

Murder Can't Stop De Carnival

By Ashley-Ruth M. Bernier

My Grandma Lolo keeps a framed photograph in her kitchen of the very first St. Thomas Carnival—the one where the revelers, consumed by glitter and sequins and the thrill of pageantry and rum, met with an unexpected rainstorm. She's an octogenarian now, but Lolo still tells that story like she's devouring the plumpest mango from her tree; savoring each word like it's a juicy bite. The year was 1952. The island was growing into its place on the global stage, taking its first tentative step into the kind of cultural extravaganza that islands like Trinidad had been pulling off for years. Lolo was little then, but she remembers the dark clouds rolling in and the downpour they'd unleashed on the parade. It had washed away makeup and destroyed hairdos, turned the festive streets of downtown Charlotte Amalie into a soggy mess.

The people danced anyway.

The music never stopped. The laughter never died. Lolo's favorite part of the story was when the Duke of Iron—a *calypsonian* with a *stage name*, she's always quick to point out; not an *actual* Duke—began to belt out song lyrics he made up right there on the spot: "Rain can't stop de Carnival!" He was right. The rain *couldn't* stop the Carnival from becoming the Virgin Islands treasure it was destined to be. It couldn't stop the people from coming together for something greater, a celebration that linked every one of us together through time and generation. Nothing could stop that. Not rain. Not excessive heat. Not hurricanes, and surely not a global pandemic...although, I'll admit, that last one was maybe just a little problematic.

Nothing could stop de Carnival. Nothing at all. And, as I learned one year when our celebration rolled around, not even murder.

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Imagine this: the blazing Caribbean sun, April humidity, and the heaviest, glitziest evening gown you can picture; complete with wrist-length sleeves and a whole damn train in the back. Imagine accessorizing that heat box with additional torture devices, like pointy sequined pumps with four-inch heels and a thick mask of makeup duking it out with perspiration. Imagine the attire wasn't even the most irritating part of the morning. Thirty minutes into our wait in the crumbling asphalt parking lot of Dorothea Upton's convertible rental agency, and I *wished* it was all something I was imagining, wished I wasn't living through every overheated, pinchy, sweaty, yappy second of it. Nope. Here I was. Carnival Princess Charlotte Caviness, twenty years after a reign that had started when I was in fourth grade; wishing with every ounce of my being to be literally anywhere else.

My grandmother whips her head in my direction fast enough that her tiara nearly tumbles off her elaborate gray bouffant. "Charlotte Christiana!" She snaps. "Some words have no place in a lady's lexicon, and I believe I heard at least three come from your mouth jus' now."

"This kin' of situation calls for a more expansive vocabulary, Lolo," I grumble. I'm too hot to even apologize the right way. "This dress can only be described as tailor-made suffering."

"Well, if you spent more time dressed for elegance instead of comfort, dahlin'..." Lolo trails off. Her tone's auditory side-eye, and the rest of the sentence doesn't even need to be said.

I begin some kind of an explanation, but swallow it back at the last second. My grandmother—who's always been *Lolo*, never "Grandma" or "Granny"—already knows shorts and sneakers are my literal daily uniform, and that as a middle school gym teacher, they're the only kind of clothes that makes sense. I already know she disapproves. There's no need to budge from an impasse we've been comfortably grumpy in for the past eight years. The only need I

have right now is to get out of the dress, and in order to do that, I have to get through the parade.

“Any idea about how much longer this will take?” I snap. “It’s been almost an hour. Shouldn’t we be on the back of a convertible right now?”

I haven’t addressed it to anyone in particular. It’s more like a wail to the Universe, to whatever the ‘Spirit of Carnival’ might be. Lolo nods sullenly in agreement, but Miss Genie looks over at me, wringing her plump gloved hands in sympathy. “It has been a while, eh?” She asks in her usual hesitant voice. “We could go wait in the shade, but I’m sure if we continue to stand here, *someone* should notice a car hasn’t been assigned to us yet—”

“But what sense dat makes, Genie?” Lolo interrupts. The two of them have been best friends for seventy-odd years, which makes me question Miss Genie’s sanity on a regular basis. Miss Genie was the second-ever St. Thomas Carnival princess. I’ve seen pictures of her from her parade back in the fifties, when she’d walked down the street in pastel green frills and ruffles and patent leather. There are still traces of those round, dimpled mahogany-brown cheeks and twinkling eyes in the rotund, bespectacled woman standing across from me. My Lolo, though, was the *first* St. Thomas Carnival princess. She never lets anyone get close to forgetting that.

“I’m just saying, Lorette, that Dorothea mus’ already know we been waiting for a convertible for quite some time now,” Miss Genie says with way more patience than I could ever manage. “I imagine she’ll have a car and driver ready for us soon so we can join the parade line.”

“Dorothea Upton can barely drink water and swallow without having to think about each step of the process,” Lolo mutters.

“Well, she’s also down a driver, isn’t she? The man they found dead yesterday morning on the waterfront—I thought I heard he was employed here for—”

“Yes, yes,” Lolo cuts her off again. “I heard that too, but that doesn’t negate the fact that las’ I spoke with her, at our Sewing Club meeting the other day, she was looking for the glasses sitting right there on her nose. Trus’ me, she has no idea we’re out here. Someone needs to go say something.” There’s a look, a tone; something in the head tilt and the slight purse of her lips. Yup. ‘Someone’ is me.

“I’ll go see what I can do,” I say, hoisting up my dress.

“Chari,” Miss Genie calls after me as I teeter in my heels toward the Upton Convertible Empire office. “You don’t want Florian to come wid you, too?”

I know that if I turn around, they’ll all see it—the spike in my already skyrocketing irritation; the eye-roll and mouthed curse word I can’t hold back. With my back to them, I only have to fake the graciousness in my voice. “Oh—no, but thanks, Miss Genie. I think I can manage this on my own,” I say into the wind.

It’s Lolo’s voice I hear next. “Right, Charlotte, but don’t you think it would be prudent to—”

“Thanks, Miss Lorette. But I’ll jus’ wait outside with you and Granny,” comes the quietest, most timid interruption I’ve ever heard. “Like Charlotte said—she’s perfectly capable of handling this on her own.”

