sat down beside him.

“Breakfast,” he said, trying with all he had to compose himself. But he still placed his arm around her waist and kissed her on the lips. And it wasn’t a simple kiss either. He couldn’t just simply kiss her anymore.

But when he realized he was probably putting too much on her too soon, he pulled back.

She was grateful. She didn’t know if she could go another round with a man with his unmatched abilities. “You cooked all this?” she asked him.

“Me? Cook?” Ronnie smiled. “Not in this lifetime. I had it brought in.”

“Brought in? When?”

“Around six. I ate and went back to bed. Until I woke up and thought about you, and went to the room to check on you.” *I checked on you alright*, he wanted to add, but wasn’t sure, given the stressed look on her face and the fact that she

had cried afterwards, if she was able to handle that kind of joke. “Hungry?” he asked her instead.

“I am actually.”

He took one of the plates that was seated beside the trays and filled it with sausages and bacon and eggs and hashbrowns and some other stuff she didn’t even know what it was. As if her little self could eat all of that. “That’s way too much, Ronnie.”

“You need to eat.”

That sounded odd to Shay. She wasn’t big by any means, but she wasn’t skinny either. “I do eat. Why would you say that?”

“When I carried you out of that shower you were light as a feather, even soaking wet. Which means you aren’t getting enough nourishments. Eat!”

Shay smiled. And before she could catch herself, she blurted out too much. “Are you my daddy or my boyfriend?” she asked him. But when she said the word *boyfriend*, she looked at him in horror. She didn’t mean to go that far at all!

But Ronnie had no qualms about it whatsoever. They had crossed that line already. “Boyfriend,” he said. “I’m your

boyfriend. And I'm telling you, not asking you, I'm telling you to eat."

Shay smiled such a great smile when he claimed her as his own, and seemingly without any reservations, that it made him smile too. And she gave him that salute she gave him once before, and ate. She couldn't eat it all, but it tasted so good she was giving it a good try.

"What time do you have to be to work today?"

"Eleven."

"Until?"

"Seven. What time is it?"

"Nine-fifteen."

"What time do you have to be in court today?"

"Nine."

Shay was mortified. "You're late for court?" It seemed unheard of to her.

But Ronnie smiled. "You look as if a lawyer being late for court is the end of the world. It's not. One of my associates requested a two-hour delay."

"And the judge granted it?"

“They always grant my requests. That’s what happens when you build that reputation. Judges get more press when I try a case in their courtrooms. They get to tell their grandkids how they presided over this case or that case with the legend of Bulldog Burton.”

Shay laughed as she ate. “You like that nickname, don’t you?”

“I’m tenacious. I get results. Hell yeah I like it.”

“You’re too pretty to be a bulldog.”

“That’s why it works. I’m still, even with all my success, constantly underestimated.”

Shay understood that. “When do we have Alana’s next court date?”

“It’ll be the day the DA stands in court and dismisses all charges.”

Shay looked at Ronnie. “But is that really possible, Ronnie, with all those witnesses claiming she did it?”

“We’re going to break down those so-called witnesses one by one until they either change their stories during deposition, or face jail time for perjury under oath. Because they will be under oath when I depose them. But I don’t think

it will even get to that. Carlos and Gabe, however, are another story.”

“Those are the two men Lana called when she first got arrested.”

“That’s right.”

“You know who they are?”

“My investigators are working on it. Something’s shady about those two, but whatever it is they’re slick with it.”

“So your investigators are really working my sister’s case, aren’t they?”

“You thought I was lying to you?”

“Not lying, no. I just didn’t figure my sister would be your priority.”

“She’s not. That girl needs a disciplined hand to get her in line, a hand that you just don’t have. You’re her sister, not her mother, and that’s the way she’ll always view you. But you’re my priority. And because she belongs to you, I treat her as if she belongs to me too. And that moves her to the front of the line.”

Shay was so touched by those words that she sat down her fork and threw her arms around Ronnie. Ronnie held her,

and rubbed her hair, and closed his eyes. “Don’t worry, baby,” he said, “I got you. And because I got you, I got your siblings too. No matter what.”

Tears were in Shay’s eyes when she stopped hugging him. “Thank you,” she said.

“Tears again?”

“I’m just so grateful to have you in my life. And you came just when we needed you most.” Then she frowned. “It’s hard out here.”

It was the first time Shay had showed to Ronnie what he suspected all along. She was struggling. Big time. He handed her the handkerchief out of his suitcoat’s chest pocket. “Shay?”

She looked at him as she wiped the tears from her eyes. “Yes?”

“Where you live. Is it safe?”

Shay wasn’t going to lie. “Not really, no. But if you keep your doors locked, you’re usually okay.”

“Have you ever had a break-in?”

“A couple of times, yeah.”

This concerned Ronnie. “Were you or the children hurt?”

“No, thank God. We weren’t home.”

“But what if you had been?”

Shay couldn’t answer some hypothetical question. “It’s not that bad, Ronnie.”

“It’s not that good either!”

Shay nodded her head. “That’s true. But it is what it is. I mean, I thank God my parents had a house to leave to us. The mortgage payments aren’t as high as rent. It’s a blessing.”

“Ever thought about selling it?”

“Selling it? No way. That’s our home. And it’s neat and it’s clean and it’s—”

“In a bad neighborhood.”

“The people aren’t bad in our neighborhood. They all know us and we know them. Robberies happen everywhere. No matter where you live.”

Ronnie knew that was true. “What if I find you a nicer house in a nicer neighborhood and I purchase it for you?”

But Shay was already shaking her head. “The only thing I’m asking you to do for me is get my baby sister out of the trouble she’s in. If you do that, you would have given me the world. And I’ll owe you the world. I’m not owing you anything else.”

Ronnie had no illusions about her paying him back, but the look in her eyes told him to back off. She was a proud black woman who had too many dashed hopes to put her trust in any man. Especially a hustler like him. But if their relationship progressed and headed in the direction his instincts were telling him was a real possibility, then he’d revisit the issue. Then she wouldn’t have any choice in the matter because he would take the matter into his own hands. But it was too early to go there right now. “Let’s get out of here,” he said as he stood up, “before my two-hour delay comes and goes.”

“Oh right,” said Shay as she bit off another piece of sausage and got up. “Want me to put all this food in the frig?”

“No, my housekeeper will handle that. She’ll be here later this morning,” he added as they began walking toward the door.

But as soon as he opened it, Shay couldn't help herself. She threw herself against him and hugged him again.

Ronnie felt a surge of joy in his heart and wrapped his arms around her and held her too. And when she looked up into his face, smiling, his heart soared. "Thanks for looking out for me and my siblings. I truly appreciate that."

Ronnie smiled too. But then his look turned far more serious. Because he decided he was not going to fight his feelings anymore. And he had to let her know. "I've never claimed anybody in my life before I met you, Shay. But I'm claiming you right here and right now. You're Bulldog Burton's girl. Got it?"

Shay's heart soared too. "Sir, yes, sir," she said, and was about to salute him again, but he kissed her instead.

And the kiss became so passionate that they both knew they were there again. Just like that.

And Ronnie, hoping he could do her quickly and still get to court on time, didn't hesitate. He closed the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

At Shay's house, Ronnie walked her to her front door. But she could tell he had something on his mind. And when he said, "*Listen, Shay,*" she could feel her body tense up as if he was going to go on again about her neighborhood.

"Yes?"

But that wasn't it at all. "I'm going to be out of town over the next week handling a messy case in L.A., but I want you to make sure you're available next Wednesday night. Dan Yates is having his annual dinner party. A lot of my friends will be there. I want you to attend."

"Who's Dan Yates?"

"My law partner. I want you to be my plus-one."

Shay knew he would ask her to attend functions she might not be comfortable attending now that she was his lady, and she wasn't going to turn any of those invitations down. But that didn't mean she was looking forward to it. "What do you wear at a dinner party? Is it like a regular party?"

"Not Dan's parties, no."

“Well if you don’t wear party clothes, what do you wear?”

Ronnie glanced at his watch. He was already pushing it. But he was leaving town that night. He wouldn’t have this chance again. “Show me what you have,” he said to her.

Shay found that an odd thing to request, but she did as he requested. She escorted him into her home, and as Alana looked on curiously, they walked to Shay’s bedroom and over to her small closet.

Ronnie’s shoes wouldn’t fit in that closet, it was so small. But he did check out her wardrobe.

Shay found it surreal watching a man as refined as Ronnie, in his tailored suit and fancy shoes, rummage through her tiny closet. But it was surreal sleeping with him too. Especially the way he made her feel. And the way she was still feeling as she watched him.

He was serious about the task at hand. He actually looked at her entire wardrobe. He really wanted her to look her best. She appreciated that.

All he saw were jeans and jerseys, a pair of dress slacks, and two dresses, one of which she wore to his office

when he met with Alana for the first time. None would do for the kind of ritzy party Dan put on.

“Anything suitable?” she asked him.

“No,” Ronnie said honestly. “But I’ll handle that.”

“You’ll handle it?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about it. But I’d better get to court before my two-hour delay is over.”

“Oh right,” Shay said and walked him back through the house and up to the front door. Alana, sitting in the living room, was all eyes. Shay walked him to his car.

“Thanks for the lift home,” she said.

Ronnie stood at his car staring at Shay. He still wanted her. He had it that bad. “Take care of yourself.”

“When do you leave for Los Angeles?”

“Tonight. But remember to save that date.”

“Next Wednesday. I will. But about what I’m supposed to wear—”

“I’ll take care of that,” he said, opening his car door.

“Don’t worry about that. Alright?”

Shay smiled, although she was worried. “Alright.” And he kissed her. Then he hugged her as if he just hated parting from her. But he knew he had to. He got in his car and took off.

Talk about an in-demand lawyer, Shay thought, as she walked back into her house.

But Alana was standing at the front window when she walked in. She saw them kissing. And she didn’t try to hide her displeasure. “That’s disgusting,” she said.

Shay looked at her kid sister like she knew she didn’t hear what she just heard. “*You’re* disgusted with *me*? All this shit you’ve been up to and you’re disgusted with me? You better get out of my face!”

“I just don’t want him to get tired of you and then he don’t wanna help me anymore.”

“That won’t happen.”

“And I don’t want him to break your heart either,” Alana added.

Shay looked at her sister. Their relationship was hardly great lately, but they still had a bond. Shay went to her

and pulled her into her arms. “That won’t happen either,” she said as if she knew what she was talking about.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Two days later and Shay was working the cash register at the café and talking with her manager Veena when two white women walked in. One was older and carried a briefcase. The younger one carried a measuring tape. They looked around. When they saw Shay at the register, they walked over to her.

She put on her public smile. “May I help you?”

“You can if you’re Shay Pearson,” the older woman said to her.

Shay was certain she’d never seen the woman before.

“Yes, I’m Shay.”

“I’m Meta Rivers, the owner of *South of France Fashions*, and this is my assistant.”

Veena was looking at the women as if she just knew they didn’t walk up in no truck stop café talking about fashions.

But Meta kept talking. “Mr. Burton commissioned me to produce a wardrobe for you right quick and in a hurry. I

shall need your measurements.”

“Take it outside,” Veena immediately said when they mentioned measurements.

Shay was as surprised as Veena, but she escorted the two women out of the side door that led to an outside table.

“What’s this about?” Shay asked Meta.

“He mentioned a dinner party, among other things.”

“Oh.” She remembered the dinner party set for next week. She also remembered that Ronnie said he’d handle it. She just never dreamed he meant this way.

“May my assistant take your measurements, please?”

Shay didn’t object as the younger woman took every conceivable measurement she could take.

