



K. AUGUST ROSE

PLATINUM  
DIARIES

BOOK I: PSYCHIC DREAMS

# Platinum Diaries

Psychic Dreams, Volume 1

K. August Rose

Published by IYA Publishing, LLC, 2022.

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ISBN 979-8-9863030-1-7 (Print) – ISBN 979-8-9863030-2-4 (ebook)

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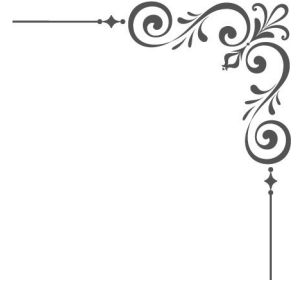
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To Mommy, I miss you every day

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# CHAPTER ONE



RIDING A BIKE TO SCHOOL when just about everybody in junior year had a car was like taking a public bus to Prom; humiliating. It was doubly demeaning when the school was West Nottingham Academy, founded in 1850 by French architect, Somebody de Whoever, to look like a medieval castle for the most elite high schoolers ever... and me.

I fanned my sweaty face with my black dream diary then chained my bike to the rack, trying not to let the utter wrongness of my situation annoy me too much. Next, I did what was becoming a morning ritual. I stood in the parking lot in front of the yellow number nine painted on the asphalt. It taunted me from my empty parking space.

At the last minute, the school gave my spot to a new student, or so I was told by a “Dear Student” email from my headmaster. This new student hadn’t even bothered to show up yet, two weeks into September. Any other time I would’ve had one of my dreams. Would’ve seen exactly what Headmaster Looper was planning. Might’ve been able to get around his ruling. But nope. Not a single premonition. That annoyed me to no end. I could dream about the headmaster slipping on mashed potatoes in the cafeteria at precisely 11:49 a.m. today, but no inkling about my parking spot. Sometimes my subconscious was just the worst.

“Sayra, if you stare at that parking space any harder, it’s gonna burst into flames,” Ivan said, stepping up beside me.

I scowled at my best friend. He was tall, skinny, pale, and undeniably dorky—his words. Ivan dug long fingers into his full, sable curls and scratched his head. With his wire-framed glasses and sagging uniform, he was a bully’s wet dream. But I loved every bit of him as is.

Penny, my other best friend—yes, you can have two—whipped her silver convertible BMW into her parking spot, which was right next to where mine still sat empty. I wasn’t



jealous. For real. It wasn't her fault. Only Headmaster Looper was to blame.

Penny rounded the back of her car, swinging her waist-length box braids over her shoulder. She propped sunglasses on top of her head, then brushed glittery nails over her snug uniform, covering seductive curves she wasn't the least bit self-conscious about. Rounding out the ensemble with knee-high white socks and black platform Mary Janes, she somehow looked twelve and twenty-five all at once. She strutted over to us.

We stood out in the land of five-foot-five blonde girls and tanned yacht club boys at West Nottingham Academy. Penny's smooth golden-brown skin made her "exotic." I was a couple of shades darker than her—dark brown, like my dad. I was annoyingly tall and skinny like him, too. Only short people "would die" to be as tall as me. I only wanted to blend in.

"Are we holding a vigil at the parking spot?" Penny said. "Cause I forgot my candles." She glanced from me to Ivan and then back to the empty parking space. "You gotta let it go, Sayra. I offered to give you a ride, but you wanted to take a stand. How's that working out for you?" She waggled a finger at my sweaty face.

"I'm devising a plan... hoping for a dream," I muttered.

"Speaking of," Penny said, "tell me you dreamed of me passing Mr. Sikes's trig test."

I shushed her. "Nope, no dream. Sorry."

Penny and Ivan were the only people who knew about my gift, other than my immediate family. At West Nottingham, you could go from under the radar to front-page freak in 0.60 seconds. I enjoyed being under the radar, as much as standing five-ten and being one of eleven black students in this school could keep me incognito.

As I tried to think of a new way to approach Headmaster Looper, a horn tooted and had the three of us jumping. We scrambled out of the way of a black Chevy Silverado as it pulled into spot number nine. My spot. The truck was a beast.

Set up for off-roading, with a nineteen-inch lift, floodlights, twenty-two-inch custom rims, and a mesh grille. *Damn*. And that was what I saw at first glance.

I was so busy geeking over the truck that I didn't notice who was behind the wheel until he was practically in my face. He tossed his head, flopping dark copper-brown hair out of his eyes. His angular face had a slight rosy hue at the cheeks, giving him a look of nervousness that I knew wasn't authentic. Nothing made him nervous because he once ruled this school. Conrad. Freakin'. Bishop. My arch-nemesis.

Okay, so maybe I could dial down the drama and simply say I really didn't like Conrad Bishop. To sum him up in a word... *asshole*. He was in a car accident halfway through our sophomore year and had been out ever since. Honestly, I thought maybe he was dead or horribly disfigured. Not that I wanted or wished that on him, but who was I to question karma? As he brushed past me, heading up to the castle on the hill—what we West Nottinghamers dubbed our ancient school—Penny began a constant stream of urgent whispers to Ivan. I ignored her because I realized the headmaster didn't give my parking spot away to a new student, but to the richest boy in our school, and that was oh so much worse. I snapped out of my trance and went after him.

“Hey!” I shouted.

Penny grabbed my arm, looking horrified. Conrad glanced over his shoulder but kept moving, his long legs taking the steps two at a time. Much of the crowd lining either side of the stone steps stared at him with bubbling curiosity. Others seemed disinterested. I yanked free of Penny, hurrying after him, shouting his name as I went. Students whispered to each other now, as word undoubtedly spread to freshman about who he was, and how dare I utter his majesty's name. My cell buzzed with three rapidly fired texts from Penny.

—what r u doing?

—stop chasing him!

—That's Conrad Bishop!

I knew who the hell Conrad was; the jerk who always got what he wanted because of his father's money. The jerk who never met the consequences of his actions. The jerk who got my assigned parking space. I was the one who stood in line for three hours last year, not him. And it was that specific spot I wanted. It sat almost at the end of the first row, so it was easy to get to after school. I wouldn't get stuck in the bottleneck exiting campus. But he waltzed in and got my spot? No way was I going to let that fly. As I reached the front doors, another text from Penny came through.

—Leave him alone remember what happened last time.

If Penny was trying to calm me down, she wasn't doing a good job. By the time I ran into the administrative office, I had all kinds of theories about my stolen parking space. I burst through the door like a lunatic. What was I going to do when I caught him? *Don't think, Sayra, just act, 'cause that always works out so well for you.*

Conrad was at the front counter. Mrs. Mann, the headmaster's assistant, was handing Conrad his schedule when she saw me. Her welcoming smile turned into a nostril flare.

"Miss Price, the headmaster isn't seeing students until after lunch."

Since the start of school, I'd made a daily complaint about my parking space. Obviously, Headmaster Looper was ignoring my protests.

"Why won't he see me, Mrs. Mann?" I panted. "It's not fair that the headmaster gave my spot to him." I pointed accusingly at Conrad. "It's only because his father dumped loads of money into this place." No idea if that was true, but I said it like I had the bank statements to prove it. Conrad Bishop turned, eyebrows raised.

*Oh, a reaction?*

"Honestly, I know why he took my spot," I continued, meeting Conrad's stare. "I'm here on a partial scholarship. Walk all over the poor, underprivileged girl. No one'll care."

I bit my lip and lowered my eyes, immediately regretting saying that. My father was a physician, nothing fancy, just a good old-fashioned internal medicine doctor. My mother was a successful author. We were far from poor.

It was just this place, this school. Compared to the other students at West Nottingham and Conrad, I was at the bottom of the economic ladder. Still, my parents grew up poor. They knew genuine struggle and what it meant to decide between lights in the house or food in the fridge. They would've been pissed and disappointed if they'd heard me say that.

Headmaster Looper's door opened. His round, balding head shined in the middle, reflecting the beams of sunlight spilling through the windows. It nearly blinded me as I stood a good four inches taller than him.

He hitched up his sloppy brown pants. "Miss Price. Thought I heard your loud voice." His brown mustache wriggled with every word, like a dying caterpillar. He eyed me in my shirtless vest and absent necktie. "Your uniform is incomplete."

"I'm hot because I had to ride my bike like a hundred miles to school this morning," I said, but Headmaster Looper hastily forgot me for some rich ass-kissing.

"Mr. Bishop! So happy to see you've made it safely. I know you'll reacclimate yourself at West Nottingham Academy in no time. In your absence, we've added ionic air purification systems in every classroom, two food trucks offering a festive, albeit a rather ethnic alternative to the cafeteria selections, and newly refurbished lavatories. If you need anything, you'll find my door is always open to—"

"Really?" I folded my arms over my chest. "Your door's been closed to me. I've been trying to get you to listen to me for two weeks. It's not fair you took my parking spot and enforced a ridiculous policy with me you haven't enforced with anybody else. Just cause I got a B in Spanish last term. C'mon, really?"

Headmaster Looper turned to face me. "Yes, really, Miss Price. Parking spots are only open to students with straight

A's. I, too, find it shocking that your final grade in Spanish would be a B when you are, in fact, Mexican, is it?" He smirked.

What in the world was this man talking about? "I'm not Mexican."

"Well, you're half, aren't you? And—"

"Not half or a quarter or any. Are you thinking this because my father speaks fluent Spanish?"

He blinked. I could see his brain readjusting, possibly trying to understand how a Black man could be fluent in another language without being a part of that ethnicity.

*Wow.*

"Anyway," I said, "the policy, which I'm only just hearing about and have yet to find in our handbook, is too strict. There is no way you will convince me that Michael Tate got all A's last term. He mistook Great Britain's flag for the Confederate flag... three times. Maybe he's colorblind." I shrugged. "But I have a suspicion it was more than the colors confusing him, yet his big Hummer takes up almost two spaces. I'm sure at least half the students driving on campus didn't maintain a 4.0 average last year. I bet he,"—I jabbed a finger at Conrad—"has had nothing close to a 4.0. How much did his father grease your pockets to take my spot?"

The headmaster glared at me as if I suddenly smelled rotten. "Miss Price, that's a ridiculous and insulting accusation. I warn you to take a moment and think about what you're saying before continuing down that line."

I did a mental rewind and internally winced. Yeah, I should probably shut up. Conrad scowled at me, just as he had the last time I saw him.

Looper cleared his throat. "I had hoped you would be gracious, Miss Price, and see that there is a fellow student in need."

Conrad didn't seem in need of close parking. Besides, there were accessible parking spaces on campus, so there was no need to take my spot.

The headmaster continued, “I would like for you two to put your past squabble—”

“Squabble?” I said, not believing he used that word. “Is that what you’re calling him almost killing me?”

Conrad scrunched his face. “I didn’t almost kill you.”

Whoa. His voice was deeper than I remembered. The accident or late puberty? I shook my head, pulling my thoughts back together.

“You pushed me down a flight of steps and broke my arm. What would you call it?”

“An accident. Because I didn’t push you,” Conrad snapped.

“Enough,” Headmaster Looper cut in. He turned fully to Conrad. “Your father said you’d need a peer guide for a few days.”

Conrad’s cheeks bloomed red.

I let out a mocking, “Ha!”

“I know my way around,” Conrad said, ignoring me.

“Of course, of course.” Looper smiled like a game show host. “But it’s part of the terms of your return.” He looked at me. “Miss Price will do the honors.”

I rolled my eyes. “Absolutely not.”

“It wasn’t a request.” The headmaster showed all his teeth, pinching the corner of his mustache. “You two need to work out this past tension. This is not up for discussion, or we can talk about it in detention.”

“Fine.” I snatched the schedule out of Conrad’s hand. “Come on.” As I stomped out of the office, Headmaster Looper called after me, “And don’t ditch him because I’ll know about it.”

The bell rang, so I had a few seconds to study Conrad Bishop while waiting to speak. I hadn’t seen him in nearly a year. He looked different, going along with his unfamiliar voice. He wore the school’s long-sleeve white uniform shirt,

buttoned at the wrists and neck. The royal blue vest was fastened perfectly, and he'd tied the blue and gray necktie tight to his throat. It was already nearing 80 degrees. In Marris Bay, the temperature was usually sixty degrees or warmer all year-round, so no one was ever this buttoned-up.

Conrad always wore the short-sleeved uniform shirt, vest flapping, and necktie simply draped around his neck. I remembered this because at least thirty kids tried to emulate him. When he scooped a hank of hair out of his eyes, I noticed he wore a pair of thin, white gloves. How'd I miss that before? Too busy shooting death rays at the back of his head. What was up with the gloves? I opened my mouth to ask, but thought better of it.

I glanced over his schedule. It annoyed me we shared three out of six classes. So, he missed more than the last half of sophomore year, and not only was he not repeating the grade, but he was starting junior year in the honors program. Probably had his father pay for that, too.

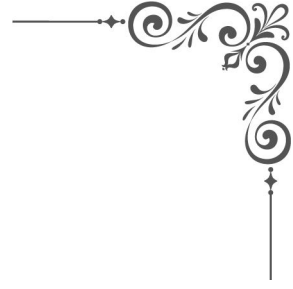
*Stop it, Sayra.*

Maybe Conrad Bishop was smart. Maybe he had changed. Maybe he wasn't a major asshat anymore. He certainly looked different. He was taller and... nerdier? Maybe he was nicer. Maybe we could put our past behind us.

I exhaled as students rushed past.

"Let's start over, okay? Clean slate."

I extended my hand. He stepped backward, face contorting like snot coated my palm. Teeth gritted, I dropped my hand. Okay, I probably deserved that. So much for the fresh start.



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## CHAPTER TWO

EVERYONE STARED AS Conrad followed me into Mr. Brookmeyer's honors English Lit., strolling like he had all the time in the world.

I jerked a thumb over my shoulder and said, "*It* has returned." Then I took my seat in the back of the room.

"You're such a wonderful welcoming committee, Miss Price." Mr. Brookmeyer turned to Conrad. "It's been a while since you've been in school, Mr. Bishop. Please reintroduce yourself."

Conrad had both hands in his pants pockets. I was probably the only one who knew he had on gloves.

"I'm Conrad Bishop," he said, as if there was no need to say more.

But really, everybody knew who he was. He didn't even seem impressed with Mr. Brookmeyer's classroom. Banned book covers lined the walls from floor to ceiling, giving the classroom an old library feel. The aesthetics of the room gave me a thrill, but much to my literary mother's chagrin, that was where my interest ended. I had little desire to read any of the books represented on the walls.

"Tell us something about yourself, Mr. Bishop."

Conrad huffed. "I'm sixteen, my favorite color is florescent-black, and I'm an Aquarius on the cusp, so sometimes I feel like a Pisces."

My lips twitched. His answer got chuckles from the class, but I refused. The loudest giggles came from Hillary Teagarden. She claimed the extra L was for Luxurious. In my opinion, the extra L was for Ludicrous or my favorite, Leper.

"Have a seat," Mr. Brookmeyer said. "Good to know we've got another smartass in the class. I was afraid we were running low."

Conrad took the first empty seat on my left and two rows in front of me, right beside Hillary, of course. His ex-girlfriend. She was about to give herself whiplash from tossing her blond hair over her shoulders. I bet she thought she moved in slow motion; the wind blowing her hair, a spotlight beaming just for her.

I snorted, pulling the attention of Tag “The Thrasher” Thaxton, seated beside me. Hillary and Tag, with their self-appointed titles, were six miles south of ridiculous. Tag shot me a look that said he was extremely annoyed with our seating arrangements, too. He wanted the seat beside Hillary as they had been an on-again-off-again couple for the past nine months. Apparently, he’d waited the appropriate two minutes after Conrad’s accident to move in on Hillary. Bro-code, ya know? Tag, with his upscale surfer-dude looks, piercing blue eyes, and perpetual tan (be it the results of ultraviolet rays or DNA) was cute, fine even, but he was such a major tool that I could barely stomach sitting beside him.

Mr. Brookmeyer gathered the class’s attention, starting his lesson. Hillary immediately leaned in with a continuous stream of hissing at Conrad’s shoulder. I couldn’t hear what she said, but it probably had to do with her consoling herself with Tag while Conrad was on his deathbed. Conrad never acknowledged Hillary. *Interesting*. He simply took notes with his gloved hands. Those white cottony things mesmerized me. All kinds of explanations for them flew through my brain. I crumpled a sheet of paper and tossed it at him. It bounced off the back of his head.

Hillary whipped around. Conrad turned slowly. Wow, I never noticed how vividly green his eyes were. Yeah, green like a serpent. *That’s better, Sayra.*

“What’s with the gloves?” I whispered, pointing to my hand as if without my visual clue he’d say, ‘*what gloves?*’

Hillary’s mouth flopped open. However, Conrad stared at me until I felt stupid and had to look away.

“Nice one, Goose,” Tag muttered.

I was so embarrassed I didn't even jab Tag for calling me by that ridiculous nickname. Because I was tall and slim with a long neck, the best he could come up with was Goose. At least be original.

By the end of class, I knew I had to apologize to Conrad or never speak to him again. Well, I would never speak to him again, with or without the apology. Maybe if I tried to make peace, he'd see the injustice of my situation and give back my parking space. Surely, he could get a limo, a helicopter or a private jet to bring him to school.

I had to rush to catch up with him. "Hey. Wait up."

He recoiled as I stepped closer.

"I wasn't going to touch you, geez."

He stopped, looked at me... through me. Something wasn't right with him. Not an illness or residual effects from the accident, I didn't think so. He seemed... detached, like he had checked out on the world.

"Listen," I said. "We got off on the wrong foot. I didn't mean to be so hostile toward you earlier. It's not your fault I got screwed."

"No, just my father, greasing palms."

*Ouch.* I deserved that. "Sorry about that. Can we start over?"

He met my eyes but gave no reply.

"Um... okay," I said. "At least let me show you to Trig." I offered a smile. "I don't have that class, but I can walk you halfway."

"No thanks. I've got it," Conrad said, already turning away.

I attempted to grab his arm. When he jerked away from me again, it hurt my feelings. I'd never seen someone so openly disgusted by my touch. Was I gross? I glanced at my fingernails, at the dirt caked under them. For the first time, it embarrassed me.

“Don’t touch me,” he said louder than necessary. Several people turned to look at us.

“I... I’m supposed to show you around.”

“I’ve been here before, remember? And I’ve been reading for quite some time, so I think I’ve got a handle on the words, third floor, room 306.”

He blinked a few times, cheeks reddened. I would say it was anger, but something in his eyes told me he was embarrassed, too. Embarrassed that he shouted at me? If that was true, he didn’t apologize. He simply turned and strode away, leaving me with my mouth hanging open.

“Burn!” Hillary shouted. She and Tag laughed as they hurried to catch up with Conrad.

So, one hour back in school, I was suddenly a freshman again, getting embarrassed by Conrad and laughed at by his clique. The bell jarred me. I had to run to make my next class.

By lunch, my mood was trashed. For most of the morning, I watched people make way for Conrad like he was the second coming of Christ. Girls tripped to put themselves in his line of sight. Guys invited him to some of the most exclusive parties thrown by some of the most popular people at West Nottingham. But the worst of it, I had to endure several verbal jabs as my exaggerated stalker-like behavior made its way around the school. The last rumor I overheard was that I had tried to kiss Conrad, and he had to threaten me with pepper spray. Three guesses which blonde with the extra L in her name started that bit of fiction.

Seeing Ivan and Penny sitting at our table put a small smile on my face. Then I remembered my dream from last night. That perked me all the way up. I tossed my journal—a black pleather book with worn pages—on the table between them.

“Hurry up and read what’s going to happen in five minutes.”

Ivan and Penny scrambled for my diary. Ivan won. He pushed up his wireframe glasses on his nose and flipped to the last entry. Penny moved Ivan’s bushy hair out of her face.

They huddled together to skim my dream of Headmaster Looper slipping on a glop of mashed potatoes.

Usually, I loved having the gift of premonition through my dreams. Got it from my Yaya, but what was the point of having the gift if it didn't do what I wanted?

“This is too awesome.” Ivan laughed as he flipped through my journal. “Did you have a dream of me making out with a hottie yet?”

“No, and quit asking me.”

“I'm hoping it'll seep into your brain like a subliminal message, and voilà, you dream of me giving some tongue action to Hillary Teagarden.”

Penny fixed Ivan with a glare so hard it should have shattered his glasses.

“I ought to stab you with this chop-stick for even saying something so foul. You can't seriously want to hook up with her, can you?”

Ivan flushed. “No.”

He looked so dejected I almost told him what was in my super-secret platinum diary; the one Yaya gave me, the one I let no one else read. Ivan would have a girlfriend soon, somebody more deserving of his sweet, nerdy ways, but telling him could alter the future. I couldn't risk it. Once, I told my mom about a dream I had of her doing a book signing with the largest crowd she'd ever had, hundreds of people. On the day of the book signing, there was a severe thunderstorm canceling the event. From that, I beta tested it with other smaller dreams and realized if I told the dream's subject about what was to come, it changed the outcome. And sometimes not for the better. Seeing my friends happy wasn't something I was willing to risk.

A roar of laughter filled the cafeteria. I looked up in time to see Headmaster Looper pulling himself up off the floor, a mashed potato stain on the seat of his pants. He hitched up his ill-fitted pants by the waistband, grumbling about churlish and incorrigible children.

“Damn, I missed it,” Penny said, flipping her braids off her shoulders. She leaned across the table and whispered, “What the hell was up with you today, chasing after Conrad Bishop like that? Then I heard you tried to dry-hump him in the janitor’s closet.”

Ivan did a spit-take of his Coke.

“I didn’t try to hump him. Dry or otherwise,” I said through gritted teeth. “I did not try to kiss him or fondle him or anything else I’ve been accused of.” I recapped the hot mess that was my morning.

“You probably shouldn’t have asked about his gloves,” Ivan said. “J.C. said that Brittany told him that Conrad got horrifically burned when the car blew up. That’s why he wears those gloves. He’s probably self-conscious about his scars.”

“Great. Now I really feel like an ass,” I said.

Penny swallowed her spicy tuna roll. “I heard the accident made him brain-damaged. So now he has OCD and washes his hands, like, a hundred times a day. They’re all dry and wrinkly like chicken feet, and he doesn’t want anybody to see them.”

Ivan rolled his eyes. “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard.”

“It’s not,” Penny said. “People with obsessive-compulsive disorder sometimes wash their hands until they bleed.”

“Yeah, but that’s not Conrad’s issue. That car accident almost killed him. It killed his mom. He was in a coma for months,” Ivan said. “So, the burn story makes more sense.”

I leaned forward. “How the hell do you two know so much about him? And why is he still so popular? He looks so weird now with his buttoned-up clothes and white gloves, but girls are practically killing themselves to get his attention. Why? So what if his father has money?” I jerked my chin at Penny. “Your father is probably one of the top-selling rappers in the country.”

She smiled. “He is. And his debut movie is still number one at the box office.” She snapped her fingers and sat straighter, pride in her posture.

“That’s my point. You’re popular, but nobody’s following you around. The crowd doesn’t part like the Red Sea just to watch you go by. And Ivan, your dad sells diamonds to some of the richest, most famous people in the world. Hell, Penny’s dad raps about the diamonds your dad sells. Nobody cares about you.”

“Wow.” Ivan lifted his soda can in a mock toast. “Just when I get cocky, you’re right there to kick me in the nuts. Thanks, Sayra, for keeping me humble.”

“You know what I mean. I never got the allure of Conrad Bishop.”

“My father’s rich,” Penny said, “and famous, but he’s not even in the same financial galaxy as Harlan Bishop.”

“He owns Bishop Tools.” I shrugged. “And while their hydraulic jack is the absolute best, I don’t get the big deal.”

Ivan looked at me like I was the dumbest thing he’d seen in his lifetime. “Have you been living in Middle Earth for the last sixteen years? Harlan Bishop is the creator of Bishop Worldwide, which controls almost everything in the free world.” He laughed. “The man owns Bishop Towers, HB Oil, Bishop Wireless, and Bishop Air, just to name a few, but you’ve only heard of *one* of his companies because it makes your car jack?”

Again, I shrugged. “Bishop’s a common enough last name. I didn’t make the connection...”

“Wow... just... wow,” Ivan said.

“Sayra,” Penny said. “You’ve got dirt under your nails, sweetie.”

I looked down, no longer embarrassed by the state of my nails. “That’s axle grease.”

She sighed. “It’s sad how you say that like there’s a difference.”

“There is a difference. I won’t be able to get this from under my nails for a few days.”

“*Sayra*,” Penny said, like I told her I had a few days to live.

As she began rummaging through her purse for something to clean my nails, I scanned the cafeteria, against my better judgment, seeking Conrad Bishop. He was nowhere to be found. Probably had a private dining room built just for him.



AFTER LUNCH, I SAW Conrad twice more. We shared Spanish III where, sadly, if last year was any indication, I would be white-knuckling a B again. I blamed my dad. Although fluent, he spoke very different Spanish than what they taught in class. He learned while doing medical outreach in Honduras, Mexico, and El Salvador years before I was born. Still, my lack of an A in one class wasn't grounds for revoking my parking space.

Conrad and I also shared our last class, Ethics, with Mr. Simmons. Hillary perked up the instant Conrad entered. Fortunately, I had Penny and Ivan in class with me. The three of us sat in the back, mainly because my classmates complained they couldn't see around Ivan and me.

Mr. Simmons held Conrad at the front of the class for re-introductions. What was it with teachers and that humiliating tradition? Conrad now seemed bored with the smartass comments he made earlier. He just said his name in a monotone. Before Conrad could take a step, Mr. Simmons reached out to touch his forearm. Conrad recoiled. At least it wasn't just my touch that had him flinching. He flushed and looked down at the floor like he wanted to disappear. I felt sorry for him at that moment. Conrad clearly had issues, something not even all the money in the world could fix.

Mr. Simmons recovered quickly from his surprise. “Erm... Mr. Bishop, you'll need to join a study group. The midterm assignment is a group grade.” He pointed to the wall where he had pinned several lists. “The group has to have a minimum of four and a maximum of six, so I think there's only one group left to join.”



That was the group with Penny, Ivan, Hillary, Tag, and me. Great. The day was just getting better. Conrad went over to the wall and stared at the lists as if wishing for another group to magically appear. Maybe I was projecting, but it took him longer than expected for someone who didn't have any choices. Finally, he signed his name under our list and took a seat beside Penny. Hillary leaned over and whispered something to him that, again, he barely acknowledged. Tag's sour mood returned with a vengeance. Was he feeling guilty about poaching Hillary, or did he know what I knew? If Conrad simply crooked a finger, Hillary would walk over babies and old people to be with Conrad again.

Halfway through Ethics, it was time to break into our study groups to outline our after-school session. Penny and Conrad turned their seats around to face Ivan and me. Tag and Hillary pulled chairs over to join us. I stared at the white cotton gloves on Conrad's hands as he opened his laptop. When his fingers drummed on the keypad, obviously not typing, I looked up to find him watching me.

"Is there a problem?" he asked quietly.

I shook my head.

"Then can you stop staring?" His voice wobbled like commands didn't come naturally to him, but they do... they did. He commanded underlings throughout freshman year, and half of sophomore year, right until his accident. Now it seemed like he was just as embarrassed to say those words as I was hearing them.

"Sorry," I muttered and looked down at the desk.

"Loser," Hillary said in a cough, making Tag laugh, but it was Conrad's approval she sought. He didn't laugh.

*What was wrong with me?* My parents taught me not to stare at people. I had lost all my sense and manners.

Thankfully, Ivan cleared his throat. "So... last Friday, we decided to meet once a week for about three hours. Saturday afternoon, if that works for everybody? We can rotate houses

and use the last hour to study other subjects... if that's what everyone wants."

There were less than enthusiastic responses from everybody, but I gathered the overall result was of agreement. I was too busy staring a hole into my desk to know if Conrad nodded, but then he said, "Fine, we can meet at my house, Saturday."

Conrad scribbled something on a sheet of paper and tore it out. I assumed he handed it to Ivan, but I refused to look at him, not trusting my eyes to behave. They talked around me. Hillary flirted. Tag grunted. Penny typed the outline while I nodded silently to whatever topics they tossed around. When the last bell rang, Conrad was up and out of his chair before the clanging finished. I wanted to go after him and apologize properly, but I'd probably only make it worse.

Penny, Ivan, and I walked to our lockers in silence. I gathered my books, hoisted my backpack onto both shoulders, and made my way out of school.

"You were kind of all over the place today, Sayra." Ivan smiled kindly at me.

"I know, but it's *him*. Those gloves are just so weird," I said, trying to get my friends on my side. "And as much as I thought I could forget about what happened when he knocked me down those steps and broke my arm, I just still don't like him."

"He says it was an acci..." Ivan trailed off under the weight of my glare.

"I don't like him either," Penny said. "But you shouldn't make him feel like a freak. His mom died. And in a group that includes Hillary and Tag, it seems insane that you were the horrible one."

"I was *horrible*?" I squeaked.

Her eyes widened. "I mean, no, you were—"

"No, you're right. I was horrible. You guys didn't even see how I was in the main office. I don't know what came over me. Maybe if I can get him alone, I can apologize without

making a complete ass of myself again.” I shook my head. “I’m going home and forget about this day.”

I fastened my helmet under my chin and climbed on my bike. Conrad’s shiny black Silverado was still in my—*his* parking space. As much as it killed me, I had to think of the spot as his, especially since I no longer had the balls to ask him to give it back.

I pedaled slowly on my way home, wanting time to think of a way to apologize. This day started on the wrong foot. It was totally my fault and over a stupid parking spot.

My mind was all over the place, so maybe I’d crossed out of the bike lane, or maybe the car had gotten too close. It clipped me. Well, more accurately, a side-view mirror bumped me. The minor collision had me wobbling out of control until I landed face-first on a heap of hard dirt on the side of the road. I rolled over. My backpack, which was nearly half my weight, had me anchored like a flipped turtle.

My skirt flew up as I kicked and flailed and tried to roll onto my side. Of all days not to have worn shorts under my uniform. Footsteps approached rapidly. When I looked up, Conrad Bishop hovered over me. His lips were pressed tightly together. That casual annoyance he’d worn all day was now mixed with concern.

“I didn’t see you. I wasn’t really paying attention. You okay?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

He tugged his glove up, yanked his sleeve down, leaving not even a sliver of skin exposed, then offered me his hand. I didn’t hesitate to take it, worried he’d think I didn’t want to touch him because of his *mysteriously contagious disease*. The glove was soft, expensive, of course. His hand inside felt strong—not at all like chicken feet. He had me righted in one yank. Face to face, I realized he was an inch or two taller than me. I looked away quickly, brushing off my front. Clouds of dirt puffed in the air as I patted myself down.

Conrad examined my bike. “It doesn’t look damaged, but I’ll pay for it if it is.”

My eyes went to slits. “You hit me on purpose.”

Surprise flashed across his face. “No, I didn’t. Why would I do that?”

“Because I’ve been a jerk today, yelling at you, staring at your hands, and—”

“If I ran down everybody who treated me like a circus freak, I’d be rolling over people daily.”

He said it with a slight lift to the corner of his mouth, as if it was a joke. I got the distinct impression that people treated him like a circus freak now. That should’ve made me feel vindicated since he’d been a monumental jerk to me and, you know... karma, but I felt worse.

“I was trying to apologize to you earlier, but you were so rude to me...” I shook my head, knowing it was pointless to explain. He had every right to be rude to me. However, he had no right to run me down.

“Let me give you a ride home. It’s the least I can do.”

He was saying more to me than he had since this morning, but somehow, he still felt far away. Guarded. I knew there was a reason for it. With everything that had happened to him, it made sense. Also, why would he open up to me? I felt sorry for him at that moment. The accident and his mom’s death had damaged him in some kind of way.

As Penny said, “You can’t be mean to a boy who’s lost his mom.” But I still didn’t like him or want to be near him. He repeated his offer to give me a ride.

“No, thank you.” I took my bike from him and straddled it. “We can call it even. I treated you like a circus freak, and you tried to *kill* me.”

“I didn’t try to kill you.” There was a spark of humor in his voice that confused me. Was he laughing at me or with me? I wasn’t laughing, though, so...

“Let me take you home. We can put your bike in the back of my truck.”

“I’d rather walk home barefoot over broken glass and hot coals than take a ride from you.” I pushed off on my bike, pedaling around his truck. Thinking better of that, I pulled to the side of the road. “It’s probably not the best idea to have you driving behind me. No need to just let you finish the job.” I gestured for him to go ahead of me.

He climbed into his truck with an expression that said he’d been in the presence of insanity all day. I didn’t move until he was well ahead of me. It wasn’t until I got home that I saw my cut chin, scraped elbow, and skinned knee. By the time I finished my homework, had dinner and a shower, sleep called me.



*IT ALWAYS STARTS WITH me pinned to my bed, a sudden heaviness that lets me know I’m slipping into a dream. My mattress suddenly transforms into damp grass. The chill in the air grows until little puffs of mist cloud from my parted lips with each exhale. I stand, lighter now, almost as if I could float away. Hugging myself against the breeze, a shiver runs through me. Before me, a sprawling mansion sits in the distance, about three hundred feet away. I’ve never seen this house before and do not know where I am.*

*The images are sharp; a dark blue sky splashed with thin white clouds that partially hide the bright moon. No matter how real everything looks and feels, I am always aware of the dream. Tonight feels different. I’m afraid, and I don’t know why. There’s no time to get my bearings. A high-pitched wail chills me to my core. I whip around, but no one’s behind me, only a thick copse of trees edging the property.*

*I want to leave. Wake up!*

*A moment passes, then a man bursts from the woods, running fast. He’s dressed in a black tuxedo and appears to be my dad’s age—mid to late forties, white, and tall with a lean build. He runs toward me at full speed. I dive out of the way as if he could trample me. Three men race from the wooded area*

*at the back of the mansion. A fourth man trails behind them, clutching a stitch in his side, but runs as fast as his stubby legs will carry him. They're all wearing clown masks. My breath leaves me in pants and wheezes.*

*Wake up! I don't know what's going to happen, but I know I don't want to see it.*

*The man in the tuxedo needs to get away from these masked men. So, I run after Tuxedo Man. He's almost at the house. I nearly let out a scream of joy when he gets one of the glass doors open and dashes inside. His fingers fumble with the locks. I slip through the glass as though I am vapors.*

*In a blink, we're at the security keypad. I'm desperate for Tuxedo Man to punch in his code. The keypad is dead. The phone lines have been cut. Tuxedo Man thinks this, and I hear his thoughts, feel his fear. The clown men hurl lawn furniture at the glass. It echoes, rippling my eardrums. The barrier will give soon. Tuxedo and I run up the stairs just as the ear-splitting sound of glass breaking reverberates throughout the mansion.*

*The clowns are in. Tuxedo still has another flight of stairs to climb before he gets to the panic room. His pounding heart rattles in my chest. The clown men are fast; at least three of them are. It doesn't take long for them to catch up. Tuxedo is at the threshold of the panic room when the largest clown bursts into the room. His mask has an evil frown and acid green hair. Moonlight glints off the large blade in his hand as he brings it up over his head. Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!*

*"Don't. Please," Tuxedo pleads. "Why are you doing this?"*

*"I was going to make you suffer like you made my family suffer, but now I just want you dead." The clown brings the knife down, plunging it into Tuxedo's chest again and again.*



SCREAMS TORE AT MY throat. Strong hands held me. My father's steady but firm voice was a mix of years of medical training and fear as he tried to wake me.

“Open your eyes, Sayra. Open them.”

Slowly, I blinked.

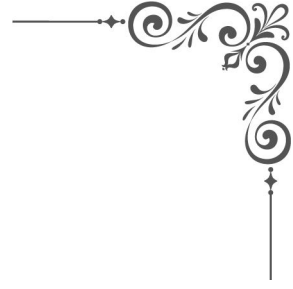
“Good girl,” Daddy said.

My parents’ worried faces swam into view. Nausea hit me full force. I had to take a few deep breaths, or I was going to retch all over them.

“*Say-say*, what happened?” Ma moved into daddy’s spot when he dashed off to get a cold rag for my head.

I wanted to answer, wanted to tell her all about the most violent dream I’d ever had. The words wouldn’t come. All I could do was cry and try to forget the vivid pictures brutalizing my mind. But I couldn’t forget the unknown man whose days were numbered. My dreams always came true.

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## CHAPTER THREE

HAVING A DOCTOR FOR a father meant you had to be damn near dead to get a sick day from school. So, when Daddy asked if I wanted to stay home today, I knew things were bad. But I needed to go to school. If I stayed home, Ma would hover, and I'd do nothing but think about that dream. So, I got dressed. Wasn't even sure if the uniform I threw on was clean. A sharp ache beat against my temples and made me want to close my eyes. That only brought on visions of the nightmare. I needed to stay awake with my mind focused on other things.

I stood in front of the mirror. Yikes. I looked like hell. Some of it had nothing to do with my dream. The scrape on my chin had scabbed over. A welt I hadn't noticed before slashed across my cheek, and my bottom lip was puffy on one side. I really flew off my bike face-first. But the dream caused the dark circles under my eyes and the grayness to my otherwise dark brown skin.

In the kitchen, my parents stared at me like I was a glass vase sitting on a three-legged chair. Ma always said how much she would love to have my gift, mad that it went from Yaya to me, skipping her. Bet she was having second thoughts about that now. Daddy seemed like he would love nothing more than to have my dreams disappear forever.

I couldn't keep eye contact with my parents, so I drank my juice, ate my eggs and toast, fought to keep it down, and left for school. I concentrated on pedaling, on not toppling over, and on the surrounding cars.

As I chained up my bike, I glanced at Conrad's truck in spot number nine. It seemed like a lifetime ago that the headmaster's decision had me so angry. Once I hooked my helmet on the handlebars, I sat at the foot of the grand steps and waited for my friends. Was I really going to tell them about this dream? It seemed too much to tell my parents, and it was their job to take care of me. My hesitancy wasn't about trust. They would keep this a secret. They'd proven that time

and time again. Do I burden my friends with this darkness was the question?

Exhaustion crept up on me. How long would I last at school with no sleep and a persistent stabbing in my head? But if the pain and fatigue kept the image of that bloody man out of my mind, I'd take it.

Ivan arrived first. The moment I saw him, I knew I wouldn't be able to keep this secret. He cocked his head to the side when he spotted me. He opened his mouth, probably to question me, but I shook my head. It would be easier to tell them both. I didn't think I could say it twice, anyway. He sat beside me on the step, took my chin in his long fingers, and ran his thumb over the welt along my cheek.

"You fell off your bike?"

I nodded, unable to go into detail about Conrad and his truck. A few minutes later, Penny peeled into her parking spot and hopped out with her usual bubbling energy. Her smile fell away the moment she saw me.

"Sayra, please tell me you aren't still moping over that parking space." Her eyes narrowed. "No, this isn't about the spot. What happened?"

With both there, I withdrew my *platinum*-plated diary, unlocked it with a key, and turned to the dream entry.

"New diary?" Ivan asked as Penny took the book. Then he seemed to notice how thick the left side was with written-on pages and met my eyes questioningly.

"Not new," I whispered hoarsely. "Just dreams only for me to know about."

Both my best friends looked as if they wanted to unpack that further but seemed to recognize they were holding this private diary, and I was allowing them to read an entry now, so something must be wrong.

Ivan stood and read over Penny's shoulder. They squinted at the page. I realized how sloppy my writing must've looked. Short, choppy scribbles made by a sick and frightened hand.

Penny gasped. A second later, Ivan swore quietly. Penny flipped the page. Ivan snatched it back, frowning as he read the last few lines. The headache seemed to ratchet up the back of my head, clawing behind my eyes. I didn't want to talk about the dream, but I had to. They'd have questions. Maybe they could help me find answers.

"Who's the man?" Penny asked. "You just call him Tuxedo in here."

I shrugged.

Penny was quiet for a moment. "Maybe..." She held the book in her palm like it might explode. "Maybe it was just a nightmare."

I shook my head, regretting the movement instantly.

Ivan sat beside me again. "Haven't you ever had a dream that was just a dream?"

"No," I whispered. I couldn't recall a single dream that hadn't come true. Either I have a dreamless sleep, or I dream a premonition.

"Maybe this is the first," Ivan said.

"Yeah," Penny added.

They were trying to make me feel better. I loved them for it, but I dreamed of a murder. It was going to happen.

Someone snatched from Penny's hand before we knew what happened.

"Dear Diary, I think Conrad Bishop is ever-so dreamy."

Hillary giggled while she strolled up the main steps as if no one would dare rip out her hair, which I planned to do. I dashed after her, ignoring the jackhammer attacking my head and the greasy ball of nausea in my stomach. With any luck, I would puke on her. Tag grabbed the diary, laughing like an oaf. He looked at Hillary for approval. When he got it, he held my diary out of reach.

"Give it back, you idiot!"

I might have felt like the walking dead, but nothing lit a fire in me like someone touching my diary without permission, especially *this* diary. I jumped for it, but Tag kept it just out of my grasp, being one of the few people taller than me. Then his free hand got caught and bent behind his back. The glee on his face quickly turned to terror. Ivan gripped Tag where his neck and shoulder met, bringing the big guy to his knees.

A hush fell over the front steps. Nearly the entire school watched. One of Tag's cronies, Brice Walker, ran up, ready to swing. Ivan kicked out his long leg, tripped Brice, and sent him sprawling across the steps.

"Give her back the diary," Ivan said in a flat voice.

Tag's face turned purplish-red. A vein in his forehead bulged. He held out my diary with a shaky hand.

"Asshole." I snatched the book.

Ivan released Tag and jockeyed backward, anticipating the attack. Tag had to save face, after all. He swung wildly. Ivan sidestepped, ducked, pivoted, and avoided both throwing a punch and having one land. Somehow, Tag still ended up on his butt, looking dazed.

Every so often, some testosterone-head would try Ivan, unable to resist his pale gangly build, glasses, large curly hair, and affinity for cosplay. They always seemed to forget that Ivan had been studying Krav Maga for nearly five years until they were staring down the business end of his elbow or knee. In the three years I'd known Ivan, I had never seen him start a fight, but he always walked away, leaving the other person looking like an idiot.

"You alright?" he asked, picking up my backpack.

I nodded as he handed over my things. Penny looked up at Ivan like he was a superhero and a Greek God all rolled into one. I bit back a smile. God, I loved my friends. They could certainly take my mind off my troubles.



MY REPRIEVE WAS SHORT-lived. My headache grew to enormous proportions in Mr. Brookmeyer's class. I couldn't keep my eyes open. Flashing lights popped in my periphery. When I closed my eyes, images of a gleaming knife buried to the hilt in that man's chest assaulted my vision. A clammy sweat broke out, and the nausea increased. A couple of times, I caught Conrad glancing over his shoulder at me. I didn't know why and didn't care. I just wanted to put my head down and go to sleep, or throw up, or cry.

"Miss Price?" Mr. Brookmeyer stared at me. Had he asked me something? Hell, if I'd heard him. Several heads turned my way, including Conrad's. He looked concerned, or maybe he had a headache too.

"Miss Price, are you alright?" Mr. Brookmeyer had his marker poised to continue writing as soon as I said I was okay. Except when I said just that, he still didn't return to his lesson.

"You don't look well. Are you in pain? Do you need to go to the nurse?"

What was I supposed to say to that? *No, I'm not sick. I had a dream, and it will come true because they always do. Now, I'm plagued with violent visions swimming around in my head and it caused a killer headache.* The last thing I wanted was for people to pay attention to me. Mr. Brookmeyer capped his marker, took out a pen, and scribbled a note. He approached, handed me the paper, and touched my forehead with his boney fingers. Then he tipped my chin up, no doubt noting the scab there, the welt, and the dark circles under my eyes.

He furrowed his brow. "Go to the nurse."

I wiped my cheek, realizing I'd been crying. Was that what made him stop his lesson? My other cheek was wet too. I wiped my face and nose with the back of my hand, and heard Hillary say 'gross' as I shakily gathered my things.

"I should send someone with you. You don't look too stable."

"I'll go," Conrad said. The entire class, including me, stared at him. His cheeks flushed, but he kept his eyes on Mr.

Brookmeyer.

“I’ll go too,” Hillary said and shot to her feet. She tried to seem concerned about me but failed because she couldn’t stop staring at Conrad.

“Sit down, Miss Teagarden. Mr. Bishop, walk her down and come right back.”

“Yes, sir.”

Conrad was out of his seat, standing in front of me before I could make my mind work. He took my books. His gloved hand hovered at my elbow, never touching me, as he guided me out of the class. The corridor was empty, drafty, and a little too dark for nine in the morning. Most of West Nottingham was still ancient. As we rounded the corner of an equally gloomy corridor, Conrad dipped his head to see my face.

“Is this my fault?”

I sniffed, and my vision blurred. “What?” I stopped walking as the hallway tilted, righted itself, then tilted again.

“Is this because I hit you with my truck? Well, I didn’t really hit you, just bumped you with the mirror. You aren’t planning to sue me, are you?”

I leaned against a cool locker. “Is that why you offered to walk with me, ‘cause you’re afraid I might sue?” How could my body be hot and cold at once? That wasn’t normal. I wanted to take off my clothes, and at the same time, burrow under blankets.

“No... I mean... I wanted to make sure you were... *Sayra?*”

My knees buckled, and I slid down the wall. Conrad dropped my books, gripped me by my armpits, and hoisted me up.

“Hey, stay up. I can’t carry you.”

“I’m big,” I slurred. “A giraffe.”

“You’re not a giraffe, but you’re not exactly dainty either. You’re damn near tall as me.”

“Shut up.” My head pounded in time with my thumping heart. “Sleep. Home. Please.”

“I’m taking you to the nurse.” He moved to put my arm over his shoulder, but stopped and looked at my exposed skin.

I still only wore the vest to my uniform with no shirt underneath. Instead, he grabbed my waist awkwardly with one hand and half-pushed, half-dragged me down the corridor.

“I don’t need the nurse.”

“Well, that’s where you’re going.”

“My dad’s a doctor. I’ll go to his office.”

Conrad stopped, looked at me, then decided. “Fine.”

We turned and headed back toward the main doors. I tried to push away from him when we got to the entrance. Maybe the draft in the corridor had settled me some, but I felt I could stand on my own. Nevertheless, Conrad held me tighter as we went down the main steps to the parking lot.

“Thanks,” I said, nudging his hand from my waist again. “I’ve got it from here.”

“I don’t think so?” He grabbed my arm as I walked toward the bike rack. “You can barely walk, but you think you can ride a bike to your father’s office?”

He simply plucked the key from my hand, unchained my bike, and carried it over to his truck, which spoke volumes about just how out of it I was. He laid my bike on its side in the truck bed and opened the passenger door for me. Because my vision wavered again, I didn’t argue, just lumbered onto the seat. Something hard was under my butt. I shifted awkwardly, then pulled out a thick book. The word *psychic* jumped out at me before Conrad climbed into the driver’s seat, snatched the book from me, and tossed it into the backseat.

“Where to?”

“Bayside. Carmel Clinic.” My eyes grew heavier with each passing second. “Awesome... this... is... truck.” Wait. That didn’t sound right. My mouth felt like it was on somebody

else's face, unable to move how I wanted. "That's... that's not what I meant."

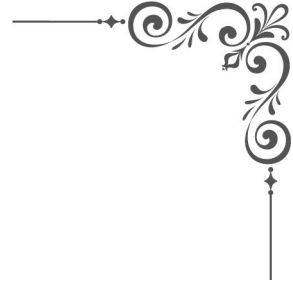
"I think I got it," Conrad said as he drove down the winding road leading away from school. My headache took on talons out in the sunlight, digging into my eyes and brain. Instead of seeing the dead man when I closed my eyes, I saw white, gold, and blue psychedelic explosions.

"Hey." Conrad shook my shoulder. "Don't fall asleep. You probably have a concussion."

"I have... don't..." The world funneled. I could hear Conrad shouting my name, but he was too far away.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

I WOKE TO THE INDISTINCT murmur of my father's voice and the scent of coffee. Hazily, an exam room at Daddy's clinic swam into focus. Daddy's back was to me as he spoke on the phone. At first, I thought he was filling in my mother, but his yeses and nos were too professional.

"Daddy," I muttered, sitting up on my elbows.

He swiveled around with wide eyes, ended his call, and rolled across the floor on his wheeled stool.

"Princess." Gently, he pushed me back down on the couch. A line formed between his dark brows. His black mustache curved downward. By many standards, my father was a good-looking man. His dark skin was so even and smooth that it sometimes looked like a filter. He had warm, kind eyes and a calm demeanor that both attracted and relaxed people.

"Lay back down," he said. "I don't want you to pass out again."

"I passed out? For how long?"

"Only a few seconds... a couple times. I gave you something to help you sleep." He looked at his watch. "You've been out about two hours. How do you feel?"

I lay there for a moment and took stock. "Better. My head doesn't hurt so much. I'm not nauseous anymore." I smacked my lips together, tasting the sourness of my mouth. "Did I puke?"

"Yup." He smiled, but there was too much worry for it to reach his eyes.

"Great." I blew out a stinky breath and then had a horrifying thought. "Did Conrad see me puke?"

"Conrad? Oh, that boy who carried your unconscious body in here and nearly gave me a coronary?" Genuine fear swept over his face, quickly replaced by a forced smile. "I suppose he did see you puke, since you got most of it on him."

I bolted up, causing my head to spin. The one thing I knew about Conrad Bishop since being reacquainted with him for a day-and-a-half was he did not like to be touched. What would he do if someone puked on him? Then I remembered I didn't like him. So... who cared? I flopped back down with a snort.

"I can't believe I puked on Conrad Bishop. That's kinda awesome. Did he freak out?"

"He can tell you himself. He's in the waiting room."

"He's still here?"

"Yes." Daddy's face took on an expression I knew all too well. I was about to get lectured. "He thinks he's why you got sick." He traced the shape of his goatee with his thumb and index finger. "Apparently, he hit you with his car, Sayra? Isn't he the same boy who caused your accident last year? And now —"

"It wasn't an accident. He pushed me down those steps."

"Exactly my point, Sayra. You told us you fell off your bike. If this boy is bullying you, then—"

"He's not bullying me. Technically, I fell off my bike *after* he bumped me."

"Don't talk technicalities with me. You could have any number of injuries because of that fall."

I put my feet on the floor, feeling steadier than I had all day. "Daddy, we both know why I got sick. I was up all night, and I always get headaches after my dreams."

"Never as severe as this." He stood.

"I've never had a dream like that, either."

"What if you had the dream because he knocked you off the bike?"

I stood too, ignoring the quick tilt the world made. "I didn't hit my head when I fell off my bike, Daddy."

He ran a finger along the welt on my cheek and the scab on my chin.

“That’s my face. My head is fine.”

“You’re in the honors program. Surely, you’re smart enough to understand that your face is on your head.”

We stared at each other. I tried to look as healthy and well-adjusted as possible. I doubt it worked, since I wasn’t exactly sure how to do that. A muscle twitched in my father’s jaw. After I spent all night scribbling the details of my dream in my diary, I gave it to my parents. Tears streamed down my mother’s face as she read, but Daddy just got mad. He was still angry. Like that would help.

“Do you have some toothpaste or mouthwash? I gotta go talk to Conrad, and I’d rather not do that with puke breath.”

“In the drawer.” He pointed behind me without taking his eyes off mine. I could never win a staring contest with that man, so I looked away. Over at the small sink, I drained a travel-sized Scope and swished it around in my mouth for a minute.

“I made an appointment for you to see my friend, Kabir Abdur. You remember him?”

Had to run the name through my brain a few times before I could place his face. Daddy’s friend from medical school. He was a specialist. I spit out the mouthwash.

“Dr. Abdur’s a neurologist, right?”

“Yes.” Daddy pulled himself up to his full height—six-five—which was intimidating enough without that lead pipe up his butt, prepared to battle me.

“I don’t want to see a neurologist.”

“Well, then it’s good you’re the child, and I’m the parent. I can make these tough decisions for you.” He brushed a thumb over my cheek.

“*Daddy.*” That came out far whinier than I intended. “There’s nothing wrong with me.” “I know that, Princess. But there could be something wrong with your brain.” He had softened his tone, but I could see there was no getting through

to him. I needed Ma. She would side with me and make him see reason.

“It’s my brain,” I muttered. “Don’t I get any say?”

“Sure you do, and you’ve had your say. But until you’re old enough to support yourself, your mother and I have the final say.” He turned his back on me, sat on his stool, and began typing in someone’s chart.

I stood for a few seconds, hoping he would change his mind, but the man hadn’t changed his mind on anything in all my sixteen years. Even though it made me seem immature, I stomped out of the exam room and slammed the door.

Conrad stood as I skirted around the broad front desk and met him in the waiting room.

“Come outside,” I said, leading him out the front of the clinic. The fresh air felt wonderful against my face. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the brick wall, enjoying the warm breeze.

“You’re not going to pass out again, are you? Or puke?”

I opened my eyes and tried an apologetic smile. “Sorry about that? Where’d I get you?”

“Shoes.”

His shoes didn’t have a spot on them. “You cleaned them well.”

He snorted. “Threw those away. Bought these down the street while you were asleep.”

“Oh. I can ask my father for the money to replace them. How much were they?”

What if he said \$200 or more? We had a decent amount of money, rich by some standards, but my father was super cheap. He’d crap himself if I asked for hundreds of dollars to replace a single pair of shoes.

“Don’t worry about it,” Conrad said.

I didn’t press the issue. “You didn’t have to stay, but thanks for bringing me.”

“Had to see for myself that you were okay.”

I rolled my eyes. “I won’t sue if that’s what you’re worried about.” For a moment, I thought he cared about my wellbeing. Of course, he was more concerned with whether I’d attempt to put a microscopic dent in his father’s mountain of money.

He stared at me as if waiting for something more. A blood oath that I wouldn’t sue?

When I was face to face with him yesterday, there was a void in his eyes, something lost and almost dead. At least that was what I thought. Now, I was thinking I was wrong. He wasn’t lost or dead inside, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Right now, he stared *at* me, and it was unnerving.

“Well, if you’re sure you’re okay,” he said. “I guess I should get going.” He didn’t move, though.

“Thanks.”

We stood like that, not moving or talking, just looking at each other like two idiots. When I couldn’t hold his gaze any longer, I looked down at his hands encased in white cotton. A sliver of skin lay exposed where his right glove ended, and the cuff of his shirt began. I wondered what he would do if I touched it.