They’re the first words I’ve heard Florian Milliner speak all morning, other than a mumbled hello when I’d hiked out into the parking lot. Twenty years ago, our grandmothers had put their heads together and hatched a plan for us to continue their legacy as Carnival royalty. We were nine years old and at the complete opposite ends of the personality spectrum, and yet they still thought it would be great fun to dress us up, make us a team, and throw us into the Prince and Princess pageant together. Lolo still has a photo of our crowning moment hanging up in her

living room. I try my best to ignore it whenever I walk past. But all the ignoring in the world can't erase the fact that our generational Carnival royalty is a sweet story everyone loves—and that every five years, the four of us are asked to ride through the parade on a convertible together. It's a hell of a big ask.

I turn around and look at the three of them—Lolo, all glittery and glamorous in her scarlet sequined gown, Miss Genie, soft and round in pale peach silk; and then Florian. He's grown into the kind of slim, tall, cinnamon-colored man I'd probably find somewhat attractive if I wasn't 97 percent sure his grandmother still picks out his suits. He's staring down at his shoes, also probably curated by Miss Genie, and I let out a long, haughty breath. I want to answer him honestly. I want to say that given our particular history of working together, *handling things on my own* is somewhat of a given. But instead, I gather up the voluminous folds of rose gold tulle and silk and lace so that none of it is dragging on the dusty asphalt. I nod tightly in their general direction to keep my crown in place. And then, I whirl around and charge toward the office to find us a spare convertible. It's no different than seeing my hoop at the other end of the basketball court or the finish line at the end of one of my triathlons. It's a goal, and I need to get there. It's the first step in getting this all over with, and no linebacker in the world's got anything on me.

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Dorothea Upton's barrelling out of the office at the same time I'm moving at my own hasty pace to get in. We nearly crash into each other.

"You watchin' where you goin', Queenie?" she begins, and then takes a second glance at the white sash pinned across my body. "Princess, I mean. What year...? Ah. Legacy year for

you. *Oh*,” she says, as realization strikes. “You’s the VanSchyler girl, right? Lorette’s granddaughter?”

“Chari Caviness,” I introduce myself. There’s a pause while Mrs. Upton’s face goes through twists worthy of a majorette’s baton, and I sigh and get ready to clarify. “Yes, I’m a VanSchyler. And Lorette’s granddaughter.”

“That’s what I thought,” she answers. “Your father’s name, but yuh grandmother’s face.”

“I’ve heard that before.” I’ve always been told I’m a miniature version of Lolo. Same warm brown complexion, same slim build; same imperious attitude. I’ve been trying to work on that last one for years. In that spirit, I shoot Mrs. Upton my sweetest smile and roll out the saccharine tones that had worked on the stadium stage for me twenty years earlier. “You know, Lolo’s always been so impressed with how efficiently you run your business.”

There’s the tiniest flicker of *something*. Suspicion, but perhaps also pride. “Has she, now?”

“Absolutely! Jus’ now, during our...uncharacteristic wait outside for a car, Lolo was saying that you mus’ be swamped with dignitaries and Carnival royalty. Everyone riding through the parade probably booked a car with your Convertible Empire.”

“You’re waiting?” Mortification floods her face. “Well, we can’t have that, honey. Let me see what I can do for you—”

“Dorothea!”

I recognize Lolo’s voice behind me and cringe. Recognize the tone, too. Dorothea Upton’s about to get verbally *wrought up*. “Lolo, wait,” I begin, but just like De Carnival, nothing can stop my grandmother’s tirades once she gets going.

“How long you plan to have us waitin’ outside in that heat? Genie and I have no intention of looking like drowned rats when we drive through Post Office Square,” she snaps.

“I’m doing the best I can. Everybody needs a car. You don’t see the lines in there?” Mrs. Upton shoots back. She turns up the drama in her own voice, and her face becomes a mask of *pain* and *suffering*. It’s about as real as the sugar in my voice a few moments earlier. “And I don’t know how much of the news you follow, but maybe you’ve heard we’re down a driver. That terrible murder on deh Waterfront? You know it was Roland, right?”

Miss Genie wrinkles her nose in confusion. “Wait, Roland? The one for Leah?”

My grandmother’s confused too. Well. What I see on her face isn’t confusion as much as suspicion. “He was still working for you?”

I look at Florian to see if he’s as lost as I am, but he’s busy fiddling with his professional camera, conveniently inspecting something on the lens so he doesn’t have to participate in the conversation. He misses my eye-roll in his direction, also.

“Deh attorneys dem said I couldn’t fire him until the divorce was final,” Mrs. Upton says. “He was a miserable husband to my Leah, but I appreciated him as a driver and worker. I am, after all, a professional.”

Lolo opens her mouth, and I’m 100 percent sure it’s to refute that last point. I see an opportunity and seize it. “Mrs. Upton, what if we drive the convertible ourselves instead?” I ask, the words falling out of my mouth as they enter my head. “Lolo and Miss Genie have parasols. They can sit together on the top of the convertible.”

Mrs. Upton’s not saying no, but she doesn’t look particularly enthusiastic about the idea either. She gestures to Florian. “*He’d* be driving the—”

I jump in to clarify as Florian looks up from his camera with his usual bewildered expression. “Oh—no, Mrs. Upton. I’d be driving. You know Florian’s a photographer. I’m sure he’d be happy to sit shotgun and take pictures for the whole route.”

Everyone looks over at Florian. He shrugs. “I’m fine with that,” he mumbles. There’s kind of a half-assed smile, a flicker of the cutie-pie he was that Carnival Prince year. Grandmothers, church aunties, and teenage babysitters thought he was the sweetest little guy who walked the earth back then. Pretty sure his current fan club consists of the same demographics. “If anyone will get us there in one piece, it’s Chari. Um. Charlotte.”

Mrs. Upton glances back at the tremendous line in the Convertible Empire office. And after ten minutes and dozens of signed waiver/liability rental forms with my signature, we’re back in the lot, this time looking for a convertible.

“They’re all exactly the same,” Lolo says. “Jus’ give us the first one, Doro. We need to get on the route. Everyone always expects the first Carnival Princess to be close to the beginning of the parade.”

“They’re not *all* the same,” Mrs. Upton insists as we walk through the rows of identical white BMWs. “Remember? The license plates?”

They’re all plays on the Upton last name, the license plates. Each one features an “UP” phrase in it—SunsUP, JumpUP, BlessUP. Lolo pauses and points to the one behind her. “I remember. Let’s jus’ use this one, no?”

Mrs. Upton whips around. “Which one is that—WakeUP? No, no, that can’t work. Cal said WakeUP was low on gas. And we’ve all been so busy these past few days with Carnival and Roland’s unfortunate passing that we haven’t been able to refill yet.” She turns to me, and a sly little smile sneaks onto her face. “Do you know Cal, dear? My grandson? He drives for me here

sometimes when I need some help, but he jus' now got a big job down at deh TV station. Bet you've seen his handsome face every night on the news."

