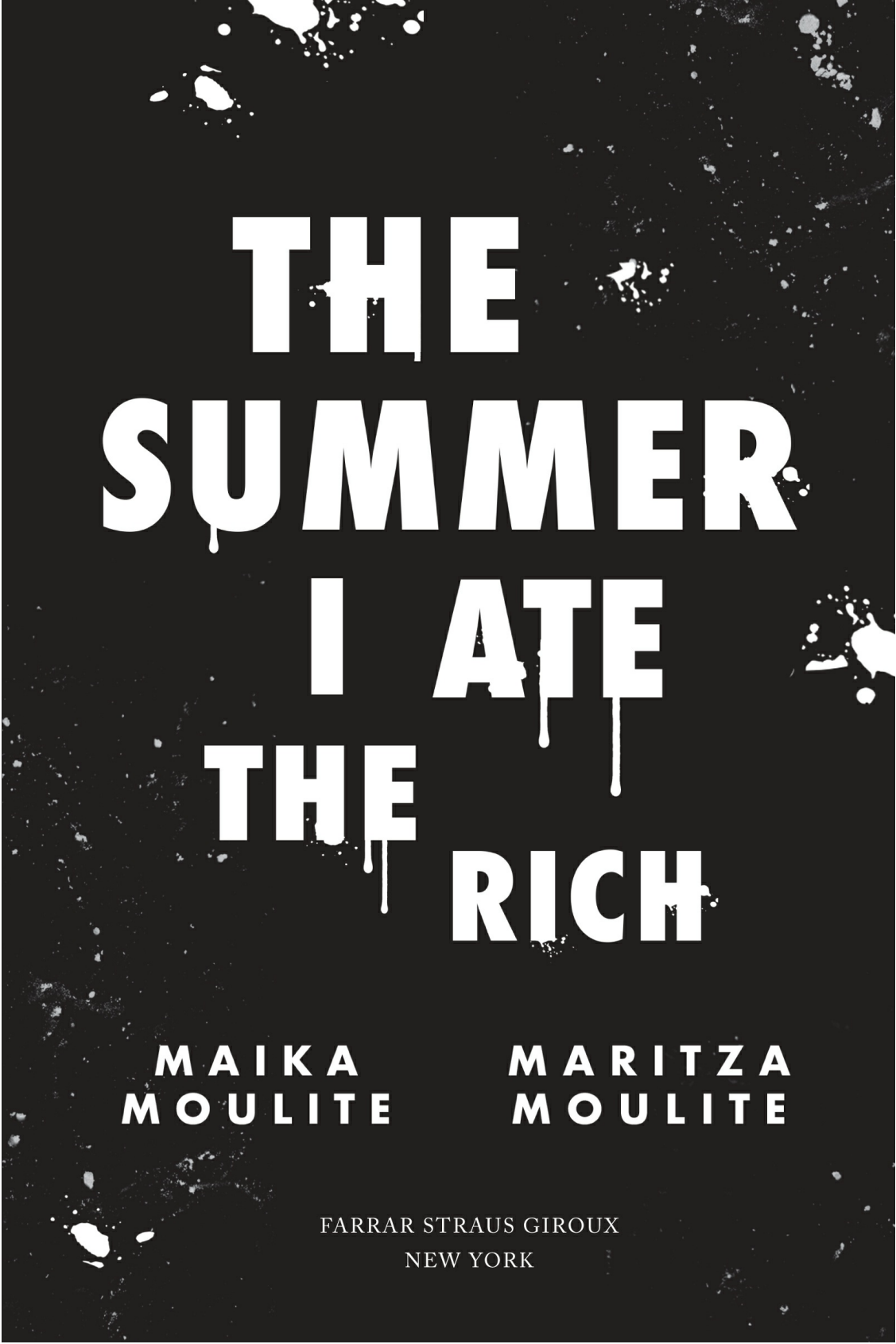


# THE SUMMER I ATE THE RICH



MAIKA  
MOULITE

MARITZA  
MOULITE



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**TO DADDY.**

*Nou manke ou anpil.*

*We carry you with us always.*

*Quand les pauvres n'auront plus rien à manger, ils mangeront les riches.*

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or probably someone else  
Who can really be sure of these things?

# ACT I



## CHAPTER 1

# BRAINS

My favorite part has always been the blood.

I can't look away as it washes down the drain and I'm left only with flesh. If I had cracked the cow's skull myself (what a dream!) and procured the brain fresh, this extensive rinsing wouldn't be necessary. The blood wouldn't have had time to nestle itself deep in the crevices of the folds. But I don't have fresh cow brain money. Hell, I barely have rent money. So instead, I picked up a prepackaged platter of beef brain at Gobernador Supermarket yesterday. I can't confirm it, but I suspect this nervous tissue belonged to the smartest cow on the cattle farm. Those gyri and sulci are very impressive.

It's funny—in that unfunny way we like to say things are funny but nobody laughs—how we try to separate ourselves from our prey. Vegans make this point all the time. Pigs become pork, chickens transform to poultry, cows to beef. It's in our DNA. Take something “disgusting” like raw meat, stuffed with pulpy worms and bacteria, and mutate it into something delectable. Something to be savored. Wanted.

I wonder what we would call humans.

*Anyway.*

Peeling away the membrane is much easier with bare fingers. I tear at the slippery sheath, speckled with beads of red, and try not to lick up the bits that have burrowed themselves under my nails. It's hard. But I can imagine Mummy sighing in my ear, wobbling on the ledge of giving up on me, so I stop myself. She doesn't believe it but I am always trying to be more human. It's not my fault it rarely works.

Morning is my favorite part of the day. Mummy is close enough for me to keep an eye on her. She snores softly in her sleep, temporarily free from the

pain that stalks her when she's in the waking world. I am left alone with only my thoughts and a simmering pot of saffron, olive oil, and garlic. And my dreams. Heaven.

I've chopped the brain into quarters, eighths, sixteenths, and tossed them around in a bit of salted, freshly squeezed lemon juice before incorporating the meat into my fragrant pot when the alarm jolts me back to the real world.

*Beeeeep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

My mother is awake, and I hate that it makes me sad. She shuffles over to the couch in our tiny apartment and slowly sinks into one of its busted cushions.

"Bonjou bebe mwen an."

She tries to keep the discomfort out of her voice but I hear it anyway.

"Good morning, Mummy," I say as I walk over and drop a light kiss on the top of her head. Her shoulders tense almost imperceptibly. I wonder if I'm gaslighting myself, if the shift in her posture could be in reaction to a sudden draft in our stuffy home, but I know better. Even after all this time, these seventeen years of my existence, my mother fears me.

I pretend not to notice.

She does the same.

"How are you this morning?" I ask politely, adding the smile Mummy has taught me to display when I am making small talk. I'm still working on determining the appropriate width I should spread my lips in each situation. But in general, I know that the happier the news, the wider the lips, and as a result, the higher the cheekbones. I've given up on making the smile "reach my eyes," though. What does that even *mean*?

She groans.

"The same. Worse."

My smile drops.

"I'm very sorry," I say. I mean it too.

*Brielle doesn't display much emotion.*

My first-grade teacher Mrs. Hawkins—and all my teachers since—incorrectly assumed that my muted demeanor means I don't experience emotions. The truth is that I feel what I feel. Happiness when I'm cooking. Sadness when I look at Mummy. Rage about many, many things. But I don't

feel obligated to share it all with the world.

“E byen.” She shrugs. *That’s life, isn’t it?*

I go back to finishing up breakfast. In silence. Too much noise exacerbates my mother’s pain. Which makes the incessant—

*Beeeeep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

—all the more frustrating.

Mummy has tried it all.

Codeine.

Hydrocodone.

Morphine.

Oxycodone.

Hydromorphone.

Fentanyl.

Since she got injured at work, Mummy has been trapped in a cyclone. For four years she’s been imprisoned by pain radiating from her back, spinning around and within her. Either the pills never did what they were supposed to in the first place, or they stopped working. Fast. For a long time, no one believed her. An immigrant Black woman with a heavy accent crying about pain? Pain that doesn’t manifest in a way that’s visible to the world, that only she can feel? She might as well have been speaking to aliens when she went to doctors for help. But a year ago, we were finally able to find a neurologist who listened and decided to implant a pump in Mummy’s abdomen that releases timed doses of oxymorphenol to the base of her spine. And it helps.

But her pump has been empty for five days now. A convoluted issue with her insurance company that’s kept her from getting a refill. It beeps every ten minutes to remind Mummy and me, and anyone within a six-foot radius, that it needs feeding. As if she could forget. What makes this all especially messed up is the fact that Mummy literally works for the family whose company produces her medication, and her bosses have never asked her how they might be able to help. Not once. Even though the only reason she’s suffering in the first place is because she got injured on the job, helping the patriarch of their family, Mr. Beauregard. The injustice of it enrages me. But I don’t share that with many people, because that’s our family’s business. Like Mummy has always said, that’s not something I need to share with the

world.

I crack open three eggs on the side of a pan with more force than needed. Pieces of white shell swim around in bubbling butter and I fish them out with a fork before folding in the pieces of brain. Scrambled brain looks a lot like scrambled egg. That's one of my favorite things about food. Some dishes are considered mundane while others are hailed as innovation. When really, it's all in what we've decided to elevate. What we say is acceptable.

The pita bread I heated up in my trusty, rusty microwave oven is the perfect temperature. Hot enough to scald the roof of your mouth until a blister forms and the palate begins to peel. I wait for it to cool down some more, though, because I know what Mummy would say about *that*.

I plate the food quickly. I tuck my egg-brain scramble into the cooled-down bread, load it with diced avocado, and garnish it with cilantro. I serve Mummy her portion from the couch where she's adjusted herself to eat more comfortably, and I sit on the floor in front of her to dig in.

"I've been in the mood for brain for weeks now," I say, looking up to meet her face. "I woke up one day and wondered, 'What does a cerebellum taste like? And if I ate it from, say, a tightrope walker, would it give me better coordination?'"

I laugh. Mummy doesn't join in.

Oh.

"Brielle," Mummy says tiredly. "Please don't say that outside this room."

