

Chasing Ghosts

A Reckless Perfection Novel

Laura Francois

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By Laura Francois

Dedication

To my God, thank you for your love and blessing me with the passion to write. To my dear parents, Jean and Esther Francois, I appreciate you both for believing in me. Thanks to my siblings and all of my nephews Demarcus, Demetrius, and Evren. I also want to express my gratitude to all my friends for being supportive of my creativeness especially Griffin Peters, Eric Sanchez, and Joyelle Mandy.

Hearts,

Laura

Chapter 1

"...don't tell."

Angela es Fresh continued to glance at the man who entered Fast Burger, the diner where she worked. Although he dressed like most of the truck drivers who came to eat at the restaurant, something about him was different. The man who came in was in his late forties, fairly tall, bald, and dark skinned. Even though he wore a scruffy looking dark blue flannel with dirty jeans and worn out work boots, he still seemed clean.

"Are you gonna just stare at him, or do you actually plan on taking his order?" her boss, Simon, questioned with his arms crossed on top of his large belly. "Sorry," Angela mumbled as she stopped leaning on the surface of the table. She pulled out her tiny notepad and pen from one of the small pockets she had in the front of her pale pink uniform. "Welcome to Fast Burger. What would you like to drink?" The man looked up from his menu.

"I'd like a hot cup of tea," he responded. "How are you doing today?"

"Good. Thanks for asking. You?"

"Great. God is good," the man replied with a look of satisfaction on his face.

"Okay," Angela said, a bit uncomfortable with him saying God.

"He is. You go to church?"

"Only on special holidays like Easter or sometimes Christmas. I'm gonna go get your drink," she added before he began to give her a whole speech about God. Something about God made her uncomfortable.

The man was polite to Angela as she served him his meal and afterwards when she gave him the bill.

"Thanks, and may God bless you."

"No," Angela replied to him rather than pick up the money he left in the black folder. She had enough of him talking about God. Who was he to proclaim how wonderful God was?

"About what?"

"About God. And how good he is." "He is good."

"No he's not!" Angela exclaimed. A few customers turned around to see what they were talking about so loudly. Angela took a step closer to the man so it didn't look as if she was arguing with him.

"If he's so great, why are people dying? Good people at that. And why would he take a father away from his kids, or cause a mother to care more about her next fix than her own children? Hm?" she questioned him. "Can't answer that, can you?" she added walking away from him.

"I can. See God-," he began in a soft voice, standing up. "Doesn't care. Or maybe he doesn't even exist," Angela

responded marching over to the back of Fast Burger to the kitchen. She placed her hand over her head and took a deep breath. She didn't know whether she believed in God or not. A part of her thought that he existed whenever a miracle happened. However, God seemed so distant to her now.

"Hey, es Fresh! Get back out there and do your job!" her boss barked at her as he saw her leaning against the countertop. "I'm coming," she said, though she did not want to be at work. She knew better than to give her boss an attitude. She couldn't afford to lose her job.

"Help! I need help in here!" a man screamed. Both Angela and Simon ran over to where they heard yelling. Angela shoved the door open to the men's bathroom. Her jaw dropped when she saw it was Robbie, her ex-fling, with a long lay rope hugged around his neck. She looked in horror as the color of his face turned from pale

to a bluish color. His mouth hung open as he gasped for air. He clutched the rope around his neck as he unsuccessfully kicked at the man who was standing on a chair, trying to hold him up so Robbie wouldn't suffocate to death.

"Someone call 911!" Angela exclaimed to the crowd of customers behind her.

"I'm going to call 911! Help the man out," Simon said to her before he rushed out of the bathroom. A few of the other customers helped to hold Robbie up as high as they could.

Angela's heart raced as she rushed over by the window where he was hanging. She tried to stay calm as she hopped onto the heater, which made her a foot higher than the level of Robbie's head. She yanked open the window, hoping the rope would loosen up. Noticing no changes she stuck her head out and looked around in the dark night to see what was holding it outside the building. "You gotta be kidding me," she mumbled, not being able to see what was keeping it intact. "Somebody, go outside to see if you can give the rope some slack!" she exclaimed in a shaky voice after she pulled her head back into the bathroom. "We're on it," one of the customers volunteered as he and his friend ran outside of the building.

Without hesitation, she reached into her front pocket and grabbed her pocket knife. As she swiveled the blade out, she tried to ignore her fear of losing another person to suicide.

She kept as tight of a grip as she could onto the knife's handle despite her sweaty palms. Without wasting another second she dug her fingers between the rope and Robbie's neck. She pressed the blade against the rope and carefully yet swiftly maneuvered her hand up and down, pressing harder against it.

"I called 911. They're on their way," Simon announced, coming into the tense bathroom. Angela nodded her head as she continued to cut through the rope. She tried to stay calm as her heart raced. She took slow breaths as she realized she was more than halfway through cutting him free.

Robbie stopped fighting the men who held him up. His

eyes closed as his head tilted to the side. "Come on man, wake up!" one of them urgently said. "Hurry up!" he yelled to Angela.

"Give me another knife!" she replied, realizing hers wasn't working fast enough.

"I'm on it," Simon called out, rushing over to the kitchen. "Please, God. Don't let him die," Angela desperately

whispered, trying to hold back her tears as she continued cutting. Though she was ambivalent about her faith in God, she was willing to believe that the Big Man Upstairs could help Robbie.

"Here!" Simon announced, running over to Angela with a butcher knife. She hastily grabbed it from her boss and dropped her pocket knife. With one swift move she sliced through the rest of the rope, relieving Robbie from his neck restraint. The men dropped to the floor along with Robbie.

"Is he alive?" one of the customers asked.

"Praise God, he's alive," the customer she served earlier that night said.

Angela let go of her knife as she came down from the heater. She knelt on the floor and watched the color in Robbie's face return. Afraid to come close to him, she pushed herself against the wall, drew her knees up, and closed her eyes.

"What's going on?" a 12 year old Angela asked her mother, Kim. She stepped inside the cold small kitchen where Jerry, her paternal aunt, was trying to comfort Kim. Angela glanced around the room knowing something was way off. Her heart raced as she saw that all of the women's eyes were filled with tears.

"I'm so sorry," Kim finally managed to say through her tears as she struggled to look into her daughter's eyes.

"Are Christy and Tania okay?" Angela asked in a panicked voice. She ran into the bedroom she shared with her two younger sisters. After seeing that the bedroom was empty, she ran back into the kitchen. "Where are they?" Angela worriedly demanded. "Where are my sisters?"

"Christy and Tania are going to stay with Aunt Renee` for a little bit," Jerry spoke, as both she and Kim continued to sob.

"What's going on? Just tell me!" Angela cried out hating the

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secrecy.

"It's your father. He shot himself. I'm sorry, Angela. Your father is dead."

Amanda Elisabeth Prescott waltzed down the crème marbled floor. Just as she made it close to the front desk, she adjusted her shoulder length blonde hair underneath her grosgrain bow felt hat.

"Mademoiselle Prescott, comment avez-vous dormi la nuit dernière?" the concierge said, asking how she slept that night.

"J'ai bien dormi. Merci de demander. Ai-je des messages?" Amanda replied telling him she slept well and asking if she had any messages. She was thankful she paid attention in her AP French class. If not she wouldn't be able to fool the residents of Paris.

"No. Voici le magazine que vous avez demandé," Amanda sighed, wondering when or if her parents were even worried that their sixteen year old daughter left their home without a word since the end of June. It was the middle of July and she hadn't heard a peep from them. She at least expected them to hire a private investigator to locate her, but nothing. The whole purpose of this trip was to get attention from her ever so absent parents. However, it seemed that her plan was failing. Amanda shrugged her shoulders, deciding to blame the lack of attention on the fact she didn't get any reception with her cell phone in another country.

Before taking her copy of People Magazine that she requested to have each week since she had been in Paris, she shuffled through her Jimmy Choo tote bag for her dark square shaped Gucci sunglasses.

After slipping the shades over her dark blue eyes, she flipped through the magazine to see if there was anything she wanted to read as she sunbathed at the beach of the resort. "You can't be serious," she mumbled, seeing her ex-boyfriend posing next to his father, a semi-famous Puerto Rican singer, at a night club. Though a part of her still despised him for breaking her heart

the previous school year, she still wanted to see him. Be with him. Impulsively, she shut her magazine. "J'ai besoin d'un billet d'avion à Puerto Rico," she told the concierge, demanding a plane ticket to Puerto Rico.

Juliana Adeliz Rodriguez stared at Carlo, her father, through her light brown eyes. As she waited for his answer, she pulled on her black, ridiculously curly hair. Glancing down at her light caramel colored skin, she made a mental note to tan. After all, she couldn't come all the way to Puerto Rico and not tan. She planned to get a one-piece bathing suit to tan rather than her usual two piece swimming attire. Since she left America she put on about fifteen pounds. It didn't help that she was over indulging in the rich Puerto Rican cuisine every chance she got. She had a sweet tooth and typically sampled a handful of deserts throughout each day. Because she hardly exercised, the weight continued to pile up.

They were both in the recording studio near his home. Julia sat on one of the stools with Carlo's acoustic guitar in hand, while he stood by her with his eyes closed during her performance. As she waited for his response, she glanced at his records on the walls hoping one day her music could be just as successful as his.

"Something's missing," Carlo finally said opening his eyes. "What's missing?" Julia questioned, disappointed that she didn't impress him.

"I'm not saying it's bad." He went over to his guitar that was on the stand. "This song is going to be a duet with you and I, so our voices can't be at the same level. Sing a couple of notes in a higher range." He began to strum the song with his guitar. "We've got to nail it so it can make it on the new album."

"Papa, are you really gonna put me on your next album?" Forget about being disappointed. She needed to get this right to record her first song. Although Carlo wasn't mainstream in America, he was a hit in Puerto Rico. If she got on his album that would surely jump start her music career.

"Yes. This album is going to completely be in English.

We're thinking of making it big in America. We just need a catchy song to do so. We've been talking to a couple of Spanish American singers to come help with the tracks on the album," Carlo continued, referring to *we* as his recording label.

"That sounds-" Somebody knocked on the door.

"Come in."

"Papa, you gotta get ready for your interview with the radio station. It starts in an hour," Julio, Julia's twin brother, said coming inside the recording studio.

"Go hang out with your friends and we'll take care of this later," he said, giving her a kiss on her forehead.

"Are you coming with us to dinner?"

"Can't," Julio replied for Carlo. "He's gonna be busy the whole night." Julio glanced down at his PDA that had his busy schedule on it. As Julia helped Carlo on his album, Julio helped him by being his assistant for their summer vacation.

"Hey, you picked up," Angela said after Robbie finally answered the phone. It had been about two weeks since he attempted to commit suicide.

"Yeah, I did," Robbie responded.

"Is everything okay?" As she sat on the bench at the bus stop, she dug into her purse to look for her bus pass.

"I'm fine!" he snapped. "What, do you think I always have a rope nearby to use whenever I'm feeling desperate?" Angela sighed before she said anything to him.

"I just wanna make sure you're okay," she calmly responded.

"I'm okay. So you don't have to keep calling me every day." As soon as she found her bus pass, she got up and walked away from the bus stop.

"You tried to commit suicide."

"Don't worry about me."

"How can you expect me not to? I walked into the bathroom to find you hanging. *Literally hanging*. I don't wanna even

think what would've happened if that man didn't find you on time and call for help," Angela said as she felt a cold wind shiver down her spine. She tried to brush her father's suicide out from her head. Though Robbie's attempt gave her flashbacks and scared her, she vowed to be there for him. She didn't want Robbie to make the same mistake her father did.

"I'm sorry," he said more toned down. "I didn't mean for you to get mixed up in all of this."

"I just wanna make sure you're going to be okay," Angela replied, thankful he seemed to be letting his guard down a little.

"I am. They had me in a 72-hour involuntary psychiatric hold. I talked to a shrink. Just trying to keep a new outlook on life.

"Angela fell silent, not sure if she could trust him. "If you don't believe me come with me to church."

Angela sat on the curb of the sidewalk across from the Catholic Church she was meeting Robbie at. As she smoked her cigarette, she stared the church down. She tilted her heart shaped face towards the cross on top of the building. She turned her head away from the church and ran her fingers through her long blonde hair. Just as she had years ago, she let her long golden tresses grow to the middle of her back. She hated cutting her hair, but found it necessary. It seemed to be the only way it would stay manageable.

As Robbie pulled into the parking lot in his black Lexus she got up and stretched her slim, tall body. She threw out her cigarette, grabbed the last piece of gum she had in her side pocket, and popped it into her mouth before hurriedly crossing the street to meet up with him. After greeting each other with a hug, they headed towards the building. Angela glanced up at Robbie. She always found him attractive. He was taller and tanner than her. He had short curly black hair and was athletically built. Everything physical about him was beautiful, but what she couldn't get enough of was his intense sky blue eyes. She looked away from him when she saw the bruises from the rope on his neck. She shook her head and tried to suppress the memory of Robbie hanging.

"I grew up in the Catholic faith," Robbie began. "Had my

first communion and all. I used to come here whenever I felt guilty. Confessionals used to help ease the pain. I hope it helps again."

"I hope so too." She crossed her arms as they got closer to the doors. She took a deep breath. Something about church always got her tight. Whenever she went she felt as if she was being judged by everybody, as if she wasn't good enough or worthy enough to be in the same room as the others.

"I won't get mad if you don't go inside. You look uncomfortable." Angela looked at Robbie and gave him a smile. If going to church was going to make him better she could stick it out and go inside.

"Sweetie, I'm not allergic to church. I'll be okay," she said touching his face.

Angela took a seat at the middle of the benches as she waited for Robbie to finish with his confessionals. Gazing around the room, she saw people scattered about either praying or reading their Bibles. Her mind became consumed with thoughts of God. Was he real? Was he responsible for miracles?

Angela turned her head up to the ceiling. "Hey, God, it's me, Angela es Fresh. But, you probably already know that," she started in only a voice that she could hear. "Um... I guess I wanna pray for my sisters. For you to protect them. And for Robbie. Protect him from hurting himself. And...keep him safe. Let him know that I only did what I did 'cause I love him," she added as thoughts of her pregnancy of over a year ago flooded her mind.

Mercedes Natalia Mendoza glanced down at her watch in hopes it was already 7 at night. She had enough of teens stalking the mall, especially the pizza joint she worked at, when they weren't at one of the infamous beaches of the Jersey shore. It was so busy that she hardly had a chance to take a break.

"Two slices of pepperoni and a Coke," Vic said to Mercedes as he showed her what was on his tray. Seeing him reminded her of her ex, Robbie. Robbie and Vic hung out back when they were seniors in high school.

"Four-fifty." She punched the order into the cash register. "Baller chick!" Vic exclaimed as he recognized Mercedes. "I have a name," she retorted, disliking the fact that he made her think of her ex.

"Mercedes," he said reading her name off of her nametag. "Sorry. So, you heard about Robbie?" He pulled out his wallet and grabbed a twenty-dollar bill.

"I don't care about him," she replied wanting to believe what she just said.

"You should. He tried to kill himself," he told her in a grave tone.

"Is he okay?" Her heart began to beat a bit faster. She wanted to hate Robbie, especially after all of the times he physically abused her. She had the small scar underneath her right eye to prove it.

No matter how many times he said he would change he would continue to act volatile towards her. Rather than leave him, she stayed, until one day she had enough and broke it off.

"Yeah. I saw him the other day. Maybe if you talk to him..." After Mercedes's shift was over, she took the bus over to Robbie's house.

She decided against calling him, fearing that he might not pick up the phone.

She went up to his door and thought about what she was going to say to him. It had been so long since they last talked. Even at school after the break up they avoided each other.

She rang his doorbell and brushed her sweaty hands over her dark work pants. Not even seeing him yet she felt flush all over. To her surprise, he opened the door.

"Robbie," she said with anxiety. His blue eyes were pale as if they were fading. He had a five o'clock shadow and he lost weight since the last time she saw him. "I heard about what happened...and I'm sorry I wasn't there for you." She came closer to him, feeling tears come down her face. "If I knew what you were going through, I would've been there for you," she added about to touch his face. The thought of losing Robbie was too much for her.

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Just hearing about his attempt to commit suicide and actually seeing how upset he looked made her need to be with him even more.

"You shouldn't be here," he said pulling away from her just as her fingers brushed his cheeks.

"But--"

"Go."

"Robbie, look at me," she demanded. "Please." For a split second, he glanced right into her light green eyes. With hesitation, she held her shaking fingers against his cold cheeks. She caressed his face in reminiscence of the time and touches they once shared. "I love you."

"You broke up with me."

"You know why," she started but stopped in attempts to not bring up all of the times he laid his hands on her. "That didn't make my love for you go away. I still think about you and the thought of you wanting to hurt yourself..." She paused once again, feeling her tears continue to come down. She took her left hand away from his face to wipe her tears away. "I want you to be okay. I want us to be okay," she added. She knew that it was a gamble to get back together with him and that there was a possibility that things would go bad between them again, but she didn't care. She wanted to hold on to the tiniest hope that things between them would work. Maybe this time thing would be different.

Still, holding onto his face, she pressed her lips against his. She felt a rush pass her by as he kissed her back. He moved his hand down her left arm, across her tan olive skin as they kissed.

"We can't," he said a few seconds later. He brushed her dark brunette wavy hair away from her eyes as their faces continued to touch.

"Don't say that."

"I can't. I hurt you so much," he whispered. He gently held onto her hair as he closed his eyes and kissed her left cheek, right on top of her dimple, before he completely let her go.

Mercedez stood where she was. She wanted to go near him

again, but her feet were planted on the ground. He was right. He hurt her so much and no matter how many times he apologized, he would still hit her again. "I love you," she managed to say through her tears.

"I know." He covered his face with one hand for a few seconds. He wiped the few tears he had before he looked back at her. "This has to be goodbye." Mercedes nodded her head in agreement. She hated this, but knew that it was for the best.

"What are you doing?" Amanda asked Juan in a whisper after he slipped his hand on her lap. They were at the hotel's restaurant eating dinner with Julia, Julio, and their guests.

"Being your boyfriend," he whispered back.

"I'm paying you to pretend to be my boyfriend, not to actually *be* my boyfriend," she hissed at him as she removed his hand from her lap. After flying to Puerto Rico, she called Julia up. Thankfully she still had her number from when she dated her brother, Julio. Julia was nice enough to let her know what hotel they were staying at and invite her to the outings with her friends.

Her plan for getting Julio back was to make him jealous by pretending to date someone around their age who was staying at the hotel. She met him earlier that day, and after seeing that he was good looking, she thought he was the best candidate to make Julio envious. So far, Julio didn't seem to pay her any attention.

"Oh come on, baby, what's the problem?" Juan asked her loud enough for the entire table to hear, while he placed his hand on her lap. The table, including Julio, turned to Amanda and Juan.

"Nothing," Amanda said smiling. She finally got Julio's attention for the first time during the whole trip and Juan was not going to stand in her way of getting him jealous. She grabbed her fork and subtly brought her hand below the table. "Absolutely nothing, *honey*," she said, kissing him on the cheek as she jabbed the hand he had on her lap with her fork. Juan's face winced. He quickly removed his hand from her. "Juan, I love how well you treat me," Amanda continued now that Julio was watching them. "It's

just about us and we don't let any *ex-girlfriend*-"

"Girlfriend," Juan said in a low voice with his eye at the door of the restaurant.

"Ex-girlfriend, get in the way of-," Amanda corrected. "No, girlfriend. My girlfriend is here." He pulled away

from Amanda and got up from his seat. She looked at the door, and sure enough, there was a female walking towards their table.

"Get rid of her."

"I can't."

"Yes you can. I'm paying you enough."

"You can keep the money," he responded as his girlfriend came closer.

"Fine," she retorted. "Juan, this isn't working for us," Amanda began at a volume for the entire table to hear. "We shouldn't see each anymore." She got up, flipped her blonde hair over her shoulders, and sashayed her way out of the restaurant.

"What an Emmy award winning performance," Keisha, one of Julia's best friend joked as the whole table laughed.

"Did I miss something?" Juan's girlfriend asked once she approached them.

"Nothing," Julio replied. "I'm gonna go see if she's okay."

Amanda waltzed out to the hallway of the first floor of the hotel.

She couldn't have left there fast enough. After completely embarrassing herself, she had no plans to stay in Puerto Rico.

"Amanda," Julio called out to her.

"What?" she asked turning around to face him.

"What kind of a person pays somebody to make their ex jealous?" he asked with a smirk.

"A crazy person." She checked him out as they talked. He looked handsome in a lime green buttoned down shirt tucked underneath his off white long pants. He also wore manly brown flip flops that showed his freshly buffed toe nails. He had his black hair spiked up. Amanda put her hand on the hip of her strapless ombre silk dress.

"A crazy person...and a person who cares." He took steps

closer to her. Amanda's heart skipped. She didn't expect him to react this way.

"You're wrong."

"If you didn't care you wouldn't have come all the way to P.R. to pretend to date some stranger." He got even closer. Amanda gulped. He was winning at her own game. She walked up to Julio, barely leaving space between them.

"You're so full of yourself," she said into his ear, making sure she was close enough for him to smell her Chanel ^o 5 perfume.

"Am I?" He took her hand. Amanda felt her hand he held get warmer. "So if I kissed you, you wouldn't kiss me back?" He took his free hand and placed it on her head and slowly moved his fingers through her hair. Amanda gazed at his light brown eyes, loving the way his hands felt on her.

"I...," Amanda said softly, trying to remember her train of thought. She couldn't. He was winning.

"You what?" he asked moving his lips closer to hers. She closed her eyes anticipating his touch. "You're not the only one who can play games," he said right before their lips could lock. Amanda quickly opened her eyes in anger that she fell for the moment. He backed away from Amanda with a huge grin on his face.

"This is war!"

"It's on," he said winking at her as he left. Amanda stood where she was. A couple of minutes later she received a text from Julio.

"Meet me tonight," Amanda read to herself thinking of what she would wear later.

Mercedes looked away from her geometry problem to Angela, who was standing by her at one of the tables at Roctown High School's library. She zipped up her baggie that she was eating her favorite cereal, Lucky Charms, from and placed it in her book bag. Annoyed by Angela's presence, Mercedes continued to study the proofs for her upcoming geometry class.

Because of her lack of studying the previous year,

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Mercedes had to retake three classes she failed in order to become a junior the upcoming year.

"I was looking for you. We gotta start working on this project," Angela stated. Mercedes and Angela were partnered by their English II teacher to work on a semester long assignment.

She took a seat across from Mercedes and pulled out a couple of books from her book bag. "I've got a few plays by African Americans from the library. Maybe our topic can be about-"

"Do the first half of the project, and I'll do the second half," Mercedes interrupted.

"That won't work. We're supposed to work on this project together. And-"

"Just 'cause we're partners, doesn't mean we have to talk to each other!" Mercedes exclaimed as her nose flared out in anger.

"What's your problem?"

"Ask Robbie. Maybe he'll tell you the next time the two of you decide to sleep together," she snapped glaring at Angela. Several months ago, Robbie slept with Angela while he was dating Mercedes.

Angela's face turned remorseful, realizing why Mercedes disliked her. "I'm really sorry, Mercedes," Angela began. "I knew Robbie was seeing another girl, but that didn't stop me from doing what we did. And I know apologizing isn't gonna change what already happened, but if it's worth anything, that's the only time it happened and we've both had regrets..." Mercedes studied Angela's facial expression and tone. Mercedes both saw and heard the sincerity in her voice. She tapped her fingers against geometry book. The project was worth half of their English grade and she wasn't up for failing the class for a second time. "... and if you could forgive me-"

"I forgive you."

"Thanks." Her face brightened up. "I promise I'll never sleep with any of your boyfriends again."

"Gee thanks," Mercedes sarcastically replied before they both cracked up laughing. Although Mercedes hated what Angela

did to her, she couldn't stay mad. She already had enough drama with people so one less person to beef with was a good thing. Besides, rumor had it that she was one of the few people who saved Robbie's life. The final bell rang for the school day.

"Let's go work on this project. Your crib good? I don't feel like going home."

"I guess it'll be okay," Angela hesitatingly answered. Angela anxiously unlocked the door to her home. Her

nervousness didn't stem from the fact she lived in a trailer park. She was more worried that Chuck, her mother's boyfriend, would also be home. Once they got in, she flipped the lights on, wondering why the lights were off in the first place. Her fourteen year old sister, Christy, was a late sleeper, but it was already past two in the afternoon and she should've been up babysitting their seven year old sister, Tania. She wondered if Christy took Tania out to eat lunch.

"We can work at the table or the couch," Angela suggested.

The clean home was small with old mismatched furniture. Angela periodically cleaned up after her family to keep the home tidy.

"The couch." They both walked over to the couch and began looking over the plays. Angela flipped through one of them, unable to concentrate. She glanced around to see if Christy left a note saying she was going out. No matter how many times Angela lectured Christy about letting someone know where she was going she rarely let anyone know.

A couple of minutes later the door unlocked. To her horror, in walked Chuck hand in hand with Tania. Angela jumped up from the couch in outrage.

Everything about him made Angela ill at ease.

"Get over here!" Angela exclaimed. Though she wanted to pull Tania away from Chuck, fear kept her feet planted on the ground. "Right now, Tania." Tania let go of Chuck's hand and went over to her. Angela didn't like raising her voice at her sisters, but she had to make Tania understand how serious she was. "My

mom's not home so get out," Angela said to Chuck. She protectively placed her arm across Tania's shoulders.

"I'll leave," he began. "But I'll be back, sugar," he added using his tongue to lick his upper teeth. As soon as he left, Angela rushed over to the door and locked it. She held her hands against the door for a few seconds to prevent herself from breaking down. Once her nerves were calm she knelt so she was the same height as Tania.

"Are you okay?" she asked Tania taking her hands. She did a quick visual assessment on her before she let her go.

"I'm okay. Chuck took me to eat chocolate ice cream." "Your favorite," Angela replied knowing how Chuck would try to manipulate a child by buying them ice cream. Some things never changed.

"Yup," she responded smiling, showing off her two missing front teeth.

"Did he...did he touch you somewhere he shouldn't have?" Angela asked in a voice so only Tania could hear. Tania shook her head no. "Okay, but if he or any guy touches you somewhere he shouldn't let me or our aunties know, even if the guy tells you to keep it a secret," Angela advised. "Promise."

"I promise." Angela pulled her sister closer to her and gave her a hug. "I love you, kid."

"I love you too," Tania replied, kissing her cheek. Angela smiled as she looked into her baby sister's brown eyes. She played with Tania's blonde hair as she continued to stare into her innocent eyes.

"What's going on?" Christy questioned in her pajamas, coming out of the bedroom that the three of siblings shared. She yawned before wiping the sleep out her eyes. Angela stood up and glared at Christy. Christy went over to the refrigerator and took out the milk carton. She opened it and drank the rest of the milk straight from the carton. "Don't have a cow. I wouldn't have drunk it if there was enough for more than one person," Christy said, noticing Angela's stare.

"You were supposed to babysit Tania while I was at school," Angela finally stated.

"I was."

"You can't sleep while you're babysitting!"

"I'm sorry. You're right. I shouldn't be able to sleep in when I'm on summer vacation," Christy sarcastically replied.

"It's about to be three o'clock in the afternoon, and you're now just waking up?" Christy always had a way of pushing her buttons, especially her refusal to accept responsibility. "What the hell!"

"What the hell to you!" Christy yelled. "You're acting like something bad happened to Tania. Nothing is wrong with her."

"Something could've happened to her, especially since you're just letting anybody take her out for ice cream."

"Chuck's not anybody. He's mom's boyfriend." "It doesn't matter."

"It does. We've known him for about ten years now. I don't get you, Angela. When we were kids you used to love whenever Chuck came over. Always sitting on his lap and locking the bedroom door with just the two of you whenever mom or dad wasn't home."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Angela snapped not wanting Christy to continue. She tried to bury those earlier memories of her relationship with Chuck.

"I might've been a kid, but I wasn't dumb," Christy said stepping up to Angela. "The two of you always touching each other whenever you thought no one was watching. *Don't Tell*. That was the name of the game you two called it, right?" she taunted.

"Shut up," Angela quietly said desperately trying to block out how she felt when she and Chuck used to get along. She wondered how much Christy knew about her past with Chuck since she knew of the *game* that Chuck created.

"It just kills you that Chuck chose mom over you--"

"I said SHUT UP!" Angela screamed holding her hands against her head. She stormed out of the trailer, slamming the front

door.

Mercedez slowly got up from the couch with her mouth slightly open. She barely knew Angela and here she was immersed in her family's drama. She got that Angela and Chuck once had an intimate relationship and that he was now dating her mother. What she didn't get was why Angela hated him or even why she and Chuck ever had a relationship since he looked old enough to have fathered her. If Mercedez knew all of this would've went down she would've suggested going to her home.

Mercedez quickly got all of the plays and shoved them in her backpack before walking outside. She saw Angela leaning against her trailer. Angela snatched the last cigarette she had in her pocket. She struggled to light her cigarette as her fingers shook.

"We can do this another day."

"Thanks," Angela agreed staring straight ahead in deep thoughts of how she and Chuck shared more than just history.

"You okay?"

"I have to be okay," Angela responded looking at Mercedez. "What other choice do I have?" Angela turned her head to blow a ring of smoke out.

"I know I already called you this morning, but I just wanna hear your voice. Even if it means just listening to your voicemail. Anyways, just I wanna say I love you and can't wait to see you, mi amor," Julia said leaving a message for her boyfriend, Eddie, on his voicemail. She hung up and placed her phone back on the bed stand.

She walked over to the balcony that overlooked the white sandy beach. She glanced outside at the beauty of Puerto Rico. It was a cool evening with a gorgeous view of the sunset.

All of this was great, but she was miserable without Eddie. It had been too long without being with him. Recording the song with her dad, having Keisha and even Amanda's drama around helped keep her distracted. Yet, that evening, Keisha was on a date with Keagan and Amanda was somewhere doing her own thing.

Julia sighed, headed to the kitchen, and pulled out her iPod to listen to Jimmy Hendrix's Electric Ladyland album. She grabbed the leftover flan from the refrigerator. Taking a few bites, she sighed. She knew her sadness of Eddie being absent was leading her to emotionally consume food. She hesitated before she took the last bite wondering if Eddie would still love her the same despite how much weight she put on.

She threw out the last piece of the desert in the trash. About to plug her headphones into her ears the doorbell rang. "Coming," Julia called out. "Dev," she said after opening the door. "Come in."

She quickly glanced at Dev. His Indian background gave him a light brown complexion. He had long dark eye lashes and short black wavy hair. Unlike Eddie who was way taller than Julia, Dev was just about three inches taller than her and was a little less than average weight for his age. He had on a white buttoned down short sleeved shirt along with khaki shorts and flip flops.

"How are you?" he asked. She didn't know how to feel about him. The year before, she chose to be with Eddie over him. Ever since, their friendship had been a bit awkward.

"Good." She closed the door and took a seat on one of the white leather couches in the living room of the suite. She slipped her pillow on top of her lap, covering her bloated stomach.

"Just missing Eddie," he said looking at her. Julia pulled her hair up then let it go. "It's okay. My heart's not gonna break into a million pieces. But that's not to say I wasn't bummed that you and I didn't get together last year," he said sitting next to her. "Ever since the pent party things got so weird between us, and it sucks that we can't be cool buds like before."

"I know." She did miss having him as a friend.

"So, I'm taking the initiative to say forget the weirdness and stuff and act like the kiss never happened. What do you say?"

"Okay." She gave him a smile. He opened up his arm and gave her a hug. This was good. She could just be friends with a guy she used to like.

"And, as a friend, I can't let you stay inside while we're on vacation in beautiful Puerto Rico." He extended his hands out to her as he got up.

"No thanks. I don't mind sulking around," she said as she placed her head on the pillow.

"Sulking is not an option," he replied, taking her arms.

"Deevv-"

"Julia."

"Fine," she said using Dev's help to get up from the couch. They went downstairs and walked out the hotel to its private beach.

Several people were at the beach. Some were still frolicking in the water as others walked, lounged or played on the white sands.

"...That's awesome. If you and your dad plan on making it more upbeat, def hit me up and I'll so be your drummer," he joked after Julia told him about making a record with Carlo.

"No doubt." She playfully bumped him at the hip. He jokingly bumped her right back a bit harder. After she stumbled, she chased after Dev.

"I'ma get you, Dev," she warned laughing along as she ran after him.

"We'll see about that." He brought his knees up high as he jogged away from her into the ocean. The bottom of his legs got wet when the waves came over the shore. Julia went over to the water and tackled him. They both giggled as they lost balanced and got soaked by the oncoming waves. For the first time in weeks, she was actually having fun and wasn't thinking about missing Eddie.

"So we're just gonna stay here for the next big wave?" "Yes." He laid a way so the next wave couldn't come up

over his head. Julia did the same. "It feels good to be here. Away from Roctown and the drama back there."

"What drama? Talk to me Devarsi Marathi," Julia said using his full name.

"Well, shrink Juliana Rodriguez," Dev responded in a light manner.

"It's just me and my parents have been going at it 'cause

they want to have an arranged marriage for me. They had one and it worked for them, but I can't do the whole get married to a stranger than maybe fall in love later with them."

"Are you gonna listen?"

"I have to. It's a part of my religion. I've got a long way before I actually get married with the rest of high school, college, and med school, but my parents don't want me getting too serious with any girl..."

"...'cause it won't matter since they'll be the one to choose your bride. That sucks."

"It does suck. How do you defy the people who love you the most?"

"I get it. I know what's expected of me. My ma wants me to go to college, get a degree and work. And my dad wants me to live my dream. I wanna play music. My dream is to make it big with my own music. I also wanna tour all over the world without being stuck in one city," Julia revealed. Her mother was a stickler for education and wanted her and her brother to have a better life than she had by obtaining college degrees. Her father wanted both of his kids to pursue their artistic careers. Of course college was important to her, but if she could fast forward her four years of college, she would so she could be free.

Chapter 2

"...Chasing Ghosts"

After a long day of school and work Mercedez tiredly stepped off the bus. Though fatigued, she quickly walked home just so she could go to sleep. It was a Friday, but she couldn't go out since she was grounded for the summer and even if she wasn't, she couldn't call her friends to hang out with. They were in Puerto Rico having the time of their lives while she was stuck in Roctown trying to pass all of her classes in order to become a junior the upcoming year.

"Mercedez, is that you?" her stepmother, Barbra, asked from the kitchen, as soon as she heard the front door open.

"Yeah." Barbra came through the kitchen into the family room where Mercedez was, with Stephanie, Mercedez's six-month year old half-sister in her arms.

"Are you hungry?"

"No. I'm fine." Her stepmother was a horrible cook. She stayed out of the kitchen for the most part. Thankfully, Mercedez's father, a chef, was the one who primarily cooked for their family.

Mercedez sat her black JanSport book bag down before plopping on the couch.

"It's not my cooking. I ordered Chinese food since your dad is working late at the restaurant tonight," Barbra replied, as she adjusted the fidgety baby in her arms.

"Well, it's been a while since I had some Chinese food." She did eat at her job a couple of hours ago, but she still had room in her stomach for some more food.

"Hey, my cooking's not that bad," Barbra said with a smile. Mercedes smiled back at her before she closed her eyes. She didn't mind taking a quick nap before doing anything else.

"Hard day at school and work?" Barbra asked, taking a seat next to the couch on the love seat so that she could look at Mercedes.

"Not hard. Just long," Mercedes replied sighing. "I have homework, projects, papers, tests and work on top of it all."

"Hang in there. The semester will be over before you know it."

"Thanks. I shouldn't even be complaining. This is my fault. I screwed up and now I'm paying for it."

"That's very mature of you to say, Mercedes." Mercedes opened her eyes and smiled at Barbra. For the past few months they took several steps forward in their relationship.

Mercedes got up from the couch and made her way to the kitchen. "All this talk is making me hungry." Barbra followed her and placed Stephanie in the high chair before she and Mercedes sat down at the table and began to eat lo mein, fried chicken, and steamed vegetables.

"How are you dealing with the break-up?" Mercedes shoved a fork full of lo mein in her mouth, not wanting to talk about Robbie. She knew her rocky relationship with him led to the friction between her and her family. Last year, Barbra saw the aftermath of Robbie hitting her across the face. Ever since, Barbra tried to get Mercedes to open up about the abusive relationship. Mercedes always clammed up. She didn't want to relive the nightmare.

"Good," Mercedes responded with her mouth full. "We're not together anymore so there's really nothing to talk about." Not wanting to get into a confrontation about a guy she still loved, she threw a few more forkfuls in her mouth before getting up from the table.

"We need to talk about this, Mercedes. He physically abused you—" Out of anger, Mercedes's nose flared as she slammed her plate against the sink. She knew Barbra was trying to help,

however, she was over her meddling. It wasn't too long ago she reluctantly said good-bye to Robbie. Had he not said that getting back together was off limits, she probably would have taken him back.

Hearing Steph cry from the noise, Mercedes closed her eyes feeling ashamed that she let her anger get the best of her. She knew her short temper had gotten her in trouble the previous year. Last year Barbra confronted Mercedes after she snuck out of the house. They got into a heated argument where ugly words were exchanged. The quarrel turned volatile after Mercedes snapped and accidentally threw a glass at Barbra, inducing her pregnancy, which caused her to give birth to Stephanie prematurely. "I'm sorry," she said quietly with her head down as she opened her eyes.

"It's okay to be upset." Barbra got up from her seat and picked up Steph, comforting her, as she tried to get her to stop crying.

"It's not. Last time I got angry, I..." she began but stopped. There was yet another thing she couldn't say out loud. She almost killed her baby sister. "I hurt you and Steph. I feel sick to my stomach even thinking about how I acted and what could've happened that morning if things turned out for the worse. I can never get that angry again. And I don't blame you for keeping me away from Steph. I don't deserve to be around her."

"That's not what I want, Mercedes. I know you would never intentionally try to hurt your sister."

"I'd never intentionally try to hurt you either, Barbra. I've apologized before, but I'll say it again. Barbra, I'm sorry--"

"Don't. You've already apologized, a bunch of times. I haven't. That day when I was lecturing you, I only did because I love you. If I didn't I wouldn't have cared that you snuck out to go to a party. For that I can't apologize. But what I said about your mother," she began in a trembling voice. "Was horrible. Neither you nor your mother deserved that. And it wasn't one thing. I kept going on and on about your mother, provoking you. Mercedes, I am truly sorry." She wiped the tears that were coming down her

cheeks as she continued to hold Steph. Seeing her mother cry, Steph, stopped crying herself and rested her head against her mother's chest.

"It's okay," Mercedes said feeling guilty. She didn't intend for the glass to hit Barbra, but it did and that was the fact. All of it could have been prevented if Mercedes wasn't such a hothead.

"It's not okay. I should've apologized months ago, but my pride..." Barbra paused as she continued to cry. "My pride got in the way to the point that I kept you away from having a relationship with your own sister. The whole time I kept you away, I thought about how my sister and I haven't spoken in years because of a falling out we had, and I don't want to mess up your relationship with your own sister." She was at a loss for words. The last thing she expected was for her stepmother to express regret to her.

"I just...wanna move on from this whole thing. I don't want it hanging over my head anymore."

"Neither do I, but before we move on, there's one more thing I have to do." Barbra took a deep breath and handed Steph over to Mercedes. "Steph, meet your big sister Mercedes," Barbra told her daughter. After slight hesitation, Mercedes carefully took Stephanie.

"Am I holding her right?" Mercedes asked as she wrapped her left arm across her upper back and her right arm underneath her legs. Mercedes ignored the tears coming down her eyes. She was captivated by her baby sister. She was so small in her arms and looked so fragile. She continued to cry. This baby in her arms could've died because of her temper.

"You're holding her right. I can already tell you're going to be an awesome big sister. I'll give you some alone time with her." As Barbra walked out of the kitchen, Mercedes slowly carried Steph over to the wooden kitchen chair.

"I'll never hurt you again. And I'll always be there for you." Mercedes sat Steph on her lap. Before Mercedes had a chance, Steph turned her body around to face Mercedes.

Just like Barbra, Steph had dark blue eyes. However,

unlike her mother's light brunette hair, she shared her father's dark curly hair. "When you get older, we're gonna have so much fun. I'm gonna teach you how to play basketball and how to cook. Dad will show you how to cook also since he's a chef." Stephanie smiled as she held her hands against Mercedez's face. Mercedez smiled back when she grabbed her nose with her small hands.

"How are my favorite girls doing?" Mercedez's father, Mateo asked coming into the kitchen. He was a little bit taller than Mercedez. He had short black hair, light brown eyes, and a black goatee. Compared to most men his age he was average in size.

He came up to them and leaned over to kiss both of his daughters on their forehead. Stephanie clapped when she saw him.

"Hey, Dad."

"I can't say that I'm not surprised to see you with Steph." After washing his hands, he took a seat next to them. "I'm really happy that you're making an effort to spend time with your sister. Regardless of who her mom is, she is still your baby sister." Mateo had three children with three different women. Barbra was Mateo's second wife. He was once married before to his oldest son, Nick's, mother. After he had an affair with Mercedez's mother, his then wife, divorced him. Several years after the divorce, he met Barbra. They hit it off and got married and after a year had Stephanie.

"I know," Mercedez responded. She looked down at Steph. She was asleep in her arms. She was glad she now had a chance to establish a relationship with Stehphanie.

"I also wanted to talk to you about other things. I'm proud of you."

"Why, Dad? I got left back last year, and I hurt both Barbra and Steph-."

"Yes, you did all of that. We all make mistakes. What counts is getting up when we've fallen and learning from our faults. I'm proud that you are making an effort to be a part of Steph's life. I'm also proud that you got a job to pay for your summer classes. After the summer, I don't want you working during the school year. I'd rather you focus more on your education and going back to

doing things you used to, like playing for the basketball team and cooking again."

"Okay," she agreed. It was always good to hear that she was no longer disappointing her father with her mistakes. Mateo pulled out his wallet. He whipped out a check and handed it to her. Mercedes glanced at the check that was made out to her. To her surprise, the amount was in the hundreds. "What's this?"

"Barbra and I talked, and we agreed that you've showed responsibility. So as long as you pass all of your classes with at least A's and B's this check is yours."

"You mean I can keep the money?" She picked up the check and wondered what she could do with that much cash. She wouldn't mind buying an iPod. She was still using a CD player to listen to music. She also needed a new basketball since she lost hers months ago at the park.

"As long as you pass with good grades." He took the check back and placed it back in his wallet.

"Awe come on, Dad. Can't you just give it to me now? I'll still make the grades." She asked smiling, showing her dimples.

"No. Besides, a little incentive won't hurt," he replied grinning back. Seeing Barbra walk into the kitchen, he greeted her with a kiss.

"How was work?" Barbra asked, wrapping her arms around him.

"Busy. I'm just glad I'm home with you and the kids," he responded gazing between his wife and two daughters.

Amanda, Keisha, and Keagan walked on the white sand of the beach over to where Julia and Dev were laying.

"Hey, you two lovebirds, we've got a party to crash," Amanda announced.

"We're not lovebirds- party to crash?" Julia asked, getting up from the floor along with Dev.

"Yeah, girl! Word is, Sonya Solis is throwing a crazy party at a beach house by the hotel," Keisha told her.

Chasing Ghosts

"*Thee Sonya Solis?*" Sonya Solis was one of the most famous Puerto Rican American triple threat in America. She was the lead actress in many number one box office movies, had a handful of number one singles on the billboard charts, and she had a successful fashion line, S.S. She was constantly in the tabloids, however, she seemed to have been lying low over the past couple of months.

"Yup. *Thee Sonya Solis*. I wouldn't mind just breathing the same air as her- but I'd rather breathe the same air as you, baby," Keagan said to his girlfriend, Keisha just as she gave him an evil look.

"How are we going to just crash her party? They probably have a whole bunch of security just ready to kick out uninvited guests," Dev said.

"As we speak, Julio is figuring out the best way to get in. He's going to text us how once he's in," Amanda responded.

"I donno. I don't wanna get in trouble," Julia said. She did want to meet Sonya Solis, but it sounded like a bad idea.

"Oh come on, Julz," Keisha began, calling Julia by the nickname that she and Mercedez gave her back in middle school. "Lighten up. We're on vacation, and how cool would it be to brag about being at Sonya Solis's party?"

"Alright. Fine," Julia said giving in.

"Let's go party with the celebs!" Amanda excitedly said. She put her arm in Julia's arm. "Of course you'll have to change first."

"Yeah. I'm mad wet."

"*That's* not the only reason you need to change," Amanda replied disapprovingly looking at her wardrobe. Amanda was aware Julia put on weight and because she did her clothes were a bit tighter than usual. She wanted to suggest to Julia to just go a couple of sizes up on her wardrobe, but didn't want to upset her especially since she had been very welcoming to her.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" Julia glanced down at her clothes. She wore a wife beater along with cutoff jeans.

"I'd rather not answer that." After they all changed, they

headed over to the beach house.

"Am I better now?" Julia asked Amanda on their walk over. "It's a step," Amanda responded glancing over at her clothes. Seeing that her bloated stomach wasn't showing like it was earlier, Amanda said no more. Julia wore her curly hair down and wore a loose fitting black tank top that had AC/DC on it, a long grey bohemian skirt and gold colored sandals. "How about me?" She didn't know why she even asked Julia. It wasn't as if Julia had any sense of fashion. Amanda knew her navy blue Amsale Blush ruffled cocktail dress with black Chloe` buckled heels looked fabulous on her.