"Oh, Charlotte knows Cal. For sure," Florian volunteers before I can say anything. "I've taken—"

"Just a little. I've...run into him here and there," I interrupt. Mrs. Upton's eyes widen gleefully, and I point to the car behind me before she jumps any further down the conclusion road. "So WakeUP won't work. Got it. Can we take this one instead?"

This is how I wind up rolling out of Upton Convertible Empire's parking lot with Florian silent and shuttered beside me and our grandmothers sitting behind us on the trunk, under the lacy parasols that match their ornate dresses. As I make my way slowly up the alley between the historic graveyard and the hulking yellow office building to enter the parade route, I hear Lolo complaining behind me.

"She could've given us a car without this particular license plate," she's griping. There's a loud *schuups* as she sucks her teeth in annoyance. "Just imagine how it will look when a car with *this* much Carnival royalty and regality pulls into the Post Office Square in a car that says WukUP."

"Calm down, Lorette. The judges and cameras in Post Office Square have seen plenty of wukkin' up and bouncing bottoms today," Miss Genie chides her. "Jiggling bosoms, thunderous thighs, winin' waists...I mean, it's Carnival, right?"

Lolo's sputtering something, trying her best to sound scandalized. I stifle a giggle from behind the wheel and look over at Florian, who's hiding a snicker of his own behind his camera as we pull up to the intersection. A parade official indicates that we can join the parade route after the current troupe, a flurry of feathers, bikinis, and skin doing plenty of wukkin' up; moves

further up the road. I feel more forgiving in the cool shadow of the office building beside us and the breeze up the Gade. I take a moment to catch Florian's eyes.

"Hey, you hadn't wanted to drive, right?" I ask him. "I didn't mean to speak for you back there at the car lot. I just thought it would be easier to—"

He's already shaking his head. "Nah, Charlotte. I'm good. It's fine."

I cock my head to the side, nearly causing my own tiara to tumble off my drop curls. "Why you insistin' on callin' me *Charlotte* today? I never stopped being *Chari*. You sound like Lolo when she's angry."

Florian sighs. Looks down at his camera. "I dunno. Maybe because...sometimes people change. Sometimes people grow, and I didn't want to assume that you—"

"Don't drive forward so fast, Charlotte! My shoe—my heel is stuck in the damn seat," Lolo cuts him off as I slowly make a right onto the parade route. I glance over my shoulder. Sure enough, Lolo's somehow gotten her high heel wedged in the fold of the backseat, and she and Miss Genie are in a tussle worthy of a comedy sketch trying to pull it out. I slow our roll just a little bit.

"You got it, Lolo?" I ask as I inch forward. The noise in the backseat has stopped.

"Oh, I got—something," I hear Lolo mutter. "What *is* this? It looks like—like some kind of cloth?"

"No, it's a shirt, Lorette. It's a madras shirt," Miss Genie corrects her.

"Lord in Heaven. Took long enough for Dorothea to find us a car, and she couldn't even give us a clean one? And it looks like there's something inside—"

There's some rustling. Some more complaining. And then—a scream. Miss Genie lets loose a few words from the unladylike lexicon, and Lolo's invoking the names of half the New Testament.

“What? What is it?” I ask, trying to keep my eyes on the rum-guzzling and prancing from the group ahead of us.

“There's a pair of scissors wrapped up in the shirt,” Miss Genie manages. She sounds like she can barely get the words out in order.

“Those aren't scissors. They're *shears*,” Lolo corrects her best friend. “And they're covered in blood.”

#

I stop the car.

“What are you doing?” Lolo asks. Her voice sounds like a block of steel, but I can see in the rearview mirror that her pageant smile and scepter wave are in full force for the spectators lining the Main Street.

“I thought I just heard you say there are bloody scissors wrapped up in that shirt,” I answer.

“I did. But that doesn't mean you stop driving,” my grandmother returns in a tone that implies *I'm* the one saying something bizarre.

“Lolo, I deal with nosebleeds and skinned knees every day, but a pair of bloody scissors wrapped up and hidden in the seat of the car? That's an entirely different—”

"I'm not saying it isn't important, dear," Lolo interrupts, chastising me through a grin that sparkles like our tiaras. "I'm just saying that it doesn't need to be important *right now*. We're on the parade route. Everyone's watching. Mos' of them have cameras."

"And? Lolo, I don't know what this means, but if someone's been hurt—"

"—there's still nothing we can do about it right at this moment. This is Carnival. Certain things are expected from those of us who wear crowns, Charlotte. We can figure it out at the end of the route," she explains.

I begin to ask Miss Genie to help talk some sense into her best friend, but she's busy patting her face with a handkerchief Florian's handed back to her. No help from either of them means Lolo wins. As usual. I ease my spiky heel off the brake and let the convertible roll down the road again. We inch past the Catholic cathedral, its steps full of people clicking photos and swaying to the calypso music playing from the troupes ahead and behind us.

"I'm sorry, Lorette. Chari. Florian. I jus'—I needed a moment," Miss Genie finally sputters. "It's just—I was thinking about Roland. Wasn't he stabbed?"

"My goodness," Lolo says through her grin. "I think I heard that as well."

I drop my parade smile for a second and shoot the grannies a look over my shoulder. "Two of allyou were talking about this Roland back at deh car rental place, too. Who is he?"

Lolo and Miss Genie exchange a glance, and finally, Lolo speaks up. "Roland Parr, dahlin'. He's—he *was*—married to Leah."

"Dorothea Upton's granddaughter," Miss Genie supplies.

"She's a little older than we are. Maybe that's why you don't know her," Florian adds, apparently finding his voice from wherever it had gone after his grandmother found the shears.

"Oh, so you know her too, Florian?" I ask.

I can still see his eyes go wide and frightened behind his shades. “I mean—I—not really. I took pictures for their wedding last year. I see them around every now and—”

“Iss jus’ last year they married?” Lolo plows over the rest of his sentence. “Because the last I heard...”

“Well, it’s true. Some of the ladies in our sewing group told us that she filed for divorce las’ month,” Miss Genie finishes for Lolo. “Apparently, Roland had a girlfriend on the side.”

“Couple girlfriends,” Lolo corrects, blowing a kiss to a group cheering from underneath the bungalow at the Market Square. “It was embarrassing for Leah. For the whole Upton family. They all take after Dorothea, and you know how she loves being the center of attention.”