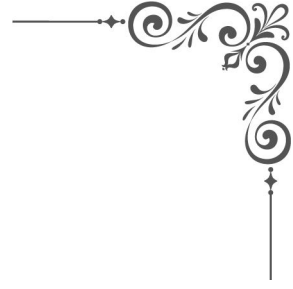
If he had OCD, then it would upset him. I didn’t want to upset him. Even though I didn’t particularly care for Conrad, that would be shitty. But I had to admit, I was more than a little curious about his hands. Were they scrubbed raw? They felt strong — solid when he hoisted me up earlier, so maybe they were burned and horribly scarred. The skin peeking out at his wrist didn’t look diseased or marred. Conrad jerked his hands behind his back as if he sensed my thoughts, or maybe he noticed where my eyes were trained.

“Never touch me.”

The fierceness in his tone made me step backward. I was already at the wall, so I could only flatten myself against it. He blinked as if just now hearing how harsh his command was. “I... just... don’t like... never touch me, okay?” he mumbled.

Before I could swear that I wouldn't, he dashed down the street to his truck, leaving me baffled.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

MA SQUEEZED ME IN HER arms the moment I stepped through the door. Even with her voluptuously textured afro, her head only came up to my chest. There was something slightly disconcerting about being taller than my mother, but there was no doubt who was in charge. Then I remembered I needed an ally.

“Daddy wants to have my brain dissected.”

“What?” Ma pulled back and looked up at my face.

Behind me, Daddy sighed. “Don’t be so dramatic, Sayra. I want her to see Kabir.”

Ma squinted as she worked out who Kabir was, and then she put her hands on her hips. *Yes!* That stance meant she was about to lay down the law. Ma always supported my gift. She never made me feel like a freak and always had an ear ready to listen. No matter how stupid my dreams were. With Daddy, it was like he thought it would go away if he ignored it.

“Rodney,” Ma said.

“Grace.” Daddy lifted an eyebrow. “Now that we’ve been introduced, you wanna sit down and discuss this as a family?”

She pursed her lips, turned, and went into the kitchen. Daddy and I followed.

One sniff had my mouth watering. Did Ma prepare my favorite dinner? To be sure, I got a closer look. Crispy golden chicken sizzled in a pan on the stovetop. The crockpot was full of collards, flavored with smoked turkey necks. Yaya’s old cast-iron skillet held buttery cornbread. Mac and cheese bubbled in the oven. And last but most definitely not least, lemon cake for dessert. Not Ma’s usual healthy meals, but oh so good.

The rumble in my stomach momentarily made me miss what this meal meant. Ma must’ve been really worried. She cooked like this for two reasons: the holidays and nerves. The sight of that food no longer comforted me like my mother

probably intended. If she was that worried, Daddy could convince her I needed to see a specialist.

I prepared the argument in my head. It would need to have logic to win over my father and passion to win over my mother. The doorbell rang. Daddy left the kitchen to answer it. A moment later, he returned with Ivan and Penny. My friends looked like they expected to find me strapped to a gurney with intravenous tubes supplying my fluids.

“Ivan, Penelope. It’s nice to see you,” Ma said. Much to Penny’s chagrin, my mother always called her by her full name.

“Sayra,” Daddy said, “take your friends up to your room while your mother and I talk.”

“But—”

“Go, young lady. We’ll call you down for dinner.”

There was no arguing when Daddy called me ‘young lady’, so I sent my mother a pleading glance, hoping she would understand that meant for her to take my side no matter what. *I don’t need to see a freakin’ neurologist.*

Up in my room, Penny and Ivan took turns hugging me.

“We were so worried,” Penny said.

I flopped on my bed and toed off my shoes.

Ivan sat at my desk, swiveling the chair to face the room. “We heard that Conrad Bishop left with you. Is that true?”

I nodded, suddenly feeling tired.

“Really?” Penny sat beside me. “Why’d he do that? I thought he hated you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You know what I mean,” she corrected quickly. “We found your books in the hall, and the nurse said you never showed. Ivan thought Conrad kidnapped you.” She rolled her eyes at the ridiculousness of that. Ivan looked like he still thought his assumption was valid. “We couldn’t figure out what happened. So, we came right over after school.”

“And if you weren’t here,” Ivan said, “I would’ve gone looking for Conrad and,”—he performed a quick elbow thrust to the air. “My instructor says my elbows are deadly, on the count of them being so boney, see? He warned not to do elbow strikes to the throat unless I *really* wanna kill somebody.” He jabbed the air with his elbow again as if that said it all.

Penny stared at him for a second, like she wanted to give him her own brand of a deadly elbow strike.

“Did Mr. Brookmeyer make Conrad take you to the nurse?” she asked me.

“No, he volunteered.”

“See!” Penny slapped my thigh. “He’s changed. I watched him all day yesterday, well, when I could. He disappears during lunch. But he’s not the same Conrad we knew last year. Something’s different.”

“Before you get too excited about his so-called transformation, he only volunteered to take me to the nurse to make sure I wouldn’t sue him for hitting me with his car.”

“He what?” Ivan shot out of his chair. “He hit you? With his truck? That’s it! He’s a dead man.” He bounced on his toes, attacking the air with his sharp elbows. “I’ll kick his ass. I don’t give a damn about his *disorder* or whatever it is.”

“Will you sit down, you maniac?” Penny said, though she looked like she wouldn’t mind seeing Ivan in action again.

“I’m fine,” I said. “He only bumped me, but now my father wants to take me to a neurologist.”

Ivan stopped killing invisible assailants and exchanged a worried glance with Penny. I wasn’t meant to see that. I stood and walked to my bedroom window. At first, it annoyed and hurt me that my dad hated my gift, but the more I thought about it, the more I panicked. What if they found something? What if I had a tumor the size of a grapefruit, and there wasn’t anything they could do about it but wait for me to die? If that was the case, then I’d rather not know.

I stared down into the front yard. Ma wouldn’t fight long, or at all, if she thought something might be seriously wrong

with me. Lost in my thoughts, I was slow to realize Conrad's truck had pulled up in front of my house. How did he know where I lived? I took a half-step backward, ready to rush downstairs to meet him, but I waited and watched as he climbed out of the truck. He grabbed my bike from the bed of his truck and set it on the other side of our flagstone half-wall. Our eyes met when he glanced up. I lifted the window and the screen, then leaned out.

"Hey," I said.

He shaded his eyes with one gloved hand. "Hey. Got your address from your helmet, but I wanted to—"

"Who're you talking to?" Penny all but climbed onto my back as Ivan squeezed in on my left.

The instant Ivan saw Conrad he shouted, "You're a dead man! You think you can just run over people without consequences? Well, consequences come in the form of my elbows!"

Conrad didn't look worried or afraid, just annoyed and slightly confused. His hand went from shading his eyes to flipping Ivan the finger. Then he was in his truck, driving away. Before Penny and Ivan made an appearance, Conrad's expression seemed more open. But as soon as my two friends barged in, that vacancy returned to his eyes. If I had to guess, I'd say he was lonely. It seemed unlikely for a guy with acres of friends and more money than God.

"Man, he spooks like a deer in the woods," Ivan said.

"He flipped you the finger," Penny said. "Didn't seem too spooked to me."

"Yeah, but he ran away. He knows the deal."

I turned to them. "Maybe what he had to say was just for me."

"What could he possibly have to say only to you?" Ivan asked.

I shrugged, but he had been about to say something. Truly, there was only one thing I wanted to hear from Conrad

Bishop, and I doubted I ever would.

“Anyway,” Ivan said. “We have more important things to discuss. I want you to tell us about the dream.”

“You’ve read it already. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“You want to help this man, don’t you?” He tugged on my hand, then he made me sit on my bed. “Your journal was hard to read, plus details are missing, so we need to sort them out if we’re going to find this man and help him.”

I blinked at him, then at Penny. She pulled a notebook from her backpack, ready to take notes.

“Help the man?” I asked. “Help him how? I don’t even know who he is.”

“Haven’t you ever changed the outcome of one of your dreams by interfering?” Ivan asked.

I lifted a shoulder. “Sometimes things don’t happen exactly like I dreamed them, but it’s only minor details, like with breaking my arm. I was laughing in my dream, and no one shoved me. But what happened was I was angry, and Conrad pushed me.”

“Okay. Let’s get started.” Ivan made me recount the dream, not from the diary, but from memory. “You said it was chilly out on the grass, right?” he asked. “Was it chilly, or was it cold like the difference between fall and winter?”

“Are you serious?” Penny asked. “It’s Marris. The difference between *summer* and winter can be only ten degrees.”

Ivan sighed as though it was so difficult to be surrounded by inferior intellect. “We haven’t even established that this house is in Marris. It could be anywhere, right?”

“I guess, but I’ve never dreamed of any place other than where I was currently living or about people I don’t know. I think my dreams link to me.” That sent a shiver down my spine. I didn’t want any part of that dream to be linked to me. “But I don’t know this man. I feel like he’s someone who lives

here. Even though the house didn't look familiar, it looked like houses in this area—lots of flagstones, Mediterranean-type villas, you know.”

“See, that's what I was getting at.” Ivan sent a taunting smirk at Penny.

“Jerk,” she said and giggled when he yanked on one of her braids.

Ivan turned back to me. “So, it could be fall or winter based on how cold you were, right?”

I nodded.

“Close your eyes for a sec.”

Hesitantly, I complied. I didn't want to see that dream again, but I knew this was important.

“Think back and look around you. Is there anything that'll confirm the time of year? How light is it in the sky? Is there a calendar around?”

I reclined on the bed, and the room grew quiet. I felt the bed dip on both sides as Penny and Ivan joined me. The three of us lay there like we all had the power to see, but something about having my friends with me made remembering less scary.

I sighed. “I wrote it down, and I shouldn't have.”

“Why?” Penny asked.

“Because writing it down releases it. Otherwise, I'd keep reliving it.” Too late to do anything about that now, so I tried my best to bring back all I could remember. “It's dark. The yard is huge. So huge it shouldn't be called a yard. Maybe just land. I feel the cold. That's it... I'm actually cold. So, I'm thinking it's winter and late at night or early morning. It gets below fifty sometimes at night in the winter. I don't see a clock yet.”

I stopped talking as I brought back the memory of running with the man and slipping inside the house with him.

“There are half a dozen glass doors, and we get into the house through one of those. We’re in a room on the main floor, maybe a living room, but fancier. There’s a sofa and other furniture in front of me. A room that may be a dining room, is to my left, but I can’t see any furniture, so I’m not sure. We move straight ahead, past another living room, and, oh—” I sat up and opened my eyes.

“What is it?” Ivan sat up, too.

I smiled. “I think it was around mid-to-late December because there’s a small Christmas tree in the extra living room, or whatever that room is called.”

“Awesome.”

Penny sat up on my right, scribbling in her notebook. “Winter, nighttime, Christmas tree,” she said as she wrote. “You said he had on a tuxedo, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe it’s New Year’s.”

“Maybe,” I said.

Ivan stood. “Good thinking, Penn. Glad to see those tight braids haven’t stopped the blood flow to your brain.”

“I’ll *start* your blood flowing if you don’t leave me alone.”

Before they could go off on their usual tit-for-tat, my mother walked in. “Dinner’s ready. Would you two like to join us?”

“Oh, sorry, ma’am.” Penny stood. “I’ve gotta get home. Thanks though.”

“How about you, Ivan?” Ma smiled, reached up, and patted his cheek. “You’re getting more handsome every day. Bet you’re beating back the girls with a stick.”

Penny snorted. “More like the other way around.”

Ivan’s flushed cheeks went redder, going from embarrassed by Ma’s flattery to anger at Penny.

“Thanks, Mrs. Price, but I need to get home too.”

He left quickly, and Penny stared after him. “What’s his problem? I was only kidding.”

Ma smoothed a hand over Penny’s shoulder. “It’s only because comments from you mean so—”

“Ma, Penny has to leave.” I all but shoved Penny out of my room, rushed her down the steps, and out of the house with a quick hug and goodbye.

Ma came up behind me. “What was that about?”

“You were about to say something I didn’t want you to.”

“What?” she asked, then frowned, understanding my reason. “You never told Ivan and Penelope about your dream?”

“God, no.”

“Why not? I’m sure they’d like to know.”

“I know my friends, and they wouldn’t want to know I dreamed of them going to prom next year as boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“But it’s so sweet.”

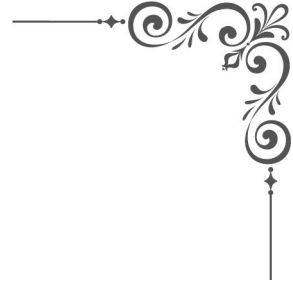
“No, Ma. They like each other, but they need to come to it on their own. So please don’t say anything. I don’t want them to do anything that’ll alter that future.”

Ma nodded. “Okay, I get it. I’ll keep my big mouth shut.” She smiled. “Now, let’s eat. Your father and I need to talk to you.”

*Damn.* I could see it all in her face; she sided with him.

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## CHAPTER SIX

EVEN THOUGH MY FATHER was a doctor, I really didn't enjoy going to them—the white coats, the sterile environment, the sick people—*ugh*. My parents picked me up early from school and then sat on either side of me in the waiting room. Apparently, I was a flight risk.

Dr. K., as he asked me to call him, was just as I remembered him. Short, dark, and smelled faintly of garlic. I looked around the exam room while his nurse took my blood pressure and temperature, then listened to my breathing. I remembered that Dr. K.'s oldest son died last year in a motorcycle accident. He was only a few years older than me. That made me rethink my plan to be as hostile as possible to my parents and Dr. K.

“So, Sayra, why don't you tell me what brings you here?”

“My father made me.” Apparently, I still had some lingering hostility.

Dr. K. laughed, but Daddy shot me a look that said I better cut it out.

“Headaches,” I said.

Dr. K. asked more questions. I felt like I was taking the S.A.T. with all the detailed answers he required. He looked into my ears, up my nose, into my eyes, and had his nurse draw blood. To my delight, he didn't recommend a lobotomy or anything else since I only had the one migraine. It took everything in me not to leap off the table and do a dance. I could see the disappointment on my dad's face. He didn't want me to be sick, but he wanted to explore every option. I bet he was hoping Dr. K. would flip a switch in my brain and shut off my dreams.

“Rodney,” Dr. K. began. “There's no indication of anything serious. Some people have a migraine and never have another for years, if ever. Right now, I would rather monitor her and see if she has another incident rather than expose her to expensive tests if it's unnecessary.”

“I’m not concerned with the costs, Kabir.” Daddy stood. “If this was one of your children, what would you do?”

Dr. K. pressed his lips together and stared at daddy. “I would do what I’m doing now. She’s young. Her body’s going through hormonal changes, and these changes can trigger many things. If you notice an increase in headaches, or if she has another migraine, bring her back, and we’ll schedule any battery of tests needed. Until then, here’s a list of natural remedies she can use to help. I don’t feel comfortable putting her on medication for one migraine.” He handed the paper to my father, who seemed only slightly mollified.

On the ride home, I read over the recommendations that Dr. K. gave to help with the headaches. Ginkgo biloba, ginger, and kava kava, to name a few. I hadn’t heard of half the herbs on the page but was pretty certain they would all taste like horse sweat. Still, I’d gladly drink something revolting over having my brain dissected.

“Maybe we can find another specialist,” Daddy muttered to Ma as if I wouldn’t hear.

“You know, Daddy, no amount of tests, scans, or medicine will keep me from having dreams.” From the back seat, I saw my father stiffen. “It’s a part of me, and the sooner you accept it, the better.”

He didn’t respond, only focused on pulling into our driveway. I wasn’t trying to start an argument, but I wouldn’t let him make me feel like I had a *condition* that needed to be cured. Daddy parked the car, shut off the engine, and turned to me.

“Sayra, I’m not trying to stop your dreams. I just want to make sure they aren’t the byproduct of an underlying condition. You trust me, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but—”

“If you trust me, then trust that I only want what’s best for you and nothing more.”

“I know that, Daddy, but you hate that I have these dreams \_\_\_”

“No, I don’t,” he said, but he couldn’t look at me.

“You do.” On some level, my father was weirded-out by me, and it broke my heart. “I can’t get rid of it, and even if I could, I wouldn’t want to.” Tears stung my eyes. “This might freak you out, but it’s who I am, and I’m going to use this gift to help that man, no matter what you think.”

I dashed out of the car before my parents could respond. No doubt they were stunned into silence. I never shouted or talked back. I grabbed my bike and hopped on.

Daddy lurched from the car, but I pedaled past him.

“Sayra, get back here.”

I had to get away. All my life I’d been daddy’s little girl and proud of it. If my father thought I was a freak, maybe I was a freak. Before I realized it, I was peddling up Ivan’s driveway. We all lived in a line of sorts. My house was closest to town, being the least expensive in the luxurious suburban area. Ivan’s neighborhood was more affluent, so he lived further out into the suburbs. Penny had the most expensive house of the three of us, and therefore, she lived about a mile from the water.

I knew Ivan wouldn’t be home from school yet, so I parked my bike by the huge pepper tree in his front yard. When I first became friends with Ivan three years ago, we would climb his tree and play for hours. It was amazing what two thirteen-year-olds could find to entertain ourselves without touching the ground. Other kids our age probably thought it was childish to climb trees, but Ivan and I always had that slight immaturity in common. All the same, it was up in his tree that Ivan and I kissed a month after meeting. Call it an experiment. That was how I thought of it. We’d never kissed anyone and wondered what all the fuss was about. I’m still wondering.

Remembering what seemed like a lifetime ago, I climbed the tree and waited for Ivan to come home. The California Pepper was a sprawling mess of a tree, but perfect for climbing and hiding, which was what I wanted to do. I didn’t

climb too high but found a fat, twisty branch that allowed me to recline and relax.

Nearly an hour passed before Ivan pulled up in his raggedy Toyota. He had a contradicting stride that made him seem macho yet gangly—an awkward confidence. Ivan glanced at the tree and then did a double-take at my bike. He hurried to the front door and went inside. After a few minutes, he came back to the front steps, eyes narrowed as he scanned the yard. I almost yelled that I was in the tree, but wanted to see if he would figure it out. Then, with quick steps, he approached the tree. Stopping at the trunk, he looked up.

“What are you doing up there?”

I shrugged. “Had a fight with my dad.”

“You coming down?”

“Nope.”

He huffed, then grabbed a wide branch, hooked his foot in the split trunk, and hoisted himself up. Ivan climbed like a monkey. His long limbs and lean muscles made quick work of reaching me. He swung his leg over and straddled the broad branch I sat on.

“How was school?” I asked as I methodically tore leaves into confetti, making a pile on my thigh.

“Same as ever. How’d the doctor’s appointment go?”

“Fine, I guess. He didn’t want to test me, just gave me some herbal remedies.”

“Cool.” Ivan let me sprinkle the confetti leaves over his head.

“You’d think that’d be good news, right? But my father has it in his head that I need to be *cured* of my dreams.”

Ivan shook out his fro until all the leaves were gone. “Do you think you can be cured?”

“It’s not a sickness,” I snapped.

“Cured was your word. But if you could do something that would keep you from having the dreams, would you?”

“No.” I started on a new leaf. “It’s like, I had one bad dream, well, it was a terrible one, and now Dr. Daddy is acting like I’ve got brain cancer, and that’s what’s been causing my dreams. It’s ridiculous. If I dreamed of next week’s lottery numbers, he wouldn’t complain.”

“Aw, man. If you ever do, you better tell me. I need a new car in the worst way.”

I looked through the branches at Ivan’s hooptie, then over at his extravagant home. “Why’d your parents get you that hunk of crap? Clearly, they can afford a new one.”

“That’s how the rich stay rich, Sayra, give crap to their kids. Otherwise, I might get spoiled, and they can’t have that. That car used to be my dad’s, then my brother Isaac’s. He got a new one when he went to college and left me with that trash.”

I chuckled and sprinkled more leaves on his head.

“Will you stop that?” He took off his glasses and shook his fluffy hair in my face. We sat quietly for a while. Cool air blew around us and made me sleepy, but I was glad I had come to see Ivan.

He smiled at me. “You realize we were on this very branch when you kissed me three years ago?”

“Um... I think you’ve got that backwards. You kissed me.”

“You wish.” He pushed my shoulder. “I distinctly remember *you* leaned in. The person who starts the lean is the kisser. *I* was the kissee.”

“Kissee?”

“Correct.” He grinned.

I blew another shredded leaf from my palm. “I don’t remember it that way, but whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I make out with my pillow every night, wishing it was you.”

There was just enough sarcasm in his voice to keep the smile on my face. But suddenly, Ivan was closer. It took a second for me to understand that he was *leaning in*. The smile

dropped from my face. He stopped grinning too, and then his lips were on mine. For a paralyzed moment, we stayed like that, lips stuck together, holding our breaths. Then Ivan's hand gripped my shoulder, and he tilted his head. Our lips parted, and we kissed—a real honest-to-God kiss.

“Ivan?” his mother called from what seemed like miles away. “Ivan, are you out here?”

He broke the kiss with a smack. “I’m... I’m in the tree,” he answered, keeping his eyes locked on mine.

“Well, get in here and do your homework.”

The front door closed, but neither of us moved. I couldn't believe Ivan kissed me. I mean, *really* kissed me. His tongue was in my mouth! And I didn't stop him. I kissed him back. Oh God, I kissed him back. Sweat broke out in my armpits. I scrambled down the tree. It took Ivan a bit longer to snap back to reality. I had already jogged my bike to the edge of his property when he jumped down from the tree.

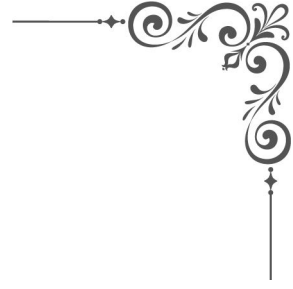
“Sayra, wait!”

I climbed on and pedaled like crazy. I couldn't face him—not yet. Ivan kissed me, and I let it happen.

Later that night, after studying, dinner, and thoroughly brushing Ivan's kiss out of my mouth, I bolted upright in bed, waking from a fitful sleep. A stabbing pain hit the center of my chest. Another dream. A terrible, awful dream. It lingered, throbbing in the back of my head.

“No. Please.”

Shame kept me from logging this dream in either journal. But I had to write it down, or it would torment me forever. I climbed out of bed, grabbed a random piece of paper, and wrote fast. When I was done, I balled up the paper and threw it in the trash, where that dream belonged.



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## CHAPTER SEVEN

ON SATURDAY, PENNY called to remind me we had study-group at Conrad's later. *Great*. Just what I needed—a study session with a guy who hated me and the best friend I let kiss me for some unknown reason. Toss Hillary and Tag into the mix, and it was shaping up to be a fantastic afternoon. I needed to talk to somebody about that kiss. Ivan was out of the question, and so was Penny. Even though she had no idea she was supposed to end up with Ivan, I felt like I would betray her. No, I *had* betrayed her. Ivan already belonged to her.

That was my list of confidantes... well, maybe not. I crawled out of bed, washed up, and headed downstairs. Ma sat at the kitchen island, writing up a grocery list.

“Morning.” She smiled up at me and puckered her lips.

I leaned down and touched my cheek to her mouth. She made a loud smack and ran a hand through my hair. I shuffled over to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of coconut water.

“Where's Daddy?”

“Down in Cover City. It's his weekend to work at the shelter.”

“Oh, right.”

“You want some eggs?” She folded the grocery list and slid it into the back pocket of her jeans.

“Sure. Scrambled, please.”

Ma hummed as she cracked eggs into a bowl. I chewed my lip, contemplating talking to her. She was a good listener, but I felt ashamed of what Ivan and I had done. I couldn't shake the feeling that somehow I was going to steal Ivan away from Penny.

“Ma, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure,” she said as she poured the eggs into a skillet.

How to start? “I had a dream, and—”

“Another nightmare?” She turned from the stove. “Did somebody else die?” She grabbed the dishtowel, twisting it with nervous energy.

“No, not another nightmare, but I didn’t like the dream.”

Sighing, she turned back to the eggs, stirring until they were fluffy. She scraped them onto a plate and handed it to me. My appetite was gone.

“What was the dream about?”

“I was at a dance with Ivan.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, and we were there together... on a date. Or maybe more than a date.”

Her brows drew together. My mom had golden brown skin with big, natural hair, bright brown eyes, and full lips she painted with the most colorful lipsticks. Blues, reds, greens, grays. She wore all shades and made them work. Today, she’d painted her lips burnt orange, matching the print on her T-shirt that read, “Never Underestimate the Power of a Black Woman Who Reads.”

“More than a date?” she asked.

I swallowed and nodded. “It was like we’d been going out for a while. We were *comfortable* with each other.” Please don’t let me have to tell her his hands were all over my butt. I’m pretty sure we were planning to have sex later.

I sat on the stool in front of the island, picked up a forkful of eggs and ate, mostly because I needed something to do with my hands.

“So, what does this mean? What about your dream of Ivan and Penelope?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you like Ivan?”

“He’s my best friend.”

“You know what I mean, *Say-Say*.”

I glanced away from her. “No, I don’t think I like him like *that*.” An image of Conrad popped into my head. I mentally gagged and punched his face out of my mind.

She studied me for a long moment. Her eyes weren’t like the truth serum that Daddy’s were, but because I already felt guilty, the entire story was about to burst from my mouth. I didn’t want to tell her about the kiss.

“Were you at the prom with Ivan in Penelope’s place?”

“No. It was the winter dance.”

“This year?”

I nodded.

Ma made a noise in her throat and began washing out the skillet. “Well, maybe this dream won’t negate the other. Maybe you’ll go to the winter dance with Ivan as friends, and by prom, he’ll be with Penelope.”

“No, Ma, you don’t understand. Penny and I weren’t friends in the dream. I... I don’t know what I did, but I could tell she hated me, and she looked so sad, and it’s all my fault.” Tears stung the corners of my eyes. Seeing them, Ma put down the skillet and came around the island to stand in front of me.

“Say-Say, there’s more to this, isn’t there?”

Damn her motherly intuition. I sniffed, lowered my head, and said, “We kissed.”

“You and Ivan?”

I nodded.

“In the dream?”

“No,” I whispered.

I could feel her trying to look into my eyes, but I kept my shameful head low.

“You kissed him, but you said you don’t like him.”

“He kissed me.”

“But you kissed him back, I’m assuming, or else we wouldn’t be having this conversation, and you wouldn’t look

so miserable.”

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “I kissed him back.” I wiped the single tear that escaped and felt dumb for getting so upset. My friends were extremely important to me. I hated that I might’ve messed everything up with one stupid kiss.

“I don’t know why I kissed him back. We were in the tree, and I just felt so... so... I don’t know. Daddy pissed me off, and...” I didn’t want to talk about Conrad. It was silly to be upset because he ordered me never to touch him.

“And what, Sayra?”

I hunched my shoulders. “I think maybe I let Ivan kiss me because we were sitting where we had our first kiss, and no boy has kissed me since or wanted to, and maybe some part of me wanted to see what it would be like to have a guy kiss me. Why don’t boys like me, Ma? What’s *so* wrong with me?”

She opened her mouth, but I kept talking.

“I don’t think Ivan likes me like *that*. I know he likes Penny even if he can’t admit it yet. And now, just because I wanted to see how it would feel to kiss someone, I’ve messed up everything.” I was breathing hard by the time I finished.

“Well.” Ma smoothed my hair away from my face and patted my cheek. “Sounds like you’ve at least figured out most of it. There’s nothing wrong with wanting attention from a boy. You’re at the age where that’s normal. And as for why boys don’t like you, well, the only explanation is boys are stupid.”

I smiled, but didn’t feel better.

“Wait,” she continued. “That’s not fair. Your father is always giving me the *male’s perspective*, and I try to consider that whenever I interact with men. We expect boys to make the first move, put themselves out there, and do all the approaching. It’s intimidating. Think about if you had to walk up to a boy you liked and ask him out. It’s hard, Say-Say. I guarantee that at least a dozen boys at West Nottingham think you’re gorgeous, but are too afraid to approach you.”

I snorted. “There are zero boys who think I’m gorgeous, Ma. Zero.”

“Pay closer attention. You’re tall with a nice shape. You’ve got your father’s flawless dark skin, my full lips, my dark, dreamy eyes, and a luscious combination of both our hair that hangs so beautifully when you... comb it.” She picked at my hair until I moved out of her reach.

*Great.* She was talking like a writer. No way I looked like that.

“You’re becoming a woman,” she said. “I bet if the boys haven’t noticed, the girls have.”

“Huh? Are you saying there are girls attracted to me?”

“No, Say-Say. Well, yeah, sure. Why not?” She shrugged. “I’m saying girls always know their *competition*, even though there’s no such thing. People like who they like.”

My mother had gone insane. No one thought I was gorgeous, and I was no one’s competition unless the contest was rebuilding a carburetor.

“Back to the problem,” she said. “How do you fix this?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never changed the outcome of my dreams before, not in a major way. But I don’t just want to change this last dream with Ivan. I want to bring back my original dream of the two of them at prom. I hope it’s possible, not only because of Penny, but if I can do that, I can help that man. Maybe it won’t be so hard. If I flat out refuse to go to the dance with Ivan, then the outcome has to be different, right?”

“Perhaps.”

“Why perhaps?”

“Sometimes, no matter which way you go, you can still end up at the same destination. You need to talk to Ivan. Find out why he kissed you. Find out how he feels about you. Get his answer before you give your own, but be honest with him, even if it puts you in a vulnerable position.” She smiled and then added, “We should probably have a talk about sex.”

“*What?* No thanks. I’m not even thinking about... I wouldn’t... I mean, we’ve already had that talk.”

“Biology, yeah. But you’re not... you’ve always been a bit... *conservative*, so I probably let this talk go a little late.”

*I think my mother just called me a prude.*

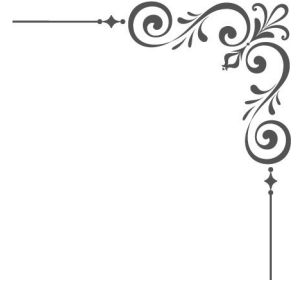
“We need to talk about responsibility, birth control, what to do if you’re being pressured, or what to do when you have sex. How it’ll feel, things you can do to make it good for you and for him, that you may not have an orgasm our first time. What to expect when—”

“Please, stop talking.” I clamped my hands over my ears.

Ma laughed. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure your father isn’t around when we talk.”

Fearing she would launch into the dreaded conversation right then, I wolfed down the rest of my eggs and rushed out of the kitchen.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

MY MOTHER'S WORDS WERE fresh in my mind, so I took down my afro puff and finger-combed my hair. It looked wild, sticking up in all directions and full of static. According to my mother, my hair was a mix of 4a and 4b curls, with a patch in the middle that was 4c. All of it required serious upper body strength to manage. But once I wetted it and worked in some of my mother's expensive butters and goop, the strands settled enough for me to part my hair in the middle and let my coils hang.

The plan was for me to pick up Ivan, then we'd scoop Penny and head over to Conrad's house. The glee of getting to drive my car almost drowned out the squirming in my stomach at the thought of being alone with Ivan and Conrad, too. Since he'd come back to school, I'd felt unsettled around him. Whatever it was, it didn't feel like my normal hostility, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

My '67 mustang sat gleaming in the sun like a navy-blue rocket. The interior held the faint scent of leather cleaner and the lingering stench of cigarettes. That odor wouldn't leave, no matter what I did. It didn't really bother me, though, it kind of made the car seem more grown-up. The roar of the engine gave me chills. I loved cars. Not obsessively like everybody thought, but I was proud I had turned this hunk of metal into a viable means of transportation—along with my family's mechanic.

It took no time to reach Ivan's house. I had hoped to think of something to say to him, but a black spot sat in my brain where ideas were supposed to live. I parked, turned off the engine, and sat in my car. The California pepper tree rustled in the breeze, and I gave it a baleful eye. I could blame it. It was a tree. What could it do about it? I jumped when the car door opened, and Ivan flopped inside.

"Heard your motorcycle on four wheels a block away." He smiled. "Your hair looks pretty."



My fingers absently ran over a few springy locks. I thanked him; I think. At least I could look at him, even if my mouth wouldn't work. He tossed his backpack in the backseat and then stared at me expectantly.

"You know, you'll need to turn the car on for it to move."

I blinked. Maybe he didn't want to talk about it. But we had to talk about it. Otherwise, it would sit between us like a smelly bag of garbage. What if he thought we were together now, that he was my boyfriend?

"Ivan, we have to talk about yesterday." I shifted so I could face him.

"Okay."

What to say? I expected him to be more... well, I didn't really know what I expected, but I thought he'd have something to say.

"Do you like me?" I asked.

He looked over at me. "Well, yeah, that's why we've been best friends for three years."

"You know what I mean. Why'd you kiss me? And please don't tell me it's because you're a horny teenaged boy."

"I think you know me better than that."

"Yeah," I said.

He sighed, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. His long brown lashes held just the slightest curl at the ends, creating shadows on his cheeks as he looked down at his lenses. He really was cute.

"Sayra, I don't know what I feel about you. I think the kiss kinda happened from being in the tree and thinking about that first kiss and the fact that I haven't kissed a girl since..."

He slipped his glasses back on. The similarities in our reasons struck me. Ivan and I always had that awkward, not quite fitting in thing in common.

He continued. "I really want a girlfriend, and don't take this the wrong way, but I thought you would be the least likely

to slap me if I put a move on you.” He gave me a sheepish, lopsided grin. “A big part of me likes our friendship the way it is, but then there’s another part that wonders how it would be if we got together.” He shrugged. “Why don’t you tell me how you feel about me?”

I opened my mouth and then remembered what Ma said. It would be important for him to tell me his true feelings first. If I told him that I did or didn’t want to be with him, he’d probably say the same thing, even if it wasn’t true. I would hate for Ivan to date me just because I was the path of least resistance. Not that I thought he’d do that, but you just never knew.

Before I could speak, he said, “Do you think we should kiss again?”

“What?” I screeched. “Why?”

“Because I was so shocked that I actually kissed you, I didn’t even notice how I felt about it.”

I thought about that for a moment. It was true. I didn’t know how I felt about the kiss, either. I expected my first proper kiss to curl my toes, make me swoon, or get me all glassy-eyed and stupid like the girls I’ve seen at school. At the very least, I should’ve fallen out of the tree.

“Okay,” I said, and was immediately terrified. *What the hell is wrong with me? I agreed to kiss Ivan again.* There was no telling what I was about to screw up now. Surely, my next dream would be of us married with children. Penny would be our nanny, and Ivan would cheat with her every chance he got. But we needed to see how we felt about each other. What if he was meant to be my boyfriend? As much as my stomach twisted at the thought of taking him from Penny, even before she had him, I had to make sure.

Ivan sat his glasses on the dashboard and looked at me. He licked his lips, and I did the same. Then we leaned into each other, and it was the longest twelve inches of my life. The sun shone through the front windshield and made his eyes sparkle like dark amber. An inch away, I could smell the mint on his

breath and wondered what my breath smelled like. Eggs? Coconut water? Lord, help me.

Our lips met, and this time I paid attention. Instinctually, we tilted our heads in opposite directions. Did that mean something? His lips were soft. Maybe they were soft in the tree, but I hadn't noticed. Ivan ran his tongue over my bottom lip. My pulse thudded in my neck, but I met his tongue with my own. His hand moved up my left arm, squeezed my shoulder, and came to rest at the nape of my neck. He scrunched my hair in his hand, and I knew it was still damp and coated with the butters and oils I'd rubbed through it. Should I do something too? Yeah, sure, why not? I put my hand on his shoulder. There. That should do it. We stayed like that for what felt like an hour, but was more like a few long seconds.

“So?” he prompted when the kiss was over.

I slumped back in my seat. “I don't know.” My thoughts about the kiss were clinically. That wasn't how I expected to think about my first kiss... or second, so I knew what I had to do.

“Okay, listen, Ivan.” I chewed my lip. “There's somebody who really likes you, only she may not know it yet, or if she does, she's not ready to admit it. And I think you might like her too.”

He shifted in the seat. “Is this somebody *you*?” He patted my hand with patronizing concern.

“No, *stupid*. It's... well, I don't want to tell you, because \_\_\_”

“You dreamed it?” His eyes widened. “You did, didn't you?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Yes!” He jabbed the dashboard with his fist. “I knew it. Who is it?”

Seeing his excitement made me ignore the abuse of my car. I'd made the right decision by giving him the information.

“I’m not telling you who she is,” I said, “but let me ask you this. If I told you I dreamed of you with a pretty girl, would you dismiss that to be with me?”

His smile fell away. He ran a hand through his bushy hair. I could see that he was thinking about it, choosing his words.

“Just say it, Ivan. You won’t hurt my feelings.”

He cleared his throat and wouldn’t meet my eyes. With a shrug, he said, “I... I think I’d choose the mystery girl.”

All the air seemed to seep from the car. I was wrong. It hurt. Ivan belonged with Penny. Some part of me always knew that, but being tossed over for door number two still sucked. What was so wrong with me that one of my best friends would prefer an invisible girlfriend over me, right in his face?

With some effort, I put on my most sincere smile and said, “Good. Now that we’re done with that, let’s never speak about this again.” I started the car, happy that the grumbling engine killed some of the silence.

“Sayra.” Ivan reached over and touched my arm. “You know I love you, right? But I—”

“It’s fine.”

My lips quivered as I tried to smile at him again. Maybe he saw it, but thankfully, he said nothing else. When the silence reached a painfully awkward level, Ivan dug in the front pocket of his jeans and came out with something black and furry. He peeled off a tab from the back, stuck the furry thing under his nose, and grinned at me from behind a handlebar mustache.

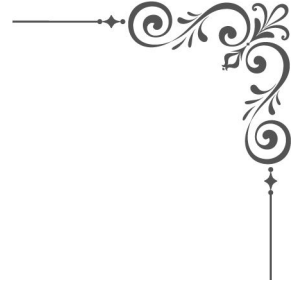
“Statistically, cops are more likely to pull over a car with a group of teens,” he said. “This way, they’ll think you’re driving with an adult.”

“An adult about to tie me to the railroad tracks.”

Laughter exploded from him, far more aggressively than necessary. I felt so miserable a minute ago, I was looking for anything to take it away, so I laughed too. Then I pulled off,

and headed for Penny's house, trying to forget how good dream-me felt with Ivan holding her in his arms.

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## CHAPTER NINE

PENNY'S HOUSE LOOKED more like a tropical resort—lots of fountains, colorful flowers—than a place where people lived every day. Technically, it was one of her family's summer homes, but they made it their permanent residence during the school year. Penny didn't want to move for her father's new acting career, and apparently, her pouting went a long way.

She ran down the winding driveway and halted when she got a foot from my car. Her mouth turned down as she looked at Ivan.

“What in the world is on your lip?”

He climbed out of the car, grabbed her, and rubbed the woolly mustache on her face until her high-pitched squeals gave me a headache. When he turned her loose, they both looked flushed by how close they had been. Awkwardly, Ivan climbed into the backseat so Penny could sit next to me. Things like that let me know they were meant to be together. Sadness, fear, and guilt swooped down on me so swiftly I could hardly breathe. Please don't let me have messed that up. Instead of giving in to it, I put the car into gear and headed for Conrad's house.

We were practically at the water when we turned onto a private road. What was it like to step out of the house and be right at the bay? I was sure I'd never know. A formidable wrought-iron gate prevented me from driving onto the property. Hedges so thick, they could've hidden a brick wall, stood at attention on both sides of the gate.

“What do we do now?” Ivan asked.

Before I could answer, a voice said, “May I help you?”

I stuck my head out the window and spotted a monitor mounted on the stone pillar beside the gate. A stern male face glared down at me. His finger was undoubtedly poised over a button that would vaporize my car the moment I gave the wrong answer.

“Um... My name is Sayra Price, and we're here to see Conrad.”

Stern Man studied me for a terrifying moment. Just when I thought he was going to obliterate us, he said, “When the gate opens, pull ahead and take the road on your right until it ends. Exit your vehicle and wait.”

“Sure.”

I glanced at Penny. She shrugged. Even she was awed, and she'd certainly been to more elaborate homes than I had.

“Ivan,” Penny said. “Behave when we get in here.”

“Whatchu mean by that?”

She twisted in the seat to look back at him. “Keep your lethal elbows to yourself.”

He grunted his agreement. I followed Stern Man's directions and pulled up to a small parking lot, big enough for maybe twenty cars. Hillary and Tag waited beside Tag's yellow Xterra. Hillary seemed ready for tea and crumpets, and Tag looked like he'd just come from eighteen holes of golf.

“About time,” Hillary said. “What part of one o'clock don't you idiots understand?”

“It's only ten after,” Ivan said.

“Exactly.” Hillary tipped down her shades and met Ivan's eyes. “Ten minutes is the difference between winners and losers.”

Ivan winked at her, then sent a beaming smile to Tag. “How's it going?” The cockiest nerd ever born.

Tag returned a glare. Their scuffle from a few days ago was not yet water under the bridge. I suspected it wouldn't be for some time.

A man in a starched red jacket rode up in a golfcart. “Good afternoon.”

So, this was how the other half rolled. Not too shabby. The golf cart was a welcomed surprise. I wasn't looking forward to



the pit stains I'd undoubtedly have if forced to walk from the parking lot over to the house.

Hillary sashayed to the cart and climbed in. "Hello, Juan," she said, making it obvious she'd been there plenty of times before.

"I am Miguel, Miss Hillary."

"Whoops," she said, flipping her hair.

We sat in the long golf cart, with our backpacks on our laps, while Miguel drove. Though three houses were on the grounds, there was no mistaking the main house. It was a palace of flagstone and palm trees, flowers, and fountains. I thought Penny had a big house, but this was one of those houses that needed to be filmed from the air so I could understand the full scope of it.

Some part of me didn't think these houses existed. It blew my mind that a single residence could be enormous enough for me to get lost. As manicured as a golf course, green lawns rolled across the hillside and down toward the bay. I spotted tennis courts, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a stone grotto, and several boats docked at the bay.

Miguel followed a paved road past the front of the main house and stopped at the foot of slate steps outside a smaller Mediterranean villa. Even this *smaller* house was still huge. A guesthouse? Miguel helped Penny and Hillary as the rest of us jumped out without assistance.

"Ring the bell, and someone will come to let you in," Miguel called as he rode away.

Ivan and Penny looked at me as if I should be the one to ring the bell.

"It's not like they don't know we're coming," I said, climbing the steps. An urge came over me to grab the big brass knocker and slam it down as hard as I could, but I rang the bell like a civilized person.

Tag and Hillary stepped up on my left. Ivan and Penny came up on my right. Just as the double doors opened with slow poise, Penny reached up and ripped the fake mustache

from Ivan's lip. He let out a howling scream along with a flood of curse words that would've surely had his mother sitting him in front of a rabbi if she had heard.

Stern Man stared down at us like five turds just knocked on the door. Ivan's eyes watered from the pain. Penny looked torn between mortification and giggles. I couldn't stop laughing.

"Basil, we are *so* not with them," Hillary said to Stern Man.

His sneer remained. Before he could slam the door in our faces—which I was certain he was about to do—Conrad stepped up beside him. He wore army-green cargo pants and a long-sleeved shirt with a picture of a monkey picking its nose on the front.

"Young Master Bishop, your... *guests* have arrived."

Hillary didn't look too pleased to be grouped in with the rest of us.

"Thanks, Basil." Conrad took in the five of us like he'd made a mistake offering his home for the study session, but he stepped back and allowed us inside.

"If you would be so good as to wipe your feet as you enter." Basil gestured gracefully toward the mat. "Follow Young Master Bishop, please."

"Awesome," Ivan said, rubbing his upper lip. "You've got your own Alfred. I knew you were Batman."

Surprisingly, Conrad laughed. I had enough time for a quick glance around as we past a sweeping marble staircase—reminiscent of *Gone With the Wind*—and down a long hallway with pastel-colored paint. Plenty of pictures hung on the walls. All ocean scenes, or abstracts. Not one family photo. We crossed through a grand eating area with a view of a pool. Stark white countertops filled the massive kitchen with pale gray marbling and cabinets to match. The house was beautiful but reminded me of the many model homes we saw when we were moving here. All polished and perfect, but you knew no one lived there. It made me a little sad for Conrad.

As we headed down another long hallway toward a less majestic set of steps than the ones at the front of the house, Hillary said, “Ugh, isn’t this the servant’s stairway?”

Conrad glanced over his shoulder and shot Hillary an annoyed look. “It’s closest to my room.”

When we got to Conrad’s room, I no longer felt sorry for him. *Now, this is more like it.* The bedroom seemed to be double the size of the average owner’s suite and ridiculously messy. Clothes were strewn about like he’d mistaken the floor for a hamper. Dishes, potato chip bags, and soda bottles made interesting nests in various places. The room smelled faintly of barbeque sauce and hotdogs, not really funky, but I still felt the desire to crack open a window.

Conrad’s walls were painted black instead of the Mediterranean colors favored on the lower level. Several digital posters of flipping snowboarders dazzled the eye. Skateboarders, twisting in various 360s, filled more screens on the walls. And quite a few pictures of scantily clad women draped over racecars rounded out the art déco. Autographed movie posters and large photos of rock bands hung between the virtual shows.

His bed was big enough to fit five robust people comfortably. The covers were tossed about like he’d actually had five people spend the night with him. And the computer equipment was staggering. Four computer monitors sat in a semicircle with a high-back gaming chair positioned in the middle to control his evil empire.

Ivan circled the room like a kid let loose at Disney World. Conrad went over to one of the computer consoles and picked up a headset. I realized he was in the middle of a game.

“Hey, guys, I’ve gotta go. Got company,” he said into the headset.

I leaned in and waved. Four guys waved back from their thumbnail windows in the corner of each monitor.

Conrad glanced over his shoulder at me. “No, she’s not my girlfriend.”

Hillary snorted. “As if that could ever happen.” Conrad quickly silenced her, stating that none of the girls in the room was his girlfriend.

I leaned closer to Hillary and said in a low voice, “I have no interest in being anything but a hostile acquaintance to Conrad, but it looks like you’ll probably never be his girlfriend again.”

Hillary rolled her eyes at me and focused her venom on Conrad. “I see this room is still as nasty as I remember.”

He snatched up a stack of books from his desk and moved toward a large closet. “You should also remember my rule: if you don’t like it, leave.”

She flushed pink. Wow, the score was Conrad, three, Hillary, zero. Maybe wait longer than a day to move on to the next guy while your boyfriend clings to life. If they ever got back together, Conrad was going to make her work for it. Tag tried to put his arm around Hillary, but she swatted him away.

I followed Conrad with my eyes, noticing the partial title on the spine of one of his books. *Suppressing Your Psy*—was all I could see. Psy-what? Psychotic Tendencies? Maybe the word had been psychic, like the other book I saw in his car. *Suppressing Your Psychic*... what? Power? Energy? As he tossed the books into the closet, I could see that the one on top had a picture of the solar system or a galaxy. Maybe Conrad was into astrology. Before I could explore that further, I noticed he didn’t have on his gloves.

I nudged Penny and sent a pointed look at Conrad’s hands. Her eyes widened. So, we could cross burns off the list of afflictions or even chicken-feet hands from OCD. His skin looked perfectly fine. He went to the other side of the room and shoved what I assumed was dirty laundry into an opening in the wall. Then he turned and caught me staring.

I smiled nervously. “So... um... why’s it so dirty in here?”

“*Sayra*.” Penny chastised.

“No manners,” Hillary said.

“It’s fine for you to comment on it,” I said to Hillary, “but I can’t?”

She smirked. “I can comment because I’m his friend. You aren’t.”

“You got that right. I’m just saying he knew we were coming,” I muttered.

“Basil and I have an agreement,” Conrad said. “The rest of the house can look like a museum, but he has to leave my room alone. I allow him in here once a week to shovel out the mess.”

“I get it,” Ivan said. “It’s like your fortress of solitude.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “I thought he was Batman, now he’s Superman? Make up your dorky mind.” Her eyes widened. “God, why do I even know the difference?”

“Cause I’m rubbing off on you.” Ivan beamed.

“Let’s get started,” Conrad said, looking ready to get this over with and get us out of his house.

He opened a drawer, pulled out a pair of white gloves, and slid them on. He had a grace about him that made me want to watch. Clearly, I wasn’t stealthy in my surveillance because he caught me staring again. He didn’t say anything, didn’t even look annoyed that I obviously had an eye problem, just flexed his fingers and joined the group. We all sat on the floor in a circle at the foot of Conrad’s bed. Hillary frowned as she dipped down in a curtsy until her butt hit the plush carpet. She made a meal out of fanning out her skirt until she looked like a photographer had posed her.

“What topic should we do?” Penny asked, pen and pad ready to take down our thoughts.

“It has to be an ethical dilemma,” Ivan said. “Preferably something that’ll have lots of shades of gray and will make people argue both sides. That’s how we’ll get a good grade. Oh yeah, and it has to deal with our lives, like an ethical dilemma in school, maybe.”

“How ‘bout this?” Conrad began. “I’m rich. What if I bribed a teacher to give me good grades?”

I sucked my teeth.

“You’ve got a problem with that?” Conrad asked, eyebrow quirked.

“Nope.”

He studied my face. “You think I’ve already bribed teachers, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t know or care what you’ve done to teachers. I just think it’s funny how you went right to that.”

“Ignore her,” Hillary said. “She’s just prejudiced against the wealthy.” Under her breath, but certainly loud enough for all to hear, she said, “Welfare.”

Conrad’s group sometimes called me that because I was at West Nottingham on a partial scholarship. I can’t honestly say I’d ever heard Conrad say it. It was mostly Hillary, but I know he laughed.

“I went right to bribery for good grades,” Conrad continued, not laughing or acknowledging Hillary’s insult. “Cause it’s a logical, ethical dilemma for high school *and* for people who have money, which most at West Nottingham do.”

“Not really,” I said. “Your example was an ethical dilemma for the teacher, and that’s not the assignment. Now, if one of us found out about the bribe, then the dilemma is ours. Do we tell? Do we keep it secret? Do we blackmail you? Blackmail you and the teacher? Offer our own bribe?”

Conrad kept his eyes locked on mine, really looking at me this time. “I like that.” He smirked as if surprised my brain worked. “And you’ve just come up with five points for us to explore. I’m hungry.”

He stood. I hated to admit it, but I wanted him to argue with me more. Hillary narrowed her eyes like she could read my thoughts.

She mouthed; *you’ll never have him.*

I mouthed back; *worried?*

I had no interest in Conrad Bishop, but rarely did I have something to taunt Hillary with.

“You guys want something to eat?” Conrad asked, waking one of his computers, seemingly unaware of the silent taunting between Hillary and me. “Anything you want.”

“Surely not anything.” A wicked gleam danced in Ivan’s eyes. “If I wanted a pizza with extra anchovies, or a bratwurst with grilled onions and spicy mustard, or a triple cheeseburger with cheddar, bacon, and barbeque sauce, I could get it?”

“Pay him no mind,” Penny said. “Someone dropped him on his head as a child. Whatever you bring for yourself is fine with me.”

“Me too.” I wasn’t hungry yet, but I would be soon.

“Personally, any of the things Ivan said sounds good to me,” Tag said. “But I’ll eat anything too.”

Tag had been uncharacteristically quiet, making me think Hillary hadn’t given him permission to speak today. I couldn’t wrap my mind around that relationship. She treated him like crap, and he took it. He was a big guy and good-looking, too. Hillary was pretty, but she wasn’t the only attractive girl in the school. He could certainly get a girl who treated him better. Yet, he was at Hillary’s disposal. If Conrad gave her just a glimmer of hope, she’d drop Tag without a second thought. He knew it too. Maybe Hillary was sleeping with him. I’d heard guys would tolerate almost anything for sex.

Conrad pulled the glove from his right hand with his teeth, then pecked out an email, clicked send, and rejoined our circle.

“Did you just email Alfred?” Ivan asked with amazement.

“His name’s Basil,” Conrad said. “And no, I emailed the chef.”

Penny, Ivan, and I exchanged glances while Conrad slipped his glove back on. This dude was *rich*, rich. My chef’s name was Ma, and if I tried to email her my lunch order, she’d make me eat my computer. Hillary went into a monologue

about how they'd been through five cooks in the past seven months because none of them could manage a proper egg-white omelet. Fortunately, Conrad got her back on our assignment before I impaled myself through the ear holes.

Soon, we fell into a rhythm. Penny took notes because she had the neatest handwriting. Conrad and I tossed out ideas about how to enhance our ethical dilemma while Ivan shot them down or gave them a thumbs up. Hillary changed positions on the floor more than a model at a photo shoot, and Tag looked around the room like he was casing the joint.

Conrad watched us. At first, I thought he was paying attention to me, studying my interactions with Ivan, and wondering if we were a couple, but he watched Ivan with Penny, too. How they teased each other to the point of anger, and the next second one would do something incredibly sweet for the other. He watched my interactions with Penny and Ivan. How we had private jokes or could say one innocent word, and the other two would understand immediately.

I realized I had been right with my previous assumption of Conrad. He was lonely, and maybe he envied my friendships, but I didn't know why. Well, I understood why he'd need better friends than Hillary and Tag. Together, they were as emotionally deep as a baby spoon. But he'd always had people vying for his friendship. At least a couple of those people could be genuine.

An hour had passed when Basil, and his stern face, wheeled in a highly polished silver cart. There looked to be enough food to feed a dozen people, not to mention two personal pizzas with anchovies, two bratwursts with onions and mustard, and two-triple cheeseburgers with bacon and barbeque sauce. Ivan nearly wept as he thanked Conrad profusely.

Penny rolled her eyes. "God, kiss him already, why don't you? And by the way, is any of that food even kosher?"

Ivan yelped. "Sorry. I thought my mother had come into the room."

Penny punched him on the arm.



For the rest of us, there was a platter of French fries—my all-time favorite fast food. There were cheeseburgers, onion rings, and bags of chips, cheese puffs, pretzels and chocolate candy bars. A few pitchers of soda sat on the bottom of the cart.

“Sorry,” Conrad said. “I forgot girls are perpetually on a diet. I can email Chef and have something else sent up.”

“Don’t you dare,” Penny and I said together.

“Conrad, you ought to know better,” Hillary said, frowning. “I care about my body and my skin. I won’t eat this stuff.”

