



Our Friendship Matters

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CHAPTER ONE

As the bell rang for first period at Chester Christian Academy, I grabbed my books from my locker and waited for Leo, my boyfriend, to walk me to class. Yes, Leo was handsome with broad shoulders and was captain of the basketball team. I'm talking about Idris Elba handsome but with smooth, black wavy hair.

Leah, my bestie, bumped my hip and smiled, "Morning, Sasha."

"Leah! You scared me to death." We've been friends since kindergarten and inseparable. I considered us blood sisters — that crazy pact you make when you're young and dumb by making your index fingers bleed and sticking them together. But it worked for us because we were like hip sisters.

Cameron, football captain and Leah's boyfriend, gave Leo a high-five. He was cute, too, but nobody could tell him except Leah. She was protective over him—and me, sometimes.

We had great boyfriends and our parents had great jobs. So, yeah, we were living the good life.

While leaning against our lockers in the hallway, kids strolling passed us would snub their noses or I would catch them rolling their eyes like they were slicing molded cheese. I guess they were envious of our relationship because we were from different ethnic backgrounds, but both pretty with long strands of hair that didn't need extensions. When the sun shined bright against my caramel skin, my hazel eyes would shimmer like glazed honey. Leah reminded me of Kendell Jenner

with her dewy, light skin and towering legs that could slaughter you on a runway. Her attitude would remind you more of Kendell's sister, Kylie. But we didn't care. As long as we had each other, there were no worries.

Oh, did I mention that we each drove a Mercedes? We were both spoiled and dressed nicely, but I always considered others' feelings and worked very hard to make good grades. As president of student government, health club, drama club, and much more, I had to work hard to maintain my status. Momma always got on me about striving to be the best, she said one day I would understand why I had to work for what I wanted out of life.

Leah didn't care about other people's feelings. She was a snotty rich girl who did just enough to get through school. She knew these things because I told her all the time. Leah and I both played sports. She did it to hang out with me more, but she was good at volleyball. My parents were well-financed too, but I didn't throw it in people's faces like Leah. We were two different people from two different worlds, but we loved each other.

The sound of a broken siren ran through the hallway, the first bell rang for seventh hour classes—our last class for the day.

"I'll meet up with you guys later," I said. "Leah, I will see you at volleyball practice. I have a student government meeting after school."

"Okay, that's cool." Leah waved.

I shook my head and massaged my neck in a circular pattern to keep my focus in Mr. Chamber's economic class. I started scribbling on a piece of scrap paper. His

class was the worst, it seemed like it went on for hours. I had eaten a full meal at lunch, which always made me sluggish the rest of the afternoon. If he mentioned supply and demand one more time, I was going to stand up and scream at the top of my lungs.

In two months, I would be attending a pre-law program so I figured I would just sit there and attempt to listen to his boring lecture. Plus, it was an easy A for me.

The last hour bell rang. *Thank God.* It was time for me to go to my student government meeting. Yes, I was the president, but being the president came with so much extra work. We had to get ready for prom, followed by graduation; both would take place in less than four weeks. There was so much to do in so little time. I snatched my belongings off my desk, packed them in my bookbag, and headed to the library.

I walked into the library and waved at Mrs. Smith, whose glasses always fell to the tip of her nose so her eyes would have to look over her glasses. I continued to the room in the back of the library where we had our meetings. It was empty. About five minutes later, Jeremy walked in. He was the vice president.

With my arms folded, I started tapping my feet.
“Where is everyone?”

One by one, they began to walk in dragging their feet. I guess everyone had to get that goodbye kiss before their boyfriends and girlfriends went home, the ones their parents weren't aware of. I couldn't wait any longer. I had to start the meeting because I had volleyball practice afterward.

“So, the theme of the prom is Tropical Paradise, and we already have the shipments of decorations. We just need to post a sign-up on each hallway for a decoration and clean-up committee. Then, we’ll have it down by Thursday,” I said. “That will give us time to close the gymnasium and start decorating on Monday. We need at least ten to fifteen volunteers, and please, let them know that they have to help clean up on Monday. I’m sure they will do it just to skip class.”

We discussed the music, food, and other things that we needed to complete before the prom. If this was a disaster, it would all fall on me. One major concern that we were having was planning the music. At the previous meeting, we tried to figure out if we should go with a DJ or have a live band. I thought a live band would be best.

Our principal clarified that if a live band was too expensive, we could throw it out of the equation. We thought about asking Cameron’s cousin, who played with a local band that was well-known in St. Louis, inexpensive, and played awesome music.

It seemed like no one was interested in the prom or making our senior year memorable. It could have been just me overreacting because of all the upcoming events that I was involved with.

I was expecting many people to attend our school prom, including the juniors and seniors, along with their guests. Our school was divided between the kids on scholarships and the kids who had money; the kids at Chester were too stupid to realize it or they didn’t care.

Leah burst into the library in her volleyball clothes. She hugged the volleyball with one hand on her hip. “Hey girlie, you ready to go slam some balls?”

I rolled my eyes at her and then brought myself back to focus on my meeting that she disturbed with no shame.

“I guess I’m pretty much finished here.” Everyone began rushing out the door.

“But, you guys, as soon as we finish with the prom, we will meet every Tuesday and Wednesday to plan for graduation,” I yelled, trying to get the last words in so they could hear me while storming out.

“How was the meeting?” asked Leah.

“Umm... You mean before or after you interrupted it? Maybe it’s just me but it feels like no one cares that this is our last year at this school. It seems like no one is taking it as seriously as I am.”

Leah and I trailed to the locker room so I could change into my practice clothes.

“See, I was saving you from suicide,” Leah patted my shoulder. “Lighten up on yourself; like you said, this is our last year and, after this, we will be considered adults. Be easy on yourself, it’s just a prom.”

While working on our daily practice routines, Mr. Davis, our coach, began blowing his whistle. “All right, listen up everyone! We have the most important game of the year. The championship!”

We started chanting, “Championship! Championship!”

“Okay, okay girls, settle down. We haven’t won the championship yet. Now it was an adventure getting here, but we are going to go over your mistakes from the last game and practice on those skills so you won’t make those same mistakes again.”

Leah and I exchanged glances and rolled our eyes at the same old bull.

Coach Davis started us off with some drills. We ran laps around the gym and jumped up and down the bleacher steps. My legs shook and my knees knocked with such ferocity I thought they would rip off my body. We scrimmaged, and I released my stress by spiking the ball hard at my teammates. It was much needed with all I had to do the next couple of weeks.

We finished practice by doing some light weightlifting. Coach had us view a video of our opponents’ weaknesses and strengths, but I had to admit that they were good.

After practice, we hung out in the parking lot for a few minutes.

Leah leaned against my car. “Do you want to go shopping with me for a prom dress this weekend?”

“I wish I could, but I promised my mom I would go shopping with her for a dress.”

“Well, why don’t I pick you up tonight so we can meet the boys at the Fountain?” suggested Leah.

I agreed to that because there was one thing I couldn’t pass on and that was time with Leo—and ice cream. The key ingredients to my heart. The Fountain was our hangout spot in downtown St. Louis.

As I pulled away in my car, I blew the horn at Leah.

On my way home, I had to stop and get my little sister, Chloe, from her school.

When I pulled into the school, Chloe stood by the entrance holding a book in her hand and tapping her feet like she had an appointment to attend.

“How was school today?” I asked as she hopped into the car.

“It was okay. Some fourth graders dunked Nathan’s head in the toilet and made him smell like poop all day. I thought the older you get the more mature you get.”

I chuckled. Chloe thought she was a mature adult and she was just in the second grade. We argued a lot, but I loved her. She was a real good kid.

We arrived at the house, and I parked by Mom’s car in the driveway. Dad hadn’t made it home yet. Mom greeted us at the door.

“How was school today?”

“Don’t bother asking Chloe. But my day was full of learning and planning for the prom next Friday. By the way, what time are we going to pick out my dress on Saturday?”

“We have to go early because I am on call that evening.”

“That’s fine with me. Leah is coming to pick me up later. We are going to the Fountain to get some ice cream.”

“As long as your homework is done, I have no problem with that. But you be back before your curfew because it’s a school night.”

“What are you cooking? It smells good.”

“I promised your dad I would cook some lasagna tonight.”

“Okay, I’m going upstairs to study and do my homework.”

I sat at my desk, preparing to complete my homework. I rummaged through my book bag and realized that my calculus book was still in my locker, and we had practice test questions to complete. I ran downstairs and told Mom that I had to return to the school to get my book.

As I got in my car, I spotted Ricardo, a neighborhood friend who went to Eastview High School. We used to play together, but we drifted apart when I started going to Chester. My parents sent me and Chloe to private schools for better education.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Nothing much, just about to go downtown to handle some things.”

“Do you need a ride because I have to run back to my school?”

“Yeah, I could use a lift. You can just drop me off at the Arch, and I can get where I need to go from there.”

The Gateway Arch is one of the biggest tourist attractions in St. Louis. The monument symbolizes St. Louis’ role in the westward expansion of America. I

tried to avoid driving near the Arch this time of day because it was usually bumper-to-bumper traffic, but I made an exception for Ricardo.

“Alright, let’s go,” I said. “Me and some friends are going to the Fountain later tonight so maybe I will see you there later.”

As I was leaving the driveway, my dad pulled up and parked his truck to the rear of mom’s car.

“Where are you going, Strawberry?” he asked.

Dad gave me that name when I was a little girl. Grandma had brought a strawberry shortcake to the house, and I took it off the counter, hid in my bedroom closet, and ate the entire cake. From then on, I was his “Little Strawberry.”

“I forgot my book at school, and I have to hurry before they lock the school.”

“Do you need a bodyguard to go with you?” he wiggled his eyebrows at my passenger.

“No, Dad, I’m just dropping Ricardo off downtown. I’ll be right back because I have a lot of homework to do.”

As we pulled out of the driveway, Dad waved goodbye. I could picture the smile on his face once he walked into the house and noticed Mom was cooking lasagna.

“So, how is the public-school life at Eastview High?” I asked Ricardo. “Other than Chester beating your guys in sports.”

“Ya’ll just have better resources than us,” Ricardo said.

“How come we couldn’t just be good at what we do?”

“What! Anyway . . . Eastview is great, I guess, but we are dealing with some issues. It’s our senior year and I am just thinking about leaving this place.”

“Why would you want to leave?”

“Because I feel trapped in a box. Everywhere I go, I feel like a suspect.”

“A suspect, what makes you think that? You shouldn’t feel like that,” I said as my brow lifted from his response.

“Yeah, I know you wouldn’t understand because you go to this perfect private school and stay in this big, beautiful house.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m sorry. Just drop me off at the next block. I got it from there.”

I pulled to the curb and, as Ricardo got out of the car, he leaned against the closed door—with half his body leaning over the window—and said, “Wake up and find out who you really are.”

I squinted my eyes, “Okay.” I drove off. *Why would he say such a thing to me?*

I arrived at the school just as Mr. Davis was locking the door.

“Don’t lock the door!” I yelled as I ran toward him.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just left my calculus book in my locker and I have to answer some test questions for homework.”

“Okay, hurry, Ms. Sasha. I have a family to go home to.”

“It won’t take me long,” I said.

I ran to my locker and, while exiting the school, I thanked Mr. Davis for letting me get my book.

While I was driving home, I reflected on my interactions with Ricardo earlier. What he said gave me chills. He seemed a little bothered, as though he was focused on something.

I decided placing Ricardo’s words in the back of my thoughts was best. I had to hurry and get home to finish my homework so I could go out with my friends that night. My phone rang—it was Leah. *Bet this is about clothes*, I thought.

“Hey, what are you wearing tonight?”

Ha! “I am wearing something out of my closet. Why would I dress up just to go to the Fountain?”

“I will be there around seven to pick you up.”

“That’s cool but I have to be back at ten o’clock.”

“Ugh! Your parents and curfews.”

“Yeah, well, at least in four weeks I will no longer have a curfew.”

I ended the call and finished my homework just in time to go eat dinner. Mom called Chloe and me downstairs to help set the table.

In the middle of dinner, Mom and Dad started their usual talk about their day at work.

Leah's horn saved me from having to listen to their stories.

I jumped up from the table. "Leah's out there. I'll see you when I get back."

"Sit down and finish your food," Mom pointed at me. "Leah will have to come in. Besides, there's no rush to go hang out on a school night."

As I sat, the doorbell rang. Dad went to the door to let in Leah.

"Hello, Mr. Brown. I'm here to pick up that beautiful girl of yours."

"She's finishing up her dinner. Come in. She'll be just a minute."

I started stuffing my face while Momma turned her head toward me and squinted her eyes like I'd better stop eating like a homeless person. I could have told her I was ready to go tongue Leo, but I was not *that* dumb.

That would have been a quick ticket to punishment and a waste of Leah's time.

"I love coming to your house. It's so beautiful, and your neighborhood has really cute boys," said Leah.

"Really? You're the one with the big, beautiful house and you have to ring a bell in order to get to your driveway. And it's already in a gated community!" I told Leah.

“Yeah, but we never have company unless it’s you or family.”

When I finished eating, Mom warned us to be careful because it was dangerous downtown. The usual worried talk whenever I left the house. I smiled at her and walked out the door. *What could be so dangerous about going to eat ice cream and hang out with my boyfriend?* That was like heaven to me.

When we got in Leah’s car, she told me she had to pick up Cameron. Leo would meet us there. I wondered why Leo couldn’t get Cameron, but Leah always wanted him beneath her thumb.

As we entered the downtown area, I noticed it was full of people on the streets. I had wondered what they were doing walking on the streets and why there were police at every corner standing in straight lines wearing body armor. It was like the movie, *Troy*, and the battle was about to begin.

Because of the thick crowds, Leah parked in a nearby garage and we walked to the Fountain.

My hunk was sitting on his hood waiting for us to arrive. I ran to his car to embrace him and pressed my lips to his cheek.

“I already reserved us a seat,” he said.

“That’s why I date you because you always think ahead.”

“By the way, can you take Cameron back home so Leah and I can have some girl talk?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The waitress took us to our table. She didn't have to because we came here on the regular, and we always ordered the same thing. The smells of butter and vanilla fluttered through the air, making me hungry even though I had just stuffed my face with lasagna. The Fountain was where we went to hang out. Some kids liked to hang out at the park near the school, but we didn't smoke joints or do drugs. We had a future ahead of us, and those things were not on our agenda.

We tried smoking a joint one time, but it was the scariest experience ever and we never did it again. That was the funniest moment of my life, though. Leah stood on the bed with her arms spread like a flying squirrel, like she was flying across the Atlantic Ocean; we laughed so hard at her that night.

"What colors should we wear to the prom?" asked Leah.

"I really don't know, but me and Leo have been going toward peach or teal."

"That sounds great, but we should all definitely match with yellow or gold."

"Gold is so overrated," said Leo.

As we were eating our ice cream, I glanced out the window and there were many people marching and chanting past the parlor.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"Some kid was killed at Eastview High by a cop, and people are out protesting," said Cameron.

"People need a life," said Leah as she rolled her eyes.

“They *do* have a life, but they are just protesting for what they believe in, Leah. You have to value their feelings. Just like people respect you for being a snob,” said Leo.

Leah scowled at Leo with defiant eyes.

“Wait, there’s Ricardo,” I shouted with such surprise.

“Who the hell is Ricardo?” asked Leo as he quickly faced me.

“He’s a guy from my neighborhood that I used to be friends with. When I started at Chester, we barely saw each other anymore. He was acting strange this evening when I dropped him off downtown. He was saying something about being a suspect because of who he is. He was kind of freaking me out. But Cameron did say earlier that they killed a kid from Eastview High, and that’s the school Ricardo goes to. Maybe he knew the guy.”

“Maybe, but can we just change the subject?” said Leah as she slammed her cup on the table.

“Hold up, why did you take him downtown this evening?” Leo asked.

“I really love when you get jealous.” I nudged him with my shoulder. “I left my calculus book at the school, and he needed a ride so I dropped him off near the school.”

I glanced at my rose-gold Apple watch and it was nine fifteen. I told Leah it was time to go because I couldn’t afford going home late and have mom put me on punishment with so much on my plate with prom and graduation coming.

As we walked out of the ice cream parlor, I hugged Leo and gave him a kiss goodbye.

“Make sure you call me when you get home,” I toyed with him by whispering in his ear.

I grabbed Leah off Cameron. Longer and they would have been making babies in the parking lot. Those two were always disgustingly flirting with each other, not caring if we were out in public or at school.

After we got into the car and drove off, Leah had to make a detour because of the crowd downtown.

“So, have you decided which college you are going to?” I asked Leah. “I think I’m going to Howard University. Leo is leaning toward Mizzou.”

“Me and Cameron have been looking at Penn State. He already got accepted on a football scholarship, and I’m just waiting on my acceptance letter.”

“Are you guys *really* considering going to the same college?”

“Yes, we love each other.”

When we arrived at the house, I noticed all the lights were off except for the living room area. It was Mom waiting for me. I still had ten minutes before my curfew.

While we were sitting in the driveway of my house, I told Leah that my mom said high school relationships never worked because there were too many opportunities in college. If Leo and I made it that meant we were destined for each other. The same with her and Cameron.

“Nothing is going to come between me and Cameron.”

“I’m rooting for you two.” I placed my hand on the door. “Thanks, see you tomorrow.”

I ran into the house. Mom was sleeping on the couch. She did this every time I go hangout. Her excuse was that parents worried for their children the most when they were out, especially without knowing what we were doing.

“Mom, I’m home now,” I said as I kissed her on her forehead. “You can go get in your bed.”

I pulled the blanket above her shoulders and headed upstairs. I peeked in on Chloe and she was asleep. My stomach vibrated every time Dad’s snoring traveled through the hallway from his bedroom. I went in my bedroom, packed my homework in my book bag for tomorrow, and called Leo hoping that he made it home.

Leo answered.

“Hey, babe,” I said. “Are you still driving?”

“Yep, I haven’t made it home yet. I just dropped off Cameron.”

“Okay, be careful. I’ll talk to you in the morning. Love you.”

“Love you too, bye.”

I stretched my arms from exhaustion. My bed was calling my name. As I lay down, I wished all the things I had to do for school would just go away, but they hadn’t even started.

Suddenly, after being so tired, now I couldn’t sleep. I got up and started to do some research on my computer

for my biology class. I wanted to get a jump start on finals but found myself on social media, somehow.

I landed on Ricardo's Facebook page. On his page there was a post he made that said, "It hurts me so much that I don't get to see my best friend anymore. He didn't die of old age or from a car accident, but some white police killed him coming from the basketball game, mistaken for a store robber.... #JusticeforMitchell."

After that post, I had to search for information about Mitchell's death and how it happened. That's why Ricardo seemed so bitter. I mean, we have problems at Chester, but this was a huge problem for Eastview. How could the kids at that school handle such a tragedy? Here I was worrying about prom and graduation, and Ricardo had to worry about one of his best friends not attending his last prom or even graduating. That was some hard news for those kids to handle at their school or, like my grandma would say, "that's a big pill to swallow."

When I laid on the bed trying to sleep, I started twisting and turning, bothered by Ricardo's post. But I couldn't let it haunt me all night. Plus, if my Momma came in and caught me not sleeping, she'd go crazy and blame it on me hanging out on a school night.

There was a soft knock on my door. It was my mom.

"Hey, honey, are you asleep?"

"No, I was just about to go to sleep." I stretched my arms and yawned.

"Your dad told me you took Ricardo somewhere earlier today."

"Yes, why?"

“Get some rest, and I will talk to you more about that in the morning.”

I wondered what that was about. She could have at least given me a hint. Was Ricardo a murderer or something? Or did he sell drugs? I rolled over in my bed and shut my eyes, waiting for sleep to hit my body. There was no reason for me to worry about why my mom said she wanted to talk to me about giving Ricardo a ride. I did nothing wrong and if it was that serious, she would have sat me down and discussed it at that moment.

CHAPTER TWO

It was morning. I was tired from tossing and turning after that Facebook post and wondering what my mom wanted to talk about.

I walked downstairs where mom was cooking fried bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast. I ate breakfast first because every morning Chloe would stay in the bathroom like she had a personal makeup artist. I was supposed to be the person hogging the bathroom and full of teenage drama.

“Morning,” I greeted mom. “It smells like the Waffle House in here.”

Daddy grabbed a cup of coffee, kissed mom on her cheek, and walked out the front door for work. Mom hid the fact that she had taken her time to cook breakfast, and her husband just grabbed a cup of coffee and sprinted out the door.

She chose to focus on something else. “How was the Fountain last night?”

“We had a great time. When I was there, I glanced out the window and saw Ricardo downtown protesting with some of his friends. The kid everyone was talking about that was killed was from his high school.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about last night. I don’t want you to get yourself involved in all that drama. I worry about coming home one day and finding out something terrible happened to you because you were involved with something that doesn’t concern you. That boy seems like trouble to me.”

“Mom, don’t forget I used to play with Ricardo when I was little.”

“Yes, but that was when you were *little*. You guys are older now and things change, people change. He’s not the same anymore.”

“Okay, Mom. But if I see him, I’m going to speak to him.”

“That’s fine. You can speak and keep it moving.” Mom rolled her eyes and slammed a plate of food in front of me.

Chloe finally came out of the bathroom. She took longer than the average person to get ready. I went to wash to get ready for school. As I put on my clothes, I yelled to Chloe to hurry because I had to drop her off at her school. One of my many responsibilities included taking her to school and picking her up. That particular day was a big day for me. The championship game was tonight, and I had to retrieve the list for our decoration committee.

We walked out the door, and I yelled to Mom that we were leaving. I turned around to remind her not to forget about my championship game tonight. I wanted to have both Mom and Dad there for support. They said they would come, but I thought a reminder wouldn’t hurt.

As I dropped off Chloe, I told her to “knock them dead.” She always acted like she hated school but, for her age, she was a pretty, popular girl with good grades and so many friends.

I arrived at school. Leo and the gang were waiting for me beneath our hangout tree. Since our freshman year,

we had claimed this spot. We planned to put a time capsule there after graduation.

When I greeted them, I bombarded them about Mitchell, the kid from Eastview High; and, of course, they weren't interested in it. But what if that happened to a kid here? How would the so-called rich students take it at Chester? Would they act like they cared, or would they ignore it?

"You still on that?" Leah sighed.

"I was just interested because it just seems unfair, don't you think?"

"No, I just don't care about it," said Leah.

Leah was on a roll with her snobby attitude that morning. I kissed Leo and told him I would talk to him later. I still had to go get the volunteer list I posted off of the wall. Leo and Cameron came with me, so I guess Leah had been getting to everyone that morning.

When I noticed the list hanging on the wall, I almost passed out. Six students had volunteered for the decoration committee.

"You gotta be kidding me." I ripped the paper off the wall in anger.

"What's wrong?" Leo asked me.

"It's going to take almost every day until the prom to decorate the gym; only six people signed the list, and about two hundred students or more will attend the prom. Let me run to the office and talk to the principal so I can tell him to announce that we need more participants. I'll catch you later."

I fled to the office, and I caught the principal in enough time to announce that it was the last day to sign up.

“No volunteers, no prom,” he announced on the intercom. He told me to put the paper back on the wall to see if we could get more volunteers. He said he would not cancel the prom, but it was a technique to get more people to volunteer.

On the way to class, I put the paper on the wall, hoping for more students to sign the list.

After all of my classes for the day, my brain was exhausted and needed a break. I still had to prepare for finals and the volleyball game. I went to get the list off the wall, and there were now ten people. That would have to work. *What choice did I have?*

Leah was in the hallway talking to some of our volleyball friends. I brushed up against her shoulder, hoping she was in a better mood than she had been that morning. Instead, she told me that her parents had been pressuring her about what college to attend. I could relate all too well from my parents badgering me.

The time came for us to be nervous. There was nothing more for us to think about but winning that game. For some of us, that game could determine the future; for others, they were just playing for fun.

We went to the locker room to get suited up. While we prepped ourselves to stay focused, we remained silent. After the assistant coach notified our coach, Mr. Davis, we were dressed, he came into the locker room to give us our pep talk.

“Okay, girls. We have worked very hard to get here today. It was dedication and determination that got you this far. Today, I want you to win this victory!” yelled Coach Davis.

We started banging on the lockers. Our adrenaline was pumping. The blood in my veins rushed to my brain. We started a huddle, jumped around and hyped ourselves, yelling, “Crank, crank, crank it up! Crank that Chester spirit up!”

We were playing Westbrook High, one of the top schools in Missouri, and they were competitive in volleyball. But we had a big chance at winning that game because they were missing two of their star players.

On my way out, I spotted Leo, Mom, and Chloe sitting beside Leah’s parents. But no sign of Dad, yet. He was always late, having last-minute meetings at the office. We were doing well the first half. We had scored eleven points, and Westbrook had scored five points.

Melissa, our star player, had been doing great on her serves. Leah and I had been backing her with deadly spikes to Westbrook.

As I scanned the bleachers, I noticed my Daddy walked in and sat next to Mom. I had to give him credit for still coming.

After a small time-out near the end, the game became more challenging. Westbrook’s attitude changed. Their coach must have given them that talk. The talk when you’re losing and your life depended on nothing but that moment of victory.

At that moment, we had twenty-four points and Westbrook had twenty-three points. They were gaining on us. Winning the game depended on our teammate, Melissa, making a successful serve. That was always the most nerve-racking part of a game, either getting that last point or the other team making a comeback.

Westbrook scored twenty-four points, tying the game. My hands were sweaty, and my heart sank to my stomach.

It was Melissa's turn to serve. She inhaled and then exhaled slowly out of her mouth while tons of sweat dripped from her face. Melissa hit the ball over the net. It landed between two girls, who dove to get the ball but missed. Ace!

She got the ball and served again. Westbrook hit the ball back over the net. I hit the ball in the air which gave Leah a chance to spike it. Point! With Leah's powerful spike, we won the game. Everybody sprinted to the floor. We were jumping and yelling from excitement. Mr. Davis told us to shake our opponents' hands to show we had some sportsmanship.

After, telling everyone "Good game," we went into the locker room. Most of us began crying. I started our victory chant.

"Six is her number! Leah is her name! She's one reason! We won the game!" I chanted.

"We should go out to the Fountain and celebrate," said Melissa.

After hitting all of those balls under stress, I was hungry. I ran to tell Mom that the team planned on going

out to celebrate. She said yes, and I asked Chloe to come with me. Chloe smiled and started this weird dance. Mom yelled for us to make it home at nine.

Leo ran to congratulate me on our victory. I gave him a huge hug and told him to expect a phone call from me later when I got home. I looked around the gymnasium for my parents so I could sneak a kiss on Leo's cheek. I told Chloe to go grab her things so we could go.

Leah planned to meet us there because she was going by Cameron's house first.

When we got to the Fountain, I parked in the garage because of all the people on the streets protesting. Chloe was with me so I had to worry about her safety. She was my responsibility. Since I turned fifteen, she has always been my responsibility. I didn't blame my parents; I knew they worked hard to provide a good lifestyle for us. In return, I just made sure Chloe was well taken care of.

At the Fountain, we sat in the rear with the other girls from the team. They were all yelling and talking about the game. Melissa asked me about Leah, and I told her Leah had to make a stop on her way.

"Call her! Tell her to hurry and get her butt down here. She was part of our victory tonight!" screamed Melissa.

We talked about the game, and Melissa started talking about her scholarship.

Minutes later, Leah arrived. While the team members ran to her to show her praise, I joked with her about getting a quickie.

“Yeah, right, his parents are always watching over him,” she smirked. “What did you guys order because I’m starving?”

“We ordered four large pizzas,” said Melissa.

“Seriously, pizza? No salad? I have to watch my amazing figure,” said Leah.

I glimpsed out the window; people were still protesting. I had imagined it would have all been over by now. Ricardo and some school friends were marching in the streets holding signs.

“Chloe, stay inside. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” asked Leah.

“I saw my neighbor, Ricardo. I just want to go talk to him.”

I *must* talk to him, I thought.

“Why?” Leah sighed.

“Because the guy killed by the police was his best friend.”

“There you go with that again.” Leah rolled her eyes. “Alright, hurry and I’ll sit with Chloe until you get back.”

“Thanks, just make sure Chloe gets some pizza and save me a slice.”

I walked into the crowd, bumping into people and apologizing. I yelled for Ricardo. I saw him but he was fading into the crowd. I focused my eyes on Ricardo’s red shirt and continued through the crowd like I was in a football game running between players holding the ball.

There was a soft tap on my shoulder, it was Ricardo. His eyes were red from screaming and chanting on the street while holding a sign. Protesting seemed like his career.

“What are you doing out here?”