I swear if I looked hard enough, I’d probably see the irony soaring over Lolo’s crown. “Right,” I say slowly.

“They say there was one woman in particular he was taking all over town. Very pretty. Much lovelier than Leah. But...well...if you’ve ever seen Leah, you’d know that doesn’t take much.” Miss Genie delivers those words in her usual soft, sweet voice. “It was killing Dorothea. Every time she spoke his name, you’d swear she wanted to wash her mouth out with soap afterwards.”

“I bet,” I mutter. I see a group of my students, open-mouthed and giggling, on the sidelines, and I crack a grin and nod at them before rolling on down the street. That’s when the thought hits me. I stop the car again.

“Goodness, Charlotte!” Lolo snaps.

“Lolo. You don’t think she could’ve been involved in Roland’s death, do you?” I ask. “If she hated him that much, if he’d hurt her granddaughter that badly; if he’d embarrassed her family to the point that he did?”

“What exactly are you asking, Chari?” Miss Genie asks.

“I guess I’m asking if maybe those shears are what killed Roland Parr. Or if Ms. Upton could’ve been...um...the one behind the shears,” I stammer, tripping over my words the way I had over my high heels earlier.

“I’ve seen Dorothea run screaming from cockroaches,” Lolo says. “There’s no way she stabbed her granddaughter’s husband, no matter how much of an ass he was.”

“Especially not if he was killed Thursday night,” Miss Genie adds. “She was at LMM that night.”

Lolo’s a member of so many social groups, all of which have 3-letter acronyms that don’t spell a word. I can’t keep them straight. “LMM...that’s your sewing—your Maidens of the Madras club, right?”

“Ladies of the Magical Madras,” Lolo corrects me indignantly, “and yes, we had a meeting that night. Doro was there, all right. Arrived late, complained the entire time about how *busy* she was, and didn’t bring a dish to share. And you know, she had the nerve to say my coconut dumbread was dry? Dry! You know I’ve never made a dry dumbread in the decades I’ve been baking...”

They continue to cluck about crusts and crumbs from the back of the convertible, with Lolo defending her dumbread recipe while Miss Genie soothes and calms. We’re rolling slowly through the entrance to Main Street when I hear Florian speak up beside me. “Um. So...this might not be important, but maybe I should mention it,” he says softly. I look over at him and see the hesitancy and reserve in his voice reflected on his face.

“Mention what?” I ask. I watch him draw in a long breath before he launches into his words.

“So the newspaper sent me to shoot the Calypso Monarch competition last Wednesday. Rainy night, not great for candid shots or my equipment, but—rain or shine, deh show mus’ go on.”

“I saw them. Your pictures in the paper, I mean. They were—hey, they were something special, Florian. For real,” I tell him.

Tiny smile. “Thanks. I try. But anyway. Uh...Roland Parr, he played trumpet that night in the backup band for the singers. His wife was there to watch the show, but, uh, so was his girlfriend. And during one of the breaks, when I was going to my car to get a better tripod, I overheard her cussing him out *good*.”

“The girlfriend?”

“No, his wife. Leah,” Florian clarifies. “It was...intense. Leah wasn’t holding back at all, mehson. Called him every name in the book. And he—it was like he knew exactly how to level her up to that next tier of fury. She was screaming at him, losing every ounce of her sh—of her, um, her *composure*; and he’d just nod and smirk. She said something about him wanting alimony so he could eat truffles and go night fishing with the new girlfriend...”

“For real? All that?”

There’s a ghost of a snicker on Florian’s face. “All that. Real specific. It was seriously the most bizarre cuss-out I’ve ever heard.” The flicker of the smile disappears as quickly as it came. “Thing is, though, it stopped being bizarre after a few. Once she really got hot. Once he’d laughed it off jus’ one time too many. It wasn’t funny when she started spitting threats.”

“Threats?” Lolo asks before I can. I hadn’t noticed when she and Miss Genie had moved away from the dumbread discourse and back into our conversation.

“What exactly does that mean, dear?” Miss Genie asks her grandson. Florian shrinks down into the collar of his shirt.

“I mean—well—I’m, um, paraphrasing since allyou probably don’t want to hear the *actual* words she used, but Leah told Roland he’d never see any of the money. That if he decided to go through with the divorce, with looking for alimony, she’d have her brother deal with him first.” He swallows hard. “She said he bes’ watch his back, test his food and check his brakes for the foreseeable future.”

Miss Genie’s voice is sharper than I’ve ever heard it. “And you didn’t think about mentioning this to anyone after he was found dead two nights ago? Florian!”

“Grannie, I—look, she was angry, sure, but people say things all the time when they’re angry. It doesn’t mean they’re actually murderers,” he tries. He’s not speaking to me, and I’m keeping my eyes ahead of me on the road, but the weight of those words hangs heavily in the space between us. After all, I’d once gotten angry enough with Florian to tell him I’d kill him. I mean, I was nine years old at the time, but he’d nearly ruined the goal we’d been working toward for six miserable months, so maybe he deserved it. Lolo and Miss Genie had been counting on my gymnastics and basketball skills to win us the crown in our Prince and Princess pageant all those years ago. I could do flips on trampolines and slam dunk like any pro. All Florian had to do during our talent section was throw me the ball. After he’d frozen on stage—after he’d stood there, staring into the floodlights while our time ticked away; after I’d run across the stage and grabbed the ball myself when he didn’t respond to my repeated furious whispers—yeah, I’d told him I’d murder him. And even when they’d placed those crowns on our heads at the end of the night, I’m pretty sure I’d shot him a look in between photographs to let him know that feeling wasn’t going anywhere. That it would stay in my heart forever.

But still, Florian hadn't actually turned up dead a couple of days later.

"Remember to smile," Lolo's voice jolts me back to the present. "All those photographers and—wha' you call them, streamlivers?—who couldn't fit up by the judges in Post Office Square, this is where they're stuck. You better believe you're being filmed. So Leah had plenty to say to her husband, eh? You think she was serious?"

"I don't know," Florian answers. "I mean, I don't want to...um...if I'm wrong, I...I dunno, Miss Lorette. 'I'm not sure' is, I think, the best I can do right now."

"Of course it is," I mutter. "Trust me, we all expected you to be this—"

"—careful. Fair. Charlotte's right, we did," Lolo finishes for me, using words that certainly weren't the ones I'd had queued up. Generous words that I hadn't been planning to use, that I hadn't even thought of; but somehow, unexpectedly, *fit*.

Florian's all hushed and hidden again. "Thank you."