Conrad sighed and went to the computer again. “What do you want?”

“I don’t want to be any trouble.” She batted her lashes.

“Yeah, right,” I said around a mouth full of fries.

“I’ll just have a spring salad with fresh berries, light vinaigrette, and a glass of room temperature lemon water.”

I bit into my double cheeseburger, and a glob of ketchup and mayonnaise plopped down my front. I thought Hillary was going to throw up when I licked it off my shirt, then off my hand and sucked each one of my fingers clean. Okay, so I was overdoing it to gross her out, but I couldn’t help it.

Ivan moaned as he bit into the bratwurst. Judging by the dinner I had at his house a few weeks ago, that bratwurst was the best thing he’d eaten in some time. Tag’s personal pizza was gone, and he was halfway through his bratwurst when Basil carried in Hillary’s salad.

“It’s refreshing to see a young person care about nutrition.” Basil’s bony face creased into something that might’ve been a smile until he looked at me with my stained shirt and messy fingers. Plus, I was pretty sure I had something on my face.

“Thank you, Basil,” Hillary beamed, then scowled at me. “Ignore her. She was raised in a pigsty.”

“Yes.” Basil’s face puckered. “Young Master Bishop, will you require anything else?”

“No, thanks.” Conrad sent Basil a toothy grin.

It shocked me to see the open affection on Basil’s face as he looked at Conrad, who was as messy as me. Basil pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Conrad.

“Do try to make a clean spot.” With that, he turned and left the room.

Conrad mopped his face with the hanky and tossed it behind him. We grazed like animals for the next half hour, and when I started contemplating another burger, Ivan and Conrad launched into a belching contest that killed my desire to eat anything else. Tag let out a loud belch and then promptly shut his mouth when Hillary glared at him. The bedroom door opened and, as if on cue, Basil appeared to collect our trash and wheel the cart out of the room.

“Does he just hang out waiting to fulfill your needs?” I asked Conrad.

“No. He’s just very efficient.”

We sat, digesting and fighting lethargy. Penny looked around with a small smile, lifting one side of her mouth.

“Do ya’ll think it’s possible for us to put the past behind us and be friends?” A ringing silence met her question. Instead of the smile dropping away from her face, it grew. “I see I’ve shocked the group,” she said. “Take a minute... think about it.”

Ivan shrugged and looked like he wanted to say he’d try it, but Hillary spoke up.

“Personally, I don’t think I could ever be friends with someone who hates me just because I have more money than her.” She looked directly at me.

I raised a brow. “You think *that’s* why I don’t like you? I have no problem with your money. You know that Ivan and Penny’s parents probably have more money than mine, but more importantly, I’m not poor, despite what you think.”

She snorted. “Your father practically gives away his medical help in those underprivileged communities. My maid

told me all about it like he's the next best thing to Jesus." She rolled her eyes. "And your mom's a housewife. You guys are living on one tiny income so—"

"First, her mom's not a housewife," Penny said. "Second, there's nothing wrong with being a housewife. My mom's one, and as far as I remember, your mother doesn't work outside the home either. And third, Sayra's mom is a New York Times bestselling and award-winning author. She writes under the name Olivia Newkirk."

Another silence followed Penny's statement. I glared at her, but she was too annoyed with Hillary to be cowed by my heated stare.

"And," Penny continued, "I believe last year your face was pressed into one of Sayra's mom's books, so much so, you almost got it taken away from you in class."

Hillary's mouth fished as she digested the information, just spat at her.

"My mom loved those books," Conrad whispered. "Especially the Island Love series."

That seemed to snap Hillary out of her shock. "How much do writers make, anyway? Can't be that much. Nobody reads. Books are practically free now."

That was it. My parents worked hard. I wouldn't sit there and let somebody downplay what they did for a living.

"You wanna know why I'll never be your friend, Hillary? It has nothing to do with money but everything to do with the fact that you're kind of an asshole. Money has always been the issue between us because you three have made it an issue. I actually like this messy, evil empire in this room." I looked at Conrad. "And your truck is so awesomely tricked out that I've given serious thought to whether it's a Decepticon. I like it. And believe it or not,"—I cupped my hands around my mouth like a megaphone — "I'm not jealous of you." I stood. Ivan and Penny stood with me, sensing this was the end of our study session.

I shook my head and looked down at Conrad, who returned my gaze with squinted eyes. “No, I don’t think we could ever be friends,” I said. “I won’t pick apart your character, but I will say something to you I should’ve said a long time ago.”

“Yeah, and what’s that?” Conrad stood, Hillary and Tag following suit. The tension amped up now that we were all on our feet.

My hands trembled, but I spoke as calmly as I could. “On two occasions, you could have ended my life.”

There was a collective groan of annoyance and, *not this drama again*, from Conrad, Hillary, and Tag.

“It was an accident!” Conrad shouted.

But I was going to speak my mind. “Yes,” I breathed. “You’ve said that before. You’ve also said you didn’t mean it.”

“That’s because I didn’t!”

I nodded. “But you know what you’ve never said to me, Conrad? You’ve never said, ‘I’m sorry.’”

His mouth opened as if to argue, but then he snapped it closed like that wasn’t what he’d expected me to say.

“If I’d fallen down those steps differently, it could’ve been my neck that was broken instead of my arm. If you’d been driving a few more inches to the right or faster, you could’ve run me over instead of bumping me. Not once have you apologized for causing me bodily injury. You were more worried that I would sue. So that makes me think you’re incapable of apologizing, which is an entirely different issue, or you don’t think I’m worthy. And I could never be friends with someone who thinks so little of me.”

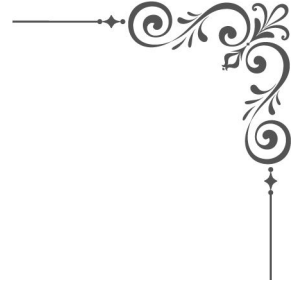
I turned, walked out of the room, and slammed the door. How ballsy was I, slamming doors in other people’s homes? I headed down the long hallway to the back stairway, hands shaking. When I reached the bottom, I got turned around. The way back to the kitchen didn’t look right. The hallway I took steered me in the opposite direction, but I found a door that led outside. That was all I wanted. I’d left, dramatically, and going back up to Conrad’s bedroom to get help would ruin it.

Somehow, I was at the back of the house. A footpath headed in the direction I thought would lead me to the parking lot, so I took it. I wasn't sure what Penny and Ivan were doing. Maybe they were explaining that they really weren't friends with that weird girl, Sayra. Naw, probably not. It was more likely Ivan was attacking the room with his dagger-like elbows, and Penny was trying to settle him down. I smiled at that thought, but it quickly dropped from my face.

A rash of goosebumps swept out over my skin as a thick patch of trees courting the edge of the property came into view. The guesthouse was closest to the water, but I'd followed the path toward the back of the main house. The wooded area looked different in the daylight, but there was no mistaking the glass doors lining the back of the mansion.

It was the house from my dream.

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## CHAPTER TEN

I COULDN'T MOVE. I stood, staring at those glass doors. The haunting memory of that man struggling his way to the panic room, only to be killed at the threshold, froze in my brain like a paused movie.

“Sayra? Are you okay?” Penny touched my arm.

I blinked at her, wondering where she'd come from.

Suddenly, Ivan was at my side. “You look kinda gray,” he said. “You about to puke?”

I glanced over my shoulder and met Conrad's eyes. His expression was unreadable. I couldn't be in his company, not after what I just figured out.

“I... I have to go.” I took off in the same direction I'd been heading, hoping to find the parking lot.

“Sayra, wait!” Ivan shouted.

I couldn't stop. I had to get away. Hillary called me crazy, but I kept running. Finally, I made it to my car, huffing and puffing and feeling queasy. Ivan was right on my heels, with Penny bringing up the rear.

“What's wrong?” He grabbed me by the shoulders.

I opened my mouth and looked at the concern on my friends' faces. “It's the house.” I panted.

“What house?” Penny asked.

“The one from my dream.”

“Oh crap. Are you serious?” Ivan dipped his head to look into my eyes.

I nodded.

“Come on. Let's go somewhere we can talk.” Ivan opened the car door and ushered me into the back seat. “I'll drive.”

No one spoke until we rode through the gates. Penny turned around in her seat and handed me her cell. “Is this the

man from your dream?”

I stared at the image of a middle-aged man with reddish-brown hair, graying at the temples, and slight crow's feet around his green eyes.

“Yeah, I think so. Who is he?”

“Harlan Bishop. Conrad's Dad.”

I was hoping she wouldn't say that.

Ivan asked, “How did you not know it was Harlan Bishop? Haven't you ever met him?”

“No,” I said. “Why would I have?”

“Um...maybe because his son broke your arm,” Ivan said.

I snorted without humor. “Conrad's mom came to the hospital and the school for the meeting. His father was out of town. He sent a gift basket full of electronics that my dad returned with a note telling Mr. Bishop to keep his bribes. I've never laid eyes on the man.”

“Oh,” Ivan said. “Maybe that's where Conrad gets his inability to apologize.”

“Can you stop the car?” I asked. We'd driven a few miles away from Conrad's estate.

“Sure.” Ivan pulled to the side of the road. “You gonna be sick?”

“No. I just need air.”

Penny opened the car door and stepped out, then flipped the seat forward so I could exit. The three of us stood alongside the road, staring out at the ocean. A lone tree sat on a hilltop, far off to our right, looking like a piece of broccoli from that distance.

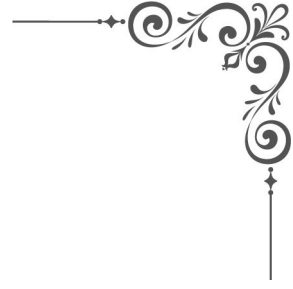
When my family first moved to Marris Bay, Daddy signed us up for one of those lame tours so we could learn about our new home. This cliff-side tree was on the tour. Standing there brought back all the fear and anxiety I had about moving across the country, but my dad helped me. He talked, listened, and made me feel safe.



I didn't know if Harlan Bishop was the type of dad that comforted Conrad and made him feel safe, but that didn't matter. No one deserved to be murdered. So, I decided.

“We have to help him.”

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I DROPPED OFF IVAN last, only after I convinced him I could make it safely back to my house. We planned to meet up tomorrow to figure out what to do about my dream. As Ivan so perfectly put it, Harlan Bishop was one of the wealthiest men in the world. Only I could dream about him and not know who the hell he was.

Three sixteen-year-olds would never get within a mile of him without security blasting us to pieces. Not to mention one teenager would be trying to tell him all about the psychic dream she had where he got sliced and diced by a gang of clowns. As much as I hated to admit it, we would probably need Conrad's help. If only I hadn't just told him off in his own home. I didn't regret telling him how I felt, but my timing could have been better.

I parked in the driveway on the side of the garage where my mother's car sat. She didn't go out as much as Daddy, so it was always best to block her in. I heard them in the kitchen and tried to sneak upstairs, but I swear my father had sonar or something.

"Sayra," he called. "Can you come in here a moment?"

I was *so* not in the mood to talk about anything related to my brain. With that in mind, I went into the kitchen with my guard up and ammo ready. They were both at the island, Daddy drinking a cup of coffee, Ma looking over something on her laptop. I knew she wasn't working on her latest manuscript because she usually shut herself away when she wrote.

That gave me an idea of how to deflect from another dream discussion. Before either of them could speak, I said, "So, my life's over." When they looked at me with eyebrows raised, I continued.

"Hillary Teagarden knows my mother writes porn."

Daddy's coffee sprayed the counter as he choked on his mouthful.

“What the hell did you just say?” Ma asked.

Her eyes locked on mine like a heat-seeking missile. Welp, I had a good run. Sixteen was probably more years than I deserved. I’m a dead girl now. *Run away, Sayra, or fake like you’re expecting projectile vomit.* If Ma kept looking at me like that, there would be no faking involved.

“I... well, I mean... Penny told me you write about heaving bosoms and throbbing erections and—”

Daddy choked again, but this time on his laughter.

Ma aimed her daggers at him. “You find it funny that our child is being disrespectful?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Sit down,” she snapped.

I plopped my butt on one of the tall stools at the island. Daddy sat on my right at the end of the island with Ma on the other side, squaring off with me.

“What do you know of the books I write?”

I licked my lips. They seemed glued together now. They should’ve been sealed shut minutes ago. I knew nothing about her books, just what Penny told me. That was enough to make me never want to read them. There was a certain ick-factor in reading sex written by your mother.

Finally, I said, “Um, I don’t really know anything. I just —”

“Exactly. You know nothing about my writing, and do you know why?”

Did she want me to answer that? “Because you told me I couldn’t read them.”

“Years ago, yes. But maybe natural curiosity could’ve made you question me by now. You’re just not concerned with anything that doesn’t have to do with car parts.”

Anger flared up inside. “So, Penny was lying? You don’t talk about taut nipples and stuff?”

“I do,” she said without a hint of embarrassment. “But give me some credit not to be such a cliché as to have heaving bosoms and throbbing erections.”

“Can we stop saying erections?” Daddy said like he wasn’t a medical doctor.

“You’re not a child anymore, Sayra. Why are you so bothered by this?”

“Because people have enough reasons to make fun of me. I don’t need to give them more. Now, Hillary knows you are Olivia Newkirk. I don’t know how, but she’ll make my life hell because of it.”

“So, you’re ashamed of me?”

I gaped at her. “No! God, no. I just...”

Truth was, I didn’t really know how I felt about what she wrote. It was embarrassing, yeah, but I wasn’t ashamed. Was I? Until that moment, I would’ve said no, but there had to be a reason I never mentioned my mother’s pen name to anyone other than Penny and Ivan.

I wanted more than anything to rewind this conversation. How did we even get here? I just couldn’t take one more talk about my dreams or possible brain malfunction, especially after finding out who the doomed man was. I never meant for this to happen.

Ma shook her head as if done waiting for me to finish my hanging sentence and walked out of the kitchen. I stood to go after her, but Daddy clamped a hand over my forearm. He gestured for me to sit back down. A moment later, Ma returned. She resumed her position on the other side of the island and slid a book toward me. It had pastel flowers, a nervous-looking girl, and the words, LATE BLOOMER, were written in hot pink on the cover.

“That’s the first book I ever wrote. It’s about a twenty-year-old girl breaking free from her overprotective parents and experiencing a series of firsts, including her first sexual experience. So, yes, there is sex in this book, *Say-Say*, but

there is so much more. You'll probably be having sex soon enough—”

Daddy flinched as if someone had touched the back of his neck with icy fingers, then hissed something to my mother, but she ignored him.

“Hopefully, you're mature enough to read this.”

My groan was cut off by my mother's heavy sigh. She opened her mouth, closed it, and shook her head.

“Nevermind.” She reached across the island to take the book.

I grabbed it. “Nevermind, what?” Panic churned in my stomach as I clutched the book to my chest. She really looked hurt. I didn't know what to do. Daddy was no help, holding our hands to keep us from fleeing.

“When you began reading chapter books, I told you my books were off-limits because they weren't age-appropriate. I expected you to obey because you've always been a good girl and you mind us well. But when we moved here, and you became a teenager... I guess I thought maybe you'd sneak and read some of my books. I can't say I wanted you to disobey me, but I wanted you to come and ask about my writing. It's such a big part of who I am, *Say-Say*, of what I do. I wanted so much to share it with you, but you never want to hear about it, never want to go with me on book tours...”

She stopped. Her chin quivered. I had to look away. *Am I that selfish?* A fat tear rolled out of my eye and splashed onto my hand.

When Daddy saw it, he said, “Okay, okay, no, no, no.”

He tugged on my arm until I slid off the stool. Then he did the same to Ma until we were on either side of him. I heard my mother sniff, but I couldn't bring myself to look at her.

“Come now. I can't have my girls in tears.”

“I'm sorry, Mommy. I didn't mean to be selfish and—”

“No, *Say-Say*.” She stepped forward, forcing Daddy back a step, then wiped my damp cheek. “I want you to be true to yourself, and if that means you're covered in axle grease for

the rest of your life, then that's fine with me. I can't make you interested in my writing just because I love it, but I want you to try it. It's not right to form an opinion about something before giving it a chance. You can hate it. I don't mind, but get to know what I do before you allow someone to tease or embarrass you about my career."

She was right, but the words wouldn't come out of my mouth. I felt on the verge of a full-blown crying jag. Everything from the last few days was about to explode from me. The violent dream, Ivan's rejection, maybe messing things up for Ivan and Penny, my brain glitch, and now I was the most selfish daughter on the planet. I burst. Daddy went into panic mode, shushing me, patting my back. Ma just held me until it was all out.

When the dam was empty, she looked up at me, and blotted my face with a dishtowel. "This was not how this evening was supposed to go. We have a surprise for you, waiting in your bedroom." She tipped her head to the left to look at something behind me. "Well, she *was* waiting in your bedroom."

"You took too long, and now I see why. Got the baby down here in tears."

The thick southern accent made me suck in a breath. I whirled around and stared at my grandmother. She still referred to me as "the baby," and I was pretty sure I would be a baby in her eyes even when I had my own.

"Yaya!" I ran to her, wanted to pick up her petite body and spin her around, but Ma would freak if I did that. Everybody said I gave her the name Yaya, instead of grandma because I was trying to pronounce her real name, Yanamarie, and couldn't. Who knew? Now, all the grandkids called her Yaya because of me.

"Why you crying, baby? These two being mean? You want me to get a switch off the tree and swat their backsides?"

I laughed, breathing in her familiar scent of vanilla snuff and Blue Magic hair grease. We stepped apart so she could look at me and tell me how beautiful I'd become. The same

thing she always said. Never had a chemical in her hair. Her long black and silver press-and-curl was sleek with grease and pulled into a ponytail that hung out the back of a white sequin ball cap. Yaya wore a hot pink velour tracksuit, showing off curves that a woman half her age would kill for. Hell, I'd kill for them. This outfit wouldn't seem out of the norm for her age group down south, but in Marris Bay, where seniors wore pearls and smart Chanel suits, she'd stick out like a lawn flamingo. I loved every inch of her.

Ma came up beside us, smiling. "I thought it would help for you to talk to Yaya. You haven't looked good since that dream, Say-Say."

A lump formed in my throat. I didn't know how to thank my parents for flying in my grandmother. Ma was right. Yaya was the only person who could truly understand what I'd been going through. I wished she lived closer. I even thought she was going to move out here with us, but she didn't want to. Ma was mad. They got into a huge argument over it, but I understood. I didn't want to leave my friends either.

"Come on, baby, let's have a walk."

"Mama," Daddy said, because Yaya insisted he called her that. "Should you be walking? You're having problems with your arthritis, right? You were in a wheelchair when we picked you up from the airport."

"Oh Rodney, ain't you learned that trick yet? Show up at the airport with a pitiful look and in need of a wheelchair, and you get to speed through security. You get to pre-board and get off first, too."

Daddy frowned. "Woman. I pushed you all the way through that enormous parking lot."

Yaya smiled. "A big, healthy man like you. I'm sure it was no trouble."

He muttered something that made Yaya blow him a kiss and mutter something back. With a strength that belied her sixty-three years, she took my hand and pulled me from the house. We walked hand in hand down the flagstone walkway



and headed to the right. Yaya looked around. It had been two years since she'd visited. We mostly made the trip across the country to her.

“Who’s that?” she asked.

I followed her line of sight and spotted Mr. Honeygo sitting in his window with binoculars around his neck. “Just my neighbor, bird watching.”

“He ain’t watching no damn birds. Get on from out dat window, you old coot!” She shouted and shook her fist at Mr. Honeygo. He quickly stepped away from the window and lowered the blinds.

I laughed. “You too much, Yaya.”

“That’s what they tell me. Let’s sit.” She gestured to a low wall bordering the house three doors down from me. “So, what’s got you so riled up?”

I took a deep breath and told her all about the murderous dream. She didn’t interrupt, just sat on the wall with her eyes closed and listened. I loved how Yaya listened. A lot of people thought they were good listeners, but nope. Most people cut you off, half-listened, or just waited for you to stop talking so they could say what they’d been dying to say the whole time you were speaking.

When I spilled every detail of the dream, everything about what had happened today, we sat silently for a long while. She took her time to answer, giving thought to her words. Even as a small, impatient kid, I never minded waiting for Yaya to answer my many questions.

Finally, she said, “I had hoped this wouldn’t come to you, baby.”

“The dreams?”

“The dark sight.”

“Dark sight?” I asked.

“It don’t happen all the time, but sometimes the dreams go dark. It was why I was happy when your daddy said he was moving ya’ll out here. Energy is powerful and negative energy

even more.” She paused and drew in a deep breath. “I need to apologize to you, baby.”

“What for?”

“The reason I didn’t move out here with you and your parents had nothing to do with not wanting to leave my friends. I was afraid.”

“Of what, Yaya?”

“Being too close to you. There’s a lot of negative energy surrounding me ‘cause I’ve seen and done things in my life. You attract it when you engage in negative energy. I thought if I was around you, living with you, that negative energy I attract would eventually come to you. I was ‘fraid your dreams would go dark. But it happened anyway, and I wasn’t here to guide you, protect you. Now...”

“Now what?” I asked, unwilling to wait for her to meditate on her thoughts like usual. Yaya had just blown my mind with her revelation. I needed her to tell me everything. Immediately.

“What happened ‘fore you had the dream?”

“You mean right before, like before I went to bed?”

“No, baby. This man, Harlan Bishop, you ever touch him?”

“No. Never even met him.”

“The boy then, Conrad, whose house you was at today, did you see him the day you had the dream? Did you touch him?”

I snorted. “He doesn’t let anybody touch him anymore, least of all me.”

Yaya looked at me with raised eyebrows. “You ain’t touch either of them at all?”

I shook my head and then remembered. “I did. Conrad knocked me off my bike and helped me up, but I didn’t touch his skin or anything.”

Yaya was quiet for a long time with her hands folded in her lap. She stared down at her white sneakers like she was trying

to see her toes through the leather. “That boy’s damn powerful.”

I stared at Yaya’s profile. “That boy’s very *weird*.”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “You got some nerve.”

“He wears gloves all the time and freaks if anyone so much as looks like they’re going to touch him.”

“Okay, that is weird.” She chuckled.

“Not to mention he’s the one who broke my arm last year. You were supposed to curse him, but that never happened.” I cut her a mock-angry glance, but she wasn’t smiling.

“From what you tell me, baby, his mama died, and he’s ‘bout to lose his daddy. I think he got cursed without any help from me.”

Heat scorched my face. It was damn petty of me to forget that. “Sorry.”

Yaya patted my leg and continued. “No matter, he damn powerful.”

“How?” I didn’t want to doubt my grandma, but she’d never even met Conrad. How could she possibly tell if he was powerful?

“You touched him, and his energy was so strong that he opened you up to dream ’bout anybody close to him.”

“What?”

“If you’d told me you dreamed this boy got killed, that would’ve made sense. But you dreamed of his daddy, through him. You’re sure you never met that man?”

“Never laid eyes on him, except in that horrible dream, and certainly never touched him. Is that how it works? I have to touch the person, and it opens me up to possibly dreaming about them?”

She nodded, looking at me like I should’ve known this. I definitely would’ve remembered something so important to my gift. For a wild second, I contemplated wearing gloves like Conrad. Yaya was pensive again. Never had my patience been

thin with her, but today I wanted to shake every ounce of knowledge out of her.

“What you wanna do with your dreams, baby?”

I didn't know how to answer that, so it was my turn to think. For so long, I'd been content to be an observer, watching the funny, embarrassing, and stupid things that would happen to one of my classmates or friends. It was a neat trick that made me feel special, even if only a select few knew I had the talent. But with one dream, I'd become something different... a girl nervous to go to sleep, helpless and afraid to close my eyes. I didn't want to be that girl anymore.

“I want to help.”

She continued to stare in front of her. “How?”

“I don't know. It would be awesome if I could change the dream.” I sat up straighter. “Can I do that? Can I stop the men from killing Harlan Bishop?”

“No, you can't do that, Sayra.”

Whoa. She never called me by my name unless I was in trouble, and I could do no wrong in Yaya's eyes. This was serious.

She looked at me full on. “It ain't our place to alter dreams. Never stop the actions in your dreams. Never step in front of a loaded gun or take a knife meant for another. Do you hear me?”

I stared at her wide-eyed. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Interfere with caution in the waking hours, but never manipulate the outcome of the dreams.”

“I'm not corporeal in the dreams, Yaya. I can't take a bullet or protect somebody, anyway.”

She looked at me with sad eyes, but there was power in her posture. “Baby, you don't know the half of the things you can do in your dreams.”

“Really? Like what? Could I die in real life if I die in my dream?”

She held a hand up to stanch my questions. Then she brushed her hand over her head, removed her cap, and loosened the band that held her ponytail.

“You won’t die, baby, but if you take violence meant for somebody else, there’s a possibility of bringing that violence onto yourself in the waking hours.”

I swallowed hard, ever so thankful to have her explain everything to me. “So, what can I do?”

“You can go back into the dream and get more details. ‘Bout fifty percent of the details get forgotten once you wake up and write them down. You can also move things if you need. These men wore masks, right? You might be able to unmask them.”

“I can?” I came up off the wall, more excited than I’d been in days.

“It takes a lot of concentration, baby. First, you gotta focus enough to bring the dream back, and then, while you in it, you gotta be strong enough to become a physical part of the dream and not just an observer. It ain’t easy.”

“You think I can do it?”

Yaya smiled up at me. “I think you can do anything you set your mind to. The bigger question is, should you?”

I thought about that for a moment. “I can’t just let him die.”

“Why not? Everybody got to. Maybe it’s meant for him to go on that day in that way. You ain’t God, baby.”

“I know, Yaya, but... I got this information for a reason, right? I have this gift for a reason, too. Whatever that might be, I should use it to help.”

“Hell, I don’t know why I got this power, other than, I have it, your great-great-grandma had it, and so on.”

“I wonder why it skips generations.”

“It don’t, really. My mother didn’t have it, and neither does yours. But it seems like before my grandma, most of the

women in our line had it. It ain't an easy burden we carry." She squinted up at the sky, contemplating. "The way I see it is the gift is given to those of us strong enough to handle it. Strong in the right way. I think your mother don't have it, not 'cause Grace's mind ain't strong. She got a different strength. She came out of my womb filled with wild ideas. Drove me crazy. But it's why she's such a talented writer. She's focused on the details."

"And I'm not. My head is empty?" I smiled.

"Empty in the right way." She chuckled as she stood and hugged me. "You don't give a damn about things that fill some girls' minds. It wouldn't bother you one bit if your belt, purse and shoes didn't match."

"They're supposed to?"

Yaya laughed. "Never change, baby. Come on, we can talk more later. I'm starving."

I felt better as we headed home, but I still had so many more questions.



*HARLAN BISHOP STANDS in the middle of an enormous bedroom, intricately decorated in various shades of gray and silver. Basil stands behind him with a lint roller, giving the shoulders of Harlan's tuxedo a last pass. I know what night it is, and I don't want to be in this dream. I scream to wake myself, but it's no use. I'm in deep and will only wake when I see what I need to see.*

*Then I remember what Yaya said and take several deep, calming breaths. My eyes glance at the door several times, hoping this isn't going to be a new twist to the original dream. Are the clowns on their way up?*

*"Where's Conrad?" Harlan asks, adjusting his bowtie.*

*"In the guest house, sir. I'm afraid he is still quite upset with you."*

*Harlan purses his lips, blowing out a hard breath through his nose. "I thought staying here, in the house his mother*

*loved so much, would help, but he grows more distant every day. Refuses to sleep in the main house, and still hasn't touched me, and now he's telling outlandish lies."*

*Basil pauses, staring at Harlan in the ornate mirror in front of them. I stare at Mr. Bishop too, right in his face, unsure what I'm looking for.*

*"Really, sir?" Basil says. "It isn't like him to lie."*

*"I know, but he hasn't exactly been himself, has he?" Harlan turns to Basil. "He told me I was going to be murdered tonight, right here in the house."*

*I gasp. "He did what? How could he know that?" Neither man answers. I'm not really here and this hasn't happened yet.*

*Basil's hand twitches once, and then he controls himself. "Sir, you know the boy has special—"*

*"No, Basil. I don't want to hear about that foolishness. And I told you not to encourage Conrad's delusions. He doesn't have any special abilities."*

*"What special abilities?" I try to think of what Yaya told me, because maybe I can get them to hear me and answer my questions. I try to concentrate, but I don't know how. As Basil answers his boss, I stand still and close my eyes, focusing on being a part of the dream.*

*"Of course, sir. Still, perhaps you ought to increase security."*

*With my eyes still closed, I reach out and try to touch Harlan Bishop, to feel something other than vapors when I contact him. It doesn't work. My hand passes right through him. Forget it! I don't know how to concentrate, and I can't focus, so I simply pay attention to the rest of the dream.*

*Harlan shakes his head, reaches over to the long dresser beside him, and picks up a cufflink. "My security is fine. I've had no threats against me, and besides, I couldn't call up more trusted men at this late hour on New Year's Eve, anyway. Conrad is just upset because I'm taking a date."*

*Basil's mouth hangs open for a second. "Really, sir? A date?"*

*With his other cufflink on, Harlan gives his appearance a once over in the mirror. "I'm not rushing into anything, but eventually, I'll have to get on with my life, Basil."*

*"Of course, sir."*

*"Madeline was my everything." I feel his sorrow as he drops his arms to his side. "But she's gone, and she would be the last one who would want me to wither up and waste away. It's one date. Not even serious. I don't want to do anything to push Conrad further away from me, but I don't think it's out of the question to want the company of a woman."*

*"Of course, sir."*

*Harlan pinches the bridge of his nose as if squeezing away the regret and lingering guilt about this date.*

*He glances at his watch. "I'd better get going. Dismiss the house staff in an hour. Let them enjoy the holiday. I told Conrad he could have friends over if he wanted. He does still have friends, doesn't he? I feel like the worst father in the world, but I can't figure out how to reach him."*

*"He has friends, sir. Mostly that girl." Basil's lip curls. "That Price girl. She's so... so... uncouth."*

*I poke a finger at Basil's bony chest but cannot knock him back a step as my finger floats right through him.*

*Harlan Bishop smiles wide, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "There was a time when you thought Madeline was uncouth. This Price girl is the same one who blamed Conrad for breaking her arm?"*

*"Yes, sir. It's such an odd friendship. She seems on the verge of causing him bodily harm at any moment, and yet he has said it from his own mouth that she is his friend."*

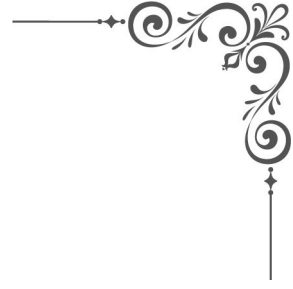
*Harlan laughs. "She sounds like a keeper."*

*Basil looks like someone squirted lemon in his eye. "If you say so, sir."*



*When Harlan leaves the room, Basil stays behind. He swipes a shaky hand over his mouth. He's afraid for Mr. Bishop. It radiates from him like steam. He doesn't want Conrad to be right about his prediction, but it was my prediction. I stand there, waiting for something to happen, but I can feel myself leaving the dream, floating up and away until there is only sleep.*

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

SUNDAY MORNING ARRIVED as it usually did, sunny and serene in the Price household. My parents, Yaya, and I ate a quiet breakfast. I hadn't questioned my grandmother anymore, mostly because I needed to think about what I wanted to do with my dreams. Specifically, not just an overall, help people.

Yaya stood from the table and gathered several items from a duffle bag sitting off in the corner. She set up bags of herbs, stones, and oils on the island. I immediately went over to see what she was doing.

"What's this?" I grabbed a small glass jar with gold flecks of something floating in blue liquid.

"Little drop of that on the center of your forehead and your enemies will leave you alone."

"Really?"

Around a mouth full of toast, Daddy said, "Cause you'll smell like a pig's anus."

Yaya shook a small velvet sack at him that rattled like it was full of marbles... or bones... maybe teeth? Whatever it was, Daddy shut up and chewed his food quietly.

"You got a boyfriend?" Yaya asked unexpectedly.

"Nope," I said, trying for a 'and I don't want one' tone, but Yaya was intuitive as hell.

"Well, when you got your eye on a boy, I can tell you what to do to keep him with you for good."

"Ma don't," my mother said.

"Just sprinkle a little pee in his cornbread, and he'll never —"

Daddy choked so hard I thought I would need to Heimlich him.

"We had cornbread last night!" He managed between coughs.

“Really, Rodney?” Ma said, lips pursed. “You think I would pee in your food?”

“Answer me this,”—he pointed a finger at Ma accusingly—“why can’t I get enough of you if it’s not for your mama and her root bag?”

Ma lifted an eyebrow so slowly that I swear the heat went up ten degrees in the kitchen. “You know why you can’t get enough of me.”

“And that’s my cue.” I turned and fled the kitchen.

Once outside, I went straight to my mother’s Toyota, ready to change the oil for her. I got the Bishop Tools jack from the garage and tried not to think about Conrad. How had I never made that connection? Under the car, I removed the oil plug and let the oil drain in an old hospital basin Daddy brought home from his office.

While I waited for the oil to drain from my mother’s car, I sat in my car and listened to the radio. Penny opened the passenger door and nearly scared me to death when she plopped down beside me.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“I called your name,” she said, “But who could hear me over this monster you call a car?”

I killed the engine but left the car on Aux so we could listen to the radio. Penny crossed her legs and smoothed out her lavender sundress. The color went well with her soft brown skin. It wasn’t even eleven in the morning, and she was completely put together. She’d styled her braids in an intricate design at the back of her head, leaving tendrils hanging like vines. Her sunglasses sat coolly on her head, and somehow, she’d looked like she could be comfortable skipping through a field of poppies or shopping on Rodeo Drive.

“How do you do that?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“Put yourself together so completely, but make it look like it was no work.”

She smiled. “It really wasn’t any work, Sayra. Most girls don’t spend hours in the mirror unless they’re totally vain. I pulled my hair back like this.” She reenacted the movements. “Twisted it, put about six or seven pins in it, and that’s it. Then, when I got out of the shower, I put on body butter and slipped this dress over my head. That’s it. It’s not that much work.”

“So, I don’t have any excuses.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” She blew out a breath. “Look, I came by early because I wanted to talk to you about yesterday. You’ve been in a weird place lately, well, ever since Conrad came back, and now, I know why. Why didn’t you tell me he never apologized for causing your accident?”

I shrugged. “It seemed stupid and needy to hate someone because they never said they were sorry for breaking your bone. And it wasn’t an accident. He pushed me on purpose.”

I looked at Penny. Her expression was unreadable, but I was past looking for agreement. It seemed no one believed Conrad capable of something so vicious even though he’d been an equal opportunity ass before his accident. I was working hard to get past the accidentally/*on purpose* breaking of my arm. I also had to get past my resentment of Conrad if I was going to help his father. If yesterday was any sign, Penny seemed to want to put the past behind us. According to my dream, I found some way to become his friend. I wish my dream mentioned how that miracle happened.

“So, this weirdness and hostility is because he pushed you on purpose and has never apologized? I mean, you weren’t even this overly aggressive when everything went down.”

“Have I been overly aggressive?” I asked, suddenly on the defensive.

“Now that I think of it, you’ve been out of sorts since you found out about the parking space. Not to mention chasing Conrad down on his first day back and asking about his gloves...” She shrugged.

I was growing rapidly annoyed with Penny. “And how he’s been with me since the moment I meant him would be classified as what, passive? Never mind,” I said before she could answer. “Apparently, I’m selfish and hostile, so whatever.”

Penny sighed. “You *are* in a mood, Sayra. What’s going on? You can talk to me.”

I couldn’t tell her about Ivan, which hurt, but not because I was in love with him. Mostly, it sucked because it seemed others around me had no trouble getting a boyfriend. Now that I suddenly realized I might want one too, it was like I was still at the starting gate when everyone else was halfway through the race. Not to mention, I couldn’t talk about the Ivan issue because even if he unknowingly chose Penny, something told me she wouldn’t want to know that we’d kissed. So, I talked about the other things bothering me.

“Do you think I’m weird or selfish because I didn’t sneak and read my mom’s books? I mean, she isn’t even your mother, and when you were told they were off-limits, you went right out and read them.”

Penny smiled. “I have a sneaky streak. But I don’t think it’s weird. No weirder than me not really listening to my father’s music. I pretend I’m all into rap then go to my room and listen to pop music that causes my father’s eye to twitch like he’s about to stroke out or something.” She chuckled. “I love him, and I’m proud of him, and I’m interested in what he does, but some of it is just too harsh.” She shrugged. “Mechanics interests you. Reading romance interests me.”

“I hurt my mom’s feelings because I never asked to read any of her books.” I couldn’t hide the shame in my voice. Penny stayed quiet as a top-forty song filled the silence. “Maybe I should try to be more girly.” I lifted a shoulder. “Maybe I should start wearing makeup and stuff like that. Get the dirt from under my nails and soften my hands.”

Penny twisted in the seat to face me. “How is that going to help? Is that what your mom wants you to do?”

I shook my head. “She said she’s fine with me the way I am.”

“You clearly have a lot of things on your mind, which explains your grumpiness of late. First things first, forget Conrad. Forget being his friend. We’ll help his father, and that’s it. I can give him the coldest shoulder. It’ll freeze him so thoroughly he’ll pee ice cubes.”

I laughed.

“So, get your attitude together. I want the old Sayra back. And while I’m at it, let me tell you what’s *not* gonna happen. We’re not gonna have a makeover party straight out of a teen movie, where I do your hair and buy you new clothes so you can walk through school like the new hot girl. Nope. Not gonna happen. And another thing, stop trying to make yourself look shorter. News flash—it ain’t workin’. I know you think you walk around proud of your height, but you don’t. You sit in the back of the class just ‘cause you think people can’t see around you. So what if they can’t? You never wear heels, and you don’t stand at your full height.”

Wow, I didn’t know that.

Penny took a breath and continued. “If you want softer hands and less dirt under your nails, wear gloves when you work on cars. You don’t blend in at West Nottingham, but neither do I. We’re two of the few black people at that school. I mean, it’s bad enough I’m a black girl named Penelope, but —”

“Yeah, what were your parents thinking?”

“It’s my grandmother’s name. Whatever, I’m stuck with it. My point is, I stand out at our school just like you, but you don’t see me trying to make my skin lighter.”

“How would you do that anyway?”

“My point is, I can’t make myself into a clone of Hillary, who is the epitome of the sunny Marris Bay girl, so that I can blend in better. I have to be me—brown skin, braids, sexy curves.” She lifted a shoulder with a big smile.

“Yeah, but look at you. It works.”

Penny sighed. “Okay then, let’s take Ivan. He doesn’t lift weights to improve on that birdcage he calls a chest.” She talked over my laughter. “Does he cut off his fro so people will stop talking about his hair? Nope. He could do things to fit more comfortably into the West Nottingham world, but he doesn’t. He’s a skinny, bushy-haired geek, and he’s proud of \_\_\_”

“You’d better not be talking about me.”

Penny and I screamed as Ivan’s face appeared at the passenger door window. He crouched, folded his arms over the window frame, and waited patiently while we caught our breaths.

“Am I supposed to be the skinny, bushy-haired geek?” His eyes were on Penny’s. She looked worried that she had hurt his feelings again.

So, I jumped in with, “*And* she said you have a chest like a birdcage.”

Ivan’s eyes lingered on Penny’s for a second longer, and then he smiled at me. “Birdcage? Really?”

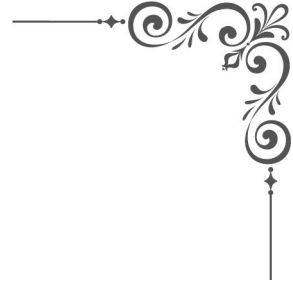
He stepped back from the car. As Penny and I climbed out, Ivan whipped off his T-shirt. He was ridiculously skinny, but he still managed six-pack abs, or maybe those were ribs.

“Girls, please. Control yourselves. My sexiness is as lethal as my elbows. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Penny’s brown cheeks dusted pink. She pulled her sunglasses off her head and slipped them on. “Geez, you need a tan. I’ve drunk milk darker than you.”

Through my laughter, I said, “Come inside. I had another dream that I want to tell you about. And for goodness’ sake, Ivan, put your shirt back on.”





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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“SO, CONRAD TOLD HIS father about the murder?” Ivan paced by my window.

“Yeah, and you know what that means?” I said.

“What?” Penny stopped reading over her notes and looked up at me.

“That means I told him about my dream, and he believed me,” I said with wide eyes, not really believing it myself, but I’d worked that out as soon as I woke up.

If I told Conrad about my dream, told him about what I could do, and he believed me enough to tell his father, then maybe that meant... what? I didn’t know. Basil had said we were friends. We must become good friends for me to divulge my deepest secret to him.

“Maybe not,” Ivan said. “Maybe you just told him something convincing enough to have him believe the threat was real without revealing your secret.”

“Maybe,” I said, slumping slightly. Ivan’s argument was rational, but a small part of me wanted to tell Conrad my secret and have him be okay with it.

Ivan sat at my desk and booted up my laptop. “What do we know about Harlan Bishop?” He opened a browser and searched for Mr. Bishop. He was fifty-two, a multibillionaire with a deceased wife and one son, Conrad Harlan Bishop, the sole heir to the Bishop fortune.

Penny said, “We don’t know enough to flesh out suspects.”

I rolled my neck, working out the kinks. “You won’t believe what Yaya told me. Apparently, I can go back into my dream and manipulate things.”

“What?” Ivan whirled around in the desk chair. “Manipulate how?”

“Like I maybe I could unmask one of the men.”

“Seriously!” He shot up out of the chair. “Do it. What are you waiting for?”

“Um... have you noticed that I’m awake? I’d need to be asleep to dream and unless you have something to put me to sleep right this minute—”

“Quick, Ivan, start talking about comic books,” Penny said, smiling brightly.

“Quick, Penn, start talking about shoes,” he mocked.

“These are new.” She angled her left foot, showing her strappy sandal. “You like them? I got them from—”

Ivan’s chin dropped to his chest, and he snored right where he stood. Penny threw her notebook at him.

I waved a sheet of paper between them like a white flag. “I tried to touch Mr. Bishop and Basil last night in my dream, but couldn’t. I don’t even know how to do it. Maybe Yaya can show me. But for now, there’s one thing I know. I have to tell Conrad.”

“Whoa. Not so fast,” Ivan said.

“It’s not like I’m going to tell him tomorrow, but eventually, I will if I want his help. And we need his help.”

“Yeah, well, until then, he stays on a need-to-know basis.” Ivan met my eyes.

“I’ll give it a few weeks. Try to make our interactions less hostile.”



WHEN PENNY AND IVAN left, I went into the kitchen to get a snack. Daddy sat at the table, reading the paper. Ma had just walked in from the backyard, and Yaya looked like she was contemplating getting a switch off the tree to whip someone’s behind. Before I could question her hostile expression, Ma spoke.

“Hungry?” she asked. “I’m going to fix sandwiches. Want one?”

“No thanks. I’m just going to have some cheese crackers.”

“Are you sure? I can make you anything you want.” Ma smiled as she washed up at the sink.

Daddy turned the pages of the paper like a robot, and Yaya tapped her foot on the floor. Something was up.

“What did you guys want to talk to me about yesterday?”

“Um...” Ma looked at Daddy.

“Yes, tell her,” Yaya bit out.

Daddy ignored her and folded his paper. “Have a seat, Sayra.”

*Oh, no. If I have to sit, it’s not gonna be good.* I pulled out the chair across from Daddy, thinking I’d probably need distance from him like I needed distance from Ma yesterday. Yaya got out of her chair and paced around the kitchen. I watched her for a few seconds. Today she wore a white tracksuit with a thin navy stripe down the pant seams and the arms of the jacket. Ma took the chair Yaya just vacated, sitting to my left.

Daddy cut right to the chase. “I made an appointment for you to have an MRI tomorrow after school.”

Yaya made a noise in her throat. My mouth flopped open for a few seconds. “What’s that?”

“It’s just a scan of your brain. It’s noninvasive. You’ll have to lie on a table and let them take pictures.”

The muscles in my jaw worked as I held in what I wanted to tell Daddy to do with his MRI and his pictures of my brain.

Instead, I said, “Fine.” I stood to leave the table, but he caught my arm.

“Sit. We need to discuss this.”

I had nothing to say, but he was free to talk until his face turned blue.

“What’s to discuss?” Yaya asked, barely holding her temper. “Will you consider her thoughts, not take her if she

don't wanna go? Of course not. There ain't nothing growing inside her head. There ain't nothing wrong with her."

"Yanamarie," Daddy said with a tone that meant this woman, who stood five feet tall and weighed a little over a hundred pounds, would not bully him. "The last time I checked, Sayra was my child—"

"Say-Say." Mom took my hand, interrupting Daddy before he said something he'd only have to apologize for later. "We're only doing this because we want to make sure everything is okay with you. What kind of parents would we be if we didn't look out for you?"

"If I get this done and there's nothing wrong, will you leave it alone?" I met my father's eyes and refused to be intimidated by the steel I saw in them.

Finally, he said, "If there's nothing, I'll let it go."

"Fine. May I be excused?"

"You have nothing else to say?" Ma asked, ignoring Yaya's grunt.

"No."

Ma let go of my hand, and Daddy let go of my arm. I bolted from the kitchen. Yaya was at my bedroom door a few minutes later. Still pissed, she paced around my room for a few minutes. She seemed angrier than me.

"You okay, Yaya?" When she only kept pacing, I spoke again. "They don't understand what it's like. And if this will give them peace of mind, I'll have the MRI. It's no big deal. It's only 'cause they love me."

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then came over and sat on the edge of my bed. "You never met your great-grandma. My mama died down south when you was real small. She..." Yaya looked up at the ceiling. "She didn't have our gift, and she never understood it. It scared her, even though her own mother could do what we do, except not with dreams. My granny would just touch something and know what was what. Part of me wonders if my mama was jealous or if fear made her mean and stupid. She took me to preachers,

root-workers, hoodoo women—you name it. Whoever she thought could get the... the demon outta me.”

I gasped, praying she wasn't about to tell me I was part demon, but I dismissed the thought as quickly as it had come.

“One day, when I was ‘bout fifteen, I’d been having a lovely dream. A boy I liked walked hand-in-hand with me down the side of the road. Then, ‘fore we got to my house, he kissed me.” She smiled at the memory that was probably still strong all these years later.

“When I woke, smile still on my face, a man stood over me with the biggest damn knife I ever seen. He’d sacrificed a goat and was shaking the head over me, chanting. I was covered in blood. Covered! My mama and three other people chanted with him. The more I screamed, the louder they chanted. He kept saying I was screaming out the demon.”

I couldn't speak. My hand trembled as I wiped the wetness from my cheek. I reached out and did the same for Yaya.

She sniffed. “I overheard the man telling my mama that the demon was still in me and he would come back in a few days to do a bloodletting. You know what that is?”

I nodded. “They drain your blood until you’re near death, right?”

“Yeah. I ran away and ain’t ever been back.”

“Yaya, you can’t think my parents would do that to me?”

“No, baby.” She touched my cheek. “It just scares me.”

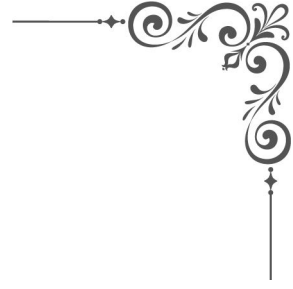
“But nothing scares you,” I said.

She gave me a watery smile. “Plenty scares me. I don’t want you to go through what I went through. I know an MRI ain’t a janky old coot shaking goat’s blood on you, and as long as it stops at the MRI, then I ain’t gotta dig a shallow grave for your daddy.”

The corner of my mouth lifted. I leaned forward and hugged her. I wondered if my mother knew any of this. It was the first time I’d ever seen my grandmother fragile. She seemed every bit of her sixty-three years right now. All my

life, she'd been a force to be reckoned with. Maybe what happened to her as a child was where she'd gotten her strength. I only hoped I could be as strong if the time ever came.

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# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE NEXT MORNING AT school, Penny, Ivan, and I split up and headed to our different first-period classes. Omar Siedel made a point of speak to me. Odd. He was tall, light, brown-skinned, with deep dimples in his cheeks. His father played for the NBA, but Omar was strictly academic, which irked the coaches at West Nottingham. He was quiet, but wildly popular. I was so surprised by him speaking to me I did a weird hand flop, tripped over my own feet, and bumped into a petite senior girl who reacted like I'd attempted to murder her.

Conrad walked past me flanked by a snickering Hillary and Tag. I didn't call out to him, mostly because I hadn't fully worked out what I would say to him. How was I going to start a friendship with him? It seemed unnatural to be seeking a friendship with the boy who had been the bane of my existence since freshman year.

Was I wrong? Did he bump into me, causing me to fall down the steps like he claimed? Honestly, I had to admit this to myself if no one else... I didn't know. I could keep disliking him if he was guilty. That was easier than admitting I might have been loud and wrong all this time. But even if I somehow befriended him, I did not know how to tell him about my dreams. Not to mention, I'd have to pal up to Tag and Hillary. *Oh God... I just can't.*

Making friends with Conrad wouldn't be easy. Especially not after I told him off in his own home. I could apologize for my rude outburst, but I meant every word. If I was going to cultivate a friendship with him for his father's sake, then I would have to base it on genuine likeability. That didn't seem probable.

I kept a few paces behind Conrad, Tag, and Hillary. She talked nonstop as they headed to Mr. Brookmeyer's classroom. Just as Conrad stepped into class, he glanced back and caught my eye.

“Hey.” He turned and walked away from Tag and Hillary, gesturing for me to meet him by the lockers.

I froze. *What do I do?* My instinct was to scowl at him with suspicion and keep walking. Maybe I should do the opposite of what my intuition told me regarding Conrad Bishop. Be Opposite-Sayra. That meant smile and meet him by the locker. The most I could muster was a weak grin and slow-moving feet. Opposite-Sayra was still no fool. I braced for a trick or something set up to embarrass me, like that one time in freshman year when the three of them waited, watching as I went to my locker to find “someone” had sealed it shut with some sort of rubbery substance. I could open it, but only an inch before it would slam back on itself, to a chorus of laughter. The so-called pranks Conrad and his crew used to pull on me were annoying and sometimes mean, but never violent. That would have been a first if he had pushed me down the steps.

Hillary glared at me as she stopped in Mr. Brookmeyer’s doorway. She wasn’t in on it if Conrad was about to pull a prank. As I stepped over to the lockers where Conrad and I had only a semblance of privacy, I realized there would be no way to bring up the subject in the three minutes we had before the first-period bell. But he’d called me over to the lockers, so maybe all I had to do was shut up and listen.

“I take it you three are the best of friends again,” I said. *Sayra, didn’t you just say shut up and listen?* Not to mention, I sounded defensive—jealous, even.

Thankfully, Conrad didn’t bother to respond to that. Instead, he said, “I wanted to talk to you about what happened at my house.”

“I’d like to talk about that too. I was—” The bell rang. “Can we talk, meet after school?” I spoke fast as we started toward the classroom door. “There’s something important I need to talk to you about.”

He cocked his head to the side as though he couldn’t understand what important thing I could have to say to him. I followed him into class and slunk into my seat, wondering

how I was going to kill the tension between us. The more I thought about it, the more I figured we'd have to help Mr. Bishop without Conrad. I couldn't be friends with someone who didn't think I mattered enough for an apology.

A piece of balled-up paper whacked me on the forehead. It bounced off my face and landed on my desk. I grabbed it before Mr. Brookmeyer turned to face the class and looked up to see Conrad mouth, "Read it." I lowered the wad of paper to my lap, opening it as quietly as I could.

He'd scribbled his phone number, and the words, *call me tonight*. I gawked, unblinkingly, at the note. Did Conrad Bishop just give me his phone number? Did that just happen? I stared at the back of his head until he looked over his shoulder, getting my nod of agreement. None of this went unnoticed by Hillary. It took everything I had in me not to open the paper and taunt her with the note. I didn't, but not because I was so mature, more so because a part of me still wondered if this was an elaborate joke.

West Nottingham Academy strictly prohibited cell phones, which meant every student had one on them at all times. I pulled out mine, kept it under my desk, and keyed in Conrad's phone number. There was no need to risk losing that piece of paper. I pressed send and ended the call immediately, locking his number into my phone.

"Desperate much?" Tag whispered.

"Shut up," I said out of the corner of my mouth.

"You and freak-boy make a good couple."

Even as my hand moved to take notes, I said, "You're only saying that because you want Hillary away from him. And why would you call him a freak and be all up in his ass, too?"

Tag opened his mouth, then clamped it shut when Mr. Brookmeyer pointed at him. He blinked rapidly at the teacher for a few seconds and then said, "Margaret Atwood?"

Mr. Brookmeyer, who looked a bit tousled today, hair and clothes, stared at Tag long enough to have him shrinking in his chair. "Correct, Mr. Thaxton. Perhaps if you'd stop talking to

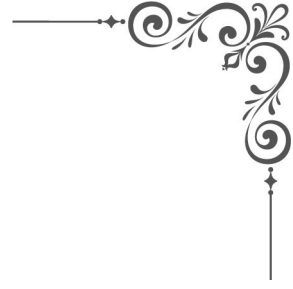
Miss Price, you wouldn't need to answer my question with a question."

Tag hunched over his desk and began taking notes again. He didn't speak to me for the rest of class. I had no problem with that. Through school, I thought of ways to broach the subject with Conrad. Penny suggested I make up a dream. Since he was a guy, she figured if I told him I'd dreamed of him making out with a hot girl—it seemed it wasn't only Ivan who'd enjoy that—then he'd be more inclined to believe the scary dream.

Ivan didn't think I should tell Conrad about my dreams at all. In his opinion, we couldn't trust Conrad. Not yet, anyway. He had a point, but it wasn't like we had loads of time. Whoever was planning to kill Harlan Bishop probably had their plan well underway by now. They were probably smarter, bigger, and definitely a lot crazier than we were.

I had to tell Conrad as soon as possible. As for the technicalities of the call, I had it all planned out. I'd go straight home from school, do my homework, eat dinner, and then casually call Conrad at like seven-fourteen or six minutes after eight. It had to be an off time, not like seven on the nose. That way, it would seem more casual, like, "Oh, I almost forgot to call you, Conrad."