“We won our volleyball championship game so we went to the Fountain. I wanted to tell you I am sorry for what happened to your friend.”

At first, I didn't grasp that it happened to a boy at his school and a close friend of his; but when I figured it out, my heart desired to show sympathy.

“Yeah, he was my best friend. We were on the basketball team together.”

“So, how did it happen?”

“They mistook him for a guy that robbed a gas station. The worst thing about the situation is they caught the real robber later that night.” As Ricardo was explaining what happened, his eyes began to turn red. “This is too dangerous. You shouldn't be out here.”

I became interested in more of the story. I wondered exactly what happened to Mitchell, and who could tell the story better than his best friend? So, I built up enough guts to ask him how Mitchell died.

“The police shot him by mistake, and nothing happened to the cop that shot him. That's why I'm out here fighting for justice.”

My heart fell below my stomach after listening to Ricardo. I never met the boy, but I mourned for him like

he was my friend, too. *That could've been anybody. It could've been Leo or Ricardo. Hell, it could've been me.*

“I’m sorry for your friend. I saw your post last night, and I wanted to check on you.”

I felt like I should help in any way that I could, but what could I do? *What if something happened to me?* I mean, the police were deep in downtown St. Louis on every corner. *What if they shot me by mistake for helping the protesters?*

As I turned to walk back to the ice cream parlor, Ricardo grabbed me by the arm.

“We have meetings in my basement every Saturday if you ever want to come to one.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Interesting, but I had too much to do with getting ready for prom and graduation. He kind of convinced me to go, though. My skin started to crawl as my mind imagined such a tragedy happening at Chester Academy. We didn’t have those problems so we didn’t worry about them. The kids at Chester should have joined in with the kids at Ricardo’s school to help protest. It would have shown them that other schools cared. Although, it might not have been a good idea because the kids at Chester were too rich and snobby to understand.

Leah was seated with her arms folded, face wrinkled, and cheeks flushed red.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked.

I had left her too long with Chloe so I gave her a sorry smirk, pushing my lips out for her to forgive me.

Everyone left. She had to stay behind to babysit Chloe while I chatted with Ricardo.

“What took you so long?”

“I wanted to ask Ricardo more questions about Mitchell, since he went to school with them.”

“You shouldn’t be talking to him about that stuff or even be around him. You know how jealous Leo is.”

“I was just curious, and we were childhood friends. Leo has nothing to be jealous of, and I won’t let him come between us because there’s *nothing* going on.”

Leah shoved the pizza in my chest and stormed out the door. Every time I brought up Ricardo, Leah’s face cheeks flushed and her lips clenched. So, why would Leo care if he wasn’t there? One thing was for sure, I had been Leah’s friend for so long that I knew she could twist a story. So, I made it a priority to rush home to call Leo.

When we got home, I ran upstairs.

“I’m glad to hear your voice.” I said as I laid on my stomach in the bed with my feet in the air and crossed my legs.

“How was it at the Fountain?”

“It was fun. I ran into Ricardo downtown.”

“What were you doing with him? I thought you were supposed to be hanging out with the team?”

“I wanted to talk to him more about his friend that was killed,” I said. “Did you know that a cop thought he had robbed a gas station so he killed him?”

“Sasha, you shouldn’t get involved in that. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I don’t think anything would happen to me. I’m just curious about the situation.”

I sat on my bed, shaking my leg and rolling my eyes, hoping for Leo to stop talking. There was nothing Leo could do or say that would stop me from getting involved and helping. Was I making a mistake? My lips began to quiver at the thought of protesting.

But I had questions about something that was new to me. *How could I help? What did protesters do that could seem so dangerous?* I started twirling my hair. Everyone in my circle was saying not to get involved, and it made me more curious.

I got off the phone with Leo, and I went to my computer to look at Facebook. This time, I went to Mitchell’s page to get more details. My heart fell into my chest after I glanced at all the comments people had posted on his timeline. Someone had videoed what happened to him and posted it on the Internet; he was as innocent as daylight.

The video bothered me, leaving a nasty taste in my mouth. *He deserved justice.* There were more questions that should have been explained from so many angles. *What happened to the police who killed that innocent child by mistake? Were there any witnesses?* My mind couldn’t rest, reflecting on everything that had happened to Mitchell. My brain was going to explode. My eyes rolled to the ceiling, feeling heavy as I contemplated these questions. I decided not to bother with that situation anymore, but a voice in my head kept telling

me, Keep scrolling and reading, there's more information about Mitchell you should know.

It was finally morning, the day my mom and I had planned to pick out my prom dress. I jumped out of bed, stretching my arms with a big smile on my face. I started dancing in the bathroom as I got dressed. I was excited about having girl time with my mom, searching for the perfect prom dress. Adrenaline filled my entire body.

On the way to the mall, I dozed off looking out the window of the car. Mitchell's name was bouncing all around in my head like a computer in sleep mode. I needed someone else's opinion at that moment, so I talked to my mom again.

"Mom, what do you think about the kid at Eastview High School, who was shot by a cop?"

"I saw it all over the news. Why would you ask me about that?"

"I've heard kids around my school talking about it," I gave her a puppy face hoping she would engage in a conversation.

I had to make something up. If my mom found out I had been talking to Ricardo after she told me to stay away from him, she would not give me the answer; then, she would probably turn the car around.

"I think it's horrible, but you shouldn't worry about that. That's the reason we send you to Chester."

She was talking like everybody else, telling me not to get involved.

“I just feel like I should do *something*.”

“Sasha, I don’t want you to get near that!” yelled Mom. “I would hate the sight of a policeman showing up at my doorstep, telling your dad and I something happened to you.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll drop it!” I yelled.

I wasn’t interested in her giving me the “what if” something happens to me parent story. I expected her to talk to me like an adult and have a conversation about real-life issues. I changed the conversation to the focus of the day, shopping for my prom dress.

When we made it to the store, I texted Leo to ask if he had his tuxedo yet so I could coordinate the colors we were wearing. He replied, “teal,” and sent me a picture of his tuxedo. It was beige with a teal vest.

“Thank God.” I danced and clapped my hands from excitement.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, Leo has the colors I want to wear for prom!”

“Stop acting crazy, and let’s finish looking for this dress.”

As Mom and I searched through a few stores and rummaged through several racks, we came across the perfect dress—a strapless teal dress with silver trim on the waistline that flared at the bottom.

“That’s perfect! I think you will look so pretty in that dress!” said Mom.

She bought me the dress but now we were in a rush to go home because she had to go to work. The hospital had called her in.

When we got home, Chloe and Dad were eager for me to show them my dress.

“Show it to us!” said Chloe.

“Okay, but promise you won’t go in my closet and try it on like you do with my other clothes.”

I pulled the dress from beneath the plastic and held it against my body as I twirled around.

“Wow, that’s a pretty gown! I can’t wait until you wear the dress on the day of the prom,” said Chloe.

I had to go call Leah and tell her about my dress. I asked her to come by the house later, but she was going to the movies with Cameron. So, I called Leo to come by the house, but he couldn’t because his parents trapped him into babysitting his brother while they went to a dinner. All my friends were busy. The walls seemed like they were crashing in on me with nothing to do and nowhere to go.

So, I went for a walk. As I walked through my neighborhood, I reminisced about all the things the neighborhood kids used to do. I couldn’t believe I was leaving all this behind for college.

I passed by Ricardo’s house and he and some friends were sitting on the porch. I waved and kept walking. But Ricardo ran up behind me.

“Hey, did you want to join us tonight?” asked Ricardo. “We have a meeting.”

“Not tonight but maybe some other time.”

I was *really* interested, but since everyone around me had been threatening me to not get involved, I decided that I better not.

Ricardo laughed and told me he would hold me to my promise.

I waved at Ricardo and walked home. That night I went to sleep because all my friends were occupied, and boredom crowded my mind. I wanted to join Ricardo’s meeting, but I had to focus more on school.

Sports ended, and the prom was coming that week. I had a lot on my plate, decorating the gym.

That talk of the school that week focused on people asking others to the prom and claiming how much fun they would have.

Leo and I would be the cutest in our teal colors. My heart started racing after my mind glanced into the future with Leo in his tuxedo and me later that night ripping it off him.

That afternoon at school, I met with the decoration committee to discuss their job duties.

“You guys did a good job of helping set up for the prom.”

“How are we supposed to clean the entire gym?” asked Jeremy.

“I’m glad you asked. Next week, for the first two days, we will excuse you from classes to clean the gym.”

Their eyes started to bulge out of their heads from excitement. They would do anything to get out of class.

“But you aren’t excused from finals. So, if you have a final to take in your class, I suggest you do that first and come to the gym afterward. But it is *very* important that the gym is clean before Wednesday because that only gives two days to set up for graduation.”

“Sounds like fun,” said Jeremy.

“See you all at the prom,” I said.

After a full week of studying for finals and decorating the gym, it was the night for the prom. Boy, was I ready; I couldn’t wait to step into Tropical Paradise with Leo.

Leah was running for homecoming queen, and she bugged me all week. Yes, I had the results for the contest, but it wouldn’t be fair if I told her. So, I admit to avoiding her that week—at least, the best I could.

Later that night, Mom curled my hair and pinned it into a pretty updo style.

We had all rented a limo, and they were on the way to get me. I glanced out the window and there was Ricardo, walking passed the house with his head down. He looked as if he was walking with a ghost and talking to it. There wasn’t much I could have said to him; me going to the prom would have probably made Ricardo feel more depressed about his friend not being able to attend their prom. The last thing I needed was for Leo to get upset witnessing me talking to Ricardo. So, I leaned my head

away from the window, continued putting on makeup and pretended he was not there.

The limo arrived and the doorbell rang. Leo was downstairs talking to my parents, and the echo of their voices traveled upstairs. I slowly strutted downstairs, like a beauty queen entering the royal ball. Leo smiled in approval and held my hand for a moment before he placed a corsage on my wrist.

Dad and Mom acted like I was going away for a long time.

“It’s just prom,” I said.

“Look at you. You look so beautiful. I want you to enjoy tonight and cherish it for the rest of your life.” Mom placed her hand on my face, rubbing it with her thumb.

“*Mom*,” I said, embarrassed.

Leo and I took pictures. Then I yelled for Leah and Cameron to come into the house so my parents could take some group pictures.

As we were leaving, Mom and Dad stood on the porch waving and yelling, “Goodbye!”

“Don’t forget we are staying at Leah’s parents’ lake house overnight!” I yelled.

Leah asked the chauffeur to drive around downtown a little before we went to the prom. We stood and yelled out of the sunroof, making memories.

When we arrived at the school, there were blue lights bouncing off the building. I was anxious to see how

shocked everyone would be when they saw how we decorated the gym and made it into a tropical paradise.

“Oh my gosh, this is beautiful,” said Leah.

“I know, but I can’t take all the credit. You can also thank my decorating committee, which none of you signed up for,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Sand covered the floor and the round tables had vibrant, tropical tablecloths. Each table had straw skirts with stuffed pineapples as centerpieces, and there were lit palm trees throughout the gym. The band played on the stage with a mural painting of the ocean behind them. It was very magical.

The food table had a Hawaiian-style buffet with several choices of tropical punch. Thankfully no one spiked the punch (that I knew of, anyway).

We danced all night. Cameron’s cousin’s band had everyone dancing the entire time. Later that night, it was time to announce prom king and queen. The contestants were Leah and Katie, a girl who was always competing against Leah.

Coach Davis, dressed in his orange seventies disco suit, came on the stage to announce the winners. I tried not focus on him because his chest hair was too revealing, and his bright suit stood out against the tropical theme.

“This year, your prom king and queen is...” Coach Davis hesitated, “Leah and Cameron!”

Leah acted so excited, and I started clapping and yelling, “Go Leah!”

After the announcement of our king and queen, they did the traditional dance. Leo and I danced more. One of my best nights ever.

Suddenly, Leah came to me with a suspicious smirk on her face.

“You knew all along, didn’t you? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Now, what fun would that be if you knew you were prom queen,” I said.

Leah grabbed me and Leo to take our prom pictures. We took more group pictures, and Leo and I took a couple’s picture.

After the prom, Leah suggested that we go downtown to take more pictures of each other beneath the Arch. She was insistent about taking pictures wearing her crown from the prom.

I tried to make them hurry at the Arch because I was getting exhausted, and we had a long drive ahead of us. It was time to get on the road. It was at least a three-hour drive and, by the time we made it there, it would be one o’clock in the morning.

We had a long night of dancing and taking pictures. The limo drove us to Leo’s parents’ house, where Cameron had parked his car. At last, we were headed to the Ozarks to Leah’s parents’ lake house!

Hours later, we drove on a gravel road; at the end of the driveway was a huge, log house surrounded by trees with a view of the lake in the background. The house had tall windows and beautiful landscaping.

We went inside to put our bags away, and Cameron and Leo went out to the backyard to start a campfire. Leah and I took off our gowns and put on something more comfortable. On the way outside to join the guys, Leah grabbed the liquor, and I grabbed the beer. Even though none of us were legally old enough to buy it, Leo and Cameron managed to get alcohol. I didn't know where they got it, and I didn't want to know.

The lake view was to die for. Leah's parents had lights on the deck that led to their yacht.

A heavy smell of fish from the lake and pine off the trees floated through the air. The two smells together weren't very pleasant. We heard the crickets chirping in the grass and the birds singing in the trees, which made our trip like a vacation.

As we sat near the lake, in the wooden lawn chairs made and bought from an Amish community, we started discussing all of our high school memories at Chester.

"Remember that time when Leo put gum in Mrs. Carter's chair, and she called his mom?" said Cameron.

"Yeah, that was when my mom came to the school and took me out of the classroom. I'm not telling what happened next," said Leo.

"I think we all know what happened," I said, laughing. "Because you couldn't even sit in your chair right for fifth period."

"What about the times Leah would buy brownies from the vending machine and ball them up, making the brownies look like turds. Then, when people stepped on

it, they thought they were actually stepping in poop,” Leo laughed.

“Oh, my gosh! You guys actually remember that!” said Leah.

“Man, I’m really going to miss Chester Academy,” I said.

We had so much to be thankful for, and I was grateful that I had such great friends.

“After graduation, we will be going our separate ways. We have to hang out as much as possible this summer,” said Cameron.

Tears started escaping from my eyes and the outdoors became a big blur. What about our relationships? I wondered if they would last because we all got accepted to different colleges, except Leah and Cameron. I was going to Howard University, Leo got accepted to Mizzou, and Leah and Cameron were going to Penn State together.

“I’m going to miss, my bestie.” I stared at Leah and embraced her.

“We’ll still see each other on holidays and during the summers,” she said.

“I’m just really glad that I have my friends and nothing tragic happened to any of us like that guy at Eastview,” I said.

“Seriously...” said Leah. “You ruined the moment.”

“What do you mean?” I asked Leah. “That boy didn’t even have a chance to go to his prom or make it to his graduation.”

“Can we just *not* talk about that? I just want to enjoy my time with my friends without discussing that stuff,” Leah said.

I eyeballed Leah; it disgusted me that she was being so inconsiderate. But, I just dropped the entire conversation. They weren’t mature enough or interested in talking about important things, apparently.

“Cut it out, Leah. You have to consider how Sasha feels about the situation,” said Cameron.

Leah eyes popped out of her head like she would slice off Cameron’s head, but that was Leah; when things didn’t go her way, she thought everybody was siding against her.

“Let’s just call it a night,” said Leo.

We all went inside the log cabin but, instead of going to bed, we shared more memories lying around the fireplace, tucked underneath blankets. I glanced at the clock, and it was four o’clock in the morning.

When I got home that afternoon, I hoped my parents would be somewhere else so they wouldn’t notice my keys fumbling at the door. They didn’t seem to be around, so I dragged my body upstairs, like a zombie. I walked into my room and gazed at my bed.

Oh my, I don’t even remember if we even went to sleep the night before. I crashed in my bed.

Later, there was a knock at my door. I opened it and found Mom waiting for a conversation.

“How was the prom?”

“We had so much fun, but I will tell you more after I take a nap. I’m too exhausted to even talk about the prom.”

“Okay, babe. Get some rest, and we’ll talk later.”

My body was moving in slow motion like a dead man walking. I needed a long nap so I could recharge like the Energizer Bunny and tell her whatever she wanted to hear.

My eyes were bloodshot, and both my eyelids felt like a bee had stung me. As I laid on the bed, Mitchell came across my mind. Something was wrong because this boy was constantly on my mind whenever it was time for me to rest or take a nap.

CHAPTER THREE

At school, we were in the week of taking our finals; I aced them all. We were still cleaning and getting ready for graduation—the last responsibility I would have at Chester.

I also had to prepare a speech for graduation, and I had no idea what I would say to my classmates. Graduation was less than a week away! I wanted my speech to travel from my heart and not sound programmed, like the familiar “you are the future” speeches. I was hoping I could write a speech that my classmates could remember and cherish.

All of my friends were busy with their families that were coming into town. I couldn’t wait until my relatives arrived, especially my grams.

Later that week, on our way to the bus station to get my grams, the first thing I could expect was for her to pinch my cheeks—which I hated. My grandma always would leave my cheeks sore for hours.

I wondered, *What if I expressed my thoughts to my grandma about the death of Mitchell? Would she sit comfortably having that conversation with me? Who could talk about this better than her? She lived during those tough times.*

When we got my grams from the bus station, I ran and gave her a hug; she grabbed my cheeks. *I knew it! And the pain...* When we got in the car, my nose wiggled from the mint candy she had been eating and the mothball scent from her clothes.

We pulled into the driveway and went inside, and more of my relatives waited for us to arrive at the house. How nice to have them around; but it wouldn't be fun without Uncle Joe, who always cracked jokes with a cigar hanging from his mouth, and his wife, my Aunt Louise, who had to have bourbon as soon as she stepped through the door. I was so glad they all made it to see me graduate. It was like a big family reunion.

"Where is your dad's stash?" Aunt Louise came tapping on my shoulder. "I know your daddy got one in this big house."

She already smelled like she'd been to a bar. She didn't realize she did, but I noticed it pouring out of her pores. She didn't care, though; and if you tried to tell her, she would curse you like a sailor. So, no one bothered her about her drinking.

"It's downstairs in the basement. He has a bar down there."

"Sounds like this might be the best graduation ever. I done hit the jackpot."

We had a long night of talking, laughing, and playing games. There was nothing like having my relatives around to support me for my accomplishments. I had a big smile on my face knowing that they were all there for me.

That entire morning, everybody seemed nervous. *I was the one graduating from high school.*

I stayed locked in my room, pacing and reciting my speech in the mirror. I hadn't even made it to the graduation, and I was drowning in sweat. My hands kept forming fists to keep the moisture off my palms.

Mom's eyes filled like an aquarium, and they were red all morning. She was such an emotional person.

When we arrived at the school, all my classmates were dressed in their burgundy gowns. I was sweating more than ever. We began to position ourselves to march in. I had to be the first person in line so I could go straight to the stage.

We had great speakers, and they showed a remembrance video. My friends and I had some memories they shared to the audience on our class slideshow. They caught the time when we were sitting beneath our favorite tree, and Leo and I were dressed as Beyoncé and Jay-Z for Halloween.

The moment had come for me to give my speech. I had so many frogs in my stomach, but my biggest concern was not falling flat on my face in my heels.

I started my speech; the more I spoke, the more my stomach became at ease. I began with:

“To my fellow classmates, we've made it to our high school graduation. I want you to look around at your friends and don't forget their faces because, as life goes on, that's what happens. We will go in different directions and leave all this behind. I want us to feel blessed that we made it this far. Some kids didn't make it to their graduation, but you did. Now is the time that really matters—the time to make our parents proud. It's

time to give back to them after they paved a way for us...”

I wasn't scared anymore. My muscles flexed like a brave knight who had conquered a country. All I could sense was my mouth moving and the crowd becoming a big blur. As I finished my speech, my classmates stood and became loud.

My classmates yelled. “Woohoo!” They were clapping and whistling. I was proud to get a standing ovation.

Mom and Dad were so proud of me for graduating at the top of my class.

“You gave a great speech,” Mom said, shedding tears as she pulled me closer and kissed my forehead.

Moments later, I wandered through the crowd to go take pictures with my friends. Leah and I hugged for a very long time. We couldn't let go. Leaving someone you loved so dearly behind was almost as bad as burying them beneath the dirt.

“Come by on Sunday so we can spend some time together,” I said. We couldn't let go of each other.

“As soon as my family leaves, I'm all yours,” she cried.

It was already beginning. The distance of our relationships. We would have to spend a lot of time together before we went our separate ways. It was like someone stabbing me with a knife over and over against the surface of my heart.

After graduation, we went to the Olive Garden to celebrate my graduation. I was out of high school, and I was no longer a kid. I was officially an adult who didn't require parental supervision anymore.

"Can I order some wine?"

"Really, Sasha, you aren't that grown yet," replied Dad. "You can ask me that four years from now and I'll think about it."

At least *I* thought I was grown. He could have let me sip a small glass. After all, Leah's parents had let me drink a glass of wine whenever I had dinner at their house. Her mom said it was good for the soul but mostly kept you from having a heart attack. I chose not to tell my parents about that. It was great spending time with relatives. I wished I could have graduated every month, especially with all the cards that I had received and the money that was placed inside them.

Before I could blink my eyes, Saturday had come and all my friends were also busy entertaining their relatives that came in from out of town. I sat on the porch with my Uncle Buck who was relaxing in the rocking chair and spitting out chewing tobacco.

Ricardo saw us and came over.

"How've you been?" he asked.

"I've been doing pretty good. All my friends are busy today so I'm just relaxing with my uncle and listening to music," I said pointing to my earbuds. "How are you holding up? Are you still going downtown to protest?"

"Every chance I can get. By the way, what are you doing tonight? You ready to come to one of our rally

meetings? They are very informative, and it will answer all you need to know about what really happened to my friend, Mitchell.”

In my head, I told myself that I had been waiting for a long time for him to ask me again. Every time I talked about it with my friends, they showed no interest. I would get eyes rolling or them sucking their teeth, which frustrated me because I wanted us to share how we felt about things instead of sweeping them under the rug.

I hesitated giving Ricardo an answer, but I had already planned on going.

“I don’t know. Wouldn’t it be a little dangerous?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t let anything happen to you, and I wouldn’t force you to do anything you aren’t comfortable doing.”

“Okay, I will come by and give it a try.”

“Cool, you can meet me at my house around seven.”

As, Ricardo walked away, I started having second thoughts. *What have I gotten myself into?*

This was the moment I had been waiting for, but would I regret going? It seemed like it would be very helpful to go to these meetings for the experience.

Uncle Buck, smiled at me as I got up to go inside. He was really hard of hearing, so I didn’t think he caught much of our conversation.

I tried calling Leo, but he didn’t answer. Everybody was still busy.

I didn't tell Dad where I was going because he would have been against it. Everybody else was already against me even being curious about the situation. So, I kept my mouth shut and told him I was running to the store.

The palms of my hands started sweating as I walked to Ricardo's house. If I knocked soft, no one would hear me, and I couldn't turn around and go home. I arrived at his door and Mrs. Johnson, Ricardo's mom, answered.

"It's so good to see you, Sasha," she greeted me. "I haven't seen you in a long time. Give me a hug."

I gave her a hug and asked if Ricardo was home.

"Ricardo and his friends are downstairs in the basement."

I went downstairs and there were people lounging around like they were at a mini club. I found a spot and sat on a well-worn couch that had potential to be a home for rodents.

Ricardo strolled towards me, thanking me for coming. He grabbed my hand and paraded me around, introducing me to his other Eastview friends, Rashad and Victoria. Victoria was Mitchell's girlfriend, who dressed like a tomboy. A little more and her pants would've been hugging her knees; she also wore big hoop earrings that could've been a bracelet for an infant. Rashad seemed timid, hesitating to open his mouth; he was on the basketball team with Mitchell and Ricardo.

I must admit that Eastview had some fine black boys that attended their school, but their style of fashion was different from the kids at Chester.

“Hey everybody, this is my friend, Sasha. She’s joining us to help protest for Mitchell.”

“Does she even *know* Mitchell?” one guy shooting pool said.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Ricardo. “She is here to help, and it’s good that we can get people from other schools to help us.”

The dude sucked in through his teeth and kept shooting pool.

Ignoring Ricardo, Victoria narrowed her eyes. “So, how *do* you know Mitchell again?”

“I don’t know him. I’m just here to help.”

After I told her that me and Ricardo played together as childhood friends, her face became at ease and she started smiling. I told her I went to Chester Academy.

“You go to *that* rich school. You wouldn’t know about anything that happens to the black boys in public school,” she said.

“No, I don’t, but Ricardo and I have been talking back and forth about the situation. When I saw the video of what happened to him on social media, it turned my stomach inside out. After that moment, I wanted to do something because that whole situation wasn’t right.”

“Yeah, it was a tragedy,” said Rashad.

They began by talking about making signs for Mitchell and said the rally they were planning on attending would be at the city center that week.

Since I was there, I had to ask the million-dollar question about what I witnessed in the video.

“Do you guys know what happened to the policeman who did it?”

“There was an investigation and the St. Louis Police Department ruled that he used appropriate force and complied with policies at the time of the shooting. Then the district attorney declined to prosecute the officer because he said his life was threatened at the time of the incident,” said Ricardo.

“That’s weird because I thought he was coming from basketball practice.”

“He rode with me and Rashad to Rashad’s house, and then he walked home. He never made it home.” Ricardo started sniffing, wiping tears off his face with his St. Louis Cardinals baseball jersey. After getting upset, he slammed his hands into the wall making a loud noise like a bomb.

“Is everything all right down there, Ricardo?” yelled his mom from upstairs.

“Yeah, Ma.”

Ricardo was too upset to continue to talk so I turned to Victoria for more answers.

“Did anyone see the truth?” I asked.

“The person who recorded the video of the entire incident, but the police still stuck to their word by defending that cop.”

Streaks of red lightning began appearing on the whites of my eyes, and I could feel the blood boiling in

my veins. Confused whether to cry or be angry, but my body sensed both. After they told me the story, all I could imagine was this young boy as a target, shot yelling for his momma in the middle of the road. Damn, how sad!

This was too much for me. I started to shed tears because this wasn't fair. I called Ricardo to the corner of the room.

I began sniffing like I had a head cold.

"Are you okay?" asked Ricardo as he wiped the tears off my face with his thumb.

"Not really. That was a lot for me to process."

"I know, but it will only make you stronger," said Ricardo. "Now, you finally woke up."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember that day when you dropped me off downtown and you were looking at me like I was crazy?" asked Ricardo.

"Yeah, I remember."

"I told you to wake up. This is what I was talking about. Now you know what we are going through and it's just not in our area. It's around the entire U.S."

As I walked home, I mourned for Mitchell; I mourned for his family, and I mourned for his friends that had to live the rest of their lives knowing the truth but living by lies.

I ran in the house and went to my room. I couldn't face the pressure of holding all the hurt myself; I had to

talk to someone. I called Leo, and he finally answered his phone.

“Hey, I just came from Ricardo’s house.”

There was at least a minute of silence on the phone. The silence on the phone allowed me to hear the crickets chirping from outside the window. Leo sighed, making a long whale-like blow out of his mouth.

“What do you mean you went to his house?”

I sunk into the bed wondering if I should say anything because the tension through the phone was noticeable. So, I answered like I was a baby.

“I’ve been telling everyone that I was curious about this the entire time, and I wanted to help. It’s not a big deal.”

“How does that make me look?” Leo asked. “It makes me look like a fool, my girl going to some other dude’s house.”

“Leo, it’s not even like that!” I shouted. “I’m not into him. I was just going for a cause.”

“Well, Sasha, you can keep going because I don’t want to talk to you anymore. It’s over.”

“Are you going to break-up with me because I went to a meeting for a protest?”

“That’s not the point. You’ve been hanging out with this dude so much lately that I think you should just go be with him.”

“How childish can you be?”

Silence. Leo had nothing else he wanted to express to me. I just needed to hear him breathe to give me a signal that we could work through this and everything could go back to normal.

“Hello?”

“Leo?”

“Hello?”

I could hear the phone beep, and I realized that Leo had hung up.

“You gotta be kidding me!”

I was more upset than ever. The walls were caving in on me and my world had sunk to a place where there was no return. I had no words. Leo had ripped my heart into pieces. My eyes began to fill, and I couldn't stop the water from running down my face.

All I could do at that moment was lay on my bed and try to sleep it all off. *He'll be over this in the morning, but what if he's not?* That could have been one of my worst days ever. It wasn't an argument where we would kiss and make up at school tomorrow. I realized that Leo and I were no more.

My sister, Chloe, came in the room.

