

Nothing Left

A Novel

Brittany Buckner

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

NOTHING LEFT

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PART I: MEGHAN

CHAPTER 1

Meghan's eyes followed her two little cousins as they ran around the tables at Mama Lucci's restaurant. Zack and Zana were seven, her only cousins, and she could hardly stand them. This realization came to Meghan at the table with the red checkered plastic tablecloth.

When Meghan saw their sun-kissed bushes of hair running around all she could think of was her second graders at Brewster in Philly. Most of her students couldn't read and write at a second-grade level, kindergarten maybe. The school had no playground, only a cracked blacktop with a basketball hoop with no net. Meghan had seen the private school her cousins went to. World-class. A famous architect designed the block-long playground. Plenty of basketball hoops, slides, treehouses, crawlspaces, jungle gyms, monkey bars, sandboxes, and zip lines. One track and field, one tennis court, one pool, and one Zen Garden. Zack and Zana regularly came home with wood chips and

flecks of black turf in their shoes, protecting them from nasty falls.

“So,” Aunt Susan said, leaning towards Meghan across the table. “How are you doing? I mean *really* doing?” Meghan knew Aunt Susan was being sincere. She was the only person left on earth who might understand her, who cared to. But in this loud, buzzing restaurant with everyone squeezed at the table, she wouldn’t tell her aunt anything of substance. Not now but later. Meghan leaned in, “I’m fine, Aunt Susan, really. Fine.”

Aunt Susan kept staring at her, not believing a word Meghan said.

“I don’t want to be here. If that’s what you’re asking,” Meghan said.

“Why?” Aunt Susan asked.

“It’s just been a long day. I just got here. I’m tired.”

“So sorry, Meg. I’m glad you’re here. We’ll talk soon, just you and me, Meg.” Meghan felt better seeing her aunt because she was such a wonderful, caring person. Aunt Susan had never questioned Meghan’s decision to join TEACH! during her last year of college. She wasn’t like her father who couldn’t resist reminding her what a mistake joining TEACH! was. How many times had he asked Meghan to work for him at his development firm? He was trying to help, but she felt he was really laughing at her whenever TEACH! was discussed.

Meghan consistently declined to work for him, despite all he’d done for her throughout her life. David James was indeed her patron. He paid for college and everything in her life. She owed him a return of his investment. He’d

poured millions of dollars into Meghan over the course of her life, only for her to make an annual salary of \$46,000, which was not a livable wage. Thus, David James gave her regular cash infusions when she was in Philadelphia for her monthly spa treatments and hair appointments. Her classroom was by far the most well-appointed. She even bought two industrial fans for her AC-less classroom.

Meghan looked at Reginald at the table, Aunt Susan's husband of eight years. Reginald was African American. Meghan and her father were shocked when Aunt Susan and Reginald started dating and then quickly married. There was nothing Meghan could find wrong with him except that he didn't make much money. Meghan wasn't bothered by the fact that Reginald was African American. In the beginning, she had been just shocked—no, *surprised* was a better word, that the James family would have someone other than a white person in it. She didn't know why she felt that way and was slightly ashamed. She never said how she felt to Aunt Susan. *What good would that do?* Anyway, by now, she was no longer surprised. Reginald was a good man to Aunt Susan. He was the quietest person Meghan had ever met. She had never spoken to him for longer than three minutes. But she trusted that Aunt Susan picked well.

Meghan wondered if she had chosen the right meal. She'd been thinking of changing to spaghetti and meatballs when Zack rammed into her. Aunt Susan yelled, "Hey, Zack, stop it, apologize to your cousin!" Her high volume didn't register in the loud restaurant. Zack and Zana weren't the only possessed kids running around and screaming. Zack laughed into Meghan's armpit. It tickled

but she was too irritated to laugh. He soon took off chasing his sister around the table again.

Molly sat to the right of Meghan. The two women hadn't said much to each other since Molly had married Meghan's father two years ago. What was there to say when he had married someone two years older than his daughter? Gross. That aside, Meghan couldn't get over the fact that her father had remarried at all. And to Molly, who lacked personality.

But Molly was pretty. Straight shoulder-length blonde hair, island blue water eyes, thin and tall. And she was an impeccable dresser. Tonight, she wore an olive green satin knee-length dress with forest green sandals. Mustard color painted toe and fingernails. Ray-ban sunglasses on top of her head. Meghan understood her father's choice to marry Molly, but Meghan still hated his decision, so she hated Molly.

The waiter filled everyone's wine glass as her father instructed. He said, "A toast!" Everyone lifted their glass; the little ones lifted their sparkling wine cups.

"A toast!" Zana parroted, revealing three adorable missing teeth. It was just Zack who Meghan found obnoxious.

Her father smiled lovingly at Zana. "I want to toast to Meghan, my Princess, for coming home finally. Safe and in one piece."

Meghan shook her head. He couldn't help his insensitivity when it came to her. Of course, she had been safe. Of course, she had come home in one piece. "We look

forward to your next steps. Cheers.” Everyone was drinking but Meghan.

“Princess,” her father continued. “Do you know what you will do now that you’re not teaching?”

“I don’t quite know. And I think you know that, dad.”

“You have options, Princess. You’ve always had them, and you always will.”

Meghan felt embarrassed to be having this public conversation about her private life. Did anyone else need to know her next steps? Instead, this time could be used to discuss Molly’s lack of direction. But that would never be a public conversation.

Only Meghan’s lack of direction was on the table. Meghan could feel heat flush her cheeks and desperately hoped that her father wouldn’t point that out to everyone either. He knew her cheeks turned pink when she was embarrassed. She turned away from her father. She looked at what she assumed was a young husband and wife eating by the wall. They were hunched over the table with a tealight lit too early, talking and smiling. They were in the wrong restaurant. Mama Lucci’s was a zoo, a place that knew no romance. Just the aftermath of romance: kids running around, teenagers slouched in their chairs hating every moment without their phones, fat, loud uncles, frail grandparents happy to be out of the house.

“Meghan!”

She turned to her father, wanting to say goodnight. Tomorrow she would be in her new apartment, in her own bed. “Yes, dad.”

“Welcome home!” Another cheers. He lifted his wine glass again, and everyone followed. “We love you, Princess. Here’s to the next best part of your life.” They all took a sip. Meghan sipped this time and put down her glass, but she noticed that her father had raised his glass again. “My beautiful family!” All eyes turned to him, again, except for Molly, who was looking into her lap. “We’ve come to celebrate for two reasons. One for my Princess. And one for Molly, myself, and all of us!”

Meghan was confused, now reading her father’s lips as if that would help her understand what was happening. “Molly and I are expecting!”

Meghan’s eyes widened; her throat constricted. *A baby?* She looked around the table to see if anyone else knew about this baby. Aunt Susan seemed genuinely happy and surprised. She clapped her hands, “That’s great, Dave. You and Molly deserve this.” Meghan wanted to maul Aunt Susan. How dare she say that. Her father didn’t deserve this. Molly didn’t deserve this.

The thing was already growing in Molly’s belly. Meghan looked at Molly. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Meghan,” Molly said. For some strange reason, Meghan hoped Molly was happy about this. She couldn’t tell.

“How far are you along?” Meghan asked.

Molly looked at Meghan. “Eight weeks.”

The food came. Three servers approached the table, confusing dishes. In the hubbub, Molly grabbed Meghan’s hand, something she’d never done before. Meghan looked

at their hands as the steam of her seafood linguine rolled over her face.

Instead of flinging Molly's hands off, Meghan politely said, "Are you happy about the baby?"

Molly gave a halfhearted smile. "I am. I love your father."

Meghan wanted to end the conversation. She couldn't tell if Molly was okay with the baby. Had it been her idea or her father's? Was the baby a *whoops*? Meghan decided not to press Molly. Mama Lucci's wasn't the right venue.

"Well, your food's here and so is mine, so we should dig in, right?" Meghan took her hand away and grabbed her fork and began eating too quickly.

CHAPTER 2

The first thing Meghan did when she arrived at her new Capitol Hill apartment was hook up her laptop. She sat against her living room wall in her empty apartment. There were so many things to do but answering Sam's email was the most urgent. On the drive, while Meghan was at a red light, she saw a text from Sam, her editor at DC Weekly. The text said that she needed Meghan's pitches.

Meghan hadn't had a chance to pitch because of the impossibly bumpy ride on the train from Philly to DC. She texted Sam:

So sorry Sam. Will have pitches today.

This isn't like me. Thanks

Unable to write, Meghan closed her laptop and her eyes. This had to work. *This* meant everything. Everything had to work now. She couldn't take another failure. She didn't know how long she'd sat crossed legged on the floor with her head back and eyes closed, vegetating.

Wishing to feel productive, Meghan popped up. The apartment, even without anything in it, was beautiful. She found herself giddy as she stood in the middle of each room taking everything in. The apartment was small, but every nook and cranny were thoughtfully done. This was a D. James Development Corporation apartment. Meghan was proud of her father. He had built this firm from a dream he and Meghan's mother had. Her father *did* deserve good things.

She went to the living room corner where a stack of her boxes had been delivered. She began unpacking. It didn't take long.

As she waited for her new furniture to arrive, she sat in the middle of her bedroom and worked on her pitches. She wasn't happy with any of them, but she sent them to Sam anyway. She gazed out her large bedroom window. She could see the National Monument and the U.S. Capitol. She could also see the cranes building new buildings. D. James Development Corporation was there along with her father's competitors. She wanted her father to be proud of her, like she was proud of him.

But the cranes meant DC was changing. Her father had explained to her that more young white snots, like her, were flooding DC living in high rises with astronomical rents. He'd told her that the blacks were being pushed out to make way for these new developments. Meghan didn't like her father calling African Americans blacks. She knew he wasn't racist but when he said things like that, he sounded borderline racist.

All her life Meghan had lived in the privileged outskirts of DC and had a vague sense of what her father was talking

about. It didn't seem real, and she didn't care. But now, seeing the cranes, the racial and socio-economic changes felt imminent. She was a snot, though she wished that she wasn't. She didn't want to contribute to anyone's demise. But she couldn't help it.

When her stomach growled, she left to find food in the quaint neighborhood. A mixture of historic row houses with well-appointed front lawns and brand-new apartments lined the narrow streets. Two blocks from her apartment, Meghan found a coffee shop called Tiger Stripes. The signs had horizontal slashes of orange, black, and white. It was packed for an early afternoon. Tiger Stripes smelled of black coffee and powdered sugar. Meghan felt at ease when she stood in line, looking at oversized, decorated pastries. She couldn't remember feeling this good in a long time.

"What would you like, ma'am?" a woman with a warm smile asked from behind the counter. Meghan eyed all the appetizing pastries. She ordered a spinach quiche and a latte and then found a small round table next to a window. Her drink and quiche were expertly made. Maybe moving to DC was the right thing to do.

She wondered how her second graders were doing now. Leaving them was cruel. But she had no choice. She nearly had to be carried out of the classroom. Meltdown felt like too light of a word. She'd snapped.

As the drink ran through her body, her students' faces flipped in her mind, one by one.

Jalene was what was called a "crack baby." She had trouble sitting still. Meghan let her stand up whenever she wanted.

Jon was a Jehovah's Witness and faithfully came with his Watchtower but rarely his books.

Jesus was chronically late.

Larry was likely autistic but undiagnosed. Meghan had no idea how to teach him.

Diamond was the only white student, and she was happy to let everyone know.

Sade was unkempt and hungry. Meghan kept a stash of peanut butter crackers and applesauce for her in her desk.

Tyrone would do anything to get attention. Meghan often sent him to the corner for time out. That never worked.

Marie was popular and bright. The boys had crushes on her. Meghan worried she would get a boyfriend too soon.

Jazmina was a shy and good student except she never did her homework. Never.

Jordan needed glasses. When he got them from a program for poor kids who needed them, he destroyed them within one week.

Thai didn't speak English.

Emelia was sweet and drew amazing pictures of Meghan at least twice a week.

And Markell.

Meghan didn't want to think of him. She wanted another latte but didn't get one. She had things to do. She needed to go home and wait for the furniture. She couldn't spend too much time thinking about the past.

As Meghan unpacked, the question of what she was going to do with her life persisted. With her soft baby pink sofa and glass coffee table, the apartment was becoming an expression of herself. She hung her paintings in the living room and bedroom. Her thoughts were as loud as a hammer hitting a nail in the wall.

She just didn't know what to do next. DC Weekly was an extremely part-time gig, but she was glad she had at least one thing to do.

The thought didn't settle well with her. She was thankful to her father for the apartment and the DC Weekly hook up, but she felt empty. Could she go work at Tiger Strips or some coffee shop as a barista? Surely making delicious drinks for people to get them through their day was worthy. Though she hated to admit it, a job as a barista was beneath her. It didn't make sense for her to do that job after graduating from UVA.

She found her sheets in a giant plastic container for her clothes and linen and made her bed. She flopped on the bed. She wanted to go back into the classroom again. She had to get it right. She had to prove she was competent. She could make a difference. *Yes, she could make a difference.* She thought of how her late mother led many causes when she was well, some of them for poor kids. Meghan supposed she was taking the mantle. She wanted to make her mother proud.

She fell into a deep sleep dissolving her flurry of thoughts.

When Meghan woke up, she had the idea of looking for a job that would allow her to make a difference. In something. She would make a positive difference in something, somewhere. Why not start looking for a job in DC Weekly? She pulled out her laptop and sat on her bed. She went to the job ads. She didn't see anything she was interested in until she did.

An ad that called for a part-time elective creative writing teacher at a juvenile detention center. She read it again. She liked half of it, the teaching half but the juvenile detention center gave her pause. That was something she'd never considered. She'd already had trouble teaching second grade. What would it be like with convicted juveniles? Could she handle it?

Meghan got a glass of lemonade and stood out on her small balcony. She needed the warm air and the sun. She thought about scratching the idea of working in a juvenile detention center. She could look for a real teaching job.

The problem with that was it was the beginning of April. There was a slim chance that she could get a job teaching in a school at this point in the school year. She'd have to wait until late summer to work as a teacher. That was a little depressing. She drank the rest of her lemonade and went for a glass of Sauvignon. Then another.

She wondered what that place would look like, feel like, smell like. She quieted her noisy brain with a fourth glass of wine.

The application was simple. Meghan filled out several questions about her experience working with youth. *Have you worked with youth for at least two years?* Meghan clicked

yes. She didn't feel bad for lying. It was fine enough. She had taught long enough.

CHAPTER 3

Aunt Susan's backyard was exactly what Meghan needed. It was small, well-appointed and had a small pool. It was just big enough and deep enough to get in, hold her nose and slip under water.

Meghan had her swimming suit on as she laid on the lounge chairs with Aunt Susan. She hadn't gotten in the pool yet. They were watching the kids run around. How could Zack and Zana have so much fun running in circles? Meghan would've been bored after the first ten minutes. Aunt Susan kept threatening them that they would leave the pool for their rooms if they didn't do this or that. Zack and Zana finally stopped running and sat on their laid-out towels and drank lemonade under the tree in the backyard. After they quenched their thirst, they opened up their bags of chips and ate them quickly. Zana went inside, probably to her room to play with her dolls. Zack got up, looked at his mother to see if she would threaten him or tell him to go inside, too. She said nothing. He grabbed a twig and

started drilling holes in the mulch. Meghan knew Aunt Susan wouldn't like that, but surprisingly her aunt said nothing.

Aunt Susan turned to Meghan. "So!" she said. "Tell me how you truly are doing?"

Meghan almost started to tell the truth. Everytime she thought about her last day at Brewster she started to cry. "Really, Aunt Susan, I'm fine. But thank you for asking." She closed her eyes. Maybe that would signal that she didn't want to talk about herself.

"Do you want to talk about the last day of school?"

"Honestly, I don't."

"Fair enough."

They sat in silence for a long time. Meghan felt like she might fall asleep. She had been sleeping too much.

"That sure was something, your father announcing that he and Molly were expecting," Aunt Susan said.

Meghan sat up and took off her clothes so she could take a dip in the pool. The heat was growing stronger. The heat was getting to her even though they were shaded. "You wanna come with me, Aunt Susan. We need a dunk in the pool."

Aunt Susan smiled like they were going to do something daring. She took off her cutoffs and tank top, revealing a neon pink bikini. She beat Meghan to the pool. With a gold one piece, Meghan ran around the pool for no reason at all and quickly got in as if someone was chasing her. They looked at each other and submerged. There was a spontaneous silent competition for who could stay

underwater the longest. Aunt Susan won. When Meghan came up for air, she splashed her aunt and Aunt Susan splashed back, laughing like little girls. Before they knew it Zack was in the water splashing around, too.

Meghan got out and dried herself with a towel. She watched mother and son play in the water. She rung out her hair and laid back on the lounge chair, feeling her belly growl. Meghan sipped the mojito she'd forgotten about until there was nothing left. Thirty minutes passed before Aunt Susan and Zack got out.

"Now go to sleep, my little gremlin," Aunt Susan said to Zack.

"Never," Zack laughed. He didn't sleep but he laid under the tree the rest of the time that Meghan was there.

Aunt Susan dried off then went inside. Meghan knew why she went inside. Ten minutes Aunt Susan came back with fresh mojitos and guilt free kettle potato chips. "You're the best," Meghan said, taking two big sips, then grabbing a handful of chips. The air felt just right now.

"The baby thing is...I don't know. They announced it two days ago. I've been so busy, I haven't thought about it much," she lied. "Why should I? It's coming whether I like it or not." They said nothing for a while. "How do you feel about this whole thing, Aunt Susan?"

"Well, I agree with you. No need to form much of an opinion. But I'm happy for Dave. He's deserving."

"What does deserving have to do with it?" Meghan didn't sound as happy as she wanted to. "Babies come whether a person deserves it or not. And how do we define deserving? Starting a family with a woman who is basically

his daughter's age? That doesn't feel deserving. Having a baby at fifty, that doesn't feel deserving. It seems reckless. He's basically okay with dying when this kid is twenty years old. Just when a parent should be there for their child."

"Meghan," Aunt Susan cut her off. "We could all die, any time. With your logic any parent is reckless."

"He never even told me he was trying." There was a lump in her throat.

Aunt Susan looked like she was going to say something but stopped herself. She sipped her mojito instead.

"Once the baby is here, you might feel different. Just be open."

"I am open."

Aunt Susan looked at her carefully. "Okay."

Meghan thought about leaving. She'd gotten what she needed, although she didn't know she needed anything when she first knocked on Aunt Susan's door. She sighed.

"It's hot. Why don't we go in? I can fix lunch," Aunt Susan said.

Meghan was still hungry. She felt bad for her tone. Aunt Susan was the only person in the whole world who was on her side, who gave a damn. "I'm sorry, Aunt Susan."

Aunt Susan gently rubbed Meghan's leg. "Don't be sorry, Meg. You have so much you're going through."

"Thank you for understanding. I love you. You're one of the few reasons she was happy about coming home."

"I'm honored then," Aunt Susan said, standing up, gathering things to put in the house. She called for Zack to come in. "Aw, man! But I want to stay outside, mommy."

"You'll bake."

"Daddy said black people don't burn."

Aunt Susan sucked her teeth. Talk along racial lines always made Meghan, and it seemed Aunt Susan uncomfortable. It wasn't necessary. "Damn Reginald," Aunt Susan said under her breath. "He's so hell bent on Zack and Zana knowing their African American side. I get it, but they're not one hundred percent that. He's convinced the world will only see them as African American."

Meghan didn't know how to interpret what was going on, but she felt uncomfortable.

Aunt Susan snapped, "Get in now. I don't care what your father said." Zack grabbed his towel and stomped inside.

Meghan stood up, took a towel and re-dried her hair. "I will take your offer for lunch."

"Great." Aunt Susan stopped and looked Meghan in the eyes. "I loved your mother. I miss her every single day. We weren't just sisters-in-law. We are close. She was my best friend. I'm here for you. I would've been anyway, but she asked me before she died to be there for you throughout your life. So, I'm here. Whatever you need."

Meghan's eyes watered. She didn't like it. Aunt Susan's eyes were watering, too. Meghan didn't want to melt now. "Thank you." That was all that Meghan could muster. It

wasn't specific enough, but she hoped Aunt Susan could somehow understand just how grateful she was.

"You understand?" Aunt Susan asked.

"Yes."

"Okay." She hugged Meghan, then went inside.

Meghan stood there, palms to her closed eyes trying to stop her tears from falling.

CHAPTER 4

Meghan didn't like that Rising Sun Adolescent Growth Center was an hour from DC. If she got the teaching job, the commute alone could be a reason for quitting. But every job had something less than desirable, right?

Driving down the long gravel road leading up to Rising Sun, Meghan almost hit a baby deer too young to know that it shouldn't meander in the middle of the road. Meghan's heart beat fast, screeching to a halt. As the deer showed his behind to her and walked away, Meghan positioned her hands on ten and two and slowly drove forward. It would've been just her luck to hit an innocent animal on her way to her job interview. She spotted what she thought was an eagle circling the clear sky ready to kill something. Meghan hoped it wouldn't be her once she got out of the car.

Every parking spot was taken, and some cars were even parked on the grass. Meghan didn't want to do that. What was she supposed to do now? The HR lady should have

warned her of the parking situation and told her what to do in this case.

After slowly surveying the land, Meghan saw cars parked alongside a dusty road in the back of Rising Sun. They were all dusty. She really didn't want to park there. It wasn't fair that she'd have to pay for a car wash.

Meghan drank the rest of her Tiger Stripes iced coffee before turning off the engine. She checked her face in the mirror. She liked her choice to wear only gold eyeshadow. She put on gold-tinted lip gloss and grabbed her portfolio and favorite pen.

As she walked from the dusty road to the gravel walkway, her pumps kept catching on the ground, causing her to walk gingerly. She had to focus on steadying her ankles. If she fell, she wasn't sure that anyone would notice except the eagle. She refused to look up.

Meghan thought of her father. She thought about accepting his offer to work for him. There would be garage parking, smooth streets, no eagles, or lost deer, and surely someone would care if she fell. But she reminded herself that being under her father's wing was not what she wanted. She wanted to help struggling kids. If she was offered and accepted this job things wouldn't be easy for her. Just like at Brewster. But it would be worth it if she could see things through. This time.

Inside, Meghan waited in the security line. The people in line wore tan uniforms and black combat boots. They must've been correctional officers coming in to start their shifts. They looked bored out of their minds. Meghan didn't have to see their faces to know. She could see it in

the way they cocked their heads, put hands on their hips, and heavily sighed.

The security guards gave Meghan a hard time. Meghan guessed it was because she was new, or white or because of something else. Meghan decided not to care. Nothing could derail her. She grabbed her keys from the security tray and headed for the lobby.

There was a small K-cup machine and Styrofoam cups that hadn't been touched in months. Powder creamer, red plastic mixers and a sorry little jar for contributions.

The door leading to the place where the boys lived was intriguing. It was the heaviest door she'd ever seen. It had been painted over with a mucus color. The door was a part of a system of security doors. Meghan got to see the door behind it, which was heavy metal as well. She couldn't tell how the doors opened. There were no keyholes or key card swipes.

Her escort came to get her.

Meghan wasn't nervous anymore. Just curious. She was here now in some strange world she'd never imagined. *Enjoy the ride.*

"You're Ms. James?" he said. "I'm a YA here."

"YA?"

"It's short for Youth Advocate," the man said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means we are not correctional officers."

"Oh, really?" Meghan said, trying to believe him.

“We do our best not to make kids feel like they are in jail. This isn’t jail.”

“Oh. How is a YA different from a correctional officer?” Meghan asked.

“We don’t focus on punishment. We focus on growth.” What a great soldier he was.

The YA walked a few steps ahead of her and nodded to one of his male colleagues leading a line of boys of the high school age. Meghan stopped to watch six boys walking with their hands behind their backs. They all looked like they’d rather be somewhere else.

Meghan was starstruck. These could be the boys that she would teach if she got the job. Instantly, she wanted the job more than ever. There was no more gray area, no more questioning things, no more negative thinking. She was going to make a difference. If those were her students, she’d make sure that they walked up straight when they walked the hallways. Dare she say, some of them might even smile when she was with them.

The YA led her to the superintendent’s office. Meghan knocked on the door.

A short, stout lady answered the door and looked Meghan up and down. “Ms. James?”

“Yes,” Meghan said.

“Come on in. Take a seat in the waiting area.”

Meghan sat on one of two chairs and a small round table with pamphlets on it. She picked up a pamphlet aimed at parents with incarcerated children. One was called “How to Advocate for Your Child in Court” with

the picture of a mother and an innocent-looking child holding hands. Meghan knew better than to assume all the kids in the system were so innocent as the mother's.

About two minutes later, Mr. Mitchell came from the corner office. He was fat, the fattest person Meghan had ever met before. She was also struck by how well-dressed he was and his deep dimples.

"Come on back, Ms. James."

She followed him to his large office with floor-to-ceiling windows that displayed an open cafeteria and yard. Meghan was impressed. She didn't think the place would be so nice, especially not after going through the indecency of the security line. This was no jail, just like the YA said. It seemed like a rehab for recovering well off alcoholics.

Mr. Mitchell sat behind his desk as Meghan sat at a round table a few feet from him. She looked at his framed pictures. One photograph was of him smiling with a girl with the same dimples as him. Meghan guessed that was his teenage daughter.

He pointed to a photograph. "These are some of my old boys from Rising Sun. They outgrow the place, some of them, if they are lucky, but I never outgrow them." He looked at a grainy photograph on the wall. Mr. Mitchell was remarkably thinner. "See that one, the little bean pole one?" He pointed with a smile. "He was killed in 1995. He was the first young man who died on me. I miss him."

Meghan didn't want to know that. She didn't want to imagine anyone from a juvenile detention center dying. She turned her gaze to the table where there was nothing

but an African print runner and a plant that had seen better days.

Mr. Mitchell took out a handkerchief and patted his upper lip. Meghan was fascinated as he talked passionately about what the boys needed and how Rising Sun was just a spoke of a broken wheel. He talked about how he loved all the boys that passed through Rising Sun but that he didn't want to become too attached. Dying was a real possibility for them. All the boys were African American which struck Meghan as odd. Were there white or Latino boys there? Meghan didn't ask. She didn't want to get political or change the tone of the interview. Besides, Mr. Mitchell seemed comfortable in the silence.

He spoke of his own time growing up in Southeast DC and how on many occasions he was close to incarceration. He talked about how good Rising Sun was, good food, good education, and often more love here than outside. Rising Sun was a revolving door for these kids. For some, Rising Sun was a place to detox spiritually. The benefit of having access to a dentist. Rising Sun is a real beacon for these kids, Mr. Mitchell said. "But..." He patted his upper lip again and readjusted in his chair. "It's just not enough. Being here doesn't fix anything." He looked into Meghan's eyes.

She said nothing. She was confused by all that he said. It was so much to take in at once. Boys dying. How good Rising Sun was, yet it produced no good results. She questioned herself about her desire to work there.

"I believe in God, Ms. James. I am a deacon. I'm not just a superintendent. I know that God is at the wheel. I'm just a passenger. I'll go wherever He takes me. And at this

point, he's put me here, at Rising Sun. Three years I've been the superintendent here. I get down on my knees everyday here, in this office, and pray for these boys. It's so hard to change these boys for the good without changing their circumstances when they leave. It can't work."

To Meghan, talking about God's grace and the failure of everything in these boys' lives didn't make sense.

"But let's talk about you, Ms. James. Tell me."

She had been so engulfed in listening to him, she wasn't prepared to say anything. She assumed he would talk the entire time. The few seconds she had to think of what to say, she couldn't come up with anything impressive. "Well, I'm a teacher." That was true.

He looked at her resume. He had highlighted parts and written in the margins. Meghan would've killed to know what he'd written. "Why aren't you still teaching?"

Meghan's heart quickened. "Well, I had an emergency family situation that brought me back home."

"That's unfortunate. Would a job like this conflict with your family circumstances?"

"Not at all. Things are steady now." How quickly she could rattle off a lie.

"Good, good." He used his handkerchief to pat his upper lip again. "Ms. James, it's tough here. It'll be harder than teaching poor kids in Philly. Philly is a hell of a city... But here, you may teach someone who has killed. Not many, but some have committed murder. Are you prepared for that?"

Meghan wanted to say no, who would be? Instead, she nodded.

“The kids will test you every day. They come from the worst circumstances, so they don’t trust anyone. If they don’t trust you, they don’t learn. Your job is to teach them, to make them learn. That’s what we hired you for.”

Meghan was confused again. Was he hiring her?

He stood up and shook her hand. “I think you’ll do fine. You’ll hear from us soon.”

Meghan shook his meaty hand. She didn’t know what else to say. It seemed she had a job. It felt unfair to get a job by saying so little. She didn’t have to talk about her strengths and weaknesses. She didn’t have to respond to scenarios. She didn’t even have a clear opening to ask questions about Rising Sun, the staff, or the young men. But ultimately she still wanted the job. This was a deep, dark place where she knew she would make a difference. After failing dismally at Brewster, she *had* to succeed here.

CHAPTER 5

Meghan's best friend from college, Jenny, moved into the apartment on Friday. That night, the two went out for dinner. It happened to be the day that Meghan was formally offered the job and she accepted. She was itching to tell someone, and Jenny was the perfect person to tell. She knew Jenny wasn't going to try to convince her otherwise.

In college, they were roommates for two years. They had gotten along without incident. Jenny had friends and would often invite Meghan out with her. Half the time Meghan would decline and stay in their dorm studying with her boyfriend.

Meghan and Jenny were lucky to find a spot in Freddy's Tackle Box in Georgetown. The restaurant was always busy no matter the time of day.

Earlier in the day, Meghan had been struck by Jenny's bad taste as she helped Jenny unpack. Jenny hadn't

improved her taste since college. She'd suggested hanging a movie poster in a cheap frame in the living room. Meghan had to tell her no, causing things to feel uncomfortable as they settled across from each other at Freddy's. As always, Meghan patted as much grease from her food with a napkin as possible. There was a chance she'd be glued to the toilet after eating her favorite fried shrimp and hushpuppies but today was worth it. She'd gotten the job. She was going to be a creative writing teacher at Rising Sun.

Jenny asked, "Is it full-time?"

"No. It's two days a week."

"The pay must be bad, but we know that doesn't matter to you. You don't need it," Jenny said.

"Well, no. It's not about the money. I'm happy to be doing what I want to do."

"That's good that you can do that."

"Do what?" Meghan asked.

"Do what you want to do."

Meghan ate her shrimp as Jenny ate her salmon burger.

She didn't like the direction the conversation was going. From time to time, Jenny liked to point out how much privilege Meghan had. Meghan didn't understand why Jenny poked her like this. It was as if Jenny wanted to make Meghan feel bad for her lifestyle. Jenny was from the Midwest and lived decently but couldn't afford many luxuries. Meghan was the one who gave Jenny access to luxuries such as the occasional all-expense paid long weekend vacation to the Florida Keys or New York.

Instead of poking Meghan, she thought her best friend should be more grateful.

“So, how are you, Jenny?”

“Me, I’m fine.” Meghan could tell Jenny was still mad about the movie poster. When Jenny was trying to hang it up with two-sided tape, Meghan couldn’t help but say, “Don’t you think it’s tacky,” Meghan was hoping Jenny would have a revelation about how ugly it was. Jenny didn’t. Since it was her apartment, Meghan won. The poster’s new home was Jenny’s bedroom with her other tacky adornments.

“There’s certainly more to say than fine when you just got home from Venezuela,” Meghan said, taking a sip of lemonade.

“It was good, but a typical time, you know.” Jenny wiped her mouth.

“You were gone for so long. You had to make new friends. You had to learn the language. Maybe you even kissed a boy.”

Jenny smiled weakly. “It was all those things. But I don’t really want to talk about it. I’m still processing it all. But I’m grateful to you for letting me stay with you in your fabulous apartment.”

“Ours.” David James had required Meghan to have a roommate to live in one of his apartments. Meghan resented his requirement. She wasn’t on suicide watch. She wasn’t a child, but it was fine. Living with Jenny would be fine. Maybe Jenny would not only prevent her from depression, but maybe Jenny had some superpower to make her happy.

Meghan looked at her friend. She looked a little older, but Meghan couldn't tell how. There were no wrinkles, no bags. A sullenness. Exhaustion that sleep couldn't fix. Meghan wondered what happened in Venezuela. Whatever it was wasn't good.

Jenny swirled her drink and took a long sip. "Don't worry, Meghan, I'm fine. I just need to thaw out, I guess. I'll be my old self soon."

Meghan accepted that. She knew what that meant, what that felt like to wait to become your old self. She was waiting, too, for her old self who believed in herself, who was hopeful, who was confident. She felt that way on the day she graduated college, wearing that graduation cap and bouncing gown. Her first day of joining TEACH! was the last time she believed in herself.

They got through their meal laughing about things that happened in college. Meghan appreciated laughing. She hadn't done much laughing in a long time. But she knew there was a hollowness between them. Once they had no more stories from the past, Meghan wasn't sure what to say.

They took an Uber home. Jenny scrolled through her phone and Meghan stared out the window.

CHAPTER 6

Meghan arrived at her father's office on K street to tell him something he didn't want to know.

"To whom do I owe the honor of my beautiful daughter's presence."

Meghan smiled. She felt underdressed. She had on a pair of sweatpants, but nice sweatpants that could be mistaken for pants and a fitted tee-shirt that said "Pow!" Her father had a fresh haircut. His hairline was a slight pink. "You look good, dad."

"Thank you. Have a seat." Her father sat on the edge of his desk. Meghan took a cushy seat before his desk. "What is it, Princess? You want something. Do you need money?"

"Dad, it's not that. I have a job."

Her father frowned. "Where is it?"

Meghan decided the best way to deal with her father was to be direct and confident. "I'm going to be a teacher again, a creative writing teacher at Rising Sun Adolescent Growth Center."

"What does that mean?"

"Boys who have made mistakes."

"What?"

"Just what I said. Boys with mistakes."

"I don't understand. What kinds of mistakes? There are many kinds of mistakes in life."

Meghan said nothing.

He banged the desk then patted it as if to say sorry to the wood. "Look, Meghan, just be straight with me. What the hell are you doing? Don't tell me you're going to do something that will drown you again. You just finished drowning and you're trying to go back to drowning. Life has shown you that those are waters you can't swim in. Damnit, Meghan. Stop this nonsense. I'd rather you'd not work at all then to work with boys who've made mistakes. I'm not stupid. And I'm insulted that you think you could come here and tell me a euphemism and think I wouldn't know. Is it a jail or a juvenile detention center?"

"A detention center."

Her father got up and looked out the window overlooking downtown. Meghan had always loved the windows. Now she just noticed the flatness of the city.

"I can't do this right now. I have meetings. I'm sure I'll be fine once I get my head around it. I'm sure."

“Dad, I could help you get your head around it. You don’t know what I’ll be doing there. It may help put you at ease. As soon as she said it she realized that telling him more wouldn’t help. Nothing would. He’d never understand.

But she also knew that her father loved her. He’d never cut her out of his life. She thought about the baby percolating in Molly’s belly. Would he cut Meghan out? No. But she could be *cut back*. That’s the part that made her angry and afraid.

Maybe she’d pushed him too far by doing things he didn’t like. Maybe she was old news, the child who did ridiculous things. And now with the coming of his new baby there was hope. Maybe she or he would grow up to become the next CEO of the D. James Development Corporation. Meghan was a drain on him and somehow with the coming of the new baby, this would be evident to him.

She understood her father, how tired he must be, and was grateful that he vowed to put his arms around her choice and at least tolerate it. She wished he would put his arms around her like he used to do when she was nine, when she was still his hope.

“Okay, dad, I’m going to go now.”

He stopped staring out the window and looked at his daughter. “Okay, Princess. I love you and I’ll always be here for you.”

Meghan wished she could be here for him. She couldn’t think of a time that she was.

CHAPTER 7

The day before Meghan started her job, she went over to Aunt's Susan's house. She was hoping that Aunt Susan would bless her decision to work at Rising Sun. *Tell me I should work there. Tell me I'll never regret it. Tell me I'm going to be safe inside. Tell me tomorrow will be great.*

Aunt Susan stepped out of the house and started stretching her arms. Meghan tied her sneaker. "I haven't run in months. I need this. Are you ready?" Aunt Susan said, using her hands to shield her eyes from the sun. The sun was hot, but not enough to stop them from running and instead, going inside for lemonade, as Meghan hoped. Aunt Susan led the way with Meghan lagging behind. "What's the matter, Meg?"

"I'm fine. I just have a lot on my mind," Meghan panted.

Aunt Susan stopped running. "What's going on?"

“Let’s keep going.” Meghan moved slowly. She didn’t want to admit that she was thinking of her ex, Barry. She used to run with him two to three times a week while in college. He liked to run so she ran, too. She hadn’t thought about Barry in awhile, however, today he’d popped into her mind and she couldn’t stop thinking about him.

Looking back, he never asked much about her, even when it was the easiest thing to do. They had quiet dinners where only sparse words were exchanged. He could have asked her then where she wanted to travel, what her favorite color was. She would have told him Paris and that her favorite color had changed from royal purple to electric blue.

He was a military man. Meghan always assumed that was why he was a man of few words. She realized now that her thinking was dumb. Desperate even. Their relationship had been lackluster but fine. As a military man he had been very disciplined and efficient. That was how sex was, predictable and quick, leaving Meghan unsatisfied.

Her father had met Barry two times. He said that Barry was a good guy but not right for Meghan. He didn’t try to stop Meghan from dating him, but he remained firm in his position. Meghan got the feeling that Barry may have wanted to work for her father. The two times they met, Barry was animated and laughing more than usual. He asked her father plenty of questions about himself.

One humid day during a difficult six-mile run, right before graduation, Barry stopped running along the riverfront. Meghan stopped, too. She was hunched over, panting, trying to catch her breath. Her hair was drenched

in sweat. He said, “Meghan, I liked us together for the last two years. I really did. But I think we should stop now.”

Meghan didn’t hear him properly. She stood up and said, “What did you say, Barry?”

“Let’s stop.” He wasn’t fazed by the run at all, sweat only under his arms and a few beads around his hairline.

“You want to stop now? We only have two miles left. We can slow down. But I don’t think we should stop.”

He stared at her as she wiped her face with her hands. “I’m not talking about the run, Meghan. I’m talking about us. I don’t see a future for us. Let’s stop.”

Meghan looked at him. Stopping a relationship sounded odd. Maybe ending was a better way to say it. The word ending implied a story, a meaningful story. But stop? An Energizer Bunny stopped. A factory line stopped. Stop didn’t imply a story or anything meaningful. To Meghan, it just meant to pull the plug.

You’re breaking up with me in the middle of a run. Did you plan this? “How could you do this to me, right now, in the middle of our run?”

“What difference does it make?”

“A big difference!” Meghan could have already moved out of his ridiculously tiny apartment instead of running to keep up with a man who didn’t want her. “You’re wasting my time!” she screamed, causing fellow runners to slow down as if a hazard was nearby. Being dumped like this felt particularly cruel under the punishing sun and strangers.

Barry's eyes were big and his cheeks were red as he looked at her scream. That was the only way she could tell he was bothered. "I'm going to go. I'll leave the apartment open for the next hour so you can get your things." Barry ran off, leaving her hunched over, trying to catch her breath.

Meghan thought, *I can't believe this*. Instead of running toward him or away from him, she'd dropped to her knees and sobbed.

Meghan could have told Aunt Susan about Barry and how getting dumped during the middle of a run stopped her from wanting to run now. But she didn't want to talk about it. Aunt Susan already knew the situation, but she didn't know how painfully alive it still was for Meghan.

She looked over at her aunt who was looking so peaceful in her stride. She wore a thin gold chain, small hoops, and waterproof mascara. Somehow Meghan knew that Aunt Susan needed this run. Aunt Susan had her own stresses, but she never talked about herself much with Meghan. But if Aunt Susan said she needed a run, then *they* needed a run.

Meghan picked up her speed. At Wisconsin Ave they stopped on the corner of the busiest street in Georgetown. Aunt Susan started stretching and Meghan followed.

"I'm sure dad told you I got a new job."

"Yes, he told me."

"What did he say?"

“Meg, I’m not here to stand between you and your father. You know how he feels.” Meghan had hoped that her father would’ve “wrapped his arms around it” by now.

“Well then, how do you feel about me?”

“About your job? I don’t know much about it,” said Aunt Susan.

Meghan explained the little she knew.

“Are they going to give you training?” Aunt Susan asked.

All Meghan knew was that she was going to attend orientation for one week. Of course, HR didn’t tell her what she’d be learning or how she’d be prepared to do her job. Meghan couldn’t fathom why a one-week orientation would be necessary. Orientations were typically half days. “Maybe.”

“I sure hope so, Meg. You just came from a tough situation, only last month.”

Meghan winced. Just her aunt saying that made her feel raw pain. She didn’t want anyone to bring up her unexpected last day of school. “Yes, Brewster was tough, but I shouldn’t ball up into a hole and die.”

“No one’s saying that. There are other things you could do that wouldn’t be so difficult. Are you still writing for the paper?”

“Yes, I am. I just got a pitch accepted.” Meghan smiled. “It’s about a new nursery in Southwest.”

“That’s wonderful. DC is becoming more interesting than it used to be. You could work full-time at the paper.”

"Sam, my editor, isn't looking for that right now. Besides, I don't want to do that full-time. I like freelancing."

"Why do you want to work in a juvenile detention center? Why now?" Aunt Susan's eyes were pleading.

"I know, I know. You care about me and I love that. But sometimes you and dad treat me like a little girl. Life isn't easy."

"Right, life isn't easy. But we don't always have to make it harder."

"So you think I'm a fool."

"No, I don't. I just want you to be safe. No one needs to tell me that you are a good teacher. I know that you are. But it's the circumstance of these kids that create bad results. It's not you."

Meghan could appreciate her aunt's point of view, but it didn't sway her. She knew what she had to do. Teach. In a juvenile detention center, it didn't matter what anyone else said anymore. She'd hope Jenny, her father, and Aunt Susan would understand and cheer her on as she started her new journey. But none of them did. None of them understood what it meant to think beyond themselves and a five-mile radius. Life was bigger than that. She could help boys who needed the most help and attention. She felt a wave of excitement like that night at the TEACH! information session. But this time it wasn't about an unknown future, but now she was clear-eyed. Now, she knew how hard it would be to teach under the toughest conditions.

She ran back to Aunt Susan's house faster than she had run from it.

CHAPTER 8

Meghan sat around a small conference table. Her teeth clenched in an effort not to show her irritation because “orientation” would be one week long. Matty, the facilitator, kept a slow pace and the content meandering. Meghan felt she could get all the information she needed in one day. She wanted to see her students, not learn about building safety for two hours. Her eyes kept drifting beyond the picture window to the yard. It was over ninety-five degrees outside. The metal exercise equipment had to be scorching.

Matty boasted to the class of six that Rising Sun had just spent over one million dollars on renovating the boys’ outdoor space. The outdoor space was empty now. One million dollars! Meghan didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Good because they were investing in their kids. Bad because all the money seemed wasteful. The hunks of exercise metal were too hot for use.

Matty tossed a booklet on the juvenile justice system and proceeded to talk through each page, almost verbatim. Meghan was surprised that she wouldn't be more interested in the detention system at large. She followed along until she dozed off. Her head fell to her chest. She almost choked, which woke her up. She was embarrassed, sleeping in public wasn't her style. She had always been studious and alert when learning.

She looked around the conference table. No one seemed to notice her. She'd stayed up too late working on her DC Weekly article on a new dog park in Capitol Hill. That park, she'd learned, cost over one million dollars. She thought one million dollars for a dog park was excessive, too, but at least it would be in high use. When she went to visit, the park was full of life. So much so she considered getting a little dog. After much thought, her answer was no.

"Welcome back, Ms. James," Matty grimaced at Meghan, interrupting her day dream. "As I was saying, Rising Sun wasn't always very good. Some mayors ago it was decided that Rising Sun needed a makeover. It was known more as a correctional facility, one where punishment was the answer, rather than what it aspires to be now: a place of nourishment and redirection for the youth passing through. Lots of laws changed so that Rising Sun is now a warm resting place, rather than a straw bed."

One of the other new hires who looked like she was going straight to the finance department asked, "What was it like before?"

Matty cleared her throat, took a sip of water, yet still sounded like a frog. "It was rough. Rising Sun, whose name

at the time was Timber Woods Juvenile Delinquent Center, was known for roughing up kids. And the kids tried to fight back, some could, some couldn't. A higher rate of suicides. Correctional officers on occasion sexually abused the kids."

Meghan cut in, "Excuse, did you say sexually abusing kids?"

Matty nodded and took another sip of water. "I worked here then. As a HR representative, I processed a lot of the paperwork for these incidents."

Megan's stomach churned gravel as the idea of sexually abusing kids set in. "But this doesn't exist now, right?" Meghan grabbed a hold of her ponytail and caressed it.

Matty's lips tightened. "For the most part no, sexual abuse doesn't exist."

"For the most part?" *What the fuck!*

Matty must have seen the terror on Meghan's face. "The abuse goes both ways." That statement only made Meghan feel worse. Matty tried again to quell the situation. "It's almost non-existent now."

Almost? Meghan looked around, no one seemed to be outraged. This orientation was for the administrative staff and non-Youth Advocate employees. Maybe they didn't care because what happened to the kids wouldn't impact their work. But sexually abusing boys who were already abused was worth some visible disapproval by this group. Were they humans? Was anyone human?

Matty moved on as if she never set off a bomb. She scanned a paper she held before saying, "Yes, before Rising

Sun there was overcrowding. There weren't many things for the kids to do. The mayor at that time thought it was time for change. Rising Sun was essentially rebuilt brick by brick but also mind by mind. Older correctional officers who were set in their ways were asked to leave. Newer, younger, more open-minded officers were brought in. This didn't happen overnight. In recent years, Rising Sun has become a model for what juvenile detention centers should be." Matty looked up suddenly. "Any questions?"

No one said anything.

"Let's take a break then," Matty said.

A YA walked up to Meghan at the water cooler. She introduced herself as a YA and said she was delivering a message from Mrs. Gibbs. Meghan didn't know what the woman was talking about. "Who's Mrs. Gibbs?" Meghan drank water from a little cup before refilling. The woman looked at Meghan until she gave her full attention.

"Mrs. Gibbs is your boss. You don't know that?"

"No." Meghan thought Mr. Mitchell would be.

"Mrs. Gibbs wants to meet with you now," the YA said.

"Now? But what about orientation?"

"You'll come back when she's done. Lunch is soon. You won't miss much." Meghan followed the woman, who said nothing more to her the entire way.

Meghan entered a plain small office. Mrs. Gibbs stood up from behind her desk. She was tall and slim, like a beanpole. Her suit was unfortunately baggy. She wore no make-up. Her hair was tightly curled and shiny. This

woman could have been pretty with a few tweaks. *Okay, lots of them.*

“Hello,” Meghan said, extending her hand. Mrs. Gibbs’s handshake was limp. Meghan didn’t like that. Her father had always taught her to shake hands firmly.

Mrs. Gibbs sat. Meghan sat. The YA vanished without Meghan realizing. The door was cracked. “Ms. James, are you familiar with this population?”

“The kids?”

Ms. James nodded. “Yes, our young people.”

“I am.”

“Oh really. Your resume doesn’t speak to it.”

Meghan was caught off guard. She didn’t know what to say.

“Have you looked at your resume lately?” Mrs. Gibbs said.

Meghan stayed silent though she was shaking inside. This was her new boss. Her new reality.

“I won’t go as far as saying you’re not qualified. I am sure Mr. Mitchell made a fine decision. He sees the potential in people. He has a good heart, but that’s not always what this place needs.”

“Is Mr. Mitchell your boss?” Meghan asked.

“Supervisor.”

“I have the necessary skills to do this job.” Meghan tried to sound confident.

“Skills? What skills are those?”

“Um, well...I am a teacher.”

“At Brewster Elementary in Philadelphia,” Mrs. Gibbs paused, scaring Meghan. “I was born and raised in Philadelphia. Brewster wasn’t my elementary school, but I have many friends who attended and some who teach there now. I took the liberty to call my friends at Brewster and ask about your time teaching.”

Meghan froze.

“You were in that TEACH! program, correct? You left early, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Indeed, you did. There is no point in discussing the details of your performance. I’m sure you are still recovering and so are your students. My concern is that you left them before the end of the year. I don’t want that to be the case here. I don’t wish to work with someone who isn’t one hundred percent committed to our youth. That’s all, Ms. James. If Mr. Mitchell saw fit for you to work here, I can’t deny you the opportunity, and it is indeed an opportunity for you. I just need your word that you will be committed, and you will work as hard as you need to improve the lives of these young people.”

Meghan wanted to cry. How could her past still be following her? She was mortified that someone could know her secrets. She felt violated by this woman. For Mrs. Gibbs to go digging up her past just to throw it in her face was...Meghan couldn’t describe the feeling. Mrs. Gibbs had no right. She had already been hired and validated as competent by Mr. Mitchell. Wasn’t that enough?

Meghan was sure her nose was red. It always was when she held back tears. She wanted to bolt out of the room, but her legs were planted in the industrial carpet.

Mrs. Gibbs extended her hand; this time the shake was firm enough for Meghan's father to approve. As Meghan walked out, shaken, she heard Mrs. Gibbs say, "Welcome to Rising Sun, Ms. James." Meghan's tears had fallen. She said nothing back to her new boss.

CHAPTER 9

Meghan's last day of orientation included a session called Trauma Informed Care. She was alert. She was interested just by the name alone. *Trauma. Informed. Care.* She took good notes, almost verbatim.

Trauma is defined as exposure to an extraordinary experience that presents a physical or psychological threat to oneself or others and generates a reaction of helplessness and fear.

Meghan's heart dropped for one second. She saw herself at Brewster that last day on the floor screaming in front of her students. Her participation in the session wasn't supposed to be about her. It was supposed to be about the boys she would soon teach. But she couldn't help thinking of her own trauma. She'd found the perfect word for what she was experiencing. Her trauma was formed from other people's trauma, and it just got too much. Each of her students had trauma and every day they dropped it off in her classroom.

She wasn't as strong as she thought she was.

Her student Markell Jackson was the straw that broke the camel's back. He was nine in the second grade and couldn't read no matter how hard Meghan tried to teach him. She'd pull him aside during Reading Workshop so that no one would tease him for hardly being able to read. She didn't have much time to sit with him because she had twenty-eight other students, but together they sat for those few minutes every Wednesday. He smiled so much. Meghan would always pat him on the shoulder and smile just as wide as Markell did. "You're making progress, kiddo." Markell had always giggled at the word "kiddo."

Meghan was often concerned about him because of his appearance. His tee shirts were usually outstretched and dirty. He rarely wore a coat, even during winter. When Meghan would ask him where his coat was, Markell would shrug, then the next day he would wear one that was too small and pink. After two days of him wearing the coat, Meghan would never see it again until the next time she asked why he wasn't wearing a coat.

One day Markell came to Meghan's desk to tell her that his father's girlfriend was molesting him. He didn't look at Meghan, only the floor. He didn't use the word "molest," instead he said, "She mess with me, like, you know, mess..."

Meghan dropped her head. It was too much at the end of a grueling day. Could she summon the energy to deal with this? She'd witnessed some terrible things at Brewster, but molesters barely passed as humans in her book.