There are a lot of things I can't say outside our house. Things you wouldn't believe could come out of a real person's mouth. That would get me in trouble. As a zombie, you probably expect me to be some repugnant monster who groans and drags heavy feet along concrete, leaving assorted decomposing limbs behind. You think I want to eat your brain just because.

How foolish.

I want to eat your brain because it's delicious, the texture a perfect marriage of mushy and firm, as if one weakly patted dry soaked tofu and ran a toothpick across the surface to carve grooves. But I don't want to upset Mummy. She only wants the best for me. To keep me safe. So I am eating beef.

Come on, now. You're going to have to stomach a lot more than that if

we're going to get through this together.

## CHAPTER 2

# SUPPER CLUB FOR BREAKFAST

“What are your plans for today, Bri-bri?” Mummy asks while I stand to take her plate from her to empty the remaining food into the trash. I keep my movements fluid to hide it, but a hunk of ice has formed in the pit of my stomach. Other people might not be able to read the emotion on my face, but my mom’s hawk-eyed intuition picks up on even my slightest ticks.

“Oh ... nothing too wild,” I say, turning my back to her completely in the hope that she doesn’t sense my lie.

Normally, Mummy and I head to work together. But today, she has a doctor’s appointment that will hopefully resolve her pain pump issue. I feel a little guilty that I won’t be joining her, but I know she’s got it handled. When I was younger, I used to miss a ton of school so I could help translate the various doctors’ orders for Mummy to understand. Imagine our surprise when we got a knock on our door one weekend and it was a social worker sent by the school. He was stopping by to make a wellness visit and identify what could be done to ensure that I didn’t get any more absences. I went to fewer of Mummy’s appointments after that but I was still there with her from afar, oftentimes stepping out of class to answer her call and translate from one of the bathrooms on campus. Today I’m using this rare morning of solitude to take care of my own business.

Mummy walks over to where I am now washing the dishes in the sink and kisses me on the cheek.

“You are a good daughter, you know,” Mummy says with a pat on my arm. She shuffles back across our small apartment and heads into her room,

closing the door softly behind her.

A leaky faucet of guilt starts to drip within me, but I firmly screw it shut. I will not let it overflow. I need to focus. I take in a deep breath and exhale slowly to clear my mind and begin listing out the things that I have to accomplish this morning. First, I will finish washing these dishes. Next, I'll grab my things so that I can head to the bus and then the next bus and *then* the ferry that will take me to work. Finally, I'll pull off the soft launch of my supper club and everything will go perfectly ... If Mummy knew what was on my little to-do list, she would most definitely take issue with that last item.

As the daughter of a Haitian immigrant, I have a responsibility to choose a respectable career path. I'm constantly reminded of it. You might be familiar with this looming expectation—it's often the legacy of children whose parents moved to the United States in pursuit of the ever elusive American dream. If you're lucky, mention of this obligation will only pop up twice a year, once at the beginning of each academic year and once toward its end. But if, like me, you're in the middle of the summer between your junior and senior year of high school, this recurring topic starts to rear its oversized cranium as much as every other week. Once a week if your parent or guardian is a devoted viewer of the weekly local access television program that's broadcast specifically to your diasporic community—in my mom's case, TV Ayiti. Infinite times if the child of a family friend gets accepted early admission with a full ride to some elite university.

And if you're wondering, there are only three viable options for me as the first generation of my family born in this golden land of opportunity: doctor, lawyer, engineer. Fine, nurse too. That makes four. Okay, you might be able to get away with being an accountant. Point is, as an incoming senior, it's an absolute must that I start thinking about my collegiate future and beyond. All in the name of a high salary that can fill in the cracks of our fractured family and support those of us left behind in Haiti. Sisters that I have never met in person before. But they depend on our remittances. Stability. My hopes of becoming a chef don't exactly fit into these plans. Instead of a day filled with delectable meals and comforting ambience, I *should* be thinking about how to fulfill my diasporic daughterly duty.

I try not to let my thoughts wander down this path very often. As much as

I hate to imagine this version of my future, I can't deny that there are so many people who would kill to be in my place. Shoot, my sisters in Haiti would sharpen their machetes and ready them for swinging at just the whisper of a life here. I know this from the many conversations the six of us have had throughout the years. My very own ~~Greek~~ Haitian chorus judging their ungrateful, Americanized sister from afar.

As my thoughts flit between what I *should* do and what I *want* to do, my hands are working overtime to pack what I need to prepare my planned dishes. Now, I know that the mealtime is listed right there in the name, but when you're sneaking around to fulfill the desires of your heart, you have to improvise. So, my supper club will be serving breakfast items and everyone will love it, thank you very much.

One thing I've learned working for the wealthy is that you should be barely seen and never heard. It doesn't matter if you're a private chef catering a major event or a server carefully balancing trays of decadent cocktails that you're not legally old enough to be serving. Your job is to fade into the background. But a supper club is all about connection—between the diners, the food, and the chef. Everyone's voice is listened to and no one is siloed away into different sections, in theory. Even though the human experience is not one I seem to *get* easily, it still fascinates me. My own supper club would mean I could share my love of food in a space of my own, with people who might even want to hear about it. There's also the benefit of getting my name out there as a chef—someone will have to take me seriously, even if it's not Mummy. If I'm going to make an exclusive event that has historically centered on feeding wealthy white people into something of my own, then I'm going to have to do things a little differently. And be sure my mom doesn't find out about it in the process.

When everything is securely stowed in my oversized knapsack, I leave it on the kitchen counter before walking over to Mummy's bedroom door. I crack the door open slowly and can hear the sound of running water coming from the adjoining bathroom that connects our separate rooms.

"I'm heading out now, Mummy," I say with my face pressed against my mom's bathroom door.

"Okay, cheri," she calls out to me. "I'll see you later."



I quickly head back over to my secret goods before she can get out of the shower. As I close the door behind me, I try to ignore the well of guilt sloshing around in my stomach. Sneaking around in pursuit of your dreams is never ideal, but I can't ignore the pull to follow my passion. In these last few years, I've seen my mom do everything she was *supposed* to do. Work hard. Get injured on the job and barely receive any recovery time. Work. Grieve my dad. Keep on working. Take English classes at the community college. Work some more. Send money back to Haiti for my sisters. More working. Unenroll in English classes because she didn't have enough money to take care of our home here *and* our family back on the island. Never stop working. And the entire time, our financial situation hasn't gotten even a little bit better. Being a chef definitely isn't what Mummy expects of me, but I'm not going to leave the visions I have for my future unfulfilled just to be pulled into an endless cycle of labor. I've seen what it looks like to do everything right and still have everything turn out wrong anyway.

The knapsack lies heavy on my back as I pull out my phone to text my friend Marcello. What was once a relationship of convenience based on asking each other to cover our shifts has evolved into an actual friendship. Marcello is my first friend ever. I have to send the message while I'm still within range of my home's Wi-Fi. My phone plan has been cut for months but I'm still able to send messages on WhatsUp, the mobile app my sisters and I use to chat.

Me: On my way.

Marcello: Finally! I've been sitting in my car for the last 20 minutes. Hurry up!

Me: I'll be sure to let the bus driver know. ☺

Marcello: Oh well if that's how it is, let me just go on 'head into work then.

Me: Marcello!

Marcello: Mmm-hmm. That's what I thought.

Me: Blah blah thank you. I'm coming!

Just as I put my phone away, I hear the huffing and puffing of what sounds like an emphysema-riddled dragon. The city bus is speeding toward the stop. *Dang it.* Carefully, I switch my knapsack to the front and hold it securely against my chest with both hands. I run full tilt toward the vehicle even though I know the driver can see me racing. But I'm not about to miss this ride for anything. Not to mention, some of the drivers have a mean streak

and will speed off even if you're within a few feet of the stop.

The bus squeals to a halt in front of me and I clamber on, paying my fare without a word before easing myself into a seat near the entrance. The familiar sights of Little Haiti blur past as we weave our way through town. Colorful houses, rogue chickens, and proud palm trees fill the scenery, eventually morphing into the many-laned concrete highway that will take us south to the Hunter Island ferry.

This morning's ride is a quiet one, and I am grateful for it. Some days aren't as peaceful. Whether it's an older woman thumping her Bible at 7 A.M., shouting for you to repent and save yourself from an eternity burning in hell, or a man in a rubber suit muttering to himself as he rocks back and forth in his seat, squeaking with each movement, you never know what mix of commuters you'll get.

We exit the highway and I prepare to get off the bus for my transfer to the next one. There is no direct bus route from Little Haiti to Hunter Island. Exclusive island community and public transportation don't exactly go hand in hand. No matter that many of said exclusive community's workers rely on the city's (terrible) transit system. Luckily, the trip on the second bus is much shorter.

At last, I am within sight of the ferry terminal. The bus rolls to a stop and I exit, walking the remaining two blocks to the ferry that will take me to Hunter Island. As soon as I step onto the boat, I can see Marcello setting up the table for the makeshift food station that will hold my food samples. He must feel my stare because he raises his head and wiggles his fingers in greeting.

"You made it, bee-yotch!" Marcello says as I place my knapsack on one end of the table.

"Barely." I open my luggage and unpack my items. "I swear the driver of the first bus was speeding to the stop just so he could leave me behind."

"Ugh. I do not miss that at all." Marcello winces. It's been two months since Marcello got his first car. He would've picked me up to take the ferry this morning but I needed him to grab a couple of last-minute items for me.

As more people board the ferry, we work quickly to set the table. Biodegradable plates, utensils, and napkins are in neat stacks toward the front

of the table for people to grab as they make their way through the line. (There will be a line, okay?! Think positive.) We've waited until just a few minutes before sailing away to open the chafing dishes full of breakfast-themed amuse-bouche, just in case one of the ferry workers asks us to show them the permit that took us weeks to acquire. If there's something wrong with our paperwork but we've already sailed away, then there's nothing they can do about it, right?

The ferry lurches forward as it maneuvers away from the dock. Marcello and I glance at each other.

"It's showtime," I say. The tremor in my voice is unmistakable.

"Try not to look so sick," Marcello says with a smirk. "You don't want people thinking it was your food that put that look on your face."