"You're good." The gang planned to hop in line between an entourage, hoping to get in.

"Here's our chance," Keisha said when a group of guests came out of a limo. The gang subtly rushed behind the guests, right past the bouncer, and inside the large and luxurious beach home.

"Hey! What are you teens doing here?" the bouncer questioned as he saw them come in.

"We gotta go!" Amanda grabbed Julia's hand and hurriedly moved away from the door and the bouncer, over to where there was a crowd of people.

"What about the others?" Julia looked back to find the bouncer kicking the rest of their friends out.

"Forget about them and try to blend in," Amanda responded letting go of her hand. Amanda fixed her hair and looked around for any paparazzi. She was here to get noticed. If she could get famous for being famous, this was the place to do it.

"But-"

"No buts. We won't stay long. We just gotta find *her*. If I take a picture with Sonya and it makes it in the magazines I could be the next socialite. The girls at St. Rose would be so jealous," she said referring to the all girls' Catholic school she once attended.

"What are the odds that's gonna happen?" Julia knew Amanda was a bit crazy, but she was now finding out how delusional she really was.

"You guys made it," Julio said coming up to the both of them.

"Yeah, but the others got kicked out," Julia responded. "Damn. I'll see if I can get them in," he offered heading towards the door.

"OMG! There she is!" Amanda exclaimed pointing to Sonya Solis.

"That's her!" Julia replied looking at the back of the superstar who was heading up the stairs.

"There they are!" the bouncer announced pointing towards Amanda and Julia. Once again, Amanda grabbed Julia's arm and rushed her over to an even more crowded area.

"Get down," Amanda hissed to Julia. Amanda and Julia crawled on the floor, passing the guests who were either dancing or chatting with one another and headed over to the bar. They sat down below the bar to hide away. They sighed in relief when the bouncer walked passed them.

"We gotta leave the party, Amanda," Julia said as people by the bar glanced down at them.

Amanda turned to Julia. "Julia, we are this close. The stairs are right there." Julia looked up. Sure enough, the stairs were about three steps away from them.

"No."

"You can sit here and wait for the bouncer to kick you out. But I'm going to meet Sonya Solis," Amanda stated before crawling away.

"Amanda, don't!" Julia called after her. Amanda stopped crawling and ran up the stairs as fast as her heels could take her. "Ugh!" Julia exclaimed before quickly following Amanda. "We have to go," Julia said as soon as she reached the top of the stairs.

"Let's try this room," Amanda suggested choosing to ignore Julia. Julia reluctantly went inside after Amanda and closed the door behind her. "Look." Amanda gazed around the room. The room had a rack full of clothes and a vanity filled with expensive makeup. Right next to that were streams of jewelry dangling out of

boxes and neatly lying on the surface. "Wow. She uses the same mascara and lipstick as I do," Amanda said in awe as she touched the makeup. She went over to look at her clothes. Amanda approvingly browsed through the wardrobe. She would wear any of the outfits, except the pieces from Sonya's actual clothing line. In Amanda's opinion, the clothes were a rip off of high end fashion. Julia went over to the music sheets that were on the sofa. She began to read the lyrics.

"We can't be together, but I'll love you forever. Can't wait for us to go public. For you to proudly say I'm your chick," Julia said out loud. She did admire Sonya Solis for being a great female role model, but she was not a fan of her music. Sonya couldn't sing well. She just had catchy songs over great beats.

"Someone's coming," Amanda said as they heard footsteps towards the door. Amanda and Julia ran inside the closet and closed the door.

"... I don't know how long I can keep this going. The paparazzi's going to find out," Sonya said.

"That's Sonya," Amanda mouthed to Julia in happiness. Amanda placed her ear close to the door to hear what Sonya was trying to hide.

"I know, hun. How many drinks can you refuse?" Sonya's assistant asked. "You can't hide forever, Sonya. They're gonna start asking questions and making up stories in the tabloids once that baby bump of yours becomes obvious."

"If this wasn't so complicat-," Sonya began but stopped after a cell phone rang. "Did you hear that?" Julia quickly tried to press the off button to stop her phone from ringing.

"Julia!" Amanda whispered. The assistant yanked open the closet door.

"You gotta be kidding me. A couple of teens snuck upstairs here? Sonya, I told you to get rid of those lousy bouncers and hire new ones."

"We can explain. We just wanted to meet you so bad, Ms. Solis-" Amanda started.

"Cut the crap, kid!" the assistant exclaimed. "I'm going to phone security to get these two out."

"Don't," Sonya said. "Give me a moment with them."

"Sonya—"

"Please." The assistant shook her head and left the room. Julia folded her arms behind her back, thinking that things couldn't get any worse. "How much did you guys hear?"

"Enough. But, trust us, Ms. Solis, we won't tell anybody about your bundle of joy," Amanda told her as she sat on the bed next to her.

"You are bold," Sonya said chuckling. "You remind me of how I was when I was younger."

"Thank you. And may I say that you are both beautiful both on and off screen." Sonya Solis was a pretty woman. She was naturally tanned, tall and curvaceous. She had long honey brownish hair and greenish brown eyes.

"Keep those compliments coming, and you can hang out with me for the rest of this party."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Only about hanging out with me at this party. I was kidding about the compliments."

"Cool! Can we?" Amanda pulled out her digital Sony Cyber-shot camera from her purse right as Sonya nodded her head in agreement. Julia snapped a few shots of them as they posed for a couple of pictures. "Thanks, so much, Ms. Solis!" Amanda squealed giving her a hug.

"No problem." Sonya laughed at Amanda's excitement. "Can you wait for me outside this room? If they give you trouble, tell them you're with me." Amanda took her camera back from Julia and waited outside. "Juliana, wait," Sonya said just as Julia was about to leave.

"How'd you know my name?" Julia questioned facing Sonya. She wondered how the famous Sonya Solis knew who she was.

"Your father and I are working on his upcoming album."

Sonya sat back on the bed and placed her hand over her belly. "He told me about his two kids and showed me a recent picture of you and Julio. He's always gushing about how great the both of you are," Sonya added smiling. "I heard the song you and your dad are working on. It sounds great so far."

"Thanks." Julia said finally speaking. She was more shocked that Carlo actually bragged to others about her and Julio more than she was to be having a conversation with Sonya Solis. "So, how far are you?" Julia asked changing the focus off of her and onto Sonya. If Sonya was going to report to her dad about their conversation, Julia wanted her to at least say how she wasn't only talking about herself.

"A little less than a month."

"Congrats."

"Thanks. I still can't believe I'm going to be a mom." "Sonya, people are asking for you," her assistant said poking her head inside the room.

"I'm coming! Duty calls," Sonya said to Julia. "I hope you and your friend can stick around, Juliana."

"Sure," Julia replied. How could she say no to hanging out with *the Sonya Solis*?

"Last day of school!" Mercedes exclaimed to Angela as they walked out of their English II class. "No better way to end it than with an A." The both of them ended up getting an A on their joint project and in the class.

"I'm finally a junior," Angela responded. She failed the tenth grade once, and was on the verge of failing again. Thankfully, she got her act together and passed all but English II the second time around. She was thankful that she took the time to retake it during the summertime and that she passed.

"Wanna go to Mickey D's to celebrate?" Mercedes asked. It was the last day of summer school and she was in the mood to have fun. She got two A's and one B on the three classes she had to retake and she was no longer grounded. Her friends weren't back from

their trip and she didn't mind having Angela around. While working on the project together they got to know one another. They've even eaten lunch together after class a couple of times.

"I can't today, but we should hang out sometime." Angela did enjoy Mercedes's company. It had been so long since she had a female friend.

"Yeah." Mercedes wished her friends were back in Roctown so she could finally enjoy what was left of summer with them.

Angela took the bus to Robbie's house. She didn't like keeping Mercedes from knowing that she and Robbie talked every day, but it didn't matter if she and Robbie were just friends. Robbie let her in as soon as she knocked on his door. They greeted each other with a hug.

"So you're really leaving." Angela said, looking around the living room where many boxes were scattered.

"Yup. Back to Philly. Hopefully I can finally make some sense of things. How was your last day?"

"Not bad," she replied, taking a seat at the arm of the couch.

"And Mercedes?" he casually asked.

"Why don't you just ask her?" Every once in a while, Robbie would ask her how Mercedes was doing. Angela informed him that she not only was working together on a project with her but also how she resolved her differences with Mercedes. Throughout the summer Angela would update Robbie about Mercedes. Though Angela didn't tell Robbie everything that Mercedes did or said, she felt bad for reporting her time with Mercedes without her consent.

"I can't," he said, sitting down at the edge of the coffee table.

"Why not? Robbie, it's obvious you still love her." "It doesn't matter if I still love her." "It does--"

"If it only takes love to be with someone, why aren't you still with Jesse?" Some days they only called to check in and say hi.

Other times, they would chat for hours, sometimes about their past, including who they've dated before.

"You know why Jesse and I can't be together, but you never told me why you and Mercedes can't be together. So you're not even gonna tell her that you're leaving?" Robbie shrugged his shoulders and got up from the coffee table. "You have to tell her, Robbie."

"I can't! I can't see or talk to her!" he yelled.

"Why not?" she loudly said getting up.

"Because I used to hit her!" he revealed to a surprised Angela. She knew he had a bit of a temper, but she never saw him as an abusive boyfriend. "And it wasn't just once," he began as he picked up the coffee cup off the table. "Every time I got mad at her, I'd put my hands on her like I was justified to do so!" Angela jumped once he threw the cup in his hand against the wall. She never saw him this upset. "She didn't deserve any of that. Even after all the hell I put her through she still loved me and was good to me. Every time I see that scar below her eye it just reminds me of why I can't be with her," he finished, taking a seat on the edge of the table.

"Robbie-," Angela began but stopped. She did not know what to say. She was shocked that he hit Mercedes across her face so hard that it left a scar.

"I'm just like him."

"Who?"

"My dad. I always said I'd never be like him. And here I am. Just like him."

"He used to hit your mom," Angela said, kneeling on the floor, in front of him.

"My mom and I were close, but after my dad died, I slowly stopped talking to her. So when I turned eighteen, I took the money my dad left for me, left Philly and used it to buy this house and my motorcycle," Robbie told her in a much calmer voice. "I thought maybe if I invested the money and finished high school I could show her how much I've grown up and maybe it would bring us back to where we were before he died. I was just waiting to settle

in before I made the call to my mom. But after Mercedes and I started dating and I hit her, I couldn't call her. How could I face her when I hurt someone just like my dad used to hurt her?"

"So you're ready to face her now?"

"No. If I keep asking myself that, I'll never go see her. I just gotta go home. I called her the other day and she's real excited to have me back."

"I'm sure she is."

"It'll be good to see her. I miss her, my old bedroom, and even real Philadelphia Philly cheesesteak," he added in a slight smile. She returned his smile.

"I'm happy you're finding some peace."

"I couldn't have done it without you." He knelt down on the ground in front of her. "You saved me. I pushed you away, yet you never gave up on me." He reached over and held onto her hands. "I know that we haven't always seen eye to eye on things. But I want you to know that I care about you." She glanced at him, finding herself once again hypnotized by his intense blue eyes. With their hands still interlocked, Robbie leaned over and kissed Angela. Robbie let go of her hands and wrapped his arms around her body, bringing her closer to him, as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She leaned backwards, onto the floor as they continued to kiss.

After a few minutes of making out with Robbie, she stopped kissing him and turned her head away from him. She remembered the promise she made to Mercedes. Angela doubted Mercedes would ever find out about her and Robbie, but Angela wanted to keep her word to her. Not noticing this, Robbie began to kiss on her neck as he snuck his hands underneath her shirt. "Robbie, we shouldn't." She took his hands away from her and softly placed both her hands on his face before they took things further. "We've gotten this far. Let's not go back." Robbie nodded. "Are you mad?"

"I don't think I could ever get mad at you," he responded, placing his arm around her back, helping her to a sitting position.

"I care about you too, Robbie. A part of why is 'cause I know how it feels when someone close commits suicide. I didn't want your family and friends to have to go through that. I don't want to have to go through that again. It's the worst pain, knowing that someone you loved thought their life wasn't worth living. You go around thinking that you're to blame for them killing themselves. And you think about all the warning signs and how you could've prevented it from happening. My dad put a bullet in his head. He just gave up on his wife and three kids."

"I'm sorry about your loss."

"It's whatever," Angela said, getting up from the floor. "If he really loved me and my sisters, he wouldn't have done what he did."

"I'm sure he loved you and your sisters--"

"That's what people keep saying. Anyways, I don't wanna talk about him," Angela said, not wanting to rehash why she hated thinking about the loss of her father: because he didn't love her enough to stay alive. "Take care of yourself," she said leaning over and kissing Robbie's cheek.

Chapter 3

"...Welcome back."

Amanda dug for some change from her Gucci wallet as the chauffeur carried her suitcases inside. Though she took three pieces of luggage, she managed to shop enough to fill two more duffel bags.

"Amanda, how was your trip?" Charles, her father asked, walking down the spiral staircase in his grey three piece Armani suit and black Prada dress shoes.

"So you noticed I was gone," Amanda stated, handing the chauffeur a hundred dollar bill.

"Thanks!" the chauffeur replied in happiness from the fifty dollar tip, before leaving.

"Of course I noticed you were gone. You do realize that credit cards carry records," he replied, finally making it down the stairs. Besides owning a prestigious law firm, both sides of her family came from money.

"Is that Amanda?" her mother, Mary Anne, asked coming down the stairs in a simple grey linen Juicy Couture sundress with a pair of black and silver Vera Wang sandals. If her mom didn't look as fabulous as her, Amanda would have scolded her for having worn something so short. Amanda was a spitting image of her Mary Anne. They were both slim and had blonde hair. The only difference was Mary Anne was a couple of inches taller and had

brown eyes. Amanda got her dark blue eyes and wide smile from Charles.

"Amanda, where have you been?" Mary Anne asked, embracing her in a hug. She held back. She wanted to hug her, however she needed more of a reaction from her parents.

After school ended, she packed her bags and left the country without telling her parents. She assumed that would be enough for them to show her how much they loved her. However, she never received a phone call from them.

"London, Paris, and Puerto Rico. Am I missing anywhere?" he asked sarcastically.

"No," Amanda replied giving him a dirty look.

"Well, honey, I'm glad you're okay," Mary Anne said, sounding as if she was going to cry.

"Cut the act, Mother. You were so concerned that you *called* me, right?" Amanda sarcastically said, pushing her away.

"Amanda, I tried to call you, multiple times, however the calls never went through. Honey, we were both concerned. When Daddy and I couldn't reach you through phone, we traced your credit card, trying to get leads to where you were."

"And when you guys figured out where I was, you didn't bother trying to come find me? I'm your daughter! Does that not mean anything to you guys?" Amanda angrily asked.

"Of course it does!" Charles exclaimed. "Excuse me, if I didn't have time to chase a spoiled brat around the world, especially when I am getting ready for the most anticipated televised murder trial! You know if you put as much energy trying to be the center of attention in school you would've remained home taking summer classes to get ahead of the game. Do you realize you only have two years to prove to Princeton that you're worthy enough to step on their college grounds?" Amanda wiped her eyes, disliking him for making her cry. She hated how he made it seem as if she wasn't trying hard enough to live up to their standards.

"Your father is right, Amanda. You have to take school more seriously," Mary Anne said, stepping closer to Charles.

Chasing Ghosts

"So you're taking his side? You're the last person to tell me I'm not working hard! What's your job title? Trophy wife?" Amanda snapped, upset Mary Anne was taking Charles's side. As usual, it was her against her family and she had to fend for herself.

"I admit, I don't have a job. And yes, I enjoy shopping and spas and going on vacation, but I don't just sit on my ass. I am the head of Relay for Life of Roctown which raises millions of dollars each year. I am also involved in many organizations. Contrary to what you may think, I don't just sign checks, I actively participate. In case you forgot, I graduated from Princeton as an undergrad and law student. And, honey, I passed the bar. So if I want to practice law, *I can*. The next time you decide to check me get your facts straight," she snapped, before flipping her blonde hair over her shoulders and walking away.

"I can't believe ya'll really got to meet Sonya Solis," Mercedes told her two best friends, Julia and Keisha. They finally came back from Puerto Rico with little time to spare before their junior year of high school began. They all decided to hang out at Roctown's annual carnival to catch up. The carnival came to town once a year at the end of summer.

"Not at first, but somehow Julia and Amanda managed to get into her dressing room, meet her, and get her to not only let the rest of us in, but to also party with her," Keisha said. Mercedes wished she passed her classes the first time around so she could have went to Puerto Rico. Instead, Amanda, her nemesis, got to share the experience with her friends. She and Amanda never got along since they both went out with the same guy, Julio. However, she wasn't going to bring up how her two best friends shouldn't have hung out with Amanda in Puerto Rico. They all walked over to where the bumper cars were set up.

"Looks like ya'll had fun with Amanda," Mercedes said while they waited in line.

"We did. She's crazy, but fun. Pero, don't worry, Cedez. She's not gonna replace you or anything," Julia reassured Mercedes

calling her by her nickname.

Mercedez nodded her head as she glanced over to Julia. She noticed she put on several pounds since the last time she saw her at the beginning of summer. She wondered if Julia was comfortable with her new body or if she planned to get back to how she looked before.

Julia pulled out her cell phone to read the text from her boyfriend telling her to meet him by the cotton candy stand.

"Chicas, you know I wanted to chill with ya'll, but Eddie's here and-" Julia began.

"Vas," Mercedez told Julia, knowing Julia was more talking to her than Keisha.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Girl, go be with your man. We've got the whole school year to hang out," Mercedez said to her.

"Gracias, Cedez. I owe you one." Julia gave her a quick hug before rushing over to see Eddie.

"Wanna play for five on the hoops?" Mercedez asked Keisha. "Or, you can go hang out with Keagan," she said after seeing Keisha eyeing her boyfriend who was at the next booth over.

"Cedez, no. Me and you are gonna hang out. I've been with Keagan all summer, but we haven't-"

"It's okay. Like I told Julz, we got the rest of the school year. Besides, Barbra's here with Stephanie. I'll go hang with them."

"Cedez-"

"Have fun with Keagan."

"I owe you one too," Keisha replied also giving her a hug before she went over to Keagan. Mercedez tried to ignore the many couples canoodling around the carnival. Had Robbie not been abusive, maybe they would have still been together and happily there like everyone else. Right before her mind raced to why she missed him, she reminded herself why they wouldn't work. Mercedez touched the scar underneath her eye and sighed. It was a reminder of how violent Robbie acted towards her.

"Mercedez, honey, are you okay?" Barbra asked when

Mercedes walked passed her without realizing it.

"I'm fine," Mercedes replied, stopping as she brushed thoughts of Robbie out of her head.

"I thought you were with your friends."

"I was, but they're doing their own thing. Hi, Steph," Mercedes said waving to her.

"You can pick her up," Barbra offered. Mercedes reached over to pick Stephanie up from the stroller.

Mercedes got up and chucked her bowl off the table. Milk and marshmallows flew everywhere as the dish shattered into pieces onto the floor.

"I CAN'T STAND YOU!" Mercedes yelled. "PICK THAT BOWL UP!" Barbra exclaimed

"HERE!" Mercedes yelled back flinging her glass of orange juice off the table. Mercedes watched in horror as the glass struck Barbra against her stomach. As the cup smashed to the floor and broke into pieces, Barbra screamed grabbing her pregnant stomach in intense pain. A shocked Mercedes froze, unable to comprehend what she had just done.

Mercedes quickly pulled her hands back after the memory of hurting Barbra and Steph replayed in her head. There was no way she could go on and pretend that she hadn't almost killed her sister that previous year. She vowed to never hurt Steph anymore. If that meant staying away from her, then so be it.

"Is there something wrong?" Barbra asked Mercedes, noticing her retraction.

"No...it's just.. I haven't washed my hands yet," Mercedes replied, showing Barbra her hands which were not visibly soiled.

"I have some hand sanitizer."

"Aunt Babs?" someone said to Barbra. Mercedes sighed in relief at the interruption, glad she didn't have to make up another excuse as to why she did not want to hold Stephanie.

Barbra's mouth dropped once she saw who it was. "Troy," Barbra said before giving him a hug. Troy was about her height and skinny. He had blondish brown hair and dark blue eyes. He had a baby face and a wide smile. He didn't look a day older than sixteen.

"You've grown up a lot since the last time I saw you."

"About five years ago," Troy responded. Barbra introduced Troy to Mercedes and Stephanie. "Can I hold her?" he asked. Barbra nodded her head. Troy picked up the baby and began to talk to Stephanie while she played with his shell necklace.

"So he's the son of your sister you haven't talked to in years," Mercedes said to Barbra when Troy was out of earshot.

"Yes. Seeing you with Steph and Troy with Steph makes me think about my sister. I have to call her. What grudge is worth breaking a family?" she rhetorically asked.

"I'll see you later, Baby Babs," Troy said handing Steph to Barbra. "It's just so surreal. I never thought you would have kids. Not that you were bad with kids or anything. I used to love it when you babysat for us. It's just you were all rock and roll and dreadlocks--"

"I had to grow up some time," Barbra interrupted sounding embarrassed about her past. Mercedes wondered who this *Babs* was and how different she was from the Barbra she knew.

"Right. Now that I've spent time with one cousin, on to the next," Troy said looking at Mercedes. "Wanna hang out?"

"Alright."

"Have fun," Barbra told them. The both of them walked over to where the bumper cars were and stood behind the long line.

"I still can't believe she's married with a kid."

"What's so hard to believe? She's friggin' cookie cutter, bright colored wearing Martha Stewart."

"No way, dude. Aunt Babs is so much edgier. When she used to baby-sit us, she'd let us stay up real late, eat junk food, and listen to some really cool rock & roll. My mom would get mad at all this, but Aunt Babs would always say that it was her job to spoil us."

"She must've changed a lot, 'cause that ain't the Barbra I know."

"She has. I mean, she used to hate it when people called her Barbra. It was always Babs. She even looks different. Back then she

was all wife beaters, tank tops, leather pants, and combat boots.”
“Now she looks like she stepped out of a Macy’s catalog,”

Mercedez said as they both laughed.

“Anyways, enough about Aunt Babs. How about you? What school do you go to?”

“RHS. You?”

“St. John’s. It’s a stupid all boy’s school. I hate it there. I wanna transfer over to RHS, but my parents are so against public schools. They think it’ll lessen my chances into getting in an Ivy League college.”

“Public schools got honor and AP classes too,” Mercedez defended. She wouldn’t mind having Troy at RHS. He was easy to talk to and it felt as if she knew him forever.

“That’s what I told them. Don’t worry though. I got a trick up my sleeve,” he said placing his hand on his chin. “It’s not like I won’t know anybody at RHS. I’ll know you, my sister, and some other people.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name’s-”

“Next!” the bumper car operator announced to Troy and Mercedez. After paying the operator, they went to separate cars.

“You’re going down, cousin,” Troy said with a smile.

“When you feel your car being smashed against the wall, know it was ‘cause of me,” Mercedez joked.

“I don’t wanna let go,” Julia told her boyfriend, Eddie. “Then don’t. I got you,” he replied giving her a kiss. She

had her arms around his shoulders and had her legs wrapped around his waist. He supported her with both his strong arms. Unlike Julia, Eddie was tall. His half Haitian and half Caucasian background gave him a light skinned complexion. He had black eyes and long eye lashes. He wore a New York Yankee fitted hat with a Penn State t-shirt, black Jordan basketball shorts, long black socks and black Adidas sandals.

“I missed you so much, pookie.” It was five times better

being in his arms than being in Puerto Rico away from him for so long.

"I missed you too." Once he brought them over to a bench, Julia sat on his lap and continued to kiss him. She was not used to being so affectionate with her boyfriend in public, but she hadn't seen him all summer. After they stopped kissing, he placed his hand on her lower back.

"You look different," he said wrapping his other arm around her. Julia blushed as she tried to suck her stomach in. Getting off of his lap, she pondered if he felt how much heavier she was compared to last time. She covered her loose top over her abdomen and said, "I uh...I may have eaten more deserts than I should have."

"If you want, I can give you some gym routines to do," he offered. Julia looked away from him in embarrassment. He was a gym rat, and always emphasized the importance of staying in shape. She would hate it if her weight gain would be the demise of their relationship.

"Do you not find me attractive anymore?" she questioned, finding it hard to make eye contact with him.

"Yes! Of course, boo. You are beautiful and if this is the new you, then I'm okay with it," he replied with much reassurance as he grabbed hold of her hand. Julia gulped. Somehow she wasn't convinced he was alright with it.

"Just okay?"

"More than okay. Look, you look finer than you did now than before."

"So," Julia began trying to desperately move away from their current topic of conversation. "What are your plans for us while you're here?"

"I can't plan too much 'cause the fam wants to spend time with me before I leave."

"Eddie, you're leaving in a week. I'm barely gonna see you," she complained. She couldn't stand a summer away from him, yet they had to be a part for so much longer once he left for

Penn State University in a week.

"I'm sorry, baby. If I could make Jersey closer to Pennsylvania, I would. You know I'd give you the world," he added winking at her. She nodded feeling warm all over.

"I love you so much."

"I love you too." He kissed her on her forehead as she hugged him. Hearing those words made her want to get closer to him. Though he had trouble saying the *I* word to her in the past, he was now saying it more than ever. "You know that day when you said you wasn't into having a physical relationship?"

"Yeah."

"Well neither am I. I'm on the same page as you. I'm into making love." Julia gazed into his eyes. She looked away, let go of his hand, and nervously folded her arms.

She was in love with Eddie and wanted to show him more and more, but she wasn't sure she was ready to be intimate. A part of her did, but she made a promise to God to save herself for marriage. "Baby, relax. I'm not pressuring you or nothing," Eddie added seeing how uncomfortable she was. "You want some cotton candy?" he asked obviously trying to get away from the uneasy conversation.

They both got up from the bench and quietly walked over to the food stand. On their way there, she wondered how long Eddie would stick with her without taking their relationship to that level.

"Did I tell you I beat my old score in Space Ship Race?" Jimmy asked Angela. They decided to spend time together at the carnival to compensate for the summer Jimmy spent away at band camp where he played the saxophone.

"No. Did you break 3000 yet?" Though they were of opposite gender, their friendship was platonic. He was also opposite from her in other ways. Their opposition in friendship worked. His geeky nature motivated her to do better in school and to have wholesome fun without alcohol.

"Over 3500 points!" he happily told her.

"Congrats, Jimmy. I'm gonna miss you when you leave for boarding school."

"Me too." Jimmy chose to go to boarding school instead of returning to RHS for the upcoming school year. He stopped to pick up his ringing cell phone. "It's my mom. She's here now. I'll go say hi, but I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

"Call me when you're done." Once he left, she went over to buy a bottle of water at the food stand. After paying the cashier, she nearly dropped the bottle out of shock. Out of the corner of her eye, there stood Jesse Ryder. She quickly left the booth in hopes that he hadn't seen her.

"Angela! Wait up!" Jesse called out to her. She picked up her pace as she heard his footsteps getting closer to her. Angela frowned as she tried to ignore him. She continued to speed walk. He began to jog backwards to keep up with her. "We don't see each other in over a year and you ignore me."

"Now you know how it feels," she snapped as her heart began to beat fast.

"You're the one who broke up with me."

"I did, but I never said avoid my phone calls or ignore the fact that I was even alive," she responded glaring at him. Jesse had his long dark brunette wavy hair over his face. He had greenish blue eyes and slightly thick eyebrows. He was fairly tall and slender. He had a bit of a five o'clock shadow going on, covering his high cheek bones.

Jesse wore a black Rolling Stones t-shirt with acid blue jeans that were rolled up right below his knees, and he wore a worn out pair of Converse All Star sneakers. He also had his infamous silver rings on his left thumb. She gulped, noticing that he looked even more striking than before.

"I'm sorry, Ang." He gently stopped her by holding onto her right arm. He pushed his hair out of his face. "I shouldn't have gone all cold turkey on you," he added as he inconspicuously circled his thumb on her arm that he held. Her heart beat even

faster. It had been so long since they last touched.

"Okay." She shrugged him off and proceeded to walk away from him.

"You know," he said strolling right beside her. "We had a good thing between us and for that reason, when we see each other, we should at least say hi, right?"

"Jesse—"

"I'm not saying let's be friends. That'd be too hard. But come on, Ang, I respect you enough to acknowledge your presence and to say hello when I see you."

"I guess we can do that."

"That's good," he said offering her a careful grin. Although a part of her was happy he was finally talking to her, she didn't want to show it. She was still mad that he stopped communicating with her in the first place.

"I'll see you around."

"Ang."

"What?" He grabbed her hand and spun her over to him. Before she could object, he pulled her in for a passionate kiss. She began to break away, but stopped herself once she felt his soft lips on hers. For a moment, she flashbaked to how it was in the beginning with Jesse. No problems. Just her and Jesse before Chuck came back. Her knees got weak once he gently stopped kissing her. He caught her before she could fall.

"I'll see you around too," Jesse said letting go of her.

Chapter 4

"...behind those Versace shades."

Amanda marched over to where her brother was trying to sweet talk a girl. She wouldn't have cared had her parents not blamed her for her brother's choice of going to RHS (Roctown High School) over the private all boys' prep high school. She also had to keep her brother out of trouble and make sure he did well enough to get into an Ivy League school.

"Why not? You just said I was a sweetheart," Amanda's brother said to the girl as he smiled. As soon as she was close enough, Amanda grabbed her younger brother's right ear.

"Amanda!" he yelled, getting up from the bench he was sitting at. She dragged him over towards the lockers before she let go of his ear.

"Shouldn't you be studying?"

"It's the first day of school, and class hasn't even started. I was just about to get that hot girl's number before you came." They were surrounded by other students in the hallway who were greeting each other as they shared their summer stories and plans for the upcoming school year.

"I don't care! Because of you not only do I have to make sure I get into an Ivy League school, but it's on me for you to get into one too. In two years at that!" she accused.

"Don't worry, Amanda. I already have all the credits to be a junior. I'll finish high school a year earlier and make it into the best college like I promised Mom and Dad." Her brother was a year ahead of where he should have been academically.

"Until then, you better keep your grades up." She knew her parents would be breathing down her neck making sure she and her fifteen year old brother got into one of the top colleges in the nation.

"I will. You should just worry about not stealing another AP exam," he teased, referring to the reason why she was expelled

from her old high school. Thankfully her father was able to cover up the incident with a generous donation to the library.

"Shut up, Troy!" Amanda snapped, hitting him across his stomach with her Gucci purse. Although more than half of the classes she was taking were AP, she was not planning of stealing another test.

"Ouch!" he said clutching his stomach. "You made your point. I'll leave." Once he left, she went over to who Troy was talking to.

"I apologize for him. My brother can be a bit much-" she started but stopped once she realized that Troy was trying to woo one of the most talked about girls at RHS. "I know who you are. Angela es Fresh, RHS's notorious man-eater."

"I've been called similar things, but never a man-eater," Angela responded, as Amanda took a seat next to her on the bench.

"I couldn't call you a slut or a whore, because if a guy does the same he's glorified and called a player." Amanda crossed her legs, placed her new Marc Jacobs tote bag on her lap, and glanced over to Angela. After all the rumors she heard about Angela she was finally meeting her. "How does it feel to be heard about before people even meet you?"

"They assume that every rumor they hear is the truth about me."

"I wish I could be like that. You know, they know who you are before they even meet you. *Famous*," Amanda added as her imagination ran wild. She was a junior, yet she was barely known at RHS. However, she was determined for that to change her junior year. All she needed was to get noticed. She felt her best bet was getting seen with someone people couldn't stop talking about.

"The gossips don't really bother me anymore. After all of these years, I got used to it and-"

"Gossip is just another way that people show how fascinated they are about your life," Amanda cut in thinking about how it would be if she was the girl that the students couldn't get enough of at RHS. "Amanda Elisabeth Prescott." Maybe it wasn't

bad having Troy at the same school as her. After all, he just gave her the perfect person to get status at their school. "Don't you think it's time you gave everybody who's ever started a nasty rumor about you a dose of their own medicine?"

"The last thing I need to worry about is revenge."

"Not revenge. Just rewarding those seniors that hate you with what they deserve."

"I can't."

"But--"

"I'm trying to stay out of trouble this year, especially now that my little sister goes here."

"Fine," Amanda replied knowing this wouldn't be the last time she would try to use Angela to get what she wanted.

Amanda dreadfully headed to her Algebra II class. To her disappointment, she had to spend another year with Ms. West as a math teacher. Ms. West was notorious for putting students to sleep with her monotonous voice.

Amanda sat a couple of seats away from the front row. If she was going to be in this class, she had to be far away so she could sleep without West knowing.

"Looks like we've got math together," Troy said, once he saw his sister. She turned to glare at her brother who was already seated towards the back of the classroom. She couldn't take her parents comparing her to Troy and now she had to go through the same thing at school.

"You got to be kidding me. Shouldn't you be in geometry?"

"Nope. I finished that over the summer. I know you don't want me in the same class. Have no fears though. I should be out of

Algebra II by the end of this semester," he replied, as he switched his seat to the one behind her.

"How are you going to do that? Daddy can't buy your way out of Algebra II."

"Daddy won't have to buy my way out of anything, Amanda. Unlike you, I plan on getting into an Ivy League on my

own merits."

"I plan on using my own merits too," Amanda snapped. "It takes more than academics to get into the top schools. I

play baseball, I'm gonna join mock trial, national honor society, beta club, and of course I've already got two hundred hours of volunteer hours. Is your resume that impressive?"

"Don't worry, Troy. My resume will be more impressive than yours. Got it!"

"Ms. Prescott," Ms. West began. "Class has begun. You and Mr....?"

"Prescott." He placed both of his hands on Amanda's shoulders. "She's my big sister." Ms. West looked down at the attendance chart to see if they really had the same last name.

"Well, Mr. and Ms. Prescott, it's good to know the two of you are siblings, however, I still expect the both of you to obey my rules."

"That won't be a problem, Ms. West. Right, Amanda?" Troy said with a wide smile as he gave her shoulders a squeeze.

"Right." Amanda responded. She pushed Troy's hands off of her. She had a feeling that she wasn't going to like having her younger brother in the same class as her.

Students energetically filled the lunch room gossiping about their summer and about times to come. Others showed off their new clothes and gadgets.

"Did you tell her?" Julia asked Keisha in a whisper before Mercedes came to their lunch table.

"I thought you was gonna tell her," Keisha replied. They both sat down and placed their tray of subs, French fries, and chocolate milk on top of the table.

"Tell me what?" Mercedes questioned, taking a seat by Julia.

"Um... you know how Keisha and I hung out with Amanda for most of the summer. Well, we kind of maybe might have--"

"Have what?" Mercedes said, having a feeling she wasn't

going to like what Julia had to say next.

"Girls," Amanda said. She approached their table with her tray of salad and a bottle of water.

"You guys invited *her*?" Mercedes furiously asked. It wasn't enough that Amanda went to Puerto Rico, but now her best friends were having lunch with her like they were longtime pals.

"I was trying to get there," Julia piped in.

"I thought the two of you were planning to talk to *her* about me sitting with you all before I came," Amanda said, glancing down at her silver Movado watch. "I waited an extra five minutes. Oh well, now *she* knows I'm here," Amanda added glaring at Mercedes as she dropped her tray down hard on the table.

"Ya'll better tell ya'll homegirl to fallback real quick before I pop off," Mercedes angrily told Julia and Keisha as her nose flared out in fury.

"Guys, relax," Keisha said knowing well that Mercedes was a hothead and Amanda had a way of getting underneath her skin. "I bet if the two of you spent a day together, you guys would get along."

"Yeah right," Mercedes sarcastically replied.

"Highly unlikely," Amanda responded, placing her hand on her hip.

"Okay! You guys don't like each other, but you guys still need to respect one another," Julia commented.

"You can sit down or leave, *Amanda*," Mercedes snapped.

"I will sit down, *Mercedes*. I'm just waiting for somebody.

Do you mind?" Amanda snapped back. Julia rolled her eyes as she drank out of her chocolate milk. This was going to be a long year. Amanda turned around and waved her hand to someone. "I hope you guys don't mind. I've invited Angela." Amanda grinned staring at Mercedes as Angela walked over to their table.

"Ay dios mios," Julia said. Keisha glanced at Mercedes waiting for her reaction knowing that Mercedes wasn't fond of her.

"Hey, Angela," Mercedes said to Angela.

"Hey," Angela replied as they smiled at each other. As

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Angela and Amanda sat down, the girls all looked around in confusion. Mercedes hadn't gotten around to telling her friends how she and Angela made amends.

"We've settled our differences," Mercedes informed the table. Julia and Keisha sighed in relief. All five of the juniors began to eat in silence. This was the first time they all hung at the same time.

"Just my luck," Troy began, walking over to the table. "I'm three for five of who I know here."

Amanda threw her fork down by her salad. "You should be in class, Troy! You have second lunch not third," Amanda said.

"I know. I needed a break from Everson so I took a bathroom break."

"Then why aren't you in the bathroom? If you get caught--"

"I won't. Unlike you, I don't get caught, Miss. *I-can't-successfully-steal-an-AP-test*," Troy bickered back.

"Troy, I swear--"

"Don't let her talk to you like that," Mercedes said to Troy.

"Excuse you," Amanda snapped to Mercedes. "Nobody asked for your input!"

Mercedes flipped her tray filled with food over and abruptly got up. "You tried me way too many times today," Mercedes began in anger. She took off her big hoop earrings and placed them on top of the table. "I swear I will beat your ass if you say one more slick thing to me." Amanda got up and took a small step back.

"You don't scare me," Amanda responded trying to sound as confident as she could. She was a bit intimidated by Mercedes and she was scared that Mercedes would actually hit her. The rest of the table got up, in hopes to calm the two girls down.

"No one's gonna beat no one's ass," Keisha said primarily to Mercedes.

"She's all talk. I'd like for her to do something," Amanda said. Mercedes shoved Amanda's tray off the table and started

coming towards her. She wanted to punch Amanda for the past year and now she couldn't resist the opportunity. Amanda took subtle steps away from Mercedes while Keisha quickly ran over and held Mercedes back.

"I won't do nothing?" Mercedes questioned as she tried to get away from Keisha's grip.

"No you won't." Amanda stood where she was now that she knew Keisha wouldn't let Mercedes hit her. Students began to look over at their table to see what was going on. Ms. West along with other teachers raced over to stop whatever was causing a commotion in the lunch room. Mercedes loosened Keisha's grip on her and ran full force towards Amanda.

Mercedes chased after a quick Amanda and grabbed her shoulders, pulling her down onto the ground.

Amanda pulled Mercedes's foot, bringing her down with her. Although Amanda was scared she refused to go out like a punk. Getting into a fight was the perfect way for people to start talking about her.

Amanda yanked Mercedes's wavy hair. Mercedes elbowed her back, causing her to loosen up her grip on her hair.

Mercedes swung her left fist across Amanda's right eye. "I won't do nothing?" Mercedes rhetorically yelled at a frightened Amanda who was still on the floor with her arms covering her bruised face.

"Calm down!" Troy exclaimed pulling Mercedes off of Amanda. He held her tightly so she couldn't go after her again. Julia and Angela helped Amanda to her feet. Amanda patted her hair down to make sure it wasn't sticking all over the place. She was sore from the fight, but she had to make sure she still looked good just in case any of the popular students were watching. She tried her hardest not to cry. "Family shouldn't be fighting like this!"

"She's not family!" Amanda snapped, wiping the blood coming out of her nose. She carefully touched her nose in hopes that it wasn't broken.

"Yes she is! She's our cousin," Troy revealed. Angela, Julia,

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and Keisha looked between Mercedes and Amanda, shocked that they were cousins.

"All of you, Barrington's office, now!" Ms. West yelled, referring to the principal of RHS.

"Who?"

"You, you," Ms. West replied pointing at Mercedes and Amanda.

"And you," she added pointing at Troy.

"Me? I was the one who broke up the fight," Troy said, letting go of Mercedes.

"You skipped class to come here," Ms. West accused.

"No I didn't."

"You're in enough trouble as it is. Do you want to keep lying to me?" Troy sighed and kept his mouth shut. "What didn't you guys understand when I said Barrington's office?" she asked as Amanda and Mercedes continued to glare at each other in disbelief about what Troy revealed to them.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Mateo asked Mercedes once he got home from work. Mercedes sat on the couch with her arms crossed as she listened to him tell her how disappointed he was in her. She bit her tongue, refusing to reply. "Right when I think you're getting better you go and get into a fight. On the first day too! I've had enough of your anger. Do you not remember what happened last year because of your temper? With Barbra and Stephanie? And what could've happened?" he added.

"Just say it out loud. I almost killed my baby sister. I'm a monster. I get it, Dad," Mercedes said, struggling to say the words out loud. She took a deep breath to keep from getting emotional. She gulped as a wave of guilt passed her by. If Stephanie hadn't survived she didn't know if she would ever be able to live with herself.

"You're not a monster," Mateo said in a much softer tone as he took a seat across from her on the opposite couch. "I worry about you, Mercedes. Just because you're under age doesn't mean you can't get arrested for being violent. Hell, people younger than

you have gotten locked up for fighting." "I get it."

"I don't think you do. One little stupid fight over something trivial can follow you for the rest of your life. You can forget about getting scholarships to colleges or getting a decent job with a criminal record. There are certain things I can't protect you from, Mercedes. You have to make a choice if putting your fists up are worth it. You know what? The more I think about it the more I feel that the best thing for you is boot camp because I don't know what else to do anymore."

Mercedes looked away from Mateo. Maybe he was right. She was tired of her anger leading her to hurt the people she loved the most. Even though she wasn't fond of Amanda she hated how it made her father feel about her. Like how he wished he had a better daughter, one whom he could be proud of.

"What's going on?" Barbra asked, coming inside from the front door with Stephanie in her arms. Though Mateo glanced at Mercedes waiting for her to tell Barbra the truth, Mercedes kept her eyes down. She couldn't look at her sister, knowing what she did to her the year before, especially now.

"Mercedes got into a fight at school."

"With who?" Barbra asked as she closed and locked the front door. She placed her purse down by the coffee table and handed a sleeping Stephanie to Mateo.

"Your niece. Amanda Prescott."

"Oh," Barbra answered, sitting down on the couch, next to Mercedes. "Well, what happened?" She glanced at Barbra, shocked that she had asked her what happened rather than scold her.

"We never got along. Last year, we both dated Julio and this past summer she went to Puerto Rico with my best friends. She's friends with them and now I find out that we're cousins through marriage."

"The both of you are cousins. She is Troy's older sister by a year. My sister and I finally sat down and talked to each other for the first time in years. We made a promise that we would never get

so angry that we would stop talking to each other again. And with that being said, I want you and Amanda to get along. Though the two of you are not blood related you both are still cousins."

"Don't worry. I'll do whatever I can to avoid her," Mercedes replied.

"No. You and her are going to get along."

"Of course that's important, but the most important thing is for Mercedes to go to boot camp. She needs help controlling her anger," Mateo announced.

"No, Mateo, that punishment is harsh. Mercedes isn't out of control--"

"Barbra, grounding her isn't going to help. It obviously hasn't worked in the past."

"No, listen. How about she and Amanda spend an entire day together?"

"No way!" Mercedes exclaimed, jumping up from the couch. She would rather go through any punishment than have to spend a whole day with Amanda. "Ground me for a month or boot camp is a way better idea than forcing me to spend time with *her!*" "You know what, I think Barbra is right," Mateo began, after seeing how upset Mercedes got. "You will still be grounded for 2 weeks, pero you and Amanda will spend an entire day with each other. By the end of the day you two better have respect for each other. If not, you can add boot camp to your list of punishment."

Before Amanda let Julio into her house, she placed her dark Versace sunglasses on. She wore a tan spaghetti strapped top with light 7 For All Mankind jeans and navy blue Jimmy Choo pumps. She led Julio up the spiral stairs to her bedroom. Once they got inside, she closed the door.

"I heard you got into a fight. Are you okay?" Julio asked sounding concerned.

"I'll survive." Amanda dramatically took a seat at the edge of her queen bed and crossed her legs. This was the first time Julio

had been inside her bedroom.

Amanda had pale pink and white walls. Her queen size bed was at the center of her room. In front of her bed was a flat screen TV with a case filled with classic movies next to it. She had a walk in closet that had her clothes, shoes, and accessories coordinated by color and season. The right side of her room led to a petite balcony that overlooked the pool area in the backyard.

"I'm gonna call Mercedes and tell her to leave you alone." Julio pulled out his cell phone from his case that was attached on his leather belt.

"Wait." Amanda extended her right leg over to Julio's chest, making sure her pump was touching his abdomen. "Wouldn't you rather be with me than call her? After all, my parents and brother aren't home." Her father was working on the murder trial while her mother was in Palm Springs with her friends.

He placed his phone down on her bureau. He slipped his hands on her leg and slowly moved them upwards. Though she enjoyed his touches, she was still in game mode. Before his hands could reach her thigh, she pulled her leg away and stood up. "You should make that call," she said handing him his cell.

"You tease," he replied refusing to take it.

"Am I?" She turned around and placed his phone back on top of the bureau. She hid her smile as she caught her reflection in the mirror. Even with her bruise she found herself to be attractive.

"You are. You gave it up to me how many times in P.R.?" he asked from behind, in her ear. "Five times. Six-?" She closed her eyes and inhaled his Perry Ellis cologne. Even though he wasn't touching her, she could still feel him.