With Markell and his little sister in tow, Meghan marched straight to his house after school. The little square

house looked abandoned. She knocked on the door, her heart speeding. No answer. She knocked again. No answer.

She sat on the front porch with them, wondering how long they would have to wait for someone to let them in the house. Markell didn't have a coat and his little sister wore the coat he had worn when she'd asked him about a coat. She felt selfish for wearing a coat, one of many coats bought from the likes of Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdale's, and Sax Fifth.

Meghan waited outside so long she was freezing and hungry, but she just couldn't leave them. She wanted to take them to McDonald's. But she couldn't. She had no right. Only Markell's father had the right. She teared up at the thought of a man who allowed his kids to be abused.

Finally, the father opened the front door. He seemed so calm, cool and collected that Meghan didn't know how to broach him. She was expecting a monster. She wanted to hate him a lot more than she could at that moment.

"Hey." He nodded at Meghan like they were casual friends.

"Hi, Mr. Johnson, I'm Markell's teacher, Ms. James. We haven't met before." Because you haven't come to conferences or any school event, jerk.

"Sorry to bother you," Meghan said. She suddenly realized that Markell and his baby sister could get punished if Meghan accused their father of doing anything wrong. She thought about calling child protective services. But the father would know that she called on him. He could find her.

He was short and wore wire framed glasses with fingerprints on them. One of his eyes was slightly cocked inward. His hair was cut low and flawless. Interesting that Markell's hair had grown out and was in desperate need of a haircut. And the little sister had matted pigtails that looked like it had been weeks since someone combed her hair. She was still cute as a button with her big brown eyes, enviable eyelashes, smooth toffee skin, and puckered lips. Meghan wanted to take her home. Both.

Not knowing what to do, Meghan just looked at the father, then the kids, and back to him. "I hope you didn't mind that I walked your kids home," was all she said.

He said nothing, but his eyes said, okay, strange lady.

Meghan looked down at the kids and said, "Well, you're home now, go on in." They looked at her with pleading eyes, but no tears, as if they had cried so much there weren't any tears left. Meghan's ankles buckled, threatening to twist if she didn't leave soon. She hoped Markell and his sister understood that she was trying to protect them, in the weirdest of ways. She looked in their eyes and saw that they didn't see that. They saw something else that sadly Meghan couldn't interpret.

She said to the father, "I've been walking each of my student's home to connect with their families. I'm sorry if I startled you. No biggie, she was telling the father exactly what she didn't want to convey.

"Okay," he said, touching the kids on the head. "Nice meeting you, Ms. James."

"You, too." She walked away, limping slightly the four blocks to her car and drove off. That night she forfeited

grading papers for watching Wheel of Fortune and eating Swiss Almond Haagen-Dazs until she fell asleep on the sofa.

The next day she marched to the principal's office and told her what happened to Markell with his father. The principal kept looking at papers and shuffling them. "Ms. James," she stopped and looked over her bifocals, "I'll take care of it." Then she went back to her shuffling.

Meghan didn't trust that the principal would do anything about it. Meghan wondered with all her shuffling and thumb licking if the principal heard her at all.

The following day, Markell ended up stealing money from Meghan's desk drawer. She'd caught him red-handed when she came back from a staff meeting. She was devastated even though it was just five dollars and some change. How could he? Markell had been her favorite. At the time, she couldn't understand why he would do such a thing. They'd built the kind of relationship where he could ask her for money. She would have never told him no. She pushed him down the hallway to the principal's office and told her how Markell had stolen from her.

The principal looked at Meghan like she was a bore. Then, she zeroed in on Markell, who looked like a wet beach towel, slumped in his seat, feet unable to touch the floor.

"You son of a bitch," the principal said, swinging her manicured finger in his face. "You listen to me, Markell. I'm tired of your shit. You're here every week. It's you or your big brother. Every week! I'm going to fix you, you little..." She didn't say bastard, but she wanted to. "Ms. James, you can go now."

Meghan didn't want to go. She didn't know what was going to happen to him. It had been wrong to bring him there. She looked at Markell's big, wide eyes and ashy face. She wanted to protect him, but she had to leave. She hoped Markell would understand but she knew any child wouldn't.

The principal immediately moved Markell to Special Education, a dark, dank place in the basement, so Meghan was told. Though she was heartbroken and guilty about what she did to Markell, she never went down there to apologize.

Meghan went back to the principal to ask her to take Markell out of Special Education and to return him to her class. But the principal refused. She told Meghan that she knew a lot more about Markell than Meghan did. And that was that.

Meghan felt that the principal didn't have all the pieces. Meghan knew Markell was being molested. Yet, she was being told that she didn't know enough.

Every day after that, Meghan's heart ached with regret, confusion, and frustration. She thought about Markell and his sister often and wondered what else she could have done.

Trauma Uninformed Carelessness, Meghan thought as she sat during Rising Sun orientation. Somewhere along the way, she'd stopped taking notes. She was lost in her sad memory. She supposed memories like this led her to her recurring nightmares about Brewster. She was hot now, desperate for a break and cool water from the fountain.

CHAPTER 10

Meghan was so excited for her first day of work that she nearly skipped to the building. She was going to meet her students, finally. On the drive over, she couldn't stop oscillating between happiness and nervousness, like she was going on a first date. *What if they don't like me?*

After the convoluted security process, Meghan entered the pod. *Her* pod. It was surprisingly quiet. A YA introduced herself. The woman was shapely and strangely pretty with her wavy blond hair scooped up in a ponytail at the top of her head. Meghan liked her mahogany lipstick and envied her audacity to wear such a color. Meghan could never have pulled that off.

The woman extended her hand, each fingernail long, spiked, and electric blue. Meghan had never seen nails like that before but found them enviable as well. "I'm YA Goode." Her hand was warm and oily like she'd just put lotion on them.

"I'm Ms. James. But I prefer Meghan."

"We don't do first names, unfortunately, Ms. James. You'll learn."

Meghan wished she didn't have to learn anything, as she stood there, a ball of nerves. Learning meant making mistakes. And sometimes the mistakes were tragic.

An overweight, bald man came over from across the room. His eyes were set back and had a large nose. His smile was wide, revealing uneven teeth. He yelled, "Alright boys! Come on out! Time for Special!"

Young male voices shouted and echoed.

"Comin'!"

"Hell yeah!"

"'Bout time!"

Meghan wanted to see them as they came from their dorms, but the man gave her a firm handshake and locked his eyes on her. "You must be Ms. James?"

"That's me."

"Nice to meet you. I'm YA BJ." His intense eyes made Meghan uncomfortable. He yelled over his shoulder, "Gentlemen, act right. New teacher. Be good."

"We can put folding chairs out for class. I think they can handle it today," YA Goode said as YA BJ went to pull them out from a locked closet. With the help of YA Goode, YA BJ, and a student, the chairs were set in a semi-circle in the middle of the pod. Meghan had brought notebooks and pencils that required special permission to bring in.

She set them on the floor next to her chair. Her heart pounded as the students took their seats.

“She white! Ohhh, she white!” an excited boy said, followed by excessive laughter. Meghan was told they had other white teachers, so she wasn’t sure what the big deal was.

“Hey, hey, Skin, don’t start that mess. You know what happened last time things got out of control,” YA BJ said, then kindly turned to Meghan. “This pod is called Nia. That means purpose. Every pod has an African name.”

The boy called Skin said, “That’s dumb, YA BJ. All these names called some stupid Africa name is a joke, just like everything else is.”

“Boy, shut your ass up,” a boy who looked too old to be in Rising Sun said. “It don’t matter the name. You a joke, nigga.”

“Hey, hey,” YA BJ said. “Watch your mouth, Daequan. Today is a good day. Let’s keep it that way.”

The boy called Daequan sucked his teeth.

From a table in the corner where YA Goode was writing in a big book, she yelled, “Time for your Special, gentlemen! New teacher. Don’t run her out of here, at least not on the first day. Treat her with respect.”

YA BJ said to Meghan, “They run off teachers sometimes. The last one, Ms. Whitehead, was like you, but she wasn’t so attractive.” He was looking Meghan up and down. It made her uncomfortable again, to say the least. “Two months ago, these busters made her quit. She quit after her second class. They haven’t had a Special since.”

There were four boys. Each one found a unique way to slouch in their chairs.

"What's your name, nice lady?" the boy with red hair and freckles said. His face reminded Meghan of a pug.

"Damn, you sit like that all the time? That's some white lady shit," Skin said. Meghan never found anything wrong with her legs crossed at the ankle. And if she had, she'd never find anything wrong or odd about it.

"Shut up, Skinny. You talk too much," Daequan said. He was strikingly good-looking, nothing offensive about his face. Eyes, cheeks, nose, and lips, all well-proportioned and symmetrical. Smooth, milk chocolate skin. *He doesn't belong here*, Meghan thought.

Meghan looked around at the boys in their standard uniforms: khaki pants, bright orange shirts, white tube socks, and Crocs. So weird for them to wear issued Crocs in a detention center. It was cute. Meghan wanted to laugh but she wasn't sure what would offend this group. She had a pink pair, but she rarely wore them. All the boys wore their pants rolled up. Meghan didn't understand this. Was it a mandate or a style?

"Okay, boys," Meghan said, hoping that calling them boys was okay. "Please sit up in your chairs." Meghan waited nervously. She wasn't sure that they were going to do it.

They did, no matter how sluggishly! If Meghan knew one thing, it was clear that they didn't want to be here. How many times had they had someone stand up in front of them trying to make them learn something that they didn't care about? It was the story of their lives.

Meghan cleared her throat. "Let's stretch." She surprised everyone in the room including herself. Stretching wasn't a part of her plan.

They stood up!

"Repeat after me," Meghan said, stretching her arms over her head. She was worried that her silk blouse had sweat stains under her arms and that boy Skinny would draw attention and poke fun.

He didn't. Like the other boys, he stretched his arms over his head, unenthusiastically, but it still counted as effort in her book. "Try to reach to the sky, Nia."

The YAs were stretching, too. Meghan was so proud of herself. She'd done something that caused all the low energy to shift to positive.

"Damn, this feels good," the boy with the red hair said.

"What's your name?" Meghan asked as she brought her arms down and began slowly twisting her body from side to side. Everyone followed her stretch.

"Red," the pug-faced boy said. His body was thick and soft, packed into his clothes. His rounded face was adorned with a matted afro.

"Nice to meet you, Red."

He greeted her back and Meghan smiled.

"Okay, gentlemen, rest your arms at your side and shake everything." Meghan started first; they were slow to follow but they did. "Jump up and down."

“Damn, Ms. James, is this an aerobics class?” Skinny said. Everyone started laughing, including Meghan. YA Goode threatened to send him back to his room.

“Just one more,” Meghan said. “Touch your toes until you feel a stretch.”

“That’s enough, gentlemen,” YA Goode yelled. Meghan didn’t like her butting in.

“Take your seats,” Meghan said. She sat down and tried to take in each boy. Who was he? Where did he come from? How did he get here?

Meghan’s eyes floated back to the beautiful young man sitting next to her. Daequan’s brown eyes made Meghan doubt he’d done harm to anyone. Meghan tried to imagine what could have brought him here. Was he a criminal mastermind? An executor? A mule? Robber? Drug king? Murderer? During orientation, she learned that she was not supposed to ask the boys what they did to bring them here. The purpose was for the boys not to be judged again. They shouldn’t be perceived through the lens of their wrongs. They didn’t need to relive their trauma. They needed a safe space and Rising Sun aimed to be it.

“Let’s introduce ourselves then we will talk about something we know really well in our lives. And we’ll do a journal entry.” Meghan pointed to the new notebooks. They groaned.

Meghan hoped they couldn’t detect her nervousness. She wanted it to be simple today. She didn’t have high expectations. She just wanted to get the kids to know her and for her to know a little about them. Meghan hoped YA Goode and YA BJ would find simplicity acceptable

enough. In the coming classes, she would assess their writing skills and assign more challenging work.

YA Goode butted in, “Okay young men, here’s the deal. You have a second chance to have a class that you may like. Even if you don’t like this class, it’s better than most anything else in your day. So, try hard, respect Ms. James.”

Daequan was twirling a dreadlock in the back of his untamed hair. Something was on his mind. Meghan wanted to know. But of course, she didn’t ask. She needed to know him first.

Meghan couldn’t read the faces of the boys apart from Skinny, whose eyes were mischievous.

Skinny smiled. “Damn, Ms.--what you say your name is? You lookin’ fine. How old are you?” Both YAs closed in on him, ready to yank him back to his room if need be. “My bad, my bad,” he said, hands up in surrender.

“Shut the fuck up,” Daequan said. Everyone looked at him. Neither YA scolded him. They were thankful that someone else could effectively and so easily get Skinny under control. “Nobody wants to sit alone in our rooms for the rest of the day ‘cause you a monkey.” Daequan flashed a smile at Meghan, catching her off guard. “Go head Ms.--I’m sorry. What’s your name?” His dimpled smile was bright, the most beautiful smile Meghan had ever seen.

“Um, Ms. Meghan. What’s your name?” She asked although she already knew his name. She just wanted to hear him talk.

“Daequan.”

"I like your name. Day, like the time we're all awake. Quan rhymes with swan." Meghan knew how stupid she sounded, she just wanted to stay in that sweet moment.

"I like that, the way you put my name like that," he said.

"Daequan is a beautiful name."

The boys snickered again, even the quiet one Meghan hadn't tried to know yet.

"Where you from?" Daequan asked.

"Here. The District."

"You mean DC?"

Meghan nodded, feeling embarrassed that they didn't have the same word for the same place.

"Hell no, you ain't from here," Skinny said.

"Not here, per se. I was born and raised in McLean."

"Where's that?" Red asked.

"It's a suburb outside of DC."

"Suburb. I knew you was rich." The quiet one whom Meghan would later learn was Petey, said. He was so little in stature, and he spoke softly.

"Where McLean?" Skinny asked.

"Virginia."

"Rich people there."

"Some."

"Are you rich?"

Meghan was dumbfounded. She wasn't sure if she should let the conversation wind or if she should end it and start her lesson. The line of questioning divided her from them. But then again, stopping the conversation wouldn't change the divide. It would just put her in control.

"You rich." Skinny seemed happy to "*got ya*" Meghan.

She'd never felt shameful about where she grew up. A place where she could live and they couldn't.

"Where?" Red asked.

"Capitol Hill."

"Dang!" Petey said. "I knew she couldn't live in the real Southeast."

Red leaned back in his chair, resigned. Meghan had lost him that fast.

"Capitol Hill ain't shit," Skinny said.

YA BJ shushed him. "Settle down, gentlemen."

Skinny said, "I bet you live in one of those billion-dollar apartments."

"I don't live in apartments that expensive." But Meghan did live in some of the most expensive apartments in the city.

YA Goode finally jumped into what felt like a deposition. "That'll be enough, gentlemen. I'm sure y'all will get to know more about Ms. James over time. Let her do her job. You do yours. She asks the questions. You answer."

Meghan didn't want YA Goode to be so stern, but she knew she was only trying to help her. Meghan wanted these boys to feel empowered to ask questions and get answers.

"Please call me Meghan."

"No, Ms. James. Adults receive respect and it starts with a name," YA Goode said.

Meghan looked off, feeling defeated, not sure what to say next. "Well, then call me Ms. Meghan. Make it a compromise."

"If you say so," YA Goode said. "Hope this doesn't backfire on you. This is not the easiest bunch." She rolled her eyes and went back to writing things into that oversized book. Meghan knew from orientation that YA Goode was tracking the boys every fifteen minutes. She was responsible for counting them to make sure no one ran off.

"Great, thank you, YA Goode. I would like to start off by sharing a little more about myself than where I live. I don't think that is the most interesting nor important part of a person."

"That depends," Skinny cut in.

"Why do you think so?"

He shrugged. "I don't know but it do matter. A lot."

Meghan put the question to the others. They said nothing. Until Daequan said, "It matters what block you from. Because that dictates what you do. Where you go. What you get."

It was a powerful answer. Simple and true. "Say more about that, Daequan."

“I ain’t got much else to add, except that where you live tells you how much the government cares about you. It tells you if your trash is going to get picked up or not. It tells you what school you get to go to. It tells you a lot, Ms. Meghan.”

Meghan nodded, feeling a little silly that she didn’t come up with this obvious truth. She paused, wondering if sharing more about herself would help things. Telling this group that she went to college and that she traveled to lots of countries wasn’t the right way to begin. That version of Meghan who was in TEACH! just didn’t seem like it would resonate with this crowd. What popped out of her mouth instead was:

“My mother died.”

All eyes looked at her. Nobody was laughing or fooling around.

“She died seven years ago when I was a senior in high school. She died of breast cancer.” Meghan’s eyes stung with the threat of falling tears. “That’s something that I think is important about me. My mother’s death has defined me in ways I never would have imagined. First off, I never imagined my mother would die.”

Red said, “My aunt had that, but she didn’t die.”

Meghan said, “Sorry to hear that Red. It’s the worst thing ever. Any questions?” She panned the room. The boys seemed interested. She wanted to know why.

No one said anything for a while then Petey said, “How did you bury her?”

“Cremation.” Meghan was surprised she could say that without emotion.

“What’s that?” Meghan noticed Petey’s bags under his eyes, like an old man. His posture was hunched over old man-like, too.

“Instead of preserving the body, putting it in a casket for all to see, and having a funeral where you march the casket to a cemetery, my mother asked for her body to be cremated, that is burned to ashes.” Meghan tried to swallow but couldn’t.

“What the f--?” Skinny said. No one reprimanded him, only when he said, “That’s some white shit, burning people up.” YA BJ whispered some choice words in Skinny’s ear. Skinny mumbled, “Sorry, Ms. Meghan.”

She’d never thought about whether cremation was a predominantly white thing or not. She didn’t think in those terms, what white people did versus anyone else. “That’s okay. Cremation isn’t as common as a funeral.”

“What happened to the ashes?” Daequan asked, trying to visualize the process.

“The funeral home gave us the ashes in an urn.”

“That’s what you see on TV, the big jar that sits on that thingy, a mantel I think, inside is the ashes of the dead person,” Red said.

“Yes,” Meghan nodded. “That’s it. But some families choose to spread the ashes somewhere, like in the case of my mother over the Potomac River.”

“The Potomac River? What’s that?” Red asked. All the boys’ faces were confused, trying to make a connection that

wouldn't plug in. Meghan was surprised that they hadn't heard of one of the main rivers in their own city. She knew public schools in DC were bad, but not this bad.

Meghan fielded more questions about her mother's death. She had never spoken publicly about her mother's death. This moment felt like the best place to do it. A place where people were used to terrible things happening.

"Gentlemen, since you know something important about me, I'd like to know a little about you." Red's face had a pink undertone. "Don't worry. Only easy questions, easy questions." He nodded, trying to straighten his face.

Of course, Meghan wasn't going to ask why they were locked up. After a bit of silence, Meghan said, "Tell me how your day is going?"

They went around the room and everyone said *fine*, *good*, *okay*. Not exactly what Meghan was going for. She wanted something more than pleasantries. She tried again: "On a scale of one to ten, how happy are you feeling right now?"

Four was the average answer, which was concerning to Meghan. What made their day so low? Was it because it was a normal, boring day? Or had something happened? Asking felt intrusive so she didn't say anything to boys she didn't know. "Okay, how about this question: what did you have for breakfast?"

"Wait—what are *you* on a scale of one to ten, Ms. Meghan?" Skinny asked, ignoring Meghan's attempt to pivot.

She was at eight, but said, "I'm at a six." She didn't want to set herself apart from the boys." She was so happy

to be in front of them teaching. Since her debacle at Brewster this was what she wanted, what she needed.

“Damn, that’s high,” Red said.

“Let her be happy,” Daequan piped in as he continued to twirl one of his locks around his finger.

“Thank you, Daequan. Since you’re talking, let’s start with you. Here’s your question. What did you have for breakfast?”

“What you mean what I had for breakfast?”

“Yes, breakfast. That’s what I mean.” Meghan was a little worried he was going to tell her to fuck off.

But then he answered, “Scrambled eggs. Nasty ass toast.”

“Why was the toast ‘nasty’ in your opinion?”

“What you mean?” Once again Meghan worried he would turn off or get frustrated.

“Tell us why you didn’t like your toast?”

Daequan looked Meghan in the eye. She kept his eye while he spoke. “It was nasty ‘cause it’s always dry no matter how much fake butter you put on it. They should keep that nasty ass shit.”

The boys seconded him.

“Boys, calm down,” YA Goode yelled. Again, Meghan wished she would go away. She could run her own class.

“Sorry, YA Goode. But that toast is a joke,” Daequan yelled back.

Skinny jumped in, “What you have for breakfast, Ms. Meghan?”

She didn’t want to say something that would leave them thinking she was more privileged than they already thought. She didn’t want to tell them she ate at Tiger Stripes, a place that had so many scrumptious overpriced options it was ridiculous. But hesitation wouldn’t help either. *Don’t overthink it, Meg.*

“I had eggs, too. With toast. Good toast.” Meghan smiled at Daequan.

Daequan’s smile was slow and untrusting. “What was good about the toast, Ms. Meghan?”

“Thank you for asking, Daequan. The toast was good because it was medium toasted, just right chewy on the inside and crunchy on the outside. And there was real butter.” Meghan looked around seeing that they all were imagining her toast. They didn’t seem to be bothered by the fact that Meghan ate a better breakfast than they did.

“I had that kind of toast before,” Petey said, scratching the top of his head. He looked unsure.

“You ain’t had that kind of toast before, nigga,” Skinny practically yelled. “Where at, Petey, where?”

“Skin!” YA Goode shouted. She came and stood behind him with her hands on his shoulders. Skinny calmed down, then looked up at YA Goode and said he was sorry. She gently patted his shoulders.

“Petey, would you like to speak?” Meghan asked. He was giving Skinny a serious side-eye. “Petey?”

“Shut up, nigga,” he said to Skinny. His eyes rolled. “I tasted good toast. For my eighth-grade graduation last year, there was a breakfast that morning with good toast.” He lifted from his chair, looking at Skinny, who was clearly no longer sorry and laughing uncontrollably. Meghan thought the question was easy and reasonable. Something everyone could relate to, a softball, or so she thought.

YA BJ barked, “Petey, sit down. It ain’t worth all that, over some toast you cain’t even eat.”

Meghan had been there only one day for less than an hour and she felt exhausted.

“Nigga, you ain’t graduate from eighth grade. You just had a wet dream, that’s all.” Skinny was relentless. If only there was some way to get him out of her class. She felt bad for thinking this. Skinny was the kind of kid she promised to help. She wasn’t supposed to give up on a kid like him in the first twenty minutes of getting to know him. And here she was, ready as ever to give up on him.

“Fuck you, nigga! You ain’t shit!” Petey was up out of his seat again, fists at his sides. YA BJ grabbed Skinny and dragged him like he was a dripping shirt and nearly threw him into his room.

Meghan froze. Her class was breaking down over toast. The other boys were still, looking at either the floor or their shoe, or someplace off in the distance. This was their normal. That was why today was a four.

Skinny yelled from his room as the door clanged close, “Fuck you, YA BJ with your fat ass!”

Daequan spoke for the group: “Ms. Meghan, sorry for all this. This is just how we do. We all got a lot of problems

as you may have guessed. I liked the question about breakfast and would like to tell you about the rubbery ass eggs I had.”

The boys burst out laughing. Meghan couldn’t help herself either.

“Fuck you, BJ. Fuck this place!” Skinny banged on the door as class continued and became normal. They talked some more about what they had eaten for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. At the end of class, Meghan had fallen to a four for the day.

CHAPTER 11

Meghan's first time in Mrs. Gibbs's office, she didn't notice much. But now, she noticed three neat piles of paper on the desk. A community college diploma hung on the wall behind Mrs. Gibbs. Meghan wondered if their educational differences contributed to the way Mrs. Gibbs felt about Meghan.

"Sit down, Ms. James," Mrs. Gibbs said, without looking away from her computer screen. Meghan sat, faintly smelling food. In the trash was a Lean Cuisine box: Shrimp Linguine. Meghan had never tried Lean Cuisine and hadn't planned on it. Her life would be sad if she ate from frozen food boxes in a windowless room like Mrs. Gibbs. It was an awful way to live.

Meghan watched Mrs. Gibbs type on her computer for at least a minute straight without saying anything. She was in awe of how rude the woman was being. Mrs. Gibbs was treating Meghan as if *she* had asked to meet and not the other way around. Before Meghan ended her first class,

which she counted as mildly successful, YA Goode delivered the message that Mrs. Gibbs wanted to meet with her.

Finally, Mrs. Gibbs turned to Meghan and said, “How was your first day?”

“Good. Thank you for the opportunity.” Meghan regretted saying that. It wasn’t her opportunity to give.

“The thanks go to the Superintendent. He hired you, I didn’t. I am your manager. My job is to make sure all the elective courses are going well.”

Meghan blurted, “Have I somehow personally offended you?” She was stupid to say something like this.

Mrs. Gibbs’ neck stretched back. “What do you mean, Ms. James? You and I barely know each other.”

“It’s just that you seem mad at me, since our first meeting. I don’t know. I just want us to have a great start considering you’re my boss.”

“How can I be mad at you and I don’t know you?” She was saying all the right words, but Meghan knew it was true that, at a minimum, that Mrs. Gibbs didn’t like her.

“Sorry, you’re right.” Heat flushed Meghan’s cheeks. *Please let me out of here, please.* “I’m just very happy to have this job and want to make sure I’m doing the best I can to succeed.” Meghan cut herself off before she said *ma’am*.

“Time will tell how things work out. But do the best you can. That is all you can do. This is a specific place with a specific culture. You fit in or you don’t.”

"I hope to fit in. I would love to know more about you and how you got here." Meghan smiled, stiffly. Maybe that would help.

"Hard work." Meghan was sure Mrs. Gibbs had worn the same navy suit the last time they met. Mrs. Gibbs could just be one of those individuals who always wore the same color for efficiency or branding, like Steve Jobs. Meghan was distracted by Mrs. Gibbs' tight little curls on her head. Mrs. Gibbs likely styled her own hair without ever asking anyone's opinion.

"I started off as a YA," she continued. "Though the term wasn't YA then. We were plain old correctional officers." Meghan detected a little warmth in Mrs. Gibbs, but not enough and it wasn't directed towards her. "I was a damn good one. For ten years. I missed only nine days in my whole time as a YA. I was promoted to supervisor and shortly after that to an administrator. Now, I own all the elective courses except for athletics."

So interesting to Meghan that she used the word "own." "What does that mean exactly, electives?"

"Well, you're teaching an elective course, so I supposed you knew."

"I do, I think. I just meant what courses count as electives."

"I'm mostly over trades like car mechanics, cosmetology, barbering, cooking. Then there's the humanities line with creative writing, art therapy and performing arts. I continue to grow my programming because things are going so well. People trust me. They expect excellence."

“That is impressive, Mrs. Gibbs.” Meghan truly meant it. She loved how goal-oriented Mrs. Gibbs was. How committed she was.

Mrs. Gibbs leaned forward. “Ms. James, I can’t afford to have any more screwups. Not in creative writing, my newest course. You know what happened to the last lady like you?”

Meghan didn’t like the way she put it: *last lady like you*.

“Do you mean because she was white? Is that how she was like me?” Meghan surprised herself once again at her directness, her honesty. But she didn’t regret the question, at least not at that moment. Mrs. Gibbs wasn’t going to walk all over her. Meghan *owned* creative writing, too.

Mrs. Gibbs blinked at least fifty times. “Well, yes, but no. Race has nothing to do with this. Though she was white. We have several white employees. So it wasn’t that... She seemed from a privileged background. She was like you because she was inexperienced.”

“Yes, YA Goode and YA BJ told me that she couldn’t control the boys,” Meghan said.

“Young men. There are no boys here.”

“Young men. Sorry.”

“Let’s not dwell on her.” *The woman like Meghan*.

“I’m sure you asked me here for a reason,” Meghan said.

“Yes, I did. So let me get straight to the point. You know what’s riding on your class?”

“I have a sense.”

"The Superintendent hired the last woman. In my humble opinion, he should never have hired someone so inexperienced. And now again?" She pulled back into her seat and crossed her arms.

Meghan's ears were now hot with the recognition that Mrs. Gibbs never would have hope in her.

"I can assure you I won't fail."

"I wish your statement brought me comfort. The last time we met, we discussed your past at Brewster. While I'm sure you were well meaning, you couldn't do the work."

"It wasn't all my fault."

"And things won't be all your fault here, whether it goes poorly and well. There will always be other factors. But it doesn't mean you can't excel. If every teacher ran from their classrooms in the middle of the year, the entire educational system would crumble. It isn't a perfect system, but it *is* the system and dedicated teachers are crucial. Teachers must stay and work within the system. Otherwise, our young people will stagnate or worse. None of the young people at Rising Sun had an adequate education. This is a powerful fact and factor in why they are here. Do you follow, Ms. James?"

Meghan averted her eyes. She wanted to cry but she would die before she did. If she cried, she'd cry forever. And she was certain that she wouldn't cry in front of this odd, confusing lady who had power over her. "I follow."

"The best person for this job would be someone with at least five years of teaching experience in an urban area. I've always thought that these young men could benefit from someone who could relate to them."

“May I ask what that means?” Although Meghan knew. Mrs. Gibbs wanted an African American teacher in the Nia pod. That both saddened and enraged Meghan. She could be effective as someone who was African American. It’s a case-by-case basis, not some sweeping generality that mattered. Clearly, Mrs. Gibbs was a racist.

“I mean someone who is familiar with their everyday life. Someone who understands the pressures that have brought them to this place. Someone who will understand where they will be going once they leave here, what they’re up against.”

“But that’s restricting” Meghan’s voice was gritty. She wanted more than anything to be seen as viable.

Mrs. Gibbs shrugged. “It’s just what I think. But I hope I’m wrong. You’re here. Mr. Mitchell put you here. He thinks you can succeed. So, naturally, I do, too.” Mrs. Gibbs was lying. Meghan understood the veiled point of the meeting.

Wanting to get the hell out of there, Meghan said what she thought Mrs. Gibbs wanted her to say: “Yes, I know what’s riding on me, Mrs. Gibbs. I won’t let you down. I will take up the challenge. I’m not the same as the lady before me. I’ll work hard to make sure it’s a good class for these boys--young men. You won’t regret my being here.” Meghan stood up.

She didn’t trust that Mrs. Gibbs wouldn’t find some way to get her fired soon. Mr. Mitchell--*her boss*--wouldn’t go for that, at least not easily. He was a fair man, she’d gathered.

Mrs. Gibbs turned back to her computer and started typing again. "That's all, Ms. James."

As soon as Meghan left, the tears fell but she wiped them away. She was being escorted by a burly YA who looked like he was having a bad day. She left the building without a word from him. Meghan was used to the rudeness by now. She said nothing to the man, not even goodbye.

CHAPTER 12

The pink, extravagant balloon arrangements were supposed to be Meghan's. They floated between the baby white rose bushes and a purple hydrangea on her father's deck. Tastefully the arrangement included three gold accent balloons, Meghan's favorite color combination.

But somehow Meghan didn't believe the balloons were for her. She thought she may have been attending a reveal party for the baby.

Leaning against the deck rail, she stared out into a field of manicured grass lined by tall trees and wilderness. Her father was always happy to tell her what kind of wildlife he'd seen: a fox, a porcupine, a beaver, but mostly deer. *You should have seen how big his antlers were, Princess!*

Looking out at the area her father experienced so much joy, Meghan never understood why he lived a few notches beneath himself. He worked hard to become wealthy. He grew up in West Virginia to a father who worked in the

mines and a stay-at-home mother with a third grade education. David James had succeeded beyond what anyone could dream of. But he lived in a townhome, albeit a beautiful and spacious one, in McLean, one of the wealthiest areas in the DC Metropolitan Area – it was still a townhome, sharing walls with neighbors. He could have a first and second mansion. Meghan had never asked him why he chose to live humbly. She didn't want to make his contentment seem strange.

“Are those balloons for me?” Meghan said.

“Yes, Princess,” her father said, fiddling with his beloved grill. “This is a celebration. You're starting a new job.”

Meghan smirked, wondering if her father was being sincere. “Seriously?”

“Princess, please accept things as they are. You're wasting your time thinking otherwise. It took me a little to accept your choice to work in a jail, but I'm okay, I guess. I'm glad you're doing something you want to do. It's not that I agree with your choice.”

Meghan didn't like his answer. “Thank you for the balloons. They're pretty.”

Eric Matters was also coming. Meghan didn't feel like outside company, especially someone she didn't know. She was moody because of this so-called congratulation party or because of her horrible meeting with Mrs. Gibbs. Both. She tried to think positively: she and this Eric guy would have a good time. She *needed* a good time now.

“So how was your first day?” her father said, smiling at the grill as the flames began to rage.

“Molly, bring out the steaks!” he yelled. Meghan doubted he was interested in really knowing about her first day.

“It was pretty good. I have a class of four boys.”

He looked distracted as he waited for Molly. “That’s good. Why so small?”

“I don’t know. Are you sure you want to talk about this, dad?”

“I just want to make sure you’re okay.” He clicked his tongs in anticipation of the meat.

“I’m okay,” Meghan said, taking a seat on a white, wicker chair.

Molly came out in kitten heels and a long sheer robe over a silk fitted dress, reminding Meghan of a rich woman from the seventies. She looked beautiful as always but *why wear kitten heels at home? There was no one to impress.*

“Oh, hi Meghan,” Molly said, handing over the steaks to her husband.

“Hi.”

Molly said with sincerity, “Congratulations on your new job.” It occurred to Meghan that it was Molly’s idea for the balloons and the congratulatory dinner. Her father would have never thought to do this and do it so well.

Meghan smiled with sincerity. “Thank you.”

“How was your first day?” Molly asked.

“It was good. One boy was rowdy and almost unbearable.”

“Oh really? How about the others?”

“They were fine. Interesting. All distinct personalities.” For the first time, Meghan appreciated Molly for her interest. This was the best conversation they’d ever had.

“Well, I’d better finish preparing the salad. But I’m happy for you. So many people would just hole up and die after everything you’ve been through.”

Meghan had no idea what exactly Molly was referring to. Brewster? TEACH!? Surviving the death of her mother? But it didn’t matter. Meghan felt Molly’s warmth. At this moment, it was what she needed.

“Thank you, Molly.” For a split-second Meghan thought about leaving her father and the balloons and going inside to help Molly. But she thought the better of it. Let this conversation between stepdaughter and stepmother remain sweet.

As Molly opened the sliding door, Meghan said, “Thank you for the balloons.”

Meghan appreciated the coolness of the air conditioner wafting from the house and the heat enveloping her again after the sliding door shut.

Meghan’s father wiped his hands on his apron and sat next to her in a matching chair. Meghan loved how the chairs matched the baby white roses. It was so thoughtful and stylish. She knew it was all Molly. Her father could never think of such things. That was partly why he had Molly around. She could take care of the things he couldn’t or didn’t know he needed. He didn’t seem to need her for emotional support like he did with Meghan’s mother.

“Hey, dad, I’m going to ask you something weird.”

She hadn’t looked at her father so closely in a long while. He was still a catch, but she noticed some crow’s feet around his sea blue eyes. He looked like he may have had a long, hard week.

“Okay shoot.” He sat back and crossed his tanned legs. Meghan had legs athletic like him, even though she didn’t play sports.

“Okay, dad... So, Molly...” she said, quietly, because of both nerves and not wanting Molly to hear even though she wouldn’t because she was inside. “Do you love her?”

“What? I love my wife. Are you kidding me? What the hell is wrong with you, asking a question like that?”

“It’s just that when I look at the two of you, it just seems so different than how you were... with mom.”

“Meghan!” Horror widened his face. “I don’t want to talk about your mother.”

Meghan thought about the boys from Rising Sun wanting to know so much about her mother. She wished she knew more. “You never do. You never want to talk about mom. It’s like she never existed to you.”

“She exists!” Her father looked straight ahead, away from Meghan. “I think about her every day. I laugh with her. I get mad at her.”

Meghan needed her mother to live not only within her but also within her father. They were silent for a while. She was nervous that he might say something that she found insensitive, like he’d gotten over her.

"I don't want to talk about mom now." He looked at his daughter. His eyes were wet. "I can't. I feel weak. I can't be weak." He turned over his shoulder and yelled, "Molly have you cut the bell peppers? I need them." He liked to grill the vegetables at the end.

Molly came out and brought a heap of thick cut bell peppers. It was way too much for eight people to eat.

Meghan had opened a vault within her father. Surprisingly, for the first time, seeing Molly as vulnerable and pregnant, Meghan wanted her father to love her. He needed that. Molly needed that. The baby needed that.

When Molly left, and Meghan was sure she was out of earshot, Meghan apologized. "I don't want to make you feel weak. It just means so much to me to know you haven't forgotten her. To know that you still love her."

Her father began grilling the bell peppers "Do I love Molly?" he said softly. "Yes, I love Molly. It's just different."

At the end of her mother's life, her mother was bald, typical of someone with breast cancer undergoing the most intense form of chemotherapy. Meghan had tried to tell herself that this whole process of dying was natural and not unique, in an attempt to neutralize her pain. Lots of people were dying of cancer. Lots of people had mothers with stage four cancer.

But those thoughts never gave her comfort. Even now, Meghan still couldn't describe how she felt about her mother's death. Not that anyone was asking her to. She'd learned going through the process of her mother's impending death that people didn't ask many questions.

They were afraid. Meghan mostly understood it. She preferred it. But sometimes she needed someone to talk to about her mother. If her mother was alive, they would have talked about anything and everything together while her mother stroked her hair.

About her father. The last three months of her mother's life David James stopped sleeping in the same room with his loving wife of twenty years. It enraged Meghan but she never confronted him. She knew it wouldn't have helped.

Her father was a coward. He couldn't manage to focus on his dying wife's needs. He was self-preserving. The only thing that gave Meghan a sliver of comfort was that she knew he was doing the best he could. He wasn't trying to leave his wife, he didn't want to leave her, but he was too devastated (to say the least) to be of use to her, to Meghan, to himself.

David James adored his first wife. Only she knew how to stroke his fits of anger until he was calm. She could do it so well that just seeing her was enough to ease him. His wife made him laugh more than anyone else. So, when it came to his wife's slow, ugly death he *had* to distance himself.

Understanding him wasn't enough for Meghan. While she could understand her father's behavior, she still hated him for it. How could he leave her mother alone every night in her final days?

Meghan's mother died in her sleep. With nobody beside her. No hand to hold. Meghan was the one who found her, cold and stiff, mouth slightly agape. Stupidly, Meghan tried to shake the body awake. When that didn't work, she started asking the body not to die. Then she

kissed the body. Her legs collapsed as she screamed next to the body.

Dinner was fine, nothing unexpected. It was predictably scrumptious. Molly made sure the presentation was appetizing. She put tiny red, edible flowers in the drinks and served the food on beautiful Seneca plates. Her father talked as much as ever, telling plentiful jokes, some of which Meghan had heard before. She ate more grilled bell peppers than usual and found them tastier than usual.

After dinner Meghan went back to the deck to be alone. However, before she knew it, Eric Matters was beside her, looking outward like she was. Shortly after pleasantries and congratulations about her new job, he told Meghan that he was getting his MBA at Georgetown. Meghan should have been impressed by that fact, but she wasn't. Eric told her more about his program and what he hoped to do once he graduated. He wanted to become a vice president at D. James Development Corporation. Given his natural banter with her father, he was well on his way. Her father always wanted a son. His experience and his vision were so typical and boring. He said the things he thought women would be impressed with. Most would. But he didn't know Meghan.

But he's nice, Meghan thought.

"That's great, Eric," She tried to sound upbeat.

"Thanks," he smiled with those perfect, shiny teeth. He must've gotten braces when he was eleven, just when she did. "So, what are you up to?" he asked.

"In life?" Meghan asked.

“Sure. In life.”

He’d judge her just like her family had if she told the truth, but she didn’t really care. “I work at a juvenile detention center.”

“Say what?”

“A juvenile detention center. You wouldn’t know anything about it.”

“Try me. Where’s it at?”

“It’s an hour out.”

“Wow, I couldn’t drive that far for a job every day.”

“I know you wouldn’t.”

“Oh, so you know me now?” He scoffed. Meghan liked that.

“If I had to guess, I’d get a lot of things right about you,” she said.

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay, agree to disagree.”

“You’re stereotyping me.” Eric seemed intrigued by it. They both knew that there was more to him than how effortlessly he impressed Mr. David James.

“Maybe.” She looked out at the field. It was dark now. She would’ve been terribly afraid if she were down there alone. She told herself to stop thinking about being alone when she was next to someone who took interest in her.

“Why would you work somewhere like that?” Eric asked.

“Really? It’s still on earth. I haven’t started working for aliens. They’re kids, for god’s sake. But I get it. You’re going to Georgetown. I should be doing something similar.”

“Not necessarily. It’s that most people in TEACH! finish and go to law school or business school or go into politics or whatever.”

“I’m aware.”

“I don’t mean harm. I’m just trying to understand.”

“Got it. I work at a juvenile detention center because I like writing and I like kids.”

“You could still teach in a normal school.”

Clearly, her father hadn’t told him much about her recent past. For that, she was thankful.

“What if I told you that you should get an English degree instead of an MBA?”

He cocked his head. “I get it now. I should shut up.”

“You should. I like where I am.”

“Look, Meghan, I don’t want to come across like I don’t like what you do. It’s just different from anything else. I like that you’re making your own path. I admire your courage to do what you are doing. I wish I could be as passionate as you are. I mean, work for me is fine. I like it. I certainly like working with your dad. He’s amazing. But I don’t take any of it home. I study, then close the book. I work then I go have a beer with my buddies.”

“I’ve been there,” Meghan said, thinking of college. “It was so boring and dull, so predictable. I wasn’t helping

anyone or anything. That's why I joined TEACH!. I wanted a different way to live. I made a choice."

"What does that mean, a choice?" Eric said.

Meghan wasn't sure why she needed to explain but she gave it a shot. "I mean, a choice to live with a purpose."

"I see." He paused. "That's admirable...You know, my dad is a good friend of your dad from college. I'm sure that's the reason I'm standing next to you."

"I didn't know that. But it sounds about right. It's a hookup." Meghan thought about her four boys at Rising Sun. They would never have this privilege. "Why are you getting an MBA?"

Eric cocked his head and didn't say anything at first. "It just seems right, I guess. Right for where I am going in my life."

"Did your dad get an MBA?" Meghan asked.

"He did."

"From Georgetown?"

"From Wharton."

"Impressive." It was undeniable. Both father and son: impressive. "The world needs at least a few people to run businesses. That's a good choice, too."

"I'm glad you approve." He chuckled. "Somehow that means a lot to me." Without looking at Meghan, he said, "I like you."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really."

"You barely know me," she said.

"I like what I know of you so far."

"You are supposed to like me."

Eric turned to Meghan and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her soft and long. Meghan couldn't help but to relax even though she didn't want to. She wanted to keep Eric at bay.

The smell of the steaks and the haze of the grill still lingered. But that distraction wasn't enough for her to pull back from him. It had been too long since she'd had a kiss like this. Actually never. As he persisted, she became wet and open, ready for him, all of him to please her.

He let her go. She opened her eyes to his green eyes. Beautiful green eyes that she hadn't noticed before.

Meghan wanted to break their locked eyes, but he kissed her again. The kiss was even better than before. It seemed to say that he wanted her, too. Not just for this moment but for all the moments.

This could be sweet, and Meghan *needed* sweet now.

CHAPTER 13

For her second class, Meghan needed to assess the boys' writing. In the circle in the middle of the pod, she'd given Daequan, Skinny, Red, and Petey a writing prompt: "What is your favorite dinner? Be specific."

She came prepared with the prompt neatly typed on a laminated piece of paper. She'd included the clip art of a plate of mashed potatoes, peas, and one chicken leg in the lower corner. At first, she'd hesitated to include the clip art because she thought it would be unnecessary and patronizing to the boys, but now it seemed to help them remember and focus on the task at hand.

Skinny struggled with the word "specific." He didn't know what it meant, nor how to pronounce it. Instead of telling him the answer, Meghan opened it up to the class. "What does specific mean, gentlemen?"

No one said anything. She gestured to Daequan. "Would you please tell us what you think *specific* means?"

“Well,” Daequan said, stretching out his leg. “*Specific* is part of what makes something the way it is.” He seemed pleased with himself.

“Poetic!” Meghan said. Clearly, Daequan had a way with words. She’d remembered his eloquence from last class.

Meghan got up from her metal folding chair holding their journals and four brand-new, beautifully sharpened number two pencils. For safety, she’d only been allowed to bring four in, exactly the class size.

“What, we ‘bout to take a test?” Skinny said.

“It’s not a test. It’s an assessment.”

“What that mean?”

“You’re going to write something. I will review it, but I will not give you grades. I will only use today’s assessment to understand where we need to begin our work.”

Skinny waved her off. “Whatever, Ms. Meghan. People say what they want but they just end up judging us in the end. I can tell you right now. You don’t need to access me, or whatever the word is. I cain’t read and I cain’t write. Well, a little. But you just gonna think what you gonna think.”

“Shut up, fool,” Daequan said, “Give her a chance.”

“We always givin’ people a chance. It don’t work, Dae. And you know that.”

Daequan nodded, patiently waiting for Meghan to hand out the assessment.

Meghan said, “Don’t write anything yet. Now that you have your paper and pencil, I would like for you to reread the prompt.”

Petey cut in, “You mean the words on the shiny paper?”

“Indeed. I want you to read it and think about it first. Thinking is the pre-cursor to writing.” Meghan realized that the boys may not have understood what she just said. But she didn’t believe in dumbing things down all the time. They needed to get used to the way she spoke. “Think about what you want to say, then write it.”

“Ms. Meghan,” Red, who had been quiet but attentive the whole time, said, “What if we don’t know how to write that good, but we can think good?”

“That’s fine. We can always learn how to improve our writing. Thinking is just as important. Just do the best you can. Don’t overthink now.”

“Man,” Skinny said, rocking his chair. “I don’t understand you, lady. Think then don’t think.”

Meghan chuckled. At least Skinny was thinking about the assignment. “I don’t mean to confuse you. Do the best you can.”

“Skin,” Daequan said, calmly. “Just do what she tells you. The whole class is gonna be canceled soon messin’ around with you. If you mess this up, we’re all gonna have to play spades a million and one times or watch some old ass, boring ass ‘Rain Man’. We seen that shit a million times.”

“Fine,” Skinny said. “Let’s go. I’m ready to get this shit over with.”

Meghan said nothing. She sat down in her seat. What would be would be. She was excited. She felt like a teacher, a real teacher, a successful teacher. After a few minutes, she got back up, walking around the outside circle. It was quiet. Petey was the first one to turn his paper over. "Make sure you re-read it to ensure you wrote what you really wanted to say," Meghan said, quietly. Petey flipped his paper over again and followed directions. He made one change.

Meghan couldn't discern much as she tried to peek at their writing. They all were protective over their work. Hunching over more, moving the journals closer to them when Meghan passed by.

"Five minutes," Meghan called, listening to the sound of her heels. She was proud of that sound, the teacher's sound.

"Dang! That's it? We need more time, Ms. Lady," Red said. Meghan wasn't offended that he didn't say her name. It was only their second day of class.

When time was up, Meghan said, "Put your pencils down."

YA Goode, who had been sitting by the table with the big book, went to help Red. She stared over his shoulder reviewing his work. That calmed him. Then she grabbed his pencil and erased something he wrote. He didn't seem embarrassed or frustrated. He seemed used to it. Meghan wanted YA Goode to stop. But YA Goode didn't seem to think she was doing anything wrong. And if she did, she wouldn't have cared.

Meghan felt compelled to remind them: “Don’t worry, no one will receive a grade.”

Daequan muttered, “You will still judge us. You’ll still tell us we dumb.”

Meghan was confused and surprised by the comment. She thought Daequan was on her side, that he understood what she was doing. “Let’s stop thinking about it in those terms. I’m here to help.”

“So is everyone else. Everybody here to help,” Daequan said.

“Keep an open mind, gentlemen,” YA Goode’s voice was piercing.

“Thank you, YA Goode,” Meghan begrudgingly acknowledged.

YA Goode smiled. She moved behind Skinny and read what he had written. “See, YA Goode, I’m dumb, ain’t I?”

“Of course not. Your writing is terrible, but you’re still smart.” Skinny smiled at her mixed review. “You just got a lot to learn. It’s a blessing you’re so young because you have the time to learn. You’re here in a little class where Ms. James--Ms. Meghan can help you. When you were in school and decided to show up, you didn’t get any personal attention, right?”

Skinny nodded. “I feel you, YA Goode, but that white lady is gonna judge us.”

Meghan felt a sliver of jealousy as she watched YA Goode’s ease with Skinny. She made him look manageable and deserving.

Meghan collected their journals and pencils and stacked them by her chair. “Now that you have completed the assignment, let’s just talk. I’ll read what you wrote later.”

YA Goode went back to her corner table. Meghan felt relieved. This was her class.

“Ma’am, excuse me, miss,” Skinny raised his hand enthusiastically.

“Yes, Skinny?”

“Skin.”

Red jumped in. “You ain’t Skinny. Yo mama didn’t name you that. You Elvin.” Red and Petey laughed.

“Everybody call me Skin, so that’s my name, nigga.”

“That don’t mean that’s your name. Your mama named you that ugly ass name, Elvin.”

YA BJ happened to walk in the pod. “Red, don’t start no trouble. Today has been a good day.”

Red yelled, “Okay, I’ll leave Elvin alone.”

“Shut up you, fag.”

Meghan wasn’t sure if she could effectively intervene, but she tried. “Elvin, I think you had a comment. If we could all just listen to Elvin—”

“Bitch, don’t call me Elvin.” Both YAs rushed over. Daequan sat up in his chair. It was eerily quiet. Meghan said nothing because she didn’t know what to say. This was the second time she’d been called a bitch. One of her second-grade students at Brewster called her a bitch. It was just as stunning now. Meghan sent that girl to the principal’s office. The girl sat in there for an hour and then

was sent back to Meghan's classroom without being made to apologize. The little girl had won. She should have been suspended. She should have been able to have a reprieve from the girl. Meghan concluded that the little girl's lesson was that you could say terrible things, take a break and move on without consequence.

"Skin, let me talk to you for a minute," YA BJ said. Meghan felt sorry for him. He'd just come back from lunch and hadn't had even a second before he was dealing with a problem.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Skin?" Daequan said calmly. "Man, I will fuck you up. You know that."

Skin lowered his eyes. He understood the gravity of the moment. But he didn't apologize. He never met eyes with Meghan again. Meghan was not hurt that he called her a bitch. But she was glad that it was being handled. The class might as well have been over despite having fifteen more minutes left.

Just as Meghan thought, YA Goode called the class over. "Sorry, Ms. Meghan. Stand up, gentlemen. Take your chair to the closet." They bunched up with their chairs, then YA Goode stopped. "No thank you gentlemen! No crowding. One at a time. Twelve feet apart. Dae, get Ms. Meghan's chair, too."

YA BJ already had taken Skinny to the side. He was speaking strongly in Skinny's ear. Meghan could only see the back of his head. She wondered if he was crying or laughing.