I take in a deep breath and exhale slowly to calm my nerves. I know my food is good. *Better* than good. It's amazing. And I'm not just saying that. I've been cooking the majority of my and Mummy's meals for quite some time now. What started off as wanting to learn how to cook to avoid accidentally poisoning me and my mom—I take over kitchen duty when she's having a pain flare-up—has morphed into a full-blown obsession. I lift the covers off the heating trays and within seconds, I can hear the *sniff sniff sniffing* of passengers searching for the source of the delicious aroma.

Today I have prepared caramelized banana French toast bites, pan-seared sausage links wrapped in massaged kale, and fresh yogurt topped with a spiced tropical fruit compote. (This is where you say, *Thank you, Chef.*)

Marcello and I have only plated four servings when a little blond boy who can't be older than eight steps up to our table.

"Can I have some?" he asks, looking directly at the plate that is just a few inches from his small fingers.

"Yes, you can," I say with a wide smile, cheekbones up.

The boy hesitates. Right. Probably too much teeth. I turn down the wattage of my grin and try again. "Please, go ahead."

Marcello picks up the plate in front of the boy along with utensils and a napkin and hands them to the child. The boy reaches for it without hesitation and hurriedly takes a bite.

"This is really good!" he says enthusiastically. He shovels another bite

into his mouth. The boy turns around and shouts to someone I cannot see. "Mom! Come try some!"

The woman who approaches the table next looks exactly like the little boy, except she's in a flowing floral print sundress and cork wedges, her long hair pulled down her back in a single braid. Marcello hands the woman a sample. The moment the food hits her taste buds, her eyes widen in pleasure.

"Wow. This *is* good," she says, looking between me and Marcello. "Who made it?"

"I did," I say with pride. "My friend Marcello is my sous-chef. My name is Brielle Petitfour. Welcome to the soft launch of my brand-new supper club."

"Do you have a card?" the woman asks as she looks between me and another serving that Marcello has plated.

"Yes, I do." I reach into my trusty knapsack and pull out my card holder, then hold one of my cards out to the woman.

"I'll definitely keep you in mind for any opportunities that come up." She takes my card and stuffs it into a powder-blue bag that's so small it must only hold her ID and some lipstick. Gold charms with the letters *DIOR* hang off the impractical purse, glistening in the sunlight. Okay, so this lady has *money*. I send up a quick prayer that I actually get business from her. Or anyone, really. I'm not picky. The woman smiles before taking another helping and walks away, braid swishing. Her son follows but not before taking an additional serving.

Marcello and I hardly have time to gush with excitement when the next person comes up to the table. And another. And another. Some ask us about ingredients and preparation style while others eat without a word. There are still a few people who haven't made their way to the food station, so I pull out a serving tray and place some plates of food on it.

"I'm going to work the room," I say to Marcello as I carefully lift the tray.

"Okay, miss business lady," Marcello says with a smile. "You feelin' fancy now?"

"Oh hush," I say, returning his smile.

I weave in and out of the rows of people who are off in the seating area of the ferry. An older man thanks me for coming over because he didn't know if

he'd be able to make it to the table and back.

"It's no problem at all," I say to him as he takes a bite. The look on his face when he tastes the first spoonful warms me from the inside out.

"This is quite delicious, young lady."

"It is," says someone beside me. I turn to see Nadia, the head chef of my place of work, Le Grand Fromage.

"You made it," I say as happily as I know how.

"I did," Nadia replies. "You have really outdone yourself, Brielle. I was going to wait until we were back at the restaurant, but I can't hold it in." She pauses. "How would you like to be my apprentice? You'll shadow me with front- and back-of-house work in a more formal capacity than you've been doing these last few weeks. Think of it as a rotation with time divided between prepping, cooking, and plating in the kitchen and learning the business end of things with inventory control, maintaining food safety standards, all that. I know you'll have to check in with your mother first, but does that sound like something you'd be interested in?"

I. Am. Euphoric. Floating above cloud nine. Out of the stratosphere.

*Nadia! This is amazing! This means so much to me—thank you! I knew I was on the right track! Ahhhhh! I can't wait to tell Mummy!*

But what I really say is "Wow. What a wonderful opportunity, Nadia. Thank you." Something always happens at the exact point when the excitement in my head passes through my lips. It sounds flat. Unenthused. Dead. Luckily, my boss is already used to it.

Nadia launches more deeply into what she hopes to teach me as I shadow her, hands fluttering away like she's getting ready for liftoff. As she rambles on, I allow myself a moment to finally relax and enjoy what I have created. I glance around the ferry and see the many people enjoying the various dishes. A small group of coworkers that I invited are also here with Nadia. I see them standing in a corner, eating and laughing over their meals. I notice my mother's ferry friends seated near the entrance of the vessel and one of them shakes her head at me as if in disappointment. I wonder what that's about. I continue to scan the room, and I find Marcello speed walking toward me. The look on his face makes the hairs on my arms stand on end. What is going on?

I feel a hard tap on my shoulder and immediately, I know.

“Brielle Swan Petitfour. Can you explain what is going on here?”

I turn to see Mummy standing right behind me. She does not look pleased.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE WOMEN OF THE FERRY

“Of course your mother’s right! She didn’t come all the way to America just for you to become some cook.”

Mrs. Uba cocks her head to the side and lifts an eyebrow. She stares into my pupils like she’s drilling a hole straight through to the back of my skull. I blink a few times to stop her from invading my mind. I don’t even know how I still get baited into having these conversations. Arguments, more like it. It’s one thing to hear Mummy drum this into my head during quiet moments at home—but she insists on having the ladies we take the ferry with pile on too.

First, we have Mrs. Uba. She’s worked on Hunter Island the longest and acts like this gives her queen status and license to say whatever she likes. No one ever questions it, so I suppose she’s right.

Next there’s Mummy, who has been there for about as long as I’ve been alive. Apple of my eye and all that.

And finally, we have Mrs. Garcia. Well. Ms. Santos. She used to complain nonstop about the lack of affection from her husband. How she had to beg him for a compliment, let alone to hold her hand. Then one day a few weeks ago she told us to no longer call her Mrs. Garcia.

“Did you hear me, mija?” Ms. Santos asks me. “You should follow your heart. This life is long. Do what makes you happy.”

“What makes her happy?” Mrs. Uba scoffs, swinging the light blue shawl she wears no matter the humidity or heat index. “What does a child know about happiness? What *will* make her happy is a consistent paycheck, benefits, and a retirement plan. You don’t want to be like us, pitit, scrubbing the toilets of ungrateful blan until your fingers twist into themselves and you have to stop working.”

*Beeeeep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Mrs. Uba, Ms. Santos, and a few of the other people sitting closest to us glance around to find the source of the sound. Mummy and I avoid each other's eyes but I thank the saints for the distraction. Finally, I'm out of the hot seat. If only for a moment.

It's not much longer before Hunter Island comes into view. It's an exclusive piece of land off the coast of Miami where several hundred very wealthy families own property. Some residents live there year-round, but others use their lavish homes as a getaway location or method of protecting their liquid assets. A few times throughout the year, the island is a ghost town. Other seasons it's full of guests escaping their other enormous houses on the mainland and around the world. How exclusive is Hunter Island, you ask? Think of the richest person you've heard of. Now think of someone who's twice as wealthy and gets to remain anonymous. Then multiply *that* by several generations.

Yeah. It's a lot.

It isn't lost on me that my mom worries daily about our financial future as she heads over to Hunter Island day in and day out to serve some of the richest people on the planet. Mummy has worked as a home health aide and housekeeper for the Banks family—yup, they're so stacked it's in their name—while I'm a server at one of the island's eight five-star restaurants. My shift doesn't start until 11 A.M., so I've taken to joining Mummy for a couple of hours before heading off to my summer job every day.

I know she only wants what's best for me. But I can't shake the absurdity of leaving one patch of land surrounded by water for the chance to toil on another. If I follow her life plan for a secure future, we'll both be destined to spend the majority of our existence making money for someone else while renting out our finite hours on this planet. All for a meager portion of funds we can use to sustain ourselves, until we wake up the next morning to do it all again. To live for the weekends that bookend our servitude. Is this really the American dream?

As we draw nearer to Hunter Island, the ferry bustles to life. I glance around and take in the various dark blues, heather grays, and freshly bleached whites that are the uniforms of the workers riding the ferry with us each



morning. People grab their items, conversations picking up again, as if all the passengers were collectively saving their energy for disembarking. Which makes sense. Dealing with the wealthy is unbelievably draining. All they do is take.

The ferry captain maneuvers the vessel toward the dock and settles on a spot between two massive luxury yachts. Their two-hundred-foot gleaming white exteriors sparkle obscenely in the Miami sun. I follow my mom and her friends to exit.

*Beeeeep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

I reach out to hold Mummy's hand and the man in front of us dressed in a standard security guard's uniform turns at the exact same moment, noticing my fingers as they lace into the gaps between my mother's.

"I knew it was coming from someone," he says, glancing at my mom. "You got a bomb on you or what?"

"Bomb? No, sir. I do not have a bomb," Mummy answers in her thickly accented English.

"Really?" the man asks, glancing around, trying to get an audience for what I'm sure he thinks is his one shot to show off his comedic genius. "That beeping sounds pretty bomb-like to me. Am I right?" He nudges Ms. Santos, who has ended up next to him in the bustling to get off the ferry.

When Ms. Santos doesn't answer, the man repeats his question more slowly. "That sounds like a bomb, right?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," Ms. Santos says just as slowly, moving closer to Mummy.

"Ugh. Does no one speak English on this boat?"

"I do." I answer without hesitation. I ignore my mom's fingers squeezing my hand.

"So that's a bomb, then?" The man says yet again, clearly not getting the picture that he should just drop it.

"How do you know what one sounds like?" I fire back.

"I don't ... I just heard the sound..." The man's eyes widen as he glances over my face.

I can always sense the moment when someone's attention shifts from curiosity to fear. I taste it in the air first. A twisted tang laced with primal

reaction and adrenaline. With just a glance I glue my prey to their spot, making it easier for me to unleash my special brand of terror. I haven't had to use it in a while, and I revel in the power that washes over me as the color drains from the man's face.