“Finished?” Meta asked her assistant, and the assistant nodded. “Okay then,” Meta said to Shay. “We apologize for any interruptions.”

“When will the dress be ready, you think?”

“We will deliver it to you no later than Tuesday of next week. Mr. Burton said that’s a firm deadline.”

“That seems very quick to make a dress.”

The woman smiled a nervous smile. “Oh it is. Trust me, it is. But he is a long-time, very high-end client. I do whatever he wants.”

“Do I pick out what I want to wear? I don’t know how this works.”

“Mr. Burton has already picked out what he wants you to have, you lucky girl.” She was smiling. “Women would give up limbs to be with Ronnie Burton. What have you given up?”

The measurement girl grinned. When the older woman saw the mortified look on Shay’s face, she realized what she had actually just said. “Oh my. I didn’t mean to imply—”

“That’s okay.”

“Please don’t tell Mr. Burton I said such a thing. I wasn’t trying to be judgmental at all. I was just—.”

“I understand. It’s no issue.”

But when the ladies left, Shay did wonder if other people saw her that way too: somebody giving it up to get material things from Ronnie. That wasn’t her on any given day. But she did wonder if other people thought it was absolutely her.

But what could she do about it? She went back to work.

Besides, a part of her was pleased that Ronnie went to all this trouble just to make sure she looked nice too. He didn't have to do that. But he did. She didn't care what people thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Shay's brand-new dress was actually delivered the morning of the dinner party: one day later than Ronnie had told Meta Rivers was the hard deadline. But Shay didn't care. Just as long as it got there before that party.

She had asked to be off on that day so that she could prepare properly for that night. But it wasn't just the dress for the party that arrived. It was an entire wardrobe: dresses, slacks, blouses, and even high-heel shoes, a pair of diamond earrings, and diamond necklaces too. And every one of them fit Shay like a glove. It was remarkable. And when a very happy and satisfied Meta Rivers left, Shay plopped down on her bed. She was blown away. So was Alana.

"I thought you said it was just gonna be a dress," Alana said. "Look at all these clothes! Their beautiful, Shay."

Shay was impressed too. There was even a card that came with the clothes. She opened it. It was in Ronnie's own handwriting. "Wear the blue dress Wednesday night," he had written. And he signed it *Love, Ronnie*.

Shay smiled. She already had figured out on her own that that would be the dress to wear. But it all felt so overwhelming too. She looked at those clothes as if she was looking at aliens. She wasn't used to Ronnie's kind of lifestyle.

Alana saw the flustered look on her sister's face and smiled. "We aren't the dinner party kind of people," she said. "But maybe it's high-time we become those people. Why not?"

Shay looked at her sister. And for some reason what she said registered with her. "Yeah," she said. "Why not?"

And then she and Alana laughed, and hugged. But they both kept looking at all of those expensive clothes and the jewelry, and they were both just a little bit scared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Cars were everywhere when they arrived at Dan Yates' mansion. But when Ronnie drove up to the Valet station and two young valets quickly hurried over to the driver and passenger side doors, their hands on the knobs, he looked over at Shay again. And complimented her again. "You look stunning," he said. "That green brings out the beauty of your eyes."

Shay smiled. "You say that about every outfit I wear."

"Me? I don't do that."

"Oh yes you do!"

Ronnie smiled too. "You know what that means then?"

"It's one of your pickup lines?"

"No!" he said and Shay laughed. "I already have you, why would I need to pick you up?"

Shay loved the way he never hesitated to claim her. She'd never had that kind of relationship before. "What does it mean then?"

“Can only mean one thing: that your eyes are strikingly beautiful no matter what you wear.”

Shay was touched. “Thank you, Ronnie.” Then they leaned toward each other and kissed.

But then a distressed look appeared on Ronnie’s face. “My social circle are not kind people. They do not cuddle you or seek to lift you up. They love to tear you down until they get to know you. Hold your own. Don’t you dare let any of them get the best of you. And you’ll be okay.”

“Is this a dinner party or an initiation?”

Ronnie laughed. “Both.”

“And why would you have unkind friends?”

“Because I’m unkind,” said Ronnie. “It takes one to know one.”

Shay was disturbed by his comment. “You aren’t unkind. I know all those articles say you’re unkind. But I don’t say that.”

Ronnie looked at her. “You don’t?”

“No. You’re the nicest man I’ve ever met.”

Ronnie felt a surge of emotion when she spoke those words. She made him feel aspirational. If he was kind at all, she made him kind. “Thank you,” he said to her. “Now let’s get out of this car before their hands fall off.” And he motioned toward the valets.

“Oh right,” Shay said the way she always said when she had forgotten something. Ronnie was learning that about her too.

He unlocked his car doors, the valets opened the doors, and they got out.

But as soon as they entered the sprawling home that was already filled with people, Dan Yates and his wife Gin hurried over.

“The boss is here! The boss is here!” Dan said lively as he and Ronnie shook hands.

“Hello Gin,” Ronnie said as he and Gin Yates hugged.

“Glad you could make you,” said Gin. “And with a date, no less. Who’s the lucky young lady?”

“This is Shayla Pearson,” Ronnie said as he placed his hand on Shay’s lower back.

“Pearson?” asked Dan. “Aren’t we working on a Pearson case?”

“Shay’s her older sister.”

“Ah.” Dan nodded, although he found that quite odd. He’d never known Ronnie to date a client’s family member before. And he wondered if she was the girl he left that very important annual associates meeting to be with. But he knew his place in Ronnie’s world. He dared not ask.

“Ronnie Burton, you’re just the fellow we need!” It was a group of men from across the room. “Settle this disagreement for us, will you?”

Ronnie looked at Shay. She was extremely nervous and it showed on her face. “Come with me,” he said as he grabbed her by the hand.

That was fine by Shay. She definitely wasn’t ready to swim in that sea of sharks.

But Gin had other ideas. “Nonsense!” she said. “Come with me,” she added as she took Shay’s hand from Ronnie. “I’ll introduce you to the other ladies. The men will just be going on and on about who’s got the biggest balls.”

Shay smiled.

“You don’t want to be a part of that. Come on.”

Shay glanced back at Ronnie as she moved with Gin’s pull. She could tell he was worried about her. But she smiled and mouthed *I’m okay*, even if she wasn’t sure that she was in that moment. But she knew she would be.

Gin carried her over to a group of ladies she introduced as Doctor So-and-So’s wife or Lieutenant Governor So-and-So’s girlfriend, and on and on. One guest was a United States Senator’s wife, although the senator wasn’t there. But they were all quite impressive.

Shay greeted all of them with a smile on her face, but she could tell by the looks on their faces that they didn’t believe she belonged there.

“Gin says you’re here with Ronnie Burton. Is that right?” asked the senator’s wife.

They were all so much older than Shay that she almost said *yes, ma’am*. But she caught herself. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Is Sylvia here too? Or has he moved on to somebody else already? I can never keep up with Ronnie and his ladies!”

They all laughed. All except Shay. The senator’s wife attempted to clean it up. “I certainly didn’t mean to offend

you.”

“Yes, you did,” said Shay. “But that’s okay. Excuse me, ladies.” And she left that particular group.

“She’s rude,” said the senator’s wife.

“Very,” agreed another woman.

“She’s just young,” said Gin.

“What mud pile did Ronnie dig her up from?” asked another one of the ladies and they all laughed at that one too.

Shay heard their laughter as she walked away, but she ignored it. “Waiter!” she called out and the waiter hurried over with a tray of drinks. She took one. “Thank you.” And just as she was about to sip her drink, she saw what she realized was the only other black lady in the entire room. She was fierce-looking and beautiful as she stood there talking with an impressive-looking black guy who appeared to be her husband, given their intimate touching and whispers in each other’s ears. But then he was called away by a group of men and she was alone, standing there as Shay was standing nearby, but she absolutely looked like she belonged there.

Shay decided to go over and introduce herself. “Hi, I’m Shay Pearson.”

“Hi.” She looked beyond Shay and did not offer up her name.

But that didn’t deter Shay. “You’ve been to one of these dinner parties before?”

“That’s a strange question.”

“What’s strange about it?”

The woman looked at Shay. “Harvard or Yale?”

Shay was confused. “Excuse me?”

“Most African-Americans in our social circle either attended Harvard or Yale. Or are you one of those Princeton or Stanford people?”

“I’m . . . none. None of the above.”

“Where did you attend then? MIT? Dartmouth? Brown? Penn?”

Shay looked at the sister and quickly realized she was being needled. That chick knew she didn’t attend any of those fancy colleges, or any college at all. And Shay thought they might have had a connection. “No,” she responded. “None of the above.”

Then the lady stared at Shay, as if she regretted being so cruel. “I’ll give you a piece of advice.”

“Not sure if I need your advice,” Shay said bluntly, “but okay.”

The woman looked Shay dead in the eyes. “It won’t last.”

Shay, puzzled, waited for her to say more. But nothing more came out of her mouth. “What won’t last?”

“With Ronnie. Don’t get comfortable. It never lasts.”

Shay frowned. “You don’t know anything about our relationship.”

“Your relationship? No. But I’ve been bearing witness to the revolving door for years. Every few months and he’s got a new brand-new shiny object on his arm. Like an ornament. Been there myself once.”

When she made that last statement, Shay paid more attention. Was she telling her that she and Ronnie used to be an item?

“And just like all the others before me and since, we all had such high hopes that we’re going to be the one to tame

that beast. That once he gets a taste of us, there'll be nobody else he'll ever want."

She hesitated, and then shook her head. "It won't last," she said again. "He'll make certain it don't. But suit yourself."

"Yes, I will," Shay said firmly. The lady looked at her a moment longer, and then shook her head as if she pitied her, and then she walked away.

And Shay felt exposed. And vulnerable. But she wasn't going to let that so-called *sister* steal her joy. Or none of those other sharks. She kept it moving too. She kept on swimming.

Ronnie, further over, had been talking and listening to the boisterous group of men that encircled him, but he was mostly looking at Shay. Especially when she started talking with one of his former ladies.

"Ronnie?" asked one of the men in his group. "You heard me? They can kiss my ass if they think I'm going to pay retail for that property. But they claim I signed the contract."

"You did."

“But I was tricked!” The others laughed. “If I hurt one of them and get arrested, will you promise me you’ll get me off?” More laughter.

Ronnie was about to respond jokingly too, but then they all heard what sounded to their trained ears like a definite gunshot.

“What the?” Ronnie said. But then they started hearing a volley of gunshots and people screaming and running. As soon as Ronnie realized what was happening, his heart dropped. “*Shay*,” he said, and then dropped his glass as he started running in the direction where he saw her last even as the crowd was running in his direction, trying to get out of that house. And the gunshots kept coming.

Ronnie was pushing people aside and running against the tide as he rushed to get to Shay. He couldn’t even see her for the crowd. “*Shay!*” he was screaming from the top of his lungs. “*Shay!*”

Shay heard his voice before she saw his face. She was running with the crowd too. And when she saw his face, she ran over to him. He grabbed her by the waist and began rushing her outside and out of harm’s way with everybody

else. But by the time they all made it outside, the gunfire had stopped.

“What’s happening?” Shay asked.

“I don’t know,” Ronnie said. Then he saw his law partner and Gin coming out of the house as if the threat was over. “Danny!”

Dan left Gin’s side and hurried over to Ronnie. Many other people gathered around them too.

“What’s going on, Dan?” Ronnie asked him.

“Some guy intended to robber us apparently. At least that’s how he announced himself. And then he started shooting in the air as if he wanted to scatter the crowd before he could start stealing whatever he came for. But my grounds security ran inside as soon as they heard that first shot and was able to take him out.”

“They shot him?” asked Shay.