As the boys were lining up to go to their rooms, Meghan gathered notebooks and pencils. She noticed one

pencil was missing. She panicked a little because she had learned from orientation that boys weren't supposed to have pencils outside of class—it was a security breach. They could be used as shanks. During orientation Meghan had thought that the notion of shanks was overkill. But now she feared that it would be used as a weapon. She could imagine Skinny holding a vengeful grudge against everyone. A good stabbing might help.

Meghan bolted towards YA Goode and told her one pencil was missing. “Oh yeah?” YA Goode yelled out, “Which one of you decided you wanted to be cute and take a pencil with you to your room to do god knows what with?”

Meghan didn't anticipate this issue becoming such a public affair. But she assured herself that she had made the right decision.

“Not me, YA Goode!”

“Nope!

“I ain't crazy!

“Don't lock us up. That ain't fair! We were good today.”

“Good?” YA Goode said. “How you gonna be good when a pencil is missing? Somebody gonna get us all in trouble. Last thing I need is to be suspended. Y'all know Mrs. Gibbs' don't play.”

Meghan's chest tightened. It had been her bright idea to bring the pencils in. She'd had to get special permission. Now everyone was going to be potentially in trouble.

YA BJ yelled, "I'm checking each of you right now. Line up, negroes." Skinny joined them. "Six feet apart. Arms out, legs apart. No sharp objects on your person. Those are the rules. You should have them memorized by now, fellows."

The pat-down began. Meghan felt like jelly as she watched dignity being stripped from them. As much as everyone around Rising Sun claimed to love these boys, they didn't trust them. Meghan could see that. The boys weren't sentenced here for vacation. They were here because they had issues with trust. Trusting others, others trusting themselves.

Indeed, YA BJ found a sharpened pencil on Skinny in the elastic of his underwear. Meghan hoped to God he wasn't planning to use it as a shank.

"What the fuck, man!" Daequan threw up his hands.

"I was just plannin' to write some poems. I want to be poetic, too. Like you, Dae," Skinny shrilled.

"Man, shut that shit up. You were already doin' too much callin' her a bitch. You the bitch."

"Sorry, Dae."

"You wasn't tryin' to write no poetry. You don't even know what that mean."

Skinny looked like he wanted to say something desperately but didn't as YA BJ placed a zip tie around his wrists and walked Skinny to his room.

Meghan wondered what would happen to Skinny. Would he get in serious trouble, or would this just be noted in the Big Book, like a warning?

As each boy passed inspection, they each said something to Meghan.

"Bye, Ms. Meghan!"

"See you next week!"

"I still enjoyed class!" That last voice was Daequan's. Meghan said nothing because she didn't want to yell. She never wanted to yell. As she walked out, she looked at YA Goode and said, "Next week?"

"Next week," YA Goode smiled at Meghan. "Welcome to our world of fun." She started laughing.

After class, Meghan sat in her car in the Rising Sun parking lot. She was still as the last of her emotions drained from her. She had scored an actual parking spot today. She leaned her head on the headrest and closed her eyes until she drifted into a catnap. She opened her eyes and looked at the notebooks and the three pencils on the passenger's seat. It seemed that every innocent thing she tried had turned out poorly and she was pissed. It was all Skinny's fault. She couldn't help how insecure he felt about his terrible name, Elvin. She wanted him gone. He was so disruptive, and it was ruining her ability to be successful.

She picked up the first notebook and read the first entry. *What is your favorite dinner?* Such a simple question. Zack and Zana would easily answer pizza. And she would coax them to say what kind of pizza and from where. Soon she wouldn't have been able to shut them up. That was the goal. Open expression.

She clenched her jaw as she read what the boys wrote. The writing was awful. No surprise. Little grammar. She expected more from Daequan, the oldest one. She

remembered him worrying about judgment despite her trying to ease his worry. It broke her heart a little that he worried so much about writing.

But the truth was: now she *was* judging. She was alone in her car, judging. There was no harm in that. She wouldn't go back into the pod with her judgment. She imagined herself next time giving them some encouragement and telling them the things she found promising about their expression. She would lie, for the good. She needed them to stay engaged.

Some entries she could barely make out, they were so disorganized. Red dug the pencil into the paper so deep that each letter looked like a cut. "Hamburger from Mackdonilds." That was all he wrote.

Petey's handwriting looked like a little girl's. Very stylized with loops and curvy lines. Clearly, he paid more attention to the way he wrote than what he wrote. "Any Thing from K.F.C." He listed some items that Meghan couldn't read. She could've guessed but she'd never been there.

Petey wrote the most, even though he finished the earliest. He wrote about eating his grandmother's Thanksgiving dinner. Relatively okay.

Skinny had only written one unfinished sentence. Meghan thought that if he'd finished he may have talked about Burger King. The thought of what he planned to do with that sharpened pencil popped in her head again. Her jaw was clenched as she imagined him trying to stab her, the bitch. The bitch who called him Elvin. If Skinny was allowed to stay in the next class, she would call him Skinny like everyone else. She wouldn't try to be clever. There

were so many nicknames to remember, just like at Brewster. At first, she found it cute and special – a sweet gift in the African American vernacular. But at times it felt exhausting having to remember two names for one person. And it felt silly calling a human being a name like Ray Ray and June Bug.

Meghan closed her eyes again. This wasn't the best time to read what the boys had written. She needed distance from them. A tea tree scented bath. A hair wash with her favorite citrus shampoo. A Netflix binge. A call to Eric. Thinking of him now seemed so out of place. He should be a separate box in Meghan's mind. The thought of his enticing smell didn't belong here in the messiness of her work at Rising Sun. The place was gritty from the time she parked to the time she left. She needed to hose off when she got home. The sun beat harder here than in the rest of the world.

Eric. After their kiss, after he left, she was able to pull away from his charming spell. She went back to thinking of him as a cookie cut out of a rich, white boy. She knew he wasn't and that she was being unfair. She just hadn't met the part of him that wasn't a cookie cutter. Even if he only lived up to cookie cutter status, he was nice. He was goodhearted. That meant something. Those qualities weren't the easiest to find in a man. She shouldn't let go of that. Good heartedness was a precious gem.

At that moment Meghan thought about cutting her hair short and dying it dishwater brown. Her long blonde hair signaled too much to people. It made them less concerned about her heart and whether she was a good person. Certainly, her hair was a liability at Rising Sun. No one trusted her heart or her intention. To them, she was a

cookie cutter, too: a do-gooder, well-to-do young white woman who didn't really care about them. That was wrong! She wanted to prove that she did care.

If she opened the door now all the sweltering heat would rush in. She picked up Daequan's notebook and read the entry:

I dont hav favorite diner I allway think I can have somethin better to eat If I could it wood be stake Delisous!

Meghan read his words over and over until tears ran down her face. She was overreacting due to the heat and the terrible way class ended. She needed something good to come from this debacle. This was it.

In reading his words, it was clear that the class wasn't a failure. Daequan got it. The focus wasn't Skinny. The focus was the other three. They did what she asked. The writing was bad for sure, but the thinking was there. The honesty was there. Daequan wasn't trying to say the right thing, like kids and some adults try to do. *Delisous*. She threw her head back and laughed. It was perfect. Perfectly said. Perfectly spelled. Perfectly placed.

She wished she could've given him one of her father's steaks from her celebration dinner. It was *Delisous*. Juicy, hot, and a little pink in the middle. A little charred. Only salt, pepper, and minced garlic seasoning. The velvety roasted baby potatoes with rosemary. The perfect salad Molly made with bleu cheese and artisan tomatoes mixed with the right amount of oil and balsamic. And beer, cold beer.

CHAPTER 14

As Meghan settled in her seat, high up in the Rising Sun auditorium, she was anxious. She didn't know why. Per Mrs. Gibbs, she had to attend a mandatory staff meeting. She wanted not to care about the meeting, but she did. She wanted to see the director, the man in charge of Rising Sun, speak. Mr. Mitchell's boss. It was hard to imagine Mr. Mitchell having a boss given his command and vision.

Meghan had only heard great things about Director Lanson. But she hadn't heard much. She knew he had only been there for three years.

Meghan was ready to see a god or a fraud. She wanted Director Lanson to be excellent. The boys needed that. They deserved that.

Director Lanson appeared behind a podium. He was handsome but Meghan mostly saw a thin man who looked like he would never hurt a fly. He looked like he could be a nerdy scientist lecturing on butterflies, not a juvenile

detention center. The lights got a little brighter on stage. He tapped the microphone in front of him. "Well, hello, Rising Sun."

Meghan wanted to clap, but no one else did so she didn't.

He moved closer to the microphone and said, "I appreciate you and all your hard work. Give yourself a round of applause."

The applause was tepid at best.

"I'm here to talk about something new: Love Up." He put his hand over his brow and looked around as if he were seeing individuals in the dark crowd. "Love Up is what we are about here at Rising Sun. We're working on creating a healthy community for our young men. Part of that is knowing and feeling that we are all about love. Love," he emphasized. "If you don't know what love is then the kids certainly won't know. Amen?"

"Amen," a few in the crowd said with the most energy yet, but still flat.

Meghan felt weird about Director Lanson invoking religion. But then she remembered Brewster. Invoking Jesus was common. She was always shocked at how naturally people worked Jesus into their every day. Jesus helped to get a mark down on chicken. Jesus gave someone patience not to beat their child. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when the lunch lady got fired. All the kids just needed more Jesus in their lives; then everything would be alright. Teachers didn't hesitate using Jesus as a scare tactic with the kids. Jesus could shame them or scare them into whatever behavior they were aiming for. Of course, it

didn't work on all students. And Jesus never lasted long enough. Meghan never got used to it, though. Jesus didn't play a role in her life. At least not one she knew of. Several teachers who witnessed the day of her downfall told her they were going to pray to Jesus as she was taken from the building, shaking. Everything would be alright with Jesus. She hated Jesus. Just for that day. The other days He had no bearing on her life and she had no bearing on His.

Meghan could already sense that Director Lanson was a good man, *but* he spoke in very vague terms about Love Up which left her confused and underwhelmed. It wasn't enough to be a good man when you were the captain of a ship. You had to make your people follow your lead. She was waiting to see this quality in Director Lanson. He never defined Love Up, but Meghan got that Love Up was a vibe more than anything concrete. In the dark of the theater, she looked down at one YA burrowed in her coat worn backwards. Meghan couldn't tell if she was just sleepy or cold. It was cold in the auditorium.

Director Lanson didn't take any questions from the audience about his short Love Up speech. Meghan was convinced that even if he did, no one would've asked any questions. She could tell that staff, primarily YAs, didn't enjoy these meetings, where they were being talked at, instead of talked to. Love Up was being forced down their throats. Love Up was no more than a catchphrase to them. They'd probably had too many catchphrases over the years. Trying to understand them and implement them was tiring to them. For some of them, their job was just a job. They did it and went home. They were tired of people trying to make them feel that their work was a higher calling just because they worked with kids. Love Up was

just another attempt. For some YAs, they loved their job and the boys, but they didn't need catch phrases to be good at their job and to care for the boys.

Director Lanson invited his leadership team to the stage, all twenty of them. Twenty people in leadership was too much, Meghan knew. All twenty leaders of this and that fanned out on either side of Director Lanson like a hawk's wingspan. They introduced themselves to a stiff crowd. When the director of janitorial service introduced herself, Meghan rolled her eyes, understanding the YAs overall lack of enthusiasm. This show of force produced the opposite effect of what Director Lanson intended. He wanted to show that leadership was strong, that the employees were in good hands. But instead, the show of resources reeked of wastefulness and pretension.

He invited Mr. Mitchell to speak first. The microphone was passed down to him on the end. He stood, looking flawless once again. His haircut was fresh and this time he wore a diamond in his left ear. Meghan liked the earring for some reason. She'd never liked the way men looked in earrings. It just looked dumb and flashy. But for Mr. Mitchell, the glint of the earring added to his delightful dimples. Meghan looked forward to him speaking. She hadn't seen him since the interview. She remembered his warmth and charm and she could use that now in the chilly auditorium.

Right away, Mr. Mitchell launched into a long prayer about Jesus keeping the kids and staff safe. He prayed that Jesus would strengthen the families and community to wrap their arms around the young men. "Watch God provide! Watch God provide!"

He woke up the crowd with his passionate, angry voice. Lots of “amens” piped up as he went on and on. Though Meghan was interested as a cultural anthropologist would be, her eyes grew heavy with sleepiness. The prayer was too long and circular. The audience seemed to get more stirred up the more Mr. Mitchell talked in circles.

He ended abruptly, yelling, “In the name of Jesus!” He handed the microphone to someone else and wiped the beads of sweat off his face with a handkerchief. Director Lanson patiently held the microphone as the crowd’s *Amens, Thank you Jesus’s, Thank you Lords, and Hallelujahs* settled down.

“Amen, amen. Thank you for the stirring prayer, Superintendent. We certainly need your prayers, as the kids sit in their pods now wanting something better for themselves, but hopelessly confused about how to get it. We know the realities of the moment they hit those streets. Indeed, we pray for answers beyond ourselves and what we can do for these young men.”

The audience dried up when Director Lanson spoke. Meghan felt bad for him because his message made more sense than Mr. Mitchell’s. It was in the delivery that made the difference.

Microphone feedback screeched. Director Lanson apologized as he repositioned the microphone. “Let’s open up for questions.” The house lights went up.

Two staff members redundantly asked questions about physical restraint training. “Two YA’s have been attacked,” one said. “All names shall remain anonymous though we all know who they are and who the monster is. Nothing has been done about it. And that’s to be expected here.”

Several YAs yelled out in sad, angry agreement. “The monster still sits in his pod being a threat to all. He will strike again. We all know you ain’t gonna do nothing about it, Director. That’s just how it goes around here. But please remind us how we can keep ourselves from being *attacked*. What can we do without being put on non-contact or getting fired?”

“Um, Candy, that’s Candy, right?” Meghan could tell that knowing names was important here but Director Lanson’s uncertainty in this moment hurt his cause. Knowing her name wasn’t important to her. Her grievance was. “Ms. Candy, right, I’m sorry that this has happened. Our job, however, is to deal with the most difficult of young men. He cannot throw them away as the system already has...”

Candy cut in with force, “But what if he’s a threat to your personal safety and everyone else’s?”

Meghan was disheartened to hear Candy’s story. She was pretty sure this monster wasn’t in Nia pod. But if it was, it would be Skinny. But then Petey was so quiet, he could’ve been the psycho. She knew there was no way the offender was Petey. He was a sweet soul. She couldn’t guess for the world what he’d done to belong to Rising Sun. She thought about how much she didn’t like Skinny. This monster story was a living reminder that she was teaching in an environment where she could be physically attacked.

She had never been trained in physical restraint. For some reason, she wasn’t mandated to attend a class even though she worked solely with the boys. At the time of orientation, she was more than happy that she didn’t have to take the class. If she were attacked now, she would have

to depend on someone else to save her. She thought about the pencil incident with Skinny. Technically, the threat was just as bad as the threat in the pod with said monster. But fortunately, whatever negative possibility was not acted out with the pencil. She could have died or been stabbed in the neck. She was biting her teeth as she listened to the YA asking for help and Director Lanson not providing or promising it.

“The young gentleman you speak of has been reprimanded...”

Ms. Candy interrupted again, “He hasn’t been reprimanded enough. He’s back in the pod after spending a day in another pod, cutting up over there.” Candy was petite. She didn’t look like she could physically restrain any of the boys. Physical restraint training was never going to work in her case. Or in Meghan’s case either. She wasn’t the workout type, though she did exercise from time to time. She’d seen some of the boys in passing who were at their physical peak with enough power to kill someone with their bare hands.

Director Lanson’s final answer was strange. “A chokehold is never permitted, never.” His voice was sharp. Clearly, he was responding to something very specific. Meghan wished she knew. Some in the audience hissed. End of conversation. Ms. Candy sat down in a huff.

A burly man asked a question about a brawl in another pod. “Will the boys receive proper punishment?”

To which the Director said, “We must Love Up with these young men? Let’s not forget how much these boys need you. Those involved in that incident know that those young men and their behavior are being addressed. I

cannot be more specific than that. Thank you for sharing that.”

Director Lanson had no further comment, to which Meghan was surprised and underwhelmed. She was baffled by the whole meeting. Rising Sun had serious problems deeper than she thought. No one told her anything. There was no one to tell her. She only saw YA Goode and YA BJ when she visited. They didn’t say much to her during her class. Mrs. Gibbs was never going to tell her anything useful. She was committed to torturing Meghan about her past and present.

Meghan looked at Mrs. Gibbs now, sitting next to Mr. Mitchell. She had perfect posture. She had on a suit that looked like the last one Meghan saw, except it was olive green. Her stockings made her legs look like raw sausages and her thick heeled shoes looked like they were from Payless. Her hair looked freshly tightened for this meeting.

Another question was asked about appropriate activities for the kids. The microphone was passed down to Mrs. Gibbs. “What do you mean, ‘appropriate activities?’” Mrs. Gibbs said, speaking too loudly into the microphone. She brought it to her lap and started talking without it. “You all can hear me, right?” Meghan was excited to see how YAs responded to Mrs. Gibbs, to see if they liked her or not.

The YA responded, “The kids never are held accountable when they are bad. Instead, we take them to a Beyonce concert.”

Wow! A Beyonce concert! What a lavish gift, one that Meghan hadn’t even splurged on herself.

“Let’s not exaggerate here.”

"Excuse me, Mrs. Gibbs, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm not exaggerating. Prince, who is meaner than the devil, just went to see the Jay Z concert. I got good kids who should've had his spot."

"Ma'am." Mrs. Gibbs seemed thrown off by the question.

"I'm not ma'am with all due respect, ma'am."

"Okay then. How long have you been working here?"

"Nine months."

"That may be the reason you're confused. We have an affirmative program for our young men. We don't compare kids. We reward based on a young man's growth."

"Well, you should compare. This don't make no damn sense. Everyone knows Prince needs to sit under this jail, but because he has a good day out of a thousand bad ones he gets to see Jay Z."

"Watch it now. What is your name?" Mrs. Gibbs was fumbling her way through the exchange, and it gave Meghan the joy of her day.

"My name is Jarva. But that's not important."

"Okay, Ms. Jarva, let me tell you again. Our program does not compare children."

"Okay then, Mrs. Gibbs, I can accept it even though I don't agree with it. Fine. But do we have to have such lavish rewards for some and not all?"

"I'll take your point. Come see me after this. We can talk."

“I think we should talk now. I know I ain’t the only one feeling this way.” The audience affirmed.

“Sister, I hear you. Just come see me. We’ll see what can be done.”

“I guess,” Jarva said and handed the microphone off.

Director Lanson took the microphone back from Mrs. Gibbs, causing grating feedback. “Look, it’s all about love here. Love Up. I know there are some issues. We can review our policies about physical restraint and how our gentleman should be rewarded.” He paused scanning the audience. “First, we treat our children with love. That’s what Love Up is all about.” The YAs didn’t like Director Lanson as much as Meghan expected. She didn’t like him as much as she expected. She didn’t dislike him, though.

Mrs. Gibbs signaled for the microphone again, seeming to surprise her colleagues and the Director. “Um, excuse me, Director Lanson, I know we’re ending this meeting soon, but this is important. I’m not sure if everyone is aware that we have a new creative writing program.”

Meghan froze. Her heart was trying to gnaw itself through her chest. She was desperately praying that Mrs. Gibbs wouldn’t involve her in any way.

Mr. Mitchell nodded and reached for the microphone, “Yes, yes, Mrs. Gibbs, I’m glad you’ve been able to take my vision for pure and developed student expression. Most of you haven’t heard of the creative writing program—my brainchild—because it’s a pilot program.”

He turned to Mrs. Gibbs and spoke directly to her. “I’m glad you were able to run with my vision. You’re doing well, I hear. The new teacher is helping the young

men along. Would you please speak on this program so that everyone knows about the remarkable progress of the class?"

Mrs. Gibbs reached for the microphone, but he continued. "Speaking of appropriate activity, as one of you mentioned, the creative writing pilot program is appropriate for every young man, no matter what his history is. In fact, the most challenging young man would benefit the most. Think Prince, think Skinny." There was laughter and affirmation. "This is one of my signature programs designed to motivate our youth, to encourage self-expression, all necessary for healing."

"Amen!" someone from the audience said.

Meghan had no idea that her program was a pilot program and that it was meant to achieve so much. She was insecure once again—that fast.

Mrs. Gibbs peered out into the audience until she spotted Meghan up in the corner and yelled without the microphone that Mr. Mitchell still gripped. "Ms. James, please stand up!"

All eyes turned towards Meghan. Her face was red, even purple. She waved timidly.

Director Lanson was smiling at her. "This is wonderful! Superintendent, your vision for our young men is always strong."

Mr. Mitchell nodded, clasping his hands together in fake humility. *How obnoxious*, Meghan thought, but she still liked him.

“Don’t be nervous, Ms. James, is it?” the Director said as if Meghan was a feral cat being coaxed inside.

“Yes, Ms. James or Meghan, however... I’m fine, Director,” Meghan said.

From various places in the audience, she heard:

“We can’t hear you.”

“Speak up.”

“Don’t worry, baby. We ain’t gonna bite.”

The director said, “Tell us about yourself.”

“Well...” *I’m not red-faced all the time, she wanted to say.*
“I teach Creative Writing for the Nia Pod.”

People clapped and Meghan didn’t know why.

“Love Up,” the Director said, looking Meghan in the eye. “Love Up.”

“Love Up,” Meghan mustered.

“Ms. James and her creative writing class is an example of Love Up, giving these young men a chance to express themselves, to heal themselves.” If only they knew Meghan was teaching them to write about their favorite foods and how difficult it was to get one good sentence from any of them. It was hardly Love Up. It certainly wasn’t healing. No one told her the goal of her class was to heal the boys. That was a tall order. Meghan hadn’t healed herself from everything that happened at Brewster so how could she help them heal?

Before the close of the meeting, the Deputy Director, an Amazonian woman with blue cropped hair, gave the Youth Report. In the last quarter, eleven young men

completed their terms at Rising Sun and have been placed in temporary homes. *Terms*, a nice way to say juvenile sentences. Meghan was starting to get how euphemisms dominated the language at Rising Sun. Nothing was ever to be said that would remind the boys that they were locked up in prison.

Three kids had arrived this week. Two with prior offenses. Offenses include assault, armed robbery, sex trafficking, sexual assault, and attempted murder. Meghan couldn't close her eyes if she wanted to. They were pinned open as she tried to process how dangerous some of these boys were. She had to know what the boys in Nia pod had done. It would drive her crazy not knowing and having to teach them to "heal." The reasons that landed Daequan, Petey, Skinny and Red at Rising Sun were confidential. That tied Meghan's hands to a degree. Without knowing, how could she teach to the level she was expected to?

Meghan thought about the Beyonce tickets. She wasn't sure tickets would be an appropriate activity for the boys in this type of environment. But Love Up, right? Whatever that meant. What was going to happen to the boys who got into a brawl and hurt staff? What did Love Up look like in that case? She wished she knew what Love Up meant so she could add it to her lesson plans and, in turn, help the boys heal from the problems she didn't know they had. *Love Up. Love up. Love Up.*

CHAPTER 15

Meghan invited Eric over. She didn't hug him when he arrived. She smiled and grabbed his hand and pulled him into the apartment. He was a little damp because it was one thousand degrees outside.

Still holding his hand, she led him to the sofa, and they sat down.

"How are you?" he asked. His voice was deep and magnetic.

She should've asked him first. "Fine." Her mind was still reeling from the staff meeting earlier in the day. Mr. Mitchell's aching to preach. Mrs. Gibbs being ignored and passed over by her bosses. The one and only time Meghan would ever feel an affinity with Mrs. Gibbs. They were two women. Meghan's brain stung from imagining the attacks and the brawls that the YAs spoke of. The undeserving rewards for poorly behaved boys. Skinny being outed as one of the worst boys at Rising Sun. Meghan hadn't been

able to neatly tuck all that away before Eric came. She thought she could but she couldn't.

Eric wouldn't understand her experience at her job. She didn't need him to. Not for what she wanted tonight.

"How about you? How are you doing with your job and your MBA stuff?" Meghan asked.

"Courses are kicking my ass. Don't know why I decided to take summer classes, especially now that I've been promoted." His smile was tired and sincere. She could tell he wanted a reaction from her, a celebratory one.

All she could think of at that moment was her father. He'd given Eric a promotion. She didn't know how good Eric was at his job but she bet David James would've promoted him anyway because he was friends with Eric's father.

She nudged Eric's arm. "That's great. Congrats."

"Thanks," he said.

"What's your new title?"

"Associate Vice President."

"Really? You're too young for that, don't you think?"

Eric yawned, "Of course I don't think so. I'll be thirty in November."

"You're robbing the cradle," Meghan laughed but Eric didn't. "Just joking. We're six years apart, that's not really a big deal." It kind of was. They were in two very different places in life. Who knows, when she got to be his age, she may not care about places like Rising Sun. Just like he didn't.

“That’s what I hoped you would say.” He turned to Meghan and looked at her. Seconds passed before he smiled. She’d dolled herself up with makeup. As she applied her makeup earlier, she’d thought about taking it off. It seemed over the top to just sit around in her apartment with a man. But seeing his smile as he looked at her was worth it.

He ran his fingers through her hair. Meghan felt a suggestive tug making her wonder what kind of lover he’d be. She hoped to find out tonight.

Sex was too early in their case. They didn’t know each other well. But after all the stress from work, she wanted sex.

“Want a drink?” Meghan had fresh lemonade waiting in the refrigerator.

“Sure.”

“Great.” She didn’t bother to ask what he wanted to drink. She was already in the kitchen fixing the drink. “So, tell me about your new job,” she said, pouring lemonade. She was just asking questions to keep the conversation going.

“I’ve only been promoted since yesterday. I’m in finance. I have twelve employees who report to me.”

“I bet you like that kind of power.”

“Who wouldn’t? But managing isn’t easy. I don’t really like it to tell you the truth. But managing comes with the job and your father is great to work with. He’s a really cool guy.”

“He’s a good guy. You lucked out.”

"I know." Eric leaned back on the sofa.

"I couldn't do what you do—or what you're going to do. Shall I add some tequila?"

"Why ask?" Eric said.

"I don't know you as well as I want to know you." Meghan splashed guesstimate amounts of tequila to get them tipsy. She mixed and tasted the drinks. She smacked her lips: way too obvious of what she wanted tonight. She added in a little more lemonade and ice to make it taste bearable.

"How do you like your apartment?" he asked again.

"I like it. I have a roommate." Meghan pointed to Jenny's door. "She's out now. She went out with her new boyfriend from the Peace Corps." Meghan made a face. She wished that Jenny was home more to hang out.

Eric had a case of hiccups.

"Drunk?" Meghan teased.

"Hardly." He downed the rest of the drink. Meghan drank the rest of the drink she'd been babysitting and got up to get them both another drink. Her head was spinning. This would have to be the last drink for her otherwise like clockwork she'd be in the bathroom with her head in the toilet.

He chuckled. "I hear you, but I want to really hear you. I want to know you a little better. Not much, but a little more."

Meghan exhaled. She shouldn't have invited him. It wasn't fair that she only wanted to have sex with him as he

wanted to get to know her on an intimate level. “How's your new job, Princess?:

Meghan laughed at Eric calling her the pet name her father only reserved for her. “My job is fine. The boys aren't so bad.”

“Really? Guess there's no reason for them to be there, right?” he said, sarcastically.

“Hey, hey, no need to be a jerk. The truth is that some need to be there. Some don't. But it's really hard to tell sometimes.”

“What kind of shit do these kids get into?”

“Anything you can imagine.”

“Where are they from?”

“You have to be from DC to go to Rising Sun,” Meghan said.

“Mostly blacks?” Eric said. Meghan didn't like the question. Eric wasn't a racist, she was sure, but he sounded like he could be flirting with the label with that question. He didn't say ‘blacks’ with a neutral tone. It meant something. People in her world didn't talk much about African Americans but when they did, they said “blacks” like Eric just said, as if being black was a joke or a crime.

“Unfortunately, yes, mostly African Americans.”

“Why do you say unfortunately? No matter the race, wrong is wrong. If they've committed crimes they deserve to be there.”

“Are you in fifth grade? Black and white thinking doesn't live here.”

“Don’t get mad, my princess. Neither of us will remember this conversation tomorrow. You got me tipsy woman, woman.”

“Fine then. I’ll keep talking, since you asked. Is it true that *only* African American boys commit the crimes in DC? No, not at all. Yet, they are the only race at Rising Sun.”

“Why aren’t there white boys?” Eric asked. Meghan wasn’t sure what his angle was.

“I’m surprised this isn’t obvious to you. But to be fair, the answer wasn’t obvious to me until I started working at Rising Sun. From what I learned in orientation, white boys have the supports to keep them out of a place like that. When they behave like idiots, they have influential fathers to save them from jail. They have access to good lawyers. The police don’t see them as criminals at first glance. When they catch them, they just take them home. They’re never booked. Nothing gets on their record.”

Eric’s face went grim. “Wow, I’ve never thought about this kind of stuff at all.”

“You don’t know anyone who’s African American either.”

“I don’t, unfortunately.”

“It’s not that hard to know one,” Meghan said.

“That’s your opinion. Going from work, to class, to home, I’m not exactly meeting anyone of any stripe right now.”

“That makes sense. I’ll grant you that. In my world all I see are African Americans.”

“It must not be the easiest thing either, to be in a black world.”

Meghan wanted to say no, he was wrong. But the truth was he was right. The exclusion and isolation was wearing. She laid back and felt her head swirl. She had hit her limit. It was enough to have sex with someone she didn't know very well.

He grabbed her hands. “Let's just relax, Meghan.”

“Good, let's.”

He looked at the television. Judge Judy was on. A case about a dog that was electrocuted by a neighbor's invisible fence.

Eric pulled her close. His chest was hard. Meghan could only assume that he worked out a lot.

Enjoy this. Tomorrow she would be at Rising Sun where the only touch would be security patting her down. She felt safe now in Eric's arms.

Eric kissed her forehead. His hand moved under her tee-shirt and bra. He forcefully yet gently moved along her body as if he knew where all her secrets were.

His hand fondled her breasts and he tasted them. Meghan smiled as he licked and kissed. In time, she straddled him, kissing him everywhere she could. His sweat smelled slightly sweet.

Meghan suddenly stood up and started unbuttoning her jeans. They were so tight she had to hop her way out of them. He enjoyed her silly performance for his eyes only. He unbuttoned his pants with much more ease. Meghan dropped to her knees and took him in, ferociously. He

yanked her hair as he finished. She straddled him again, slowly rocking him, taking control over him. He found joy in her breasts as she quickened.

“Oh God!” she pushed and pulled, unable to wait any longer. She collapsed on his chest.

“Whew!” Meghan opened her eyes to see the used lemons on the kitchen countertop.

“Whew is right,” Eric said, kissing her neck. He tugged on her hair playfully and said, “How are you feeling?”

“You know exactly how I feel.” Meghan peeled herself from him. He was still beautiful, but just a bit splotchy. She was, too. He tucked himself back into his pants.

“When are we going to do this again?” Eric asked.

“Soon,” she said, hoping that would be enough of an answer. She liked Eric without a doubt, but she felt the urge to put him into a small box that she only opened when she wanted.

“When is *soon*?”

“I’ll call you and we can set a time.”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Meghan, I’m right here. We don’t need to wait to plan a time. You okay?”

“Yep, I’m okay,” Meghan said. “It’s just that we both have so much going on.”

“Meggy, I know you love your job teaching in kid jail, but you have one class, five boys, right?”

“It’s four actually. But *kid jail*? What do you mean by *kid jail*? This isn’t a joke.” She started combing her hair

with her fingers. Eric had tangled it. She wanted to take a shower and go to sleep, alone.

Eric didn't answer. He looked confused and sorry.

"You're trying to tell me that I'm not really that busy."

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I was just saying that we can easily find a way to see each other. I'll take my lunchtime to come see you. I'll come over right after class. Or you can come to my place." He reached to stroke her hair and she pulled back.

"Meghan," he said. "Did I do something wrong? I'm so sorry if I did."

She stood up with her hands on her hip. "It's best that you go. Today was good. I liked us together. I think we can leave it at that. No need to move fast, right? Like you said."

Eric stood up. He was six foot one. The perfect height for Meghan's five-foot seven frame. But she refused to focus on how attracted to him she truly was.

"So, when will I see you again?" he asked again, this time sheepishly. It made her want him even more. Seeing him vulnerable was adorable. This thirty-year-old man with a big job at a big firm who owned a condo wanted her. Putting it in those terms made her insecure. She had nothing but two very part-time jobs.

She grabbed his arm and walked him to the door.

"Soon," Meghan said. "Soon." He turned away, shaking his head. She missed him already.

After Eric left, Meghan was energized. Her orgasm was divine. This had only happened a handful of times in her life. One was a month-long affair with a local jazz

musician. She thought he was a little more impressive because he played the saxophone. She cut it off with him when she realized a saxophone didn't make him special at all.

Meghan went to her bedroom and sat at her desk with her laptop, the blank screen glaring. Sam popped into her mind. She'd sent Meghan three emails this week asking her for a draft along with new pitches. *Coming!* Meghan responded to the last email.

Lately she hadn't had any good ideas for DC Weekly. Her mind was too much on Rising Sun and the boys. Sam neither her readers wanted to know anything about Rising Sun. They wanted to feel good when they read her column, not heavy with societal problems, making them feel hopeless and guilty. Her column was created to make readers feel interested in the good aspects of DC.

Meghan brainstormed topics until she was drowsy and tossed herself in bed.

Ideas:

New dog park in Shaw

New independent movie theater on Barracks Row

Top three massage parlors (!!!) - will I get free massages??

Floral mural on the Cleveland Park Metro

CHAPTER 16

After the Love Up staff meeting last week, Meghan got the idea to put the Love Up concept into action—as much as she understood it. She gave the boys an assignment to define Love Up. She was curious to see if they knew what Love Up was. She hoped they knew more than she did. She hoped she could learn what it meant from them.

She stood in front of them with a green linen suit with a green, pink paisley blouse and dark pink slingbacks. She forgot that slingbacks were forbidden but the mean security lady wasn't there and the male security guard was fine with it. "Nice shoes," he said. Meghan wondered if he was flirting or if he was nicer when his partner was away. It could've been that he was more pleasant because she was less of a stranger now. As she walked to the security door, she replied, "Thank you, Vincent."

As Meghan stood before her class now, Red said in all seriousness, "You look nice."

"You do, too," Meghan said.

"For real?"

"For real."

"Wow, ain't nobody ever told me that. They always say I look like a rottweiler or some other ugly dog."

"'Cause you do, nigga," Skinny said. He was calmer today but still willing to demean.

"Shut up," Red said.

"Enough!" Meghan said. She wasn't going to have this class fail. She had too much riding on it. It was no longer acceptable for her to have lighthearted classes, discussing superficial things. She had to have them express themselves fully. She had to teach them to heal. Just like Mr. Mitchell envisioned. While she was planning to do those things down the road, the staff meeting made it clear she was expected to produce meaningful work without delay. That was a tall order. It wasn't fair. What about the other classes? Did those teachers have to dig as deep? If she didn't do well, not only would she be fired, but she'd be an even bigger failure than she was at Brewster. She'd been young at Brewster. It was okay if a young person failed at anything, nonetheless something so hard as teaching the kind of students she had had.

But now she wasn't so young. She'd fudged her resume to say she had the experience to succeed at teaching these boys. Proving Mrs. Gibbs wrong was enough to motivate Meghan to succeed, but the boys motivated her the most. She wasn't giving up on Red, Petey, Daequan and even Skinny. If she thought about it correctly, Skinny and all

the challenges he brought should be her main motivation to succeed.

“Skinny, if it helps you, you look good, too,” Meghan added. But the truth was, he didn’t. He had an ashy look that permeated his body. His face was slender as if stuck between two bookends. He was too young to have yellowish eyes but he did. His long fingers were capped by nubs like ET’s.

“You’re just saying that,” Skinny said.

“Maybe,” Meghan said. Everyone laughed, including Skinny. “Jokes aside, Skinny, you look good, too.”

“What about me?” Daequan said. He was the definition of handsome.

Before Meghan could answer, YA BJ said, “Never mind Prince Charming over there. He knows he’s a looker.”

“Okay, enough of that. We’re all good looking. We need to focus on the assignment at hand,” Meghan said, trying not to think about how attractive Daquan was.

“I hate assignments,” Skinny said.

“This is class, dummy,” Daequan said.

“I ain’t no dummy. Am I, Ms. Meghan?”

“You’re bright,” Meghan said. She wasn’t totally lying. She just wished that Skinny focused on learning more. He had to be bright to be so quick witted all the time.

“Maybe assignment isn’t the right word,” Meghan said, trying to ease the tension in the class.

“Un-un, Ms. Meghan. I got to stop you there,” Daequan said. “Some of us want to learn. Some of us want

to feel like we are taking a college course. So, the right word is assignment. Don't let Skin pull us all down. Pull us up, Ms. Meghan."

Meghan would always remember this moment. It would motivate her. The boys—her boys—were here to learn, to be better, to grow. To treat the class as any less would be a crime, Meghan's cardinal sin.

"Thank you, Daequan. I like that you're thinking about college. A place that you can all go to if you put your mind to it." She smiled at Petey who hadn't said anything the entire class. Petey's face was sullen, but he was following along.

Red said, "Don't worry about Petey, Ms. Meghan. "He had court today and it ain't a good day."

Skinny said, "Damn, Red, why you gotta be telling everybody's business? You a snitch."

"You a bitch," Red said, leaning towards Skinny.

"Gentlemen, let's not call names." Meghan was glad the YAs didn't intervene on this one. In general, they were intervening less than in the beginning.

"Apologize," Red said.

"Nope," Skinny said, crossing his arms. "I just ain't going to call you nothing else. You just be the last name I called you: snitch. 'Cause you is."

"Skinny," Meghan said. "I don't know if there's a time out corner but you may need to spend some time there." All the boys found Meghan's comment funny. "Listen, I'm not trying to make light of this, it's just that you're distracting."

“You callin’ me a name, Ms. Meghan? You say I’m distractin’?” Skinny said.

“Are you not?” Meghan said.

“I believe your ass is distractin’,” Daequan said to Skinn.

Trying to bring all the banter to a close so that they could learn one thing before class was over, Meghan said, “Distracting is not your name, Skinny, but it is how you are behaving. For the rest of the class, I need you to be quiet.”

YA BJ yelled from the corner table, “Quiet! If not then I’m taking you to the room you know all too well for your behavior.”

Daequan said, “Nigga, don’t ruin this. Just shut the fuck up.”

Skinny lowered his head.

Meghan checked her watch. There were twenty-five minutes left. She sat down, exhausted. She felt like ending class and trying again another day. She waited until the room was still.

“Back to the assignment. I want you to tell me what you think the term Love Up means. I must admit that I am still learning about this term. I heard Director Lanson speak about it the other day. It’s important here. If we understand what Love Up is and can live it out, we’ll be better for it, right?”

No one said anything.

“So, what is it?” Meghan said, passing out their notebooks and freshly sharpened number two pencils.

"Skin, you can handle these pencils, right?" Daequan asked. Meghan would have preferred no one spoke of the pencil incident.

Skinny looked like he wanted to give Daequan the middle finger then stopped himself. "Man," he said.

"Today is a new day. No need to look behind us," Meghan said.

"I'm just saying, Ms. Meghan. I don't want any more shit. I just want to do the assignment," Daequan said.

She let them write for ten minutes. She had planned to give them more time but due to the way most of the class had been idly spent, ten minutes was all she could spare.

After ten minutes she told them to put their pencils down. They all seemed happy except for Skinny, whose head was bowed and was still writing. He was sniffing and Meghan realized he may have been ready to cry. She knew he would never cry. He wouldn't be able to live down crying in front of the other boys. What did he do to belong to Rising Sun? Meghan wanted to know now more than ever.

Their writing wasn't really writing. The boys had so few writing skills that their assignments were more about idea formation. Writing was so confusing to them; therefore, their writing was confusing to anyone who read it.

While reading and assessing their work was painful, Meghan made the boys write because it was the proper thing to do in a writing class. She couldn't sleep at night if she didn't push them to write, despite their misgivings and groans whenever she asked them to write something. Rising Sun leadership expected them to write. Meghan was

now dreading the moment that Director Lanson, Mr. Mitchell, and Mrs. Gibbs would come to visit and judge. Meghan didn't know where the line for acceptable teaching was. She couldn't be expected to teach them how to proficiently read and write. Creative writing was indeed built on those proficiencies, but it was so much more than that. Creative writing was about ideas, storytelling, and authenticity. Meghan wasn't sure which was harder: the basics of reading and writing or creative writing. She worried that leadership would confuse knowing the basics of reading and writing with the basics of creative writing.

Meghan knew all too well from Brewster that the public school system was an abomination, letting kids pass who hadn't learned anything. The term was social promotion. But Rising Sun took the abomination to new heights. Daequan was seventeen for goodness' sake. The future wasn't bright for him, no matter his charm. Without learning to read or write, he would be left out of many, many circles. Circles that could change his life for the good. That was incredibly sad to Meghan. She didn't want to be the one to tell him the truth, that with a criminal record and the inability to read and write, he wouldn't have wings in life. She studied him as he sat rereading his essay to himself. Her eyes watered.

"We have time only for one reader, unfortunately. Daequan, since you seem ready to read your work, please do," Meghan said.

He licked his lips to keep from smiling. "Thank you, Ms. Meghan, for the opportunity." He read:

Love Up mean making other strong It means being asseptin of some one who trying to do better for him or her self And if you can help them. My exampel of Love Up is our class You assept me despit my problems. Ms. Megan I assept you to.

“The end,” Daequan said. The boys clapped except for Skinny. Then Daequan stood up and took a bow. Meghan loved that moment. If she got nothing else from this experience teaching at Rising Sun, this moment was enough. The hope in his eyes. The happiness in his dimples. His face full of pride.

“Thank you, Daequan! I hope it is clear to you that I accept you, too.” Meghan clapped. “Nicely done.”

She looked at Daequan again and his smile had gotten impossibly brighter.

CHAPTER 17

Meghan left the windows down as she raced down the highway letting her hair flap like a flag on a windy day. She was glad when she parked her car in the driveway next to her father's customized Porsche. Molly was standing at the door in a blue satin moo-moo. Meghan had never thought about moo-moos, but seeing how sophisticated Molly looked, she was almost jealous.

She looked down at her damp outfit. She wanted a shower and thought about taking one.

Molly beckoned her in. She was already holding a teacup in her hand. Not a mug but an actual teacup. The thought of using a teacup felt ridiculous to Meghan. She thought about refusing the teacup. Instead, Meghan gave Molly a light hug.

Molly ushered her into a small den off the first-floor patio. The just-right temperature in the room with the breeze of a ceiling fan made Meghan remember laying on

the beach in Rio, Martha's Vineyard, Santa Barbara, Outer Banks, and Jamaica. Funny how one little room in her father's house could rival some of her best vacations.

Before Meghan sat, she excused herself for the bathroom. Molly told her to use the pink powder room because she'd set out a few things for her to freshen up. "I know you've had a busy, busy day so I thought this might help."

Prior to their positive exchange at Meghan's congratulatory party, she would have been annoyed by Molly's gesture. But now Meghan was pleasantly surprised by the gesture. "Thank you, Molly. That's very sweet."

In the bathroom with the ceiling brushed silver, she used the things Molly had laid out for her: a face cloth, cherry scented soap and lotion, Scope, and cue tips. She cleaned her ears. She felt more refreshed cleaning her ears than all the other options.

When Meghan returned, Molly had the electric tea pot heated and an extensive array of tea, agave, honey, and raw honey. "You treat my father this good?"

"Yes, I try," Molly grinned.

"That's a shame," Meghan kidded. Molly looked confused. At that moment, Meghan felt her father deserved a smart wife who could understand simple jokes. Like her mother. "Just joking, Molly. I'm happy you pay so much attention to him. Hope he does the same for you."

"I'm simple. So, I am pleased."

“That’s good. What are you pleased with?” Meghan didn’t want to come off sounding rude, but she couldn’t think of a better way to ask the question.

“Just spending time with him. That’s all.”

“He doesn’t have a lot of time. Never has since the beginning of his company.”

Molly nodded.

“What do you do when he’s not around?” Meghan, liking the cherry theme from the bathroom, fixed herself cherry tea.

“I keep myself busy. I love keeping the house. Shopping. Planning romantic trips so that we’re all set to go when he does have time off.”

Meghan thought that was sweet. “Now you’ll be mommy of the year soon.”

Molly laughed humbly. “I’ll try.”

“Are you excited?”

“Sure. I didn’t think I would ever be a mother.”

“Why not, Molly? Doesn’t every woman of our age want to have a baby.”

Molly’s eyes caught Meghan’s, then asked, “We are so close in age. I’ve always wondered does that bother you?”

Meghan didn’t want to answer this question because she didn’t want to make anything worse between the two of them. She’d asked for the meeting. The meeting was meant to somehow make things better. Meghan was intrigued by Molly’s question. It was honest and daring. Meghan was refreshed by that.

“Yes, it does bother me if I can be honest. It weirds me out. It makes me feel like my dad is perverted. How can you date someone who’s about the same age as your daughter? At what age did it become okay for my father to be attracted to women—girls, his daughter’s age? Twelve? Eighteen? How about never?” She took a few quick sips of tea. The smell of cherry blossoms from the soap, the lotion, and the tea was delightful after coming from Rising Sun.

Molly looked defeated.

She should have stopped but she continued. “I don’t feel mature. Because I’m not mature. I’m still trying to figure out everything. My dad still helps me. I just don’t see how he could have a mature relationship with someone my age. You’re beautiful Molly, but...but...I guess I need to get to know you better. Which is why I asked for us to meet. I mean, do you think you’re mature?” Meghan felt all over the place. She doubted if Molly could follow.

Molly sipped her peppermint tea. “I suppose I’m not the most mature. But that’s not how I think of myself in relationships. It’s about compatibility. Not necessarily maturity. Your father and I like being in each other’s company.”

Meghan thought of her mother. “Well, he really liked being in the company of my mother.” She knew she shouldn’t have said it. It wasn’t fair to bring her mother into this. Not fair to Molly, her father, her mother, and even herself.

“I respect your mother, Meghan. I’ve always wanted to tell you that. I just couldn’t find the right time.”

Meghan stayed quiet.

“She was a phenomenal woman. I can see Dave’s pain every day. We never talk about it.”

“Why?” Meghan demanded. “Why? You’re his wife, aren’t you? You should be able to talk about anything.” If Meghan couldn’t have that intimacy with her father, she longed for him to share that grief with someone. Meghan was angry that Molly didn’t know what exactly her father was feeling.

Molly didn’t seem offended by Meghan’s rudeness. “I am his wife. We *can* talk about everything. But it isn’t always the best thing to talk about *everything*. I know your mother will always occupy a part of his heart. Always. At first, I thought that she would have less power over time, but it’s steady. She will always be within him, Meghan. I see you wanting it to be that way.”

“Really? How?”

“I can’t explain it. But I see the way you’re aching, too. I’ve learned that I have my place. Dave loves you and your mother fiercely. Honestly, there have been some days I resented him for not letting me have his entire heart, especially in the beginning, when we didn’t really know each other. Imagine a stranger wanting a lover’s complete heart. I didn’t understand how silly that was. Now I know him, and I find I don’t need all of it. I *want* all of it, but I don’t need all of it. It’s not available anyway.” Molly absently caressed her belly.

Meghan had underestimated this woman and her ability to have complex emotions and thoughts. Molly wasn’t a dumb tool at all. She possessed more maturity than Meghan had herself. Meghan now could see the attractive side of Molly. It wasn’t just her looks; it was her

heart. Her willingness to share her husband's heart with his dead wife. That's maturity.

Watching Molly rub her stomach, Meghan thought about the coming baby. "We got away from my question about motherhood. Are you ready for it?"

Molly nodded while sucking in air like she was following a Lamaze step. "What if I tell you I'm not? Would you hate me?"

"Nope. I wouldn't."

"Oh good. I'm going to make it work. I have no choice."

"So, you and dad didn't plan for this?"

"Not at all. But here we are."

"Do you *not* want the baby?"

"Of course, I do, now that it's growing, I'm growing mentally. But honestly, I just wanted to be with Dave. I thought it was great that he had you because I hoped the kid bug would've been out of him. I never saw myself as a mother."

Sadness draped Meghan. A former version of herself would have loved to see Molly unhappy and struggling. But not now. Meghan drank the rest of her tea. She felt the urge to tell Molly that she would be a good mother. She hoped she would be a good mother to her baby brother or sister. But she was still. How would telling Molly those empty words help?

Meghan and Molly talked about other things. Meghan found herself enjoying the conversation and not wanting

to bolt like she'd had too many times before. They even imagined a family vacation to Greece.

Meghan was refreshed by not talking about Skinny, shanks, inappropriate prayers, and Mrs. Gibbs. Meghan and Molly planned a shopping outing to buy the baby some gender-neutral clothes.

Meghan didn't see them as becoming friends—she was her stepmother after all—but she respected Molly and that made her feel hopeful about her relationship with her father. One wall had been knocked down. Meghan didn't have to fear Molly taking her father away. Molly had unequivocally told Meghan that she understood the circumstance between her father and her mother's death. Molly understood, but did Meghan's father?

CHAPTER 18

Aunt Susan sat on the front steps animatedly talking on her cell phone. This was unusual. Aunt Susan was always measured in her conversation.

Her legs were beautifully tanned and supple. Meghan had always admired Aunt Susan's legs. She doubted Aunt Susan had to shave twice a week like she did.

Meghan sat next to Aunt Susan. She was enjoying Aunt Susan's summer signature smell: rose water with a hint of sourness from her yoga sessions.

Meghan could make out that Aunt Susan was talking about something the school claimed that Zack did. *Sounds about right.* Aunt Susan abruptly ended her call in a huff. She exhaled, then turned to Meghan as if there had been no upsetting phone call.

They hugged tightly. Meghan missed Aunt Susan. "How are you, Meg?" Her eyes were kind yet piercing.

“I assume you’re a busy lady. Hopefully, there’s a man that contributes to your active schedule.” Aunt Susan smiled suggestively.

Meghan smiled politely. She didn’t want to talk about Eric.

“I’ll take that as a maybe. I hear that there’s a successful gentleman at a top development firm who wants to be closer to you.”

“How about we talk about that later? I just came to visit. To see what’s happening with you.” Meghan could hear the two rug rats running around in the foyer, yelling, and screaming.” How did Aunt Susan deal with this much energy each day?

“Really? You came here to hear about me? Ha!” Aunt Susan said.

“Yes, really. I just came to see about you.” Which wasn’t entirely true. She wanted comfort, a moment to help her recover from the stress of Rising Sun.

“Am I really that self-centered?”

Aunt Susan said nothing, which was all too revealing. Meghan didn’t want to be perceived as self-centered, especially in Aunt Susan’s eyes. Meghan viewed herself as the opposite of self-centered. For the last two years she’d freely given herself to help others less fortunate than she was. There was almost nothing left of herself. That’s why she needed to be here with her aunt, the only woman left to love her.

She felt sad and a little embarrassed. Aunt Susan was not a person to lie about anything. Whatever she thought

was usually a fair assessment. Meghan didn't know how else to become more generous and selfless.

Meghan regretted not paying enough attention to her appearance before she came here. Her lips were dry, her hair wispy, her skin oily. Meghan hoped Aunt Susan would invite her inside soon. The July afternoon sun was blazing.