"Brielle." Mummy's voice is sharp. Like she's more upset at me than the security guard. I break my eye contact with the offending man. He turns sharply and speeds off toward the front of the ferry, first to disembark.

"Don't pay any mind to people like that," Mrs. Uba says. "They're all bark and no bite."

"I could show him a bite," I reply without thinking.

"Brielle." Mummy again. This time there's no mistaking her warning. Thank you for your help. But if you don't stop that right now, I'm going to *make* you stop. Zombie abilities or no.

I sigh deeply and turn to my mom. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine, cheri. I appreciate you standing up for me but it's not the first time someone has asked me about the beeping."

A small part of me deflates as I consider this. She's right. She's run into issues with the insurance company and been left making cyborg noises before. She's had to stand up for herself when I'm not around and someone notices the rhythmic, robotic sounds emitting from the base of her spine.

"I just wanted to help," I whisper.

"I know, baby. But don't worry; I've got it."

"I'm going to head to work," I suddenly say, wanting to be alone. I just went from feeling the proudest I've ever felt in my life to listening to my mom rip me a new one for sneaking behind her back to barely containing my rage at some bigmouth stranger trying to come for my mother. How can I get off this roller-coaster ride?

A bit of worry dances over Mummy's features, either at my abrupt announcement or because I'm breaking our workday routine. Even though it would've been broken anyway since she wasn't supposed to go in to work today. But I'm in no mood to tolerate the time loop of small talk my mom's boss forces me to sit through each time I see him. He's too rich to be bothered to remember even the smallest detail of the inconsequential life of the daughter of a woman who's worked for him for sixteen years.

I double air-kiss Mummy, Mrs. Uba, and Ms. Santos goodbye before I start my walk to the restaurant. I could hop on one of the many golf carts used to navigate around the island, but I need to kill time—I'm going to arrive way ahead of schedule. The walk will be just long enough for me to calm down so I don't unintentionally bite some organic-only, extra-truffle-oil-please, no-carb-diet-loving socialite's head off.

*Beeeeep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Figuratively or literally, I can't tell.

## CHAPTER 4

# LE GRAND FROMAGE

By the time I get to my job, I'm only fifteen minutes early instead of the hour and a half I would've been if I'd walked with purpose. Don't look so surprised. I'm a zombie. If there's one thing I know how to do, it's walk slowly.

Just kidding. That's all American nonsense.

Zombies are no faster or slower than the average human. Nor do we ravenously crave brains and eyeballs every hour on the hour. It's more like we ravenously crave brains and eyeballs every hour on the hour, *but* we can control our urges. And the only time we might consider deviating from that is after we've expended a lot of righteous energy standing up for someone defenseless. (I'm sure my mom wouldn't want me describing her that way so we'll just keep that between us.)

Basically, everything you've learned about zombies from TV and film is a lie.

Okay. Damn. Maybe I can only speak for myself. I haven't actually met any other zombies. And maybe there is a bit of truth to it. When people share childhood memories about how cute they were when they walked into their parent's workplace and flashed everyone their frilly underwear, they get uproarious laughter and oohs and awws. Meanwhile, if I mention my mom having to sit me down at the not-so-tender age of seven to explain why I shouldn't pull worms up from the dirt for a midday snack, I'm met with uncomfortable shuffles and averted gazes. Slimy, wiggling, dirt-covered squiggles does not an adorable childhood story make. I get it. Well, I did as soon as I was able to spell "internet-based search engine" and looked up everything I could about what I am.

If you ask any Haitian person if they've ever heard of zonbi, they will tell you yes. But the zombie of my home country (which I still have yet to visit) isn't rooted in decaying limbs falling haphazardly to the ground as you scoot and drag and crawl yourself to your next meal. It stems from the fear of slavery. That your existence of forced labor will continue far into the afterlife, white masters lording over you even in the next plane. Scarier than any American zombie, if you ask me.

"Brielle! Things are picking up. This isn't the time to sit here and daydream like you always do!"

Oh. That's right. I'm at work.

Marcello snaps his fingers repeatedly in my face. I resist the impulse to swing open the hinges of my jaw like a python and clamp down around his wrist to stop the offending motion. "I know things didn't end up the way you thought they would this morning, but you can't let it derail your entire day," Marcello says gently. "Now, are you going to go into the kitchen to help prep the meat? I have to let Paul know if you're not so he can call in some backup."

"Yes. I can help."

"Well then, look alive and follow me!"

I walk behind Marcello, weaving between the empty round tables floating like a legion of eyeless ghosts with suspiciously flat heads. Menus placed carefully on the center of them stand tall like Victorian top hats. Nondescript music plays softly in the background, enough to help set the proper ambience but not to distract from conversation. The uniformity of the dining area is calming in a sanitized way, stripped of anything that doesn't align with the French-influenced atmosphere of Le Grand Fromage.

Finally, we are in the kitchen. The metal doors swing open and I'm greeted by the familiar cacophony of clanging plates, screaming chefs, and sizzling pans. This is where I feel most at peace. Right in the midst of the chaos. I grab an apron from a hook along the wall and head to a sink to wash up. I am meticulous with my cleansing, scrubbing furiously at the tips of fingers, under my nails, the center of my palms, the backs of my hands.

"Girl, you're gonna make yourself bleed scratching like that," Marcello says, looking at my hands with a concerned expression bordering on slight

disgust.

“Gotta make sure they’re squeaky clean,” I say.

“Mmm-hmmm. You’re right. Ain’t no telling where those hands have been.”

“Brielle! You’re here!” Nadia’s familiar voice rings above the noise. “Thank goodness. We need you at the rotisseur station today.”

My favorite. I make my way to the empty spot at the end of the row of men swinging cleavers and boning knives and other utensils, nodding at the ones who acknowledge me as I go. Marcello joins me shortly after. We settle into a comfortable silence as we work side by side.

Mummy has always told me that I should try to make at least yon ti zanmi wherever I go. But making friends isn’t as simple as deciding to do it. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that I don’t really say much to anyone. I’m too far inside my own head. But somehow, Marcello knows how to read me. Each workday he gives me just enough time to get into the zone. Especially when I’ve got a knife in my hand.

I love all the animals that come in. Or the parts of them anyway. Chucks and shoulders. Rounds and hams. Every kind of loin. Le Grand Fromage doesn’t skimp on its meats. (Or anything else for that matter.) I am a machine as I move through the parts of the carcass. Bones. *Snap*. Tissue. *Stretch*. Blood. *Splash*. I know which bits to pull and which to coax. How to maintain the tenderness of a rib and the flavor of a skirt steak. I glance around quickly and when I confirm that I’m not being watched I slip a morsel into my mouth. My eyes almost flutter closed at the succulent flavor. The tang of iron coats my tongue, followed by the wonderfully earthy taste of prime beef. I run the mouthful between my teeth and chew slowly. Mmm. Brisket. Slightly fatty. Full of flavor. Perfection. I wish I wasn’t at work so I could fully enjoy the experience. I’m brought back to my senses when someone behind me yells—

“Hot plate!” I turn to see a line cook zoom past.

“Shit,” Marcello yelps loudly. He just narrowly missed his fingers and holds a paring knife haphazardly. But it wasn’t the cook who distracted him. Marcello is too busy making eyes at his latest crush, a beautifully dark-skinned sous-chef named Chad. As if on cue, the object of Marcello’s

affections saunters over from his station.

“Gotta be more careful with your tool,” Chad says pointedly.

“You’re one to talk,” Marcello replies, batting his long eyelashes shamelessly. “Besides, Nadia would kill you if she saw you here with those earbuds in.”

Chad flashes Marcello a white smile, two even rows of brilliant pearls. “It’ll be our secret, then.”

They stare at each other for one, two, three seconds too long and my cheeks heat. The sexual tension is rising like the temperature of a boiling kettle of water. I’m happy for Marcello, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that sometimes I feel a little left out. Thankfully, Nadia’s shouts at another sous-chef cuts through the moment, stopping my jealous spiral as we’re forced to scatter to our respective places.

“So do you want me to give y’all a room the next time Chad comes over, or...?” I ask once we settle back into our rhythm again.

“You just might have to.” Marcello fans himself. I smile at him. “What’s that on your teeth?”

I clamp my mouth shut and rub my tongue furiously back and forth. Blood. I swipe, swipe, swipe and smile again. I blink a few times and open my eyes widely, hoping the smile “reaches” them.

“Better?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Marcello says, already turning his attention back to Chad, who’s throwing fiery glances of his own from across the room.

Everyone loves to go on and on about doctor shows and how they’re full of the most beautiful people banging each other left and right in any supply closet they can find. But the back of house at a luxury restaurant is where the real party is at. There’s nothing like knife wielding, the roar of fire, and delicious smells of cooking food to get your blood pumping. Or at least that’s what I imagine. I don’t have any suitors of my own.

When I applied for the waitressing job at Le Grand Fromage before the summer, I was so nervous. But Mummy said I had nothing to worry about. She’d said a prayer to Saint Joseph and the position was already mine. I got the callback the day after the interview. Apparently the woman who had the job before me quit very suddenly and they needed a replacement. They

wanted me to start immediately. “See? Told you there was nothing to worry about,” Mummy had said. She was right.

I enjoyed the serving part enough but a week or two into the gig, I worked up the courage to ask Nadia what I really wanted—to shadow her for a day. We had just received a particularly large tip courtesy of one of the ultra-wealthy clients that regularly visited the restaurant and Nadia must’ve been feeling the effects of this residual generosity because she agreed. I sent up my own prayer to Saint Joseph then, just in case he’d had a hand in things.

That day, Nadia walked me through the parts of a pig. I nodded along like I was learning it all for the first time. When she stepped away to instruct a line cook on what he should be working on next, I took my shot and grabbed the chef’s knife, slicing the pork loin we were working on into perfectly even pieces. Nadia came back, looked at the pork, then at me, then back to the pork and said, “You’ve been holding out on me, kid!” I got a dollar raise and stepped into my new role as a part-time waitress slash part-time whatever-she-needs-me-to-work-on cook.