“Are you okay, Sasha?” asked Chloe. “I listened to you yelling at Leo.”

“Yeah, I'm fine. Just shut my door.”

After Chloe left, I pulled the blanket to cover my entire body, curling into my bed like a turtle hiding in its shell, and pressed my head into the pillow.

I remembered just the other day telling Leah that her relationship with Cameron would not work in college and my relationship didn't even make it that far.

Morning came, and my hair looked like I had spiked it with mounds of gel and my mascara had drained from my eyes to my cheeks. I resembled someone from a horror movie about to jump from the bushes and scare someone out of their pants. Good thing school was out. I didn't have to face the people there, asking what happened to me and Leo while I pouted through the hallway.

I went downstairs, and Mom was pouring herself a cup of coffee.

“Are you okay, Hun? Because you don't look okay.”

“Yeah, I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Why don't you look for a summer job?” asked Mom. “It's the best way to keep your mind occupied.”

So that's what I did. I browsed through several job websites to search for places that were hiring. First, I had to call Leo to get confirmation that we were really ending our relationship. If he answered his phone that would be a sign that he was just going through a phase, but he didn't answer the phone. At that moment, it dawned on me that it was over between us. I just wished he would have seen my point of view instead of being a jealous jerk.

I came across an advertisement stating that the Fountain was hiring so I called them. I called the

manager, Pam, and she told me to come around noon for an interview. That was quick, and it was almost noon. I went upstairs to get ready for my interview.

Mom and Dad had already gone to work, so I had to take Chloe with me. I went upstairs to get Chloe so we could head downtown.

Walking in the Fountain, I asked the waitress for Pam.

“Chloe, go sit at the booth where I can see you.”

The manager wouldn't even realize that she was there because she had her iPad, so she wouldn't disturb me.

I sat at the rear of the parlor at a booth near the bathroom, praying no one would bomb the bathroom while I was being interviewed.

Minutes later, a tall woman with spiral curls of red hair walked toward me.

“Hello, I'm Pam. Sorry to keep you waiting, but we are very busy during this time of the year.

That's obvious, I thought to myself. What ice cream parlor wouldn't be busy during the summer?

“So, tell me a little about yourself?”

“I am a hard worker and during the summer, when school is out, this job would be great for me,” I said while tapping my foot underneath the table.

“Great, I will call you with a start date,” she said. “It was nice meeting you.”

“Thank you so much,” I said with a big smile on my face. “I won't let you down.”

She gave me the job without asking me a lot of questions.

She seemed happy, but she kept stressing that they were *very busy* in the summer.

I sprinted to the front of the parlor to get Chloe. I told her to hurry because I couldn't wait any longer to do my victory dance. As soon as I got outside, I grabbed Chloe and spun her around and started screaming.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, your big sister just got a job!”

We made it home, and I went upstairs to my room because I couldn't wait to share the good news with my friends. I tried giving Leo a call again, and he still didn't answer. That's when I decided to make that my last call to Leo. I could've called Leah, but I wasn't up for the “I told you so” lecture about our break-up.

I got on the Internet and cruised through social media, but nothing interested me. Somehow, I ended up searching “innocent black kids killed by the police” and so many articles appeared. I noticed that we recently had a shooting in Ferguson, Missouri with another African-American teen, which was forty minutes away from Baldwin. This wasn't just happening in St. Louis, but it happened in different states.

I had no one to talk to, so I went to Ricardo's.

“Back again?” said his mom. “It must interest you to try and make a difference. Go ahead, baby, they are downstairs in the basement.”

I gave her an innocent, good-girl smile and went downstairs. I hoped they weren't having another rally meeting because the last one was too devastating for me.

I gave Ricardo a soft punch on his upper shoulder while he was talking to his friends.

"What brings you back to my castle?" he asked.

"Just to talk."

"It has to be more than that. Follow me over here so we can talk."

Me and Ricardo went to a corner in the room where there was no one to disturb us.

"Okay. Well, my boyfriend broke up with me because he was upset about the fact that I came to your house to the rally meeting, my friend Leah is busy and, yes, I have to admit that I'm interested in this protesting."

"Oh wow, you've just graduated, and your life is suddenly changing and your rich friends... never mind. Maybe it's for the best."

Ricardo cleared his throat, smiled, and moved closer to me. *Was he flirting with me?* I wouldn't say that he wasn't cute, because he was; I just couldn't let it go that far with him in case Leo and I rekindled things. If Leo and I didn't, we could remain friends. I was going to college in a few months so I couldn't make any promises.

"What are you doing for the rest of the night?"

"Nothing much. All my friends are too busy with their families."

I had to hurry and change the subject. All I could imagine at that moment was Leo and what he would do if he found out Ricardo was flirting with me. I didn't show any signs of being interested in him in that way; I was only interested in helping him protest.

I glanced at Ricardo and took a few steps back.

"I will help in any way possible, but I'm scared."

"Look, Sasha, you don't have to do something you don't want to do," said Ricardo. "People really do get hurt during our rallies, and I wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

"I'll just try it one time and, if it isn't for me, then I won't do it again. Maybe it will be good for my resume, since I'm going to school to be a lawyer." I placed my hand over my mouth and chuckled.

Going home wasn't an option, and Ricardo had been making this so easy for me. I missed his friendship so much. We laughed and talked about things I liked to talk about, and so much more. Yes, we flirted, but we didn't overstep any boundaries. Leo and I were no more, so technically I wasn't cheating on anyone.

"I apologize for running out of the meeting the other day, but it was too much information for me to process. I went on a scavenger hunt on the Internet to find out more of what happened to Mitchell."

"This really has your attention."

"Yeah, at Chester the kids are different. Either the kids have cars or we aren't allowed to walk home for safety reasons. But literally almost everyone has their own car."

“Why did you stop coming over to play when we were kids?”

I hesitated; when me and Leah became friends, I made her my focus.

“I guess things changed for me, but I do miss our friendship. We grew apart because of the different schools we attended.”

I missed out on so much throughout the years. I threw our friendship away, but fate brought us together again.

“I should be headed home because it’s almost time for dinner, so I’ll see you later.”

“Why don’t you take my number, just in case you want to call me sometime,” he said.

“Sure.”

I walked home, dragging my legs from Ricardo’s house. I couldn’t get my mind off of him. His spirit put me at ease. I hadn’t had that feeling in a long time. If I could, I would have spent the entire night with him talking about real-life issues. Leo and I didn’t even have those conversations. I glanced at Ricardo with a smile; he was standing on the porch, smiling and waving at me. The entire time we talked, I didn’t even have Leo on my mind. It was like Ricardo yanked that part out of my life and repaired my heart.

I walked into the house and started helping Mom set the table. We all sat at the table to eat.

“Where have you been?” Mom asked while chewing her food and cutting through her meat.

“I’ve been hanging out with Ricardo.”

“Why are you hanging out with that boy? What have I told you? It’s going to make Leo mad.”

“Why shouldn’t I be hanging around Ricardo?”

“Because he is bad news. You told me that he goes downtown with those people protesting, and that’s just asking for trouble.”

“But that doesn’t make him a bad person. His best friend was shot and killed by a police officer when he was coming home from basketball practice because he was accused of robbing a store. Sooo... how does that make him a bad person, again?”

“I understand that, honey, but you shouldn’t get yourself involved with that,” said Mom. “So, that’s where you went last night?”

“Mom, would you just cut it out? Ricardo isn’t like that. Why are you judging him? Is it because he went to a bad public school and the students’ parents don’t have money like the parents at Chester?”

Dad slammed his cup on the dining table and stood. “Be quiet, Sasha, and listen to your mom.”

“Why? Perfect Leo broke up with me,” I said. “Ricardo has been my friend since we moved into this area, and he made me feel like I’m wanted. He showed me what real friends are like.”

“Stop it!” yelled Dad. “I’ll be damned if I answer my front door and have the police standing there telling me something happened to my daughter just before she goes off to college. Your mom and I work hard so you and your sister can attend schools like Chester and wouldn’t have to worry about things like that.”

“But, Dad.”

“No, but Dad. You stay away from that stuff because people get hurt every day downtown protesting for a lost cause.”

Did my dad say that? Suddenly, I lost my appetite and went to my room and laid on my bed crying. My eyes were twitching from anger. I had to get out of the house, but how could I?

I was grown, and they couldn't stop me. Had they forgotten I finished school? I could make my own decisions and that's exactly what I intended to do.

I called Leah and she answered her phone.

“I've been calling you for two days.”

“My family just left a few hours ago.”

“Are you okay? I can hear the anger in your voice.”

“No, Leo broke up with me last night and I have no one to talk to.”

“Why did you guys break up?” asked Leah. “Was it because of college?”

“I went to Ricardo's house yesterday to one of those rally meetings. Lately, I've been so interested in the death of Mitchell. Once they told me what happened, I left because I couldn't stomach anymore.”

“I told you not to get involved with him because you know Leo is a jealous guy,” said Leah.

“Yeah, you did, and I was just curious. I told my parents and they basically just yelled down my throat. I just feel so bad. Can you come over to see me?”

“Not tonight, me and Cameron are going out because we haven’t been spending any time together. But I’m coming over tomorrow to spend the entire day with you. I love you,” said Leah.

“Love you, too, and see you tomorrow,” I said sniffing my nose.

At least I still had my best friend giving me advice. I gave Ricardo a call to tell him about my situation. He answered.

“I just got into a huge argument with my parents.”

“About what?”

“I told them that I was going to protest with y’all.”

As I was listening to him, he began to sound like my parents.

“If they don’t feel comfortable with me hanging around you, then you should listen to them,” said Ricardo. “I don’t want to start confusion between you and your parents, Sasha.”

I ended the call with Ricardo to think things through.

I would not listen to anyone. It was my time to take a stand and do something for myself. It was time for little Ms. Sasha to be a rebel! I was out of school and who could stop me from doing what I felt was right?

I got my cell phone and dialed Ricardo again.

“I made up my mind, and I’m going to join you guys for the next rally.”

I would march and yell with them until my throat grew sore, and I would do it with or without my parents' approval.

My mom came into the room, and I told Ricardo I would talk to him later.

“Who was that, honey?”

“It was just Leah,” I told her. “I’ll call her back later.”

“I know it seems like we are being hard on you, but we want nothing but the best for you. I know you used to play with Ricardo when you were kids, but people change as they get older. Your father and I love you and we couldn’t stand the thought of you getting hurt.”

“Why haven’t you and Dad ever talked about these things that go on? How could you guys possibly ignore such things that happen in our city or even to African Americans?”

“It’s not that we ignore those things but, with our careers, we try to forget about them. We have to care for both white and black people, and we can’t just side with one. Deep down, we know how we feel about things that go on. but, if we continue to dwell on the past, things will never change. We want the best for you and your sister.”

“I know, Mom, but you have to allow me to make my own decisions or learn from my mistakes.”

“I know, baby, but just make sure you make good decisions. I love you.” Mom kissed me on my forehead and walked to the door.

“By the way, how did your interview go?” she asked.

“I got the job.”

“I’m so proud of you.” Mom walked back to me and placed her arms around me and gave me a tight hug.

“And what about Leo?”

“I tried calling him again, but he didn’t answer so I quit calling him. I guess he moved on.”

“A boy like that wouldn’t know a beautiful thing if he had it wrapped around his neck,” said Mom. “You will be in college in two months, and you will find so many guys so much better than Leo.”

What she did not understand was that I wasn’t looking for someone else. It was always easier said than living that moment. Leo gave me my first kiss and was the only one I had ever kissed. He made me feel like I was the only one for him. When I was with him, I felt complete with no worries. If we were on a deserted island, we would’ve survived from the love that surrounded us. It would be one long summer without him.

“Thanks, Mom.”

I was thankful she came and talked to me. My body became at ease but, a few minutes earlier, I was about to explode. That was a stressful time in my life. I didn’t have to worry about that in high school.

Since my life was changing so drastically, I wondered what I would do to occupy my summer? Would I protest with Ricardo and his friends? Or would I sit in the house, go to work, and wait for college?

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning, my phone rang. It was Ricardo.

“Can you meet me and Victoria at the park around the corner?”

“Okay, just give me a couple of minutes to get dressed.”

I wasn't a morning person, especially when school was out. *Why did they want me to meet them at the park?*

I eased forward on the bed and stretched my arms. Sleep still haunted my body. It must have been important if they called me out in the morning. I went to the bathroom to get ready. Chloe was up and lounging around. I'd let her tag along with me. She could go play while I hung out with Ricardo and Victoria, and it would be a good excuse to tell mom if she asked.

“Chloe don't tell Mom and Dad I'm going to the park to see Ricardo. If you do, I won't take you anywhere else with me.”

“Okay, I won't tell Mom as long as you watch me go swimming today.”

Could Chloe be blackmailing me? I had no choice but to do it.

I could not be at the park long because Leah was coming over. I texted her before we left the house so she would bring her swimsuit, and we could go for a swim. She promised me last night she was coming, and it was time for her to raid my dad's stash in the basement.

As we walked to the park, Ricardo and Victoria were standing near a tree. I told Chloe to go play while I talked to my friends. Chloe went sprinting to the monkey bars.

“Hey, guys! What’s going on?”

“Nothing, we just wanted to see what you’ve been doing today,” said Ricardo.

“Nothing much, but my friend Leah is coming over to hang out with me at my house,” I said. “We’ll probably sit by the pool and just relax and talk about how much we will miss each other when we go off to college.”

“That sounds nice,” Victoria said. “But what we really wanted was to talk to you to see if you could gather some of your Chester friends to join us in protesting.”

“I don’t know. Plus, all my Chester friends don’t want me to do it.”

“Well, we understand,” said Ricardo. “We have friends at Eastview who are scared to protest with us.”

I knew from their facial expressions that I was asking too many questions. I was making them relive the sad moment of their friend’s death. But, if I protested, I needed to know about my safety.

“How do people get hurt at these rallies? My parents are really concerned that something is going to happen to me.”

“Well, I won’t let anything happen to you. But it can go several ways,” Ricardo said. “First, there are the cops

that can either hurt you or place you in jail. But, as long as you're not doing anything stupid, they won't bother you. Then, there are the people who are protesting against us, saying we are always acting like victims. One man actually had the nerve to tell me to get over it because slavery ended a long time ago."

"What! And what did you say to him?"

"I said nothing because you don't want to let your anger get the best of you. One little mistake can cause the whole protest to go wrong. Then you could give the police a reason to arrest you. At the rallies, all we want is justice for Mitchell and our voices to be heard."

"So, what about the white teenagers who are killed by policemen?" I asked. "Shouldn't they have a voice speaking for them?"

"They should, and we do it for all. But more young African-American boys are being killed on a daily basis, and there is no justice for them. The cops either go free or get a slap on the wrist."

"But we are all Americans, and we have to protect each other. I think we should just call it 'American Lives Matter' or 'Justice Matters' because we are all under one nation," I said.

Ricardo went into this long speech about how they don't care about us black people.

"How is that?"

"What I'm trying to say, when a white kid goes on a massive shooting, they say he has a mental problem or they have to dig deeper into the crime. But when a black kid gets shot or does the shooting, he's a thug."

To me, all of it was contradictory. My parents taught me to love everybody and not just a certain group. I did want justice for Mitchell, but I also wanted justice for all families that went through these situations.

“This is really confusing to me,” I said.

“Over the past centuries, young black kids have been shot by police officers by mistake—or could it be a mistake?”

“But aren’t they trained to kill?”

“Yes, but only if the situation gets out of hand or someone is shooting back,” he said. “But, at the end of the day, the supposed victim doesn’t even have a gun on him. All he has is a cell phone or maybe a dime bag.”

I wanted to hear Victoria’s view; besides, she was Mitchell’s girlfriend.

“What is it like for you, Victoria? How do you feel about all of this?”

“You can call me Vickie, by the way. But with all this going on, I really don’t know what to say. No matter what we do or what happens, it will not bring Mitchell back. Can you imagine going to the prom by yourself and your date not showing up to be by your side or waiting every night for a phone call just to hear ‘What are you doing?’ or ‘I love you’? No matter how much I walk up and down those streets, marching and screaming, it won’t bring my baby back. It can’t take away the pain and the hurt I feel every day. I will always remember this time in my life.” Victoria’s eyes began to water.

My stomach started turning as she talked. Ignoring my stomach, I placed my arms around her and squeezed her tightly.

I became speechless and couldn't respond to Victoria. This was the first time I cared about something that was so meaningful. This differed from Leah breaking a nail or Cameron losing the football game. This situation was above anything that happened at Chester.

"It will be okay, Victoria." More than anything, she was screaming for support and someone to be there for her during this time.

"Guys, thanks for getting me out of the house but I really have to go. Here is my phone number, Victoria. Put it in your cell phone. Maybe we can hang out sometime."

"I hope you really think about protesting with us," said Ricardo. "You could make a difference, and it would be helpful if others join us."

"I'll think about it."

Even though I had already made up my mind that I would help.

I yelled to Chloe as she was swinging on the monkey bars. "Let's go!"

"But I just want to stay a little longer," cried Chloe.

"We are going back so you can go swimming, and Leah is on the way to the house."

Chloe would stop doing anything to go swimming. Yeah, it was a little trick to get her off the playground. It

was not a good time to have an argument with her; she would tell Momma where we went this morning.

I was ready for some much-needed girl time with Leah. I hadn't been with my bestie in a long time. I missed my bestie so much and was hoping we would have happy thoughts and lots of laughter.

We walked on the sidewalk to our house and there was Leah, waiting for us in her car.

Leah had her arms folded. "Where have you guys been?"

"I took Chloe to the park for a little. Hey, Bestie! I haven't seen you in a while. I miss you so much. Are we drifting apart already? I hope it's not like this in college. We have to visit each other."

"No, we've just been busy after graduation, but nothing can come between our friendship."

"Let me go upstairs to put on my swimsuit. Chloe, you can go put yours on too because you have been bothering me about swimming all week."

"Wait, before we go swimming, I need to go to the basement just to get a small glass," said Leah.

"Make sure you get a little glass because my dad has been noticing his bottles were getting low, and I'm the only teenager in the house so he is going to blame me."

After changing into my bathing suit, I went outside to the pool. Chloe was swimming, and Leah was relaxing on the lounge chairs with a small glass of vodka and Sprite.

"I'm working on my summer tan," she said

I sat by Leah, so we could have our girl talk while I supervised Chloe in the pool.

“Have you seen or talked to Leo?” I asked

Leah rolled her eyes at me like I had taken my nails and scraped them against a chalkboard.

“You should just move on,” responded Leah. “He’s not even worth the breath.”

“Why did you say that? Do you know something I don’t know?”

Leah changed the subject. “No, but anyway, what have you been up to?”

An arch came to my eyebrows. Leah was hiding something from me but not telling.

“Leah, what do you know about Leo? I asked. You are supposed to be my best friend.”

“It’s nothing, seriously. I’ve been talking to Cameron, and he told me that Leo was just really upset with you.”

“Is that it?” I was getting annoyed talking about Leo because he had no reason to be upset with me. It was insecurities and jealousy that got us in that situation. “Anyways, I did get a summer job at the Fountain.”

“A job? You are about to go off to college. Why do you need a job?” asked Leah.

“I just need to get my mind off of Leo.”

“Well, that is a good way to keep you busy for the summer.”

“I’ve been hanging out with Ricardo and his friends, too.”

She narrowed her eyes, tightening her lips together like she was jealous.

“Why are you hanging out with them?”

“He was my childhood friend. I have known Ricardo for a long time. Plus, all my real friends have been too busy for me lately.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? That’s what got you into this mess with Leo, and you still chose to hang around that guy?”

“Yeah, I just wanted to know more about the incident. I also met Mitchell’s girlfriend.”

Leah glanced at me and rolled her eyes.

“Why did you look at me like that?”

“Obviously, it seems like your real friends are too busy for you so it looks like you just went out and got new friends.”

“It’s not like that. I’m just interested in something other than getting a pedicure or shopping for Chanel. These people have been through so much because of this tragedy, and that’s all you can say?”

“Sasha, people die every day and it just so happens that boy got shot. What they need to do is get over it and stop acting like victims. All that marching to Zion is not going to bring back their precious little Mitchell.”

Did Leah say that? Of all the people in the world, I didn’t expect Leah would say such hurtful words.

“Leah, you shouldn’t say things like that. You have no sympathy for people. I don’t know what goes on in your head sometimes. You have to understand that people who have witnessed such terrible things have to cope with that, and this is the only way they know how. They’ve lost a good friend who was walking home from a basketball game. Unfortunately, he didn’t have a Mercedes or a BMW to drive home like the kids at Chester, so he walked home and, being a young black male, he became a victim. Since you have a black friend, I thought you would understand, but ever since I started talking about this situation, you just turned your back to me!”

“I just don’t care for that type of stuff. Black and white males get killed every day, but do you see me hanging around wanting to ask questions or get involved with that? The world has changed, and racism doesn’t exist. It’s not the eighteen-hundreds anymore. Black people get paid for their work now. And if they can’t march for all races, then there’s no need to march at all. I can’t believe you are even bothered with that type of stuff.”

“Leah, I have no more words for you right now. You can go. Chloe, get out of the water; it’s time to go in the house. Oh, and maybe I will go see what my real friends are doing tonight so we can go march to Zion. But I would have to be careful because I might get stabbed in the back by my best friend who doesn’t support me.”

“I’m out. If this is what friendship means then I don’t want to be a part of it.” Leah stomped her feet and stormed out the front door.

I ran to my room and slammed my door. I was furious. I was so mad that I could have punched a hole in the wall. Leah and I never had an argument as intense as that. I was so mad I balled up in a corner and started hitting my hand against the wall while the tears ran down my face. It just seemed like my entire world was crashing, and I didn't have anyone. Leo broke up with me, my parents were not supporting my feelings, and my best friend and I had a huge argument over me wanting to help make a change.

I just wanted to run away from this entire country and never come back. If this was what life would be like after graduation, then I was more nervous about college and how everyone would treat me there. My life really sucked in this moment; what made it so bad was that I only had one person left to talk to—Ricardo. Right now, he was the only person who understood me. So that was what I did. I called Ricardo to see if he was busy because I had so many mixed feelings right now.

Ricardo answered his phone.

“Hey, what’s up?” asked Ricardo. “You sound a little strange. Are you okay?”

“No, I could really use someone to talk to right now. Is it okay if I come over?”

“Yeah, sure. I’m home. I’ll be waiting for you in the basement.”

As I began to leave the house, my mom stopped me at the door.

“Where are you going, Sasha?”

“I just need to clear my mind.” I walked out the door.

It was not a good time to tell her about the argument Leah and I got into. All she would do was make things more complicated than they already were, and she would probably take Leah's side.

As I walked along the sidewalk on the way to Ricardo's house, a police car pulled alongside of me and stopped.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" asked the officer.

"Yes, I'm just walking to a friend's house."

"Okay, be careful because we have gotten reports that a couple of kids from this area have been vandalizing houses in the Frontenac area. You have a good night, and get someone to walk you home," said the officer.

He drove off.

That was crazy, because that was where Leah's family stayed. I hope she didn't call the cops on me because that would be the lowest of low. Leah was known for pulling shady stunts like that to get back at people. But why would the cops drive around in Ballwin? There was no crime here. This was a good neighborhood.

When I got to Ricardo's house, I noticed he had the whole gang in the basement. Rashad, Victoria, and a couple more people who I didn't recognize were there. They were talking but, when I walked in, they got quiet as though they were hiding something. I didn't care because I came to talk about my problems with Ricardo.

"Hey, everyone," I greeted as me and Ricardo went into the poolroom while everyone else lounged on the couch.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“I just got into a big argument with my best friend, Leah.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. What was it about?”

“We argued about me making the decision to get to know more about Mitchell. As my friend, you would think she’d be supportive of me.”

“Well, you girls seem mature. You’ll be friends again in no time.”

“Who, Leah? Then you don’t know my friend,” I said. “She will do something really dirty just to get back at me. I’m just so tired of people telling me what not to do. What have you guys been up to?”

“Nothing much, just the same—wanting justice,” said Ricardo.

“Are you guys ever going to stop and forget about that? I don’t mean Mitchell, but you all are actually going to college this fall, right?”

“Some of us are and some don’t have that option.”

I loved talking to Ricardo, and we had the best conversations, but there was still something about him that made me unable to let my guard down. Sometimes when I was with him, it was great; but then, his suspicious acts rubbed me wrong like he was hiding something from me. I would have loved to let him get close to me, but he was not the same little boy pushing me on the swings at the playground. I remembered the kid Ricardo, but I didn’t know the grown-up Ricardo.

“Tell me about your life at Chester,” said Ricardo.

“It was good. Leah and I owned the hallways. A lot of people were jealous of our friendship, but we are like night and day. I made good grades, and Leah’s grades were enough to get her by. She dated the football captain, and I dated the basketball captain. We did everything together. She had my back, and I had her back. She actually got a volleyball scholarship to Penn State, and I received a scholarship to Howard University, but my scholarship was because of my grades. I want to be a lawyer, but the way everything in my life is turning out, it seems like the world is against me.”

“You shouldn’t feel like that. What about your boy, Leo?” Ricardo asked me.

“Well he was around, and I thought we loved each other enough to trust each other, but me and him are over now. I don’t really want to talk about him. What about you? Do you have a special girl?” I asked while my cheeks blushed red.

“No, right now everything is too stressful.”

I couldn’t accept that because he was too handsome to not have a girlfriend. I could never forget his golden eyes that made his light-brown skin shine. When we were little, the girls would get mad at me because we always played together. But we were only friends, just like we are now.

“It’s getting late. Why don’t you walk me halfway home?”

“Sure,” said Ricardo.

Departing, I told everyone bye as me and Ricardo walked out of the house.

“You know a police officer stopped me on the way to your house. He told me to be careful because there had been kids vandalizing Frontenac homes.”

Ricardo’s face began to pinch, pulling his eyebrows down. He said, “If they are vandalizing homes in Frontenac then why was he patrolling over here in Ballwin?”

“Maybe they were just looking out for my safety. I was walking by myself.”

All this protesting had Ricardo on edge. *Why was it a concern? Could he be hiding something?* If any cop was patrolling a neighborhood, I would feel safe and he should too. But the cops weren’t on his good side just then.

We arrived at the edge of my house near the bushes. I had to stop in case Mom or Dad noticed me.

“Thank you for walking me home. I feel so much better. During the past couple days I’ve had so many problems, and you have been a great ear to me. I never had anyone sit down and just talk to me like an adult.”

I gazed into Ricardo’s eyes for a few seconds, and my stomach tingled like an airplane had landed on the surface from the excessive crosswinds. He returned the favor, and our lips began to get closer to each other. Suddenly, I stepped backward. Refusing to engage.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do this,” I said. It was too soon. I couldn’t. My life felt like it was on the edge.

“I understand. Maybe we’ll save it for another time.”

My face flushed red. I became the Joker from the Batman movie that couldn't take the smile off my face. I soared to my room, plopped on my bed, and looked at the ceiling with a big smile. Yeah, I liked Ricardo, but I was still in love with Leo. Rushing into another relationship before I went off to college would make my life more difficult. Ricardo and I should remain friends and if it was meant to be... it was something I could consider.

It had been nice having Ricardo around because we had conversations that Leo and I could never have had. I missed out on such a great friend all these years. When I was at Chester, I didn't have too many problems, unless you considered getting a B+ in my English class or the football team stealing another school's mascot as a problem. But with Ricardo, it was different. We discussed more of what I was interested in.

Even though Leah and I had gotten into a huge argument, I couldn't help but think about her and what happened earlier.

We had been friends for a long time, and our friendship should not end on something we had different views on. I wondered if she felt bad that we had argued or if she was the same Leah that hadn't changed; all she would've desired was getting revenge on me somehow.

I remembered when we were in seventh grade, and I asked Mr. Brown to go to the bathroom because Leah was in the hallway peeking in the door of my classroom. I went out into the hallway with Leah. But actually, Leah was skipping class. The principal caught us, but I didn't get in trouble because I had a hall pass; she was mad at me for two weeks. She switched my peanut butter

sandwich with a mud sandwich. The kids picked on me for weeks and I still forgave her, like always.

I wondered what she was doing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Leah walked into her house and slammed the door.

“Are you okay?” asked her mom.

She trod heavily upstairs, plopped on her bed, and called Cameron. She had to vent to someone about her argument with Sasha. Cameron always sided with her no matter if she was wrong or right, depending how far Leah was willing to take it. If there was one thing he knew, it was Leah when she wanted revenge.

“Hey, babe, you wouldn’t believe what just happened.”

“What?”

“I went over to Sasha’s. She told me how she was over at her so-called ‘new friend’ Ricardo’s house talking about the situation with that boy at Eastview. I was telling her not to get involved with that stuff because I wanted nothing to happen to her, then she became irrational.”