I'd never called a boy before—Ivan didn't count—and was so nervous that I'd forgotten all about the MRI my parents scheduled after school. Let me say I never wanted to do that again. The loud, claustrophobic-inducing machine was like a forty-minute nightmare, and this was from a girl who'd just had the worst nightmare ever.



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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AFTER THE MRI, WE DROVE Yaya to the airport for a tearful goodbye. I promised to call her whenever I had questions, which would be like all the time. I felt a little lost with Yaya gone. We were closer now. She'd shared something with me that made us confidants, and I liked it. Back home, I rushed through dinner, barely said two words to my parents, and at seven, fifty-two, I locked my bedroom door and called Conrad Bishop.

The phone rang once, twice, and then, "Hullo."

"Hey, Conrad... how... are you?" *Be less weird, Sayra.* My heart banged against my chest like a wild animal begging for freedom.

"Fine," he said with an inflection that made me think he was asking.

"Um... this is Sayra... Sayra Price from West Nottingham." *Wow, girl, make it worse.*

"Yeah, I figured, since you're the only one who has my new number."

New number? Did that mean even Hillary didn't have it? Great, now my palms were sweating.

"So, what's up?" he asked.

In the background, the TV droned on, then I heard rustling. Was he lying on the bed? Should I lie on the bed? But that would mean I'd have to stop pacing. Why was I so freaking nervous? *This is Conrad Bishop. You are not anxious with him. You are hostile and confrontational.* But that was the old me. I needed to make him my friend, and that didn't come naturally where Conrad was concerned. So, time for Opposite-Sayra to reappear.

"How was school?" *Good grief. Why would you ask that?* Apparently, both Sayras were stupid. "I mean, I'm not interrupting you, am I? If you're busy, I can call back?"

“Just watching TV.

“What’re you looking—” The knock at my door had me dashing over to avoid any interruptions.

The knob jiggled, then Daddy said, “Sayra?”

“Hold on.” I yanked open the door. “Yes?”

“Why was the door locked?”

“‘Cause I’m on the phone.” I waved my silver cell, then hid it behind my back. I was trying to avoid the nightly barge-in.

“We need to talk.”

*Oh my gawd, what now?* I didn’t dare say that, but how many talks can one family have? “About what?”

“About the fact that you’re angry with us. It’s best to talk these things out.”

“I’m not angry, Daddy.”

He folded his arms over his chest. “You barely said two words since Yaya left. I know she’s pissed with me, but you don’t have to be, too.”

“Daddy, I’m not angry. Can I get back to my call, please?”

After a long, truth serum stare, he said, “Fine, but I won’t tolerate any more silent treatments. It’s immature.”

“Yes, sir.”

It took all I had not to close the door in his face, but that would’ve only worsened the situation. So, I waited for him to turn away, then I closed the door with a quiet click and locked it again.

“Hey, you still there?”

“Yeah.” Conrad yawned. “So, *are* you angry with them?”

“Oh, I’m mad as hell.”

He chuckled. “Then why’d you tell him you weren’t?”

“‘Cause telling my parents they’ve pissed me off is a three-day conversation.”

“It’s like a week and a half conversation in my house, with pie charts and a PowerPoint presentation. So, what’d they do?”

“Made me have an MRI.” The words were out before I realized what I’d just confessed.

It grew quiet on the other end of the phone, like Conrad had muted the TV. “Why’d you need an MRI? Was it the accident?”

“No. And I told you, I won’t sue.”

“If you’re really hurt, maybe you should—”

“I’m not hurt,” I said. “The thing is, I have these dreams... crazy, vivid dreams, and when I wake up, I have a terrible headache after.”

I blinked several times at the reflection in my vanity mirror, like I didn’t recognize the girl staring back at me. What the hell did I just do? Opposite Sayra was a true split personality now, and she had diarrhea of the mouth. I could still salvage this. He didn’t know my dreams came true, just that they caused headaches.

“Oh,” Conrad said, sounding like that was the last thing he expected me to say.

“Yeah.” Another painful silence followed. This phone call would go down in history as the worst exchange between two humans ever.

“What kind of dreams?” Conrad asked.

“Um, just really real.”

“Like what?”

I had his undivided attention, but I couldn’t make myself say, *‘I saw your father murdered.’* “I don’t wanna tell you.” I kicked off my socks and reclined on the bed.

“Why not?”

“Cause. I mean, our history doesn’t really show you as being the most considerate where I’m concerned.” I knew that wasn’t something Opposite-Sayra should say, but thinking before I spoke was giving me a headache.



“Well”—he expelled a heavy breath into the phone—“I deserved that. But what’s the worse that could happen from you telling me?”

“Lots. I don’t trust you.” Obviously, Real-Sayra was here to stay. *So long Opposite-Sayra, you won’t be missed.* “Sorry,” I continued. “But it’s true. For all I know, you could be recording this right now.”

“Paranoid much?” He snorted. “And who would I tell? I don’t have any friends.”

That threw me. “What about Tag and Hillary?”

“Ha! My ex-girlfriend and my ex-best friend who got together so fast after my accident, I was clearly the only one who didn’t know they’d been hooking up long before I got hurt. You mean those friends? In what bizarro world would I gossip with Tag and Hillary?”

I bit my bottom lip. It was the only warning I had that my lips were about to betray me and spew everything without taking a breath.

“My dreams always come true, and recently, I had a terrible one that made me extremely sick, so my parents want to make sure I don’t have a tumor the size of a lemon that’s causing my psychic abilities.”

I waited, heart hammering, as I listened for any sound from Conrad’s end. “Hello? You still there?”

“Yeah.”

Then another long stretch of silence let me know I’d made a monumental mistake. I couldn’t even explain why I’d blurted that out, but it was gone now, and I couldn’t un-say it.

“You’re not laughing... so I guess you don’t think I’m crazy.”

“Not crazy, but maybe a pathological liar.” He chuckled.

“I’m not lying.” My stomach twisted. “Forget it. Forget I said anything.”

“Can you prove it? Prove you’re not making it up?”

“I could, but I don’t think I want to.” I got up to pace.

“So, you’re mad at me because I’m not gullible? As you pointed out earlier, our history doesn’t show either of us in the best light.”

“I didn’t do anything to you, ever.”

“Ha! I was the one in the coma, but you’re the one with the memory loss. You gave as good as you got, Sayra. We were mutual assholes to each other.”

Was that true? Naw, nope, never.

“Forget it, Conrad. I wish I’d never said anything. I gotta go.” I wanted to slam the phone down because tapping a screen didn’t convey the type of hang-up I wanted to send.

“Hang on. I can own up to my past shit. Can you? And I don’t think it’s out of the question to ask for proof. But the fact that you can’t prove it makes me think you’re lying.”

I heard the taunt in his voice, the dare to make me put up or shut up.

“Whatever. I don’t care what you think. Plus, I don’t have a way to prove it to you. I keep a diary of all my dreams, but that won’t prove anything. Believe me or don’t. It doesn’t matter. I have to go.”

“Wait. Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No. It’s not important now.”

“Okay...but Sayra, I wanted to—”

I tapped the screen and ended the call. I didn’t even consider that he’d think I was an attention-seeking liar. Crazy, yes, but a liar? Really, though, what should I have expected? My stomach ached now. I’d made a huge mistake. I’d given a boy, who’d proven that he and his friends knew no limits when it came to inflicting humiliation, the ammunition to annihilate me, and I couldn’t even explain why I’d done it.

I called Penny because something else he said bothered me. I didn’t tell her anything about the phone call but simply

asked, “Was I an asshole to Conrad and his friends in the past?”

The silence on the other end had me flopping down on the bed. *Oh, shit.* Then she did the next worse thing to silence.

She gave me a high-pitched exaggerated, “*Well...*”

“Really?”

“Sayra, let me just give you one example. Remember freshman year around Black History month when you called Conrad and his crew colonizers? It hurt Conrad’s feelings. I don’t know why. Maybe he’s got Black family members or something, but it bothered him. I don’t know if you noticed, but you called them colonizers for like a solid month, to their faces, so much so that other people started doing it too?”

I knew what she was talking about, but I didn’t remember seeing any pain in Conrad’s eyes. Maybe because it was only a split second, or maybe I didn’t want to see it.

Penny continued, “They started it. They always do, but it’s like with Ivan and how people start physical fights with him, and he always finishes them. When people start these verbal battles, it’s the same with you, except Ivan finishes his fights without hurting people. You go for the kill-shot. Sayra, you have a sharp mind and an even sharper tongue. You don’t give as good as you get. You give ten times better. The whole time Conrad was out of school, you settled down, mainly because Hillary and Tag settled. Just don’t go back to that machete-mouth person. I see her coming back. Don’t let those people manipulate who you are, and you’re a good person.”

Warm tears slid down my cheeks. I wondered if I’d ever been sharp-tongued with her or Ivan, but was too afraid to ask. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t cry, Sayra.” Penny’s voice broke.

“I’m okay.” I sniffed. “Thank you for always being honest with me. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

It wasn't every day somebody turned the mirror around and showed you your face so clearly. I was part of the problem. Penny was right; my retorts were harder, louder, and stronger. I used to excuse my vicious tongue as just being wittier than those who came for me. As an army of my previous clap-backs marched through my head, I wondered how I had any friends at all. So, I was selfish *and* mean. *God*. There was nothing left for me to do now but go to sleep.



*CONRAD PACES THE SMALL bedroom in front of a door as thick as a bank vault. His lips move as if he's talking to himself, but no sound comes out. With fidgety movements, he glances into the room with the heavy iron door.*

*"The panic room," I say. "Oh no."*

*He mutters something else to himself. The sounds of glass shattering has his body jerking hard. I jump too. I don't want to be back here, but I don't know what to do. Conrad dashes to the bedroom door and then paces back to the panic room. Footsteps pound up the stairs. Heavy breathing echoes in the bedroom. Is it my breath or his? I can't tell. My heart thunders in my chest as I see Conrad reach behind him and pull a gun from the back of his waistband.*

*"No, Conrad don't!" I give all my attention to Conrad's right hand, ignoring all things around me.*

*Vaguely, I notice Harlan Bishop barrel into the room.*

*"Conrad! What are you doing here? Give me that gun and get in the panic room."*

*Harlan tries to disarm his son and shove him to safety, but Conrad breaks free. My eyes remain on the gun in Conrad's hand.*

*"No, Dad, I'm not going in there and I'm not giving you this gun."*

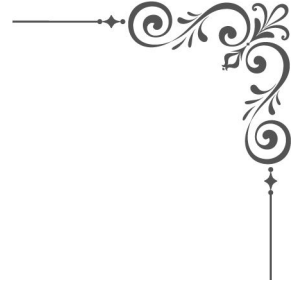
*When the first clown steps into the room, Conrad aims. I lunge forward, panic and adrenaline coursing through every cell. A quick lurch in my body and I feel heavy, like I've just*

*stepped out of a swimming pool. I shove Conrad's hand up in the air, feel it like a cool weight in my hand, just as the gun rockets three bullets into the ceiling.*

I shouted myself out of sleep with a dry, wheezing sound. Pain exploded in my head like cannon fire. I rolled off the bed and made it to my wastebasket before vomiting. I stayed hunched over the trashcan until the room stopped spinning, and my head no longer felt like several people had driven railroad spikes into it. Crawling, I made my way back to my bed, but couldn't pull myself up onto it. I grabbed my cell and dialed.

“Yaya. I think I made a mistake.”

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A DULL ACHE LINGERED behind my eyes the next morning, making me squint against the sun. I got no sleep last night, not after my conversation with Yaya. She told me where she'd hidden all the root bags in my room; under my bed, under my mattress, in my closet, and over my door and windows. I don't know how I didn't see those two.

"Get the one from under the mattress," she said. "I made it with a long string, but if it ain't long enough, add more and wear it round your neck when you sleep. And for God's sake, girl, stop grabbing on folk in your dreams."

I couldn't believe I'd slept enough to dream. The phone calls with Conrad and Penny had me wired for hours afterward. I realized, somewhere in the post-dream hours, why I'd said all that to Conrad. First, it was apparent I had no control over my tongue, given my history of machete-mouth. Second, it shocked me to hear Conrad speak against Hillary and Tag. For a moment, I felt like this wasn't the Conrad I'd known for two years. He wasn't the pompous elitist who took pride in making fun of those with less than him. Was I stupid for being sucked in and telling him about my gift, even for that moment, or did I get a glimpse of the real Conrad?

Penny, Ivan, and I stood off to the side at the bottom of the grand steps under the shade of a large oak tree. Our schoolmates flowed past us, but some lingered in small clusters waiting for the first bell. I was careful to keep my voice low.

"I told him," I whispered to Ivan and Penny.

"Told who, what?" Ivan asked, but his intense eyes told me he knew exactly *who* and *what* I'd told.

"Conrad... about my dreams."

Penny sucked in a breath. "Really? What'd he say?"

"Damn it, Sayra," Ivan said. "What happened to giving it some time? This is Conrad we're talking about, your self-

described archenemy.” He shook his head. “I don’t get it.”

I looked at Penny to see if she’d told him about our conversation. I didn’t need to speak it, but she answered anyway with a quick headshake. Now she understood why I’d asked her that question last night. To Ivan, I simply made him believe I’d become a silly, trusting girl, giddy over a boy’s attention. Was there truth to that?

Penny elbowed Ivan back and pulled me deeper into the shade, away from the steps.

“What’d he say, Sayra? You don’t look too good. Was he a jerk?”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t say he was a jerk—”

“Told you he changed.” Penny clapped her hands. “This is awesome.”

“Yeah,” Ivan said dryly. “It’s freakin’ outstanding.”

“Did something go wrong, though?” Penny asked. “Cause, like I said, you don’t look well.”

“I look this way for an entirely different reason. I’ll tell you about it in a minute. Conrad assumed I was lying and—”

Ivan hissed out a curse word. “I swear if he so much as breathes a word, I’ll twist his spine like a pretzel. I’ll—”

“Shush!” Penny shouted at him. “I’m trying to get all the deets.”

“I feel like an idiot. He said he has no one to tell, so...” I shrugged. “I still think a part of him doesn’t believe me, but maybe he doesn’t think being a pathological liar is all that bad. He didn’t sound angry that I might be lying to him, more like, ‘well, this is an interesting twist.’ I don’t know where his head is, but he wants me to prove it to him.”

“Screw him,” Ivan said. “You don’t have to prove anything.”

“She had to prove it to you.” Penny turned hard eyes on Ivan. “Or have you forgotten how you didn’t believe her when



she first told us? And you are her friend, unlike Conrad. He has every right to question her truthfulness.”

“He doesn’t have a right to anything.” Heat pumped off Ivan. I could see the beginnings of a nasty argument coming. “He’s not one of us, so—”

“Ivan stop.” I grabbed his arm. “I have something else to tell you both, and I can’t have you two at each other’s throats when I do.”

It took a few seconds, but Ivan settled and gave me his attention. Penny’s cheeks had a light flush of pink as her temper simmered.

“I didn’t tell Conrad everything. I didn’t tell him about the dream, or any dream, only that I had psychic dreams. It’s a good thing too, because I don’t think I’ll be able to tell him about his father after all.” I told them about my dream and how I’d interfered.

When I was done, Penny and Ivan stared at me. Neither blinked nor spoke.

“Say something,” I said.

“So,” Ivan said, “You did what your grandmother said you could.”

“Actually, she told me never to do that. Never interfere with the outcome of a dream. She... she said I could bring that fate onto myself.” My friends were so silent I was questioning if they’d forgotten how to speak. “Last night, she tried to say this wasn’t such a big deal, but I could tell she was worried. She says Conrad is really powerful, but I don’t know what she means by that, and she won’t say more than his energy is strong. I messed up, stopping him from killing that man, and now... now...”

“Somebody’s going to shoot you?” Penny asked, eyes wide.

“Nobody’s doing anything to Sayra,” Ivan said, straightening to his full height as if preparing for battle.

I sighed, feeling tired and scared. “What am I supposed to \_\_\_”

“Sup, psychic girl?” Conrad had joined our little cluster without any of us noticing. “Or should I say, *psycho* girl?” He didn’t smile when he said it, so it was hard to read his meaning.

“Don’t call her that.” Ivan had a fistful of Conrad’s vest before I knew what had happened.

“Stop it, Ivan.” I shoved between them as Conrad struggled to free himself with the desperation of a man fearing for his life. I didn’t see fear of being pummeled in Conrad’s eyes. The way he’d leaned his face away from Ivan, he seemed afraid of being touched.

“It was just a joke,” Conrad said, jerking out of Ivan’s grip. He smoothed out his vest with steady, gloved hands, contradicting his wide eyes. “You have roid-rage for breakfast or something?”

“Don’t mind him,” Penny said with a nervous laugh. “He’s overprotective.”

Ivan rounded on me. “I told you it was a mistake telling him.”

“I take it you all know about her claims of clairvoyance?” Conrad held up a hand when Ivan took a menacing step toward him. “Relax. I won’t tell anybody. Who’d believe me?”

“Comforting,” Ivan spat. “Loyalty only lasts as long as you’re worried about looking like a fool? Sayra is very important to me. You open your mouth about anything that could hurt her, and I swear my fist will be the last thing you see before you hit the ground.”

Conrad raised an eyebrow. I was sure he’d forgotten about the confidence and outright hostility from such a nerdy guy, but Ivan left no doubt he’d make good on his threat.

An odd expression came over Conrad’s face. “Dude, if you thought I was trying to make moves, I wasn’t. If Sayra’s your girlfriend, trust me, I only gave her my number because—”

“Whoa, I’m not his girlfriend.” I choked out a sound that was a bit too high-pitched to be a laugh. Then I shook my head rapidly because Conrad obviously needed the visual aid to believe the truthfulness of my statement.

Ivan’s cheeks flushed, and if I could see his ears through his fluffy curls, they’d be red too. “We’re not... I’m not... we’re just friends.”

Neither of us could look at the other. Our stumbling embarrassment made it seem like we had something to hide. We kind of did, though. I caught Penny studying both of us. Her big, brown eyes lingered on mine until I had to look away.

Conrad looked among us, probably sensing the awkwardness. “I won’t tell anybody, and not because no one would believe me. I believe her.”

“You do?” I goggled at him.

“But why?” Ivan asked at the same time I’d spoken. He leaned closer to Conrad so others around wouldn’t hear. “You believe her just like that?” He snapped his fingers. “Without an ulterior motive? I don’t buy it. Not from you.”

Conrad shrugged. “I believe her because she got angry enough to hang up on me.” He turned to me. “Of all the people at West Nottingham, you were the only one who was honest enough to ask about my gloves. You commented on my dirty room and accused my father of bribery to lockdown a parking spot. Your problem’s brutal honesty, not lying. Beyond that, let’s just say I have my reasons. I won’t talk. The only thing you can do is wait to see if I’m lying.”

I jumped in. “You’re probably open to this kind of stuff ‘cause you’re into astrology?”

Conrad looked at me as if I had spoken an alien language.

“Well, I saw the book in your car and the one with the planets on the cover in your room, so I figured—”

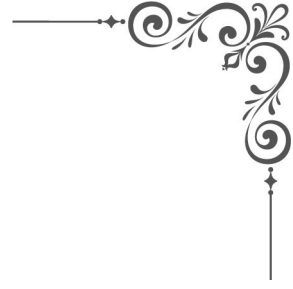
“Right,” he said quickly. “Yeah, I’m all into that zodiac stuff. Love it.” He smiled stiffly, then walked around us and headed up the steps to the main entrance.

“I still don’t trust him,” Ivan said, glaring after Conrad.

Penny started up the steps. “We got that loud and clear. But I believe him. So, relax, Ivan. He’s not going to rat out your *girlfriend*.”

My stomach lurched. Penny’s smile strained at the edges. I convinced myself she was worried about my dream. But that didn’t stop a memory of the winter dance dream from popping into my head. Ivan looked at me, but I wouldn’t meet his eyes. I distanced myself from him as we headed up the steps. *We are not together. We will not be together. He does not like me. I do not like him.* If I said it enough, maybe Penny wouldn’t end up hating me. Worrying about that suddenly overshadowed last night’s dream.

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# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MY NERVES WERE SHOT all morning. I kept waiting for Conrad to blurt out what I'd told him the night before. Every time the intercom crackled with the beginning of an announcement, I knew it would be a recording of our conversation. "My dreams always come true," would reverberate through the entire school, and all would immediately know it was my voice. The laughing, pointing, or outright fear would chase me through the corridors until I had to be homeschooled.

When I wasn't giving myself panic sweats about that, I couldn't stop obsessing over whether interfering with the dream had set in motion a violent event scheduled for my future. I knew telling Conrad about my ability had been the catalyst to the dream. I should have waited. Was that what Yaya meant by Conrad's power? And then, to pile more crap onto my frayed nerves, Penny hadn't spoken to me all morning.

Yes, we'd only been in one class together so far, with limited talking, but we could always communicate: texting, notes, or simple hand gestures. Hell, Penny and I have had entire conversations with only our eyes. But she stayed focused on the lesson and even raised her hand to answer every question the teacher asked. *What the hell?* If she was still acting the same during lunch, I would force her to talk to me, even if that meant telling her about the kiss.

*Please don't let it come to that.*

Conrad came up behind me on my way to the cafeteria. "So, did you dream about me last night?"

I yipped out no far too quickly. Conrad studied me while we walked through the crowded corridor. As we rounded the corner, he took my shoulder, making sure he wasn't touching any part of my skin, and guided me past the cafeteria doors.

“Come with me for a sec.”

We walked swiftly down a set of steps in a part of West Nottingham I’d never seen. For some strange reason, I followed him through a spooky corridor and past a sign that read *No Students Beyond This Point*. Conrad rapped twice on a door marked Boiler Room. A man, so bent he looked like the number seven, opened the door. Conrad handed the man a brown paper bag, and we slipped into the boiler room. This was my third year at West Nottingham, and I’d never seen that door or that man. The room smelled of chemicals as we walked through a dark maze of hissing pipes and clanking machines to a dead end.

“I’m not in the mood to be murdered today.”

He snorted and opened a door that was so camouflaged by dirt it blended in with the wall. We stepped out into what looked like the back of the school, but a part I did not know how to get to from the outside. Conrad propped open the door with a cinder block and kept moving. My lack of questions surprised me as I followed him down a narrow dirt path through overgrown trees and hedges. I was more interested in the where rather than the why and what would happen once we got to our destination. Although, given our history, this had all the makings of a prank waiting to happen. Like that time I had to put away the equipment in the gym, and Hillary shut off the lights and locked me inside. I wasn’t let out until Miss Hawthorne came back from lunch.

The bushy path ended in a small, untended garden. Maybe once it had been a circle, but with all the unkempt vines, plants, and flowers, it was more like someone dropped a bench in the middle of a forest. Patches of the bricked ground peeped through the snaking vines, spotlighted by the rays of sun that fought through the thick trees. Bees and beetles buzzed, and the heavy scent of honeysuckle hung in the air. Other smells emanated from the tangled garden, but I couldn’t identify the individual aromas. So this was where Conrad ate lunch every day, because he certainly wasn’t in the cafeteria.

“Hope you’re not bothered by bugs,” he said as he sat on the bench.

“Fine, time to ask.” I joined him, sitting on the opposite end. “Bugs don’t bother me, but snakes... now that’s another matter.”

“Oh.” He looked around his feet. “Maybe lift your legs, then.”

“*What?*” I jumped up on the bench, scanning that bootleg jungle while Conrad laughed. Everything looked like snakes.

“I’m kidding.” He dug a brown paper bag out of his messenger bag.

“So, there aren’t any snakes out here?” I looked down at him as he rooted through his lunch.

“I can’t guarantee that, but I’ve never seen any.” He looked up at me. “Could you sit, please? I’m going to get a crick in my neck looking up at you.”

I glared at him for a second more, then sat but kept my legs tucked under my butt. Conrad pulled out a sandwich in a plastic baggie.

“You eating?” he asked.

“Normally, I bring lunch, but today I was going to buy it. Wasn’t planning on being accosted. So, the answer is no. I won’t be eating.”

He dug in the bag again and pulled out three additional sandwiches. “These two are egg salad on sourdough, and these”—he held up the other two—“are PB&J on banana nut bread.” When I only stared at him, he said, “What?”

“You’re being weird. This is weird. I’m uncomfortable. I don’t trust this. Why did you bring me out here like we’re friends? Why are you offering me food? Why haven’t you told anyone about what I said to you last night?”

He put the sandwiches down, but not back in the bag. It took him a moment to speak. In that time, he scratched his brow, cleared his throat a few times, and then did a bizarre neck stretch thing while aiming his eyes straight ahead.

“So... here’s the thing,” he finally said. “I brought you out here cause I wanted to... I figured I needed to... I thought I



should... apologize.”

I gaped at him. “I’m sorry, *what?*” That was the last thing I expected to hear.

Conrad ran a gloved hand over his face and glanced in my direction.

“Wow,” I said. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You could accept my apology.”

I opened my mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. “What exactly are you apologizing for?”

He twisted to face me. “You know what I’m apologizing for.”

I waited.

“You want me to say it?” He shook his head as if I was the most annoying girl he’d ever met. At that moment, he looked like the arrogant boy I knew before his accident. Conrad spoke just as I was thinking this was a mistake and I needed to get out of here.

“I’m sorry for accidentally causing your broken arm.”

“Accidentally?”

He stood and looked down at me. “Accidentally! You can’t seriously think I did that on purpose.” He stopped like he was waiting for me to reply, but I simply continued to stare at him.

Conrad shook his head. “I never apologized to you because my father said only weak people apologize. Correct your mistakes and never repeat them, but never say sorry. Sorry makes you sorry.”

I frowned. “That’s the dumbest shit I’ve ever heard.”

Conrad glared down at me. I wondered what he was about to do. We were alone... really alone. Then the corner of his mouth twitched, and he snorted. He did that a lot. I could only describe his laugh as a series of *ha’s!* and pig sounds.

“Yeah,” he said. “I thought it was stupid the first time I heard it, too.” He flopped down on the bench and picked up

the sandwiches. “I *am* sorry,” he said, keeping eye contact with me. “I’ve been sorry since it happened. Honestly, I didn’t think you noticed that I never apologized, but when you yelled at me the other day, I felt like crap. I wanted to apologize right then for the broken arm and for hitting you with my car.” He winced. “When you say it back-to-back like that, it does seem like I’m out to kill you.”

“*Mmm-hmm.*” I stared at him with a twisted mouth and a quirked brow, just long enough for him to fidget in his seat. “I accept your apology, Conrad Bishop.” We stared at each other. “I guess I have an apology for you, too.”

He leaned away from me. “Is that so?”

“It has been brought to my attention that it is true. I may have been an asshole to you on one or two occasions.”

“One or two?”

“Yeah, just one or two,” I said, grinning. “It would appear I need a filter between my brain and mouth. I’m working on it. I’m sorry.”

“Well, well, well... hell hath frozen over. But, apology accepted.”

Again, we stared at each other until I broke eye contact with a laugh.

“What’s funny?” Conrad asked.

“Nothing. I’m just wondering if you’ve taken personality pills or something. You’re acting so... *normal.*”

“Personality pills? No such thing.”

“Sure, there are. My father’s a doctor. Prozac is what he’s always yelling at wild drivers.”

“I’ve been to every type of shrink you can think of and—” He stopped as if just realizing what he’d admitted.

We were in new friendlier territory, but we were not friends. He gave his head a quick shake. “I’m far from normal. Normal is a distant planet to me now.” He held up the sandwiches. “Which one do you want?”

I ignored the shrink comment, sensing he didn't want to talk about it. "Were you going to eat all four sandwiches?"

"I'm a growing boy." He flashed a grin.

"And you'd be willing to share with me?"

"My stomach will be growling by last period, but I don't want you staring at me, envisioning me as a cartooned turkey while I eat in front of you."

"It's the price you pay for kidnapping. I'll take one of the PB&Js."

Conrad handed me the sandwich. Even before I removed it from the plastic baggie, I knew it would be good. I could smell the bananas. The bread was soft and still kind of warm, like it had come out of the oven only minutes ago. Maybe his manservant brought his food to him five minutes before lunch period.

Conrad tugged each finger of his gloves, sliding them off gracefully. It reminded me of a movie I'd seen where the hero calmly slapped the villain with his glove, challenging him to a duel. Conrad had attractive hands. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why he covered them now. From what I could see, there wasn't a scar on them. His nails were clipped, and certainly cleaner than mine. Hell, his hands even looked softer than mine. When they balled into fists in his lap, I looked up and met Conrad's eyes.

"You do that a lot," he said. "Stare at my hands."

My face heated. "I don't mean to. I just can't figure out why you wear long sleeves, and it's so warm out, why you button your shirt up to your neck, why you choke yourself with that necktie, and why you wear those gloves. I'm sorry, I'll try to control my brain and my eyes and pretend I'm not wondering about it. I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

Conrad stared at me. A beam of sunlight hit his right eye, illuminating the iris like a sparkling emerald.

"Don't worry about it." He picked up his PB&J sandwich, hesitated, then put it down and grabbed the egg salad. He said around a mouthful of sandwich, "It's kinda okay that you

stare. Most people go out of their way not to look, so they don't look at me at all now. Others try too hard to act like it's not weird for me to wear these gloves when it's weird as hell." He snorted his nerdy laugh. "I know they talk about me behind my back. I guess that's karma." He was quiet for a few long seconds. "But that's why I don't have friends. It's just easier than having a bunch of fake people around me like before."

The loneliness I'd read in his eyes earlier was back, and it made me a little sad for him. I tried hard not to stare, but I wanted to understand him, to see if he was being genuine with me right now. He seemed... nice. Was this something Hillary and Tag knew about him, or was this the result of a life-changing accident? Something told me that this Conrad wouldn't have been friends with Hillary and Tag, just as he wasn't now, with or without the cheating. My suspicions were still warning me not to trust him, but my father always said trust a person until he gives you a reason not to, and if we were starting from Conrad's return, he hadn't given me a reason not to trust him yet.

"Is that why you eat out here?" I asked.

"Yeah. I just want to be alone most of the time."

"How'd you find this place, anyway?" I picked up half of my sandwich.

"I bribed the boiler room worker." Conrad laughed when I paused and stared at him. "Wow, you're so quick to believe I'd bribe somebody."

"I saw you slip Igor a bag back there. What was that if it wasn't a bribe? And let me just say, it's more than a cliché to have a hunchback roaming the underbelly of such a creepy school."

"His name's Smitty, and he's a nice old man. He likes..."

I didn't know if Conrad had stopped speaking or if I'd left my body momentarily, but all I knew was the mind-blowing taste of that PB&J on banana nut bread. *Oh—My—God*. It took a few seconds to realize the moaning was coming from me. I'd closed my eyes and gone to my happy place, which

would be the memory of eating that sandwich from that point on. The bread was so soft my fingers left imprints on it. Heavy on the peanut butter and lighter on the jelly made just the perfect combination with the sweet bread.

Conrad cleared his throat. “Are you oka—”

“*Shhh*... I’m having a moment.”

“Would you like to be alone?” He chuckled.

“I wanna marry this sandwich, have its babies, and name them all after your chef.” I took another bite and moaned louder. “I wanna Netflix and chill with this sandwich. Or skip through a meadow and go horseback riding with this sandwich. I’m in love.” I wiped a fake tear from my cheek.

“If you aren’t in Drama Club, you should consider joining.”

“Say what you want.” I slanted my eyes at his smirking face. “But this sandwich is perfection. Everything else will pale in comparison from now on. You’ve ruined me for PB&J on plain white bread.”

“Sorry. I’ll see if Chef can make up a few loaves for you.”

“*Mmm*, then I can die happy.”

I plowed through the rest of that sandwich with embarrassing speed. I tried to eat slowly, tried to savor the fruity bread, the salty peanut butter, and the sweet strawberry jelly, but I couldn’t. When I was done, I eyed Conrad’s other sandwich, which called to me from its confining plastic bag, begging to be eaten by someone who’d appreciate it.

“Don’t even think about it.” He picked up the heaven-in-a-bag and placed it on the other side of the bench as if out of sight would be out of mind. *Hardly*. He offered the egg salad instead, but I declined.

“It’s good. Fantastic. Just take a bite.”

He held out the half he’d been eating. I looked at him like he was crazy. Sharing food felt like something friends did, or *more* than friends. I wasn’t comfortable with that, but it was time for Opposite-Sayra to make a reappearance. The goal was

to become his friend—which I had to admit was easier than I’d expected—so he could help us save his father.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He pushed the sandwich closer to my mouth.

So, I could cross germ phobia off Conrad’s new afflictions list. With a nervous smile, I leaned forward and bit a corner of the sandwich on the opposite side of where he had eaten.

“Wow,” I said, covering my mouth to show I had some manners. “That’s delicious. Can your chef make lunch for me, too?”

“He’s the best. What do you think I bribed old Smitty with?”

“I thought you said you didn’t bribe him.”

“I didn’t. Not really, but Smitty has a soft spot for good food. It’s more like a thank you gift.” Conrad pulled out a bottle of milk from his messenger bag and handed it to me. “You like milk?”

“Not my favorite, but I’ll drink it.”

He took out one for himself, twisted it open, and took a long swig. “So, you gonna tell me about the dream you had about me?” He wiped away his milk-stache.

“I didn’t have a dream about you.”

“Yeah, you did. You looked too panicked when I asked. But you don’t want to tell me. It’s cool. You don’t trust me, and I don’t blame you, but I’m... different now.” He shrugged. “Or was it a sex dream?” His eyebrows danced on his forehead like a pervert.

“No, it absolutely wasn’t a sex dream. Maybe that’s your dream, but it wasn’t mine.”

He watched me just long enough for it to grow awkward, and then he started in on his second egg salad sandwich. I couldn’t tell Conrad about my dream, not until I knew for certain that I’d positively changed the outcome. Obviously, telling him about my ability had changed my original dream.

And Lord only knew what kind of hoodoo I'd brought on myself. Whatever I told Conrad from now on couldn't make things worse. I had to save Harlan Bishop without getting myself shot or making Conrad a murderer.



LATE THAT SAME NIGHT, I lay in bed on the phone with Conrad, reading my mother's book to him.

"His lean body pressed against my back as he wrapped his arms around me. He was hot, breathing hard, driving me insane. And..."

"And what?" Conrad asked, as if I'd shut off a movie right at the long-awaited conclusion.

"Umm, this was a mistake," I said. "I can't read this anymore."

"Why?"

"Cause this whole next part is a very detailed description of them having sex."

"You definitely gotta keep reading then. I need to live vicariously through these people, since it'll never be me." He made a hollow sound that was supposed to be a laugh.

"What do you mean?" My brows drew together. "Are you saying you'll never... have sex again?"

"*Again*, would imply that I've—" He stopped.

Only his breathing and the low hum of his television came through the phone.

"Just keep reading, Sayra. I didn't mean anything by it."

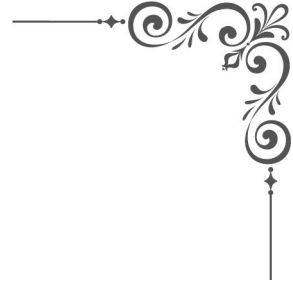
No way was he a virgin, not with Hillary as a girlfriend. But what if he was, and now he was saying he won't ever be with anyone? Because of his condition? Did the accident disfigure him? I wanted to grill him until he spilled all his secrets, but I'd wait until he was ready, if I were truly his friend.

I read again, but the words were no longer risqué. The naughty electricity between us had died. Now, it felt like a

taunt. *Look what these people can do that you never will.*  
There was so much more to Conrad Bishop than I had ever  
thought possible. Somehow, I had a feeling all his ugly secrets  
wouldn't seem so ugly to me.

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# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BY FRIDAY, I'D TALKED to Conrad every night and had lunch with him every day in what I called the boiler room garden. My friends weren't too happy about it, but I had a mission. Things I discovered about him so far: He had a healthy appetite, usually eating three sandwiches, a bag of chips, and two juices. He was happy to grill me about my dreams, but never wanted to talk about his gloves or his accident. Understandable. He didn't want to talk about his dad, either. Be it because they weren't close or a reminder of his mom, I didn't know and didn't push.

After lunch, Conrad peeked around the corner, making sure the coast was clear. We dashed down the corridor, blending in with the crowd leaving the cafeteria. I separated myself from him quickly, weaving through the den to catch up with Ivan and Penny. Ivan was easy to spot since he towered over most of the students, like me. I came up on the other side, placing Penny in the middle.

"Hey guys, how was lunch?" I asked.

Penny shot me a look so cold it stopped my heart. "Why do you care?"

"Penn," Ivan said, putting a hand on her shoulder as if to keep her from attacking.

"What's wrong?" I looked at my friends.

They had every right to be annoyed that I hadn't eaten lunch with them for the past week, but this was pure hostility coming from Penny. She shook her head and walked away.

"What's with her?"

"I told her," Ivan said.

"Told her what?" Then I noticed his red cheeks. "The kiss?" I whispered, stepping closer to him.

He nodded.

“Why, Ivan? Why would you do that?” All the blood rushed from my head, leaving me dizzy for a moment.

“She asked if anything ever happened between us. Said she saw something in our faces when Conrad thought I was your boyfriend. She had this entire story cooked up that we’d been dating behind her back. So, I had to tell her it was only a kiss, but I don’t think she believes me.” Ivan ran a hand through his bushy hair. “She thinks we’ve betrayed her.”

“I’ll talk to her.” My mouth felt dry. I wiped at the beads of sweat that had broken out on my forehead.

“She doesn’t want to talk... to you.” Ivan looked down at the floor. “She blames you more than me, even though I told her *I* initiated the kiss. I don’t know why she’s so upset, but she looked like I’d stabbed her when I told her.”

*She’s upset because she likes you.* Saying that would be another betrayal to Penny, so I kept my mouth shut. Somehow my feet found their way to class, but my mind was a jumble of puzzle pieces. What could I possibly say to Penny to keep my dream from coming true? We had another Ethics project meeting scheduled for Saturday at my house. Would Penny even show? She avoided me in the halls and ignored me in class. I didn’t dare bring it up in last period, not with Hillary and Tag sitting with us discussing the Ethics assignment.

It was obvious something was wrong. Penny sulked silently, and I was distracted, thinking of what I’d say to her. Quite a few times, I tuned in and noticed Tag staring at me, only to look away when I caught him. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was checking me out. No way. I shivered at the thought.

“You cold?” Tag asked.

“Why do you care?” Hillary spat so viciously that Tag flinched like she had struck him.

When the bell rang, Penny raced out of the classroom. It took little effort for me to reach her. My legs were probably a good eight inches longer than hers.

“Penny.” I touched her shoulder, but she shook me off and dashed through the crowd. She was a quick little thing. I ran after her. “Wait! Please.”

She didn’t stop at her locker, just headed straight out the main doors, down the steps, and into her car. I grabbed the door handle before she could back out of the spot. Since her convertible top was down, she had to listen to me.

“Penn, please. Nothing’s going on between Ivan and me. Never was, never will be.”

“Right. I see the way you are with each other. He says nothing’s been going on, but when I put the pieces together, it all makes sense.”

“What makes sense? There are no pieces to put together.”

Penny glared at me. “Deny all you want, but I’ve seen how he touches you—”

“You mean the same way he touches you?”

“He looks at you—”

“Like he looks at you.”

“It’s different!” she shouted.

“Yeah, you’re right, it is different. If you’d open your eyes, you’d see exactly why it’s different. Jesus, Penn, don’t you see? You’re angry because you have feelings for Ivan.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it and pursed her lips so tightly I thought she was going to spit on me. I stepped back, but Penny only slipped on her shades, backed out of her parking spot, and sped away.

Ivan raced up to me. “What happened? Did you fix it?”

I shook my head. “I think I made it worse.”

“*Say-ra*,” he said in a way that reminded me of Eeyore. “Give her a minute to settle down. She should be okay by tomorrow.” He spoke more to himself than to me.

“You think so? Because I don’t.”

I stood there while Ivan walked down a few spaces and climbed into his car. He honked as he drove away. I didn't hear Conrad come up beside me, but I felt his sleeve brush my arm. He stared off in the same direction that I was staring.

“What're we looking at?”

“Nothing.” I slumped over to the bike rack and strapped on my helmet.

“Let me give you a ride home. You look distracted. I'd hate for you to get clipped again.”

I didn't argue when Conrad wheeled my bike over to his truck and laid it in the back. I climbed in the passenger seat, not bothering to take off my helmet, and waited for Conrad to start the truck, but he didn't.

“So, you want to tell me what's going on with you and Penny?”

“Just a misunderstanding.”

“About?”

I hesitated. Did I want to tell him this? Would it be more fuel for him to use if this nice guy routine was just a joke? I thought for a moment, then decided it didn't matter.

“Ivan and I...kissed.”

Something unreadable passed over Conrad's face, and then he started the engine. “Oh. So, you two *are* dating.”

“No. We kissed because... never mind. I'm not dating Ivan, nor do I want to date Ivan. The whole thing was a mistake.”

“Well, maybe you should go out with him. He seems like a nice guy.”

I narrowed my eyes at Conrad. He was overly concerned with backing up the truck.

“You think I should date Ivan?”

He shrugged, and it looked anything but casual. “If you want.”

“What the hell is going on with everybody today? I say I don’t want to be with Ivan, and nobody hears me.”

Conrad was silent as we headed down the winding road away from school. “Well,” he said after a few awkward moments, “if not Ivan, I’m sure somebody else likes you. Tag may be whipped, but I know for a fact he thinks you’re hot. He’s actually kinda cool away from Hillary.”

“Tag?” I turned my body to face Conrad as he picked up speed down the long stretch of Carmichael Road. It would be like them to make me think one of them had feelings for me, only to embarrass me in front of the entire school. Well, this was no teen movie, and I wasn’t stupid. Now, I suspected everything.

“Why are you trying to push me off on Tag? If you three are planning some kind of prank and that’s why you’re being so nice to me, then just—”

“Prank? Why would I be planning a prank?”

I shrugged. “How should I know why you do the things you do?”

He snorted, but it wasn’t his usual nerdy laugh. “Whatever, Sayra. Be paranoid. I’m not planning to do anything to you. I just don’t see why you’re not dating somebody.”

“Well, maybe I ought to date you, since you’re so concerned.” My eyes went wide. Did I just ask him out?

Conrad shook his head. “I don’t date.”

My mouth went dry as I thought of his list of don’ts. Don’t touch. Don’t date. Don’t have sex. But the curt way he said it got me annoyed all over again. He left something off the end of that sentence.

“You mean you don’t date girls like me, right? Cause you surely dated the hell out of Hillary. So, what is it? I’m too tall? Black? I’m dirty? I smell like motor oil?”

“Wow. Manage your insecurities, please. That’s not—”

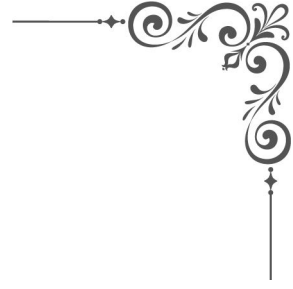
“Sure. I get it. You don’t touch, you don’t have friends, and you don’t date. Right? You should just go live in a

bubble.” I muttered the last part, but he heard me.

Pain flashed over his face, quickly hardening to that arrogant mask he used to wear. I wanted to kick my own ass. *Here’s that thing Penny said you do, Sayra, in real time.* Conrad slammed on the brakes in front of my house and hopped out of the truck before I could speak. He dragged my bike from the back. As I jumped out to apologize, he climbed back into the driver’s seat.

“Conrad, I’m sor—” He sped away before I could say more. “Damn it. I should just take a vow of silence.”

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# CHAPTER NINETEEN

“SAYRA, COME INTO THE kitchen,” Daddy called the minute my foot stepped over the threshold.

*What now?* I dropped my helmet and backpack and then slumped into the kitchen. Daddy’s brows drew together as he studied something on his laptop. He glanced up, and whatever my expression said, it made him turn the laptop around to face me. Four images of my brain were on screen. I looked at the pictures, unsure if what I saw was a normal brain or one with only weeks to live.

“They’re negative. All clear,” Daddy said with what he probably thought was a comforting smile.

I had yet to breathe. He held out a sheet of paper. I took it in a shaking hand. It was the report from the radiology facility. *No masses found* were the only three words I read. I flopped into a chair and let my head drop on the table. The back door opened. Ma said something, then abruptly stopped and rushed over to me.

“Say-Say, what’s wrong? What’d you say to her, Rodney?”

“Nothing,” Daddy said a little defensively. “Her scan’s all clear. That’s good news.”

“Obviously, it’s been stressing her more than she let on.”

Ma slid the band from my afro puff and sank her fingers down to my scalp, massaging. It helped. I hadn’t realized how much tension I’d been carrying around, waiting for those stupid results.

“So, this is it, right?” I asked with my head still on the table. “No more tests, no more doctors.”

When no one spoke, I lifted my head and looked at Daddy. He traced the line of his goatee with his thumb and index finger—something he did when he was thinking or stalling.

“You promised.”

“Sayra,” Daddy began. “I know what I said, but I want to know why you have the headaches. What kind of father or doctor would I be if I let my daughter suffer?”

“I’m not suffering. You just want to stop my dreams.”

“I don’t like to see you in pain, Sayra.”

“You promised, Daddy,” I whispered.

A muscle worked in his jaw as he stared me in the eyes. I wouldn’t lose this staring contest. He’d promised.

“You two are just alike,” Ma said, walking over to the refrigerator. “Stubborn as hell.”

Daddy rubbed his chin, blew a hard breath out his nose, and looked away. *Whoa... wait.* He looked away. I won? *Yes! In your face, old man.*

I stood, and Daddy looked up at me, a small frown on his face. He would always worry about me, and at that moment, I knew I couldn’t tell him about my dreams anymore. It was the only option.

“We worry, Sayra because we love you,” Daddy said in that way that always filled me with guilt. Did they have classes to teach parents how to get that tone just right?

“I know, Daddy. I love you too.” I leaned over the table and kissed his cheek.

He cupped my face before I could straighten. “I want you to tell me if you have any more headaches, okay?”

Then I did something I found almost impossible to do. I lied to my father’s face. “I promise.”

He kissed my forehead and let go of my face.

“I’ve got homework,” I said, feeling sick about the lie.

In my room, I tried to work up my nerve to call Conrad and apologize. I wanted to call Penny and let her vent. I could only hope she would forgive me. Conrad seemed like an easier call to make.

I picked up my phone and then decided against calling him. We'd talked for hours every night since that first call. If he rushed me off the phone because he was still mad, I'd be pouty throughout dinner. So, I took the coward's way and texted him one word.

—Sorry.

I waited for the longest five minutes of my life, and then my phone vibrated.

—Dmi.

I assumed that meant, 'don't mention it,' or maybe he was calling me a dirty, messy, idiot—one way to figure it out.

—Call me later?

After a few seconds, I got:

—Ok 9ish.

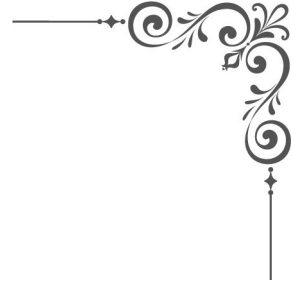
That had me doing my hip-shaking dance that was only done when there were no witnesses. Even though my mood was super high, I still didn't have the courage to call Penny, so I texted her.

—Can u come 2 my house 2moro @ 12?

I'd changed out of my uniform and was halfway through my English Lit homework before my phone buzzed with Penny's message.

—k.

She was seriously pissed at me, or seriously hurt because she never took that long to answer a text. Her phone was glued to her hand 24-7. *Whatever*. I'd deal with it later.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY

I SLID ON A PAIR OF denim shorts and a pink tank. Ma did my hair, showing me how to keep my kinky-curls from drying out for the hundredth time. My hair looked darker, fuller, and shinier whenever she worked her magic. It fell at my shoulders in tight, springy coils, parted down the middle. She completed my look with black mascara and lip gloss that held a hint of red. A little went a long way, as Ma explained.

I told her I'd finished her book and loved it. The smile on her face made me so happy. That hour together, doing my hair and "makeup" brought us closer. It also left me understanding that self-care differed from vanity. I needed to take care of myself and be better to the people I cared about.

Penny arrived right at noon. I'd gone from worrying she'd no-show to wondering why she was so punctual. When I opened the door, there was a quick flash of surprise at my appearance before she glanced away and gave me a dull, "Hey."

"Wanna go out back?" I asked.

She lifted a shoulder. I took that as a yes and headed to the yard. The back of our house was my mother's oasis. She'd hired professionals to design an outdoor paradise. Exotic plants and flowers decorated the yard, along with a pond, privacy nooks, and a hot tub. I didn't want to think about what my parents did in that thing. A long-cushioned bench sat under an ivy-covered thing my mother called a pergola. Whatever it was, it provided lots of shade.

Penny and I sat on opposite ends of the bench. I faced her, but she looked straight ahead. As usual, the white strapless top and white shorts she wore looked perfect on her. A brown hair clip that matched her sandals held her braids back.

"Do you honestly think I'd date Ivan behind your back?" I don't know why I started with an attitude. Looking at the cute little package she was born into made me angry that she'd be stupid enough to think Ivan would choose me over her.

“So, you didn’t kiss him?” She looked at me.

“We kissed, but it wasn’t what you think.”

“All I know is neither of you planned to tell me. If I wasn’t smarter than the average bear, and know when something’s off with my best friends, I guess I wouldn’t have known until you were walking down the aisle to marry him.”

“You’ve truly lost your mind,” I said, leaning toward her. My stupid, bouncy hair fell into my face, reminding me why I always wore it in a ponytail.

“I’m in complete control of my mind,” she said. “But it’s fine. Now that I know, you don’t have to sneak.”

“Oh my God,” I muttered. “I told you why you’re so pissed. Just admit it.”

“Admit what?”

“That you like him.”

She scrunched up her face. “Now you’re the one who’s lost her mind. There’s no way I like Ivan.” She stood. Maybe she was going to storm out, kick me, or maybe she just needed to rant, and standing made her feel better. I made a decision.

“I had a dream that you and Ivan went to senior prom as boyfriend and girlfriend.”

Penny’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You’re making that up.”

“So, I’m a liar now?”

She pressed her lips together and swallowed, but her eyes never left mine. “No,” she whispered, sitting on the bench again. “You’ve never lied to me, except by omission.” She threw in that last dig, took a breath, and slanted her eyes toward me. “Me and Ivan? No way. Prom? Really?”

I nodded. We sat silently for several long minutes. I had to let her speak first. I’d already spilled too much, so maybe I could get away without telling all.

“When did you have this dream?” she finally asked.

“Months ago.”

“So, you had it before you kissed him?”

*Shit.* “Well, yeah, but—”

“You dreamed of us together, and you still kissed him?”  
Her voice rose, approaching shrill. “Why would you do that?”

I wanted to shout that he’d kissed me, but that was crap. I could have stopped him. “Penn, I... you’ve had tons of boyfriends and—”

“I’m pretty sure it hasn’t been tons,” she snapped.

“Compared to my none, you’ve had plenty, and certainly plenty, vying for the position. So, will you listen to my explanation? If you never want to speak to me after, then I’ll leave you alone.”

I waited for her nod before I continued.

“The first time we kissed was three years ago.” Her mouth opened, but I kept talking before she could interrupt. “We were playing in the tree in front of Ivan’s house. We’d made these disgusting mud balls and were waiting for Ivan’s brother to come out so we could bomb him. But when Isaac came out of the house, he had a girl with him. He pounced on her like he’d swallowed poison, and her mouth had the antidote. We didn’t throw the mud balls since we couldn’t figure out what was so great about kissing, why Isaac’s girlfriend was moaning like that, and why she looked like someone had conked her on the head when they’d finished. She actually stumbled to the car. It took her three tries to get the door open.”

“Wow, he must be a good kisser,” Penny said. “I wonder if it runs in the family. Does it run in the family?” She quirked a brow.

“How should I know? I’ve never kissed Issac.”

She looked at me like I was deficient. “Is Ivan a good kisser?”

“Again, I say, how should I know? I don’t have anybody to compare him to, but I was quite capable of pedaling my bike home if that answers your question.” It encouraged me that her

focus shifted to Ivan's kissing skills and hadn't lingered on the fact that I'd kissed him three years ago. So, I skipped ahead.

"When we kissed two weeks ago, we weren't thinking. It's no excuse, but it's the truth. I think we both just wanted to kiss someone. Actually, that's not entirely true for me. I kissed him back because I was all over the place, mentally. The day before, Conrad told me to never touch him, and then my father —"

"What? He said that?" Penny gaped at me.

"Yup. He told me never touch his skin, like I'm an outbreak monkey, coughing the plague on people."

Penny snorted, and that led to a giggle until finally, she was laughing full out. I laughed too, although I wasn't entirely sure what was so funny.

"God, he's *so* weird," she said through her laughter.

Suddenly, I felt a need to protect Conrad. "No, Penn." I reached out to touch her arm. She stopped laughing. "I think I was wrong about him. He's changed, or maybe he was a product of his environment, but he's lonely, maybe. He envies the friendship I have with you and Ivan. I think it's hard for him to trust people because he was such a ginormous ass before his accident, and he's so freakin' rich that he knows he never had a genuine friend, just lackeys. Now, he's back with those gloves and the not touching. He returned to school with some serious issues. I don't know what they are. I asked, but he said he didn't want to tell me. If he doesn't want me to touch him, I have to respect that."

"Okay," Penny said seriously. "I get it. You two are friends now. It's cool. I told you he changed. Do you think you could be more than friends?"

Just the thought of it had my heart racing. "I don't think so."

"But you'd like to be?"

"How'd we get on this subject?" I asked. "Aren't you supposed to be mad at me for kissing Ivan?"



“Whoa.” She leaned away from me with wide eyes. “You like him enough to bring the subject back to something you’d rather not talk about. *Interesting*. So, is he the reason behind the makeover I said you didn’t need? By the way, you look fabulous.”

My face heated at the compliment. “Thank you, but how bad do I normally look when some leave-in conditioner, lip gloss, and mascara can be called a makeover?”

“Mascara?” Penny leaned in. “No way your real lashes are that long.” She leaned closer until she was nearly nose-to-nose with me.

“If you two are about to kiss,” Ivan said, “let me get my phone out so I can get a pic.”

Penny and I jumped apart. Ivan stopped thirty feet away, as if afraid to come closer. It was like we all just remembered we had a problem in our friendship.