“Killed him, yes.” Then a distressed look came over Dan’s face as police sirens could be heard. “Right in my own home!”

The police cars didn’t have any respect for Dan’s home, either, as they raced onto his well-manicured lawn

because his driveway was filled with cars. They hopped out and ran into that house with their guns drawn. Dan hurried in behind them.

“Let’s get out of here,” Ronnie said to Shay, “before the Police orders everyone to stay and give a statement. We don’t want that.”

“I agree,” said Shay. It was h er pleasure to leave that place even before the shooting started.

But many others had that same idea as they overwhelmed the valet station trying to retrieve their cars too.

Ronnie pulled Shay closer as they waited.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The call came in that next morning as he was driving Shay home. He had planned to take her home the night before. But after the shooting, neither one of them wanted to be out of the other's presence. He took her to his home. He took her to bed. They slept, together, sound as a lamb.

Now it was the next day and he was pressing his car phone button. "This is Ron."

"You've got to get back to Texas." It was Dan.

"I didn't expect you to show up for work today."

"I certainly didn't want to stay in that house. It's a crime scene now."

"Did they say who that fellow was?"

"Some known criminal. But like I said, my guys took him out. So nobody really knows his true motive, but the cops are convinced it was us. He thought he'd gain control of one area, rob us blind, and then take off. But my security guys had other ideas."

Ronnie exhaled. “Even dinner parties aren’t safe anymore.”

“Not anymore!”

“But what were you saying about Texas? What’s the problem there?”

“The prosecution just did a document dump on us with the kind of exculpatory evidence that would have absolutely granted us a summary judgment had they turned it over in time.”

“It’s that good?”

“It’s that good.”

“What’s their excuse?”

“They thought they had turned it over. An innocent mistake, they claim.”

“I’ll bet. Did you petition the judge?”

“I did. A hearing is set for the next few days.”

“Okay. I’ll fly out this evening. Thanks, Dan.” And Ronnie ended the call.

“Sounds like good news.”

“It is,” he said as he drove onto her driveway and parked behind her Buick. Then he looked at her. “But it means I won’t be around at least until Monday or Tuesday of next week.”

“Oh,” said Shay.

Ronnie could tell she was disappointed. He was too. Then he took his hand and began to massage her small arm. “Come with me,” he said.

“Come with you where?”

“Texas.”

“*Texas?*” Shay was floored. “I thought you said you were leaving this evening.”

“I am.”

“I can’t just pack up and leave like that, Ronnie.”

“Why not?”

Shay knew he knew better than that. “Because!”

“Because why, Shay?”

She could tell he was getting a little pissed with her. But that was his problem. “Because I have responsibilities.”

“Alana will be okay for a few days.”

“You don’t know that. And I also have a job, Ronnie. You’re talking about being away until next week. Veena isn’t gonna let me just take off for days on end. It’s just not done.”

Ronnie was royally pissed she could tell. He was so accustomed to getting his way that whenever anybody rocked the boat he would just as soon be done with them!

But he didn’t trip. He didn’t go off on her. But his coolness, to Shay, was worse.

“Have a good day,” he said without bothering to get out of the car, to open her car door, or to walk her to her front door. Even though they weren’t going to see each other for several days.

Shay was disheartened and for a second began to wonder if she should just go with the flow and if she lost her job, which was highly likely, and then her house and her car too, so be it. But even just thinking about the consequences told her that there was no way he should have expected her to drop everything and fly out to Texas that same day. That wasn’t fair. That was unreasonable to Shay.

And if that pissed him off, then that was his problem. She was certain he’d come to realize it, too, later on. “You have a good day as well,” she said and got out of his car.

What really got to her was how he sped away before she even made it to her front door. That was a first for their relationship. He'd always been such a gentleman to her.

Then she wondered if that shooting got to him more than he let on. That maybe it reminded him of the fragility of life and how easily it all could have ended for them last night.

And that black lady's voice from Dan's party was still in Shay's ear: *It won't last. He'll make certain it don't.*

She remembered after he rolled off of her last night, with both of them breathing so heavily you would have thought they had just run a marathon. But she remembered him just staring at her for a long time, as if he was frightened about something. She asked if he was alright, and he said that he was, but he kept on staring at her with that odd look. Then he pulled her into his arms and kept her there all night long. It was the first time she felt as if he wasn't sure about something. As if he was still trying to make up his mind when she thought their relationship had moved beyond that phase. It felt as if he had jockeyed a few feet back from her.

It won't last. He'll make certain it don't.

Shay, wondering if this was Ronnie's way of pulling away for good, unlocked her door, fell against it after she

closed it, and cried.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

After work that evening, Shay drove over to Cleveland Heights apartment complex to pick up Alana from her friend Shateka's apartment. She didn't tell Shay she was going anywhere at all, and Shay was upset about it, but Alana made it clear: *I'm not in prison*, she had said to Shay when she phoned and asked her to pick her up. *Not yet*, Shay had responded. Alana still, in Shay's view, didn't seem to understand the gravity of the trouble she was in.

But that was just one thing on Shay's mind as she drove into that apartment complex, stopped in front of apartment number 32, and blew the horn. Ronnie was the other thing. She expected to hear from him at least once during his five-day absence, but he hadn't phoned her at all. She knew why. It was because she turned him down. But how could he expect her to pack up and leave when she had obligations and responsibilities? She could have lost her job, her house, and her car if she didn't work for those three days. She would have been plunged into a state of crisis if that would have happened. He viewed her job as a nothing job and

wanted her to just forget everything she worked so hard to achieve and rely exclusively on him, but how could she do that? They were just beginning their relationship. She didn't know if she would have went to Texas with him and they argued and it didn't work out, and he would have been ignoring her just like he was ignoring her now. Yet he expected her to just drop *everything*?

But a part of Shay wished to God she had gone with him. It would have been the riskiest move of her life, but she should have known he was worth it. Did her natural cautiousness cause her to make the biggest mistake of her life? He may never want to have anything more to do with her because she wouldn't do that one thing for him. Shay's heart felt like it was in knots. It felt like it was breaking. Especially after she broke down and phoned him several times today, and he never picked up.

It won't last. He'll make certain it don't.

“Shay? Shay?”

Shay looked and realized Alana was standing at her passenger car door banging on the window. “Unlock the door, what's wrong with you?!”

Shay realized she had lost herself in her musings of Ronnie once again and quickly unlocked her door.

Alana hopped in with a frown on her face. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked her again.

But Shay flipped the script. “What’s wrong with you coming all the way over here like you don’t have a serious situation?”

“I keep telling you I’m not in prison.”

“I didn’t say you were,” Shay responded as she drove off. “But what if something would have happened over here and the Police were called? Everybody will point the finger at you since you’re already in trouble, which will only compound your problems. Mr. Burton is helping you now, but if you get in any more trouble he could dump you like a bad habit.”

“Like he dumped you?” Alana asked.

Shay frowned and looked at her sister. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You heard from him today? Yesterday? The day before that? How about the day before that?”

Shay turned another corner and kept on driving down the long stretch of road that led to their house.

“You heard me, Shay. Have you heard from him?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Yeah, I thought so. I knew he was just like all those other dudes you were all excited about. But every one of them got what they wanted and dumped *you* like a bad habit. Now you’re almost thirty and never even had a serious relationship. Not even close. You haven’t even had any man consider you his girlfriend or anything like that. Old as you are.”

A sense of drain washed over Shay when she heard those words from Alana. Because she wasn’t lying. Because Shay’s entire life had been built on disappointed relationship after relationship, topped off when she got pregnant, the guy denied it was his, and then she miscarried. That was why she was so hopeful that it was going to be so different with Ronnie. Or did she blow that too? “Don’t worry about what’s going on with me. You be better than me,” said Shay. “Don’t you let any of these guys use you.”

Alana looked over at her sister. She never meant to hurt her, but she always did. “The right guy will come along for you too. Just not Ronald Burton. I Googled him. He’s not a good man.”

That riled something within Shay. “And how would you know what kind of man he is? You can’t look into somebody’s heart. How would Google know anything about that man’s heart?”

“Every article I read about him said he wasn’t a good person. And he’s proud of it, Shay. You should read some of those articles.”

Shay had read all of those articles, and she knew exactly what Alana was talking about. But she’d spent time with Ronnie. He was good to her. At least before that Texas blowup.

But as soon as Alana looked out of her side window, a look of horror appeared on her face. “*Shay!*” she screamed so loud that it shook Shay’s eardrums.

And when Shay looked, too, and saw a tow truck running the red light and was heading straight for the passenger side of their car, the side where Alana was sitting, Shay floored the gas pedal trying her best to clear that intersection before that tow truck could make contact with them. Her heart was hammering as hard as Alana’s heart was pounding.

But the tow truck was coming so fast that there was no getting away from it. And Shays' Buick didn't have enough pickup-and-go to completely clear out. That tow truck slammed into her Buick with such force that it rocked that Buick sideways, with its front tow latching onto Shay's vehicle as if it couldn't let it go.

The tow truck violently pushed that Buick all the way across the intersection, down a side street as it sideswiped two other cars, and then it raced through an open field, coughing up gravel and mowing down hedge after hedge until it ran straight into the big fat bark of a loblolly pine tree. Shay and Alana were screaming from the top of their lungs until their Buick slammed sideways into that tree, nearly bending it in half.

And then there was total silence.

And people, all those natural born helpers, jumped out of their cars and raced to help Shay and Alana. But they couldn't even open any of the doors.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

It was five-thirty that evening when that Texas court finally adjourned for the day, which was six-thirty Tampa time. Ronnie was dead on his feet. He sat on the bench outside of the courtroom and listened to his billionaire client praise his great work. “That judge should have thrown this case out for prosecutorial misconduct, but he know it. But so what? We don’t need that judge. You destroyed the prosecution’s case. I never seen anything like it. All day long you tore their case to shreds.”

Ronnie knew he had done no such thing. He punched holes in a lot of their evidence, but it was still strong evidence. Even the exculpatory evidence that was uncovered in their late discovery turn over helped their client on some of his charges, but not on all of them, and none of that evidence was as solid as the evidence the prosecution already had. He was going to have to do a whole lot more than he did today to win an outright acquittal. “We have a long way to go,” said Ronnie to his boastful client. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“I’m pleased with what I saw. The way I see it, don’t even bother to put on a defense. You already proved my innocence.”

What a smug bastard, Ronnie thought. But so were all of his clients. So was he! But he was just getting tired of dealing with them. Including himself. “You’re misreading what happened today,” he said to the billionaire. “It was a good day. It wasn’t a defining day.”

“Oh yes it was too,” said the billionaire. “Oh yes it was!”

Ronnie’s anger flared. “So you know better than I do? Is that what you’re saying to me? If it’s such a slam dunk, if it’s already won, why don’t you save yourself a boatload of money and do it yourself? Since you know so much.”

The man’s girlfriend was standing beside him. He was unaccustomed to being upbraided that way, and especially in front of one of his women. But he’d been warned about Bulldog Burton: *Never get too comfortable around that guy. If you decide to hire him, expect nothing but disrespect and fireworks. He’ll win in the end, but he’ll never kiss your ass. Don’t antagonize him, or he’ll dump you.*

“I’ll see you in court tomorrow,” the billionaire said with lost enthusiasm as he grabbed his girlfriend and left.

Ronnie knew he was being a bastard too, but he hated smugness. Even in himself. He just hated it.

He pulled out his cell phone and turned it back on. When he saw that he had three missed calls from Shay today, he was surprised. He had decided to deal with her when he returned to Florida. But the fact that she had attempted to phone him gave him the excuse he needed to check on her now.

But when he phoned her and a male’s voice answered her phone, he sat upright. He knew she had a little brother, but this was no little brother. “Who is this?” Ronnie asked.