“What happened? What did she do?”

“She was saying things, like I don’t understand because I’m not black and how it was not fair that a white policeman shot the guy. I told her I didn’t want to hear all that. Then she told me she didn’t want to be my friend anymore. I tried to reason with her, and she told me to get out.”

“Wow, I’m sorry that happened. But you girls are best friends. You’ll be talking in no time. I wouldn’t be surprised if Sasha calls you tonight.”

“No, I don’t think I’ll ever talk to her again. On the way home from the Fountain that night she told me that we needed to breakup because when we go off to college our relationship won’t last.”

“She said that?”

“All I can do now is think of ways to get back at her.”

“If you want to get back at her, I know some friends in my neighborhood who meet at the park and discuss ways to protest against ‘Black Lives Matter.’ They think it’s unfair that some people think they’re the only victims of police brutality.”

“Who are these people?”

“Just some people I know. I never bothered with them before because I can’t afford to lose my scholarship, and they really have nothing to lose.”

“That would be great. How often do they meet?”

“It depends,” said Cameron. “Are...you...serious about doing this? On second thought, I don’t think you should get involved with them. They aren’t really nice, and they do bad things. But they are always at Tinley Park hanging out at night.”

“Well, I’m not nice, and Sasha said some mean things about us. I think she should pay.”

“But, she is your best friend. What if something happens to either one of you? That stuff is real, and you shouldn’t be caught up in it. I don’t even know why Sasha would get herself involved with it, either.”

“Nothing will happen, but I can’t wait until I see the look on her face when she sees me protesting against

her. I just want to hurt her just like she hurt me. I will call you tomorrow to tell you how my initiation meeting went,” Leah laughed.

Cameron always sided with Leah on her actions, but this time it was different. Those guys were always getting in trouble and, even though he gave her the idea, he didn’t expect Leah to go through with it.

Cameron’s voice began to get lower over the phone as he realized he shouldn’t have given her that idea.

Leah ended her phone conversation with Cameron and went to her computer to research about black boys being killed by police officers. Her stomach began to turn after researching the information, but she was on a mission to make Sasha mad. She noticed on social media that people were talking about “All Lives Matter” and not “Black Lives Matter.” She realized that was what she tried to tell Sasha. So, she researched a lot of information. She had second thoughts attending the rally meeting but, if she was going through with it, she had to fit in with them.

This was too much. *Why was Sasha interested in this stupid stuff?* Leah scrolled through the links, squinting her eyes and shaking her head. But if this would get Sasha’s attention, nothing would stop her. Leah shut her computer off and got into bed.

As she laid in her bed, she wondered what she’d done to offend Sasha that would make her so mad. She was trying to help her. But all she desired was revenge, not even realizing she could step into it with no remorse.

Morning came, and Leah woke up to a phone call from Cameron. He tried to convince her it wasn’t a great

idea to protest with those guys, but she insisted that she would still go through with it. Nothing would get in her way. She ended the conversation with him and went downstairs to the kitchen.

Her mom walked toward her as she began to fix her coffee. "Is everything okay with you?" asked her mom as she massaged her daughter's back. "You came in yesterday and slammed the door."

"Me and Sasha got into a huge fight."

"You and Sasha have been friends for a long time. You girls will work out your differences."

Leah's jaws started clenching as her teeth were grinding. Leah was not interested in rekindling their friendship, at that moment; the only thing on her mind was for Sasha to suffer.

She laid around the house all day until it was time for her to go to the park. When she got there, a group of white kids were hanging around. Leah walked toward the kids standing around a burning barrel.

"Do any of you know Joshua?" asked Leah.

"Yes, he's over there sitting on the bench. By the way, my name is Jake."

She walked to Joshua and introduce herself.

"Did Cameron tell you I was coming tonight?"

Leah's eyes scanned around to examine the kids hanging out there. She realized that it wasn't her cup of tea, and she didn't belong there. She didn't recognize anyone, but it still didn't stop her from plotting against Sasha. If she went against Sasha and gained new friends,

she thought that would make Sasha come crawling to her crying and apologizing.

“Yes, Cameron called me and told me his girlfriend was coming to one of our meetings. Are you ready to do something like this?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m ready.”

“Well, before you start, let me introduce you to my friends”

They walked over by the playground so that Joshua could introduce Leah to his group.

“Everybody, I want you to meet Leah. Leah this is Jake and Elizabeth.”

There were more people around, but it appeared his closest friends were Jake and Elizabeth. She started to get edgy but she was already there, and it was too late for her to turn around.

Joshua moved into the center of everyone as they formed a circle. He started talking about what they did as a group and how they were different.

“We don’t care for just one group,” yelled Joshua. “We care for all. It’s not just African-Americans getting killed by police but White Americans too.”

That’s not what I read last night, thought Leah.

Leah glanced around and slowly eased behind everyone as the crowd rooted for him. It was like they gave him power to become a supernatural being.

“Why should African Americans even care when most of them are killing themselves? Whose lives do

they really care about? They were only doing it for attention and to make us seem like we were racist.”

Leah gazed at Joshua out the corner of her eye. *This guy, Joshua, must be crazy*, she thought. But she had to admit that some of it was the same things she had been saying to Sasha.

Racist? Leah thought. That was impossible. Her best-friend was African-American. She witnessed on the Internet that both races have been killed by police officers, although she also noticed that a lot more cops killed African Americans.

“They aren’t victims,” yelled Joshua. “We are.”

In her mind, she smirked at what he had said; she kept it in so no one noticed her reactions. They were taking this seriously.

When Joshua finished talking, he walked to Leah.

“So, what do you think? Is this something you would be a part of?”

She had a few questions, but she mainly wanted to know how this would help her get revenge on Sasha.

“What would I have to do when it comes to protesting? How could I help?”

“Well, while the other group protests for only ‘Black Lives Matter,’ we protest for ‘All Lives Matter.’ We think it should include everybody.”

“Yeah, but you don’t see as many white boys being shot by the police,” said Leah.

“That’s what they want you to think, but they are too.”

He was telling lies, but that didn’t stop her from completing her mission. Elizabeth walked to Leah. She was a pale girl with long black hair to her waist and an athletic body. Elizabeth lived in the neighborhood with Leah. They had seen each other around, but they went to different private schools.

Suddenly, Leah had another idea about how she could retaliate against Sasha.

“I thought I recognized you,” said Leah to Elizabeth. “You live around the corner from me.”

“Yeah, I saw you a couple times too,” said Elizabeth.

“We should hang out sometime.”

“Okay.”

“Well, what about tomorrow? Some friends and I are going to the Fountain just to hang out, and I want to invite you.”

“Sure, I have nothing else to do,” Elizabeth said, not realizing that Leah was out for revenge and already had a plot.

Leah had it in her mind to get Cameron to invite Leo to go to the Fountain. Since Leo and Sasha weren’t together anymore, she planned to make Sasha jealous by making her think that Elizabeth and Leo were together.

Leah turned to Joshua. “I’ll join you guys this week to protest,” she said as her eyebrows came to a perfect V-shape.

She left the park because she had another stop to make.

Leah drove to the Fountain. “Is Sasha working tonight?” she asked a waitress.

The girl went to check in the kitchen. Minutes, later she came out holding two ice cream cones in her hand. “She’s not working tonight but she’ll be working tomorrow night.”

Leah said, “Okay” and walked away. Everything was falling into place just as she had planned.

When Leah got home, she plopped on the couch with her mom.

“Where were you?” asked her mom.

“I was with Cameron,” Leah rolled her eyes with such drama.

“Sasha, called you.”

Leah wrinkled her face and raised her eyebrows wondering why would she call her after their big argument. She went upstairs to her room to call Cameron.

“How did it go?”

“I was about to leave but it was interesting, and Joshua made some good points. He just really said everything I was telling Sasha.”

“Well, I still think you shouldn’t get involved. Those are some real-life issues, and they take that stuff seriously. I wouldn’t do it just to get back at a friend.”

“Whatever. Just meet me tomorrow at the Fountain and make sure Leo is with you. Don’t come without him.”

Without saying bye, Leah ended the conversation with Cameron. She opened her computer and browsed through the topics of “All Lives Matter.” If she was going to protest with the opposers, then she would have to research everything about them.

Leah agreed with Joshua that there should be justice for both black and white kids but disagreed with him saying they’re acting like victims. They were victims, and the facts were showing all over the Internet on social media and news channels. She read an article that mentioned how more black males had been killed by the police than white males.

She opened her mouth in a wide yawn as she stretched her arms and closed her laptop. After researching all night, she laid on her bed trying to process all of the posts on social media and an article about police brutality. Gazing at the ceiling, she began to wonder. *Should I go through with this? Is it worth it? I’m weeks away from going to college... But if Sasha was going to choose them as her new friends, then I’m all in.*

Boom! A loud noise came from downstairs. Leah jumped out of her bed to investigate. It was her mother who had dropped a pan on the floor in the kitchen.

Leah was panting, “Mom, you scared me!”

“It was just a pan. Why are you so startled this morning?”

Not wanting to tell her mom what she planned to do to Sasha, she said, “Nothing. I’m just wondering if I should go to the mall to get me a new outfit for tonight.”

“What’s happening tonight?”

“Nothing much just hanging out with some friends.”

Leah decided she would go to the mall. But first, she called Elizabeth.

“Hey, Elizabeth,” said Leah. “You still coming to the Fountain tonight?”

“Yes, I’m still going.”

“Great, I’ll pick you up at eight.”

As Leah pulled into the shopping mall, she parked and called Cameron to check if he was still coming with Leo.

After searching several department stores, she found the perfect outfit to go to the Fountain.

Leah smiled all the way home realizing that her plan was still in place. Lounging around the house, Leah wondered how Sasha would react when she noticed Leo sitting with Elizabeth.

Later that evening, on her way to the Fountain, she drove to get Elizabeth. She lived about three minutes from her in the same neighborhood. She pulled onto a sparkling marble driveway with a section of well-cut grass in the middle and a bronze water fountain.

The driveway reflected the house. Her house was as big as the White House. Elizabeth’s dad was a doctor, and her mom worked from home.

“I’m excited you could come with me to the Fountain. My friend flaked on me at the last minute,” said Leah.

“Yeah sure, I didn’t have anything planned. I’ve just been hanging out with Josh and Jake. I need more girlfriends, anyway.”

“What do you like to do?”

“I like to shop, go to the movies, and go to this club where we sometimes hangout. It’s called the Black Sea. Have you heard of it?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of that club, but I could never get my friends to go out with me to a club. They’re scared, and they only want to hang out at the Fountain which I find so boring sometimes.”

Leah had to make sure she would beat Cameron and Leo to the Fountain. So, she took a short detour through the city.

“We’re here,” said Leah as she pulled into the ice cream parlor parking lot.

Relieved that they had gotten there before the guys, Leah asked the waitress if she could have a booth in her friend Sasha’s area.

“I’ll be right back,” the waitress said. “I’m going to grab you guys some menus.”

The girls started chatting while Leah’s eyes scanned the parlor. There was no sign of Sasha. Leah’s body was on edge; she kept peeking over her shoulder trying to spot Sasha. Every female voice she heard made her jump and turn her head to see if it was Sasha.

Cameron and Leo walked into the door. Leah raised her arm and waved to them. She had this huge smirk on her face and, if you looked closely, there were probably two small horns sticking out of her head. Her plan was falling in line just as she had expected.

“Hey, guys, I want you to meet my friend Elizabeth. Elizabeth, this is my boyfriend, Cameron, and our friend, Leo.”

Leo squinted his eyes at Leah, then he slowly turned his head toward Elizabeth as his face began to wrinkle with confusion.

Leah was playing one of her games, he thought. What is she up to?

They sat at the booth with Leah and Elizabeth. They all talked and laughed. Their waitress came to the table. It was Sasha.

“You gotta be kidding me.” Sasha placed her hand on her hip.

Cameron kicked Leah’s leg beneath the table. As he focused his eyes on her, he leaned his head and slowly nodded then hid his face from the others behind the menu.

Leah threw her hands up in the air. “What?” Playing stupid to the stunt she had just pulled.

Cameron leaned back into the booth, folded his arms, and started shaking his head—stunned by Leah’s actions. He had a suspicion that there was a reason she had stressed for Leo to come.

At the table, Sasha's eyes widened from the betrayal from all her friends. It felt like they had stabbed her in her spine.

"This is so wrong, and you guys are supposed to be my friends. That's even low for you, Leo," she cried.

Leah jumped out of her seat and yelled, "I don't know what you're talking about!"

Sasha unraveled her apron from around her waist and fled to the kitchen, catching her breath while going toward Pam's office.

Sasha gasped for air, "Pam, I think I'm getting sick and I need to go."

"Okay," Pam said as she wrinkled her face. "Is everything okay with you?"

At the table with Leah, Cameron and Leo had no words for her.

"That was really dirty and low," said Cameron as he stood up from the table. "You are still playing childish games. Don't bother calling me tonight or maybe ever."

Leo slammed the menu on the table and walked away, shaking his head. He departed without saying a word, not wanting to be associated with any part of Leah's schemes.

"What's wrong with them?" Elizabeth asked Leah. "Did I do something?"

"It was nothing. They had to run off and do something." Her nose stretched like Pinocchio and her devil horns grew larger on each side of her head.

Elizabeth seemed confused. “Oh, well. When is that waitress coming back? I want to order some food.”

Elizabeth seemed lost and didn’t realize their waitress departed the restaurant because of Leah.

Minutes later, a new waitress returned after Sasha had fled from her job.

Leah smirked and ordered her food. She had it in her mind that Cameron would call her phone by tonight to tell her he was sorry for how he acted, and that he would be all over her again. Leah wasn’t worried about Leo at all. Besides, he and Sasha weren’t a couple anymore, especially after she brought Elizabeth to the Fountain to make Sasha jealous.

Elizabeth and Leah stayed at the Fountain, giggling and having a good time.

“So, what private school you go to?” asked Leah.

“I went to Whitmore School.”

“That’s a great school. I know some girls from my church who attend that school.”

“Yes, that school expects us to have high expectations for ourselves,” said Elizabeth.

“Same as Chester. Hey, I’m going to the bathroom.”

Leah called Cameron because he should have called by now. She needed to make sure everything was good between the two of them, but he didn’t answer.

“Oh, well. I will just call him later,” Leah whispered to herself as she walked out of the bathroom.

She went back to the table to sit with Elizabeth.

“Sorry for my friends leaving, but they had an emergency.”

“It’s okay.”

Leah started rubbing her stomach. “I’m pretty much stuffed now. Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty stuffed too.”

As they departed the Fountain, Leah tried to call Cameron again, but he didn’t answer.

Leah started to sweat, worrying if Cameron would talk to her at all since he was not answering her phone calls. She had never witnessed him so upset. Usually she had him in her back pocket, but this time was different.

She thought, *If Cameron doesn’t answer his phone, I will go by his house to see what is his problem.*

“So, what are you doing for the rest of the night?”

“I’ll probably go hang out with Jake and Josh at the park,” responded Elizabeth.

“Can I come and hang with you guys?”

“Sure. We don’t do much, but I am pretty sure they will want you around. Plus, I think Joshua has a crush on you.”

That was pretty much not happening.

“Oh, no,” said Leah. “I’m very much taken, and Joshua knows that already.”

As they pulled up to the park, Joshua and Jacob were throwing rocks at the garbage can.

“You guys don’t have anything else to do but throw things at the garbage?” asked Elizabeth.

“No, we were just waiting around trying to find something to do, but there is nothing much to do around here,” said Joshua.

Leah hung out for a little while with Elizabeth and her friends.

“We are so excited you are joining us this weekend,” said Joshua. “Maybe you can get some of your other friends to join us?”

Joshua was out of his mind. I’m doing this for one reason, Leah thought.

Leah wasn’t going to ask any of her friends. She wasn’t joining them for that; it was only revenge she was after.

“I’ll ask them,” said Leah.

“That would be nice to have more on our side,” said Joshua.

Leah started thumping her feet nervously because Cameron hadn’t responded to her phone calls nor did he return the calls.

“Hey guys, it’s getting late. I’m going to head out before my parents start to worry.”

It wasn’t her parents she was worried about. It was Cameron.

Did Cameron mean what he said?

It wasn’t supposed to turn out like that. She and Cameron were weeks from going off to college, and they

were supposed to be spending the rest of their lives together.

Leah got in her car and drove away from the park, wondering if she should go to his house or try calling again.

She went home. As she pulled into the driveway, she tried to think of ways to tell Cameron that she meant nothing by bringing Elizabeth. She couldn't hang out with Sasha, so she brought Elizabeth to hang out with them at the Fountain. She tried to plan a good lie so he would forgive her.

Leah went to her room and called Cameron but didn't get an answer. She kept calling and calling until he answered the phone.

"Thank God, you answered. You had me worried. I've been calling you all night."

"I know, but I told you that I didn't want to talk to you anymore. We are through. I know you, Leah, and this was right up your sleeve to hurt people because you felt offended by Sasha."

"I'm sorry, Cameron, but it wasn't like that. I just wanted you to meet with Elizabeth to show you how cool she was."

"Well, I did, and I think you are going too far with this obsession of getting back at Sasha. I'm not going to be a part of it, so I wish you luck."

"Cam, I'm sorry. Please don't do this."

Cameron ended the phone call.

Tears poured from Leah's eyes onto her face. Guilt and hurt ran through her body like lightning. Leah laid on her bed in sorrow. Her head began to pound, and her neck and face began to heat as she blamed Sasha. This was all her fault. She was the reason Cameron ended their relationship. As she placed her head on the pillow to sleep, she had it on her mind that she would join Joshua, Jacob, and Elizabeth to protest with them.

All she could meditate on was “an eye for an eye.”

CHAPTER SIX

I went home and slithered into my bed, but I couldn't sleep. The betrayal of all my friends gave me a feeling like I had been nailed to the cross. I was having so many mixed feelings. I called Ricardo to see what he was doing. If anybody could make things better, it would be him. It seemed like he always had the right things to say to me whenever we talked.

When I called him, he told me he was out with some of his friends. They were coming from the Frontenac area, and they would be back at his house in thirty minutes. I laid around in my bedroom, then went to my laptop. I deleted Leo, Cameron, and Leah from all my social media accounts. Then I went to the bathroom to wash because I smelled like vanilla and strawberry after leaving my job.

While I was in the bathroom, I stared in the mirror at my reflection. I tried to figure out the girl who was looking back at me. My eyes became watery and I had no one to talk to.

Why now? Am I a bad person? Why would my friends do me like that?

My phone started buzzing. It was Ricardo returning my call.

“Hey, I'm home now.”

“Yeah, I'm about to walk over to your house.”

“Okay, cool. I'll be waiting.”

I wasn't trying to use Ricardo whenever I had a problem, but truly, he was my only friend at that point and the only one I could trust.

On my way to Ricardo's, the same cop pulled up beside me again patrolling the area. He stopped and got out the car. My stomach began to flutter, especially after knowing what happened to Mitchell. *What if something happened to me? I was out there by myself with no one to witness anything.* My heart was about to bust out of my chest. Was this police officer harassing me?

"Hello, Officer. Is everything all right?" I rolled my eyes because there must have been a reason that he kept coming into the Baldwin area.

"We just got another call about some kids vandalizing the Frontenac area again. Do you know anything about that?" The police officer leaned over his car while his eyes ran from my head to my feet. He pulled out a piece of chewing gum and started chewing it, obnoxiously smacking in every corner of his mouth.

Yes, he was scaring me. Did I look like I knew anything about some kids vandalizing that area? That was the moment that I realized that I had been profiled. I decided to just stay calm and answer whatever he asked, giving him no reason to hurt me. Dad told us if a police officer ever asked for something, always be polite and give them what they needed. At that moment, it was clear why he had that talk with us.

"No, sir, I'm just walking to my friend's house. I stay in the house right there," I pointed. "Can I ask you a question, sir? You asked me that question twice now. Are

there some kids in this neighborhood doing the vandalism?”

“Yes, the kids that have been reported are from this area. What school do you attend?”

“I just graduated from Chester Christian Academy.”

I hoped that if I told him where I lived and that I had attended a good school, he would leave me alone.

“Okay, young lady. You have a nice night but do be careful around this neighborhood.”

“I thought this was a good neighborhood,” I said.

“It is, but just be careful.” He hopped back into his car and drove off.

When the police officer turned the corner onto the next block, I watched him like a hawk to see if he would turn around or keep going. He never returned. I continued walking to Ricardo’s house. Why was it that whenever the police stopped me, I became fearful? I shouldn’t have felt such a way. I should have felt safe in their presence.

When I got into Ricardo’s driveway, he got out of the car with some friends. He threw his muscular arms around me.

“What’s going on?”

“I just need someone to vent to, like usual.”

Ricardo grabbed me by the waist with his eyes checking behind me speed-walking into the house.

“Hurry, let’s go inside.”

“You okay? You look scared?” I said.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

When we got downstairs, I sat on the couch. It hit me to ask where he was coming from because I hoped that it wasn’t him and his friends doing the vandalism.

“We just came from downtown hanging out near the Casino.”

Ricardo started biting his lips together.

“This is my second time getting stopped by a cop on the way to your house. He said it was some kids from this area.”

“It’s probably some bad little teens with nothing else to do. Anyway, what’s going on with you?” Ricardo changed the subject.

When I called Ricardo, he said that he was in the Frontenac area. I wondered if he had lied to me with a straight face. I had too much on my mind to think about anything else. But, I decided that I was being foolish to blame such a crime on him and his friends. After all, he could be telling me the truth. I had too many of my own issues to notice if he lied to me earlier about his whereabouts.

We sat downstairs on the couch in the basement and began to gaze at each other. I started talking so we wouldn’t do anything I would regret later.

“I don’t know where to begin. There’s been so much happening since I talked to you the last time. I was at work earlier today and you wouldn’t guess who came to my job and sat at my table.”

“Who?”

“Leah and her boyfriend. And what made it so bad was that Leo was there with another girl. I just told them how low they were, and I went to my manager and told her I had to leave for the day. That had Leah written all over because she was the only one that knew I had a job at the Fountain. Sometimes she can be so petty.”

“What kind of friends do you have? Do you guys just spend most of your time sabotaging each other?”
Ricardo laughed.

“No, I thought we were over those types of childish games, but apparently some of us grew up before others. I’m just too angry, and I don’t care if I see them again ever.”

“Well, we have a meeting tomorrow to get ready for the protest on Saturday. How about you come and join us? It would help to get your mind off things.”

“At this point, I don’t have any choice but to join you guys. You all have been good friends to me. It’s getting late, so I think I better head home.”

“Don’t do it because we’ve been good friends to you. Do it because you want to.”

After being stopped by the police officer twice, whenever I walked home; I became nervous. I kept looking over my shoulder and checking behind me wondering if that same cop would stop and talk to me again.

When I walked into the house, Chloe was lying on the couch looking at the television, and my mom was in the kitchen. I gave my mom a kiss on the cheek.

“How was your first day at work?”

“I left early.”

“What do you mean, you left early?”

“Mom, you wouldn’t believe it. Here I am working hard and in training. I go back to get my order for my new customers and guess who it is?”

“Who? Obama?”

“No, Ma, it was Leah and Cameron.”

“Did you guys talk over your problems?”

“No, when I got to the table, Leo was with them with another girl and suddenly I felt sick, so I asked Pam the manager to let me go home.”

“You guys have been friends since childhood and you are doing that to each other?”

“Ma, I’m not doing anything to her. I even tried to call her yesterday, but that’s how Leah gets down. There’s no telling what’s up her sleeve next.”

“Well, in a couple of weeks, you’ll be in college. You will get new friends, and Leah will get what she deserves because karma is really serious.”

“Okay, Mom. I’m going to bed.”

“Where are you coming from? I hope you haven’t been at Ricardo’s? Remember what your father and I told you. Not to get involved with that protesting because that stuff is really serious.”

“Okay, Ma!”

I wasn’t listening to parents or no one at that point. They didn’t approve of me protesting, but I felt like I

was doing something that could change the world and it was for a damn good cause!

My parents were acting delusional. How would they react if I told them that a police officer stopped me twice just walking to a neighbor's house?

They would probably have Chloe in here making signs.

I walked upstairs and sat on my bed. My cell phone started vibrating. It was Leo texting me to meet him tomorrow tonight because he needed to talk to me.

"Whatever." I had so much rage against my supposed friends and it wasn't a good feeling. I gazed at the phone in contempt.

I was still pissed at him.

Pissed at all of them.

But there was another part of me telling me to meet Leo because I did still have feelings for him. My feelings for him didn't go away overnight. I wished it were that easy.

I texted him to meet at my house at nine tomorrow night because I planned to attend the meeting at Ricardo's house.

Disturbed by the sun shining directly in my eyes, I stretched my arms, rose from my bed and walked to the bathroom like a zombie. *Can't I just sleep all day?* I had to attend the meeting at Ricardo's and then meet Leo later that night. School was out, and my summer still involved a to-do list. A list of drama. I wondered what

Leo had to say to me. There was nothing he could say at that moment that would make me forgive him. Leo broke my heart, especially knowing that he'd moved on. I mean, that girl was pretty but not his type.

All morning, I laid around and did some research on Howard University. They sent me a list of possible things I would have to get for college. I also saw pictures of the dorm I would stay in. The school was a little descent, nothing compared to Chester, but it would do. I was just excited to move on in my life away from all the drama.

“Chloe!” I yelled.

Chloe came running upstairs. Her eyes were glued to the television cartoons.

“What do you want?” asked Chloe.

“Are you going to miss me when I go off to college?”

“No, is that what you called me upstairs for?” she said. “Because I’m taking your room and I’ve been waiting for a long time for that.”

“Seriously,” I said as I slumped and gave her a lip-pout.

“I’m just kidding,” said Chloe. “I will miss your big head.”

I showed Chloe the school I was planning to attend, but she didn’t seem interested. I could tell because she folded her lips. Was my life that bad that I had to share things with my little sister and not my friends?

Hours passed. I glanced at my watch, and it was time for me to go to the meeting.

Dad was in the basement, rummaging through boxes of files from his previous cases, and Chloe was in her room. It was the perfect time for me to ease out the door with nobody asking where I was going.

That evening, we all met at the park. There were more people than I saw last time. About thirty to forty people gathered around in a circle. Ricardo stood above the crowd on a park bench and began his speech.

“Let’s give a moment of silence to Mitchell and the other innocent people who have been killed by cops,” Ricardo said.

Everyone paused and shut their eyes. He cleared his throat to start his speech again.

“All we ask for is justice. This racism and hatred has to stop. So many centuries has passed, and the world needs to change. It’s now starting in our neighborhoods and they are taking it to the schools. Our parents don’t feel that their kids are safe. It scares them that something could happen to us or we will never make it back home. We, as African Americans, shouldn’t have to fear coming out of our houses or walking to the store. We African Americans don’t all look alike. It’s wrong, and we demand justice. When we go tomorrow to protest, we will stay civil and calm no matter what happens. All we want is justice and peace for those innocent black men and woman who died amongst the hands of cops.”

When Ricardo finished, they all started chanting, “Justice.” I was so happy for Ricardo; it took a lot to get in front of so many people and fight for a cause that he had invested so much in.

When he finished his speech, Ricardo jumped off the bench and walked to me. “How was my speech?”

“You convinced me a little,” I teased. “But you honestly did a great job.”

“Thanks. I will talk to you later, okay? I have to handle some business in Frontenac.”

Ricardo was in such a rush.

“Hey, Victoria. Would you please walk me home?” I asked.

“Sure.”

When Victoria walked me home, we started talking about our schools.

“Did any of you have to face racism in your schools?”

“We did. Our school was separated. The black kids hang with the black kids, and the white kids hang with the white kids.”

“Did you have any white friends?” I asked.

“No, but there were a few that were cool.”

“Wow, I didn’t even recognize it at my school or I just was too blind to see it. I had both black and white friends. Hell, my best friend was white.”

“Once in my homeroom class, someone had written ‘Go back to Africa’ on the chalkboard,” said Victoria. “The teacher’s face was so red, she was embarrassed. Of course, no one admitted that they put it on the board or witnessed who did it.”

“What did your principal say about that?” I asked out of curiosity.

“The principal did nothing but announced that negative behavior was not tolerated at our school.”

“I remember Rashad got into a fight one time with a white kid because he called him a nigger.”

“What!”

“I know it seemed different at Chester because the people at your school had money, but it’s just like going to your school and picking on the kids that just attend on a scholarship or don’t have any money. It’s not different, but you just couldn’t see it.”

“I’m sorry you guys had to go through that at your school,” I agreed with her.