"That was there. We're not on vacation anymore, Julio." She opened her eyes and moved away from him, keeping her back to him. She thought about their time spent on vacation. She did give it up to him many times there, but she also took pleasure in their dinner conversations where he listened to her tell him about all of her dreams and future goals. However, she couldn't let him know that.

"So if I asked you out to dinner you would say no?" "Why would you ask me? It's Mercedes you have drawn

on your wall. I'm sure she would love to have you as a boyfriend." Right before summer vacation began Amanda dumped Julio after seeing a drawing he made of Mercedes on his bedroom wall.

"I took the drawing down the second you left and if I wanted to be with Mercedes I'd be with her right now. But I'm right here with you, Amanda."

"Take me," she seductively said. She turned around, wrapped her arms around him, and kissed him. He picked her up and carried her over to the bed. After making out for a while, Julio took off her sunglasses.

"Mami," he began. He carefully touched the side of her black eye. "I can't."

"That's why I've got my shades on, hun." She placed her sunglasses back on and grabbed his American Eagle shirt collar, bringing him closer to her. He pulled away before she could kiss him.

"I can't. You're all bruised and sore." Julio sat up while Amanda rolled her eyes. "You poor thing. Let me give you a massage instead."

"Fine," Amanda reluctantly replied as she rolled over to her stomach. A couple of minutes passed by before they heard a knock on the door. "Who is it?"

"Aunt Babs."

"Coming!" Amanda jumped off her bed. She heard that her mother and aunt were now talking again, but she didn't expect a visit from her. "Hide," she hissed to Julio. Julio got on the floor and snuck underneath her bed. "Aunt Babs!" she exclaimed as she opened the door. They gave each other a hug before Barbra came inside her room.

"Look at my gorgeous niece. You've grown up so much," Barbra gushed.

"I know! But look at you! *You* are gorgeous. Thank goodness you got rid of those dreadful dreads and bad buzz cut."

"I had to get a buzz cut to get rid of the dreadlocks."

"It's good you did because your hair looks flawless," Amanda complimented as she touched her aunt's hair. "Whoever gave you a makeover did a fabulous job." She was impressed by her aunt's physical transformation.

"You sound just like your mother."

"If that's supposed to be a compliment I don't want it. It's not like she cares about me anyways."

"Sweetie, she does."

"That's why she's barely home." Amanda was constantly let down by her mother's lack of effort to spend time with her. "It's actually good that she isn't home. She doesn't have to know about the five day out of school suspension that I got. But I'm sure I didn't have to tell you that since it was your stepdaughter I got into a fight with," Amanda added, crossing her arms.

"We'll talk about that after that boy you have hiding in your room leaves."

"What boy?"

"It's amazing how you forget that I was once your age." "You heard her," Amanda said to Julio. Julio crawled out

from underneath the bed and grabbed his phone. He gave them an apologetic smile before he left.

"That's Julio, Mercedes's ex-boyfriend. No wonder the two of you are at odds with each other."

"Are you going to tell my parents?"

"They are away, so I won't tell them about you having a boy in your room or about the suspension."

"Thanks, Aunt Babs. It's good to know you're still cool."

"However, I don't want you having boys in your bedroom and I want you to resolve your issues with Mercedes."

"*She's* the one who attacked me."

"It takes two to fight. Refuse and I will tell your parents. I know how disappointed they'll be if they find out you might've screwed up you and your brother's chances of getting into an Ivy League school."

"You're blackmailing me."

"I am." Barbra pulled her Ray Ban shades over her eyes. "Your mother taught me well." Once Barbra left, Amanda smirked, impressed by her aunt's tactics.

As Julia played the guitar on the stage along with the worship team, she tried to meditate on the words that she was singing about her relationship with Jesus Christ. She couldn't. All she could think about was how Eddie wanted to be more intimate with her. She wanted to please him. However, she wasn't sure if she was ready to take that step. She wondered how long he would stay without her giving it up to him, especially since he was a division 1 athlete at a top college, and-

"Julia," the choir director said to her as she tapped her shoulders. "The song is over." Julia immediately stopped playing and singing a cover of Mary Mary's *Shackles (Praise You)*. She looked around and saw that many of the other members were walking off the stage. Her face turned red with embarrassment.

"Sorry," Julia apologized. She quickly got off the stage and went to go sit next to her mother and brother.

"Way to show off," Julio said once she sat down. "Whatever." After announcements were made, the pastor

began to preach. Julia took out her notebook and a pen to take notes. Once the pastor began, her mind was back on the dilemma she had with Eddie.

So what if she slept with him? They were in love and faithful to each other. But, what if he had an STD she didn't know about and she got it? Or what if something happened to the condom and she got pregnant? "Birth control," Julia mumbled answering her question.

"What?" her mother, Gloria, asked.

"No es nada," Julia quickly said sinking into her seat. Even if they did use a condom and she got on the pill she still wanted him to get tested. She knew he was not a virgin.

"Pay attention, Juliana," Gloria hissed to Julia as she

pinched her arm.

"I am!" She sat up and rubbed the arm her mother pinched. "...temptation comes from the devil, not from God," the pastor preached. "We must understand that being tempted is not sin. Temptation becomes sin when we give into it. With all that said, let me tell you, Christians are not immune to temptations. Can I get an amen?"

"Amen," the congregation responded. After church, Julia rushed outside to her Gloria's car so she could talk to Eddie in private. Listening to the pastor made her realize that it wasn't bad that she was tempted to compromise her promise with God. She just had to control her thoughts and stand firm to her beliefs.

"Hey, Eddie, it's Julia. I've made up my mind about us taking our relationship to the next level. I'm not ready- not until after I'm married. I made a promise to God that I intend to keep. Um...I love you and...yeah," she ended hanging up the phone. She was glad she got his voicemail. It was easier talking to a machine than him. She hoped he wouldn't bring it up again.

"Like I told you before, you don't have to keep giving me money," Angela's mother, Kim said accepting the one hundred dollars Angela gave her every two weeks.

"You say that yet you keep taking it," Angela responded as she continued to wash the dishes in the sink.

"I love money way too much to say no. Besides, this money is an investment."

"How is buying meth to snort an investment?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I don't use all the money you give me on my *habit*. If you haven't noticed I've been keeping up with my looks." Kim twirled around to show off her outfit. Angela had to admit that since Chuck came back Kim made an effort to look nice.

Kim wore makeup and she had her blonde hair in curls. She wore a tight blue blouse, short mini skirt, and wedge heels. "I use the money to buy hot clothes and little outfits that Chuck loves

when we're having hot, heavy--"

"I really don't wanna know," Angela cut her off. The thought of Kim and Chuck together was repulsive.

"Okay. The point I'm trying to make is the greater I am in bed with Chuck, the more money he gives me to pay the bills and do other things." Angela glanced down at the dishes wondering how long she could take them dating. Kim leaned close to Angela. "I know things are hard for you, but I'm doing what I can to keep things together." Angela didn't reply. Kim dating Chuck had been such a low blow to Angela. Kim knew that Chuck had raped her a couple of years ago, yet she was still willing to keep his company just because he gave her money. "Do you still have that knife I gave you?" Angela nodded her head. "Just use it if he tries to hurt you--"

"Honey, I'm home," Chuck announced coming inside the trailer. Angela rolled her eyes annoyed that she left the door unlocked for him. Kim rushed over to embrace Chuck. "You look hot, mama." Angela had to turn her head to keep from throwing up at the sight of them kissing. "Angela, cat got your tongue?"

"Say hi to him, Angela," Kim stated. Angela decided to not converse with him as she usually did whenever he came over.

"Ain't your parents ever tell you to respect your elders?" Chuck asked. Angela chose to ignore him. She began to dry the dishes instead. "Go to the car, Kim. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Chuck--"

"I said go to the car, woman!" Angela froze. She felt him staring her down. She held her breath in hopes that she would stay and not listen to him. However, Kim reluctantly walked out the door. Chuck went over to the door and locked it. Angela dropped the dish she had in her hand and ran for the exit. There was no way she was going to stay alone with him.

Chuck grabbed her body from behind and aggressively placed his hand over her mouth. She unsuccessfully tried to fight him off of her. He held his 5'11 body tightly against her slim frame making it hard for her to free herself. "It's about time we had a little chat." He moved his hand away from her. "Be a smart little girl and

don't scream. Or scream if you want. You know how much screaming *turns me on,*" he said before placing his mouth behind her ear.

Angela cringed, feeling his lips on her skin. She bit her tongue in hopes of not screaming. She knew better. Chuck pushed her blonde hair away from her neck and breathed heavily before sucking on the back of her neckline. "I miss you and your body." He ran his fingers through her hair. "And that long blonde hair of yours. It was the first thing I loved about you when I first met you." "I was seven," Angela finally said in a shaky voice.

"All innocent and pure. Now you're a woman," he replied in her ear. "Remember our little game *Don't Tell?*" She continued to wince as he grabbed her right upper thigh with his cold right hand. She tried to block the memory of the game she hated to play, as his hand continued to crawl upwards.

She subtly and slowly reached into her back pocket where she always kept her pocketknife. Right as her fingers touched the knife, Chuck snatched it from her, swiveled the blade out, and placed it by her neck. Angela tried not to panic more than she already was as she stared at the knife that was kissing her neck. "Why is it that every time we get close you push me away?" Chuck threw the knife across the room and let her go. Angela quickly moved away from him. "I came back for you, Angela! Not your mother. Can't you see that I love you?" he yelled at her, pulling his feathered brown hair away from his face.

"Well, I don't!" she screamed back. Chuck's face turned pale, as if she slapped him. She continued to back away from him as he took steps closer to her. She took one more step back and shoved one of the kitchen chairs in front of Chuck. As he stumbled over the chair, she raced for the door. Chuck got back to his feet and once again seized Angela. This time, he violently knocked her against the wall. Angela winced in pain from the brutal attack.

"I forgot how *rough* you like it!" He took a deep breath. "I try not to hurt the mother of my child, but damn you make it hard." Angela's heart jumped. "What? You can't possibly think I bought

that phony story about you having a still born. I know for a fact you had a baby boy about a year and a half ago."

"My baby died," she quietly told him, hoping he would believe her. Chuck backed away from her and viciously licked his upper teeth.

"Our baby didn't die. I got money and people in high places who informed me that you had our baby adopted." He glanced down at his nails. "Now I know that boyfriend Jesse of yours name is on the birth certificate even though he ain't the father." Angela kept her mouth shut. He was telling the truth. Her baby wasn't dead and he was the dad. "Sooner or later, I'm gonna find him and get back what's mine." She feared this day the most: the day Chuck found out they shared a child.

The front door opened and Kim walked in worriedly looking at the both of them in hopes that all the yelling she heard was just yelling and not Chuck sexually assaulting her daughter.

"I forgot something in my room," Kim said. "Come help me find it, Angela." Angela followed Kim to her bedroom, knowing it was a lame excuse for her to make sure things were okay.

"I'll wait for you in the car," Chuck said before going outside. As soon as Angela stepped inside the bedroom, Kim locked the door.

"Did he hurt you?" Kim asked in a low voice.

"If you're asking if he raped me again, the answer is no," Angela snapped.

"I know you're mad--"

"Of course I'm mad, *Mom!*" Angela cried out. "You know what he's capable of yet yo- you left me alone with him." Angela wiped the tears from her eyes as her mind raced trying to find a solution to her problems with Chuck. "I can- I can give you more money. I'll just ask my boss for more hours. And if he can't give me more hours I can get another job. I can do that."

"Angela," Kim said looking remorseful. "You don't have to do that--"

"Then what do you want me to do? If you want, I can quit

school again. I'll be eighteen in a few months and then I can really work full time. Please, I'll do anything so I don't have to see him again," she pleaded.

"Look, just give me a couple more months to save the money I get from him. I promise I'll leave him." Angela glared at her in bewilderment, realizing no matter how much money she brought to the table Kim was always going to want more. Angela shook her head, finding it harder to even look at her mother.

"Screw you," Angela said under her breath in anger.

"Angela, don't act like I don't care."

"You made your choice. Go get high off your meth and keep telling yourself that you're not sharing your bed with the devil."

Chapter 5

"...it's not me...it's you."

Mercedez and Amanda faked smiles as they posed for a photo at the basketball court. Immediately after Amanda took the picture with digital camera they repelled from each other. "Let's go," Amanda demanded, slipping her camera into her Puma tote bag. "We just got here," Mercedez replied.

"Your point? We can leave now and take all the pictures at the places we need to take them before evening. Then, we can go our separate ways and afterwards meet up with Aunt Babs."

"Barbra's gonna know if we do that."

"Don't sweat it. I've got more to lose if I don't do as Aunt Babs wants me to do than you, yet you're the one flipping out-" Barbra wanted each of the girls to spend a part of the day doing something the other girl enjoyed doing. After they were done she wanted them to tell her how their day was and say what they learned about each other. Playing basketball was Mercedez's choice.

"You're not the only one who's got something on the line. You know what? Forget about it!" Mercedez furiously dribbled the ball away from Amanda over to Barbra's Lexus that she let them borrow for the day.

"What could *you* possibly have on the line?" She followed Mercedez to the car. "Well?" Amanda jumped in front of Mercedez before she could open the door.

"They're gonna make me go to boot camp if we can't get along."

"Boot camp? You just got into one fight."

"It's not the first time my anger got the best of me." Mercedes wanted to change for the better. She was tired of hurting everyone close to her because of her inability to control her temper. She also hated how her dad felt like he couldn't help her anymore and her behavior was going to affect her future negatively. Mercedes gulped, not wanting to be the girl that everybody feared.

"Fine. We both have a reason to go through with this. So let's play ball." Mercedes walked side by side with Amanda in silence over to the court. Mercedes challenged a couple of men to a two on two game.

"Here, Mercedes, I'm open!" Amanda called out to Mercedes who was being guarded by one of the guys during the game. Mercedes ignored her until the other guy came to double team her. She passed the ball to Amanda. After holding up her hands up for a second to catch the ball, Amanda clenched her fists, protecting her nails as she ducked.

"What are you doing?" Mercedes asked.

"That ball could've broken my nails," she replied, glancing down at her nails to make sure they were okay. "I just got a French manicure." Mercedes rolled her eyes and ran over to get the ball that was out of bounds. Mercedes began to defend one of the guys while Amanda stood still with her hand on her hip.

"Can you please play some defense?" Mercedes asked Amanda, trying to sound as nice as she could. Though Mercedes knew Amanda was not an athlete, she expected her to at least try. Amanda grunted before going over to guard the other player. Amanda waved her arms madly in front of her opponent. Once the guy she defended got the ball, he slowly went to the hoop with Amanda following him and made the shot.

Mercedes lightly passed the ball to an open Amanda. She dribbled it twice before running while cradling it in her arms. As soon as she got close enough to the hoop, she threw it as high and

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far as she could. All four of them watched as the ball went up and over the backboard.

"Oops," Amanda said feeling a tad bit embarrassed. Basketball wasn't her thing.

As time passed by, Amanda tried to play to the best of her ability. Mercedes hit a couple of baskets to keep them in the game, but it wasn't enough to win. As the girls had the ball again, Mercedes handed Amanda the ball and told her to shoot. With nobody guarding her, Amanda carefully shot the basketball and made it. She jumped in the air. "I made it! In your faces!" she added to the opposing team.

"Good job," Mercedes said giving her a high five. Right after they lost twenty-one to ten, Mercedes and Amanda walked over to the Lexus.

"That was kind of fun," Amanda said, as they both got into the car.

"I haven't played throughout the summer. Just playing right now reminded me how much I missed basketball," Mercedes said, driving out of the parking lot.

"Then why don't you play for the school team?" Mercedes shrugged her shoulders and turned on the radio to Hot 97 before she pulled out of the parking lot. Hearing Tupac's "Brenda's Gotta Baby" play on the radio, Mercedes switched the station to Z 100, assuming Amanda wouldn't appreciate rap music, let alone one that was from the 90's. "Put it back. I love this song. I'm telling you, I can listen to him all day."

"What do you know about Tupac?" Mercedes asked, switching the station back.

"I didn't live under a rock. I know about the whole east coast west coast war. I was team east coast back in the 90's out of obligations of living in Jersey. It wasn't until a couple of years ago I actually listened to Tupac. The guy is a lyrical genius. His lyrics has a lot of meaning to it." Rather than respond, Mercedes let out a laugh, surprised that Amanda was into rap music. "What? I can get down," Amanda added doing a little dance before they both

giggled.

"Where to now?" Mercedes asked at the stop sign where the exit was to the park.

"To your home so I can shower and change. I have some clothes in my bag," Amanda responded, pointing to the backseat where her small Coach duffel bag was.

"You're ridiculous."

"You can't expect me to actually dress like this for the whole day." Amanda was dressed down to a white tank top, light blue Puma shorts along with light blue and tan Puma sneakers. "And besides, you need dress up to go where I'm taking you." Mercedes rolled her eyes and drove back to her empty house.

Mercedes went to get ready in her father's bathroom and let Amanda get ready in her bathroom. After taking a quick shower, Mercedes went to her bedroom and dressed in a black Dickies dress along with black and gold Nike Air Force 1 sneakers. She kept her dark wavy hair down and wore gold jewelry. She patiently waited a full half hour for Amanda. Not wanting to lose her patience, Mercedes picked up her Game Boy Advance held hand system and began to play Pokémon.

"I'm ready," Amanda announced at the entrance of Mercedes's bedroom. Seeing the cluttered mess, Amanda stuck up her nose. She didn't understand how anyone could live in such a messy room. Amanda leaped over a pile of dirty clothes on the floor.

"Give me a second," Mercedes replied, pressing on the buttons on her gaming system in attempts to capture a wild Pokémon. Amanda nodded her head. Though she thought Mercedes was being a complete nerd for playing video games, she didn't say anything. So far they seemed to be getting along and she didn't want them to take a step backwards.

The nightstand next to Mercedes's full sized bed caught Amanda's eye. Unlike the messy room, the nightstand was very neat. Other than the Bible, a rosary cross, and lamp, there was a

photo of a seven year old Mercedes and another woman holding her. Amanda reached over and picked up the picture frame.

“Is she your mom?” Mercedes looked up from her gaming system at Amanda holding a precious photograph of her and her mother. “Yeah.” “She’s pretty,” Amanda said as she continued to glance at it.

“Thanks,” Mercedes responded, not sure how to feel about having a conversation with Amanda about her family.

“What is she?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, is she mixed? Half black and half white?” “Yeah. She’s half German and half African American.” “What about you?”

“As you know, my mom’s mixed and my dad is Cuban,” Mercedes responded used to people questioning her ethnicity.

“I heard about your mom,” Amanda started, placing the picture frame back on the nightstand. “I’m really sorry,” she added, taking a seat on the bed, a couple of feet away from Mercedes. “It must be hard not having her around.”

“It is,” Mercedes started, pressing pause. “She’s alive, but she’s got a tube down her throat, a machine breathing for her, and wires everywhere...It gets hard sometimes having to see her like that. Like she’s helpless and I can’t do anything to make her better...I still try to visit her as much as I can though. But I can’t as much with school in session. Thankfully she still has brain activity,” Mercedes added, putting her gaming system down on her bed. “I pray to God every night for her to wake up,” Mercedes said in a shaky voice as she glanced over at her rosary. Though Mercedes wasn’t a devout Catholic, she believed in God and believed in prayer.

“I’m sure God has a plan,” Amanda said. Amanda didn’t always go to church on Sundays, but she had faith in God and prayed every once in a while.

“So,” Mercedes started, getting up from the bed, not

wanting to make the day about her. "What's next?" "To the hospital."

"I thought we was gonna catch the train to see Chicago in The City," Mercedes said, referring to New York City as The City.

"We can do that any day. Visiting your mom take's precedence," Amanda replied offering her a smile.

"Thanks," Mercedes responded with a grin.

Angela glanced at the mirror in one of the bathrooms at school before homeroom. As she touched her hair, she wondered if the new hair dye fit her face. She already heard people gossip about why she dyed her hair, but she didn't care.

She turned away from the mirror when she heard the door open. It was Christy. "Hey," Angela said.

"You just couldn't help yourself, could you? It's not enough that I can't walk down the hallways without someone staring and talking about me 'cause you're my sister, but now you had to dye your hair to steal my look," Christy replied in anger. Christy was about the same height as Angela, but skinner than her. She had the same eye color as Angela and had medium length brunette hair. Angela new hair was a couple of shades darker than Christy's.

"That's not why I dyed my hair, Christy." The reason behind her change of hair color was because of Chuck. She couldn't look or feel her blonde hair without thinking about Chuck and how it was the first thing he supposedly loved about her.

"Yeah, right. You just hate not being the center of attention at home and now here at school. I'm over being in your shadow." Angela sighed, trying to calm her sister down. The last thing she wanted was for Christy to reap the negativity that she sowed from years of bad choices.

"You don't have to be in my shadow."

"As if I had a choice not to be! Half of the teachers hate me 'cause they think I'm gonna screw up like you did. Oh, and did you know that before I even said a word, Ms. West yelled at me saying how she wasn't gonna tolerate any nonsense from me after she saw

I had the same last name as you." Christy folded her arms as she looked at Angela with a crossed look on her face.

"I'm sorry," Angela apologized. She was used to people gossiping about her, but she hadn't thought about how the constant rumors might affect her younger sister who only had a couple of weeks of high school experience.

"I'm sure you are," Christy sarcastically replied before leaving.

Amanda bumped into Christy on her way inside the bathroom.

"What's her deal?" Amanda asked giving Christy a dirty look.

"She's my younger sister. That's her deal with me."

"Younger siblings, I tell you," Amanda responded shaking her

head. Amanda went to the bathroom after she finished convincing her last teacher to let her make up the work she missed from suspension. She had to do some begging, but it was worth it and every grade counted. "Anyways, your hair! I didn't believe it when people said you're now a brunette." Amanda glanced at the final product. The blonde hair suited her more. However, she could still pull off the brunette look.

Once again the door opened. The two popular varsity cheerleaders, Gina and Jackie walked inside and headed straight for the mirrors.

"The garbage man obviously forgot to pick up *this* trailer park trash this morning," Jackie said to Angela right before she and Gina snickered. They both dropped their purses on the countertop before digging into them for their makeup.

Amanda watched in disbelief as Angela didn't say anything to them. How could she not defend herself? "Don't worry though, whore, I'll remind the janitor to pick up the trash he left in the bathroom." As Angela made her way to leave, Amanda spoke up.

"The only trash I see is the two of you," Amanda snapped to Jackie and Gina. They unpleasantly turned to Amanda. Amanda knew they were popular and had a much better reputation than Angela. However, she was not going to let them insult Angela.

"Who the hell are you to talk to us like that?" Jackie questioned with her hand on her hip.

"Don't worry about who I am. You should be more concerned about making sure your boyfriend doesn't find out you're cheating on him, Jackie. Oh and, Gina, that guy Jackie's cheating on her boyfriend with, is your ex-boyfriend Adam." Gina's mouth fell a little bit as she shot Jackie a look.

"Gina, she's lying," Jackie tried to reassure her best friend. "She's not the only one who said that, Jackie," Gina retorted. "So what if I did. You and Adam broke up a long time ago." "You don't hook up with your best friend's ex!" Gina exclaimed in anger. "Girl code!"

"Gosh, we would love to sit here and help you two sort out this problem, but we've got more important things to do," Amanda said smirking. She and Angela walked out of the bathroom. Angela had to hand it to Amanda. She had great comebacks. Jackie soon followed them.

"You are not going to get away with this," Jackie warned them. "Especially you, Angela."

"You've been talking foul about me for years now. Do you really think it fazes me anymore?"

"Okay, okay, Ma. We got it," Julia told Gloria.

"Are you sure? Where's the map?"

"Here," Julio replied, showing her the Google map directions from Roctown to Penn State. Even though they were being chauffeured to Pennsylvania, Gloria insisted that they take a map.

"And where are you going to be sleeping on Friday and Saturday night?" Gloria questioned, as she continued to pack them several empanadas in a large Ziploc bag.

"I'll be sharing a hotel with Amanda and--"

"I'll be sleeping with Amanda...Just kidding," Julio replied with a smirk as he grabbed one of the empanadas.

"You are to sleep in Eddie's dorm!" Gloria practically yelled, yanking the empanada out of Julio's hand before he had a chance to take a bite.

"Hey! I was gonna eat that!"

"I'm serious, Julio, no hanky panky. You too, Juliana. I'm too young to be a grandmother." Julia nodded her head, knowing that she wasn't planning to sleep with Eddie.

"We know, Mama. Relax. We're only going away for the weekend. If you're so worried now, how'd you manage when Julia and I were in Puerto Rico for most of the summer?"

"I knew you two were going to your father's house and besides I visited your abuela and tía in the Bronx whenever I was not at work," Gloria replied. After hearing the car honk outside the house, Julia rushed to look outside of the window. As she suspected, it was Amanda's chauffeur ready to take them to Penn State.

"Well, Ma, we gotta go," Julia replied, going back into the kitchen.

"Take care of each other," Gloria said, embracing both of her children at the same time. "I love you both."

"Love you too," Julio and Julia said simultaneously. Both siblings grabbed their luggage and headed over to the car.

"Are you two ready for our first college experience?" Amanda asked, as Julio sat beside her and placed his arm around her shoulders.

"Are you?" Julio asked, before kissing her. Julia rolled her eyes. She had a feeling that they would be flirting all the way to Penn State. She was happy for the both of them, however, she didn't want to be the third wheel. Julia grabbed her iPod from her purse and tucked her earphones into her ears. She closed her eyes as she let Nina Simone play "I Put a Spell on You".

"So, my mom is up my butt about us not fooling around," Julio said, shifting his arms down to her waist. "But I don't care. I want youuuu," he whispered into her ear. Amanda giggled as she playfully pushed him away.

"Maybe your mom is right. At least not in the car ride since Julia's here."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Julio asked in a sigh.

"Talk." Julio sighed again, letting go of Amanda completely. Amanda crossed her arms while she glared at Julio. Was that all she was to him? A bed buddy?

"Why are you mad?"

"Because I came on this trip to spend time with you. I didn't come to sleep with you--"

"Is that all you think you are to me?"

"I don't know. Lately we barely talk. All we ever do is *you know*--"

"*I know*," he replied with a big smile. Amanda shot him a dirty look as she flipped her blonde hair over her shoulders. "I'm joking! And I'm sorry. Really, mami, I don't want you to think that's all I care about. I care about you as a person too," he added, taking her hand. "So, what do you like to do for fun?"

"You know what I like to do for fun. Shopping, spending time with you--"

"But not spending time with your family." Amanda rolled her eyes as she let go of Julio's hand. "I just don't get how you aren't close with them. My familia means everything to me."

"You don't get it, Julio. It's not like I don't want to be close with my family. You and Julia are so lucky. I would love if my mom cared enough to spend time with me like your mom does with you two. Or if my dad told me he was proud of me rather than belittle me and tell me how much better my brother is than me. Do know how much pressure I'm under to not screw up? Because if I do as my father puts it, I'll disgrace the family's name."

"I'm sorry," Julio said. "I didn't know that was how you were feeling--"

"How I *am* feeling. How I've always felt since I was a kid," Amanda corrected. She took a deep breath. She felt somewhat relieved that she was able to confide in Julio about the issue that bothered her the most.

"I would hate to be under that much pressure. I don't know how you do it. But I'm here, Amanda. I wanna be the guy you go to

when you wanna talk.”

“Thanks,” Amanda mumbled, leaning her body against his. “Even though I plan to go to Princeton, I’ll still want to date you. We can visit each other when we don’t have classes. Or you could apply to Princeton,” she suggested, looking up at Julio.

Okay, she knew he wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box, but he was talented. He was on the varsity soccer team at RHS...Then again he wasn't the best at soccer. But there were his paintings! His beautiful paintings. “I can’t get in. I’m not smart like you. Even if I was, I don’t even know if I wanna go to college.”

“What do you mean? I can’t date a guy who doesn’t go to college. My family would disown me!”

“Who cares about what they think! Are you dating them or me? You know what, let’s just drop the whole college talk.”

“Fine.”

“Yay, Eddie!!!” Julia screamed from the bleachers, as she watched Eddie run with the football to the end zone on the jumbotron. Though she didn’t quite understand football, she was there to support her man.

As soon as Penn State beat Minnesota, Julia, Julio, and Amanda rushed out of the stadium. As Amanda stepped aside from them to call a taxi, Julia pulled her brother over to the side.

“You and Amanda okay? I heard you guys arguing in the car.”

“I donno,” Julio started, as he tugged his Penn State jersey down. “At times, I don’t even know why we’re together. I care about her, but sometimes it feels like we’re not even on the same page. I thought this time us being together was supposed to be fun. No strings attached. But she wants us to be in a relationship. Then there’s the future. She’s all about going to college, which is great and all, but she’s judging me ‘cause I don’t think I wanna go-”

“Why wouldn’t you go to college, Julio?” Julia asked. She knew Julio didn’t get the best grades, but this was news to her. She

always thought he was planning to go.

"I don't wanna go 'cause I already know what I wanna do with my life. Paint. College is for people who don't know what they wanna do for a living or for those who have to go to college in order to pursue their careers. Then there's the people who go 'cause that's what others are expecting from them."

"College is so much more than that. You'll be able to learn things you never thought you would learn--"

"Maybe. I don't even understand why you're gonna go. Don't you know that you wanna be a musician? It's not like Papa can't hook you up with a music producer--"

"I do want to be a musician and I know that Papa would help me out, but I want to go to college. I wanna experience this life. Maybe it won't be for me. But maybe it will. I'll never know unless I try. And neither will you."

"I guess you have a point," Julio said right as Amanda came back to them.

"Let's go party!" she exclaimed throwing her hands in the air. They smiled at each other as they made their way to the apartment.

They walked together in the apartment, filled with college students. There were several athletes, mostly football players and cheerleaders among other people dancing, talking, or engaging in an intense game of beer pong.

"Do I look at least 18?" Julia asked Amanda, who tried to help her look a little older. Julia rocked a Nittany Lions female jersey with Eddie's number along with black cargo pants and dark brown combat boots. To appear more mature, she wore a darker coat of makeup and had her curly hair gelled up in a bun.

"Yeah. Go have fun with your man," she said, as Eddie came over to them. They all greeted each other before Julio and Amanda made their way to the floor to dance to Daddy Yankee's new hit song.

"Pookie, you were so good," Julia said, before kissing him. "Thanks," he replied, leaning down a bit to hug her. "So

you were actually watching me and not studying?"

"Yes, baby, I was watching you. I finished all of my homework just so I wouldn't even be tempted during the game."

"By the way, boo, you look good!" he said, spinning her around. "I especially like the jersey," he said grinning. She smiled back happy that he found her attractive despite the fact she gained a couple more pounds since last they saw each other. She was thankful that her jersey hid her midsection and didn't show her round tummy.

"Well, you don't look too bad yourself," she responded, checking her boyfriend out. He had his curly black hair tucked underneath a fitted navy blue Penn State hat. He wore a plain grey t-shirt, jeans, and tan Timberlands. "I missed you so much. Don't be surprised if I transfer to some high school near-by here," she added, placing her head against his chest. Maybe then he wouldn't be so tempted if she was in the same town. She noticed that there were many pretty girls at the party who looked more mature, more experienced, and slimmer than her.

"We'll figure something out," he chuckled, resting his head on top of her head, as she wrapped her arms around his waist. "When football season is over, I'll be able to see you more. And I don't have classes on Fridays so we can spend more time with each other. Besides, if you had a problem with me going to Penn State and moving far away, why didn't you say something?"

"I know that playing for Penn State was your choice. I could have been selfish and opposed your choice, but I didn't. I love you and I'm here to support you. I want you to follow your dreams. And if that means we have to cut our time with each other then..." Julia hated that Eddie lived so far away, but she was not going to stand in between him and his dream. She didn't want him resenting her and she expected the same from Eddie, if ever she decided to move to pursue her career in music.

"Eddie Webb, come here Mr. 2 Touchdowns!" a girl squealed, approaching him. She held onto her red cup as checked him out. Julia held onto Eddie tighter, after realizing who it was. It

was Eddie's ex, Silesia. Eddie let go of Julia.

"Silesia, you remember my girl Julia, right?" he asked. "Yeah, the girl who dated that Indian guy," she replied,

sizing Julia up. Julia grabbed Eddie's hand, feeling a bit insecure by Eddie's pretty and thinner ex. She had on a tight white and navy blue stripped tube top along with skinny jeans and leather boots. She had her long black hair down against her brown skin.

"Now I'm with Eddie. I didn't know you came here," Julia finally said. Silesia drank out of her cup as she offered Eddie a tipsy smile.

"I do. And I'm a cheerleader. Isn't that right, Eddie?" she asked, winking at him.

"Yeah. And she's dating the quarterback," Eddie responded, ignoring her wink.

"Not cliché at all," Julia mumbled under her breath. Why were they still talking to her? As far as she was concerned, they had nothing else to talk to her about.

"I never understood why we broke up, Eddie. I guess she's giving you something I could never give you. I gave it up to him two weeks after we started dating," Silesia continued. Julia blushed, feeling her hands get sweaty. She couldn't believe this chick was going on about what used to be. She was with Eddie now and Silesia just needed to deal with it.

"You're right. Julia gives me something you couldn't. She makes me happy and what we got is more than whatever we had going on between us," Eddie replied, placing his arms around Julia's shoulders. "So if you'll excuse us," he added. "Let's get out of here." Julia let Eddie lead her outside.

They walked a couple of blocks back to the campus before they finally reached his dorm. Once they got in, Julia glanced around the double room. On Eddie's side, he had a couple of football posters up of the Patriots, the Jets, and of Penn State's football team.

Julia sat down on Eddie's bed and reached over to the picture frame she noticed by his bedside. It was a photo of the two

of them together at Eddie's high school graduation. In it, Eddie was carrying Julia while in his cap and gown. They were smiling at one another, not realizing that their picture was being taken.

"I remember this day. Everything was so simple. Not complicated," she added, recalling when they lived in the same town and the pressure of taking their relationship to the next level wasn't so huge.

"You feel things are complicated between us?" "Sometimes," Julia admitted, placing the frame back on the bedside. "I just wish we could go back to these days," she added, looking up at Eddie.

"Me too," Eddie responded, taking a seat next to her. Julia's eyes shot open as she noticed that they were sitting right next to each other. Both of their bodies were touching. Julia stood up as her mind raced. The last thing she needed was to be tempted.

"I'm sorry," Eddie started, also standing up. "I didn't mean for you to feel like I was pressuring you."

"You're not. Pookie, you've been nothing but good to me, and so patient. I'm just being stupid. I know nothing is gonna happen," she added, trying to convince herself. Her hands continued to sweat as she tried not to think about taking that next step and how she kind of wanted to. Would that make her and Eddie closer than ever? Would that keep the girls away from him? Would it make their relationship less complicated? Would it-

"Baby, you okay?" he asked, taking her arm. He went over to his mini refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water.

"Thanks," she said taking the bottle. She chugged the beverage, feeling awkward. Eddie probably thought she was crazy for acting weird.

"Slow down, Julia. I got more water if you need it. We ain't in a drought," he joked as he smiled. Julia smiled back as she laughed. This was Eddie. Her Eddie. If she didn't want things to feel different between them then she had to act normal. Whatever that meant.

"Before I forget, my ma made you some ground beef filled

empanadas," Julia said, grabbing the Ziploc bag from her purse. "Tell your mom I said good looks. She's not trying to poison me, right?" Eddie questioned.

"No. Eddie, she knows what she thought happened last year was a misunderstanding," Julia responded. The previous year, Gloria walked into the bedroom and found Julia innocently kissing Eddie on the floor. She mistakenly thought that they had done the deed. "Now open up," she demanded, shoving the empanada into Eddie's mouth before he had a chance to decline. They both giggled as she pushed too much into his mouth.

"I see it's you who's trying to kill me," he joked with his mouth full.

"Maybe," Julia teased smirking, wrapping her arms around Eddie. "That's if you ever fall out of love with me," she added.

"Never," he responded, kissing her.

Julia sat at her desk in her bedroom as she looked through her physics textbook to find the equation for the speed of light. She was working on a worksheet that was due in a couple of days. She preferred getting her schoolwork done way before the deadline. She hated procrastinating.

Once she finally found the equation, the doorbell rang. After glancing out the window and seeing that it was Carlo at the door, Julia rushed down the stairs. She gave him a hug. It had been since August since she last saw him and it was now the beginning of October. Though she hadn't seen him in months, the time span between them seeing each other was less than what it had been in the past, when she and her brother would go years without seeing him.

"Papa," she said.

"It's good to see you, Juliana," Carlo responded.

"I didn't know you was coming."

"I told your mother not to say anything." He stepped inside the home of his estranged wife and kids. He glanced over at Julia's stomach and raised his eyebrows. She blushed as she covered her

abdomen. "I thought your chunkiness was just a phase. Are you planning to lose any weight? You know your Abuela Carlotta had diabetes because she was big. Don't let it get to that point, Juliana."

"Hola, Papa," Julio replied flying down the stairs to greet Carlo. "Surprised to see you, man. I saw your car outside. It's pretty cool." Julia sighed in relief that he wasn't continuing to grill her for her appearance. She pushed her feelings of embarrassment away not wanting to think about how she continued to eat rich foods. She planned to exercise more but never made a real effort to.

"You get cool things when you work hard. The two of you can drive it while I'm town."

"You mean me. Juliana refuses to learn how to drive-" "Shut up, Julio," Julia snapped.

"What do you mean she doesn't know how to drive?" Carlo asked.

"Who is that?" Gloria asked from the kitchen. Julia was happy that her mom interrupted a potential lecture from him about facing her fear of driving.

"It's me," Carlo responded. Gloria came into the living room where they were in her apron and oven mitts. Carlo gave her a polite kiss on her cheek. "The food smells good, Gloria." Gloria had her dark brown hair down in a low ponytail. She shared the same skin complexion as her children. She was on the lower end of the plus size body type.

"Thanks. The food's ready. Let's go eat," Gloria told her family. They all sat down at the dinner table. Gloria made an effort to share meals with her two children, but it was rare that they all ate together with Carlo.

As they ate chicken wings, avocados, rice and beans, Julia waited for her brother to finish rambling on about his new art work so she could ask her dad how his album was going and if the song they made together would make it on there. She limited the amount of rice and beans she ate just so Carlo wouldn't make another comment about her weight.

"...you gotta come see the new art gallery at our school," Julio said with his mouth full of chicken. "I got like three painting's there."

"Good job, son. You and your sister make me so proud. You with your art and Juliana with her music. I admire how the two of you work hard at getting better at the gifts God gave you," Carlo told them, pouring a cup of rum in his glass.

"It's good that you two are passionate about what you do, but I want you guys to put school before your talents," Gloria warned.

"Don't kill their dreams, Gloria."

"I am not, Carlo. I'm very supportive of what they do. That's why unlike you, I'm always there to support them," Gloria snapped glaring at her husband.

"That's all going to change. As you all know, I'm working on an American album and I need to move to America so this can work."

"Papa, are you gonna move in with us?" Julia asked in excitement. The last time Carlo lived with them had been when Julia and Julio were nine years old in the Bronx.

"No," Gloria quickly answered. She carefully cut the chicken off the bone with her fork and knife.

"Why aren't you gonna let Papa live with us?" Julia stopped eating her avocado to hear Gloria's response.

"Because," she replied as she continued to eat.

"Why, Ma? He wants to live with us and your just gonna push him away?" Julia asked. *Because* wasn't a good enough answer for her.

"All this time I thought it was Papa who didn't want to be with us. Now I know he's not with us because of you," Julio said in fury to Gloria.

"That's enough!" Carlo exclaimed. "You can't talk to your Mama like that."

"Then why doesn't she want you living with us?" Julia asked.

"Tell them, Carlo. We can't keep beating around the bush." She stopped eating and placed her clean napkin on her lap. Julia waited in anticipation to hear what he would say next.

"Later," he said to Gloria. "Juliana, I've got good news. The record company loves the song we did. I'm almost positive it's going to make the final cut."

"I'm excited!" Julia squealed. She waited for this moment for a long time. Hopefully she would soon hear her song play on the radio.

"Your father and I are getting a divorce," Gloria stated, obviously unable to keep it from her children. The room fell silent. Everybody stopped eating. Carlo glanced away from the table as he downed the rest of the rum that was in his glass.

"Who asked for the divorce?" Julio said breaking the silence.

"It was a mutual decision," Gloria responded.

"So, one of you guys just called the other and said *oh I think we should get a divorce* and the other said, *you're right I was just about to call you about getting a divorce*," Julio said upsettingly.

"It wasn't like that, baby," Gloria said placing her hand on Julio's arm. "We didn't just jump and say we're going to get a divorce. We've been legally separated for over six months."

"Why didn't you guys say anything to us?" Julia asked looking at Carlo who kept quiet. It now made sense why he came to town. He always seemed to have an ulterior motive for visiting them.

"We didn't want you two worrying. We love the both of you and-

"

"Maybe Mama loves us, but not you. I gotta get out of here," Julio said abruptly getting up from the table.

"Julio, sit down," Carlo started. Julio ignored him and continued to make his way out of the house. "I said sit down!" Carlo said louder. Julio went over to the table and jumped in front of Carlo.

"You can't tell me what to do!" Julio yelled in his father's

face. Carlo quickly got up. Gloria stood up and pulled Julio away before things escalated.

"Don't talk to me like that!" Carlo yelled back. Julio clenched his fist.

"No!" Julio turned around and punched the wall. "You lost the right to tell me or Juliana what to do when you walked out on us years ago."

"Julio!" Gloria said in astonishment. She took his hand to see if it was bleeding. He pulled away.

"Just let me go," he said to Gloria before leaving the house. Julia sat down trying to process everything that just happened. She had never seen Julio or Carlo get so angry, especially at each other.

"Damn it!" Carlo exclaimed. Julia jumped after he slammed his fist against the table.

"Cálmate," Gloria said placing her hands on his shoulders. "How can I when he just...I told you later! If you listened to me--"

"Do not try to spin this on me! Your inability to honor our wedding vows is the reason we are in this mess!" Gloria exclaimed backing away from him.

Julia upsettingly got up from the table as they continued to argue. She no longer had a reason to stay. She needed to get away. As her parents carried on, Julia made her way to her best friend's house.

It was about twenty minutes on foot between their homes. Once she got to there, she rang the doorbell. "Sorry, I didn't call before coming," Julia said once Mercedes opened the door.

"It doesn't matter, Julz," Mercedes responded. Julia followed Mercedes inside, over to the couch.

Mercedes picked up her bowl of Lucky Charms that she had on the coffee table and took another spoonful from her cereal. "Am I glad to see you! I was working on this quadratic mess, and I don't get how to do it, especially with the calculator. I try to pay attention in class, but you know how West's ass is always putting us to sleep in Algebra II. Can you help me?"

Julia was exceptionally book smart. She was the one who helped her friends with schoolwork. They both sat down while Mercedes continued to eat.

"Yeah. Show me what you need help with." Julia looked at the couch next to the coffee table that had Mercedes's homework sprawled all over it. Julia looked at the piled up clutter of papers. It was typical of Mercedes to make a mess. People usually ended up cleaning up after her.

"It was here a minute ago..." She placed her bowl down and pushed a couple of packets and notes off the table. "Here!" Mercedes said with the packet in her hand. "But, before you help me with this, tell me what's wrong."

"It's nothing important," Julia responded. Her reason for going over to Mercedes's house was to forget her problems at home. She didn't think she could tell Mercedes without breaking down.

"If it wasn't important, you wouldn't be here."

"Are you saying I don't come over to hang out with you?" "Nah. It's just you got that *I'm about to cry* look on your face.

You know, when your eyes get super huge and you frown." Julia's eyes got a bit wider. It always widened right before she was about to cry. Julia shrugged her shoulders. She felt her throat get heavy. She began to frown. "If you wanna talk about it, I'm here to listen." Mercedes said with much concern.

"My par- parents are getting a divorce," Julia cried out.

"Oh, Julia," Mercedes said placing her hand on her back.

Mercedes wasn't shocked at all. After all, Carlo was a famous good looking guy living in a different country than his wife. Mercedes wouldn't have been surprised if Carlo had been unfaithful to Gloria.

"I know they haven't lived with each other for years, but I thought that they would once he came back to live in America." Her hopes of having her entire family living under one roof were crushed. "Yeah they argue a lot, but they still love each other."

"Julz... they might not love each other anymore, but they still love you and Julio."

"Then why are they doing this to us? No es justo."

"Tu tienes razón. No es justo, pero you're gonna get through this." Hearing her phone ring, Julia pulled it out of her pocket. After seeing it was her mother, she didn't answer. Her phone rang again. This time it was her father. "I can't talk to them," she said placing her phone down on the coffee table. What was she to say to the two people who just couldn't try to make a marriage work in order to keep a family together? Mercedes put her arms around Julia as she softly cried.

Amanda carefully and swiftly solved all of the problems in one of the practice test in the SAT II practice booklet. As she worked on the math section, she would occasionally look at her stopwatch to make sure she was on time. She planned to take the SAT later that year. Along with the tutor her father hired for her, she also took time to practice for the test after she was finished working on her homework. At first she didn't want a tutor. However that changed after she got straight A's the year before with the help of one.

"Ms. Prescott," Isabel, the family's housekeeper said through the intercom in a thick Spanish accent. Charles had an intercom system installed in the entire house to communicate with each other. "You have a visitor."