As Ivan hesitantly approached, I whispered to Penny out of the corner of my mouth. “Don’t tell him about my dream.”

“Wasn’t going to,” she said through her teeth.

“Just act normal.”

“Shut *up*.” Penny elbowed me in the ribs.

Ivan stopped in front of us, looked at me, and then at Penny, where his eyes stayed. I could see her struggle to keep eye contact and act like she didn’t know they’d be a couple next year, if not sooner.

“You guys okay? Are we friends again?” Ivan asked.

“I think so,” I said, but it wasn’t my call.

Ivan kept his eyes on Penny. “We good?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I’m not pissed anymore.” A nervous smile played at her lips, but it must’ve been enough for Ivan because he flopped down beside her with a goofy grin. When his butt hit the bench, Penny shot up from her seat.

“Hey, anybody thirsty?” She twisted a gold ring on her finger like she was trying to unscrew it.

Ivan frowned at Penny's unease.

"Yeah, I am," I said. "Let me help you. We may as well get stuff for everybody." I grabbed Penny by the elbow and hustled her into the house. "Will you quit freaking out? I should've never told you."

She snatched her elbow out of my grip. "Yeah, why did you burden me with this?"

"Cause you're the girl and supposedly more emotionally mature than the boy. Look, Penn, you don't have to admit it to me, and you don't even have to admit it to yourself yet, but some part of you likes Ivan. That's why you were so angry that I kissed him. That's why it gets awkward between you two sometimes, and that's why you two will eventually be a couple, groping at prom."

Her mouth opened, but whatever she was going to say got canceled when my mother led Hillary, Tag, and Conrad into the kitchen.

"Whoa," Tag said, eyeing me like I was a juicy ribeye. "You look hot."

The noise Hillary made was reminiscent of a strangled cat. Tag went red and immediately started back-pedaling. My mother didn't even try to hide her smile. She just guided Hillary and Tag out to the yard.

"Argue out here, please." She closed the sliding door and turned to me. "Told you, Say-Say. You're stunning."

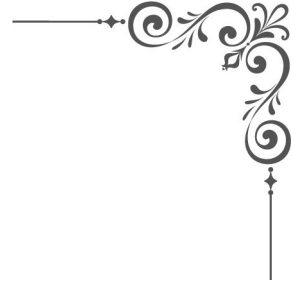
"Stunning might be a bit much, Ma, and I'd rather not have Tag confirm it."

Conrad didn't say a word. Something about how he looked at me had a chill running down my spine. I had hoped he would look at me like Tag had, drooling with little birdies flying around his head. Not that I wanted him like that, of course. Conrad looked like he had sealed himself off. That thousand-mile gaze I'd seen in his eyes on the day he had returned to school was back.

Honestly, though, I'd looked in the mirror today and liked what I saw. That was all that mattered. So, I straightened to my

full height and followed everyone outside.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

“YAYA, YOU THERE?” A ridiculous amount of noise blared in the background from wherever my grandma was, probably a party.

“Yeah. Hang on.”

I waited with my cell mounted on my dashboard as I drove to Penny’s house. The background noise quieted, and Yaya came back to the phone.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just wanted to ask you a few questions. I’m going to try to bring the dream back tonight. How do I do that?”

It took a long moment for her to answer. “You sure you wanna do this?”

I huffed. We’d been through this already. She sounded like my father. “Yes. I’m absolutely sure I want to do this.”

Again, with the silence. I parked in front of Penny’s house and sat with the car idling.

“Be careful, Sayra. You already interfered in one dream. You don’t wanna do anything else dangerous.”

“Yaya. I know this already.”

“Don’t assume you know everything.” I could hear the lecture approaching.

“I’m calling because I don’t know everything, but it seems like you don’t want to tell me, and I have to say that’s frustrating. What’s the point of having this ability and this dream if I don’t use it to help? And in order to help, I have to get back into that dream. I’m not trying to be a smart mouth, Yaya, but if you won’t help me, I’m going in blind. Either way, I’m going to do it.”

“I’m afraid you’ll get back into that dream and do exactly what I told you not to do.”

“I won’t interfere. I promise.”

She sighed. I swear it felt like I waited twenty minutes before she spoke again. “You gonna need some herbs. Mugwort, Sun Opener, African dream root, African Dream Bean, Blue Lotus—”

“Where am I gonna get all that?”

“In the root bag under your bed.” Yaya pronounced root like *rut*.

I groaned. “Yaya, I’m already at Penny’s house.”

“Whose fault is it you didn’t call ‘fore you left the house? You gettin’ on my nerves, chile.”

“Sorry. I’m just frustrated.”

“Mm-hm. When you get the bag, shake it round, mix it up good. Scoop out a teaspoon. Only a teaspoon, baby, this here powerful stuff. Make a tea with it. Steep it for two minutes and drink it down right ‘fore bed. Burn some sage, for you start. Your mama got some. Open your window a crack to let out the negative energy and then, when you ready for bed, make your room as dark as it can go. Cover up any clocks or things that give off light.”

“Okay,” I said, typing it all into a notes app on my phone.

“It ain’t easy, baby. You think ‘cause you moved that boy’s arm already that you can do this so quick. But that ain’t the case. You gonna have to focus to bring the dream back, stay focused to keep it, and then concentrate hard to become more than a vapor. The tea will help, but it’s all about your mindset. It’ll surprise me if you can manage it within a year.”

“A year! I don’t have a year, Yaya. From what I can tell, they’re planning to kill Mr. Bishop on New Year’s Eve.”

“I know that, baby. But maybe it ain’t meant for you to solve this dream. Maybe this dream only meant to help you strengthen your ability.”

I shook my head, suddenly angry with her. She was supposed to understand better than anyone else, but it sounded like she was telling me to be okay if I couldn’t do anything to

help Mr. Bishop. I couldn't be okay with that. I shut off my car and got out.

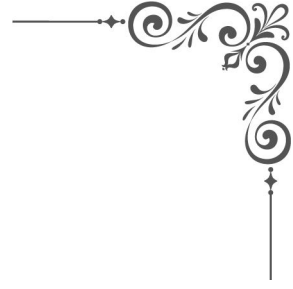
“I can't just accept that I may have to let Mr. Bishop die. I won't accept that.”

“Sayra, damn it... I don't like the way you sound. You sound like somebody that's 'bout to do something stupid.”

“I'm not, Yaya. You're the one who told me it'd probably take me a year to even return, stay, and be more than a ghost in the dream. So, don't worry. I'm late for a sleepover at my friend's. I'll call you tomorrow.”

She was not happy and didn't believe me, but that just went to show my grandma was very smart. I had to control this power, not let it control me. Since I had that dream about Mr. Bishop, I've had a hollow feeling in my chest. Three months was all I had to do something that could take me a year or more. I didn't have the luxury of playing by my grandmother's rules. If that meant I had to shove that clown away from Mr. Bishop, then so be it. I wouldn't take the stabs for him, but preventing them from happening didn't seem so bad.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

THERE WAS NO POINT in having the sleepover if I didn't have the herbs to help bring back the dream. I stayed at Penny's long enough to watch a movie in her home theater and then went home.

The mojo bag under my bed smelled... *different*. It certainly didn't smell like something that would taste good. Yaya mentioned nothing about adding sugar, but I knew enough not to mess with the herbs.

Down in the kitchen, I put the teakettle on. Ma was in her office writing, and it sounded like Daddy was in the den working too. Good. I slipped a measuring spoon into my back pocket and peeked in on both my parents to say goodnight. Ma looked at the mug in my hand questioningly, but didn't say anything. I never drank tea unless I was sick.

Once in my room, I closed the door and locked it just for good measure. I wanted to smudge the room, steep the tea, and drink it without interruption. I scooped a teaspoon of the herbs and put it in the water. After the room was smokey from the sage, I covered my alarm clock and powered off my cell. Those were the only light-casting objects in my room. I had room-darkening curtains that I never closed because I liked to wake up with the sun. Tonight, I closed them, overlapping them to make sure not even a sliver of the streetlight shone through. Had to roll up my fluffy bathrobe and shove it under the door to keep the hallway light from creeping under. I guzzled down the tea, gagging immediately on the funky sour taste, then slipped on my pajamas and got into bed.

My room had never been this dark. Even with my eyes wide open, I couldn't see. I waited for sleep like I used to wait for the bus back home where I grew up, impatiently.



*THE DREAM COMES QUICKLY, without hardly any focus to bring the images back. Something's wrong, though. I stand in the middle of the grand landscaping behind the Bishop mansion. The grass is luminescent, almost cartoonishly so. I shield my eyes against the moon, beaming like a spotlight from heaven. Fog floats around my calves, liquid and dense. I turn, or try to, but my limbs weigh fifty pounds each.*

*Blackness skirts the edge of the property where the woods sit, contradicting the florescent grass and the blazing moon. I can't see a tree or any shapes in that direction. Mr. Bishop, in his tuxedo, bursts from the blackness. He's running at full speed and brushes past me again. I try to go after him, but my legs won't move. I fall forward, expecting to pass through the thick mist at my knees, but I hit nothing. Grey clouds fill my lungs and steal my breath as I fall and fall. Screams try to escape, but I choke on them.*



“SAYRA!”

*Bang, bang, bang.* My father pounded on my bedroom door. I could hear him, but couldn't move. *Bam!* The door flew open. Ma and Daddy rushed in. Ma flipped on the light, and they stared down at me. I didn't know what they expected to see. Why were they so desperate to get into my room? Was I moaning, screaming? Yeah, I think I was screaming.

Daddy sat on the edge of my bed and thumbed a tear from my cheek. “Take a deep breath, Sayra.”

“What's wrong with her?” Ma asked. “Why isn't she moving?”

Daddy pressed two fingers to my wrist and then had me track his finger with my eyes. “Looks like sleep paralysis.”

“Should we do something?” Ma asked, flapping her hands. “Take her to a doctor?”

Daddy turned to her and held out his hand. “Hello, I'm Doctor Price. I'll be treating your daughter tonight.”

She swatted his hand away. “You know what I mean. Take her to the ER or something?”

“If this is sleep paralysis, it’ll disperse in a few minutes.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“We’ll deal with that then.”

Ma let out an annoyed breath and began pacing the room. She stopped by my dresser.

*No, no, no. Don’t look over there!*

I had to strain my eyes toward my toes to see what she was doing. She picked up the sage bundle and put it back down. Nothing unusual about that. Ma burned sage all the time, especially after certain neighbors stopped by with their gossip, as Ma put it. Next, she opened the red velvet pouch. That wasn’t even all that odd to her. I mean, she grew up with Yaya and all her root bags. When she picked up the coffee mug, my heart beat harder.

She smelled the cup, swirled it around, and smelled it again. There had to be dregs left in the bottom. Ma picked up the root bag and smelled that, then turned to me with wide eyes.

“Sayra, did you drink this?”

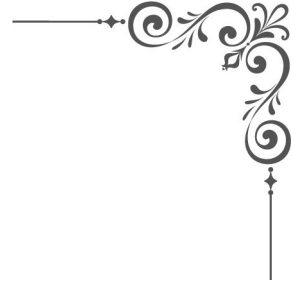
Daddy twisted toward Ma. “What’s that?”

“Roots from my mother.”

Dr. Rodney *Daddy* Price whirled around and looked down at me like I’d lost my ever-loving mind. It was at that moment my sleep paralysis subsided.

*Perfect.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

AFTER MY PARENTS YELLED at me for what felt like three generations, Yaya called and yelled at me, too. I'd steeped the herbs for longer than two minutes. In my defense, she didn't stress exactly two minutes, so I thought it was a suggested amount of time. Ma and Yaya had an argument that was just shy of my mother being completely disrespectful to Yaya, which didn't fly in this family. I'd pissed off everyone.

Daddy confiscated every root bag Yaya put in my room... all that I knew about. Yaya told me there were others, but she refused to tell me where they were. Apparently, I couldn't be trusted not to make more tea or roll a blunt and smoke the damn herbs.

So, three weeks into October, and my attempts to bring back the dream without Yaya's roots were fragmented. The bits that weren't jumbled still only allowed me to be a spectator. I had learned nothing new or useful. Ivan suggested I take a break, not try for a week, just go to sleep with no thoughts in my head. That was easier said than done.

I was more desperate now than ever. Conrad had been distant since our study session weeks ago, which meant I was being pushed further away from asking him for help. We weren't any closer to Harlan Bishop or knowing who wanted him dead. I didn't know what put that wall up between Conrad and me. Truthfully, it wasn't so much a wall as it was hesitation and reservation on his part. He still spoke to me, but we only talked on the phone when I initiated the calls. Even then, our conversations were never more than a few minutes before he had to go.

We hadn't had lunch in the boiler room garden anymore, but every morning, in first period, I found a brown paper bag on my desk with PB&J on banana nut bread inside. Whenever I braved the subject with Conrad, he would play it off like he didn't know what I was talking about.

I even tried to go down to the garden so we could have it out in private. It took me a week to find the right thing to bribe old hunchback Smitty. With two slices of sweet potato pie, I finally found Smitty's soft spot. Conrad wasn't even out there, and he never showed.

Maybe I'd read more into our "friendship" than there was, which was fine. But he seemed like he still liked me, still wanted to be my friend. Something kept him from actually doing it.

In the cafeteria with Ivan and Penny, I stood to head to class. Omar Siedel stepped in front of me.

"Hey, Sayra." He smiled and looked anywhere but at me.

Omar had been speaking to me a lot lately. Fortunately, my replies had been better than that first time when I flopped my hand around like a boneless fish.

"Hey, Omar. What's up?"

"Um..." He glanced at Penny and Ivan, who hadn't budged and looked as if they had no intentions of doing so. "I was wondering if you'd like to go to the Halloween dance with me?"

I think I gaped at him for a solid minute until he said my name again.

"Oh. Sorry, Omar, but I'm not going to the dance."

"Yes, she is," Penny piped in.

"No, I'm not," I said through clenched teeth.

Omar looked at Penny and me. "If you change your mind, maybe you'll let me know... or save me a dance?" He grinned, and a dimple winked at me from his right cheek. *Gulp.*

Penny punched me in the arm the minute Omar was out of earshot. "Are you crazy? That was Omar *freakin'* Siedel. And you said no? Do you know how many girls would give their left liver for a date with—"

"Hang on," Ivan cut in. "Their *left* liver? I don't know what planet you're from, but we humans only have one liver."

Penny's upper lip curled back into a snarl. "I meant lung." She turned back to me. "Why would you say no?"

"I don't know. Maybe I would've thought about it if he'd asked me to the movies or something, but a school dance is too... under the microscope. And I can't go from totally dateless to dating a guy girls would give *both* of their livers for."

Ivan and I laughed. Penny told us to shut up.

"And what's this nonsense about not going?" she asked as we headed to class.

"I've only got a week to find a costume. I can never find anything I like. All the costumes are slutty or made for short girls."

"Slutty isn't necessarily a bad thing," Ivan said. "You two should embrace your inner slut."

"I have an idea," Penny said, pointedly ignoring Ivan. "We can have a group costume. I'll be Dorothy. You two can fight out who will be the Tin Man and the Scarecrow. I thought Conrad could be the cowardly lion, but I guess that's out."

Ivan and I exchanged glances over Penny's head. He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. Penny really was in the Land of Oz if she thought I was going to dress up like a scarecrow or tin man.



TWO DAYS LATER, I SAT straight up in bed, ignoring the mild thumping in my head because I just had the perfect dream to prove my gift to Conrad. I wrote every detail in my black diary and tried to get the times as close to the events as possible. Riding my bike to school didn't even annoy me like usual.

With quick hands, I chained up my bike and didn't bother taking off my helmet. I raced over to catch Conrad as he climbed out of his truck. Penny and Ivan watched with interested confusion as I rushed past them and straight to Conrad.

“Hey,” I said, breathing hard.

He closed the driver’s side door and furrowed his brow.  
“Hey.”

It was hard to keep my smile in the face of his carefully controlled features. “I don’t know what I did to make you not want to be my friend anymore, but—”

“Sayra...” Conrad met my eyes with an expression that confused me. Loneliness? It couldn’t be loneliness because I was offering him friendship, and he wasn’t taking it. “You didn’t do anything,” he finally said.

“I realized I never proved to you I have psychic dreams,” I whispered.

“That’s not the problem.”

“So, you admit there’s a problem.”

He let out a long breath. “There’s no problem with you.” He tried to step around me, but I blocked him. I would keep him trapped between his car and Penny’s if it took all day.

“The bell’s going to ring.” He stepped toward me. We began walking, him forward, me backward.

I opened my diary and pointed to the entry on the last completed page. “Between eight a.m. and eight-ten, Sayra will trip.”

“Not surprising since you’re walking back—” Conrad reached out and grabbed a fist full of my vest to keep me from cracking my head on the curb I just tripped over. “Will you turn around and walk the right way?”

I stopped. By this time, Penny and Ivan had come up on either side of us. “I want to prove that I’m not a liar or a fake.”

“If I take this book and read it, will you give it a rest?”

“Not the response I was looking for, but yes. I’ll give it a rest. Except you can’t have my book.” I tore out the page and handed it to him. “Sorry, but this book never leaves my sight.” It wasn’t my platinum diary, but I still wouldn’t let him have the entire book.



He looked over the page. A grin lifted one side of his mouth. “So, during last period, at least thirteen people will become violently ill?”

“That I know of, there could be more. Avoid the west corridor on the third floor unless you want to wade through vomit. Oh, that reminds me.” I turned to Penny. “I’m not sure, but don’t eat the sushi today, to be safe.”

She frowned. “Thanks.”

Conrad folded the paper and stuck it in his pocket. “This was unnecessary, Sayra. I told you I believed you.”

“I know, but I thought it would help put things right between us.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he said a bit sadly, which left me even more confused. “I’ll read this, okay? Thanks for trusting me with it. It means a lot.” He moved around me and took the steps two at a time.

We stared after him until Ivan said, “I know why he doesn’t want to be around you anymore.”

Penny and I turned our attention to him.

“Why?” I asked.

“How much is it worth to you?” He rubbed his hands together.

“How much is not getting your ass kicked worth to you?” Penny said.

“Why does it always come down to violence with you? Is it ‘cause you’re short? All that hostility compacted into a five-three frame can’t be good for you. And let me just say, *you* couldn’t kick my ass even if you reincarnated Bruce Lee and borrowed his foot.”

Penny glared, opened her mouth to argue, but I interrupted.

“Will you just tell us?” I said impatiently.

“Fine.” He sighed. “He’s acting weird because he likes you. Dare I say, he sees little cartoon hearts when he looks at

you. You move in slow motion, and the sun shines only on you in his eyes.”

“You’re insane,” I said.

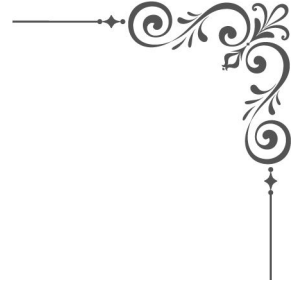
“I’m a guy. I know how we get when we like a girl. You’re *it* for him, but he doesn’t want you to be. Probably because it’s like an abomination. You two were mortal enemies. Superman and Lex Luthor. Optimus Prime and Megatron. Batman and The Joker. Dracula and Van Helsing—”

“We get it!” Penny swatted his arm.

Ivan shrugged. “I’ll put money on the fact that he likes you, *really* likes you, and that’s a problem for him.”

Penny and I stared at Ivan. I couldn’t make sense of it. Conrad liked me, *really* liked me, like he wanted to be my boyfriend? If that was the case, then why freak out? His long list of don’ts popped into my head. *No touching, no dating, and no sex*. I wasn’t in any rush for that last one, but maybe it wasn’t any of that. Maybe it was me. Maybe I was too much of an asshole with my sharp tongue. I looked down at the grit under my nails, the dust on my sneakers from riding my bike, and the crescent moon sweat stains under my pits. Maybe I was just gross.

He had come back to a school where he used to rule, and he was no less popular. His notoriety now was more so because everyone wanted to know what happened to him. Also, Hillary held a lot of sway, and if she decided Conrad was now a loser for hanging with me... dating me, he could quickly become the school’s freak, even if he was still the richest. Being popular might matter a lot to him. Part of me felt sorry for him. I knew what it was like just to want to fit in. The other part of me thought he should suck it up and like who he wanted to like, no matter what. Whatever the case, I was going to find out the truth.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

I STOOD IN MY BEDROOM, fastening a metal plate over my chest. The freaking Tin Man. It was the first hand of rock-paper-scissors I'd ever lost to Ivan. It was my fault, really. I couldn't blame Penny. I allowed myself to be talked into going to the stupid dance at the last minute. Penny just happened to have Wizard of Oz-themed costumes at the ready, two costumes to fit either Ivan or me. What does it say about my body that I can share clothes with a gangly boy?

Metal thigh and shin guards went over my black leggings with Velcro straps. I secured another metal plate to my torso over a black turtleneck. With my hair pulled back into a low ponytail, I strapped on the ridiculous oilcan hat. *Kill me now.*

"Grace," Daddy shouted as he entered my bedroom. "Come here!"

"No, Ma, no need to come up here!"

She came up to my bedroom anyway, camera in hand, and gave it to my father.

"We don't need to capture this moment," I said.

"Sure we do," he said, snapping pictures like the paparazzi. "You look adorable. It's been years since you've dressed up."

"Wow," Ma said. "This is a good-looking costume."

"You think so?" I tried to look down at myself, but my torso's metal plate limited my movements.

The doorbell rang, and Ma clapped as she dashed out of the room. "They're here."

I frowned after her. "She's more excited than I am."

"A man on death row would be more excited than you." Daddy pulled me into a one-armed hug and kissed my temple.

“If you could’ve picked any costume to wear tonight, what would it have been?”

I knew immediately what I wanted to say, but didn’t want to speak it out loud. Then I looked up at my father and knew he’d never laugh at me.

“A princess.”

“You’ve always been my princess.”

I clunked downstairs, making more noise than a fork in the garbage disposal. Penny stood in a soft blue dress with lots of white netting underneath, and four-inch sparkling red pumps. She styled her braids into two ponytails, looking more like a doll baby than Dorothy.

“I don’t recall Dorothy wearing stilettos,” I said, looking down at her feet.

“We thought we got the short end of the stick,” Ivan said, scratching at the straw sticking out of his scarecrow outfit, “but twenty minutes in those things, and she’s going to be begging for our costumes.”

“Doubt it,” Penny said. “I was born to wear heels.” When I stepped beside her, she squealed and did a little butt wiggle. “Look at us. We’re too cute.”

“I look like a giant muffler.”

“Then you should feel right at home,” Penny said to howling laughter from my parents. Everybody got jokes.

After hundreds of pictures, I folded myself into Penny’s tiny BMW, and we sped off like an actual wicked witch was chasing us.



DRY ICE MACHINES PUMPED cherry-scented fog across the main steps to school. Lanterns hung from the lampposts, and cobwebs covered the trees. Howls and hooting owls cried out from the PA systems. All this and we hadn’t even made it into the school yet. Walking the foggy steps gave the

impression that we were heading to Dracula's castle—as if West Nottingham needed help to look spooky.

Artfully sculpted pumpkins, glowing with soft candlelight, lined the corridor to the Athletic Arena. Apparently, the arena was too fancy to be called a gymnasium. The room was roughly the size of a soccer field. Half of it was closed off with a temp-wall that folded away when more space was needed. Orange and black streamers clustered together with cobwebs, dangling skeletons, and cutouts of witches on broomsticks. It was a bit much, but the dance decorating committee never half-stepped.

A DJ did a call and response over the thumping music as kids yelled and gyrated on the crowded dance floor. Those not lucky enough to have a dance partner sat on the perimeter, right where I was about to go. I might do permanent damage if I tried to dance in my costume. Usually, Penny, Ivan, and I would work our way to the center and dance together. I considered myself a pretty good dancer. At least, I had a lot of fun.

Penny always did a lap around the party to find the perfect spot on the dance floor. I was on the lookout for Conrad, but didn't see him. I didn't ask either of my friends to look out for him, but I didn't have to. They would point him out when they saw him.

Since we'd stopped near the punch, I got a cup. Who'd have thought this costume would be so hot? Penny and Ivan kept going. I'd catch up with them later.

Hillary and I reached for a cup at the same time. She grabbed it before I could.

"Cute costume." She smirked as she looked me up and down. "Suits you."

As much as I wanted to make a snide remark, I couldn't. Hillary wore a fairy costume, well, if Tinkerbell had a naughty side. She wore a skin-toned bodysuit covered with sparkly crystals, iridescent wings at the back, and clear heels that glimmered in the low lighting of the athletic arena. It was the most beautiful costume I'd ever seen. Pale, blue glitter dusted

her eyelids, and long silver lashes completed the look. It was perfect.

I swallowed, feeling clunky, square, and ugly in my Tin Man costume.

“Looking for Conrad?” she asked, peering up at me with a coy smile.

I hadn’t realized I’d scanned the surrounding area, searching for him. “Is he here?” I had to ask.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” The coy smile turned taunting as she walked past, bumping into me.

If Conrad was with her, looking at her in that outfit, why would he even look twice at me? Ivan was crazy for thinking Conrad liked me. *I* was crazy for listening to Ivan. Hell, he couldn’t even own up to his feelings for Penny, and I was taking relationship advice from him.

Mr. Brookmeyer bumped into me as he reached for a cup, knocking me out of my miserable thoughts. Normally, he would have apologized for bumping into me. He was one of the nicest teachers at West Nottingham, but he just grabbed a cup with his bony fingers. He looked frail, kind of like I could push him with one finger, and he’d fall right over. Nevertheless, he commanded respect in his classroom. Hands trembling, he sloshed more punch onto the table than into his cup.

“Everything okay, Mr. Brookmeyer?”

He jumped. “Oh, Miss Price. Enjoying yourself?”

“I just got here.” I ladled up punch, drank it, and then scooped up another cup.

“I hate these things,” Mr. Brookmeyer said as he looked out at the dance floor with loathing. “You need a hundred eyes to watch all these sneaky little bastards.”

*Okay, I think Mr. Brookmeyer had his punch spiked.*

“Why are teenagers so damn sneaky?” he asked.

“Um...” I said, because he looked like he really wanted an answer. “I don’t know.”

“You aren’t sneaky, are you, Miss Price?”

“No, sir. I don’t think so.”

He smiled. “You’re one of my better students. Honest and respectful. Wish I had a dozen more like you.” He took another gulp of punch while he scanned the crowd with nervous energy.

Something was very off with Mr. Brookmeyer tonight, and it was weirding me out.

“Miss Price, will you do me a favor? Mrs. Middleton wants to host a game later. I told her these kids would eat her alive if she turned off the music to play a stupid game, but there’s no deterring her. Can you go to the admin office and get a ream of paper?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” He took off toward the exit at a quick, twitchy pace.

I cut through the packed dance, searching for Penny or Ivan, but pointedly did not search for Conrad. I didn’t want to see him wrapped around Hillary in her beautiful fairy costume. He might not want me or anyone else to touch him, but I bet he chucked out all the rules when he saw Hillary tonight.

No luck finding Ivan or Penny, so I headed out into the corridor solo. I pulled off the tin hat and sat it on a nearby table with raffle tickets, hoping I’d cool down without that metal crap on my head. I wasn’t halfway down the hall when I realized the admin office would be locked. The art department was on the third floor, so I headed there. Climbing three flights of stairs, surely, I’d run into Conrad when I looked like a drowned rat and smelled like one too.

I clomped up the first flight of steps, and the den of music, voices, and sound effects from the dance faded. It was darker with each flight. Who needed special effects when West Nottingham was a horror show as is? Stupid, ancient, creepy school. As I approached the third floor, I stopped, wondering



why I hadn't thought to remove the metal covering my torso. It would've certainly cooled me off by now.

"What have you been doing all these weeks?" a male voice hissed.

Something in the tone had me slinking back into the shadows of the stairway.

"It's not my fault," another male voice whispered. This one sounded younger. "I can't get close to him. He's... different from how he used to be. Hillary's trying to surgically attach herself to him. And Sayra's been all over him, too. I'm trying to get in, but it's difficult."

I backed up farther. The mention of my name had me both scared and eager to know who was speaking and what they were talking about. The whisperers were on the third floor. I couldn't risk going up the steps anymore, since I didn't know if they were facing me or not.

"Forget Hillary, she's an idiot," the older voice rasped. "Sayra's smart. She could be a problem. If you can't get around her, then go through her. You've got to get in good with him." This person was clearly the one in charge. A parent? A teacher? Both groups were at the dance to chaperone.

"He's our *in* with the father, and without him, we won't make it. The New Year is right around the corner, and if we want to be successful, you must get him to tell you what we need to know. Video surveillance? Armed guards? Do they have a panic room? Find out, or by God, you'll wish you had."

*Oh my God.* They were talking about Conrad. Harlan Bishop. Fear thickened the air on the landing between the second and third floors, suffocating me against the wall. These were the people who wanted to kill Conrad's dad. Sweat poured off me now for more reasons than heat. My frozen terror almost got me caught. Footsteps approached. My survival instincts kicked in and I held my chest plate against me to keep it from clanking. I ran down the steps, then slipped into the darkness of the second-floor corridor.

*Think, Sayra.* I needed to see these people. I dug my hand between the gap in my costume and unclipped my cell from the waistband of my leggings. As the footsteps grew louder, I held out my cell, ready to snap a picture. With a quick thumb, I turned off the flash. The odds of getting a good shot dropped drastically. But I would recognize some parents at the dance and all the staff.

My hand shook as I waited. *Please, don't see me. Snap!* I managed a relatively clear picture. The guy stepped into a beam of moonlight shining through the small window by the stairs. He wore a Zorro costume—mask and all. *Damn it.* No one else followed. Whoever Zorro talked to either hadn't left the third floor or used the stairs at the other end of the corridor. I was afraid to move. What if he heard my clanking costume and was waiting for me to step out of the shadows?

I peered out of the darkened corner. A cold line of sweat trickled down my back. One step, two steps, and then I ran. I didn't stop until the pounding music in the gym surrounded me. I found Ivan and Penny within minutes.

“Find Zorro,” I said. He had to be a student. Chaperones couldn't wear costumes. “If you find him, take off his mask and tell me who he is.”

“Why?” Penny asked.

“Because he's planning to kill Conrad's dad.”

I left my friends gaping after me as I snaked through the dense room, hunting for anyone in a cape, a Spanish gaucho hat, and a black mask.

By my third lap, I was hot, desperate, and exhausted. Ivan grabbed me by the arm and led me around the perimeter of the party until we were out in the corridor where Penny was waiting. Together, they pulled me outside and down into the parking lot.

“Before we circle that dance one more time looking for somebody who's obviously not there,” Ivan said. “Tell us what happened.”

I told them and watched twin expressions of horror arrive on their faces. None of us thought it would be someone at the school. And a student too.

“You never saw the other person, the one who seemed in charge?” Penny asked.

“No. His voice sounded familiar, but they were both whispering. Maybe a parent or something. Maybe it was Zorro’s father. But you see now, we can’t wait. We have to tell Conrad. Somebody’s going to worm their way into a friendship with him and use that to kill his father.”

“But,” Penny began, “if you tell him, then he’s more likely to live out the dream you had of him shooting someone.”

“Then maybe we have to be with him.”

“What do you mean, ‘with him’?” Ivan asked, brow quirked.

“I mean, in the house with him on New Year’s Eve.”

“When the creepy clowns come with the knives and the stabbing? Are you crazy?” he screeched.

“I don’t know, Ivan, but we’ve got to change this.” I was done talking.

I hit the speed dial on my cell for Conrad. Yes, he’d made his way onto my contacts list and number five on my speed dial, right behind my parents, Penny, and Ivan.

“Hullo.”

“Are you inside or outside?” I asked, noting the lack of music in the background from his end and my lack of seeing Hillary on my laps through the party. Maybe they were somewhere making out.

“Inside,” he said.

“Inside where? I didn’t see you.”

“Inside my house. Are you peeping through my window?” He yawned. “We have guard dogs, you know. And they don’t listen to me.”

“You didn’t go to the dance?”

“Why would I want to do that?”

Half of my heart lifted, but the other half was still heavy with fear. “Um, can we come over?”

He hesitated. “We?”

“Me, Ivan, and Penny. It’s important and won’t take long. I promise.”

“Um... okay. I’ll let Basil know to expect you.”

Ivan got behind the wheel of Penny’s car. He was the safest driver of the three of us. I wished Penny was driving. She was a maniac on the road, but we’d be there already.

In the back seat, I began fighting out of my costume, realizing I was still hot. I didn’t want Conrad to see me looking so incredibly stupid, either. I had to lie down so that I wouldn’t punch a hole through Penny’s convertible top. The car stopped as I wrestled out of the chest and back plates.

“What’s that dude’s name—Conrad’s manservant?” Ivan asked.

Penny looked at him. “Why?”

“Cause I want to address him by his name,” he spoke louder over my clanking and swearing in the backseat.

“I don’t know, some kind of spice,” Penny said.

“Cinnamon?”

“Why would his name be cinnamon?” Penny shouted. “He’s not a pole dancer.”

“His name’s Basil,” I said from the backseat, stopping an argument before it started.

It was much cooler outside of my metal prison. I left the thigh and shin plates on because it was too cramped in the backseat to fight with them. Ivan pulled up to the gate, and it opened before we could announce ourselves. He drove to the right and followed the road to the same parking lot we used the last time we were there. Conrad waited for us, bare-

cheded, with a pair of jeans hanging low on his hips. He wasn't wearing his gloves. It was the most skin I'd ever seen him show.

Those buttoned-up shirts didn't do him justice. He was slim, but solid and defined. I had to stop myself from staring. I heard Penny blow out a breath that got her a dirty look from Ivan as he parked the car. Conrad stood right at the edge of the parking lot, beside a golf cart.

When we climbed out, he held out a hand to stop us.

"Can you guys not come any closer? I don't want any of you touching me, sorry."

Ivan snorted. "Dude, you've got some major issues."

I elbowed Ivan in the ribs, but apparently, Penny's silent appraisal of Conrad's six-pack had put Ivan in a foul mood.

"Conrad." I stepped closer but kept a safe distance. "I need to talk to you about something important." His chest glistened with sweat, and the ends of his damp hair curled. Had he been working out, or was he fresh from the shower? Damn, it was distracting.

He smiled. "Okay, I get Dorothy and the scarecrow, but where in The Wizard of Oz was there a mime that played hockey?"

I looked down at my black turtleneck and leggings with the thigh and shin guards and realized what I must look like. When no one laughed, the smile fell from Conrad's face.

"So, what's this about?"

"I overheard someone planning on killing your father." There, like a Band-Aid. Off in one rip.

The flush from whatever had him sweating drained away. "That's not funny."

"I'm not joking."

Anger pinked his cheeks. "No one's going to hurt my dad. Why would you even say that?" He sounded like a little boy. My heart went out to him. I knew then that my decision not to

tell him about my dream was right. He was already shutting down, walling himself against this information.

“It’s true, Conrad. I went up to the third floor at the dance tonight and overheard two people talking. One told the other that he had to get in close with you. You’d be the one to tell them all about the security here and—”

“St-Stop.” He scooped a hand through his hair and began pacing. “Don’t lie to me, Sayra.”

“She’s not lying.” Penny stepped up beside me. “Look at her. She’s shaking.”

Conrad stared at me. “Did you see who it was?”

“I saw one guy, got a picture of him.” I took a few steps closer to him, put the phone on the backseat of the golf cart, and stepped back.

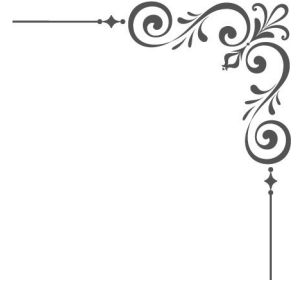
Conrad studied the image. “This is a picture of some asshole dressed as Zorro.”

“Yeah, I know. But I figured since we can’t go to the police and say, ‘Zorro and some faceless man want to kill Mr. Bishop,’ we can try to find out who wore that costume on Monday. You know, just ask around casually.”

“And then what, Sayra?” Conrad took a step toward me. “How do we protect my father? We’re not exactly qualified.”

“Is your father here?”

Conrad let out a slow breath. “He’s in Europe, opening a new company. He won’t be back until just before Christmas. It would be pointless, telling my father what you heard. He thinks teenagers are full of embellishment. According to him, we hear things wrong, see things how we want to see them, and do whatever makes us feel good. He won’t listen. If we’re going to stop this, we’ll have to do it ourselves.”



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## CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE

EVERY CELL IN MY BODY wanted to run over and hug Conrad. These murdering jerks had recruited a teenager. Well, four teenagers were going to stop them. We *could* stop this, and maybe I'd be able to tell Conrad about my dream. The more details he knew, the better it would be. Now was not the time, though.

"Can I talk to Sayra alone?" Conrad asked. "If it's okay with you, I can take you home."

Before I could speak, Penny said, "Sure."

"We came together." Ivan narrowed his eyes at Conrad. "We should leave together. What'll her parents think if she comes home in a different car than she left in?"

"They'll think I got a ride home with someone else," I said through gritted teeth.

"Get in the car, Ivan." Penny shoved him into the driver's seat and scurried around to the passenger side. She waved as they backed out of the parking space, leaving me alone with Conrad.

"Come up to the house," he said. "I'm sorry to have to say this again, but can you make sure not to touch me?" Color spread through his cheeks, and he cast his eyes to the ground.

"Sure."

Quietly, we climbed into the golf cart. Resisting the urge to touch him wasn't as easy as I thought—all that skin. I had to lace my fingers together and lock my hands between my knees. If he hadn't asked me not to touch him, thoughts of running a finger down his biceps would never have occurred to me. I was not a seductress, so running my finger down his arm would be stupid.

I licked my lips and forced myself to say, "So, why'd you skip the dance?"



“I don’t do dances anymore,” he said.

Yet another *don’t*. “Too cool?”

One corner of his mouth lifted. “Too many opportunities for people to touch me.”

Yeah, I could understand that. It was all I could do not to leap upon him. *Weird*. This was the boy I wanted to leap on last year and beat to a pulp.

He parked the golf cart at the base of the steps. I was so busy mentally groping Conrad that I hadn’t noticed he’d brought us to the back of the main house. At night, the thick trees looked too black and dense, too much like my dream.

“I have to be home by eleven,” I blurted. “Eleven-o-one, and my dad gets his 12-gauge and rounds up a posse.”

Conrad stopped while climbing out of the cart. “I’ll have you home by curfew. What’s wrong? You see something in the woods?”

I shook my head.

“You look a little pale.”

“People my complexion don’t really get pale.”

“Well, you look kinda gray, so what do you call that?” He moved his hand like he was about to take my elbow, but stopped before making contact. “Come inside. Let me get changed, and I’ll take you home.”

I hurried in after him, not wanting to be out in that familiar yard any longer. The sliding doors, the parlor... it all brought back my dream with vivid clarity.

“I know what you need. Come on.” Conrad trotted down a set of steps I hadn’t noticed until he disappeared in front of me.

We entered a kitchen so massive I couldn’t even see the whole thing. It was what I’d imagine a restaurant kitchen would look like, or maybe a hotel. Silver refrigerators lined one wall. A long counter with a gas grill took up the opposite

wall. Four huge sinks sat against the back, ready to do a mountain of dishes.

We passed a brick oven that made my mouth water for pizza. Then we turned a corner and entered a room that looked like any kitchen you'd find in a modern home. One refrigerator, one stove, and an island in the middle where Basil sat, laughing with a man in a chef's jacket. The white jacket lay open to mid-chest, revealing a fitted, black shirt. Before they noticed us, the man in the chef's jacket gestured wildly as he spoke. He had smooth olive skin and was of average height and weight. What wasn't average was the white-blond hair that hung down to his diamond studded earlobes.

When Basil spotted Conrad, he sprang to his feet. "Is everything all right, Young Master Bishop?"

"Yeah. Well, she's not feeling good, and I wondered if Chef could whip her up something?"

"I'm fine," I said, feeling like we had intruded on their off time.

"You do look a little peaked, dear," Chef said.

"Chef Alan, this is Sayra." Conrad gestured to me, putting me on display.

The chef's eyes widened and he slapped a hand to his heart. "Not Banana-Nut Sayra?"

I shot a glare at Conrad.

"I don't call you that," he blurted. "You're just Sayra to me."

I rolled my eyes and then turned to Chef Alan. "Are you the one who makes those spectacular sandwiches for me?"

"One and the same."

"Thank you. They make my day. Can I hug you?"

He hooted with laughter and opened his arms for a hug.

"I *love* her," he mock whispered to Conrad. Then he stepped back, holding me at arm's length. "No offense, sweetness, but I thought you'd be a chubster. When Conrad

told me how you went after that sandwich like an attack dog on a murder's throat, I said, 'now there's a girl who'll put on a freshman *fifty* when she gets to college' but you're divine." He kissed both my cheeks and let me loose.

I was torn between wondering why Conrad told Chef about me at all and trying to figure out how I could choke him without touching him.

Chef continued. "Conrad, you've been holding out on me. Why didn't you tell me your little Sayra could stop traffic? She's gorgeous." He reached over and pinched Conrad on the cheek.

Conrad didn't jerk or flinch at Chef's contact, but stammered over something that was meant to be a sentence. Basil handed Conrad a long sleeve green shirt, socks, shoes, and a pair of white gloves. When did he even leave the room? Stealthy old dude. While Conrad got dressed, Chef Alan started on a sandwich for me.

"Will you require anything else, Young Master Bishop?"

"No thanks, Basil."

"You're not staying, *Baiz*?" Chef Alan asked.

Basil's lips pursed, then curved upward just the slightest bit. "I have some things to tend to. We can continue our talk, after." He turned and left.

It was weird to see Basil smile. I thought the scowl was permanent, but apparently, it was just for me. When Chef finished my sandwich, he left Conrad and me alone, exiting into a room on our right.

I leaned over to Conrad, who'd pulled up a stool beside me at the island. "Are they a couple?"

He choked on his Gatorade. "Who, Basil and Chef? No. Basil's married. His wife works here as well."

"Chef Alan lives here with his boyfriend. If you saw anything between Chef and Basil, it's a solid brotherhood that started from loathing." Conrad chuckled.

I looked down at my half-eaten sandwich and wondered if I would ever stop inhaling those things. According to the clock on the microwave, it was getting late.

“I should get home.”

“Right. I want to talk to you, but I guess I can do that in the car. Let’s go.” Conrad stood and led the way. I finished my sandwich as we headed to a garage that housed nearly fifty cars.

“Are all those cars your dad’s?” I asked as we drove toward the main gates.

“No, that’s the staff parking lot.”

“Oh. I wondered why you’d need a full-time chef for just you, your dad, and Basil.”

“We’ve got about twenty people who live on the grounds, and another, I don’t know how many, part-time people. So, Chef and his crew cook for everybody.”

It took almost no time to get to my house, and we arrived with ten minutes to spare. I was happy I made curfew, but wanted more time with him. I really wanted to touch Conrad. *Really*. He was staring at me when I chanced a sideways glance.

“Do you think you’d have time to meet tomorrow?” I asked. “We need to figure out who might want to hurt your dad.”

“Yeah, of course. ‘Bout one o’clock?”

“I’ll let Penny and Ivan know.” I undid my seatbelt and opened the door.

“Wait.” Conrad grabbed my forearm. “We’ve got ten... well, nine minutes.”

“Okay.” I closed the door and twisted my body toward him. Was he going to kiss me? The idiot that I was really wanted him to kiss me. And I couldn’t believe it myself.

He licked his lips but didn’t lean in. “I wanted to apologize for how I’ve been acting toward you lately.”

“So, there *is* something. I’m not crazy.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” He flashed a grin that made my stomach flutter.

How did I never notice how cute he was? I knew how. It was hard to see the real person when there was jerk written all over his face. So, what’s been on my face? Anger? Bitch? A brick wall?

“I want to tell you something,” he said. “Because I trust you to keep my secret. You trusted me by telling me about your gift and letting me read your diary entry. Everything happened just like you said.” He shook his head. “You have an amazing gift, Sayra. *You’re* amazing.”

A smile crept up on my face until it was practically ear to ear. “This is a plot twist. You think I’m amazing?”

“Not if you’re going to get conceited about it.” He grinned.

“Too late.” I poked him in the side, and he all but jumped out of the seat. “Whoa,” I said, holding back a laugh. “Was that because I touched you or because you’re ticklish?”

“I’m not ticklish,” he said, but his lips twitched.

“Why do people always deny being ticklish?” I jabbed a finger into his ribs and a quick one into his stomach.

“Cut it out.” His face was turning red from the pressure of fighting a laugh.

“If I poke you hard enough, will you shart your pants?”

“Something is seriously wrong with you.” He laughed full-out, fending off my jabbing fingers.

His expression was so open, so alive, that I closed the distance between us to get a better look. I’d never seen him like that... before the accident or since. I poked his chest, his arms, his side, but when I aimed higher, he caught my wrists in a firm grip.

“Cut it out, Sayra.” A gleam of amusement lingered in his eyes.

I pressed against his hold, feeling wicked. Conrad held my wrists, pushing my hands away from his face, but I pushed back. Without noticing when it happened, we weren't playing anymore. I wanted desperately to touch him, and he absolutely did not want to be touched. It was like I needed to show him that one little tap with the pad of my index finger wouldn't kill him. He wouldn't get a flesh-eating virus. His head wouldn't explode. The world as he knew it would still go on. Then maybe he would be open to a hand on his cheek, lacing our fingers together, pressing his lips to mine. After all, he allowed Basil and Chef to touch him. Why not me?

And then it was like I'd stepped outside myself, hovered over us, and saw what I was doing. Conrad's wide eyes, his pale, sweaty face, and his firm grip on my wrists were like a slap to the face. I jerked backward, completely to the other side of the truck. Conrad's entire body shook as he stared at me like I was an alien just beamed into his truck.

*Oh, God. What did I just do?*

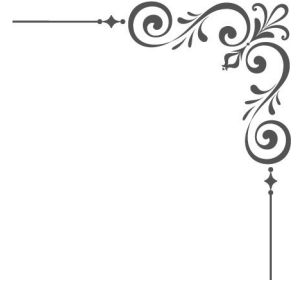
"Conrad—"

"Get out," he breathed, holding his chest as if in pain.

"Conrad, I'm so sor—"

"Please... Sayra... go."

My hands trembled so much that it took two tries to grip the handle. I practically fell out of the truck. He didn't wait to see if I was okay, didn't wait for me to close the door. The force of his speedy escape slammed the truck's door shut. I stood in front of my house with shameful tears streaming down my face.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

I AWOKE WITH A HEAVY weight in my gut. My eyes felt fuzzy and swollen from crying all night. When I flew into the house, bawling like an oversized baby, my parents knew something was wrong. Both took turns trying to coax the reason out of me, but I couldn't tell them. I was too ashamed.

“At least tell me this,” Daddy had said as he sat on my bed last night with Ma looking over his shoulder, nearly in tears, too. “Did someone hurt you? Did they put their hands on you? Do—” He'd swallowed. “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

I realized where my parents' minds had gone and knew I needed to give them some peace.

“No, Daddy.” I sniffed. “I'm not hurt, but I hurt someone else.”

They shared a confused glance, but left me alone when I buried my face in the pillow. That was where I stayed all night, face in the pillow, trying to smother the memory of that look of horror, chased by fear and ending in overwhelming sadness on Conrad's face. I felt so low, so guilty. I imagined that once everyone knew what I'd done to Conrad, they would hate me too.

Penny and Ivan arrived at my house by noon. There was no point in their visit since Conrad wasn't speaking to me and probably never would. The sole purpose of the meeting was to find out if Conrad knew who wanted to kill his father.

I greeted my friends with puffy, bloodshot eyes and a blotchy face. Ivan took one look and knew Conrad was responsible, then immediately threatened him.

“Stop,” I said. “He didn't do anything to me.”

“So, what's wrong?” Penny sat on my bed and pulled me down beside her. Ivan took a seat in my desk chair, silent but still ready to explode if it turned out Conrad needed an ass whipping.



I sighed, hated what I was about to say, but they were my best friends. I shared everything with them, even if it made me look like a horrible human being. So, I spilled. Ivan winced a few times, and Penny gasped. But neither of them hated me, at least as far as I could tell. I couldn't bear it if they left me.

"For real though, Sayra," Penny said, "a part of me thought Conrad did that hands-off thing for attention and that if you two got to steam up some windows, he'd forget all about it."

"I know, right?" Wow, it was good to be understood. "I mean, I didn't think he was faking it, just that it was some kind of mental block."

"And you'd be the one to cure him?" Ivan shook his head. "You two watch too many movies."

"I wasn't trying to *cure* him. I don't know what I was trying to do. What's worse, I think he was about to tell me why he wears those gloves. Now, even if by some miracle he speaks to me again, he'll never trust me enough to—" I broke off, choked up by how much I had betrayed him. Boy, had the tables turned. I never thought I would be the one to hurt him, betray him.

"What do we do now?" Penny asked. "I mean, Conrad was supposed to help with this. Are you sure he's not speaking to you?"

"I texted him last night, but—"

"You don't text something like that," Ivan said, suddenly on Conrad's side. "You need to apologize face-to-face or call."

"I tried to call!" I hadn't meant to shout, but I wasn't being a coward. Conrad was just ignoring my texts, emails, and calls—as he should.

"Sorry," Ivan muttered. "But we need to figure out what's next."

"The plan hasn't changed. Conrad may hate me, but I'm still going to help his father, and that means finding out who wore the Zorro costume."

"We can ask around in school tomorrow," Penny offered.

“Maybe we don’t have to wait until tomorrow,” I said. “I’ve been thinking. The pictures should be up on the school’s site by now.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.” Ivan turned and booted up my computer. After several minutes, he pulled up West Nottingham’s website, but the most recent pictures posted were of the choir performing in a competition two weeks ago.

“Hang on,” Ivan said. “I’ve got an inside connection on the activities committee.” He grinned and pulled out his cell phone. I could hear the faint ringing before a female voice answered. “What-up future baby mama!” Ivan crowed into the phone.

Penny’s mouth flopped open, but before she could speak, he continued.

“I need a favor.” The person on the other end must’ve said something biting because Ivan flinched but laughed. “C’mon Hadley, don’t be like that. In ten years when you and your life partner wanna have a cute little baby with a high IQ, I’ll be holding auctions for my seed. Do me this favor, and I’ll move you to the top of the list.”

“You are beyond disgusting,” Penny said, but her lips quivered, fighting a laugh. Her tension had eased, probably because Hadley was a well out-of-the-closet lesbian. I didn’t know what Hadley was saying to Ivan, but I could hear snatches of her tinny voice coming through the speakers.

“I know you probably took 200 pictures and only twenty of them will make the cut. Let me swing by and check out the pics.” He was silent for a moment, lips twitching into a smile. “Alright, see you in twenty.”



HADLEY’S HOUSE SAT between the bay and the city. It wasn’t a big house, kind of like a traditional beach house, but it was only Hadley and her dad living there. Rumor had it her mom left a few years ago and Hadley wanted to stay with her father. Just the thought of deciding between my parents made me ache.

Hadley met us at the door wearing a pair of cutoff jeans and a T-shirt, decorated with a yellow smiley face emoji smoking a cigarette. Her face, arms, and legs were painfully pink, like she had recently been in the sun too long. Her dark, straight hair sat on top of her head in a messy knot. A diamond stud glistened in her nose.

“Ivan. Don’t ruin my Sunday,” she said. “I’ve got a lot of lying around to do, and I don’t want you in here all day.”

Ivan smiled. “That’s what your lips say, but your eyes...” He leaned in. “Well, your eyes say that, too.” He laughed. “You remember Sayra and Penny.”

“S’up.” She stepped back and let us in the house.

Hadley showed us to a cramped room at the top of the stairs. The walls were covered floor to ceiling with photos that I’d wager she had taken. Candid shots of our classmates, random people in town, and stills of nature showed her talent behind the camera. She sat in front of a computer screen and brought up a file full of pictures. The little counter at the bottom of the page showed 175 photos loaded. This was going to take all day, so I cut to the chase.

“We’re looking for someone dressed as Zorro. Do you remember if you took a picture of him?”

“Yeah, sure,” Hadley said, sounding bored.

“Do you remember who he was?”

She glanced at me over her shoulder. “No. Why would I?”

Ivan said, “Don’t you have to label the people in the pictures or something?”

She rolled her eyes. “I could, but that would require me giving a crap, and I don’t.”

“Alrighty then,” Ivan muttered.

Hadley clicked through the pictures at a rapid pace, almost too fast for me to see them clearly. She obviously wanted us out of her house so she could get back to being a couch potato.

“Wait!” I shouted. “Go back.”

Hadley clicked back three pictures and stopped at a picture of Zorro in the background. The photo focused on a girl with a cloud of cotton candy as a hat, two rainbow lollipops secured to a bra, and a hot-pink tutu. What or who she was supposed to be escaped me. Zorro stood by the punch bowl with his head tossed back, chugging punch.

“Do you have a better picture of him?” I asked.

“Maybe.” Hadley began clicking through the photos again at a slower pace this time. “Why are you guys looking for this dude?”

“We want to know who he is?” I answered.

“Yeah. I figured that much, but why?”

“I think he stole my purse,” Penny piped in with a lie at the ready.

Hadley looked doubtful, but didn’t say anything more. She clicked through fifteen more pictures before landing on one that made me suck in a breath. Zorro posed for Hadley’s camera with his arm draped around a fairy. *Hillary*.

“Oh my God, it’s Tag!” I screeched.

“Hang on,” Ivan said. “Just ‘cause he’s all over Hillary doesn’t mean it’s Tag.”

“Who else would it be?”

“Keep clicking,” Penny said.

Three more pictures, and we came across Hillary hugged up on Frankenstein. The next, she was all over Jason Voorhees from Friday the Thirteenth—hockey mask and all. I’m guessing the school frowned upon him bringing a chainsaw.

I remained quiet as Hadley clicked through picture after picture. Another shot of Zorro, back turned away from the party, looking as though he headed for the exit.

“Wait,” Penny said. “Zoom in.”

Hadley did as directed.

“Pan over to the right.”

“O.M.G.” I said, but we all saw it. As Zorro went to the exit, another one drank punch by the bleachers. The three of us stood for a moment, taking it all in. Poor Hadley didn’t know what the big deal was, but she didn’t seem too concerned either.