"But let's say you had to be decisive, though," I shoot at him. "Let's say 'I'm not sure' wasn't an option and you *had* to say yes or no. Let's say you actually had to take a damn shot, Florian. What would you say?"

"If I *had* to? I guess I'd say yes, I thought Leah was serious. But you're missing the point. I don't have to. And it's not always about that kind of shot. You know, like a basketball shot, where you have to get there first and fastest." There's something in his voice, the slightest bit of an edge, that makes me take my eyes off the road for a second and glance over at him. "Truth is, I take shots all the time. The other kind, though. I have to stop and check lighting, and glare, and background, and color. Lens and perspective and contrast. It's...not every shot that needs to be rushed, Chari."

I've never been put in my place so quietly before.

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I'm still trying to rustle up words—the right words—and Lolo doles out another kindness by picking up the conversation thread from there. “So Leah was likely serious, you think, when she made the threats deh other night. Okay. So what does that mean? Florian, you said she mentioned her brother? Oh, *God*. That's that boy, isn't it, Genie?”

“Sen' help,” Miss Genie mutters, and even though I'm looking carefully at the road, at the waving crowds that line Main Street, I can *hear* her grimace and scowl. “Wha's he name, now? She wasn't jus' talkin' about him back at the lot?”

“Chad. No, not Chad. Cal,” Lolo practically spits. “I remember his greedy li'l hands trying to sneak money out of the collection plate in church when he was a child.”

“And as a teenager, taking seconds and thirds at the church potlucks before some people even had firsts,” Miss Genie adds.

“Well. If the boy grew up on Dorothea's cooking, we could maybe pardon him that,” Lolo mutters. “Deh two of allyou know him, right? Cal Upton? You probably remember him from growing up.”

Florian clears his throat. “Oh, Chari knows him pretty well.”

There's silence from the back of the convertible. I don't dare turn around, but I can feel their curious stares boring through the driver's seat and the lacy scoop back of my gown. “I—I wouldn't say *well*,” I stammer finally. “It was, um, just a couple of dates. A while ago. Months. Entire seasons. It was clear from the start we were better off as friends.”

“Clear to both of you?” Florian asks. There’s a hint of something in his voice, something sly and mischievous I’ve never heard there before. “I have shots of the Soca Slam concert on St. John las’ July, know. Maybe one of allyou knew Cal was in the friend zone, but it wasn’t Cal.”

Nope, it wasn’t. Cal had spent that entire night with an uninvited hand on my back, one he’d tried like hell to move southward all night. It hadn’t exactly been an accident when I’d elbowed him in the gut while raising my VI flag towel to wave in the air during one of the songs. “Acquaintance zone,” I say through a crisp smile.

“I had no idea,” Lolo says. After our talks about my career path, I didn’t think there was room in Lolo’s voice for any more disapproval. Apparently, I’ve been wrong.

“He works out at the same gym I do. He’s persistent,” I mutter. “He’s also still greedy, still impolite, and still...remember how he used to say ‘Palms’ for ‘Psalms’ and ‘Collisions’ for ‘Colossians’ whenever he had to read at church? In, like, eleventh grade? He hasn’t improved.”

“Well, as a teacher, dear, I’m sure you’re aware that some people have more of an uphill battle with literacy than others,” Miss Genie says in a voice that’s a little more patronizing than gentle.

“Yeah, I’m aware. But Cal’s problem isn’t that he can’t read. It’s that he *doesn’t*. He doesn’t take the time to look closely at words—at anything, really—because his mind is always on something else. And that ‘something else’ is usually himself.” I shake my head. “Same night you saw us in St. John, Florian? We left the show early. Man swore he had a coupon for some new restaurant, Coral Bay Saloon, and he wanted to check it out. Turns out what he’d cut out of the paper was a promotion for Cruz Bay Salon. Like, a nail salon. There was a picture of nail polish and a French manicure on the coupon. We drove across the whole damn island for nothing.”

Florian's trying his best to stifle a laugh. "I'm...so sorry."

"And the whole drive, I had to hear about his boat and all the big fish he catches. All his fishing tools, his rod and his shears and his scaling knives and his big net and his backup rod. His dream of being on TV with a fishing show. And the ultimate dream of an even bigger boat," I tell them. "Ah tell yo, I've had some bad dates in the past, but dem two with Cal? *The* worst."

"Yes...but he is actually on TV now, right?" Miss Genie muses. "Does some reporting for the station, for the news every now and again? I knew he looked familiar. Lorette, he's the one who dropped Dorothea off to the LMM meeting the other day."

A glance in the rearview mirror reveals that Lolo isn't really listening—at least, not listening to the extent that she should be. We're right at the major intersection of Main Street and Garden Street, the base of Government Hill; the beautiful historic heart of Charlotte Amalie also known as Post Office Square. A Carnival official is ushering the troupe ahead of us into the wide expanse of the Square, the midpoint of the parade; where cameras, interviewers, judges, and dignitaries wait for each entry's performance, for all their glitter and mas. We've got to wait our turn, though. The troupe ahead of us is just getting started. "Mmm-hmm, he did. Late," Lolo agrees absently as she touches up her face powder. "He was driving one of these. A convertible. He mussbe had a job that night."

"Doro said it's her busy season," Miss Genie remarks.

"Well, then she needs to take time away to rest, if it's going to affect her sewing the way it did that night," Lolo says. "You saw her stitching that night, right, Genie? Lord..."

"It's because her cut lines were off," Miss Genie sniffs.

“Mrs. Upton isn’t new at sewing, though. I remember she worked with you on the dress I wore to the parade when I was 15,” I say. Bright turquoise ankle-length gown almost as uncomfortable as this one, but I don’t mention that part.

The dismissal in Lolo’s voice is swift. “Yes—usually she’s...acceptable. Experienced enough to assist a more skilled seamstress like me, and competent enough to at least stitch fabric together. But something was off the other night. I think it was those ridiculous shears she showed up with. Or maybe she just wasn’t well, you know? Dry mouth or something like that, because it certainly wasn’t my dumbread.”

“Perhaps,” Miss Genie agrees. I glance over my shoulder just in time to catch the judginess in her slow nod and raised eyebrows. “She tried to blame the grandson for her mistakes, too. Said how he was in a foul mood and rushed her out of the car. As if that should have any bearing on years upon years of sewing skill.”

Lolo can’t resist. “Sewing *mediocrity*. But you’re right. Several children in the li’l quadrille group down at Alma Lewis Elementary won’t get to have their madras outfits now that we have to go back and fix her mistakes. Who thinks about cutting fabric with bent-up shears like that, anyway?”