As we walked to my driveway; Leo was there waiting for me. I told Victoria that I would call her later because I liked our talk on the way home. We had a deep conversation. I would love to hang out sometime, or she could come to my house to meet my parents one day. I thought it might help her ease her mind a little so she didn’t fill all of her time worrying about Mitchell.

“What’s going on?” I asked Leo.

My facial expression changed quickly when I slowly walked to Leo. My face burned with anger.

“So, where is your girlfriend? Does she know you are here?”

“Look, I didn’t come here to argue with you,” he said. “I just wanted to let you know that I didn’t go to the Fountain with that girl. Me and Cameron left them

both there after we found out what Leah was up to. She was there with Leah, and I didn't even know you worked there. How come you didn't tell me you work there?"

"Don't play those games, Leo. I've been calling you, but you never returned my calls. It's nice to know that you can just move on like that."

"I haven't moved on. I just had a lot on my plate and yeah, I was a little jealous of you hanging out with your neighbor. But, I should have trusted you."

"Leo, you know you could've talked to me about anything. You did not have to break things off like that between us. I thought we knew each other, and we were better than that."

Leo grabbed me by the waist with a smile on his face. "Can we work on things, with us getting back together?"

Damn. I had it bad for him. I was seconds away from melting into his arms, but I had to stay strong and let him know what he did wasn't cool.

"I don't know about right now. I've been busy hanging out with Ricardo and his friends. I'm going tomorrow night to help them protest. And no, Ricardo and I aren't seeing each other. I just think it's for a good cause."

"I really miss you," he said.

"I know. But we can take things slow. I need you to trust me and support me."

Leo laughed, "Okay, I will. But I'm not protesting."

"I'll call you after your little adventure tomorrow to see how it went."

Yeah, I could forgive him. I was glad that Leo came and explained everything to me. It was obvious I still had feelings for him.

After Leo went home, I opened the door and my mom and dad were laying on the couch relaxing, focused on the television. I sat on the couch and laid my head on Mom's stomach.

"Who was that in the driveway?"

"Nobody but Leo."

"You guys are talking again?"

"Well, I told him we can't jump back into a relationship, but we are just going to take things slow."

I kissed my parents goodnight and went upstairs to my room. I reached for my phone to call Leo, but hesitated. I wanted to call him. But we decided we would take things slow; besides, I figured I should let him sweat just a little. I couldn't give in so soon.

It was the day! I woke with my heart beating fast and sweat running slowly on my face like I had a bad dream. I was having second thoughts about protesting and the time was approaching fast.

Shortly after dinner, the phone rang. It was Ricardo.

"Hey, Sash! Victoria and two other girls will ride with you downtown."

I hadn't decided if I was still going, but now I didn't have a choice because he designated me to drive others downtown.

“Okay. I’ll be there in a little.”

I tiptoed out of the house so no one could notice me leaving, but Mom stopped me.

“Where you headed off to?”

I cleared my throat as I gathered my lie. “Out to movies with Leo. He has a whole lot of making up to do.”

For me to cover my tracks, I texted Leo and told him I was on my way downtown and if he needed to reach me, to contact me on my cell phone. I stressed to him not to call the house.

As I pulled up into Ricardo’s driveway, Victoria and two other girls who attended Eastview were standing there holding signs that said, “Justice for Mitchell.” I was sweating more than ever. Scared of both the police and the girls I didn’t even know who were going to be getting into my car.

“I didn’t know you were doing signs. I would’ve made me one.”

Ricardo and some guys were busy placing things in the car’s trunk.

“Are you okay? The time is now,” said Ricardo.

“I’m ready but a little nervous, too.”

“You shouldn’t be nervous. All we are going to do is go downtown and making a statement that we want justice. Once we are done, we’ll come back home. I won’t let anything happen to you but, if something breaks out, I need you to look for Victoria and get in your car and go home. And if something happens to me,

I need you to look for Victoria then go to my house and warn my peeps.”

As the girls got into my car, Victoria told me I could march, and chant the same thing they were planning on saying.

I was missing Leah. This could have been a positive moment that we could've shared together. I was still hoping she would come to her senses and realize that our fight from our disagreement was all crazy.

We arrived downtown, and I parked in the garage.

“Why didn't you park on the streets?” Victoria said.

“My parents always told me to park in the garage so nothing would happen to my car.”

She laughed at me and said, “Well, you *are* driving a Mercedes. I would do the same if I had an expensive car.”

I wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic or if she was being honest, but I smirked and laughed like it wasn't a big deal.

As we walked out of the garage, I noticed that downtown was so crowded. The streets were filled with people protesting with signs, and in the middle of the streets were the cops. On the left side on the sidewalk, people were chanting “justice” and waving signs in the air for people they'd known who had lost their lives to cops. They were also holding signs that said “Black Lives Matter.”

On the right side on the sidewalk in front of the park, people were chanting and holding signs that said “All

Lives Matter.” There were also signs that said, “Blue Lives Matter” and “Cops are not bad people.” I also noticed a sign that said, “White Lives Matter.” I wondered why there were so many groups. Ricardo told me we were all doing this for justice, but from the looks of it, these groups were after each other.

My heart started beating faster. “Please don’t leave my side.” I said to Victoria as I tugged the bottom of her shirt.

“Just follow my lead,” Victoria said.

Ricardo was standing on top of a bench, speaking with some others.

We started marching and chanting, and I started getting the hang of things.

When we were marching, we chanted, “Hands up! Don’t Shoot! No Justice! No Peace! No Racist Police!”

When we turned at the corner of the block, we started another chant, “Black Lives Matter! I Can’t Breathe!”

I had been getting the hang of everything, and my skin started tingling from excitement.

The crowd was like a professional sports game, except the people were all on the streets. I bumped into so many people several times but, they were marching and chanting so hard, they didn’t even notice it.

I had been walking for about two hours non-stop, and my legs were killing me. I was in shape after all the sports I played, but I had to admit that I had been lazy the last couple of weeks. Maybe one day I would go to the country club.

“Thirty more minutes!” I yelled at Victoria.

I had to go because it was getting late. My parents would get worried about me, blowing up my phone with their calls, which was the last thing I needed. They knew movies didn’t last longer than about two hours. I could add in that we went to grab something to eat but, if I stayed any longer, there was nothing else I could tell them.

“I’m about to leave.”

“Go ahead. We are going to stay and catch the bus.”

“Okay, can you please walk me to my car?”

“So, what do you think of the protesting?” Victoria asked me on the way to my car.

“It felt great to do something positive that I could tell my children about one day and they could tell their children. I really hope those parents get justice for their kids. The stories they had were so hurtful and I could only imagine how they feel.”

Walking to the garage, a group of white kids were standing near the parking lot protesting with “All Lives Matter” posters and in the crowds’ midst. I noticed Leah and that girl she had at the restaurant with her.

I glanced at her, and she returned the same look. I decided to not pay her any attention. How stupid was I to consider her a friend again? And what kind of friend would go against me? She was trying to sabotage me no matter what the circumstances were. At this moment, I decided that I was done with Leah. We were not in high school anymore and those stupid schemes were lame. I was tired of her.

Most of the time I didn't let things bother me, but Leah was working on my last nerve.

All the way home my heart was racing fast out of anger. My nose was burning like a bull blowing smoke. I couldn't even enjoy a peaceful movement because of Leah's antics.

As soon as I got home, I ran upstairs and called Leo. Leo answered his phone. I immediately started talking.

"You wouldn't believe what happened to me tonight. I saw Leah protesting on the other side."

"What! I can't believe that."

"That girl would do anything to get back at me. What is her problem with me? She is supposed to be my best friend."

"Well, I talked to Cameron after the incident she pulled at the Fountain. He broke it off with her. Maybe that's why? You girls just need to talk about it."

"I don't know what to think. Maybe after I sleep it off, I'll feel better in the morning. But I'm glad you answered the phone."

"Yeah, I was a jerk but I'm here for you now. Well, get some rest and call me tomorrow."

Afterward, I called Ricardo to check on how things went but I didn't get an answer.

I went downstairs. Mom was still relaxing on the couch. I went to talk to her because I couldn't sleep at all. I laid my head on her lap as she began running her hands through my hair.

“What’s going on? How did the movies go with Leo?”

“What movie? Oh, I was asleep the entire time. Leo wanted to watch some sci-fi movie.”

I almost got caught by telling my mom the truth. It would have been nice to share something like that with her, but I couldn’t because they probably would have punished me until the day I went to college. I had to talk to someone and get some answers. At least from an adult point of view about what was going on between Leah and me.

“Mom, I don’t know what to think about me and Leah’s friendship. I miss her, but every time I give in she does something else to piss me off.”

“Sasha, friends come and go. As you get older, you will find out who your real friends are, and it may not be Leah. I had a lot of friends. Some I don’t know where they are, some are on the streets, and some even passed away. So, enjoy who you think your friends are now and who you think aren’t your friends. Life is a lesson, and they are all part of it.”

“But me and Leah were inseparable. How could she be doing this to me? Friends don’t sabotage each other.”

Mom stretched her arms around me and gave me a tight squeeze. “Your gut will tell you. But you and Leah need to stop all the madness and talk about what’s really bothering you girls.” Then, she went upstairs.

My mom gave me so much advice about our situation. Me and Leah needed to talk. I could’ve made her jealous by putting protesting in front of our

relationship. I had been hanging out with Ricardo and his friends, but what would make her protest with another group? Summer was not going as planned so far.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next morning my eyes slowly opened. I couldn't move out of the bed from exhaustion, and my feet hurt like I had been wearing clogs all day. It could have been from the marching and screaming while protesting. Leah betraying me downtown could have also been a good reason. I chose not to be bothered with the world that day. I just needed to lock myself in my room, blast some Drake, and hangout with myself to get my priorities straight like the girl who I was when I attended Chester.

But again, I couldn't unwrap Leah from around my finger. Man, she couldn't stop poking at me. She was like a leech that kept sucking all the blood from my body. I made the decision that I would not talk to her anymore. She'd hurt me too many times.

Walking to the bathroom, I pulled my phone from my back pocket and found a text from Victoria trying to convince me to hang out with her. I had nothing planned, but I needed some time to myself. Time to reevaluate my summer and no one was trying to give me space.

I texted that I would hang out with her. She was my only female friend, at that moment. She asked me to go to the mall to pick out a cute outfit to wear at a club later that night, then she asked me to go to the club.

I jerked my neck in shock. "Club!"

I had never been to a club in my entire life. I couldn't pick an outfit. I would have to get club-clothes therapy because clubs were not my thing. Could we even get into a club at our age? All the kids at Chester had house parties, or we went to school dances. Going to a club

would be new for me, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to experience it.

At least when I went to college, I could tell people that I'd been to a club before. Going to the club would put me one step ahead into adulthood.

Chloe had to go with us to the mall because my parents wouldn't return home until that evening. But that was okay with me. I hadn't been spending as much time with her as I should that summer. Plus, I was on babysitting duty, like always. Mom was at the hospital, and Dad was at the office.

It would be fun going somewhere without having to worry about all the drama that had been going on between Leah and me. Sometimes, I put too much on my plate, more than I could handle. Just like school but without the clubs.

I texted Victoria that I would be at her house at two that afternoon. She texted back and said we would go to a club called the Black Sea.

"Get ready, Chloe, we're going to the mall later this afternoon."

Chloe started dancing like Carlton from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*. "Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Can you get me that shirt I showed you in that catalog?"

"You can get it if it's not too expensive," I said. "Hurry, because I have to go pick up someone."

As Chloe began getting ready, I rushed into my clothes so I could call Leo. He answered the phone.

"Hey, what are you doing today?"

“I was thinking about coming over to see you for a little.”

“Me and Chloe are about to head to the mall. But you can come see me before I go to the club with Victoria tonight.”

“The club? You have never been to a club in your life. What makes you want to go now?”

“I know, that’s the point. I just want to go see how it feels for the first time.”

“Well, text me on your way back from the mall so I can come over to see how you look. If you look too good, you might just have to stay in with me tonight.”

That was the old Leo, talking slick. I told him I would text him on my way from the mall.

I yelled for Chloe so we could leave, and we were off to Victoria’s.

“When I go off to school, how are you going to decorate my room—or, should I say, your new room?” I asked Chloe.

“I don’t know yet. But Zac Efron posters are going all over my walls.”

“Yeah, he is definitely a cutie.”

We arrived at Victoria’s house. There were kids playing in the street, guys shooting dice on the sidewalk without shirts, and women sitting around on their porches smoking cigarettes. Her neighborhood was so much different from my neighborhood.

“Hop in the back seat, Chloe.”

Victoria got into the car. “Hey, how have you been doing?”

“I’ve been doing okay. I talked to my mom about my situation with Leah. She gave me some good advice. Hopefully, someday we will squash all this and put it behind us. It’s just so childish to me.”

“What’s going on with you and her now?”

“Well, I didn’t tell you, but I saw her at the protest downtown with some new friends of hers, I guess. They were holding up an ‘All Lives Matter’ sign.”

“What? Why would she do that? She doesn’t know what she is getting into. That group doesn’t fight fair.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing, but she will find out the hard way.”

“You sure it’s nothing?”

“I’m sure,” Victoria said.

Even though me and Leah weren’t talking, I couldn’t let anything happen to her that could be regretful.

Victoria tried to ease away from the comment she made. “Do you know what kind of outfit you will get for tonight?”

“No. To be honest with you, I have never been to a club before. The only club I’m familiar with is the drama club, student government, or a house party. So, you will have to help me pick out an outfit. By the way, that is my baby sister, Chloe, in the back.”

Victoria swung around and waved. “Hey, sister Chloe in the back.”

Chloe waved, acting as though she was shy.

“Okay, I got you. We can probably just go to Forever 21 and get everything from there.”

“Okay, but first I promised my sister a shirt she has been wanting for a long time.” I added, “I had a great time yesterday. It felt really good doing it.”

“We really take it seriously. One guy who had been protesting dropped out of school to protest.”

“What did you think about the ‘White Lives Matter’ and all the other banners we spotted last night?”

“I don’t usually pay them any attention. I’m only there for one reason, and that’s justice for my baby.”

“I felt like we were proving ourselves to other groups instead of the cops. But Mitchell would be proud of you standing up for him.”

When we made it inside the mall, Chloe had her eyes focused on popcorn. So, we rode the escalator to get her some popcorn and afterward found the shirt she had seen in the catalog. It wasn’t too expensive, and I figured why not buy it for her as I would be leaving home in a few weeks.

We located the Forever 21 department store upstairs. Inside the store, I noticed so many cute outfits, but which one could I wear to the club? I picked the perfect outfit; I showed it to Victoria.

“Hey, what do you think about this?”

“Yeah, that’s good if you’re going to church tonight. I got the perfect outfit for you. I saw it over here.”

Victoria searched through the racks and pulled out a short, sleeveless dress.

“That’s too short. But it is a pretty black dress. I can see myself wearing that under another outfit so my parents won’t make me turn around and go back upstairs as I leave the house tonight. Okay, I’ll get that one. Let’s hurry because my friend, Leo, is coming over soon before we go out tonight.”

“You back with Leo now?”

“No, not really. But we’re working on it by just being friends again.”

“But haven’t you been friends, like forever?”

“Yeah, but we both need some time to think things through instead of just jumping back into a relationship.”

Walking out of the store, I glanced over to the side of the mall and it was the devil in disguise. It was Leah and her new friend, Elizabeth. I hesitated to go talk to her because all this trying to make me jealous stuff was getting out of hand. *She was my best friend since grade school.*

I walked over to Leah. She stopped and scolded me from my head to my toes with sour eyes, placing her hands on her hips.

“Can I talk to you alone?”

“Anything you need to say to me, you can say it in front of my friend,” Leah said.

“Seriously, Leah? What is your problem? All you’ve been doing is trying to sabotage me. I thought we were friends. No, I thought we were best friends.”

“You’ve made your choice. So, I made my choice.”

“What choice? All I did was try to do something for a good cause but you are just doing it to get back at me. I just wanted your support.”

“What is she talking about?” Elizabeth asked.

“She’s just making up stuff.”

Victoria stepped in front of me, pulling my arm to leave. “You don’t have to listen to these girls. All they seem to be is nothing but trouble, and we don’t need that.”

“You need to mind your own business,” said Elizabeth.

Why did she say that?

Victoria’s voice dripped with hatred as she started glaring into Elizabeth’s eyes. Victoria placed her bags on the floor and took two confident steps toward Elizabeth; out of nowhere, Victoria raised her arm preparing her hand for the knockout.

“No!” I yelled. “It’s not worth it. My little sister is with us, Victoria!”

Victoria balled her hand and walked backward. “You’re right.”

Victoria’s eyes were red and her hands were shaking. There was nothing I could do to calm her.

“You don’t see that you are starting problems for no reason.” I said to Leah.

Leah placed her hand on her hip. “What problems? You made it a problem when you chose your new friends over me.”

“I didn’t choose anyone over you. I just wanted to do something meaningful and take a stand for something.”

“Oh, yeah. You wanted to protest with your ‘Black Lives Matter’ group. Protesting for people you don’t even know.”

“So, what? You protested with a group. If that’s what you choose, then that’s your right. But don’t get mad at me because I made a decision that shouldn’t affect you.”

“Excuse me. Let’s back up for a second. Did she really just say that?” said Leah to her friend.

“Let’s just go,” I suggested walking away. “It’s really not worth being here with someone that I thought was my best friend.”

We walked out of the mall, and my sister’s eyes widened. Chloe was shaking, arching her eyebrows at me and Leah. She was confused, wondering if she should trust either of us. I couldn’t blame Chloe for feeling scared, knowing that Leah and I were friends before she was even born—which, to her, was her entire life. She didn’t understand why we’d been arguing, but I needed to get her home. Her eyes were becoming watery, and I didn’t want to see my little sister like that.

“What was that all about?” cried Chloe.

I buried my face in my hands. “It was nothing, Chloe. It was just a big mix-up.”

“Are you okay?”

“I just want to go home.” I grabbed Chloe by the arm pulled her closer to me and continued to the car.

Victoria was pacing in circles and crying. I had to calm her. The bad thing about this entire situation was that Leah did not understand that Victoria had been Mitchell’s girlfriend. I could understand why Victoria was so upset with her.

“Victoria, can you please calm down? My little sister is getting terrified, and I don’t want her to witness anything like this.”

“The way I feel right now... Oh! I just want to punch something.”

“Get in the car, Chloe.”

I placed my arms around Victoria trying to calm her while standing next to the car in the parking lot. After she was calm, she told me she had to make a phone call. I got into the car while she called Ricardo and told him what had happened. As, she began talking to him; I noticed her face turned red from anger and tears began to flow. I overheard her on the phone, and she mentioned vandalizing Elizabeth’s house to Ricardo.

When she got into the car, I pretended like nothing ever happened, but I decided that I had to say something. It was bothering me too much.

“Are you okay? I heard you on the phone with Ricardo. I hope that what I heard isn’t what you guys are going to do. Have Ricardo and his friends been vandalizing those houses in Frontenac?”

“I’ll talk to you about that later. Now is not a good time.” Victoria wiped the tears from her face. She swung around and apologized to Chloe.

Chloe lowered her voice, “It’s okay.”

I looked over into Victoria's eyes and could feel her sorrow. That was on a whole different level than I’d ever seen.

Driving to Victoria’s house there was nothing but silence. I was nervous about going to the club later that night after eavesdropping on her conversation with Ricardo.

The fact that Ricardo and his friends had been the ones vandalizing houses in the Frontenac area made my stomach go in circles. All the feelings I had for him went away. He’d played me this entire time, and I even asked him about it. This was supposed to be all about justice, but it seemed like they had been doing this for all the wrong reasons. That was why the police had been patrolling our neighborhood.

Victoria got out of the car while wiping evidence of crying off her face. “I can drive tonight. I’ll pick you up around nine.”

I didn’t want to go to the club but, as mad as she was, I was too scared to say I changed my mind.

I turned around to check on Chloe. “Get into the front seat.”

“Are you okay?” I asked her rubbing her leg.

“Yeah, but why were you and Leah arguing? I thought y’all were friends.”

I paused. *What could I say to her?* There was no explanation for how we reacted.

“It was just a misunderstanding between us.” I said. “But you can’t tell Mom and Dad what happened because they would be really upset.” *Especially if they knew that I had Chloe around an argument like that.*

I could imagine how mad my parents would react. I had tried so hard to make amends with Leah so we could squash that mess. That situation was different, it was not like when we were in high school and we could talk things out. There were more people involved that time, and I wasn’t sure if I should forgive her. That situation exhausted me, and I was tired of fighting with her.

I pulled into the driveway and Leo was there waiting for me.

“Chloe tell Mom I will be in shortly. And don’t forget what I told you earlier.”

She nodded her head and went inside the house.

Leo greeted me with a hug. “You seemed tense. Are you okay?”

I told him what happened at the mall.

“Sasha, you should probably stop hanging around them.”

“After the club tonight, this will definitely be my last night hanging out with them.”

That whole protesting for justice was for me, something I wanted to do for a good cause. I hadn’t intended to get caught in their little war games.

“Do you want to see what I’m wearing tonight?” I reached into the bag and pulled out my dress to show him.

Leo licked his lips. “I might have to come with you. It’s nice but short.”

“You could come if you want to.”

“Nah, I don’t know them like that.”

I gave Leo a flirtatious push. “Whatever. Keep your phone on you because I’m not driving and, if I don’t like it, I need you to come get me from the club.”

We sat on the porch and talked for a while, enjoying the evening of a cool breeze from the sun going to rest in the west.

“I need to go inside to talk to my parents,” I said. “I’ll talk to you later.”

I really wasn’t going to talk to my parents. I just wanted to go check on Chloe to make sure she said nothing about the mall incident. Plus, I wanted to get some rest before Victoria texted me.

I peeked into Chloe’s room, but she was busy on her computer playing some fashion celebrity game.

It seemed like the clock was skipping hours because time was really going fast. My nerves tingled like someone was tickling me with a feather. I wanted to know about the vandalism and why they were doing it. That was *not* bringing justice to Mitchell.

I began to get dressed. I went to look for a coat to hide my dress, but hopefully I could walk to the door without my parents seeing me.

Minutes later, I saw Victoria pulling into the driveway. I yelled to my parents that I would be back later and told them not to wait up. I rushed out the door so they wouldn't see me wearing a coat when it was about eighty-seven degrees outside.

"You look nice," said Victoria. "We just have to go pick up Ricardo and Rashad. Rashad is already at Ricardo's house."

"You look nice, as well," I said. "But can you tell me more about the vandalism?"

"Just can't tell Ricardo I told you," said Victoria.

"I won't."

"Yes, they have been vandalizing anyone who protested for All Lives Matter."

"Why would you guys do that? Is that what gives you justice? Well, you guys can have that because I'm not going to be a part of it. Be careful because the cops stopped me twice about the vandalism that has been going on."

We pulled up to Ricardo's house and became silent. We stopped talking about it. Ricardo and Rashad jumped into the car.

"You look nice, Sasha," said Ricardo.

I rolled my eyes and folded my arms. "Thank you."

My frown showed that I was upset with him because he lied to me. The one person I thought I could trust betrayed me, too.

“Victoria, we will handle that business soon,” Rashad said.

They were trying to downplay everything so I wouldn’t understand. But, after she had called Ricardo earlier, I knew what he was talking about.

My parents would go nuts if they caught me in something stupid like that. I’d already been such a rebellious teen that summer.

“Victoria, can you make a stop at Kum & Go gas station?” requests Ricardo. “I’m meeting my cousin to get us some brandy and Heineken.”

“Did you want something, Sasha?” Ricardo asked.

“No, I don’t drink beer. But I will get a shot of that brandy.”

I would drink, but not so much that I’d be stumbling into the house later.

When we arrived at the club, my hands began to sweat. I wished I could’ve gone with Leah; this was something else we were supposed to do together.

When we got in, they were playing Juvenile, “Back That Azz Up.”

Flashing blue lights bounced from one wall to another. The DJ was playing Juvenile so loud that I had to scream to talk to Victoria.

I followed Victoria’s lead. She started bobbing her head, so I started bobbing my head. When she started moving her hips, I started moving my hips. Then I backed that thang up, just as Juvenile was telling me.

The girls off to the side of us were bending with their arms on the floor twerking, while the boys surrounded them scheming. Yeah, they were dancing really inappropriately. Their butts were moving like Jell-O.

We went to grab some Cokes so we could mix them with the brandy while Ricardo and Rashad went to grab us a seat. *With all the stress I had been going through, I should have drank the entire bottle.* We passed it around taking shots.

After a while, we started getting woozy from the drinks; we started getting loose. My hands were waving in the air.

“That’s my shit,” yelled Victoria, dancing to “God’s Plan” by Drake. We went to the dance floor and started dancing.

I was having so much fun until someone bumped my shoulder. It was that girl Elizabeth and behind her came Leah and two other guys I had never seen before. *Did she bump me on purpose?* I said nothing because I remembered how Victoria went off earlier at the mall. I didn’t need that side of Victoria coming out, especially after a few drinks.

At that moment, I felt like my entire night had been ruined by Leah with her newfound friends. *How did they know we would be at this club?* I walked away and went to the bathroom. I went inside a bathroom stall and called Leo. I told him to come and get me because Leah was there. I could imagine this whole night turning into a disaster.

I went out of the bathroom, and Ricardo and his friends were getting into a confrontation with Elizabeth

and those two guys that came with Leah. *Damn it, I knew it.*

It all started with Ricardo staring at one guy, and they started exchanging words. Ricardo jumped, trying to charge at those guys, and Rashad was behind him. Victoria and Elizabeth started to argue. It was becoming too much for me, and it wasn't worth it for me to be at the club with them if I wasn't having a good time. *Could I ever have a good time doing something I had never done before without Leah trying to sabotage me?* I had made a bad decision to go to the club. It was time for me to go.

I grabbed Ricardo and Victoria, telling them to come to the booth where we had been sitting; I tried to calm them. It wasn't worth it because we were there to enjoy ourselves. There was no reason for them to get into a brawl on my first club night ever. They came to the booth. Rashad said he was going to go to the bathroom and, afterward, he was leaving. He seemed disturbed, as though he didn't want any part of what happened tonight.

Leo texted and said he was outside waiting for me. That was the best news I had heard all night. I needed to get away from there before something happened to me.

I walked to Victoria and Ricardo. "My friend Leo is outside. I'll call you guys later."

My hands were trembling, and I had to leave and not involve myself in anything that I could regret for the rest of my life.

Walking out of the club, I glanced at Leah; it seemed like she stayed with Elizabeth. After that confrontation,

she chose her new friends. So, I departed the club to get in the car with Leo.

“I’m glad you came. It was getting crazy in there. I guess the guys who came with Leah know Ricardo and his friends and they got into a huge altercation. I also found out that Ricardo and his friends have been vandalizing homes in Frontenac. Even though Leah and I aren’t talking, I hope she leaves because they are trouble. I sure don’t want Ricardo and his friends to vandalize her house. This entire time I was thinking they were protesting for justice and they were not; they have been going to the extreme. They have like a war going on between them.”

“Did you want to see if Leah wants to leave?” Leo asked.

“No, it would probably make things worse. I should’ve listened when you told me not to get involved with Ricardo.”

“You didn’t know all that was going on, and you’ve been actually doing it for good cause. They are just on some other shit.”

“I’m just glad you came and got me. I feel safe now. Let’s go back to my house.”

At the club, everything seemed calm for now. Rashad grabbed his Kansas City Chiefs black hat from the table, surrounded by shot glasses and spilled liquor puddles from people bumping the table while twerking. He was getting ready to leave. He wasn’t feeling the atmosphere.

Everyone full of anger and eyes fixed on him and his crew. Something was sure to happen.

He hugged Victoria and dapped Ricardo. Victoria and Ricardo stayed at the club.

Leah became scared, but she wasn't going to show any signs of being afraid around Elizabeth.

Leah glanced around, and there was no one she knew. She was there only to make Sasha jealous, not to join in a confrontation. She knew that being part of a public fight was not her cup of tea. She had to leave and get away from them.

"It's getting late so I'm going to go," Leah gathered a lie so she could leave. Leah didn't have a purpose to be there now. She walked out. She suddenly turned around and went inside the club because she forgot her purse.

"I'll call you later," said Elizabeth. "Jake and Josh are coming right back. They said they had to handle some business really quick."

On the way to her car, Leah took the alley to the garage where she parked her car. She pulled out her keys and cellphone to pretend like she was talking to someone while walking in the dark alley.

She noticed some guys ahead of her; they were arguing so she turned around. She squinted her eyes and realized it was Jake and Josh. They were arguing with Rashad, the boy who came with Sasha.