Something brewed in my brain. “Can you put both Zorros up, side-by-side and do a screen shot?”

“Sure.”

“Now one with the Zorros and the Jason and Frankenstein, please?”

“Y’all have quickly worn out your welcome.”

“Sorry, Hadley. This is the last request, I promise. Text those screen-shots to Ivan, and you can go back to couch potato’ing.”

Those four guys were the only ones in masks. I didn’t know if identifying Frankenstein and Jason would help, but at least we would know who wasn’t dressed as Zorro.

“Any ideas?” Ivan asked as soon as Hadley closed the door behind us.

I didn’t offer another opinion until we were in the car, driving away from Hadley’s house. “I still think it’s Tag.”

“Why?” Ivan asked.

“Because.”

“Nope. Sell me on it.”

“Since when are you a Tag fan?” I glanced back at him in the rearview mirror.

He rolled his eyes. “I couldn’t care less about Tag. But you have to prove your reason for thinking it’s him, and even if one of them is Tag, one certainly isn’t.”

I couldn’t prove it, not really, so I deflected. “Prove why you think it’s *not* him.”

“First, Zorro was only in one pic with Hillary, whereas Jason was in six. It’s more likely that it was Tag behind that

hockey mask. He's usually all over Hillary, anyway. That means Zorro is probably somebody who doesn't run in Hillary's circle but wouldn't turn down a chance to hug up on a hot fairy. And we need to know who both Zorros are to figure out which is most likely involved in a plot to kill Harlan Bishop."

Damn Ivan. He was always so freaking logical. "So, who else could it be?"

"I've been thinking," Penny said. "Both Zorros, Jason, and Frankenstein were roughly the same height and build."

"Yeah, that's why I had Hadley send all their pictures."

"Tag fits that build," Penny continued. "So now we have to think of some other guys who are about his size."

"Brice Walker," Ivan said. "He's in your first period, right, Penn?"

"Yeah."

"Tory Mathis might fit too," Ivan continued. "Tomorrow, we need to ask anybody who is even close to their height and build what costume they wore."

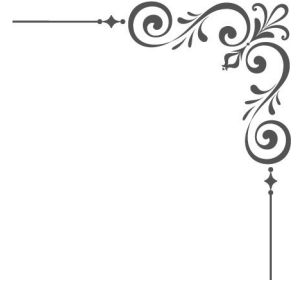
"Fine," I said. "But don't ask outright. If either of you guesses right and identifies Zorro, I don't want him on to us. So be sly about it."

"No problem," Penny said. "I can do it in a flirty way, like... I didn't see you and I was looking for a dance." She pouted perfectly. "What costume did you wear and how did you avoid me all night?" This time, she batted her lashes.

"That won't work," Ivan said.

"It would work on you," she shot over her shoulder. If Ivan had a rebuff, he swallowed it, probably because he knew she was right.

With that settled, I resigned myself to go to school tomorrow on the hunt for Zorro, but more importantly, attempt a face-to-face apology with Conrad.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

WHEN I TURNED INTO Mr. Brookmeyer's class early Monday morning, I thought I was prepared to see Conrad, but I wasn't. I certainly wasn't prepared to see how he gave Hillary his undivided attention. My ready-to-look-him-the-eye posture dissipated as I stared at the side of his face, willing him to look at me as I passed. I wanted him to see the sorrow in my eyes and know that I would never, *ever* do that to him again. But he wouldn't so much as glance in my direction.

I flopped down in my seat and slammed my books on the desk. New heartbreak came when I realized there was no paper bag waiting for me. No PB&J on banana-nut bread. Conrad and I didn't eat lunch in the boiler room garden anymore, but the sandwiches were always on my desk during first period. He was truly mad at me. I felt like crying all over again, but I could feel Tag staring at me. I ignored him. *Don't be stupid, Sayra. You need Tag to talk to you.* Ivan and Penny were each in their first periods, checking out some Zorro possibilities. I needed to do the same.

"You look like crap, Goose."

That had me aiming a sharp eye on Tag. So much for being friendly.

"I mean, you've been looking so pretty lately, well, prettier." Pink slashed across his cheeks. "What I meant to say was you just look tired. If you're sick again, I can take you to the nurse." His eyes darted over to Conrad. "I'm reliable too."

I forced a smile and met his eyes. "Yeah. I guess maybe you could be." The thing about the pictures Hadley sent over, Zorro could be a tanned white guy, which Tag certainly fit, or he could be a light-skinned black guy. I stared at his lips and nose, trying to pick up on anything telling. Tag's blue eyes and blond hair were his most remarkable features. The Gaucho hat covered Zorro's hair, and I took the photo from too far away to get a clear look at his eyes.



“I was hoping I’d see you at the dance.” He spoke low now, but I suspected it had more to do with not wanting Hillary to overhear than Mr. Brookmeyer’s lesson, who, at the moment, was more interested in texting someone than teaching his class.

“I didn’t stay long,” I whispered, seizing the opportunity.

“Me neither,” he said. “My stomach was upset.”

“What were you dressed as?”

He opened his mouth, but Mr. Brookmeyer, glancing up from his phone, shot us a look, and Tag went back to his work.

“I was the Tin Man,” I said when Brookmeyer turned his back.

Tag snorted. “A slutty Tin Man?”

I frowned. “What would that even look like?”

“Miss Price,” Mr. Brookmeyer said, no longer preoccupied with his text conversation. “Do you have something to say to the class?”

“No.”

“No more talking from either of you.”

I lowered my head, pretending to be hard at work, but I scribbled a note to Tag.

—I saw a cool Jason costume. Was that u?

He glanced at my note, smiled with one side of his mouth, and shook his head, then scribbled.

—Guess.

I shrugged. Tag took out a clean sheet of paper and, with a flourish, slashed a Z on the page much like Zorro did with his sword. My heart stopped. I stared at the page for far too long. He must have thought I didn’t understand. He took the page and wrote out Zorro. When I finally brought my eyes up to meet Tag’s, he wasn’t looking at me.

He dropped his colossal bomb and went back to taking notes on the lesson. Part of me hadn’t expected to be right

about Tag. It was a knee-jerk reaction to seeing him standing with Hillary. Not to mention Ivan had convinced me that I didn't have any solid reason to suspect Tag. But I kind of did. Of the hoard of people clamoring to reclaim their spot on Conrad's short list of friends, Tag seemed to be front and center. I chalked it up to guilt over dating Hillary, but there were so many things still wrong with this picture.

Tag was not the type of guy to be mixed up in this sort of plot. I suddenly became terrified for him. I opened my mouth to say something but didn't have another chance to talk. Mr. Brookmeyer stared down my throat every time I so much as yawned. When the bell rang, I was right on Conrad's heels. We didn't share the next period, but I was prepared to follow him all the way to his seat if necessary.

"Conrad," I hissed at his shoulder. "Conrad, please. Can we talk? I'm sorry about—"

"Sayra, leave me alone. I don't want to embarrass you," he whispered as he kept walking, "but I'll do it."

"I just need a minute, please."

He quickened his pace, but my legs were long too, so I kept time easily. "Tag was Zorro."

Conrad stopped and turned around. I'd been wrong about my earlier thoughts. He wasn't raging mad at me. There didn't seem to be an ounce of anger in him. His eyes were so full of sadness and hurt that it made me want to run and hide. I'd caused that. I was a terrible person.

A muscle worked in his jaw. "How do you know?"

It took a few seconds to remember what we'd been talking about. "He just told me."

"Damn it," he breathed.

"I thought we could—"

"This changes nothing between us. I still don't want you near me."

"Okay." The word burned leaving my throat.

“But thank you for telling me. I’ll handle it from here.”

“I want to hel—”

His gloved hand came up, palm out, and his lips thinned into a tight line. I backed up. The look on his face was so foreign and feral that I thought he might growl at me. So, there was anger, and lots of it. I wouldn’t be able to fix what I’d broken. Our trust was already fragile because of our past. Now I’d shattered it. Saving his father probably wouldn’t even put things completely right between us. The sooner I accepted that, the better.



PENNY AND I NEARLY collided as we both rushed into the cafeteria. She grabbed my arm and pulled me to the side.

“Omar was Zorro!”

“Tag was Zorro!”

We said at the same time and then stared at each other.

“Holy hell,” Penny finally said. “Let’s find Ivan.”

The three of us sat so close it was like we were all in one seat. With Penny in the middle, we had hushed conversations about this mess. Penny said she’d just walked up to the tall guys and asked what they wore to the dance. If they found her question odd, it didn’t stop them from answering her. She nearly passed out when Omar said he was Zorro. So, we discussed both boys. Tag first.

“He’s weak,” Ivan whispered. “You see how he lets Hillary push him around? He’s a follower. Now he’s gone and followed somebody who will ruin his life.”

“Maybe we could help him too,” I said.

“Screw him,” Ivan hissed over Penny’s head. “If he’s dumb enough to get caught up in this, then he deserves to go to jail. Prison is full of stupid people. One more won’t hurt.”

“When did you become so cynical?” Penny asked.

“Not cynical, logical.”

“What about Omar?” I asked. “He’s not stupid. What could he possibly have to do with a murder plot?”

Ivan leaned closer. “He asked you to the dance.”

“So what?” Penny said.

“No, Ivan’s right,” I said. That is suspicious.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “You only think it’s suspicious because you think no boys are interested in you. They are. Omar was just asking you out. He has no motive.”

I shook my head. “We don’t know that. And we don’t know if Tag has a motive. Being an idiot isn’t a motive. Zorro said he was trying to get in closer with Conrad. That means putting distance between Hillary and Conrad, but also distance between Conrad and me.”

I’d done that myself, though. My stomach knotted at the memory, and I pushed my lunch away.

“Maybe that’s why Omar asked me to the dance.”

Penny opened her mouth but closed it when Bethany Rosenbaum approached the table. Her brown eyes flitted among the three of us and our close seating arrangement. She furrowed her brow for a second, then flipped her dark curly hair over one shoulder and smiled at Ivan.

“Hi.”

“Erm, hi,” he said, shifting in his seat.

“I was wondering if I could look at your calculus notes. I can’t figure out one equation.”

“Sure. Do you need it now?”

“No time like the present.” She beamed.

Bethany was an odd girl. I hated to call anyone odd because I knew there were people who thought the same of me. But a prime example of classic Bethany was her pristine uniform. Most students at West Nottingham made the uniform unique to them. I barely wore the required white shirt underneath my vest, opting to leave my arms bare until the

weather cooled. Not Bethany. She could model for the catalog, pressed and proper—not a thread out of place, every day.

“It’s in my locker,” Ivan said.

Bethany looked at her watch. “We have ten minutes before next period. If we hurry, we can get it.”

“You need this now?” Penny said with enough bite to have anyone with good sense rethinking their request.

“Uh-huh.” Bethany nodded rapidly.

Ivan stood. “We’ll finish this later. We need privacy anyway.” He turned and strolled out, with Bethany skipping beside him.

Penny watched them all the way. “I don’t like her.”

“She’s sweet, just a bit over-starched,” I said.

“It’s called toxic positivity.”

I chuckled. “Which neither of us suffers from. If you’re worried there might be something between them, you have nothing to worry about. Ivan only has eyes for you.”

Penny frowned.



ETHICS WAS BRUTAL. The four of us—Penny, Ivan, Conrad, and I—sat in awkward silence while Hillary talked. She didn’t seem to find it odd that she was the only one speaking. Tag tried to engage Conrad in conversation and get him to hang out, but Conrad grunted something about having plans. My leg wouldn’t stop bouncing. I wanted to leap across the table, grab Tag by the collar and make him spill his guts.

“What’s that noise?” Hillary asked.

“Your voice,” I answered.

“Har, har. I hear a rattling or thumping. What is it?”

Conrad’s hand landed on my knee under the table, stilling my nervous bouncing. *Calm down*, he mouthed as Hillary started talking again.

His hand didn't linger, didn't indicate that he forgave me. When the bell rang, Conrad was up and out the door before I could attempt to speak to him. Hillary shot after him. I needed to tell him that Omar was Zorro, too. I shot him a quick text, hoping he hadn't blocked me.

"Can I talk to Sayra for a minute?" It was Tag, asking Penny and Ivan to give us space.

"I don't think so," Ivan said, standing his ground.

"It's okay," I said. "Just wait by the door." Reluctantly, Ivan walked to the door, but stood at the threshold and watched us.

"He's protective," Tag said with a half-laugh.

"You don't have a history of being nice to me." I stood.

He looked down at the floor. "Sorry 'bout that. It's 'cause of Hillary, but I'm done with her."

That got a raised eyebrow from me. "Really?"

"Yeah." He met my eyes. "And I wanted to know if you'd like to go out with me on Saturday. Just to the movies or something." He added quickly.

I stared at him, heard the protest that Ivan wasn't even trying to whisper, and before my brain rationalized the movement, I nodded.

"Huh?" Tag gawked at me.

"I'll go out with you Saturday."

"Really?" He pulled out his cell, and I entered my number. He called it right away. I guess he didn't believe I would give him the right number. Tag whooped as he left the class, and because Mr. Simmons was still in the room, Ivan let Tag go without incident. But I could see he wanted to break the guy in two.

As we hit the main corridor, I halted in my tracks. Omar leaned against my locker.

"What the hell?" I whispered, but walked ahead of my friends to meet up with him at my locker. "Hey, Omar. What's

up?”

“Hey, Sayra.” His eyes darted behind me as Ivan and Penny stepped up to join us. He looked at me, then at them. I was getting annoyed with my over-protective friends.

“Can you guys give us a minute?”

Reluctantly, they walked down the hall toward the main entrance.

“So, what’s up?”

“Nothing.” Omar fidgeted with one of the gold buttons on his uniform vest. “Just wanted to give it another try at asking you out. You know, something, simple, like—”

“Sure. Saturday work for you?”

His mouth flopped open, but he nodded all the same. I held out my hand for his phone and entered my number.

“Call me tonight. We can set everything up.”

Outside, in the parking lot, Ivan yelled at me. “Are you insane?”

“I’m perfectly sane. Tag has information. Omar has information. We need information. One of them may be plotting murder. I need to know which one.”

Ivan shook his head. “Have you considered both of them could be part of this?”

“Sayra,” Penny cut in. “Have you considered that your first date *ever* will be with Tag Thaxton? I mean, Omar, yes please, but Tag?”

“Priorities!” Ivan shouted.

I hadn’t considered that, but shrugged. “You see another way to get the information we need?”

Ivan paced the parking lot in front of his car, rubbing his temples. “This is serious.” Ivan grabbed me by the shoulders. “We’re going with you Saturday.”

“Who? You and Penn?”

“Yup,” Ivan said. “Like a double date.”

“*Huh?*” Penny squeaked.

“No,” I said. “They won’t talk if you two are there, especially not with you sending murderous glares every five seconds.”

“You can’t go alone. You’ll be on a date with one or two boys plotting murder! They said they couldn’t get close to Conrad ‘cause you’re in the way. What if this date is to get you out of the way, Sayra?”

I hadn’t thought of that either. “Well, I’m not in the way now. Conrad doesn’t even want to look in my direction. But either way, you two can’t go. If either of them sees you, we won’t learn anything.”

“Okay, then we’ll go undercover.”

“If you pull out that stupid mustache again, I’ll punch you.” Penny made a fist.

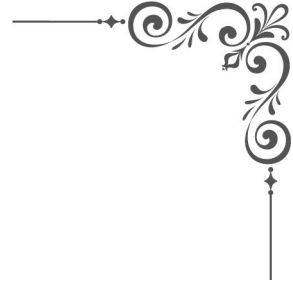
Ivan grinned. “I’ve got all kinds of disguises, baby.”

“Oh, God. He’s going to show up dressed as a Storm Trooper.”

And that gave me my first laugh of the day.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

I FELL OUT OF BED, hitting the floor with a thud, reaching for Conrad. Tears soaked my cheeks from the dream... nightmare. I couldn't let this come true. The covers tangled around my legs. It took almost a minute to fight my way out of them. I didn't think about what time it was, didn't care that I would probably get grounded if my parents caught me. I had to get to Conrad.

Rationale flew out the window, and I followed it down my trellis, slipping on the dewy ivy laced rungs until I landed softly in my mother's hydrangeas. My father would hear any noise in the house, and I'd have to disarm the alarm if I went out the front door. I cursed when I saw my father's car blocking mine.

I grabbed my bike, climbed on, and pedaled. Calling Conrad wasn't an option. He was ignoring my calls. Maybe this could've waited until morning, but my dream could come true tomorrow for all I knew. Every time I thought of it, I pedaled harder. During the night, it had rained. The wet road made my rolling tires louder than usual. Each neighborhood I cut through was quieter than the next. That was until my sniffling and squeaking bike sent the dogs barking. I set off a few motion detectors, flooding the fronts of houses with light, but I rode on.

By the time I turned onto the private road that led to Conrad's estate, my legs were cramping, my back ached, and sweat had my nightgown clinging to me. I came up short at the wrought-iron gate. How had I forgotten about the damn gate? The wild hair up my butt told me I'd be able to climb into Conrad's bedroom window, tell him about my dream and be done, but that wouldn't be possible. I dropped my bike, and with a trembling hand, reached out to touch the gate. A light snapped on, blinding me. I backed up until I was out of the beam and could see the monitor. Basil's disapproving face wasn't there. Maybe touch or motion activated the light.

Giving it another go. I touched the iron bars with the tip of my finger and was glad not to be electrocuted. Then I climbed. As I swung one leg over the top of the gate, I heard,

“I beg your pardon. Is there any plausible reason why you are straddling our gate?”

Basil glared at me from the monitor. I could only imagine what I looked like. My hair was all over my head, and dirt streaked my white nightgown. Probably looked like I’d just crawled out of the television in some Ring-like horror movie.

“I need to see Conrad.”

“Civilized people visit in the daylight hours, Miss Price, and call ahead as not to be an inconvenience.”

I hitched in a breath. “Please. I need to see him now.”

“Go home.”

“*Please.*”

“Go home, or you will force me to call the authorities.”

I gritted my teeth. “Look, *Paprika*, either you open this gate, or I’m going over. Take your pick.”

Basil pursed his lips. “You are aware we have guard dogs. Don’t force me to—” He broke off, and the screen went black.

I wasn’t sure if he’d stopped speaking because the monitor died or if he had released the hounds. I teetered for only a second—climb down and go home, or continue and risk being mauled to death? No choice. I swung my other leg over, prepared to jump down onto the Bishop property, but a golf cart whizzed up. A pudgy man with dark skin and an amused half-smile sat in the driver’s seat. He wore a security uniform and a sidearm.

“You here to shoot me?” I asked, still hanging from the gate.

“Not yet.” He smiled wider. “I’m to bring you up to the house.”

I jumped down and stared at him.

“C’mon now. Ain’t got all night.” He chuckled, shaking his head in that way older people did when they found young people ridiculous.

My muscles screamed as I lifted my legs to climb into the cart. My feet weren’t any better. Riding miles in socks and a nightgown wasn’t exactly something I would recommend. We came to an abrupt stop at the guest house.

“Go on up. Basil’ll be waitin’ for ya.” As I stepped out of the cart, the guard touched my forearm. “Might be none of my business, but you a purty lil’ thang, too purty to go the stalker route so young. Just think on it.”

“I’m not—”

He zipped away before I could tell him I wasn’t a stalker. Who was I kidding? If we had to go to court right now, Conrad would have emails, voicemails, and text messages to add to this midnight visit, proving I *was* a stalker. Basil framed the doorway like a boney sentry. I didn’t think he could get any more disapproving, but I was wrong. I moved up the steps, feeling beyond extra. Basil moved aside to let me in. Conrad sat in the center of those Gone with the Wind steps watching me.

I burst into tears. The fierceness of it scared me.

“Sit down,” Basil snapped.

I slid to the floor and leaned against the door he had just shut at my back. Then I realized he was talking to Conrad, who had started down the steps when I had begun to cry.

“What do you want, Sayra?” Conrad asked.

I hiccupped once and glanced at Basil. He stood at the foot of the steps, a human moat between the prince and me. With the hem of my nightgown, I wiped my face and nose.

I glanced at Basil again.

“He’s not leaving,” Conrad said. “I told him what happened the other night. So, you may as well say what you have to say.”

I nodded, sniffed, and wiped my damp face. Then I looked Conrad in the eyes. “I dreamed you got hurt, really bad... maybe even died.” Fresh tears spilled out again.

“A nightmare?” Basil said. “Terrible, yes, but hardly calls for such dramatics.”

“No.” Conrad moved slowly down the steps until he was beside Basil. “Her dreams always come true.” A tremor rolled through his voice. I could see skepticism in Basil’s expression, but when he looked at Conrad’s pale face, he turned and stared at me.

“It was all my fault.” Would telling him the details help or hurt the situation? I didn’t know, but there was one thing I knew for certain. “I’ll leave you alone forever. I promise. Just never run away from me. Okay?” Hopefully, that wasn’t too much information.

Basil and Conrad remained silent while I sobbed and hiccupped into my knees. Something bumped my shoulder. I looked up to find Basil offering me a box of tissues.

“As an alternative to your *gown*.” He wrinkled his nose.

I took the box, pulled out three tissues, mopped my face, and blew my nose. Basil walked over to Conrad, placed a hand on his bare shoulder, and whispered something in his ear. After a brief exchange, Basil turned to me.

“Young lady, you are to remain right where you are until I return. Do you understand?”

I nodded and watched him with watery eyes until he left the room. “Is he going to call the cops on me?”

Conrad sat on the steps again. “No. He’s going to get me a shirt and something for you to put on. We need to talk.”

“You can trust me, Conrad.” My voice hitched. “I know you have no reason to believe that, but I won’t come near you again. I promise. If I have to transfer schools...”

The thought of that made bile rise in my throat. Leaving Penny and Ivan would kill me, but I’d do it if it meant I wouldn’t be responsible for Conrad’s severe injury or death.

Conrad opened his mouth, but Basil walked in with a short stack of folded clothes. He handed Conrad a long-sleeve shirt and a pair of white gloves. Then he walked over and offered me a red T-shirt with a pair of light-gray sweatpants.

“The powder room is to your left,” Basil said. “When you have disrobed, hand me that filthy garment, and I’ll see if I can launder it.” He took my elbow and helped me up.

How pathetic was I to have Basil even moderately nice to me? “Sorry I called you paprika.”

Conrad turned his snort of laughter into a cough when Basil shot him a glare. He pointed the way to the powder room without acknowledging my apology. Inside the bathroom, I stared at my reflection in an ornate, oval-shaped mirror. I looked like a witch. My dark brown complexion was ashen, my eyes puffy from crying. Once again, it was disheartening that I could fit so nicely into a boy’s clothes. The shirt was roomy, as were the sweats, but they were the right length.

I stepped out of the bathroom, hyperaware that I didn’t have on a bra. But who’d stop to strap one on while saving somebody’s life? Conrad wasn’t on the steps any longer. He stood in the room I thought of as the parlor. Maybe it was the great room or the living room. Basil positioned himself by the entrance to the room and promptly took my dirty nightgown.

“You two need to have a discussion,” he said, giving Conrad a pointed look. “I’ll put this in the laundry.” He looked at me. “I trust you will behave.”

“Yes, sir.” There was no way I’d touch Conrad now.

When Basil left the room, Conrad said, “Have a seat.”

My first impression of Conrad’s house was of a model home, impersonal and stiff. Sitting on that sofa confirmed my thoughts. No one used this sofa. It felt as stiff as the day they bought it, I’m sure. Conrad paced in front of me.

“I’ve wanted to tell you this ever since you told me about your dreams. I was going to tell you the other night in the truck, but...”

He didn't need to finish that sentence. I hung my head in shame.

“There's an actual reason I don't touch people anymore. It's not a neurosis or a skin condition. It's as real as your dreams.”

He sat beside me but kept his eyes straight ahead. Then he stood and paced again. “Before I say this, I have to be completely honest with you. After I tell you this first part, you may hate me and not want to hear anymore, but I have to say it.”

He waited for my nod before he continued. “That time you fell down the steps, I promise you it was an accident.”

“Okay, you've told me that, and I believe you now. Why are you telling me again?”

“Because it was who I was. A shitty person. I may have accidentally caused you to break your arm, but I've done plenty of other things to other people on purpose. I once locked Michael Reese in a locker on the west side third-floor corridor, where no classes are, and forgot about him. It was ninety degrees that day. By the time I remembered, Michael was dehydrated and almost died. Then—” He laughed without humor. “One time, I left Tag all the way out in Ocean View, took his wallet and phone. He didn't get home until after midnight. No wonder he cheated with my girlfriend. I've been a shit-ass friend to him. I pantsed Omar Siedel freshman year as he was getting out of the pool. Let's just say the water was freezing and there may have been significant shrinkage. He got teased mercilessly. It's probably the reason he doesn't play sports. Meaning, *I'm* the reason he doesn't play sports. He has reason to hate me. They all do. Everything that happened to me has been karma: the accident, the coma, losing my mother...”

He stopped pacing but didn't sit as he drew in deep breaths. Conrad was a monumental jerk and maybe what happened to him was karma, but it wasn't my place to confirm that. What this was confirming to me was Conrad might have been a chip off the old block, which could account for why

someone would want to murder his father. He learned his bad behavior from somewhere.

Because I was still confused about where this was going, I said. “My mother always says life isn’t about where you’ve been, it’s where you’re going.” I stood. “No one deserves what happened to you. You didn’t deserve to be in a coma and lose your mother. Please, sit down,” I said, “and tell me why you wear those gloves.”

He sat once more, looked at me, licked his lips, and said, “When I touch people, I mean, make skin-to-skin contact, it’s like I have an out-of-body experience. I don’t know. Something happens, and I can see the day they die.” He blew out a breath. “If you think your dream of me dying was horrible, imagine that, but a hundred times worse.”

I stared at him, not fully sure I understood.

“Can you say something, please?”

My mouth opened, closed, then opened again. This was so far to the left of what I thought he would say. “I’m just a little confused. You touch people and see how they’re going to die?”

“Yes.”

Conrad clasped his hands tightly together. I imagined his knuckles were white with tension. He wouldn’t lie to me. Not after that confession... and now I understood why he unburdened himself first. If he could own up to being a terrible person, then everything else he said had to be true too, right?

I narrowed my eyes. “I’ve seen you touch people. Chef and even Basil touched you, skin-to-skin tonight. Is it only certain people?” I tried to keep the skepticism out of my voice because he believed me so easily when I told him what I could do.

Conrad scooped a hand through his hair. “Fortunately, or unfortunately, however you want to look at it, I’ve touched Chef and Basil already. I’ve already seen what’s going to happen to them.”



“So, once you touch someone, you don’t see it anymore? You can touch them from then on?”

“Right. I see it only once.”

“Have you been like this all your life?” I asked, trying to think of a question that would catch him in a lie. He wasn’t wearing gloves all freshman year nor for the half of sophomore year before his accident.

He shook his head. “After the accident, I was in a coma for about fourteen weeks. When I woke up, I was like this.” He lifted a shoulder. “I’ve researched it and found cases of people waking up from comas doing weird things. Like this one woman only spoke German when she woke. She didn’t know the language before her coma. I can’t find anybody who can do what I do. Your gift is amazing, Sayra. It’s the closest thing to what I can do. This thing I have is a curse. It wasn’t enough that my mother died inches away from me. I had to become a freak too.” A muscle in his jaw worked. I watched as he pulled himself back together.

“The nurse in the hospital was the first person who touched me after I woke up. I saw her husband beating her to death. Then there was the doctor. He was going to fall off a ladder. By the time I figured out what the hell was happening, Basil, Emma—his wife—and Chef had come in. All three of them touched me at once.”

Conrad stood and paced a moment. “It was like being electrocuted. All of those deaths hitting me at the same time...” He shook his head. “They thought I was having a seizure and called in more people who touched me. God, it was the worst. Basil was the only one I told. Well, I told my dad when he showed up later that day. By then, I wouldn’t let anybody touch me. He didn’t believe me, and still doesn’t. Just thinks I’m suffering from survivor’s guilt, post-traumatic stress, or whatever those high-priced shrinks diagnosed me with.”

He pulled in a deep breath. “I haven’t touched my father in almost a year. We used to do everything together: arm wrestle, flag football, basketball. I never realized how much we

touched each other until it was gone. But I saw my mother die, and I can't go through that, even if it means I never touch my dad again."

A quick stab of pain cut through his voice, and just like that, I believed him. "The psychic books."

He looked at me.

"I saw one in your truck and spotted a few in your room."

He nodded. "Yeah. Still researching."

I wanted to hug him, just wrap my arms around him and kiss his forehead like my dad always did when I was upset. Then it hit me. Yaya said Conrad was powerful. And...

"Is this why you pulled away from me, because you didn't want to tell me?"

"Yes, and no." He stopped pacing and looked anywhere but at my face. "I like you Sayra. I mean, *really* like you." Our eyes met for a brief second before he started moving again. "I know, right? Imagine that, especially from where we started." He flashed a grin before his face sobered again. "I can't offer you anything. I can't date you, can't touch you, and I sure as hell can't kiss you or anything else. There's no future for us beyond friends. Even being friends with you is hard. I tried to back away from you because I like you so much. It's not fair to build something with you knowing I'll never be able to..."

"Be my boyfriend."

This was so weird, talking to Conrad Bishop about being my boyfriend. I wondered what kind of cruel irony would finally let me like a boy who was my arch nemesis, have him change his ways only to keep him permanently out of reach.

"But what if we, I mean, what if you just touched me and got it over with?"

He was shaking his head before I even finished the sentence. "Sayra, you don't know what it does to me every time I see—"

"Yes, I do. If anybody knows, it's me."

“No.” He sat beside me again, desperate to make me understand. But all I could focus on was never touching him, ever.

“You go to sleep, have a dream, and your life is still the same when you wake up. When I woke up, my world was completely different. I didn’t just see that nurse getting beaten to death by her husband. I felt every blow. Something comes over me, and I’m there, dying with them. I feel all the pain and all the fear. I can’t stop it, can’t control it, and I can’t change it. Wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy.”

“But”—I reached out for him and then snatched my hand back. “Sorry.”

Conrad took my hand, lacing his gloved fingers with my bare ones.

“This isn’t a life, Conrad. Have you thought this through? You’ll never touch anyone for the rest of your life. You’ll never get married or have children. That’s not a life.”

He stood, sliding his fingers away from mine. “It’s what I have to do, and it’s working for me now.”

“No, it’s not.” I stood too, put my embarrassment aside, and asked, “Do you want to... have you ever thought about kissing me?”

“Absolutely.” He blushed right up to his hairline but stared at me through a fan of brown lashes.

“Then your no-touching rule isn’t working.”

“Sayra, I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I don’t want you to say anything. You should take off the gloves and touch me. I want you to... to kiss me.” If anyone had walked in at that moment, they would have thought I was desperate, a stalker-like that security guard thought. “I’ll be right here to go through it with you. And after, it’ll be better.”

Conrad’s hands fisted at his sides. I stepped forward and stretched out my hand, but he quickly backed away.

“Don’t push me on this.”

“Please, Conrad.”

“Remember what brought you here tonight,” he said lowly. “Remember, you said you’d respect my wishes. You wouldn’t touch me.”

I stepped back. How could I have forgotten? “I’m sorry. I just really want to hug you.”

“Me too.” He stared down at the floor. It seemed an entire continent formed between us. Then Conrad looked up and flashed a grin. “I’ll be right back.” He dashed out of the room and up the stairs.

Basil materialized the moment Conrad was gone. “Would you care for a refreshment?”

My eyes narrowed. “Ear-hustling?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Snooping, eavesdropping. You know, pressing a glass against the wall.”

He pulled himself up to his full height, which I was only about an inch shy of topping. “As I am a person of character, something you undoubtedly know nothing about, I would never stoop to such antics. One cannot help what one overhears as voices carry.”

“Uh-huh. So why didn’t you call the cops on me?”

“As much as I abhor what you did the other night, Miss Price, Conrad is partly to blame.”

I shook my head.

“Yes, he is. While it should be enough to ask that one not be touched and have one’s friends respect that, it is not enough to assume one’s friends will understand the severity of said request without a proper explanation. He owed you an explanation.”

“If I had known this, I would have never tried to touch him.”

“Precisely my point.”

“So, did he tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Basil stood as stiff as another piece of furniture in that fussy room.

“What he saw when he touched you?”

His lips pursed. For a moment, I thought he wouldn't answer, but then he said, “No. I did not want to know.”

“Why not?”

He inhaled, let it out quietly, and then he did something he hadn't done before. He really looked at me. “It is not wise to live with a time clock weighing you down.” He paused and thought. “I make no excuses for the boy Conrad was. For a moment, I too wondered if he had pushed you on purpose. I prayed he would change his behavior. Though, I never wanted what happened to him to be the catalysis. I truly believe the accident simply brought out the boy who was always there.” He turned to leave, then stopped and looked at me again. “What I want most for Young Master Bishop is to have a normal life. He's afraid to even allow for the possibility, but...” He studied me for a long second. “I think I was mistaken about you, Miss Price. Do not make me regret my change of opinion.”

I frowned at him, confused by that statement. Conrad skidded into the room on socked feet with a black ski mask on his head. He snatched it off when he spotted Basil.

“Planning on burgling tonight, Young Master Bishop?”

“No, sir.”

“I think the time has come for you to escort your guest home.” He gave Conrad a pointed look. “And be sure to return promptly.”

“Yes, sir.”

Basil sent me a curt nod and left the room.

“I think he likes you,” Conrad said.

“Yeah. I can tell by all the warmth.”

He puffed out an amused breath as he tugged the ski mask down over his face. We looked like we were at a standoff—mugger against victim.

“I know it looks stupid.” Conrad’s mouth moved behind the knit mask. “But it’s the only way I could think to hug you and not risk our faces touching.”

He handed me a pair of white cotton gloves. I slipped them on and stepped up to him. For a moment, we simply stood with several inches between us. The mask covered every part of his face except for his eyes. They were even more beautiful, isolated like that. Long, full lashes over wide green eyes. And the green was so vivid, without a single fleck of brown.

We stepped together. His arms came around my waist, hesitant at first. Then he slid them all the way around and pulled me into him. I held on, let him squeeze me, rub my back, my hair. He needed this more than I did. It made me sad to think how long it had been since he had his arms around someone. Basil loved him, that was plain to see, but I couldn’t picture him hugging Conrad like a dad would.

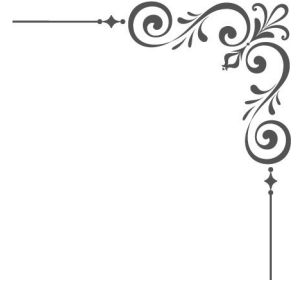
The layer of knitted cotton didn’t keep his breath from warming my neck as he trailed his mouth down to my shoulder. I imagined his lips doing the same, no barrier, no layers, just his skin against mine.

“I want to kiss you so bad,” he whispered.

I gripped him tighter. I never wanted to do anything more than I wanted to kiss Conrad Bishop. The insanity of it all! Our hearts pounded as we clung to each other in the middle of the parlor.

“Conrad.” Basil’s voice was crisp.

We jumped apart. Guilt had heat flashing through my body, although I didn’t know why. We were only hugging. Basil tossed a set of keys to Conrad and didn’t speak another word. He didn’t have to. The message was clear. *Take her home.* Conrad pulled off the ski mask, revealing a face flushed from either guilt or lust. He nodded to Basil, and we left.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE

FOR THE REST OF THE night, I was on the phone with Conrad, filling him in on my dating plans for Saturday. He was not happy. No surprises there.

The next day, Conrad sat with us during lunch, rejecting my idea that he should sit with Hillary and Tag. That Tag could be involved in this mess gave Conrad the urge to beat the hell out of him. Tag sent secret glances over to me, confirming that no matter what he said about things being done with Hillary, *she* wasn't aware of their done status. He was such a coward. Still, I smiled and waved at him shyly when Hillary wasn't looking. That got me double kicks under the table.

I glared at Ivan and Conrad sitting across from me. "What that hell?"

"Stop with the doe-eyes," Conrad said.

"Yeah," Ivan added.

"I'm supposed to be looking forward to this. So stop acting like jerks."

"They can't help it," Penny said, flipping through an *Essence Magazine*.

"Anyway." Conrad swallowed the last of his juice. "Guess what I requisitioned from my dad's tech company?"

"What?" I asked.

"Spy equipment."

Ivan squealed so loudly that a hush fell over the cafeteria. He clamped his hands over his mouth and promptly turned red.

"Sorry." He looked around sheepishly, but his excitement bubbled under the surface.

"Dude," Conrad said when the normal riotous level returned to the cafeteria. "You've gotta contain yourself 'cause



I've got some wicked stuff coming."

"Yeah? Like what, an air gap computer?" Ivan asked.

Conrad frowned. "No. Why would we need that?"

"I just want one." Ivan shrugged.

"I got microphones that look like earrings," Conrad said. "Earpieces so we can hear Sayra, and a skin patch with GPS tracking, so we won't lose her."

"Oh my God." Ivan closed his eyes as if savoring deliciousness. "That'll do. That'll do nicely."

"Hey, Ivan." Bethany bounced up beside the table. "I'm really looking forward to tonight."

Penny's head shot up from her magazine. "Tonight?"

Ivan sprang from his chair and ushered Bethany out of the cafeteria, forcing that skip-walk thing she did into an awkward run.

"What's happening tonight?" Penny asked me.

"Haven't a clue." But a sense of dread came over me. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be good.

Ivan returned, and before he could sit and face the Penny Inquisition, the bell rang. He picked up his books without making eye contact with any of us.

"What's tonight?" Penny asked, staring at him, daring him to lie.

His shoulders drew up. "Nothing. We're just going to see a movie."

*Oh no.*

"A date?" Penny asked.

Ivan wobbled a gesture somewhere between yes and no, then he fled.

Penny turned to me. "Only has eyes for me, huh?" She shook her head, turned on her heel, and marched out.

"What'd I miss?" Conrad asked.

“I probably ruined their chances at happiness because I couldn’t stand the idea of Penny not being my friend anymore. Come on.”

I filled in Conrad as we headed to class. At the end of the hall, Conrad meant my eyes before we separated. A crooked grin lifted his mouth as his gaze dropped to my lips. He squeezed my hand—which I took for our way of a goodbye kiss—and headed to his class. Smiling, I turned to the right and headed down the hall on the second floor. I couldn’t believe I was thinking, hoping, longing to kiss Conrad Bishop. *Wow.*

At the end of the hall, I spotted Omar. He was walking fast, headed for the steps. Was this unusual? I couldn’t say. It was possible I’d seen Omar headed to class in this very hall, walking that fast on other occasions, but today it was odd. So, I rushed past World History class and followed Omar.

He went down the steps at a quick clip, but I could keep time well enough. Quietly, I followed him past the first floor and the ground floor. As the corridors emptied, I realized I wouldn’t be able to trail him as closely. I stopped at the corner when Omar traveled down the same hallway where Conrad and I used to have lunch. I peeped around the corner just as Omar passed by the boiler room. He looked around and then entered a room two doors down from the boiler room. As I scampered down the hall, two things occurred to me: one, Omar was definitely up to something and two, I was in this dark hallway by myself. Not smart.

Fortunately, the door wasn’t closed all the way. I crouched down on the left side of the entrance, pretending to tie my shoe, in case Omar or anyone else came out of the room and saw me.

“We set for Saturday?” a male voice said from inside the room. He didn’t sound like Omar.

“Yeah,” Omar answered. I’ve got something to do around noon, but I should be ready on time.

“Should be?” the guy hissed. “What could you possibly have to do that’s more important? Don’t mess this up, man.”

The voice didn't sound familiar to me at all. But there were over five hundred kids at West Nottingham. I couldn't know all of them.

“I won't mess it up. This was my idea, wasn't it? I just got plans with Sayra... Sayra Price, for a couple hours. That's it. I'll be there.”

“A date? You're kidding. And with her?”

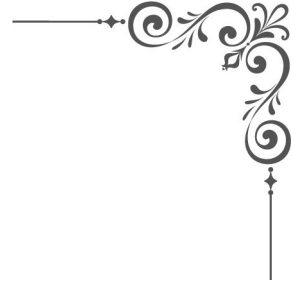
“What's wrong with Sayra?”

*Yeah, what's wrong with me?*

“She looks like a snitch. You getting close to her isn't a good idea. Not when we're this close. This shit we're doing will wreck our futures if we're caught. We—”

A door opened behind me in the hallway. I lurched up in time to see old Smitty hobble from the boiler room, coming straight for me. Worse, Omar and his mystery friend had stopped talking. I darted past Smitty with a quiet wave that he didn't acknowledge. I didn't stop running until I burst into World History. Mrs. Livingston made me stand at the front of the class and explain why I was late. Tiny bladder was the weak excuse I gave.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

JUST WHEN I THOUGHT Ethics class couldn't get any more awkward, I was wrong. Penny wasn't speaking to Ivan. He sat shamefully silent after his attempt to spark a conversation with her got blatantly ignored. Conrad would rather cut out his tongue than speak to Tag. Tag's mood was so often contingent upon Hillary's. She wasn't her usual talkative self. Not to mention she looked a little green.

I had plenty to say, but not for mixed company. Omar and his friend were planning something for Saturday, something they would do after our date. And apparently, I looked like a snitch. Honestly, I couldn't even get offended. If Omar was involved in a plot to murder Mr. Bishop, I would shout it over the loudspeakers.

The group of us didn't even pretend to work on our assignment, which was due in a few weeks. When I suggested we skip this Saturday's study group, no one protested. Our grade might suffer, but some of us had more important things to worry about.

Finally, the bell rang, scaring me. Penny zipped out of class, eager to get away. I didn't go after her because I wanted to talk to Ivan.

"Want a ride home?" Conrad asked.

"Sure." I smiled. "I have to tell you something. I'll meet you by your truck."

Ivan had just closed his locker when I stepped up. "What the hell, Ivan?"

"Huh?"

"You and Bethany?"

"What's so wrong with Bethany?" He straightened to his full height.

"Nothing's wrong with her, exactly, but why are you dating her?"

He rolled his eyes. “I haven’t dated her yet. It’s just a movie.”

“I know, but what about Penn?”

His brows drew together. “What about her?”

*Tread carefully.* “Don’t you like her?”

“Course, she’s my best friend.”

“You know what I mean. Why don’t you... date her?”

Ivan stared at me for a long second. “Date Penn? Penelope Lashawn Northwood, you mean? You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not kidding. You like her as more than a friend?”

“It doesn’t matter if I do.” Ivan looked at his watch. “First off, she’s my best friend, which dating her would ruin. Second, she’s so far out of my league that I’m playing third-grade dodge ball while she’s playing doubles tennis with Serena Williams.”

I shook my head. “Ivan, you’re not out of her league. You’re cute and—”

He laughed, but there was no humor in it. “There’s a disconnect in your head. You look at things and your brain receives the message all screwed up. You don’t see how pretty you are, but you can stand here and tell me I’m cute.”

I swallowed because the embarrassment in his voice broke my heart. “But you are, Ivan. You’re good enough for her.” I wanted to say, ‘Penny certainly thinks so,’ but she’d kill me.

“Half the time, she’s yelling at me—”

“Which you love.”

He blushed. “Yeah, I kinda do. But we’re too different. I can’t picture Penny going to temple or having brisket with my family. Her father writes songs about bustin’ caps in people’s asses.” He looked at me with owlish eyes. “You write songs about things you *love*. So, he must really love bustin’ caps in asses. What do you think he’d do if Penn showed up with a pasty-face Jewish boy?”

“Are you seriously making this about race? Mr. Northwood likes you. He certainly laughs at all your stupid jokes. Not to mention, you wouldn’t be the first white boy Penny brought home. The dating pool at this school isn’t exactly diverse. You’re throwing out excuses and it’s pissing me off.”

“If it was just that, then I’d say they were excuses, but can you see Penn cos-playing? Or going to Comic-Con? Like I get a migraine whenever I think about shopping or seeing a *chick-flick*. We have nothing in common.”

“And yet, you’re best friends.” I cocked my head to the side. “I wonder how that happened. And don’t say me. I’m not the glue holding you two together. You were friends before I moved here. Maybe not best friends, but friends all the same. You want to know what Penny said to me three years ago? ‘Let me introduce you to Ivan. He’s a geek to the core, but he’s cute, really smart, and insanely funny.’ I’m just saying, if people have enough in common to be best friends, then they have enough in common to be more than friends.”

Ivan stared at the floor, ran a hand through his bushy hair, and said, “So, Bethany wasn’t the girl you dreamed about?”

“God, no,” I said, immediately regretting how quickly I answered.

Ivan frowned, then one by one, the muscles in his face relaxed until he looked like he got conked on the head.

*Oh no.*

“You dreamed about me with Penn?”

I was afraid to confirm or deny, unsure of how the pendulum would swing. A thousand things could mess up now with just a simple yes or no.

“I’ve gotta go,” Ivan said.

“Wait.” I put my hands on his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart. “You tell me right now that you don’t have feelings for Penny, and I’ll leave it alone.”

Ivan shook his head, opened his mouth, closed it, then said, “I... she’s... it just wouldn’t work. Leave it alone, please.”

He bolted then. I could’ve caught up with Ivan, but he didn’t want to talk anymore. I had to respect that. Conrad was leaning against his truck when I reached him.

“I wish you had that ski mask. I could really use a hug.”

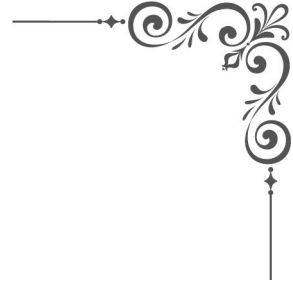
He smiled. “It’s in the glove box. But let’s go get some ice cream.”

“That would be perfect right now.”

As we ate our cones, I wondered if this was a date? I was afraid to ask. He would probably tell me again how he didn’t date. I chanced a glance at him as he absentmindedly crunched into his cone. He looked deep in thought, no doubt going over what I told him about Omar.

I left him to his thoughts. There was guilt there. Conrad believed his actions brought about this scenario where he may lose his father so quickly after losing his mother. My words would be hollow. He wasn’t ready to believe this wasn’t his fault. So, I sat beside him and quietly ate my ice cream.





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# CHAPTER THIRTY- ONE

SATURDAY CAME WITH the swiftness of a death sentence. The plan was to meet Omar at the Marris Bay Aquarium at noon, then Tag at four. The Team, which Ivan was calling us now, met up at Conrad's house since he had all the spy gear. Penny was back to her normal self. Almost too normal, bubbly even. Although I was dying to ask Ivan about his date, I couldn't with Penny around. It made me feel like I was taking sides, and I didn't want to do that. So, I coerced Conrad into asking about it when he found an opportunity.

When Penny went to the bathroom and Ivan was on the other side of the bedroom, tinkering with something, Conrad whispered, "He said they went to the movies, got a burger after, and he had her home by curfew."

I narrowed my eyes. "You're holding out on me, Bishop."

Conrad huffed, looking like he hated every minute of what he considered gossip. "He kissed her. Actually, she kissed him." Conrad smirked.

My heart sank, almost as if Ivan had cheated on Penny. This was different from him kissing me. I knew for a fact that I would never kiss Ivan again. This was a date that ended with a kiss. That meant something. "Is he going out with her again?"

"I don't like this. I feel like I'm betraying him."

"I was going to ask him myself, but I can't with Penn here. If she sees us whispering in a corner, she'll know I asked him. Then she'll ask me what he said, and I won't lie to her. But getting it from you, I can honestly tell her that *Ivan* didn't tell me anything."

"The evil workings of the female mind." He shook his head. "Yes, he's planning to go out with her again."

"Damn it." I chewed my thumbnail for a second. "As much as it kills me, I can't interfere anymore. For all I know, this

happened because I kissed him and told them both about my dream.”

I grabbed my diary out of my bag, reread the note about telling the subject of my dream about the dream. Penny and Ivan would be a stronger test subject than my mom and her book tour. I felt horrible about using my best friends as guinea pigs, but I couldn't go back in time and keep my big mouth shut, so at least I could learn from it. If they didn't get together or go to prom, then I would know that my interference was the cause.

*Please don't let that happen.*

“Hey...” Ivan interrupted us as Penny stepped out of the bathroom. “It's almost noon.”

“Yeah,” Penny said. “I need to be home by six. I have a date.”

You could hear a pin drop. Ivan's lips parted as he stared at her. “You... you do?”

“Yup,” she chirped, but wouldn't meet his eyes.

“With who?” he asked.

“Lance Taylor.” She shrugged and glanced at Ivan. Lance was a senior, half Black, half Korean, and had an excellent reputation. “He's nice.”

“Yeah. He is.” Ivan agreed, looking a little hurt. He didn't have a right, though. I wanted to shake them both, but my guilt kept me rooted to the spot.

Then Ivan got petty. “I thought Lance sorta liked Sayra. He stares at her all the time.”

Conrad frowned. “He does?”

“No,” Penny and I said together for what I suspected were different reasons. I didn't want to give Conrad yet another reason to feel bad because, in his mind, we couldn't date. Penny probably didn't want anyone to think she would date someone who liked her best friend better. I don't even really know Lance. He had never even said one word to me. Ivan was being an ass.

“He asked me out. I accepted. End of story.”

“Right,” Conrad said, breaking the tension. “Let’s get to it.” He moved to his dresser, where five small boxes sat. The first box held three black watches. “So me, Ivan, and Penny can talk to each other if we get separated.”

Ivan seemed to push his hurt aside and began bouncing on his toes, itching to touch. Conrad opened the second box and revealed four earbuds.

“These will let us hear each other.”

The next box was smaller than the others; a jewelry box that held a pair of round silver earrings with a yellowish-green stone in the middle.

“These are mics, so we can get sound from both sides. Speak normally, and we’ll hear you.” Conrad moved on to the fourth box. I thought it was empty until he held up a clear square.

“That looks like a nicotine patch,” Ivan said.

“Right. From what I’m told, it sticks to the skin, and we track it with this.” He opened the last box, which held a flat gadget like a small cell phone. “You’ll need to stick this patch somewhere that doesn’t have a crease. So, not on the back of your knees or neck. Your lower back, maybe?” Conrad turned to me.

“Well, the jeans I plan to wear are pretty low cut, so—”

“How low cut?” Conrad and Ivan asked together. It seemed Ivan had taken on the role of big brother and Conrad as a jealous boyfriend when neither was true.

“Low enough to keep them both interested,” Penny added, not helping.

“I’ll just stick it here.” I slapped my right butt cheek. “It won’t move, and there’s no chance either of them will see it there. Satisfied?”

Both guys grumbled something unworthy of a response. I grabbed my clothes and went to change. Ten minutes later, I stepped out of the bathroom in a deep red top with thin straps

and my dark jeans. Penny went to work on my makeup, dusting my face with a brush and powder and getting too close to my eyes with sticks and pencils. The front of my hair was in Bantu knots, my mother did for me, and the back was down in a curly wash-and-go. She thought I was hanging out with Penny and Ivan. There was no way I'd tell her what we were actually up to. Penny undid a Bantu knot on either side of my head so my hair would hang over my ears and block the earpiece and mic earrings.

She tsked. "These earrings don't match your outfit."

"I doubt Tag or Omar will notice," I said.

Ivan snorted. "Not with that hot red top and those tight ass jeans."

"Shut up." I chuckled until I looked up and saw Conrad's expression. He stared at a spot by my feet, mouth set in a tight line. "Can you guys give Conrad and me a minute?"

Penny and Ivan gathered the equipment and said they'd meet us at the car.

"What's wrong?" I asked the minute the door closed.

"Nothing."

"You look like you want to punch something." I reached for the earbud and stuck it into my left ear.

"Maybe I do. So what?"

I stopped fussing with the earbud and looked at him. "Why are you pissed at me?"

"Not you. I'm mad at the situation." Conrad folded his arms over his chest. His scowl deepened. "I was such a dick to Tag and Omar that one of them is trying to kill my father? I don't get it. Why not kill me? And then, if that's not enough, I'm jealous of them. It's insane, right?"

"No. It's understandable."

His lips twitched. "You're supposed to say that I have nothing to be jealous about." He was practically pouting. "They shouldn't be taking you on a date. I should."

“So why don’t you?”

“You know why.” He moved to his closet and began digging through a pile of clothes on the floor.

“I know why you say you can’t, but I still don’t see why we can’t go to a movie or to the aquarium or putt-putt golf.”

When he backed out of the closet, he wore a red ski mask and had me in his arms before I could speak. I really liked the way he hugged me. No one had ever held onto me like I was sand slipping through their fingers. But why would they? My parents loved me and certainly gave me hugs, but not with the desperation that poured from Conrad. These hugs were weird, given our history. If someone told me a month ago that Conrad Bishop would give me the best hugs of my life, I would think that person had been snorting something illegal.

His hands groped at my back, then he slipped them under my shirt, massaging his cottony fingers on my skin.

“Do you have to smell so good?” he murmured in my ear. “Go wash off your deodorant and get a nice onion stench going.”

I laughed even as a shudder ran through me. Conrad rubbed his mouth across my neck and shoulder. Although a layer of itchy fabric separated us, I knew what he was doing. Kissing my neck, kissing whatever part of my skin he could reach. He pulled back and shook his head, gathering himself.

“I don’t like this mask,” I said. “It’s creepier than the black one. You look like you want to murder me with this one.”

“Duly noted.” He pulled off the cap and scrubbed a hand through his hair, making it stick up cutely.

“I’ve been meaning to ask. Would it be okay if I told Ivan and Penn about you? They’re my best friends, and I tell them everything. I won’t if you don’t want me to, though.” I said it all so quickly it seemed to come out in one sentence.

“I assumed you’d already told them.”

“I wouldn’t without your permission.” We headed to the bedroom door.

“Sure. Just wait till I’m not around.” He grabbed my hand before I could reach for the knob. His eyes lingered on my mouth as he stepped closer to me. “I want to kiss you so bad it’s making me crazy.”

I opened my mouth, but before I could form a word, I heard an intake of air. My hands shot to my ears. “Are these things on?”

“Yup.” Ivan snickered in my ear.

“Sorry, Sayra,” Penny added. “We just turned them on, so we only heard that last bit.”

“I’m going to barf if I have to listen to you two make out.”

“Shut up, Ivan.”