“This is Officer Scobie of the Tampa Police Department. Who am I speaking with?”

Police? Now Ronnie was confused. “This is Ronnie Burton.”

“Ronnie Burton the attorney?”

“That’s right. Where’s Shay?”

“I’m on the scene of a hit and run accident.”

Ronnie jumped to his feet. “Hit-and-run?”

“I found her phone in the wreckage just before you called.”

Ronnie’s heart was pounding. “What wreckage?”

“I’m afraid to inform you, Mr. Burton, but based on the ID we found, we believe Shayla Pearson was the driver of the Buick Encore.”

Ronnie knew that was the SUV she drove. His heart nearly stopped. “Is she alright? Let me talk to her.”

“They’ve already transported her and her sister to Acadia General,” the officer said.

“But is she alright?”

“I have no idea. I just got on scene.”

As soon as it was clear he could give Ronnie no more information, Ronnie grabbed his attaché case and began running as fast as his feet could run down that long, winding hallway. He didn’t stop running until he was out of that courthouse and in his rental car. He sped like a bat out of hell to the Austin, Texas airfield.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Less than three hours later and Ronnie rushed into the emergency room at Acadia General Hospital in Tampa, Florida and hurried to the reception desk.

“Shayla Pearson, the victim of a hit-and-run, was brought into your ER tonight and I need to see her.”

“Your relationship to her, sir?”

Ronnie knew he wouldn't get back there if he wasn't a close relative. “I'm her husband,” he said to the receptionist. “Please. I have to see her.”

It was enough. A nurse was called, and she came up front and escorted Ronnie to Shayla's room in the back of the ER.

It was a room with a curtain for a door, and when Ronnie walked in, Shay, seated on the side of a hospital bed, had just removed her hospital gown and was reaching for her bra.

Ronnie hurried to her. “Shay! Are you alright?”

Shay was so shocked to see him that she didn't realize the state of disrobement she was in. "Ronnie? How did you find out?"

"Are you alright?" He held her by the arms.

She could tell he was frantic. "I'm okay," she said quickly. "I wasn't hurt at all."

Ronnie let out a huge exhale. He leaned his forehead against Shay's forehead just to calm himself back down. That plane ride from Texas to Tampa was like floating on a nightmare. Every possible scenario went through his head. He even ordered Dan to get to that hospital and check on her status, but they would only tell him that the doctors were examining her, and later that she was in X-ray. And later that they were running additional tests. Ronnie knew nothing.

Shay was surprised that it had affected him so completely like that. Especially when he hadn't even bothered to call her for five whole days. "How did you find out?" she asked him again.

"I called your phone and a cop answered it. When he said there had been a hit-and-run car crash, I thought I was going to die where I stood. And for you not to have a scratch on you?" Ronnie was rubbing the sides of her face with his

hands. Then he pulled her into his arms and hugged her with a big bear hug. “What a wonderful gift,” he said.

It wasn't lost on Shay that she was sitting up there naked, but his embrace felt too good. She wasn't badly injured from that accident, but she was still badly shaken. She was glad he was there.

Ronnie pulled back. “What about Alana? That cop said she was in the car with you. Is she okay?”

Shay nodded. “The doctor said all of her tests were negative too, but he wants to keep her overnight for observation.”

“But not you?”

“That tow truck hit on Shay's side of the car. She got the brunt of it. But the doctor said she just have bruised ribs, thank God. He says she'll be fine too. I was about to go to her room and check on her.”

“The doctor doesn't mind you getting up like that?”

“I've been released. That's why I was putting back on my clothes. I was going to see Alana for myself.”

Ronnie, realizing the state of dress she was in too, began helping her put on her bra and her blouse. Those sexual

feelings he always felt for her were creeping in, but he tamped them back down. He also put back on her jeans and tennis shoes. And then they walked together to Alana's room, his arm around her waist. Alana, unlike Shay, had already been removed from the ER and was upstairs in a room. They took the elevator to her room.

Ronnie still had his hand around Shay's waist as they entered Alana's room. Alana, lying in bed, was happy to see her sister. "They said you can go home, but I can't."

"They want to keep you overnight for observation."

"I keep telling them I'm fine."

"You're going to do exactly what they tell you to do," Ronnie ordered. "They apparently saw something on scan that they want to make sure is no issue. And you want to make certain of that too. Don't you?"

"Where did you come from?"

"Answer my question."

"Yes, sir," Alana answered.

For the first time since Ronnie had met her, he could see the child in Alana. Because, in truth, she was still just a kid. "But you'll be okay," he reassured her.

“That tow truck hit us and kept going,” said Alana.

“Did they catch him yet?”

“Not yet,” said Shay.

“Did you see the driver?” Ronnie asked. But both sisters said no.

“Want me to stay with you overnight?” Shay asked her kid sister.

But Alana was shaking her head. “And be bugging me all night? No thanks.” Then she looked at her sister. “You look like you can use some rest yourself though.”

“I can. I’m exhausted. Still shook up too.”

“Me too.”

“Sure you don’t want me to stay with you, Lana, because I don’t mind?”

“I’m positive, Shay. Go home. Get some sleep. I’ll be fine.”

Shay nodded. “Okay. I’ll call you later. And I’ll be back first thing in the morning.”

Alana said okay, the two sisters hugged, and then Ronnie escorted Shay out of that hospital room, and out of that

hospital altogether.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

After showering together and drying off together, they spent the night at Shay's house. Although her bed was a small double bed when Ronnie was accustomed to a California king, he made the most of it and pulled Shay into his arms and kept her there. He would have preferred sleeping in his own bed at his own house, but it wasn't about him. He nearly died when that cop told him about that accident. He drove so fast to his plane that it was a miracle he arrived alive. He couldn't bear the thought of Shay in harm's way. He felt devastated.

He knew Shay was beyond devastation. And as they said their goodbyes to Alana and left the hospital, he could look in Shay's eyes and tell that she was still badly shaken by that car crash. That was why he took her to her own home. That wreck and Alana's arrest were upheaval enough in one person's life. She needed steady and familiar. Let her sleep in her own bed in her own house. He'd be there with her every step of the way. But what was best for her came first.

But it was the very thought of that concept, that somebody else was first in his life, that caused him to endure a

sleepless, restless night. He laid awake just trying to figure out the why of it all. Why now? Why her? Why not all those other women he had before he knew she existed? He wasn't looking for love. He wasn't even interested in being loved. But love landed in his lap like an asteroid from some unknown galaxy. And he didn't know what to do with it because it was so foreign to him. But he knew it was precious, and unique, and everything he never had, but deep down knew he needed. He knew that.

He stared at Shay as she slept. He wanted to call her every day he was away from her. But she had truly upset him. Not that he didn't understand her position. He came to understand it fully. Men never gave her anything but headaches and heartaches. How did she know he wouldn't end up doing the same? And then she would have to start her life all over again. That had to be scary for a woman who lived paycheck to paycheck. He understood it. But it still hurt.

He gently removed hair from her forehead as she slept. And a truth emerged as he watched her. A truth he somehow knew within two minutes of talking to her in that hall outside of that courtroom. It wasn't by happenstance that she was fast

becoming the most important, most significant person in his life. It was because he was in love with her. Not falling in love. Not getting to love. He was already there.

That reality brought him comfort and terror all at the same time.

A sleepless night was the least of his worries.

She began to move around in her sleep as soon as he admitted to himself that he loved Shay Pearson, as if she felt his love even as she slept. He kissed her tenderly on her sweet lips and that was enough to calm her back down. And he wrapped her even tighter in his arms.

But it was still so surreal to Ronnie. Because even as they laid there, he knew his phone was filled with brand new text messages and voice mails from all those different women from all over the globe that wanted him so badly they would uproot their entire lives to be with him. But he was naked in bed with a woman who wouldn't uproot a week of her life to be with him. Who had those siblings to take care of when he never wanted the responsibility of children. But he knew all three of them would become his kids, and his responsibility too, if he became Shay's husband.

But even that was a shocker too. He almost wanted to pinch himself at the thought of him being somebody's husband. Even the women he used to fool around with knew that would be an impossibility. He doubted if even they would go as far as marriage with a rascal like him. But he knew all-in for Shay would absolutely mean marriage. She wasn't going to be anybody's plaything. She was a precious gem. And gems didn't come cheap.

It would take several more hours, but Ronnie finally fell asleep. And slept like a baby too.

The next day, Ronnie and Shay showered together, made love together, and then got dressed early. Ronnie knew why Shay insisted on getting up so soon. She needed to go check on her kid sister. She needed to find out if the cops knew anymore about that tow truck driver. She was always a woman on a mission, and he liked that about her.

But just as they were fully dressed and preparing to leave the bedroom, they heard what sounded like the glass of the up front window shattering.

“What was that?” Shay said and immediately began hurrying out of the bedroom to go upfront. But Ronnie pulled

her back and hurried out of the bedroom ahead of her. But as soon as they both stepped out into the hall, an explosion rocked that house so violently that it threw both Ronnie and Shay off their feet and backwards down the hall. They landed on their butts.

Ronnie realized what was happening and that they had to get out of there and get out of there quickly. He jumped up and grabbed Shay and began running back into the bedroom as fire erupted inside that house. It was a fast-moving fire that was heading down the hall even as they were running into the bedroom. They hurried to the window. And as Ronnie unlocked and opened the window, Shay looked back and could see the fire tearing down the bedroom wall. She was about to grab the picture frame of her parents that she kept on her nightstand, but Ronnie grabbed her and all but threw her out of that window. Then he grabbed that frame as he jumped out too.

Within seconds the entire bedroom was consumed in flames.

Hand-in-hand they ran away from that house as fast as they could run. There was an alleyway between the houses

and they were able to run through that alley as other neighbors were out of their homes and running for cover too.

Within seconds of their departure, a second explosion occurred that utterly destroyed the house Shay and her siblings had lived in all of their lives. Shay, astonished, could see the flames even from the back street.

Ronnie, astonished too, kept his arm around her waist and her body as close to him as he could keep her. *What was happening*, consumed his thoughts.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

After an hour of answering questions from the police, they were allowed to leave. The security chief at Ronnie's law firm had been informed of the explosion and was already on scene with a security detail ready to guard Ronnie until they could find out who was responsible for that act of undeniable terror. One of the bodyguards had also stopped by Ronnie's house and was given access to another one of his cars, his Lamborghini, for him to drive. His Bentley that was parked on Shay's driveway had been, like her Buick, destroyed in the fire.

Ronnie and Shay hopped into his Lamborghini and with the security detail car behind them, they made their way to the hospital. Ronnie was holding Shay's hand in a tight squeeze. But Shay was strong. That fire angered her. That fire put fire under her feet.

"Who would have done something like this?" she asked.

"I don't know. My security chief, have men looking into that hit-and-run and this fire. I've got investigators on it

too.”

Shay looked at him. “I was thinking the same thing,” she said. “That hit-and-run has to be connected. I thought it was an accident, that the front of that tow truck got entangled into my car and couldn’t let it go, but how did he get disentangled to leave the scene of the accident as fast as he did?”

Ronnie nodded his head. “Good question. I haven’t had a chance to think about that. All I’ve been thinking about is you.”

Shay and Ronnie exchanged a glance. And Shay did squeeze his hand too. “I don’t know what I would have done without you with me. And I know you were supposed to still be in Texas today, and me and my problems are the last thing you need right now in your life.”

It was exactly what he needed in his life right now. “Don’t worry about me. Once you’re okay, I’m okay. Let’s get you okay.”