It’s all been fading into my background for some time now, ever since Lolo and Miss Genie had begun to talk about that drama-laden LMM meeting they’d had just a couple nights before. The music, the colors, the glitter. The scent of rum and sweat. The crowds. The cheers. The itchy dress and pinchy shoes. All of that has pulled back, bit by tiny bit; as our gossipy grandmothers’ words paired with a tingly rush in the back of my mind begin to build a reality that rushes to the foreground and drowns everything else out. There’s a truth at the heart of it that causes a few of those words Lolo objected to earlier to make a resurgence.

"I know exactly who does," I follow up those words, before my grandmother can snap that *Charlotte Christiana* at me like a Carnival firework. "A bad seamstress. A worse liar. ...A terrible murderer."

#

"Murderer?" Lolo answers. "Love, we're talking about Dorothea Upton. *Doro*. I told you how she was lookin' her glasses the other night, right? The ones on top her head?"

"Well, exactly, Lolo. I think that's why she grabbed the wrong shears," I answer.

"I'm completely lost," my grandmother admits.

"I am too, dear," Miss Genie clucks sympathetically.

Florian lets a beat go by before he says anything. "I mean...it's a big accusation, Chari. But I bet you got reasons. And I'm ready to hear you out," he says quietly. I look over at him in his silver suit and plum tie, at the patience in his face; all of which had come straight from his grandmother. I sigh and figure that if I wind up looking ridiculous after laying it all out for them, at least I'd be in good company.

"Leah and Roland's divorce—you said it was a huge embarrassment for the whole Upton family, right? So I bet it pissed off Leah, but it made Cal and their grandmother even more livid. I mean, think about it, Lolo. Think about what you'd do if I married a man who made me look foolish ten months later."

"I'd like to say both of us would've seen warning signs and avoided the whole situation entirely," Lolo mutters.

"You'd raise hell," Miss Genie counters. "But go on, Chari?"

“Cal hates looking stupid. Which is unfortunate, ‘cause he usually can’t avoid it. But he also hates the idea of anything coming between him and his grandmother’s money, and it sounds like Roland Parr was aimin’ straight for that. So I bet the thought of beating Roland’s ass into a ball of bruises was real appealing,” I tell them. “I’m thinking Cal’s sister probably told him about the fight you saw at the Calypso Monarch show, Florian. And knowing Cal, he probably wanted to go mess with Roland right away. But first, he had to drop off his grandmother to the Mystical Madras Women meeting—”

“Ladies of the Magical Madras,” Miss Genie interrupts sweetly.

Whatever’s on the tip of my tongue, but “Right,” comes out instead. “He had to drop her off there, and then get down to the TV station for that dumb show of his. Mrs. Upton had her glasses up on top of her head, so I bet she couldn’t see well and Cal was probably rushing her out of the convertible. I don’t know how it happened, but in the end, when she was getting out of the car, she grabbed his fishing shears. They’re bent and hooked, which I learned in the forty-five minute lecture Cal gave me on every piece of his fishing equipment. She grabbed those instead of—well, those are sewing shears wrapped up in the shirt, right, Lolo? I didn’t see them, but—”

“They’re sewing shears.” Lolo’s still grinning for the crowds, but her voice is taut and strained. “Nine inches long and sharp enough to slice right through leather. Or an errant grandson-in-law, it would seem.”

“Yes, but she didn’t do it, right, Chari? Not if she was at the Ladies—the Magic—you know, the meeting,” Florian asks.

“No. It was Cal,” I whisper. “Had to be Cal. I bet he somehow met up with Roland, things went south real fast, and then he—”

“—with the sewing shears. Lord sen’ help. It’s probably the mos’ effective use of deh damn things since Doro bought them,” Lolo sighs. There’s a pause, and then— “but wait, Charlotte. Doro isn’t exactly as sharp as her shears, but she’s got some brains in there someplace. She was very particular about the car she gave us at the lot, which makes me think she’d want the car with the murder weapon inside off limits. Why would she ever let us drive *this* car if she knew?”

“I was trying to think that through too,” I say. “I don’t know why Cal still had them here in the back of the car.”

“It’s their busy season,” Florian says. “There are jobs all day long during Carnival. People flying in from St. Croix. Different events and pageants. Right now? This week? There are people on their lot renting out cars all the time. And Cal has that other job with the TV station, too. So he probably didn’t have a chance to get rid of them yet. Sneak them off the lot, take them out in his boat, and drop them off the north side of Thatch Cay.”

I snicker. “Cal called it ‘Thratch’ Cay. Asked me if I wanted to sail there with him about four times on our first date—hey, wait. *Wait*. Maybe that’s—” I turn my body in my seat and look back at my grandmother and Miss Genie. “Do any of you remember the license plate on the car Lolo asked Mrs. Upton if we could take first? The one she wouldn’t let us have?”

“Oh, I remember, dear. It was WakeUP,” Miss Genie supplies.

I feel my glossed lips curl into a smile. “Then I think I know exactly what happened,” I tell them. “See, the thing about Cal—”

A loud thump on the hood of the convertible cuts off the rest of my sentence. It’s a Carnival official, a tall woman in a pink and blue madras shirt and a straw hat wide enough to shade a small family at the beach. “Iss all you, honey. Drive right in. Fete Til We Fly is moving

out deh square,” she barks, gesturing to the feather-and-jewel clad mass exiting the Square to continue the next half mile to the ending stage at Lionel Roberts Stadium. “Mrs. VanSchyler! *Princess!* You know all deh camera dem ready fuh you, right?”

Lolo says something demure that exactly zero of us in the car believe, and the official leans further into the car. “Well, well, well! Look royalty up here in dis car, mehson. Allyou mus’ be tired wavin’ deh whole route. At least you get a li’l break here in the Square. At least you’re not a troupe and your pageants are way behind you, right? You don’t have to worry about puttin’ on no show.”

I’m not so sure about that as I ease my pointy pump off the brake, beginning our infinitesimal creep toward the center of the Square. We might not have a dance routine or tiny costumes, but *something*’s about to go down. Because right there, between a stand full of dignitaries and a cluster of cameramen, microphone in hand and a punch-worthy leer on his face, is Cal Upton.

#

We’ve got to smile and wave. No way around that. There are 12 TV station cameras, several hundred phones, and about a thousand pairs of eyes trained on us as I slowly roll WukUP toward the center of Post Office Square; and the one thing they expect from us is a smile. To anyone watching, we’re four Carnival royals bonding through blood and pageantry; through heritage and tradition. Behind those smiles, our words are terse and pointed.