"How are the kids?" Meghan asked.

Aunt Susan's gaze turned from the gorgeous houses across the street, hidden by colorful plants and exotic shrubbery. "Good. We were changing schools."

"Why? Blue Lakes is considered one of the best schools in the DC area."

"That might be the case. But not for Zack and Zana. Blue Lakes doesn't understand black students."

Meghan paused. It always felt funny when she heard Aunt Susan refer to Zack and Zana as black. She supposed they had a right to claim black, but the label didn't seem honest. It didn't tell their whole story. Their mother was a white woman. That should account for something. Of course, Meghan knew better than to challenge their racial label publicly. If she did, she would be considered a racist to African Americans.

Meghan wasn't sure what to say. She felt like Aunt Susan wanted her to understand everything at that moment without any explanation.

She yawned after a long day at Rising Sun. Aunt Susan didn't seem to notice.

"You're so woke, Aunt Susan," Meghan kidded, kind of.

"I'm not woke. I'm just trying to do what's best for my kids." Aunt Susan didn't entertain the joke. Meghan was irritated with her cousins for once again finding a way to ruin the budding of a conversation. Meghan didn't come here to talk about them. She felt a headache coming on.

"Blue Lakes has claimed that both Zack and my sweet little Zana have ADHD." Aunt Susan closed her eyes, shaking her head in disbelief. "The school is requiring that they take special classes."

The ADHD diagnosis didn't surprise Meghan, especially for Zack. "What special classes?"

"All."

"All? Goodness." Meghan found the requirement of *all* special classes extreme. While annoying, the kids weren't stupid by any means.

"Goodness is right. Last year it was one thing after the next. Zack and Zana always were in trouble. Then, after researching black children with white parents and all the social problems that come up, I saw these so-called behavioral issues for what it was. The school was seeing my children with implicit bias. There is no way I'm going to have my children start off like this." Her voice was low and grainy, almost hoarse.

Meghan couldn't help wondering what would happen if Aunt Susan just found a way to accept her children's natural misgivings. Sure, race was part of it, but *how much* was the question. What would she think if the next school recommended the same thing as Blue Lakes? How many situations would it take for her to see that race wasn't necessarily the problem alone.

Aunt Susan popped up. "Let's go inside. I've said enough about this. I just needed someone to talk to. Reggie isn't so keen on my perspective. He's open to the kids getting special help. Maybe not totally separate from all the other kids but help somehow. He just drives me insane with this. I feel so alone."

That was Meghan's first inside look at her aunt's marriage in all of eight years. She didn't like her aunt feeling alone. But if Meghan had to choose a perspective, she'd be on Reginald's side.

She almost said a prayer of gratitude when they walked to the cool kitchen with a cool water source. She was parched.

"So, how's work, Meg?"

"Work is fine. It's so draining. I'm tired all the time." Meghan wished she could've taken that back. She didn't want her aunt to think even worse about her decision to work at Rising Sun. Honesty was not her friend when talking to her doubters.

"I thought you only had one class."

Meghan's back of her neck flashed hot. Here Aunt Susan was telling her what she *only* had. Her father wouldn't listen to her. Jenn seemed disinterested. Eric couldn't understand her and now Aunt Susan was limiting her.

"I only have one class but it's not easy teaching under these circumstances." Meghan wanted her aunt to understand how she felt without her having to explain anything.

Aunt Susan paused, then smiled. “Your mom would’ve loved how good of a job you’re doing. Teaching under any circumstances is hard, nonetheless, the kids you’re dealing with.”

What a relief to hear Aunt Susan channel Meghan’s mother. That was the affirmation Meghan needed. That was comfort.

Meghan leaned against the marble counter. She could faintly smell her mother’s homemade cookies.

Aunt Susan brought her a chilled glass of water, the thing she most needed now. “So, tell me about your students.”

“I don’t know where to start.” Meghan didn’t want to answer Aunt Susan’s question. If she did answer she’d have to say, among other things, that she had a monster boss who hated her from the start. Meghan took the easy route. “They’re kids. They’ve done stupid stuff that brought them to the juvenile detention center.”

Aunt Susan nodded. “I think I get it. Reginald had a difficult home life.” She brought a dishful of Mom’s cookies. “Meg, sweetie, I made you some cookies.”

Meghan could’ve cried. A million times she’d made these cookies with her mother. Her original recipe, homemade drop cookies with almond, cranberries, and cinnamon. All just for Meghan and her father. That was a stubborn memory of when Meghan felt the most love in her life. The memory of love filled her up now along with a chilling sadness.

Meghan went to the powder room to freshen up. *No tears allowed.* She patted her eyes. She needed a shower. She

needed sleep. She needed a hug. Her eyes were bloodshot, giving her a ghoulish look. Her skin was pale with the familiar red blotches on her chest and neck.

She went back to the kitchen and sat on a chair at the island and ate another cookie. Her mother was running through her veins with the crisp outsides and soft middle. She ate cookie number three.

"Meghan, honey, you look tired," Aunt Susan said.

"I know," Meghan said, putting a half-eaten cookie on the cool island. The coolness was soothing.

"I don't want you to burn out like when you were at Brewster."

Just saying the name Brewster unsettled Meghan. It was still a ball of bad memories. She thought of how she failed Markell. She wondered where he was now. The likelihood of him being somehow positive was slim.

She grabbed another cookie, even though she still wasn't finished with the last one. "I'm doing well. Don't worry. It's just been a long day." Meghan wondered for the first time since she'd been at Rising Sun if she was okay. Places can change a person for the worst. Brewster had.

"I bet you're fine," Aunt Susan said. She hugged Meghan.

Meghan softened and held on.

Aunt Susan released. "Have you been to see the therapist yet, Meg?"

Meghan felt betrayed by the comment. "Why, Aunt Susan? Why do you want me to go see one so badly?" She

wished she had sounded less defensive to the only semblance of a mother she had.

“I think you’re fine. Don’t get me wrong. You’re fine.”

“So why should I see a therapist then? Why are we having this conversation, Aunt Susan?”

“Meg, I love you.”

Meghan knew that Aunt Susan didn’t mean her any harm. In fact, just the opposite. Meghan’s tears fell so easily now. She found the strength to say, “I’m not going to therapy, Aunt Susan. No.”

She saw the tick of frustration in her aunt’s face just before it quickly disappeared. “What do you mean, Meg?”

“Aunt Susan, there’s nothing left to say. I’m not going to therapy. I don’t need it.”

“I see.” Aunt Susan dropped her head.

Meghan didn’t like letting her aunt down and making her uncomfortable but she couldn’t budge on this.

“Meg, what does it hurt?”

“I just don’t feel the need. I love what I’m doing. There’s no problem. If anything, Rising Sun is healing me.” Meghan thought of Love Up. She still didn’t quite understand it, but she remembered her task, to heal the boys. She’d heard the common saying that you can’t heal someone if you hadn’t healed yourself. Well, she wasn’t going to wait until she was healed to try. She believed that she could heal simultaneously. Some stiff sessions with a therapist weren’t her style. It made her feel excessively privileged, and she didn’t want to feel that way. But mostly, she just didn’t want to open any old cans. Surely,

she'd have to relive the death of her mother and all the ways it was still taking hold in her life. She had a good relationship with her mother. She was protective of her mother still and would never let her die within her. She was fine with that. And her nervous breakdown in front of her second-grade class? She was still sore about it but as the days wore on, she was feeling a little better. The better she performed at Rising Sun the more she could forgive herself. She didn't need a therapist. She only needed herself.

"You're under stress."

"Really? What makes you think that? I'm happy." Nice, little weak Meghan of the past had left the building. It would take her father and aunt some time to see how strong, committed, and competent she was. Everyone would.

"Something's different about you." Aunt Susan shrugged. "We just want to make sure you're okay."

"We?"

"Your father. We are concerned."

"Concerned." Meghan lost her appetite for the cookies.

"Maybe concerned is not the right word. We just want to know..."

"That I'm doing fine. I'm doing what I want to do and I resent you for trying to make something negative of it." Meghan wanted to scream. She had never been this annoyed at her aunt before. But Meghan remembered what she looked like ten minutes ago in the powder room mirror. Whatever caused her to look like that was concerning.

“I know I look like hell. Normally I look better. It’s just today. I had a bad day. Just like any other human being.” Meghan put her face in her hands and let the tears fall to her own embarrassment.

Aunt Susan gave Meghan another long hug that Meghan needed more than anything else.

CHAPTER 19

“So...” Meghan said to the boys as she was struggling to introduce their new assignment in class. It wasn’t easy like the one where they had to describe their meals. The assignment was deeper and important.

She looked at each of their faces: Petey, Skinny, Red, and Daequan.

“Why you keep looking at us crazy?” Skinny said, not joking this time.

Meghan smiled stiffly. “I have a new assignment that I think you’re ready for now.”

“How do you know that?” Petey said.

“I’m guessing, Petey. No, I *know* you’re ready. You guys have done some great work so far. It’s time to celebrate our progress,” Meghan said, cheerfully.

“What, with more shit to do?” Meghan could hardly believe Daequan was being so rude. He was having a tough

day. At least one of the boys had a tough day in each class. It could be anything from a bad court appearance, a bad memory that had been triggered, or a parent who didn't show up for visitation. Meghan had learned not to take it personally. She was proud about that because that meant she was healing from Brewster. At Brewster, she had taken everything personally.

On the heels of the staff meeting about Love Up, Meghan had been trying to come up with an assignment that had some real weight. Writing about food wasn't satisfying enough. She wanted them to write about something meaningful, even profound.

She wanted to know the boys' stories. She wanted to know who they were as individuals sentenced to Rising Sun. Technically, she wasn't supposed to ask about their convictions. Now, standing before them, she wasn't totally comfortable with her bright idea of an assignment that did just that: ask about their convictions. It could backfire, but she decided to forge ahead. This was important for their healing.

"So..." Meghan said again. She just came out with it: "We are going to tell our stories." Her eyes darted to the YAs. They were in a juicy, animated conversation at the corner table.

"What do you mean, tell our stories?" Skinny asked. Meghan hadn't heard him this subdued. She liked it but she knew it was only temporary. He could have been subdued from psych meds. YA Goode had told Meghan that most of the boys at Rising Sun had taken or were currently taking psych meds. Some more than others. Some for a short while, some forever.

"When I say we're going to tell our stories, I mean, we are going to answer the question: Who are you? Where do you come from? What landed you here?"

Confused faces all around. Arms crossed.

"We ain't gotta tell you that." Skinny had been here too many times to know the rules inside out.

"You're right. You can share as much as you want. Whatever you feel comfortable with." Meghan tried to sound nonchalant. But she wasn't. She wanted to know *everything*.

"Why we got to do this?" Skinny said.

"You don't have to do anything." Meghan was hoping that Daequan would back her up, but he said nothing. This wasn't a good idea. She didn't have another assignment. She didn't think that they would behave like this. She imagined them being somewhat open and trusting enough to complete the assignment. She thought she'd earned that by now.

"You all know about Love Up. You wrote about it, remember? My interpretation of Love Up is to know more about ourselves. How can we be loved if we don't know who we are?"

"We know," Petey said. "We know what happened to us." He looked like he'd lost a little weight. His orange T-shirt sagged.

"Or," Red said, "what we did to other people."

Meghan appreciated his comment. She thought about Brewster again. She looked forward to the day she had the ability to stop thinking about Brewster! She'd always seen

herself as a victim. Everything had happened to her. Clearly and honestly, now she could see herself as a reluctant predator. She didn't want to hurt people but she did. She'd hurt Markell, perhaps beyond repair. And if she hadn't done so by her own hand, she couldn't stop others from traumatizing him.

"Yes, Red, yes, excellent point." Red gave a contagious toothy smile.

Daequan asked to use the bathroom. She waited for his return to finish delivering the assignment. She did a quick Round Robin asking how everyone was feeling now on a scale of one to ten. Skinny, three. Red, five. Petey, four. Daequan's return seemed forever but she waited because it was such a small class and she didn't want to repeat anything. When he came back, she got straight to the point. She felt on the verge of losing the boys.

"So," she said for a third time. "Here's what we're going to do: you're going to tell your story. I'm going to ask you questions. What's a word for this process?"

"Interview," Daequan said, sounding bored.

"Exactly. Great, Daequan, I'm going to take notes during our interview and from there we will craft your story."

"What does that mean, craft your story?" Petey said.

"Shape, create how we want to tell your story. See, with stories you always have choices. You'll need to decide what to keep and what to throw away or, maybe *bench* is a better word than throwaway. Bench what you don't want. Nothing is final."

"Why we got to do this?" Daequan said with an edge.

"I explained this. Our stories are critical. We're using our stories to be better understood. How many times in your life has someone determined your story and decided what to think about you and what to do with you before you had a chance to speak?"

They all nodded. Red, vigorously. "In court, everybody think you just the same as all the other niggas."

"Yeah," Daequan piped in. "Just walkin' down the street, you a criminal already. Before or after anything pops off, you a criminal. It just makes you want to go 'head and be a criminal since that's all they see you as."

Meghan could see the tension between his eyes. She got it now, this assignment was sensitive, potentially explosive. Telling their stories was a risk, for them and for her.

"Right, Daequan, you understand. It's time for you to tell your own story. It will require trust, which I hope to have built with you. I hope you know that I'm here to support you. I care about you, each of you, and want to know your story."

No one stirred at the mention of trust, no confirmation on the trust earned. Why would they trust her? But she was still going to forge on. She was committed now. There was no taking the assignment back, lest she wanted to look incompetent and weak. That was not an option for her.

"Telling your story will take courage. You may say things you've never said before, but they are true. Telling the truth we never tell is courageous. We don't want to exaggerate or leave out the most important parts."

“What we gonna do with our stories?” Red asked. At closer look Meghan thought he gained a little weight. His freckled cheeks looked pudgier than she remembered.

“I’m not sure,” Meghan lied. She was planning to have them present their stories as part of the student showcase coming up in a few weeks. She didn’t want them to become nervous and have that get in the way of them telling their honest stories (though she would do a considerable amount of editing to make it palatable to the audience, especially with Mrs. Gibbs in mind.) Meghan knew that the timeline wasn’t the best. They wouldn’t have much time so she needed to get the interviews completed this week so that the writing and crafting their stories could become the focus. She wasn’t looking for a memoir. She just wanted to make them a little more reflective, to feel relief and satisfaction because of it.

“So, are we ready?” Meghan clapped her hands.

The boys said nothing, but she could tell by their eyes that they were willing to try, but not completely.

“Who wants to go first?”

Nobody said anything at first, until Skinny cautiously volunteered. Meghan didn’t want to start with him. If things didn’t go well, he would poison the well for everyone else and the assignment would fail. But what choice did she have? No one else raised a hand.

Meghan grimaced. “Okay, Skinny, we’ll start with you. We’ll sit by the window for a little privacy.”

“What the rest of us supposed to do?” Red asked.

"I brought a short interview with Rihanna in Vogue magazine that I want you to read so that you get a feel of an interview. Once you read that you are free to relax. Unless you're next."

The boys talked about how fine Rihanna was while Meghan called for YA Goode. Meghan asked, "Is it okay if some of the boys watch TV or play cards or whatever for the last part of class. I'm working with the boys one on one."

YA Goode hitched up her tight pants and came over. "What now?"

Meghan explained again. YA Goode cocked her head as if considering the pros and the cons of such a simple request. "I guess." She asked YA BJ to wheel in the TV and VCR.

Meghan and Skinny dragged their chairs next to the window, facing each other. Looking out the windows, Meghan and Skinny stared at the overcast sky but didn't comment on it.

Skinny's lips were badly chapped, and his arms were an inch or two too long. Meghan felt bad for him. She hated that she felt bad for him, but she couldn't shake how she felt. Being so close to him, he felt precious, vulnerable as if he wanted to be seen and not seen at once. He seemed keenly aware of what made him unattractive and unaware of what was attractive about himself. *That* was what made Meghan feel sorry for him. She saw that he was trapped in his body, a body that few would consider beautiful. But just looking at him now, he was beautiful somehow. He wasn't the monster that Meghan pegged him to be the day he stole her pencil.

Meghan felt his eyes catching tentative looks at her.

“Are you ready, Skinny?” She picked up her legal pad and wrote: *Interview: Skinny*

“I guess, whatever.”

She pushed on, not sure the interview would be good.
“What’s your last name?”

“What’s it to you?” Skinny crossed his arms.

“Believe it or not, your last name is a part of your story.”

“I don’t see how.”

“It’s usually attached to your father and his bloodline.”

“I don’t know that nigga.”

“I see. Let’s start with what you want to tell me.”

“I don’t want to tell you nothin’. I don’t see why we gotta do this.”

“You don’t have to.” Meghan was frustrated. *Why did he volunteer then?*

“I bet you just want to know what I did.”

“I won’t lie, I’m curious. But only because it’s part of your story.”

“Nobody give a fuck about my story. And you won’t either. You already judged me. That day when I had the pencil. I wasn’t gonna hurt nobody.” With every word, he pulled it back into his throat, for protection.

Meghan refrained from asking him anything else about his name. Just thinking about it began to stir up anxiety for Skinny. They sat in silence for a moment. She rested

against the back of her seat. She was about to call it quits but decided to try one more time. "Why haven't you left this interview yet?"

He waved her off. "Look, I don't know what the hell you talkin' 'bout."

"Fine. But why don't you just leave?"

"I don't know. I do have somethin' I want to say."

Meghan sat up with the legal pad neatly on her lap. She didn't want to start writing right away. That might scare him away.

"Don't nobody know what really happened. I hate every day that nobody knows. Everybody think I'm a pervert or some shit, but I ain't." He snuck a look at Meghan before looking down at his shoe. "Why ain't you sayin' nothin'? That shit is creepy, Ms. Meghan."

"What do you want me to say? I'm listening. I'm not here to scold you. I just want to listen."

"That girl came onto me. I swear."

Meghan was confused but relieved that the story was beginning to come out.

"I'm fifteen. She said she was fifteen, too. But she was really twelve. I don't like how don't nobody believe that I didn't mean to hurt her. She wanted it. So that's what we did."

Meghan wrote nothing. She was concerned. She knew there was another side to the story that wasn't good, that was so bad that it landed him here. He couldn't have been fully innocent. She was trying hard to withhold her judgment. That would be the trick for her while

conducting these interviews: to withhold her judgment. They were all likely to portray innocence. Just like she did at Brewster. Everyone, including herself, had justification of their role in harming someone else or something else.

“Could you tell me more about yourself? What's your home life like?”

“Ain't nothin' like yours, I bet. It's fuckin' crazy. People in and out of the house some days. On others it's quiet and still. It just be me and my little brother. My mom be out, doing her thing.” He swirled his finger as if to say this mother was off engaging in negative, frivolous behavior. “Me and my baby brother George just be left on our own. Those were the days with no food. I hustled enough to get some McDonald's sometimes, but I ain't never wanted to be deep in the drug game. I don't care about that shit. You know why?”

Meghan wasn't prepared for a question. She shook her head.

“Because that was what landed me in here the first two times. That shit ain't worth it. Plus, I knew I wasn't very good at it. Couldn't be if I kept getting caught.” He laughed. Meghan laughed, thankful for the levity.

Skinny's smile faded. Eyes down to his shoe again. “I'm in here for rape.”

Meghan felt heat work its way up and down her body. The word rape burned as it always did with Meghan. She now thought this assignment was a bad idea for her. Rape was an unforgivable crime. Rapists were the lowliest of human beings.

"It wasn't rape, Ms. Meghan. It was mutual consent," he said as if he had researched the perfect name for his situation, a name his public defender may have used on his behalf in court. "On one of those quiet days she would come over. I never asked her to. But she would. I didn't mind her there at first. Felt a little bad for her anyway. She was a new foster kid, my grandmama told me. Her situation was worse than mine and George's, my grandmama told me. I ain't know nothin' else about her."

"Did you like her?" Meghan wished this girl had a name.

"Not really, not at first." He shifted in his seat. "I never liked her. She was just a girl around. She wasn't talkin' about nothin'. But one day, she told me she liked me. It made sense to me. Why the hell else does she come by every time she got a chance? We got together real soon after that. Now, I liked *that*. We did *that* a lot. Sometimes twice in a day. Then one day, the police come after me, and put me in handcuffs. I didn't understand it. I tried to fight back but you cain't fight against the police, not with handcuffs on. My mama wasn't there, nobody was except for George who was screamin' and cryin'. That's the end of my story. All the rest is court and here."

Meghan had no words. She believed him. What if the accused rapist didn't actually rape? She'd never thought of that before. A twelve-year-old girl who said she was fifteen. A fifteen-year-old boy who was horny like every other fifteen-year-old boy. Meghan didn't know how to think about this. Was Skinny really a rapist? If she had been fifteen, would he have been a rapist? Was it *how* he had sex with her? Did he abuse her?

“What happened to the girl?” Meghan said, softly.

He shrugged. She went to a new foster home. My grandmama told me that she pregnant.”

“By you?”

“Yeah, by me. So she say. She was fuckin’ other dudes.” Skinny frowned. It made him look old.

“Is she going to keep the baby?” Meghan asked, carefully.

“Yeah, she is.”

“That’s your child,” Meghan said.

“I don’t see it that way.”

“How else might you see it?”

“I ain’t ask for that baby. I ain’t ask for none of this. That bitch got me locked away.”

“Do you think she did it on purpose?” Meghan imagined the foster care system played a role in the outcome of this situation. They found out she was having sex and rape was how the authorities saw the situation.

“I don’t give a shit. It is what it is now. I’m locked away until I’m eighteen. There ain’t no way I can be nobody’s daddy.”

“But does your sentence change the fact that you will be the father?”

“Ms. Meghan. You a nice woman. But you don’t understand shit.”

That stung, but he had a point.

“My life is fucked up now. It was fucked up before but at least I could breathe. This place is suffocatin’.”

“Rising Sun seems to be a nice place. It’s better than jail, right?”

“But that don’t mean nothin’. I ain’t got George. In fact, they took him away and put him in the system.”

“What about your grandmother?”

“Ms. Meghan, you diggin’ now. That’s all the story I want to say.”

“Sorry. How do you feel after telling me your story?” Meghan took a cleansing breath.

“This ain’t help me one bit. But I ain’t mad at you no more.”

“Good.”

“So, what you gonna write on those papers?” He pointed to her legal pad.

“I’ll keep it simple.” She began writing and reading aloud as she wrote. “Skinny. Here unfairly. Convicted on a rape charge but his story is not one of rape.”

He stopped her. “It is *not* rape, period! Fuck all the fancy words you sayin’. I ain’t rape nobody!”

Meghan crossed those out and put: *Did not rape anyone*. She strained to write those words as well as: a twelve-year-old girl is carrying his child.

“Write down that Skinny ain’t the father of no baby. She a lie.”

Meghan wrote those exact words and added:

--George, little brother. "How old is George?"

"He nine now. That's my little dude." Skinny smiled fondly.

--little brother nine.

--home sometimes quiet sometimes not.

"Who were all those people coming in and out?"

"Niggas. My mama pretty. She got niggas and she like to party."

"Did you like anyone who came by often?"

"None of that matter, who I like." He sounded offended and frustrated by Meghan's questioning.

"Everything matters," she said.

"I'll show you a courtroom where nothing matters. Even your own lawyer don't listen."

"Fair enough."

"Well, there was this dude named Harry. He treated my mother fine, even though everybody knew he had lots of women. That was the thing I liked about him, even though my mama was one of the women he had and it made her feel bad. He was real good lookin', and dressed nice. But he was just the same as everybody else comin' to get high, tellin' my mother to fuck this nigga and that."

Meghan wanted to wrap up the conversation because she felt uncomfortable knowing this level of detail. Skinny's story made her feel nauseous. The interview ran over the ten minutes she hoped the interview would last. Plus, even though the conversation was dynamic, it wasn't quite an interview she wanted. None of the content could be used for the showcase. Skinny couldn't get on stage debating if he was a rapist or not.

Meghan looked around at the other boys. Daequan had fallen asleep as "Rain Man" was playing. Petey and Red were in an argument over a card game and YA BJ was trying to calm them down by threatening them time in their dorms.

"Thank you, Skinny. This was a good thing, sharing your story."

"It was alright."

He and Meghan walked to the circle. She called the boys back and quickly ended class, not saying anything about the interview. Skinny didn't either. It was their little secret. Meghan felt a headache coming on as if to purge her brain of information overload.

Skinny had a bounce about him. He didn't say anything negative as Meghan wrapped up class.

"See you next time," he called to Meghan as she waited for the door to drag open. Hearing the door open in that sad way, she understood how Skinny could feel suffocated in a place like this. Those boys listened to dozens of doors drag open and close every day with a loud clang. Closing the doors to their dorms while in it provoked the worst feelings of suffocation, even horror.

Meghan waved to Skinny and said, “Yes, see you next time, Skinny.” Meghan heard the clang behind her as she left, only feeling free as she walked outside to the parking lot, hit by an unusually cool and pleasant July breeze.

CHAPTER 20

Next class, Meghan had a new student, Tyrik. How on earth was she going to get him caught up in time for the showcase? She smiled at him, hopefully projecting calm, cool, and collectedness. “Welcome,” she said, staring at the muscle-bound, lean, caramel-colored boy. He could either behave well or become another terror, like Skinny. She’d have to wait and see.

Meghan gave a quick recap of the assignment so that Tyrik would have a sense of what was going on, then went straight into the interviews. For the first ten minutes, she interviewed Petey about his botched armed robbery. Petey cried quietly but powerfully as he remembered the face of the old Hispanic woman he robbed at gunpoint as she was coming from an ATM. He stole two five-dollar bills.

Then for the next fifteen minutes Red told her how he got caught stealing cars.

Hearing their stories were harder than Meghan thought. They did poison her opinion of them, but she had to keep reminding herself that this was why she was here. She chose this job because she wanted to help boys like this.

The stories had left her drained. She was tired and unsure if she should start her interview with Daequan. She would wait until she gained a little of Tyrik's trust before interviewing him but, of course, that would throw off her production schedule for the showcase. She still didn't have any appropriate material but she was confident that she could mold their stories to acceptability.

Seated near the window, she turned to Daequan and examined him. He was gorgeous with all that hair hoisted on his head. He was somehow nonchalant yet astute. He could be mistaken for disinterested, especially the way he turned his eyes away from the conversation, but Meghan knew he was engaged. Honestly, of all the boys she was most interested in his life. He had been the most eloquent in class. He really seemed to enjoy learning how words could illuminate and communicate. Based on his thoughtfulness in class, he seemed most ready to complete this assignment.

Meghan looked at the clock high on the wall. She still had fifteen minutes. She decided to do the interview with Daequan. She preferred to complete the interviews today, apart from Tyrik, so that next class they could begin the writing process.

Tyrik turned around in his chair and made kissing sounds at Meghan and Daequan. "Those two love birds. Don't come back pregnant, Ms. Meghan."

Meghan tensed. Tyrik was going to be a problem.

Meghan hoped YA BJ would say something to Tyrik, but he had been disciplining Skinny for something else. YA Goode was out today and her replacement was blending into the walls. He was the definition of a disengaged employee.

Meghan looked at Daequan who was already seated, his body like a human slide on the chair.

“Don’t worry about that dude, Ms. Meghan. I could beat the shit out of him if you want me to.” He stared at Tyrik who was still laughing. Thankfully, the other boys didn’t find anything funny.

“He ain’t worth it, Ms. Meghan. He’s a fool.” Daequan started twirling the same lock he twirled so many times before.

“No, please don’t beat him up. I appreciate the offer though.”

“Don’t worry, Ms. Meghan. I got your back.” His broad smile comforted Meghan. Every time he smiled, she couldn’t help but smile.

“Thank you, Daequan. Are you ready?” She looked in his hypnotic, brown eyes. She was attracted to him, though, she hated, hated, hated that she was. It was inappropriate, she knew, but that fact didn’t change her visceral attraction to such an anatomically beautiful human being.

She wanted a way into his life, his heart. She created the assignment for him, if she were honest. But now looking at him as he stared out the window looking at the drizzle, Meghan felt this was an awful idea. It felt invasive, selfish,

and dishonest. But Meghan pressed forward. She'd started and she wasn't going to quit.

"Let's begin, Daequan. I want to hear your story."

His mood shifted. He became more serious. She wondered if he was going to tell her to fuck off. Meghan felt nervous and guilty.

She picked up her legal pad and pen and scribbled his name at the top. "There's so much to learn when telling our stories. But I want us to focus on introspection..."

"Introduct--what's that, Ms. Meghan?" Daequan asked.

"Introspection. It's you telling your story and really examining your role within your story. What were you thinking, what were you feeling at any important moment?"

He pondered, "Introspection, right?"

Meghan nodded.

"Why?" he asked.

"'Why' is a fair question. Introspection is meant to help."

"Me?"

"Yes, help you."

He exhaled. "I'll give it a try."

Meghan's legal pad nearly slipped off her lap.

"How old are you, Ms. Meghan?"

"What, huh? Me?"

“Yes, you, Ms. Meghan.” Daequan shifted towards her.

Meghan’s instinct was to resist the question. It was inappropriate but the answer rolled from her mouth. “Twenty-four.”

“That’s good, twenty-four.”

“Why?” She asked. “What does my age have to do with this?”

He shrugged. “I just wanted to know,” he said, playfully. “You’re young.”

“Look, I’ll do this if you do your introperfect.” He laughed at himself. “Tell me the name of that long ass word again, Ms. Meghan.”

Meghan grinned. “In-tro-spec-tion.”

“Yeah, that word.”

“Introperfect might definitely be a word.” Meghan laughed.

“What’re you going to do with all these stories again?”

“We will have a showcase.” Her heart sped up, thinking of Mrs. Gibbs being in the audience wrinkling her nose at Meghan’s portion of the show. She hadn’t told Mrs. Gibbs about her plan. Meghan knew she wouldn’t approve.

“Ms. Meghan, you go first.”

“What?”

“Show me how this goes, Ms. Meghan.”

He gently took her pad and pen. As his teacher, she shouldn’t have let him do that.

“Will you be taking notes?” Meghan said, nervously. If she asked for his vulnerability, she had to be vulnerable with him. She had to tell her story.

Daequan smiled, “No, I ain’t takin’ no notes. You know I can’t keep up.” They both chuckled even though as his teacher, she shouldn’t have laughed. “I do like holdin’ the paper and the pen though.”

“I want you to pinky swear you will keep my story secret,” Meghan said.

“Pinky swear? That’s some girl shit.”

Meghan put her pinky up. “Let’s do some girl shit.”

He sat forward, pinky in the air. Their pinkies intertwined. “Say pinky swear,” Meghan instructed.

He dropped his head and smiled, “Man, this is fucked up, but pinky swear.”

They settled back into their chairs.

“I don’t know where to begin.” Meghan looked at him for direction.

He shrugged. “Start anywhere.”

She cleared her throat. “Well, I was born here in a suburb of DC. I had two parents who loved each other and loved me. I don’t know what else to say about my childhood. It was good. Wish I’d had more friends, though.”

“Why you ain’t have no friends?”

“Well... I had friends. But I was never the popular girl. I’m not really sure why.”

"Were you too pretty?"

Meghan snorted. "I don't think so. I'm not really sure."

"Yeah, you were too pretty, Ms. Meghan. Bitches was jealous."

"Daequan, let's keep the cursing to a minimum."

"Fine. I'll try."

"Thank you. I appreciate you saying that I am pretty." Meghan hadn't felt pretty in a while. It meant something coming from him. She wasn't sure what that something was.

"I was lucky until I was unlucky. Until my mother died." Meghan stopped, unsure if she should continue. She felt as soft as a warm boiled egg. She started to regret this stupid assignment again.

Meghan could feel Daequan staring at her.

"Look, Daequan, I don't really have much more to offer. You already heard me speak about my mother before. She died of breast cancer." Meghan sighed. Daequan kept staring. "So, after that, I finished college and decided to teach in Philadelphia."

"Why?" Daequan asked.

"Why do you ask why?"

"Cause you went to teach poor kids."

"What's wrong with that?" Meghan asked.

"Man, I hope you ain't like every other white person that comes to help us." He air-quoted *help*.

"Wait, what do you mean?"

“Don’t tell me that you don’t know how ya’ll do?”

“I’m not the kind of white person who does that.” Her face stiffened in disappointment that Daequan would think of her that way. He should’ve seen her good intentions. Hadn’t he seen her commitment to the program, the boys, to him? She was reminded of thorny Mrs. Gibbs. He was saying the same thing as she was. Mrs. Gibbs was right to question her loyalty and ability when there had been so many other white people who let the boys down.

“Y’all come with your great plans for us. And when you don’t get what you want out of us then you leave. You go back to being a regular white person who don’t give a damn about us. You don’t see us no more.”

Meghan understood what he was saying. She thought about TEACH!-ers. Only a few were still in the classroom. Most had used the program as a launching pad. A resume starter. So many in her program had already gone into law, business, politics, and educational leadership.

“You might be different though. You have a good heart, I think. I hope so anyway.” He stared at the legal pad, curling the edge of the paper with his fingers.

“I only want to help you and the other boys succeed.”

“We’ll see. Finish telling me your story, Ms. Meghan.”

Meghan wished Daequan wouldn’t call her Ms. She didn’t want to be a teacher now. Later, but not now. They were two human beings.

“I was pretty bad at teaching, it turns out,” she said on the tail of nervous laughter.

“Be specific, Ms. Meghan,” Daequan found her eyes. He was being clever, using the word Meghan taught him: *specific*.

“Right, I owe you specificity.”

“Don’t get all fancy changing up words and shit, Ms. Meghan.” Laughing together made the moment lighter. They needed that. Turns out she had been holding her breath.

“You want me to tell you something specific that I failed at?”

Daequan nodded.

She told him about Markell. How she pushed him into special education. As she ended the story her eyes were wet.

“Damn,” Daequan said.

Meghan then told him the story of the girl who she suspected was being molested and how she told the principal, and nothing was done about it.

“That’s fucked up.”

“You know what I did on the last day I taught?”

Daequan looked her in the eyes.

“I screamed. I couldn’t stop screaming. I was reading a book to my second graders, *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, about a family going through a divorce. My kids were glued to every word. Even the kid who caused trouble every day, listened when I read. Jacoby, who had a short attention span, hung onto every word of that book. Every one of my students loved it when I read to them. There was so little I could do for any of these kids. I knew that. So, I read to

them a lot. And..." Meghan paused to wipe her tears. "One day I-I-I just snapped."

They sat in silence as Meghan wiped away her tears with her arm.

"Then what happened, Ms. Meghan?"

"Why do you keep calling me Ms. Meghan?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I really like you. I like your name. I like the way you look. You're very pretty. I like you. But Ms. Meghan is what you told us to call you, remember?"

"Right." Nothing productive could come from Daequan's words: *I like you. You're pretty. I like your name.* Meghan was overwhelmed and nervous that something inappropriate was going to happen.

But no, no, no, her student couldn't have a crush on her. And worse yet, she couldn't have a crush on her student.

Meghan looked at him, trying her best not to show emotion. "Thank you, Daequan. That is kind of you."

He moved toward her. "You don't feel the same?"

"I-I-I...I don't know, Daequan. I like you as my student." Meghan was shaking and her vagina was throbbing. *I can't believe this is happening!*

"It's you I'm thinking about all day, especially when I'm lonely in my room," he said, looking Meghan up and down. "You're fine. You're a fine lady."

Meghan smiled at the thought of her being in his fantasies.

“Daequan, we have to set our feelings aside.” *Our* feelings? That came out of her mouth. “I mean, let’s get back on topic. Your story. Introspection.” She quickly wiped away the last of her drying tears and straightened. “Can I have my pen and pad back?” She put out her hand.

He pulled them to his chest. “No, Ms. Meghan. Only if you finish your story.”

“What more to say about my story? I’ve told it all.”

“How did you snap? I can’t imagine you ever snapping. You’re so nice.”

“What?”

“Snap. How did you snap?” He wasn’t going to stop until Meghan answered. He understood specificity like Meghan did and was committed to pulling it out of her.

“Well, I dropped to the floor and covered my face. I couldn’t look at my kids. I didn’t hear their chairs moving, so I knew they were staring at me, horrified, afraid. I was screaming and rocking back and forth. I couldn’t stop screaming, I just couldn’t. I’ve never been that out of control before in my entire life. Nothing seemed to have triggered it, which is the craziest part. I still have no idea why and how that happened. I was just reading...and boom! I have no idea how long I was screaming until I started sobbing, telling them I was so sorry. Some teachers rushed in and knelt next to me, calling my name repeatedly, rubbing my jerky shoulders, asking me to stop, but I couldn’t stop.”

As Meghan told Daequan her story, she had no tears left in her.

“Then what happened?”

“Another teacher came in and funneled my kids away as if they’d seen something shameful. And it *was* shameful. A teacher who couldn’t teach. That is a shame. I still couldn’t look and would never look at my students again. I was so horrified at myself. Once the kids left, I stopped sobbing, but I was still rocking back and forth like a mental patient. Can you believe that? I still can’t believe it.” Meghan closed her eyes and shook her head like a dog trying to get rid of fleas. For a moment, she lost awareness of where she was. Her mind took herself back to herself on the dirty linoleum tiles. She hated that she ever had that experience. She thought she was going crazy and would never return to normal. The scary part was knowing that it could happen again. She didn’t know how to prevent it. She only knew how to run from it.

“How did it end, Ms. Meghan?”

“I’m not so sure it ended. It still stings. But how about this as an ending: I left. I took only my purse and shades and bolted to the parking lot. I drove home and went to sleep for twelve hours.”

“Damn, Ms. Meghan. Damn.”

Meghan’s face pulsed with heat. “I bet I look terrible now.”

“Nah... You’re still the prettiest woman in the world.”

Meghan mustered a laugh. She wondered if she should take a nap in her car before she drove home, she was so tired.

“You red though, your nose is red for sure.”

Meghan heard the master door drag open. It was Mrs. Gibbs, Mr. Mitchell and the deputy director with blue hair whose name Meghan couldn't remember.

Meghan grabbed her pad and pencil from Daequan's lap.

YA BJ and YA Goode rushed to greet them.

"Isn't this Creative Writing?" Mrs. Gibbs said. The trio looked around at the boys in front of the TV and at the table playing cards.

YA BJ said, "It is Creative Writing. We just follow her lead." He pointed to Meghan with a shrug. Meghan felt a punch of betrayal. She didn't want to feel isolated and wrong. YA BJ knew how hard she'd been working and how her class was going well. He could have said something positive instead of shrugging and pointing at her.

"Wait a sec," Meghan said to Daequan. "I'll be back." She walked calmly as she could to the trio, though she wasn't calm. She was shaking. She wouldn't have been surprised if she was fired on the spot for appearing not to have any semblance of a class.

Meghan's hands were balmy, but she still offered it to Mr. Mitchell.

"Tell me, Ms. James, what's going on here in your creative writing class?" She couldn't tell if he was judging her or if he really wanted to know.

"I know it might not seem like learning is happening, but this is the most meaningful learning so far. I'm interviewing each of the boys about their lives. They should be able to tell their stories in their own words. They

should be challenged to find new words and try different approaches to telling their stories.” She sounded stronger than she felt. “I must do this work one on one. We must tell our stories to ourselves first. I’m just a vessel to make sure the story is as clear and full as possible.”

The blue haired lady said, “That’s what Love Up is all about. This is brilliant. These young men have never had this opportunity.”

Mrs. Gibbs interrupted, “But this is a writing class, isn’t it? Is there a writing component?”

Meghan cleared her throat. “I must be honest, Mrs. Gibbs. Their writing skills are very low. It’s hard to make strides on the creative side if writing slows the creative process. The boys enjoy writing but after a certain point they get frustrated because their brains and hearts are moving too quickly for their hands.”

Mrs. Gibbs said nothing. Superintendent Mitchell was nodding.

The trio left Meghan standing there without an endorsement. They went around to each boy to say hello. Each boy tried their best to show respect. Red by lowering his eyes. Skinny by looking them straight in the eye. Petey stood at attention. Tyrik remained seated but shook their hands. Meghan loved to see them have respect and a little fear in them. The boys needed that.

When the trio came to Daequan, he stood and each of them gave him a warm hug. Meghan found the hugs too familiar, like a homecoming. They spoke with him for a few minutes. Meghan couldn’t hear them from where she

was standing. Then they left, with Mr. Mitchell gave her a thumbs up before the door closed behind them.

Meghan was relieved they were gone and that they didn't fire her on the spot. Love Up had saved her. She took a breath and looked at the time. She had ten minutes left to finish the interview with Daequan which hadn't started. They were still on her story.

As Meghan walked back to her chair opposite Daequan, she told herself to let go of all my fear. Stop trying to be a teacher. Stop trying to be anything.

Daequan stretched back into his seat as if all was well.

"How about your story now?" Meghan said.

"Alright. My story. I was born in Southeast. I always lived there. Never left there a day in my life except to come here or court. Got one baby sister. She fifteen. Her name is Velvet."

"I like that name," Meghan said, wondering if Velvet was his sister's real name. Was it the way her skin felt? Was it because she spoke well? Her hair was thick and smooth, maybe?

"Don't know my daddy. Go figure."

"Does that bother you, not knowing your father?" Meghan couldn't imagine never knowing David James.

"Yes and no," he said. "I did meet that nigga once, but I don't remember. My mom said he came around when I was one. He's a bitch ass nigga. At least that's what she say. But she ain't never tell me why. I don't know what happened between them. But a little bit of me blames her. Nothing can be all one person's fault." He laughed.

Meghan was starting to understand this kind of laugh of his—slow, deep, forced, masking discomfort and a relentless pain.

“It don’t bother me ‘cause I don’t know what he suppose to do for me. My mama says he ain’t shit, he couldn’t help me if he tried... She want me to take care of everything. That’s the part I don’t like. I don’t want to be the man of the house. Velvet looks at me as a brother and a daddy, even though she got her own daddy. That nigga come around like once or twice a year. She hate that nigga.” That laugh again. “He got this big ass belly. When he come around he’s always wearing some dusty ass suit, claiming he a church man, a deacon or some shit like that. Whatever. He never say where his church is. He got a whole ‘nother family. I don’t know, but he ain’t shit.” Daequan stared at the basketball hoop outside.

“But that ‘man of the house’ thing irks me because I ain’t no man of nobody house. I’m here, locked up. This ain’t my house. When I’m here, I cain’t do shit for my mom or Velvet if I wanted to. I like it and I don’t. I worry about them every day.”

“Do they come and visit?”

“Sometimes. Not as much as I want. My mom be workin’ and there ain’t no transportation here, so she got to wait until she can afford to take off and for her friend to bring her all the way out here.”

“You know, you don’t have to do this,” Meghan said, noticing how heavy and dark his mood changed. “You don’t have to tell me anything else if you don’t want to.”

"I know, Ms. Meghan. It's not easy to say all this, but I need it. I sit in my room at night. I can't sleep 'cause I got the weight of the world on me." He snatched his gaze from the basketball hoop to Meghan.

She made a mental note to call his story *The Weight of the World*.

"I think 'bout my family. I think about what I did."

"What did you do?" Meghan felt nervous and conflicted about asking.

He squirmed in his seat. "I don't want you to hate me, Ms. Meghan."

"I can handle it."

"I got friends. We all together. We live on the same block in Williams T. Heights."

The name Williams T. Heights sounded vaguely familiar to Meghan, but she couldn't place it. Williams T. Heights rolled around in her mind. It bothered her that she couldn't place it. Her father had mentioned it as part of a plan to redevelop. Maybe it wasn't her father. *Please not him, please*. If her father spoke of Williams T. Heights it wasn't good, at least for the residents. Maybe Williams T. Heights was something she heard in the news. There were lots of killings and crime in Southeast.

"Shit is hard, Ms. Meghan."

She started writing on the legal pad:

Williams T???

Velvet, sister

No father

Meghan stopped writing. She was a little embarrassed, treating Daequan's life as if she were writing one of her DC Weekly articles. She usually wrote about things, not people. Writing about people, she found, required more sensitivity.

"What's hard, Daequan?" She gripped her pen, ready to write, despite her embarrassment.

Daequan scratched the top of his head. "It's hard leavin' the block."

Meghan wrote:

The block? Hard to leave? How?

"You don't know how it is. You a white lady with everybody on your side."

Meghan hated what he said. She wasn't just a white woman. She wasn't a stereotype. Not everyone was on her side.

"I care about you," Meghan said.

He clenched his jaw.

Meghan looked at the vomit-colored floor tiles. The floor needed cleaning.

"Daequan. I'm trying my best. I am here. I'm trying to help."

She wrote:

Daequan's Story

"I killed someone," Daequan said.

Killed someone.

Meghan wrote the words "killed someone" not feeling anything, not processing anything.

"Did you hear me, Ms. Meghan?" Daequan said.

She stopped writing and looked up at him. *You killed someone.* "I heard you, Daequan. You killed someone."

"Ms. Meghan, you okay?"

"Yes."

"I knew I shouldn't have told you." They were quiet and still. Meghan agreed with him. He shouldn't have told her. Nausea was beginning to pour into her body, sloshing around.

"We have crews, not gangs like in other places. We roll in crews. A crew is about where you live, what block. Gangs pick people or people pick gangs. But you can't pick your crew. You were born into it. You get it, Ms. Meghan?"

Meghan nodded. She was sure her face was ghost white.

"I was the leader of my crew," Daequan continued, confidently, like a teacher. Meghan didn't like his

confidence now. She didn't hear remorse in it. He was too matter of fact, too cool like a psychopath.

"A leader is just the nigg--the dude who tells motherfuckers in the crew what to do."

"So why did you do it? Why did you murder another human being?" she said slowly.

"You have to protect the crew at all times otherwise shit gets real ugly, you feel me?"

"I do," Meghan lied. "How long were you the leader of your crew?"

"Since fifteen. When Short, my cousin, got life. He was the leader before me."

Meghan looked at the time. Five minutes left. She should have ended the interview then. Instead, she tried to rush the story. "So, what happened? Why did you murder--" With a jolt in her stomach, she knew she had asked him the wrong question. She remembered in orientation that killing someone was not the same as murdering someone. That distinction had made her awfully uncomfortable then and still did. *A killer was a murderer, and a murderer was a killer.*

She took a deep breath to relieve the tension in her neck. She tried to pull up some quick de-stressing techniques from her old yoga class. She tried square breathing. It usually helped, but not now. She gripped her pen and looked him in the eyes.

He was still beautiful. Just as beautiful as he was before this interview. His eyelashes were straight and full.

"I shot him."

“Who?”

“That nigga. Cue. We called him Cue Ball ‘cause his head was so round. *That* nigga. He was my cousin. He was fourteen. Nigga wanted my place so bad. I felt it, I knew it. He was tryin’ to give orders to my crew on the side, behind my back. I talked to him about it. Lyin’ ass nigga. ‘No, no, Dae, I ain’t tryin’ to do all that. You the king, you the king.’” Daequan’s face soured as he mocked the sound of Cue’s voice. Meghan noticed bitterness in his voice as he spit his words. But no remorse.

“I kept my eye on that little nigga, but what else could I do? I pistol whipped him one time. That was a few months before I had to take him out. When it was over and he was on the ground shakin’ like a bitch, holdin’ his bloody head, cryin’. But I got the feelin’ that pistol-whippin’ him didn’t help at all. I’d pistol-whipped niggas before and that always got them in line. Don’t fuck with me, you know? I’m a serious nigga. But that little bitch disrespected me.

“I got word from a lil’ dude from another crew that Cue was planning to take me out after I pistol-whipped him. I don’t know why he told me, considerin’ he was basically an enemy. I ignored lil’ dude at first. He was turnin’ fourteen. What the fuck did he know? But somethin’ just wasn’t right with Cue. I knew it, I could feel it.”

Daequan took a deep breath then said, “One day, I went to Cue’s grandmama’s house, two apartment buildings down from mine. I kissed her when I came in. She was like a grandmama to me. I can’t count the times she fed me and Velvet when we ain’t have nothin’ to eat.

She always called me Baby Dae Dae.” Daequan half-smiled which gave way to a snarl.

“I asked Cue’s grandmama where he was. I was sweatin’ even though it was January. ‘Where else could he be, Baby Dae Dae?’ she said with that fucked up cough-laugh. She was drinkin’ some iced tea and watching the news like she always did. ‘He playin’ them silly games, I suppose,’ she said to me. I wasn’t sure my sweaty hands could even hold a gun without droppin’ it. I didn’t want to kill *her* grandson. I didn’t want to hurt her.” A panic came over Daequan’s face. There the remorse was, finally.

“Cue didn’t deserve her. I asked her if Cue was by hisself. I’ll never forget, her house smelled like chitlins and pound cake. Her house always smelled like food. I loved the smell of her apartment more than anything else in the world.

“His grandmama asked me if I wanted a plate, like she always do--did. That was the first day I said no. She said, ‘what’s the world coming to, you saying no. That’s a first, Baby Dae.’ She looked at me and laughed. I told her the world was fine. I’d get a plate later. Then I went to Cue’s bedroom. When I saw him, he said, ‘sup nigga’ like he was already king. ‘Sup, nigga’ I said back. I just pulled out the gun and pointed it at his head. His eyes got big and he dropped the controller. Then I shot him. Shot him right in the head.

“I couldn’t believe there could be so much blood in a person. It kept gushin’ and gushin’. I’ll never forget that when I shot him, he flew against the wall. Then he slid to the ground. Eyes real big. I went blank after that. I heard screamin’, the kind that stays in your ears forever. I covered

my ears and fell, crying. Next thing I remember was I was on a stretcher goin' to the hospital. I was so glad for those damn ambulance doors to close. Cue's big sister was bangin' on the door, screamin', 'Why did you do this to my brother? Why?' I heard the siren. It was so loud I thought my head would explode. Then ambulance people were testin' me for things I don't know. They were so nice to me that I almost forgot what I did."

"Why were you in the ambulance?" Meghan asked softly.

Daequan shrugged. "I blacked out. Maybe they wanted to check to see if I was okay. None of it made sense that day and the days after."

Tears fell onto Daequan's khaki pants. He needed a tissue, but Meghan didn't get him one. She didn't want to interrupt the story. He used his palm to wipe his face.

"Daequan," Meghan said, resting her hand on his knee, trying to quell the quaking. "Daequan," she said again.

He was overtaken by his story that he didn't respond to her. "Them ambulance people kept askin' me if I was okay. I don't remember if I said yes or no. They got me to the hospital. Shit was crazy, the ER was crazy. People were everywhere. Some people were in beds in the hallways. I still can't understand that. It smelled nasty, like mop water, funky underarms, and blood. The nurse came to my little spot. It wasn't a room; it was just a place with two curtains on the side. The punk ass cops came and chained my leg to bed as if I was goin' to run away. I wanted to, but I couldn't do it. I heard a nigga cryin' for his mama, sayin' he cain't move. The nurse gave me a pill and then I was

sleep, I don't know for how long. When I opened my eyes, my mama was there with Velvet."

"Daequan," Meghan said, softly, leaning forward. "Daequan." Time was up. Meghan waved to YA BJ to ask for another five minutes. He agreed, yelling to the boys that they had five more minutes of free time of which they were very happy about.

"Daequan," Meghan said. "You're okay. Don't worry, Daequan. You don't have to tell me anymore. You're here now. All you can do is move forward."