"Ugh! Right when I'm practicing for the most important test, somebody wants to visit me," Amanda complained. She stopped her timer and closed the SAT book. This was one test she wouldn't dare try to cheat on. Everything about this had to be done by the book.

Amanda went by her door to where the intercom was. She pressed and held the button to talk. "Tell whoever it is I'm busy. Get their name so I can call them later," Amanda said through the intercom. She let go of the button and waited a few seconds to get a response.

Even after her SAT II practice, she still had to finish her AP physics homework. She was already a little behind due to the many clubs she was in. That afternoon, she had a national honor society

gathering right before her beta club meeting. She had to stay a little longer for those meetings since she was the vice president of the national honor society and treasure of beta club. Besides those clubs, she was also involved in junior class and student government. Her schedule was hectic, but she knew it had to be that way in order to get into the school of her dreams.

"Yes, Ms. Prescott. I'll tell Mr. Rodriguez." Amanda quickly pressed the button.

"Actually, tell him to come up. I've been meaning to take a break." Amanda went over to her vanity. She grabbed her MAC makeup and quickly applied mascara, blush, and lipstick. She snatched her perfume and dabbed it on her.

By the time she finished brushing her hair, she heard a knock on the door. As soon as she opened it, Julio grabbed her face and kissed her hard. She kissed him back, surprised by his intensity. He stopped kissing her and took her hands.

"I'm done playing games. I wanna be with you, Amanda," he said looking right into her eyes.

"Are you admitting defeat?" She wanted to believe him, but she was on guard. He let go of her hands.

"I'm serious." He took a seat on her bed and placed his hands over his head. She sat next to him, sensing that something was off.

"Baby, what's wrong?" she gently asked. He shrugged his shoulders. "It's okay. You can tell me."

He rested his head against her shoulder. "I don't wanna talk about it," he softly said. She placed her arm around him and caressed his back. She hoped that whatever happened to him wasn't too bad.

"Okay. I'll be here to listen when you're ready to talk." Following his wishes were more important than her curiosity at the moment.

Once Mercedes finally got Julia to fall asleep, she placed her head on her pillow. Julia took Mercedes's offer of sleeping over

her house instead of going home for the night. Julia slept on the other side of Mercedes's bed. Mercedes looked at the back of Julia's head full of crazy curls. It took her hours to get Julia to finally fall asleep. Her best friend was a mess. Before going to bed, Julia cried and overanalyzed everything her parents did that might have contributed to the divorce such as, *maybe if my dad never left us or my ma should have moved the family to Puerto Rico to be with my dad.*

Mercedes shifted her body to where her nightstand was. Though the lights were off, she could still see the picture of her mother and her in the picture frame. She sadly glanced at the photo as she replayed the memory of the picture in her head. It was an old picture of her and a seven-year-old Mercedes. That day, she helped her face her fears of riding the Ferris wheel.

She closed her eyes to dream. Only there she wasn't in a coma, but up and lively. She loved going to sleep just to hear her mother's voice. After her accident she had nightmares about her. Now her dreams of her were sweet. She slept for a while.

"...Daddy, I understand....I am listening!" a voice like Barbra said loudly. "We had a deal!"

"Did you hear that?" Julia asked in a sleepy voice. "Yeah," Mercedes replied. So she wasn't dreaming. She

opened her eyes and looked over at the digital clock on her nightstand.

"I told you, we do nothing until the chances of her surviving are greater than the chances of her not!" Barbra continued.

"She's mad loud. I need to get some sleep." It was already three in the morning and they had to be up by six to go to school.

"She'll definitely go somewhere else if you ask her," Julia responded. Mercedes took a deep breath before getting up from her bed. She opened the door and saw Barbra talking on her cell phone by the stairs. A startled Barbra turned to Mercedes and placed her hand over the phone so her father on the other line wouldn't hear.

"Did I wake you and Julia up?" Mercedes nodded her head. "Sweetie, I'm sorry. I'll take this phone call somewhere else."

Barbra went downstairs while Mercedes went back inside her bedroom. Mercedes heard the front door of the house open and close.

"Must be something serious," Mercedes said getting back in her bed.

"Yeah..." Julia mumbled, half asleep.

"What'd she mean by *do nothing until the chances of her surviving are greater?*" Mercedes wondered why Barbra seemed so caught off guard and secretive.

"Yo no sé. She's probably..." Julia began but stopped as her sleep got the best of her. Mercedes rolled over to her back and stared at her ceiling knowing it would be hard for her to fall back asleep. Now it was her time to overanalyze things. Mercedes pondered what Barbra's secret could possibly be.

Chapter 6

"...Warm hands, cold heart."

"So, did Mama make a big deal about me not coming home last night?" Julio asked Julia, taking a seat right next to her at the library prior to homeroom.

"I wouldn't know. I didn't come home last night either," Julia replied, looking up from her physics packet.

"Really?" Julio noisily unwrapped his strawberry Pop Tart. Before he said anything else, he shoved half of the pastry in his mouth. "Where did you go?" he asked with his mouth full.

"Mercedes's. She let me crash at her crib. Where did you go?"

"Amanda's. She let me sleep over."

"Sounds like you guys are serious." Julia was happy that her brother had somebody to turn to during the divorce. She turned to Mercedes rather than Eddie, because she didn't want to burden Eddie with her troubles at home when he was so focused on football. Besides, it was easier to access her childhood best friend than it was her boyfriend.

Chasing Ghosts

"I guess. I wasn't sure if I wanted to get into a relationship with Amanda again, but after seeing Mama and Papa not even try to make their relationship work, it made me want to work harder on my relationship with Amanda. Plus, she was really great last night. She listened even though I didn't say anything to her--"

"What?"

"It doesn't matter. All that matters is that she and I are official." About to put the second half of his food in his mouth he stopped and sighed. "I can't believe they're getting a divorce."

"Me neither. I really thought Papa and Mama were gonna stay together, especially since Papa moved to America."

"But we both know that's not the reason why he moved here."

"I know," Julia silently replied. They both were aware their father was here to further his career not to reconnect with his estranged children. He always placed his music before his family and they all knew it.

"Things are gonna get better, Juliana."

"I hope so," she replied looking at her twin. She wasn't sure about anything. She was disappointed in both of her parents for their lack of effort. She couldn't understand why Carlo didn't even try to live with their family to see if things would work rather than just throw in the towel.

After the bell rang for chemistry, Mercedes fled out the door and made her way to her locker. She still didn't quite get chemistry even though she tried to pay attention in class. It was even harder when she forgot to take her medication, such as that day. It was easier for her to concentrate when she was taking her ADHD pills. After her grades slipped and she failed the tenth grade

she decided to take them again. They helped her pass her classes over the summer.

Mercedez opened her locker and searched for her bottle.

Once she found it, she popped a pill in her mouth.

"Hey, druggie," Amanda said coming over to Mercedez.

"Hardly," Mercedez replied yawning as she placed the bottle back into her locker.

"I'm kidding." Besides their break during school, Mercedez and Amanda would occasionally stop to chat with each other between classes. Mercedez shoved her chemistry book back in her locker.

"Are you heading to West's?" Mercedez asked seeing the Algebra II book in Amanda's hands.

"Yes. Thank goodness. I need to take a nap because I've got student government and junior class meeting after school today. I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Join the club." After Barbra's mysterious phone call, Mercedez stayed up until five in the morning trying to figure out her secret.

"I don't know what's wrong with him."

"Julio?"

"Sorry. We shouldn't talk about him--"

"It's okay, Amanda. I've been over him way before me and he broke up."

"Well," Amanda began in hesitation. After all, Julio was the reason Mercedez and Amanda didn't like each other before. "He was very upset yesterday. When I asked him what was wrong he told me he didn't want to talk about it."

"Oh." Mercedez grabbed her Spanish III book and closed her locker. She began to walk to her next class.

"Oh?" Amanda walked next to her. "Is there something you know about *my* boyfriend?"

"No."

"Mercedez--"

"Amanda, your boyfriend is the brother of my best friend."

"Did something happen to Julia too? Is their family okay?"

"Sort of."

"Just tell me!"

"Their parents are getting a divorce," Mercedesz replied, not wanting to put their business out there.

"That's it?"

"What do you mean? That's gotta be tough on anybody." "Come on, Mercedesz. It's not surprising. Their dad's got money, power, talent, and oh is he gorgeous. Those honey brown eyes, tan, strong jaw line, and those irresistible dimples-"

"Your point?"

"My point is, what guy like that is going to remain faithful when he's not even living in the same country as his wife. It's not like they visit each other."

"It's obvious to us, but not to them. We just gotta be sensitive. Anyways, your mom and Barbra's maiden name is Thomas, right?"

"Yup."

"Their dad's George Phillip Thomas?"

"Dr. George Phillip Thomas. What's it to you?"

"He's my step granddad and I was planning to visit him the next time Barbra and my dad go to New York to see them," Mercedesz lied. She needed to know his whole name. She had some research to do.

Jesse comfortably rested on his back on top of the hood of his classic 1970 red Cadillac Deville. He had his black sunglasses and hair over his face. He wore a faded black t-shirt underneath an auburn colored jacket along with long black skinny jeans and dark black boots.

After admiring Jesse's beauty, Angela frowned and marched over to him. He had his car parked in the parking lot at RHS. When he saw Angela coming towards him he smiled and sat up.

"I see you got my text," he said. Earlier that day, he sent her

a message, offering her a ride home from school.

"Didn't you get my text? I told you not to come," she said, crossing her arms. Jesse picked up his cell phone that was next to him and checked his messages.

"I must've been asleep," he replied, reading her text. He slid off his car and came close to her. Her heart pounded. "I'm here, so why not let me take you home." He pushed his sunglasses and hair back.

"No."

"I didn't know the sight of me made you gag." "That's not what I meant."

"Yeah, right. I saw you just swallow that vomit that was coming up," Jesse joked as he grabbed his throat and pretended to throw up. Angela couldn't help it. She smiled.

"Awe, she finally smiles. I forgot how intense you can get at times," he added grinning at her. "You still look awesome as a brunette." She blushed as she touched her hair.

"J- Ryde!" Gina squealed rushing over to Jesse before they gave each other a hug. Along with Gina were Adam and Jackie hand in hand with Sal. The girls had their cheerleading outfits on while the boys wore their RHS football jerseys.

"My old co-anchor!" he responded in enthusiasm. When he was a senior at RHS two years ago, he was the anchor and Gina was the co-anchor of RHS's news program that ran every morning. "Sal my pal," he added slapping Sal's hand.

"What's up, bro," Sal replied with an uneasy smile as he and Angela avoided eye contact.

"Adam the meat head," Jesse said giving Adam a hand shake.

"Dude, it's been a while. You should come party with us on Bordo one of these nights," Adam replied. Angela uncomfortably watched them talk. She didn't get along with any of the seniors who came to greet Jesse. Jesse on the other hand was very much loved at RHS by the students and teachers.

"For sure."

Chasing Ghosts

"I heard you're in a band," Gina said. Angela frowned a bit hating that Gina knew more about Jesse than she did.

"I am." Jesse opened the door to his car and grabbed a couple of flyers. "My band's playing at the Café Lounge on Valentine's Day," he said, handing them the copies.

"The *I-M-V-i-C* band?" Sal asked spelling out each letter from the flyer.

"It's pronounced *I'm Vic*," Jesse answered.

"I don't get it," Gina said.

"You guys named it after Vic Morgan?" Adam asked, referring to a RHS alumni.

"No, meathead. The drummer of the band is a microbio major and one day he was studying IMViC, a test they do to test water, and we decided that was the perfect name for the band. So, what've you seniors been up to?"

"We're all seniors, except for Angela," Jackie told him. "She's a sophomore *again*."

"I'm a junior," Angela snapped. She didn't care what Jackie had to say about her. However, it irked her now that Jesse was here. She was working harder academically and compared to the previous years, she didn't wait for the last minute to study or to do her homework. Having her sister in the same school motivated her to do better.

"I might as well tell you what Angela's been up to. After all, I wouldn't trust a word she says to you. Last year, she slept with a kid named Robbie and she slept with my boyfriend, Sal, a bunch of times--"

Feeling uncomfortable, Sal let go of her hand. "He wasn't your boyfriend then," Angela retorted.

"And she did all this while she was dating Travis. *What a whore*," Jackie ended, giving Angela a dirty look.

"Don't worry, Jackie. She didn't beat your record. What was it...four, five guys you cheated on me with?" He went over to Jackie and placed his hands, arm's length away from her, on her shoulders. "That, my dear, makes you a whore." He backed away

from her as the crowd snickered, except for Jackie and Sal. Before Jesse and Angela began dating, he dated Jackie for about a year. They broke up after Jesse found out about the many guys she had been with while they were together.

As Jackie angrily left with Sal following behind her, Jesse slipped his arm around Angela's hip, causing her body to tingle. She was a bit shocked that he stood up for her. He always did when they dated. However, she thought that would've changed since they were broken up. "Shall we?" Angela followed him to the passenger side and allowed him to open the door for her. "Later, guys." The gang said bye as he hopped into the driver's seat.

They didn't speak on their way home. The only sound came from the radio and Jesse. Jesse tapped the side of the window as he lightly sang along to Pearl Jam's *Undone*. As she kept her eyes out the window of the passenger side, she let his singing soothe her like it always did. His bass voice was amazing. Just listening to him sing made her reminisce on the old times and the many car rides they once shared. "We're here," Jesse announced, parking in front of her home.

"Thanks for the ride." Angela unbuckled her seatbelt and slowly picked up her book bag from the floor. She waited a second, hoping he would pull her in for a kiss.

"I almost forgot." He reached in the backseat and grabbed an album.

"I've been looking all over for this!" Angela exclaimed as he handed her Queen's *Live Killers* album. She examined her favorite record, making sure it was still in the same condition it was since the last time she saw it. "I thought I lost it."

"You let me borrow it. Remember that day you said if I helped you cook you'd let me borrow one of your dad's albums? I think you were six or seven months pregnant at the time. We made some Italian food that you were craving that day."

"I was six and a half months along then. We made spaghetti and meatballs."

"That day after we cooked, I sang you to sleep and I didn't

want to wake you up, so I took this album. You were always trying to get me to listen to Queen.”

“Did you like it?”

“Like is an understatement. You were right. This album kills. I wanted to keep it, but I couldn't. I know how much it means to you.” Even though it was her favorite album, it was more than just an album to her. It was some of the few memorabilia she had of her deceased father.

“Thanks,” she said looking down at her album. Jesse reached over to her and pushed her hair out of her face. Her eyes moved away from the music to him. Her heart raced as his hand came away from her face to her neck. He slowly brushed his fingers down her neck. She remained still, unable to move. She didn't want to leave. When he reached the bottom of her neck, he rested his hand. They stared at each other as he felt her heart beat faster than average.

“I should go,” he softly said, taking his hand away from her.

“Yeah,” she said in a cracked voice. She blushed as she cleared her throat, before reluctantly getting out of the car.

Julia studied Eddie from the corner of her eye. She tried to read his face to see what he was thinking. He had his arms crossed as he was intensely watching the movie. She, on the other hand, couldn't concentrate on the action film. She wondered if he still wanted to be together without her giving it up to him.

Eddie reached his hand in the popcorn bucket. Seeing this, she also placed her hand in the bucket so their hands could touch. He quickly pulled his hand away. Julia took her hand away in anger. What was his problem?

“What?” Eddie asked in a low voice after noticing her stare. “You tell me, Eddie. You were gonna get popcorn, but when I go get some, you don't want popcorn anymore,” Julia accused.

“I was letting you get some first.”

"The bucket is big enough for the both of our hands." Eddie rolled his eyes, grabbed a handful of popcorn, and shoved it in his mouth.

"Happy now?" he asked with his mouth full. Julia puffed as she folded her arms. After the movie was over, they walked out of the theater room and angrily shoved their coats on.

Julia rushed to zip up her jacket before Eddie could. Once he finished zipping it up, she took hold of his hand. He let go of her and rubbed his hands together.

"Really, Eddie?" Julia said in irritation. Was the reason why he didn't touch her because he was cheating? "Every time we touch you pull away."

"My hands are cold."

"Then give me your hand and I'll keep it warm!"

"Julia, it's fine. I can keep them warm myself." Julia stormed out of the movie theater, ahead of him in fury. She was almost certain that he had been hooking up with other girls when he was away at college. "Why you acting crazy for?" he said, catching up to her.

"I'm not acting crazy! You're the one acting mad shady." "Just 'cause your pop's been creeping with other females behind your ma's back, don't mean I'm like that--"

"Don't talk about mi familia," she snapped. She wished she never told him about her parents getting a divorce if she knew he was going to throw it in her face. "If you don't wanna be with me, let me know."

"Where's all this coming from, Julia?"

"You tell me. You're the one who doesn't want to hold my hand." Since she visited him at Penn State, he called her less and now that they were together, he barely kissed her.

"What's the point of holding hands if that's all we're ever gonna do," he mumbled. Julia stopped walking and crossed her arms.

"Is this about me not sleeping with you or about my weight?"

"It is what it is," he responded shrugging his shoulders. He continued to walk to his Ford Explorer. "You coming?" He was already opening the door to the car. Julia unwillingly walked by the vehicle however, she didn't get in. "What now?"

"I'm not going with you."

"What do you mean? You're gonna drive home?" he mockingly asked, knowing that she didn't know how to drive.

"No, Eddie. I'll find my own ride home." Julia didn't want to learn how to drive. She opted to skip the driver's Ed class in school her tenth grade year out of fear of being behind the wheel.

She turned away from him and walked away. She was not going to spend a car ride with someone she didn't quite trust at the moment. She had a feeling that they would probably argue all the way to her house anyways. Eddie closed his door and jogged a bit to catch up with her.

"Julia, come with me."

"Why? It's obvious you don't love me anymore."

"I do still love you. I love you so much that I didn't sleep with a bunch of chicks when I had chances to do so! And believe me, there's been a lot of chances where I could've banged a hoe."

"You don't love me enough to respect my choice or the way I look! You walk around making me feel guilty."

"One, I told you I don't care that you gained weight! Two, you expect me to lock it down 'til we get married- *if we even get married*. It's not like you can get married now. You're only sixteen. So the least amount of time I gotta wait for you is two June's from now. I donno if I can wait that long." Eddie sighed. "With that said, I still wanna try to wait," he added. He came closer and extended his hand to her. She glanced at his hand. She knew it had to be hard for him to go from being active to nothing at all. She hated arguing with him and she still did love him. She had to appreciate his honesty.

She took his hand and followed him to the SUV. On their way to her home, they chatted about his football season and her music. Once he reached her home, he gave her a peck. She came

closer to him and kissed him. Before he could pull away, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders wanting to show him that she was invested in making him happy.

"Stop," he weakly said as she kissed on his neck.

"Why?" She took off her coat and maneuvered herself on top of his lap. She helped him take his off before he tossed it on the backseat.

"When you do that...you make me want you more..." He placed his arms around her back and held her tightly.

"That's a good thing," she said, continuing to kiss on his neck. She lifted her head and kissed his lips. It had been a long time since she felt she was pleasing him. She loved making him happy and it filled her with joy that he was okay with her putting on close to twenty pounds.

"Not when we're trying to- to wait 'til marriage," Eddie said between their kisses. He let go of her and placed his hands on the car seat. "You make it so hard." She placed her hands on his face.

"Pookie, I love you."

"I love you too."

"Because I love you, I don't wanna wait. I wanna make love to you," she added staring into his eyes. What was the point of waiting anyways? She loved him and wanted her first time to be with someone she loved. It's not like they weren't going to get married, right? So what if she made love to him before they got married to each other. He took her hands into his.

"Nah. I meant it when I said I'd wait. And 'cause I love you, I don't want you to feel like I'm pressuring you." He took a deep breath. "So, let's call it a night," he said, kissing her on her forehead. ***

Mercedez typed in *George Phillip Thomas* into the Yahoo search engine during her study hall. She decided to do some research on her step grandfather rather than prepare for her chemistry midterms. She wanted to know what Barbra's father had on her, hoping she could somehow help her stepmother out. She

clicked on the first website that appeared. After reading his biography, she learned that George was the head neurosurgeon at Homestead Regional Medical Center. She went back to the Yahoo search results and typed in *criminal background of Dr. George Phillip Thomas*.

"Hey, cousin," Troy said taking a seat next to her. Mercedes quickly closed the webpage in hopes Troy had not seen her digging dirt about his grandfather.

"What's up?" she asked. She subtly repositioned her body to hide the screen of the computer.

"Why were you looking up my grandfather?"

"He's my step granddad. I just wanna know more about him."

"You don't look up someone's criminal background just to know more about them. Why didn't you just ask him, or me, or Amanda, or Barbra? I'll save you the time, my grandfather is not a criminal," Troy snapped getting up.

"Troy, wait," she said before he could leave. After sitting back down, Mercedes filled him in on the mysterious conversation between Barbra and her father.

"Do you think he's blackmailing Aunt Babs?"

"I donno. Why would a father blackmail his own daughter?"

"I hate saying this, but I wouldn't put it past my family. Besides being infamous for the Prescott Law Firm, they're infamous for blackmailing people to get their way."

"I still don't get what she meant by *do nothing 'til her chances of surviving are greater*."

"Neither do I."

"I know this isn't our business--"

"What if it is our business? Aunt Babs could be in trouble." Troy placed his hand on his chin. "I'll help you figure out what Grandpa George has on Aunt Babs."

"Thanks. I'll continue to find out what I can about him-." "Don't." Troy moved his chair closer to hers. "Looking him

up at school with all these filters is useless. I can get almost any type of information on him." Troy promised. "We're gonna find out what Grandpa George is up to."

"I think that's wrong," Angela said to Julia. "It is a theorem." They were both at Tutoring Teens, an after school tutoring program which took place at RHS's library, where the students and teachers aided those in need academically.

As a tutor, Julia was helping Angela out in geometry. Angela came by occasionally to get assistance in her school work. Julia carefully looked at one of the problems she was working on to show Angela how to do one of the harder proofs. Julia carefully tried the problem once more. It was a theorem.

"You were right. Sorry. I got a lot on my mind," Julia said.

"The divorce?"

"That and Eddie."

"What about him?"

"Lately, we've been thinking about...you know." Julia didn't want to say the word out loud in the open library.

"About taking your relationship to the next level?" Angela asked in a voice so only she and Julia could hear. Julia nodded her head as her ears turned red. The library was full due to upcoming midterms. Thankfully Julia and Angela had the whole table to themselves.

"I think we should. We've been together for a while and most importantly, we're in love."

"It seems like you made up your mind."

"Not really. Whenever I think about the pros of sleeping with him, I think of the cons. What if I disappoint him? Or, what if the condom breaks and I get pregnant? I'm not ready to be a mom. My parents would kill me." Julia's face turned worrisome. "I'd be all pregnant in high school and I'd have to get a nine to five job while going to school full time. Awe, man! I'd probably have to drop out. Poor Eddie, he'll have to move back to Jersey to help raise our baby. He'll resent me for the rest of his life and-"

"I'm guessing you're a virgin," Angela cut in before Julia continued to worry about the *what if's*.

"Is it that obvious?" They both laughed. Julia placed her hand on her head. "I know I'm overacting."

"You're not. I wish I would've given more thought before I lost my virginity. If so, I wouldn't have slept with most of the guys I've slept with." She had regrets about most of the guys she had been with because they either didn't want anything to do with her afterwards, or looked for her to become their girlfriend immediately. Jesse was the only guy she didn't have any regrets sleeping with.

"I donno what to do. He's surrounded by girls who are pretty and in shape. I gained so much weight this year. If I do decide to take our relationship to another level with him, I need to make sure I lose some weight so he can find me more attractive--"

"If he can't love you for who the hell you are now, forget about him. You are beautiful inside and out and any guy would be lucky to have you as his girl."

"Thanks. You're right. He's gotta love me for me, which he does. He's told me more than once he doesn't mind how I look now. I'm just being insecure, I guess...Us being so far away makes me wanna make love to him even more. What should I do?" She knew Angela had more experience with the opposite gender. "Do I follow my mind or heart?"

"Both. I can't tell you what to do. The only advice I can give you is love makes you crazy and sex makes you stupid." They both giggled. "I'm so serious. When you're in love and the relationship gets physical you start doing things you never thought you would. Like this." Angela pulled down the collar of her sweater to show Julia a part of the tattoo she had of Jesse's nickname. The medium sized tattoo was positioned on her right shoulder blade. "A tramp stamp of a guy I broke up with over a year ago."

"You must have loved him a lot."

"I did," she responded. She thought about her use of the past tense. In her heart, her love for him was still very much

present.

Keisha pulled off her tan Timberland boots and put on her white and light blue Jordan sneakers. "Girl, I know you ain't about to play in those fresh Jordans," Mercedes said coming out of the locker room.

"They're gonna stay fresh 'cause I'm not rocking them outside the gym," Keisha replied. "Wait a minute. Cedez, what are you doing here?"

"Trying out." Mercedes placed her book bag right next to Keisha's belongings and took a seat next to her on the bleachers. Mercedes played basketball for the school since junior high school. However, she intentionally skipped try outs last year and did not play for the school's women's basketball team.

"For what?"

"Basketball!"

"Uh oh! Cedez is back!" Keisha exclaimed. Mercedes grinned at Keisha as she grabbed her black scrunchie from her black Nike basketball shorts. She pulled her dark wavy hair up into a ponytail. She gazed around the gym at her competition. Some of the girls seemed confident, knowing that they didn't have to try out since they had a guaranteed spot on the team. Others appeared a bit nervous about tryouts. Mercedes was in between. She knew some of the girls who already made it from when she played. However, the junior varsity coaches were different from when Mercedes played as a freshman.

"Ladies," Coach Chen began. "Stretch, do lay ups, then we'll start with tryouts." After stretching and doing layups the coaches split the girls into teams of five people. The door to the gym flew open and Christy ran inside.

"Sorry I'm late. I had to make up a test," Christy said to Coach Chen.

"That's fine. I talked to your teachers. Just stretch, run two laps, and come to us," he responded. Christy threw her bag on the bleachers before doing as she was told.

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"Word is she's already got a spot on varsity," Keisha whispered to Mercedes. Keisha was the starting center on the girls' basketball varsity team.

"For being so damn tall?" Mercedes asked seeing that Christy had to be at least 5'7 at just age fourteen.

"Nah. I heard she could ball."

"Red team against blue team and yellow team against green team. Winner of each game plays each other. The losers of the first round will owe me ten suicides while the loser of the second round will have to give me five," Coach Chen announced. After Christy finished warming up, she was picked to start on the red team along with Mercedes. "You." Coach Chen pointed to Mercedes. "Give her your jersey." Mercedes reluctantly pulled off her red jersey and handed it to Christy. Christy nodded her head to Mercedes in gratitude. Mercedes ignored her, annoyed that a freshman was taking her spot.

Mercedes stood along with the other girls who weren't chosen to start. The first game was close. Though Keisha made almost a third of the points for the blue team, they lost to the red team.

Once the yellow team lost the game against the green team, Coach Chen gave the girls a water break. Mercedes remained standing where she was. There was no point of her getting water if she didn't play. She wondered if she should've even come in the first place if she was not going to get a chance to show the coach her basketball skills.

"Sorry about your jersey," Christy said, standing next to Mercedes.

"It's whatever." Christy glanced at Mercedes a little hard.

"You're Mercedes?"

"Yeah."

"I remember you from the summer when you came over to work on a project with my sister. It's good to know at least one person here," Christy admitted.

"Oh yeah. I forgot you're Angela's sister."

"Okay, red team versus green team. Same players!" Coach Chen said before blowing his whistle.

"I'll talk to you later," Christy said. She ran back onto the basketball court. Mercedes folded her arms in hopes the coach would call her name and give her a chance to play. The red team and green team played a close game. One of the girls from the green team shot the ball. Christy got the rebound and yelped as she held onto her thumb. Coach Chen blew his whistle. "I can't play anymore. It hurts," she added massaging her thumb.

"Fine. You, get in," he said to Mercedes. Mercedes unfolded her arms and caught the jersey Christy tossed to her. Although Mercedes usually played the point guard position, she took the forward's position, who was now Christy's position as a center. The green team threw the ball in bounds. The guard on the yellow team came up, took a jump shot, and missed. Mercedes ran to half court with her eyes on the ball after she saw that one of her teammates had it. That teammate saw Mercedes and passed it to her. Mercedes caught the ball and dribbled down the court. It was now or never. She crossed the opposing guard and went up for a layup. She grinned when she saw she made the basket.

Chapter 7

"...oh, mother, where art thou be without you?"

Julia ignored the knock she heard on her bedroom door, knowing it was her mother. Gloria waited a couple more seconds before coming inside.

"Nena, are you up?" Gloria asked. Though she came closer to the bed, Julia pretended to be fast asleep. "I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas. Yo se` this Christmas is different with Julio away and me going to work. We'll still celebrate the birth of Jesus cuando I come back."

Julia planned on spending Christmas with Mercedes and her family rather than stay home alone while Gloria worked a twelve hour shift as a nursing assistant at the local hospital. Julio was in New York with their father. Julia refused to spend the holidays with the man who broke their family apart. She still wasn't happy with any of her parents for deciding to get a divorce, especially Carlo.

"I'll buy a cake and we can blow out a couple of candles to honor Jesus's day. Okay, I have to go. I love you," Gloria ended. Gloria gave her a kiss on her forehead before leaving for work.

Julia jumped out of bed and rushed to get ready. Eddie was coming over soon to exchange gifts.

She wore a red and black sweater with a long grey wool skirt and combat boots. She slapped a handful of gel in her hair to

restrain her rebellious curls. By the time she was finished getting dressed she heard the bell ring to the front door of the house. Right as she let Eddie inside he gave her a fast kiss before pulling away. She closed the door and locked it behind him, wondering why he didn't kiss her longer.

"Here," Eddie said. He handed her a ring box. Julia's heart raced as she opened it, in suspense if it was an engagement ring. Once she opened the box she realized it wasn't. It was a simple sterling silver band with a cross pendant on top of it. She held it up in confusion. "Baby, love is like a game of football. In football, if something don't work, you gotta make another play. Our game plan, us making out and touching ain't working. So we gotta go back to the board and make a play that works." Eddie took her left hand. "So I think we should slow things down. No kissing for longer than three seconds and no touching below the waist. We should also do stuff outside the house so we're not tempted." Julia looked at Eddie. He sounded sincere and his speech seemed rehearsed. "This ring," Eddie started as he held onto her left hand. "Is a reminder of our commitment to wait 'til we get married." He slipped the jewelry on her ring finger of her left hand. Julia glanced down at it, realizing that they were not on the same page.

"Eddie," she began pulling off the band before handing it back to him. Had it been a month ago, she would have loved his effort to commit to being celibate. Things were different now. After much thought, her mind was made up. "I can't honor that commitment." She picked up the red wrapped gift she had for Eddie from the table and gave it to him.

"Why not?" he asked, unwrapping his gift as she anxiously watched him. His mouth dropped as he lifted up the black lingerie from the box. She was excited for the lingerie she purchased knowing it made her look slimmer. It helped that she dropped a couple of pounds and planned to lose more before Valentine's Day. Julia pulled off the ring from her finger and handed it back to him.

"I won't be able to wear that if we wait." She came up closer to him and placed her arms on his shoulders and she pulled his

head down for a kiss. After four seconds, he stopped kissing her. "We shouldn't." She kissed him again. This time, he wrapped his arms around her waist.

"We should and will, very soon," she replied in between their kisses.

Amanda sang along with the Christmas music playing from her iPod that she had plugged into the speaker phones in the kitchen. She joyfully hummed some of the tunes as she watched Mercedes get out cooking supplies. That holiday season, Amanda and Troy chose to stay at their aunt's house. Their father was on a business trip with a potential client in Florida, while their mother was in Saint Barts with a couple of her friends.

"I'm thinking lasagna, French bread, and Caesar salad-" "And some holiday cookies!" Amanda exclaimed. "Oh I'm

so excited!" This year she was determined to have the best Christmas yet. She encouraged the Mendoza family to put up the Christmas tree. She also had holiday music playing throughout the home ever since she came over. "However, it sucks that your parents and Steph are stuck in New York." Mercedes's father, Barbra, and Steph visited Barbra's parents a couple of days before Christmas. They were supposed to come back the day before, but couldn't due to a heavy snow storm.

"It does," Mercedes agreed. She knew she would've enjoyed the holiday with all of her family. Mercedes took out the ground meat from its package.

"Do you know what you're doing? I can hire a cook for us." "She does," Julia answered. Eddie dropped Julia off right after they exchanged gifts.

"Don't worry, Amanda. My dad taught me how to cook," Mercedes said.

"What about you Julia?" Amanda asked.

"I can barely boil water." Julia wasn't a cook. Gloria was the one who made most of the meals in her household. Whenever her mother wanted to teach her how to cook, Julia would always

come up with an excuse to stay out of the kitchen.

"Hey, can the two of you manage to make these ready to bake cookies and loaves of bread without burning the house down?" Mercedes teased, seasoning the ground beef.

"We'll try," Julia responded, before they all giggled.

"She's late," Amanda said.

"She's probably on her way," Mercedes responded. They all invited Keisha and Angela to eat with them. Keisha was out of town, however, Angela was up for it. She arrived a couple of minutes later.

"Sorry I'm late," Angela said taking off her coat as she stepped inside the warm house.

"You can leave it on the chair," Mercedes said. Angela placed the coat on the chair and followed Mercedes to the kitchen.

"I have a gift for you!" Amanda excitedly said to Angela. She handed her an apron that was neatly folded and wrapped with a bow.

"I can't accept that," Angela replied feeling a bit embarrassed. She wasn't comfortable with people giving her things. It made her feel like she was charity.

"You have to. Do you know how much thought I put into these?"

"You made these?" Angela asked

"Don't be silly. I had them handmade," Amanda replied. "If she's got us wearing them, you gotta wear it too,"

Mercedes said. Amanda bought all of the girls customized baby pink Juicy Couture aprons with their initials sewn on the bottom right corner.

"Where's your Christmas spirit, *Ms. Grinch*?" Amanda said.

"Thanks." She took the apron before giving Amanda a hug.

Angela went over by the stove where Mercedes was boiling the pasta for the lasagna. "Need help?" Angela asked.

"Yeah. Please tell me you know how to cook." Mercedes spent most of the holiday cooking. Besides the dinner, she also prepared a breakfast of eggs, pancakes, and bacon for everybody.

"I do." As the oldest sister, Angela learned how to cook. Angela took over the lasagna while Mercedes started to make rice and beans. Julia carefully took out the premade French loaves from the can while Amanda placed the ready to bake holiday cookies on a cookie sheet.

"Dude, we killed them at the end," Troy said coming inside along with Mercedes's nineteen year old brother, Nick.

"Yup. They never saw that catch coming," Nick replied. He flicked the football in the air as he closed the door. "Angela?"

"Nick!" Angela responded in a smile as they hugged. Nick lifted her above the floor before he spun her around. "It's been forever. Sorry. My hands probably smell like pasta," she added, right as Nick placed her on the ground, before he sniffed his hands.

"Mine smells like dirty snow and leather."

"There is nothing wrong with snow and leather," she replied taking his hands as they chuckled.

Mercedes tightly held onto the pot of rice she was cooking. She couldn't believe Angela was flirting with her brother. The nerve of her! Thoughts of Robbie raced in her head. She hadn't thought of him in so long, but it came rushing back once she saw Angela flirting. Mercedes had a feeling that Angela's constant flirting was what tempted Robbie to take her to bed. A part of Mercedes questioned if she and Robbie would have been better off if he and Angela never slept together.

"The two of you used to date," Amanda stated.

"No," Angela quickly said, dropping his hands. "He's good friends with my ex."

"Her ex, Jesse," Nick said. "I'm gonna hit the showers. See you at dinner?" he said to Angela.

"Yeah," she replied touching his arm.

"She obviously can't help herself," Amanda whispered to Julia about Angela's flirting, as

Nick and Troy headed upstairs to wash up. "We should make a pact," Amanda insisted, feeling a bit insecure. She was glad Julio wasn't there for Angela to hit on.

Julia placed the cookies and bread underneath the oven where the lasagna was cooking as she continued to listen to Amanda. "We're all friends, so we shouldn't date each other's exes," Amanda announced, glaring at Angela.

"I agree," Mercedes jumped in. Now that she was friends with Angela she had to trust that Angela wouldn't hook up with any of her past or current boyfriends.

"I guess," Julia said.

"Alright," Angela said, knowing the pact was being made because she might've been a little too friendly with Mercedes's brother.

"That means, Julio, Spencer, Robbie, Eddie, Keagan, and *all* of Angela's exes are off limits," Amanda announced.

"Just Jesse is off limits. It doesn't matter about the others," Angela replied.

"How many *others* are we talking about?" Amanda questioned as she crossed her arms. She wondered if Angela ever hooked up with Troy in the beginning of the school year.

"Okay our pact is made. Those boys are off limits. Anyways, the food is almost ready and I'm hungry," Julia said before the conversation could get even more awkward. Angela mouthed thank you to Julia.

They all told stories, joked, and laughed as they ate the Christmas dinner they prepared. Yet again, Angela's phone rang. It was the third time it went off during dinner. "Who's blowing up your cell?" Nick asked.

"I'm about to find out," Angela responded. She glanced down at the caller ID. It was the same number that kept calling her before. She put her coat on before stepping outside to the front porch in the cold. She shivered trying to keep warm.

She sat down on the wooden rocking chair and dialed the number. She grabbed a cigarette out of the side pocket of her coat. As she phoned the number that called her multiple times, she lit her cigarette. "Angela es Fresh?" a woman on the other line said.

Chasing Ghosts

"This is she." Angela blew a ring of smoke out as she tried to figure out why the woman's voice sounded familiar.

"Hi, um... it's Patricia Stonewall." Angela got up from the rocking chair and walked down the steps of the porch speculating what Patricia could possibly need.

"This was supposed to be a closed adoption," Angela told the adoptive mother of her son. "We agreed that I wouldn't get any updates on him." Though Patricia and her husband offered to have an open adoption where they would keep her posted about her son, Angela refused. She knew the best thing was to give him up completely. She already had regrets of letting him go in the first place. Throughout her pregnancy she battled with keeping him or giving him up. Realizing that she would struggle to raise him, she gave him to a family who could give him more than she ever could.

"I know, Angela. I wouldn't have tried to reach you if it wasn't urgent," Patricia said in a shaky voice. Angela stopped smoking. Her heart began to pound.

"Is he okay?" Angela frantically asked. She impatiently waited for her to say he was. She toyed with the cigarette in her hand waiting for her response. "Well?" Had she known the Stonewalls' couldn't care for her son she would've chosen better parents.

"Caleb, the son you so kindly gave us," Patricia said in between sobs. "He um..."

"He what?"

"Has cancer," Patricia finally managed to say.

"What a great dinner," Amanda said, going up the stairs with Mercedes.

"Too bad the other girls left," Mercedes replied. Right after Angela called whoever kept ringing her phone, she quickly said goodbye then left, and Gloria came to pick up Julia a couple of minutes ago.

Mercedes went over to her desk where a couple of DVDs were. "Wanna watch a movie?"

"Mercedes, we've been hanging out since this morning, yet I haven't spoken to Julio since yesterday afternoon. So why don't you pick a movie while I talk to him and I'll catch up with you."

"Okay," Mercedes replied a bit taken aback. Surprisingly, Mercedes actually didn't mind having Amanda around, even with all of her antics. It was like having another sister that she could talk to. They argued once when Amanda cleaned her sloppy room. Amanda claimed how the untidiness hindered her from studying for her upcoming SAT exam while Mercedes yelled how the mess helped her study.

Mercedes had a decent size bedroom. However, when it was messy, the room seemed small and cluttered. Her walls were sky blue and were decorated with a couple of NBA basketball posters. On a typical day she would have snack wrappers, dirty mixed with clean clothes, and schoolwork polluting the floor. The only place Mercedes kept consistently clean was the nightstand beside her bed.

Amanda stared at Mercedes, waiting for her to leave. "My bad," Mercedes said closing the door on her way out. She figured that Amanda wanted some privacy. Amanda sprayed Mercedes's room with her Victoria's Secret Vanilla Lace body spray.

"That's better," Amanda said, inhaling the sweet smell while she lay on the bed before dialing Julio's number. "Darling, how are you?" Amanda purred to Julio once he picked up. She heard Julio and another female's laughter in the background.

"Why are you calling Julio's phone?" a woman asked on the other line. Amanda shot up from the bed.

"Stop," Julio said as he laughed in the background.

"Shhh," the woman said to him.

"I'm his girlfriend. Who the hell are you?" Amanda snapped.

"I'm his girlfriend for the night so do him and me a favor and don't call us until tomorrow afternoon--"

Amanda slammed the phone shut and chucked it across the bedroom. She threw her face into the pillow and burst into tears.

She hated that she gave him a second chance. She knew she should've protected herself instead of falling for him again. As far as she was concerned, Julio was dead to her.

Troy jogged down the stairs to the TV room wearing his father's old Princeton sweater and plaid pajama pants.

"Where's Amanda?" he asked Mercedes.

"Upstairs sleeping." Through tears, Amanda told Mercedes about the phone call. Mercedes listened to her and had to convince Amanda that Julio never cheated on Amanda with her. When Amanda finally believed her, she asked Mercedes to be alone. Seeing how upset Amanda was Mercedes stayed downstairs and began to watch *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*.

"Good. Nick's on the phone with his girlfriend. That means we can talk," Troy said, holding up a tan folder.

"What's that?"

"Possibly everything we need to know about what Aunt Babs is hiding." They both went to the table in the kitchen and sat down. Troy opened the folder and handed Mercedes a pile of papers. Mercedes gazed at the bank statements of Barbra's father, George.

"These are just money transactions," Mercedes said in confusion.

"Look a little harder."

"Okay... so he's been making large withdrawals each month. I still don't get how this has to do with Barbra's secret."

"Every month since March 2004, Grandpa George has been taking out almost the exact amount on the fourth of each month. It's December 2005 now so it's been over a year." Troy pointed to the latest transaction of that amount of money. "Look at that." The last one was made December 10th.

"He paid late. That's the day after I caught Barbra on the phone with him."

"Exactly."

"It could be a coincidence. Maybe what her dad has on her

has nothing to do with the money withdrawals.”

“I think it does.” Troy pulled out another set of papers. “I checked his phone records and it shows that Aunt Babs called Grandpa George that same night you told me about. They also talked the following day before that late transaction was made. That's not normal for them because they usually only talk about once a week. Also, back in March 2004 Aunt Babs and Grandpa were on the phone throughout the whole first withdrawal of that much money.” Mercedez glanced at all of the suspicious phone calls Troy highlighted from George's phone records.

“Thanks for the help, Troy. Now who's he been giving so much money to?” Mercedez looked at the bank statements once more. The large withdrawals on the fourth were all made out to the same place. “Homestead Regional Medical Center. It's like he's paying someone's hospital bills. It doesn't say who's.”

“I had to look up who it was.” Troy took out a blank computer paper with a post it on top of it. “Her name is Natalia Washington,” Troy said reading the name off the Post It. Mercedez grabbed the Post It from Troy. It really was that name. She looked at Troy with her eyes wide open as she shook her head.

“That can't be right,” she mumbled to herself. Mercedez pushed her chair back, away from the table. She glanced down at the name again. “Oh my God...”

“What? Do you know the person?”

“Yeah. She's my mother,” Mercedez revealed.

Chapter 8

"...I'm just not that type of gal."

BEEP! A car honked as it drove passed them. Awoken by the noise, Angela rubbed her eyes. Seeing that she fell asleep leaning against Jesse, she pulled away from him.

"Jesse," Angela said, nudging him. He was still fast asleep with his head tilted back against the headrest and his mouth slightly opened. Although he looked adorable asleep she needed for him to wake up. After Patricia told Angela about her son having cancer, she asked for her and Jesse to get tested to see if their stem cells were matches for Caleb. Though Jesse knew he wasn't the biological father he insisted on going.

Angela and Jesse made their way to Connecticut's Children Medical Center in Hartford on Christmas night. They drove for a while before pulling over to sleep. They slept in the back of Jesse's Cadillac so they could have more room. "Jesse." He remained inattentive. "Jesse!" she said a little louder into his ear.

"Why are you screaming?" Jesse asked, awoken from his sleep.

"Sorry. I had to wake you up. It's morning." Jesse yawned and shoved his disheveled hair out of his face with his left hand.

"Let go of my hand so I can drive." Angela glanced down. Sure enough, her left hand was interlocked with his right hand. She immediately dropped his hand as she felt her ears burn red. Jesse leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Don't worry. I'll let you hold my hand later, gumdrop," he whispered in her ear. She

continued to blush at him calling her *gumdrop*.

"I won't need you to hold my hand." She wasn't giving into his charm that easily. Jesse smirked as he threw his grey skullie on top of his head. They both moved to the front seat of the car and drove off to the hospital.

"Thank you both again for helping Caleb out," Patricia, the adoptive mother of Angela's son, said embracing Angela and Jesse.

"Yes, thank you," Walter, her husband, said giving them a handshake. "The doctor said we should get the results soon. He's certain that at least one of the parents' should be a match."

Angela and Jesse each gave blood samples along with buccal swabs. The doctors were going to see how close their HLA was to Caleb's to see the best match. They would find out later if Angela was a match for him.

Though the Stonewalls' weren't aware that Jesse was not the biological father, he knew the truth. It hurt both Jesse and Angela when they found out that Caleb wasn't his blood over a year ago. Jesse still stayed with her throughout her entire pregnancy. As far as he was concerned, he was Caleb's natural father.