“That’s him, right? That’s Cal?” Lolo asks as we roll forward.

“That’s him,” I answer with a sweet laugh.

“Still moon-faced and meaty, I see.”

“Sure is,” I say as Florian begins to laugh for real. “And that’s not the only thing that hasn’t changed.”

“What’s that, dear?” Miss Genie asks.

“He still doesn’t read,” I explain. “Not coupons, not maps...not even license plates. His grandmother wouldn’t let us take WakeUP out of the lot. I bet it’s because Cal told her that’s the one he was driving that night. The one where he stashed the shears. He wasn’t driving WakeUP. He was driving this one. WukUP.”

“He confused the license plates,” Miss Genie says.

“Geez. You think he knows? Like, he’s realized his mistake?” Florian asks.

All eyes are on our car, but Cal’s are especially focused on us as we approach the heart of the Square. I’m not flattering myself that the intensity on his face has anything to do with how glamorous I look today. Nah, Cal’s got something else on his mind, and I’m willing to bet it has everything to do with saving his own ass.

“I think he might,” I say evenly, behind my smile.

“Charlotte...what should we do?” Lolo asks.

We’re too close to the stopping point for me to linger in that moment the way I want to. Lolo actually asking for my opinion? A Carnival miracle, if there ever was one. “I think we need to hide it,” I whisper. “If he does know he messed up, he’ll be looking for it between the seats. Your purse is up here by Florian, Lolo. It’s just about the right size. Can the shirt and shears fit inside?”

“Let’s see.” Lolo bends forward gracefully, like she’s shifting the voluminous folds of her gown, and swiftly passes the bundle to Florian. I step on the brake and push the car into park.

"They're coming," Miss Genie says to Florian as the camera operators, reporters, and hosts move toward us en masse. "Can you fit it in the purse?"

"Not really," Florian mutters. "The purse is jus' slightly too small. Maybe if I force it—"

"Put them under the seat for now. They're here," I whisper. There's a TV host and her enormous microphone hovering over me already. I sigh, grin, and step out into the fray.

"Walk with me, gyul, to deh center of deh Square so deh crowds dem could see your dress! You lookin' great!" the lady barks. It's a compliment that I find hard to believe since she's looking at the camera, not at me. "You're Princess Van Schyler, right? And yuh granny there was the first princess, too?"

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, you're right, she was the first princess. But my last name is different. I am her granddaughter, though. I just—uh—" I stammer, stringing words together horribly as my eyes dart around the Square. Lolo and Miss Genie are a few feet away being interviewed by a slim girl with long neat locs, one who's usually on TV talking about local food and restaurants. An older guy, radio show host who probably hung out with our grandmothers back in high school, is laughing and chatting it up with Florian. The thought blazes through my mind with heat more intense than the inferno radiating up through the asphalt. *Where the hell is Cal?*

I'm barely listening to the woman next to me, and it's not just because she's asking me some schupidness about how Virgin Islands pageantry has changed and evolved over the years. My eyes find Cal slinking across the Square, straw hat slung low and microphone shoved into one of his pockets. He's heading toward our convertible.

"—all of that. All of it. You're so right! Happy Carnival!" I interrupt the Channel 5 host. I turn on my heels and charge over toward Cal.

“Hey!” I call out as I stalk toward him. “Hey, Cal! You don’t want an interview with me?”

He turns around. Breaks into a sheepish grin. “Hey, gyul, you good?” That’s it. That’s the extent of the conversation. Then he turns around again, headed back to WukUP. He’s leaning over the back seat when I call out to him again.

“Lookin’ for something? I swear Lolo and Miss Genie made sure they cleaned their shoes so they wouldn’t leave smudges on the seat,” I say, hating the insipid laugh I’ve thrown into my voice.

There’s a sharp chuckle. “Clean shoes. That’s funny. That’s real funny, Chari.” I’m about to ask him what’s so funny about it when he turns back to me and pulls off his shades. He’s not awful looking when he smiles, but it’s a totally different story when he doesn’t. “Where is it?”

“Where is...what, the car key?” I ask. I’m trying my best to play dumb, but I see him take a glance at where I’ve left them in the ignition and wish I hadn’t brought them up.

“I lef’ something in the back. Something wrap up in a mardaras cloth. Jus’ a—um, a fishing tool.”

My inner Lolo bursts out in full force. “Lord, Cal. It’s pronounced *madras*, honey. And no, we haven’t seen anything like that.”

“Everything good, Chari?” It’s Florian this time. He’s finished his interview with the radio show host, who’s moved on to Lolo and Miss Genie. I glance over my shoulder and see him walking toward me, silvery and shiny; more focused and *ready* than I’ve seen in the decades I’ve known him.

“Florian deh Historian. Camera Boy. You good, mehson? Ay, you seen—my granny jus’ called to remind me I lef’ a mahdar—uh, a ma-had-rass piece of cloth here in the backseat of this car, I think. You see it?”

Florian’s shaking his head. A little too fast. A little too early. “Nah, bruh. Nothing like that back here. Maybe you lef’ the shirt in another one of your cars or something? Dey all look alike, right?”

“*Florian*,” I hiss, but Cal’s already heard it. Picked up on it faster than he’d picked up on any of the *let’s-be-friends* vibes I’d desperately tried to send him on both of our lackluster dates.

“But you knew it was a shirt, eh?” he growls. Through a smile, of course. It has to be the most terrifying thing I’ve ever seen him do with his face.

“Cal. Look. I...get it, okay? Roland Parr sounds like he was a real ass to your sister,” I say quietly through a fake smile of my own.

“You don’ know deh half of it.” He shakes his head. “Roland was trying to destroy my family from the inside out. Mess with my sister. Make us pay him my Granny’s money. I wasn’t gon’ stand for that.”

“Of course not. But—”

“And I don’t know wha’ you thinking, *Miss Canavess*,” he interrupts. He’s talking to me, but his eyes are on Miss Genie and Lolo. No. *No*. They’re on Lolo’s purse, which is sparkly and shiny and *just about the right size*. “But you sure as hell ain’ gon stop me from doing exactly what I need to do right now.”