“Thanks for your help today, Brielle,” Nadia says as I finish up at the rotisserie station. “You work as fast as two people. It’s amazing!”

“My pleasure,” I say, thinking about the piece of brisket I tasted earlier.

I head back to the sink and wash up, scrubbing and rubbing the same as before. When I finish, I remove my apron and double-check my shirt for any stains. You’d be surprised how often bone marrow splatters can ruin the appetites of the bourgeoisie. I’m about to leave for the hostess table when Marcello rushes over to me.

“You are not about to go out there smelling like raw meat and smoke. Go into my locker and spray yourself with some of my cologne.”

I pull my shirt up at the shoulder and sniff. “Smells fine to me. We work in a restaurant.”

“Go!” Marcello says, pointing to his locker and shaking his head at me.

I do as I’m told and spray myself, hoping that the combination of eau de Marcello and raw meat isn’t off-putting to anyone. I don’t want it to mess with my tips, especially since I’ve been trying to save enough money to help Mummy with her insurance bill.

The rest of my day is as busy as Marcello predicted. Le Grand Fromage is



notorious for double-booking patrons to give the air of busyness that marks a five-star restaurant. There is a wave of diners visiting for Memorial Day weekend. While Miami Beach has an influx of Black patrons who are always ostracized and downright not welcomed, Hunter Island is still lily white, just as the property owners want.

I flutter between tables, take orders here, fill cups there, laugh politely at all the jokes, the way men who are too wealthy to know what to do with their money expect from the people who serve them. American visitors demand that you fawn over them while international visitors prefer to have their space. But there's just enough people from either group who want the opposite of what's expected to keep me on my toes. So I treat each client as if they're my only one.

I'm good at it too. Making people feel special. When you've spent the entirety of your life feeling like you don't quite belong, you get really good at finding little ways to help make others feel seen: complimenting someone on their fresh manicure because I pick up the lingering scent of chemicals, crouching down to be on eye level to take the order of a shy and soft-spoken kid, listening from across the room for the telltale sounds of the final sips of a near-empty glass and rushing over to refill it just in the nick of time.

But I shine brightest in the kitchen. So I soak in as much time as I can with Nadia and the other chefs and cooks and hope that one day I can preside over my own Le Grand Fromage. Not as pretentious, though. Someday I'll be able to let people know that I'm the genius behind their delectable meals. Besides, my unique abilities really come in handy when it comes to handling raw meat. The art of carving and slicing and trimming and dicing plays a crucial role in providing the best flavors to your food. Plus, I have an acute sense of taste. Phenomenal ability to smell. Otherworldly skill at snapping bones at the perfect point to make a clean break. It's a gift.

Finally, my shift comes to an end. My toes are throbbing from rushing around on them all day. All I can think about is the bubble bath that I'm about to soak myself in. That is, after I've walked over to the Bankses' house to meet my mom so we can go home together.

"You really killed it today," Marcello tells me as I wait for him to pack up his things. Sometimes he'll insist on taking me and Mummy back if our hours

are scheduled for the same time. I mostly refuse. I don't want him to get tired of me. Besides, the commute goes quickly enough. Mummy and I usually use the time to chat and catch up about our day.

"Thanks, friend," I say. I have the sudden urge to tell Marcello that I'm simply channeling my kaleidoscope of emotions into being productive because it makes me sad that even though Mummy won't support my dreams, I still have to do what I can to help her with her pain. But I keep it to myself. No need to open up that can of worms. Instead I say, "You saw my mom and her friends scolding me earlier. I had to get my frustrations out somehow." There. A half-truth. Regular teenage angst. Much more palatable than discussing fraught medical situations and money.

"Ugh, tell me about it," Marcello says. "My entire family is the same. Whenever I tell them I don't want to go into the family business, they get going too. Even though I'm helping out now. Running a funeral home is exhausting. But it's fine, because I'm so good at tuning them out now that I don't even hear them when they call my name."

Marcello and I are laughing when a voice behind us says, "Hey, don't leave just yet."

We turn to see Nadia standing with Chad. Immediately he and Marcello are undressing each other with their eyes.

"Hi, Nadia," I answer, ignoring Marcello and Chad's erotic force field.

"Have you given any thought to my apprenticeship offer earlier?"

"Apprenticeship?" Chad asks, impressed, actually taking a second to glance my way. "That's what's up."

"Yeah, congrats again, Brielle," Marcello says, gaze glued on his crush, clearly less concerned about appearing distracted. But even with their divided attention, Marcello and Chad seem genuinely happy for me.

"Yes, but I have to talk about it with my mom first. She wasn't thrilled to hear it this morning," I tell Nadia truthfully.

"That's fair," she says. "I'm sure you'll be able to convince her. And if your mom has any questions, just have her call me."

I nod, but Nadia has already walked away, off to make sure that everything is being sliced and diced to Le Grand Fromage's high quality standards. I glance at the clock on my phone and take note of the time.

Mummy will be out of work soon and I should really head over. I can tell Marcello is torn between asking if I need a ride and staying with the newfound love of his life (or of the summer). I tell him that I'll see him next time.

He pulls me into a hug and whispers, "I'll make it up to you. Promise."

To which I answer, "Make sure you have a juicy story to tell me and we'll be even." He giggles.

The walk to the Bankses' house passes in a blur. I'm one step closer to achieving my dreams, if only Mummy could see it. I'm rehearsing my lines in my head to help her understand just how passionate I am about making my way in the culinary world. I'll be sure to throw extra oomph behind my words and pray that enough time has passed since this morning for her to be receptive.

I turn down the final block before I reach Mummy. The palm trees are so lush that even in the evening light I see that there isn't a dried frond in sight. It's cool for a summer evening in Miami, and the streets are quiet. I walk briskly. There's no strolling leisurely when you're a poor Black girl in the wealthiest of the wealthiest of the wealthiest neighborhoods. You walk with purpose. But not with too much speed. Don't want anyone to think you're running toward something. Or away from it.

Finally, I arrive at the Bankses' palatial home. There are many luxury condos on Hunter Island. But a mere condo won't do for the Banks. They own one of the few private houses on the island. A true marker of their position at the top of the food chain. The mansion is a mix of modern edges, sharp corners, various shades of white, and Mediterranean luxury. There are waterfront views and cityscapes, more marble than should be allowed, multimillion-dollar contemporary paintings that look like they could have been drawn by a child. Hundreds if not thousands of plants surround the exterior and interior of the home, including at least four plant walls (retouched or replaced weekly, of course). And you can't have all this "living art," as I've heard the Banks call it, without floor-to-ceiling windows, sparkling clear and washed three times per day. There's a gym, a sauna, a home theater, and access to a private golf course and exclusive beach. Not to mention an infinity pool the size of a football field.

Full-time staff work around the clock to ensure that every Banks whim is fulfilled posthaste.

And they don't even bother to lock the door.

They haven't done it once in the almost two decades my mom has worked for them. I have never found their door locked. Perhaps it's because they feel especially safe on Hunter Island. Or maybe it's the knowledge that they can replace everything in this house, including the ground it's built on, twenty times over and it wouldn't make a dent in their wealth. It doesn't explain why they aren't worried that someone with sinister intent could come in whenever they want. Maybe they made a deal with the devil or the big one upstairs to help them out with that too.

I'm always very aware of myself whenever I step into the Bankses' home. There's nothing like your reflection shining off the floor you're walking on to highlight all your imperfections. Tattered shoes. Frayed pants. Crumbling belt. Mended shirt. And there's the small matter of being a teenage zombie. I might as well walk in with a megaphone and shout, "I don't belong here!"

I am prepping myself for the "ha ha," "so funny," "good one, Mr. Len," that I've mastered for our forced conversations whenever we meet, nodding in agreement until my head nearly rolls off my neck and back out onto the street. And then I feel it.

A sudden shift in the air.

The first sign is always the goose bumps that pucker my skin and lift the fine hairs along my arms. They're the sentinels standing guard and sounding the alarm that something isn't right. Someone is hurting. My heart races as my feet fly to keep up. I run through the Bankses' house at top speed, pushing faster than Mummy would allow me if she saw me. But I can smell it. The hint of salt water on the wind. No. Not salt water. I sniff. My feet are wings.

I smell my mother's tears before I even see her.

## CHAPTER 5

# RED ANTS AND RACE CARS

I've almost reached her. My mom's lilting voice is faint but grows louder with each leaping step I take through the Bankses' obscenely large estate.

"But, Mr. Len," I hear Mummy say, "she was my last remaining aunt. I must pay my respects. My family requested that I come in person, but given my position here, I told them that I would only be able to watch the ceremony online."

She and Mr. Len are standing outside near the infinity pool. Mummy's shoulders are hunched and her head is bowed, hands clasped firmly in front of her. Subservient. Mr. Len is seated before her in one of the plush deck chairs, a king on his throne. The worn rubber soles of my dilapidated sneakers feel warm beneath my feet as I come to a stop near them. They turn their heads to me in sync, their eyes wide as owls' hooting in the night.

"Brielle!" Mummy says, startled. "What is going—"

"Are you okay?" I cut her off, not even a huff of exertion puffing past my lips.

"Y-yes. I'm fine."

"I smell—I thought I heard someone crying," I say, trying quickly to cover my slipup.

Mummy swiftly wipes the back of her hand across her eyes to dash away her tears, though they still shine brightly as she looks at me.

"I'm fine," she says again, this time in a stronger voice. "I was only asking Mr. Len if I might have Saturday off to attend Matant Vercia's funeral."

Mr. Len, who has since recovered from my abrupt entrance and is scrolling distractedly through his phone, looks up at us.

“Yes,” he says, almost with a yawn. “And I was telling Valentine that I just can’t give her the day.”

My ears prickle at the way Mr. Len says Mummy’s name. “Valen-tyne” like the holiday, instead of the proper pronunciation of “Val-un-teen.” She has worked for his family for ages and yet he still can’t be bothered to say it correctly. Whether it is a power move or simple carelessness, I am not sure. But I know that men like Mr. Len are rarely ever corrected. In their minds, they are always right.

“Besides,” Mr. Len continues, “do people in Haiti even have the means to live stream a funeral?”