They started fighting. They pushed Rashad on the ground while Jake and Josh were kicking and punching him.

He was helpless. It was two against one.

“Stop it! Stop it!” yelled Rashad.

Leah ran to them and told them to stop.

“What is wrong with you? You are going to hurt him!”

But they wouldn't stop. They kept kicking Rashad.

“If you don't stop, I'm calling the police.”

Joshua faced Leah and threw her to the ground. “If you tell anybody about this, I will do the same thing to you. Remember, I know where you stay. You won't look as pretty as you think you are after I finish with you.”

They fled from the alley.

She bent her knees and hesitated to touch Rashad. So much blood covered the cement. Rashad didn't move nor did his eyes blink. Leah's legs started trembling, and her hands were shaking.

She started pacing around for help.

Leah noticed that Rashad now had stopped moving. She started shaking him and checking for a pulse. He began to breathe hard; his body began shaking. His arms and legs were moving fast as he was foaming from his mouth.

Rashad reached for Leah, “Help me.” He passed out.

“I will get you some help. Just hold on and the cops will be here soon,” she said with such a frantic voice.

At first, he wasn't responding but seconds later he started moving again, in so much pain. Leah couldn't leave him all alone, but the memory Joshua planted in

her head made her scared. Soft voices of chattering came from around the corner. Leah ran to the garage to her car. Stumbling to find the car key on her chain, she found it and drove off fast, leaving tire marks in the garage.

All the way home, Leah was crying, driving fast, and swerving on the road. Her eye mascara was drooping. She had to pull off to the side of the road because her heart was about to jump out her chest and her hands were shaking too much to drive. She tried to call someone, but she realized there was no one to call because she had burned bridges with all her friends from being so petty.

The horrible incident that happened to Rashad and all this revenge on Sasha was making her sick.

Could my actions have caused this?

Leah quickly jumped out of the car. She ran to the rear of the car, holding her hand on the trunk, and bent her body forward to bring up everything she had eaten that day. She grabbed some napkins out of her glove compartment to clean around her mouth and drove off.

She realized that what she did wasn't worth losing her friendship with Sasha. This was too much to handle.

She pulled herself together, stopped at a gas station with a pay phone, and called the police. She told them that a guy had been hurt in the alley near the Black Sea club. She quickly ended the call while the operator tried to ask her more questions.

Leah's eyes roamed around making sure no one noticed her make the call. She got into her car and drove home.

When Leah got home, she slammed the car door, ran upstairs, threw herself on the bed, pressing her face in her pillow screaming as tears fell.

Leo and I were still hanging out at my house. It was late, and everybody was asleep. We laid on the couch, watching a movie and talking about our days at Chester. It was good to have Leo around again. We started to get cozy, but Leo had to leave because his parents called him home. I kissed him goodnight as he pulled out of the driveway.

I hoped Leo didn't have the wrong idea that we were a couple again because he still had a lot of work to do. But I could admit that having him as my friend had been helpful with my issues. Knowing I had someone to talk to that I had known for a long time was good. Leo understood me, but I hoped we could have better conversations. Deep conversations like I had with Ricardo.

I walked upstairs and glanced at my cell phone, noticing I had seven missed calls from Ricardo and Victoria. I wondered why they had called me so many times. I told them that Leo was coming to get me from the club.

Maybe Victoria told Ricardo that she confessed to me about what they had been doing to those houses. But whatever it was, I meant what I said. I was not going to be bothered with them anymore. I couldn't involve myself with all the confrontations and the things they did. It was too much drama for me.

My phone rang again, and I ignored it.

Ricardo texted me to call him ASAP—that it was very important.

What could be so important?

So, I called him.

“Yo! We’ve been trying to call you all night!” Ricardo said in a panicked voice.

“Yeah, my phone was upstairs, and I was downstairs with Leo. You sound like you’re scared and nervous. What’s going on?”

“It’s Rashad.”

“What about him?”

“He’s been severely beaten, and they don’t know if he’s going to make it or not.”

I was puzzled. I became silent on the phone for about ten seconds. I wondered who would have done something like that.

“Oh my gosh! Do you know who did it?”

“No, but I have a clue.”

“Whoever you think did this, don’t go off and do something that will cost you your life. Let his family and the police handle this. Where are you guys now?”

“At the hospital, waiting for his family to get here.”

“I thought Rashad left the club early.”

“He did but, as he was walking to the bus stop, he was jumped in an alley next to the garage near the club.”

“It’s impossible for me to come to the hospital. My parents wouldn’t let me come this time of night. I would have to sneak out, but I don’t want to get in trouble. Text me when you guys leave and call me in the morning.”

I called Leo.

“Sorry to call you so late, but something bad happened to Rashad.”

“What happened?”

“He was jumped in an alley, and the doctors don’t know if he will make it or not.”

“Wow.”

“It was a good thing I left early.” I said. “Something could’ve happened to me. What about Leah? I wondered if she was okay or if she witnessed what happened because she was still there when I left the club.”

“I hope not, but don’t let this bother you. Get some rest because it’s late.”

“Okay, goodnight.”

I mourned for Rashad. This situation had my mind racing with so many thoughts. I started worrying about me and Leah’s situation. *Was all this arguing worth it?* I went from being the top student at Chester Academy to hanging with people who were vandalizing homes and getting hurt.

I had to separate myself from everything and everyone. I was not used to being caught up in that much drama. I hadn’t even picked up a book all summer, or even spent time with my sister before I had to leave for college, because every day it was something new.

Sometimes I wished I hadn't given Ricardo that ride downtown or even been so curious about him protesting. I wondered if this was all my fault, but it couldn't have been because that had been going on way before I came into the picture. I hadn't been vandalizing homes nor fighting.

All that protesting that they did was good, but what would really give those families justice was putting that police officer in jail. At the end the day, he was guilty and he had killed an innocent boy.

It was like a war between the different groups of protestors, and Ricardo and his friends were a part of it. I thought Victoria would be different being that Mitchell was her boyfriend. She had the right to become mad, but what they were doing was wrong and it ended with someone in the hospital.

How would the parents of the victims feel if they found out they were doing those things? It wasn't bringing justice to their children, and it wasn't even doing anything to the cops that were getting away with killing those innocent young men. It was giving the cops more power to have hate groups against them, and it took the focus off what they had done.

I became worried about Rashad, and I hoped he pulled through. But that had gone too far. Someone was hurt from stupid actions and people not respecting other's constitutional rights. I thought that would be a good time for me to talk to Ricardo, and Leah to talk to Elizabeth, and tell everyone involved to stop what they were doing and actually *do* what they believed in—find justice for innocent young men.

When I laid on my bed, I couldn't help but grab my laptop and go to my social media page. I scrambled through the web to research, "Black Lives Matter." I thought I should make a statement about unity and inequality. That was what mattered, and that was what we should fight for, not having different groups against each other. But I took myself out of all those groups so they would not bother me; but somehow, the ghosts of Mitchell and the other young men kept appearing. I decided it wasn't worth joining those groups, but my mind wasn't steady. The incident with Rashad had me all over the place. *What could I do to make things better?*

Finally, my body needed rest, my eyes began to shut, and my mind wandered off.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I woke with a huge headache. It could have been from drinking that cheap brandy the night before or all the drama that had been going on. I didn't get much sleep.

I decided that me and Chloe should go to the country club so I could exercise and hit the ball on the tennis court. That would take some stress off. I hadn't been playing any sports or exercising since school and my body was out of shape, *but still cute*.

I walked around the house to find Chloe to get her to come with me so we could have some sister time. When I asked her, Chloe started running around in circles yelling. She had been begging me to get out the house and hang out with me all summer—just the two of us. I wanted to spend the day clearing my head, making no room to stress about what happened to poor Rashad or what Leah had on her mind to sabotage me.

“How about I make this whole day just me and you? So, after we go to the country club, we can have our own little pool party when we get back.”

“That sounds like a great idea. On the way back can I also get some ice cream?”

“Okay, let's get ready.”

While I was waiting for Chloe, I called Ricardo. I said I wasn't going to be bothered with them, but I couldn't go without checking on how Rashad was doing. Ricardo answered his phone.

“Hey, Ricardo. Hope all is well. How is Rashad doing?”

“I spoke to his mom today. He’s awake and speaking a little but not too much movement. The doctor wants him to get as much rest as he can.”

“Okay, that’s really good because I couldn’t sleep well without knowing that he would be okay. If you go see him, tell him I said hang in there. I might drop by to see him one day this week. I’ll check with you guys later.”

It was nice that Ricardo informed me that Rashad was doing well. I grabbed my keys and locked the door.

We headed to the country club. I was excited to spend some time with Chloe because college was only a few weeks away.

When we arrived, I went to sign us in and Melissa, my volleyball teammate from Chester, was standing at the counter. She was working there for the summer before she went to Ohio State. We all got into good colleges, but Melissa received a full volleyball scholarship.

“We need to get caught up one day before you leave to go off to college. Maybe we could exercise some days you don’t have to work,” I said.

Melissa handed me some towels. “That would be nice because I have to stay in shape for my scholarship.”

We had some great times on the volleyball team together.

“Chloe what do you want to do first?”

She pointed to the playground. While she went to the playground, I went to the gym to do a little exercise.

I could tell I was out of shape because I was breathing hard and sweat soaked through my entire T-shirt. I had been running on the treadmill for only five minutes. I decided to do at least thirty minutes, then do some stomach exercises and weights to keep my stomach flat.

When I finished doing weights, I went to check on Chloe and she was still at the playground. She told me she was fine and wanted to stay there so I went to hit some tennis balls.

Walking to the tennis court, I glanced and saw someone I wasn't expecting at all. Leah was there, hitting some balls. I went onto the tennis court where she wouldn't notice me. As much as I was bothered by our relationship, it was not worth it to try and talk to her again.

As I was hitting the balls shooting from the launcher, I peeked out of the corner of my eye and noticed she didn't have her new friends with her.

When I glanced at Leah, she seemed different. I noticed that something was bothering her. We hadn't been talking for weeks, but I still could sense when she was disturbed by something.

I wondered if I should go talk to her. After all she had put me through because of one little argument where we had different views... *Oh shoot, what the heck, it couldn't get any worse than what had already happened.*

Many times, I said I would never talk to her again, but I still cared about her. I went up to her after realizing she was by herself without her friends, maybe she would come to her senses.

“Leah, can you come over and talk to me?”

Leah slammed her tennis racquet and placed her hand on her hip. “What do you want, Sasha? I really don’t have time to hear what you have to say.”

“I want us to talk. Things have gotten really out of hand between us.”

Leah tried to ignore me by hitting the balls harder. “I know, but I really don’t want to talk about it. And I don’t hang around Elizabeth and her friends anymore, if that’s what you want to know.”

“I think we should talk about it, Leah. Our friendship has been torn apart over some stupid things you did to get back at me.”

“Yeah, I know, but I really can’t discuss it. I have to go.”

When Leah walked away from me. I could sense that something was going on with her. She wasn’t the sassy and spicy Leah I knew. It seemed like she was hiding something.

But there was nothing I could do. At least I tried, once again, to talk to her. As I walked into the building, I remembered that Leah said she couldn’t discuss it, as though something was bothering her and she couldn’t say anything. That bothered me.

I went to get Chloe because it was time to go.

“You ready to go get some ice cream, Chloe?”

“I’ve been ready for some ice cream!” Chloe yells.

I considered letting her invite some of her friends over. I called Leo and asked him to come to the house in a while.

I took her to the Fountain where I could use my employee discount even though Pam cut my hours to one day a week ever since I walked out sick.

We arrived at the Fountain and everybody was in line like an angry mob waiting on the new Jordans to drop. But it was scorching and was early in the afternoon.

“Sit on the patio where I can see you,” I said. “What kind of ice cream you want?”

Chloe’s cheeks began to rise showing her pearl-white teeth. “Two scoops of cotton candy.”

After ordering our ice cream, I grabbed some spoons and napkins and joined Chloe on the patio.

“Great job picking a table with shade. Do you want to invite some of your friends to the house?”

“No thanks, I just want it to be me and you.”

“Alright, that’s cool with me.”

That was good she said that because I would have had to clean up behind her friends, anyway.

“Alright, let’s go home.”

On the way home, I wondered how it would be without me at the house when I went off to college.

When we got home, we went to put on our bathing suits and I played Pandora so we could have some music while in the pool. Chloe suggested we listen to Kidz Bop.

It was my turn to go to the basement to raid my dad's stash because, with all the stress, I wanted to just relax by the pool. Minutes later, I got in the pool to play with Chloe.

As we were playing Marco Polo, my phone rang. I jumped out of the pool to answer it.

It was Victoria.

I hesitated to answer the phone. I couldn't handle any more bad news, and that was all there was with them those last couple of days. And today was for Chloe and me.

I answered the phone and, when I did, she was shouting.

"Slow down. I can't hear you."

She was yelling and talking so fast I couldn't understand her. I had to yell her name to get her to stop screaming.

"Okay, what is it? Is everything okay?" I ask.

Victoria shouted, "I need you to go over to Ricardo's house and calm him down. He says he knows who hurt Rashad, and he is going to get them!"

"I can't get involved, Victoria. I also have my little sister here, and I can't take her over there."

"You don't have to get involved. You just need to calm him down so he won't do anything stupid that he will regret."

"Okay, I will go as soon as my mom gets home. But if I can't stop him, I will call you back," I said.

I started stomping my leg on the ground. I was two seconds from breaking my cellphone to pieces.

Damn it! I knew it, but my dumb butt answered, anyway.

All of the revenge stuff was going too far. I glanced at Chloe and showed a fake smile, jumped into the pool, and we started playing again.

“Who was that?” Chloe asked.

“Just someone I went to school with.”

Chloe folded her arms, twisted her lips, and started shaking her head.

“I heard you yell Victoria.”

“Yeah, but we are having a good time together and I’m not going to let anyone interrupt us.” I dunked her head in the water.

That was sister time for us, and I couldn’t keep letting their problems affect me.

Mom came home, and I told Chloe that we should go inside because I was about to leave. I went upstairs to change my clothes so I could head to Ricardo’s. I had to try and stop him from making a stupid mistake.

I texted Victoria and told her I was on my way to Ricardo’s. I got to Ricardo’s house and went to the basement. He was with a few guys that reminded me of trouble.

“Hey, what’s going on? Victoria called me and told me you were trying to get back at the people who hurt Rashad?”

“Yeah, they are going to pay for what they’ve done.”

“You shouldn’t take things into your hands, Ricardo. If you know who it did, just go to the police.”

“Did you hear what you just said? The police! The police can’t do a damn thing. Hell, all they do is make matters worse. Look where Mitchell is, and Rashad could’ve been killed as well from some stupid white boys trying to make a point.”

“Ricardo, can’t you see? That’s what they want you to do, and you guys haven’t been innocent either. I know about the vandalism. So, what role are you playing? None of this is bringing justice to Mitchell.”

Ricardo’s eyes were bloodshot red and tears flowing from his face. “Yeah, but you wouldn’t understand. You’ve been living in a bubble your entire life. Your parents have good careers, and you went to a good school that never even mentioned racism or anything, probably only during Black History Month. You have white friends, and I bet you never even in your whole life turned on your television to look at the news to see what’s going on in this world. We’ve been fighting this world since the day we left our parents’ womb. There are black boys being killed at least once a week and this time it happened to be my best friend.”

“Yes, you are so right, but when I saw you that night downtown protesting for a good cause, I admired what you were doing. Because of my curiosity, I lost my friends because I wanted to do this with you. But everything changed for me because, the night I protested with you guys, I saw so many groups. I felt that we should all be united and fighting for justice together.

This should be between the police department and protestors, not making it personal or about whether you just care about black lives only or white lives only. This should be about the innocent lives that have been taken. What you and your friends are doing is wrong. There is no justice in vandalizing the homes of people who have different opinions or views than you. One thing my grandma taught me is every dog has its day. You can't take matters into your own hands, Ricardo."

Ricardo started sniffing his nose and wiping the one tear that fell from his face. He missed his best friend. I would, too. I wanted him to do the right thing because one small mistake could lead to a lifetime of pain.

I drew closer to him as he wiped the tears off his face and gave him a hug. I stayed around for a little while. I cared enough for him that I didn't want him to leave and do something that he could regret for the rest of his life.

While walking upstairs to leave, I glanced back at him. "Ricardo, please promise me you want do anything."

"I'm not," he said.

I placed my arms around him and kissed him on his cheek.

On my way home, I texted Victoria and told her he should be okay; he would do nothing.

As I walked home, I worried about Leah and me. About our stupid argument and taking our friendship for granted. And about Ricardo's situation, and how he didn't have his best friend any longer; plus, he had another friend in the hospital. I remembered my mom

always said, “Child, you blessed and don’t know it.”
Now, I understand what she meant.

When I got home, I sat on the porch for a little while because I had so much on my mind. I needed a moment of fresh air to think. I had to make some decisions with my friends from school. I missed them a lot. If I had never been curious about protesting with Ricardo, I wouldn’t have had to worry about all that was going on between Leah and me. Leo and I would still be together, and Leah and I would still be best friends. I kept blaming myself that we weren’t talking anymore.

When I went into the house, Mom made Chloe go to her room and she told me to sit on the couch.

“Is everything alright?” I asked.

The frown on her face showed me she was pissed. She folded her hands and started shaking her head.

“Sasha, I want you to be honest with me and tell me the truth.”

I laughed, “Okay, I will as soon as you tell me what’s going on.”

“This isn’t a game. I just got a phone call from the police, and they said that you need to come in for questioning.”

At that moment, I was puzzled. I couldn’t say anything or do anything. The more I lied, the more trouble I could cause.

I was busted.

“That night you told me that you were going to the movies with Leo. Where were you really?”

I put my head down from disappointment and shame. “I went downtown to protest with Ricardo and his friends.”

“Damn it, Sasha, didn’t we tell you not to bother with that? What about the other night when you stormed out of the house?”

“I went to a club with Victoria.”

“Who is Victoria, and why do you have to go to the police for questioning? And a club? When did you start going to clubs? Haven’t we given you enough to stay out of trouble? What have you been doing this entire summer?”

I was about to jump out of my skin with all the questions Momma was throwing at me. I wasn’t ready to answer them at all, but I had to tell her the truth. Eventually my lies would catch up to me.

“One of her friends was jumped in an alley, but I wasn’t there because I left with Leo.”

“Well, I called your dad and he will take you to the police station. He also wants to talk to you when he gets home, and you can explain everything to him when he gets here. Just to let you know, he is very pissed. I’m done, just go to your room until your dad and I figure all this out.”

I went to my room and shut the door. There was nothing I could say. I had lied to my parents this entire summer after they told me not to get involved. I disobeyed them. I had no choice but to tell my parents the truth when my dad got home. He would put up a fuss, and I feared what he’d do with me. A lawyer who

fought for justice for others and now he had to take his own daughter downtown to be interrogated by the police. He was going to be livid because now he had to sit with his daughter, not a client, in a closed room with cops.

The door slammed. Dad came in the house, yelling for me to come downstairs. So I went downstairs, and we sat at the dining room table. I started talking first because, if I started, I thought it might ease their anger.

“Let me start by telling you the truth. Remember when I was asking about the kid that got killed by cops from Eastview High? He was best friends with Ricardo. I know you told me not to get involved with it, but I was curious and still wanted to hang out with Ricardo. I was curious because here I am at Chester Christian Academy, being of color and not facing things like that at our school. All the kids there just worry about was the next trend or who had the hottest car. During that time, I thought my friends were turning against me. But I did go against your word, and I went to protest.”

“After we told you not to get involved with that stuff!” Dad said.

“I know I lied, but it felt good that I did something for a good cause. I got discouraged after seeing so many groups, and I truly believe it should be just one group protesting for the innocent lives. Ricardo and his friends have been really good friends but, after I found out they have been doing other things, I decided that after going to the club was my last time hanging out with them. I had Leo come and pick me up at the club. The next day, Ricardo and his friend, Victoria, called me and told me

that their friend, Rashad, was severely beaten leaving the club we all went to.”

“So, you see where your lies sent you? You don’t have to lie to us, Sasha,” Dad said.

“But you didn’t want me to do it, and I really wanted to do it for a good cause.”

“We told you not to get involved with that because we know what it’s all about. It’s been going on for years. Before you were born and even before I was born. This is not the first time the world went through this. But you lied to us. Don’t you see where it leads to now? We weren’t telling you this because we were against it. We are African Americans, too. I fight for clients every day who look for justice. That’s why I became a lawyer, and your mom became a doctor. There are other ways you can defend people who look like you or need your help. We told you not to get involved with the protesting because we love you and don’t want anything bad to happen to you. People are *really* getting hurt and dying while protesting downtown.”

“Yes, Dad, and I understand. I see where my actions led, but I honestly left with Leo and didn’t know what happened to Rashad until they called me.”

“Well, they want you down there first thing in the morning. So, I advise you not to leave the house tonight or until after we clear your name tomorrow,” Dad said.

I went to my room and pouted a little, but I couldn’t blame anyone but myself. I created the situation because I lied to my parents.

My hands were trembling. They scared me. I have never gone to a police station for questioning. *What if I go to jail for hanging around Ricardo and his friends?* I had to tell them the truth about everything, but I hoped Ricardo wouldn't get mad. *What if they think I had something to do with the vandalism? Poor Rashad was laying in the hospital in pain and almost killed because of this so-called war.*

Morning came, and I was so tired. I could not sleep at all that night because I was so nervous about going to the police station. My hand had been trembling all morning and my heart was in the bottom of my shoes. I did nothing wrong, but what if I went to jail for being around them? Or, what if they accused me of being an accomplice to all the vandalism Ricardo and his friends had been doing in the neighborhoods?

Dad knocked on my bedroom door. "It's time to go Sasha."

I went downstairs and hugged my mom as though I might not return. But I really hugged her because of my guilt and the humiliation I put them through.

As Dad and I were going to the police station, he started to give me the lawyer talk. He would act as my lawyer.

"They will ask you several questions. Every question they ask you, you look at me and I will give you the okay to answer. You just tell them what you told your mom and me, and everything will be alright."

While he was talking to me, it was going in one ear and coming out the other. I couldn't focus on his little prep talk. My mind was going in different directions. I glued together my legs, and I couldn't stop rubbing my hands.

We arrived at the station and, when I got out of the car, I took a deep breath. My dad told me not to worry about anything.

As I walked through the door and went into the waiting room, there was Victoria and Ricardo; they were sitting across from Leah, Elizabeth, and those two guys who came to the club with them. Everyone was quiet, and Joshua was staring at Leah like he wanted blood. I noticed that Leah's eyebrows were drawn together, and she was shaking her legs and biting her bottom lip, scared to give anyone eye contact. She was a nervous wreck, and that was not like Leah. She was not talking to Elizabeth or her friends, but she told me at the country club that she was no longer speaking to them.

My dad and I went to inform the officer that I came for questioning. The officer told us to hold for just a few while he got Officer Smith, who worked on the case.

We waited for a few minutes and this big handsome, white military guy came walking toward us.

"Hello, I'm Officer Smith. You can follow me to the room in the back."

We followed the officer, and he took us into a small room with a big window. He told us to sit tight while he gathered his files. When he departed the room, my dad reminded me to answer questions if he gave me the okay.

My dad said the officer may seem a little aggressive, but that was his job to interrogate witnesses.

About five minutes later, the officer returned to the room and sat at the table with a glass of water.

“Do you know why you are here, Sasha?”

“I have a clue, but not really.”

Boy was I nervous. My hand was knocking on the table and my knees were break dancing underneath the table.

“Rashad has been severely beaten and is in the hospital. He’s doing well now, but he wants to press charges against the suspects. We need you to be honest and tell me your relationship with Rashad and his friends.”

“I met Rashad through Ricardo, my neighbor and old childhood friend. After I saw Ricardo downtown one night, when I was hanging out with my friends, I was curious about what they were doing; I mean, by protesting for their classmate, Mitchell.”

“I’m very familiar with that incident. Where were you the night Rashad was hurt?”

“A couple of nights ago, we went to a club downtown, Black Sea, to hang out.”

“Who is we?”

“It was me, Victoria, Ricardo, and Rashad. They got into a confrontation with those two guys outside in the lobby. Then Rashad said he was leaving early, and that’s when I went to the bathroom to call my friend, Leo, to come pick me up because I was scared. Then I left the

bathroom to tell Victoria and Ricardo I was leaving. Leo and I went to my house and watched television for the rest of the night. After Leo left later that night, I saw I had a lot of missed calls on my phone. I called Ricardo back and that's when he told me what happened to Rashad."

"Can Leo vouch for you?"

"Yes, sir."

The cop went out for about three minutes and returned.

Officer Smith shook my hand and glanced toward Dad. "Thank you for coming here to talk to us. You have a good day, and I will see you later."

"Oh, and, Ms. Sasha."

I twirled around. "Yes, sir."

"You are a bright young lady. Choose your friends wisely."

I nodded my head at the officer as he gave me the best advice I'd heard all summer.

On the way out, I glanced at Leah; she gave me puppy sad eyes like she wanted to tell me something. I just waved at Ricardo and Victoria and exited the police station with my dad.

You could tell that something had her shaken.

When I hit the first step of the police station, fifty pounds lifted off my shoulders. I was so relieved.

On the way home, I texted Leo to come to the house later because I wanted some company. I also wanted to

tell him what happened that morning at the police station.

Mom was waiting for our return downstairs in the living room.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“It went well and quick. They wanted to know about Rashad because he pressed charges,” I said.

“That’s great. Now your name is cleared, and my heart is lifted.”

“Okay, but I need you and Dad to sit down because I do have one more thing to tell you I didn’t tell the police.”

Dad started rubbing his forehead. “Oh my gosh. Go ahead, honey.”

“Well, after I started hanging out with Ricardo, I was stopped by the police twice.”

“Why?”

“Well, they said that there had been kids vandalizing some neighborhoods. A few days later, when I went to the mall with Victoria, I overheard her talking about vandalizing houses with Ricardo. I knew they had been doing it, and I think that could have led to Rashad being in the hospital.”

“Well, they didn’t ask about that. And we don’t know that for sure because you did leave the club early,” said Dad. “For now, they are probably just interested in the incident with Rashad because that was a serious crime—and vandalizing homes is, too—but they could have

killed Rashad. Whoever did it could face an attempted murder charge.”

“Ouch, now that sounds scary,” I said. “They would be in jail for a long time.”

“Is there anything else you need to tell us? I hope this is it, and you’ve learned your lesson this summer.”

“Yes, one more thing. I want to go visit Rashad in the hospital one day soon.”

“I think that’s a great idea, but remember you said that you were through with Ricardo and his friends. I’m going to hold you to that.”

“I’m through with that entire experience. I’m not curious about anything now except going to college and experiencing what that’s going to be like.”

Dad interrupted me. “Oh! Wait. Why was Leah at the police station?”

“That’s an even longer story if you want to know.”

“No, only if it’s something I need to worry about.”

“No, it’s not. Mom, can fill you in with that situation.”

I went upstairs to my bedroom. My phone started to ring, and it was Ricardo. I answered. It was time for me to explain why I would not hang around them anymore, out of respect for him and his friends.

“Hey, how did it go at the police station?”

“They just asked me a lot of questions, but I was scared.”

“You didn’t have a reason to be scared.”

“Yeah, but I have never been to a police station to be questioned.”

“What did you tell them?”

“There wasn’t much to tell because after I left with Leo, it was a wrap for me. They wanted to know about Rashad, but I had nothing to tell them.”

“Why don’t you come over and hang out?”

“No, my hanging out and protesting is definitely over for the summer. My focus now is getting ready for college. You guys are great, but I can’t have a record and go to college. I really thank you for the adventure of protesting for Mitchell this summer. I really enjoyed doing something for a good cause. Hopefully, I will be able to tell my kids about this.”

“I understand. This has been a crazy summer. Okay, well, I guess I will see you around.”

“Yeah, you’ll see me around.”

I was glad that Ricardo was being understanding. I hoped for nothing but the best for them. After I ended the call with Ricardo, I laid on my bed and smiled feeling only upbeat vibes about the rest of my summer. Then I started wondering about Leah. She wasn’t herself and, if anybody could relate to Leah, I did. Something was bothering her, but I had no interest in speaking with her at the police station because every time I tried to talk to her it became a disaster. But I was worried for her. Her tone at the country club the other day seemed tense; then, at the police station, she was like a mute robot.

I had to get dressed, Leo texted me and said he was on his way. I had been lounging around since morning.

A few minutes later, Mom yelled upstairs.

“Leo is downstairs.”

I ran downstairs to greet Leo.

“Mom, is it okay if we go to my room?”

“You are joking with me, right?”