It all happens so fast. So fast that when I play it back in my head, it feels like there’s only one quick blink between Cal saying those words and me opening my eyes on the ground where I’ve fallen. No—where I’ve been pushed. I register that Cal’s shoved me on the ground at the

same moment that the words Lolo's been screaming make sense in my brain: *He grabbed my purse!*

The scene playing out in front of me makes no sense, and yet there it is—Cal, behind the wheel of WukUP, hitting a U-turn tighter than the shapewear under my dress and leaning on the horn, trying to clear the crowds blocking the intersection to Garden Street as he speeds toward it. It's the only way out of the Square that doesn't lead to more streets blocked off for the parade.

"Cal!" I yell as two hosts and a couple of onlookers from the crowd rush over to help me back to my feet. The camera operators are too busy doing their job, walking across the Square with their lenses trained on the retreating convertible.

"Florian!" Miss Genie screeches with a volume and hysteria I never knew her voice was capable of reaching.

That's when I notice he's there, too. Florian. In the convertible. Well—half of him, that is. He's bent over the passenger door, head and torso in the car; legs outside against the door. Ass in the air. It's about as far away from the regality of Carnival Royalty as one could possibly get.

"What in the hell..." I begin to whisper. There's a tussle going on in the front seat of the car, as Cal tries to steer the convertible with one hand while landing punches on the top half of Florian's body with the other. He hasn't slowed down at all, though. Nobody wants to get run over today, so the crowd blocking Garden Street screams and dashes off to either side.

"What deh hell goin' on here?" a police officer asks as she jogs over to us.

"You've got to go get him!" I yell at her. "He's getting away!"

"Who? Get who?" she asks.

"Charlotte!"

The voice is Florian's. He's tumbled out of the car just past the intersection and practically rolled in the deep gutter on the side of the road. But he's got it. On God, the man has the madras bundle in his hand. Even though Florian's a couple stage lengths away from me, our eyes lock. They *lock*. And when he speaks again, I know exactly what I have to do.

"Chari, the cameras," he hollers, and I nod and kick my shoes off. Dress and tiara be damned. When Florian does it, when he hurls the bundle my way, I dash toward it at full speed, ready to be at the bottom of that beautiful, wide arc. It's perfectly executed. Confident. Stylish. It's everything I wanted from him on our stage 20 years before, only now—well, *now*, when I leap forward and snatch it one-handed from the air in the middle of the Square, it's not for points from judges. As I untie the cloth in front of the officer, under the eyes of the officers and crowd in Post Office Square and the thousands more viewing in real time as the cameras stream [all of this] live, I realize it's for a score much bigger than that.

There are questions, of course. And explanations. Police officers shouting into their radios and running off to squad cars and motorcycles. In the middle of all of that chaos, there's a quiet hand on my arm, and I look over and find Lolo standing beside me. My fallen tiara's in her hand and something different's on her face. And when she nods at me to bend down just a little bit, when she dusts off my sleeve and places my crown back on the top of my head, I feel like the quiet pride I see in her smile is the biggest Carnival miracle of all.

#

People still talk about it, even to this day—the time murder stopped de Carnival. Well. Not really *stopped*. It was more of just a short delay. It didn't take the police long to catch up to Cal. Turns out the escape route he'd taken had also been a favorite of enormous steel pan trucks carefully creeping back to the panyards after the parade. There were some dramatic moments in

the Square as the crowd regathered, as the hosts and law enforcement and Carnival officials swarmed around me, Lolo, Florian, and Miss Genie for more details. But after some promises to come to the police station right after the parade for some more formal witness statements, and some band-aids for the scrapes Florian got when he'd tumbled from the car, the police let the parade continue. As the old saying goes, the show must go on. As the ol' St. Thomian saying goes, de Carnival mus' go on.

Except we couldn't actually continue in the car, of course. Cal was a quarter mile up Bunker Hill when the police caught up to him. Besides, they needed to impound the whole thing as evidence. Which meant the four of us had a choice—we could either leave the parade there at the Square, or finish it on foot. Lolo and Miss Genie—okay, maybe just Lolo—wailed and complained in outrage at first about the *indignity* of it all, but those two hadn't gotten twenty feet down the road when they realized that walking the rest of the route gave them more time to grin and smile and schmooze with the crowd. They were greeting friends and blowing kisses in no time. Posing for pictures. Waving at admirers. Yup. They were loving this, and I was loving it for them, even if it meant it was going to take three times as long to get out of my dress.

Florian and I walked along behind our grandmothers, sharing plenty of laughs and the occasional eye-roll at their antics. He'd offered his arm and I'd taken it. He offered to hold my shoes, and after the next excruciating quarter-mile, I'd let him take those, too. It wasn't until we were standing under one of the enormous palm trees at the entrance to Roosevelt Park, waiting for our grandmothers as they chatted it up with their old friends in the Senior Citizen stands, that I finally spoke to him about what happened in the Square.

"Hey. Um. Maybe I don't have to kill you after all," I said. I'd looked over at him and let a little smile bloom on my face.

He'd matched my smile with one of his own. "No? I've been forgiven? Don't have to watch my back anymore?"

"Nah. I think you're safe." I squeezed his arm. "That was amazing back there, Florian. The way you jumped in there to grab Lolo's purse back from Cal—"

"The shears weren't in her purse. I couldn't fit them, remember? They were under the seat, where you told me to stick them. Regardless, though, I couldn't let him drive off with the evidence." The smile got bigger. "What's really amazing is the way you figured that all out. Put it all together."

"That was all of us, Florian. Not just me."

"Mostly you." He shrugs. "But...hey. We were something back there, weren't we?"

"For sure. You see what happens when you actually take a shot?"

He'd laughed again. Loud and hearty. Let that Carnival Prince smile out of wherever he'd hidden it for the previous twenty years. "Oh, there's a shot I been meaning to take for some time now." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and pointed it our way, selfie style. "My good camera's back in WukUP with the police, but...my phone could work. Come on, Princess Charlotte. Come take a Carnival picture with me, no?"

It wasn't as great as the photos Florian takes with his 'good camera', but the shot he took that day captured our Carnival perfectly—the bright sun and the brilliant sky, the historic stone buildings with the vibrant, bold colors of costumed revelers in front of them; the decorated stage of the Carnival Village behind us. Our grandmothers in the background, celebrating another year of Virgin Islands joy; the legacy of the past meeting the exhilaration of the present. The dust and rips on Florian's silver suit. The disheveled, sweaty, mess my hair had become. The deserved

triumph on our faces. The unexpected closeness in our embrace. The very beginning of our realization that maybe de Carnival wasn't the only thing that couldn't be stopped.

It's a ridiculous picture, but we've still got it under a magnet on our fridge. We still laugh at it every single day.

-END