"Okay." His head hung low. She squeezed his hand. It was big and warm. She stood up and smoothed her dress. She felt light-headed and nauseous.

This assignment wasn't about Love Up. It was about Meghan's maniacal selfishness. She didn't *need* to know Daequan's story, she just *wanted* to know. With this assignment she devised a way to meet her selfish desire. Aunt Susan was right.

As she was leaving, she looked at Daequan. He was still seated on the interview chair by the window, his head down between his legs, hands on his head. YA BJ was consoling him and rubbing his back.

All Meghan could think was, I really hurt him. I really hurt him.

She didn't mean to, but that's what she did. She hurt him.

PART II: Ms. Meghan

CHAPTER 21

Meghan felt the flu coming on. She didn't have the energy to get out of bed. But she forced herself to. She gingerly walked to the kitchen and poured herself a bowl of Fruit Loops. She should've been eating something like scrambled egg whites and pumpernickel toast. Or fruit and steel cut oatmeal. But she didn't have an appetite or energy for real food. She had chills.

How could I do that to him? Hurt him like that.

Her hand forced her to eat. She always ate cereal from her mother's favorite bowl. "Hip Hip Hooray" was on the bowl.

Another chill started from the top of her spine to her heels. She couldn't eat another bite. Her stomach rolled in rebellion. A headache crept in. She shuffled to the sofa to lay down.

Jenny came out of her bedroom. Meghan was surprised. She didn't see her much during the day. She had been

working day hours at the library full-time and she had been spending lots of time with her boyfriend from the Peace Corps. Jenny seemed a little more upbeat since she got the job and the boyfriend. Meghan suspected that Jenny was planning to leave. She just didn't know when. They'd agreed she would stay for one year. But there was no contract. It's just what David James required when he agreed to let Jenney move in.

They'd eaten dinner together twice since Jenny came. Quick and easy: home cooked spaghetti and takeout burgers. Last week Jenny wrapped up a borrowed library copy of Rachael Ray's *Meals Under Thirty Minutes* and gave it to Meghan as a joke. They laughed long and hard like they used to in college as they flipped through the book picking every meal that would take them well over thirty minutes to cook. It was fun taking down Rachel Ray and exposing her as a fraud. After a few days of them not cooking a single recipe in the book, Meghan saw the book in Jenny's bag, ready to return to the library.

With aching eyes, Meghan looked at Jenny in a tee shirt that said "I Won" standing over her. Jenny had to be mad at something, that Meghan didn't clean the dishes before bed. Jenny was a stickler about things like that. "I'm sorry--" Meghan started.

"Sorry about what? You look like shit. Let's go sit on the balcony. Summer breezes can help. So can the sun." Jenny had this motherly way about herself sometimes. Steady and sure. Knowledgeable even when she didn't know. That's why Meghan had gravitated towards her. She had no mother in college. She needed a mother. Aunt Susan was too far away. Jenny didn't fill the void, but she helped.

Meghan didn't feel like moving an inch, but Jenny was right. She needed the sun and the breeze. Jenny helped her up. Meghan's headache worsened as she inched her way to the balcony.

"Do you feel the difference now?"

"No, I don't. Not yet. My eyes hurt," Meghan whined. Jenny ushered Meghan to a lounge chair more suitable for the beach and not an urban balcony. Meghan loved the lounge chairs that Jenny had brought. It was the only thing that Meghan liked of the things Jenny brought.

The breeze hit Megan like it was forty degrees. The sun blinded her.

"I'm going to make you some lemon tea. Lots of honey." Jenny left for the kitchen.

Meghan strained to look at the hustle bustle below. Working people in search of lunch. Fresh salads and wraps. Smoothies with beets in them, skim milk foam in espressos. Foreign nannies walking the babies of the working women and men. Law firms, Capitol Hill, Think Tanks, posh residential buildings. Meghan was supposed to be there. If her father could drag her down there, he would.

Meghan folded her arms, shivering, wishing she had a down blanket.

Jenny was back with two mugs in her hand and a blanket draped over her shoulder. Good motherly instinct. Meghan could smell both peppermint tea and coffee. "I brought you peppermint for your headache instead of lemon. On second thought, I figured peppermint may be better given your state. Lemon will be next. We can rotate

throughout the day. Here's yours with a little honey." She sat the mug down on a little table between them.

"Thank you," Meghan said as Jenny covered her with the frayed blanket from her room. It smelled like Jenny from college: a hint of tea tree oil. Meghan loved the warmth of the blanket and that her friend was still there. Jenny still cared about her. She dreaded the day Jenny would leave. She would be alone. She didn't want to be alone.

Meghan didn't touch the tea. Jenny sat down and took several sips of coffee from her mug.

"Jenny." Meghan looked at her friend. "What happened to you in Venezuela?" Meghan had no idea what gave her the audacity to ask after these weeks of Jenny never saying.

Jenny put down her steaming coffee. She didn't look surprised or offended as Meghan assumed she would. Jenny looked at the sky for the longest time. "I was robbed at gunpoint."

"What?" Meghan turned to her. "You got robbed? At gunpoint?" Meghan's voice gained strength despite her condition. She was in shock. "I'm sorry. Please tell me what happened?"

"I was by myself, cleaning up the school we were building. I stayed back while everyone left. Thirty minutes or so. The whole time I'd been in the country, I felt safe, despite all the training that said robbery was possible for Americans. I thought it was not for me, the rules didn't apply. For someone else but not for me. Just like how we think here. Every day someone is robbed, raped, or killed

and you never think it will be you. You know it won't be you. That's what it takes to live—to believe that you are safe. If not, we'd never have the courage to get out the bed."

Meghan had forgotten how wise Jenny was. She didn't have eloquence like Jenny. She usually felt a tad jealous when Jenny showed a deeper understanding of life and how it worked, but not now. Jenny's words touched her. Made her think of her boys. She wondered if they woke up with the same sense of security she had. Who was safer? One who knew how violent, and indiscriminating life was? Or one who always felt safe in life? Of course, she'd had a nasty dose of life's medicine when her mother died, but generally she felt she would live a good life until she was eighty. Eighty was a fair age to die.

Meghan watched her tea lose steam. She took a sip just to clear her throat. It hurt to swallow, but she wanted to show Jenny her appreciation for her thoughtfulness and honesty, two qualities she thought Jenny would never grant her again.

"This guy with a stupid mask like you would see in an old movie rushed into the school and put a gun to my head. Just like that. He was at my back strangling me. I could smell his cheap pleather coat and cheap cologne. I can still smell him. If it wasn't me getting robbed, I would have thought it was funny. All I could think was that he was going to rape me. Or kill me."

Meghan didn't want to listen anymore.

"I started yelling as best I could, stop, help, somebody!" He covered my mouth with this free hand. He barely spoke English. 'Be quiet,' he said in my ear with a thick Spanish

accent. He demanded money, which I didn't have. He didn't rape me or anything like that but just the thought that he could've was enough. I kept trying to yell, but his hand was like duct tape over my mouth. He must have done this to unknowing Americans many times."

Meghan reached out for Jenny's limp, clammy hand. "I'm so sorry. I'm so happy you're safe," she said drowsily.

Meghan tried not to doze off. She wanted to be a good friend.

She fell asleep. She awoke surprised that Jenny was still there. She smelled lemon tea and took a long sip. The tart taste fought her headache, which was slowly retreating.

Meghan cleared her groggy throat. "I'm sorry for falling asleep, Jenny."

"That's okay. You're fine," Jenny said. Meghan chose to believe her. For the next hour, Jenny talked more about the Peace Corps and her new boyfriend who brought the biggest smile Meghan had ever witnessed on Jenny's face.

Meghan couldn't have been more appreciative. She wanted to hear about Jenny and her boring yet exciting life. The scratchiness of Meghan's throat and the congestion in her lungs prevented her from talking much. For that she was glad. She didn't want to talk about herself because she would end up talking about Daequan and how she left him, crying with his head between his legs. Jenny would ask how that happened. Meghan didn't want to tell her how.

Meghan might have been tempted to tell Jenny that she had feelings for Daequan. Jenny would've responded like any normal adult would: *No, Meghan, that's wrong! That's*

against the law. He's too vulnerable. Don't take advantage of him. He's young! You don't really know him. He's in a juvenile detention center. Do you hear that? You can't do this, Meghan. You can't.

Meghan hadn't gone to work in a week. Too sick with dizziness, fevers, headaches, and nausea. She considered going to the hospital for fear of dehydration. But she thought going would have given her drama queen status. It was just the flu. She picked up something from the pod. She had taken a double dose of Tylenol PM in the morning and afternoon then conked out until midnight, where she laid stiff with eyes that wouldn't shut. She took more medicine so that she could sleep.

One day, she woke to Eric sitting at her feet in her bedroom. "Oh my god, what?" Meghan jumped upright.

"Hi Princess."

Given her disorientation, him calling her princess felt creepy. Once she came to and could figure that it was Saturday, she grew insecure. She could only think of how unattractive she must have looked to him. She ran her fingers through her snarly hair. She hadn't combed her hair in days. Her mouth was pasty.

"I brought you some water," Eric said. He handed her the glass. Meghan guzzled the whole thing.

"How did you get in here?"

"Jenny let me in."

Meghan felt aches in her ribs and shortness of breath.

"You okay?" Eric said.

"Yep," she said, trying to sound better than she was. She started combing through her hair.

"You look amazing, Meghan."

"Don't say what you don't mean."

"For your condition, of course." He smiled.

She appreciated him trying to lift her spirits. He wasn't creepy anymore. She smacked her lips.

"Want more water?" He reached for her glass before she could say yes and went to the kitchen for more.

Now that Meghan wasn't desperately thirsty as she was, she noticed the welcome cool sensation running down her esophagus as she drank.

"Thank you for the water. Thank you for coming. That was sweet of you." Her voice was raspy. She patted his hand as if he were the sick one.

Eric smiled again with his teeth so perfect they reminded her of dentures.

"You must really like me," Meghan said. Her throat felt like the burn of a match. She needed to stop talking.

"I do like you. I like you very much."

Eric helped Meghan out of the bed and walked her to the sofa. She wasn't sure why, but she suspected that he believed movement was healing. While she was still in pain, it was easier to walk than in the days before. Eric, with his strong arms she leaned on, was the reason.

He found a movie for them to watch, fantasy. Something Meghan would never watch on her own, but now she was open to it. She needed to concentrate on something other than her illness. She ended up sleeping with her head in his lap for most of it. At the end he kissed her forehead, stood up, and gently placed her head on the sofa.

“Your medicine is on the table. Take it when you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” Meghan said. She pulled herself up and her body didn’t ache. She smiled at the relief.

“Anytime,” Eric said. “I’ll text you later.”

“I might be feeling better. Cross your fingers.”

“It’ll run its course and you’ll be the old Meghan you and I both know.”

She reached out for him. He took her hot hand and kissed that, too.

CHAPTER 22

The following day Meghan's father called. She could tell he was upset by how he slowed his voice and over-enunciated. "Meghan, why didn't you call me?"

Meghan felt that was an odd way of starting a conversation with a sick person, chastising her for an assignment that was never assigned.

"Dad, I've been too sick to do anything, really." She had more energy today, but she was still congested. Eric could've possibly been her healer with his gentle touch and attentiveness. After his visit she could move around the apartment easier, though still shaky.

Despite her progress, she felt more congestion creeping up as she talked with her father. She grabbed the last tissue from the box on the coffee table. The floor was littered with used tissues.

"Meghan," her father said.

“How about calling me Princess?” she said.

“Meghan.”

“Yes, father.”

“I’ve been thinking. You need to get a new job.”

“What are you talking about?” Meghan said.

“I’ve just been piecing things together.” He had to have spoken to Aunt Susan. She was the only way he could *piece things together*. “You’re sick, Meghan, and for too long. You’ve never been this sick before. I can only imagine the stress of working in that hell hole.”

“It’s not a hell hole,” Meghan rushed. But it kind of was. All jails were hell holes.

“I know what you’re thinking. Don’t go blaming Aunt Susan. All she said to me was that last time she saw you, you didn’t look so well.”

“Dad, I’m really fine. Me being sick is just me being sick. Nothing more, nothing less.” She was terribly thirsty again. Meghan looked around for a glass of water. None. Just the old empty glass with finger smudges. She would wait until after this call to get new water and a new box of tissues. She expected the call to be short. She didn’t like the way things were headed. Her father was paying little attention to her ailments, instead, just wanting to talk about big picture things like getting a new job and eliminating stress.

“Dad, I’m not feeling well right now.”

“I want you to quit that job.”

“Dad, I’m not a quitter, not now. I quit TEACH! I quit Brewster and all those kids I was supposed to help. I’m not quitting anything else. It’s pretty simple.”

“Watch your tone. I’m still your father. It may not be as simple as you think, Meghan.”

“Call me Princess, please. I don’t like it when you don’t.”

She checked her forehead with the back of her hand, thankful that she wasn’t burning up anymore. There was a sheen of sweat on her arms. “I’m not quitting Rising Sun. I’m not quitting those boys.” *I’m not quitting Daequan.*

For a second, Meghan had thought about quitting Rising Sun after she found out Daequan was a murderer. Meghan didn’t know about murder, but she knew about death. She knew about losing the person you loved the most. Every day had a bit of awful in it, as she woke up from a hazy dream and realized her reality was a lonely life without the person she loved the most.

A part of her hated Daequan for what he’d done.

“Meghan, I had chicken soup delivered to you,” her father said, jolting her from her thoughts. “It should be there in thirty minutes. I’m sorry I couldn’t deliver it myself; things are hectic at work.”

Meghan thought his gesture was sweet and pathetic. He *could* find time to see her. Just like he found time to do everything else.

“Let me guess. You’re getting ready for construction of a new development. You always get out of sorts just before a new project. I never understand why, Dad. I don’t mean

to be rude, but all you do is just press go and then all your minions get going. You don't do a lot of things." Meghan laughed to hurt him. She was being ridiculous. She knew her father worked harder than anyone she knew.

"Are you my daughter? If so, then I'm surprised at you. I work hard. Around the clock, Meghan. You know that."

"Doing what?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"Do you know about a place called Williams T. Heights, Dad?" Usually, she only had little to no interest in her father's work. "Is this your first development across the river? I've never heard you talk about Anacostia."

"I've told you, Meghan. Don't be silly. You weren't listening. We're redoing this neighborhood called Williams T. Heights. It's a very nasty place."

There it was. Williams T. Heights. That was Daequan's neighborhood! She felt upset and nervous about the destruction of his community that was coming. Did the residents know? "Where exactly?"

"Are you familiar with the area?" her father asked.

"That's where Daequan lives."

"Excuse me?"

"Just one of my students."

Her father said nothing. He was scrolling through his phone or distracted by something else or just didn't know how to respond to her newfound interest in his work.

It was a terrible thing that he was going to level Daequan's neighborhood, his home. Meghan was helpless.

Her helping the boys couldn't help this. The impact of this eclipsed her lesson plans.

"Don't you care about the people you will uproot?" she asked, hoping to make her father feel uncomfortable.

"Meghan, sweetie, that's not my job to answer that question and you know that. That's a question for the Mayor, city planners, politicians, advocate groups. They all fight about that question every day. I don't have anything to do with that process. I just come in and build after those decisions are made."

"You have no idea of the reality of poor people. You're crushing the lives of human beings." Meghan managed to sit up. She grabbed a used tissue to wipe her nose.

"Princess, you don't either." His comment cut her. He realized it because he paused. "Those people get vouchers to leave. It's their chance to find something better than the hell they live in. Housing projects don't help anyone or anything. I've had to survey those places and they aren't anywhere anyone would like to live, including the folks relegated to live there."

"You don't know that," Meghan said. But she knew there was some truth to what he was saying. She wondered what was going to happen to Daequan and his family. Velvet. Someone she'd never met but knew was sweet and undeserving of this kind of destruction. What about Cue's grandmother? The only thing that gave Meghan comfort was that there would be some months before the redevelopment began. Meghan trusted that the city would have decent places for the residents to live.

“Meaghan, you should’ve seen what your neighborhood was before I built the new development.”

“Dad, I’m sleepy now.” Meghan’s guilt was settling in. She was a gentrifier. A cookie-cutter privileged white woman. When she moved in she never thought for one moment of the people who lived there first. She just kept living in a world that was made for her. Daequan kept living in a world that was made for him.

“It was rat infested, I’m telling you.” Her father’s voice sounded mildly proud. He’d thought he was making things better.

“Dad! I think I might throw up.” She didn’t have to, but she kind of wanted to. She felt dirty. She would take a shower after this call. She would take some Tylenol PM.

“Okay, Princess. Do you have ginger ale? Or some peppermint tea? That should help.”

“I don’t think I have ginger ale, but I’ll ask Jenny when she gets in.”

“How’s Jenny?” She could tell that he wanted to know how things were going, but knew it wasn’t the right time. “Well, don’t worry about answering now. We will catch up when you feel better. Eat the soup.”

Meghan rested her head back on the sofa. “Yes, Dad, thank you for thinking of me.”

“You are my baby girl. My Princess. Rest well and think about getting a new job. You can always come work for me.”

“No, I don’t want to work for you.”

“Why?”

“I’m not quitting Rising Sun. I have to throw up now.” She said goodbye. She didn’t mean to be so rude to her father. However, she was tired of him trying to control her life, trying to fix her and her situations. She was proud of herself. She hoped she would feel better soon so that she could go back to work with the boys. Instead of the shower, her body demanded another catnap. Twenty minutes later, she was woken up by the arrival of her steaming hot chicken noodle soup from one of her favorite cafes.

CHAPTER 23

One week after she'd fallen sick, Meghan deemed herself well enough to go back to Rising Sun, even though her eyes were still sore and she felt a general weakness throughout her body. Before leaving for work, she looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. Her hair had grown quite a bit over the summer. She was of two minds about the growth. She welcomed the change because it symbolized the progress in her life.

Her other thought was that the state of her hair with its split ends revealed how haggard her life was now. She was working in a volatile, dangerous environment where, at times, she wasn't certain she was making a dent. Her hair signaled how much she was abandoning herself as she gave everything she had to the boys.

She applied her lip gloss and brushed her hair again. She checked herself in the mirror one more time. She was pleased with her green A-line dress with pink and green

flowered flats. She didn't think she could handle heels today.

When Meghan entered Nia Pod, it was tranquil. The boys were spread out doing free time activities: playing cards, watching TV, listening to music, and napping. Meghan could see how free time could get old. The boys greeted her warmly as they took their seats in the class circle they had set up before her arrival.

"We missed you," Petey said. "You okay? Somebody said you died."

"Shut up, nigga," Daequan said. His hair had grown out on the sides and was in bad need of a haircut. Just like Meghan.

She smiled at Petey then Daequan. "It's good to see you, too, gentleman. She looked around the circle. Everyone was still there including Tyrik. Tyrik. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with him. He'd joined the class at an awkward point where he was terribly behind. He didn't seem like the kind of kid who wanted to catch up either.

"I didn't die, thankfully, but I was quite ill. A little rest fixed it. Now, shall we begin?" She was happy that Daequan seemed happy, at least unbothered by their last exchange. He hadn't shut down like she thought he might. He seemed ready to go as ever. "We're going to pause our interview project," Meghan announced.

Skinny stood up. "Why? Why can't we do it?"

Meghan felt nervous, however, she trusted that Skinny wasn't going to do anything crazy anymore. Not since his interview. He'd been seen—that's what he needed. She hadn't judged him, at least not outwardly. That was gold. For both him and her.

"Skin, sit your butt down before you end up locked up in your room permanently!" YA Goode yelled. She was working on a crossword puzzle.

Skinny sat down. He looked back at YA Goode. Her eyes glued to him, as if he was under a spell to follow her orders.

YA Goode had long gold braids held in a high ponytail. She wore long, thick eyelashes that worked for her look. YA BJ was next to her, looking bored. They both chewed and popped bubblegum.

"Skinny, you deserve an answer," Meghan said. "I decided to postpone the interview assignment until after the showcase because we need more time. Your stories were rich, too rich. It will require a long time to edit the stories. We must focus on the showcase."

Red said, "You already got our stories, though. It doesn't have to take all that time to fix 'em up."

"You ain't got my story, Ms. Meghan," Tyrik said, earnestly. She was surprised that he *wanted* to do this assignment. The boys had resisted the assignment at first. They must have convinced him that this was a good thing for him to do.

"That's true, Tyrik. Yet another reason why we should wait." Meghan didn't share the real reason for the cancellation. The project had already worn her out. She

didn't have the energy to follow through. God only knew what Tyrik had done. "So, let me ask the class, do you really want to share your stories, the truthful stories, with your families and staff for the showcase? Doesn't it seem a little...much to talk about your convictions?"

They were still. She looked at Daequan, hoping he would back her up but he said nothing. He pushed back in his seat and folded his arms.

The silence worried Meghan. She wasn't making the right decision. She was proud of herself that she created a project that enthused them. But she could see Mrs. Gibbs's twisted face as she sat through their crime stories. This time she would surely get fired on the spot. "We will get to the project, gentlemen. Please be patient."

Petey cut in, "Ms. Meghan, it just felt good to tell our stories just how we like to tell it. Do you know what it's like to never have anyone believe you? To always have a nigga thinkin' you wrong? Do you?" Petey wanted a real answer. Meghan loved his intelligence and vulnerability but just not now. She didn't want to feel guilty for asking them to do something, having them do it, and then not allowing them to complete it.

Meghan didn't want to answer. "Well, no, not really."

"I bet," Petey said. "You told us to tell our stories. We did, now you sayin' wait so that nobody else will hear it. I'm tired of that shit." Petey never spoke so forcefully before.

"Watch it, Petey," YA Goode said, looking up from her crossword puzzle.

“It’s fine, YA Goode,” Meghan said. “I want to hear what Petey and everyone else has to say.” Which wasn’t totally true. She was ready for them to move on. Meghan refused to tell them that she would lose her job if Daequan got on stage professing to be a murderer or Skinny explaining how he didn’t think he was a rapist.

Meghan felt weak. She should have skipped one more class. She didn’t have enough energy to challenge the boys on the issue. She thought she had had enough energy when she arrived for class, but now she didn’t. She picked up her thermos of orange juice.

When she felt strong enough to talk, Meghan said, “I’m sorry about having to postpone the interview project. But there’s no chance of me changing my mind. Please take three deep breaths and let’s move on. We can’t always have our way.”

“We never do,” Petey said under his breath. Meghan wanted to slap him. She’d never felt that violent before, even with Skinny.

“Come on, bro,” Daequan said. “Let’s get this shit over. Do what she says.” There was a pleading quality in his voice.

Petey nodded at him. “Alright. Sorry, Ms. Meghan.”

Thank you, Daequan! “For the showcase we will answer a simple question: what’s your favorite thing to do?”

Red said, “I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, Ms. Meghan, but that’s some dumb shit—stuff, excuse my French. We gonna be like first graders.”

He was right. But she needed a safe topic, an easy topic. The boys would never understand her reasoning. They wanted to show off all they'd learned. They wanted to share their authentic stories. But there was no time or space for any of that.

Meghan pulled out her laminated clip art with the question: *what's your favorite thing to do?* with a soccer ball, a music note, a horse, and a pen.

"What that horse 'posed to mean?" Red asked, squinting at the image.

"Horseback riding you, dumb dumb," Daequan said, sitting wide legged on his metal folding chair, one finger poking through his messy bun at the of his head, itching a spot.

"How I'm 'posed to know? Ain't nobody I know includin' you ever rode no horse before, man," Red said.

Daequan nodded, "You right. That shit ain't a possibility."

"The pictures on this card are not necessarily possibilities; they're just examples. Write down your favorite things," Meghan said, trying not to go down a rabbit hole, which was the easiest thing to do with this crowd.

She passed out paper and pencils and let them write. Tyrik threw the paper and pencil and said, "Fuck this. I don't have no favorite thing to do. I just do shit just 'cause. It ain't 'cause I want to do nothin'."

This group never ceased to amaze Meghan. The simplest question could become complicated within an

instant. She never thought that a person could *not* have a favorite thing to do.

YA BJ gently came behind Tyrik and put his hands on his shoulders.

“Don’t fucking touch me, bro!” Tyrik yelled.

YA BJ said, rather professionally, “Come on, Tyrik, calm down.” His voice was low and forceful.

“Fuck!” Tyrik jerked YA BJ’s hands from his shoulders.

“Let me talk to you. Let’s go to the corner. You just need to chill.”

“I don’t need to chill for nothin’. No one! This shit is stupid.”

YA BJ waited patiently as did the rest of the class for his outburst to end. “Come with me, Tyrik.”

Meghan detected weariness in YA BJ’s face as he waited for Tyrik to stand up. She didn’t have time for this. Valuable time was being wasted. She needed to gain back her class. “I know you didn’t have much time to write your answers to this question but in the interest of time, is anyone ready to share one of their favorite things to do?”

Daequan raised his hand while Tyrik reluctantly followed YA BJ to a corner to talk.

“Shoot, Daequan,” Meghan said, praying that his answer would set a focused tone for the rest of class.

“I like talkin’ to you. That’s my favorite thing.”

Meghan was surely red. She was so uncomfortable she shrilled.

“Why you laughin’? That interview was good for my soul.”

Meghan wanted to ask how so, considering that when she left, he was inconsolable. “I don’t mean to laugh. I just wasn’t expecting that.”

“Well, it’s true.”

Her face heated up so fast she was worried she might be getting sick again. She took a sip of her orange juice. “Thank you, Daequan, that’s very sweet.”

“Do you feel the same way?” Daequan said just as soon as she finished her sentence.

Skinny’s eyes volleyed between the two of them. “Nigga is you tryin’ to get with your teacher?”

The group laughed. Meghan could tell that despite the laughing they wanted to know if it was true.

Meghan said, “I feel the same way about you and *each one of you* in this class. Teaching is indeed one of my favorite things to do.” And she wasn’t lying. Being with these boys, despite low moments, was one of her favorite things to do. What she wasn’t totally honest about was that she preferred some boys over the other. It wouldn’t do any good to be honest.

She looked at Daequan, his face dejected. She wanted to hug him. She didn’t mean to reject him, and she didn’t mean any harm, but she had no choice standing in front of everyone.

Tyrik slowly came back to his seat, kicking imaginary pebbles. Petey and Red were giving him the side eye as if to show how they were upset that Tyrik had been wasting

their time in a class they liked. Whatever YA BJ had said to him, it was clear that Tyrik wasn't going to be a bother for the rest of this class.

"Anyone else want to share their favorite thing to do?" Meghan cleared her throat.

Skinny, as if answering the call of duty to be the class clown now that Tyrik had vacated the role, said, "Tuggin' my dick."

The class burst into barbaric laughter. Meghan sipped her orange juice and stared at Skinny. Then she looked at YA Goode who was busy writing in one of their logbooks. She was likely recording a head count. YA BJ was leaning on the window looking out at the empty basketball court. Surely, he needed a break after dealing with Tyrik.

"Excuse me, Skinny, that's inappropriate. Please choose something that isn't offensive."

"But it's true. I want to write about my penis. That's the correct term, right?"

"Yes, penis is the correct term, but let's write about something less personal."

"Okay," Skinny said. Meghan was glad Skinny was going to comply without more drama.

"Thank you. Now, since Tyrik has said that he doesn't have a favorite thing to do, let's brainstorm." Meghan reviewed the term brainstorm and began to jot down their ideas. "No idea is a stupid idea in a brainstorm." Meghan took notes as they shouted out:

Sleep (Daequan)

Basketball (all)

Football (Petey and Skinny)

Eat donuts (Tyrik)

Cheetos (all)

Kiss my girlfriend (Red)

Hang with my sister (Daequan)

Be in this class (Daequan)

Talk to Ms. Meghan (Daequan)

Count my money (all)

Drive cars (all)

Work out (Daequan and Skinny)

The commentary for each idea from each boy was quite entertaining, Meghan had to admit.

Nigga you know you can't play basketball. Can you even dribble?

Nigga, you ain't never had no donut before. A Twinky don't count!

You can't get a girl with your little body. She'll break you in two!

You can't even get your dick up so how you gonna please a girl!

What's your girlfriend's name? Yeah, see, that's what I thought, you trying to make up a name. She don't exist!

You ain't never been around no nice car. A bus don't count!

You can't bench press an ant without getting crushed!

"Wow! There is no shortage of things to write about," Meghan said. The exercise was lighthearted and fun and she was grateful for it. The boys were getting along. None of them were trying to derail. They understood the task perfectly and took all the jokes as they were: jokes.

"What are you gonna write about, Ms. Meaghan?" Daequan asked.

She knew Daequan was only trying to improve class or he just wanted to find a way for her to talk more, but she didn't want to engage. She didn't need to. During their interview, he'd wanted her to participate, to share her story and she got caught in his web where he was in control, and she wasn't. But not now. They had a laser sharp mission to get ready for their showcase. *She* wasn't going to perform; *they* were. "Mm, I don't know. I wasn't really planning on writing, Daequan."

"You got to, Ms. Meghan. If we write, you write."

"Yeah, Ms. Meghan," Petey encouraged. "We want to know your favorite thing to do, too." The other boys chimed in.

She was stuck. The only way out was to share. "Sure, I'll write then." She studied the brainstorming list looking for inspiration but found none. "My mother," Meghan spit

out. She didn't want to talk about her mother. "Spending time with my mother is—*was* my favorite thing to do."

"She dead, right, your mama?" Red said so bluntly Meghan wanted to run off and cry.

"You a punk," Daequan said to Red. "You know her mama dead. Stop trying to make her feel bad. She don't do that shit to you?"

Meghan doubted her success as a teacher without Daequan next to her. She appreciated his protectiveness over her. He knew how to make the rest of the boys fall in line like little soldiers.

Her left hand was shaking, from too much Tylenol PM. She'd taken way more than was medically safe. She closed her eyes. She could feel herself losing balance. It felt as if she were under water, which always made her feel alone. The boys were silent. She felt their eyes on her. She opened her eyes surprisingly without falling over and looked at the clock. She wished class was over early.

"You alright, Ms. Meghan?" Daequan said, softly. "Don't let these little dudes get to you."

"Thank you," Meghan said. "I'm still recovering. I'm not feeling the best."

Daequan sat up and looked around at all the boys. "My niggas, Ms. Meghan still sick. Give her some respect. Take it easy on her. Shut your mouths."

Meghan looked at the YAs as Daequan was giving orders like a lieutenant to a ragtag army. They were looking at Daequan taking charge. Their faces were a mix of respect

and relief. For them, here was someone who could do their job better than they could.

Daequan turned to Meghan. "I don't want to be a copycat or make you sad having to think of your dead mama, but I want to write about my mama, too. She alive though." He scratched his head. "I don't know what I want to say about her. I know she loves me."

Meghan became intrigued about Daequan's mother. Surely there was plenty to say about one's mother whether it be good or bad. Her brain raced. She knew he loved his sister Velvet but that was it. Was his mother like her mother was?

"But I might just write about you, Ms. Meghan," Daequan said with a big kid smile.

"Me? Why me?" Why not your mother?

"Cause I just like you. I like your class. I be so happy when you come."

Meghan was hoping he didn't declare his love for her or put her on the spot (more than she already was). She wanted him to stop, but instead she just sat feeling the congestion take control. Within seconds things weren't fun anymore. The mention of her dead mother shocked her system. She was supposed to be the only one who mentioned her mother. The boys' talking about her dead mother without her permission brought on a slight headache. She was embarrassed by having one of her students gush over her in front of everyone. He all but said he had a crush on her. And now her illness was quickly returning. She regretted coming back today. She wasn't ready on any level.

Tyrik said, "You want to write about a white lady? Seems like you like that white lady." Tyrik might as well have said Daequan was pathetic.

Daequan cut his eyes at Tyrik and stared at him.

Meghan knew that look could mean war, but she chose to move on. She couldn't fix anything at that moment, so she chose to move on. She was praying to divert the class towards something positive. She breathed, remembering the wonderful Daequan she knew. He would never ruin his favorite class with his favorite teacher.

"Before we get started writing about our favorite things to do, just a few rules," Meghan said moving on.

"Fuck your rules," Tyrik said.

"Watch your language, please, Tyrik," Meghan said as soothingly as she could, but she was afraid. A match had been lit. It was only a matter of what it would set on fire.

"We don't have to call them *rules*, maybe rules was the wrong choice of words, instead of rules, let's just say things you should remember as you free write, now it's wordier that way, but some of you may choose to use the rules, it's a helpful concept, but you don't have to think of the word *rule* at all, it's not essential, as long as you can complete---

"Nah", Daequan said, still staring at Tyrik. "You said it just right, Ms. Meghan. Rules is rules, nigga, if you don't want to participate, walk, nigga, walk!"

Tyrik stood up so violently his chair fell backward. "What, nigga, what! Where I'm walkin' to? I ain't going nowhere, bitch!" His shoulders squared with rage.

Meghan had no time to think before Daequan stood up, towering over both Meghan and Tyrik. He seemed two feet taller. His fists were clenched. Instinctively, Meghan, wearing her teacher hat, moved in between the boys. The other boys, witnessing the start of something scary, shrieked and yelled, all in favor of Daequan killing Tyrik.

Meghan didn't yell, but she desperately searched for YA Goode and YA BJ, who weren't paying attention. They'd tuned out this noise long ago. Meghan didn't want to yell or scream because she didn't want to escalate the situation.

"Sit down, boys, sit down," she said forcefully. They ignored her.

Daequan spit out: "What the fuck did you say, nigga?"

"Daequan!" Meghan shrieked. "Please sit down! This is not the thing to get upset about. Let's move on." Her legs were shaking as she realized that she might be a casualty of war. She imagined her blood splattered all around.

"You ready, nigga? Since I'm a bitch, be ready!" Daequan roared to Tyrik as he stomped around Meghan, rushing him, punching him right in the nose. Clearly, Daequan had fought many times before. He had the swiftness and efficiency that only a prized MMA fighter would have.

"Oh no!" Meghan screamed as she watched Tyrik's knees buckle bringing his whole body down to the ground like a practiced loser. It was Tyrik's blood that splattered, not Meghan's. While Tyrik brought the fight on himself, Meghan didn't think he deserved this one punch knock out. It was cruel, especially that he wasn't given the chance to swing even one punch.

Meghan froze, the only thing that was moving was her mouth. “Help! Help!”

In a completely unnecessary move, Daequan pinned Tyrik down to the floor with his knee in his chest, so Tyrik was loudly gasping for air.

“Daequan!” Meghan yelled, “Please let him go!”

Daequan was banging the boy’s head on the floor. Tyrik couldn’t talk, yell, scream or breathe.

The rest of the boys were energized by this fight:

“Get that bitch ass nigga!”

“He a bitch!”

“He been needin’ an ass whoopin’!”

“Tear that nigga up, Dae!”

“He had it comin’!”

YA Goode and YA BJ finally appeared, out of breath and panicky. They were doing their best to pull apart the boys. Their best wasn’t good enough. YA Goode knelt next to Tyrik’s head trying to peel off Daequan’s grip.

Daequan, in all his blind madness, grabbed YA Goode’s head and pinned it to the ground. Her head landed in Tyrik’s blood. She screamed, “Help! Help me, Jesus!”

Daequan banged YA Goode’s head repeatedly. She sounded like a turkey.

But he didn’t stop.

YA BJ got a hold of Daequan from the back and started pulling his shirt to get him up and off Tyrik and YA Goode. Daequan’s shirt ripped off as he continued to bang

whatever he could, which happened to be YA Goode's head. Tyrik seemed to have passed out.

YA BJ wrapped his arms around Daequan's back to pull him up. Instead, the two of them fell on top of YA Goode who'd fallen limp. Her eyes and mouth were open, but she wasn't seeing anything or saying anything.

YA Goode's condition was more frightening to Meghan than anything else. The damage was done. The fight was over. YA Goode's long blond braids were wildly tangled on the floor. Two of her braids were ripped out and flung underneath a metal chair.

There was a loud stream of intensifying voices pouring through the walkie-talkie.

Backup arrived. A short, plump woman waved her Billy club at no one in particular. She'd managed to make her way past the circle of rowdy kids. She swung her Billy club and accidentally whacked YA BJ on the back. He wailed like a wounded dog and rolled off Daequan.

"Daequan! Get up before I have to hit you!" The lady was afraid of Daequan, like everyone else. She feared that hitting him would set him off even more. That was impossible, he couldn't be more incensed. He was seething like a hyena, eyes still focused on Tyrik.

"Call 911!" Meghan yelled. With all the commotion she was sure no one registered her voice. She'd never felt so helpless. It was her fault bringing up the word *rule*. She never imagined that could set two individuals on their way to a blood bath within seconds.

As the group turned to YA Goode's condition, the room silenced. YA Goode was groaning in an

unrecognizable high voice, “My head, my head, my head hurt.”

Meghan noticed the trickle of tears falling past YA Goode’s temples as she lay there. There had to have been a gash somewhere because there was a growing pool of blood behind her head.

Meghan held her breath. She rarely prayed, but she did now. She prayed for Tyrik’s life, for YA Goode to be okay.

Daequan finally pulled back and sat on his haunches, panting. Meghan couldn’t read his eyes as he looked down at the damage caused to a boy whose life was in the balance, a woman who could only whimper, and a hefty man rubbing his back in extreme pain.

Meghan stood there in her stupid green designer dress. The stupid dress that had lifted her spirits as she returned to work. No one said anything to her; it was as if she didn’t exist.

Someone would have to clean up the blood. Daequan would have to be punished.

When YA BJ, out of breath and profoundly sweating, had enough strength, he zip-tied Daequan and ushered him to his cell.

Daequan didn’t resist. Tyrik and YA Goode laid on the floor like fallen ragdolls until medical arrived. They were rushed off to the hospital. The backup YAs locked the boys in their cells. Meghan was the last one standing and no one cared.

Meghan cried like a baby in the car. This wasn't the place for her, she was sure now. Her father had been right all along. She needed a job that was more conventional and less scary. She should take her father up on his job offer. There would be no bloodbaths. No cursing and personal attacks in team meetings, at least not lethally.

She cried at the thought of the fight today. She cried at the thought of leaving Rising Sun. She cried at the monster she saw in Daequan. This hurt her the worst.

She cried because she had to admit that she didn't know him enough to truly have feelings for him, like she thought she had. She didn't know what was going to happen to him. She was terrified she would never see him again. How would Love Up handle the fallout from the fight? She thought back to the staff meeting where the YAs expressed their need for better safety support and how the administration dodged that question. Or when the YAs wanted appropriate punishments for the youth and how Director Lanson told them that Love Up prevailed. Love Up governed discipline. Love Up reigned supreme.

Meghan still had no idea what Love Up meant. She remembered Daequan's sweet example of Love Up in the essay she'd assigned them. He read it with so much pride:

Love Up mean making other strong It means being asseptin of some one who trying to do better for him or her self And if you can help them. My exampel of Love Up is our class You assept me despit my problems. Ms. Megan I assept you to.

You accept me despite my problems, kept ringing in her ear like a bell too close. Did she really accept him? Could she after today?

Daequan had nearly murdered two people today in a matter of minutes. Meghan understood now why there was poor morale amongst the YAs. The thought of YA Goode's head being bashed on the floor made Meghan heave.

It took several minutes to adequately blow her nose. Her phone, tossed in the passenger's seat, rang. It startled her. No one ever called her right after class. She saw Mrs. Gibbs's name and shuddered.

She wasn't ready to talk about what happened. But she knew she had to. The fight had started because of her. She couldn't forgive herself for that. She'd used a word—*rules*—that had set a kid off and Daequan wanted to protect her from that upset boy and thus the fight.

Meghan picked up the phone because she wanted to make her side of the story known. If she was going to get fired for not being able to control her class then at least she wanted to document her side of the story. She *was* doing her part. She couldn't have done anything better. She couldn't control Tyrik or Daequan.

"Ms. James. This is Mrs. Gibbs."

"Mrs. Gibbs, this wasn't my fault, I'm not sure what happened, I was just trying to teach and Tyrik was being rude, I don't know why, Daequan got angry with him and... I guess, the rest is history..." Meghan's voice was too high and squeaky. "I am very sorry, I know you expect better from me, and I will improve, if given the chance. Is

YA Goode okay? How about Tyrik?” Meghan held her breath to stop crying.

“Ms. James, please relax. Just relax. I know this has been a tough day for you and for the Nia pod and for Rising Sun.”

Meghan wished she had some water. Her eyes skipped around as if she’d find a nice cool bottle of water, but all she found was old, ugly trees that had given up long ago. Fallen limbs, weak roots, bent trunks. “I’m fine, Mrs. Gibbs. I’m sorry. I’m relaxed now.”

“YA Goode is in critical condition. But doctors expect her to turn around eventually.”

“That’s so terrible.”

“Tyrik is just about the same.”

“Ms. James, while I appreciate your point of view and understand it quite well, I’m not calling about this incident.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Rising Star is no stranger to fights and other troubling situations. We will deal with this appropriately—”

“What will happen to Daequan?” Meghan’s voice was low and gritty.

“Well...” Mrs. Gibbs seemed stumped. Meghan knew she was trying to decide whether or not to be honest with Meghan.

To help Mrs. Gibbs along, Meghan said. “He is one of my students. I should know.”

"Well, he will be disciplined, of course. However, he is in a unique situation because he is aging out very soon."

"What does that mean, *aging out very soon*?"

"He's turning eighteen next month so he must leave Rising Sun soon. We must consider that when we discipline him."

"Is he going to go to DC Jail?"

Mrs. Gibbs cleared her throat. "No, thankfully. His sentence was made to coincide with his age. This was a fortunate thing for him and all of us." Mrs. Gibbs turned human as she said, "Whew, praise the Lord." The way she said *praise the Lord* Meghan instantly knew she was a committed churchgoer, not just a button up program administrator at a juvenile detention center. Not just an unnecessarily mean woman intent on ruining Meghan's life. "If we charge him for this, he will go to DC Jail."

At that moment, Meghan wanted to befriend Mrs. Gibbs. "Yes, praise the Lord," Meghan said, unintentionally knocking Mrs. Gibbs back into her usual mean, stiff character.

"Don't worry about Daequan. He's fine. We're working with him, putting him on a plan to help curb his anger."

"Was this a surprise to you?" Meghan said.

"What?"

"The way he fought. His blind rage. He couldn't stop himself."

"Not quite." Meghan could sense that Mrs. Gibbs was omitting information because she didn't think Meghan

should be privy once again. “He’s a sweet young man. That’s the truest thing about him.” Meghan understood and agreed with Mrs. Gibbs that Daequan was a beautiful person above all else.

“When will he leave Rising Sun?”

“Well, we don’t quite know but soon. Paperwork dictates everything.”

Silence. Meghan was too tired to press anymore. She wasn’t happy that Daequan was leaving soon. Just her and Skinny, Red, Petey, maybe some new boy, she couldn’t picture it.

Mrs. Gibbs snipped, “As much as you think you know these young men, you don’t. You don’t know their stories.”

Meghan *did* know their stories. The boys appreciated that she knew their stories in a way that no one else did. Sharing their stories was cathartic for them. But Mrs. Gibbs would never be able to fathom that, let alone accept that.

Tap tap tap... Tap, tap, tap, Meghan heard through the phone. Mrs. Gibbs signature move. To partially detach from their conversation by typing on her computer.

“What will happen with the class?”

Mrs. Gibbs stopped typing. “Oh yes, I am sorry. I was a little distracted by an email that came in. The short answer: nothing. We’ll skip a week of your class and their other specials and see what happens from there... Ms. James, the reason I called was because I wanted to know exactly what you’re planning for the showcase.”

"Showcase?" Meghan searched her confused mind for the word *showcase*. The boys' showcase was the furthest thing from her mind. "Oh yes, the showcase."

"Will you be ready?"

A few seconds went by before Meghan could answer. "Yes, I'll be ready."

"All I want is for you to have the boys ready for the showcase. This is the first of its kind. Director Lanson and Mr. Mitchell will be there."

And you want to make yourself look good. That's why of all the things to discuss you want to talk about a stupid showcase. "I see," Meghan said.

"Okay, I'm glad you understand. What are you planning?"

Meghan panicked. She had no plan. She had *had* a plan of having the boys share their stories but, despite all her effort and intentions, nothing about it was going to work.

She lied: "The boys will tell their stories."

"They will be appropriate stories that won't rattle the crowd?"

"Exactly. Just basic stories, without too much detail. I just want to show their ability to craft a story and present it. Mrs. Gibbs, I need to go now. But thank you for the call." Meghan regretted saying thank you. Mrs. Gibbs didn't say thank you to her for taking her time now or any time since they first met.

She heard *tap, t-tap, tap, t-tap* again, and hung up the phone.

Meghan told Jenny about the fight earlier that day. She needed to tell someone, and it wouldn't—couldn't—shouldn't be her father or Aunt Susan or Eric.

Meghan expected Jenny to understand tough situations because she had been in tough situations in Venezuela and even in college. One time Jenny's boyfriend had sex with her when she clearly didn't want to, but she continued to date him for two years. In those two years, he'd done it two more times. Jenny had cried to Meghan about it but Meghan didn't know what to do but tell her to go to the campus Rape Crisis Center. Each time Meghan suggested that Jenny got mad and wouldn't speak to her for weeks. They never talked about why she'd been so angry.

Yes, Jenny would understand. The fight could have been no worse than being robbed at gunpoint in a third world country.

As they ate Jenny's homemade frittatas on their balcony, Meghan told Jenny about the fight in detail. The frittatas were a tad greasy but still good. Jenny's eyes were pinned wide open when Meghan told her that Daequan almost killed Tyrik and YA Goode.

"Wow, Meghan, that's crazy! How do you work in a place like that?"

Meghan shot back, "How did you stay in Venezuela after you got assaulted?"

"Geesh, Meg, I'm just saying. Once I was there in that room with that man, I couldn't get out. At least I didn't know how I could get out. It was much more complicated than this."

"What do you mean, my situation is easier?"

Jenny shrugged. "You could just walk away and none of this would affect you anymore. You could resume a normal life."

"If you'd dumped Alan--the first time--you could have resumed a normal life. I never judged you for the way you stayed with a rapist."

Jenny cut her eyes at Meghan in disbelief. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. My world isn't simple. It isn't simpler than yours. You, nor anyone I know, is sensitive about my life. Everyone thinks they can say anything about my choices. Meanwhile I tell no one how shitty their lives really are. Your life sucks. You work at a library and leech off me."

Jenny's eyes got impossibly bigger, her fists pumping at her sides. "What are you talking about?"

Meghan was seething. "You can leave. You're not helping me with your presence. I know my dad 'recruited' you to help me not fall apart again, but honestly, you can just go. Go find a place you can afford!" Tears streamed down Meghan's face. The day had been too much.

"Sorry, Meghan, I didn't mean to offend you." Jenny's voice was everywhere, loud, hush, shrill, gritty, quick, slow. "But I don't see how you can win with these kids in a place like that. You could've been attacked. You could've been the one with brain damage. It's an awful, awful place. You can be mean to me. You can kick me out, but I'll still feel the same. You should quit!" She dropped a half-eaten

frittata on her paper plate which almost fell over the balcony before she caught it.

“I’m sorry,” Meghan said, foolishness and embarrassment spread throughout her body. “I’m just tired. It’s been a long day.” She rubbed her eyes like a sleepy baby.

Jenny collected her plate and red cup and stormed off. The tequila certainly didn’t help the argument. She left Meghan on the balcony.

Meghan convinced herself that she was glad Jenny was gone. That she wanted her to move out. That she would rather be alone.

She just needed a breeze to break the heat. She leaned over the balcony and ate her cold frittata. The breeze never came.

CHAPTER 24

Mr. Mitchell called on a Saturday morning as Meghan was slowly waking up. He wanted her to know that Daequan was suspended and that her class was canceled for the next two weeks. “Don’t worry, you’ll still get paid,” he said with urgency.

Meghan wanted to tell him she wasn’t worried at all about the money. Instead, she just said, “Thanks!”

There was silence. Meghan wasn’t sure exactly what the call was about at seven o’clock in the morning. She liked Mr. Mitchell so she was patient. She was disappointed that her class would be canceled. She would write more for DC Weekly during that time. She hadn’t been performing particularly well at the newspaper. Sam had nixed several of her pitches recently.

Meghan was laying on her back with one leg propped up, foot twirling.

“Ms. James, how are you doing?” He sounded hesitant.

"I'm fine, Mr. Mitchell." She was sure Mr. Mitchell didn't want her to be honest. He had enough on his plate.

"How's your class going--before all this mess?" He was breathing hard and slow. "I know it's been tough with the boys and the issues they come with."

"It has, but I love what I do. I can handle it."

"I knew you could. I saw that in you from the first time I saw you, during our interview. I knew that people had underestimated you and that you needed an honest chance. I could just tell."

"Thank you for saying that, Mr. Mitchell." Meghan could see all the faces who doubted her abilities: Mrs. Gibbs, her dad, Aunt Susan, Eric, Jenny, her principal at Brewster, other teachers, some kids. There had been so many doubters, pushing her toward a sad, mediocre life of comfort and privilege. She would've hugged Mr. Mitchell if she could.

There was a long pause. "Ms. James, I must ask, though I don't want to. Do you plan on staying at Rising Sun?" This was the real reason for his call.

"Of course!" she rushed. "I'm staying at Rising Sun. Never doubted it."

"That's good news! Teachers leave all the time and we're often left in a lurch. Don't get me wrong, some teachers we don't mind when they walk out the door." His laugh was both jolly and sad. "But you're one of the good ones. I see the work you're doing with those boys. They've probably never experienced that type of learning. They are engaged. I ask them what classes they enjoy and yours is always first."

“Wow! That’s so wonderful to hear. Sometimes I leave class and doubt myself.” Meghan thought about the fight, or rather, the bloodbath. Was she a good teacher on that day? Since it happened, she doubted herself constantly, wondering what she could have done to prevent the fight. Up until that point, she had basked in the fact that Daequan always protected her during class. And that’s exactly what he was doing when he attacked Tyrik. Though she didn’t know how ugly and dangerous Daequan’s protection could become, Meghan was guilty of enabling his protective nature towards her.

Meghan foolishly hoped that Mr. Mitchell wouldn’t bring up the fight. But of course, he would. He’d never called her out of the blue. She didn’t want to know what he thought about the fight or what was going to happen. She realized she had no control over Daequan or Rising Sun.

“As you know, the showcase is coming up. We pushed it back until you have time to work with your full class.” She couldn’t believe that he was skipping over the fight.

“Um, the showcase? Yes, I know. Mrs. Gibbs called me about it.”

He was silent again. She was starting to worry about his silence. She didn’t know what they meant unless he was multitasking like Mrs. Gibbs. Meghan doubted it. He was just a thoughtful person who needed time to think.

“Everyone is expecting something great from you. Love Up, right?” He chuckled. Meghan was confused by his laughter. Was he mocking the Love Up concept?

“Love Up, exactly.” Meghan sat up and looked out the window. She looked at the National Monument and all the ant sized people milling around. Oddly, she’d never been to visit. She could find a new angle on visiting the monument that would please Sam.

“I won’t even ask you your plans. I know it’s going to be wonderful, Ms. James. I trust you and your ability with these boys.”

“Thank you, Mr. Mitchell. I’ll see you in a couple of weeks when everything returns to normal.”

“And it will.”