Conrad stuck his earbud in and exchanged a few colorful remarks with Ivan as we made our way to the car. I drove my car so we wouldn’t risk Tag or Omar spotting me with Conrad. Because his truck was so noticeable to anyone at West Nottingham, he borrowed one of his father’s fleet. Borrowed would imply he asked when what he did was grab the keys and run. They drove behind me in a black Suburban. Nerves had my palms sweating.

Ivan’s voice piped up in my ear. “Jew-fro to Evil Squirrel. Come in, Evil Squirrel.”

“Are you talking to me?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why are you calling me Evil Squirrel?”

“When I gave you the list of approved codenames, you told me to get that list outta your face or you’d shove it down my throat. So now, you’re Evil Squirrel. Conrad is Batman, for obvious reason, and Penn is BGM or Black Girl Magic.”

“You know that’s right,” Penny said.

“*Or*,” I said, “you could be Penny, and I could be Sayra... see where I’m going with this? I’ve got too much to think about to worry about stupid codenames.”

“And that’s why you’re Evil Squirrel,” Ivan muttered.

I made a left on Cannery Road and felt my pulse speed up as the Marris Bay Aquarium came into view. According to plan, I would go in alone. The team would wait until they heard me meet up with Omar before they followed. Conrad parked the Suburban one row over and several cars down. I checked my face in the rearview mirror then caught myself. Why should I care what I look like for Tag? With a deep breath, I stepped out of my car. The temperature had dropped to a chilly sixty degrees. I was sorry I hadn't thought to bring a jacket.

“Relax, Sayra.” Penny's voice came soothingly through the earpiece. “Take a deep breath, roll your shoulders, and stick out your boobs.”

“What?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“When in doubt, stick your boobs out.”

I could hear Penny's smile. Whether she meant for me to stick out my boobs or her ridiculous advice was just to calm my nerves, it worked. I felt less like a girl headed to her own murder and more like a nervous girl on a first date.



OMAR NEVER SHOWED. I got stood up! No call. No text. No, nothing. I didn't know him well, but he seemed punctual, and seemed to have good attendance. Aside from being rude as hell, this was weird. Maybe whoever he was whispering to in that room didn't allow Omar to meet me.

We talked it to death sitting in Conrad's truck parked in a shady spot down the road. It was no use. I'd find out what the deal was with Omar on Monday.

Time for date number two.

I walked into the aquarium again, hoping the staff wouldn't notice I was the same girl who lingered for an hour, around noon. I spotted Tag immediately. He stood by the gift shop, nervously circling a rack of postcards. Dressed in khaki pants and a pink button-down shirt, Tag looked ready for the country club. When he saw me, he rushed over.



“Wow, you look...” He swallowed. “I didn’t think you’d come.”

“Am I late?” I looked at my watch. “We said four, right?”

“Oh yeah, yeah. I meant, well, I just thought you’d come to your senses or one of your friends would talk you out of it.”

“We tried,” Conrad, Penny, and Ivan said into my earpiece. It was difficult not to react.

Tag smiled shyly and took my hand like a guy used to being rejected for showing affection without permission. “You want to get started?”

“Sure.”

He had paid for our tickets already, so we went straight to the entrance, following the flow of people headed for an exhibit called The Secret Lives of Seahorses.

“What secrets do seahorses have?” I asked.

Tag lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know, but I’d never want to be a seahorse. The dudes get pregnant. That’s just sick.”

Soft snickering in my ear, then Penny said, “I’m surprised he knew that.”

“Tag’s in AP classes just like the rest of us.” Conrad’s voice came through without a trace of humor. “Can we stay focused? We haven’t been able to pick you up on the GPS this time. A glitch or something. The feed isn’t coming through on the receiver. So we’ll come in when you say you’re headed to the next exhibit. We’ll try to stay at least one exhibit behind you. Cough if that’s cool.”

I cleared my throat.

“So, what’s the deal with you and Conrad?” Tag asked. It nearly made me cough for real.

“Um... no deal. Why do you ask?”

His hand tightened on mine and began a pulsating grip. “For two people who hate each other, you sure spend a lot of time together.”

“Hate is a strong word. I don’t think I ever hated him. I—”

“You said, and I quote, ‘I hate you, Conrad Bishop. I hope you get a flaming case of poison ivy right in the crack of your ass.’”

In my ear, Ivan roared with laughter. “Oh, I remember that. Good times.”

Conrad was silent.

“That stuck with me,” Tag continued, “’cause I really wanted to laugh.”

I hoped this wouldn’t be an afternoon rehashing all the horrible things Conrad and I had said to one another. Conrad was right. We’d been equal opportunity assholes. We needed to move past our history.

“People change,” I said. “Without forgiveness, there’s no growth.”

“Well said, Grasshopper,” Ivan whispered.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to shut up, but I caught myself just in time.

“So...” Tag began. “You’re not dating Conrad?”

In my ear, Conrad murmured, “Worried about taking another one of my girlfriends, Tag?”

“We’re friends,” I answered.

“Good.” Tag smiled. “Then he won’t mind if I do this.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine.

I put my hands on his chest, stopping him before he could go any further. I got an instant headache from the explosion of noise inside my ear. All three of them talked at once, but Conrad’s voice rang clear.

“Mind if he does what? What did he do? If he touched you... I’m coming in, now!”

“No,” I said calmly, keeping my eyes on Tag. “First, Conrad has no say in what I do. Second, I don’t want us to

rush into anything that may mess things up.” I prayed Conrad understood those words were for him and Tag.

“We’ll keep him off you two.” Ivan panted in my ear from what I imagined was chasing after Conrad. “Just keep going. We’re listening.”

Tag licked his lips, nodding sheepishly. I was here because I wanted to find out wanted Mr. Bishop dead. Was Tag here because he really wanted to date me?

“I get it,” he said. “I’m sorry. It’s just that you’re being so nice to me. I haven’t given you a reason to like me.”

I tugged his hand, getting him to walk through the exhibit so maybe Conrad would cool down with enough distance between us.

“You haven’t been a monster, Tag, but a typical boy, suffering under your toxic masculinity, teasing a girl because he likes her.” Was that really it? It just came to me, but that may not be too far off from the truth... for him and Conrad.

We walked quietly for a while, out of the seahorse exhibit and into the Splash Zone with the penguins. I couldn’t concentrate on how much fun this place would be under the right circumstances. Tension wouldn’t allow it. Then I had a startling thought. What if I had to go out on more dates with Tag and Omar (forgiving him for standing me up) before I got information that could help us? I might start liking one of them. Like, what if Tag was just misunderstood and not totally annoying? What if he was involved with this mess with Mr. Bishop and was just in over his head? I mean, I like Conrad now, something I never thought possible. Who was to say I wouldn’t one day see past Tag’s idiocy and find a good guy there too?

If Tag was involved, I didn’t want to sympathize with him, and I certainly didn’t want to like him. But if either boy was just an innocent pawn in this, I had to help them, too.

We left the Splash Zone and headed toward the Giant Octopus. Blue lights illuminated the calming area. It was dark, serene, and just a little spooky. Tag slipped his arm around my

shoulder. I let him but felt guilty for allowing him to touch me like this was an actual date.

“Where are you?” Conrad whispered in my ear.

“The octopus exhibit is kinda creepy,” I said, which was a mistake. I only wanted to give my location, but Tag pulled me closer, sliding his arm down to hold my waist. The dark exhibit invited inappropriate thoughts. I didn’t want to have to punch Tag if he got handsy.

“I could go for a soda and popcorn,” I blurted.

“Sure, no problem. Butter?”

“Of course.” I grinned at him.

“I’ll be right back.” He leaned over, kissed my cheek, and dashed off.

“That asshole is probably going to run off and call whoever he’s working with,” Ivan said.

I put my hand over my mouth like I had to yawn. “We don’t know if Tag is the Zorro. I still say it’s suspicious that Omar didn’t show. Where are you guys?”

“Hanging back by the entrance of the exhibit,” Penny said. “We just saw Tag jog toward the eatery.”

“Did he kiss you again?” Conrad wanted to know.

“Um... just on the cheek.”

I turned in to a darkened corner in front of a door marked, *Authorized Personnel Only*, so no one would see me talking to myself.

“At first, I thought it wasn’t so bad when we found out it was someone at the school, but this is kinda scary, y’all. What do you guys think so far?”

“Nothing really to think. We know nothing.” Conrad said. I could tell his teeth were clenched.

“Conrad is pretty pissed,” Penny added.

“Yeah, I gathered as much. Don’t worry about—”

Something slammed into my back, like a tackling linebacker, sending me into the personnel door. I glimpsed a jacket and shoes, but had no time for recognition. They forced me through the door and shoved a black bag over my head. My friends went ballistic in my ear. My earpiece popped out as my attacker slammed my head against a wall. It took seconds to separate me from the crowd. Did anyone see what had just happened to me? A hand wrapped around my throat, squeezing my windpipe.

“Sayra Daniella Price,” a man said with a deliberately graveled voice. “11803 Bayside Terrace.” He pressed harder against my throat, cutting off more of my air. “I know who you are. I know where you live.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks. The pressure on my throat had stars bursting in my eyes.

“This isn’t Mission Impossible or whatever you kids are playing at. Pack up your spy gear and go home. I can promise you won’t like what you find. I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if—”

I brought my knee up as hard as I could. Unable to see, I missed his groin and hit his stomach. My blow knocked the wind out of him enough for him to release me. My lungs burned as oxygen rushed into them. I tried to wrestle the bag off my head, but got struck across the face hard enough to knock me off my feet. He ran away then, with a rasping shuffle. In the distance, I heard a door open and slammed closed.

I pulled the bag off my head and weakly said, “Octopus exhibit. Personnel door.” My earrings were still on, so I knew my friends had heard everything. Pain pulsed across my face where I got punched. I lay inside a long hallway with half a dozen doors I assumed led to the exhibits and supplies. A second later, the personnel door flew open. Conrad looked like a wild man as he rushed in with Ivan and Penny hot on his heels.

“What happened?” Conrad tried to help me up, then let me stay on the floor and propped me against the wall.

“He... he attacked me.” I heard the incredulous tone in my voice. I couldn’t believe what had happened.

“Where’d he go?” Ivan asked.

I lifted a trembling arm and pointed to the end of the long hallway. Ivan took off on his well-trained legs before I could stop him.

“Ivan, wait!” Penny raced after him.

Conrad held my face in his hands. “Can you get up?” Inside the soft white cotton, his thumb brushed over my cheek to wipe away a tear. I winced, and he jerked his hand back.

“Sorry.”

With a deep inhale, I stood. Nerves and spiked adrenaline had my extremities trembling.

“What the hell?” Tag stood at the open doorway, popcorn in one hand and a jumbo soda in the other, staring at Conrad and me.

If Conrad had looked at me like he glared at Tag, I would have run away. Tag stood with a convincingly baffled expression on his face. Conrad took two long strides and slammed his fist into Tag’s face. Popcorn went one way, soda flew the other as Tag dropped to the floor, dazed.

Ivan and Penny arrived at the door, breathing hard. Ivan stepped over Tag as if he was just another piece of tiling. “We couldn’t get back in through that door down there. We didn’t see anybody.”

“Let’s get out of here before security comes.” Conrad pointed toward the door at the end of the hallway. “Does that lead outside?”

“Yeah,” Penny said, visibly shaken. Ivan put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer.

Conrad led me to the parking lot like I was a person in a trance. He and Ivan kept sharp eyes on the area, but my attacker was long gone. I was sure of it. Conrad took my keys and opened the driver’s side door. Then he tossed the keys to

his father's truck to Ivan. I watched all this as though they moved in slow motion.

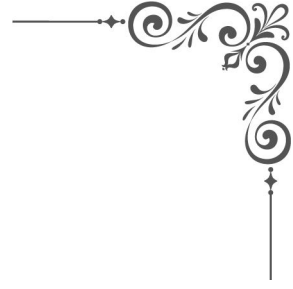
"I'll drive her car," Conrad said. "And you follow us back to my house."

"No," I said, snapping out of my stupor. "I want to go home."

"It's safer at my house," Conrad argued.

"But I can't live there. I'll have to go home at some point." He knew my name and address. I had to go home to make sure my parents were okay.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY- TWO

THIS WAS REAL. UP TO this point, I could hope that my dream was just that... a dream. A warm tear slid down my cheek. These men would kill Harlan Bishop and me too if I got in their way. Conrad squeezed my hand as we stopped in front of my house. He winced when I turned to him.

“Your face is getting puffy. Your parents are going to freak.”

“Don’t remind me. For now, they aren’t home. Dad’s still at his office, and my mother is visiting a botanical garden, researching her next novel.”

Inside, my friends went up to my room while I made my way to the kitchen for a bag of frozen corn niblets for my cheek. I loaded one of my mother’s baskets with juice and chips, then headed up to my bedroom. Conrad looked around, investigating my things.

He studied my bed, the deconstructed canopy, where only the frame survived. Then he moved to my vanity. A deconstructed carburetor sat in the center of the dainty table along with a corroded car battery.

“This is like Princess Interrupted,” Conrad said. “Like a prissy girl is trying to get out, but she can’t ‘cause she’s drowning in battery acid.” He smiled, lifting my mood some.

“Whoa, Sayra,” Ivan said. “You’ve got bruises on your neck.”

I leaned down and stared into the mirror on my vanity. Yup, I had purplish marks that would soon turn black from where that man choked me. That these bruises showed up on my dark skin spoke to how hard he had squeezed my throat. There went my lifted mood.

“I can’t believe this,” Penny said. “I’m scared to go back to school. We should tell our parents and the police.”

“We can’t,” I said, holding the bag of corn to my cheek.  
“We have no proof. It could be anyone.”

“The proof is on your neck!” Penny stood. Ivan took her hand and the simple gesture settled her slightly.

“I have proof that someone hit me and choked me. That’s it. We know nothing more than we did before I got attacked. Getting our parents involved or the police could make them move up the timeline. Our best bet is to figure out for sure which boy was the Zorro we need. They are the weak link. We can work them.”

Ivan pulled Penny down on the seat beside him, but kept her hand in his. “Did the voice sound familiar at all?”

I shook my head.

“I’m wondering if it’s a teacher,” Ivan said.

Conrad turned to him. “Why?”

“Sayra overheard a student at the Halloween dance. We know that for sure because he was in costume. Only parents and teachers chaperoned that night. Only a teacher would have access to Sayra’s address.”

We sat for a moment, digesting the information. “Maybe,” I said. “But what if they’re following me?”

Ivan sighed, and I felt his frustration. There were so many variables. Too many. As the group tossed around ideas, I stepped into my closet to change my shirt. The sleeveless mock-turtleneck I found would hide the bruises on my throat. Since I wasn’t a fan of purple, I never really liked the shirt, but it would serve the purpose. As I stepped out of my closet, my father opened the bedroom door. Of course, he would come home early today of all days.

“Princess, I—” His eyes widened at finding I wasn’t alone, then narrowed as he spotted my swollen cheek. “What happened to your face?”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Lying to my dad wasn’t something that came naturally.

“Before you even think about telling me you fell off your bike, I know what a bruise from a fist looks like.” A muscle ticked in his jaw. Even if my father wasn’t extremely protective of me, which he was, I’d imagine seeing me bruised would set him off, anyway. “Who hurt you? Was it him again?” He rounded on Conrad, who yipped and scrambled from his spot on my bed.

“N-no, sir.” Conrad looked like he was contemplating jumping out the window.

“It was Ivan,” Penny shouted.

The room fell silent as my father turned his attention to Ivan. No sound or breath came from my best friend. He cowered in my desk chair under my father’s intimidating six-foot-five stature.

“He-he,” Penny stuttered, “was teaching us that crab stuff \_\_\_”

“Krav Maga,” Ivan corrected, then promptly shut his mouth.

Penny continued. “I guess he underestimated the length of his arms. It was an accident. He’s a better student than teacher.”

“Sorry, sir,” Ivan whispered.

My father stared at Ivan for another heart-pounding moment before his attention returned to my lumped-up face. “I appreciate wanting to learn how to take care of yourself, Sayra, but go to a proper instructor.” He stepped closer and pressed his fingers along my jaw, causing serious pain. “Open your mouth.”

I complied. My dad used his thumb to press on my upper and lower molars. “If her teeth had been loosened, you’d be paying for that.” He snapped at Ivan.

“Of course, sir.”

Daddy took my bag of corn. “I’ll get you a gel pack and some pain pills. Ivan... I like you. You’re a good kid, but if

you ever hit my daughter again, accident or not, I'm going to hit you. And trust me, it will hurt."

Ivan's gulp was audible. The moment the door closed behind Daddy, the four of us sagged with relief.

"You couldn't think of anything else to tell him?" Ivan clutched his chest and glared at Penny.

She lifted a shoulder. "I figured Sayra could never lie convincingly. If he knew what really happened, he'd call the police."

"No," I said. "He'd get his gun. Then I'd have to visit my dad in prison."

Conrad opened his mouth to speak, but Daddy returned with a gel pack, an enormous pill, and a glass of water. He waited while I drank all the water and held the gel pack at the right angle. But as he went to leave, I had an idea.

"Hey, Daddy?"

"Yeah?" He turned.

"Do you know Harlan Bishop?" I could feel my friends' eyes on me.

"Not personally." He lifted a shoulder. "I only spoke to him on the phone after the,"—he waved his hand toward Conrad—"incident with your arm."

"Would you have any idea why someone would want to kill him?"

A line formed between Daddy's brows, then realization tightened his features more. "Is he the man you..." Daddy glanced at Conrad.

"Conrad knows about my dreams, so you can talk in front of him."

That didn't make Daddy look any happier. "I don't want you involved with this, Sayra."

"I'm already involved."

He shook his head. "I'm serious. Harlan Bishop is an enormously powerful man. Whoever wants to get to him won't be deterred by a group of teenagers. Let the police handle it."

"And what am I supposed to tell the police?" The cold pack against my face made me shiver. "It's not like I can walk into the station and tell them one of the most powerful men in the world will get stabbed on New Year's Eve, and I saw it all in a dream."

Conrad flinched.

"Sorry." I walked over and took Conrad's hand.

Daddy looked down at our joined hands, then back up at Conrad. He did not like what he saw. That was as plain as if he'd spoken it out loud, but now was not the time to deal with my overprotective father. He stared at Conrad three seconds beyond the point of awkwardness, and then he spoke.

"I'm sorry that someone is after your father, but you should understand I have to protect my daughter."

"I understand, sir." Conrad squeezed my hand.

"Daddy, I won't do anything dangerous."

"So, there's some other reason you're trying to learn self-defense?"

The lie tossed back into my face. Sometimes it really sucked having an intelligent father.

"I want to get information that will lead me to the identities of the men. Then I'll give it all to the cops. Do you know of any reason someone would want to hurt Mr. Bishop?"

"I suppose there could be many reasons. No offense," he said to Conrad. "I don't know the man, so I don't know what he's done." Dad looked down and to the right, thinking. "Well, I was extremely angry with him not too long ago."

"Not that, Daddy." I indicated my arm.

"I'm not talking about that either. I was angry with him—or rather with his organization, because Bishop closed down one of his medical facilities. They had a charity care program

that no one could rival in the U.S. They took on some of my most dire patients. Do you know how hard it is to get cancer treatment for the poor? The facility was a godsend. One day, he just closed the doors. It was the talk of the medical community, as it suddenly cut most of us off at the knees for options. Bishop made provisions to refer patients to other medical treatment programs, but I have yet to find a facility that can handle severe needs as sufficiently as Bishop's facility and do it without a charge to the patient."

The room grew quiet. I wondered if everyone was having not so good thoughts about Mr. Bishop, or was it just me?

"When was this?" Conrad asked quietly.

Dad shrugged and looked up at the ceiling. "A year ago. Last January or February. I don't know why he—"

"My mom died," Conrad said. "It was my dad's company, but my mom ran it."

He moved to the window, turning his back to the room. I wanted to go to him, but I thought maybe he needed a moment alone.

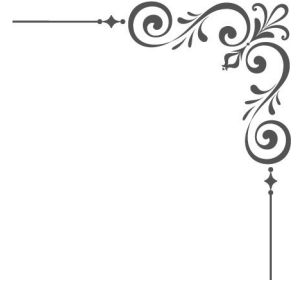
"I'm sorry," Daddy said and then looked at me. "I meant what I said, Sayra. Don't get involved with this. If you find out anything, you come to me, and we'll go straight to the police, okay?"

I nodded, fearing that he would see right through even a half-lie. I did plan to go to the police, but not until I could point them right at the killers.

Daddy walked to my bedroom door. "I'm ordering pizza. You kids are welcome to stay for dinner."

When he was gone, Conrad turned from the window. His face looked drawn and pale. He'd gone far away again, alone in a room full of people. I thought we'd gotten past that. I had to accept that this was his way of coping.

"Monday, we figure out which of the two was the Zorro we need," I said, breaking the tension.



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## CHAPTER THIRTY- THREE

THE HOUSE WAS SILENT, and my mind was clear as I lay in bed. Yaya wouldn't give me anymore root bags. It seemed no one trusted me not to do something stupid. I found the other root bags she'd hidden in my room. One was in the vent over my bed, another was in a shoebox in my closet, and she'd twisted the last one around the curtain rod over my window. Because I didn't know if I could ingest the herbs inside, I didn't make another tea. Besides, one bag had what looked like broken shells or... bones.

After practicing this ritual for weeks, I relaxed as much as possible and hoped that would help bring back the dream. No phone or television. No artificial light in my room. I took a warm bath with lavender Epsom salts and sipped some chamomile tea.

The dream came back to me.

*The field behind the Bishop mansion returned vividly. It's vital to become an actual part of this dream. Frigid air whirls around me. I let it sink in, feel every chill. Drawing a long icy breath into my lungs, I control my breathing and focus on the damp grass beneath my feet. My brain tells me this is all manufactured, that I can't really know how cold it is outside or how wet the grass is, but I quiet my mind. I need to trust everything I am feeling.*

*Mr. Bishop bursts from the woods. I jump but quickly recover, then step to the side, just out of his path. I stretch out my arm, close my eyes, breathe in, breathe out. Wind ghosts across my body, raising goose-bumps. He's closer. I hear Mr. Bishop's frantic panting. As he races past me, his arm bumps against my outstretched hand, brushing the tips of my fingers. Yes! Calm down, Sayra. Breathe in, breathe out.*

*I wait, calm and focused, as the clowns fly from the woods. Breathe in, breathe out. Again, I reach out, and while my heart gallops in my chest, the rest of me remains relaxed. The clown*



*in front is the fastest, anger hurling him forward. I don't move, but when he is only a breath away, I lean slightly to the left, grab the acid green hair on his mask, and snatch it off.*

*For a second, I stand there with the mask in my hand, looking down at it in surprise. It's only when the last clown wheezes past me I spring into action. I run past the stumpy clown and race after the leader. The dream is progressing as if I had not interfered. I find the group up in the bedroom by the panic room. The leader—the killer—has the knife out. Paying better attention now than I ever had, I can see that he is slightly taller than me. Broad-shouldered.*

*I circle the room. He raises the knife. I move in front of him, slowly raising my eyes to his face. My heart sinks. Instead of looking into the face of Mr. Bishop's would-be murderer, I stare at a blurred image. It's as if snatching off the mask smeared the paint on a wet canvas. Disappointment crashes down hard. It grows smokey around the edges of the room. A sign of my mind waking me. No. Not yet! The killer makes his speech to Mr. Bishop, telling him why he's about to kill him. I take in all I can; hair color, but blurred texture, height, and build. Despite what he's doing now, driving the knife into Mr. Bishop's chest, I stare at his blurred face through the blood splatters, trying to make out even the smallest detail.*

When I opened my eyes, I was sitting up in bed. My hand gripped my pillow the same way I held onto that mask in my dream. A searing pain shot up the back of my head, spreading to my temples. My stomach lurched, and my mouth watered. I had just enough time to make it to my bathroom before I vomited. This was becoming the price of getting what I wanted from my dreams.



“Yaya.”

“What’s wrong?”

She could always read me, even thousands of miles away. “I did it. I unmasked the killer in my dream.” Silence met my declaration. “Hello?”

“I’m thinking, Sayra. This is... unexpected. Well, it is, and it’s not. You’ve always been powerful. But I didn’t think you would tap into it so quickly.”

“I’m powerful?”

“Course you are. That’s why you’re named after your great-great-grandma. My grandma was the most powerful seer in our family, and you might just give her a run for her money one day. But it’s gonna take a lot of work to control it. What happened when you woke up?”

“I threw up.”

“Ah, well, that makes sense. You pushed too hard ‘cause you ain’t got no patience. It’s gonna get you in trouble.”

“What do you suggest? Obviously, I need to be more patient, but later for that.” I talked over Yaya’s chuckle. “What do I do with this now that I’ve taken off his mask?”

“I assume you didn’t recognize him.”

“His face was blurred.”

“Like I said, you pushed too hard. You can only force so much, baby. But you seem like you need to learn that lesson on your own ‘cause you won’t listen to me.”

“I listen, Yaya. I know I need to slow down, but I can’t really do that now.” Could I tell her what had happened at the aquarium? Yaya kept my secrets, but not if she thought I might get hurt. “Will I ever be able to interact with my dreams, like talk to the people and have them talk back to me?” It would be so easy to just ask him, ‘Who the hell are you?’

“I don’t think so. I’ve never known anybody who could do it. You ain’t real in the dream.”

“But I touched him.”

“Did he even notice? Did that boy notice when you moved his arm?”

“No,” I said quietly, hopes dashed.

“Don’t sound so disappointed, Sayra. At the risk of sounding like your uptight father, pushing too hard for things

that can't happen might cause irreversible damage.”

“Like brain damage?”

“Maybe.”

I frowned. “Okay, Yaya. I get it. You don't have to worry about me frying my brain. It's frustrating. I can't believe I unmasked that man, and still feel like it didn't make a difference. I don't know any more than I did before.”

“You know plenty. You know his hair color, his height, and build. That's a lot. Be careful, Sayra. Don't take on more than you can handle.”

When I got off with Yaya, I picked up my platinum diary and scribbled down every detail I could remember. Then, I flipped to the inside cover and made a list of dos and don'ts for my dreams. It was more like a ‘This is how my gift works’ list.

1. If I touch someone, then I'm open to dreaming about them.

*Be careful who you touch.*

1. Telling the subject of a dream about said dream can change the outcome.

*Be careful what you say and who you say it to.*

1. I should not change the outcome of a dream, or I might bring bad juju on myself.

*Be careful with your actions in the dreams.*

1. With quiet and concentration, I can repeat any dream.

*Be mindful of your surroundings.*

1. I can move things inside of my dreams, but I'm still only a ghost there. No communicating.

*Be present as much as you can.*

1. It's best to fall asleep naturally. Natural herbs can help but use them with respect.

*Be careful what you put in your body.*

I wrote it all in ink because I had proven them all true... not the bad juju, but the warning was important enough to be permanent in my diary. I still wasn't completely sure about screwing things up by telling the subject about the dream. Changing the results, yes, but that may not always be for the worst. After I finished, I called Conrad, Penny, and Ivan over to my house to tell them what I'd discovered.

Conrad arrived first. I was alone with a boy in my bedroom. I never thought this would happen, so I didn't have prepared dialogue to ease the awkward silence. We stood in the middle of the floor, looking at each other, but not making eye contact.

"I brought a ski mask," he whispered.

I nearly shouted for him to put it on so he could hug me. My lips curved into a smile while waiting impatiently for him to tug on the knit cap. Once I was in his arms, I let out a sigh. Giddiness overtook me. These hugs probably did more for him than me, but they were mine—the one thing that Conrad only did with me. I couldn't help grinning.

The door swung open, and we jumped apart like we'd got caught undressing. *O.M.G.* Daddy's face was priceless. I couldn't tell if he was more disturbed by catching me hugging a boy in my bedroom or hugging Conrad Bishop—the boy I vowed to hate beyond my death—or maybe it was catching me hugging a boy wearing a black ski mask.

"Downstairs," he barked.

Conrad snatched off his ski mask.

"But we're waiting for Penny and Ivan to—"

"Wait for them downstairs. You can use my office and my computer if you have homework to do." His jaw tightened, letting me know I shouldn't argue.

Conrad and I headed down to Daddy's office. His university degrees were mounted to coffee-colored walls. The leather furniture and a large cherry wood desk left no question that a doctor worked here.

"I almost crapped myself when your dad walked in," Conrad whispered when we were alone.

"Did you see his face?" I laughed. "I thought he was going to shoot you."

"That's not funny, especially not with me dressed up like a cat burglar."

Ivan and Penny walked in already in the middle of an argument about, as best as I could tell, cheese. Ivan gave a definitive declaration of "Mozzarella!" that seemed to end the argument. He sat in my father's desk chair, removed his laptop from his bag, and opened it.

"Y'all ready to get to work?"

"Sure, whatever," Penny said, then muttered, "mozzarella, as if."

I didn't know what that conversation was about and would die happy, never knowing. "I was thinking about what the man from my dream said, that Mr. Bishop ruined his life. We need to find people that might fit."

"No offense," Ivan said to Conrad, "But that could be a long list, just like your dad said, Sayra. You don't become a billionaire without making enemies."

"I know," I said. "But we need to look for people specifically tied to Tag or Omar. That will narrow it down, right?"

Ivan began typing on his laptop.

His initial searches included phrases like '*people who hate Harlan Bishop*', or '*Harlan Bishop evil*.' Unfortunately, that yielded a lot of results. Apparently, factory workers hated Harlan Bishop, truck drivers, environmentalists, pretty much anyone against capitalism had a bone to pick with the man.

Conrad finally said, “Search Harlan Bishop comma Thaxton, then do the same with Siedel.” Thaxton was Tag’s last name, and Siedel was Omar’s. I crossed my fingers, hoping this would narrow it down some.

The first result under the Thaxton search brought up an article about UniMedical Research and Treatment facility. Experimental drug research, new and advanced surgical procedures, UniMedical did it all. Ivan followed a link and clicked on an article about the closing of UniMedical. It talked about the patients on the brink of recovery when the doors closed. This was probably what my father mentioned earlier. The journalist made it seem like Mr. Bishop just walked in, snatched out I.Vs, and shoved wheelchair-bound people into traffic.

“Man,” Ivan said, “why’d your father just shut the door on all those sick people? He could’ve found a dozen qualified people to run the place. I know he was in mourning, but... I mean, damn, some people died.”

“And there aren’t little kids in Sierra Leone missing their arms because of the diamonds your father sells,” Conrad spat.

Ivan shot out of his chair. “My father doesn’t sell blood diamonds!”

“Hey.” Penny calmly stepped between the two guys. “Let’s not fight each other.” She turned her attention to Ivan. “You owe Conrad an apology.”

“But—”

“No buts. You were out of line.”

Ivan clenched his jaw and said, “Sorry. I’m sure your father had a good reason for closing that facility.”

Penny turned to Conrad. “Your turn.”

He looked at the floor. “Sorry that I *implied* your father sold blood diamonds.”

Pretty pathetic apologies if you asked me, but it was probably the best either of them would give. I slid into the vacated desk chair and began clicking and scrolling.

“Hey, guys. Listen to this,” I said. “Mr. Bishop sent the more dire patients to a facility in Switzerland to continue their treatment—and paid for it. The rest went to local hospitals. He paid for that too.”

Behind me, Ivan apologized again. I followed a link that read ‘Ousted CFO of UniMedical’ under a picture of a man identified as Theodore Thaxton. According to the article, Theodore Thaxton got fired for alleged embezzlement.

Conrad leaned over my shoulder, “That’s Tag’s father.”

“Did you know Tag’s dad worked for your father?” I asked.

“Course, but I didn’t know he got fired. If Tag knew, he didn’t say anything.”

“Well, now we know why he’s after your dad,” Ivan said. “He’s pissed he got fired.”

To me, that didn’t automatically follow a path to murder. “He should be in jail.” I looked at all of them incredulously. “Isn’t the fact that he’s not enough for him to be happy and leave it alone? Doesn’t that negate any motive?”

Conrad shook his head. “Not if he blames my father. What if he didn’t do it? What if he’s innocent?”

I met Conrad’s eyes and remembered the rest of what that man said in my dream, right before he killed Mr. Bishop. “He said your father ruined his life, and he *was* going to ruin Mr. Bishops, but now he just wants him dead. Maybe this was what he was talking about. Your father accused him of embezzling and fired him, so now he wants his revenge.” Even as I said it, I knew it didn’t fully make sense. Obviously, he wasn’t convicted. If Mr. Bishop accused Mr. Thaxton of embezzling and Mr. Thaxton was still free to walk around. Get over it, right? I said as much to the group. As usual, Ivan shook his head before I even finished.

“You think a man like Harlan Bishop can accuse someone of stealing money from a company, and that person can get another job anywhere on the planet? Nope. Not happening.” Ivan turned to Conrad. “Your father has the power to breathe

the word unemployable, and that man would have a tough time getting a job on a chain gang. That's motive."

A muscle clenched in Conrad's jaw. That was certainly a motive. I was out of my depth about wealthy people's politics. If Thaxton was guilty, then he didn't deserve to get another job where he controlled money. And while Ivan's chain gang exaggeration was amusing, it certainly wasn't true. Maybe Thaxton had to take a huge pay cut, but as I saw it, if he had stolen the money, he was lucky to be outside of prison. There would never be a good enough motive for cold-blooded murder.

"Search Siedel," Conrad said.

"You really think someone else is going to have more motive than that?" Ivan asked.

I had already started typing. Good investigators ran all leads. I certainly wouldn't consider us investigators of any sort, but searching for a link to Omar was necessary, especially since we still couldn't say definitively which boy was *the* Zorro. Not to mention, neither Tag nor Omar had responded to my texts or calls since yesterday. They were both acting suspicious.

My search for Harlan Bishop and Siedel turned up nothing, and then Penny remembered something crucial.

"Siedel is his mother's last name. His father's name is..." She looked up at the ceiling and bit her lip. "Marcus Goode with an E."

I searched Harlan Bishop comma, Marcus Goode, then clicked on an article about Mr. Bishop buying the team that Mr. Goode played for. This was two years ago. Immediately, the team made cuts, and let Marcus Goode go. He now played overseas for an Italian team. I winced. I knew nothing about sports, but I knew the money from an NBA contract, and an overseas contract was completely different. Was that motive?

"Would you want to kill someone because you got cut from a team?" I asked everyone.



“Depends,” Ivan said. “What did that loss in income cost him? What was the domino effect of that?”

Penny’s brows drew together. “Do owners make cuts, or is that strictly a coach’s decision?”

None of us knew. Penny would talk to her dad, who apparently knew a lot about sports. For now, Omar stayed on the list.

Ivan raised his hand, slowly. “Can I ask a question that may seem racially insensitive?”

“Tread lightly,” Penny answered with her hand on her hip.

He leaned closer to the laptop screen. “What race is Mr. Goode?”

“He’s Black,” Penny and I said together.

“You’re sure?” Ivan asked.

“We come in all shades, with all hair textures.” Penny put both hands on her hips.

“I’m just asking because Sayra said the blur from her dream was a peachy beige smear with dark brown hair. Marcus Goode is a bit more... taupe... olive? Does he look like he could be the blur from your dream?”

I sighed. “The height and build, yes. But so does Mr. Thaxton. Complexion wise? I don’t know. It was a literal blur, and it really could be a tanned white man or a light-skinned black man. I couldn’t make out hair texture, just color because that was a blur too. The problem is, it could be either. I’m worried we won’t figure this out until it’s too late.”

“The problem is,” Conrad mumbled. “My father is a piece of shit with multiple people who hate him enough to wish him dead.” He walked out of the room, leaving the rest of us in stunned silence.

I caught up with Conrad pacing in my front yard. After the fourth pass in front of me, I touched his arm softly. He stopped and looked at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“What if I hadn’t been in that accident? What then?”

My brows drew together. “I don’t follow.”

“If I hadn’t been in the accident, then in the coma and woken up with this thing I can do, what then? Would I still be a piece of shit like my dad? As much as I hate this thing that happens to me when I touch people, it gave me empathy. Now I see I don’t want to be like him. I don’t want to be terrible to people.”

His eyes glistened, and I had to stop from pulling him into my arms. “I don’t know your father, Conrad, but I think people can be multiple things. Your mother seemed like a beautiful person. Why would she love a terrible man? There has to be some good in him, just like there’s good in you.” I shrugged. “You’ve changed. He can too.”

Conrad wiped his eyes quickly. “Yeah,” he said with little conviction. “I’m gonna go. I wanna be alone. Sorry.”

“I understand. I really want to hug you, though.”

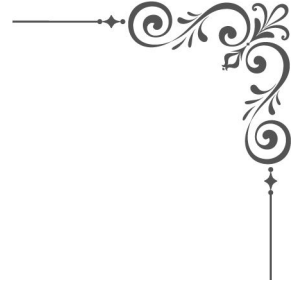
He gave a half-smile. “I don’t feel like putting this on.” He pulled the hat from his back pocket. “But thank you.”

I took the hat from him and tugged it on my head. He snorted when I opened my arms.

“You look ridiculous.”

“Uh-huh.” I beckoned him to me. The smile slipped from his face, and he stepped into my arms.

“Thank you,” he whispered again against my mask-covered ear.



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# CHAPTER THIRTY- FOUR

MY FACE WASN'T NEARLY as bad as I thought it would be by Monday. That was one benefit to living with a doctor and a nagging mother. At one point, I thought Ma was going to duct tape the gel pack to my head. With a little makeup, she hid most of the bruises on my face. Somehow, I was convincing enough to have my parents believe Penny had put the bruises on my neck during our self-defense lesson.

By the time fourth period rolled around, constantly looking over my shoulder exhausted me. Tag wasn't in school. I hadn't seen Omar yet, but that only increased the paranoia. What if they both were planning something?

Conrad had to rush off to his locker before second period, so he didn't walk me halfway to my class like usual. I was reasonably certain nothing would happen to me in school. After what happened at the aquarium, I had no plans to follow anybody else down any more dark and isolated corridors.

As I was leaving first period, Mr. Brookmeyer spoke to me.

"Miss Price." He looked as tired as I felt. Already a thin man, he seemed to drown in his yellow button-down shirt. It was wrinkled today, too. How had I not noticed?

"Have a good day, sir."

"You've got bruises." He said, standing by the door. "Hope everything's alright."

I stopped walking. He wasn't blocking my exit, but I felt the need to flee all the same. There was nothing inherently wrong with what he said, but how he said it sent ice through my veins. He tried for a kind smile, but he couldn't quite pull it off. I only just realized Mr. Brookmeyer's eyes never smiled. He was nice, just not a happy sort of teacher. I liked him, but what did I really know about the man?

"Everything's fine," I said.

“Well, if you’re having boyfriend troubles, you can come to me if Mr. Bishop is being abusive.”

I opened my mouth, shocked, but had to bite back the instinct to shout at him. My heart beat faster. How did he know about Conrad and me? Nothing’s secret in school. Even so, Mr. Brookmeyer scared me. “Conrad would never hit me. Only cowards hit women. Conrad is one of the bravest guys I know.”

Mr. Brookmeyer’s mouth twitched as he studied me. “Quite a change from a few months ago.”

*Stop shaking.* “Is there anything else you wanted, Sir?” I tried for a smile, but it felt wobbly.

He held out his arm, allowing me passage. “Just wanted to let you know I’m here if you need to talk.”

I rushed past him and practically ran down the hall. I didn’t know what to think. Was Mr. Brookmeyer involved in this? He didn’t fit the head guy’s build from my dream, but he certainly could have been the one talking to Zorro at the dance. Then a memory had me walking into my second period class and sitting in the first empty seat I came to. Mr. Brookmeyer sent me to the admin office to get paper right as he left the gym. Did he know I’d end up going up to the art department? Had he known all along I was hiding in the corridor? If he didn’t think of it then, he would’ve had to realize by now that, one: I never brought back the paper, and two: the admin office was locked. The third floor would have been my next logical place. I felt sick.

Letting my friends in on my run-in with Mr. Brookmeyer was easier than expected. For once, we were all on the same page. Mr. Brookmeyer was at the dance, had left the gym right before I came across the two people on the third floor, and finally, he was a teacher here, so he had access to my full name and address. He fit. But why?

At lunch, Ivan searched for Mr. Brookmeyer with Harlan Bishop and found nothing. The lack of information didn’t sway me. Sometimes motives for murder or vengeance didn’t make the news. Sadly, I hadn’t paid close attention to the other

men in the dream. The man with the knife had the real motive. The only other one that stood out was the stumpy one. Now, I would need to go back into the dream and study the other two men to see if they fit Mr. Brookmeyer.

Guilt heated my face, even though my friends weren't aware of my thoughts. We were now in November, a couple of weeks away from Thanksgiving, and I just realized I never fully delved into the most basic details of my dream. *Stupid.*

Later that night, I did my ritual: lavender bath, chamomile tea, cotton pajamas, earplugs, and a completely dark room. I focused in on the details of my dream and fell asleep. In the morning, I nearly cried when I woke up from a well-rested, dreamless sleep. The answer was simple, as I sat on the edge of my bed trying to figure out what went wrong. I didn't have control over my gift. Sometimes, I just got lucky. I cried then.



WHEN MY FRIENDS ASKED how the dream went, I just shook my head. They didn't question me further.

Tag was in school with a black and purple eye. I overheard him out on the main steps, telling his friends that three guys had jumped him. He wrapped himself around Hillary, like he wanted to merge with her. He had the nerve to send me a glare as if to say, "Jealous?"

I was seriously confused. Conrad came up on my right as I started up the steps.

He took my hand. "He's a jerk, but I have to envy him his public display of affection."

"Don't envy Tag Thaxton anything. You're everything he's not."

Conrad looked at me. "See, things like that make me want to kiss you."

Everything he did or said made me want to kiss him, but I promised not to push. The possibility that Conrad would never work up the nerve to touch me and see my death was something I tried not to think about. As vivid as my dreams

could be, they were nothing compared to feeling someone die. The more he felt for me, the harder it would be for him to touch me. He hadn't even touched his father in nearly a year. Well, that just depressed me.

As I walked into Mr. Brookmeyer's classroom, he followed me with his eyes all the way to my seat. At least that's what it felt like. He went back to writing on the board when sat down. Tag flopped beside me with all the hostile energy of a scorned lover. *Ignore him, Sayra.* He threw down his backpack, slammed opened his book, and started taking notes.

Conrad tossed a note on my desk. I unfolded it and read: You're right, there's no reason we can't go on a date. Movies Friday?

I nodded when Conrad glanced over his shoulder at me, unable to hide my huge grin.

Tag leaned over. "You know, I never expected you to be such a lying little bitch," he hissed in my ear.

"Don't get slapped, Tag."

"I know I've been a shit to you sometimes, but if you just wanted to play games and pay me back for all the times I teased you... that was just mean."

I turned so I could look him square in the face. "Tag, I can't deny that my friends were there because they didn't trust you, but Conrad only hit you because I got attacked in that hallway. He thought you had something to do with it. You're not the only one with bruises."

He squinted at me, eyes darted over my face and neck. "Sayra, I—I didn't know anything about that. I'm sorry."

He did look sorry, and was that guilt too? It didn't matter. I wasn't interested in dating or befriending Tag Thaxton. He probably wasn't involved with this mess, so I could forget about him. For the rest of first period, I ignored him. Tag fidgeted during the entire class. When the bell rang, he shot out of his seat.

On my way to World History, I ran into Omar.

“Sayra!” He jogged down the hallway to catch up to me.  
“Hey, I wanted to apologize about our date, Saturday.”

“A date would imply that both parties showed.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed his forehead. “I got caught up in something and needed to take care of it.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t explain why no call or text. It’s rude and shows a lack of concern for my time.”

“You’re right. I lost my phone. Got a new one last night. Can we try this again?”

Every part of me wanted to tell him to shove his new phone right up his butt, but I had to remind myself I wasn’t really dating him. He was a resource. I was no closer to figuring out which of the two boys was the right Zorro.

“Fine. Call me tonight.”

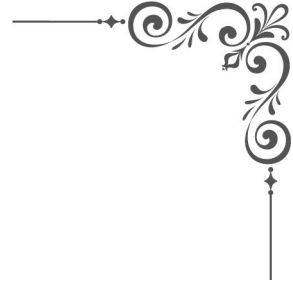
“Awesome.” He smiled with those deep dimples and jogged down the hall.”

*What had I just agreed to?*

After school, Conrad gave me a ride, but instead of going home, we drove to Marris Bay Creamery and got ice cream. We parked at the beach, climbed into the flatbed of his truck, and enjoyed our cones in silence. The sounds of the ocean calmed me, and for the moment, I forgot all about Mr. Brookmeyer, Tag, Omar, creepy clowns, my lack of control over my powers and just enjoyed this quiet with Conrad. I wasn’t delusional enough to think it could last.

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# CHAPTER THIRTY- FIVE

AROUND MIDNIGHT TUESDAY morning, I shot up out of bed before my dream finished. That never happened before. At the very least, I could get the dream's meaning before I got ripped out of it. After a few foggy seconds, I realized the buzzing on my nightstand was coming from my cell. I picked it up in time to see Conrad's name before it blinked to *missed call*. I called him back.

"Sayra," he said in a rush. "I'm freaking out!"

"What's wrong?"

"My dad's back in town."

I swung my legs out of bed. "Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure, since I just got a two-hour ass-chewing from him. Apparently, I'm flunking, and I beat up my girlfriend."

"*What?*"

"The headmaster called him, said I was failing most of my subjects and that you'd confided in a teacher that I'd hit you."

"Why would he say that?" But even as I asked, I knew Mr. Brookmeyer had lied to get Harlan Bishop back in town.

"It's only November, Sayra. I thought we had until New Year's Eve."

I paced in front of my window. "So did I. They obviously can't wait. I don't know what to do." Damn my interfering. Maybe this was all my fault. If I hadn't meddled, maybe they wouldn't be trying to speed up the plan, if that was what they were doing.

"My father and I have a meeting with the headmaster at eight. They're going to kill him tomorrow!"

"No, Conrad, they're not." I could hear the panic in his voice and needed to calm him. "Think about it. They have to make sure your father came to town. You have too much

security for them to try anything just yet. Mr. Brookmeyer will probably say it was a mistake. They may even call me to swear that you didn't hit me. That's all this visit probably is. When it's all cleared up, maybe your dad will leave town again."

"He won't. He already told me he's been gone too long. I need discipline," Conrad said sourly.

"Then maybe we can convince him to beef up his security. Conrad, don't forget we've got the advantage. We know what they're planning, even if we don't know all the players. So, if your dad doesn't want to believe you, we can still prepare."

Conrad let out a shaky breath. "He's a pain in the ass, but he's my dad. I can't lose him."

"I know." I sat on the edge of my bed, feeling some of the urgency subside. "Listen, I was having a dream when you called, but I didn't get to finish it. It looked like a repeat of the initial dream I had of your father. There's something familiar about one of the clowns. I haven't unmasked any more of them, but I feel like I might know him. I woke up before determining if he had Tag's, Omar's, or Mr. Brookmeyer's build. And another thing..."

"What?"

"You and I were there this time."

"Doing what?" Conrad asked.

"Trying not to die."



LATER THAT MORNING, before first period, I stood by the large oak in front of the school with Penny and Ivan. I told them about the midnight call from Conrad and my dream. Conrad hadn't arrived yet. He was usually at school by now. Just as I had that thought, three black SUVs rolled to a stop at the foot of the cathedral steps. Men in dark suits exited the lead and tail cars.

Basil stepped out of the center SUV, and my heart stopped beating for a second. I moved closer. He opened the back door for Harlan Bishop. The tall man wore a charcoal-gray suit.

He'd styled his reddish-brown hair away from his face. Conrad stepped out next, looking like his father's younger, more miserable version.

Harlan turned to Basil. "We shouldn't be more than an hour."

"Yes, sir." Basil held out his hand to Conrad. "Young Master Bishop, your cellular, please."

Conrad hesitated, then handed over his phone. "Guilty until proven innocent?"

Basil pressed his lips together, then addressed Harlan. "I shall be here when you are done, Sir."

One of the four black-suited men headed up the steps in front of the Bishops. Another trailed behind, scanning the crowd of teens, seeking any threats. As Conrad and his dad started up the steps, attracting the attention of the entire school, I approached.

"Mr. Bishop?" My voice squeaked. When Harlan turned those intense eyes on me, the same green as his son's, I couldn't speak.

"Dad, this is Sayra."

Harlan Bishop stopped. Somehow, my shaky legs allowed me to step closer. He narrowed his eyes on the faint mark on my cheek and the lingering bruises on my throat.

"Did my son do that?"

"No." I shook my head adamantly. "He would never."

"Even after you accused him of hurling you down a flight of steps?" Harlan leaned in. "Is that why you look so frightened, young lady? Your lies are catching up to you, or my son has a severe problem with violence. Which is it?"

My mouth opened and closed several times, but nothing came out. Harlan turned and continued up the steps, with Conrad and their security following. By the time I walked back over to Ivan and Penny, the whispers had started. The rumor mill would surely have Conrad as a serial killer by the end of the day. Mr. Brookmeyer's plan was brilliant. I'd

screamed to the heavens that Conrad Bishop had pushed me down the steps on purpose. Now, accused of attacking me, everyone who had called me a liar or a drama queen would now believe I was telling the truth all along.

“Miss Price.”

I jumped when Basil’s voice came from right behind me. When I met his eyes, he looked nearly as miserable as Conrad.

“May I have a word?”

We stepped away from the crowd, currently pouring into school, and stopped by the Bishop’s car.

“What happened?” Basil asked.

“Conrad didn’t do this.”

“Of course he didn’t,” Basil said, as if to even think it was absurd. “Master Bishop...” He paused, clenching muscles in his sharp jawline. It seemed speaking against his employer, his friend, went against every fiber of his being. “Master Bishop doesn’t really think Conrad is responsible. Deep down he doesn’t. But Conrad has been so different since Madeline passed. Master Bishop doesn’t know what to think.” He pursed his lips and shook his head. Then those efficient eyes were back on me. “Who struck you, Miss Price?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

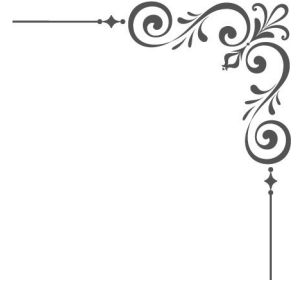
“I don’t know who attacked me.”

Basil blew out a hard breath through his nose. “Conrad says it was possibly one of your instructors. Is that correct?”

My mouth fell open. I must’ve nodded because Basil swore tightly. “I do not know what you children have gotten mixed up in, but it stops now. You will get yourself killed. Conrad told me everything, and I shall speak with Master Bishop. Under no circumstances will you continue with this game. The consequences could be deadly. Have I made myself clear, Miss Price?”

I swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

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# CHAPTER THIRTY- SIX

CONRAD WASN'T IN SCHOOL for the rest of the week. I avoided any interactions with Mr. Brookmeyer, although the following day, he tried to ask me questions about Conrad's absence. For lack of a response, I ran away. My reaction was so odd that Mr. Brookmeyer said nothing else to me for the rest of the week. He was still twitchy as hell, though.

I needed to talk to Conrad. Basil hijacked his phone. I suspected his computers too. All my emails went unanswered. I had no way of contacting him. I made up my mind. When I got home from school, I would text, call, and email him again. If he didn't answer, I was going over to his house. If I had to pole vault over the gate, I wouldn't leave until I saw him. I cut class last period and peddled my bike like the wind. I would change, then go see Conrad. My parents wouldn't be home until at least six in the evening. No one would know.

Fortunately, I didn't have to do any of that. Conrad was waiting for me, sitting behind the wheel of a black sedan. He stepped out when he saw me, a gray ski mask already covering his face. I dropped my backpack and all but dove at him. Nosey Mr. Honeygo sat in his window, binoculars perched, *bird watching*, but I didn't care who saw us. I was in Conrad's arms. That was all that mattered.

"What happened?" I asked, face pressed into the itchy fabric at his neck.

"I got expelled."

"No!" I pulled back. "But... but."

Conrad gathered me into his arms again, squeezing me for a solid minute. "Wait, just let me breathe you in for a minute." When we stepped apart, he snatched off the ski mask, and I saw how utterly miserable he looked.

"Come on. I damn near had to become a ninja to escape from my house. If I'm going to be grounded until I turn to



dust, I may as well take you on a date.” He smiled, but his eyes still looked miserable.

I climbed into the passenger seat, and Conrad drove away from my house. “Why were you expelled?”

“Because the headmaster showed my dad a list of failing grades, a dozen missed classes and something, supposedly written by you that said I’d punched and choked you.”

I was so confused I couldn’t even speak. Mr. Brookmeyer certainly had access to do all that.

“My father looked hurt more than angry. I didn’t even bother to defend myself because I knew it would be pointless. Honestly, right now, I don’t care if my father thinks I’ve turned into a complete psycho. I just want to keep him alive.”

“I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.”

“How?” Conrad glanced at me.

“If I hadn’t been so vocal about my broken arm and saying that you pushed me on purpose—”

“I was an asshole to you first, so, of course, you would think I pushed you,” he said. “This is karma. I’m telling you. I’m getting back what I gave.”

“Conrad, you don’t deserve what has happened to you. You don’t deserve to lose your father. But my big mouth made it easier for Mr. Brookmeyer to come up with a lie your father would believe. So now, they have insurance.”

“Yeah. No way my dad will leave now, not with me in *crisis*.” Conrad took his hands off the steering wheel to make air quotes. It scares me what’s about to happen, but there’s still a part of me that’s pissed at him. He should know I wouldn’t abuse a girl even if I was failing and had accidentally pushed her down a flight of steps.”

I touched Conrad’s arm. “Your dad wants to believe you, but you’ve changed so much since the accident. He probably doesn’t know who you are anymore. You won’t let him touch you. You wear gloves all the time and talk about seeing death. He’s probably just scared you really are in crisis.”

Conrad glanced at me. “How do you know all that?”

“Basil.”

Conrad’s phone rang. He pulled it out and ignored the call. “Guess they figured out I stole a car and my phone, too.” He sent me a crooked smile. “So, the adventures of Bonnie and Clyde begin.”

“Their adventure ended in death.”

“Right. Forgot about that. Then we’ll have to come up with new—”

Something slammed into the back of us, sending the truck fishtailing. I screamed.