I open my mouth to answer but Mummy glares at me. Her eyes say *don’t play, Brielle. You know I need this job—keep your mouth shut*. So I clamp my lips together and hope that my teeth don’t shatter from the force of my clenching.

“Haiti is not perfect, but there is Wi-Fi,” Mummy says with more patience than I could ever muster.

“In any case,” Mr. Len drones, not hearing a word that Mummy has said. “My wife and I have a dinner party to go to that evening and we need someone to stay here with my father. He’s a bit of a party pooper now that he’s in his old age.”

“It’s only one day,” I say incredulously.

“Yes, but I fairly recently gave Valentine some time off to attend another relative’s funeral. I forget who.”

Mr. Len is still talking, but I am not listening. My blood boils in my veins, heat rising through my body like lava oozing down the side of an active volcano. It might be easy for Mr. Len to “forget” who died, but I never will. Neither will my mom. Mummy asked for time off to grieve my father. Years ago. And now Mr. Len won’t give her the time to attend Matant Vercia’s funeral. Because of a dinner party? There is no dignity in this life for people like me and Mummy.

I feel a light grasp on my wrist and look down to see my mom’s delicate fingers wrapped around me. All I want to do is release the fire inside so that Mr. Len might know an ounce of our pain but I have to contain it. Even if I hate when my mother is disrespected. Even when people like Mr. Len get to

move through the earth ignoring the fact that everything they have is because of the sacrifices of others. Because without this job, we will be out on the streets. There isn't enough justice in this world.

I shake my hand gently out of Mummy's grip and smile at her. I know my eyes are flat.

"I'll see you when you're done, Ma," I say, and turn without saying goodbye to Mr. Len.

I weave my way through the mansion until I am standing outside the Bankses' home. As I lower myself to the front steps to wait for Mummy, I heave a heavy sigh. Without a doubt, there will be no seats left on the bus ride home. We've long since missed the last one that would allow us to sit semi-conformably and instead will be crammed against strangers like sardines in a too-small tin can. Salt in the bloody wound.

I pick at the fancy cobblestone pavers that make up the driveway and allow myself to rage silently. How dare Mr. Len treat Mummy like that? And though he is the current object of my fury, Mr. Len is just one person in a tapestry of entitlement that spans generations. In fact, there are currently four generations of Banks men walking this planet, exercising their special brand of privilege. And I unfortunately know their whole history thanks to my acquaintance with Mr. Len.

First we have Beauregard Banks, Mr. Len's father, and the reason why Mummy can't attend Matant Vercia's funeral. He's pretty old but still mobile, albeit a little unsteady on his feet. Mr. Beauregard had a fairly modest upbringing. Then his financial prospects skyrocketed thanks to the 1944 GI Bill. When he joined the military at eighteen, five years later, he climbed quickly through the ranks, using government funds to pursue an education that would've been out of his reach otherwise. Thus was Mr. Beauregard able to give his son, Mr. Len, a head start in life by paying for his education and a home of his own.

Mr. Len used his leg up to create a successful medical supplies business. As it goes with each subsequent generation, Mr. Len's wealth gave him access to places his father had only dreamed of, and his own son, Silas, continued that trajectory. With a small loan of \$1 million, Silas turned the already impressive medical supplies company into one of the largest health

conglomerates in the world. Through his own hard work (cough) and no help whatsoever (obviously), Silas propelled the family company, Banks Corps, to multibillion-dollar status. And no doubt Silas's own son, whom I have never met, will reap all the rewards of his legacy and pull himself up by his bootstraps to add on to his family's wealth.

I am still picking at the ground as I muse over the unfairness of being granted success or failure by one's accident of birth when a trail of red ants enters my line of sight. The insects are swarming a fat, dead caterpillar, each little worker moving quickly to communicate with the next and then filing one by one to carry their bounty back home. They're so organized in their feasting, probably because they know there's enough to go around. I pull out my phone to record them, glad for the break from thinking about the Banks men.

As the ants finish their meal, I hear the shuffling footsteps of someone making their way up the street to the Bankses' home. It's Mr. Beauregard.

Absentmindedly, I lift my hand to greet the elderly man and he raises his own in response. My phone is trained on him, now, as he attempts to power walk to the house. He is humming a song that I can just make out. *We're in the money*. Classic. Mr. Beauregard Banks has no care in the world as he pauses in the street to catch his breath. The phantom *beep beep beep* of Mummy's pain pump rings in my ears in time with the rise and fall of his chest.

I don't hear the silent purring of the car until it's too late. The souped-up luxury car bolts around the corner, swerving sharply, veering to the left and then right as if caught in a high-stakes tug-of-war. Abruptly one side loses and the vehicle slams right into Mr. Beauregard. He doesn't even have time to yell as the impact catapults him feet away.

I gasp in shock and race over to Mr. Beauregard. He lies on the ground at an unnatural angle that *no one* should be in, let alone a man in his early nineties. Just as suddenly as it appeared, the sports car reverses in a wide arc and speeds off in the opposite direction. And I have it all recorded on my phone. As I gaze down at Mr. Beauregard's still form, I am entranced at how the pool of blood beneath him races down the street like the almost perfect line of red ants.



Make that three generations of Banks men.

## CHAPTER 6

# THE GREEK HAITIAN CHORUS (AKA THE MUSES)

*Thalia (comedy)*

What's the difference between a psychopath and a sociopath?

*Callisse (poetry)*

Psychopaths are impulsive. Brash. Can't maintain a job or form emotional connections. They are—

*Tersi (dance)*

Wrong. You're describing a sociopath. They're the more volatile of the two. The ones always destroying their families. Meanwhile—

*Clionie (history)*

You're both incorrect. The term *sociopath* is no longer medically used while *psychopathy* refers to a collection of traits—

*Thalia (comedy)*

Ehps! You all ruined my joke. No point in telling it now.

*Callisse (poetry)*

Well, why do you mention this?

*Clionie (history)*

Do you think Brielle is either of those things?

*Thalia (comedy)*

No, it was only a joke! Ugh. This is just like when I send Mummy a post online and she asks all these follow-up questions. What is this? Who is that? How do you know them?

*Tersi (dance)*

But you're the one who brought it—

*Melpo (tragedy)*

Hush! Brielle has a good heart.

Besides, we all know that she is something else entirely.

## CHAPTER 7

# ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Here's the thing about Hunter Island. It has eight fine dining establishments, two golf courses, multiple points of beach access on private land, almost as many yachts as there are cars, and more wealth spread across its four hundred acres than any other place in the country ... but not *one* hospital. Though the wealthy among us seem to live suspiciously long lives, in the end, we are all human. Skin and veins. Blood, bones, and guts. But when you live your life as a god among mortals, I suppose that's easy to forget.

I don't know how long I've been watching the life force drain out of Mr. Beauregard, but when I hear him make a bubbling, groaning sound, I snap out of my stupor. If he doesn't get some immediate medical assistance he isn't going to make it. Maybe even with it.

"Mr. Beauregard! Wait here; I'm going to get you some help," I say to him loudly as he continues making sounds of pain. I take the front steps three at a time, and I race through the Bankses' home.

"Mummy! Mummy!"

"Brielle?" I can hear her voice coming from the everyday entertainment room (not to be confused with the second entertainment room designated for company). A 98-inch TV screen tuned to CNBC stretches along the farthest wall above an unlit fireplace. Artfully arranged oversized furniture is spread throughout, cozy but luxurious. Mummy stands beside a reclining seat holding one of Mr. Beauregard's pill bottles in her hands, making notes in a small legal pad.

"What's the matter, Bri?"

"Mr. Beauregard is hurt," I say without preamble. "A hit-and-run in front of the house. He's on the ground, and he's bleeding badly." I pause.

“Mummy, I can smell death on him.”

Mummy had reached out to halt my speech, but it’s too late. Mr. Len is standing in the doorway of the entertainment room with his mouth open.

“What did you say?” he demands.

“Call 911!” I shout. I’m already past Mr. Len as I head back outside to Mr. Beauregard. “*Right now!*”

I can hear them both spring into action, Mummy clattering behind me and Mr. Len following closely after her. I hear him speaking to an emergency operator, voice panicked.

“Yes, my father has been struck by a hit-and-run driver.”

Mr. Beauregard is right where I left him, moaning in agony on the concrete. I stoop down beside him, and soon after, Mummy joins me.

“Oh, Mr. Beauregard,” she says, her voice thick with tears. “Bondye.”

While Mummy calls on God, I try to help right now. I reach out to straighten Mr. Beauregard’s once pristine white T-shirt that is now spattered with blood and grime.

“No, don’t touch him, Bri,” Mummy says, stopping me. “We might cause more harm if we move him.”

“But what are we supposed to do?” I ask, looking down at Mr. Beauregard. His intermittent whimpers make me want to put him out of his misery. I could do it so easily. Mummy must read the thoughts on my face, because she says, “We have to wait for help to arrive. That’s what’s best.”

As if on cue, we hear a loud clang coming from down the street. I look up quickly, wondering if the driver has returned to finish the job. Instead, I see three men crammed into a golf cart, the mechanical whirring of the small motorized vehicle making a racket on the too-silent road.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Mr. Len says when he joins us beside his father, staring at the newcomers making their way toward us.

The three riders quickly hop off the cart, each holding a red bag of what I can only hope is medical supplies.

“Mr. Beauregard, we’re with the Hunter Island medical response unit,” one of the men says as he crouches down beside the elderly man. “We’re here to help you, okay?”

Mr. Beauregard moans in response. All three men have lowered

themselves to the ground now. They act swiftly to stanch the bleeding, hands flying quickly but gently over Mr. Beauregard to assess the damage.

“Where the hell is the ambulance?” Mr. Len shouts, his patience completely frayed. “If this delayed care impacts my father in any way, I’m suing you all!”

“They’re on their way, sir,” party man number two says. A walkie-talkie that I hadn’t noticed before crackles at that moment.

“ETA thirty seconds,” a woman’s voice says through the device.