“Never mind, we can go on the patio and sit next to the pool.”

I wasn't joking when I asked her that. But I thought with me out of school, she would cut me some slack. I could only respect their wishes because I was still under their roof. Dad always said, “our roof our rules.”

Leo and I walked outside and hugged each other.

“So, how was your day?” he asked.

“It wasn't the best, but it was fair.”

I would tell him about my police visit later. I was so tired of repeating myself and telling the story, but I would tell him about Leah because she was Leo's friend, too.

“So, I saw Leah at the police station this morning, but she looked scared and her parents weren't there with her. Do you think they knew she had to go to the station for questioning?”

“Did you talk to her? Well, if it's the Leah I remember, she probably hid it from them.”

“No, I didn't talk to her because every time I try to talk to her, we argue. But this time she seemed different because she looked at me with guilt.”

“You should’ve talked to her. You guys have been going too long without squashing this mess. You and Leah will go to college soon, and you all shouldn’t be holding grudges for the rest of your lives. You two were friends first before all this craziness went down.”

I had to admit that Leo was making sense, and I should talk to Leah. But I would do it when I was good and ready, and when we were by ourselves and not around her friends. At that moment, was not a good time.

“My dad asked me why Leah was there. I told him that was a whole other story.”

I would tell my dad about me and Leah and our falling out later that night.

“So, are you going to tell me about your police visit?” Leo asks.

“Well, all I told them was how I went to the club with Ricardo and his friends, and they got into a confrontation with those other guys. I told them I was scared, and I called you to come pick me up.”

“That’s why they called me, then? They needed to confirm that you were telling the truth.”

“They really wanted to know what happened to Rashad because I guess his parents are pressing charges.”

“Would you blame them? He was beaten and left for dead. I would press charges myself.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that. One day this week, I’m going to go visit Rashad at the hospital.”

“Aren’t you just the sweetest thing? No, seriously, that would be great. I’m sure he can use some friends with him during this time.” Leo added, “I really miss us hanging out.”

“Me, too. When was the last time you talked to Cameron?”

“Me and Cameron talk all the time. He was upset with Leah for a while, but he’s over it. He misses that girl. Isn’t it weird that every time we get mad at her, we still miss her?”

“It’s the love we have for one another. But, you got to admit it, Leah went overboard this time,” I said. “Out of all her stunts, this was her lowest one. Now, I just need to focus on college. What do you plan on studying?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’m thinking since I have the basketball scholarship,” said Leo. “It’ll probably be sports management.”

“That sounds good. I want to ask you a question, and I want you to be honest with me. Why did you break up with me?”

“Oh, man, you really would ask that question,” he said.

“Yeah, because you really didn’t have a reason to. Was it another girl?”

“No, it wasn’t another girl. To be honest, I really thought I was losing you to Ricardo. I guess I was a little jealous.”

“Seriously, we are just neighbors. I told you I was curious about protesting with him because of his friend,

Mitchell, and you should've trusted me. I really felt good after I did it, but some people go to the extreme. It wasn't just us protesting. They had other groups protesting against each other. That's what made me not do it again because I thought it was just for justice for young African-American boys. But you know I would never do anything like that to you because I love you."

Leo closed his eyes, leaned toward my face, and we started kissing. My heart started beating so fast from the warm sensation in my stomach; it was puppy love. That's what mom said we have because we will know nothing about real love until we make sacrifices for each other. I hadn't had his lips pressed against my lips in a long time.

"We should get back together," he said.

"Not just yet. I'm still working on myself accepting the fact that you dumped me high and dry, but we are almost getting back to that place where we used to be. Still, let's give it some time."

It was time for Leo to go. I walked him to his car and gave him a hug and kiss. I went into the house and plopped on the couch between Mom and Dad to talk.

"What's up now?"

"Well, I want to go see Rashad tomorrow, and I want to go by myself."

"I don't know about that. What if the people who hurt him come to the hospital?"

"Dad, seriously. I'm a big girl, and it's not that serious. I just need to go see if he's alright because I probably won't see him again."

“Well, okay, but if you see anything suspicious, call the police and then call one of us.”

“Okay, Dad.”

It made me wonder, how will my dad react when I go off to college? He might put a tracker on my car if one’s not already on it. He might cry instead of my mom when they drop me off at my dorm room.

My cell phone started going off, and it was Victoria. *Why was she calling me?* I wondered. I texted her I would call her tomorrow when I got home. I was not telling her I was going to the hospital because she might meet me there. I wanted to spend time with Rashad alone.

I started scratching my head. *How should I approach Rashad? Should I take him some flowers? What should I say to him, when I visit? Will he even want to see me?*

CHAPTER NINE

On the day I planned to visit Rashad at the hospital, I was so nervous that I couldn't find my keys. I didn't have a clue what to say to Rashad. I had to remember not to say the wrong thing. I also hated hospitals. They were always cold and smell like medicine.

I went downstairs to get my keys off the dining room table where I remembered I placed them, but they were gone.

Mom was in the kitchen making coffee so I went to join her and sat at the breakfast counter. I thought she could help with what to say to Rashad; she was basically at the hospital all the time, witnessing these incidents.

"Today is the day."

"The day for what?" said Mom.

I'm going to visit Rashad, but I don't know what to say to him. I'm a little nervous."

"All you need to do is be a friend to him by listening and responding. You don't need to ask questions about the case. That's his family's concern, and the police are working on that."

"Yeah, you're right. By the way, have you seen my keys?"

"Your dad put them on the key rack last night, where they belong."

Heading out to the car, I glanced across the street and there was Ricardo, sitting on his porch talking on his

cellphone. I ran to the car. Fortunately, he was too busy on the phone to notice me.

On the way to the hospital, I was even more nervous than before. I had so many questions popping in and out of my head.

What if they had beaten him so bad that he couldn't talk to me?

This was too much. *Should I turn the car around?* It was too late. I realized, by the time I finished complaining, I was already at the hospital in the parking lot.

I walked to the information desk and asked the receptionist for Rashad's room. She told me to go to the second floor, to room two forty-five. I went to the elevator and rode to the second floor. The closer I got to him, the more I felt a panic attack building. I tried to remember what the receptionist said downstairs, to stay calm, and to not think about what I was about to witness.

Go up the elevator to the second floor. Once, on the second floor, you will see the nurses' desk. Pass the desk and make a right on that hall. Keep going all the way down and the room is on your left.

I knocked on the door and someone yelled, "Come in!"

"Hey, I didn't expect you to come and see me," said Rashad. He sat up, alert in the bed.

"Relax, you don't have to sit up for me. I needed to see if you were okay. That's what friends do."

Rashad was lying in the bed with a patch over one eye and dressed in a hospital gown. The kind that tied in the back and showed your butt unless you squeezed the gown with your hands from the back (which I, personally, think should be the front). I pitied him. You know that moment when you want to cry but you have to be strong for that person, just to not make them feel bad.

“You know, you are the only person who has been here to see me other than my mom sneaking me three meals a day. She said the hospital food isn’t nothing but plastic.”

I was shocked. “Wow, you haven’t talked to anyone, not even Ricardo?”

“Well, Victoria called, but only you came to see me. She said she was coming tomorrow.”

“I do know they were here the night it happened. Well, I’m glad you are moving around and talking. If you don’t mind me asking, do you know who did this to you or anything that happened that night?”

“No, but I think I have a clue.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, if you don’t already know, we haven’t been just protesting. We’ve been going at it with the white kids in Frontenac.”

“Yeah. One day, I overheard Victoria talking to Ricardo when we were leaving the mall, and that would explain the cops stopping me twice on the way to Ricardo’s. That’s when I backed off a little because I didn’t want to get in any trouble.”

“So, I think it was one of them. but, as I was getting kicked in the head, I remember hearing a female voice telling them to stop.”

“Do you know who the woman was?”

“No, but I think they hurt her, too. I saw her get thrown to the ground and one guy, I think, had threatened her. But, it was very blurry for me.”

“Well, I’m sorry I left early that night. After the confrontation, I was scared so I called one of my friends to come and pick me up.”

“That’s understandable,” he said. “But I was backing off from Ricardo because things have just been going all the way left. After the confrontation that night, I just left early because it started to feel like Ricardo was getting revenge instead of justice. He started taking things out of proportion, and my parents haven’t been feeling me protesting from the start.”

“What makes you feel that way about Ricardo?” I asked.

“Well, when we were protesting, it was just about getting justice for Mitchell because he was our homie and all. I wanted was to help make that statement. Then when people with their different views started protesting like ‘All Lives Matters’ and ‘White Lives Matter,’ he started taking it personal by vandalizing homes in the Frontenac area. I saw it leading to disaster, and I started backing off. I’m supposed to be starting college in a couple weeks, and I can’t be involved with it anymore. Now I have to go to college with bruises on my face.”

“Why did Ricardo take it personal?” I asked.

“He changed,” said Rashad. “Ricardo felt it wasn’t about justice anymore. It was like he was taking matters into his own hands. He felt that those other groups had no right to be there, and it became a racial issue. If you look at social media, you will know what I’m talking about. You can just search in the different groups and see what they have to say.”

“Yeah, I saw that on social media, but that’s exactly how I felt about the different groups when I saw them downtown. It should be justice for all victims and not separated groups against each other. But, in all reality, it happens to African Americans more often. My parents went crazy when they found out I had to go to the police station for questioning. I was even scared myself, but if you could get justice for what happened to you, I was going to tell it all. The police didn’t ask about the vandalism, they just wanted to know what happened to you.”

“Yeah, that was a horrible night for me.”

The nurse came in to check his vitals. So, it was a good time for me to leave.

“Well, I’m glad you are doing well and getting around. I have to get home because Victoria wants to come over later to talk to me, and my mom is texting me to come home because she is on call at the hospital today.”

“You should speak to Victoria. If anybody needs a person to talk to, it would be her,” said Rashad. “She is going through a lot. She really misses Mitchell.”

Leaving the hospital room, I told Rashad that I hoped to catch him around in Missouri one day. He gave me a hug and thanked me for coming to visit him.

Getting into the car, I felt good that Rashad was doing well and getting around. Also, I was glad someone had witnessed the incident. There was no telling what would have happened to Rashad if no one had come through that alley.

When I got home, Mom was on her way out the door heading for work. So, I was on babysitting duty for the day with no notice. Good thing I didn't have to work because Chloe would have had to help me serve ice cream. I went upstairs to check on Chloe. She was on her computer playing some celebrity game, and she didn't even notice me because she was so hypnotized by the game.

Looked like I didn't have much going on for the day.

I couldn't keep avoiding Victoria; she really could use an ear to talk to. I called and invited her to my house so we could talk. She texted me and said she would be over in thirty minutes, which was good because I would have time to settle in.

Minutes later, Chloe yelled and said someone was at the door.

I went to the stairway to peek downstairs. It was Victoria.

"Hey, how has it been? Your parents have such a nice house."

"Thank you. You look tired. Are you okay?" Victoria eyes were puffy and red.

“Yes, I went to Mitchell’s grave site, and I went to say my farewells because next week I’m off to Clark Atlanta,” she said. “Every chance I get when I come back to St. Louis, I will pay him a visit and see his family. I just feel so bad because I’m leaving him.”

“I understand. Let’s go out back to sit on the patio so that my sister won’t be getting a full ear.”

I handed her some tissue as we sauntered out onto the patio.

“You have a swimming pool, too. I should’ve brought my bathing suit.”

Teasing with Victoria, I said, “My mom said if you have a good bra and panties, you can always use that as a two-piece. I’m just kidding.”

Victoria and I sat on the chairs, and I got comfortable.

“The real reason I’m here is because I want to apologize for all that’s been happening to you,” said Victoria. “I know things have gone too far, and you aren’t used to confrontations like this. We were only supposed to protest for Mitchell. But, he was my boyfriend, I lost someone that I really cared for. Then, I was caught up in the hype of making everyone who disagreed with us hurt just like I did.”

“I know your intentions but, to be honest with you, I kind of distanced myself after I overheard you talking to Ricardo about the vandalizing,” I said. “I wanted to hang with you at the club because you were a good friend to me when I didn’t have anyone to turn to.”

“I can understand that. Things did get out of hand.”

“Yeah, and what topped it off was me going to the police department with my father.”

“What did the police ask you?”

“They wanted to know if I saw what happened to Rashad.”

“The same for me, too,” she said.

Tears started to roll down Victoria’s face. “The reason for me going to his grave is to let him know that I will be moving on to college, but I will never forget him. This was my toughest visit ever.”

“I’m sorry you lost Mitchell, and I know this time is really difficult for you. Mitchell would want you to go on with your life. I’m sure that his mom and other family members will still protest for his justice. By the way, I went to visit Rashad this morning.”

“Wow! How is he doing? I called him earlier this week, and he told me he was getting better. He also told me he almost went blind in his left eye.”

“He seems to be doing well. Yeah, he was wearing a patch over his eye, and they bruised him pretty good. He also said that a woman caught the guys and was telling them to stop, but they hurt her as well. Because of her they ran off.”

“That was good that she came just in time. No telling what would’ve happened if she hadn’t come on the scene,” said Victoria. “Sometimes I wonder what life would be like if Mitchell was still here. Would we still be protesting for other victims or would we just be going on with our lives? I guess everything happens for a reason.”

“That’s actually a good question. It hasn’t happened at my school, but I would still be curious about helping the victims without a voice. I don’t know Mitchell from a can of paint, but I felt good speaking out for him,” I said. “I don’t know what I would be doing if Ricardo never told me about this. I really enjoyed doing it because I just felt like I belonged to something, and I haven’t felt that in a long time. It was different than just student government or some school committee.”

“Well, I’m going to see Rashad tomorrow. Does he need anything?”

“I don’t think so. He said his mom is bringing him three meals a day.”

“I just hope I don’t get too emotional and cry when I see him.”

“I don’t know because you guys were closer than me and him, but I was nervous this morning when I went.”

My phone buzzed. It was Leo texting me. He said that he had to talk to me about something.

“Well, I really enjoyed talking to you, and I hope nothing but the best for you,” said Victoria. “What are you doing for the rest of the evening?”

“I just got this crazy text from Leo, and he says he needs to talk to me now. So, I guess he’s on his way here.”

“You have to keep in contact with me. You have my number. We will both be on the east coast attending college. Maybe my school might play your school in some sport and we will see each other.”

As I walked Victoria to the door, I gave her a huge hug. That was what she could use more than anything. Going on with her life without Mitchell was tough for her.

I ran in the house and shut the door. As I shut the door and leaned against it and gazed at the ceiling, my body released so much stress. It was all over. My days with Ricardo and his friends had ended, and I could conclude that chapter in my life's book.

I wondered what was Leo's deal, texting me saying he had something important to tell me? I ran upstairs to check on Chloe. Leo was outside, and Chloe was still playing that game on her iPad. So, I went downstairs.

The doorbell rang, and I ran to the door. Leo was standing at the door holding a dozen roses. Red leaked into my cheeks as I smiled and bit my lip.

"What's the special occasion?"

Leo gazed into my eyes and said, "You are the special occasion. Let's go somewhere we can talk."

"We can talk downstairs. It's only me and Chloe here. So, what is it that you needed to talk about?"

"I've missed you so much and lately I just can't stop thinking about you. I know I've messed up in the past, but I'm trying to become a better friend to you. Let's put it all in the past and just get back together."

"I don't know. We are about to attend different colleges and so many temptations will come both our ways. How are we going to handle it?"

“When we come to that path, I’m pretty sure we will make the best decisions. Right now, I’m focusing on getting my girl back.”

“We can try,” I said, “But this time I need you to trust me and, if anything happens between us, promise we will always remain friends.”

“I promise,” said Leo as he took me in his arms and gently kissed me.

There was no doubt, I still loved Leo, so I was willing to try again. We’d been dating for so long that we could put all that other stuff in the past.

“Well, okay, enough about us,” said Leo. “How was your day?”

“I went to see Rashad this morning, and he’s doing better. He is leaving for college in a couple of days. “

“That’s good.”

“Victoria also came by today, and we had an emotional moment. I felt bad for her, and I hope she’ll be okay.”

“She should probably get some counseling. That was a tough situation, especially with her being young,” suggested Leo.

“It was heartbreaking for me because she came over after visiting Mitchell’s grave.”

“Wow, it was good that you were there for her.”

My phone started buzzing as Leo and I walked to the patio.

It was Leah calling me. My eyebrows raised, wondering why the hell she was calling me after all that time.

I stood, wiped my brow, and placed my hand on my hip. “Um, Leo. I just got a call from Leah.”

“Why didn’t you answer it?”

“Because I don’t know if it’s a setup or what. It has been nothing but trouble with her this summer. I thought she was my best friend and I also thought she grew out of her little scandals, but obviously she didn’t.”

I was not going to call her but then she texted me.

“Leo, she just texted me and told me to call her back because it is important.”

“Just call the girl back. Maybe it *is* very important!” Leo said raising his voice.

That good Sasha was telling me to call her and the bad Sasha was saying, don’t you do it. It was a tough decision to make.

Did she even deserve for me to call her?

Every time we got into a fight, I always gave in, but this time I had planned on leaving her alone.

But what if she wanted to repair our friendship?

There was no way I could go there. When I tried to talk to her at the mall, she started a fight with me with her new friends.

Oh my gosh, my head was spinning, and Leo was telling me to call her.

I was pacing and almost yelling at Leo, “You really think I should call her back? What if she just wants to argue?”

“Would you just call her back and calm down? You two have been friends since elementary school. Just call her to see what she has to say.”

“Okay, here goes nothing. But if it turns into an argument, I’m hanging up the phone and never talking to her again.”

Every time the cell phone would ring, my stomach jumped.

If she didn’t answer on the third ring, then I was just going to end the call. I had wished she wouldn’t, but she answered the phone.

“Hello, Sasha.”

I paused for a second because I was not excited listening to her voice. I was so bitter and mad at her.

“Yes, what is it you needed to talk about?”

“I need to come over and talk to you. Please, it’s important.”

“What is it that you can’t tell me now? I don’t know after all you did to me this summer. I can’t trust you right now.”

“I know I’ve been a horrible friend, but I can’t say it over the phone. It’s about Rashad.”

“What do you mean? Honestly, Leah, I am leaving all that in the past. I’m really focused on getting ready for college, and you should do the same.”

Leah cleared her throat. “I know who hurt him.”

“Hold on for just a second. Say what?”

I muted the phone and started whispering to Leo.

“She said she knows who hurt Rashad. What should I say?”

“Just tell her to come over. She probably needs someone to talk to. That’s why she has been acting strange at the country club and the police station.”

I wondered why should I talk to her, but I figured I could put my mean-girl attitude aside and listen to what she has to say.

As I rolled my eyes at Leo, I unmuted the phone.

“Okay, you can come over, but Leo is here.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in about an hour.”

CHAPTER TEN

It was Leah. Chloe was downstairs, hypnotized by the television, so I told her to go answer the door. I was too nervous.

Leah walked to the patio where Leo and I were hanging out. She seemed strange, as though she wasn't getting any sleep or eating. Her eyes were red with bags underneath. Something must've been bothering her.

"Hey, guys," murmured Leah.

"What is it because I have had enough of your stunts for the summer, Leah."

Leah's chin was hanging down to her chest. "First off, I really want to apologize for all the hurt that I caused you this summer."

"You think?" my mean-girl attitude took over.

"I'm sorry but we can talk about that later. I'm not here to start an argument with you. I just came to tell you I know who beat up Rashad."

Was this a trap to get my attention so I would be her friend again?

"Who was it?" I asked.

"It was Jacob and Joshua. They saw when Rashad left the club, and they went behind him. I thought nothing of it. That's when I left, not knowing what they were doing."

"Why didn't you tell the police when we were all called to the police station?"

“When I caught them jumping Rashad in the alley, I ran up to them and told them to stop.”

“So, you were the woman who Rashad heard that night?”

Tears leaked from her eyes. “Yes, after I told them to stop, Joshua turned around and shoved me to the ground. Then he threatened me and said if I told anyone he would do the same to me because he knew where I stay.”

“Wow, I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“It’s all my fault that this happened to your friend Rashad. If I would’ve never tried to make you jealous, none of this would’ve happened.”

I looked at Leo and he turned away, showing no interest in joining the conversation.

“No, it’s not your fault,” I said. “Before you and I even protested they already had a little secret war going on. So, what happened next?”

“After the police flooded the scene, I ran to my car and pulled away quickly. Then I stopped at a gas station to call the police. Now I don’t know what to do because I’m terrified for my life. If I go to the police, they will know I said something.”

Damn.

I had already put this in the past, but Leah needed my help.

I told her my dad would be home soon and, because he’s a lawyer, he would help her situation with Jacob and Joshua.

A few minutes later, Dad came walking in the door, surprised to notice Leah at the house.

“I haven’t seen you in a while. I miss you raiding my cabinets,” he chuckled.

“Dad, she needs to talk to you about a situation she witnessed.”

“Okay,” Dad said. “Let me go put my things up, and I will be right back.”

I took Leah into my dad’s study. Leo was still on the patio waiting for me to come back. I stayed in the study to be with Leah.

Dad returned, “So, what’s on your mind, Leah?”

Leah started telling my dad the story, and he asked if it was the same questioning that I had to go downtown for.

“Why didn’t you tell the police when you were at the station the first time?”

“Because they were there, and they threatened to do the same thing to me they had done to Sasha’s friend, Rashad,” Leah half whispered.

“This is a serious issue. Have you talked to your parents?”

“No, I haven’t told them anything.”

“Why haven’t you told your parents?”

“Because those guys know where I stay, and my parents would’ve made me go to the police.”

“Oh my, Leah. I have to call your parents. I can take you down to the station as your lawyer until your parents

come, but you have to tell them everything you witnessed that night.”

We sat there while Dad got his phone and dialed Leah’s father. Those guys scared her good because telling her parents was the last thing on her mind. The cops had to know the situation for Leah and her parents’ safety. That would explain why she was at the police station by herself, looking as though she had seen death.

Dad told Leah to follow us to the police station.

“Let me go check on Leo because he is on the patio,” I said.

Leo was lying on the patio sofa sleeping. I shoved his shoulders to wake him.

“Ride down to the police station with Leah so she isn’t alone. Her dad will meet us downtown.”

Leah’s hands were shaking and her legs trembling.

I would be scared, too, if someone threatened to hurt me. Especially, after seeing Rashad at the hospital all bruised. I was hoping that after she gave her statement, she would never encounter those guys again in her life.

“You think she will be okay?” I asked Dad on the way to the police station.

“Yes, as soon as she tells the police what really happened, they will look for them.”

When we arrived at the police station, Dad took Leah into the interrogation room to meet with Officer Smith. Leo and I stayed out in the waiting room.

Inside the room, Officer Smith started asking Leah questions.

“So, what brings you back to us?”

Leah’s eyes were on the floor as she spoke in a low tone. “The first time I came to you, I wasn’t telling the truth.”

“Can you please tell us this time the truth about what happened that night? Don’t worry, you don’t have to be scared. We will take care of you.”

Leah’s dad walked into the room and sat near Leah. The officer told my dad to continue to act as her lawyer.

“When I was leaving the club to go to my car in the garage, I walked through the alley. That’s when I saw Joshua and Jacob jumping this guy. I went up to them and told them to stop. Then, Joshua threw me to the ground and threatened me, saying that if I told anyone, he would do the same to me that he did to Rashad. They ran off, and I got into my car and called 911 from a gas station.”

“So, you were the anonymous woman who called it in?”

Leah’s legs started shaking. “Yes. Now that you know who did it, what will happen to them? What if they come for me? They know where I stay.”

“As of now, you try your best to stay away from them. I will get a cop to patrol the area and occasionally have one at your house until we get them, but Jacob and Joshua will probably face attempted murder charges. If

anything happens or seems suspicious, please call us. Your safety is very important now until we catch these guys.”

In the waiting room, Leo and I were talking about Leah having someone there for her. She shouldn't have to go through this by herself. Leo suggested calling Cameron.

“Maybe her dad will let her come back to my house, and we can call him over. Maybe we can talk over our differences later, but now is not a good time. Do you know if they have been talking this summer?”

“They have been trying to rekindle their relationship, but Cameron told me he wasn't going to deal with her until she stopped what she was doing. But those two really love each other. There's no doubt he will be there for her. He mentioned that something happened to her, and she wouldn't tell him what it was.”

They came out of the room with Officer Smith. I asked Leah's dad if she could come to the house for a few hours before she went home. He said it was okay, but she has to come straight home afterward because it could be too dangerous for her to stay out too late.

I told Leo to ride with Leah so she was safe. In the meantime, while in the car with Dad, I texted Cameron to come to the house and he agreed. I hadn't seen Cameron since the Fountain incident when they came to my job with that girl. He texted me and said that he had to talk to me as well.

When we got to my parents' house, Cameron was waiting in the driveway.

My dad walked to Cameron and greeted him.

"Is this some high school reunion?"

I told everyone to follow me into the backyard. Before we sat, Cameron grabbed me by the arm.

"Can I talk you in private?"

"Okay, follow me to the gazebo."

Cameron sighed, "I don't know how to say this, but I kind of gave Leah the idea of meeting up with Joshua and his friends."

"Wow, Cameron. Was it beat up Sasha's feelings summer?"

"It wasn't like that. I was just joking, and I told her not to go through with it."

"I understand, and she was your girlfriend."

"And with the restaurant part, I didn't know she was bringing that girl. I don't even know who she is and don't want to know."

"Yeah, I know all about it. Leo told me." I said. "But we are here for Leah."

"What about Leah?"

"Let's go back to Leo and Leah, and we will explain everything to you."

As we were walking, I realized it was good being with the gang, even though the circumstances weren't pleasant.

When I began to tell Cameron what happened, he started to shake his head from disappointment.

“I told you not to get involved with those guys because they were trouble.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know they would do something like that,” said Leah.

“Of course not. All you do is think about yourself, and you don’t worry about what could happen to the other person,” said Cameron. “Did you ever think they know where I stay, as well? What if they hurt me or my family?”

“I’m pretty sure they won’t do anything to you. But, now we have to think about Leah and what we can do to help her stay safe,” I said.

She had tried to sabotage me the entire summer but there I was sacrificing my time to do something for her.

Leah and Cameron walked away to talk somewhere in private. They had been blushing and flirting since the time they arrived.

Suddenly, Leo jumped and yelled, “I got it! I got an idea!”

“What is it?” I asked.

“We can go to Leah’s parents’ lake house in the Ozarks. That will give time for all the madness to calm down. We can spend time together that we missed out on from this summer. And, you and Leah can talk over your problems.”

“I don’t know about that. I leave next week for college.”

“Yes, you do, and that will be the perfect time for you and Leah to hash out your problems. She would be away and only her parents would know where she is. So, she would be safe.”

“That sounds like a great idea, but we would have to talk to our parents.”

When Cameron and Leah came to sit with us, they were giggling and blushing about something. I hoped they’d reconciled things. I already expected that would happen because those two were inseparable.

“Leo had a good idea,” I said.

I told them everything but the part where Leah and I would try to rekindle our relationship. I didn’t mention it because she should’ve been the bigger person and come to me first to talk about our situation.

“That sounds great. I will talk to my parents tonight,” she said.

“Me too,” I replied, thinking of ways to ask my parents.

It was getting late and Leah had to leave. Cameron walked Leah out. Leo had already left minutes ago.

“Hey, Cameron! It might be a good idea if you followed Leah all the way home,” I yelled to them.

I went inside to talk to my dad about what we decided. My dad was in his study working on his computer. So, I sat with him and fumbled with his pens that were sitting on his desk; I started pouting.

Dad pulled his glasses to the tip of his nose. “What is it now, Sasha?”

“Dad, we all got together and came up with a good solution that would help Leah.”

“I’m listening.”

“We thought we could go down to Leah’s parents’ lake house in the Ozarks for a few days until all this died down.”

“That sounds great but only if Leah’s parents agree to you guys doing this. You need to make sure you have your cellphone on you at all times, and I will track the car just in case.”

“Dad, you track the car anyway.”

“Make sure you or Leah are never alone.”

“Will do.”

I kissed him on the cheeks and ran upstairs to call Leo and tell him that my dad gave me permission to go to the lake house. I told him I could meet him at his house and we could go from there. Cameron should get Leah and bring her so we both had someone with us. I started packing my bags, waiting for Leah to either call me or text me.

I had been waiting all summer for a mini vacation without drama and parents.

At that moment all I had to worry about was Leah and I discussing what she did to me that summer. I was hoping we could hang out like old times, but I guess us being together wouldn’t be the same until we talked. But I didn’t want to ruin this trip for us. There wasn’t much to talk about. Leah just should give me a good apology

and explain why she would go to the extreme of sabotaging our friendship.