Shay managed to smile. But she was still cautious with Ronnie. She still didn’t know what to make of him yet. She still had doubts circling through her head. She just didn’t know if he was this attentive to all of his previous girlfriends,

or if he was treating her better than he treated them. She just didn't know. And it wasn't as if she had time to think a whole lot about that. She was worried about Alana. Somehow she knew this was all about Alana.

“She's got to come clean, Shay,” Ronnie said as if he could read her mind. “She's holding something back.”

Shay nodded. “I believe so too. But what? And what if she's in danger too, Ronnie?”

“That's why we're going to get her out of that hospital today. I've also dispatched a security detail to Ocala to pick up Rashaun and Jasmine from your grandparents house.”

Shay looked at Ronnie in horror. “You think they could be in danger too?”

“We don't know. That's why we need to get them under security.”

“What about my grandparents?”

“I doubt if it runs that deep. But if you like I can leave a guard there just in case.”

“Please. If it's possible.”

Ronnie got on his car phone as soon as she asked. It was easily possible.

After he ended the call, Shay was still baffled. “How did you know where they even lived?”

“The grandparents? Their names and address are a part of the dossier.”

“What dossier?”

“The one on Alana. We need to know all of her family members and where they live, and if she might be covering up for any of them. It’s routine when I take a case.”

Shay nodded, and leaned back. “It’ll be good having RaRa and Jass back home.” Then she frowned, remembering they had no home.

“Until we figure this all out, my home will be you and your siblings’ home.” He glanced over at her. “Okay?”

She readily agreed to that. Beggars, she knew, couldn’t be choosy.

But when they arrived at the hospital and found out Alana had just checked herself out with some young man pretending to be her older brother, they took off back down the stairs and out of the hospital.

As soon as they made it out of the entrance doors of the hospital, Shay could see Alana getting into a black Dodge Charger on the other end of the circular driveway. “There she is!” she said anxiously. But as soon as Alana got into that car, it sped away. Shay and Ronnie hopped back into his Lamborghini and they sped after the Dodge. Ronnie’s security detail sped right behind them.

At first, Ronnie was blowing his horn to get the attention of the driver of that Dodge. But as soon as they could see the driver of that car look into his rearview mirror and realize they were trying to get his attention, he floored it and took off as fast as that Charger could take him. Which was very fast. But it was no match for Ronnie’s Lambo. He stayed on that Charger’s tail like white on rice and didn’t let up until the Dodge was able to run a red light. Ronnie had no choice but to slam on the brakes and wait for the light to change.

It changed quickly and Ronnie shifted gears and took off again. Even his security detail car could barely keep up with him. But they didn’t know if Alana was in danger, or just being plain stupid. They had no idea. But they weren’t losing that car.

“It just turned left,” Shay said, who was all eyes on that black Charger. Ronnie was on it too, and turned that corner as fast as he could, his engine revved up as if it was a race car.

But just as they turned that corner, they saw the Charger stopped at the end of the street, Alana quickly got out on the side of the road, and the Charger took off. Ronnie pressed down his window and waved for the security detail to follow that Charger, and they sped around Ronnie’s lambo and did just that. They took off after the Charger.

But Ronnie pulled his sportscar over to the side of the road just in front of Alana. And Alana, who apparently had seen that Shay was in that car too, ran over and got in. She had to sit on Shay’s lap in the two-seater, but Shay didn’t mind at all. She had her kid sister back and in one piece.

But that didn’t mean she wasn’t pissed with her sister. “Who’s driving that thing?” she asked her.

“Carlos. Who else?”

“He had to see me sitting up in this car, Lana. Why didn’t he pull over?”

“I don’t know,” Alana said. “When I saw it was you and Mr. Burton, I yelled for him to stop, but he wouldn’t.

Then I yelled for him to let me out. And he did.”

Shay glanced at Ronnie. Ronnie exhaled. He would interrogate her once they got her home. “No more questions,” he said, changed gears and sped away, and Shay understood what that meant.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

At Ronnie's house, Shay sat beside Alana on the sofa with her arm around her sister's waist. Ronnie sat in the high-back chair and was leaned back with his legs crossed. He was as determined as Shay to get the truth out of Alana. But Alana was so busy looking at the beauty of Ronnie's home that she didn't even hear his first question.

Shay looked at her as she was staring up at the chandelier. "Lana! Answer him."

Alana finally looked at Ronnie. She still couldn't understand how a man who lived in a house like that would even be bothering with them. "What was the question?" she asked him.

"How old is Carlos?" Ronnie asked her again.

"Twenty-three."

Shay was floored. "You told me he went to your high school, Alana."

"I said he used to go there. And he did."

"Very cute," said an exasperated Shay.

“Did he know you were fooling around with Jimmy Mayweather?” Ronnie asked Alana.

“No. Jimmy was before I even met Carlos. But he ...”

Ronnie was staring at her. “But he what, Alana?”

“He knew about Carlos’s brother.”

“Who’s his brother?” asked Shay.

“Gabe Lucan.”

“He’s the other person you called when you first got arrested.”

“That’s right.”

“Why would you call Carlos *and* his brother?”

Shay wanted to know that answer too. She stared at her sister.

“Because Carlos said his brother could get me out of jail. That he would post my bail. But he had to make sure I wanted him to. So Carlos told me to call him.”

“What does Gabe do for a living that he would have been able to post a high bond?” Ronnie asked her.

Alana hesitated. But she knew she had to come clean.

“He owns a bar.”

“And?”

Alana said nothing.

Ronnie uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. “Listen, little girl, that bastard almost killed your sister this morning. Now you had better tell me the truth!”

Alana could hardly believe it. “Almost killed her?” She looked at her sister. “What happened?”

Shay was still reeling from that too. “Somebody firebombed our house this morning. They burned it down to the ground, Lana. The house Pop worked so hard to own is gone.”

Tears appeared in Alana’s eyes. “You was in there?”

Shay nodded. “Yes. Me and Ronnie.”

“And I’m willing to bet he had something to do with that tow truck quote unquote ‘accident’ too,” added Ronnie.

Alana looked lost. Ronnie could see the terror in her eyes.

“Now do you understand how serious this is? Those two brothers aren’t playing with you.”

“No telling where Carlos was taking you when we got to that hospital and chased after him,” said Shay. “He could have been taking you to his brother.”

Alana’s entire demeanor changed. And she looked at Ronnie. “What do you wanna know?”

“What else does Gabe Lucan do for a living?”

“He sells drugs,” she said.

Shay was shocked. “*Drugs?* Lana, you didn’t!”

“I don’t have nothing to do with that. I don’t do drugs and don’t be around them either. I had to get out of that jail, that’s the only reason I called Gabe.”

“What did he say when you called him?” asked Ronnie.

“He said he’d get me out. But then he said I’ll owe him.”

This fascinated Ronnie. “Did he say what owing him would consist of?”

“No, sir.”

“And you said yes anyway?” asked Shay.

“Yes. What you wanted me to do? Rot in that awful place for something I didn’t do? I knew you couldn’t make bail for me. I had to make a deal.”

“You don’t make deals with drug dealers, Alana. Didn’t I teach you that?”

“No, you didn’t teach me that. You were too busy working to teach me anything.”

Ronnie looked at Shay. He could feel her recoiling. That guilt was a mighty destroyer. But he had to get the full story out of Alana. “Does Carlos work for his brother?”

“He said he doesn’t.”

“But?”

“But I think he does.”

Ronnie was staring at Alana. That payoff Gabe wanted had everything to do with Jimmy Mayweather. He was convinced of it. “Why did you get in that car with Jimmy Mayweather?” he asked Alana.

“He wanted me to take him to Gabe.”

“To Gabe?” asked Shay. “Why?”

“Because he wanted a hookup. He wanted to be one of Gabe’s guys.”

“He wanted to sell drugs for him, in other words?”

“That’s right.”

“Why on earth would he think you could get him a hookup?” asked Shay. “You said you didn’t know Gabe like that.”

“I don’t! All I was gonna do was introduce him to Carlos so Carlos could introduce him to Gabe.”

That was only part of the story, Ronnie believed. “Why would you do that for Mayweather?” Ronnie asked. “What did he have over your head?”

Alana was surprised that he figured that much out. But she told it. “He threatened to go to Carlos and tell him we sometimes had outings together.”

“That you were still fooling around with Mayweather?” Ronnie asked bluntly.

Alana nodded her head “Yeah. I mean yes, sir.”

Shay leaned back and crossed her legs. That girl!

“Carlos is very jealous. He would be so angry if he found out.”

Even Ronnie was disgusted. “A child playing grown women games.” He angrily pointed his finger at her. “Your ass going to boarding school!”

Shay looked at him. “Boarding school?”

“Once I get her out of this mess,” he said, “that’s exactly where she’s going.”

“Says who?” asked Alana.

“Says me!” Ronnie fired back angrily. “Somebody’s got to run this family. From here on out, I’m running it. That burden is officially off of your sister, and it’s now on me.” He looked Alana dead in her eyes. “And I’m not your sister,” he said bluntly.

Alana saw that look in his eyes, and it did scare her. She turned to Shay for help.

But Shay was still staring at Ronnie. At what his declaration meant. “You want to take all this on?” she asked him. She was as perplexed as Alana was about the why of it all.

“I don’t want to take any of it on,” said Ronnie. “In an ideal world, I’d take you away from all of this. But we don’t live in an ideal world. You have three younger siblings you are absolutely responsible for. I’m absolutely going to be with you. They become my responsibility too.”

Shay was pleased. She actually smiled.

“You’re smiling?” Alana was mortified. “He wants to put me away in some fancy school that’ll ...”

Shay looked at her. “That’ll do what, Alana? Teach you discipline? Teach you how to be a respectable lady who doesn’t give it up for any Joe Blow that asks for it? That’ll get you great scholarships to Ivy league schools? You’re on the wrong path, Lana, and I can’t help you to get straight because I don’t know what straight looks like. That boarding school does. You need it and you know you need it.”

Alana wasn’t fighting against it anymore. Because she knew she was on the wrong track too. She knew it for some time.

Alana fell against her big sister. She was tired of fighting too. Shay hugged her and looked at Ronnie. He lifted his eyebrows. Shay knew what that meant.

“Why don’t you go upstairs to the room and get some rest,” she said to Alana. “Ra and Jass are on their way.”

Alana sat up. “They are?”

“Mr. Burton sent a security team to Ocala to pick them up.”

Alana was pleased, Shay could tell. But she was still thinking about what Ronnie had said to her too. She looked at him. “Is that boarding school expensive, Mr. Burton?”

“Very.”

“And you’re going to pay for it?”

“That’s correct.”

“But why?” She looked genuinely puzzled. “Why are you doing all of this for us?”

Ronnie just sat there. He wasn’t ready to reveal his true feelings to the world like that.

Shay wasn’t ready for him to go that far either. His actions said enough. “Go on upstairs,” she said to Alana. “I’ll be up there in a minute.”

“You’re gonna stay in the room with me?”

“Yes,” said Shay. “Where else was I gonna stay?”

Alana glanced at Ronnie. Ronnie showed no expression. Then she looked at her sister. Shay could tell she was relieved that she wouldn't have to be alone. "Go on up, I'll be there," she said.

Alana stood up and went upstairs. Shay could see her staring at every chandelier in her path. It was like the Beverly Hillbillies in Beverly Hills. They weren't used to such beautiful things. It was a lot for Alana to take in all at once, just as it still was for Shay.

Ronnie's phone rang. He got up and answered the call, talking and walking away from Shay as he did. She knew why. Alana had put him on the spot. He wasn't ready to go there yet. In truth, neither was Shay.

When Ronnie got off of the phone, he went over to his full-sized bar. "Want a drink?"