"How?" Jesse asked. "He was born perfectly. No complications and now he has leukemia? It's not fair!"

"You're right. It's not fair," Patricia began, taking a seat on one of the chairs outside of Caleb's hospital room. "It started a couple of months ago." Jesse sat down next to her waiting to hear what she had to say. "First with the fever. We along with the doctors had trouble keeping his temperature down. Then the bruising began. Caleb started walking and as any toddler, he was clumsy, bumping into things. But I noticed that he was getting bruised easily and then the worst happened--"

Patricia took out her handkerchief to wipe her tears before she continued. Walter comfortingly placed his hand on his wife's shoulder. "He had trouble breathing. So we rushed him to the hospital, and that's when they ran tests and we found out."

Angela turned away from them in tears. She hated herself

for not being there for Caleb when he needed her the most. Had she known all that he was going through she would've been there for him months ago. She didn't know what she would do if anything happened to him.

"Angela, wait," Patricia called out. "Would you like to see him?" Patricia looked at Angela as she turned to face them. "I know that you chose not to see him after you gave birth, but if you want, you can go see him." Angela's heart dropped as she wiped her tears. She opted against seeing her son after his birth. She knew if she saw him she wouldn't want to ever let him go.

"We'll go see him," Jesse responded getting up from the chair.

"I can't--"

"You should," Jesse began, placing a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Go in. I'll wait for you here."

"Come in with me."

"No."

"Why not?" Angela glanced away from Jesse as she continued to cry. "Stop running away from everything that makes you uncomfortable," he told her before going to see Caleb. About fifteen minutes later, Jesse came out of the room. "Your turn."

"No," she responded in a small voice.

"I'm not leaving until you meet your son," Jesse stated with assertion. He crossed his arms, waiting for her to go in.

"Why are you making me do this?" she cried out. "He doesn't know who- who I am. I am *not* his mother. I gave up those rights when I signed the adoption papers." She used the sleeve of her black sweater to wipe the tears from her face.

"I hated it when you gave him away. Now I know you did it 'cause you loved him so much." Jesse took her forearm and used his thumb to massage her arm. "The Stonewalls' are an awesome family who obviously love and care about him tremendously. Just as the Stonewalls', you care and love Caleb incredibly. So, go in there and let Caleb know that."

Angela took a couple of deep breaths before she stepped inside the room. Her heart escalated beyond belief. It had been a year and eight months since she was pregnant with Caleb.

Caleb was in a crib by the window. Beside his bed were a couple of pictures of him and his family along with toys. Caleb lay on the bed with a teddy bear's ear in his mouth. He looked fatigued. For his age, he lacked energy. He only moved to weakly play with the teddy bear.

Seeing Angela approach his crib, he stopped playing with his toy to intensely stare at her. She stared back. He had medium length curly blonde hair and hazel eyes. His physical traits terrified her. There was no doubt he was her son. She reached over to touch his hair, but stopped once she observed the shape of his eyes. Caleb had the same down turned eyes as Chuck. It scared her even more that Caleb looked like a combination of both Chuck and herself.

"Tigah," Caleb said trying to reach over for the stuffed tiger that was by his foot. His body didn't allow him to do so. He gazed up at Angela for help.

"Here," she softly said to him. She handed him the tiger as she unsuccessfully fought back tears, wishing she could trade places with him. He didn't deserve to suffer when he had done nothing wrong.

"Thank you," Caleb replied giving her a frail smile. She smiled back in pain. In all his suffering, he still found it in himself to find happiness.

"You're gonna get better, okay sweetie," she said. She placed her hand on top of his head and gently played with his curls. "I promise I'll do whatever it takes for you to get better."

Amanda waltzed right past Julio by the lockers. It was the first day back from winter break. Students swarmed the hallways with their new winter clothes and gossip. Though some were bummed that the holidays were over, many of them were excited to tell stories of their time away from school.

"Can we talk?" Julio questioned. Amanda proceeded to

open her locker. She was in no mood to converse with him, especially since he waited until after break to talk to her. She grabbed her AP physics book and SAT II test prep book from her locker. "Amanda." She shoved her books into her tote bag and slammed her locker shut. Julio grasped her arm.

"Let go!" Amanda growled. Just looking at him made her despise him even more. He released her arm.

"I'm trying to explain myself, Amanda. Stop being dramatic!"

"Dramatic was never what I was being. What I was being was stupid for falling for you twice. Don't worry though. I won't make that same mistake ever again."

"That girl who picked up the phone--"

"You slept with," Amanda accused, with hopes he would deny the accusations.

"I did." Amanda looked at him with anger and disappointment. She realized he would always be a cheater. "I'm not gonna lie to you. I talked to my dad about the divorce. He told me that I'm too young to be stuck with one girl and how I should meet other girls and enjoy my youth so when I get married I won't cheat on my wife."

"Well enjoy all the girls in the world. Just know I won't be one of them," she snapped in disbelief. She couldn't believe he was actually trying to justify his actions.

"Amanda, try to see where I'm coming from! I've had a girlfriend for the past three and a half years and I'm only sixteen. I don't wanna be tied down now--"

"Save your breath. I'm tired of never being good enough. I said it last year and I'll say it again, consider this the last time we ever talk, and this time *I mean it.*" Amanda flipped her blonde hair over her shoulders and turned her back to him. She wondered why she wasted most of her energy trying to please him. He stood there for a while before leaving. Amanda counted backwards in her head from twenty to calm herself down.

"I couldn't help but notice you and that guy arguing,"

Adam said coming up to her. Adam was tall and muscular. He had feathered dirty blonde hair and greenish brown eyes and a slight gap between his two front teeth. On any normal day, she wouldn't have given him the time of day. He was not very attractive. Amanda was amazed how Gina dated him for so long and how Jackie cheated on her gorgeous boyfriend, Sal, to hook up with him. From what Amanda heard, Adam was a world class meathead and womanizer. She figured the only reason why he got girls was because he was a defensive starter on the varsity football team. She then remembered that he was also quite popular at RHS. "That guy is--"

"So last year. I'm over dating boys, you know. It's all about men now. Strong, athletic, *good looking* men," she flirtily told him. She gave him a wink before walking away. She internally smiled once she heard his footsteps following her. Her plan was working.

"I can be that man for you, baby girl."

"Oh really? I don't even know your name," she lied.

"Adam. Your's?"

"Amanda Prescott." He picked up her hand and planted a juicy kiss on top of it. She held back from yanking her hand away from him. She could only imagine where his lips had been.

"Let me take you out so I can show you how much of a man I am." Adam licked his lips as he checked her out. She tugged her hand away from him with a frown. She quickly smiled, remembering that if her plan was going to work, she had to be more convincing. She ran her hand down his muscular arm.

"Why don't you give me your number and we'll take it from there. I'd love to see how *manly* you are." She gave his arm a little squeeze before handing him a small piece of paper. He grinned as he wrote his number down. When he finished, she took the paper and folded it. She reached down her sweater from the neckline and tucked it in her bra. "I don't want to lose your number," she explained. As she expected, when she looked at Adam, his eyes were focused on her chest. "Call you later, hunk."

As soon as he was out of sight, she snatched the paper from

her bra. "Ugh," she mumbled to herself. She copied the number on her cell phone before throwing the paper away. She took out her hand sanitizer and frantically rubbed her hands, especially the one that Adam decided to leave his saliva on. Trying to be popular sure came with consequences!

Julia glanced down her physics packet. She was sitting on her desk in her bedroom working through the problems. Julia's room was painted red and black. Her walls were neatly covered with posters of musicians such as Prince, AC/DC, Pink Floyd and Whitney Houston. Above her full sized bed was a painting of Jesus holding a fallen man. Next to her desk was her black cherry Agile AL 2000 electric guitar. Gloria knocked on her bedroom door before entering.

"Nena, can we talk?" Gloria asked.

"I'm busy."

"I asked you yesterday to talk and the day before and you said you were busy."

"I've got homework every day." Julia went on to the twentieth question. She didn't want to talk to Gloria about the divorce.

"You can take a break from your studies for a little while." "I can't." Julia punched a few numbers in her calculator to finish solving the problem.

"Juliana Adeliz Rodriguez, close your books and let's talk," Gloria demanded with much authority as she placed her hand on her hip. Julia shut her books. She knew her mother meant business after hearing her say her full name. Julia faced Gloria as she crossed her arms. "The divorce is hard on all of us. We can get through this as a family by talking about it. Do not shut me out, Juliana."

"I'm not shutting you out," Julia responded trying to sound neutral. She was angry at both of her parents for getting a divorce. It felt as if they never gave their marriage an honest effort to work, especially since they hadn't lived in the same country for years. Now that Carlo was finally living in America, he lived in New York

City rather than in Roctown, New Jersey.

"You are. You're holding a grudge against me because of the divorce. Ever since your father and I told you the news, you hardly talk to me as if I've done something wrong--"

"Are you done?" Julia impatiently asked. She knew she was right. She hadn't spoken much to her other than when she had to.

"No, Juliana, I'm not done! I've had it up to here with your attitude," she said placing her hand above her head. "God does not want us fighting like this--"

"He also doesn't want us getting divorces," Julia snapped. She surprised herself at how rude she was talking to her mother. She was not the type to get an attitude with her parents. For some reason, she couldn't help herself.

"Where is all of this coming from? I know you have been eating more sweets probably because you are upset about the divorce--"

Gloria had a hurt look on her face. Julia felt slightly bad for how she had been treating her. However, her hurt overcame her feelings of guilt.

"Are you kidding me? You think I'm fat because of the divorce?" Julia asked jumping from up from her chair.

"I never called you fat, Juliana."

"You might as well have! Yes I've gained weight! Pero it's not because of the stupid divorce!"

"Juliana, you are not fat." Julia shook her head annoyed at her mom and how much her weight was always being brought up.

"What?" Gloria questioned noticing her head shake.

"I'm tired of living by other people's rules."

"My rules?" Julia shrugged her shoulders and sat back down on the chair. Her mother wasn't the only rules she was over living by. She opened her book, hoping she would get the hint and leave. After Gloria left her room, Julia tried to continue her school work. She couldn't. She got up, grabbed her cell phone, and dialed Carlo's number.

Chasing Ghosts

"Juliana, it's good to hear from you," Carlo said, picking up the phone after the first ring. "You should've come up to spend Christmas with me."

"I wasn't up for traveling."

"Okay. When you're up for it, come visit me in New York City. I got an apartment with three bedrooms so you and Julio can have your own rooms when the two of you come to stay with me." "Of course.... Papa, can I have a credit card?" she asked, cutting to the chase.

"Sure. You're young, but you are responsible and very mature for your age." Julia smiled. She never really asked him for much. However when she asked him for material things, he was fast to give it to her. "Does your mama know about you wanting a credit card?"

"No. I was hoping you wouldn't tell her." Julia knew Gliria would talk Carlo out of getting one.

"I won't. It'll be between you and me. Just send any of the bills to my address so she won't find out."

"Thanks, Papa!"

"One more thing, Juliana. There's no limit as to what you can buy."

"Thanks." An unlimited credit card was just the gift she needed. Without one, how was she going to reserve a luxury suite for Valentine's Day for when she was planning to give it up to Eddie? Julia gazed at the calendar that hung above her desk. Valentine's Day was less than a month away.

Mercedes unlocked the door to her home and went to the kitchen. She was hungry after a long basketball practice. The coach was working the girls extra hard after losing about a third of their basketball games. The season was coming to an end and the coach wanted the girls to win the remainder of the games.

When the season began, Mercedes slowly became the starting guard. She occasionally played as the shooting guard. She loved the hard work. It felt so good to be playing on the school's

team again. Not playing for a year made her realize how much she missed the game.

Mercedez took off her North Face coat and threw it on the couch before going into the kitchen. She had on her jersey along with Nike basketball shorts underneath her warm up pants.

She stopped at the entrance of the kitchen. Her father and stepmother were in the kitchen along with her baby sister. All of them smiled and cooed over Steph, as if they were one happy family. As if she wasn't a part of that family. She tried to brush her feelings away before walking into the room.

Mateo went back over to the stove where he was cooking parmesan chicken and baked ziti. Meanwhile, Barbra continued to read to Steph, who was sitting on her lap.

Mercedez greeted them with a kiss on their cheeks before grabbing a box of Lucky Charms cereal and a big bowl. She pulled out the milk from the refrigerator.

"I thought you were coming home an hour earlier," Mateo said stirring the ziti pasta.

"I had to go to the library." When her practice was over she did indeed go to the library to meet up with Troy. There, they discussed the possible reasons why Barbra's father was paying her mother's medical bills.

"Okay." Mercedez poured a good chunk of her favorite cereal in the bowl. "Save some room for my cooking."

"I will." Mercedez dispensed the milk into the bowl. She began to eat the cereal as she leaned against the countertop. Mateo put the milk carton back in the refrigerator. He knew she was a bit forgetful. "I was at the hospital visiting my mom the other day," Mercedez began. She couldn't hide the fact that she knew the secret Barbra was keeping from her. "As I visited her, I couldn't help but wonder how her medical bills are getting paid. So, I did some research and found out she ran out of money from her insurance since March of 2004. To my surprise when I asked who was picking up my mother's bill they said the donor was anonymous," Mercedez ended glaring at Barbra. Mercedez noticed Barbra lift her

eyebrows in shock.

"Really," Barbra said looking at Mateo. She gulped as she closed the book she was reading. Mercedes glanced at him. He slowly stirred the pasta. She couldn't believe it. Her father obviously knew the truth.

"Yeah really." Mercedes sat her bowl of cereal on the counter. "But come on, no need to act surprised. We all know it was your dad's money who has been keeping my mother alive." Barbra gazed at Mateo once more.

"We have to tell her," Mateo said. He lowered the heat from the pasta and sat down at the table while Barbra placed Steph on the high chair. "Sit down," he told Mercedes. She sat down next to him.

"As you said, your mother's insurance stopped paying for her medical bills back in 2004. After talking to your dad and my father, he agreed to help her out," Barbra started.

"I still don't get why you guys didn't tell me. She's my ma." "We were planning to tell you," Mateo began. "The time just never seemed right." Mercedes nodded her head. She truly was happy, but something didn't add up.

"I'm grateful, but I gotta wonder what the catch is." "The catch?" Barbra questioned.

"I know you made a deal with your father on my mother's behalf. Question is, at what price is he keeping her alive?" Barbra face gave her away. She looked guilty. Mateo seemed as if he knew what was going on also.

"As a neurosurgeon, my dad thinks she can wake up with a specific surgery. Our deal is we keep her alive as long as she undergoes this operation. I'm sorry. This was the only way--"

"Why haven't they done the surgery yet?" She didn't care what the arrangement was. She would do anything to have her back. If there was a chance of her waking up, Mercedes wanted to take it.

"The procedure is risky. The success rates aren't so great. We also wanted to ask your permission before they performed the

surgery," Mateo said.

"Okay. Do it," Mercedes impulsively answered. She was the only blood related family her mother had. Both of her parents passed away when she was young and the only brother she had died when she was in her late teens.

"Mercedes, at least sleep on it before making up your mind," Mateo suggested. Mercedes got up from the table and began to eat her food once again.

"What's there to think about, Dad? I actually have a chance to get my mom back again." Mercedes shoved a spoonful of cereal in her mouth. "Do it." Mercedes drank the leftover milk before placing her empty bowl in the sink.

"I don't want you to get your hopes up, just in case it doesn't work," Mateo told her. Mercedes didn't let Mateo's realism affect her choice. She was not going to waiver.

"It will. I have a good feeling. You gotta have faith," Mercedes said placing her hand on his shoulders. If God helped her through Barbra's induced labor, she was sure he would come through for her mother's recovery. ***

Angela stood as she glanced down at her cell phone that was rested on the kitchen table. Just an hour earlier, Patricia called to say that neither Jesse nor she were a match for Caleb. It took her by surprise that she wasn't a match. The only person who could help her was the one person she loathed the most. Once she heard a thud on the door, she opened it.

"You called?" Chuck questioned as he leaned against the entrance with a sneer. He had on a coffee colored sweater, black slacks, and jet black shoes. His dark hair was combed back.

He closed the door before moving towards her. She tensed up as he got closer. To his shock, she didn't back away from him. He stopped when he was about a foot away from her.

"I did. My mother and sisters aren't home. It's just...you and me."
"Wasn't too long ago when you claimed to want nothing to

do with me," Chuck cautiously responded. "You better not be trying to set me up."

"I'm not." He gave her a hard look before slithering over to the couch and taking a seat. Angela turned around to face him. "You were right. We have a son together. He's got cancer and I need you to get tested to see if you're a match. You can save his life by giving him some of your stem cells." Chuck sucked his upper teeth as he got up from the couch.

"Let me get this straight, I save your son's life and get nothing in return," he said snaking his way over to her.

"No, you save *our* son's life and get the satisfaction of knowing you at least did one good thing in your life," she snapped. Trying to converse with Chuck was infuriating. She already couldn't stand him and now she had to beg him to save Caleb's life.

"Breathe. I can help our little boy with a price."

"Of course." She picked up an envelope full of cash from the table. She had a feeling Chuck would try to blackmail her. She passed the envelope over to him. "There's three hundred dollars in there."

"Out of all the problems I got in this world money ain't one of them. Who the hell do you think pays the bills in this very home? That's the only reason why your mother's with me anyways. In return, she gives it up to me. And let me tell you, that mother of yours is wild in bed. Always has been--"

"Spare me the details," she cut off in disgust. She didn't need the mental image. "What do you want from me? What do I have to do for you so you can save his life?" she impatiently asked him.

"You."

"What do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean." He held his craggy hand on her stomach. "Our son used to be in there," he said glancing down at her abdomen as he drummed his fingers against her belly. Angela cringed. Every touch from him made her want to puke. "I always wanted a son and when I finally get one, you give

him away."

"Get your hand off of me." She shoved his hand away and protectively covered her stomach with her arms.

"You better get used to me having my hands on you if you want me to save his life."

"I'm not gonna date you."

"I'm not asking you to. I'll give you what you need in exchange for one night, one *passionate* night of love making." Angela repulsively glared at him. "What's it going to be, Angela? As I see it, that little boy's life is in *your* hands."

"Fine. I'll do it," Angela agreed, swallowing her pride. It was only going to be one night with him. One night of hell. Of hatred and disgust. She pushed her feelings out of her head. She made a promise to Caleb to make sure he was okay and she intended on keeping her word. Chuck grinned as he fiercely licked his upper teeth.

"We do this my way. I want you for an entire night. Say from seven at night to seven in the morning. We'll eat dinner first. Then we'll head up to a hotel room. We'll sip champagne while we eat chocolate covered strawberries. Then," he said in her ear. "We'll make love 'til the wee hours of the morning." Angela swallowed the vomit that came up her throat.

"Okay. Under one condition. You wear protection." "No. It doesn't feel natural that way."

"What? You want me to get pregnant again?" she questioned. Ever since the last time she got knocked up, she took extra precaution to make sure the men she was with wore protection.

"You won't. Use that money you got over there to buy the morning after pill. Do we have ourselves a deal?"

"We do." He grabbed her face and kissed her. She knew better than to push him off of her. She almost threw up again when his tongue found its way into her mouth. As repulsed as she was, she didn't pull away. If she could handle making out with him maybe she could make it through one night of hell with him.

"You gotta be kidding me," Christy said. Chuck and Angela stopped kissing. They looked at the door where Christy was standing with her basketball duffel in her hand. Angela hadn't heard the door opening. She hadn't expected for Christy to be back so soon. Chuck wiped the lipstick off of his mouth.

"The fourteenth of this month. And go back to being a blonde," Chuck said before leaving. Angela made her way to lock the front door. She could feel Christy staring at her, waiting for an explanation.

"You tell everyone to stay away from Chuck and here you are with your tongue shoved down his throat," Christy said dropping her bag on the floor. Angela went over to the sink. She turned on the faucet and used the running water to wash the taste of Chuck out of her mouth.

"You don't understand." Angela hadn't told her family about her son's health.

"I think I do. Jackie was right. You're a selfish whore who deserves every bad thing coming to you." Angela frowned. They got into arguments before, but this had to be the most insulting on her part.

"You talked to Jackie?"

"Yeah. I did. I defended you before to her and other people. But no more. Now I see how accurate they are about you," Christy snapped in disappointment. "How do you think Mom's gonna feel when she finds out her own daughter is having an affair with her boyfriend."

"We'll never know 'cause you're not gonna say a word to her about this."

"Don't threaten me, Angela. I'll tell her if I want." Angela glared at Christy with irritation. She had gone too far that day and she was fed up. Nothing was going to get in her way of saving her son, including her own sister. Angela fumingly grabbed her wrist.

"Tell Mom and I swear on Dad's grave I'll never speak to you again," Angela snarled at her.

Ms. West handed back the Algebra II tests the students took a couple of days ago. Amanda smiled when she saw she got a ninety-three percent. She turned her body around to see what her brother got on his exam. So far that year, he always got a higher grade in the class than her. She was determined to not let that happen again.

"What'd you get?" Amanda asked him seeing that his arm covered his grade.

"It doesn't matter," he replied, aware of her competitiveness. "You probably did better than me." Amanda snatched his test to see his grade. "Hey, give that back!" Amanda threw it back at him when she saw his ninety-seven percent.

"I don't get it. All you did the night before the exam was play video games while I was studying and yet you still manage to get a better grade than me."

"It's not a competition, Amanda."

"Mr. and Ms. Prescott, talk on your on time," Ms. West demanded.

"Yes, ma'am," Amanda and Troy said in unison.

"Now class, does anyone have questions about the test?" Troy lifted his arm up.

"I actually had a question on number fifteen. You marked my answer wrong even though it's right." Amanda went to number fifteen. She also got the question wrong. The question was asking to solve for the inverse fraction. The students turned to Troy. Nobody ever questioned Ms. West's grading.

"I don't think so, Troy."

"Can I at least show you on the board?"

"Go ahead." Troy got up and solved the problem on the marker board. When he finished, he explained the mistake Ms. West made that made her believe the answer was $f_{-1}(x) = (x - 1)/3$ rather than $f_{-1}(x) = (x + 1)/3$. Ms. West carefully reviewed the problem on the board. "Well, Troy, you are right," she admitted in defeat. "Everybody, pass your exams up. I'll omit number fifteen and add three points to everyone's test." Everybody in the class

except for Amanda cheered for Troy. "Also, Troy, see me after class." When class was over, Amanda waited outside the door for him, wanting to know what Ms. West talked to him about. After a couple of minutes, he came out.

"What'd West want?" Amanda asked.

"Nothing."

"Troy--"

"Nothing. Just drop it." Amanda grabbed his shirt collar as she gave him a dirty look.

"Charles Troy Prescott IV, *what did she say?*"

"She just said I passed the exam to get into the second semester of pre calc, even though it's already begun," he replied in fear.

"Oh," Amanda said releasing his shirt. She patted down the area she wrinkled. "Congratulations," she added sarcastically. After parting ways, she started walking to her AP physics class, contemplating how she could do better academically than Troy. She was tired of him always beating her when it came to the books.

"I've been looking for you, baby girl," Adam said coming up to her. Before she could object, he lifted her above the ground with one of his arms around her whole body. He held her stiffly as he gave her a huge kiss on the lips. Amanda flailed her hands at her sides. She planned on going out with Adam to become popular. However, actually kissing him on the mouth was not a part of her scheme.

She could taste what he had for lunch. A cheeseburger, fries, and pork rind chips. "Adam!" Amanda exclaimed when she was finally able to push his mouth off of her.

"What's wrong?" he asked, placing her back on the ground. "We've been talking for a month. Don't you think I deserve a kiss by now?" Amanda had been *talking* to Adam since the beginning of January and it was the start of February.

"Of course. I'm just... not that type of gal who kisses a guy in public," Amanda lied. She glanced around to see if anybody saw them. If she had to sacrifice kissing Adam in the middle of the

hallways between classes, the right people better have been watching and taking note of it.

"Oh, come on. Don't be a prick." Adam ran his fingers through his dirty blonde hair as he reached in his back pocket. He pulled out a pack of gum and a flyer. He slipped the gum in his mouth. Amanda rolled her eyes, annoyed that he decided to make his breath decent after he planted a big one on her. "J- Ryde and his band are playing at Café Lounge on Valentine's Day around seven." He showed her the red flyer. Though she wanted to use him, she was not going to be his Valentine's date.

"I don't know if I can make it-"

"Try to make it. You can meet my friends."

"In that case," she began with a smile. Finally she was getting somewhere with this so called relationship with Adam. "Of course I'll go. I mean I must be pretty special to you for you to invite me to meet your friends."

"You are, baby girl," he replied before giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Chapter 9

"...enough is what it takes to walk away."

"So, who's going to the Café Lounge on Valentine's Day?" Keisha asked as she took a seat at the lunch table. "Keagan and I are going."

"Me," Julia responded.

"Same here," Amanda piped in. As the day passed by, she found out more people were planning to go to the Café Lounge, a local restaurant, for Valentine's Day.

"What are ya'll doing after the concert?" Keisha asked. "Well," Julia began, feeling a bit embarrassed. "Eddie and

I are gonna consummate our relationship."

"What?" Keisha said.

"I thought you was for abstinence 'til marriage," Mercedes said. She was surprised. Since Julia and Mercedes were in middle school, Julia always talked about saving herself until marriage.

"Things change. Eddie and I are in love. What difference does it make if we make love now or wait until after we get married. It's not like we're not gonna be together forever," Julia explained. Mercedes listened in support, even though she didn't agree with Julia. Mercedes didn't think her relationship with Eddie would last forever. Of course when she was in love with Robbie, nobody could tell her otherwise either. Mercedes wanted to be with Robbie at any cost, even at the expense of her family and best friends.

"Be safe," Mercedes advised her childhood friend in a low voice.

"Of course," Julia responded as her cheeks turned red. "My dad actually gave me a credit card. I used it to book a hotel for Valentine's Day."

"Are you going to look like *that* on your special night with Eddie?" Amanda asked as she nibbled on her French fries.

"What's wrong with the way I look?"

"Where do I begin?" Amanda started. She picked up a handful of Julia's wild curls. "This *hair* of yours is *unexplainable*. The eighties called. They want their big hair back. Nails are not here to release stress," Amanda added grabbing Julia's left hand. Julia looked down at her bitten nails. "And dear goodness, who does your eyebrows? It looks like you used a chainsaw to chop that uneven mess you claim to be your 'brows.'" Julia touched her eyebrows wondering if they were that uneven. She usually used a razor to shape them. "And don't get me started on your wardrobe-

"

"Cool it, Amanda," Mercedes said, wanting to protect Julia as she saw Julia's cheeks turn a darker shade of red.

"It's okay, Cedez," Julia began. Although she appreciated Mercedes having her back, she didn't want Mercedes and Amanda to get into another argument. Besides, she wanted Eddie to find her attractive on Valentine's Day. "Amanda, can you help me?"

"Sure. Just bring that credit card with you the day before and I'll help you get a makeover that you so desperately need."

"Okay, stop clowning her, *Mrs. Todwell*," Mercedes teased, referring to Adam's last name.

"Very funny," Amanda snapped.

"I get you're on the rebound, but isn't the rebound guy supposed to be an upgrade from the ex?" Mercedes asked.

"I agree. Adam's def a downgrade from Julio," Keisha said. "He is not. Adam's popular...well known... athletic...and umm..."

Amanda said struggling to find more reasons to justify dating him.

"A meathead," Mercedes filled in. "I had him in my bio class last year and he swore up and down that humans aren't mammals since they're not completely covered with hair from head to toe."

"So what if he's not the brightest crayon in the box?"

"He's also a man whore. This guy's been with half the girls at RHS," Keisha added.

"That could just be a rumor," Amanda replied, annoyed that the girls were completely right about Adam.

"What can just be a rumor?" Adam asked as he came behind Amanda and stabbed the side of her stomach with his index finger. She jumped up and rubbed her side in slight pain. Amanda had enough of his surprises for that day.

He squeezed in between Amanda and Julia and faced Amanda as he kept his complete back towards Julia. "I skipped West's boring lecture to see you," he said.

"Did you?" she asked taking a sip from her diet Pepsi. "Aren't you gonna introduce me to your hot friends?" he

asked as his hand made its way to her lap. Seeing this, Amanda took hold of his hand and held it. She refused to give him an opportunity to grope her. After Amanda introduced the table to Adam, she realized someone was missing.

"Where's Angela?" Amanda asked.

"At the library. She said she had to study," Mercedes responded.

"She's been studying a lot lately." She realized that Angela didn't come to lunch as often as she used to before winter break. When she did, it felt as if she wasn't really even there since she hardly talked.

"Forget about es Fresh not being here," Adam said letting go of Amanda's hand. He grabbed Amanda's half eaten turkey sandwich and began to chow down on it. The girls looked at him, on the verge of laughter. "Do you mind?" he asked waving the sandwich in her face, with his mouth half full.

"Go right ahead," Amanda replied trying to hold back her

disgust. After he ate the sandwich, he downed most of her diet Pepsi. "Here, I left you some."

"You shouldn't have," she sarcastically responded. She knew damn well she wouldn't drink out of the soda bottle again.

"Oh yeah, I came to ask if any of your friends wanted to go out with my buddy. He's coming back from Rutgers for Valentine's Day and he needs a date," Adam announced. "Any takers?"

"Mercedez," Amanda said.

"Mercedez what?" Mercedez replied.

"You can go. It's not like you've got a hot date this Valentine's Day."

"I don't care. I'm not gonna go on a blind date. No offense to your friend, Adam."

"Sorry, she's still hung up on her ex, who broke up with her since June," Amanda said.

"No wonder she's so bitter," Adam said.

"One, I'm not bitter. Two, I broke up with him. And for the record, I'm not hung up on my ex. Maybe I just like being single," Mercedez retorted. Being single made life less complicated. She didn't have to worry about things like looking good every day or trying to constantly please her boyfriend.

"Then go out with him. We're not asking for you to marry the guy," Adam said.

"Fine." It was just one date. Besides, anything would be better than the Valentine's Day she had the year before.

"Cool. I'll tell him." Adam turned Amanda's head and kissed her. Right before he slipped his tongue in her mouth, she pulled away.

"Adam, save some kisses for later, okay," she said forcing a smile on her face. The bell rang for the end of lunch.

"Sure thing, hot stuff," he agreed. He gave her butt a slap after they both stood up. Amanda shot him a dirty look, annoyed by his obnoxious behavior. "I'll call you later," he said before leaving. Once he left, the table roared with laughter.

"Girl, you're mad right. He's such an upgrade from Julio,"

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took a seat. "What the hell was that out there?"

"What do you mean? I busted my ass trying to win--"

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about you not shaking the other girls' hands after the game." After the game, Mercedes refused to shake any of the opposing teams' hands. She knew she was being a poor sport, but she didn't care. The opposing team was supposedly the worst in the league. Yet, they lost to them. "It's that attitude of yours that's keeping you away from playing on varsity. The varsity coaches don't want to deal with your temper."

It wasn't the first time Mercedes was a poor sport. She also had a bad habit of yelling at her teammates when they continuously didn't do what they were supposed to do. "As a senior, you will no longer be eligible to play for junior varsity. The only way you're going to be able to play for the team is to play on varsity. So you need to keep your attitude in check if you want to play on that level next year."

"I need to put gas in the car," Chuck said to Angela turning off the engine of his red 2000 Chevy truck at the gas station. Angela kept her arms tightly folded as she focused her attention out of the window.

"I gotta go buy something," Angela announced, seeing Chuck reaching out to put his arm around her. Angela got out of the car and walked inside the convenience store. She roamed the aisles, waiting for the man to finish pumping gas in Chuck's vehicle before she went back.

"Ang." She twirled around in response to the familiar voice. It was Jesse. He had his hair combed back. He wore a black buttoned down shirt with a red tie along with black jeans. He had on silver chains on the pocket of his jeans and wore black boots. "Jesse," she said mesmerized by his beauty.

"Wow, you look, amazing," he replied in fascination. She blushed. She wore her now blonde hair down in curls. She wore a strapless sweetheart neckline short red Valentino dress along with a simple pair of black Jimmy Choo heels that Chuck brought her for

their occasion.

"Thanks," she responded.

"Got a hot date. Any guy would be lucky to have you." She blushed once more. She wished it was him who she would be spending Valentine's Day with and not Chuck.

Jesse glanced over her head and frowned. Angela turned around and saw Chuck snaking his way over to them.

"Why don't you run along, Jesse," Chuck told him in a sneer. Angela cringed, feeling his arm slither its way to her waist.

"Get off of her!" Jesse exclaimed, shoving Chuck away from Angela.

"Jesse! Calm down!" Angela exclaimed, placing her hands against his chest in attempts of calming him down.

"No, Angela! You can't tell me to calm down. Not after all that he did to you. And for him to come in here and touch you like that!" he angrily said. As much as she wouldn't mind seeing Chuck getting hurt, she needed for the night to continue so she could honor her part of the deal so Chuck could honor his. Besides, she didn't want Jesse to get arrested for assault and battery.

"If you care about me, you'll walk away," she added, taking her hands away from him.

"No. I can't leave you alone with him." "I'm fine--"

"What do you mean you're fine? What are you even doing with Chuck?" he asked in confusion.

"Me and her are on a date," Chuck announced with a smirk. Jesse turned to Angela, in more confusion, knowing how much Angela hated Chuck. "And she's 18 so ain't nothing you can do about us making love," he added sucking his upper teeth. Jesse swung his arm back and slammed his fist across Chuck's face. Chuck stumbled backwards as he held onto his cheek.

"Out! All of you!" the owner of the store screamed, swinging a bat up in air. "Before I call cops!" he added in his thick Indian accent. They all rushed out of the store.

As soon as they walked outside, Jesse grabbed Angela's

arm. Feeling her heart jump, she yanked her arm away.

"Ang, you're obviously not thinking straight--"

"I'm thinking perfectly clear. What I do is my business. And Chuck is right. I'm 18 so there's nothing you can do about any of this, so back off. Please," she added, secretly wishing she could tell him the truth behind her being with Chuck.

"You heard her, boy. So leave before I call the cops and have you arrested for battery." Jesse stood still as he watched them climb into his truck and drive away. Angela glanced away from Jesse, not wanting to see how hurt and disappointed she made him feel.

Though Chuck kept chatting, Angela kept quiet on their way to the restaurant. Just before they got out of the car, Chuck violently grabbed her arm and dug his nails into her wrist.

"Keep acting like you don't want to be here and I'll make sure you experience the worst pain tonight. Worse than that night we conceived our son," he threatened. Angela snatched her wrist back and tried not to cry. Though she tried to black out the night he raped her, the ill memory kept playing over and over in her head. She reminded herself to stay focus. The more she cooperated with Chuck, the less painful the night had to be.

"Sorry," she apologized.

"Good." He positioned his hand on her lap. "Why don't we play *Don't Tell* for a while?" he asked rhetorically.

"Okay," she responded in a small voice. She closed her eyes and clutched the sides of her seat as she felt his cold hand move underneath her dress. She felt hot tears run down her face when his hand moved upwards.

"Do you want to play a game?" Chuck asked a seven year old Angela. Angela raced over to where her jump rope was. She loved having Chuck around. Whenever he came over he always made sure to bring her a treat, whether it was candy or a new toy. She handed him the jump rope hoping he wanted to play with her. He glanced down at the rope and grinned.

"I was thinking about a different kind of game," he said. Chuck

gazed around the room. He viciously licked his upper teeth. "A game called Don't Tell...Your parents and sister are outside keeping the guests company." Her parents were throwing a small outdoor barbeque for the summer. Most of the guests were outside. "So, I was thinking we can finally play this new game. The thing is, if we play this game, you got to keep it between me and you 'cause if you tell other people, they'll want to play too and that won't make the game fun. Don't you want the game to be fun?"

"Yes."

"Okay, come on." Chuck took her small hand and led her to her bedroom. He locked the door and took a seat on the bed. "Come sit on my lap." Angela did as she was told.

"How do you play the game?"

"How about I show you rather than explain it to you..."he added placing his hand on her lap.

"STOP!" Angela screamed in tears. She threw Chuck's hand away from her body. It was game over for Chuck and her playing *Don't Tell*.

"Do I need to remind you what's on the line?" Chuck yelled back at her.

"I don't care! I swear that's the last time you'll ever put your dirty hands on me again!" She abruptly got out of the truck and left Chuck behind.

The Café Lounge was a local restaurant and bakery in Roctown. They made renovations recently, placing a small stage, in hopes that entertainment would help bring in sales.

The Café Lounge began to use the stage more often with different acts from poetry nights to hiring local bands. Pink, white, and red balloons were scattered around the restaurant. There were several round tables decorated with red tablecloths.

"I can't believe you talked me into coming. Where's my date anyways?" Mercedes asked Amanda and Adam.

"He'll be here. Don't have a pickle," Adam responded. Amanda and Mercedes sat at a table with Adam, Sal, Gina, and

Jackie. They had one more seat open for whoever Mercedes's date was.

"Gina, Jackie," Amanda began looking at the two seniors. She got off on the wrong foot with the two most popular girls at RHS. She wanted to make amends and in exchange, hopefully they would let her in their clique. "I just wanted to apologize about the bathroom incident that happened last semester. I was... out of line to talk to the two of you like that."

"You were out of line," Jackie said. Jackie was a couple of inches taller than Gina. She had brownish blonde hair, dark green eyes, and was average height.

"Don't sweat it, Amanda. That was forever ago," Gina said sounding somewhat sincere. Gina ran her fingers through her medium length dark brown hair. She was average height, slender, and had dark brown eyes. Both she and Gina wore red cocktail dresses.

"Doesn't it bother you that she's dating your ex?" Jackie asked Gina about Adam.

"Gina, if it bothers you, I can break it off with him," Amanda said in a low voice so Adam couldn't hear. She didn't think Adam could hear anyways. He was standing up along with Sal, playing a game on his PlayStation Portable.

"It's fine," Gina quickly replied, distracted by a text on her cell phone.

"It's not a good thing for you to date your friends' exes," Jackie snapped at Amanda.

"Then why did you?" Amanda questioned giving her a dirty look. She knew she had to work Gina over Jackie since Gina was the head of the well-known kids at RHS.

"She has a point, Jackie," Gina stated, glancing at her cell phone. Jackie rolled her eyes.

"Are you texting your boyfriend?" Jackie asked Gina. Gina nodded as she covered her phone so Jackie couldn't see who it was. "I still don't get why you won't tell anybody who your mysterious boyfriend is."

"He must be one lucky guy," Amanda complimented. A little brown nosing couldn't hurt.

"He is," Gina admitted smiling.

Mercedez continued to play solitaire on her phone while waiting for her date. She sighed, wondering where her date was.

"Hi, guys. We're the IMViC band," Jesse told the audience over the microphone. "We're gonna play a cover of Foreigner's *Juke Box Hero*." Jesse tuned his bass guitar before him and his band began to play.

"Here's your guy," Adam told Mercedez. Mercedez let out a little laugh when she saw who was standing beside her. It was Vic, Robbie's old friend.

"Baller chick," Vic said. He took a seat next to Mercedez and gave her a sideways smirk.

"If I knew you were my date I would've canceled," she said.

"Ouch."

"I'm serious. How do you think Robbie's gonna feel when he finds out his friend went on a date with his ex?" Every time she was ready to move on, there was someone or something to remind her of Robbie. She didn't have a direct problem with Vic. Her problem with him was that he was her ex's friend.

"I got news flash for you, Baller Chick, Robbie's not checking to see who you're dating. He's all the way in Pennsylvania."

"Pennsylvania? Since when?" she questioned. It must have been recently. Even though they were broken up, he would've told her that he was leaving town. Right?

"Since back in the summer. I thought he told you. Sorry," he added sounding remorseful.

Mercedez took a sip from the Sprite she had on the table. "He acts like we never when out. You would think he would at least have the decency to tell me he was leaving, you know," Mercedez complained. "But nooo, he just keeps his mouth shut and lets me find out a half of year later that he's gone." She angrily slammed her cup on the table. Even though he was in another state, Robbie

still managed to get her worked up. She suddenly felt hot all over. She hated how much she missed him. "I'm gonna go get some air." She wasn't up for watching couples in love dancing and making out.

She got up and left the building. She marched outside to an unusually warm February night.

She whipped out her cell phone and ran down to Robbie's number. She stared at the screen as she made her way to the side of the building.

After hearing noise, she looked up. Gina had her back against the brick wall and her arms around some guy's neck. The guy had his arms around her body as they kissed. Mercedes squinted to see who this mysterious guy was. Her mouth dropped when she saw it was Troy. Her phone slipped out of her hand. Gina and Troy stopped making out when they heard the sound of the phone hitting the ground. They both looked over to Mercedes in shock. "My bad," Mercedes said. She bent over to pick up her phone.

"I'll call you later," Gina mumbled to Troy. She swiftly went back inside the restaurant. On her way back, she gave Mercedes an apologetic look. Troy started to go after her but stopped.

"I won't tell anybody," Mercedes said to Troy. She figured out that he was Gina's mysterious boyfriend.

"Thanks," he said scratching the back of his head. "Crazy, huh?" he asked with his wide smile.

"Surprising. Isn't she two years older than you?" No wonder Gina didn't want anybody to know about her love life. They walked over to the bench that was in front of Café Lounge and sat down.

"Two years and a half. When we first met, she assumed I was a year younger than her since I mostly had junior classes. I let her believe that. Then I told her the truth. She was gonna break up with me 'cause of that, but we worked it out. We figured that our age difference doesn't matter. As long as we love each other."

"Age shouldn't matter. How long has it been?"

"Four months a couple of days ago. Mercedez, I'm in love for the first time."

"I'm happy for you, Troy." She gave him a grin. She could tell he was in love. She had the same look on her face during the better times in her relationship with Robbie. "She treats you right?"

"She does."

"Good. 'Cause if she doesn't, Cousin Mercedez will have to beat her up," Mercedez joked. They laughed as they looked out into the night.

Mercedez glanced down at Robbie's name on her cell phone. As much as she missed him, she couldn't be with him. Remembering how badly he treated her, she deleted his number. If she was ever going to start something new with a guy she had to close the chapter of her life that Robbie ruled. ***

Before Angela stepped inside her home from what seemed to be a long bus ride there, she took a deep breath and wiped all of her tears. Though she cried most of the way, she needed to keep it together. Her family had no idea what was going on. They didn't know about Caleb's cancer or about Chuck's blackmail. Angela wasn't worried that the truth would come out. After all, she was used to keeping secrets, especially the one about Chuck being Caleb's biological father. Her family assumed that Caleb was Jesse's real son.

Stepping inside, she found Kim sitting on the couch drinking a beer. "I thought you'd be back tomorrow morning," Kim said.

"Me too," Angela mumbled, locking the front door.

"So a guy buys you a fancy dress and you don't give it up to him. Impressive." Kim took a sip from her beer as she leaned forward from the couch. "Maybe if I held back I would've gotten jewelry. Diamonds perhaps. Instead, I'm home alone on Valentine's...Chuck couldn't take me out. Said something came up."

"You disappointed?" Angela asked, hoping Kim wasn't starting to catch feelings for Chuck. Kim shrugged her shoulders. She pulled out her cigarette that was resting on the coffee table and lit it.

"The difference between me and you is I keep my eyes on the prize. The money. I don't have time to fall in love 'cause the moment you do is the moment you start making mistakes. Remember that," Kim added, blowing a ring of smoke out.

"I will," Angela replied agreeing about the love part. Love made things messy.

She made her way to her bedroom, thankful that her sisters were away for the night at their aunt's home. She couldn't wait to go to sleep to get over the hellish Valentine's Day. The next day she would try to figure out how she could save Caleb.

"So tell me," Kim started. "Had fun with Chuck tonight?" Angela's heart dropped. She hoped Kim wouldn't find out the truth. Kim knew about Chuck raping her, but she wondered if she was aware that he molested her as a child.

"What?" Angela managed to say after a moment of silence. "I was with Chuck last week and I saw a receipt with that same dress you're wearing. I thought the dress was his gift for me."

Angela turned to face her mother.

"It's not what it looks like--"

"So you're *not* wearing the same exact dress I saw on the receipt and Chuck *wasn't* the one who picked you up today?" she rhetorically asked. "I must be imagining things," she added sarcastically. Angela gulped. She hadn't realized her mom was home when Chuck picked her up earlier that day.

"I um...it's true," Angela said looking at her mom, expecting for Kim to curse her out or ask her why she went on a date with Chuck. Kim nodded her head as she smoked away. "I'm sorry."

"Why? You cringe every time he's around you. I know you hate him, Angela."

"I know."

"Then why? He has something on you," Kim said, getting up from the couch. She began to pace the floor, trying to figure out why her daughter would decide to go on a date with her rapist. Angela kept her mouth shut. How could she tell her mom the truth when she couldn't trust her? "Is it money?" she asked, pausing in front of Angela. "It couldn't be money. I haven't taken cash from you for a while now. But if it's money that you need, I can give you more. I don't want you sleeping around for money--"

" 'Cause that's your job, right?" Angela snapped. Kim glanced away from her daughter as she started to pace again.

"Sorry," Angela said, not wanting to argue with Kim. "I was gonna sleep with him tonight. But...I couldn't go through it."

"Why, Angela? Why the hell would you sleep with a man you hate?" she asked, as she stopped pacing.

"Because he's the only one who can save my son!