CHAPTER 25

Meghan came back to Rising Sun two weeks from her last class. She fully expected Daequan not to be there. He should have been in jail. He certainly deserved it. She was still crushed by the fight and crushed by the thought of not seeing him again. If she were honest, she didn't want to teach without him. At times, she found herself angry at him for ruining their relationship, for ruining everything.

Poor YA Goode. Meghan could still see her lying on the floor almost lifeless and her long braids spread on the floor like rotten tree roots.

Poor Tyrik. While she didn't like the kid, he didn't deserve to be fighting for his life.

Poor YA BJ. He was the least abused, but he helped as much as he could, a poor match for Daequan. Meghan remembered YA BJ's butt crack showing as he leaned over to catch his breath, his shoe off, revealing a dingy sock.

Poor boys who had to witness that. The other boys must have been scared underneath their chanting that Daequan could come for them as he had for Tyrik. They knew who to root for. They were relieved that Daequan didn't unleash his wrath on them.

Poor Daequan even, unable to control his rage. What was the darkness that lived within him to unleash such rage?

Meghan sighed as she walked into the pod. She was anxious. She didn't know what to expect. She didn't know what buttons she might push that could cause such mayhem again. *Poor me.*

The boys had come in from the gym. They stunk. They needed showers. The chairs were set up in a circle like always, without her needing to ask. She suspected the new replacement, YA David, who warmly greeted her when she entered, had set up the chairs.

Daequan was coming from the bathroom. She couldn't believe it! He was still here. She clipped her smile realizing that him being here wasn't necessarily a good thing. Had he been punished? She thought back to the one and only staff meeting she'd attended when the YA asked about appropriate discipline for the boys with bad behavior. She fully understood that question now. She needed to know.

Daequan gave her a head nod with his signature charismatic smile.

As the boys settled in their chairs, Meghan looked for Tyrik. He wasn't there. She was a little sad, wondering if he was okay. Was he still in the hospital or just moved to a different pod? It wasn't exactly fair that Daequan was still

in the Nia pod. But she was quick to remember how Skinny remained in class after keeping a pencil that could've possibly been a shank intended for her. That Skinny had stayed in the pod wasn't fair.

She looked at Skinny and smiled. She was glad to see him, too.

He said, "Nice to see you, Ms. Meghan."

"You, too, Skinny." Meghan sat down.

As usual Daequan sat to the left of her. She wanted to tell him to behave himself, but she decided not to. Moving forward was best for all.

"Hello everyone!" Meghan said, looking Petey and Red in the eyes. They weren't as excited as Skinny and Daequan to see her. She knew they would come around.

"Gentlemen, as you know, there will be a showcase soon," Meghan said.

"What's that?" a newbie named Jon Jon asked. He had a large birthmark on his forehead.

Daequan answered, "A showcase is where all of us get up on stage and do somethin'. Everybody in the audience watch and clap at the end."

"That's exactly right," Meghan said. "Has anyone ever been in a showcase before?"

"Nope, but my little sister was in one. I went to hers," Petey said. "There was dancin'. It was okay. Boring mostly."

“That’s gay!” Jon Jon shouted. Meghan’s heart sank. She was afraid that Jon Jon’s outburst would lead to an argument amongst the boys.

Meghan looked at Daequan to make sure he wasn’t going to react. He was slouched in his chair peacefully, hands locked over his belly. She was confident he wasn’t going to involve himself.

Meghan said, “We don’t use that term gay unless we are using it in the correct context.”

“I don’t know what the hell you talkin’ about. *Context*. What the hell is that?” Jon Jon said.

“How about we talk about that later? I only want to spend time on our showcase that’s coming up soon. But just know that it’s not a respectful thing to say unless you are talking about a person’s sexual orientation. I just want to get back on topic: our showcase. Our showcase will include not only creative writing, but some of your other classes, like music, and performance art.” Mrs. Gibbs had sent out an email detailing the showcase expectations and instructions to all staff members. As she read the email, Meghan’s eyes glazed over until she found the information about her creative writing class.

Groans.

“No groans please, gentleman,” Meghan said, “It won’t be too bad. I promise. Our part should only be ten minutes.”

Groans persisted. “Ten minutes! That’s forever.”

“Let’s just get started. We’re behind. There’s been so many disruptions.” Meghan tried not to look at Daequan.

“It’s one week from today. Which only means we have today and our next class before the showcase.” Meghan could feel anxiety creeping up, reminding her of the anxiety pills she had to take after her mother died. She needed one now. “All you have to do is answer the question: tell us about a time you were most proud of yourself.”

Meghan had made that question up on her way to Rising Sun earlier that day. It wasn’t the best question, but it was okay. They had wasted too much time working on possibilities that wouldn’t work. Her stomach tightened. She’d had stomach ulcers after her mother died. This situation wasn’t anywhere near the pain she felt from losing her mother but she felt it. She didn’t understand why she was feeling this way now. This moment was not deserving of the grief of her mother’s death.

The boys mumbled and groaned.

She passed out blank papers and freshly sharpened pencils, wanting but deciding against reminding the boys that she would be collecting the pencils at the end of class.

“Put your name on the top of the page and start writing. Again, the question is: tell us about a time when you were most proud of yourself. Don’t worry about spelling and grammar if it’s holding you up. If it’s not, great. Remember this isn’t English class, it’s creative writing so you don’t have to be perfect. Remember to be specific.”

Somehow the groans disappeared, and the boys were writing. All Meghan could see was the top of their heads. She was pleased. This was a moment of sweet success.

As the boys were writing, YA David came up to properly introduce himself to Meghan. He shook her hand limply. He had both ears pierced and wore scented lip gloss. He was thin and meek. If he was new, he didn't have a chance. The boys would eat him alive. Meghan was glad that she corrected the boys on the use of the word "gay" within earshot of YA David.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Meghan," he said, softly.

Meghan smiled. "Nice to meet you, too. Are you new here?" Meghan felt as if she was now a part of Rising Sun. She owned a piece of it now.

Daequan butted in, "No, YA David has been here forever."

YA David lightly popped Daequan's head. Daequan playfully rolled his head. "I'm just playin', you know you my nigg---so sorry, Ms. Meghan. He's cool as they come. He's my boy."

"Dae is correct, I've been here twelve years. I'm the biggest fool for staying this long." He put his hands on his hips.

Meghan couldn't figure out what to say. She was busy watching the chemistry between the two of them. Like uncle and nephew.

"Dae, you've been in and out of here since you were twelve."

Daequan shrugged. "Well, you ain't gonna see me here no more. I'm out this joint." Meghan couldn't tell if Daequan was happy about that fact or not.

"I hope so. You're too bright to be in here." YA David turned to Meghan. "I've been telling him for years."

She was jealous of how close the two of them were, that YA David wasn't an outsider. He had command over Daequan and the other boys in his own unique way, so much so they didn't make a big deal of him being effeminate.

"The little I've known Daequan I would agree," Meghan said.

"Well, Ms. Meghan, it was nice meeting you. I'm not sure if they will keep me in the Nia pod. I'm kind of a floater." YA David frowned.

"You don't like floating?" Meghan asked.

"Yes and no. I get to meet so many of the kids, they are all so special. But I don't get to know them as much as I would like. I just had to come over and meet you, Ms. Meghan. Daequan thinks the world of you."

"I'm so glad to hear that. I'm quite fond of him."

Daequan looked up hesitantly as if to say, *even after what I did?*

"I've enjoyed each and every class with him—I mean them, all the boys," Meghan said.

"Really?" Daequan said.

"Yes, really."

YA David smiled. "I love Daequan. He needs to get the hell out of here and never return. My heart will break when he goes, but he's got better things to do than to be here or in any prison. Right, Dae?" YA David waited until

Daequan said yes. He patted Daequan on the back and leisurely walked away to the YA table and sat next to a checked-out twenty-something female YA who hadn't said a word to Meghan or anyone else for that matter.

As the boys finished and started horsing around, Meghan turned to Daequan. "What do you think about YA David?" She wanted to know how genuine their bond was.

"Yeah, that dude is cool. He always been kind to me. Don't matter if he gay. He good."

"That's just great."

The other boys were in conversations with each other, allowing Meghan to talk with Daequan a little longer. "Daequan, I'm glad you'll leave here. YA David is right; you have better things to do than to be here. I just want us to stay in touch when you leave. Seeing you outside of these walls will be better that way."

"You want to stay in touch after I leave?" He searched her eyes for a joke.

"Of course, I do. Don't you want to, too?"

"Hell yeah!"

"Good, then we will." She ripped out a page from his notebook and wrote down her cell phone number. She folded the paper and handed it to him. "Don't tell anyone about this. When you get out, just call and we can meet up." Her heart was rushing. What if Mrs. Gibbs found out? If Mrs. Gibbs didn't fire her, she would berate her. "Please don't tell anyone that we will keep in touch."

"I won't."

Meghan left it at that. She didn't have a vision for how keeping in touch with Daequan would work. They came from opposite ends of the world. She wasn't naïve enough to believe she understood him. She just went with her gut. Despite all the reasons not to, Meghan wanted to stay in touch, so they would. "Don't wait too long when you get out." She winked at Daequan then turned to the class.

"Okay, gentlemen! It's time to share your writing. Who wants to go first?" Meghan said, looking around at boys, none of whom wanted to go first.

"I'll go then since everyone else is gay," Daequan laughed. He said it loud as though he was trying to engage YA David from the corner. To call someone gay, playfully, or not, seemed out of Daequan's character.

Meghan looked over at YA David. He looked up, waving Daequan off. Clearly this wasn't YA David's first time experiencing homophobia. Given his ability to survive and succeed in this environment for so long, he was clearly stronger than Meghan perceived.

"Daequan!" Meghan admonished.

YA David yelled, "Don't worry, baby, these boys are forever ignorant. Half of them in here wouldn't mind..." He popped his hand over his face in mocked surprise. Meghan felt a little sick at the thought of something sexual going on between the YA and the boys. Meghan remembered from orientation that inappropriate and illegal sexual relationships of all stripes took place at juvenile detention centers. For a second, Meghan wondered if she misread the uncle-nephew relationship comradery between YA David and Daequan. She cut her thoughts off. No, there was nothing inappropriate going

on. She was ashamed that she even entertained the thought.

“Ah-ight, ah-ight. I’ll stop it, YA David.” Daequan blew a kiss at him. The other boys snickered.

“Can we get back on point?” Meghan pleaded.

“Okay, okay, Ms. Meghan. Lighten up. I won’t say gay even if I’m thinking it about a gay person. Let’s move on. Do you want me to stand up?” Daequan said.

“That would be great.” That would shift the tone of the room to a more serious environment.

Daequan stood, hoisting his pants a little. They still sagged beyond Meghan’s taste. “I was most proud of myself when I beat the shit out of my mama’s boyfriend.”

Jesus. Could this class test Meghan anymore? She felt like giving up, walking right out that door. She thought she’d asked a simple, foolproof question once again that everyone could answer. Daequan’s answer was not showcase material, to say the least. Meghan’s toe started tapping. She had no back up plan for the showcase.

Meghan let him go on. There had to be some gold in there. It wasn’t always about how things are said. It was about *what* was being said.

Daequan looked at Meghan for approval. She nodded. “Try not to use curse words if you can, Daequan.”

“Okay,” he said, looking unsure. “That nigga was runnin’ around with all these other women right in front of my mama’s eyes. She was all fucked up about it. She ain’t have no confidence and that hurt me. How dare some motherfucker gonna come and destroy her in a matter of

months. So, one day I fucked that nigga up. That's it for now. I didn't get a chance to write all this down."

Meghan looked around; the boys seemed mesmerized by his story. "Okay, thank you for sharing. Time for some feedback. Right away I'm drawn into your story. Right, boys? Given we are in a creative writing class, we must ask ourselves how we can improve our storytelling. How could you make this story better?"

"I know," Daequan raised his hand as if anyone else wanted to speak. "Be specific. Give examples."

"Excellent. Do you think you could provide an example now?"

"Hmmmmmm. I'm not sure. How about... how I pounded my fist into his nose when I had him pinned to the ground." Meghan thought about Tyrik, a familiar story. She shook her head to shake away the memory. She imagined him pistol whipping Cue. Her stomach rolled the tuna sandwich she'd scarfed down before class.

"Why are you proud of that?"

"It's simple. I'm proud that nigga never came back around. But my mama was mad at me for so long over that shit. She wouldn't talk to me for like a month. It was fucked up."

Jon Jon said, "That was good though, how you fucked that nigga up. I can see it now, his bloody nose running all over the place. That was a good example." He put his hand out for Daequan to shake.

Daequan hit it away playfully, but his voice was mean and strong. “You a corny ass nigga. Look, Ms. Meghan! I didn’t say gay even though I wanted to so bad.”

“I ain’t gay,” Jon Jon mumbled as he settled back into his seat.

“Daequan, please watch your language and try to be kind,” Meghan said.

“Yes, Ms. Meghan. I’ll do whatever you say. You know that. You make me a better man.”

The boys laughed. Meghan did, too.

When the laughter settled, she continued, trying to make this class count. “In all seriousness, Daequan, your story is intriguing, and I want you to develop it more. What did he look like? How long had they been together? How did the fight begin?”

He nodded, “I got you, Ms. Meghan.”

“I think you get it, Daequan. But I must say, this story will not make the showcase.”

He took his seat. “Yeah, my mama wouldn’t like that anyway, me sayin’ that to nobody. She’d probably drag my ass off stage and punch me.”

Turned out no one had proud moments ready for primetime. There was some level of inappropriate aggression or violence in all the stories. The showcase was right around the corner and Meghan had nothing to show for her weeks of teaching this class. Everyone was expecting something great but there was nothing great to show for. She would be better off quitting now, on her own terms.

Rather than quitting, she ran to the bathroom to throw up her tuna fish sandwich.

CHAPTER 26

The big day arrived. For Meghan's part of the showcase, each boy was to stand up and talk about breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Just like they did in her first class. That was the best she could do in a short amount of time. No Love Up, unfortunately. She was sure Mrs. Gibbs would admonish her later for her odd and simplistic presentation.

Meghan introduced the boys to the half full audience by explaining the vocabulary they learned including *specificity* and *example* and how they used these words to develop clarity and creativity in their writing. The audience was silent and stiff. For her.

When it was time for the boys to present, the audience yelled out things like, *You go, baby! That's right! Tell it! I love breakfast, too!*

The boys became more confident in response to the crowd's support, but not enough to properly read from

their scripts. They tripped over words, forgot to say some of them, talked too fast, and spoke too softly.

Daequan was the last speaker. He explained what he would like to have for dinner. Just as he said in the first class, he wanted steak. "I want a big, juicy steak with a little red in the middle. That's how the rich people do. I'm gonna be rich one day."

Someone yelled out, "You sure are gonna be a millionaire!"

"No red for me, cook it all the way through. But go 'head boy, be *specific*!"

Even though the audience enjoyed the boys' performance, Meghan cringed the entire time. She could have done so much better. She feared that Mr. Mitchell and Mrs. Gibbs would be waiting for her after her breakfast, lunch, and dinner bit.

As the boys bowed the audience stood up and clapped. Meghan was relieved--for a moment. Then anxiety washed over her, wiping away her relief that the show was over. Her breaths were so short she thought she might choke. *Breathe, Meg. Breathe!*

Once she got her breathing under control, she warmed a little when she saw the smile on Daequan's face. She could tell he was proud. In the wings, she started clapping harder and harder. Seeing his beaming smile was worth it.

Daequan gestured for her to come on stage. "Take a bow, Ms. Meghan," he mouthed. Nothing in her wanted to do it. She didn't want to expose herself to the cold audience but he wouldn't stop beckoning her.

She came out, slowly. Daequan put his hand out for her to grab and she did. He pulled her in front of the line.

The clapping died down fast, leaving Meghan standing there feeling like an idiot. She began to talk because she didn't know how else to fill the awful silence.

"Let me tell you, the boys behind me are incredible," she said.

"Young men!"

"They ain't boys!" someone shouted as if offended.

How was Meghan calling them boys different from anyone else? Everyone called them boys. That's what they were: boys.

"I mean young men. These young men are very interested in the topic of eating." She laughed with the audience. Score. "These young men are quite imaginative." She looked back at Daequan. His smile was still bright. "I will miss each one of these young men when they leave and go out in the world."

She noticed Mr. Mitchell standing in the back with his arms folded. She couldn't tell how he felt.

"Thank you, Ms. Meghan, what's next?" someone yelled out.

"Thank you, thank everyone who helped make this possible. YA BJ, YA Goode..." She paused and dropped her head thinking of YA Goode.

"Jesus!" someone uttered presumably about YA Goode. Meghan was reminded of how Daequan pounded her head until she fell to the floor, confused and in excruciating pain. Even if it was a mistake, it was appalling.

Meghan continued, “YA David, thank you for stepping in and supporting this project. Mr. Mitchell, thank you for believing in me.” He saluted her from the back. “Mrs. Gibbs? Where are you?” Mrs. Gibbs was sitting so far back Meghan couldn’t see her until she stood up. “Thank you—just thank you. I’ll leave you to enjoy the rest of the show,” Meghan cleared her throat obscuring her words. People started clapping before Meghan finished speaking anyway. She shooed the boys--*young men*--off the stage.

Backstage, Daequan hugged her tightly, halting her sadness about YA Goode and what he’d done to the poor lady. She didn’t want to let him go but she had to. She was still Ms. Meghan the teacher. She hugged all the boys, too, and told each of them that they did a good job. She couldn’t hurt their smiling faces.

Rising Sun had arranged a nice luncheon for the boys after the showcase, including their families and staff. R&B music played in the background. Meghan only recognized an Usher song. YAs were seamlessly mixing with families; laughter filled the room. She leaned against the wall far away from the festivities, near to the cafeteria workers and janitors.

Her stomach growled. She wished she could sit at the table and eat the baked chicken, green beans, chicken broth-soaked rice, an oversized chocolate chip cookie and grape juice.

Meghan observed Daequan who was sitting with what looked like his mother and sister. Both uniquely beautiful. They did not resemble each other. If the teenage girl was indeed his sister. She had dark brown skin with a round

face. She was wearing fake eyelashes and too much mascara. Her curly hair was pulled high up in a bun. Daequan kept alternating between tight side hugs and playful hits. What if that was his girlfriend? It never occurred to Meghan that he might have a girlfriend. She was foolish. Of course, Daequan had a girlfriend, probably several of them, given his exceptional good looks and natural charm.

The woman with him had to be his mother. Or aunt. She had fair skin that was just as flawless as the girl's. That's where their similarities stopped. Her features were pointed, and her eyes were hazel. She had to be biracial. She wore a yellow and orange headwrap matching her fitted orange tee-shirt. Meghan wanted to talk to her and the girl she was hoping, hoping, hoping was his sister, Velvet, if she had the opportunity. She needed to find out their relation to Daequan. But the woman also seemed cold so maybe that wouldn't have been the most fruitful conversation.

As Meghan scanned the room, she saw boys who had no families come sitting with staff. They were the rowdiest. It was surely a sad day for them.

Suddenly, Meghan found herself headed to Daequan's table. Her feet were moving before her brain agreed. "I'm so sorry, Daequan, I didn't mean to scare you," she said.

"You cain't scare me, Ms. Meghan." He scooted over so she could sit next to him. The woman watched Meghan with a straight face as she sat down. Meghan's skirt hitched up. It was too tight. She regretted wearing it. When she dressed that morning, she wanted to wear something that would be attractive to Daequan. Now she was just embarrassed, praying a seam wouldn't burst.

“Ma, this is Ms. Meghan. I been tellin’ you ‘bout her.”

His mother. She studied Meghan. *What did she see?* Meghan got the sense that his mother was not impressed.

Meghan extended her hand. The woman hesitated before limply shaking her hand. She didn’t feel the handshake was necessary. The lady’s hands were warm and feminine. Meghan wondered what she did for a living. Manicures weren’t likely a part of her regimen. The woman looked at Meghan’s manicured hands, then looked away. Meghan regretted shaking the woman’s hand the way her father taught her: Firm. Eye contact.

“What’s your name?” Meghan asked her.

“Lateesia.”

“What a unique name. Lateesia.”

“I love Ms. Meghan’s class,” Daequan cut in eagerly, or nervously. Meghan couldn’t tell. He was animated and Meghan knew that wouldn’t play well with his mother, Lateesia.

“What do you love about it, Dae?” Lateesia asked, coldly.

“I can just say what’s on my mind. She doesn’t judge. She’s real careful ‘bout everything, you know?”

“That’s good. Ms. Meghan, that’s really good. You got my son smilin’ and I’m happy about that. It’s been a long while since I saw him this happy.” She was reading both Meghan and Daequan now. Meghan couldn’t read her expression, but it wasn’t good.

Meghan’s underarms began to sweat. Maybe leaning against the wall out of sight and sound was best for her.

The girl cut in, "I'm Velvet, Dae's sister." Meghan exhaled. His sister. Not his girlfriend.

Velvet extended her hand and Meghan shook softer this time. The girl shook firmly, impressing Meghan.

"Hello, Velvet. Daequan speaks so fondly of you." Velvet's smile was warm and authentic. Meghan liked her already.

"You want some of my food?" Velvet asked. Lateesia cut her eyes at Velvet.

Before Meghan could say no, Lateesia answered her. "I'm sure Ms. Meghan gets breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day." She nodded at the pun, Daequan and Velvet chuckled. "She doesn't need your half-eaten food. You should know that, Vel."

"Yes, I might get in the lunch line a little later."

Daequan had picked up his plate and started devouring the rest of his food like he suddenly remembered to eat his last meal on earth.

"Dae, we're gonna leave soon," Lateesia said.

Daequan stopped mid-chew. "Why? Why you gotta go, ma? I never get to see you, Ma, please... this ain't over yet. Everybody else got people still here." His eyes were desperate and childlike in a way Meghan had never seen before.

"I took off work only for a few hours, you know that."

"What do you do?" Meghan blurted. Lateesia looked at Meghan as if she were an alien. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to ask that," Meghan said, physically pulling back.

Daequan cut in like it was a perfectly okay question. "My ma, she works the cash register at Safeway."

Lateesia leaned into Daequan as if they were the only ones in the room. She looked as if she was going to pull his ear. "I ain't doin' none of this no more, Dae." Thank God it seemed like she forgot all about Meghan.

"I know, I know, mama, I ain't comin' back. I promise." He sounded like he was convincing not only his mother but himself. It wasn't possible that he could come back to Rising Sun—everyone knew that. If he messed up again, there was only one place he could go: prison.

Meghan looked at his mother's sad and tired eyes. How many times had her son told her that he wasn't going to mess up again? She had to take off work for this.

"There cain't be no next time. Not here, not nowhere. You understand me?" Lateesia said.

"Yes ma'am." Daequan was fighting off tears.

Lateesia whispered but Meghan could still hear, "You almost killed a woman and a boy!"

Daequan dropped his head.

"Mr. Mitchell let your bitch ass stay." Her voice was stronger and more forceful. "He could have done much more to you. I'm embarrassed by you. My son, the killer. That's what people think of me when they see me. My son ain't shit. Shit!" She grabbed his chin and pushed his head up. He looked past her like he was staring at a tiny dot far away.

She slapped him. Meghan got chills. She looked around. Everyone had to have seen the slap. It was loud.

Lateesia's face was red, his face was red from the impact of the slap.

"This place has always babied you. Never gave you what you deserve. But you're gonna see one day. You're gonna meet the big boys, over there at DC Jail."

Tears were streaming down Daequan's face. Meghan understood his mother as much as a stranger could. It wasn't right that Daequan was not adequately disciplined for what he'd done to Tyrik and YA Goode. Lack of proper punishment wasn't going to prepare him for life beyond Rising Sun. Meghan wanted to ask Mr. Mitchell what in God's name made him decide against serious punishment for Daequan? Not only was it bad for Daequan, but it was bad for the other boys to see the unfairness, the favoritism. Daequan was treated like a saint here.

But at the same time, Meghan hated seeing Daequan humiliated now, on a perfectly good day.

"He's comin' back home in a couple of weeks, ma, ain't you, Dae? Everything is gonna be fine," Velvet said urgently, trying to diffuse the situation. Meghan didn't know if Velvet believed her words or if any witness to this spectacle did. "Things gonna be better than fine," Velvet tried again, her voice weakened.

Meghan felt she shouldn't have been there observing this intensely personal family moment.

His mother looked at Meghan as she was getting up. "Thank you, Ms. Meghan, for making my son happy. Glad someone can."

Velvet took her last bite of green beans before getting up. They were surely cold and soggy. "Bye, Ms. Meghan."

Velvet kissed her brother on the cheek twice. He didn't seem to notice. He was again staring at a little dot far away that no one else could see. Lateesia and Velvet headed to the door. They had to wait at least a minute until security opened the heavy door to leave.

"You okay?" Meghan said to Daequan. She felt sad. Sad for the way Lateesia had treated him. Sad because his mother was right to feel how she did. Sad because a mother was tired of trying with her son. Sad for Daequan and all the things that had happened in his life to lead him to Rising Sun, again and again. Sad that he would not be shielded anymore. His time was up and she wasn't sure he understood the full gravity of making hideous mistakes, no longer as a boy, but as a man. She was even sad for Velvet because she seemed so sweet, and she didn't deserve any of this. She loved her brother, but she had no control over what he did and where he ended up. It was clear that Velvet had tried so many times to protect both her mother and brother when they were at odds.

But Meghan refused to cry. Not as she sat next to Daequan in the state he was in.

"I'm okay, thanks for askin'," Daequan dropped his head. He wiped away the tears with his orange shirt.

"Velvet is right. Everything will be fine, better than fine," Meghan said.

"How you know, Ms, Meghan, how you know? I ain't gonna live nothin' like how you live. I ain't never gonna get a steak cooked that way I like it."

"You'll be fine because you are an extraordinary person."

“You think so? Nah, I ain’t shit. I’m just a nigga who killed somebody. I’m a killer just like my mama said.” He dropped his head again. Meghan lifted his chin towards her.

“You’re great. You’re more than you think you are.” She hesitated before saying, “Do you have any ideas of what you’ll do once you’re back home, Daequan?”

“I hate that question, man. Only ‘cause I ain’t got no answers. I’ve been here too many times. I know this place better than I know outside. If I learned anything, I learned that you got to have somethin’ positive to do when you leave. Otherwise, you fall back into what you were doin’ before you got locked up. I’ve lived it too many times, Ms. Meghan.”

His eyes were watery and so were hers. She wished she could fix his life. Her throat was dry. She looked for some water. She spotted Velvet’s juice and guzzled it. It only left her wanting more.

“Have you learned any trades here?” Meghan asked as if he’d never considered this. The boys were exposed to many trades including truck driving, car mechanics, barbering, computer science, and culinary arts. She had to admit that Mrs. Gibbs was doing a hell of a job preparing these boys for sustainable careers.

“I guess so, nothin’ I give a shit about. I took car mechanics but that ain’t for me. I did some barberin’. That was alright. I kind of liked it but they say you got to go to school or some shit like that.”

Was it money that kept him from going to school? Meghan could have easily given him the money, but she

didn't offer quite yet. Let him get settled at home and then it would make more sense to help him as their relationship progressed. He just needed comfort and encouragement now.

"Shit, I may just have to keep hustlin'. That's real talk, Ms. Meghan. I don't have no other skills. You think bein' a barber is gonna to bring home the money I need for me and mine? Velvet needs me, my mother needs me. People need me."

Meghan wondered who else depended on him. This wasn't the time to ask. It was only time to listen.

"Nah, barberin' ain't gonna work. Standin' on your feet all day, smelling dirty ass niggas." He waved his hand. "Nah, nah, you got the wrong one, bro."

"I understand." Though Meghan wasn't totally sure she did. "You have to start where you are and with what you have." Meghan felt for him. It was easy for her to do that but not so easy for him.

"Maybe Rising Sun can help."

He laughed. "You ain't been around here long enough. Some things they try to help you with, but you don't understand, Ms. Meghan. Once you leave here you're on your own. They can't fix nothin' for me. That's how I end up here again and again. Here they protect you and sometimes make you feel special like you have a chance. But when you get out, you ain't protected. You ain't special."

"How do you feel now?"

"Like a piece of shit."

“Don’t say that. It’s not true.”

“You know me here, but you don’t know me out there. I killed a nigga.” He wiped off a tear with his palm. “You’ll never know how that is. Only the niggas who kill other niggas understand. Maybe. Some niggas kill niggas and feel great about that shit. They brag. They take money to wack niggas. Plenty niggas are like that.” Another tear. She wanted to wipe his face. She looked around, no one noticed them. But still, she didn’t wipe his face. She scooted closer to him and put her hand on his knee.

After several long seconds, Daequan said, “Your hands are pretty, Ms. Meghan. I been watching your hands, and everything else ‘bout you since you first came. Your nails are so nice and painted. I like you, Ms. Meghan. You make some of all this hurt go away at least when you’re around.”

Meghan couldn’t help but smile. “You are quite handsome yourself.”

“You tryin’ to say I’m beautiful. That’s some bullshit. Ain’t nobody ever told me that shit. Nobody...Shit, that’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout. You’re the most beautiful lady I’ve ever seen.” He cocked his head, thinking. “Well, nobody can ever take my mama’s place and Velvet. No matter that she just slapped the shit out of me. They are some excellent women.”

“I agree.”

“But you’re in a different category. You’re like someone I want to be with. Spend a lot of time together.”

She smiled, running her fingers through her long, blonde hair. “I want us to stay in touch, to become closer when you leave here.”

He nodded, "I feel you, Ms. Meghan. I want that, too."

Meghan felt she did a good job in this conversation. She'd lifted his spirit after a sad and humiliating moment with his mother. It wasn't hard lifting his spirit because she was just telling him the truth.

"I really like you, Ms. Meghan. You're pretty." He looked at her hair like he wanted to stroke it.

Mr. Mitchell came over, catching Meghan off guard. How much had he seen of the two of them gushing over each other? Meghan hoped that he was not coming over to put a stop to it.

"How are you, Ms. James? How are you, Daequan?" Mr. Mitchell's cologne was strong and distracting.

"Good," they both said like good children.

He shook Daequan's hand firmly and kept shaking as he said, "You did a good job today, sir. Nice and solid."

"I guess so. I owe some of my great performance to Ms. Meghan. Only a little bit," Daequan joked.

"I'll take that," Meghan said.

Mr. Mitchell laughed. "Oh, is that right, son? I'm pretty sure you owe more to Ms. James than you think. We are blessed to have her, the way she has brought out the best in each of you young men. We are going to miss you, Daequan. But I don't want to see you in any correctional facility--none! You've learned your lesson, right?" He patted Daequan on the shoulder. "I'll come to see you when you get out of here, wherever you are. Let's make a deal."

Daequan stood up and they shook hands again.

“Now, son, you’ve got to control your anger out there. You know exactly where it will take you. I can’t help you then.” His look was stern.

Daequan didn’t seem able to give his vibrant smile. He hid his teeth and dimples, the best parts of his smile. “Deal, sir. Thank you for lookin’ out for me.”

Mr. Mitchell stepped backward and yelled that the luncheon was ending. When the room fell silent, he gave a protracted speech thanking families and staff and praised the boys for their performance in the showcase.

Mrs. Gibbs was seated on the other side of the room with the boys whose families didn’t attend. Her arms were crossed and she looked unhappy. Perhaps bitch was just her resting face. Meghan felt anxious at the sight of her, realizing that she would still have to hear what Mrs. Gibbs thought about the Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner bit at some point soon.

When Mr. Mitchell finished his remarks fifteen minutes later, Meghan patted Daequan on the back and left as quickly as she could to avoid Mrs. Gibbs.

CHAPTER 27

Meghan wanted the opportunity to say goodbye to Daequan. She knew it was only a matter of days before he was released. She wanted to tell him one more time to call her so that they could build a proper friendship.

Meghan began putting notebooks and freshly sharpened pencils on each seat, just as always. She felt good resuming class. She halfway expected Daequan to come from some unexpected angle and say hello. She missed his smile.

“Okay, boys!” she yelled.

And the boys came quickly—no problem. Even Jon Jon didn’t make a fuss.

When Skinny took his seat, with only his words he sliced through Meghan like a knife: “You lookin’ for that nigga ‘cause you like him like that.” He stared at her. The room went still.

“Yo’ neck is red and everything. But he gone, Ms. Meghan. That nigga gone.”

Meghan’s eyes could’ve popped out. She hated Skinny. She always did. *‘Cause you like him like that.*

“I don’t feel anything special for Daequan, Skinny. I like you all the same.”

“No, you don’t. I saw all along how you liked him more than a student. But that’s okay.” Skinny leaned back in his seat, his long arms hanging at his sides. “Your face is red now, too.” He was satisfied.

Meghan slowly nodded trying to digest the moment. It was indigestible. She wasn’t supposed to hate kids, but Skinny was an exception. He always was. He was a rapist. Shame on her for thinking they had trust and decorum. Meghan eyed the door. She couldn’t look at the boys, not yet. She feared their eyes would say the same thing as Skinny’s.

YA BJ, whom she’d been delighted to see back when she entered, came behind Skinny just like he did time and time again, and said calmly, “Skin, I’m telling you. You’ll be back at that other pod.” Meghan had gotten the impression that the other pod YA BJ spoke of was solitary confinement. Skinny squirmed in his chair like he was trying to get the chair to scratch his back. “Gon’ head with all that, man. I ain’t scared of nothin’.”

He was the most despicable person Meghan had ever known. In this moment, Daequan would’ve stepped in and made all her embarrassment and humiliation go away. Just like that, he would’ve cut Skinny off at the knees.

But he was not there. She turned to her left where Daequan had always sat. He wasn't there. Just his empty seat. The realization that he was not coming back hit her. She was in a room full of dangerous animals.

YA BJ just walked away, emitting exhaustion.

"Okay boys," Meghan said, avoiding Skinny who sat opposite her, as always. Avoidance was difficult because he was in the middle. Meghan began class. "Today we are going to talk about onomatopoeia." Meghan recently realized that she could recycle her lessons from second grade with this group. Onomatopoeia was a new concept for them.

"What is that crazy word?" Red asked, moving to the edge of his seat, ready to learn.

"Yes, it's a crazy word that we will learn all about. It's going to help you become better creative writers."

"Don't nobody need that," Skinny said.

Meghan looked at Skinny. "How do you know?" His skin was dry and badly in need of intensive moisturizing lotion.

"I just know."

"Is something bothering you?"

"Ain't shit botherin' me, lady."

YA David, who was still subbing for YA Goode, seemed to sneak up behind Meghan. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Daequan left today. Whenever any boy leaves it causes varying degrees of mess with the ones who have to stay."

“Makes sense,” Meghan said, sadly. She still was hurting from Skinny’s attack.

The boys started to chat as YA David spoke to her. “The chip on Skinny’s shoulder has nothing to do with you, nothing. Just give it a few days.”

“No problem.” Easily done for YA David, who had all the trust and rapport with the boys. They’d cooperate with him and YA BJ and YA Goode (if she was ever well enough to come back). Meghan wasn’t naïve anymore. She didn’t have leverage with these boys. Never did and never would.

But Daequan’s presence led her to believe otherwise, that she was still making progress. Now that was the unvarnished truth.

For the first time, she doubted whether she was going to return to Rising Sun. She would be glad not to see Skinny, Jon Jon or anyone new. Petey and Red had grown on her, but that was all.

She blinked away the tears in her eyes. Her thoughts were disturbing but they were only temporary. She was hurt. And the hurt made her want to give up. She wasn’t going to actually quit. She’d promised to be there for the Skinnys of the world.

YA David’s hands still rested on her shoulders.

Meghan felt faint. She shouldn’t have been shocked about Daequan, but she was. He was gone. His smile, his thoughtful responses, his willingness to learn, to protect her.

Gone.

Horribly so, Meghan's motivation was gone. She dropped her head, trying to process her feelings and how she would get through this class.

"Don't worry," YA David said, giving her a parting pat on her shoulders before going back to the shadowy corner from where he came. "Everything is okay."

By the end of class, Meghan had a light sheen on her face. She was surprised she'd made it through class without running away or fainting. The boys did pretty good with the onomatopoeia lesson. They were quick in identifying words that sounded like their meaning:

—Bang, bang, nigga, bang bang!

—Boom nigga!

—Pop-pop you dead!

Meghan didn't have the energy to challenge them not to use the n-word or to stop pretending to shoot each other with imaginary guns and rifles.

After class, she gathered her things quickly without saying goodbye to anyone.

CHAPTER 28

Meghan stood in her father's mancave, the first place she came to when she came home from Philadelphia some months ago. Her father peeled his eyes from the television and greeted Meghan with a smile. "Princess, what a surprise! How did you know I'd be here, hiding from a couple of meetings I didn't want to have today?"

"Molly told me that you'd be here," Meghan said.

"Sit down, Princess." Meghan sat next to her father on the leather couch. He pulled her into a tight hug. He smelled of beer and hair shampoo. "I'm thrilled to see you. What a treat!"

"Dad?" She pulled back to look him squarely in the face.

"Yes, honey."

"I'm going to take you up on your offer."

"What offer?"

"I'm going to work for the D. James Development Corporation."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, me, I'm going to accept your offer."

He didn't ask why. Meghan was glad he didn't ask why. David James was a man who made many presumptions that were usually right. He presumed her change of heart was because of a malfunction of the environment she was in. He would never have presumed that Meghan would quit Rising Sun due to a malfunction within herself. She omitted the truth—that *she* was the problem.

David James wasn't trying to understand his daughter and what led her to her decision to leave. He simply accepted the outcome. He was happy with her decision to come to work for him and that was all that mattered. He hugged her again.

"Too tight, dad, too tight." Meghan wiggled from his hug.

Where Meghan should have felt gratitude and happiness for her ease into a new position, she felt disappointment, guilt, and insecurity. She wasn't sure this was the right move. She wasn't proud of herself for aborting her mission to successfully teach socioeconomically disadvantaged children. No matter how irritating those boys had been, they didn't deserve more abandonment. But the truth was, staying wouldn't have helped. She didn't feel safe. She didn't feel respected. With Daequan gone there was a high probability that things would devolve.

Meghan decided to quit.

Her father looked her in the eyes. What was he seeing in her? How exhausted she was? Her profound distress? He was not seeing those things. He was seeing his own relief reflected in his daughter.

“How soon do you want to start, Princess?”

“Um, I don’t know, dad. I need a few weeks to get things together.” As soon as Meghan said it, she knew how evasive it sounded and that her father would pick at her answer.

“What things?” His eyebrows narrowed.

Meghan sighed. “I don’t know, dad. I just need a little time. Nothing will be lost at the D. James Development Corporation if I start work in a few weeks.”

“Okay, Princess, take your time. But in the meantime, do you have an idea of what you’d like to do when you start working?”

Meghan was surprised he let that part of the conversation go so easily. She shrugged. “Honestly, I haven’t given much thought. What do you think I’d be good at?”

“You could go into sales? Marketing? What do you think?”

“Sounds very boring, dad.”

“Boring is okay for right now. How about something related to writing? We always need good writers. You can write in marketing.”

“Like writing what?”

He kissed her on the cheek and rattled her hair. "You'll figure it out, Princess. It'll all be great." He turned back to the television and leaned toward the soccer game. "Let's watch. You used to love watching soccer together."

Only so I could be closer to you. She would've watched paint dry with him if it meant being closer to him.

"I can't stay, dad. But thank you for giving me a job." She squeezed his warm, smooth hand. "It'll all be great. I'll figure it out."

She left to shop for baby clothes with Molly. She had a fierce want for her father to relax. She'd never stopped to think about all the stress he carried each day to keep everyone happy and supported.

PART III: Meghan the Beautiful

CHAPTER 29

Daequan finally called Meghan after two weeks of her quitting Rising Sun. She was excited but not as excited as she would've been if he had called her right away. What took him so long?

She and Eric had been on three dates since then: ice cream on the Harbor, a new Mexican fusion restaurant, and a day trip to a vineyard in Virginia. They had sex, quite a bit of it. Meghan enjoyed being with Eric, but she couldn't stop thinking of Daequan. She felt so foolish for caring and for wishing. She had Eric, one of the most eligible bachelor's hands around her waist. She and Eric laughed together. She and Eric were happy together.

When Daequan called, Meghan was sitting cross-legged on her sofa practicing yoga breathing techniques. It was the best thing she could think of to ward off her anxiety these days. She could find no reason for her anxiety. All the pieces of her life were put together now. She had a new job. Her DC Weekly column was quickly becoming more

popular. She and Eric were progressing nicely. She had no worries. She was safe.

Meghan challenged herself to keep her back as straight as possible as she took the call on speakerphone. She'd read somewhere that straightening the spine while holding one's breath for at least five-second repetitions helped with anxiety. She held her breath as Daequan greeted her.

"Ms. Meghan." His voice sounded a notch deeper and seemed a tad sluggish. Maybe because it was seven o'clock in the morning and he'd just woken up. Meghan was typically an early bird, so she was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, glad to have recently turned in her next article to Sam for publication. This one was about a new state-of-the-art dog park in Capitol Hill.

She exhaled. "Daequan. Nice hearing from you. How are you? I didn't expect you to call me at this point." She sucked in another breath.

"You gave me your number. It's not every day I get such a beautiful lady who gives me her number. I'm fine."

"That's great. What are you up to, Daequan? I hope you're staying out of trouble." Regrettably, she sounded like a teacher talking to her student which was the last thing she wanted to sound like.

"I am, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Yeah, Ms. Meghan, I guess. You don't understand. Most people who don't come from where I come from don't understand. Staying out of trouble is hard. All it takes

is to live and breathe before you get pulled into some shit. But so far so good, Ms. Meghan.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Why you say that? *Sorry* don’t do nothin’. Same shit, different day.”

“Are people mad at you?”

There was a long pause. Meghan wondered if she was being too nosy, asking him if people were mad at him because he killed Cue. “Nah,” he said, lightly as if they weren’t talking about a murder. “We don’t need to get into all that...”

“Fair enough,” Meghan said, sucking in another breath.

“I just wanted to hear your voice,” Daequan said. Meghan could tell he was smiling.

“Really?”

“Really,” he said.

“I quit.” The words tumbled out of Meghan’s mouth.

“Quit what?”

“Rising Sun.”

“Why you do that?”

“I’m not sure. I guess I just lost my mojo.”

Daequan laughed. “Mojo, man, you say the craziest shit, but I mean that in a good way, Ms. Meghan. I like how you talk, the things you say.”

She ran her fingers through her hair. She was ready for a shower. Her cucumber scented body wash mixed with the faint smell of mouthwash always made her feel tranquil.

“What you lose? Mojo, you said?” he said, tickled.

“Yes. I just think I wasn’t the right person for the job anymore,” she said.

“I understand. Them niggas are somethin’. So many teachers leave ‘cause they cain’t get them niggas in line. But your class was pretty good. It was excellent for me.”

“Excellent?” A sexual valve was released in Meghan.

“Yeah. I learned a lot from you.”

Meghan needed to hear him say that. She’d made an impact. And that was too bad that Mrs. Gibbs couldn’t see it. Meghan’s lesson was that you don’t need to stay in a place for long to make your desired impact. If she ever spoke to Mrs. Gibbs again she would tell her that. Leaving so abruptly, she surely left them in a lurch, scrambling to find a replacement. She felt sorry. While it felt relieving to hear Daequan’s point of view, she’d left Red and Petey. She never said goodbye to them. She ran away from everything because she wasn’t committed—just like Mrs. Gibbs said she would be. Technically Meghan was no better than when she left Brewster.

She refused to make herself feel any worse in this conversation. She’d been hiding her shame about the way she left Rising Sun, not admitting to herself how poor her decision was to leave. She’d made it about Daequan. Not the others. Not about her capabilities, but her weaknesses. She was a quitter. That fact was the cause of her anxiety these days.

Meghan quit her breathing technique and breathed normally again. "I learned a lot from you, too. You were a joy to teach."

"Wow, thank you, Ms. Meghan. Wow. Ms. Meghan, I gotta ask, why did you give me your number? That was some unorthodox shit. A teacher wantin' to be friends with her criminal student."

She laughed nervously. When it was put that way she sounded like a creep. "I gave you my number because I care about you, Daequan, you and your future. I didn't think you had enough help at Rising Sun. I don't think you had enough help before you went in. Somehow I think I can help you."

"Help me do what?"

"Umm...figure out what would be good for you going forward."

"I never asked for that."

"I know. But I've worked with kids--youth long enough to know that you all don't know enough to ask for help," Meghan said.

"I don't need your help. We can be friends if you want, but I don't want your help on how to live my own life." That stung Meghan a little bit. But he was right. "So, what are we gonna do? Do you want to see me? Do you want to hold my hand?" Daequan's voice lightened.

Her body throbbed at the thought of seeing him. She was ready for him to pin her to a wall and fuck her.

She slowly rocked herself, trying to simmer her urges as they talked. She didn't want him to know how badly she

wanted him. She'd wanted him all along, but they were stuck between the walls of Rising Sun. She needed to know if he felt the same primal urge to have sex with her.

"I would like to see you." Under her lime green silk pajama shorts, she stroked herself. She couldn't help it. She bit her lip to keep from making any sounds as she quickly orgasmed.

"You there?" he said. "You real quiet."

As she felt her body release, she said, "I'm here."

"You sound out of breath. What you doin'? Running up steps?"

"I am doing a little yoga."

"Now that's some white woman shit, I gotta say." He laughed. "You strikin' poses while you're on the phone with me and shit."

"You could say that. I would like to see you, Daequan."

"Really?" He sounded like an excited little boy. "Where can we meet? How about the library close to where I live?"

Meghan laughed. He couldn't be serious. She imagined someplace discreet. Some place outside of his neighborhood. At a coffeehouse downtown where no one would recognize him. Maybe her place.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing, nothing. Sure, Daequan, we can meet there. But I must ask, why did you choose the library?"

"I like the library. There ain't a lot of people there. Just mothers, kids, and homeless people. It's so quiet and

peaceful. I don't go there by myself much. But I've always wanted to hang there. This is my chance to go with you."

Sweet. She was grateful that he wanted to spend time with her at a place he admired. "Won't it be odd for people to see us together?" she asked.

"You, Ms. Meghan, you are still my teacher. I like you and all, but you are still my teacher. That's how people will see it. Teacher and student. Especially if you bring one of those sharpened pencils you always bring." They laughed.

"The library it is."

CHAPTER 30

Gorgeous was the only word to describe Daequan when he came into the Rosa Parks Library in Ward 8. His dazzling smile hadn't changed, only perhaps it was brighter. Was that a sparkle in his eyes?

Meghan had never heard of the library before, but it was quite nice with all the open space and sunlight. She'd never been "across the river" as they say. She didn't know much more about the ward than this moment. She wished she did.

Meghan had been fifteen minutes early. She brought *War and Peace*, a novel she only read occasionally when she was bored.

She closed the heavy book and waved as he scanned the room. She couldn't stop smiling. He was out of Rising Sun, free now. He looked better than when he was in Rising Sun. It was his height. He was taller than she remembered. He had to be at least six feet.

They hugged briefly. She smelled his cheap cologne. It was too strong but on him, it worked. He couldn't wear cologne at Rising Sun. This was his choice now that he was free. Meghan gestured for him to have a seat. He sat and spread his legs in that obnoxious, casual masculine way that she'd been accustomed to at Rising Sun.

"Ms. Meghan... You're really here."

"I am," she said. "I'm really here."

"At my library, in my 'hood."

He'd gotten a fresh haircut on the sides and back. His dreadlocks were hoisted on top in his signature overstuffed bun.

You're so handsome," Meghan found herself saying.

"Thank you, thank you," he joked, bowing. His eyes looked a little hazel as the sunroof sun reflected off them. Like his mother's eyes.

"So how are you, Daequan?" Meghan asked, rolling a pencil between her fingers. She'd brought the freshly sharpened pencils and his old notebook in case they needed to look like teacher and student.

He shrugged. "I'm alright, I guess." He put his hand over her hand on the table. His touch was warm. She wanted to kiss him. "You're so sweet. I never knew a sweet lady like you."

Meghan blushed. "Thank you, thank you." She bowed like he did, causing a laugh between them. She was surprised that he touched her hand in public. But she was glad. It meant something more than teacher and student. It was human to human. Man and woman. "You're sweet,

too. I've never known a man like you before." Calling him a man felt premature, but she'd already said it and didn't want to draw attention to it by retracting it.

"Man, huh. I like the sound of that. I'm sure you have plenty of men to choose from."

"I'm not sure about that." Eric popped into her head and she felt a pang of guilt. She tried her best to brush it away. It wasn't like she was cheating on him. He wasn't her official boyfriend, not yet anyway. She didn't owe him anything. But Eric was a sweet man, too. And he was a real man. "Daequan, it doesn't matter who I can choose from. I choose you."

He looked surprised. She was even more surprised at herself for being romantic. She fidgeted with her pencil until she could meet his eyes.

"Ms. Meghan--"

She put down the pencil and put her hand on top of his, making a hill. "Just call me Meghan. We're friends now." She imagined them having sex and in the heat of it him calling out "*Ms. Meghan.*" That's the only time she wanted him to call her that. The thought of it turned her on now, in the library, with kids giggling and the beeps of the checkout machine.

"I'm not your teacher anymore. I want us to become friends."

"How old are you, Ms. Meghan?"

"*Meghan,*" she insisted.

"Right, Meghan--Meghan. Meghan. Okay, Meghan."

"I'm twenty-four. I told you that."

"Damn. You're old." His bluntness was funny, but she was embarrassed. She *was* old compared to eighteen. She wasn't old when she told him her age in Rising Sun.

"Why does this all matter, Daequan?" she asked.

"It doesn't. It's just that I ain't been with a lady your age before. You're old. A sexy old woman." They both laughed.

"I'll take the sexy part and the woman, but not the old."

During their silence, Meghan noticed a sticky stain of gum under her new white sandals.

"Actually, Ms. Meghan--excuse me, Ms. Meghan--shit..."

"Don't worry," she said, sorry she'd made a deal of him calling her Meghan.

"I've been thinkin'... Remember that conversation we had when I was locked up? The one about what I was gonna do once I got out?"

Meghan nodded.

"I think I got somethin' I want to do with my life. You ready, Ms. Meghan? Meghan, my bad."

"I'm ready."

"I like what you do, teaching. You teach people how to write and express themselves."

"Wow, Daequan, that's wonderful." Meghan meant it but she knew how hard getting there would be for him. She wouldn't ruin the moment by detailing the path to becoming a bona fide teacher. "What would you like to do

exactly? Would you like to be a classroom teacher? A poet? A writer?"

He looked confused yet pensive. "I don't know yet. But I do know that you make people feel like they can float."

"Really?" Meghan flashed back to her old classroom in Philly where there was no floating. People were only stuck to the ground.

"Yes, really. When I was in your class, I always felt like I could say somethin' and it was always important. No matter what happened in my life, it was all welcome. With the shit I did with Cue, my side of things was important to you. Nobody ever asked my side but Velvet. I never told her." He dropped his head and said, "I just couldn't. Vel didn't deserve to know how bad things were. I didn't want to break her heart. But you. I knew you could handle it. I needed you to handle it. You listenin' to me, writin' all them damn notes," he chuckled. "I could start to handle my issues and shit. I didn't have to lock it up inside and pretend like nothin' was fucked up. I didn't have to pretend to the YAs and Mr. Mitchell and them that I was just a good kid who came to Rising Sun for no good reason."