As I laid on the bed, Leah texted me and said that her dad said it would be a good idea for her to go to the lake house until they caught Joshua and Jacob.

I sent her a thumbs-up emoji. Sending mixed messages now wouldn't be a good idea. It would appear we are friends suddenly again. It would have been a lie if I said I was excited about spending that weekend with her.

The trip was for her safety. If she wouldn't have done what she did, we wouldn't have been in that predicament. But I couldn't blame someone else's actions on her. My focus was on Leo and I having our last fun vacation together before we all went to college.

My mom came into my room as I finished my packing. She was against me going because she remembered that Leah and I were not speaking to each other at the moment.

“Are all your things packed?”

“Not everything, but most of it is.”

“I want you to be safe and call us every day and every night, so we know that you are all right.”

“I will.”

“So, are you and Leah friends again or what?”

“No, not really. But, during this trip, we are supposed to hash out our problems. Even after all she did to me, I put all that aside and made myself willing to be there for her.”

“You are a good person, a good friend, and maybe she didn’t realize it until she really needed you. Some people have to learn things the hard way.”

“How did she learn anything?”

“Well, her jealousy of you having other friends drove her to make you jealous. What she did was wrong. When things got tough for her, she needed you because the people she used now turned on her. It took someone getting seriously hurt for her to be threatened and scared to come to her senses. Trust me, she is regretting everything she did to you.”

“Yes, but she could have joined me and protested with me and all of that would have been avoided.”

“But did you say that to her? Did you try to involve her with your decisions? This entire time you were too busy trying to find out everything for yourself by disobeying your father and I. You didn’t care about your friendship with others or how it could affect them.”

I had to agree with her because she was right. I was too involved with protesting and learning about African-American boys being killed by cops instead of considering how my white best friend would feel. I owed her an apology for that. I would’ve felt the same if her shoes were on my feet. Still, it didn’t excuse her retaliation. I wouldn’t have gone to the extreme like she did.

“Your dad and I will have a going off to college cookout for you.”

“Wow, thanks mom! That would be fun. I’ll invite all my friends. Old ones and new ones. I’ll tell them when

we get to the lake house this weekend, and I'll call the others."

"Yes, you can invite all your friends, but not the whole city of St. Louis."

"I want to invite my friends I met over the summer because I want everyone to get to know each other."

Mom started laughing. "Okay. As long as they don't vandalize my house."

"Ha! You got jokes."

Mom placed her arms around me and squeezed me tight.

"You guys enjoy yourself this weekend."

I continued packing my clothes to get ready for my trip with the old gang.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

My mom came into my room to wake me. I had finished packing last night so I was all set to go.

I texted Leo and told him I was on the way.

I gathered my things and put them in my car. I went back inside to tell my parents I was leaving.

As I walked to the door, my parents followed me. Dad told me to be careful and not to forget to call every morning and night. I was only going for three days. I could only imagine how college would be for them. They didn't make goodbyes easy.

On the way to Leo's house, I started reminiscing on how crazy my summer had been. How Leah and I would react on this vacation? *Would we actually talk out our problems or would we act as though nothing ever happened?* We had to talk about what happened. That was the only way that we could make it together on this trip. We couldn't come together acting like nothing ever happened for three days in the same house.

At that moment I wondered, *should I be mad at Leah or pity her?*

When I got to Leo's house, Cameron and Leah were already there waiting for me. They were all packed and ready. Leo threw his bags in the trunk. I ran and gave his parents a hug because I hadn't seen them all summer with all the break-ups and drama going on. His parents were nice, and I loved them so much because they accepted me for who I was. We could have all rode together, but I wasn't ready to be in the car for hours with Leah.

I told Leo that I would drive for the first two hours and he could do the rest. We were off!

“How are you feeling?” asked Leo.

I started biting my lip. “I’m nervous.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be. It will be just like old times. I’m just glad you and Leah are back together.”

“We aren’t back together yet because we still need to apologize to each other.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“I’m going to apologize because I was involved too much with the protesting and never considered how she felt. I didn’t even try to involve her with my decisions.”

“Wow, I never thought I would have heard you say that. This weekend should be interesting. Yeah, when your best friend is white that’s only fair. Having her African-American friend decide something like that without her, it probably made her feel vulnerable,” he said.

“Yeah, but if she cared for me, her fault was not being supportive of me. We could’ve made a big statement together.”

Time flew by so fast because me and Leo had been talking the entire time. I had already driven for two hours, so I stopped at a gas station. It was time for Leo to drive; my eyes were turning red and I kept yawning. We stopped in some old country town in Missouri. Cameron and Leah followed us. We all went inside to use the restroom and grab a few snacks.

The woman behind the counter, with blonde curly hair and missing front teeth, couldn't stop eyeballing us. I wanted to ask her if she'd had a problem, but that was what we expected from these small towns in Missouri with ninety-eight percent of them being whites. I just grabbed my Cheetos and Sprite, placed it on the counter for Leo to pay, and walked to the car.

The guys started driving. I fell asleep and, when I woke, we were at the lake house.

We drove on the rocky circular driveway with a water fountain in the middle, surrounded by grass. Leah's parents had a beautiful lake house that they used once a year. I loved going there and was looking forward to spending more time with my friends.

We went inside to put our bags away. Cameron and Leo said they would start a fire by the lake. I walked behind Leo. We all went inside, and I asked about food. That was when Leo and Cameron went to the store.

"Do you want us to go?" I asked.

I was trying to avoid Leah every way possible. But that was their way of trying to get Leah and I to talk. The guys walked out, and I went into the kitchen. About five minutes later, Leah came in behind me.

She leaned on the breakfast table in the kitchen. "So, I guess we should talk."

"I guess."

"Okay, I want to start by apologizing to you."

"No, it was kind of my fault too. If I was being a good friend, I would have asked you about how you felt."

It's a sensitive subject when you are white, and I am black. I also should have asked you to join me, but I just assumed that you weren't interested."

"Well, I never saw it that way, but my actions led me and you to be involved with something other than protesting. I could've ignored it all and just left it alone. I was just jealous, and I thought you were throwing our friendship away. I should've supported you. You know I'm a jealous person when it comes to you and Cameron."

"Yes, you are. But we have to grow up someday and realize that we are going to have more friends as we go off to college and are apart. You will always be my best friend, and no one can take that from us. Our friendship matters more than anything."

"I just hope that you find it in your heart someday to forgive me for being so stupid this summer and missing out on all the fun we could've had together."

"You did some hurtful things to me, Leah. It went beyond the stunts you'd pulled in middle school. I will only forgive you on one condition."

"What is it?"

"My mom is having a going off to college cookout and I am going to invite Ricardo and his friends. I want you to come and apologize to them."

"Okay. They must hate me for what I did."

"No, they barely know you, but you especially have to apologize to Victoria because she was Mitchell's girlfriend, the kid that was killed by the cops."

“Yikes, I never would’ve known that. Okay, I will apologize to them.”

“Thanks. We will take our friendship slowly, and no more of these childish games. We are too old for that now. I will tell the guys about the cookout when they get back from the store.”

I drew closer to Leah and placed my arms around her as we comforted each other. As soon as we hugged each other, the boys returned from the store.

Cameron was smiling holding a bag of groceries in his arm. “Oh, look at them.”

“It’s about time you girls squashed all your differences and became friends again. Now, let’s at least enjoy the bit of summer that we have left together.”

“The campfire should be ready for us. So, let’s go in the back and enjoy it,” said Cameron.

We walked to the back of the house which sat off the lake overlooking the water. I sat on Leo’s lap, and Leah sat next to Cameron. We started reminiscing about our school days, and somehow, we started talking about volleyball.

I started laughing. “Do you remember when we beat Woodland Academy, and they wanted to fight us?”

“Yes, and Melissa threw her shoe at the girl,” said Leah. “Melissa deserves that scholarship. I don’t see myself playing volleyball for the rest of my life, but I’m still thinking of playing in college.”

“Melissa was our best player. But you were really good, too. I think I’m just going to play tennis when I go

to college and explore some other options. I just really want to focus on my academics.”

I leaned over and nudged Leo’s shoulders. “What about the football and basketball scholarships, boys?”

“Well, I have to leave early for college before the students come back. We have football camp to attend.”

“So, you will be there before Leah gets there?” I asked.

“Hey, why don’t you girls tell us about your experiences protesting?” said Leo.

I choked, “Seriously!”

“Yeah, I want to know how it felt to do it,” added Cameron.

“Well, I can start,” I said. “When I went downtown, I was scared at first. But then Victoria helped me by guiding me through the march the entire night, and I started to enjoy it. There were some angry parents and protestors, but they had a right to be mad. I felt like I made my statement until I saw Leah there protesting with the opposing side.”

“They really weren’t the opposing side. They have their own views, as well. It’s sad but people think differently,” said Leah. “Everybody thinks differently and, after hanging out with Elizabeth and her friends, I’ve learned that.”

“Unfortunately, I had to stop after I found out that Ricardo and his friends had been vandalizing homes in Frontenac,” I continued. “So, I distanced myself from them.”

Cameron gasped. “Oh my, that’s where me and Leah stay. Why didn’t they vandalize our homes?”

“Because you and Leah weren’t involved with those kids, but if Leah would have kept it up, there’s no telling what they would’ve done.”

Leah started shaking her head. “That’s true because I do know what they are capable of. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Overall, I’ve learned so much from them and how they felt about Mitchell,” I said. “Can you imagine if it was Leo or me that was killed, walking from a basketball game, because we looked like potential suspects that had robbed a store?”

Cameron laughed. “Don’t be silly, you both have cars.”

“That’s it. We all have parents with money, and we attended an expensive school. We never thought about what could happen to students at a school like Eastview,” I said. “This guy was their best friend and, because his life was taken away, he couldn’t graduate with them or attend the prom with his girlfriend.”

“That’s a hard pill to swallow. I can’t imagine how Victoria dealt with that. It’s probably still haunting her,” Leah muttered.

“I didn’t protest to get back at anyone. I just wanted to help my community, as you all should want to do. In the past couple of years, do you know how many African Americans were killed by cops? Can you imagine how it affects their families and friends? You guys will have time to meet them at my cookout in a few days.”

Cameron stood eager to hear more. “Wow, that’s very enlightening. It gives me a whole different outlook on it. What about your experience, Leah?”

“Well, for me it was interesting too. I learned how they felt, as well, when I wasn’t trying to get back at Sasha. Joshua and his crew felt that they mattered also. The same thing happens to whites, but not to the extent that it happens to African Americans.”

“But don’t their lives matter every day?” asked Leo.

“Yes, they do. But they are living in a false reality where times have changed and racism is no more. But it really hasn’t changed.”

“Why would they go into a war with Ricardo and his friends?” I ask.

“I don’t know that much. I think it was way before me and Sasha came along.”

Cameron giggled. “That’s so weird that your drama was a learning experience.”

“Yes, it was. But, to be honest, I wish we were doing it together,” Leah said.

The campfire burned low so we rested for the night.

We woke to a day full of rain. We sat around inside the lake house and hung out playing games and telling more Chester stories.

Everyone was downstairs, so I walked away to call my parents to inform them that everything was okay, and we were having a good time.

The next day, we were getting ready to leave the lake house. We had such a great time that weekend, and I would miss going there with my friends.

Suddenly, the phone rang. It was Leah's dad. After she answered the phone and listened to her dad, her eyes begin to widen.

I squinted my eyes at her with concern, and started whispering, "What's wrong?"

She rolled her eyes and started rubbing her forehead. She held a finger, telling me to wait. After she finished the call, she threw the phone on the bed and made a deep sigh.

Leo and Cameron started going downstairs with the bags to put them in the car.

"Wait, before you put my bags in the car, Cameron..." said Leah.

"Is everything okay?"

Leah plopped on the stool at the breakfast counter. "You wouldn't believe what just happened."

Cameron dropped the bags. "What happened?"

Leah shaking her head, "My dad just called. Someone broke into our house and trashed it."

I covered my mouth with my hand. "Oh my gosh! What? Did they find out who did it?"

"No, but my dad wants me to stay a few more days until all of this blows over."

My eyes wandered around hoping this wasn't Ricardo and his friends that had done this. Ricardo

promised me he would stop vandalizing homes. It seemed obvious, though, because Leah lives in Frontenac.

“He also said that police think it was Joshua and Jacob because they spray-painted ‘Keep your mouth shut’ on a wall at the house.”

With a sigh, I was relieved that it wasn’t Ricardo or his friends. I was wrong for jumping to conclusions.

Cameron put his arms around Leah and started massaging her back. “I can stay an extra day, but I have to leave tomorrow night. Hopefully, everything will be over by then, and you can ride home with me.”

“Hopefully, you will get to attend the cookout,” I said. “Call me tonight to give me an update of what’s going on.”

Leo and I got into the car and drove off from the lake house onto the dark, bumpy road. I cocked my legs on the dashboard, pulling a blanket over me to relax for the long ride to St. Louis.

“What did you think about this weekend?” asked Leo.

“I had a great time. It was like the old days. Leah and I put all our problems aside and we had a chance to share our experiences with you guys.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t expecting Leah to apologize. But she did. This situation must have really taught her a lesson.”

“Yeah, I told her we are going to slowly move back into a friendship because she really hurt me. But I’m glad I have my best friend back because I was

really lonely this summer. The only person I really talked to was Ricardo, his friends, and you when you tried to get me back. Out of all my summers from childhood to now, I can say that this was the worst of them all.”

The phone rang, as Leo and I were halfway home.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“My dad just called. They have Jacob, but Joshua is still on the run.”

“Okay, be careful and thanks for calling to let us know.”

“It was Leah. She said they have Jacob and he is now in police custody being questioned, but they are still looking for Joshua.”

“I hope they find Joshua quickly,” said Leo.

“Me too.” I started to stretch, and my eyelids began to close.

When I woke, we were at Leo’s house. I went inside to say “hi” to his parents and invite them to my cookout.

Leaving Leo’s house, I gave him a kiss on the cheek and told him I would talk to him later this week at the cookout, if not before.

When I got home, my parents greeted me at the door with a warm hug.

“So, how was your weekend?”

“It was great. Leah and I made up, but I made it clear that we will slowly work on our friendship. I do have to admit that I missed my best friend.”

Dad took a bite out of an apple and sat in his recliner. “That’s life. You guys aren’t always going to agree on the same things but, if the friendship is worth it, then you will come to an understanding and tolerate each other’s decisions.”

“When we were leaving, Leah had to stay because her dad called and said someone broke into their house and trashed the place. The police have Jacob in custody, but they are still looking for Joshua.”

“Oh my! Yes, it would be better if she stays there. They don’t know about the lake house, do they?” asked Dad.

“No, I’m sure they don’t know about the lake house. But Cameron is staying with her until it is safe for her to go home.”

“I just hope all this goes away so you kids can go back to living a normal life.”

“Okay, well I’m tired and had a long trip,” I said as I went upstairs to check on Chloe. She was asleep. I kissed her on the cheek and she slowly opened her eyes.

“You’re back home?” she said with a sluggish voice.

“Yes, I just wanted to check on you. Get some rest, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

I pulled the covers to her shoulder as she rolled and went back to sleep.

As I walked to my room, my phone began to ring. It was Cameron.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“We just got a phone call from Leah’s dad. They now have both Jacob and Joshua in custody. They caught Joshua at the bus station trying to leave the city.”

“Wow, that’s good news. When are you guys going to come back to St. Louis?”

“We are leaving in the morning.”

“Great, I will see you at the cookout.”

I ran to my parents’ room to tell them that the police caught both Jake and Josh. They were relieved with the news because it wasn’t safe for Leah with them on the run, especially after trashing her house.

What if Leah had been there at the house while Jake and Josh were there?

I went to my room and lay on the bed. We could put all this behind us and start fresh. Leah was safe and didn’t have to worry about looking over her shoulder anymore.

It was the day of the cookout, and I was so excited! But the closer I got to leaving for college, the more nervous I became.

I helped my parents get ready for the cookout and we finished decorating. All that was left to do was throw out the trash.

Walking to the mailbox, I spotted Ricardo in his yard.

What the hell? I walked to his house.

“How have you been doing?”

“Doing okay.”

“I want to invite you to my cookout tonight. It’s for me going off to college. Oh and please tell Victoria and Rashad.”

“Sure, I’ll come. I’m up to nothing these days so I will definitely make an appearance.”

“Great, see you tonight.”

I went home to get ready for the cookout. A few minutes later, my relatives and friends started arriving. So, I went downstairs to go around and greet everyone.

Melissa walked in and I talked to her. She was leaving the next day for volleyball camp. I wished her the best and told her that I hoped she succeeded in college because she was a great volleyball player.

There was no doubt she would succeed because her parents were driving her hard to get a scholarship. I remembered when her dad would yell at her from the bench when she made one small mistake. Melissa getting a volleyball scholarship was their life. I was blessed that my parents were more interested in my academics instead of me playing sports.

Leah and her parents walked in along with Cameron and Leo.

I thought, *Now the festivities can begin!*

I walked to the patio to turn on the music. You couldn’t be in St. Louis and not listen to at least one song by Nelly on the radio. People started dancing to his song, “Hot in Here.” Mom was still bringing out food and placing it on the table while Dad was cooking on the

grill. The smell of Kingsford charcoal burned throughout the backyard. I heard the meat juice dripping on the charcoal and sizzling from the fire.

Chloe and some of her friends were swimming and dancing in the pool. I allowed her to invite some of her friends because tonight was not all about me. It was about spending time with family and friends. Chloe deserved to have fun after witnessing all my mischiefs that summer.

I was a little nervous because I told Ricardo and his friends all the things Leah put me through. I thought if she would apologize and make a good impression, they would change how they felt toward her, but she did burn a lot of bridges.

I went to greet Leah and her parents.

Leah's mom embraced me with a tight hug. "I'm glad that you girls put all that crazy nonsense in the past and became friends again."

I grabbed Leah and the boys and took them on the patio.

We were having a great time dancing and talking to each other. Rashad, Victoria, and Ricardo walked out to the patio. Everyone seemed happy.

I grabbed Leah by the arm and told the guys to follow me. I was hoping once they got acquainted, Leah will do the right thing.

"Hey, you all: come with me, so I can introduce you to Ricardo and his friends."

As I began to walk to Ricardo and his friends, my heart started pounding.

“Hey, guys, I want you to meet my friends, Cameron, Leo, and Leah.”

Ricardo tilted his head. “Don’t I know her from somewhere?”

“Speaking of that, Leah has a few words she wants to say.”

Leah stood in front of me. “I am so sorry for how we met, but I had no intention of siding with Joshua and his friends. I was totally on another mission.”

“Yeah, what mission was that?” I said.

“I owe you an apology. Rashad, I’m sorry for what happened to you. I was that mysterious person who caught them hurting you. I went back to the police and told them who it was. Even though I had to go in hiding for a while, it was worth it to see them pay for what they’d done to you.”

“Thank you, love. I also appreciate you calling for help and scaring them off that night,” said Rashad.

“No problem. Victoria, I really owe you an apology. I shouldn’t have acted that way toward you at the mall. I didn’t know Mitchell was your boyfriend. I can’t imagine how you feel, and I was wrong to side with Elizabeth not knowing the facts about you. I’m also sorry for what happened to him.”

“It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean any harm to us. Sasha told me you were just getting back at her.”

I winked at Leah. “I’m really proud of all of you,” I said. “Now, we can all be friends. If you need anything other than a soda, you can ask Leo and Cameron where the stash is.”

I went to light the fire.

I invited everybody to come and sit by the campfire.

Rashad and Victoria talked about leaving in a week to go to college and how they couldn’t wait for a new change.

Victoria told us about the cop who killed Mitchell. He got fired but they still hadn’t charged him. She also mentioned how she would visit his grave every chance she got when she came to St. Louis.

“Speaking of graves,” said Ricardo. “I finally visited Mitchell’s grave today. It was hard, but it was much needed.”

“I’m proud of you Ricardo,” said Victoria. “It took you awhile but sometimes that’s courage we have to build.”

“So, are you going to stay and protest?” I asked Ricardo.

“I was going to stay and protest for Mitchell,” said Ricardo. “Somehow, I let the protesting take over my life. I didn’t know where my life was leading me. It took such a toll on me I just wanted to be an activist for the rest of my life until he gets justice, but protesting isn’t going to pay the bills. At least, that’s what my momma keeps telling me. I had a conversation with one of the victim’s moms, and she gave me such good advice. I’m going to college and majoring in political science.”

I smiled at Ricardo. "That sounds great."

"I'm glad you guys can share your experience with us because at Chester Academy we don't witness things like that," Leo said.

Dad walked by the campfire to check on us but, I could tell by his facial expressions, he was coming to join in the conversation.

"What are you youngins talking about?" asked dad.

"We were talking about how it was for them knowing that a cop killed their best friend."

Dad sat in a patio chair and placed his Corona on the ground. "Well, if you kids don't mind, I will enlighten you on some things from my past and some things before my time. Take heed to what I'm about to say because you will learn something."

I placed my hand over my eyes, shook my head, and muttered, "Okay, Dad, go ahead with your story but I think we all learned a lot this summer."

"What you kids are trying to prove is a good thing, but vandalizing homes and hating one another will not resolve anything. It will only allow the past to succeed and give us a future that remains without hope."

"What do you mean by that?" Ricardo squinted his eyes as though my dad didn't have a clue to what they had been doing.

Yes, Ricardo, he knew. He knew everything.

Dad returned a death stare and sat in silence for at least five seconds, then turned the focus back to everyone else sitting around the fire. "Speaking from

experience, I went to school to be a lawyer so I could help those in need. Every day, someone will need something from you whether it's a doctor, teacher, or lawyer. Our ancestors paved the way for us to be educated to help one another. You protested and got caught up in doing it the wrong way. By doing that, you lost yourself in a side war. You are young and have a whole life ahead of you. Let the older people, who have lived their lives, be a voice for you. What you all have been doing is just a repeated cycle of the past. People have been protesting for inequality since before you were born, before I was born, even during my mom's era, and it goes further back than that. You are protesting for the same thing. We've been doing this for years, but you are just calling it a different name, 'justice.' This isn't new, it's just an eye-opener for the new generation."

"Why have African Americans protested for so many years?" I asked.

"Back in those days, it was worse than what it is now," Dad stressed as he moved closer to the edge of his patio chair. "We weren't allowed in certain places that whites breathed in. At one point, we weren't allowed an education, we couldn't vote, and we damn sure couldn't protest because we didn't matter. Look at what you can do. You can get educated, you can vote, and you can go anywhere you want to now. I remember in my small town in the seventies, we had our own black prom at the armory and our yearbook was segregated with whites in the front and blacks in the back. So, it is very important that you go to college and gain a degree, then you open the door for your children and their generation."

“So, what about these cops killing young African-American boys?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. One day, you, Sasha, or anyone here will be able to help others. In due time, things change. Look, we just had a black president. So, over time, things will get better. But, for now, just live your life. Look, this is a diverse group now. Only, the present can change the future, and that’s you. Work together and be an example because with everyone coming together that will show the world is changing.”

Smiling from one ear to the other, I was proud of my dad telling us that. I could imagine everything from a whole different perspective, and I felt empowered. *Hell, I might become president one day*, I thought.

Everyone was leaving and, on the way out, Ricardo stopped at the door and told me to tell my father, “Thanks for the conversation.”

I was also proud of Ricardo and the decisions he made to go to college. It seemed like he was settled.

It was the night before I was to go off to college, and I was sitting at my bedroom’s window seat in deep thought. I couldn’t sleep. Some parts of me were reminding me that I had been waiting for that moment my entire senior year, but the other part was me thinking about being away from my parents.

I went downstairs to ask my parents about their experience in college.

“Well, my experience was fun, and I had good grades. I remember when I was in UCLA and protested in '92,” said Dad.

“Wow, Dad, you protested!”

“Yes, but it was a great experience. I marched up and down the streets of Los Angeles, protesting for Rodney King. Witnessing that tragedy made me want to be a lawyer. The people were distraught, and they became so hostile that they damn near destroyed almost every business in that city. Enjoy college but don't let your grades fall. What you do in college will follow you for the rest of your life.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because every time you apply for a professional job, the first thing they ask you for is a resume, transcripts, and references.”

I started laughing. “Can I put protesting on my resume? I'm just kidding.”

“That's not funny. I'm serious,” he said.

“What about you, Mom?”

“Well, because I was the only African-American woman at the time studying to be a doctor at an Ivy League college, I had no choice but to study my butt off every day. Johns Hopkins only had a few of us. I didn't have many friends because I had to focus so I wouldn't lose my scholarship. I struggled a little but, once I started to get the hang of things, it became easy for me.”

“If you and Dad went to different schools, how did you meet?”

“We met at a medical conference that I was attending in California.”

“But Dad is a lawyer.”

“Yeah, we met at a coffee shop and he couldn’t resist my beauty.”

“Now, you are getting weird. I’m going to make you and Dad proud of me.”

“That’s exactly what we hope for,” said Mom.

I walked upstairs to imagine how my four years would be at Howard.

My laptop was beeping, and it was Leo calling me on Skype. I answered, and it was also Cameron and Leah. They called me on a conference call.

Cameron was already at school in his dorm room. He was at school for football camp. Leah was leaving in a week. Leo was planning on leaving the next day, but he was going to come by in the morning to visit me before I left.

“Hey, guys, I have so many mixed emotions,” I said. “Cameron, how is it so far for you?”

“Well, now it’s just the football team here. The freshman will arrive next week.”

“I’m going to miss you guys. Even though I ruined our summer of fun, I will make it up on the holidays,” Leah giggled.

“Well, guys, I have to go finish packing. We all can Skype each other after our classes or on the weekends.

We can text each other and meet up at a certain time, when we come home for the holidays and summer.”

“That sounds great!” everyone said.

As I ended the connection on my computer, I continued packing my things and laid on my bed for some rest. Leah called me on the phone. I jumped and answered. I couldn’t sleep, anyway.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“I just wanted to talk to you by myself. Sasha, I really feel bad about our summer. For now, I will prove how much of a good friend I will be to you.”

“I’m glad you called me. I’m sorry, too.”

“I also called because Officer Smith called and said that I need to come back in three weeks and testify against Joshua and Jacob.”

I started shaking my leg. “Are you up for doing that? You’re not scared?”

“Yes, but it’s the right thing to do.”

I was proud of Leah. She made a brave move by deciding to testify against those guys. I guess it took her longer to mature from her childish antics, but I was noticing a new Leah. The Leah that was learning from her mistakes and maturing.

It was finally the day that my life would change. I ran back into the house to double check that I had packed all my stuff in the car. We were off to the capitol.

Leaving St. Louis and glancing at the Arch gave me flashbacks from my old childhood memories and beyond. The time I started preschool, and I cried for my mom. The time me and Leah met, and we made a friendship pact. Also, the time when me and Leo first started dating. Everything I had accomplished and everything I'd been through.

We'd been on the road for hours. Chloe slept almost the entire trip, but I was too nervous to sleep. My hands were shaking, and my eyes were red from holding all the tears that tried to escape.

We made it. Howard University, home of the Bison. The campus was filled with students walking with suitcases and bags. The grass was so green and soft. The buildings were huge. It was like a school inside a city.

When we arrived at my dorm room, I glanced at some freshmen who I might be able to consider my friends or people that I could hang around.

We unpacked my things from the trunk of the car and went to check in. In the lobby, I was greeted by my residential assistant (RA), Francis. She was the RA on my floor for the semester. She greeted us with such a pleasant smile on her face. She showed us to my room and told me to come to her anytime I had questions.

When we set up my room, Momma started crying and made me cry.

Mom walked to me and wiped the tears from my eyes. "Momma, you said you would not do this."

“I know, but I’m just so proud of you. This is the first day of making decisions on your own without me and your dad around.”

“I know, and I will make you proud.”

I hugged both my parents.

A tall girl with long black hair and skinny legs walked in, carrying some bags. My dad ran to help her with her bags as she tried to wobble with them through the door.

“Hi, my name is Veronica, and I am your new roommate.”

I greeted her with a handshake. “I’m Sasha.”

My parents left to go to the hotel. “We will see you in the morning.”

My new roommate walked out of the room and I sat on the bed, remembering my days in St. Louis. I started to get teary eyed when I realized that I would no longer have anyone to cook for me, tell me when to go to bed, or wash my clothes. I was officially on my own and couldn’t wait to experience what was ahead of me. But one thing was certain—I would never forget that summer.

My roommate returned to the room wearing a different shirt. A black T-shirt that said, “Black Lives Matter,” with a red fist below the words. All I could do was lay on my bed and stare at the ceiling, laughing and saying to myself, *Not this shit again.*