Remember my son Caleb? He's sick with cancer and my stem cells don't match his. If I don't do something, he could die. Do you get it, Kim? My son might die 'cause I was too scared to spend one night with Chuck--"

"Where does Chuck fit in all of this? Jesse is Caleb's fath--" Kim started but stopped. Her face turned pale as she and Angela's eyes met. Kim quickly looked away. Angela's heart raced, realizing that the truth was finally out.

Kim placed her hand over her mouth for a quick second before grabbing her jacket. She watched in confusion as Kim walked out the front door. Angela waited a few minutes before following her outside.

Kim was leaning against the trailer smoking another cigarette as she stared out straight ahead of her. "Say something. Mom..." Angela started. She knew that would get Kim's attention. Angela rarely called her "mom".

"I should've known. It all makes sense. So you lied. Chuck raped you earlier than you claimed. He got you...he got you pregnant," Kim said through her teeth. "That bastard." She threw her half cigarette on the floor. "I know I haven't been much of a

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mom to you, but I'm gonna fix this. Chuck is no longer gonna be a problem for you," she continued, refusing to look at her. She yanked out her keys from her pocket and made her way to their car.

"Where are you going?" Angela asked, afraid of what Kim would do next. What did she mean about Chuck? What was she planning? Instead of answering her, Kim gave her one last remorseful glance before putting the pedal to the floor. ***

Eddie slipped the hotel key into the keyhole slot. "So, this is our hotel room," Julia said. They both left the Café Lounge a little earlier to come to the hotel. Eddie took her hand and led her into the room. Inside by the door was a small table that had a bottle of Cristal Champagne in a bucket of ice and two wine glasses. Next to the champagne was a red velvet cake with white frosting. A knife was laid beside the cake. "You like it?" Julia asked. Eddie put his hand on the small of her back.

"Yeah. I love it... love you... I mean I love it and you even more. How'd you get champagne?" Eddie picked up the chilled bottle out of the bucket. "You're not 21."

"The credit card I used is under my dad's name." She went all out to make sure this night was perfect. She never drank alcohol a day in her life. However, she felt that it was appropriate and necessary for their special night.

Julia took off Eddie's jacket that she wore from the chill of the AC and placed it on the chair by the television. He reached to where the two small plates were and handed one to her. He took the knife from the table. "Eddie, wait. I wanna take a picture." She pulled out her digital camera from her purse. They kissed as she took the picture.

After taking another one with the same pose, she placed the camera on the bed. As Eddie cut two pieces, Julia used the corkscrew to pop open the champagne. Removing the top, a cool mist evacuated the bottle's opening. She poured champagne in both wine glasses half way and placed the Cristal bottle down. She carried the glasses by the bed where Eddie was sitting. She sat

down next to him and handed him one. Eddie handed her a plate with a piece of cake and a fork.

"To us." Julia took a sip before engaging in the delicious cake. Although she could fit the whole thing in one bite, she took small pieces. She looked around the room. There was only one bed. This was really going to happen.

Seeing that she was done, Eddie took both their plates and forks and placed them on the table. He moved closer to her and placed his hand on her lap as he tried to kiss her. Julia turned her head to finish the rest of her drink. As soon as she finished, he took the glass away from her and began to kiss her.

"Are we gonna do it with the lights on?" Julia asked between their kisses.

"Do you want it off?"

"I donno." This was it. There was no turning back.

"Are you nervous?"

"A little," she admitted.

"Don't be," he said, brushing her hair out of her face.

"Go slow, Eddie," she replied as he kissed her neck. She nervously placed her arms around him and took one more look around the room.

Time was coming. She took a deep breath as she tried to focus on her first time with her boyfriend. Before he started to kiss her lower than her neck, Julia pulled his head up and pressed her lips against his and sucked on his bottom lip.

"Ow!" he exclaimed after Julia accidentally dug her teeth into his lip. He sat up on the bed and he held it.

"I'm sorry, Pookie! I didn't mean to," she apologized. Never had she bit a boy's lip when kissing them. "Is it bleeding?"

"Yeah," he replied holding his lip. He walked over to the bathroom and closed the door.

"Real, smooth, Julia," she mumbled to herself. "Just relax." She gazed up and saw the bottle of Cristal staring at her. She got up from the bed, picked up the glass, and poured some more in her cup before drinking it in hopes it would make her relax. She tried

to calm her nerves as she felt insecure of her body. Though she lost about five pounds, she still wasn't comfortable about how she looked.

After drinking some more, she went over by the mirror to see if she looked okay. In a matter of one day, she went from looking like a fourteen year old to about eighteen. The day before, she got rid of her rambunctious curls by flat ironing her hair. Since her straightened hair reached her lower back, she had it cut so it was just below her shoulders. She wore more makeup than usual and had the salon redo her eyebrows, making them skinner. Lastly, she got a French manicure and pedicure.

After fixing a few strands of her hair that was out of place and reapplying red lipstick on her lips, she stood up in a seductive way and waited for him to come out. She reminded herself that her boyfriend didn't care about her weight gain. Eddie came out of the bathroom. His lip was no longer bleeding.

"You look so beautiful." Her heart pounded rapidly as she gazed at him, unsure if she was ready to take the next step. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the Bible. "What's wrong?" he questioned, sensing something was off.

"That's a bible," she said to him.

"Yeah. They got one in almost every hotel room." "It sounds like you're talking from experience."

"Julia, when my family vacations, we usually stay at a hotel."

"So you never slept with other girls at a hotel?"

"Yes, but it don't matter. Tonight's about us." Julia reached for the Bible as she sat down on the bed. She turned away from Eddie. She was almost sure that it was a sign. How did she get here? She flipped through the Bible. She couldn't believe she was so strong willed about breaking her promise to God.

"Would you hate me if I said I'm not ready?" Julia asked. "No." He got up and sat next to her. "I'm kind of glad we're not gonna do it."

"Why? I won't live up to what you're used to?"

"Baby, that's not it at all." He took her hands into his. "I never felt this way about a girl before. Every other girl I've slept with was out of lust. But you, you're different." He lifted her chin so she could look at him. Her heart beat faster. "What I'm trying to say is, I would feel guilty for taking something that's so precious to you. I'm not worth it."

"Pookie, you are worth it," she said caressing his face. Her eyes enlarged as she frowned. "It's just, I made a promise to God and-" She stopped to wipe the tears coming down. She disliked how hard this was for her.

"You don't have to explain. We're not ready and besides, God will probably strike me with lightning if I'm the one who causes you to break your promise to God," Eddie joked. Julia laughed through her tears.

"So you understand?" Julia asked in a whisper.

"I do," he softly replied back. He used his hand to wipe her tears away. "We definitely got to slow things down." Eddie reached into his pocket. He grabbed out the ring that he had on Christmas. He took Julia's hand and once again slipped the ring on her finger. "I guess we're back to my Christmas game plan."

"We are." She gazed down at her ring. She took in the image of the cross on it knowing that it wouldn't be coming off anytime soon.

Chapter 10

"...pour ma famille."

Mercedez took a seat at the chair by her mother's hospital bed on the first Saturday of March. She picked up her mom's hand and held it. Today was the day of her risky surgery.

Mercedez resembled her. However, her comatose state had changed her physical appearance. She went from having long honey brownish hair to short curly dark brunette hair and she gained almost thirty pounds.

"It's the day of your surgery. If all goes well, you'll be able to wake up. I've been praying and going to church. You know, keeping the faith. You gotta come out of this, Mommy. I need you. I don't know how much longer I can go on without you," Mercedez said to her unresponsive mother. She ignored the many wires and tubes connected to her body. Hopefully soon enough she wouldn't need any of them to survive.

Mercedez looked at the door when it opened and saw Barbra's father, George. She stood up and extended her hand, wondering what to call him. "Mr. Thomas- Dr. Thomas- Dr. George Thomas-"

"Grandpa George will do," George responded with a familiar wide grin that both Amanda and Troy shared. They shook hands as they smiled at each other. Mercedez watched as he assessed her.

"Grandpa George... thanks so much for keeping my mom alive and for doing this surgery. I really appreciate it." She wasn't

sure what to make of calling Barbra's father her grandfather. She never had a relationship with her parents' fathers. Her mother's dad was dead and her father's was living in Cuba. She saw her paternal grandfather only three times in her life.

"No problem. I'll do anything for family. I consider you and Nick my grandchildren. It doesn't matter if the two of you aren't blood," he added looking at Mercedes.

"Thanks." Mercedes wished her good luck before leaving prior to them prepping her for surgery. When Mercedes went into the waiting room she almost cried. The room was packed. Other than Mateo, Barbra, and siblings, her close friends were all there. "What are you all doing here?" Julia and Keisha were working on their Algebra II packet together at the table while Troy was helping Angela out with her geometry homework by the couch. Amanda practiced her SAT II math problems right beside them. Her friends glanced up from their work to Mercedes.

"Where else would we be?" Julia asked.

"She's right," Amanda said.

"Thank you all...so much." She was overwhelmed with love. She didn't expect so much support from her friends and family. She couldn't ask for anything more. Mercedes put her hand over her heart as she gave them all smiles. She went to each person to give them a hug.

"Can we talk outside?" Mercedes asked Julia as she gave her a hug. Julia and Mercedes put on their coats before heading outside of the hospital. "Yo no supe that you all was gonna be here. Mi familia, usted y Keisha of course, but not the rest."

"Créalo, Cedez. We've all come so far."

"Right. I went from despising Amanda and Angela to them

being down ass friends." Thinking back, Mercedes couldn't believe that there was actually a period of time that she would never consider having a civilized conversation with them, yet there they were supporting her through a tough time. "Anyways, I wanted to know if you could pray for my mom with me." Mercedes had to ask Julia to pray for her mother. Last year, Julia prayed with

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her after Barbra and Stephanie were hospitalized and they turned out okay. A prayer to God for a miracle couldn't hurt.

They sat down on the bench outside. They closed their eyes and held hands.

"Dear Lord, thank you for all you've done. I pray that you'll wake Mercedes's ma from her coma. I pray that you'll guide the surgeons throughout the operation...." ***

Angela took another swing from the vodka she had hidden in a brown paper bag. She was sitting on the bench at the bus stop, watching buses continue to pass her by with no intentions of actually going aboard. Though she was scheduled to work, she called out last minute. She did not want to deal with her demanding boss and unappreciative customers. All of that seemed minute compared to what was going on with Caleb.

She continued to drink the vodka even though it burned her throat. She didn't mind. She needed to get buzzed. It was the only way for her to forget her problems.

"Having a rough day?" a woman in her forties asked, taking a seat beside her. Angela shrugged her shoulders. More like a rough life, but who was she to complain about her problems? She took another sip in hopes the lady would stop talking to her and get on the next upcoming bus.

When the stranger didn't get on the next one that came, Angela pulled out her cigarette and lit it. Maybe she would leave her alone if she smoked. "You're not going to find the answers to your problems at the bottom of the bottle, especially since you're not twenty-one."

"If I was old enough to have a kid at sixteen, I'm old enough to drink at eighteen," Angela retorted.

"So you're a mom?"

"Hardly. Conceiving a baby and giving birth doesn't make you a mother." Angela blew a ring of smoke out. "I gave him away after he was born to a family who can give him everything that I couldn't."

"How did it feel to give him up?"

"I don't wanna talk about it." She threw her cigarette on the floor and stomped on it. She was used to keeping things to herself. Holding it all in drove her mind crazy at times, however, that was normal for her. When she felt like she couldn't take it anymore and wanted to scream, she would rather drink her problems away rather than talk about them.

"It might help to let it out than keep it all bottled up."

"I don't need anybody judging me." Angela ran her fingers through her brunette hair. She dyed her hair back since she left Chuck on Valentine's Day. Chuck made her never want to be a blonde again.

"I won't judge you. I promise." Angela gave her a quick glance before looking away. She didn't know the woman. That was probably a good thing. The woman didn't know her to prejudge her. Angela waited a few minutes in hesitation before she spoke to the stranger.

"You asked me how it felt to give him away. It felt like someone ripped my heart out and never put it back. I hate that I let my son go, but I had to do what was best for him." She couldn't stop thinking about Caleb and the choice she made. She thought about him all of the time after she first had him adopted. After a while, she blocked any thoughts of him out to keep from going insane.

Ever since the Stonewalls called her about Caleb, she imagined how her life would change and wondered if keeping him would have made her happy. "What hurts the most is that I can't help him now that he needs me."

"What do you mean?"

"He has cancer. I'm not a match and his biological father won't help him unless I sleep with him. I love my son more than anybody in this world, but I just can't do that."

"God wouldn't want you to sleep with a man to save your son."

"Yeah, just how God wouldn't let anyone get sick,

especially an innocent kid," Angela sarcastically replied.

"God, doesn't want us hurting. Suffering and sickness is all a part of life. But we can go to God to get through those trials and tribulations. And what doesn't kill us will only make us stronger," the lady responded. "All you have to do is pray to him, believe, and have faith that he'll answer your prayers." Angela rolled her eyes. Talking about God made her tense. She recalled the prayer she made to God back when she went to church with Robbie during the summer. She asked God to keep her son safe. Apparently he didn't get the message. "You know everything happens for a reason, even though we don't understand why."

"Like my son getting cancer. Is God punishing me for not going to church every Sunday or is he punishing me for not saying my daily prayers?" she mockingly questioned.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out once your son is cancer free." "Let me guess, God told you that he was gonna be cancer free?"

"As a matter of fact, he did," she responded with a grin.

Angela felt a cold shiver go down her spine.

"What makes you so confident in God when you can't even see him?"

"It's called faith. Believing in what's not seen rather than what's seen and obvious. Second Corinthians 4:18." They remained silent for a while as a couple more buses passed them by. "You remember when I said that everything happens for a reason? Well, God told me to get off at this bus stop instead of going home. I didn't know why then, but now I know it was to talk to you."

"Yeah, okay." Angela let out a chuckle. She was over this Godly woman. The woman stood up as the next bus approached them.

"Your son is going to be okay. I'll see you around, Angela," she said getting up from the bench. Angela looked down to see if her nametag from work was showing. When she saw that her jacket was zipped up, covering it, she glanced up at the woman in amazement.

"How'd you know my name? I didn't tell you." Instead of answering, she smiled at Angela and got on the public transportation.

"Juliana Adeliz Rodriguez, venga aquí ahora!" Gloria shouted from the kitchen. Julia stopped practicing the new song the worship team planned on performing the upcoming Sunday and placed her guitar back on its stand. She came to New York City to visit him in his fancy condo. Her bedroom was slightly bigger in the City and resembled a hotel room rather than a bedroom someone lived in.

Julia walked out to the kitchen area. She could tell he was upset. He wasn't the type to yell at his kids.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Carlo held up a piece of paper. "This bill."

"You said I could spend as much as I want."

"My problem is not about how much you spent. It's *what* you spent it on." Julia gulped. She just got busted. She should've known that the hotel room would show up on the bill. "I thought when you asked me for a credit card it was to buy clothes or maybe an MP3 player, not to go book a hotel room to sleep with your boyfriend!"

"Papa, I can explain-"

"What's there to explain, Juliana? It's pretty obvious to me what you've been up to. I knew something was up when you came here looking like you just went to a club." It wasn't about the t-shirt and jeans she wore. It was about her physical transformation. Ever since her make over people constantly told her how much better she looked. She was surprised by all of the vain comments.

"It's not what you think-"

"It's exactly what I think." Carlo looked down at the bill again. "Champagne? That boyfriend of yours has got you underage drinking amongst other things!"

"He's not making me do anything I don't wanna do," Julia defended. She was not going to let Carlo blame her boyfriend. If

anything, she was the one who pushed for more intimacy in their relationship. Eddie had been great and so patient.

"*Oh really?* I defended you to your mother last year when she accused you of sleeping with your boyfriend in her bed. Now I know she was telling the truth and you were lying." Carlo slammed the bill on the table. Julia jumped. She didn't know what to say to convince him that she was still a virgin. "I try to treat you like a mature adult and you go behind my back and abuse my trust!" The front door of the condo opened up to a businesswoman. She was chatting on the phone and typing away on her PalmPilot in her other hand. As Julia glanced at her, she tried to recall where she knew her from.

"Okay, I'll call you later," she said, hanging up the phone. "Sorry for busting in like this, Carlo."

"Marge, what's going on?" Carlo questioned in confusion. "Somehow the paparazzi got tipped off that Sonya was coming over here." Julia remembered Marge from the house party her friends and she crashed in Puerto Rico. Marge was Sonya's personal assistant. Julia speculated why Sonya Solis was coming over to her dad's condo, better yet, why she had a key to her dad's place. "The car she's in is circling the block in attempts to throw the paparazzi off, so I got out of the car to tell you. There're still some of them outside the building." Carlo and Julia moved over by the window and gazed out. There were paparazzi stalking outside of the building, ready to take pictures of the famous star.

"Marge, have Sonya's chauffeur go into the parking lot. The only ones who can go into that parking lot has to either live here or be a guest. Tell Sonya I'll leave the door open for her," Carlo added, assuming that Marge had Sonya's keys. Marge went back on the phone to call the chauffeur as she went to the door to unlock it.

"Why is Sonya Solis coming here? Is she still helping you with the album?"

"No." Carlo glanced away from his daughter. "She's coming for another reason. I told Julio already and your mama knows."

"Knows what?" Carlo took a heavy breath before looking back at Julia. He began to toy with his infamous yellow canary diamond pinkie ring. The tone of their conversation changed. He was no longer upset at her. "What is it?" The front door opened. This time it was Sonya Solis.

"How are you, papi?" Sonya Solis asked. She waddled over to kiss Carlo, however she stopped halfway when she saw Julia. "Juliana, I didn't know you were going to be here," she said in shock. "It's good to see you again." She cautiously and apologetically smiled at Julia. Carlo pulled out one of the wooden kitchen chairs for Sonya to sit down. Julia glared at Sonya's gigantic baby bump in a frown. She was about nine months pregnant and it looked as if she was going to give birth at any moment.

"Really?" Julia angrily asked, glaring at him. She could no longer look at the woman who came between her parent's marriage. "So she's the reason why you and Mama are getting a divorce?"

"It's not like that, Juliana," Carlo began.

"It *is* like that. She's having *your* baby even though you're still a married man!" Julia didn't care if Sonya Solis was one of the most famous Latina musicians out now. Her opinion of Sonya greatly dropped in a matter of seconds.

"Your mama and I were legally separated for six months before we filed for divorce. That's when Sonya and I became a couple. It wasn't like we started dating while your mama and I were legally together."

"That doesn't make it better. You're still married to *my mom!* What? Was Mama not good enough for you? Is that why you got your mistress knocked up?" Julia furiously screamed as she pointed at Sonya. Julia was usually level headed through tough situations. However, when she was pushed too far, she would snap in frustration.

"Hey, kid, watch how the hell you talk to Sonya Solis!" Marge exclaimed.

"Don't talk to my kid like that again," Carlo snapped. Carlo

turned to Sonya. "I know you hired her to lick the bottom of your heels twenty-four seven, but the next time she gets an attitude with my kid--"

"Marge, can you wait for us outside?" Marge rolled her eyes before stepping out.

"Juliana, your mama was good enough for me. I was the one who wasn't good enough. I still love your mother--"

"But you're not in love with her."

"I'll always care about her," he responded ignoring her question. "Just know that I'll always love you and your brother with all of my heart."

"Your father's right," Sonya started. "He's always talking about how great you and Julio are--"

"Don't you dare talk to me like you know who I am," Julia retorted refusing to give Sonya the time of day.

"Juliana--" Carlo began.

"Soy grave. Tell your mistress not to ever talk to me again."

Julia stormed off to her room and slammed the door shut. She locked her door and blasted the radio to a piercing volume. She had enough drama for one day!

"How rad is this party?" Adam asked, placing his arm around Amanda's shoulders.

"Rad," Amanda replied. She tried to brush Adam's heavy arms off of her shoulders.

He invited her to a party at Bordo Avenue. Bordo Avenue was the street where most of the crazy parties took place in Roctown. The guests parked their cars all throughout the neighborhood. Though the party was held inside the house, there were several people outside in the front and backyard partying. The two story house where the party was held was infested with the well-known teens of RHS. Inside, many of the teens participated in drinking games, while others danced as they made out with the opposite sex to the deafening music that blared from the stereo.

"Let's dance." Before Amanda had a chance to decline

Adam picked her up over his shoulders and carried her to the dance floor. He placed her down and began to dance behind her. "Back that thang harder, baby girl!" Amanda rolled her eyes annoyed that everything about Adam was aggressive. As he grabbed hold of her waist, she glanced around, wondering where Gina and Jackie were. She didn't feel like she made enough of an impression on the two popular seniors. She needed to continue to work harder to be accepted into the clique. Adam began to slam his body into Amanda's body from behind her. Amanda almost fell forwards from his dancing behind her. Once she regained her balance, she stopped dancing.

"Adam, be a sweetie and get me something to drink. I'm parched."

"Okay." She dodged his kiss when he leaned over. Once he left, she wandered around the house looking for Gina and Jackie. She was planning to invite the two of them to go shopping. She found Jackie downing drinks as she was losing a game of beer pong. Amanda decided against asking Jackie about shopping. She needed to ask the seniors when they were sober, not when they were hammered out of their minds.

"Jackie, have you seen, Gina?" Amanda asked, hoping Gina was sober.

"Have I seen her?" Jackie yelled, slurring. She held her cup of alcohol up. "Have you seen her? She's like Carmen San Diego."

"What?"

"Oh come on. You never seen Carmen San Diego? *Where in the world is Carmen San Diego?*" Jackie began to sing off beat. "With Gina, it's like *where in the world is Gina Giordano?* Jackie laughed hysterically as she drank what was left in her cup.

"Is she here?"

"Weren't you listening to anything I said? Her Italian ass isn't here. I think she said she was going out with her boyfriend or something."

"There you are," Adam said as he approached the girls. He handed her a red cup. Amanda faked a smile as she gazed down at

it. She took a whiff and realized the beverage had been spiked with alcohol. She wasn't much of a drinker. When she drank alcohol, it was either champagne or wine. "Drink up."

"I will," Amanda replied, knowing she wouldn't drink anything Adam gave her to sip on. She wouldn't put it past him to slip a rooie in her drink.

"Can we talk in private?" Adam asked.

"Okay." Amanda subtly dug into her purse, making sure her mace was readily available, just in case Adam got rough. On their way to an empty room Amanda walked slightly behind Adam. When Adam stopped to say hi to one of his buddies, Amanda threw the drink out in one of the fake plants by the stairs. Once they entered the room, Adam closed the door and sat down on the bed. Amanda crossed her arms as she remained standing. "Adam, if you think anything is going to happen, think again."

"I don't want anything *to happen* either. I don't even want to date you."

"Excuse me?" She wasn't attracted to Adam and she didn't like him much, but she was somewhat offended that he didn't desire her physically.

"Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't mind, violating you," he began as he inappropriately looked at her. "But I've got other plans."

"Where are you going with this, Adam?"

"I've been with many women these past four years of high school. But none of them can compare to Gina."

"You're using me."

"Just like you're using me. I know the only reason you're with me is to be one of us. One of the *elites* at RHS. I was going to keep this little game we have going, but it's not working. She's still with her boyfriend."

"Let me get this straight, you used me to get Gina jealous." "Yup. So, we have to think of another way to break Gina up with her boyfriend so I can get with her."

"I'm not helping you do anything, Adam. Like you said, we

should stop this charade we've got going on." Amanda walked towards the door. She didn't need Adam anymore. He paved the way for her to gain access to the popular kids at RHS. She was sure she could handle doing the rest to become well known at their high school.

"Don't and I'll make sure you'll never want to show your face at RHS again." Amanda paused. "You know I've got the power to do that."

"How do you expect me to break Gina up with her boyfriend? She's not jealous that you and I were *dating*."

"Easy. Just tell your brother to dump her."

"Are you saying that my brother, Troy, is dating Gina Giordano?" This was the first time she was hearing about this. She was surprised by how discreet Troy and Gina had been. She wondered how long they'd been dating. It must not have been that long, or else she would have figured it out. Then again, she never took an interest in her brother's dating life.

"Exactly. You've got 'til May to break them up," Adam threatened.

Mercedes disappointingly came back to her mother's hospital room. Though a week passed by, she still hadn't woken up like expected from her neurosurgery. The surgeons assumed that she would have regained consciousness on the day of or day after the surgery.

"I don't know what to say... I thought you'd be awake by now, but—" Mercedes started but stopped, not wanting to get emotional. She glanced out the window at the sunny sky and covered her mouth as she held onto her hand. She prayed to God for answers and guidance. She wondered if prolonging her life in a comatose state was fair to anybody, especially her mother. Mercedes sighed, knowing that she would not want to live like that. She would just want her family to let her go if she was in the same condition as her. "I love you," Mercedes said, not wanting to stay any longer. She was tired of having hope and faith in what seemed

to be an impossible situation.

Mercedez gave her hand a squeeze before letting go. She leaned in to kiss her forehead. As she kissed her, her eyes slowly opened. "What the hell!" Mercedez drew back from her in shock. Her mouth dropped as her heart pounded. Had her mother really opened her eyes? As she took steps away from her, she tripped over the chair that was behind her.

Mercedez kept gazing at her with her eyes popped out. She slowly got up from the floor as she watched her in bewilderment. She pointed to the endotracheal tube that was preventing her from talking.

"Oh my God. Oh my God! Mommy, you're really up!" She rushed over to her side. She waited for this moment for the longest time and now it was actually happening. Seeing her try to fight the tube that was in her throat, Mercedez said, "Don't fight it. I'll go get one of the nurses. They can page the doc to get the tube out."

Mercedez raced out to the nursing station to tell them the miraculous news. A couple of the nurses along with the doctor who was rounding came into the room. Mercedez anxiously waited for the doctor to finish assessing her in the corner of the room. She smiled in anticipation as she watched him deflate the balloon of the endotracheal tube and take it out of her throat.

"Do you know who you are?" the doctor asked.

"Nat- Natalia Washington," her mother said in a hoarse voice. "Where am I?" Natalia, "Talia" glanced around the hospital room in confusion.

"You're at Homestead Regional. Do you know what year it is?"

"2004. It has to be. Right? The last thing I remembered was driving on the Jersey turnpike and there was this semi-truck driving uncomfortably close to my car on the lane next to me. The driver of the truck was kind of swerving. I tried to speed my car, you know to pass the truck. And...and...that's all I can remember," she added as she struggled to regain her memory of the ill-fated night.

"How long have I been here? A couple of weeks?" Talia asked looking confused.

"More like a couple of years. You got into an accident back in January 2004 and it's March 2006 now. The driver of the semi-truck was going on about 26 hours. He fell asleep behind the wheel and hit your car on the passenger side. Your car flipped a few times and you were brought to the nearest trauma center. Though you have been comatose for years, you still maintained brain function. You had an experimental brain surgery about a week ago. We weren't sure it wasn't going to wake you up, but it has," the doctor ended in a smile.

"Over two years?" Talia said in shock.

"It must be overwhelming. We'll give you some time to talk to your daughter. In the meantime, I'll page Dr. Thomas to tell him the great news. We'll be back to do further tests to make sure everything is okay and after we'll talk about physical therapy. Just so you know you are going to feel weak since you have not used your muscles in years." The doctor and nurses moved out the room. Mercedes went over to her with a grin.

"Two years," Talia said once more. "That means you're seventeen." Talia took her daughter's hand. "You're going to be eighteen later this year. You're growing up so fast and I missed two years of your life," Talia cried.

"Mommy, don't cry," Mercedes said. She hated it whenever her mom got upset. Mercedes handed Talia a tissue. Talia wiped her tears as she looked at how much her daughter changed physically. "Look at you. You look so much older. You're taller and your hair is darker."

"I stopped dying my hair, but I can dye it again." Mercedes wondered how she was going to adjust to the many changes that happened in the past couple of years. Perhaps if she dyed her hair she could give her a little bit of what she was used to.

"And that scar beneath your right eye. What happened to your face?"

"I fell over a branch," she lied, not wanting to let her

mother know the scar was the result of domestic violence. Talia nodded her head as she touched her chin length dark brunette curly hair.

"What happened to my hair? I need a mirror, Mercedes." "Here," Mercedes replied handing her a pocket mirror from her purse.

"Oh my gosh!" Talia exclaimed in horror as she saw her reflection in the mirror. "I look horrible!" She shook her head and placed the mirror down on her lap. Talia wasn't vain. However, she was always on top of her appearances. "If I would've known I was going to look like this, I wouldn't have stayed in the coma for that long," she joked. They both giggled. It was good to see that she still had her sense of humor. "I'm so serious, Mercedes. Last time I could pass for a twenty-five year old, now I look like I'm in my mid-thirties."

"You are in your mid-thirties."

"Thirty-five is considered early thirties. What I'm trying to say is two years ago people thought I was your older sister. Now I look like your mom." Talia sighed. Back then, Talia was almost always confused for Mercedes's older sister. Talia wouldn't correct those who made the confusion of her relationship with Mercedes. Mercedes smiled. "The first thing I want to do when I get out of this place is hit the salon. I need to do something with this hair they chopped off and my nails."

"We'll go together," Mercedes responded. She was still amazed that she was no longer comatose and actually talking to her.

"Do you know what I want to do now?"

"What?"

"Give you a hug. Come here, sweetie." Talia wrapped her arms around Mercedes. She ignored the pain she was in by moving so much. That didn't matter to her. It had been so long since she last hugged her daughter. "I love you so much. I'll never leave you like that again," she added. Mercedes melted in her mother's arm. She wanted to stay there.

"I love you too, Mommy," Mercedes told her in happiness.

"What are you all doing here?" Angela asked when she opened the door to her home to Mercedes, Julia, Amanda, and Keisha. The girls planned to see what was bothering Angela. They noticed that she was usually absent from the group and the very few times she was around them, it was as if she was still not present. They could tell that something was off.

"We were-" Mercedes started.

"-in the neighborhood," Amanda finished.

"It's really not a good time," Angela replied. She wasn't in the mood for girl talk. Amanda ignored her and walked inside her home and glanced around. The other girls followed her inside.

"Wow! So this is what inside a trailer looks like," Amanda said. "I must say, it's much bigger than I expected it to be."

"Yeah," Angela responded. Angela went over to close and lock the door, giving up on the idea of getting rid of her guests.

"Can we see your bedroom?" Amanda questioned. The girls all agreed to talk to Angela in private, not in an area where people were able to eavesdrop in their conversation. Angela unwillingly led them to her bedroom. The orderly tiny room was big enough to fit all of the girls.

Her bedroom had a bunk bed pushed to the wall. There was a small window adjacent to the beds. Next to the window was a wooden box filled with the many classic rock albums her father left behind. Beside the albums were Angela's collection of rock and roll and classical music CDs, mostly dated. There was a rocking chair against the wall by the bureau where Angela and her sisters kept their clothes. "I thought you said you had two sisters," Amanda said, noticing that there were only two beds.

"I do. I share a bed with my youngest sister," Angela responded.

"Oh," Amanda said, not used to being around people who had to struggle financially and live in such small quarters. "What an admirable thing for you to do. Anyways..." Amanda closed the

bedroom door and took a seat on the rocking chair. As the other girls sat down on the carpeted floor, Angela walked over by the window.

"We came because we're worried about you," Mercedes spoke.

"Why? I'm fine," Angela defensively replied, crossing her arms.

"You're not," Amanda said. "We're your friends, Ang. We know when things are off."

"I don't know what you guys are talking about," Angela said feeling uncomfortable by all of the people confronting her.

"Girl, we just wanna help you," Keisha said.

"It's not good to keep everything bottled up," Julia added. *Bottled up*. Angela sighed annoyed that it was the second time in the same month that she was told not to keep things bottled up.

"If anything, we came to listen. Vent, scream, do whatever, and we'll listen," Mercedes told her. Angela leaned back against the wall by the window. She was overcome by the care and concern. She never had a group of friends, let alone female friends, who cared about her to notice that something was wrong. The group of girls stayed quiet for a couple of minutes, waiting for Angela to open up.

"When I was fifteen, I- I ugh...I got pregnant," she revealed. Angela kept her eyes on the opposing wall, refusing to look at the girls. That would have been too much. She didn't want to see their reactions when she told them her secrets.

"Did you get an abortion?" Amanda asked. Angela shook her head no. "Miscarriage?"

"No, I had a boy. Caleb. That's his name."

"You have a son? Nobody ever talked about you getting knocked up. Well, besides that rumor last year," Mercedes said. The year before, a rumor spread rampant that Angela was pregnant with either Sal or Robbie's baby after she didn't show up for school for a week. Angela uncrossed her arms, walked over to the bottom bunk bed, and took a seat.

"Back my sophomore year- my first time in tenth grade, they had block scheduling. I got pregnant during the first semester. After finishing those four classes that we had to take, I decided to take all online classes the second semester. I didn't want to go to RHS when I was showing. That second semester I kept a low profile. The only places I went were doctor appointments, Jesse's house, home, and work. And my work is by the highway where truck drivers mostly stop to eat, so it wasn't like I was going to run into anyone from RHS."

"Did you have Caleb adopted?" Keisha asked.

"Yeah. It was what was best for him."

"You miss your son," Mercedes said.

"All of the time. It was the hardest when I first gave him away. Then I blocked it out of my mind. I acted like I never had him. That was the only way I could deal with me not having him. It worked for a while. I only thought about him sometimes. When I did, I'd keep myself busy to take my mind off of him. Now it's different. All I think about is him."

"Do you regret having him adopted?" Julia questioned. "Sometimes. But I know I couldn't give him a good life. His

adoptive parents are good to him. But that's not why he's been on my mind lately." Angela stopped talking and covered her face with her hands, hiding her tears. The girls comfortingly came closer to her.

"Honey," Amanda said placing her arm around Angela as she took a seat next to her on the bed.

"My son has cancer, and I can't- I can't even help him because our stem cells don't match."

"Sorry," Julia said, feeling sad for her friend.

"Shouldn't Jesse be a match?" Keisha asked.

"He's not," Angela responded.

"Because he's not the father," Amanda spoke.

"Amanda-" Julia started, about to scold her.

"It's okay, Julia. Amanda's right," Angela said.

"Then who's the dad?" Mercedes asked.

"Chuck."

"Who's Chuck?" Keisha asked.

"My mom's boyfriend," Angela told them in an ashamed voice. Once again, the room fell silent. The girls didn't know what to say. What was to be said after that?

Mercedez thought back to when she was over Angela's place for the first time. Back then she didn't get why Angela had an intimate relationship with Chuck. She still didn't get why, but she wasn't planning to pry.

"Did you ask Chuck to see if he was a match?" Amanda questioned, breaking the silence.

"I did," Angela began. She wiped her tears as she stood up from the bed. The girls turned their bodies to face Angela. "But he won't do it unless I sleep with him. I love my son to death okay, but I won't- can't sleep with Chuck. I'd do anything else to save my son, but that."

"Chuck raped you. That's how you got pregnant," Mercedez silently said. It made sense. Mercedez remembered how tense and afraid Angela got around Chuck over the summer. Angela went over to the window and gazed out of it. She started to cry again as the thought of Chuck forcing himself on her played over and over in her head. The girls all stood up and went over to comfort Angela once more. By then, there were no dry eyes in the room.

"Ang," Amanda began as she wiped her tears as hers continued to fall. "We are going to help you save your son. Even if it means stabbing that bastard with a needle and stealing his blood."

"I think there's another way. Troy helped me out before and I think he can help you," Mercedez said.

"How?" Angela asked.

"She's right. My brother is a genius when it comes to hacking and solving problems. We just need leverage. All we have to do is get some dirt on Chuck and blackmail him into saving your son's life," Amanda proposed.

Laura Francois

Chapter 11

"...Blackmail."

Amanda dropped her pencil when her timer went off. She was done practicing for her SAT II test. After seeing how well she did on the practice exams she decided to call it quits. It was seven at night and she had the SAT II test the following day.

She walked downstairs to grab a bite to eat before going to bed. Troy was already in the kitchen, sitting on a stool, eating a sandwich while studying for the SAT. He was also planning to take the test the next day.

"Are you done studying?" Troy asked looking up from his prep books.

"Yup. I'm ready to get a better score than you tomorrow," Amanda replied, opening the refrigerator to see what she could eat.

"It's not a competition."

"Sure it is. You know Daddy made it like that." Feeling her sweet tooth kick in, Amanda closed the refrigerator and pulled out the cookie dough ice cream from the freezer. "Didn't you get his message?"

"Yeah. Whichever one of us gets a higher score will get whatever car he or she wants." Their father made a deal with them, in hopes that they would excel in the SAT II test. Amanda hated it when Charles compared her to her brother, especially since Troy always seemed to win with her parents.

For the standardized test, Amanda was going to make sure that wasn't the case. She had been studying the whole year. And besides, getting a brand new car would be great. Most of her upper class peers had already gotten one when they turned sixteen.

"I need a favor."

"I'm not going to take the SAT for you," he joked.

"I wouldn't want you to botch my chances of getting into Princeton," Amanda snapped. She grabbed a spoon and began to dig into her ice cream as she made her way to sit on the stool beside Troy. "Can you help a friend of mine?"

"How?"

"I need you to help me blackmail this guy. I know you're

into hacking and stuff.”

“Why do you need to blackmail him?”

“I’ll give you the details only if you agree to do it.”

“Fine. After the SAT I’ll help your friend out.” Amanda knew Troy couldn’t resist a challenge. After going to Angela’s home last night, Amanda saw a more sensitive and vulnerable side to her. She was determined to help Angela in her time of need.

Hearing his phone go off, Troy glanced at the caller ID. Before he muted and slipped it onto his lap, she caught a glimpse of who was calling. It was Gina. Amanda couldn’t believe it. Troy was really dating the most popular girl at school.

“Who was that?” Amanda questioned, though she knew who it was.

“Just a friend.”

“A girlfriend?” Troy shrugged his shoulders and continued to work on his practice problems. Amanda placed the spoon in the sink and threw away the empty carton of ice cream. “Troy, you can tell me about your girlfriend. I can give you relationship advice.”

“No thanks,” he replied chuckling.

“Why not? I’ve been in relationships before.”

“I would never take relationship advice from you. No offense.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, Amanda, your track record with guys is why. You go out with Spencer, who cheats on you with your *best friend* for months before he finally breaks up with you. Then you start dating Julio who sleeps with some girl he barely knows when he finally makes a commitment to you. And now you’re with Adam Todwell. That guy’s gonna cheat on you, just like the rest of them, Amanda.”

“Shut up, Troy. My relationships are none of your business.” Just hearing all of her past relationships with guys made her feel unwanted and unappreciated.

“Just like how mine is none of your business.”

“I know you are going out with Gina,” Amanda blurted

out. Troy glanced at Amanda with red ears.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You do. Gina's not good for you. She's two years older than you. Do really think she's actually going to stay with you after she leaves for college?"

"She is good enough for me. We don't have a problem with our age difference. And yeah, I do think she's going to stay with me after high school," Troy protectively replied of his relationship.

"What makes you think she's not going to cheat on you with Adam? They've been together for two years."

"She's not. She doesn't like Adam at all. The only reason why you might see them around each other is 'cause they have mutual friends."

"Why does she want you to keep your relationship a secret?"

"Because of what you're doing right now. Everyone's gonna do the same thing, judging us and giving us reasons why we shouldn't be together. We're good without people in our business." Troy sighed after getting so worked up. "Why can't you just be happy for me?"

Amanda pondered his question as she left him to go to sleep. A part of her wanted to be supportive of Troy and to leave his relationship with Gina alone. Then again, her reputation was on the line. She had to make a choice between sabotaging her brother's relationship in order to be popular or butt out of his relationship for his contentment and become a social pariah. ***

Mercedez watched as the physical therapist worked with Talia to help her regain her strength. Talia grimaced holding onto the two wooden bars as she fought through the pain to walk.

"That's enough for today," the physical therapist told her once she reached the end of the walkway.

"I can bring her back to her room," Mercedez offered as they maneuvered her back to the wheelchair. They chatted on their way back to the room about her progress. She was expected to leave

the hospital once she was physically strong to walk and move around.

"I tell you, those workouts are so intense," Talia admitted, giving herself a right shoulder massage.

"It's worth it."

"It sure is. I can't wait to get out of this damn place. I want to smell the flowers outside and eat a cheeseburger and fries, and of course go to the salon 'cause these products I've been using aren't cutting it." Even though Talia was still admitted as a patient, she made an effort to look nice. She had Mercedes buy her cosmetic products to do so. Talia wore her makeup and styled her hair to the best she could. She even started to wear street clothes.

"We'll do all of that once you're out. Do you want me to help you get back in bed?"

"No. I'm fine here. Thanks so much, sweetie," Talia replied giving her a smile. "You've been so good to me." Mercedes grinned back. She tried to visit her every day to make sure she was okay. "You and so many others. Your daddy's been here often. Nick's paid me a couple of visits. Gloria and Keisha's mom have stopped by several times to keep me company too. Even Barbra has come to see me a few times."

"What'd Barbra have to say?" She took a seat on one of the chairs beside the bed.

"Not much. The polite *how are you* and *hope you get better*. You know she isn't too fond of me." Talia and Barbra didn't always get along in the past. It bothered Barbra that Mateo and Talia have been such great friends since the late eighties. Their friendship might not have troubled Barbra if Mateo and Talia were never intimate or never had a child together.

"She didn't tell you?" Mercedes asked, wondering if she knew the truth behind her hospital bills.

"Yeah. She told me about the little girl she and Mateo had after I asked about her. Mateo showed me a picture of Stephanie. She's so pretty. Aren't you lucky! Now you're a big sister. You get to do all of the fun things like go shopping with her and show her

how to wear makeup.”

“You’re right.” Talia didn’t know about how she almost didn’t have a baby sister because of her temper. There was so much she had to catch her up on.

“Anyways, how’s your boyfriend Julio?” “Julio’s not my boyfriend anymore.”

“Since when? Gloria and I always talked about the two of you getting married in the past. When Gloria visited me she didn’t mention that you two broke up.”

“We broke up early last year.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. It just wasn’t there anymore.”

“Oh. So, have there been any other guys after him?” Mercedes turned away from her to her sneakers. She untied her shoelaces and began to tie them slowly. Hopefully she would forget the question she asked. “*Mercedes.*”

“What? Sorry. I didn’t hear you.” “You heard me, Mercedes. Spill-”

“Can I come in?” Barbra asked standing by the door that was already opened.

“Sure. Come in.”

“I’ll let you two talk. I’m gonna go to the vending machine,” Mercedes said. Never had she been happier to see her.

“Buy me a Milky Way and a bag of nacho Doritos,” Talia called out. Though Talia loved junk food she still stayed fit. “Actually get me a bag of pretzels. I need to lose weight, not gain it,” Talia said after seeing how slim Barbra was. Out of all of the things that changed the most about her, Talia was mostly bummed out by her weight gain. Since she woke up, she was able to lose about five pounds.

Mercedes and Barbra exchanged hello’s before she went to the vending machine. She got a bag of pretzels for Talia and a Butterfinger candy bar for herself. Just as she was going to step inside the room she paused by the door. Even though it was cracked, she could still hear what they were talking about.

Normally, she would've been respectful and not eavesdrop, but her mother and stepmother were in an intense conversation.

"...called my insurance the other day and they said they stopped paying my hospital bills years ago," Talia said. "I was talking to your dad and he told me that he was the one who's been paying my bills. He also said that you asked him to do that. Why would you do that for me?"

"I did it for Mercedes... and Mateo. I know how much you mean to them. And I wasn't going to sit there and do nothing, when I had the means to do something," Barbra replied.

"I'm so thankful for you and your father. I will pay the two of you back every penny that you spent on me. I mean it, Barbra. You have my word."

"You don't have to. I know you don't have that kind of money."

"It doesn't matter. I don't care if I have to spend the rest of my life paying you back, I will." Mercedes knew she was serious. Talia was a prideful woman who paid her debts and refused to let anyone help her out monetarily. After all, she had been financially independent since she was in her teens.

"Natalia--"

"For the last time, Barbra, it's *Talia*."

"Fine, *Talia*. I was helping you out. The least you can do is just accept it and move on. I didn't do this expecting something in return!"

"I didn't say you did! I'll forever be grateful for what you've done for me, Barbra. But I'd really appreciate it if you would respect my decision."

"How the hell are you planning to pay me back, Talia? By getting back on the pole?" Barbra asked in frustration. Mercedes's heart dropped. She didn't like how Barbra was talking to her mother. Mercedes peeped in to see Talia's reaction. She saw her nose flare out in anger.

"Yes, that's exactly how I plan on paying you back," Talia snapped. "Got a problem with that?"

Chasing Ghosts

"I do. How can you keep taking your clothes off for money when you have a daughter? Can you honestly look at Mercedes and tell her what you do for a living?"

"That's none of your damn business, Barbra."

"It is because she is my step daughter and is living underneath my roof, not yours!"

"Woman to woman, Barbra, what I do to make *legit* money is none of your business," Talia started in a much calmer voice. "As I said before, I will pay you back and that's that." Mercedes opened the door. She had enough of the arguing between them.

"There was... a long line at the vending machine," Mercedes fibbed to explain why she was so late.

"You can leave now," Talia said. Barbra gave her an unpleasant look before exiting the room. Mercedes handed her mom the bag of pretzels. "I can't stand her sometimes," Talia mumbled opening the snack. As Mercedes began to eat her candy bar, she thought of what she could do to help Talia out financially. She hated her occupation and didn't want her going back to it. ***

Amanda marched into the bathroom at RHS when she saw Gina and Jackie go in. Amanda crossed her arms once she got inside and glared Gina and Jackie down.