"Nothing for me," Shay said as she got up and went over to the bar with Ronnie. She sat on one of the stools as he mixed himself a drink. "Who was on the phone?"

"That was Joe Lambert."

"Who's that?"

“My chief investigator. He runs my entire investigative team.”

“Not the security teams?”

“No. That’s a different department. My security teams provide security for me and members of my firm as needed. My investigators uncover the truth for my clients.”

“Did Joe Lambert find something?”

“Just as we suspected, yes. That tow truck incident was no accident. They retrieved video recordings from various businesses where the incident occurred. That truck was waiting for you. It was no accident.”

Shay leaned back. “What does that mean? That somebody tried to kill me?”

“Somebody tried to kill Alana more likely.”

Shay’s entire demeanor changed. She was floored. “But if it’s all connected, then why did they firebomb the house? Alana wasn’t at the house when it was firebombed.”

“Either they didn’t know that,” said Ronnie, “or they wanted to bomb that house with you and me in it to send a message.”

“To Alana?”

“Yes.”

“But what is the message?”

“To keep her mouth shut about Gabe and his dealings.”

Shay leaned her head back. This was too much.

“Where’s Gabe now?”

“Not sure. He’s not where he normally hangs out. He knows the heat is on. But Joe and his team are on it.”

Shay nodded. “Good.” Then she stood up.

“Until we figure it out,” Ronnie said, “you and your siblings will stay here with me. I ordered beefed-up security all around the house. Your siblings will not be allowed to leave until we get answers. Make that clear to Alana and to Rashaun and Jasmine when they get here.”

“Don’t worry,” said Shay. “They’ll stay put.”

“And I’m going to be your personal bodyguard just in case you were the target.”

Shay looked at him. “But what about your case in Texas?”

“I’ll get my associates to handle what they can. And those at trial right now, I’ll get continuances for a few days.”

“You aren’t going to go to work at all?”

“You aren’t either,” said Ronnie. He had already planned to get Shay away from that truck stop café to begin with. This was a convenient excuse.

But Shay wasn’t playing along. “I have to work, Ronnie.”

“And you will work. I’m hiring you.”

Shay frowned. “Hiring me to do what? I’ve never worked in a law firm in my life.”

“I’m hiring you as my house manager.”

That title didn’t scare Shay. “What does a house manager do?”

“Make sure the house is run properly. In your case, you’ll take care of your siblings. Take care of me when I come home from work.” When Shay looked mortified, he clarified. “By feeding me and listening to me bitch and moan about work.”

She smiled. “I was going to do that anyway.”

“And make sure the pool man and the lawn man and every man and woman that does any work around this

property are doing what they're being paid to you. Think you can do that for me?"

Shay nodded. "I know I can, but ..."

"But you don't want to be dependent on a man?"

She stared at him. "What if I quit my job and we don't work out? Jobs don't grow on trees around here. It's hard to find work."

"Being in a relationship is a risk, Shay. I'm not going to lie to you. You've got to decide, once and for all, if I'm a risk worth taking. I've already decided that about you."

Shay smiled. "You're definitely a risk," she said. "And you're definitely a risk worth taking," she added.

Ronnie smiled. "Good." And they kissed again.

"Thanks," Shay said when their lips parted. And then she exhaled. "I'm going to bed."

Ronnie lifted his drink to his mouth. "But not with me?" he asked. He needed her too.

But she was shaking her head. "Not with my siblings in the same house. At least not yet. I don't want them to think sleeping with a person you aren't married to is the best way to live your life. Because it's not."

Ronnie stared at her. “I’m sure they think we’re up to all sorts of things anyway.”

“They can think it all day long. But I’m not going to be proving it.” Then she leaned over and kissed him on the lips again. “Good night,” she said, and began heading toward the staircase.

Ronnie watched her leave. He wanted her to stay. But she was a woman who fulfilled her obligations. And right now, he knew like she knew that her obligation was to Alana.

But he couldn’t stop thinking about how wonderful he felt just lying next to her. It was a feeling he couldn’t even describe. And he felt that way every time he was with her. And he loved the feeling.

But feeling that way only reminded him how she held all the cards. She held all the power. And because he knew that, there was no way he was ready to confess anything about his true feelings to anyone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The next morning, the entire Pearson clan was at the breakfast table. RaRa and Jasmine were delivered to Shay last night. It was so great to have all of them together again that they all slept in the same bed in the same bedroom although there were more bedrooms in Ronnie's house than they'd ever seen. And that morning, before Ronnie could order breakfast or order his chef to prepare breakfast, Shay got up and cooked it herself: sausage, eggs, grits and toast, and pancakes on the side. Their favorites. They ate like kings.

But Shay could tell Alana had something else on her mind. "What is it?" she asked her.

Alana was chewing a piece of toast. "I did a lot of thinking about what Mr. Burton said last night."

"About that school?"

Alana nodded. "What do you think about it, Shay?"

"I think it's a great idea. I mean, we'll miss you, but your future is in jeopardy. You need help. The kind of help I can't give to you. We've got to get you back on track."

Alana nodded again. “That’s what I think too,” she said, to Shay’s delight. “I had so much freedom whenever you worked at night. And I abused that freedom,” she admitted.

Even RaRa glanced at her.

“Freedom’s the last thing I need right now,” she said. “If Mr. Burton get me out of this mess, I’ll do whatever he orders me to do.”

RaRa was shocked. “You will?”

Alana nodded. “He’s looking out for us. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because you hate authority.”

Shay laughed. Of all of them, RaRa was the true brains of the family.

“I’m more mature now,” said Alana. “I know better now.”

Shay stared at her. “What about Carlos?”

“He doesn’t care about me. Like you said, there’s no telling where he would have taken me if you guys weren’t following us. And even when he saw that you were in that sports car, he kept on speeding. I screamed for him to let me

out or I would jump out. As soon as he thought he had lost y'all, he let me out.”

Then she shook her head. “I’m done with guys like him. I want a good future. I wanna be able to go to college and buy me, you, RaRa and Jasmine a big mansion. I have dreams I want to fulfill.”

Shay, so overcome with gladness, leaned over and hugged her sister. “That’s what mommy and daddy wanted for you too, Alana. That’s all they wanted for all three of y’all.”

“For you too, Shay,” said RaRa.

“She had to take care of us,” said Alana. “She had to put her dreams on hold.”

It was true, but Shay never wanted them to feel as if they were the cost of her lack of success. “Raising you guys have been the highlight of my life,” she said, and RaRa and Jasmine smiled.

By the time Ronnie came downstairs, they were laughing and talking like their world wasn’t upside down. When Ronnie knew it was completely just that.

RaRa was the first to see him. “Hey, Mr. Burton,” he said happily. “You have a beautiful home.”

Ronnie smiled. The two youngest Pearsons were a delight. “Thank you, young man.”

“My sister said she’ll beat our butts if we mess it up.”

“I’m sure Shay didn’t mean that literally.”

“Not Shay,” said Jasmine. “Alana told us that.”

Ronnie was surprised. He looked at the sixteen-year-old. “Thank you for looking out, Alana,” he said.

Alana smiled, but when her little brother grinned and elbowed her, she rolled her eyes.

“Hungry?” Shay asked Ronnie.

“Very,” he said. “It all smells so good. But may I speak with you for a moment first?”

The children looked at Shay with worried faces. Shay was worried too. “Sure,” she said and got up. Ronnie escorted her down the hall to one of the downstairs guest rooms.

“If he kicks us out,” RaRa said to Alana, “where will we go? We don’t have no house no more.” He and Jasmine were told about the house fire when they got in town. Shay never believed in lying to children.

“He won’t kick us out,” said Alana.

“Why won’t he?”

“Because he loves Shay.”

RaRa was surprised. “Really?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“Does Shay love him?”

“Why wouldn’t she love him?”

“Because she don’t be liking none of them men out there,” said Jasmine so innocently that Alana had to laugh.

“Just eat your breakfast,” she said. “Don’t worry about none of that. That’s grown folks business,” she added, sounding like Shay. And they ate up. But Alana was worried herself.

In the guest bedroom, Ronnie closed and locked the door and then pinned Shay against that door.

“What’s wrong?” she asked him.

“I missed you last night,” he said and kissed her with a long, hard, passionate kiss. So passionate that Shay, thrilled that it wasn’t bad news, couldn’t control her emotions either.

She ran her hands through his hair and kissed him too. They became so heated that he lifted her up into his arms, she wrapped her legs around him, and he carried her to the bed.

But as soon as he laid her on that bed and untied his bathroom, his cell phone began ringing.

“Dammit!” he said angrily. But when he pulled it out of his robe pocket and looked at the Caller ID, he couldn’t ignore it.

“Important?” Shay asked. Hoping that it wasn’t.

It was Joe Lambert. Ronnie answered the call. “What’s up, Joe?”

Shay watched him as he listened on the phone. She continued to run her fingers through his thick hair. He was a hardworking man. It was a wonder he had time for anything.

“Take her to the firm,” he said. “Conference Room One. Video ready. I’m on my way.” And he ended the call.

“A client?” Shay asked.

Ronnie looked at her. “Jimmy Mayweather’s wife is ready to talk.”

Shay’s large gray eyes grew larger. “Now?”

“Right now. Joe has her with him. He’s taking her to my office.”

“Can I come with you, Ronnie?”

“Of course you can come. You know your sister. You’ll know what questions to ask her.” He got off of her and helped her out of bed. “Go get ready. And don’t worry about your siblings. They’ll be under Fort Knox protection.”

Shay smiled. With Ronnie in charge, she wasn’t worried at all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Walking into that ginormous law firm building with Ronnie holding her hand was surreal to Shay. This man wasn't trying to hide her or front or anything like that. And the way all of his employees were watching them as they made their way through the busy lobby made it clear to Shay that they weren't used to Ronnie displaying that kind of affection for any woman. It made her feel special. It made her feel as if she belonged by his side.

He held her hand even as they walked into the downstairs conference room. But when she saw the slender, caramel-colored black lady sitting at the table with a white man she assumed was Joe Lambert, feelings of rage entered Shay's body. That was the woman who had beaten up Alana when she had to know she was just a high-school kid. And not only that, she was one of the ones that had lied on Alana too. But she kept her emotions out of it. They were there for answers. Not for payback.

Ronnie pulled out a chair across from the lady and Joe Lambert, and Shay sat down. Ronnie sat down beside her.

And got down to business. “This interview will be recorded. Do I have your permission?” Ronnie asked because he knew Joe had informed the lady that that was the only way the interview would take place.

“It’s okay with me,” she said.

Shay expected Ronnie to pull out a videorecorder, but he kept going. Apparently the interview was being videorecorded from a camera that wasn’t even visible.

“Your name?” Ronnie asked the lady.

“Frenella Mayweather.”

“Your relationship to Jimmy Mayweather?”

“He’s my ... He was my husband.”

“Did Alana Pearson kill your husband?”

There was a small pause. “No.”

“Tell us what happened that day.”

“Alana got in Jimmy’s car thinking she was taking Jimmy to get a hookup with Gabe Lucan.”

“Who’s Gabe Lucan?”

“Drug dealer,” Frenella said. “But it wasn’t about any hook up. It was a set up. I found out Jim was fooling around

with that girl and I told him I wanted a pound of flesh. I told him to take me to that bitch. And he did. And I beat her ass.”

Shay could feel the rage return when she so flippantly said those words. But she held her peace.

“After that, we kicked her out of the car and that was the last time I saw her.”

“What happened at your crib?”

“Carlos Lucan came over. He said he saw the bruises on Alana when she went over to Shateka’s apartment. He said she claimed I beat her up, but he knew it wasn’t me. He was certain Jim had beat her up. That wasn’t true and me and Jim tried to tell that fool it wasn’t true, but he wouldn’t listen. They started fighting. Then the next thing I know, Carlos pulls out this knife and stab Jim over and over and over again. He stabbed him until he died.”