“Hang on,” Conrad shouted.

Behind us, a black SUV closed the distance like we were sitting still.

“Faster, Conrad!”

They were too quick. The next impact knocked us completely out of control. Conrad struggled to drive straight but couldn’t keep us from careening off the road and down a slight embankment. The airbags exploded in my face, spreading pain throughout my head, neck, and shoulders like a lake of fire.

“Sayra?” Conrad coughed. “Are you okay?”

“I think so.”

We’d landed nose-down in a ditch. That much I could tell, but I couldn’t see anything else. Someone yanked my door open. The airbag popped, blowing out chemically scented air as it deflated. The same thing happened to Conrad’s airbag. Paramedics? No, not that fast. My head spun, and a wave of nausea twisted my stomach. The sickness intensified when I locked eyes with a grinning clown mask standing at my open door.

“Out of the car,” said another clown on Conrad’s side.

Conrad and I glanced at each other, then got out of the car.

“Up the hill. Move,” said the smaller clown. He held a gun, aimed at the ground, but no less terrifying.

The bigger clown held a baseball bat. “Go.” He pointed up the hill with the bat.

My cell, which was still in my hand, began ringing. Penny’s picture lit up the screen. The clown with the bat snatched the phone, tossed it in the air, swung the bat and hit a home run.

“Go,” he repeated his order, pointing up the hill again.

“No,” I said, ignoring the ringing in my ears from the exploded airbag. I knew enough to know I wouldn’t willingly go anywhere with them.

“Sayra,” Conrad hissed.

I tried to be brave, but my stuttering betrayed me. “No. M-my dad told me never to go anywhere with an attacker. Y-you increase your chances of being k-killed if you let him take you to a second location. S-so if you want to kill us, you’ll have to do it r-right here where anyone can drive by and see.”

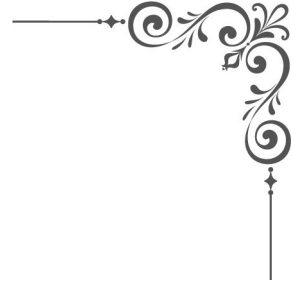
My heart banged against my chest. I didn’t know if this would work, but I had to try something. Even though their masks smiled, I knew the men were doing anything but.

“Get up the hill, or you’ll wish you had,” said the shorter clown.

“No.” I folded my arms—which had already started aching—over my chest and attempted to steady my breathing.

The taller clown said, “I’m really sorry about this, Sayra.”

As he swung the bat, and my world went black, I recognized his voice... *Tag.*



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# CHAPTER THIRTY- SEVEN

“SAYRA. SAYRA. CAN YOU hear me? Open your eyes.”

The voice was low. There was an edge of tension that would turn to panic if I didn't answer soon. I couldn't make my mouth work. My eyes obeyed his commands and opened. Conrad swam into focus, looking down on me like a frightened owl.

“What happened?” I croaked.

“He hit you with a bat.”

The clown Conrad indicated sat slumped in a corner. “What did you do to him?” I asked.

“Nothing. He just sat over there and started crying when we couldn't wake you.”

I lifted my head, and the room tilted. “Whoa.”

“Lay back for a minute,” Conrad said.

My head rested in his lap. Duct tape bound my wrists in front of me. With careful movements, I glanced around, trying to keep the spinning to a minimum. We were in serious trouble. The room was unlike any place I'd ever seen. We sat in a long rectangular box with small reflector lights running along the floor and ceiling. They illuminated the room enough for everyone to be seen easily.

“Where are we?” I took my time sitting up.

“The back of an eighteen-wheeler.”

That news got my pulse racing. We could be anywhere in the country. Tears filled my eyes, blurring my vision. Would I ever see my family again... if I even lived much longer? I'd seen, firsthand, what these men were capable of. Killing two teenagers would be nothing if they were bold enough to murder a billionaire. Then I realized we weren't moving. Would we move eventually? Would they drive us to a remote

part of the state or country and just leave us in the back of this thing with no air and no food? *Calm down, Sayra, and think.*

Conrad and I sat in the middle of the trailer. On our left, the clown I was certain was Tag, slumped in the corner. His mask sat askew but still covered his face. Bright red tufts of hair matched the clown nose with a rotted toothy smile. Creepy. About twenty-feet away were double doors—our only exit. Unfortunately, two more clowns guarded that exit. All of them wore black long-sleeve shirts and black pants. The short clown's mask had the same brown toothy grin as Tag's, but the hair was neon yellow, as was the nose. So, now I wondered if Tag's father was the one I unmasked from the dream.

The third man in the room didn't fit the build of the main clown from my dream, either. This clown was taller than the short clown and paced the trailer with nervous energy. This fidgety clown had the same smiling mask, but the hair and nose were bright orange.

"Sa-Sayra? Are you okay?" Tag had righted his mask. Conrad sprang up with shocking agility for someone whose hands were bound.

"Hey," the neon yellow clown grumbled. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" I felt like I recognized his muffled voice. Was he the one who attacked me at the aquarium?

Conrad stopped halfway to Tag and turned to the short clown. "I'm going to kick him in the head until he has a lump the size of hers, and then I'm going to ask if he's okay."

"Sit down," Short Clown said, aiming the gun.

Conrad sat down hard, blinking rapidly, as if remembering he was not in control of the situation.

"We've got to get out of here, Sayra. You know they only want us, or me, so they can get my father here. Once he's here..."

"I know, but—" Then something occurred to me. None of these people fit the thin build of Mr. Brookmeyer. My heart beat faster as I watched the two men by the trailer's exit. Short

Clown was trying to calm the taller one, muttering firm but gentle orders. As he gestured with the gun, talking wildly but quietly, he grabbed his waistband with one hand and hitched up his ill-fitting pants.

“Oh, God,” I whispered. “Headmaster?”

Short Clown turned with a snap and then jerked back around like he hadn’t just answered to his title.

Conrad and I stared at each other in shock. This just got tons worse. The headmaster hated me! I had hoped we could negotiate with Mr. Brookmeyer, but Headmaster Looper? There would be no talking my way out of this.

Fighting back tears at the sudden hopelessness of our situation, I asked, “I don’t understand. Tag? Headmaster Looper? Why do you want to kill Harlan Bishop?”

No one spoke for a moment. I had a sinking feeling that identifying two of the three captors just absolutely sealed our fate. They would cut their losses and kill us now.

“How does she know?” Tag stood. “How do you know?”

“Idiot,” Looper said, “I told you they were playing you like a fool on your date. You thought she really liked you. She couldn’t care less about you, and she certainly doesn’t want to date you.”

“She heard you two at the Halloween dance,” Conrad muttered. He seemed to realize what I had. We’d both rather deal with Mr. Brookmeyer than the headmaster.

Tag snatched off his mask. “This thing is itchy, and there’s no point now, is there?” He stared at me as he spoke. Anger and hurt radiated from him.

“You know,” Tag began, “I didn’t really want to date you. I mean, you’re cute. I just thought maybe we could be friends. But Hillary hates you, and I love her so—”

“Nobody cares,” Looper shouted. “She’s still trying to get information out of you, so shut your mouth. Bet if I put a bullet in her head, she’d keep her mouth shut.” He took a step toward me.

“Dad!” The clown with the orange hair grabbed Looper’s arm. “Mr. Theo said leave them alone.”

“Dad?” Conrad and I said together.

Looper lowered his gun as the other clown pulled off his mask. He appeared to be our age, with dark hair and eyes. He looked nothing like the headmaster. Looper snatched off his own mask. Now all three revealed their sweaty faces. No way they would let us go now. I swallowed down the sob that wanted to escape my throat.

Conrad leaned forward, looking at the headmaster. “Why do you want to kill my father?”

“Nobody’s getting killed,” Looper’s son said.

“Don’t talk to them, Michael. I hate these little over-privileged bastards,” Looper said, spittle flying from his mouth. He pointed the gun at me, not to shoot, more like an extension of his hand. “Your parents probably make the least amount of money of all the students at West Nottingham, but they’re still leaps and bounds ahead of me. I’ve been Headmaster of that damn school for a decade, and I can’t even afford to send my son there. The elite West Nottingham doesn’t automatically admit faculty children. It’s bullshit.”

“You’re right,” I said, leaning away from him. “But how’s that our fault? Take it up with the board.”

“Oh, wow. Why didn’t I think of that?” Looper paced away as he began a mock conversation with the board. “May I have a scholarship for my son? No? But he’s bright, and I’ve done an excellent job here. No available slots? Okay, I understand. If you don’t have the room, then you don’t have the room.” He shrugged, then turned his attention back to me.

“They could’ve made an exception, but maybe next year I could get Michael in.” He looked at his son with affection.

“Although we were at capacity, the board told me ‘We have two minorities coming.’ You and your little friend Penny,” he spat. “The board was drooling over the opportunity to give West Nottingham more *color*. Penelope Northwood’s father is a gangster who puts his murderous exploits to music,



but they chose her over my boy. And then we have you.”  
Looper stepped closer. “Do you have any idea how much money your mother makes?”

Wide-eyed, heart stuttering, I shook my head because he seemed to be waiting for an answer.

“She puts out a new novel about once a year, and they each go to number one on the New York Times Bestseller’s List. She makes more money than your father.” He laughed, but none of this mattered to me. “I’ve seen the tax returns in your enrollment folder. Oh, your father makes a decent living, but not like your mother. Together, they make enough that you don’t even need a scholarship, but they gave you a partial one because the board thought it would look good.”

A muscle worked in Looper’s jaw. “Sophomore year, when this one had his accident...” He jabbed the gun in Conrad’s direction. “I thought, okay, maybe Michael could be a late transfer. But no. ‘Not at this time, Looper. We just don’t have the space, and we need to see how poor Conrad Bishop will recover from his unfortunate accident.’ By junior year registration deadline when we hadn’t heard from Harlan Bishop about his son’s return, the board told me I could finally bring Michael in. I was beyond happy. At last, they’d done right by me and mine.

“At least he could have two years of a quality education. Imagine my surprise when I got a call revoking Michael’s spot one day before the start of the term. No apology, no remorse, just, ‘Conrad Bishop is returning. Harlan Bishop apologized for his late notification with a ten-million-dollar donation to the school. Find something to do with three million to show off to the parents and faculty.’”

By now, Headmaster Looper stood right over me. His face, red with rage, was scarier than the clown mask. Conrad had hooked his arms around me, his bound wrists resting against my stomach. He still wore his gloves, but I didn’t think we were overly concerned with accidental skin-to-skin contact. Looper looked maniacal.

“So, Miss Price, you understand why I couldn’t muster much sympathy for your lost parking space?”

“I agree with you, Headmaster,” I said, voice quivering. Conrad held on so tightly around my stomach that I thought he’d Heimlich my lunch. “But it still seems like your beef should be with the board, not Harlan Bishop.”

“He’s a means to money. That’s it.”

“Murder isn’t the way, though.”

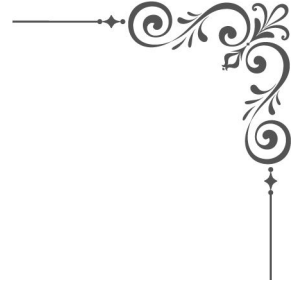
“Stop saying that,” Tag said. “Nobody’s getting murdered.”

“What do you think’s going to happen when my dad gets here?” Conrad asked.

Looper snorted. “I don’t care what happens. All I want is my money. I’m sick of watching you spoiled little brats get everything and deserve nothing. It’s time for me to be spoiled. Your dad’ll pay if he wants to see you again.” Looper smiled.

“Yeah, he’ll pay,” Conrad said. “And pay a lot to get me back, but you guys haven’t thought this through. One of you wants more than money. One of you wants to see my father dead.”

Looper opened his mouth but closed it with a snap. The trailer doors opened, and the fourth clown arrived.



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# CHAPTER THIRTY- EIGHT

AN ORANGE GLOW FROM the setting sun created a terrifyingly beautiful backdrop for the masked man. He bound into the trailer with the agility of someone in excellent shape. Unlike everyone else's masks, this clown's mouth frowned. Acid green hair stuck up in tufts that made him look insane. The energy changed in a snap. This new arrival hadn't spoken, hadn't brandished a weapon, and yet, he was much scarier than the other three. Theodore Thaxton. Michael had called him Mr. Theo earlier, but what was more telling, Tag's demeanor became that of a kicked puppy.

Even through the mask, I could see his hard eyes fixed on Looper. "Why do you assholes have your masks off?" His voice and build fit an MMA fighter more than a CFO.

Looper swallowed audibly. "They already knew who we were."

"No, we didn't," Conrad said quickly. "We didn't know it was Tag and our headmaster under—"

"Shut up," Thaxton said softly. Conrad snapped his mouth shut. "Idiots, all of you." He hadn't raised his voice, but the controlled way he spoke made me tremble. Looper struggled to put his mask back on, but Thaxton snatched it from him and tossed it out the back of the trailer.

"What good will it do to put the masks on now?" Thaxton said. "You think they'll forget that one of their classmates and their headmaster kidnapped them?" He looked at Tag for a long moment, causing his son to shrink back into a corner. The frown on the mask seemed appropriate as he muttered something I couldn't hear.

I had hoped when the leader arrived, he would be angry. Looper and Tag had removed their masks. Maybe they would fight, distracting them enough for Conrad and me to attempt an escape. This man presented an eerily calm demeanor. We

were dealing with someone in control of his emotions and not sidetracked or easily set off like Looper. Thaxton pulled out a cell phone with an extra mouthpiece clipped at the bottom. He dialed a number and waited a few seconds for the person to answer.

“Harlan Bishop,” Thaxton said.

I realized the attachment on the phone was a gadget to distort his voice.

“I have your son. If you want to see him again, you’ll gather all the money you can liquidate in an hour and meet me at Turnabout Pass. There’s one road in, one road out, so I’ll see you miles before you get here. If you even think about calling the police or any of your private security, you’ll find your son and his girlfriend with a bullet in their heads.”

Thaxton listened for a second, then marched over to Conrad, popped the voice modulator off the end of the phone, and thrust the cell at Conrad’s face. Conrad lifted his arms from around my waist as if preparing to fight for his life.

“Tell daddy you’re fine.” Thaxton’s mask frowned, but his own mouth probably smirked.

“Conrad? Conrad, are you okay?” Harlan Bishop’s tinny voice came through the cell, high-pitched and frightened.

“Don’t come, Dad! They just want to kill—”

Thaxton’s boot connected with Conrad’s head, sending him over in an unconscious heap.



WHEN CONRAD FINALLY came around, he had a bruise on his face in the tread pattern from Thaxton’s boot. He coughed and spat out a piece of tooth. While he was out, they moved me to the other side of the trailer to keep us from plotting. Pointless, because I didn’t have a clue how we would get out of our predicament.

“Are we moving?” Conrad asked, voice hollow and scratchy.

“Yeah. I guess we’re headed to Turnabout Pass.”

Looper sent us a look that said he didn’t want us chatting. The truck stopped a few minutes later. We sat in silence for several minutes until the doors opened, and Thaxton motioned for Looper to come to the edge of the trailer. They exchanged words I couldn’t hear. It was full dark now. The moon lit up the deserted area in blues and grays. We sat in the stuffy trailer for what could have been ten minutes or an hour. Suddenly, Looper turned to Conrad and me.

“Up,” he ordered.

We lumbered to our feet. Bound hands and blows to the head didn’t make for agile movements.

“Out of the truck.”

Conrad stepped in front of me as if planning to shield me from any threats waiting for us outside. He jumped down and, without the aid of his hands to balance him, he fell face-first onto the gravel road. I didn’t land with any more grace. No one offered to help us up, allowing me to gather as much dirt and rocks as I could conceal in my hands. Conrad saw me and followed suit. I did not know how the dirt and rocks could help us, but it was a weapon, no matter how feeble.

The sound of a car had everyone turning their attention up the road. Conrad and I stood with our backs to the trailer. The scent of ocean air came from the left, making me think there was a body of water just beyond the patch of trees. On our right was a field scattered with trash, dead appliances, mattresses, and anything else people hauled there to dump. The road stretched in front of us and far behind. Thaxton had been right. If anyone else had come with Harlan Bishop, he would know. There was no place to hide unless they came from the water, but I got the feeling Mr. Bishop had followed directions.

He pulled up in a tan sedan and stopped a few feet from us. Thaxton and Looper both had their guns aimed at Conrad. Harlan tugged a duffle bag off the passenger seat. It was large enough to fit a robust human. He dragged it along as he approached. When his eyes met Looper’s, he stared at him

with shock and suddenly seemed to understand everything. The failing grades, the lies about abusing me.

“I’m so sorry, Conrad,” Harlan murmured.

Thaxton pulled off his mask.

“Theodore?” Harlan asked. “What are you doing?”

“What I should’ve done three years ago,” Thaxton said. “How much is in the bag?”

“Little over a million. It was all I could get on such short notice.”

“Toss it in the trailer.”

“You alright, son?” Harlan stared at Conrad as he dragged the loaded duffle up to the truck.

“I told you not to come, Dad. They won’t let you leave.”

No one helped Harlan hoist the heavy bag up into the truck. “Let my son and his friend go. You can have me.”

“No!” Conrad’s voice broke as he lunged for his dad. Thaxton knocked him back with an elbow to the throat. Conrad dropped to his knees, wheezing and coughing.

“Please don’t hurt him. Just let him go.” Harlan looked helplessly at his son.

“Mr. Bishop,” I said, warm tears escaping my eyes. “He doesn’t plan to let you leave. Hasn’t anybody noticed he didn’t even ask for a specific amount of money? Who does that? He hasn’t bothered to check the bag to make sure the money is even there. He doesn’t care. Mr. Bishop... he wants to kill you.

“Shut up,” Thaxton said. The calm ice in his voice chilled me to the core.

“Dad?” Tag stepped up. “You won’t kill him, will you? You said we’d scare him, make him give us what was rightfully ours. That’s it. You... you can’t kill him.”

Thaxton’s top lip curled back over his teeth. “Don’t question me. You three take the kids into the woods and duct

tape them to a tree. I'm going to stay here and have a chat with Harlan.”

“Theo,” Looper said. “I didn't sign on for murder. My boy and I won't be—”

Thaxton aimed his gun right at the center of Headmaster Looper's forehead. “I don't enjoy repeating myself. Take them deep into the woods and leave them.”

Looper swallowed, then grabbed Conrad by the arm until he stood on his feet. The headmaster slipped his clown mask back on. Why? I didn't know. He shoved us toward the trees. Conrad screamed for his dad. I wanted to cover my ears to block out the anguish, but I couldn't. I had to think, which meant ignoring Conrad's sorrow for the moment. Thaxton would come and kill us, then kill Looper, Michael, and maybe even Tag. All of this would be after he killed Harlan Bishop. Leave no witnesses.

The deeper we moved into the woods, the harder I had to strain my ears for the sound of a gunshot. I could only pray Theodore Thaxton was the type of psychopath who liked to hear himself speak, and right about now he would be in the beginnings of a long rant about how Harlan Bishop had wronged him.

Tired and out-of-shape, Looper seemed to have had enough walking. “Here's good. Get up against the tree.” He waved the gun.

Conrad was pale, red-eyed, and bruised. His emotionless face had gone to some outer plane where pain couldn't reach him. I needed him to snap out of it, but I couldn't think of anything to help as we backed against the tree trunk.

“Duct tape them,” Looper said.

Tag didn't move. He looked around the forest like a lost child. Fat tears swam in his eyes. I could almost see the thoughts forming in his mind. He was about to decide something. I hoped it would be for our benefit. Tag threw down his mask as Michael approached with a roll of duct tape.



“I can’t do this.” Tag spoke so low I didn’t fully hear him. “I can’t do this,” he shouted. “Ruin my life for him?” Two tears slipped from his left eye. “Ever since Todd died, it’s like I don’t exist.”

*Todd? Who the hell is Todd?*

“I...” Tag looked around, then locked eyes with me. “I’m sorry, Sayra.” His eyes darted over to Conrad. “Sorry,” he murmured shamefully. Then he dropped his bat, turned, and ran deeper into the woods. My breath caught on the words, ‘Don’t leave us!’

“Get back here!” Looper shouted, but Tag was gone, swallowed up by the darkness.

Michael, who was about to bind Conrad to the tree, stopped and stared off into the woods where Tag was last seen fleeing. The distraction was all I needed. I tossed my handful of dirt and rocks into Michael’s face.

“Hey,” Looper yelled.

He aimed the gun and jerked his finger on the trigger. Nothing happened, except a little pee trickled down my leg. The safety must’ve been on. He looked at the gun as if it had betrayed him. I didn’t hesitate, just leaped at him like a wild spider. Conrad snapped out of his haze and took on a dirt-blinded Michael. Throwing the full force of my weight, I slammed into the headmaster, expecting to bowl him over, but he was built like a tree stump. My impact was enough to knock the gun from his hand.

Looper shoved me hard, and I fell backward. He headed for the gun, but I sprang up and jumped on his back. For the first time, I was happy to have forty-inch legs. I wrapped them around Looper’s waist, wishing I was strong enough to break his back with the pressure. My bound wrists limited my movements, but I hooked my left arm under his chin, gripped his neck, and tried like hell to choke him.

Looper bucked like a drunken rhino in a twisted clown mask. “*Gert* off me.”

“Sayra, move!”

I barely had time to jump down from Looper's back before Conrad *bonked* him on the head with Tag's bat. The headmaster face-planted, unmoving.

"Where's Michael?" I asked between hitched breaths.

"Ran off." Conrad panted. Frantically, we chewed at our taped wrists. When Conrad was free, he tore at mine. "Let's tape him up. Hurry."

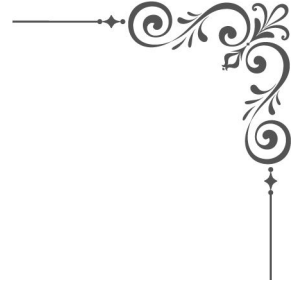
He tossed me a roll. I got to work on Looper's wrists, wrapping them behind his back. When Conrad was done with Looper's ankles, he looked around for the gun. I had picked it up and shoved it into the waistband of my uniform skirt, hiding it under my shirt. Memories of my dream about Conrad trying to shoot Theodore Thaxton rushed back to my mind. I had to keep that from coming true.

"Where's the gun?"

"I don't know. Maybe Michael grabbed it when he ran off."

"No." Conrad looked around on the ground. "He didn't have it."

"It doesn't matter," I said, moving toward the truck. "We have to get to your dad."



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# CHAPTER THIRTY- NINE

WE HADN'T GONE TOO far into the woods. Thank God for Headmaster Looper's laziness. As I broke through the thick trees, I saw Theodor Thaxton standing inside the truck with his back to us. He stood rigidly, legs spread and with a straight back.

My father owned a gun and taught me how to hold it, load it, and aim it, but I'd never shot one before. My mother found out about the lessons and shut that mess down immediately. I could tell by Thaxton's stance, even with his back to us, that he held a gun, and knew what he was doing.

Harlan Bishop had to be alive. Right? Why else would Thaxton be so alert? I crept closer, with Conrad creeping behind me.

"Theo," Harlan called weakly, and my heart leaped. "Put the gun down."

"It doesn't work like that. And you two get into the truck," he said, without turning to indicate he'd heard us sneaking up behind him. At that moment, I wished I had given Conrad the gun because he would've simply shot Thaxton in the back. I didn't have the guts to do it, nor did I think it was right, but it would have ended this terrible situation.

Thaxton angled himself, so his back was to the trailer's wall, keeping Mr. Bishop, Conrad, and me in his view. I climbed into the trailer. Conrad followed. Blood trickled from Harlan Bishop's nose and split lip. His tousled copper hair showed Thaxton had handled him violently, but Mr. Bishop was alive. Thaxton had his gun trained on Harlan.

"Dad, are you okay?"

"Yeah." Harlan Bishop took a ragged breath. "Let them go, Theo. Your problem is with me."

Conrad took a step forward. "I'm not leaving you."

Thaxton leveled the gun at Conrad. “True. You aren’t leaving now. Should’ve stayed in the woods, kid. Now, you’re going to make my original plan finally come to fruition.”

No one seemed to know what Thaxton was talking about.

“What plan?” I asked weakly, afraid of the answer.

“Harlan Bishop cost me everything. He has to pay.”

“Theo,” Harlan said and gripped his ribs as if an invisible foot had kicked him. “You got fired. It happens. It’s not as if it wasn’t warranted. You *were* stealing from Madeline’s company.” He coughed. “I sympathized. You were a grieving father. I can’t imagine what I would’ve been driven to do if I’d lost my son.”

Lost a son? But Tag was fine... *Todd*. He must’ve been Tag’s brother.

Harlan continued. “That’s why you’re not in prison where you belong. But all of this is my fault? You steal from my wife, remain a free man, and it’s my fault?”

“Your wife drove me to this! I needed the money because she stopped Todd’s treatments.”

“I know, Theo, but—”

“Didn’t think they were working,” Thaxton said as if he hadn’t heard Harlan speak. “Told me to go home and watch my son die. Oh, the good doctor didn’t say it like that, but that’s what she meant. So, I had to find someone else to give Todd his treatments. The only place was in Brazil, and it wasn’t cheap. She owed me.” His gun hand shook. “Todd died, and it’s all her fault. We lost valuable time because of her.”

As Theodore Thaxton’s words registered, my pulse quickened, and a cold sweat broke out on my skin. Money could motivate people to do dangerous things, but a grieving person, someone who believed he had nothing to live for... there might be no reasoning with him.

“Four years ago,” Thaxton said through gritted teeth, “Todd died. Your wife took him from me, so I tried to take

something from her. But wouldn't you know she died instead?"

*Oh God.*

"You..." Conrad blinked. "You killed my mother? How? You... caused the accident?"

"*You* were supposed to die." Thaxton glared at Conrad. "She couldn't even get that right."

"I'll kill you!" Conrad lurched forward. I yanked him back by his shirt. Thaxton aimed the gun at the center of Conrad's heaving chest.

"Your wife took my son," Thaxton said. "Now I'm going to take yours."

"You've taken my wife." Harlan wheezed. "Isn't that enough?"

"No. It's not enough. You can get another wife, but nothing, *nothing* replaces a child. No one can give you that back." His voice broke, but before he allowed himself to give in to his tears, he sucked in a breath and straightened his back. "If you have any last words for your son, I'd say them now."

Blood raced through my veins, and roared in my ears so loudly I thought everyone could hear it. I'd called all this onto myself. I was living the very consequences of interfering with my dream, but there was nothing I could do about that now.

Embracing my immediate destiny, I slipped my sweaty hand under my shirt, moving as little as possible. Remembering Looper's mistake, I clicked off the safety. Before letting my fear and conscience render me helpless, I snatched the gun from my waistband.

Three things happened simultaneously: I screamed, squeezed my eyes shut, and fired. Those last two things would haunt me forever. I shot a man. And I'd done so with my eyes closed. Stupid, careless, and dangerous. Because of my closed eyes, the bullet only grazed his gun arm.

Surprise and pain staggered Thaxton back against the trailer's wall, frantically checking his wound. Blood spread

down his sleeve and covered his hand. I'd just sealed our fates with my impetuous act. Now I *had* to kill him and keep my eyes open while I did it. Before Thaxton could gather himself, Harlan kicked out and hit Thaxton in the gut, knocking the wind out of the man.

Without thinking, I dropped the gun and dove forward. My hands locked on his gun arm. Theodore Thaxton was very strong even with the wind knocked out of him, and a bullet wound. But then bloody hands joined mine as Harlan Bishop got to his feet to help me. Soon, gloved hands entered the fight. Thaxton fought like the madman he was, punching and thrashing. I couldn't see the gun anymore, but I was sure Thaxton still held it. I bit down on his shoulder and dug my nails into his wound. Either Conrad or Mr. Bishop punched him repeatedly in the ribs and face. We were only a pile of bodies on top of a monster. Nothing we did worked.

*POW!* The gun went off. A bullet ricocheted off the steel frame of the truck. I froze. Thaxton fired again. Mr. Bishop screamed an animalistic sound that I would ever forget.

“Dad!”

My heart *thwop, thwop, thwoped* in my ears like a helicopter. I briefly wondered if I got shot, too. Harlan groaned and rolled away from the fight. A dark red spot spread across his thigh. Thaxton shook me off like I was a light-weight jacket. I rolled onto my back, groping for the gun I'd dropped.

When my hand met the cold steel, I brought it up, and pointed it right at Thaxton's chest. He was standing now, aiming his gun at me. Conrad sat frozen to my right. Mr. Bishop writhed on the floor. I kept my aim steady, knowing I would die because I was hard-headed and didn't want to listen to my Yaya.

I had saved Theodore Thaxton's life in my dream, stopping Conrad from shooting him, and now he was going to take my life. I hadn't asked for these psychic dreams, nor had I wanted any part of them going dark. Why was this happening to me? A sixteen-year-old shouldn't be contemplating this level of violence.

I didn't want to shoot him again. I didn't want to shoot anyone, but if it came down to him or me, I'd rather it be him. As I looked into the eyes of this madman, I knew I had to do it. *Breathe in, breathe out.* He saw it then, too, my resolve. His eyes widened, and just as I was about to squeeze the trigger...

"Drop the gun," a voice shouted from outside the trailer. I froze. Thaxton narrowed his eyes on an object behind me. He made the slightest upward jerk with the gun, and his hand exploded. I screamed, covering my blood-splattered face. The gun got yanked from my hand, and someone pulled me roughly by the arm toward the mouth of the trailer. A commando-type man, dressed in all black, pointed a gun at Thaxton's writhing form.

"Out of the truck," said the commando, who had me by the arm.

He helped me down, and another man in tactical gear sprang into the back of the truck. There were three of them, taking command of the scene. Conrad argued to stay with his dad, but they yanked him out of the trailer as two of the soldiers climbed into the back. One secured Thaxton, although he was still screaming and holding what used to be his hand. The other one applied pressure to Mr. Bishop's leg. Minutes later, two ambulances stopped beside the truck. Four paramedics exited. I wanted to weep when I saw them. They climbed into the back of the trailer to tend to Harlan and Thaxton.

Dirt and gravel whipped through the air as a helicopter landed in the field across the road. So that had actually been a chopper I heard and not the thwapping of my heart. Basil jumped out, moving faster than I thought possible. He grabbed Conrad in a fierce hug, all formality and decorum forgotten. Conrad may have lost his mother, but he certainly had two fathers.

My legs wouldn't hold me any longer. I slumped to the ground, ignoring the gravel. My uniform was done for, but I didn't care. I needed to get my breathing under control and make my head stop spinning.



Conrad and Basil stood by the truck, keeping a nervous watch on the paramedics tending to Harlan. When the man and woman exited the trailer with Harlan on the stretcher, he reached for his son. Conrad pulled off his glove and took his father's hand. His entire body trembled as he arched over his father. He seemed on the verge of passing out, seeing what fate now had in store for Harlan Bishop. I wondered if Conrad had touched his father a few months ago, would he have seen the same thing I'd dreamed? What did he see now? I held my breath, going through the rush with him, wishing I could make it easier for him.

"Are you okay?" the paramedic asked.

"He's fine," Basil said. "Just give him a minute."

It looked as if every muscle in Conrad's body clenched. The color drained from his face, and his eyes rolled back in his head, but he didn't lose consciousness. He sucked in a huge breath as he came back to himself. Visibly shaken, Conrad all but collapsed on his father.

"We need to get moving," the female paramedic said.

Conrad straightened and whispered, "I'll meet you at the hospital, Dad."

Harlan touched his son's face and didn't break eye contact until the ambulance doors closed. Conrad turned his back to me and wiped his face. I'd already seen the tears. He had nothing to be ashamed of. When he sat beside me, I was disappointed to see him slip his glove back on.

"That lump on your head is getting bigger, I think."

I touched the left side of my head and felt the knot.  
"You've got a boot print on your face."

We sounded raspy, like we'd been screaming. Maybe we had, but at the moment, I couldn't remember.

Conrad met my eyes. "You okay?"

"No." I was seconds away from barfing, crying, fainting, or all three.

He took my hand. "You lied. You had the gun all along."

I sniffed. “Yeah. I didn’t want you to become a murderer.”

“But it was okay for you to become one?”

“I hadn’t thought it through.”

He snorted. “No. I’d say you didn’t.” He squeezed my hand. “When you pulled that gun... when you shot him... there’s a big difference between wanting to kill someone and actually doing it, even in self-defense. I’m glad you’re not a murderer, Sayra. And I’m glad you kept me from becoming one, too.”

Warm tears slid down my cheeks as Basil approached. “I see you are filthy yet again, Miss Price.” The corners of his mouth curved ever so slightly.

I grabbed a handful of dirt and tossed it on his pristine shoes. “So are you.”

He merely raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps you two require a third ambulance.”

Conrad and I gave weak protests that were immediately disregarded.

“The helicopter is ready,” Basil said after a moment. “We can meet Master Bishop at the hospital rather than wait for an additional ambulance. I believe Miss Price’s parents and friends are also eager to see her.”

“Oh, God. My parents are probably freaking out. How did they find out?”

“When you failed to come home, a neighbor of yours, I believe his name is Honeygo, said he saw you leave in a black sedan with a young fellow in a ski mask. Your friends told your parents where Conrad lived and when they arrived, I naturally had to tell them everything.”

“*Naturally.*” I tried not to sound too snarky. Yaya owed Mr. Honeygo an apology. He may not be bird-watching, but he had helped my parents.

Basil held out a hand to Conrad and me, helping us off the ground. As we made our way to the chopper, I told one of the commando men about Looper taped up in the woods. I almost

told them about Tag and Michael, thinking they could probably catch the two boys, but I let them go. Both of them had suffered enough, having cruel idiots for fathers. Then I realized something and turned to Basil.

“How’d you find us?”

“Did Dad call the police?” Conrad asked, but there wasn’t a cop in sight. Those men were mercenaries, from the looks of them. We climbed into the helicopter and slipped on headsets.

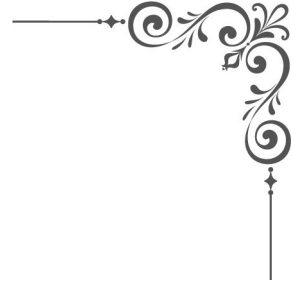
“Your father did not call the authorities,” Basil said. “When your parents arrived, Miss Price, and I discovered that Master Bishop had left without a driver, I knew something was the matter. Master Bishop has not driven himself in over twenty years. I knew you would sneak out to see Miss Price, Conrad. I also knew you would steal your phone, and I knew you two would keep meddling in this dangerous business. So, I placed a GPS tracker in your phone. I have one in Master Bishop’s phone and all the automobiles. The initial search led us to the accident site. However, when I saw Master Bishop stopped in this peculiar location, I summoned the security we utilize when he travels to hostile countries.”

Conrad and I goggled at Basil.

“Yes, I am extraordinarily clever.”

“Extraordinarily scary,” I muttered.

He smiled and faced forward as the helicopter soared over the trees.



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## CHAPTER FORTY

THE EMERGENCY ROOM doctor wanted to keep me overnight to monitor me for concussion and slight dehydration. The instant my parents left the hospital room, in search of something edible from the cafeteria, Penny and Ivan rushed in. Penny stopped short, covered her face with her hands, and sobbed.

“Do I look that bad?”

Ivan gathered Penny in his arms. “It’s pretty bad, Sayra. But we thought you were dead or about to be.”

“I was.” I beckoned Penny over for a hug. She sat on my hospital bed and cried onto my shoulder. “You called me just as Conrad and I were being taken.”

Penny sat back abruptly and wiped her face. “All hell broke loose after you left, which, if you’re going to cut class, tell me. We wasted precious time looking for you in school, and your ass was getting kidnapped.”

“I promise, the next time I cut, you’ll be the first to know. What happened?”

“First,” Penny said, now buzzing with excitement. “This girl’s mother came up to the school and tried to kick Mr. Brookmeyer’s ass!”

“What?”

“Yup. Apparently, he’s been so stressed out lately and looking guilty because he’s been hooking up with a student.”

“You lying! Who?”

“Girl, I don’t know. Some chick in our year. Supposedly, her mother found all these texts between them. It was a mess. So, he’s fired.”

I was stunned. Not Mr. Brookmeyer. He was so nice. Well, yesterday I suspected him of plotting murder, so how nice could he be?

“And then,” Ivan said.

“There’s more?”

“Yup. Remember that sketchy conversation your overheard Omar having with some unknown person?”

“Yeah.”

“Turns out it was Greg Peterson.”

“I don’t know him.”

“He’s a senior or pretending to be one ‘cause he’s actually an undercover cop busting an illegal *everything* ring. Omar’s been selling exams, clothes, shoes, pills, weed, you name it. He was just an underling, but they still cuffed him and four other students, then escorted them from campus.”

“OMG. Why did all the crime happen Friday? Poor Omar.”

“*Poor Omar?*” Penny snapped. “Omar made his bed. Now, his criminal-ass made it look bad for all of us.”

“No, he didn’t.” I didn’t know Omar well, but this seemed very out of character for him.

“Yeah, well, while they were perp-walking Omar from the building, the school did random locker searches. They checked fifty lockers but managed to search all eleven black students.” She pursed her lips. “Five hundred students to choose from, and they get one hundred percent of the black student body? That’s some bull. My father is about to go off on West Nottingham.”

That made me feel all kinds if icky. I didn’t even want to tell my parents that while the headmaster was kidnapping me, school security was searching my locker for drugs and stolen goods. They would go off too.

My head hurt now. I loved my friends, but I wanted to sleep.



TWO WEEKS LATER, THINGS were getting back to some sort of routine. Thanksgivings was relatively normal. Yaya came to stay for good. The only thing that kept her away was her fear of bringing her negative energy to me. Since I was

now open to the negative dreams, she packed up and moved. That was the first step in the right direction. She gifted me with another “platinum” diary. Hopefully, I wouldn’t have so many dark dreams that would need to fill up two super-secret diaries.

Getting over being kidnapped and almost killed would take some time. I flat out refused to see a therapist. The last thing I wanted to do was sit and talk about what happened. My parents agreed for the time being, but Dad monitored my every mood.

Conrad got reinstated in West Nottingham. Headmaster Looper and Tag Thaxton were still the talk of the school. I mean, the headmaster in prison for kidnapping two students. Tag was missing, a teacher fired for inappropriate relations with a student, and another student expelled and arrested for damn near racketeering... yeah, people would talk about this forever.

No one had seen or heard from Michael either, which made me wonder if he and Tag were together. News reporters had contacted me, but one shout from my father, in English and Spanish, that I had ‘no comment,’ and they quickly left me alone. I wasn’t looking forward to the trial, but I knew Conrad, and I would have to testify, eventually.

On my first day back, Hillary cornered me in the lavatory. I prepared for her wrath, but that wasn’t what I got.

“Where is he?” she asked, chin quivering.

“I don’t know.”

“Please, Sayra. I know I’ve been a bitch to you, but I need to talk to him.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where he is. Tag would reach out to you before he even thought about contacting me.” Truthfully, I thought Hillary was the one hiding him.

As the tears leaked from her eyes, I realized she and Tag had really cared for each other. Who’d have thunk it? I did something then that shocked the hell out of me. I wrapped my arms around her, *around Hillary Teagarden*, and let her cry on

my shoulder. Afterward, she left the lavatory without speaking a single word. It would've freaked me out if Hillary had talked to me like I was her new bestie. Maybe we could be civil to each other if nothing else.

I just wanted to erase it all. I felt safe now. Even my dreams had returned to simple things, which was beyond awesome.



MY PHONE BUZZED. PENNY'S face lit up the screen.

“What's up?”

“I'm not going,” she said dully.

I froze while smoothing shea butter on my legs. “Whatchu mean? Why not?”

She sighed. “I asked Ivan why he was taking Bethany to the winter dance tonight, and he said... ‘Why wouldn't I take my girlfriend to the dance?’” Penny sniffed.

I flopped down on the bed. *Oh, no.* “Sorry, Penn. This is all my fault.”

“He likes her, Sayra. She's a sweet girl. That's not your fault.”

“If we hadn't had that stupid kiss in the tree and then I over-corrected by telling you both I had a dream... it changed things. I'm sorry.”

“Don't cry,” Penny said when my voice broke. I loved my friends so much. Penny being miserable made me miserable.

I sniffed and wiped my face. “Listen, this doesn't mean anything. I saw you two at prom, and that's going to happen.”

“Sayra—”

“No, it's going to happen. So get up and get dressed!”

“I don't want to go.”

“I don't care,” I shouted. “You know how many dances I didn't wanna go to, but you forced me? All of them! So, get up, put on that dress that I know looks good as hell—”



“It really does.” She chuckled.

“I’ll see you in thirty minutes or I’m coming to your house.”

“Fine. You’re so annoying.”

After I hung up, I took a deep breath. I could fix this mess I’d made. How? I didn’t know, but I would. I slipped into my dress just as a tap on my bedroom door announced Ma and Dad’s entrance.

“Conrad’s downstairs,” Ma said. I stood, and she sucked in a breath.

“How do I look?” I smoothed nervous hands down my silver dress.

“Oh, Say-Say, you look so beautiful.”

“You’re showing a lot of skin,” Daddy said.

It was true. The halter dress was full-length, but it left my arms and back bare. Ma had twisted my hair into a curly knot. I even had on heels, or as I liked to call them, strappy deathtraps. I felt pretty as I stared at my reflection in the mirror, no longer embarrassed by my height.

“Don’t go anywhere alone, Sayra.”

“*Daddy.*”

“You got kidnapped. I think I’ve earned the right to be overprotective.”

He would keep that in his arsenal, locked and loaded, for whenever I wanted to do something he didn’t approve of. Instead of arguing, I kissed his cheek and agreed to do everything he said, even if I had to text my every move.

Conrad’s mouth flopped open when I reached the bottom step. He was handsome in his black suit. Tonight, he wore black gloves, which made him look like a high-priced hitman.

“Wow,” he said. “You’re showing a lot of skin.” Panic raced over his face, like he wanted to step into a hazmat suit.

Ma handed me long, silver gloves, and I slid them on. Smiling, I said, “Better?”

“A little. You look beautiful. I didn’t mean to imply that I didn’t like the dress, ‘cause I do. I really, really, do.”

*God help me.* I giggled.

Dad stepped between Conrad and me. “Young man, make sure your hands, lips, and other body parts keep a safe distance from my daughter.”

“*Omigod.* Let’s go.” I pulled Conrad toward the door.

“Hey,” Dad said, “I thought you had a limo with a driver.” He glared at Conrad’s truck.

“I changed my mind. It’s only the winter dance, not prom. I’d rather drive.”

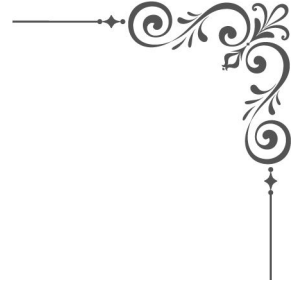
“But it’s safer if you have someone with you,” Dad argued.

“Sir, the car parked in front of my truck and the one across the street are private security hired by my father. As my he put it, those are the ones we can see. Others are hidden.”

“Oh. Well, then. Very good.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“Sadly, yeah,” Conrad said as we walked to his truck. “You think your father has gone off the deep end? Mine can fund his neurosis.”



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# CHAPTER FORTY- ONE

COUPLES PACKED THE dance floor, swaying to the melodic tunes from the band. Across the crowd, I saw Ivan dancing with Bethany. He looked sharp in his dark blue suit. Bethany looked lovely in her pale blue dress. While swaying with her, Ivan stared at Penny. She was pretty in pink, dancing with Lance Taylor. Her eyes met Ivan's, and she smiled, sending him a little wave over Lance's shoulder.

Ivan winked, mouthing, *you look beautiful.*

There was hope!

Even with our gloves protecting most of our skin-to-skin contact, Conrad and I kept a good twelve inches between us, much to the delight of the chaperones. Neither of us wanted to risk an accident.

"You smell great," he said.

"Do I? It's something my mother sprayed on me."

"You make it sound like a pesticide."

"Felt like it. Perfume burns."

He laughed and linked our gloved fingers.

"I can't believe you wanted to come here," I said. "I thought you had a no-dance rule."

"Something tells me you'll always be the exception to any rules I have."

The grin on my face felt epic. The music changed. Before I could tell Conrad I wanted to go for some punch, the crowd began dancing wildly to the thumping beat. Someone knocked into me. Despite Conrad quickly shoving me away, we made skin-to-skin contact. The slightest tap of my nose against his. That was all it took. Conrad grabbed his face like he had been burned with acid. He cried out, but the loud music swallowed up his agony. The he jerked like something hit him with

invisible projectiles. Again and again, he thrashed, reacting to pain that sent him to the floor amid stomping feet and kicking legs.

I shouted his name, but he was elsewhere, out of his mind, seeing and feeling my death. Helpless seconds ticked by as I tried to haul him up. It was as if he had become a solid block of marble. No one noticed Conrad's corpse-like body at their feet. My fellow West Nottinghams were too busy dancing to know or care that something important was happening around them.

Conrad arched, sucking in a deep breath. Our eyes met. I saw fear and sadness looking back at me. He staggered to his feet and elbowed through the crowd while I was still comprehending that he'd just seen my death. I called to him, but he kept going. Where the crowd seemed to part for Conrad, they closed in on me. The dance floor was like a mosh-pit, arms flailing, bodies bumping. I took a slap to the throat, an elbow to the ribs, and countless stomps on my feet before I made it off the floor.

A quick scan of the perimeter told me Conrad was no longer in the athletic arena. I burst through the double doors and hurried down the corridor. Where would he go? He'd need air. I headed for the front of the school, figuring other couples would go to the back to make out. Conrad would want to be as alone as possible.

I found him at the bottom of the main steps. He sat with his knees up to his chest and his head buried in his arms, rocking. I wanted to run to him, but the stupid shoes I wore slowed me down. I popped one of the fragile straps in my haste to get the shoes off and get to Conrad. When I reached him, I stood for a moment, unsure of what to say. He wouldn't look at me as I sat beside him.

“Conrad, are you okay?”

He didn't answer, just kept rocking with his face buried. Hesitantly, I placed my hand on his back. He didn't flinch, so that was something. I'd let him get it out and settle down, then

I'd question him. But did I want to know? I certainly didn't need the gory details.

After a few minutes of rubbing his back in what I hoped was a soothing way, Conrad lifted his head. His eyes were red-rimmed, and tears wet his cheeks. My heart sank. If he was upset to the point of tears, then he didn't see me dying as an old lady with all my loved ones around me. I opened my mouth, but he got up and walked away before I could speak. He scrubbed a hand over his face as if trying to wipe away the memory. A lamppost beamed yellow light over and around his truck. Conrad paced in and out of the glow.

With a deep breath, I got up to join him. "Stop," I whispered. "Stop walking and talk to me."

He shook his head as another tear spilled from his eye. The sight of it had my knees going weak.

"Conrad, please." I stepped in front of him and clamped both my hands on his face.

He blinked a few times as if waking from a daze. Then he wrapped his hands around my wrists and pulled them away from his face. His eyes took on a fiery burn that had me stepping backward.

"What is it? Please, tell me."

When he peeled off the glove on his right hand, I drew in a breath, understanding what was about to happen. He was going to touch me. My heart banged against my chest, loud enough for the world to hear. His breathing went shallow as he removed his other glove. I fought with mine, yanking them off and tossing them to the ground. We stood with only a few inches between us, no barriers on our hands.

Conrad reached out. It was a simple gesture I'd seen guys do a million times to other girls. I'd seen him do it hundreds of times to Hillary. He took my hand, curled his fingers around mine, and let out a breath like he had been holding it since the day he first returned to school. My fingers trembled as he took my other hand, brought it up to his face, and pressed it against

his cheek. He closed his eyes, rubbing my palm against his jaw.

Not for the first time, I realized what life must be like for him now. Yes, it was torture not to touch him, but being unable to touch anyone... I couldn't imagine. Conrad's eyes opened, and I only had a second to read their heat before he hauled me against him. His hands slid up my back, and while I couldn't wait for him to kiss me, I was terrified.

He was so close to me that our noses touched for the second time that night. I could taste his breath. We didn't close our eyes, and it felt right. I wanted all five of my senses to experience this kiss. His lips brushed mine. Once, twice, and then we went at each other like two starved people.

My eyes slipped closed as we kissed clumsily, lips and tongues meeting with inexperience, but it still had me spinning. His fingers ran up my spine, caressing my bare skin as he backed me against his truck.

“Get a room,” a stray partygoer shouted.

They didn't understand. This wasn't merely kissing. This was years of mutual disdain that somehow morphed into friendship then turned into months of being inches apart, desperate to touch. When Conrad broke away, I chased his mouth with my own, too far gone to be embarrassed. My lips tingled. Every part of me vibrated. Conrad pressed his forehead to mine. We breathed against each other and held on. His face was softer than I imagined. I couldn't resist brushing my cheek against his and burying my face in his neck, kissing him there. The soft moan he let out made me smile. My fingers dug in his hair, working over his scalp.

“That was... intense,” he said against my neck as he pressed a wet kiss there.

“Understatement.”

He worked his way up to my mouth and kissed me again, holding the back of my neck to keep me in place. But I wasn't going anywhere. We stood for a long time, going in and out of kissing, hugging, and brushing our skin against each other.

Conrad had rough hands, not hard or dry, but not baby soft like I expected from someone who'd been wearing gloves for close to a year. I liked his hands. But even as his forehead rested against mine, as he nibbled my lips, I knew something terrible had made all this possible. I swallowed and asked the question my mouth seemed to form before my brain could stop it.

“Is it bad?”

Conrad let out a long, hissing breath. He pressed his lips to my forehead and then moved to my neck, where he muttered, “We don't have to talk about this tonight.”

“I need to know,” I whispered. If only that much. But I already knew it was bad. What else would move him to tears? I needed him to say it. “Is it bad?” I repeated.

“Yes.”

A storm whirled up inside my stomach and blew through my chest. You're never prepared for that kind of news. *Don't cry.*

“Is it soon?”

“Sayra, please.” His arms held on so tightly that I thought he might break something inside me.

My throat hurt. All the saliva had dried in my mouth. “Just that, Conrad. Tell me if it's soon, please.”

“It's... no. It's not,” he finally said.

He was lying, but I couldn't bring myself to call him on it. My brain had turned to mush. When my knees buckled, Conrad scooped me up in his arms and hauled me to the passenger side of his truck. He opened the door and sat me on the seat.

“Put your head down and take deep breaths.” He pushed my head between my knees and rubbed my back. “I'm sorry,” he said, “sorry I'm like this, that I did this to you.”

“Don't. It's not your fault.” I closed my eyes, sat up slowly, and rested my head on his shoulder. It felt like a sick joke that I got a death notice and the opportunity to touch Conrad on the same night.



He loosened his hold, but I held on tighter. “Look at me, Sayra.”

He pulled back enough to meet my eyes. His thumb brushed away the traces of a tear that had dripped off my chin. For a long moment, he simply stared at me.

“I fought with this, had even contemplated touching you on purpose. But that seemed selfish, and honestly, I couldn’t do it. If that makes me a coward...” He shrugged. “As much as you say you’d be there to go through it with me, the bottom line is, it’s *your* death I’m seeing. No one wants to know when their time is up unless it’s when they’re a hundred. First, we had my father’s death to deal with, and now this. I’m sick of death being between us. What I’m trying to say is after all we’ve been through, no way am I going to let go of you now. We saved my dad. We’ll save you too.”

Save me? Save me from what? I couldn’t make my mouth ask that question. We met each other’s eyes, unblinking. I wanted to believe him. I had to believe him. Otherwise, I may as well die now.

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “C’mon. I’m tired of dancing. I can take you home.”

“No.” It was all I could say. Something had shattered inside me, and I needed to be put back together.

“Go for a drive?”

I nodded.

Conrad tucked my dress into the truck and closed the door. I couldn’t take my eyes off him while he crossed the front of the truck and climbed behind the wheel. He took my hand as he pulled out of the parking spot. Our palms met. His skin against mine. He would tell me every detail of what he saw, but not tonight. I wouldn’t be able to process it now. Plus, Basil might have been right. ‘It’s not wise to live with a time clock around your neck’. But Conrad was also right. We saved Harlan Bishop, so I’d dig deeper into my dreams, learn to control them better, and we would change whatever tragic

future was in store for me. We had to. There was too much I wanted to do with my life.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



THIS BOOK WAS A LONG time in the making. It sat on the shelf for nearly a decade while I wrote other things and had a life. I never forgot Sayra and her razor-sharp tongue. I often thought of putting this book out into the world on my own. The stars never aligned until 2022. While things were tedious and time-consuming, they were never difficult. As I prepared to launch this book, I met each challenge with interest, if not excitement. That's when I knew now was the time to start my business.

To my amazing mother, who did not live long enough to see this come to fruition. She read this story and loved it, as she did with everything I wrote. She was my first fan and my consummate cheerleader. I'm everything I am because she loved me. I will forever be grateful to God for choosing me to be her child.

To the best sister anyone could be blessed with. Thank you for always listening to my stories and reading my work, even though you take forever! 😊 I am so grateful to have you as my cheerleader, sister, but most important, my best friend. "Me and you, us never part!"

To my bestie, Nikki. Thank you for your unwavering, honest, and unconditional friendship. It is a rare thing indeed and has stood the test of time. You are always willing to read anything I write. It matters.

To my writing group, Janese, Myriam, and Brittany. I am eternally grateful for your words, support, love, and, most of all, your prayers. Thank you for your feedback and for always uplifting me.

To my beta readers and critique partners, Tere and Ruona. Thank you for your feedback. It was honest and helpful. No writer can truly create and grow without a solid team of early readers.

To my friends and family. There are scores of you, too many to name or count. I see you and appreciate you. So many

of you have offered an encouraging word and have unknowingly lifted my spirits when I was down or doubted myself. I appreciate you all.

To my readers, thank you for taking a chance on me and this novel. I can only hope you enjoyed this story as much as I loved writing it.

May all your dreams come true!

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## About the Author

K. August Rose is a writer and lover of bookish things. She grew up with a mother who read everything from X-Men comics to crime thrillers, and a father who tried to solve the mysteries of the universe, one book at a time. A graduate of the University of Maryland, with a BA in English, when not reading or listening to audiobooks, K. August can be found pouring over her latest novel and battling her addiction to Starbucks.

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