Meghan could've cried, but she didn't. She didn't want to ruin the sweetness of the moment. He was confirming what she needed to hear. She wasn't just some terrible, ineffective teacher who didn't belong in the classroom. Daequan was reminding her that she was Meghan James who knew how to make kids feel important and help them improve their lives.

"I want to do what you do," Daequan said, lifting his head.

He'd have to finish high school, then get into college, at a minimum, then he could possibly make a living as a teacher. That would be at least five years away if everything went right in his life. He would need safety and freedom. He would need the privilege of selfishness. He wouldn't have those things unless the world made a seismic shift in his favor. Who was going to support Velvet? Their mother couldn't do it alone working in a grocery store.

"How about this, Daequan?" she said, tightening her ponytail. "Let's go," She stood up.

"Where are we goin'?"

"Let's go." Meghan had no idea where she was taking him. She just had the urge to leave. Two librarians sitting behind the check-out desk stared at them surely with the thought: *What the hell was a blonde, white woman doing at the Rosa Park Library with this boy?* Meghan pressed the notebook and pencil to her chest as she walked past the two unsmiling women.

After they got in her car, Meghan let the windows down to cool the blazing seats. She texted Jenny to ask if she could stay somewhere else for the night. Waiting for her response, Meghan put on her shades. Jenny's answer would be yes if she bothered to answer at all. Jenny had spent fewer and fewer nights in the apartment since their argument. Meghan had tried to say she was sorry once as they were both fiddling in the kitchen, but she couldn't get the word sorry out. She only said, "I regret our conversation." To which Jenny said, "Yeah."

"Is everything okay?" Meghan said to Daequan.

"Those Gucci? That shit is right." Daequan whistled.

Honestly, Meghan couldn't remember which shades she'd put on. She had Prada, Coach--counting the different name brands made her feel ridiculous to have so many designer shades. "Yes, these are Gucci, I think."

"Damn, you got a nice car, Ms. Meghan, for real." He looked around like a little boy getting ready to take off on his first rollercoaster ride. Meghan felt uncomfortable with Daequan's childlike admiration of her things. "It's clean as shit, too."

"Clean is good, I hope."

"It even smells good." He sniffed. "What smell is that?"

"The car isn't new, but I try to keep it in good shape. But no, I don't have anything special to make the car smell good."

"Everything about you is in good shape, Ms. Meghan. You are. Your car is. Damn!"

"Buckle in," Meghan said as she clicked in.

Jenny texted back: *Np.*

Meghan froze a moment, mourning the loss of her friendship with Jenny. She'd been a total bitch to Jenny that day on the patio. But Jenny had too although Meghan doubted Jenny could see the error in her ways.

"You okay?" Daequan said watching a mood come over Meghan from nowhere.

Meghan could've shut this date down. She should have. But she didn't. She wouldn't. Daequan was still a human being and quite a good one nearly all his days. She wasn't going to throw him away, especially because he had been

good to her. She was attracted to him, and she couldn't change that if she wanted.

She put her hand on his hand resting on the console. "I'm fine."

He looked down at their hands. "Damn, this feels good. I never felt... so good before. I feel good with you, Ms. Meghan."

"Me, too, Daequan."

"Where we going?" He chuckled, "Sorry, Ms. Meghan. I mean to call you by your name, but it's hard." He practiced saying her name six times. Her name never sounded so sexy. Her name was perfect now. He pulled her hand to his face and kissed it. "Meghan the Beautiful. That's you from now on."

Meghan didn't prefer her new pet name. She didn't want to be put on a pedestal. But she knew it was his way of showing affection.

"Where are we goin', Meghan the Beautiful?" He rolled the back of his head on the headrest. Everything he did was sexy.

Meghan's phone rang from her purse laying on the backseat. She grabbed the phone and looked at who was calling. "Crap." She tossed the phone in the backseat.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." It was Mrs. Gibbs. If only Mrs. Gibbs could see her now, next to Daequan. Meghan smiled deviously.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure." Mrs. Gibbs's call sobered her. She sat up straight. New start. She thought about never returning her call, but she didn't want to be any more of a quitter than she already was. She would return her call—later, of course. "How about ice cream?"

Daequan rested his head back "Wherever you want. I just wanna be with you."

Without thinking, she leaned over and kissed him. His lips: nice and plump. She'd never had a better kiss.

She ran her hand over his thigh and massaged him on the outside of his pants. He was hard as a rock, but he pulled back and said, "No, nah, not here."

Meghan had never been stopped before by a man. If anything, men always wanted her to do more sexually. She was throbbing. She slowly inhaled before speaking. She pulled her hand back and rested it on her lap. "Is everything okay?" she said to him.

"Most definitely. You're sexy as hell. But..." He rubbed her thigh, "Let's be cool. Cool? We're still in the library parking lot."

Meghan eyed the library's front door. Two young women, close to Daequan's age, were leaving with their babies in strollers. Were they the kind of women Daequan normally went for? They were curvaceous and clearly put a lot of energy into their looks: the long, flowing fake hair, the fake eyelashes, ample lipgloss, cropped tops and the tightest jeans Meghan had ever seen. She looked at Daequan. He was looking straight ahead in a zone, not at those girls. Nothing for Meghan to be worried about. A group of teenage boys howled their way into the building,

not caring that they were entering the quiet sanctity of a library.

Daequan was right. Not here. Anyone could see them. It dawned on her that he was worried about being seen with her. She didn't like feeling ashamed. This had never happened to her before. But she stayed quiet. Things would shift in her favor once they left the library. She decided not to be upset. She didn't want to ruin their day by being unpleasant.

"Let's go," he said.

"You want to grab something to eat? What are you in the mood for?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Not ice cream, I want real food."

Meghan slowly drove out of the parking lot and waited in the middle of the sidewalk to move into street traffic. A few pedestrians moved in front of and behind the car.

Meghan timidly mouthed "sorry" to them for being in their way. When they passed, she said, "Let's go grab some lunch then. What would you like, Daequan?"

"You know what I want to eat. Remember that from class?"

"I suppose I do. You like steak but I'm not taking you out for steak today."

"You ain't gotta be like that. Tease me then tell me no." He found something flirtatious in their exchange. "So, how about that steak? Pretty please, Meghan the Beautiful." His smile was wide and playful.

"No way I'm taking you for steak on a first date."

“So, this is a date?”

“Could be if you want it to be.”

“Oh, shit, Ms. Meghan. We are on a date.” He laughed.
“Wow.”

A Skinny looking kid banged on the hood of the car as he passed. Meghan jumped.

“Move your fuckin’ car you white bitch!” Meghan grabbed her chest as her heart shot out of a cannon. Daequan laughed and laughed. He couldn’t have stopped if he wanted. The boy kept moving—thankfully.

“Don’t worry. You were just in the boy’s way, that’s all. When you’re in the way, a motherfucker is gonna let you know.” His laughter tapered off. “We better get the fuck out of these people’s way.”

Meghan’s shaky hands gripped the steering wheel at ten and two.

“Aw, Ms. Meghan, that lil’ nigga ain’t gonna do shit to you. There ain’t no way a little nigga gonna’ do nothin’ to some rich white lady in the ghetto. That nigga would never see the sun again. With you, I’m safe as I will ever be.”

Meghan didn’t think the situation was funny. “Okay, I’m driving now. I don’t know where I’m going. I need your help. Tell me where to go.”

Daequan pointed right. She turned right. There was a concentration of people milling around storefronts. At one corner there were ten young men standing outside of a seen-better-days laundromat.

“So what restaurant are we going to?”

"I ain't never been to no restaurant before," Daequan said, quietly.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, seriously. Ain't no restaurants by my place. I live close to here. The only thing close to a restaurant is these Chinese joints. People order in front of dirty bulletproof glass. The Chinese people hate us. But if you want us to eat there, usually there is a nasty table and two chairs inside."

Meghan didn't know what to say. She was appalled. "Sorry," she said, driving eighteen miles per hour. A car aggressively beeped from behind, then sped around the car, only to be stuck at a long red light with Meghan's car. Her body tensed.

"Don't be sorry for me, Ms. Meghan. It's just a fact. You'd be surprised how much you don't need restaurants." He was right but she wouldn't want to live without restaurants.

They ended up at McDonald's parking lot in Maryland bordering DC's Southeast. Daequan liked McDonald's best of all the choices around the big intersection a mile or so away from the library. There were Popeye's, Burger King, Taco Bell, and a Seven-Eleven in close range. Meghan was fine with McDonald's once a year but she didn't share that snobby little fact with him. She was nauseous from the thick smell of grease and gas permeating the air. There were four gas stations, two on each side of the six-lane road.

"Turn off the car, Meghan the Beautiful. I'll go in to get the food. What do you want?"

“Um, I’ll get a fish sandwich, nothing on it.”

“What do you mean, nothin’?”

“I just want a plain fish sandwich, nothing on it.”

“You eat like a bird. That’s how you get that perfect body. I bet you don’t want French fries either.”

“That’s right.”

“No soda either.”

“You got it.”

“You are the strangest, beautifulest lady I know.” He pecked her on the cheek and went into McDonald’s. Though she was nervous she couldn’t help but smile at his kiss.

While he was gone, which seemed like forever, Meghan watched the drive-thru line grow long. Watching the line was a nice distraction from her fear that someone was going to put a gun to her head in exchange for her purse, or worse, her car.

Daequan came back as her fear was beginning to flood her again, handed her a bag, and started eating his Big Mac. She looked at his full bag of food. “Do you have another Big Mac?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said with a full mouth of food. “Got another for me, one for Velvet and for my mama if she comes home.” He admired his burger. “If she ain’t then this other one is mine, too.”

Meghan took a few small bites of her fish sandwich. She seriously felt sick. She had to hold it together. She refused to embarrass herself. She could handle this. Judging

by the way he was devouring his Big Mac, Meghan wondered if he'd eaten all day. She asked.

He stopped mid-bite and looked at her curiously. "Um, I ate some stuff earlier." She could tell he was lying. "What did *you* eat, Meghan the Beautiful?"

Meghan couldn't tell if he was mocking her or just trying to take the spotlight off himself. "Well, I ate an omelet with toast."

"One slice or two?" Daequan asked.

"One."

"I knew it. You are a one piece of bread lady."

Meghan didn't laugh. She preferred to talk about something else, something interesting. But Daequan persisted. "Did you have butter?"

"A little." Meghan didn't tell him everything she had for breakfast this morning. She'd picked up her favorite coffee from Tiger Stripes, too. She didn't mention that her coffee cost four dollars. She went there at least four days a week. She'd never thought about how much she spent on herself every day. It didn't feel good sitting next to Daequan. Her daily spending habits felt shameful. She acutely felt the distance between them. She shouldn't have done this, secretly meeting with him, recklessly calling it a date, and landing in an unfamiliar, oil-stained McDonald's parking lot.

She grabbed her purse from the back seat. "How much was lunch?" She pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. Daequan laughed and she felt silly once again because she didn't

know what was wrong and he did. "What's so funny?" she asked.

As his laughter faded, he said, "I can buy you lunch. I don't need your money. I know you got it. But I don't want it."

"Sorry," she said, putting the cash back in her purse.

"Don't tell me sorry again." He ran his fingers through her hair, catching a small kink.

"Damn, Meghan, who knew you had nappy hair!" He rolled over laughing again. Meghan didn't find it funny. He was laughing so hard he didn't notice Meghan's irritation that once again she was the butt of the joke.

They were silent as he finished his food. When he took his last bite, he eyed her untouched fish sandwich. "You gonna finish that?"

"Isn't your stomach going to burst right now?"

"Nope."

"Have at it." She handed him the sandwich.

He ate it in five bites. "Shit was dry. And cold. But," he figured, "It was good enough." He let down the window, balled all the wrappers and threw them out the window. Meghan was horrified. Littering was one of her pet peeves, to say the least. Whenever she saw someone littering, she was okay with their untimely death. "What did you just do?" she said, chopping each word.

"What do you mean, 'what did I just do'? I threw the shit away. What, you want me to put it in your back seat?"

"How about a trashcan?"

"Where?" he said, looking around. "That one?" It was five parking spots away. The trashcan had overflowed with McDonald's wrappers, and cups. Meghan spotted a half-opened soiled diaper, bees buzzing around it. She then understood what Daequan was saying in this case. It made no sense to put trash in a trashcan like that. Still. Littering was nonsensical.

"I see what you're saying," Meghan said, agitated, not so much at him anymore. Just agitated by being on this side of town where nothing felt good or clean.

"Don't worry, Meghan. Just relax. Ya'll white people be on some *save the planet earth* shit. Well, over here, this ain't the earth."

"What is it then?"

"It's dirty concrete with junk growin' from it. You ain't better than nobody around here, Ms. Meghan. We want the same as ya'll. The only difference is that we don't get what we want. Not gettin' stuff for so long changes you. You start to think you don't deserve it. It ain't possible. This is just how it is. That's how it's gonna be."

He lifted her hand and kissed it. He knew what he was doing: telling her the ugly truth with a kiss. That way she wouldn't get upset.

They rested their heads on the headrest. Meghan closed her eyes, trying not to think about where she was, but only who she was with. A peace that she was desperate to keep washed over her.

"I have a lil' man," Daequan said.

“A baby?” She raised her head. She tried not to sound upset but she was. It felt as if someone had slapped her.

“My kid, he’s one and some change, going on twenty-five. His name is Marcus.”

Meghan did the math. His baby was born when he was at Rising Sun the time before last.

“That’s great,” she said, though she didn’t mean it. She was pissed. She didn’t want to think negatively about an innocent little baby, but Daequan having a baby was a bad idea. He hadn’t graduated high school. He was intelligent for sure but that wasn’t enough to get through life. He was functionally illiterate. He needed to learn how to read and write. Math and science would surely help but there was no way he was proficient in those subjects or any subjects at all.

“Meghan the Beautiful.” His smile was dreamy, the kind of smile a new parent has for his child. “My son is gonna be different from me, better than me. He’s gonna have a chance.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Meghan scowled.

“Tell you what?”

Meghan was further irritated that he didn’t seem to understand her feelings or take them into account. “About your son.”

“It just wasn’t relevant. To us.” She could hear some defensiveness in his voice.

“I thought we knew each other well enough for you to tell me about your son.”

"I don't know everything about you. In fact, I don't know shit about you besides knowin' what you eat for breakfast."

"Fair enough, but clearly your son is your pride and joy."

"So what? It doesn't mean you need to know that."

She took a long frustrated breath. This time together was a waste. She didn't know much about him. She just knew that she was attracted to him. She was pretty sure he found her just as attractive.

"Don't get upset. I'm telling you now."

She folded her arms and nodded. Though there was nothing else useful to say on this topic she still felt upset and betrayed. She knew she didn't have the right. "What about his mother?"

"His mother?"

Were they a couple? A happy couple? Then Meghan changed her mind. She didn't want to know anything about the mother anymore. Surely, the child's mother was young and immature like Daequan. Meghan felt foolish and too old.

"Anastasia. We call her Ana."

With that name, Meghan figured the mother had to be pretty, though she knew her logic was shitty. A name was just a name.

"Why do you want to know about Marcus's mother?"

Meghan couldn't look at him. She didn't want to see more of his defensiveness.

“You trippin’. Cool down. You’re an important person to me. That’s all that matters, right?” From her periphery, Meghan could see him looking at her.

“Who are *you* with?” he said.

Meghan paused. She understood now. If she wanted to know about him, she needed to share information about her life. “I am dating.”

“See? What’s his name?”

“Eric.

“What that nigga do?”

Meghan laughed in dismay. Eric being called a nigga was wild. “Well, Eric is the vice president of a company.” She refused to tell Daequan anymore. It wouldn’t benefit him to know that the company was owned by her father.

Daequan looked at her quizzically. “You see what I mean? I know you ain’t telling me real shit about your life. I know. Am I right?”

“Right.” She was disappointed that Daequan was only making a point; he didn’t really want to know more of her life.

“What we have is real,” he said.

Meghan wasn’t sure if she could believe that. All she knew was that today was more revealing than she’d thought it would be.

He cupped her chin and gently pulled her face to him. He kissed her and she relaxed a little. “I had a life before you. That’s all we talkin’ about, my life before you. It’s real, it can’t go away,” he said.

He was right. The past didn't have to mean that their budding relationship wasn't important.

"Are you with Anastasia?" Meghan found herself foolishly asking, sounding like a jealous girlfriend.

His jaw tightened and his eyes closed. "Yeah, on and off kind of thing. It's hard to have a relationship with me being locked up for so long. We started together when I was in ninth grade. She was in seventh. Shit... She ain't on nothin' anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"She don't mind sittin' around all day, collecting handouts from Uncle Sam. She pregnant again but this time the baby ain't mine; it's another nigga's." He yawned and stretched his arms. "When you're locked up, you're locked up, you feel me. You can't control nothin'. Not one single thing."

"Do you like that sometimes?" Meghan asked.

"What?"

"Being in a place where you don't have to be in control and be responsible."

"How do you know?" He laughed.

"Don't laugh, Daequan. This isn't funny. I can imagine you needing a controlled space where you don't feel the pressure of taking care of everyone in your family. You're under a lot of pressure."

"I would never tell nobody but that's how I feel. That's why I've been locked up so many times."

"Everyone likes you there. You're the favorite."

He half-smiled. "I guess so."

"That's okay with you, too."

"With what?"

"You're being coy now. You know what I mean. It's nice to go to a place where you're loved. Where you are the favorite. I bet you don't feel that way out here."

"I never thought about it that way. But I don't want nobody to know that either. My dirty secrets. I know Velvet loves me. My mama do, too. Now my son. He's gonna love me forever, no matter what. Just like I love him no matter what. That's my lil' dude. He's gonna change the world. Be president one day."

"Quite possible." Though Meghan didn't think it was possible. Just because the baby was destined to acquire many problems not caused by him but carried by him. Meghan didn't have the heart to say anything except "quite possible."

"How do you think Anastasia feels about you?" she asked, playing therapist.

He shrugged. "It don't matter 'cause she ain't shit."

Two teenagers with a baby, lacking the tools to make it work, whatever *it* was. Their child had no chance of growing up without deep scars. Like his father.

"She wants me more than she wants that weak ass nigga, but I don't know. All I know is that Marcus is gonna be someone important, like you."

"I'm not so sure I'm important, Daequan."

“Stop bullshittin’. You matter. If somethin’ happen to you, five o’ be out everywhere tearin’ up everything to find you. They’d do anything to make sure you good. You feel me?”

Meghan had never thought about her life like this, that her life was more important than others. But Daequan was right; Meghan didn’t want to say. This wasn’t about her. This was about him.

He started kissing her. Christ, it felt so good. He started fondling her breasts. Everything was happening at lightning speed. She unzipped his jeans and stroked him.

He stopped kissing her and looked around. No one was in the McDonald’s parking lot. “I wanna make sure nobody can see us.”

“Okay.” Meghan tucked her hair behind her ears and looked sheepishly at him. With one expert hand, he pulled himself out from his briefs. His other hand guided her to it and she started orally pleasuring him. He gave off a musty smell that Meghan was both repelled by and attracted to.

“Oh shit, oh shit, don’t stop, shit, oh...” He pulled her hair up from his penis a couple of inches and said, “Open up.”

She opened her mouth as he pushed himself into her mouth, leaving her with the warm cum sliding down her throat. When he finished, he pulled out and began to tuck himself back into his jeans. “Meghan the Beautiful.”

Meghan felt cheap as she swallowed his never-ending cum. She started wiping her sticky face with her hands. She

wanted to throw up. She could feel the weight of her hair stiffening with semen.

“You alright?” Daequan said.

Meghan grabbed her purse from the back seat and got Kleenex to wipe her face. It helped but her face was still sticky. She remembered she had hand wipes in the glove compartment. She reached over him, got four of them, and started using them one by one. She had a scrunchie in the console. She pulled her hair back in a bun. She looked in the driver-side mirror and noticed her mascara was running.

“You got a wipe for me?” he asked. She handed him a wipe and he wiped his fingers. “Did I please you?” he asked.

Was he kidding? Things had been going well until the stunt he pulled in the end. “It was fine, I guess. I wanted you to be happy, so I was happy. I’d never had a man... do that into my mouth before. I didn’t quite enjoy that.”

He chuckled. “It’s good to try somethin’ new.”

She found nothing funny. She bit her tongue. She didn’t want to make their time together negative by telling him how disrespected she felt. She should’ve driven him home or to wherever but didn’t. She still wanted to spend time with him. She could live with the disrespect, for now.

“Next time, it’s my time to be happy. I’ll make the rules.” she said, trying to seem unbothered.

“I didn’t mean no harm,” he said.

"Let's go to my place." She was insane for extending this "date" with him. Insanity was the only way to explain it.

Meghan quickly drove away from the McDonald's parking lot. "Yo, what's the matter with you? Why you goin' so fast?" Daequan said.

"Nothing's wrong." She didn't talk to him the whole ride to her house. She was back to ruminating on how he'd disrespected her. He didn't know any better, she reasoned. That was not an excuse. She earned the right to kick him out of her car on some random corner of DC with no easy way home. Then the other side of her brain thought that things would work out. Not everything will be perfect. By the time they got to her house, she'd settled on, *let's move on. Let's see where insanity takes us.*

Daequan couldn't get over the underground parking. "This shit is crazy. How much does this cost?"

"I don't kiss and tell." Meghan finally spoke.

"Word. I understand that. You never want me to feel bad." Daequan stroked the side of her face. She didn't mind. She'd calmed herself down enough to feel attracted to him again.

In her apartment, she invited him to sit on the sofa. He didn't sit at first. "Damn, this is how rich people live." He spun around taking it all in and then sat down. "This is a nice couch." He rubbed the fabric.

"I'm glad you like it." She went to the kitchen and grabbed two glasses. "You want something to drink?"

“What you got?”

“Lemonade, water, wine.”

“Wine?” He cocked his head. “I never had wine before. Gimme wine.”

Meghan poured two glasses of Sauvignon Blanc, her favorite, and joined him on the sofa.

He took a sip. “Damn, this shit nasty.” He shook his head in protest. “But at least I can tell my son I had some fine wine when he gets older.”

Meghan took several sips. “Do you have a picture of your son?”

He pulled out his phone. Marcus was the screen saver. He looked like Daequan but with chubby cheeks. There was a strong resemblance by the nose and eyes. He was just perfect. “Awww,” she said. She wanted to scoop him out of the phone and give him a big kiss on his plump cheek.

Daequan smiled as he scrolled through more pictures of Marcus. Meghan saw one with Velvet and his mother kissing the baby on each cheek. Marcus looked like he couldn’t be happier.

“Who takes care of Marcus?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just mean that when you were at Rising Sun...”

“My mama took care of him as much as she could but she has to work a lot. Mostly he was with Ana and her mother. Now Marcus goes between us.”

“Daequan, I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

He looked at her. "What happened to me?"

She shrugged, unsure how to answer his question. "Everything."

"Everything? You are sorry about everything in my life. My life ain't that bad. I'm not dyin'." Meghan realized what she'd said was stupid. Of course, nobody's life was cursed completely. He was so proud of his son. His mother, though weary and tired of his destructive acts, and Velvet loved him. How dare Meghan insinuate that everything in his life was something to be sorry for.

"I know you're not dying. I don't mean to sound strange. I'm just saying that you've been through a lot, more than most people. So much trauma. It's not fair."

He stared at her. She had no idea what he was thinking. Then, he felt her hair like it was a new, unknown material. "I like your hair."

She blushed.

"Meghan the Beautiful."

She had to look terrible. She wanted to shower to wash off the ickiness of their sexual encounter, but she didn't want to be rude and leave him sitting there alone.

"So why did you bring me here?" Daequan asked.

Before she could answer, Daequan pulled her close and kissed her forehead. They kissed each other for so long Meghan forgot the question he'd asked.

His phone rang. He stopped mid-kiss to check it. He didn't answer it but whoever it was killed the mood. He sat back with something on his mind.

“You okay?” Meghan asked softly. She wondered if he’d joined his crew again.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“How about a shower?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you, Daequan--what’s your last name?” She felt so silly that she didn’t know already.

“Jackson.”

“Well, Mr. Jackson, you need a shower just as bad as I do.”

“Together?”

“Absolutely not, Mr. Jackson. One step at a time.” Though she’d already gone too far with her former student. She wagged her finger at him like a fifty-five-year-old suburban mom.

She got towels and a bar of cherry soap, a gift from Molly. They went to the bathroom. “There. You should be all set,” she said. He didn’t move. “What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Nah, nothin’.”

“Okay then. I’ll see you when you get out.” She wished she could have given him new clothes, too.

“Um, how do you turn on the shower?” He studied the showerhead. “The water just pours over your head?”

Meghan turned the shower on. “Easy, right?”

"I ain't never seen no shit like this before." He looked hesitant and curious. She left him in the bathroom while she put new sheets on her bed.

Ten minutes later, Daequan came out of the bathroom, locks dripping, wearing his jeans and underwear. He had his shirt in his hand. "It got wet," he said. He took the big towel and started patting his hair until it was no longer dripping. "That shit was nice, Meghan the Beautiful. Nice."

"I'm glad you liked the shower. It's one of my favorite things about this apartment." She couldn't help staring at his body with his six-pack, and sculpted arms. "What's your tattoo?"

"Oh," he looked down. "This is a macaw spreading his wings."

"Why did you pick that?" She was in awe.

"A macaw is a beautiful bird. I remember learnin' about macaws when I was in second grade. I never forgot it. The beautiful colors."

"Tell me about the wings. They're spread so wide all over your torso."

"Torso?"

"Your upper body."

"Oh. Torso, I like that. Torso. But back to my tat. I wanted to spread its wings like it's flying or just about to."

"Wow, that is beautiful, Daequan." And so was his body, a perfect specimen.

“I want to get the hell away from all the bullshit in my everyday life, you know? I want to fly away.”

“Me, too,” Meghan said so softly he didn’t hear.

“Do you have a tat?”

“I don’t,” she said.

“Let me guess what it would be if you got somethin’.” He frowned at her. “A bunch of little hearts close together. Or roses. Or Buddha.” He was having way too much fun mocking her, putting her in some white girl box.

“Actually, I would get one related to my mother.” This was news to Meghan herself, but it felt right.

“What’s her name?” he asked.

She paused, realizing that she hadn’t said her mother’s name aloud in months. “Sarah.”

“I like that name. Sarah. What’s wrong with puttin’ her name on you?”

Meghan paused again. *Sarah, Sarah, Sarah.* She shrugged. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I am right.”

Meghan couldn’t look him in the face for fear of getting emotional. She was sure her mother wouldn’t have judged her for her actions today. Where everyone else in her life would judge Meghan for having sex with a criminal boy-barely-a-man who was her former student, her mother wouldn’t. At least she’d like to think so. Looking at the Macaw, Meghan missed her mother so much it nearly brought her to her knees.

She diverted her near collapse by looking at the tee-shirt Daequan was holding. It was sagging with water. “Would you like me to take that? I can put it in the dryer.”

“Please.” He was looking around for the washing machine. She walked next to the bathroom and opened a door to the stacked washer and dryer. “That’s some shit from a James Bond movie, all hidden and shit.”

She laughed. She put his shirt in the dryer, poured him a glass of lemonade and another glass of wine for herself. They didn’t say much while they drank and waited for his shirt to dry. She was fine with the silence. She kept thinking of Sarah. She would’ve killed to know more about her mother when she was alive. What happened to her mother after death? It was excruciating not to know the answers. It was excruciating to love someone fiercely and not know enough about them. Meghan only knew Sarah as a mother and a wife. She wanted to throw a chair at a wall. Instead, she drank two more glasses of wine. Then another.

“You want to stay the night?” Meghan asked as Daequan put his tee shirt back on. The question just popped out of her. She wanted him to stay, to keep her warm. She didn’t want to be alone.

“Uh...” He pulled out his phone and checked it. His face soured as he scrolled.

“Daequan, is everything okay? I don’t mean to be intrusive but when you check your phone you seem upset.”

“I ain’t mad. I just got a lot of shit going on.”

“You care to share?” she asked.

“Uh... It’s just that niggas still be on the same bullshit. They never change. That’s the reason I wanna get out of here. Me, Marcus, Velvet and my mama.” His jaw clenched.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry again,” his voice cut. She hadn’t heard him this angry before. “I told you to stop. Sorry don’t help nothin’. I don’t mean to be rude to you. I just wish I had more than sorry.” He was quiet as he hung his head. He was thinking about something, searching for an answer to a question Meghan didn’t know. “I know niggas still mad about Cue. Hell, I’m still mad about Cue. The whole situation.”

All Meghan could think to say was sorry again. But she dared not repeat it. Cue’s murder and the fallout was not a territory she could help him. She was still sorry about it.

“Niggas won’t let it be. He’s gone.”

“Come on, Daequan, stay.”

They slept through the night. No sex. He fell asleep so easily. At first Meghan was a little upset because she wanted to be with him, but it wasn’t long before she fell asleep, too. She spooned him, loving the smell of the fabric softener and the soap she’d given him and the feel of his firm body.

Daequan woke up first. “Good morning, Meghan the Beautiful,” he whispered, gently shaking her shoulder. “Time to get up.”

“Huh?” Meghan slurred. When she opened her eyes, he was staring at her.

“Good morning,” she said, groggily, wiping away the crust in her eyes. “What are you looking at?” She hoped to God her breath didn’t smell.

“You. Meghan the Beautiful,” he said.

She sat up and finger-combed her hair. “You okay?” she asked softly.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“How did you sleep?”

“I never slept so good.” His voice was deep. He had taken his hair down before they slept. He looked as impressive as Meghan imagined Christ’s hair would. It was silly comparing him to Jesus, but she couldn’t explain just how stunning his hair was. He put his hair up and secured it with the rubber band he’d worn around his wrist.

“I love your hair. Do you ever wear your hair down?” she asked.

“Nah. No reason why. I just don’t.”

Meghan stood up. “Let me cook you breakfast, Daequan the Delight.” He smiled halfway. “I don’t know how long I can keep that name up,” Meghan said. “But indeed, you’re delightful. I’ll make you some of my famous scrambled eggs and potato hash.”

He’d pulled out his phone and started texting, face frowning again. She left him and went to cook.

They talked about Rising Sun over breakfast. He was fond of every staff member, including Mrs. Gibbs and Mr.

Mitchell. Meghan omitted her distaste for Mrs. Gibbs. What was important was that he had a positive experience. That he felt safe.

“And of course, you. I’ve never had a teacher like you. You didn’t know it, but the other boys liked you, too. They were just fools, not knowin’ how to have a good time learnin’.” He put his fork down and looked at Meghan. “How does it feel to be unemployed?”

“Not too bad. I got a new job,” Meghan said.

“That’s what’s up.” He smiled as he scooped a big mouthful of eggs. “When niggas lose their jobs they be mad unemployed for months, sometimes years, sometimes forever. They get on them government rolls. Anyway, what’s your job?”

Meghan didn’t know how to respond to him as he spoke about the reality of unemployment for poor people. She felt bad but also grateful that she didn’t need a job, and when she wanted one she could always have one, a decent paying one at that. If she wanted, she could work her way to the top of her father’s firm. “It’s a marketing job.”

“What’s that?”

“Just letting people know you’re selling something. That’s the basic definition.”

“Wow, it sounds dope. Where are you gonna work?”

“My father’s company.” She explained that it was a development firm.

“That sounds like big money.”

“My father builds all over DC.”

“Ward 8? I bet he doesn't. Don't nobody want to build in such a hell hole.”

Meghan didn't have the stomach to tell Daequan that D. James Development Corporation was going to level his community in a matter of months. “I wouldn't be so sure.” Anxiety gripped her from her lack of honesty. She had a chance to help him and didn't. She didn't want to put more on his shoulders than was already there. She poured herself a big glass of wine. It was before eight o' clock in the morning. Daequan made a funny, confused face as she took her first sip.

“Don't ask,” was all Meghan could muster.

Daequan continued to discuss the idea of some development firm building in Ward 8. “I've seen a little building here or there where I live but nothing serious. In fact, everyone in Ward 8 knows the deal. White people ain't interested in comin' over the river. They'd rather go to Mars first.” He looked at Meghan to see if his joke landed but it didn't. “Well, I hope no one's going to come anywhere near me and mine. That would mean me and my mama and Velvet got to move. And I don't know where the hell we'd go. There's a better place where Marcus could go to school.” He cocked his head. “Well maybe it wouldn't be the worst idea, if the government gave us a better place to live.”

Meghan said nothing as he was trying to imagine uprooting his family. Meghan's leg started nervously tapping. Her face heated. She suddenly felt tired.

“You okay?” he asked her.

“I am.”

“You just got all different. Your face is red.”

“I’m fine.” She excused herself for the bathroom. She sat on the lid of the toilet and tried her Square Breathing. It helped some. Then she threw water on her face and dried it very well so Daequan wouldn’t ask any more questions about her wellbeing. She didn’t quite feel ready to go back to him. She felt like a liar, despite knowing that she didn’t have all the information about leveling Williams T. Heights. If she told him, she’d be speaking out of turn. It would be reckless. It wouldn’t help anyway?

“Your eggs are amazin’. I never tasted nothin’ like this. What do you put in it? What’s your secret ingredient?”

“Scallions.”

“Scallions?”

“Yes, they’re related to onions. I have a few other tricks up my sleeve, but I’d have to kill you if I told you.”

“I don’t want to know because I don’t wanna die.” Daequan said without a laugh.

“You want some more eggs?” Meghan said.

“Hell yeah. And the potatoes. And more toast with that fancy ass bread you got.”

It was brioche but Meghan didn’t tell him. This wasn’t a cooking class. She didn’t want to be his teacher anymore. Their time together proved that he taught her things as well.

She leaned against the kitchen counter and sipped her wine. Watching him enjoy her food gave her pleasure.

Daequan wiped his mouth with a napkin, guzzled the rest of his juice. She was prepared to offer him more, but he stood up and patted his belly. "I could stay here with you for the rest of my life. I'm so relaxed. You treat me good. Better than anybody else in my whole life. Velvet would if she knew how."

Her phone rang. She fetched it from the living room table. It was Eric. She silenced the call. "Where are you going?" she asked Daequan.

"I gotta get Marcus. Ana actin' a damn fool. I was supposed to get him last night and she was pissed I didn't."

Meghan didn't like hearing Ana's name. Ana would always be tied to him. She would always have that ubiquitous title: mother of his child. Meghan had no such ties. She couldn't compete. There was no binding element between Meghan and him. It was too soon. Only yesterday, Daequan had said sweet words to her in the McDonald's parking lot to make her believe they could grow their relationship. *What we have is real.*

Meghan weighed her options. To take him home or not. She could spend more time with him. She was leaning towards no. The possibility of seeing Anastasia could piss her off. No.

He rocked on his feet. "Can I get a ride?" he asked.

"I have an appointment. I'm sorry."

"Is there a bus around here then?"

Meghan had no idea. She didn't know for certain where the metro was either. She vaguely knew it was near Barrack's Row, five or six blocks away.

Daequan took out his phone, trying to find his route home. Meghan rushed him and gave him a hug so hard he dropped his phone. He put his arms around her. "You okay?"

"Not sure," she said. "I don't want you to go." She got on her toes and kissed him. "I need you. Before you go, I need you." She tried to unbuckle his pants before he took over. His pants and briefs hung around his ankles. She pulled him to the kitchen then slipped off her pajama shorts and panties. He lifted her on the counter, spread her legs and entered her. In less than one minute, they orgasmed together, her letting out a guttural sound as he grunted and panted.

"That's good, Meghan the Beautiful. Real good." His head collapsed on her shoulder. She enjoyed feeling his sweat on her body. She wished she would have had enough time to take off her pajama top. She wanted him to suck her breasts. Her nipples were so hard they pushed through her satin top.

As if he knew her thoughts, he pulled back and looked at her breasts. "Damn, girl, delicious." He squeezed them. "Next time, Meghan the Beautiful. We will do these beauties next time," he said.

"Amazing," Meghan said. It was more than amazing.

She drove him to the metro. They'd planned the route he would take to get home. They barely said anything to each other. He looked at his texts for most of the five-minute drive. "Damn," he said.

"What?"

"Nothin'." His attitude dimmed, as if his flame was snuffed.

"You sure?" Meghan hoped it wasn't about Ana.

"Yeah, it's just that niggas can't leave well enough alone. He's dead. I killed him. I had to."

"Cue," she said, softly. He didn't seem to hear her. He was staring at his knees, but he was staring at some invisible spot far away like the day his mother slapped him in the Rising Sun cafeteria.

Meghan pulled over on Pennsylvania Ave in front of the station. She turned on her emergency lights, hoping they could talk. "Would you please tell me what's bothering you?"

"What you gonna do?" Daequan said.

The question caught her off guard. She said nothing.

He sighed and put his phone in his pocket. "I'd better get out of here." He opened the door then looked back at her. It hurt, seeing him leave mainly because she didn't know when she would see him again.

"Stay good." He gave her a peck on the cheek before getting out.

"Wait! Daequan... When do you think we can get together again?"

"Soon...I just gotta deal with a few things and then I'll holla at you."

She watched him walk away. He suddenly stopped and turned towards Meghan. "Thank you, Meghan the Beautiful, for everything. It was all lovely."

CHAPTER 31

As Meghan was sautéing spinach to go with her salmon for dinner, she decided to call back Mrs. Gibbs. She didn't want to pass up a moment when she felt strong enough to do it. Maybe being with Daequan earlier allowed her the courage to do it. He let her know without a doubt that she had made a positive impact on the boys at Rising Sun. Mrs. Gibbs should know that.

"Mrs. Gibbs?"

"Ms. James."

Silence.

"You called me earlier. I'm returning your call."

"Yes, I thought you would have let me know you were leaving. I didn't appreciate hearing from the boys."

Meghan understood. "I didn't think it all the way through."

"See, that's just it. You didn't think it all the way through."

Meghan said nothing. She could've hung up then. She didn't need to listen to this.

"When we first met, I knew you wouldn't last."

"I lasted long enough. I made my mark."

"You're using your own barometer, different from the boys, and mine, and Mr. Mitchell's. He was surprised to learn of your decision to leave the boys as well. Ms. James, leaving when you did is a shame. I'm aware that you had a close relationship with Daequan who happened to leave just before you. Is that why you quit?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you quit when you got what you wanted?"

"No!"

Mrs. Gibbs waited. "It is not my business, but it is my observation. Ms. James. This is the second time, at least, when you left when times got hard. The first was Philadelphia."

"It was always hard," Meghan said.

"Yes, it's hard on the boys, too. You were making good progress."

"Now you see that I can teach."

"That wasn't the question. Mr. Mitchell saw your abilities when he interviewed you—I'll give him that. I knew you would leave; it was only a matter of time. It will not be easy replacing you with someone qualified to teach."

"I'm glad you can see I am fit for the job."

"You had some qualifications, but fit is another thing. A quitter is never fit for the job."

"The job became too unsafe, Mrs. Gibbs. How can you call me a quitter when I witnessed a bloodbath? You expected me to stay?"

The spinach was unfortunately wilted and crispy now. Meghan turned the stove off and sat on the sofa. "Mrs. Gibbs, I apologize for not telling you first that I was leaving."

"An apology from you is not why I called. I just wanted you to know what you left behind."

"Is there anything else you need from me? I've got to finish cooking dinner." She'd made too much salmon. If Jenny were there, she would have offered her some. But Jenny wasn't there. She was rarely there anymore. Meghan was stuck with too much fish and no vegetables.

"I don't need anything else from you, Ms. James. I wish you the best."

Meghan was upset when the call ended. Mrs. Gibbs didn't seem to understand her. She didn't give Meghan credit for anything she'd done. It was all negative. Meghan knew Mrs. Gibbs was only trying to stick a knife in her and twist it. Though Meghan's blood was pumping, and she was shaking, she decided to ignore her former boss. She never had to see her again.

Lying on the sofa, watching television after dinner, Meghan was surprised to see a call from Daequan. She

almost didn't pick up. She'd had time to think about their time together and she wasn't feeling great about it. He'd treated her as if she were a whore in McDonald's parking lot. He'd also done some good. He inspired her to get a tattoo with her mother's name. With him, she'd had the best sex ever. He was mostly warm and sweet. And smart. But there was so much she didn't know about him.

She'd decided to take a break from him. Their time together had been intense and she was exhausted. Her life would be fine without him. She had Eric. He was an excellent lover, too, and he brought no drama.

The phone stopped ringing, relieving Meghan.

A minute later the phone rang again. It was Daequan. Meghan picked it up because she was worried something might be wrong. However conflicted she was about him, she didn't want a single bad thing to happen to him.

"Daequan?"

"Meghan the Beautiful." She could tell he was smiling. "How did you like being with me?"

"What? Is this why you called me?"

"Maybe," Daequan said.

"I guess I did like being with you today, Daequan."

"You guess? Don't do that to me."

"Okay, fine, good, great. What did you think about being with me?" She was nervous to hear the answer.

"Excellent. You've been on my mind since I left. You got some good ass pussy," he said.

That word *pussy* stopped her in her track. Was he serious? *Pussy*. Meghan thought about how far Daequan had come from sitting in one of those metal chairs at Rising Sun, vulnerable, telling his story of killing his cousin to this moment. He wasn't vulnerable anymore. He was hardened. Raunchy. She'd never been talked to that way. She wasn't sure if she liked it.

"Thanks, I guess."

He laughed then his tone changed to serious. Hey, let me get straight to the point. I need you to lend me some money for diapers."

"What?"

"Look, I don't like having to ask but... What, you're afraid I'll be your gigolo?" he laughed.

"No, no! That never crossed my mind. I'd be happy to give you the diapers. You don't need to pay me back."

"Good", said the gigolo," he laughed. Meghan didn't. "It's just this one time. Ain't nobody around who can pay. My mama's out. It's just me and Velvet. My girl is ready to kill me over these diapers."

"Anastasia." Meghan didn't want to be involved. She didn't want to be hurt by seeing him with another girl.

"Yeah, her."

"Do you need me to bring the diapers to you?"

"Just come over here, girl."

The closer Meghan got to Daequan's home, the blocks worsened. Abandoned buildings, demolished buildings,

burned buildings. Meghan thought she had the wrong address. These buildings were not fit for anyone to live in. She could see the city's desire to bulldoze everything and start anew.

A few men stood outside Daequan's apartment building, which wasn't as bad as the other buildings. There was no grass in front, just dirt, pebbles, and litter. The building was made of cement blocks painted burnt orange. The area around the doorknob was blackened from a grime buildup.

The men mugged Meghan in her car but didn't say hello. She parked the car. Before Meghan could get her phone from her purse, Daequan got in the car quickly and reclined the seat.

"What do you think, Ms. Meghan?"

"Of what?"

"My place, my block, Williams T. Heights."

She stayed quiet for a long time. She didn't know what he wanted her to say. "It's nice. It's different."

"No, it ain't. You lyn'."

"Why did you ask me then?"

"I'm just shittin' you, Meghan the Beautiful. This is Williams T. Heights right here, baby. Williams T. for life. It ain't shit but it's mine. I don't think I could feel comfortable any other place."

"Sure, you could."

"You scared?" he asked.

"Of what?"

“Being on this side of town. White people don’t come over here.”

“Should I be afraid?” She was afraid. Those men with glassy eyes drinking from bottles in paper bags scared her.

“I got you, Meghan the Beautiful. I wouldn’t let nothin’ hurt you.”

“Do you want me to pick up diapers for Marcus now?”

“You ain’t got to do that. I will get them. I just need a few coins.”

Meghan handed him a twenty-dollar bill. He inspected the money.

“It’s legit money,” Meghan said, slightly resenting his examination.

“Did you just get this from the bank? It’s so smooth. I ain’t never seen a dollar bill like this.”

“It doesn’t count any more than other money.”

He looked at her. “You’re right. But if I take this to some place and they gonna think I stole it. It’s just the way it is. No use in gettin’ sad about it.”

He was right. She was trying her best to get rid of her frown. “Where is the store?”

“We ain’t got no grocery store around here. No CVS. Nothin’. We only got a corner store.

“A corner store?”

“Yep, two blocks up. You can walk to it.”

“Do they have diapers?”

"Yeah, but they don't have the right sizes."

"There has to be a proper grocery store somewhere."

"Well, I'd have to take a bus, well, actually two buses to get there." He crumpled the bill then rolled it. Meghan understood. He could use it now. No one would be suspicious of him.

"Let's go to the grocery store now. I'll drive you, it's the easiest and best way. We could pick up a few things for you and Velvet. Maybe some steak," Meghan winked at him. What a three-sixty moment that she could buy him the steak, his request from their first class about Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner at Rising Sun.

"Wine, steak, damn... Meghan the Beautiful, you spoil me." He pulled out his cell phone and made a call. "Ma? Yeah. I'm about to go to the store and get some stuff for dinner. Don't worry, ma. Nah, I ain't selling nothin'." Meghan could hear the tinny sounding voice on the other end of the phone saying a lot, however, she couldn't make out the words. "I have someone I want you to meet," Daequan said to his mother.

Meghan squeezed his knee tightly. "No!" she mouthed. "No, I can't meet your mother."

"Yeah, she's cool. She ain't my woman or no shit like that, ma. I know that. She's a friend. You met her at the big show at Rising Sun. It's good, ma. She was my teacher. We just friends now. Anyway, ma. What do you want? We goin' to get food from the Giant. She got a car. Someone like her has a car, no doubt. I'm gonna get some steak." The mention of steak tickled him. "I'm goin' to get some steak, enough for me, you and Velvet."

He asked Meghan: "What do you think we should have with it? Salad? Is that what people have with a steak?"

She nodded, nervously. This was becoming more than just a simple run to the store for baby diapers. The voice on the other end said loudly, "How about macaroni and cheese? Sweet potatoes? That works, right? Ask her."

"No need, ma. Okay, ma. We're gonna be back soon. Yes, I'm gettin' his diapers. Of course. Alright." He hung up without saying goodbye to his mother. Daequan looked at her with that killer smile. "You cool with that, Meghan the Beautiful?"

"Perfect," Meghan said, pulling off.

Once Meghan and Daequan got the diapers, steak, and a few other groceries from the grocery store, they returned to his apartment. Meghan didn't want to. She was feeling tired from the whole diaper ordeal. But since Daequan asked her to come up to say hello to Velvet, she did. She wanted to see Velvet again.

There was an unpleasant smell as they went up the two flights up to his apartment. Urine mixed with egg rolls and cigarette smoke.

Meghan carried two heavy plastic bags with four two-liter sodas.

"You alright?" Daequan said. He was ahead of her, carrying a bag full of groceries and two big bags of diapers under each arm.

"I'm fine," she said, despite a brewing headache.

He knocked on the door and soon Velvet answered the door with her cheery smile—just as beautiful as Daequan’s. She wore a lavender bandana on her head, a plain tee-shirt, and oversized pajama pants.

“Hey, Ms. Meghan!” She took a bag of diapers as Daequan entered.

“Meghan, just Meghan, please,”

“That don’t sound right, Ms. Meghan. It’s a sign of respect.”

“I understand, Velvet. Great to see you again.” Meghan smiled. “Where would you like me to put these bags?” Velvet pointed to the kitchen opposite the door.

Daequan followed Meghan. He took out the steak from a bag and slammed it on the counter. “You know how to cook a steak?” he asked, grinning.

“I’m not planning to stay long,” Meghan said.

“Dang, Meghan the Beautiful. You don’t have to be like that. Why don’t you at least have a seat on the couch.” Meghan sat on the couch by the door. The couch smelled fruity and had a surprisingly low seat.

Velvet put the groceries away in the small, open kitchen with old vinyl floors. The kitchen’s motif was pale yellow and rotten banana colors with fluorescent lighting. There was a picture of a younger Daequan wearing a graduation cap on the living room wall. Eighth-grade graduation, Meghan guessed.

After a few minutes of her just sitting alone, Daequan sat next to her and put his arm around her. “Damn,

Meghan the Beautiful, why you so tight? You weren't this mornin'." He kissed her on the cheek.

She felt mixed emotions. When they had sex that morning their chemistry was undeniable. She never felt that good before. But now, as she sat next to him, she questioned herself. Why did she have sex with a man-child (she couldn't think of a better word than that)? Daequan's life was forever twisted. She'd known that since she met him. Other than sex, there was nothing else she wanted from him. Regretfully, she was selfish. Meghan knew she was wrong to insert herself in his life, knowing she was going to leave. She didn't know if she added to the dysfunction in his life or helped him in some small way.

Meghan asked for the bathroom. Daequan pointed, "Go that way and then right. You'll see it."

The bathroom looked as though it had never been cleaned. She knew then why he bought sponges and Clorox spray at the grocery store. She refused to sit on the toilet. There was urine and grime on the bowl. She squatted. Lo and behold, there was no toilet tissue either. At the grocery store, Daequan had picked up a 4-roll pack.

Meghan flushed then washed her hands with no soap and no towel to dry her hands. She looked in the mirror. Her mascara had run, and her skin was blotchy. *What am I doing here?*

As she came from the bathroom, Daequan's mother was sitting in Meghan's place, smoking a cigarette. The smoke was overwhelming, but Lateesia seemed oblivious to the smoke. Everyone did. Meghan heard her saying to Daequan who was next to her, "Get that bitch out of here. She ain't got no business here, with us. White people can't

love niggas. They can be around us, smile in our face, poke all in our business, make us do all the shit they won't do but they can't love you." She stopped talking when she noticed Meghan. She wasn't embarrassed, though.

Daequan said, "Why you gotta be like that, ma? She bought us food. Marcus got diapers now."

His mother took another drag of her cigarette. "I said what I said and I mean that shit. She ain't no good."

"Hi," Meghan waved, hoping that his mother would stop talking about her. What she was saying made no sense. If Meghan could talk, she would've said: *People love people. Nothing to do with race.* She resented being judged by someone who didn't know her.

His mother grunted and looked away. Her black, curly hair was pulled back into a high, side ponytail that gave Lateesia a childish look.

Velvet had put all the food away. The diapers were on the floor against the wall in a neat stack. The unpackaged steak and seasoning were the only things on the spotless counter with the smell of bleach spray that Meghan had bought from the store. There was a big pan on the stove. Her hands were on her hips. She looked at Meghan, eyes heavy with unleashed tears, as if to say to Meghan: *I'm sorry about all this.*

Meghan's headache was full blown as she studied mother and son.

"That boy, Carl came by looking for you, Dae." Lateesia's face twisted.

Daequan's face went deadpan. "Yeah?"

"I don't like that nigga, Dae. He's bad news. Do I have to remind you he was hangin' with Cue right around the time Cue betrayed you? He ain't your friend. Next time he comes knockin' on this door, tell him don't come around here again. If you don't tell him, then I will." She looked sharply at Daequan.

"Okay, okay, okay, mama. But it ain't that simple."

"Why the hell not?"

"He lookin' for me."

"Why, Dae?"

He shrugged.

"Don't be a fool, Daequan," she said.

"Mama, I ain't no fool! But what can I do? Where can I go?"

Lateesia stamped out her cigarette in the ashtray, then stood up. "Look, I gotta go."

Daequan laid back on the couch and put his hands over his face.

Meghan's leg stiffened from standing for too long. She wanted to go. Carl, whatever his intentions, could be lurking anywhere. She hated seeing Daequan that way, trying to block out the world. Even if he spent another night with her, he'd have to come back home and Carl would find him.