"Are you going to just sit there and stare at us? I know we're gorgeous but, Amanda, really?" Jackie asked as she and Gina began to apply more makeup on.

"I need to talk to you, Gina. Alone," Amanda replied, ignoring Jackie.

"Whatever you say to me, you can say in front of Jackie," Gina replied.

"Oh *my brother*. I didn't know you two were so tied at the hip."

"Give us a minute, Jackie. Stand outside of the bathroom and make sure no other girl comes in here 'til I come out." Jackie puffed before leaving. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Troy."

"Who's Troy?"

"Give it up, Gina. I know." Gina sighed, placing all of her makeup back inside her Guess purse.

"I know you know, Amanda. Troy told me that you found out about us. We don't keep secrets from each other."

"So you know he's two years younger than you." She was determined to break the two of them up. The more she thought about it, the more she didn't like Gina for her brother. She was materialistic, superficial, and bossy. She even dated Adam for two years. Amanda had to wonder what she saw in a guy like that.

"Two and a half."

"Like that's so much better."

"I know it's crazy that we're together because of our age difference. But that doesn't matter to us. I care about Troy a lot."

"You're lying. You're just using my brother and you better believe that I won't let you break his heart."

"I would never do anything to hurt him. I love your brother, Amanda."

"Yeah okay! What do you love about my brother, that's if you really love him!"

"There's a lot I love about him. He's smart, funny, attractive, and so caring. He's always making sure I'm happy. He's young, but it doesn't matter. He's more mature than most guys my age. I mean, he's got goals and he's driven. What I love the most about him is his smile," Gina said as she started to blush. "When he looks at me, I know he's the one."

Amanda glanced at Gina. There was no doubt that she was genuinely in love with her brother. Why couldn't she find a guy who loved her that much? Amanda thought about Julio. She missed having him as a boyfriend, however she did not want him back. She was over dating guys who weren't satisfied with just her.

"Look, you *cougar*, stay away from my brother and there won't be a problem," Amanda warned. She walked out of the bathroom. Yet again, there was another thing her brother was better than her at. *Love*. She was not going to lose at this. She was settled

on breaking them up.

Julia munched on her nacho Doritos as she read one of the many stories of how Sonya Solis gave birth from the gossip magazines at the library. It had been a month since it happened however, the tabloids just found out last week. Most of them speculated about who the baby's father was. Julia knew it was only a matter of time before they found out it was Carlo who got her pregnant.

"Why are you reading that?" Julio asked taking a seat next to her. Julia rolled her eyes after he grabbed a few chips from her and threw it in his mouth. "All you have to do is ask Papa and he'll tell you what you wanna know about our baby brother."

"I don't wanna know about *his son*." Since the birth, Julia hadn't bothered to visit Carson. As far as she was concerned, that baby was not related to her, especially since they didn't share the same mother. It was easy to not talk about it at her home since Julia and Julio didn't want to upset Gloria by talking about the child her husband just had with another woman.

"*His son*? Juliana, Carson is our brother."

"He's not Mama's kid so he's not my brother." Julio got up and threw his book bag over his shoulders.

"Whatever, Juliana. Swallow your pride," he added before leaving.

"Julia," Dev said to her a couple of minutes after Julio left.

He took a seat by her before giving her a hug.

"Dev! I haven't seen you in forever."

"I know. We don't have any classes together." The last time they hung out was back in the summer when they went to Puerto Rico. They saw each other occasionally at school and would stop to chat. It had been a while since she saw him last. "I heard about the divorce. Sorry."

"I'm guessing Julio told you about my dad and his mistress having a baby," she said to one of her brother's best friends.

"Yeah. Cool name, huh? Carson. Julio told me they wanted

to name the kid after both of their names.”

“Yeah real creative,” she sarcastically replied.

“So, how’ve you been? Are you and Eddie still together?” “Yeah,” she responded. Julia glanced down at her ring and

played with it. She and Eddie were still together. It didn't mean they were still in a happy relationship. Since Valentine's night they slowly began to talk less and less on the phone. When they actually did speak they didn't have much to say to each other. She hated how they became so distant in just a couple of months. Hopefully they would get it back over the summer. He would be home for a month or two before having to go back for football camp. She just wasn't so sure that she was up for fighting for what they once were. “Hey, that doesn't mean we shouldn't hang out. We had fun in Puerto Rico together. Do you wanna maybe go do something this weekend?” She could use time away from her family. She was tired of the drama from them and her boyfriend. She needed a dose of fun.

“I don't think that's a good idea. I have a girlfriend now and you and Eddie are together.”

“Dev, we're just gonna be hanging out as friends. Come on. What? You didn't have fun in P.R. with me?”

“I did. It's... my girlfriend isn't too crazy about me hanging out with other females who aren't her.”

“She won't know if you don't tell her.”

“Okay. Fine. Only 'cause you're so awesome,” he told her. “Oh, by the way, I love your new look.”

“This guy's a bastard,” Troy said to Amanda and Mercedez eyeing his laptop. The girls got up from the matching leather love seat in Amanda and Troy's father's office and glanced over his shoulders. “Look.” He pointed to the computer screen. “It's a list of Chuck's arrests.”

“He's been arrested for rape twice. Once in 1987 and again in 1992,” Amanda said as she read the computer page. “Has he been convicted of those charges?”

"No. Both of these charges against him were settled out of court," Troy stated after a couple of minutes of research.

"Doesn't he have to have a lot of money to settle out of court?" Mercedes asked.

"Yeah." After hacking into Chuck's bank statements, he printed out a couple of months of his bank transactions. "This guy is loaded," Troy added, seeing the couple of millions of dollars he had in his accounts.

"Where's he getting that much money from? He doesn't have a job," Mercedes said.

"Troy, check to see if his parents come from money," Amanda said. It took Troy a few minutes to find out that Chuck's family owned a profitable company.

"Got it. You were right, Amanda, he comes from money. His parents own a company called *Sheppard's Dairy Products* in northern Jersey." Troy leaned back in the chair. "So we got that he's a rich pig who comes from money and got away with rape twice-three if you count Angela. How exactly are we going to blackmail him? I don't see anything we can use," Troy said.

"Maybe we can get him to save Caleb if Angela tells him that she'll tell people about his previous charges," Amanda suggested.

"He's not gonna care. He's got nothing to lose if people find that out about him," Troy replied. "We need to find out something about him that would destroy him if it got out. But so far we don't have anything on him that'll do that."

"That's 'cause he's not the one we need to blackmail," Mercedes replied. Troy and Amanda turned to Mercedes.

"Who then?" Amanda questioned. Mercedes pointed at the computer screen.

"We're staring at them. Like you said, Chuck's got nothing to lose, but his parents do."

"She's got a point," Amanda agreed. "Dig up dirt on his parents." Mercedes and Amanda took a seat back on the couch as Troy hacked away. "So, how's your mom doing?"

"Good. She's actually leaving the hospital soon. She's gonna stay at a friend's house for a little bit before she gets her own apartment." Talia was getting better each day. She was moving more and was able to walk, however, she still had trouble doing certain things such as lifting heavy objects.

"Mr. and Ms. Prescott, you both have mail," their housekeeper, Isabel, announced through the intercom. Amanda and Troy both looked at each other for a second before they bolted out of the den knowing that their SAT scores were due soon. Amanda shoved Troy against the wall on the way to the kitchen. Troy stumbled, but regained his balance and caught up to Amanda. He grabbed her and threw her on the floor of the hallway.

"You loser!" Amanda exclaimed. Amanda quickly got up from the floor. Finally making it to the kitchen, Troy reached for the mail in Isabel's hands. Isabel took a huge step back, not wanting to get caught in the sibling rivalry.

"Thanks, Isabel!" Troy said. Amanda snatched the mail of her SAT scores from Troy. They both speedily ripped the envelopes to see who got the higher score as they caught their breaths.

"Damn you guys are quick," Mercedes said coming into the kitchen. She couldn't believe how competitive they were.

"What'd you get?" Amanda asked. "What'd *you* get?" Troy questioned. "I asked you first."

"2000. I got a 1300 in the reading and math."

"2050 out of 2400! 1380 with just the critical reading and math." Amanda jumped in the air. She finally beat her brother at something. "In your face!" she laughed as she showed Troy her SAT scores. Amanda began to do the running man while she proudly held her score in the air.

"Good job," Troy said forcing a smile.

"No, I did a great job!" Mercedes laughed as Amanda did the wave with her arms. "I am AMAZING! Do you know what this means, Troy? I am this much closer to getting into Princeton. And I get a car. I'm thinking a Porsche or a Lambo. What kind of car are

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you planning to get? Oh that's right, *you're not getting a car!*" Amanda kissed her score out of satisfaction as she laughed. She was ecstatic. Hopefully this would be enough for her parents to see how much better she was than Troy.

"Thank God she beat me. Imagine how it would be if I actually got a higher score," Troy said to Mercedez as Amanda continued to bask in her success.

Angela nervously rang the doorbell during the last day of spring break. She looked down at her attire. She opted to wear a dark brown buttoned down top, black slacks, and black heels. She was dressed more conservatively than usual.

The door opened to a woman in her sixties. She had her medium length grey hair combed back. She was a hefty woman with very few wrinkles. She wore a purple business blazer with a matching skirt and beige flats. She had the same downturned eyes as Chuck and Caleb.

"Can I help you?" Teresa, Chuck's mother asked. "Yeah...I uh...um," Angela began. She had no idea how to

say what she needed to say Chuck's mother. All she planned got lost the moment the door opened. She was staring at the woman who mothered the man who she hated the most.

"Why don't you come in and tell me what's up." Teresa led Angela inside her massive home over to the living room. Angela tucked the folder she had underneath her arm. She subtly glanced around the living room. It was large and filled with antiques and pricy paintings.

Teresa pointed to a couch. "You can sit over there." Angela sat down where she was told while Teresa took a seat on the couch across from her.

"Madam Shepherd, here's the tea you asked for," her maid said coming into the living room with a set of tea. She placed it on the coffee table between Teresa and Angela.

"Thank you. Would you like some?" Angela shook her head no. "Well, darling, what brings you here?"

"I...um..."

"Okay. I see that I somehow make you nervous. Let's start with your name," Teresa said offering her a friendly smile as she began to sip her tea.

"Angela es Fresh," she replied in a shaky voice. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath. The image of Caleb lying helplessly in his hospital bed reminded her why she came to see Teresa in the first place. She promised him that she would do whatever it took to save him and she wasn't going to let her nerves get the best of her. "I'm the mother of your grandchild-mother of Chuck's child." Teresa looked at Angela from head to toe in disbelief.

"No," Teresa said with a chuckle, choosing not to believe her. She took another sip from her cup. "I would know if Chuck had a child. After all, I'm his mother." Teresa placed her glass down on the plate. "You're obviously mistaken. I'll show you out," Teresa stated getting up from her seat.

"I'm not mistaken." Angela remained seated. She knew she was going to have to be firm in order to get what she needed. "We had a son about two years ago."

"No. Now I know you're lying. Why would Chuck have a child and not tell me for two years? I admit we don't keep in touch, but still. He would tell me something like this. Besides, you look young enough for Chuck to have fathered you, so why would he even take a romantic interest in you."

"I'm eighteen."

"That would mean you were sixteen when you supposedly gave birth."

"That's what it means." Teresa frowned and shook her head.

"My son would not commit statutory rape," she quickly defended in a sharp voice.

"He has in the past and you know it. 1987. Kate Ghastly ring a bell?" Angela snapped, choosing not to correct Teresa about the statutory part of the rape. "Chuck was arrested for raping Kate

Ghastly. She was fifteen when it happened and because of you and his dad he was able to walk free."

"You can get out now," Teresa snapped pointing to the door. "I let you in here and you try to accuse my son of some malicious act of evil. I should've known not to let you in," Teresa added giving her a dirty look.

"I'm not leaving until I get what I came for."

"You better get up and leave before I throw you out." Angela tensed up in her seat, refusing to waiver.

"Mrs. Shepherd, I need to talk to you about my son."

"I can't help you. For the last time your son is not my grandson!"

"He is. All I need for you to do is hear me out. I need your help," Angela replied in desperation as she got up from the couch.

"What do you want? Money?" Teresa rubbed the side of her temples. She sighed. "I'll write you a check for a hundred thousand *after* your son takes a DNA test proving that he's really Chuck's son."

"He is Chuck's son--"

"The DNA test will prove that! You got another thing coming if you think I'm going to let you swindle money from me." "I don't want your damn money!" Angela cried out. "All I need you to do is help me save my son. He's sick and Chuck is the only one who can save him."

"I'm sorry. I can't help you with that....Chuck and I haven't

spoken in years," Teresa admitted, finally convinced that she and Chuck truly had a child together.

"Please...please," Angela pleaded. She put her hands together as the tears fell down from her face. "You- you don't understand. My son- your grandson is dying of cancer right now. But you can save him. All you have to do is ask Chuck to get tested to see if his stem cells match my son. I tried asking him and he won't do it. You can help save him. You can give him a second chance to live. To play and to be a kid again." Teresa turned away from Angela, holding back her own tears.

"You should go now," she told her in a grave voice sounding close to breaking down.

"No." Angela wiped her tears with her wrists. She was done crying. Crying wasn't going to get rid of the cancer Caleb had. Angela dropped the tan folder she had all afternoon on the table and crossed her arms. Teresa looked down at the table to the closed file.

"What's that?" Angela kept her mouth shut as Teresa picked up the folder and opened it. Her mouth dropped as she flipped through the pages in disbelief.

"Get Chuck to do what I asked and they'll never find out about the money laundering. Don't and I'll go straight to the cops."

"You're blackmailing me," Teresa stated looking away from the papers to Angela.

"You call it blackmail. I call it saving my son's life. You've got 'til tomorrow to take care of this." She took steps to leave the house.

"Oh, and by the way, *lovely home.*"

Mercedez tapped on the steering wheel of her father's Nissan truck, waiting for the driver of the Toyota to back out of the parking space. She just came back from the gas station and she was hanging around while Talia finished getting her hair and nails done at the salon. Talia got out of the hospital a few days ago and was staying at a friend's place as she searched for a new apartment.

"Any day now," she said as she impatiently waited for the car to pull out. She reached over to the side of the car where she had her CDs. She grabbed her Lauryn Hill's "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill" album. While she put it into the CD player of the truck, *Ex-factor* played as the Toyota backed up. "Finally." Mercedez stepped on the gas. Just as she was about to go in, a Mercedes Benz zoomed past her and pulled into the parking spot. She pressed on the brakes to prevent from hitting the car.

She shoved the vehicle in park and turned the truck off. She angrily got out and slammed the door. "What the hell is your problem?" she asked when the door to the Mercedes opened.

"Nothing. I'm just parking my car," Sal, the driver of the car replied, clicking on the remote of his vehicle to lock it.

"That was my parking spot! You saw I was feeling to park there!" she said as her nose flared out in annoyance. Mercedes didn't care that Sal was fine. He took what was hers and she wasn't going to let him get away with it.

"Just park somewhere else."

"No! Move your car," Mercedes demanded with her hand on her hip.

"It's not that serious--"

"You don't move, I won't move." Mercedes had Mateo's truck parked right behind Sal's automobile. There was no way Sal could leave without Mercedes moving her vehicle.

"What's with you? It's just a parking space." Mercedes walked away from him and made her way to the salon. "Where are you going? Move your car," Sal said coming up to her.

She ignored him as she went inside the salon. Seeing that Talia was still getting the paint of her toenails dried, she sat down hard on a chair. Sal stood in front of her. "Go move your car."

"Give me the parking space."

"No."

"Then I won't move my car." Mercedes picked up one of the style magazines and flipped through it.

"Is there a problem?" one of the hairstylists asked. "Yeah, he stole my parking spot," Mercedes responded. "I didn't. I took the space fair and square and now she's

mad and won't move her car that's blocking me from leaving."

"Who cares--"

"Okay, okay!" Talia said getting up. She held her hands out as she carefully walked with the disposable sandals that were used for her pedicure. "Let me talk to you outside, young man."

Talia wore a slip on pale yellow dress along with her silver jewelry. Since she left the hospital, her looks have picked up. She wore make-up and even had the ladies of the salon put extensions in her hair. She was starting to look like the woman she was before

the coma.

They both followed Talia outside. Mercedes decided to keep quiet and let Talia handle things. Her mother had a way of persuading people, especially men. "Look, mister, my daughter says you stole her parking spot."

"I didn't--"

"Let me finish. You could have just given her the parking space. What happened to chivalry?" Sal sighed. "Now I know there's a gentleman inside there," Talia added as she placed her hand on his shirt where his heart was. Sal glanced down at her hand and gave her a cheesy smile. Mercedes rolled her eyes when she saw Sal subtly check her mom out. She had to get used to guys flirting with her mom again.

"There is a gentleman inside me. I'm really sorry, Mrs...?" "Just call me Talia, honey," she responded winking at him.

She removed her hand. "I'm too young to be a Mrs."

"I didn't believe you when you said she was your daughter. I thought you were her older sister," Sal added with a grin. "Her gorgeous older sister."

"You are too much!" Talia let out a light laugh as she squeezed his cheeks. Mercedes watched in disbelief as Talia flirted back. "What's your name?"

"Salvatore De Laurentis. But you can call me Sal," he responded as he picked up her hand and gently kissed the back of it.

"Well, Sal, I admit I am her mother, not her sister. That means I'm too old for you. Anyways..." Talia slipped her arm around Mercedes. "This is my lovely daughter, Mercedes. I'm sure you two can get pass this parking space issue, right?"

"Right. I'm sorry about the parking mishap. Hope we can start over. I'm Sal." He extended his hand to Mercedes. His wavy brunette hair was underneath a backwards navy blue baseball cap. He had on a royal blue RHS football sleeveless t-shirt that showed his toned and tan arms along with black Adidas basketball shorts and K-Swiss sneakers. Mercedes glanced down at what she was

wearing wishing she dressed up more. She had on a white wife beater with pale denim jeans and black and white Jordan sneakers.

“Okay,” Mercedes responded, refusing to shake his hand. She was still mad at him for flirting with her mother. Sal pulled his hand away in a grin.

“I’ll go move the car. I need you to move yours so I can do that.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be there.” She didn’t want to walk next to him. She rather walk behind him so she wouldn’t have to have small talk with him. Sal gave them both a smile as he walked away. Talia and Mercedes gazed at Sal as he made his way to the car. Mercedes noticed how much more appealing his brown eyes were in the sun.

“He’s good-looking,” Talia whispered to Mercedes. “I bet you two would make a cute couple.”

“Whatever.” Mercedes replied. She was good being single. It worked for her and uncomplicated life. Besides, Sal seemed more interested in her mother than her.

Chapter 12

"...the cougar's out the bag."

"Strike!" Dev exclaimed with his arms in the air after knocking all of the bowling pins down. He grinned, walking over to Julia before giving her a high five.

"I didn't know you was an expert," Julia replied. They looked up at the screen that showed both their scores.

"Thanks. I'm actually planning on joining an intramural bowling league when I go to college."

"What college do you wanna go to?"

"Rutgers. Both of my parents are alums there. You?" he asked, as they both sat down and switched back to their own shoes.

"I'm actually planning to apply there and Monmouth U. I'm gonna practice for the SAT over the summer and take it in September."

"I'm taking it in two weeks."

"I hope you do well."

"Thanks."

"Want to race?"

"Sure." They sat next to each other in the virtual car seats and cheered after Julia finally won a race.

"So that's the reason why you don't drive in real life," Dev teased.

"Funny," Julia replied as they laughed. Unlike her friends who had their driver licenses, Julia didn't. "I don't mind not driving. Everything's close in Jersey and I can always take the city

bus to places I can't walk to." Dev was the one who drove them to the bowling alley. Thankfully, Gloria and Julio weren't home to question why she was going out with Dev alone.

"And you've got me. Just call me whenever you need a ride."

"Thanks," Julia said giving him a hug.

"Eddie," Dev said letting go of Julia.

"What about him? We're not doing anything wrong, Dev." She didn't feel guilty about spending time with Dev whatsoever. He was just a friend who she enjoyed spending time with. She didn't go out with him with any intentions of cheating on Eddie and she knew that Dev would never cheat on his girlfriend.

"I know. Eddie is here."

"No he's not. He's at Penn State. He would've told me if he was coming."

"He's over there," Dev replied glancing above Julia's head. Julia looked over to find Eddie laughing with his friends who graduated the same year at RHS as he did. "I guess he forgot to tell you." Julia frowned, wondering how long he had been in Roctown, or better yet, why he hadn't told her that he was going to be in town.

"I'll be back." Julia marched over to where Eddie was. He took a step back in surprise once he saw Julia.

"Ya'll remember my girl Julia," Eddie said putting his arm over Julia's shoulders. After exchanging hellos, Julia and Eddie went outside.

"How come you didn't tell me you was coming?" Julia fired as soon as they stepped outside into the warm night.

"Me coming to Jersey was a last minute thing. I was gonna tell you."

"When? When you went back to Penn State?" "No."

"Is this what we've become? You come to town and don't even tell me?" Julia accused. Eddie leaned against the wall of the building.

"Well? Don't just stand there. Say something."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Gee, I donno!" Julia threw her hands in the air. She was annoyed by his lack of conversation and emotions. She wasn't even sure that he was still in love with her. "Say how you feel," she demanded, placing her hand on her hip.

"It's nothing."

"It is something. Eddie--"

"You wanna know how I feel?"

"Yeah I do!"

"I feel trapped!" he exclaimed looking at her. "We're not what we used to be. I didn't call you 'cause I wanted to have fun."

"You don't have fun when you're with me?" "I didn't say that."

"That's exactly what you said!"

"What I meant is that we ain't vibing like we used to. We used to have fun, but now everything's so tense between us. I don't know if I can do it anymore," Eddie confessed.

Julia hated to agree with Eddie, but he was right. The main reason she wanted to go bowling with Dev was to get away from the issues she had with her family and boyfriend. She had a great time with him and she knew that she wouldn't have had as much of a splendid time if she went with Eddie since things weren't the same. "My bad. I don't want to be mean to you or anything. I still love you and I wanna be with you, but I need some space." Julia removed her hand from her hip as she took a seat on the bench. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea if they cooled it for a bit. Hopefully then their relationship could be the way it was before things got so intense between the two.

"Fine," Julia responded.

"Fine?" he asked in surprise, taking a seat next to her. "Yeah. Fine. What'd you expect me to do? Go loco?" "No. Just didn't think you was gonna act so calm." "We're slowing things down. Clearing up our heads and

seeing what we want individually. But that doesn't mean we're single."

"Of course not, boo," he said, taking her hands. "That's

why you're my girl. 'Cause you're mad understanding," he added, kissing her. As they kissed, Julia pondered what their relationship would be like now that they were giving each other space. Though she was starting to become more comfortable with her looks she still felt insecure about the slimmer and prettier girls he was around every day at Penn State.

Mercedes munched on her Lucky Charms cereal from her Ziploc bag by the vending machine before homeroom. She was listening to the girls chat about their lives before school started... or at least trying to listen to her friends' conversation. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Sal and Adam toss a football back and forth in the hallway as the students tried to dodge them as they passed by them.

Mercedes made sure not to look directly at Sal. He didn't need to know that she was checking him out. He still looked cute without even trying. Sal wore a black t-shirt with burgundy Pirates of the Caribbean pajama pants and black slippers.

After the bell rang, the girls said goodbye and parted ways. Mercedes threw the empty bag in the garbage and pulled out her pack of gum. She popped a piece in her mouth.

"Watch out!" Adam exclaimed after he overthrew the football to Sal. Mercedes looked up to find a ball coming fast towards her head. She bent her knees and threw her left leg back and held her hands up. Seeing her catch it, Sal flashed her a smile and clapped his hands as he approached her.

"Nice catch," he said sounding impressed.

"His aim sucks," she said about Adam's terrible throw. "That's why he plays defense." Ignoring his grin, she tossed the ball back to Sal.

"I'm sorry." Mercedes stared into his warm eyes for a split second.

"I'm sure you are," she sarcastically replied. Noticing Sal walk with her towards her homeroom, she felt her heart beat faster.

"I am. I didn't mean for the ball to almost hit you."

"Or maybe you did. You was just trying to get back at me 'cause I got the parking space."

"No," he replied in a light chuckle. "What's with you? Are you always this mad?"

"I'm not gonna answer that," she snapped. Who was he to tell her she was always in a bad mood?

"You know, guys would actually ask you out if you were more like Talia. She's easy to talk to, takes care of her looks, and most importantly, she cares about people--"

"Then why don't you date her!" She couldn't believe he was still crushing on her mother. If only Talia wasn't so...

"Because she said I was too young for her. Weren't you listening when your mom and I had this conversation?" he questioned in a smirk.

Mercedez's nose flared out in annoyance. She knew he was pushing her buttons, trying to get her to react. Mercedez made a sharp right turn to get away from him. "Wait," Sal began. He came up to her and took her arm. Mercedez froze as she felt his strong hands on her. She watched him take the pack of gum she had in her hand, grab a piece of gum out, and slip it in his mouth. "Can't have morning breath," he explained, handing her gum back. He winked before he left. Mercedez stared from behind as he jogged over to his homeroom.

"Mendoza," Ms. West began outside the door. "Homeroom has started." Mercedez looked around the hallway. While talking to Sal, she hadn't noticed that the bell rang and that most of the students were already in their homeroom. ***

Angela smirked as she bit the end of her pencil. Last night the Stonewalls' called to let her know that they found a match for Caleb. Though she hated Chuck, she was eternally gratefully for him for helping Caleb out. She wondered how Chuck's parents got him to oblige.

Angela turned around after feeling a crumpled up paper tap her shoulder.

"Save me! I'm dying here," Mercedes whispered across from her. They were both in English III listening to their teacher lecture them about the characters in "The Scarlet Letter".

"It's not that bad," Angela replied, pulling the pencil out of her mouth.

"Says the person who's not even paying attention," Mercedes replied as they both giggled. "I'm guessing Caleb's the reason why you're happy."

"He is. In all of this I learned something. I may not be Caleb's mother in all the ways that count, but he's my son and there's nothing I wouldn't do for him."

"Looks like you're getting some peace," Mercedes said, glancing down at her vibrating phone. "Hey, your sister has your cell phone, right?" she asked, looking up from her text.

"Yeah."

"She just texted me. She wants you to meet her in the bathroom by the cafeteria. She says it's important." Angela's hand immediately shot up.

She tried not to speculate what could be wrong. She prayed to God hoping it had nothing to do with her 7 year old sister Tania. Nor her aunts. Or her mom. Though she and Kim didn't get along, she still cared about her.

"Yes, Ms. es Fresh?" the teacher asked.

"Can I please use the bathroom?" As soon as the teacher said yes, Angela practically jumped out of her seat. She was surprised that the hall monitor hadn't stopped her from jogging as she made her way to her sister.

"Chris, what's going on?" she asked as soon as she walked inside the bathroom.

"I...," Christy started. Angela's heart beat faster as she noticed Christy's pale skin. It was Ghosts-like. Her large eyes, even seemed bigger than normal, as if she was scared. "Something happened...something bad. I just can't believe it. Someone could be here one day and the next they're just-just gone!" Christy cried out as she paced the floor.

"Who?" Angela questioned, grabbing both of her arms to keep her still. Christy shook her head as she miserably tried to control her tears. "Christy!"

"He's gone," she responded in a whisper as her lips trembled. "Chuck's gone."

"Oh," Angela said, letting go.

"Oh?" Angela shrugged her shoulders as she took a step back. Chuck was dead. Big deal, right?

"It happens. Death is a part of life. Everyone's gonna die someday," Angela responded, while her mind raced, trying to figure out what it all meant.

"You don't get it, Angela. He didn't just die from a disease or a car accident. Someone murdered him! I was at study hall and I saw someone reading the Asbury Park Press and Chuck was on the cover. Someone shot him in the chest in his sleep and left him there for dead. Since his house is deep in the woods, nobody heard the shots being fired. It wasn't until last night his parents called the cops since they haven't heard from him in months. The police got there and found out that he'd been dead for months. His body has decomposed--"

"I get it," Angela replied, as a graphic image of what Chuck's remains might look like came into her mind. "Look, Christy, I know this must be hard and scary, but don't worry about it."

"Don't worry about it?" she said in outrage.

"Yeah. You need to focus on school and basketball--" "How could you say that? Have some compassion! We've

known him for years and he's always been good to me." Christy shook her head as she glared at her sister. "Please tell me the reason why you're not upset is 'cause he chose mom over you."

"That's not it at all, Christy! I don't care that Chuck dated Mom," Angela lied.

"And that's why I found you and him hooking up--"

"We weren't hooking up! It was one kiss," she said, referring to the time when Christy walked in on her and Chuck

locking lips.

"And that makes it better! He was a grown man. He was old enough to be our dad, but you didn't care. You just wanted to be with him. When we were kids you were always around him. And when he came back you pretended you didn't like him when you did. But guess what...I was watching. I know the truth."

"You know nothing," Angela replied, as her heart continued to beat even faster, trying not to let any memory of Chuck molesting or raping her come to mind.

"I do know the truth. When Chuck came back years ago and started dating mom when you were fifteen, you wanted him."

"You're wrong," Angela replied.

"No I'm not," Christy added, taking a step closer to Angela. "I know that Chuck is Caleb's biological father and not Jesse," she told her in a low voice. Angela looked away. "So you're not gonna deny it?" Angela shrugged her shoulders as she turned away from her sister. She was ashamed of the truth. But she was also tired of the lies and secrets.

"No. And it stays between us. Got it?" "Or what?" Christy challenged.

"Don't push me," Angela responded, in fury as she clenched her fist, having had enough of her disrespect.

"Whatever." Out of impulse, Angela grabbed Christy's shoulders and shoved her against the bathroom's wall. Angela held her left arm across her chest before she spoke.

"You're gonna keep your mouth shut and *I mean it.*"

"Get off!" Christy exclaimed, trying to worm her way out. "Not until I'm done! I'm tired of trying with you! You are my sister. *My sister.* So start acting like it! I'm not asking for you to kiss my ass. All I'm asking is for you to respect me and to have my back like I always have yours. Is that a lot to ask for?" Angela asked in frustration, still holding a tight grip on her. "IS IT?" Angela yelled, jerking her arm hard against her chest, after Christy didn't answer.

"No," Christy replied in a small voice as their eyes met.

Angela held on for a second before pulling away. Christy gave her a sorrowful glance before leaving the bathroom.

Angela turned around and swung her fist at the bathroom wall. Never had she put her hands on her sisters, until today, the day she found out about Chuck's death. Even after death, he was still haunting her.

"Damn you, Chuck," she mumbled as she cradled her injured fist.

Amanda stepped inside the rowdy party after spending the evening plotting the break-up between her brother and Gina.

"Time's running out," Adam said in a low voice to Amanda. "You got 'til midnight to break them up. If you don't I'll--"

"Ruin me. I know," Amanda snapped. "I'll break Gina and Troy up by midnight." Right after Adam left, Troy walked over to Amanda.

"Have you seen my phone? I don't know where I put it. I think I left it home. I tried looking for it, but I was already running late for dinner with Gina."

"No. I haven't seen it." Amanda made her way past the crowded party over to the backyard. As soon as she reached the corner of the house, she glanced around before whipping out Troy's cell phone from her purse that she stole earlier. She sent Gina a text using Troy's phone before calling Adam on her own phone. "Go to the bedroom closest to the kitchen. Make sure no one's there and lose your shirt."

"Why?" Adam asked.

"Do as I say and you'll get her back," Amanda spoke before hanging up her cell phone. She deleted the text conversation she had with Gina on Troy's phone. Now all she had to do was make sure Troy saw Gina coming out of the same bedroom as Adam. Amanda went back inside the house and looked for Troy. When she found him, she chatted with him, maneuvering him near the designated bedroom and made sure he was facing the right

direction.

Just as she planned, a pissed off Gina marched out of the bedroom with a shirtless Adam following her with a cocky smile on his face as if something indeed happened between the two in the room. "OMG!" Amanda exclaimed in fake surprise. "Is that Gina and Adam *together?*"

"Yeah," Troy responded in fury as he frowned.

"Wait, what are you doing?" she questioned when Troy clenched his fist and stormed over to Adam. "Troy!" Adam was a giant compared to her slim brother. Before Amanda could stop him, Troy punched Adam across his face. Adam stumbled back in surprise as he held his cheek. "Troy, don't!" Amanda exclaimed pulling Troy away from Adam.

"Stay away from my girlfriend," Troy furiously stated. Adam shoved Troy against the coffee table. Troy fell over the table onto his right ankle, breaking one of the legs of the table.

"Back off, Adam!" Gina shouted, rushing over to the floor where Troy was. "Baby, are you okay?" Gina hysterically pulled off her jacket and wrapped it around his leg, trying to stop it from bleeding.

"Don't touch my brother!" Amanda exclaimed as she pushed Adam.

"Get out of my way, Amanda," Adam said.

"No," she replied. She stood in his way trying to prevent him from hurting her brother again, however, Adam threw Amanda onto the floor and went after Troy.

"Don't hit my sister," Troy said, struggling to get up. He weakly attempted to punch Adam again. Adam ducked and grabbed him by the neck before slamming him against the wall. Gina and Amanda raced over to where Adam was, trying to stop him from choking Troy.

A few of the boys at the party pulled Adam off of Troy. Sal and another guy held Adam back before he could do anymore damage. They took him to the backyard in attempts to calm him down.

Amanda and Gina hurriedly approached Troy who was bending over trying to catch his breath.

"Oh my gosh! Troy, you're bleeding," Amanda said looking down at his leg. Gina's jacket was soaked in his blood. Troy continued to breathe heavily. His eyes rolled back as he collapsed to the floor.

Amanda's heart pounded out of her chest. She dropped to the ground on her knees beside Troy. Though the room became encompassed with screams and pandemonium, she couldn't hear any of it. To her, the room was quiet and her brother was lying there helplessly. She wished she never agreed to Adam's blackmail, but it was too late. Her brother was unconscious and bleeding nonstop because of her. She pushed away her feelings of regret. Now her brother needed her more than ever. "HELP! SOMEONE CALL 911!" she yelled in a shaky voice as she tried to stop the bleeding.

"I called 911," Sal said after getting off of the phone. He pulled off his shirt and handed it to Amanda. Amanda took off Gina's ruined jacket and placed Sal's clean white shirt over Troy's bloody leg and held pressure. The paramedics came by and quickly placed Troy on the gurney and covered his face with an oxygen mask. Gina pushed her tears aside as she stood beside Troy.

"You're gonna be okay, baby, alright," she told him as she took his hand. "I'm right by your side." Gina looked over to the paramedics. "He's going to be okay, right?" she asked in tears. Amanda stood and watched. She didn't know what to say or do. She glanced down at her blood-covered hands in disbelief, realizing that it was all of her fault.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to step back," the paramedics said as they began to wheel Troy out.

"No. I'm coming with him" she refused.

"You can't you're not his family."

"I'm his older sister and she's his girlfriend. And we don't care what you say, we're going with him to the hospital," Amanda finally spoke with a shaky voice.

"Fine. Let's go," the paramedic said giving in.

Angela pushed the sleeves to her large black hoodie up. She gazed at the patches of the different rock legends such as Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, and Red Hot Chili Peppers, among other artists. Years ago she ironed on patches of bands Jesse had her listen to while they were dating onto the hoodie that was once his.

"You can come out now," Christy said, knocking on the door to their bedroom. Angela took a deep breath before opening the door.

"You okay?" Angela asked in a whisper to her frantic sister. "I thought I said no talking," Detective Daniels stated after seeing the exchange between the two. Both sisters were being questioned by the cops in regards to Chuck's death.

Angela walked over to the kitchen and sat across the table from the muscular and tall detective. As soon as the door closed, the detective turned the recorder on.

"I understand that this must be a difficult situation, but we have to ask you questions that can hopefully help us find out who was behind the murder of Charles Shepard."

Angela nodded as she gulped. Too afraid to think about who killed Chuck, she focused on the table. There was a salt and pepper shaker that separated the two. In between them was also a half empty cup of water that Christy must've been drinking out of.

"What do you remember about February 14 of this year?" "In what regard?" Angela asked, looking over to the cup.

Her heart skipped a beat. If this was the start of the questions, she didn't want to continue.

"In regards to Charles Shepard and your mother. Did you see them that day?"

"I went to school February 14. It was a school day," she replied, ignoring the question.

"Okay. Did you see them at all that day?"

"I might've," she said, rubbing the side of her neck as she avoided eye contact. Thankfully they didn't know about her being with Chuck on Valentine's Day.

"Look, Angela, I understand this must be difficult for you, but you have to help us out. A man was shot to death in his own bed and his murderer is on the loose. Do you understand that?"

"I do. Chuck- that's what everyone calls him. He came over a lot. I didn't keep a diary of when he would come and go."

"What about your mother? What was she doing February 14?" Angela's eyes shot up over to Detective Daniels. He had come to the same conclusion as she had: her mother offed Chuck.

"She was home the whole day," Angela told him as convincingly as possible, making sure she kept eye contact with the detective.

"And at night time?"

"She went to bed."

"At what time?"

"I donno. 7 or something. She didn't go out that night," Angela lied remembering that Kim couldn't get out of the home fast enough. When her mom came back the day after Valentine's Day, Angela asked about her whereabouts. Kim told her that she had to *blow off some steam* and how Chuck *was no longer going to be a problem*. Little did Angela know that Kim's definition of *blowing off steam* meant offing Chuck.

"How do you know?"

"I went into her bedroom that night for a lighter." "So you smoke?"

"Yeah," Angela said, pulling out her pack of cigarettes. "Worst habit ever."

"Tell me about it," Detective Daniels said in a chuckle. "Anyways, when was the last time you saw your mother?"

"I donno," Angela fibbed. She did recall the last she saw her. It was the morning that Chuck's death was announced. Detective Daniels leaned forward as he turned the recorder off.

"I'm going to give it to you straight. We have reason to believe that your mother is the one who murdered Charles Shepard. So if you know what happened February 14 or about your mother's whereabouts, you are obligated by law to tell the police. And if you

knowingly withhold information you will be faced with charges. And since you're 18, you will be charged as an adult. I know you've already been in trouble with the law and that you are close to finishing your probation. If we find out you knew something, I will personally make sure they throw the book at you." He slipped his fingers over to the recorder. "Now do you want to tell me what really happened February 14?"

"Like I told you before, that's all I know," she said staring him down. She looked away and crossed her arms, trying not to let his threat scare her into ratting her mother out.

"What's going on?" a voice asked, as the front door opened.

In walked her aunt, Jerry.

"Nothing. We're done here," Detective Daniels said, getting up from the chair.

"Is that so? So you'll question my client without a lawyer present and when her counselor is present you want to leave?" Jerry asked, coming into the home with her briefcase.

Angela wondered how her paternal aunt knew the cops were questioning her. She hadn't bothered to call her, though she thought about it.

"That's not what was going on. We were just asking her a few questions."

"Well the next time you decide to ask Angela or my 15 year old client *a few questions* without their attorney, there's going to be a problem."

"Wouldn't want that to happen," Detective Daniels replied, sarcastically. "If you remember anything, give us a call," he added, handing Angela his business card.

"Of course." As soon as he left, Angela sighed. She waited for her critical aunt to lecture her. "Christy, you can come out!" Christy came out of the room and plopped on the chair that the detective was sitting on.

"So they're asking questions about Chuck's death," Jerry said, resting her briefcase on the table.

"They are. And they think Mom did it," Christy said.

"Why didn't you tell me, Angela? If Christy hadn't said something, would you have called me?"

"I donno. Doesn't it make someone look guilty if they have a lawyer present when their just answering preliminary questions."

"No, Angela. It makes them look smart," Jerry replied, tucking her medium length brunette hair behind her ears before folding her arms across her slim frame. "So the next time they call, you tell them you have nothing to say without a lawyer present."

"Fine."

"I'm serious, Angela. And as your lawyer, I need to know all that you two know about your mother and Chuck, especially on Valentine's Day. I'll talk to you both separately," Jerry said. She went over to her briefcase and opened it. She pulled on her reading glasses before taking out her legal pad and pen. "Who's first?"

"Christy, can go. I have nothing else to say," Angela said getting up from the table. She wasn't planning to let her family know the truth about her relationship with Chuck.

"But, Angela-

"Aunt Jerry, really, Valentine's Day was like any other day for me," Angela said on her way to her room.

Chapter 13

"...the guilt will kill you."

Amanda and Gina anxiously sat in the cold waiting room of the ER anticipating news about Troy. Although they rode in the ambulance, they weren't allowed to go inside the room with him while the physician took out the small pieces of glass that pierced through his skin of his ankle.

Amanda observed her hands. Even though she washed them in the bathroom at the hospital, she still had her brother's blood underneath her nails. Consumed by the guilt, she closed her eyes, wanting the nightmare to be over. She desperately wished she could go back that night and do things differently. Besides that night, she thought of all of the times she was ever mean to her younger brother.

"I can't believe this is happening," Gina cried as she shivered from the icy room. Unlike Amanda who wore a jacket, Gina only had on a tank top. Her jacket was soaked in Troy's blood. "I don't know what I'd do without him."

"He's going to be okay," Amanda replied. That's how it was since they got to the hospital. Gina would cry and wonder why the events of the night happened, while Amanda tried to keep her calm. If anything, that night Amanda was sure that Gina and her brother were genuinely in love.

Amanda opened her eyes and glanced at the clock in the

waiting room. She couldn't get a hold of her parents who were at a gala for a charity event. The door to the ER flew open to several other students who helped stop the fight. They all sat around the two girls, trying to comfort them.

"I got you girls coffee," Sal said, handing them each a hot cup from the hospital's cafeteria. Amanda and Gina thanked him as they took the coffee. "Gina, are you cold?" he asked, noticing her quivering from the chilly room.

"The coffee should keep me warm. Thanks."

"Here," Sal replied pulling off his varsity jacket.

"Sal, no. You've already helped so much--"

Sal ignored her and wrapped it over her body. "What about you? You don't even have a shirt."

"Don't worry I've got about two more spare jackets in the back of my car. I don't want you to be cold," he insisted as he rubbed her arms to keep them warm. ***

"Mary Anne, it's Babs. You and Charles need to come to Roctown ASAP. Troy has been in an accident. Call me when you get this," Barbra said on Amanda's mother's voicemail. Barbra hung up her cellphone and placed it back in her Coach purse as she and Mercedes quickly got out of the car at the parking lot of the hospital.

"Mercedes," Sal said coming out the doors of the emergency room. She tried to keep her eyes off of his chest. She didn't want to pay attention to the fact that he was shirtless and showing off his well fit body.

"What?" Mercedes asked.

"I'll meet you inside," Barbra said leaving the two of them to catch up as she headed towards the hospital room.

"Are you going to see Troy?" Sal asked. "Yeah. Is that why you're at the hospital?" "Yup."

"Your ego that big?" Mercedes questioned. She was sure she knew why he chose to not wear a shirt. His cockiness reminded her of Robbie. Just as Robbie, there Sal was always trying to get

girls.

"Huh?"

"Why would you go to the hospital without a shirt? Is that your lame ass attempt to get girls to notice you?"

"No. That's not it at--"

"Whatever. I don't even know why I'm talking to you when my cousin is in the hospital," she snapped to him. She fled inside the ER to where several of her classmates waited to hear news about Troy.

As soon as Amanda saw her aunt, she rushed over and embraced her in tears.

"Sweetie," Barbra said now crying too. "Troy's going to be okay." Amanda shook her head as she wept on her aunt's shoulder.

"I don't want him to die," Amanda replied, glad that she didn't have to be strong for her aunt like she had to be with Gina.

"He won't."

"Are you Charles Prescott IV's mother?" the doctor said as he came up to Barbra.

"I'm his aunt. His parents are out of town."

"Okay. Well, I have good news. Charles is going to be okay." Amanda and Barbra sighed in relief. "After taking the small pieces of glass that penetrated the skin on his right leg, I was able to stitch it up. He also fractured the same ankle. I checked his blood count and his levels are fine so we won't need a blood transfusion. I'd like to keep him overnight for observations."

"I'm sorry to hear about Troy. I know how much he cares for you," Mercedes said to Gina as she sat down next to her.

"Thanks," Gina said, sniffing. "I hope he's going to be okay."

"He will be," Mercedes reassured her as she noticed that she had on Sal's football varsity jacket on.

"Isn't that Sal's?"

"I was cold and he let me wear it to keep me warm," Gina

replied.

“What happened to his shirt?”

“It's bathed in Troy's blood. After my jacket got soaked in it, Sal took the shirt off of his back to help stop Troy from bleeding. It's a good thing he was there. He and some other guys stopped the fight and he also called 911. Don't let his poor taste in women fool you. He's always been a sweetheart since I've known him.” Mercedes nodded her head. Had she known how accommodating Sal had been, she wouldn't have gone off on him. She felt stupid for jumping to conclusions about him having a massive ego when he actually had a big heart and was a hero.

“Good news, you all. Troy's going to be okay,” Amanda announced to those who came to support him. They all cheered in happiness.

Craving a late night snack, Julia went downstairs to the kitchen after midnight. She pulled out the left over flan Gloria made earlier that week and a bottle of Malta from the refrigerator. She grabbed a spoon and began to dig into the flan as she made her way to the wooden round kitchen table to sit.

“Nena, you couldn't sleep?” Gloria questioned coming into the kitchen.