The emergency vehicle turns the corner and pulls up to us, parking as close as it can. Two more festively dressed people exit the ambulance, opening its back doors and pulling out the stretcher to transport Mr. Beauregard to the ferry and then to the hospital on the mainland. Another person that I can’t quite make out stays behind the wheel, ready to depart at a moment’s notice. Mummy and I make space for the workers as they carefully fit a neck brace onto Mr. Beauregard to hold him in place. Next, he’s eased onto a long, flat board, then lifted onto the stretcher and into the back of the ambulance.

“Valentine, I need you to go with my father to the hospital,” Mr. Len says to Mummy.

“But, Mr. Len, you are his family.”

“Yes, but it’s *you* who knows all his medical information. I’ll pay you double overtime for the trouble. Go on, and I’ll meet you there.”

Mummy hesitates, looking from me to Mr. Len then back to me. “Well,” she says at last, “I’m not leaving without my daughter.”

The medical staff begin to protest given the small space in the ambulance, but my mom won’t relent. Everyone goes silent when Mr. Len puts up one hand.

“Her daughter goes,” he says with finality. “I’ll follow behind in my car. I have to call our estate managers.”

Suddenly, the sound of sirens comes blaring to life. It’s coming from two Hunter Island police cars that have sped over to the Bankses’ home. One of the officers exits the vehicle, greeting Mr. Len with a handshake. He barely acknowledges the rest of us.

“Mr. Len,” the officer says. “I’m so sorry about this. We have a couple

questions about what happened here.”

“Well, that’s going to have to wait until we’re at the hospital,” Mr. Len says dismissively. “We’re already delayed because we have to take this ridiculous ambulance to the ferry. I knew I shouldn’t have let my pilot have the week off. See, Valentine, look what happens when we’re not fully staffed?”

This man is unbelievable. His father is lying in an ambulance, probably on the brink of death, and he’s justifying why he won’t let Mummy take one day off from work.

The officer puts on an amenable tone, the same one I use when dealing with difficult patrons at Le Grand Fromage. “Yes, Mr. Len. We’ll ask more questions at the hospital. Can you at least let us know if there were any witnesses to the hit-and-run?”

Mr. Len points a thumb at me. “Valentine’s daughter ran in and told us what happened.”

The officer turns, probably noticing me for the first time. Mummy slides an arm protectively over my shoulder as the policeman scrutinizes me.

“Interesting,” he says. “Can I ask you a few questions, young lady?”

“Later,” Mr. Len says decisively. “We’re going to the ferry right now.”

Without any further delay, everyone catapults into action. Mummy and I join Mr. Beauregard in the back of the ambulance with the two paramedics, Mr. Len heads to his sparkling black Jaguar parked in the driveway, the golf cart holds its three passengers, and the two police cars are flashing their sirens again to clear the path.

There is a small crowd of people standing at the entrance of the ferry when we arrive. This is the biggest emergency that the island has had, maybe ever, so it’s not surprising that onlookers mill about waiting to catch a glimpse of the chaos. The ambulance is guided right onto the ferry along with one police vehicle and Mr. Len’s car. The doors are quickly shut. Though I can’t make out the exact words of the bystanders, their whispering sounds like the lapping of a thousand tongues thirsty for gossip.

As the ferry begins its glide across the water to the mainland, I can see the police officer who wanted to question me step out of his car. I already know where he’s headed. He makes a beeline to the ambulance and knocks on the

door. One of the paramedics grumbles under her breath but swings open the door.

“Young lady,” the police officer says, staring directly at me, “could I ask you a couple questions?”

“Can’t this wait until we’re at the hospital?” the paramedic says. “Mr. Beauregard is still conscious. Hearing about the accident may retraumatize him.”

“We’d like to get her account while the memory is fresh,” the officer says.

“Well, if that was the case, you wouldn’t have been the last to arrive,” I mutter under my breath. The cop doesn’t hear me, but the look that Mummy gives me tells me that she heard it just fine.

“Brielle,” Mummy says in her no-nonsense tone. Someone who doesn’t know her might think she’s asking a question with her intonation. But really, that upward note is like the warning shake of a rattlesnake’s tail. So I know that what Mummy’s really saying is *watch yourself*.

My mom speaks to the officer. “Sir, I am Mr. Beauregard’s home health aide, Valentine. This is my daughter, Brielle. Might we conduct this interview at the hospital when things are calmer?”

“It seems pretty calm to me now,” the officer says sharply. Well that was rude. I guess his accommodating demeanor is only reserved for absurdly wealthy white men.

“Of course.”

*Beep. Beep. Beep.* Mummy’s pump chooses that exact moment to chime to life. Mummy looks around, and I wonder who she might be searching for. And then I remember Mr. Len’s earlier dismissal of the police officer’s suggestions. It would be pretty handy to have Mr. Len here ... just in case. They’re more likely to take heed of Mr. Len’s words than Mummy’s. I hate that this is our reality.

Mr. Len is nowhere to be found. Mummy turns to me and nods for me to exit the ambulance. I crawl out of the cramped space and extend a hand for her to do the same.

“We’ll answer the questions outside so as not to disturb Mr. Beauregard,” Mummy says to the paramedic. “We’ll be back shortly.”

The paramedic closes the door silently behind us, and we take a few steps



away from the ambulance in case our voices carry.

“Thank you for taking time to answer my questions,” the officer says.

*Like you gave us a choice.*

“What is your name?” he continues.

“Brielle Petitfour.”

“Bri-elle,” the officer says, guillotining my name. He frowns down at the small notepad he is using to take notes. “Can you spell that for me?”

I do as I’m told and once he’s gotten it down, he’s all business.

“What were you doing outside the Bankses’ home?”

*Seriously?*

“I was waiting for my mom,” I say. Could I be a bit more forthcoming? Sure. But really, why make it easy for him?

“Mm-hmm. And she’s Mr. Beauregard’s home health aide, right?”

“That is correct,” Mummy says, intervening because I’m certain she can tell that I’m not exactly in the mood to comply. “How does this help you out with learning what happened to Mr. Beauregard?”

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

“Just want to get a clear picture of who I’m speaking with, is all,” the officer says. “Now, Brielle. What is it that you saw happen to Mr. Beauregard?”

“Like I said, I was waiting for my mom to leave from work. She was almost done for the day. I saw Mr. Beauregard coming down the block. We waved at each other. He stopped a moment to catch his breath, and all of a sudden, a white sports car came racing down the street and hit him.”

The officer proceeds to ask me every variation of “what happened” you can think of. When Mummy asks him a quarter into the ferry ride how much longer he will be, the officer says he wants to make sure that he’s thorough. But really it just feels like he’s interrogating me. Or trying to catch me in a lie. I’ve been completely honest with the questions I’ve answered so far, though a bit tight-lipped, but the sweat pooling under my arms has me feeling like they’re about to ask me to confess to a crime I didn’t commit.

“Could you describe the vehicle that you saw?”

“It was a shiny white car. One of those really expensive luxury sports ones. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it. It was probably custom-

made or something.”

Something about this description makes the officer’s face blanch. He must know something that he isn’t telling us, but I will not be asking any questions. If it’s not my business, it’s not my business.

“Custom-made you say?”

“That’s what I think. But I can’t know for sure. I don’t even drive.” As soon as I say this, I can feel the blood drain from my face. Anxious thoughts pop in my head one by one like the kernels in a bag of popcorn. Will my not knowing how to drive make them think that I could’ve been the one who hit Mr. Beauregard? But where would I have gotten a luxury sports car from? Maybe they think I stole it?

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

I am yanked out of my spiraling by the sound of Mummy’s pain pump, and I don’t think I could be more grateful for that incessant beeping than I am in that moment. The officer looks around, searching for the source of the sound. Mummy and I look at each other out of the corner of our eyes but don’t volunteer any information.

“One last question,” the officer says as he flips through the pages of his notepad. “You ran into the house to get Mr. Len and your mom after Mr. Beauregard was hit. Why didn’t you call the ambulance yourself?”

I look over at Mummy before responding. I learned at a young age that even though things were tight financially, I was never to speak about it with anyone outside the family. Mummy never had to tell me this explicitly. Even as a child, I knew. All through elementary school, I would spend alternating afternoons being babysat by Mummy’s friends, Mrs. Uba and Ms. Santos. The deal was that each woman would switch between days so that there was always someone to watch one another’s children after school. Every holiday season, Mrs. Uba’s two sons and daughter, along with Ms. Santos’s two daughters, would all talk about the different toys they got for Christmas. Every year I had nothing to add to the conversation. And if they ever asked me outright, I lied. We might not have a lot in material wealth but we’ve got pride to make up for it.

“Young lady?” the officer says, waiting for me to say something. Finally, Mummy nods her head for me to answer.

“My cell phone plan is cut. I didn’t think the call would go through.” I say this with my shoulders back, looking the policeman right in the eyes. I refuse to lower my gaze in shame.

I’m surprised when the officer looks at me with sympathy. “I understand,” he says. “But just so you know, it’s still possible to make a phone call to 911, even if your phone doesn’t have a plan. It only needs to be charged. The dispatchers wouldn’t be able to call you back, but you’d at least be able to make an outgoing call for help.”

“Thank you, officer,” Mummy says. “We didn’t know that.”

The policeman gives Mummy a business card but he’s looking at me when he says, “If you remember anything else at all, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

As the officer heads back to the police car with his partner, Mummy and I turn back to the ambulance. Once we are settled, the paramedics close the door behind us once more.

The officer’s parting words repeat in my mind. *If I remember anything.* Well, I would’ve had to forget that I recorded the entire hit-and-run in the first place in order to remember it. So I technically didn’t need to comply with his request.

I don’t see anything wrong with that.

## CHAPTER 8

# AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

“Right here is fine,” I say to our driver hours later.

The black car that Mr. Len hired for our return home stops abruptly in front of our apartment building. We’ve barely placed our feet on the ground to exit when the vehicle is already on its way, the driver eager to escape our humble neighborhood. People like to act as if the ungentrified parts of Little Haiti are rife with thieves and murderers lurking around every corner. It’s so annoying. Already the car has sped so far down the street that it is only a shiny black dot against the night. Good riddance. We don’t want them here anyway. The giant oak tree concealing the front of our building is a welcome sight, and I sigh as we head inside. Moss hanging from the tree’s branches tickle my cheek as I walk by, swinging gently in the wind.