She covered her mouth as her voice changed from a straight storyteller to an emotional one. But she continued.

“Then Carlos pointed the knife at me and told me he’d kill me too if I ever told anybody. Then he ran out of our house.”

“Why did you claim Alana did it if you knew she was Carlos’s girl?”

“Because Carlos apparently told his brother what happened and his brother, Gabe Lucan, told me to say Alana killed Jim because she was a juvenile and she wouldn’t do any hard time like Carlos would get.”

“What about all of those witnesses? Where did they come from?”

“Gabe had those ladies tell the cops that they saw Alana do it. He told them to say that they were in our house and they saw the whole thing.”

“Were they there?” Ronnie asked her.

“No. Nobody was there but me, Jim, and Carlos. Nobody else was there.”

Shay sighed relief. That was what they needed to hear. “Why are you coming forward now?”

“When I heard that somebody bombed Alana’s house. I figured it had to be Gabe trying to silence her so that she would die as the only suspect in Jim’s killing and that would forever clear his brother’s name. I knew then that if they would try to kill a kid, I knew I was next. I witnessed the whole thing. I knew I was next. So I called your investigator back and told him I was ready to talk. But only if he promised

me protection until the Lucan brothers are caught and locked up.”

“And we shall honor that promise,” said Ronnie.

He could see Frenella relax on his word.

“We’ll put you and your two kids up in a decent hotel outside of the city.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll contact the state attorney. They will have to see this recording and do their own investigation, but at the end of the day Carlos and his brother will be brought to justice. I promise you that as well.”

She nodded. “Thank you, Mr. Burton.”

“You’re quite welcome.” Then he looked at his chief investigator. “Joe, make sure you personally stay with her as she go get her children and get to the hotel. Have an additional security detail car to ensure nobody’s following her. The prosecutor, I’m certain, will want to meet with her right away.”

“Yes, sir,” said Joe as he escorted Frenella Mayweather out of the conference room.

When the door shut, Ronnie exhaled.

“What’s next?” asked Shay.

“I’ll get this video to the state attorney’s office. They’ll have to review the evidence first, and if they’re satisfied that this information is credible, then they will have no choice but to drop all charges against Alana.”

Shay’s heart began to pound. “But only if they believe her, right?”

“They’ll believe her. That tow truck incident and that firebombing will give what she has to say credence. They’ll believe her.”

Shay shook her head. “And Carlos and his brother was willing to sacrifice Alana because of her juvenile status in order to keep Carlos’s sorry ass out of prison. And Lana thought she was in love with a joker like that.”

“We can’t help who we love,” said Ronnie.

They both glanced at each other. But Ronnie knew the tape was still running. He stood up. “Let’s get out of here,” he said as he pulled Shay’s chair back.

Shay, happy beyond measure but understanding that they most likely were still being recorded, gladly got out of there too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Two weeks later and Shay was cooking dinner in Ronnie's kitchen while Alana and the children played cards at the kitchen table. When they heard the sound of Ronnie's Bentley arriving home, RaRa and Jasmine didn't bother to look out of the floor-to-ceiling window that encompassed the whole of the kitchen. They jumped up from the table and ran all the way to the front door. RaRa flung the door open and then they ran out just as Ronnie was coming up the steps.

Shay removed the pot off of the burner, turning off the burner. Then she looked out the window and could see Ronnie sit his thick attaché case down as Ra and Jass ran up to him. And when he squatted down smiling, with his arms wide open for both of them as if he was as happy to see them as they were to see him, Shay's heart melted. Her siblings were falling in love with Ronnie almost as hard as she was. Even Alana, who always gave Shay considerable lip whenever she asked her to do something, did everything Ronnie told her to do as if he was her parent rather than her attorney. She even stopped talking back to Shay when he got on her case: "All of

the sacrifices your sister has made for you? You will not talk to her like that ever again. Do you hear me, Alana?” And she heard him. She cut it out.

So much had changed since they moved into his house. Shay no longer worked at the truck stop café, for one thing. He put a stop to that real quick when he made her his house manager. And Shay was actually enjoying the job, and was good at it. Ronnie said she was a natural at bossing people around and her siblings laughed at that.

But most importantly, her siblings were having the time of their lives. With the tennis courts and basketball courts and swimming pool and all the other toys at Ronnie’s estate, they felt as if they were living at the kind of resort they only thought existed on TV. Even Alana seemed like a kid again.

After the children escorted Ronnie into his own kitchen and he spoke to Alana, he made a beeline for Shay. “Hey there,” he said as he gave her a hug. They didn’t even kiss in front of the children, although he desperately wanted to kiss her after a long day in court. But he obeyed her wishes.

“How was your day?” Shay asked him.

“Grueling. Yours?”

“It was good. I enjoyed my day. I just finished cooking everything. Ready to eat?”

“You wanna play cards with us, Mister B?” RaRa asked Ronnie.

“Give the man a minute, Ra,” said Shay. “He just got home.”

“Lawyers don’t get summer vacations?” Jasmine asked.

Ronnie smiled. “Only if they take one, sweetheart.”

“You don’t wanna take one?”

“I want to. But I can’t. Not yet.” Then he looked at Shay, and then Alana. “I have some news.”

“About my case?” Alana asked.

When Ronnie said yes, Alana and her siblings hurried over to the center island. Shay just stood there. She was holding her breath.

“The prosecutor made a decision?” Alana asked.

Ronnie leaned against the kitchen countertop, crossed his feet at the ankle and folded his arms. “All charges have been dropped,” he said.

Alana and the children ran to Ronnie, but Shay was already hugging him. Ronnie was grinning from ear to ear when he saw their reaction. They were so elated and were hugging him so tightly that they all fell to the floor laughing. It felt like the absolute best court case Ronnie had ever won.

But when they all got back up, Alana was crying. “Oh, Mister B, thank you so much. You don’t know what this means to me.”

“Clean up your act,” Ronnie said forcefully. “That’s what it had better mean.”

“Yes, sir,” Alana said, wiping away her tears.

Shay was wiping away tears too. “Did they arrest the Lucan brothers?” she asked.

“Both are in custody,” he said. Shay could tell he wanted to give details, but not in front of the children.

“Lana, take Ra and Jass upstairs and go call grandma and grandpa. They’ll be so happy.”

“They sure will,” Alana said, smiling grandly. “And thanks again, Mister B!” Then she and her younger siblings hurried out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

Ronnie took Shay's hand, went into the living room, and laid down on the sofa. He pulled her on top of him and wrapped her in his arms.

Shay could feel him immediately start expanding beneath her as he held her. He'd been very patient. But she knew it was just a matter of time. "You look exhausted."

"I am. But a successful outcome always reinvigorates me. You saw how happy Alana was? She's changing so much. I thought she was going to be a handful. Now I think she just might outdo'em all."

Shay smiled. "She's back to being herself again. Ever since she turned thirteen, she was boy crazy. I just never realized she was man crazy too."

"That's usually the next step. But we can't take our feet off the pedal. We've got to keep her on the that straight-and-narrow until she's willing to keep herself there."

"Right," said Shay. "But tell me what happened. You said they arrested the Lucan brothers?"

"Carlos was slapped with a first-degree murder charge. Gabe was charged with being what they call an accessory after the fact when he tried to cover up his kid

brother's actions. They also slapped him with a witness tampering charge.”

“But no charge for burning down my parents' house?”

“Not yet. But the prosecutor's office is still investigating. And so are my guys.”

Shay smiled and pinched his nose. “You're a great lawyer, Mr. Burton.”

“Why thank you, Mrs. Bur ... Miss Pearson.” Ronnie could not believe he had almost gone there. Shay either. But then they both laughed.

Ronnie's cell phone rang in the midst of their laughter. When he looked at the Caller ID and saw that it was Joe Lambert, his lead investigator, he answered quickly. “Hey, Joe. Got something for me?” He placed the call on Speaker.

“We found the tow truck driver. He confessed on video that Gabe Lucan paid him to take out Alana Pearson. That was no accidental hit-and-run.”

Shay leaned her elbows on Ronnie's chest and looked at him. Ronnie was surprised too. “Have you presented this information to the State Attorney's office?” he asked Joe.

“While you were in court, yes, sir. They just added a conspiracy to commit murder charge against Gabe Lucan. Like his brother, he’s being held without bond too.”

“Wow,” said Shay.

“Any news on the house bombing?” asked Ronnie.

“Nothing,” said Joe.

“But at least they got Gabe on a lot more charges,” said Shay.

Ronnie agreed. “Yes, that is good news.”

But Shay could tell Ronnie wasn’t satisfied. Joe could hear it in his voice too. “What is it, Boss?”

“That bombing. What if it’s unrelated?”

“What are you saying?” Joe asked him.

“I was in that house when it happened. What if Alana wasn’t the target. Nor Shay. What if I was the target?”

“You?” asked Shay.

“Think it could be one of your ladies?” asked Joe.

“Ex-ladies,” corrected Ronnie. “It’s possible.”

“But which one, sir?”

Then as soon as Joe asked that question, it seemed as if Ronnie already knew.

He quickly sat up, holding Shay in his arms. “I know only one lady that’s capable of going that hard.”

Joe realized it too. “You’re right. Why didn’t I think of her before?”

“Because we were too focused on making it all connect to Alana’s case. I want even more security around my house, although I’m certain the children are no longer in danger. And then meet me there, Joe. I’m on my way,” he added, and then ended the call.

“Where are we going?” Shay asked as she and Ronnie stood up.

But he didn’t answer her question. He was hurrying toward the exit.

Shay yelled to Alana that they’d be back, and then she hurried behind Ronnie.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“Who lives here?” Shay asked as they drove up to the big house in Stoney Point.

“A lady I used to fool around with.”

“And you think she could have been responsible for that firebomb?”

“I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“But why?”

“She slapped me once. And I returned the favor,” Ronnie said as he got out and opened the passenger door for Shay.

He hit a woman? That didn’t sit right with Shay. “Why would you hit a woman?” she asked him.

“A woman hit me, I’m hitting back. So be warned,” he said to her with a smile and a point of his finger.

Shay smiled too. “I want you to try it.”

Ronnie’s look turned serious. “I won’t. I’d even let you do that to me too. Aren’t I pathetic?”

Shay's look turned serious too. "I wouldn't call it pathetic."

"What would you call it then?" Ronnie asked.
"Love?"

Shay looked at him. It was about time they admitted it. "Yes," she said.

Ronnie nodded. He was there too. "I'd call it that as well," he admitted. They stared at each other momentarily. There, they said it, their unflinching look seemed to say. Now they move on.

Ronnie closed the car door, and they walked toward the house.

When they walked up to the front door, Shay was surprised to see that Joe Lambert, a stocky white guy who looked to her more like a mob figure than a law firm investigator, was already there and waiting inside. He had already secured the area.

Ronnie kept his hand on Ronnie's lower back as they walked into the house. But when he saw Sylvia Collins sitting up there in all of her smug self-righteousness, his anger flared. If she was responsible for almost taking Shay's life that

morning, there was no way he was going to be able to restrain himself. But until he got answers, he kept his composure.

“I’m going to slap you with a law suit that’ll make your head spin if you don’t get this goon out of my house,” said a defiant Sylvia. “And now you bring your bitch in here too? What’s wrong with you, Ronnie?”

Ronnie didn’t want to spend a second longer with her than he had to. “Why did you do it?”

“Do what?” she yelled. “What am I supposed to have done?”

“Why did you firebomb that house?”