“I was hungry. Do you want some?” Julia asked, wanting to reconnect with her mother. She didn't like being so distant with her. Gloria took out a spoon and sat next to Julia and began to quietly eat the flan. They hadn't spoken much to each other lately, however, when they did, their conversations were short. Gloria didn't even say anything about her makeover, even though she was against her straightening her naturally curly hair.

“I heard about your friend. Tell her that our prayers are with her and her familia,” Gloria said, breaking the silence.

“¿Quien? Did something happen to Mercedes?” Julia asked, in a panicked voice.

“No. I believe her last name is es Fresh-”

“Angela. What about her?”

"I can't believe you haven't heard. It's been all over the news recently. Her mother is being accused of murdering *su novio*."

"Chuck..." Julia said, wondering how Angela was holding up. She couldn't believe that Angela hadn't told any of the girls.

"Yes, that's his name. How'd you know?"

"Um... Angela might've mentioned his name before," Julia said, remembering that it wasn't her secret to tell what Chuck did to Angela. She wondered how she should've felt about a rapist dying. She didn't wish death on anyone. She didn't even believe in the death penalty, but a part of her was relieved that Angela didn't have to worry about Chuck hurting her again. "Eddie and I are cooling things for now," Julia said, hoping to talk about something lighter than death.

"I'm sorry to hear about that. Who broke up with who?" "We didn't break up, Ma. We're just slowing things down."

Julia took a sip from her Malta.

"What do you mean slowing things down? Did you and Eddie decide to... *do anything*?" she asked sounding a bit panicked. "You can talk to me about these things, you know. *Yo soy tú madre*."

"*Yo se`*." Julia sighed before she continued. She didn't know how Gloria would react when she told her the truth. "I booked a hotel room with Eddie back in February. I wanted to be with him...for him to be my first 'cause I love him so much."

"So, how did things go?" Gloria asked, trying to sound as understanding as possible. Though Julia could tell she was trying hard to not overreact, she saw the sadness in her eyes. "I mean I do not want to know what the two of you did. I just want to know how you're dealing with being in an intimate relationship."

"Nothing happened."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Right before anything happened, I saw a Bible on the nightstand. It made me realize how far away I've gotten from the promise I made to God. I love Eddie, but I love God more."

"How did Eddie take it?" Gloria asked, trying to hide her smile.

"He took it well. He thought he wasn't worthy enough to be with me, which couldn't be further from the truth. We're gonna wait 'til we get married," she added, playing with her promise ring that Eddie gave her.

"Oh, Nena, I'm so happy to hear that," she proclaimed, giving Julia a warm hug. Julia wrapped her arms around Gloria and smiled. It had been such a long time since they were affectionate towards each other. "I love you so much."

"Me too, Ma."

"So, what have you been doing now that you and Eddie are slowing things down?" she asked letting her go.

"I hate to say it, but I've been able to focus on other things. Like music. The only time I played the guitar when we were together was during rehearsals for worship team and at church. All my other free time I spent talking to Eddie," Julia admitted.

"I'm glad to hear that, Juliana." Gloria placed her spoon down and drank out of the bottle of Malta. "You need to go see your baby brother."

"He's not my brother."

"He's your father's son, therefore he is your brother." "Ma, why would you want me to go see him? He and Sonya are the reason why you and Papa are divorced."

"Carson and Sonya are not the reason for the divorce. Your father and I have been long over this marriage since he left nine years ago. Trust me, Juliana, Sonya is not Carlo's first mistress. I can count at least three of them while we were married."

"Sorry, Mama." Julia suddenly felt sorry that Gloria had to deal with Carlo's absence and infidelity.

"I'm sorry that I didn't ask him for a divorce years ago." "Why didn't you ask him for one sooner?"

"Fear. Of being alone and being a single mother. Pero, that changed when Carlo told me that he and Sonya were going to have a baby. I realized that I had nothing to fear because I have been

alone and single since that day he walked out on us. Even though I was aware of your father's unfaithfulness, I stayed with him because I didn't want you and Julio to get hurt by us getting a divorce."

"I'm sorry, Ma."

"Stop saying sorry. I am a free woman and now I can finally stop waiting around for Carlo. It's time I start taking care of me," she added. "Anyways, like I was saying before, I want you to go meet your brother. He's just an innocent baby and he's also tu hermano. You shouldn't hold a grudge against him. Promise me you will go see Carson."

"I promise," Julia unwillingly replied.

Amanda forced herself to stay awake, even though it was almost 3 in the morning, while Barbra went to get a quick cup of coffee and Gina left for home.

Amanda had her chair stationed right in front of Troy's hospital bed. He had already been transferred to the pediatric floor. He was sound asleep with an IV inserted on the top of his hand while his leg was splinted.

Amanda reached over to hold Troy's hand as she tried to ignore her guilt. If she wasn't so obsessed with competing with him, none of this would have happened.

"I'm really sorry, Troy," Amanda began in a whisper. "I know I may be a little much at times, but I love you. You're my little brother and no matter what, I don't want to see you hurting," she added, squeezing his hand.

Once her parents barged into the room in their gala outfits and worrisome expressions, Amanda dropped Troy's hand.

"Troy, honey!" Mary Anne exclaimed in tears, throwing her arms around him, even though he was sleeping.

"Don't hurt the boy," Charles warned, as he placed his hand on Troy's shoulder. Amanda swallowed her giggle. Mary Anne hugged Troy tight enough to make it seem as if she was going to break him.

"Mom... Dad," Troy began opening his eyes giving them a weak smile.

"I'm going to make sure the low life that did this to you pays. Don't worry. He's not going to get away with this," Charles added in anger, as he loosened his tie.

"Don't worry, Daddy. I'm going to be fine." "Baby, you are not fine. If you were, you would not be in this hospital bed,"

Mary Anne replied, refusing to let Troy go.

Though she wasn't holding him as tight, she still had her arms around him as she sat next to him on the bed. "This is all of my fault."

Amanda gulped as she stood up from her chair. She walked over to the window, wondering if Troy knew what she had done.

"How is it your fault, Mom? You didn't tell me to fight," he replied.

"It doesn't matter. I'm your mother and a part of my job is to protect you and Amanda. And I have done nothing to do so. I hardly ever spend time with you two. When I heard about you being hospitalized my heart stopped. I don't know what I would do if anything happened to the two of you. All the way here I thought of all the times I chose to do other things rather than spend time with my two kids. But that's going to change. We are going to spend more time together."

Amanda walked out of the room. She always wanted her mother to just spend time with her, yet she hated that it took a tragedy to make her realize that. She wondered if she was going to stick to her word or not.

"So tell me, why would you drag Troy to a party in the *ghetto*?" Charles asked, following her out of Troy's room.

"They're mostly middle class. And it's not the *ghetto*," Amanda defensively replied.

"I don't care! I do not want you parading your brother to parties like that. I may have let Troy go to a public school, but I will not let you destroy him. Understood?" he spat at her in anger. Amanda glanced away. She couldn't look at her father, a man who

seemed to hate her. She squeezed her hands together to stop herself from crying.

"Understood," Amanda grunted through her teeth.

"Come on, let's go home, sweetie," Barbra said to a sleeping Mercedes.

"What time is it?" Mercedes asked, as she yawned from one of the hospital chairs in the pediatric waiting room. Since Troy's parents and sister were with him, Barbra and Mercedes had to stay outside.

"Three-forty," she replied sipping on her coffee. "Troy's parents are here now and he's stable. We can visit him tomorrow-I mean later today. I can't believe it's so late."

"Way past your bedtime, huh," Mercedes joked with a smirk, knowing that her Dad and Barbra usually went to sleep early. Barbra smiled back.

"You make me sound like I'm a senior citizen. I'm only 33. Besides when you have children, you'll probably sleep this early too."

"Maybe," Mercedes said before they giggled on their way to the parking lot.

"Mercedes, I'm glad we're in a better place now. At least I think our relationship has improved."

"It has," Mercedes responded. Things had gotten better, but there were things the two of them hadn't talked about since their falling out.

"Is that how you feel? How you *really* feel?"

"Yeah. Why do you think I'm not telling you the truth?" "Last year, I thought we were bonding, especially throughout the pregnancy. And that morning of the argument, you said some things that made me realize you resented me."

Mercedes shoved her hands in her denim pockets. She didn't reply because Barbra was right. She had resented her in the past. Last year, she felt as if Barbra was taking the place of her mother and she hated her for it. "Were you afraid that I was getting

in between you and your father's relationship?" Mercedes shrugged her shoulders and kept walking towards the car. She didn't want to have this conversation. How was she supposed to tell Barbra the truth without hurting her feelings? "Mercedes?" Barbra asked, stepping in front of her so she could stop walking.

"Yeah, I resented you because I had more of my dad before you came. My dad and I used to always hang out. Play basketball, cook, watch games. Everything. But after the wedding he's always working because he has more responsibilities with a new wife and kid. Not to mention, he had to pick up the slack after my mom got hospitalized. And when he's off, he's all about his new family," Mercedes replied, surprised by her response. It wasn't until she spoke the words that she realized a part of her still had some resentment towards Barbara.

"Mercedes, we never wanted you to feel that way," Barbra began, sounding guilty.

"I didn't say that to make you feel bad. I'm just being honest."

"And I appreciate that. I wish you would've talked to us about it. We could've done something. The last thing I want is for you to feel that you don't belong."

"I really felt like that last year, but it's not as intense this year."

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to talk to your father and we're going to work it out so you and your dad can spend more time together."

"It's okay, Barbra, I'm used to things being how they are now." She and Mateo not hanging out on a one on one basis was becoming something normal. She couldn't even remember the last time they had quality time the past year without Barbra, Nick, or Steph being there.

"It's not okay... I also wanted to talk to you about Steph-" "What about her?" Mercedes asked. She hadn't done anything to hurt her Stephanie. She avoided her just so that wouldn't happen.

"You tell me. Are you staying away because you resent her too?"

"No!" Mercedes quickly replied. She never thought that it was that obvious that she had been avoiding her baby sister.

"Then what is it? I meant it when I said sorry. I really do want you to have a relationship with your sister. Or it because she's only your half-sister--"

"Of course that's not the reason either! If it was, I would have a problem with Nick too. I'm afraid, okay! My anger scares the hell out of me. That's why I'm not getting close. That morning last year when I hurt you and Steph, I shocked myself. I let myself get so mad that I almost caused you to lose the baby. What kind of a person does that?" Mercedes asked in a shaky voice, walking away from Barbra.

She began to feel like a monster all over again as the memory of the ill-fated morning she threw the glass at her played in her head. She continued to walk faster to the car, not waiting for Barbra. She heard Barbra jogging to catch up to her. By the time Mercedes reached the car, her eyes were filled with tears. She turned her head away so Barbra couldn't see her crying.

"Mercedes, I don't blame you," Barbra said, trying to face her. "It's all in the past."

"That doesn't mean anything. I almost killed my baby sister." Mercedes whispered, "*I'm a monster--*"

"No you're not," Barbra said, crying. She pulled Mercedes closer and tightly held onto her. Rather than pull away, Mercedes broke down in her arms.

Amanda carried her Marc Jacobs tote bag in her hand along with Troy's book bag over her shoulders as he walked besides her using his crutches.

"Sweetie, I got you your favorite. Cherry Slurpee," Gina said coming over to Troy holding out the 7- Eleven cup in front of him.

"Thanks, baby," Troy said, sipping on the drink after

giving her a wide grin.

"You shouldn't be drinking something that cold, Troy. Here, I have *your favorite* hot cup of latte for Starbucks. You need to keep your body warm."

"Thanks for that too, Amanda."

"I copied down your schedule so I can meet you after class and help you carry your books around," Amanda told him as they approached his locker.

"No need. I know his schedule by heart and I can help him."

"Are you sure you want to? I thought you wanted to keep your relationship a secret," Amanda retorted. Every time she tried to assist he brother since the fight, there Gina was getting in her way.

"Amanda, you know things have changed. I almost lost my schnookums." She paused, reached over and kissed Troy. "I don't care who knows now. All that matters in our relationship is you and me," she said to Troy. Amanda rolled her eyes as they lovingly glanced at each other. Every time Gina was with Troy she acted as if it was the last time they'd ever see each other again.

"Anyways, Troy. Why don't we order dinner this Thursday. We'll have a blast. After, we can watch the latest Fast & Furious movie." They hadn't spent quality time together in a while. Besides, Amanda wanted to show Troy she was sorry without actually saying the words.

"Order food from the country club?"

"You know it."

"I'm in."

"I was actually planning to cook for you this Thursday," Gina spoke. "Chicken alfredo. Then after dinner, I thought we could....*you know.*"

"Yeah... that sounds great, Gina. Sorry, Amanda," Troy said.

"Sorry? Troy, we already made plans. Tell *your girlfriend* another day."

"How about I have dinner with you after school and later, I'll go out with Gina," Troy offered.

"I love the way you think. Save the best for last," Gina said kissing his cheek.

"You are the best," Troy responded giving her another peck.

"Look, Gina, Troy and I are having dinner this Thursday and that's that. Why is it that every time I turn around, there you are?"

"Troy wants to have dinner with me. And I'm always around because I don't wanna be away from my schnookums."

"Look, you cougar, you are not going to steal my brother away from me."

"Don't call me a cougar again."

"Would you prefer the one who robs the cradle?" Amanda snapped back.

"I--"

"Ladies, why can't you two just get along--"

"Stay out of this, Troy," Amanda and Gina said at the same time. They glared at each other as they continued to bicker over Troy. Troy nodded his head and used his crutches to hobble over to where Mercedez was sitting on a bench by the Coca-Cola machine.

"What's good, Cuz?" Mercedez said, giving him a hug. She helped him sit down on the bench.

"I had to get away from them."

"Amanda and Gina?"

"Yup. All they've been doing since I went to the hospital is fuss over me. I know a part of the reason why they're doing it is because they both feel guilty. Gina thinks it's her fault the fight happened 'cause we kept our relationship a secret."

"What does Amanda have to do with the fight?"

"She stole my phone and sent Gina texts like it was from me. In the texts, she told Gina to meet me in a bedroom where Adam was. The plan was for me to see them coming out of the bedroom together and break up with Gina."

"Get out of here!" Mercedes always found Amanda to be unpredictable. Mercedes could never do something like that to anyone, especially her brother. "Did she confess to all of this?"

"No. You know Amanda. Pigs would have to be flying for her to admit she's sorry. But, I know she's trying to show remorse by being nice to me and helping me around. She doesn't know that I figured out what she's done and I don't plan on telling her. I kind of like Amanda being nice to me for a change," he added.

"Do you blame her for the fight?"

"No. It's not her fault Adam's the way he is. I did kind of blame her for what went down, but I realized it would be stupid to hold a grudge. Because of a grudge my mom and Aunt Babs held onto for so long, I didn't meet baby Stephanie until she was months old and I didn't even know I had you and Nick as two awesome cousins." Mercedes and Troy smiled at each other. She was happy he was in her life. Without him, Barbra and her sister might have not spoken to each other. Without him, her mother might have still been in a coma. Without him, Angela's son wouldn't have started chemotherapy. Without him, she and Amanda wouldn't have become good friends. There was a lot she had him to be thankful for.

Mercedes took a deep breath. She finally mustered the courage to apologize to Sal for what she said to him at the hospital. Before she came up to him, she glanced at her pocket mirror and did a quick booger check. She made sure her hair was okay before she put on lip gloss. It was the end of the school day and he was at his locker putting his books away.

"I wanted to apologize for what I said to you Friday night," she said the second she approached him. Sal pushed his headphones down to his neck and grinned.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Gina told me why you had your shirt off and how much of a help you were to my cousin. So thanks." Sal nodded his head and gazed at her. Though she didn't mind ogling into his eyes,

she wasn't going to let herself fall for Sal. "What?" she asked after he didn't say anything.

"I'm still waiting for you to say sorry." "I said thank you."

"But you didn't say you're sorry." Mercedes chuckled. She could tell he was anticipating an apology especially since she tended to come off as harsh towards him.

"You're just loving this."

"I am. I don't think it's often that you say you're sorry. So yeah, I'm gonna milk this moment for what it's worth. Go ahead, Mercedes. Tell me how sorry you are and maybe I'll forgive you," Sal mockingly said. Mercedes pulled her hair up and let it go. She didn't know why it was so hard to say sorry to Sal. She didn't usually have trouble apologizing to those she wronged.

"I'm sorry," she finally said through her teeth.

"For?"

"For assuming you had a big ego." Sal placed his hand on his chin and gave her a hard look.

"I don't believe you're truly sorry."

"That's too bad, Sal," she replied catching on to the fact he already forgave her.

"Okay, okay. I accept your apology, Mercedes. You don't have to get on your knees and beg for my forgiveness," Sal said loud enough for the people passing by to hear him. Mercedes laughed along with Sal as those who walked by looked over to see what was going on.

"Very funny."

"Come get a hug of forgiveness," he said opening his arms. Mercedes happily went to embrace him enjoying the comfort of his strong arms. She also appreciated the smell of whatever cologne he was wearing. To her disapproval, he let her go. "I gotta go to the senior class meeting," Sal spoke, taking the cell phone Mercedes had sticking out of her book bag. "I'll call you later."

"How? You don't have my number."

"I do now," he said, using her phone to call his. He handed

it back to her in a smile before he left. Mercedes's heart skipped a beat as she looked at his number and quickly saved it. She couldn't wait for his call.

Julia, Julio, and Carlo covered their faces with their hands as the paparazzi persistently snapped shots of them. They hurriedly rushed onto the sidewalk of New York City to their apartment. Once the media found out that the father of Sonya Solis's baby was Carlo, they took an interest in him. Carlo couldn't leave his home without getting his picture taken now. Sonya and Carlo tried to avoid being seen together in public as much as possible to shun away from all of the questions and accusations. Julia repeatedly blinked as the flashes from the cameras blinded her.

"Is it true you left your wife for Sonya then got her knocked up?" one of the crazed paparazzi asked.

"You're only dating Sonya Solis to boost your career!" another one accused. The only good thing that came of all of the attention was the American audience took an interest in his music and loved what they heard. There was much created buzz around his first American album that was due out in the late summer.

Finally making it to the door of their apartment, Julia and Julio raced inside before Carlo. "Papa, I can't believe you have to deal with that every day," Julio said as they walked past the concierge and towards the elevator.

"I know," Julia added as they waited for the elevator to take them to the penthouse. It was her first time at Carlo's home since the media found out about Carlo and Sonya's relationship. She decided to go along with Julio as he went to New York so she could visit their younger brother for the first time.

"I'm sorry the two of you have to deal with all of that. You'd think they'd get lives instead of stalking Sonya and I," Carlo replied as they walked out of the elevator and went to the kitchen. Julia and Julio sat next to each other on the barstools as Carlo leaned against the granite countertop.

"At least all of the attention is helping your music career out," Julio spoke.

"People need to listen to my music because of my talent and hard work, not because of who I'm with," he interrupted. "That goes for the both of you. You two need to accomplish your goals by your own merits. I don't want you guys getting ahead in life by using people. Now, Julia, I know you came to see Carson. Like I was trying to tell you outside before we got swarmed by the paparazzi, Sonya took him to go meet his grandparents. So another time. Now that we're all here, we can spend time together without any interruptions. Julio, go to your room and order pizza for us. I need to talk to Juliana alone," Carlo said. Julio nodded his head before leaving.

Julia sighed. She knew he wanted to talk about the hotel and Eddie. Carlo waited for Julio to close his bedroom door before he spoke. "We need to talk about that credit card bill. When I found the bill, I was mad. You can't blame me, you know. I'm a father and the last thing a dad wants to hear is about his 15 year old daughter in bed with a boy."

"Papa, you do realize that I'm gonna be 17 in June. That's like *next* month--"

"That's not the point," Carlo interrupted. Julia rolled her eyes at his ridiculousness. Her father didn't even know how old she or Julio was. "My point is, you're growing up fast and you think you're ready to be involved in an intimate relationship when you're not. Kids your age don't stay together. It's just a fact. And you're just willing to sacrifice your body for some boy who might not even be here tomorrow--"

"Eddie's not a boy. He's a man and I know that he'll be here tomorrow and the day after that and so on. We love each other. And if you must know, he and I did get a hotel room with the intentions to make love," Julia started, as she saw Carlo rolling her eyes when she said *make love*. "But we didn't do anything--"

"Just like how you didn't do anything with Eddie in your mama's bedroom last year?" he accusingly asked.

Chasing Ghosts

"I don't see how you could be mad at me! At least I'm only with one person at a time unlike you--"

"I'm only with Sonya. Just Sonya. Don't listen to what the tabloids are saying--"

"So you were only with Mama when ya'll were married?" she angrily asked. How could he be so judgmental when he was no better himself? Carlo looked away from her to his pinkie ring.

"I made mistakes and suffered from my choices. I don't want you making the same mistakes, Juliana. I was a boy once and I know what boys around your age think about. And for that reason, I forbid you to see Eddie."

"What! That's not fair!" Julia screamed, hopping up from her chair. "You can't force us to stay away from each other--"

"I can and I will because I'm your father!" he spoke, as his voice got louder.

"Oh, so now you wanna be my dad?" Julia asked, storming away from him. She went for the door out of the apartment rather than to her bedroom. Not wanting to wait for the elevator, she ran to the stairs. Her heart raced as she traveled down the stairs. She hated how Carlo wanted to be a part time dad whenever he felt the guiltiest. It was too late for him to act like he cared. ***

Christy threw the basketball from the top of the key, to where Mercedes was at the three point line to the right of her. Once Mercedes got the ball, she faked the shot, tricking Vic, her opponent she was playing against, took two steps, and took a jump shot.

Mercedes and Christy gave each other a high five after she made the basket. Both girls were playing a two on two game with Vic and Travis.

Since it was loser's ball, Travis checked the ball to Christy. He tossed it to Vic. Before Vic had a chance to catch the ball, Mercedes snatched it. Mercedes threw the ball behind her back and upwards to Christy, who raced towards the basket. She caught it and made a layup.

"Game!" Christy exclaimed as Mercedes and her cheered.

"So lucky," Vic grunted.

"It's called skills, Vic. Just admit it. You guys are good at football, but ya'll ain't got nothing on us when it comes to basketball," Mercedesz replied, grabbing the rebound.

"Exactly. So pay up," Christy requested, holding out her hand.

"Give her the money, bro. I forgot my wallet," Vic said. Travis rolled his eyes before handing them each a ten dollar bill. Mercedesz and Christy laughed as they walked over to Mercedesz's house.

"Hey, I heard about what happened with Chuck and your mom. I'm really sorry your mom's involved in this whole mess," Mercedesz said, carefully choosing her words. She was sorry for the fact their mother was involved, however, she wasn't sorry that Chuck was no longer going to be a problem for Angela.

"It sucks. I hate how everyone is talking about it and having sympathy for us," Christy admitted. "Me and my sisters are living with Aunt Jerry now and that's all we talk about, the case and my mom's whereabouts. I wanted to get away and forget for a little while. That's why I came out today."

"Well, okay then. We won't talk about it," Mercedesz replied, wanting to respect her choice.

"So you really think the team has a shot at being better next year?" Christy asked.

Every once in a while they would go play street ball and throw a bet here and there. Especially now that the weather was much warmer, they would go to the basketball court more often. They wanted to keep practicing in hopes that the basketball team would be more successful the upcoming year than the past season.

"Yeah. I mean we gotta work hard for it, but from what Coach is saying, varsity is gonna be a better fit for us than junior varsity," Mercedesz replied, tossing the basketball between both hands.

She knew she had to do so much better at playing so she could get noticed. She felt that if she didn't work hard at basketball,

she wouldn't be able to get into college since her grades weren't greater than average and she didn't participate in any extracurricular activities other than basketball. She needed a scholarship to get out of Roctown.

Once they made it to her house, Mercedez unlocked the front door and walked to the kitchen. "Here," Mercedez said, tossing a bottle of fruit punch Gatorade to Christy before taking a bottle herself.

"Thanks." Mercedez led Christy upstairs into her bedroom as they drank their Gatorade. "Hey, can you give me a ride home?"

"Yeah. Let me just check my MySpace real quick," Mercedez said, turning her desktop computer on. She sat down on her chair to check if she had any new comments.

"You know Robbie?" Christy asked. Mercedez swung her chair over to where she was, holding a picture up. Mercedez got up and went over to the photo. In the picture, Robbie and she were kissing on the couch at Dev's infamous pent party from last year.

Mercedez glanced, thinking back to the time when they used to be happy...before he used to hit her. "Sorry, I wasn't being nosy. I just noticed it on the floor." It didn't surprise her that Christy found something that she thought she hid. After all, Mercedez's room was a cluttered mess and at times she misplaced things.

"We dated eight months last year on and off." "What happened?"

"Stuff. We used to be happy. Then things just...changed," Mercedez admitted, putting the photo away in her Nike shoe box that had a bunch of her ex's belongings in it.

"What changed?"

"Him. Or maybe it's who he was all this time. I donno. We dated for months and a part of me feels like I barely knew him. I didn't even know anything about his family." When she dated him, she always felt there was something mysterious about him. Like he was keeping something from her. However, she could never put her finger on it.

"Do you miss him?"

"What?" Mercedes asked, though she heard her. She grabbed the box and knelt on the floor.

"So I'm guessing you do." Mercedes shoved it underneath her bed as she thought about the question. She knew the answer: Yes. She missed Robbie. Every once in a while she would think about him. Not just about him, but about being with him.

"It doesn't matter how much I miss him. We can't be together."

"Is it 'cause you two fell out of love?"

"No," Mercedes replied standing up. "If it only took love to be with someone, we'd still be together."

Chapter 14

"...the charm of reckless perfection."

Amanda and Troy sat at the back of the courtroom along with their mother while waiting for the jury to determine if they found the defendant guilty of murder or not.

Allegedly, the wealthy Marshall Jacobs, stabbed his girlfriend with a knife multiple times during a domestic dispute. Jacobs hired lawyers from the Prescott Law Firm in hopes that he would get away with ending his girlfriend's life.

"In the circuit court for the ninth judicial circuit for Homestead County, New Jersey the state of New Jersey versus Marshall Jacobs as to case number 2002 CF123-09, as to the charge to first degree murder verdict as to count one, we the jury find the defendant guilty so say we all dated at Roctown, Homestead County, New Jersey on this 8th day of May 2005..."

"Oh my goodness," Mary Anne said, covering her mouth. Just as she spoke the audience began to chatter amongst themselves. The Prescott Law Firm's lawyers were notorious for getting the most faulty defendants acquitted, making them one of the best law firms in the country.

"This is bad," Amanda said glancing around the loud room.

"It can't be that bad," Troy replied.

"Yes it is that bad, Troy! Do you know how long the firm

has been building this case for? This is going to hurt them," Mary Anne replied.

"How so? It's only one case," Troy stated.

"One case that the law firm has been preparing over the past 3 years. One case that all of the local channels are broadcasting along with national news," Mary Anne replied as she leaned forward and rubbed her temples.

Amanda and Troy looked at each other, worried after witnessing Mary Anne's reaction. She usually kept her cool in tense situations. "We have to do damage control... explain why we failed to get him acquitted to the media," she said to herself. "If only your father would've listened to me. I always tell him not to defend clients who tell him point blank that they committed their crimes like this one did."

"Order! Order in the court!" the judge screamed as he banged the gavel.

Amanda scanned the room to where Charles was. Although he had his hand covering his mouth so the media wouldn't see what he was saying, she could tell he was angry by how his veins looked like they were going to pop out of his neck. It seemed as if he was scolding another lawyer.

Though their parents were still inside the courtroom, Amanda and Troy stepped outside and rested by the white pillars. "I've never seen Dad so mad," Troy said, loosening his tie.

"If that's the case, you've never seen Daddy yell at me before. But you can't blame him. Everyone thought Jacobs was going to be acquitted."

"Even though he was guilty as sin?"

"And? It's the lawyer's job to convince the jury that they aren't guilty--"

"So the bad guys just walk? Where's the justice in that?" "Look, Troy, being a lawyer isn't about being fair or not.

It's about being good. So good that you can sway a bunch of strangers that the guiltiest person is a saint and therefore could never commit whatever heinous crimes they're being accused of,"

Amanda lectured.

"Do you even know why mom quit practicing?"

"Because she wanted to spend more time with us," Amanda sarcastically replied.

"Because she was tired of defending people she knew were guilty. People who told her that they committed the crimes and expect her to lie so she can get them off."

"You know what, Troy, I wish Daddy could hear you right now. Maybe then he wouldn't continuously threaten to disown me. If he knew how you really felt, he'd never want you to be a part of the family business," Amanda snapped, angry that Troy "the golden child" was always winning in their father's eyes, even though he didn't share the same views about being a lawyer as their father and Amanda did.

She glared at her younger brother. She couldn't wait for the day when Charles realized how much she was like him, unlike Troy.

"First day of summer!" Amanda exclaimed as she took a cold cup of lemonade from Isabel before sitting at the edge of the pool. She sipped from her cup as she dangled her legs in the cool water beside Mercedes. Julia and Keisha each lay on lounge chairs.

"Yup. I can't believe we're about to be seniors next year," Keisha said, switching the radio station on the boom box to Hot 97.

"It's about damn time. We gotta do it big next year as seniors," Mercedes replied as Amerie's "1 Thing" played on the radio. She couldn't believe that they were already on the verge of beginning their last year of high school. "I'm talking parties, actually winning basketball games, and boys--"

"Like Sal," Amanda cut in. The girls giggled as Mercedes blushed.

"I wasn't referring to Sal. I like him, but he hasn't asked me out on a date. Besides he's gonna be busy playing football for Monmouth U."

"So, he'll still be living in Jersey and besides you still got the

summer with him. Summer love, hun," Amanda responded.

"I'm with you on the winning basketball games. I could use a full ride to one of these state universities in Jersey," Keisha stated.

"Ugh! You just reminded me of why I'm dreading the responsibilities of being a senior. Taking the SAT, writing essays to get into these colleges," Julia said. She was very involved in school. However, she still had standardized tests and college application essays to worry about.

"Recommendations, stepping it up with volunteer hours, and extracurricular activities," Amanda added as she took a sip from her lemonade. She knew she had to do even more than she did the year before to get accepted into Princeton.

"That's the boring and tedious stuff," Mercedez said downing half of her drink before placing it beside her. Talks of going to colleges made her uneasy at times. She didn't feel like putting in the work to getting into college since she wasn't sure what the point of college was. Her main reason for attending was because it was expected of her and because she wanted to be around her peers. If it was up to her she would skip college and explore different career opportunities where she didn't have to waste her time in a classroom.

"Tedious and boring, but it's important, Cedez," Julia replied. "Julz, I'm not saying I'm not gonna do what I gotta do to get into college... Yo, where's Ang? I thought she was coming," Mercedez said trying to change the subject in attempts to avoid talking about her future.

Amanda shrugged her shoulders, knowing exactly why Angela wasn't sitting poolside with them.

"I feel so bad for the girl. First her son gets cancer," Julia said.

"And then she finds out Chuck was killed by her mother," Keisha added.

Amanda's cell phone rang. When she saw who it was, she got up. "I have to take this," she told the group. She threw her slip on summer dress over her bikini before making her way inside her

home. "Did you think about what we talked about?" she asked Angela as soon as she picked up the phone.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Isabel let me in. I'm in your living room." Amanda hung up the phone before she came up to where Angela was sitting on one of the couches. As Amanda went to go sit down, she noticed how terrified Angela appeared. However, as soon as Angela saw her, she put on her brave face.

"I don't think it's necessary," Angela said.

"If you didn't, you would've just told me over the phone. But you're here so that means you're at least considering it," Amanda replied, calling her bluff.

"Why do I need a lawyer? It's not like I offed the guy-" "That's not what the cops are saying."

"What are you talking about? How do you even know *what the cops are saying?*"

"I didn't think I was going to be the one to tell you. My parents have connections and they heard that you might be facing some legal troubles with Chuck's case. My mom didn't tell me exactly why, but she said you'll need a lawyer. And she is willing to represent you--"

After the loss of the recent publicized murder trial, many clients left the law firm. Mary Anne decided to practice law again to help improve the firm's reputation. Knowing that Amanda knew Angela, Mary Anne asked her to convince Angela to let their firm represent her, especially since the case was getting a lot of media attention.

"Slow down, Amanda," Angela said, getting up from her seat. "I come here and not only do you tell me that I need a lawyer, but that your mom wants to represent me? Not that I need a lawyer, but what makes you think I can even afford her?"

"She wants to do it pro bono. All you have to do is say yes." "No, Amanda. I'm not a charity case!" Angela exclaimed, getting upset.

"I didn't say you were!" Amanda replied, standing up. She

walked a little closer to Angela, not wanting to talk loud just in case anybody was listening. "What do think is going to happen as this case progresses? You and I both know all the secrets of your relationship with Chuck are going to come out, especially the fact that you two share a son. It makes you look like you had motive to kill him."

"One, I didn't kill him. And two, they aren't going to find out about what he did to me nor about how he's Caleb's biological father. I'm gonna keep my mouth shut."

"They're still going to find out. You've told too many people. I'm not saying it'll be me, because it won't, but someone's going to talk for the right incentive." Angela backed up some more and sat right back down.

"So you really think I need a lawyer?" Amanda took a seat right next to her. As excited as she was that her mother wanted her help for the case, she was upset that it was happening to her good friend.

"Yes I do, Ang. Look at it this way. No matter what you choose, the truth is going to come out and things are going to get crazy. The difference is with a lawyer you'll be ready." Angela's face turned pale after her phone rang. Angela glanced up from her mobile device to Amanda with the same facial expression she had earlier. "What is it?"

"It's the cops."

Mercedez woke up to the sound of her mother cooking in the kitchen of her new apartment. Talia moved into her own place yesterday. She still had several unpacked boxes of her belongings that she had from before the coma.

The small apartment had two bedrooms and one bathroom along with a petite kitchen and living room area. Mercedez planned on staying with Talia over the summertime to help her re-adjust to life.

Mercedez yawned as she walked into the kitchen with her pajamas on. Talia sang *Crazy* by Gnarl's Barkley as she whipped up

a breakfast of eggs, bacon, and pancakes.

"Good morning, sweetheart!" Talia said in a cheery voice. She kissed Mercedes on her forehead before she walked over to open the shades, allowing the sun to shine through the apartment.

"Hi," Mercedes replied in a sleepy voice with a smile at her singing. Talia had always been an early bird.

She handed Mercedes a plate of breakfast. "Thanks." Mercedes went over to the tiny table of two and sat her plate down. She went to the refrigerator and poured orange juice for the both of them and put them on the table. Talia went over and placed a coaster underneath each of the cups. She took her food and sat down next to Mercedes.

"How'd you sleep last night?"

"Good." Mercedes began to dig into her breakfast. "You?"

"Good." Talia hesitated before she started to eat. Mercedes glanced at her, sensing something was on her mind. "I need to talk to you. I know I've always been vague whenever you asked me what I do for a living. Well, I was going to wait for you to turn eighteen before I told you, but I think you're both mature and old enough to know the truth." Talia nervously took a sip from her orange juice.

Mercedes waited for Talia to tell her what she already knew. She found out about Talia's occupation when she was in the ninth grade. Before then, she assumed she was a local model. When she got a little older, she thought Talia was a part of the CIA since she didn't talk about her job.

"I am a...*professional dancer*. No, that's not the truth," Talia drank what was left in her cup and took a deep breath. "Just go out and say it, Talia," she said out loud to herself. "Mercedes, I get paid to take my clothes off. Now, I know that's not a noble profession but it pays the bills and puts food on the table and clothes on our backs. A couple of months before I was hospitalized, I actually stopped dancing and started working as a bartender at the same club."

"Mommy, I know," Mercedes said on her second pancake,

knowing that it was hard for her to talk about.

"How long have you known?"

"Ninth grade. I overheard you and Dad talking about it." "That's a relief. Why didn't you tell me? You could have

saved me a panic attack I was having before I told you," she responded at ease. "Now that that's off the table!" Talia exclaimed as she began to eat her breakfast.

"Are you gonna go back to *dancing*?" "I have to."

"Why? I thought you said you was bartending now." "Bartending doesn't make as much money. And you know I've got a hell a lot of bills to pay."

"I don't want you taking your clothes off. I got you. I can get a job and help you pay the bills--"

"No. You are not going to help me with that. You need to stay focused on school and basketball. Honey, you've only got one more year before college and you need to concentrate on that. Even though I didn't go to college, that doesn't mean I don't want you to get a degree."

"I can do school, basketball, and work at the same time and still get into college."

"Mercedez--"

"How about we make a deal? If I keep my grades up, continue to ball, and do what I gotta do to get into college, let me work. The minute my grades drop, I'll quit my job. And as long as I have a job, you can't dance." Mercedez would do anything to lend a hand to her. The last thing she wanted for her mother was to keep degrading herself to make a living.

"Honey, I don't know..."

"I'm not taking no for an answer," Mercedez replied glaring at Talia.

"Have you always been this stubborn?" "Yup. Kind of like you."

"Fine. But the second your grades drop, you're quitting your job."

"Agreed." Mercedes raced to her room and took out the check Mateo gave her back in September that she never cashed. "Take it."

"I'm not going to take money from you now." Mercedes sat the check of a few hundred dollars on the table so Talia could see. "I'm especially not taking that much from you." Talia folded her arms as the doorbell rang. She gave Mercedes a look before opening the door. "Flowers!" Talia exclaimed to the delivery man. She quickly took the dozen roses and smelled them. "Thank you, sir," she added to him before he left. "Awe," Talia sad as she read the card.

"Who are they from?"

"Sal," Talia replied smiling.

"Are you kidding me?" Mercedes jumped up from the table as her nose flared out. She already didn't fancy most of the guys Talia dated, but this was the worst. How dare she try to get with someone who was around the same age as her! "Mom, he's only a year older than me! You could've given birth to him. I know you still think you're twenty-five, but you're not."

"Mercedes--"

"No! It's not okay for you to be dating someone who's half your age!" The more she talked to her the angrier she got. No wonder Sal only called her once since they exchanged numbers. He was obviously feeling Talia more.

"Listen--"

"I'm good. Fall back," she snapped before making her way to her bedroom.

"Mercedes Natalia Mendoza, these damn flowers are for you!" She stopped as she felt her ears turn red from jumping to conclusions.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I was trying to tell you before you started to rip my head off."

"My bad." Mercedes went over to the vase of flowers in Talia's hands. Mercedes blushed as she read the card from Sal.

"Beautiful flowers for a beautiful girl," Talia said reading the card out loud. "From Sal. To Mercedes. I can tell he likes you. And I can tell you like him by the way he's got you all worked up." Mercedes looked at the note a couple of times over. For the first time in a while she didn't want to get back with Robbie. Sal was the one on her mind.

"Wait," Mercedes began after she heard a familiar voice on the radio that was still on. She raced over and turned up the volume. Yes indeed, it was her best friend. "That's Julia and her dad! She was talking about how they made a song together last summer."

"That's great! Tell her," Talia grabbed the house phone and handed it to Mercedes. She quickly dialed Julia's number.

"Put it on 107.5," Mercedes quickly said as soon as she picked up.

Julia rushed over to the stereo and yanked out one of Julio's reggaeton CDs and maneuvered the dial of the FM radio to 107.5. Julio got up to put the CD back in but stopped when he heard the duet Julia and Carlo recorded almost a year ago.

Gloria went to the TV room where they were. Her mouth dropped when she heard Julia's song. They all attentively listened to the last fifteen seconds. Julia held her breath in utter shock as she heard the words of the song which was about a father's promise to always love and protect his daughter, regardless of his imperfections.

Julia and Carlo's duet was breathtaking. Although she had to sing at a higher octave than usual, it seemed effortless, especially with her father's tenor voice and acoustic guitar. She breathed again, still not coming to grips that her dream of becoming a rock star was coming true. Though she was at odds with Carlo, she couldn't be more excited.

"That was that new joint by Carlo Rodriguez and his daughter Julia. It's a slow song..., but I like it and I gotta good feeling that ya'll are gonna love it too," the female radio personality announced after the song. "For those who don't know, it's called

Reckless Perfection.”

Angela led Jesse to her new bedroom at her aunt's home. Now that Angela and her sisters were living with their aunt, they each had their own bedrooms. A part of her couldn't believe that she was living in such a large home. When they first moved in with her aunt, Angela humbly suggested that she and her sisters share a bedroom, however, Jerry insisted for them to each have their own room.

“What'd you wanna talk about?” he asked, once they entered her room. Angela went over to the door and locked it. Her heart raced as she turned over to Jesse.

“Who said anything about wanting to talk?” she asked, as she seductively walked over to him and pulled him in for a kiss. Her heart raced as their lips locked. She held onto his face as he lifted her up and brought her over to the bed.

“NO!” a fifteen year old Angela screamed, trying to shove a belligerent Chuck off of her. He ignored her. Stubbornly, Chuck kept her stationed against the wall.

“Shut your mouth,” he snapped as he violently covered her lips with his hand. Angela tried to yell as she attempted to squirm out of his grip. “The more you resist, the harder I'll push!”

A shiver ran down her spine as the thought of Chuck forcing himself on her raced through her head. Unable to stop the ill night from replaying over and over in her mind, she pushed her lips harder against Jesse's. She wanted to forget that stupid night, but lately that's all she could think about.

She tried to distract herself by concentrating on Jesse and what was happening. She started to unbutton his shirt as Jesse kissed on her neck.

“If you would've just obliged, things wouldn't have been so...rough,” Chuck stated as he finished zipping up his pants. He glanced down at a petrified Angela and sucked his upper teeth. Angela's mind went blank. What had just happened? Was this the same man who used to buy her treats as a child and who would listen to her talk about her fears and

dreams? Wasn't he the one who said that she could trust him?

After he left, Angela shook as she struggled to put the last piece of clothing that Chuck had ripped off earlier. Hot tears fell from her face as she tried to comprehend what just happened: Chuck raped her.

"Stop," she weakly cried, feeling Jesse's hand on the zipper of her black dress.

"Sorry," Jesse said, automatically pulling his hands away from her.

"No, I'm sorry," she said, getting off of him. She continued to cry as she finished zipping up her dress.

"Are you okay?"

"No. Everything is wrong," she said, getting up from the bed. "My mother is being accused of killing the man who raped me. And now the cops are looking my way. They called me a bunch of times, but I'm not gonna talk to them."

"You're gonna have to eventually."

"I can't. They think I had something to do with it." "Things aren't looking so good for you. Have you thought about getting a lawyer?"

"So *you* think I need a lawyer too?" Angela yelled. "I didn't do anything, Jesse! I thought you out of all people would believe me."

"I do!" he exclaimed jumping up from her bed as he reached over to touch her. Out of impulse, Angela pulled away.

"It's just you and Chuck have history." "I know.

They're probably gonna find out about him being Caleb's biological father even though your name's on the birth certificate.

And I know they might not believe he raped me since I didn't report it. But they're not gonna find out any of that from me."

"What about the other stuff?"

"What other stuff?"

"How he used to- to touch you and play that stupid game *Don't Tell*," Jesse said in a shaky voice. Another chill ran down her spine thinking about the past.

"No one knows about that other than you, me, Christy, and Chuck. Christy won't talk and Chuck is dead, so as far as I'm concerned, no one else is gonna find out."

"And you plan on keeping your other secrets about you and Chuck buried?" Angela shook her head, not wanting Jesse to continue. She didn't think she could handle her deepest and darkest secrets spoken out loud. "About how you used to like it when he touched you--"

"What do you want me to say? That I enjoyed him touching me? Well I did at first. I was seven. I didn't know any better. But when I got older him touching me made me feel dirty. I couldn't tell anybody about it. I was scared nobody would believe me--"

"Were you afraid that no one would believe you or that you would lose Chuck?"

"What?"

"You told me that you used to love him. That you thought you and him were gonna get married and that's the reason you kept playing *Don't Tell* until you were 12. And that's the reason you *willingly* slept with him when you were 12, a month after your dad died," Jesse said through his teeth. Angela listened to Jesse tell the truth. She turned her back to him and wiped her tears in shame.

"Then he went away and I vowed to never do anything like that again. And I didn't," Angela replied back in frustration.

"What about Valentine's Day? Did you sleep with him then?"

"No. And the only reason I was going to was 'cause he was blackmailing me. If I didn't do it, he wasn't going to help Caleb. But I couldn't go through with it. Promise me you won't tell anyone what we just talked about." "I won't."

"I'm gonna get some water," she said. She was over this conversation about Chuck. All she wanted to do was to forget about him, even for a little while. However, she did not expect for Jesse to remind her even more of Chuck.

Angela sighed as she opened the door. They both went

down the stairs to the kitchen. She took out two glasses and grabbed the pitcher of water from the refrigerator. "I swear things can't get any worse."

"Hi, you two," Jerry said coming from outside. They both smiled at her as she walked in, shuffling through the mail. "Angela, are you okay? You look like you were just crying," Jerry said in concern, after noticing her red eyes.

"It's just allergies," she lied.

"Well, okay. This is for you," she replied handing her a large envelope. Angela took it in confusion.

After opening it, she flipped through a pile of stapled papers. Her head spun as she tried to figure out why her name was on documents that Chuck had filed earlier last year.

"What does all of this mean? Aunt Jerry?" Angela asked, looking up from the papers. Jerry came closer and began to go through the packet.

"Congratulations," Jerry responded, sounding unsure if that was the right word to use. Both Angela and Jesse glanced at Jerry in confusion. "According to this will, Chuck has left everything for you." "Wait-what?" Angela questioned, not sure if she heard her right.

"Angela, you are now 3 million dollars richer."