Lateesia bent over and kissed her son's head, to which he had no response. "I love you, boy. God is watchin' over you. You don't have to be afraid." When she stood up and put on her light jacket, her tears fell. She was leaning on a

lie about what God was doing. That God was watching over Daequan was the best she could come up with before she left.

“Ms. Meghan, would you like to cook with me?” Velvet said. Meghan felt she deserved help cooking steak.

“Sure. How about we make some smothered potatoes with it?” Meghan said.

As Meghan instructed Velvet how to make the meal, she learned about the brother and sister duo. Velvet adored him. He served as both a father figure and big brother to her.

Velvet got a kick out of pounding the meat. She beat the eggs way too hard and cut the onion slices too thick. But all of it she did with a smile. Daequan was still lying on the couch with his shoes off now, revealing bright white socks. One arm was still covering his face. What was he thinking? Meghan wanted to know. What didn’t he want to show her and Velvet? Was he crying? Meghan refrained from asking. She didn’t want to disturb his fragile state.

Velvet didn’t pay him any mind. “Ignore him,” she said. “He’s fine.”

Meghan was anxious and concerned but she kept cooking. Once the potatoes had been cooking long enough, she took the top off the potatoes and steam blasted her face.

Velvet opened the cabinets and drawers and took out mix-matched plates and forks and knives.

“Dae,” Velvet called. She went and shook him out of his sleep or slump. “Dae, Dae, Dae.”

He sat up, groggily. “Huh? What’s goin’ on?” He finally focused his eyes on Meghan who was leaning on the counter. After he got his bearings, he motioned her to sit on his lap. She did. She wished for privacy so that she and Daequan could have round two of their sex date from this morning. Her body was ready for him, though she knew this wasn’t a good idea. A good idea was to go home.

“That shit smells good,” Daequan said.

Velvet fixed the small table near the kitchen. She pointed where she wanted Meghan to sit, between her and Daequan. She pulled out the orange soda. “Sorry, Ms. Meghan, this is all we got. You want some wine or something like that.”

“No, no, Velvet, I’m fine.”

“You so classy, Ms. Meghan. I wish I could be like you one day.” Meghan imagined Lateesia’s head bursting hearing her daughter say that.

“Just become your wonderful self, Velvet. We don’t need any more Meghans in the world, but we could use a few more Velvets.”

Velvet smiled and went to get plastic cups. Daequan poured the soda to the brim. Daequan finished first and got seconds. “Meghan the Beautiful, you outdid yourself.” He delicately, comically dabbed the corners of his mouth.

The steak was a little stiff, too well done and over seasoned. The potatoes were unevenly cooked, but the cooked parts were delightful. Velvet finished her plate. Meghan couldn’t finish hers.

"You ain't gonna eat that?" Daequan eyed Meghan's plate. She handed him her plate.

Chocolate Cookies were for dessert. Daequan ate five. After Meghan ate one, she said, "I should go now." She'd done everything she could for him today. She needed to go home, sit out on the balcony and get fresh air. What an emotional roller coaster ride from Saturday until now. She would've never guessed all of this to happen.

Daequan grabbed her hand. "Don't go. Please."

"I don't think your mom wants to see the likes of me again."

"You're right. She doesn't," Daequan said, "But she ain't coming back tonight. She is gonna be with her boyfriend once she get off work. She gone for days. I need you."

I need you. Hearing Daequan say those words to her left her wanting to cry. She wanted to cry because she didn't need him anymore. She was just experiencing him. She felt sick to her stomach, thinking about the ups and downs, the twists and turns of the day, of her time at Rising Sun with Daequan. This moment was her fault. All the things she'd done to make him need her. She let him protect her. She'd made him feel hopeful about his life when there was no indication to. Arranging to meet him after he got out of Rising Sun. Having sex with him. Making him comfortable in her bed. Buying his son diapers. She should have said no, no to all of it.

But here she was looking down at her toes. She could feel him looking at the side of her face, wanting her to want him. What was he seeing in her? Could he tell she wanted

to bolt? Or was she an Oscar winning actress who was pretending to need him too?

When you comin' back, Ms. Meghan?" Velvet asked, forcefully.

"I'll come back another day. Soon," Meghan said, standing up.

Daequan stood up and sighed. Meghan took her cup to the sink.

Velvet gave her a big hug at the door. "Thank you, Ms. Meghan. Please come back, please."

"I will." Meghan's head was pounding. Daequan walked her to her car. He didn't hold her hand as Meghan wanted him to do. As she drove off, Daequan went to talk with the guys with the whiskey bottle in paper bags, the men she was afraid of.

CHAPTER 32

As Meghan walked into the very well-constructed, modern building that her father built, she kept thinking, *this is good for me*. She arrived at the D. James Development Corporation at eight o' clock with her hair still wet. The young, graceful receptionist greeted her warmly then showed her to her office cubicle.

A stringy-haired, thin woman came and introduced herself as Meghan was changing from her flats to her favorite red high heels.

"Oh, hi," Meghan said, trying to hide her bare foot.

"I'm Laura, your supervisor." With her supervisor's dark, receding eyes, Meghan wondered if she was chronically ill. Laura's hands were cold and clammy.

Meghan decided not to tell people that she was the daughter of David James. She didn't want special treatment. James was a common last name so she doubted someone would make the connection.

“I’ll give you a tour,” Laura said. They started with the vending machine void of basic junk food, instead offering Kind Bars and wheat crackers with almond butter. They moved to the two conference rooms suited with ergonomic rolling chairs. In a half hour there was going to be a team meeting in conference room two, Laura told her.

Meghan went back to her cube and got settled. She opened every drawer wondering what each one was for. Inside most of the drawers, there were more compartments for tacks and staples and pens and some others she had no clue. She would find out the longer she worked here.

Laura didn’t give Meghan an assignment before the meeting. She just told her to read the employee manual. Dear God, it was so boring she almost fell asleep. She was still tired from being with Daequan last night. She was worried about him. She kept seeing him lying on the couch dejected, receiving his mother’s kiss. Something bad was going to happen. But she didn’t know what and she knew she couldn’t help.

Laura came back and asked her if she had any questions.

“Nope.”

“Okay, that’s great. Team meeting in five minutes. You’ll love the view.”

Except the room didn’t have a great view. Meghan sat down near the door so that she could look out the window. She could see the nation’s capital but mostly a bunch of cranes, some marked with D. James Development Corporation.

“The blue cranes are ours,” Laura said as she opened the door and put the doorstep in. To her, the cranes *were* the

great view. Meghan didn't like seeing them. She had no good reason. The cranes should've given her comfort; they allowed her lifestyle. As long as the cranes were up, Meghan would never fall flat on her face. They reminded her that there would always be her father. The cranes were his accomplishment. Meghan's mother would have loved seeing the cranes. They were because of her parents' hard work and sacrifices. And yet Meghan wished she didn't have to look at them. Not today. Tomorrow.

Three people filed into the room. Two young women and a man, all a year or two out of college. They dressed like they belonged there: smart, tasteful, and trendy. Two minutes later an African American man, impeccably dressed in a pinstriped suit and brand-new shoes, entered. Meghan was impressed. She appreciated seeing someone older and seasoned and who carried himself as such.

The meeting was to welcome Meghan. Laura brought donuts and coffee from Gorilla Bakery, one of Meghan's favorites. She ate an entire oversized cinnamon roll, while everyone else nibbled on donuts and muffins. While they were eating Laura had them go around and say how long they had been working there and the best part of working at the D. James Development Corporation.

The African American man's name was Joseph. He playfully rolled his eyes when he said he worked here for ten years. "Laura is a fair and fun boss," he said, flatly. Meghan liked him already.

The younger man's name was Stuart, three years, he liked the opportunities for growth. Blah, blah, blah was all Meghan heard. Skinny girl's name was Ashley, nine months, she liked "the company's focus on diversity,

especially opportunities for women. There are so many women here!” Meghan didn’t like her.

Skinny girl two’s name was Melissa, nine months, she and Ashley had been recruited from the same college. “I love how DC is changing, becoming so beautiful. I’m proud to work for a development firm that is helping change the look and feel of the city and to attract more... um... young professionals.”

It must have been exhaustion, but Meghan wanted to rip up Melissa’s barely eaten chocolate muffin and smash her face with it.

Laura’s story: four years, promoted to supervisor after one year. “I love this team. We have such a community.”

It was Meghan’s turn. Her questions were a little bit different. What attracted her to the role? What does she hope to accomplish? “I’m Meghan, an employee told me about the company and had very good things to say. I don’t know what I hope to accomplish, I guess. The goals we have as a team will be my priority.”

Laura cheesed. “We’ve only heard great things about you.”

Meghan didn’t want to ask what Laura had heard and from where. Eric took the time to vouch for her. That was fine.

After the meeting, Joseph came to Meghan’s desk and stared at her as if he could see her aching soul.

“Hey, Joseph, right?” She couldn’t meet his stare because she knew her soul wasn’t exactly enthused to be there.

“Let’s go to lunch,” he said. Meghan was game. She had no lunch plans except to eat a homemade salad and a boiled egg, which, once she stepped into the impressive office, she realized eating a boiled egg was a bad idea.

“Laura is a stickler for long lunches. We got thirty minutes,” he said, picking up the pace when they got outside. He walked so fast Meghan could hardly keep up in her heels. Waiting in the long line for their salads to be made, Meghan asked, “What is it really like to work here? I sensed it may not be as great as Ashley, Melissa, and what’s his name said.”

Joseph gave her a high eyebrow and made a popping sound with his lips. “Not bad, but not good,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“The pay is good. I never got a promotion, like Ms. Laura. I can’t help but think it was because of the obvious.”

“The obvious?” Yes, the obvious: race. If Rising Sun had taught her anything, it was that race and racism was alive and well in DC. She couldn’t play dumb to the power of racism when the juvenile penal system was solely based on African American boys, as if they were the only ones committing crimes. She felt a pang of anger as she watched her salad being made. She could no longer be the innocent white girl who didn’t know that African Americans were passed over for promotions for no other reason than the color of their skin. But for the purposes of this

uncomfortable conversation, Meghan faked dumb, asking: “The obvious?”

“Never mind, Meghan,” Joseph said, stiffly, then easily to a more pleasant tone. “Today is about how happy we are for you to come on board. Someone from on high spoke highly of you. Said he worked with you in a previous job.” Joseph winked.

Meghan dropped her head. She didn’t want anyone, let alone Eric, singing her praise. She didn’t know she could live up to his praise. She couldn’t. She didn’t want to. She didn’t know what she wanted yet.

Joseph smiled warmly. Meghan smiled back. That was the first time today Meghan smiled and meant it.

He paid for her lunch, which she appreciated but found unnecessary. They sat at a small, rickety table outside. Joseph asked where Meghan was from. She didn’t know what to say. She should’ve been prepared for this question; it was so basic. But it wasn’t. She could have told him that her father was Mr. David James, CEO of D. James Development Corporation. Meghan wasn’t certain if Joseph knew. She bet he did but was just playing along. She could have told him she was fresh from working in a juvenile detention center. Or that she was a columnist at DC Weekly. She could’ve told him that she was a former teacher. That sounded the most interesting, so she went with that.

“I worked in Philadelphia with TEACH!. Are you familiar?”

“Yep,” he said, loading his fork full of mushroom and salami.

“How do you know about TEACH!?”

“That program’s been around for some time now. I have a little age on me. I have a few friends who joined TEACH! long ago. Did you enjoy it?”

“Well yes... I guess.”

He looked her dead in the face. “That shit was hard. I know it.”

Meghan almost spit out her arugula. “You don’t know how happy I am to hear you say that.” She exhaled. And again.

“How long did you stay?” Joshua dabbed his napkin on the corners of his mouth.

“Two years,” Meghan lied. Even after all this time, she didn’t want to sound like a loser who couldn’t complete the program.

“Lucky for them you stayed. Many people don’t make it through the commitment. It’s so tough.” Meghan nearly melted having someone finally validate her experience.

Joseph’s focus shifted behind her. “There is so much expansion in DC. See that? Y’all here now,” he smirked.

“Me?” Meghan said. “You mean white people?”

“Who else? Every time I look at all those cranes that’s what I think. DC is no more for black people. It ain’t Chocolate City anymore, for sure.”

“White people aren’t a monolith, you know.”

“I know, but the ones coming here are. You can tell by the three thousand dollar a month studio apartments. They

are building for a certain type. A young, rich, urban type of white person. Like you.”

She turned around and looked at the cranes. He wasn't wrong. After eyeing one of the D. James Development Corporation cranes for a minute she turned to him. “Well, some of those white people might actually care about the people in this city.”

“You mean you, right?” He gathered his salad to go.

“Yes, me.” Meghan gathered her half-eaten salad for the garbage.

He shook his head as he went to throw away his trash. Meghan felt incomplete. She felt like she was missing something. She wanted to know why he shook his head. She wanted to know more about Joseph as a middle class African American, potentially gay, man, and how he experienced the world. But the moment was gone. They walked back talking about anything but race in DC.

CHAPTER 33

When Meghan got home, she took a shower, then wrapped a plush towel around herself and plopped on her bed. She'd planned to call Eric, but she didn't. She wasn't up for a conversation. She'd call him tomorrow. She buried her head in her pillow and fell asleep.

The ring of her cell phone woke her up. Drowsy, she ignored it at first. But then it rang again. Reluctantly, she felt for the phone and answered it. "Hello?" she slurred. She thought it would be Eric but instead, she heard:

"Ms. Meghan, Ms. Meghan!" Then a scream. Then crying and choking.

"Velvet? Velvet? Slow down, please." Meghan begged. "Velvet?"

"Oh no, Ms. Meghan, Ms. Meghan... Jesus, help, God please!" the voice pleaded.

“Velvet, are you okay?” Meghan knew her question didn’t make sense but that was all she could come up with. She wanted Velvet to say *yes, she was okay*. But Meghan knew she wasn’t.

“He dead. Dae is dead. Oh no, oh no, oh no...”

“Are you alone?” Meghan panted.

Meghan was grimly reminded of the howling dog sound she made when she found her mother’s fragile dead body.

Suddenly Velvet stopped wailing. Meghan thought (and hoped) the call dropped.

“Carl.” The name slashed her throat.

“Where are you?” Meghan managed.

“Carl.”

“Carl what?”

“He, he, he, he shot my brother. Last night after you left, me and Dae went to bed. Somebody came knocking on the door. Daequan got up to answer it... Carl shot my brother. In his heart. I found him on the ground, blood kept coming’ from his mouth. He was tryin’ to breathe but was chokin’. I got on my knees. The only thing I could do was hug and kiss him. I don’t know CPR. I should know CPR.”

“CPR wouldn’t have helped. This isn’t your fault.”

“Yes it would, yes it would.”

Meghan’s nose was running. She knew not to offer any stupid sayings that people say when a loved one is dead: *It’ll get better. Don’t worry. It’s going to be okay. You just need*

time. Or some people would nosily ask Meghan: *how long did she have cancer?* As if that had something to do with the price of tea in China.

“Ms. Meghan, I just wanted you to know my brother really liked you. He talked about you more than any girl he had. I called just so you would know he dead. I thought you’d want to know. He’d want you to know.” Velvet’s sound was like a wave carrying her to the bottom of the ocean.

When Meghan’s mother died, she started to hallucinate. She would hear her mother’s voice. She would look in the mirror and see her face morphing into her mother’s skeletal, lifeless face. She was having trouble seeing Daequan in her mind. She could see his build but not his face.

Meghan thought about ending the call. There was nothing she could do for Velvet. “Velvet, thank you for letting me know,” she said.

“I’ll let you know when the funeral is.” Velvet’s voice was beginning to calm but still had a way to go.

“Okay, sweetheart. Take care of yourself. If you need me, let me know.”

Meghan wasn’t going to go to Daequan’s funeral. Despite how Daequan may have felt about her, she strongly believed that she was the least important person in his life. His mother. Velvet. Anastasia. Marcus, friends and extended family. Meghan didn’t fit into any of that. The last thing she wanted to do was upset Leetisa any more than she had done already.

She ended the call and threw up between her legs.

She kept seeing life draining from Daequan's body. The blood running from his heart onto the dirty carpet.

CHAPTER 34

The next day, Laura asked Meghan to review a PowerPoint on a new marketing strategy for the next mixed-use development in Northeast. She liked Meghan's edits, so she asked her to edit more as well as to draft a white paper. This kept Meghan busy for the next two days, helping her to push back her painful imagination of Daequan's dead body. The blood wouldn't stop flowing.

She avoided Eric. Poor Eric. He didn't deserve her behavior. But she couldn't find the energy or desire to be around anyone. She texted him: *sorry I've been acting strange We can go out Sun*. He didn't respond. She felt numb anyway.

Numb was what Meghan needed. She hadn't seen Jenny in days. Meghan knew what was coming next, but she was in denial. They had been friends for so long. Shouldn't that have afforded Meghan mercy. She had been brutal during her last argument with Jenny. She'd gone for the jugular. She'd told Jenny to leave. But she didn't mean

it. Yesterday Jenny broke up with Meghan via text, which Meghan felt was tacky, cowardly and mean. She told Meghan that she was moving out on Saturday, the very day she knew Meghan would be hanging out with Molly for most of the day.

With Daequan's death, it helped Meghan to forget the pain of losing a best friend. Meghan couldn't stop seeing faceless Daequan on their last day together. His dripping hair coming out of the shower. He was stuck in time now. He would always be.

Tuesday after work, Meghan called the number that Velvet had called her on, hoping she would answer and not Lateesia.

"Ms. Meghan?" Velvet's voice was cracked.

"Yes, Velvet, it's me." A baby was crying in the background. Had to be Marcus's. It crushed Meghan to think that Marcus would never remember his father, a father who believed he could become president of the United States.

"Where are you?" Meghan asked, cautiously.

"In the house."

"I would like to bring you some cookies." Meghan prayed Aunt Susan was home and would be willing to bake them if she didn't already have them. She should have called Aunt Susan first before promising.

"Cookies?" Velvet asked.

"Yep. Would you like them?"

"Yeah. Thank you, Ms. Meghan." Velvet sounded exhausted.

"We could meet in the Giant parking lot tomorrow afternoon." Meghan knew Velvet would have to take two buses, but she didn't think it was best to come to their apartment. She wouldn't want to see Lateesia or the blood stains.

"Yeah, let's meet there," Velvet said.

Meghan purposely didn't ask Velvet how she was doing. She already knew the answer.

Meghan sat in her car in front of Aunt Susan's home, waiting. She was perfectly still. Aunt Susan came out and handed Meghan the fresh baked cookies in a tin jar, just as her mother would have done. The old school "Leave It to Beaver" June Cleaver way. Meghan didn't tell her anything about the situation with Daequan. She didn't want to.

When Meghan called a few hours earlier, she could barely get her words out, but she did just enough to ask for the cookies and to tell her they were for a very special girl.

Aunt Susan didn't ask any questions but how many to bake. Meghan would certainly tell her later when things settled. Meghan accepted the cookies now and looked at her aunt with tears falling down her face. "I'm sure they're delicious, Aunt Susan," she said.

Aunt Susan patted Meghan's head like she might've done Zana before bed.

Meghan looked at her aunt who wasn't dealing with tragedy, but was, judging by her bags under her eyes, dealing with something unpleasant. She couldn't bear to leave her without showing some regard. She owed it to her

aunt to ask about Zack and Zana. “How are the kids and their school situation?” she said, blowing her nose.

Aunt Susan looked surprised, curling the corners of her lips upward in skittish appreciation. She studied her bare feet for a while before looking back at her niece. Meghan was itching to go.

“They’ll be going to public school,” Aunt Susan said. The public schools in their neighborhood were known to be good. A little more diverse than the private schools. Still, that didn’t mean Zach and Zana’s problem would go away.

“That sounds good,” Meghan said, blandly. Aunt Susan’s kids would be fine. They were always fine. They would be fine.

“I’m glad you think so. You’re a smart girl. You’re your mother’s daughter, so you have no choice than to be smart.”

Meghan appreciated the mention of her mother’s name and hearing that she was smart like her mother. It gave her the boost of confidence that she sorely needed. “I gotta go. Thank you for the cookies. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

As Meghan was rolling up the window Aunt Susan said, “Come by next week. We can hang out in the pool.”

Meghan drove off a little too quickly.

When she arrived at Giant, she waited in the parking lot feeling anxious. Velvet was late. That was understandable considering the circumstance. But as a rule, Meghan disliked tardiness. Two homeless people knocked on her window for change. She gave the first

woman a five-dollar bill. The second man she gave nothing and waved him off. This wasn't a bank. After fifteen minutes, just as Meghan was about to leave, Velvet got off the city bus, looking around.

Meghan felt nervous. This was a mistake. Bringing cookies for Velvet was ridiculous. That wouldn't solve anything.

Velvet didn't apologize when she got in the car. Her hair was pulled into a low bun just like Meghan's, except Velvet had a short puff of hair. She smelled like donuts and McDonald's.

Velvet reached for a hug. Meghan held her tightly. She needed the hug, too. When they peeled apart Velvet was crying. Meghan was on the verge, but she refused to cry. They shouldn't both cry. Someone had to be strong.

Though she was sad, the reality of Meghan's relationship with Daequan had been nagging her since learning of his death. He wasn't her friend—they were working on it but hadn't got there yet. They needed more time. He wasn't her lover—not after one day. And in that time, he'd disrespected her in a McDonald's parking lot—how pathetic and gross. He wasn't her boyfriend. The only indisputable thing was that he was her student. That fact made her ashamed of having sex with him, her student. She was a predator.

They sat there for a few minutes, looking forward. People were milling in front of Giant's entrance, going in and out, standing and waiting. There was a cart shortage and people were unfazed, carrying shopping bags in their arms.

“You have a lot going on, your family is going through a lot, and...” she stopped. What she was saying wasn’t helping; it was just noise. “Velvet, I just wanted to give you some cookies.” She took the cookies from the back seat and handed them to Velvet. “My aunt made them. She used my mother’s recipe. I’m not sure if your brother told you, there was no reason to tell you, but my mother died.”

“When?” Velvet asked.

“A long time ago.”

“When?”

“When I was seventeen,” Meghan said.

“So, you know,” Velvet said.

“Know what?” Meghan knew exactly what Velvet meant.

“How this feels. It’s worse than the worst thing in the world.”

“Yes, I do know. I know every day. I miss my mother everyday.”

Velvet took out a cookie and sniffed it. Then she took a bite. “Mmmm...They’re soft. Magical.” She ate the rest of the cookie. “Dae would have loved these cookies. Homemade, that would be a first for us.” She enjoyed another cookie. Meghan ate one, too. “The funeral will be on Sunday. Will you come?” Velvet said.

“I don’t think so.”

“I want you there. Dae would want you to come, too.”

Meghan squeezed Velvet’s hand. “How are things at home?”

“A lot of fussin’ and cryin’. Who should have done what. Who *should* do what. That sort of stuff. That’s why I’m glad I’m here with you. Peace. The best cookies I’ve ever had. I’m sure he would’ve wanted to be here, too.”

“Do you mind telling me why he died?” Meghan said, softly.

“Carl, that dude you heard about on Sunday, he just wanted to kill him ‘cause Cue was his best friend. That’s all. Revenge.”

That’s all. Meghan let the windows down hoping the air would help. Suddenly, she felt nauseous and dizzy. Honestly, she knew Daequan was going to die. But she couldn’t face reality. She couldn’t pinpoint when she knew. It was the day she interviewed him about his story that left him alone and crying frantically. He knew at that moment his fate.

Meghan drove Velvet home and watched her go into her apartment building as she cradled her cookies. Meghan waited until she was out of Williams T. Heights to pull over and cry so hard she could hardly breathe.

CHAPTER 35

Laura asked Meghan to review a PowerPoint on the demolition of Williams T. Heights. After two years of planning, it was finally time for D. James Development Corporation to begin phase one. Meghan's heart raced as she sat at her desk. She wanted to scream. At whom, she didn't know? She wanted to shove the papers into Laura's chest. Laura, Meghan found, was a nice person with two young children and no husband. She didn't deserve Meghan's outlash, so she took a deep breath and gracefully accepted the assignment.

She flipped through the presentation with pictures of *everything's-going-my-way* people who looked like her, she couldn't deny as much as she wanted to. Joseph was right. Nowhere in the presentation was an answer to where the current residents would go. That was never a question. Who cared?

Though Meghan knew it was unfair, she asked Laura the question, "Where do the people who currently live in Williams T. Heights go when this all happens?"

Laura tucked her stringy hair behind her ear and thought, imagined. "Well, I am no expert on this, but I believe they are given vouchers that they can use wherever."

"Wherever?"

"Well, I'm not sure."

"Probably not around here." Meghan's voice was sharp. She dulled her tone by softly adding, "Right?"

"Right. Do you have a problem with that?"

The truth was that Meghan didn't want the people in Williams T. Heights to relocate to her neighborhood. Not those men with glassy eyes outside of Daequan's apartment. Just Velvet and Daequan. She thought of him again, which she was trying hard not to do. Her eyes clouded with tears.

"Are you okay?" Laura crouched to see eye to eye with her.

"Yes." Meghan reached for a tissue. It was her last one. Her eyes had clouded many times that day.

"You sure?"

"I'm fine. I'm just surprised that you've worked here for years and you don't know exactly where the Williams T. Heights residents will go once you all mow them over."

"I wouldn't describe it like that. But if you are getting that impression from the presentation, please let me know." Laura looked horrified and sorry.

“No, no,” Meghan assured her. “The presentation is quite nice. I don’t have much to add. If I did, this redevelopment wouldn’t be happening.”

Laura stood up with understanding in her eyes. “This isn’t about me. There must be something else going on... with you.”

Meghan shrugged. This is not the way she planned her day: insulting her new boss and crying. In this environment crying seemed wildly inappropriate.

“You should take some time and go home for the rest of the day. You don’t have to take any leave.”

Now Meghan was the one horrified. She must have looked broken and weak. She looked down at her blouse: a sriracha stain. She sighed. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“Do you want to talk?”

“No.”

“Okay, well do what you think will help. We can go to the conference room if you want to talk.

Meghan laughed, “Yeah, talk about all my woes with my new boss, no thanks...But Laura, you’ve been really great, great since my first day. I appreciate that. Someone close to me just died if that helps you understand my odd behavior.”

Laura covered her mouth as her eyes bugged.

Meghan took in a deep breath and sat up straight.

“Do you mind sharing more?”

“I shouldn’t. I’m a wreck and talking about it will only make things worse. I am starting to feel better if you can

believe that. I'll do my work, no favors asked." Meghan looked Laura in the eye. Laura nodded and walked away from Meghan's cube.

Meghan found the energy to make edits on the Williams T. Heights presentation. It would be presented to the communications leadership team whose job was to funnel stories about the project into local media to entice the right kind of people to move in and live perfectly happy lives.

At home that evening, Meghan kept refreshing the local online newspaper sites to see if anyone wrote a story about Daequan dying.

Nothing about Daequan. She couldn't believe that a person could die without public notice.

She emailed Sam and told her she wanted to write something different, something impactful. Sam wrote back an hour later: *more information please*

Meghan's response: *let me draft it then send to you. It'll be better that way.*

Sam: *Fine. Whatever it is, stay on deadline. I'm trusting you more than I should. Can't promise I'll run it*

CHAPTER 36

The next day at work Daequan and his death dominated Meghan's thoughts once again. Him standing at his apartment door seconds before bullets rammed through his heart. Then him laying on the floor, alone, before Velvet found him.

Meghan kept resettling herself in her office chair with each image of Daequan. She needed to pull away from herself. These kinds of thoughts nearly crippled her a year after her mother died. She'd be damned if it happened again.

She opened a new Word doc on her laptop to write an article about Daequan. There was so much to say but then nothing at all. Writing about Daequan was Meghan's hardest assignment yet. She only had thirty minutes until her team meeting. She typed as fast as she could.

Driving home from work, Meghan mulled over her draft in her mind. Did she say the right things? Did she omit the right things? She called Velvet to tell her about the article and to ask her for a couple of pictures of Daequan that she could choose from for the piece.

“Wow,” Velvet said. “You a news reporter?”

“Just a columnist for a local paper.”

None of that could change Velvet’s mind. Her smile was bursting through the phone. “I cain’t wait until it’s in the papers, Ms. Meghan. I’m gonna tell everybody bout this.”

“Not now anyway, Velvet. Once it’s published. *If* it’s published.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will pitch this to my editor and if she accepts it then the article will be published in DC Weekly.”

“The what?”

Meghan explained the paper. Velvet was impressed.

“Anyway, please don’t share until the article is published—*if* it’s published,” Meghan said again.

“That makes sense. But it’s gonna be hard. This is about my brother. Everybody needs to know about my brother.”

Velvet sent three pictures. One was a close up of Daequan and his smile at someone’s birthday party, perhaps Velvet’s. He looked a couple of years younger. His locks fell only to his ears. The other picture was of him and Marcus, the cute little thing. The last one was a selfie with

Velvet. That one was the one. Velvet's smile almost matched the wonder of his.

Meghan turned in her piece to Sam two minutes before the deadline. She was so nervous Sam would toss it. She could understand Sam rejecting the piece. Sam should reject the piece. It didn't fit with her column.

Meghan had one rule in writing this piece: She wouldn't remember him by his deficits, but by his strengths. She wouldn't measure him for everything he wasn't. Not for every mistake he made either. Not for what he didn't know and didn't have a chance to find out.

CHAPTER 37

On the morning of the funeral, Meghan sat on the edge of her bed feeling the wash of the sunlight from her large picture windows. It was a good day for a funeral, if ever. Nice blue sky. Something Daequan deserved.

It was a good day for a best friend to leave. Last night Meghan came home to an emptiness in the apartment and within herself. Her things were as she left them, but something was wrong. Jenny was gone, for good. Meghan was struck with sadness. No, it wasn't a surprise Jenny would leave. She lost her best friend, her *only* friend. Jenny texted:

Fred and I are moving in together. Thanks for letting me stay with you.

Thanks. Meghan hated when people said "thanks". It didn't signal gratitude; it was just a quick way to say nothing. Jenny's text didn't invite Meghan over to her new apartment or anything like that. It just shut a giant door.

Today, Meghan was feeling temporarily better; she knew she was soon going to break again. But not today. If ever there was a good day to lose a best friend, today was fine. At least for the moment.

Truthfully, Meghan didn't understand why she was upbeat. She was going to a funeral. A funeral of any kind was unpleasant. The truth, at least today, was that she was going to the funeral, and she didn't feel too bad about it. Though she didn't understand her feelings, she wouldn't fight it.

Later that night she planned to be at her father's house for a familiar, comforting dinner, surrounded by the people closest to her, including Eric. That was what was giving her the strength she needed.

Meghan checked her phone. Nothing from Sam. That was fine for Meghan because she didn't want to know if her article had been published today. She'd be pissed if it wasn't. She promised herself not to check though it was hard. Velvet had texted her the funeral parlor address for the third time. To which Meghan responded:

Thanks.

Meghan showered, ate a bagel with peanut butter, and put on her plain black dress with her mother's pearls, and black patent leather slingbacks. She fixed her hair into a low, neat bun. No eye shadow, just mascara, lip gloss, a tad bit of blush. Meghan remembered how much she used to want to impress Daequan with her outfits at Rising Sun. Well, she was dressing up for him once more. For the last time.

She parked a block away from the funeral parlor and watched people walk in. No one was in a hurry. She watched a man in his fifties help an old lady get out of a black limousine and usher her into the building. Was that Daequan's grandmother? Couldn't be. He told Meghan how he wished Cue's grandmother was his own. But he killed her grandson. No way she would ever attend his funeral.

Meghan stared at a group of men in black suits smoking. Who were they? Meghan realized her time with Daequan was in a vacuum. She knew none of these people. Rising Sun felt unreal now.

Most people were dressed like they were going to a funeral but teenage boys with tight, sagging jeans, baseball caps, and brand-new sneakers entered. Meghan smiled. They looked like Daequan the last time she saw him.

She saw a group of Rising Sun staff walk in. Mr. Mitchell and Mrs. Gibbs among them. She froze. She belonged there even less now. She considered not going in. She didn't want anyone but Velvet to know she was there.

A second limousine pulled up. A good-looking man helped Daequan's mother out of the car. Meghan assumed that was Lateesia's boyfriend. Her face had aged ten years and her eyes seemed to be in constant plea with the world. Once she was in the building, there was a wail. No doubt it was Lateesia. Meghan welled up with tears. She didn't like the woman, but she understood the depth of that sound.

Then Velvet stepped out, alone. Nobody had a chance to buy her a new dress. She made do with a wool black dress in July. It was too small. Her head was down and she

was holding a cardboard box. The men smoking said something briefly to her and she nodded, clutching the box on the way in.

The crowd was dwindling. It was time. Meghan grabbed her purse from the passenger seat, ready to get out. Then she saw a curvaceous girl get out of the limo. Anastasia. Meghan's heart stopped. She was pretty but she scowled. Meghan could see that that scowl was her resting face. She picked up a chubby baby in black jeans, a white shirt, and brand-new sneakers. Marcus. Meghan felt like she was seeing a little celebrity. The little boy who could be the president of the United States one day. Tears fell as Meghan chuckled at how proud Daequan had been of his son. How he had an outsized belief that his son could do anything, more than he ever could.

Marcus was fussing a little bit. Anastasia bounced him on her hip as she grabbed a diaper bag and made her way inside the building.

Meghan got out of the car and walked in. She didn't feel ready for this. Inside, the air was stuffy with the thick red carpets and heavy drapes and dimmed lights. She could smell traces of smoke which felt disrespectful. An organ swelled with the gospel music that made Meghan want to weep. She refused to.

Two smiling middle-aged ladies at the door said, "Welcome, praise God," and handed her the obituary and program pamphlet. One said, "Please take a seat near the back. The front is reserved for the family."

Meghan wanted to sit in the back anyway. She didn't want to be noticed. As she took her seat as far away from the Rising Sun crew as possible, she saw Lateesia slide off

the pew and pound the floor. The boyfriend helped her up and whispered something in her ear. Lateesia sniffled and nodded. Someone handed her a handkerchief. She blew her nose and wept into the handkerchief.

Meghan was certain she would never walk to the casket. She could see him from her seat. It frightened Meghan to see Daequan's body in a baggy brown suit. His face was bloated, and his chest was protruded. His hair was shaved. Meghan cried at the sight. He looked twelve. That wasn't Daequan or any representation of him. He needed his long, playful hair and perfectly formed face.

The line to view the body moved slowly. Velvet was composed as she looked at her brother. Meghan wondered how Velvet could be so stoic. Anastasia started jumping up and down when she saw the body. Someone rushed to take Marcus from her arms. When the baby looked in the casket he said, "Da Da no sleep. Wake up! Da Da sleep no no. He wake!" Velvet put her hand on Anastasia's shoulder. Anastasia stopped jumping. Then she started howling. Velvet didn't try to stop her. Instead, Velvet studied her brother's body carefully. She adjusted Daequan's lapel. She ran her hands over the chest and then kissed the cheek.

Where does a sixteen-year-old girl get that much strength from? She was more composed than anyone. Meghan remembered how hard Velvet tried during the Rising Sun showcase luncheon to make everything okay between their mother and Daequan. She tried but nothing changed.

Meghan had seen enough. She'd cried enough. She needed to go home, nap then and go to her father's.

As the sermon began, Meghan slipped out. What was the point in staying longer? She didn't want to hear about a person she thought she knew. The preacher was surely going to describe a different Daequan than the one she knew. She wasn't interested. She had already paid her respect to him. She bolted.

One of the ushers said, "May God bless," and handed her a newspaper as she breezed past her. "There's an article about Daequan on page five, baby."

Meghan froze. So, the article had been published. She took the newspaper. "Thank you."

"God bless."

Walking to her car Meghan realized that the box Velvet carried had been filled with DC Weeklies. Clever. Meghan read the article in the car with shaky hands. There was a picture of Meghan, the same one that ran with every article. She looked young and happy. It was taken just before she left for Philadelphia to join TEACH!. Meghan saw a hope in her smile that wasn't there anymore.

A Look Around DC by Meghan James

I normally write about things to do or see around the city. Flower shows, new plays, museums, dog parks, etc. I usually use this column to make people feel good and give my readers something to look forward to in the city.

But I can't do that today. My friend died. His name is Daequan Jackson. He was eighteen years old, living in

Ward 8, the most impoverished area in DC. I met him while teaching creative writing at Rising Sun, a detention center for minors. He was sweet and quick to laugh and smile. Each lesson I taught, he was engaged and ready. If I had a problem with another student, he had no problem putting him in his place. I became dependent on him to control the class at times (not good).

I learned about his life story over some weeks while interviewing him. He loved being interviewed even though his life was deeply flawed. He committed a terrible crime under terrible circumstances. Sharing the crime won't help. He'd been judged enough in his life. But I will say that his crime didn't define him.

He wanted his life to improve after leaving Rising Sun two weeks ago. When I last saw him we spent the whole day together. He told me he wanted to become a teacher like me. I was happy for him because after years of incarceration, he struggled with finding a vision for himself. I was elated that he could see his future in me.

The day I last saw him, I wanted to help him plan his next steps to become a teacher, but there wasn't enough time. I would never see him again.

Daequan taught me things. Not to judge when you don't understand the full picture. Figure out a way to honor those you love the most. Realize you may be perfect

in one's eyes and not another. Accept that you are somewhere between good and bad.

One of Daequan's greatest loves was his sister Velvet, 16 (pictured). He was her protector and provider in a cruel, unfair and unjust world. They loved each other fiercely. Daequan was also the proud father of his two-year-old son Marcus. He was one hundred percent certain Marcus would be able to escape the unrelenting pain and limits he had experienced throughout his life. He believed Marcus was going to be the president of the United States.

Daequan was murdered on his doorstep. He was shot in his heart.

There was no public notice for his death. I find that shameful and unacceptable, so I wrote this article. I don't have anything fun for you to do or see in DC this week. I just want you to know my friend Daequan died here in DC, a place full of wonder for so many. Let this serve as public notice.

-M. James

CHAPTER 38

Meghan texted Eric to hang out with her a few days after the funeral:

The weather is too beautiful to miss

Five minutes later he texted:

agreed

She picked him up at his condo in Georgetown. He looked just right in his soft pink shorts, white polo shirt, and boat shoes. He reminded her of her father: handsome, charismatic, and kind.

Eric jumped in the passenger seat and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "What about my lips?" Meghan said.

"Oh, sure. I didn't know these days if you would ever want me to kiss you again. You didn't kiss me at your father's house the other day."

Meghan thought about telling Eric she was grieving and didn't feel like talking much, let alone kissing. But she didn't. She would have cried if she told him the truth. She kept seeing Daequan in his casket, unnaturally positioned in a decorative wooden box. Ashes would have been much better.

Meghan kissed Eric warmly, suggestively on the lips. "I missed you," she said.

"Likewise. Where are we going, my love?"

"I'm not telling you," Meghan said.

"Oh, so you're one of those mysterious girls, so badass you'll ask me to marry you."

Meghan laughed. "Maybe. How's work?"

"Busy. Work. You know. How's work been for you? I know how much you miss Rising Sun—is it?"

"I'm over it, Eric. I'm fine working as an overpaid underling for you and my dad."

Eric burst out laughing. She knew he would get a kick out of her calling herself an underling. "What does that mean?"

"Oh, you know," Meghan rolled her eyes. She thought about Joseph. It was offensive what she just said. If she were an underling then he was too. The way Joseph carried himself made that statement impossible. He should have been promoted from underling to upper management. She would wait to tell Eric who Joseph was, and that Joseph had been passed over due to racial bias. She would ask that Joseph be promoted to his rightful position. She worried about doing that because Joseph would move to another

division and who would she have to laugh with? Meghan looked forward to work because of Joseph. He was soon on his way to becoming her work husband. If Joseph left, who would make the days go faster?

She rolled down the window and put his arm out to feel the warm weather. She turned off the air, let the window down and put her arm out, too. Her hair started blowing all over the place. She grabbed a scrunchy in the console and pulled her hair into her faithful low ponytail. She thought about Daequan and how she wore her hair like this so many times with him. Her stomach sank. He was the reason she left Rising Sun. It was purely selfish. Mrs. Gibbs, yes, it wasn't right what I did or how I did it, she could finally admit.

She never told Eric much about Rising Sun and all the people she worked with because from the beginning he had shown little interest, only judgment. He was no different from anyone in her life except for Molly. She told Molly plenty and Molly sopped it up like a biscuit with gravy. It was crazy that Meghan enjoyed Molly's company and might go as far as admitting she counted her a friend, one she surely needed, with Jenny gone. She'd once told Meghan that she was envious and wished she'd taken more risks in her life. Meghan touched Molly's belly and said, "No risks now, Mol. Later."

Meghan turned up the radio. Beyonce's "Single Ladies" was on. She started dancing and singing to the music. She laughed when Eric started flicking his hand back and forth like Beyonce in the video. When the song was over, Eric turned the radio down. "So, what do you think about going on vacation with me?"

Daequan flashed in Meghan's mind. He'd never had a vacation or traveled beyond Anacostia. "Vacation?" she said.

"Yeah, vacation." Eric started biting his lips and looking out the window.

She wasn't ready to vacation with him. Not now after going to Daequan's funeral. But then again, that might have been the best time to go. "It seems like you have something planned already."

"Maybe. You really need it, Meg. You just left a stressful job to start a new job that's boring you to death. You need fun, joy, good love."

"I'm not totally bored. Where do you want to go?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I don't know what kind of vacationer you are. We are still new, right? Do you like beaches? Cities? Foreign travel? Come on, don't turn me down."

She took her time answering, "Paris."

"Hell yeah, Paris. Paris it is. Have you ever been?"

"Nope. I was supposed to go with dad and Molly a couple years back, then I pulled out because I just wanted it to be me and my dad. I believed I would be miserable going anywhere with Molly for more than a day. I feel so stupid now. I'd volunteer to vacation with Mol any day."

He clapped his hands. "Well, that's it: Paris! Let the two of us go first. And then maybe a family affair. I'll start planning, captain. I'll get us some good options."

Meghan hadn't felt this grateful in a while. Before knowing Daequan, she expected to take lavish trips a few

times a year. But now she was a little embarrassed realizing how easy it was for her to be rich, knowing how easy it was for Daequan to be poor. She held Eric's hand on his lap and squeezed.

She parked in front of Red Angel's tattoo parlor. "A tattoo parlor?" Eric asked.

"Yeah, a tattoo parlor. Not a great surprise for you," Meghan realized. She should do something nice for him one day. She hadn't done anything nice for him yet. She was embarrassed by her selfishness, the kind that Aunt Susan said she had.

"It's okay but I just need to know who's getting the tattoo."

Meghan laughed. "Don't worry, it's not you."

Getting out of the car, Eric said, "You never cease to amaze me, Meg."

She wished she could say the same. "Shut up, Eric." She walked over to him and gave him a needed hug and a kiss. "Now come on."

Inside the parlor was stereotypical. The walls were painted black, with lots of purple, red and orange cursive words. A pretty African American woman with a nose ring greeted them. "Hello, how y'all doing?" Looking around, it was a slow Monday. No other clientele. The other tattoo artist was asleep in his chair. "You want a tattoo? Both of you?"

Eric pointed at Meghan.

"You, little lady," the lady said. "Okay." She looked impressed.

Meghan was nervous fearing she would regret the tattoo. But she remembered the McCaw tattoo on Daequan's torso, and it boosted her confidence. She was doing this for the right reason.

"Follow me." The name Lucy was scrawled on the woman's mirror with red lipstick. "What do you want, little lady?"

Meghan couldn't get the words out. She noticed the parlor chair that would transport her from here to where she wanted to be. With the cuts and the cracked leather, the chair had seen better days.

"Tell me," Lucy said softly. "What brought you here?"

"I want a tattoo."

"No," Lucy said, "What really brought you here? See, I must know the real reason otherwise I can't do the tattoo. I have to capture the spirit, you know what I'm saying?"

Meghan's throat went dry and her eyes became wet. She spotted the water cooler and asked Eric to get her a drink.

"Umm...I want a tattoo with my mother's name."

"What's your mother's name?"

"Sarah... My mother died from breast cancer seven years ago."

"I see." Meghan appreciated Lucy's response. It wasn't patronizing like most people. She must have lost someone close, too. "Why now?"

Eric came back with water and Meghan guzzled it.

"I should have done it seven years ago." Meghan's eyes crowded with more tears. She remembered Velvet's

graceful strength at the funeral and pretended to have some. It was just a few days ago that she was with Daequan standing in her apartment and him encouraging her to get the tattoo with her mother's name.

She turned to Eric: his face was red and intense, like he was trying with all his might to get new dance steps right.

"What would you like for it to look like? Did you bring a picture?"

Meghan shook her head feeling foolish for her lack of preparation. A simple Google search would have done.

"Don't worry, little lady. You'd be surprised how many people have no clue what they want until right before I begin." Lucy grabbed the thick book of her work and handed it to Meghan.

Meghan flipped through it. Lucy was amazing. She'd done an anaconda up a man's arm that was scarily realistic. She'd done an enviable bouquet of roses on a woman's shoulder blade. But nothing came close to what Meghan wanted.

"Did you see something you like?" Lucy said.

Meghan handed the book to Eric to look through. "I love your work. But I want something simple. Just my mother's name on my wrist. Cursive." Lucy examined Meghan's wrist.

"That's it? Just a name?"

"Yes."

Eric took her hand. Meghan appreciated him for coming. She needed support to complete this mission.

“Okay, I think I got it. Something small. Are you ready?” Lucy said.

Meghan sat down in the chair and Lucy got to work. Meghan winced the entire time. Eric tried to comfort her by rubbing her shoulder but halfway through Meghan asked him to sit in the waiting area. She was thinking about Daequan, the first time she met him and he told her that he wanted better toast. She laughed to herself.

When Lucy was done, Meghan’s face was wet with tears and a smile.

“Was it too painful, little lady?” Lucy asked.

Meghan nodded her head.

Lucy handed her a few tissues. “You got a lot on your mind, in your spirit. I can see it. It’s going to be okay.”

Meghan blew her nose. “I do, I do. How do you know, Lucy?”

“I ain’t no tarot card reader, but when people choose to put ink on their bodies, there’s always a story. Some people are just having fun. And some people come to rectify something, to work something out. You ain’t here for fun.” She took Meghan’s wrist and inspected her work. “Lots of people come in here with pain that they don’t know what to do with, so they get a tattoo.”

Meghan had considered—briefly—to get a tattoo of Meghan the Beautiful. She realized how it would be viewed as vanity. It wasn’t that at all. She never wanted to forget Daequan’s special name for her. But she wouldn’t, she decided. She didn’t need it on her body. He would always be in her mind and heart.

"Thank you, thank you, Lucy," Meghan said, studying her red inner wrist with her mother's name written in small cursive. Sarah. Perfect.

Eric came back but didn't touch her this time. "You okay, Meg?"

She showed him her tattoo.

"It looks like it stings."

"It does, but not for long." She hoped.

"You okay?" Eric asked again.

Meghan kissed her tattooed wrist.

"That's right, little lady, that's right," Lucy said, softly from the corner of her workspace, putting her tools away.

Eric asked again if she was okay.

"I'm better now," she smiled. "I had a friend who inspired me. He told me in his own way that I was a good teacher, a good person. I helped him. He had so many problems beyond me. But still I inspired him, I motivated him. That's all I've wanted since I started teaching." Meghan laughed. "He used to call me Meghan the Beautiful."

Eric rubbed her back. "Are you talking about that kid who died?"

Meghan pulled away from him. She knew he meant well but she was repulsed at Eric's diminishment of her life and the people that mattered to her. He happened to be a young man."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Eric repeated.

"I am okay. I have always wanted you and my father to see my full life and appreciate it. But I see now that you can't. You'll never understand. That's okay. As long as I understand what I've been through, that's all that matters."

"Excuse me, I should say 'your student,'" Eric said.

Meghan continued to be annoyed. "Yes, he was my student, but he was also my friend."

"Dae—something, from the detention center, right?" Eric said slowly.

"Daequan. He's the one who gave me the idea of honoring my mother in this way." She showed him her red, puffy wrist with her mother's name. Meghan looked at him with tears coming down her face. She hated that she had a puffy face to go along with her wrist. She didn't want Eric to see an ugly woman.

"Are you crying for him or for her?" Daequan or Sarah.

"Both."

Eric paid Lucy and left. Neither of them was sure of what to do next. They walked around the unfamiliar neighborhood for a while. She was no longer irritated by Eric. Finding him attractive was easy to do. He could make her laugh. He could kiss her the way she liked. He held her hand when she needed it. He held her hand now as the tattoo continued to sting and throb.

Meghan's world was smaller now without Daequan and Rising Sun. Jenny was gone. Her mother had been gone physically for years. She only had her father, Molly, and her aunt.

She needed Eric. For the next phase of her life, she needed him. There was nothing in her past to deal with. It was all dead.

Meghan stopped on a cracked, uprooted sidewalk, turned to Eric and kissed him warmly. "Thank you for being with me today. I'm not sure I could've done it without you. You're a good man."

"No prob, Meggy. I'm sorry if I offended you in the tattoo parlor. You're a mystery to me. I'm intrigued by you. I am attracted to you, you know that. I want us to be official."

She dropped her head, laughing. Foolishly, she had been running from Eric toward a troubled boy from the other side of the earth.

"Are you sure you're okay, Meg?"

She threw her head back, still laughing. "It's not you, Eric." She calmed down. "I'm okay. I've made so many mistakes." She thought about her shameful last day at Brewster and how she'd abandoned Rising Sun and the boys who needed a steady, gentle force. She could afford to run away, so she did.

"The only thing I can do is move forward." Luckily, she had the opportunity to forget the things she didn't want to remember.

It seemed sudden that Eric got on one knee balancing himself on the cracked sidewalk. He took her hand and gently tugged it so that she would pay attention to him raising a big, shiny diamond ring.

Heat washed over her face, neck, and ears. She wished she could have looked her best. But Eric didn't seem to mind.

"I know it has not been too long since I've known you, and we've had a few hiccups in our relationship. But I knew when I first saw you that I wanted you as my wife. I never imagined I'd be asking you to marry me in some seedy place like this. The moment feels right though. Your new tattoo honoring your mother. I want to add a ring to that hand."

She looked in Eric's eyes and smoothed the sides of his silky hair that she'd always admired. Now, he met her at the place she had just declared she needed to be. The ring was huge. She never expected as much.

"So, what do you say? Will you marry me, Meg?"

She cradled his face with her hands and bent down to kiss him. Her heart was racing. This moment cleansed her from her painful past. She didn't have questions to answer but one.

"Of course, I will marry you."

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First, I must thank you, dear reader, for reading *Nothing Left*. I hope that you've found it worthwhile.

I asked four beautiful women to read and provide feedback on an early version of my manuscript. I thought Meghan's character was solid but was still unsure if readers would want to follow her journey. My beta-readers each saw something unique in the story yet they understood the universal themes I intended. They weren't shy to tell me what didn't work. These are the kind of beta-readers a writer needs! Their careful and kind criticism helped me to pivot in some areas of the book, double down in others, and burn other parts.

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Deeply grateful,

Brittany

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Also by Brittany Buckner:

No Water for the Desert: A Novel

A reader's review: "No Water For The Desert by Brittany Buckner is fantastic! I read it straight through without putting it down. I love Grace & would read a sequel in a heartbeat. The writing is so beautiful & effortless. I'm envious! Read it!"

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