Sylvia smiled. “Are you nuts? Why would I firebomb a house, Ronnie? Please tell me why would I do anything that basic?”

“Because you don’t like to lose.”

“I haven’t lost.”

“That’s my record,” said Ronnie. “You’re confusing your record with mine. I never lost a case.”

“I don’t have cases. What am I supposed to have lost?”

“You lost me. You hate to lose.”

Sylvia shook her head. This time Shay could see her bitterness. “You’re an asshole. It was my pleasure to get rid of you.”

“Did you or did you not firebomb my lady’s house?”

“No!” she yelled. “I don’t firebomb houses and I don’t pay people to firebomb them either. Now if you were here asking if I paid somebody to take you off my hands, then we’d have a conversation. But me firebombing a house? Don’t be absurd!”

Ronnie believed her. He could always tell when she was lying. He looked at Joe Lambert. He nodded. He believed her too. Which put them right back to square one: who firebombed that house?

“Let’s go,” Ronnie said to Shay.

“Yeah, you’d better get out of my house.” But like usual, Sylvia had to take a parting shot. “And you’re wrong you know.”

Ronnie looked at her. “I’m wrong about what?”

“You did lose.”

“You think you were a loss to me? Are you kidding?”

“Not me. Your beloved cases. You haven’t won every case.”

Ronnie frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t win that Heather Fisher case, now did you? She killed herself because of you. The prosecutor dropped the charges, but you’ll always have an asterisk next to your so-called undefeated record. A record you pride yourself on keeping no matter how guilty those losers are you represent. You didn’t lose that case. But you didn’t win it either.”

Shay could see the happiness in her eyes when she pointed that out to Ronnie.

But as soon as she said it, Ronnie froze in place. Everybody saw the change in him. It was as if his entire body had tensed up. Shay thought he was going to harm Sylvia, as if even just questioning his unblemished win record enraged him. Which would have shocked Shay. She knew he believed in winning at all cost. But that woman was just pushing his buttons. Didn’t he realize that?

But Shay quickly realized that woman had nothing to do with what was going on with Ronnie. Because instead of confronting her, he began hurrying out of her house. Shay and

Joe hurried out of the house behind him. It was as if Sylvia's words had told Ronnie something that he should have seen all along. But he had missed it.

After sitting Shay in his car, he went over to Joe's Lexus and told Joe his thoughts. Then she saw Joe put some type of recording device in Ronnie's pocket, and then Joe pressed some buttons inside his Lexus, as if he was checking to see if it was transmitting back to him properly. It seemed so cloak and dagger to Shay, but they seemed to know what they were doing. Then apparently satisfied that it was working, Ronnie hopped into the Bentley. Joe hopped into his Lexus. And the cars took off, although in different directions.

But Sylvia, who was standing at her door staring more at Shay than at what Ronnie and Joe were doing on her driveway, angrily slammed her door as soon as they pulled away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Another big house in another fancy neighborhood on Tampa Bay, and Shay had more questions than answers. But she left him alone. It was obvious he was still thinking it through. It was obvious that he was determined to get to the bottom of who bombed that house if it was the last thing he did. And since it would mean everything to her if they found out the truth too, she waited to see.

They had to request entrance at a security gate this time, and the butler who cleared them answered the door and escorted them into the dining hall. It was a massive dining hall to Shay where only three people sat at the long table.

“Ronnie!” said the man at the head of the table. “How wonderful to see you again.” It was Morgan Ellsworth, the billionaire father of Ronnie’s former client. But Ronnie was staring daggers at the son.

“Would you care to join us?” the mother of his former client asked.

But Ronnie ignored her too. “Hello, Dalton,” he said.

Dalton Ellsworth, the young man accused of raping Heather Fisher before she committed suicide, only grunted a hello. Shay could see him looking down, as if he knew exactly why they were there. She didn't know. But Dalton seemed to know.

Morgan picked up on the tension too. "What's this about, Ronnie?" he asked him.

"Why don't you ask your son that question," Ronnie responded. "Why am I here, Dalton? Wanna tell Daddy why I'm here?"

Dalton slammed his hand on the table, causing Shay to jump, as his rage unleashed. "You ruined my life!" the young man yelled out.

His parents were shocked. "Don't you dare raise your voice at my dinner table," his mother declared.

"What's wrong with you?" his father asked. "Mr. Burton saved your hide, boy!"

"He ruined my life!"

"How did he ruin your life? He saved your life."

"Heather committed suicide because of how he treated her on that witness stand. She died before I was exonerated.

Now I have to live with this cloud over my head everywhere I go. Even my frat brothers kicked me out of the fraternity. No girl will date me because they still think I'm a rapist! Everybody look at me like I'm a piece of trash everywhere I go, even at the club. He caused her to kill herself before he got me off. He ruined my life."

"So you decided to ruin mine," said Ronnie. "Why don't you tell Daddy and Mommy what you did?"

Nothing but hate filled the young man's eyes. Shay could see it clearly.

"I hired that robber," said Dalton. "He was supposed to take you out at Dan Yates annual dinner party."

Morgan frowned. "We were at that party! We go every year. And you hired somebody to rob us?"

"Not to rob anybody. To kill Ronnie Burton!" Dalton proclaimed. "But he was too stupid to get it right. He let Dan Yates shoot and kill him."

Shay was shocked. It wasn't a robbery attempt after all!

"After he failed, I knew I had to do it myself."

"What did you do?" his anguished father asked him.

“When he got back in town, I followed him to that hospital. His girlfriend was sick or something else was wrong with her, and he went and picked her up. Then I followed him to her shack of a house. And that’s when I did it.”

“You did what?” his mother asked.

“I drove by and threw that bomb through her window. I lit it up! I lit it up!” Then he looked angrily at Ronnie. “And you still lived,” he cried out. “You still lived!”

“You’re angry because Heather Fisher died before you could be exonerated. But you and I both know you were guilty as sin. You raped that girl.” Ronnie didn’t know that for a fact, but he suspected it.

And Dalton proved him right. “What difference does that make!” he screamed from the top of his spoiled rotten lungs. “You were supposed to clear my name. You were supposed to do your job and you didn’t do it!”

Shay looked at his parents. They looked mortified, but not entirely shocked like they should have been. They probably knew he was guilty as sin too.

Then the butler came into the dining hall. “Sir,” he said, “we have company.”

Joe Lambert, along with two police officers and the ATF agent in charge of the house bombing case, entered the dining hall. Morgan Ellsworth, unaccustomed to law enforcement taking liberties with him, suddenly became papa bear and quickly rose to his feet. “What is the meaning of this? I do not give permission for this intrusion!”

“Too late,” said Ronnie. “I’m wired. They heard the entire confession.”

“Why that’s illegal!”

“No, it’s not. They didn’t wire you. I wired myself for protection, and after that bombing I had a right to fear for my life. I’ll defend my right in any court of law. I’ll make it legal.”

The officers immediately handcuffed Dalton and read him his Miranda rights. Dalton was crying. “Get me out of this, Father! You’ve got to get me out of this!”

To Shay’s shock, his father agreed. “Don’t worry, son,” he said as they were escorting him away. “This intrusion is illegal, I don’t care what Ronnie Burton says. I’ll get you the best attorney money can buy.”

Dalton looked at Ronnie, as if he wanted him to defend him. He knew he was the best.

But Ronnie couldn't believe the nerve of that fool. "You must be joking!" he decried. Then the cops, smiling themselves, jerked Dalton away.

Ronnie and Shay left that residence too. Once they made it to the passenger side of Ronnie's car, Shay looked at him. "How did you know?"

"I didn't know. I just suspected he raped her."

"Not that part. How did you know he was the one that firebombed my parents' house?"

"When Sylvia said I didn't win that case. When she said there would be an asterisk to my legacy because of that case."

"Then you realized that rapist had the same problem?"

"Right," said Ronnie. "There would be questions about his innocence too. Which unsettled a narcissist like him. I realized it gave him a powerful motive."

"And powerful means," said Shay.

"Definitely the means."

Then Ronnie pulled her into his arms. “It’s over,” he said.

“Let’s go home and get his stink off of us.”

“I’ve got a better idea.”

“What?” Then Shay saw that look in his eyes and realized what.

“Alana’s not alone,” he said. “Ra and Jass are with her. They can spare you for one night.”

Shay smiled. “I thought only teenagers in heat did that sort of thing.”

“This is no two-hour motel. We’re doing it in style. The Ritz-Carlton all the way, baby.”

Shay laughed.

“I own a condo there.” Then Ronnie’s look turned serious. “You’re in?” he asked her.

Shay stared at him. “All in.”

He nodded. “Well alright,” he said. “Let’s do this.”

Then they got into his car. And for the first time since Shay had known him, Ronnie didn’t speed off.

“Finally!” Shay said.

“Finally what?”

“You’re driving like you got some sense.”

Ronnie laughed.

“Why now?”

“Precious cargo,” he said. “I’ve got responsibilities now. Because I’m all in too,” he said.

Shay’s heart soared and she leaned over and kissed him. He was everything she could have ever hoped for in a man.

But Ronnie was certain that he was the one who had won the prize. He took her hand, and squeezed it.

EPILOGUE

He had never been this nervous in all of his life. Dan Yates stood beside him as his best man, but that didn't give him any comfort either. He pulled on his tie. He straightened his tux a hundred times. He looked out at the well-wishers that populated his beautifully-decorated backyard and knew most of them didn't even like him. But They could not believe he would go through with marrying anybody. Let alone some unsophisticated country bumkin ten years his junior. That was unreal to them.

It didn't get real to him until the musicians began to play that fateful music. *Here Comes the Bride*, was what most people knew it as. He knew it as the *Dum, Dum, De-dum* song.

And then it happened. Shay appeared like an angel in the morning. Her dress, a Vera Wang mermaid wedding dress with gorgeous lace stitching and a halter neck with an open back that highlighted Shay's small frame and wonderful curves. Her hair was in a perfect up-do that made her face

look stunning. And as soon as Ronnie saw her, all of his nerves disappeared.

Her grandfather walked her down the aisle with Alana, RaRa, and Jasmine walking in front of her as her flower boy and girls. That was his family now. Each and every one of them. They were no longer Shay's responsibility. They were his.

Alana was in boarding school and was an excellent A-student and role model, according to the school's headmistress. And she was in all of the extracurricular activities, from soccer and rugby to the school's symphony and drama clubs. She was a kid again.

RaRa and Jasmine were placed into private schools, too, and even their grades, already good, began ticking up even higher. And RaRa was fast becoming the most popular boy in the school. But his first priority remained little Jasmine, whom Ronnie could only describe as sweet.

And then there was Shay, he thought, as she made her way toward him. She was his soul mate. She was the clock that made him tick. She made him the best man he could have ever imagined he could be.

And when her grandfather handed her off to Ronnie and then sat down beside his wife, Ronnie could feel his heartbeat racing. It was the happiest day of his life. He even fought back tears. He didn't think he was going to make it through the ceremony.

But he held on. Because Shay was looking at him with such loving eyes that he knew he had to stay strong for her. And she was glad he did. Because she was fighting back tears of joy herself.

When the final words came and the minister pronounced them husband and wife, Ronnie moved up to Shay, removed her veil, and gave her a kiss so sweet and tender that it took her breath away. And then they stood there, hand in hand, with the children on either side of them, as the minister made the final announcement:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Burton!”

It made both of them giddy as they walked down that aisle to great applause and cheers. The children were right on their tails, following them.

“You're okay?” Ronnie asked her as they walked and smiled and waved and squeezed each other's hand.

“I can’t be any better even if I tried,” said an emotional Shay.

And that said it all for Ronnie. With each other, and with the family they now had together, they couldn’t be any better even if they tried.

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