We spent hours in the hospital, Mr. Len refusing to let us go in case his father woke up wanting to see a familiar face, AKA my mother. There was no talk of how Mummy was holding up even though Mr. Len knows full well she suffers from chronic pain.

Our front door is near, and I can feel the waves of exhaustion rolling off Mummy’s shoulders, back, body. Though she has always been angry about the fact that we live on the first floor, because *any vagabond can walk right in!*, I don’t mind at all. I’m grateful that we don’t need to depend on a perpetually broken elevator that reeks of pee or climb up the many steps to the higher floors, even if they’re slightly safer. Especially after Mummy’s worked a long day and her body is taut from spasms and this much pain. Though we stayed until the wee hours of the morning, Mr. Beauregard never woke up, his bruises slowly turning a mottled beet color while the blood the paramedics missed dried on his face.

As Mummy unlocks the door to our apartment, I notice a small box placed in the center of our welcome mat. I crouch down to pick it up before Mummy trips on the package. I am flipping it over in my hands when Mummy notices and we've stepped inside.

"Oh, good, the phones have arrived," Mummy says. She motions for me to place the box on the table, and I grab a knife from the kitchen to cut through the tape. Inside, just as Mummy said, are two cell phones. These aren't one of the latest models of the newest, shiniest phones, though. They don't even look like they're from this decade. I reach for one of them, turning over the basic black brick in my hand to get a better look at it.

"What are these?" And how can we afford to pay for them? Though I don't ask that second question aloud.

"Mrs. Uba told me about a program that has cell phones for people with little money," she explains, handing me the flip phone. My classmates would surely tease me for it—if they weren't all scared of me.

"I already didn't like that you had to rely on the internet to make calls, and then today happened." Mummy sighs. "But now you can use this one, no Wi-Fi needed. I remember when telephones used to be simple. None of this extra stuff that makes it so expensive."

"Do we have to trade in our old phones?" I ask. I'm already missing the camera on my older model iPhone. What would I do with all my pictures and videos? Especially my most recent recording ...

"You can keep it," Mummy says. "They don't need them back for this program. Besides, I know these versions aren't the best quality for all the TikToks you like to watch."

"That's not what they're called, Mummy," I say with a smile, silently breathing a sigh of relief. "And thank you for the new phone," I add, even though my other hand gravitates to the pocket that holds visual evidence of what I shared with the officers earlier.

"You're welcome, darling," Mummy says, floating around the kitchen. She pours herself a bowl of cereal and stands over the sink to eat it. "You have a new number, by the way. Check inside the box for it. We're on Mr. Len's family plan now."

"Uh, what?" I *know* she's not trying to act all casual as if that's something

she can just mention in passing. I don't say anything else as I wait for her explanation, unsaid words suspended between us. *He's no family of ours.*

"Well, the reason why I looked for this program in the first place is because Mr. Len told me he was tired of all the times he had to change my number in his phone," Mummy explains. "He said if I had a phone, he could add it as a line. And since mine was already so banged up, I got us both new ones because they gave them as a deal."

"If that's the case, why didn't Mr. Len just get us new phones?"

Mummy looks at me with a *You know damn well that cheap rich man wouldn't go out of his way to part with a dime, even if it's for his convenience.* She's right.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Mummy sighs.

"I am going to bed. Good night." There is a tinge of bitterness to her voice.

I am quiet as I go through the motions of unwinding to go to sleep. I slide from my bed to the floor, remembering Mummy's constant reprimands not to place dirty outside clothes where I lay my head. I have both of my phones out, scrolling through the contacts in my old device so I can transfer them all as I wait for Mummy to be finished in the bathroom. It doesn't take me long since I only have a few people I communicate with anyway. I open up the texts in my new phone to send Marcello a message.

**Me:** Hello, Marcello. It's Brielle. Save my new number.

**Marcello:** Dang, girl! You must be in witness protection the way you always changing your number.

**Me:** Ha!

My laugh feels hollow even through text. Marcello and I coordinate what time we'll meet up tomorrow, and once we're confirmed, I ignore the rest of his texts to explore my new phone's very few amenities (a weird game that is just a ball hitting some bricks, alarms, and a calculator). Though I am trying to keep myself busy, Marcello's witness-protection comment burrows deeper and deeper under my skin.

This is probably the second time in a year that I've gotten a new phone number. That's definitely more than the average person. Whenever bills are

tight, something has to go, and our cell phones are usually the first casualty. We've hopped from carrier to carrier, under both my name and Mummy's. Sometimes I worry that we'll run out of options and never be able to have a phone again. I shake myself out of my growing funk, deciding to get up and check if Mummy is finished in the bathroom. I need to wash the day off me too, yes, but I also want to make sure she's okay. I'm about to knock on Mummy's door when she speaks.

"This country is so hard. Difisil. I can't take it." Mummy is using that voice she thinks is quieter than it actually is.

"No, Farah."

Tati Farah in Haiti. Mummy's sister.

"Every day I wake up hopeful despite my circumstances. But by nightfall, I am always crushed—"

There's a pause as Tati Farah seems to interrupt Mummy's lamenting.

"—I have *nothing* here!" Mummy continues. I can hear the tears in her words. I look down at my old house slippers, still standing on the other side of the door, lurking.

"I want to go back home. Even if I was poor there, I had my family and the rest of my children. I didn't have to deal with the disrespect I receive here because of my brown skin or my accent or because I have to work for a living."

Mummy snuffles as Tati Farah continues on the line.

"But I'm as close to being a pariah as one could be in our village. How could I not be after how I left?" she says.

*After how I left?* What is Mummy talking about? I have a moment of guilt over my eavesdropping. Mummy and I are pretty open about things so for her to keep this a secret makes me feel it's especially not meant for my ears. I take a few deep breaths, hoping to calm myself, to get rid of this feeling of being excluded. But Mummy's words of feeling trapped and alone replay in my mind. I am only one closed door away. And yet she is alone. Mummy speaks again.

"Sooner than later, I need to go back to Haiti to right my wrongs," Mummy says with a heavy sigh. "Maybe the American dream isn't for me. All I've gotten from this country is a monster for a daughter and a dead

husband.”

I can almost feel the salt stinging my eyes.

But the tears never come.



## CHAPTER 9

# POWER

I wait until Mummy is completely silent before I walk through my side of the adjoining bath to take a shower. It's late. I am cross-eyed with sleepiness but there's no way I could run the risk of having to look her in the eye and act like nothing is wrong after hearing her call me a monster. I might not display the most emotion, but trust me when I say I feel it.

As quietly as I can, I step into the shower. Though we spent hours at the hospital, it wasn't until we got home that I felt my muscles twist into a million bite-sized pretzels. Maybe it had something to do with the adrenaline finally leaving my body after watching Mr. Beauregard almost die on the hot Florida asphalt. Or maybe it's my mother's words bending me out of shape. The water runs hot against my back, and I sigh deeply as it massages away the day's tension. I imagine what it must have been like for Mummy to know that the child she made out of love, carried for nine months, and pushed into this world with birthing pains of agony resulted in me. A zonbi from our people's nightmares.

Mummy doesn't speak much about her life in Haiti or why she left the island. I know that it had something to do with me. My sisters always allude to this but never answer any of my questions outright. *That's Mummy's story to tell.* So I've stopped asking them to tell it. It doesn't make me wish that we could all be together any less. For as long as I can remember, my entire life has stayed within a twenty-mile radius. Daddy was never well enough to get very far, and my mom didn't spend much time apart from us besides when she had to work. All Mummy's running should've provided her with a better outcome. But with only me as a consolation prize for everything and everyone she left behind, it must not feel like an even trade at all.

I step out of the shower and perform my nightly ritual: teeth brushing, hair twisting, and so much moisturizing that, with a running start, I could probably glide down a theme park slide and keep on going for miles and miles. At least, that's how it *should* be. In reality, no matter how much I slather up, the dry flakes that pop up around my skin are persistent. Side effects of being a zombie.

Don't get me wrong, I can understand why Mummy feels how she does. There are times that I wish I wasn't a zombie too. It would be great if the body oil that Mummy constantly makes for me actually worked. We'd bond over our favorite cosmetics, giggling every night until the sun came up. Instead, she tries not to stare at the flare-ups that arise on my elbows, knees, arms, and back.

I put away all my products and head back to my room. I crawl into bed for the night and tuck the covers tightly around me as I turn off my bedside lamp and nestle into the worn comforter and lumpy pillows. I didn't ask to be born the way that I am. I didn't ask to be born at all. For all I know, I was probably having the time of my not-yet-in-existence life before I was yanked into this shitty reality. Even as I think this, I cringe. I don't want to be ungrateful for everything that Mummy has done for the both of us. She has hustled more than should be humanly possible to make ends meet.

I'm trying my hardest to get off the merry-go-round of my mother's words when I hear a gentle knock at the adjoining door of the bathroom. I burrow deeper into the sheets and act like I'm asleep.

"Brielle?" Mummy says as I hear the door squeak open. "You forgot your old ph—"

Mummy's voice quiets as she must notice that I'm "sleeping." I hear her shuffling feet as she gently places my old phone beside the new one on the small table. She doesn't leave right away. I can feel her staring at me in the dark as she stands over my bed. Mummy stays like that for a long while until, finally, she adjusts the sheets around me and quietly makes her way out of my room.

I am just about to drift off to sleep when one of the phones buzzes loudly on the nightstand. I pat my hand around in the dark and switch the phones to silent but a message on the new device flashes across the screen:

Hey Silas ... I haven't heard from you since our night together a few months ago. I'm hoping this number works ...

Um. I look at the unsaved phone number, trying to get a clue as to who this person is. More importantly, why do they think they're getting in touch with someone named Silas? I'm ready to write the message off as a wrong number when another text pops up on the screen.

Silas! My man! When are we going golfing?

What is going on? The only Silas I know is Mr. Len's son, Silas Banks, but there's no way these messages could be for him.

Could they?

I sit up straighter in bed as the phone continues to light up in my hand. With each new message, I feel more certain that I am somehow receiving all of Silas Banks's text messages. Mummy did mention that we were now on the Bankses' phone plan. But he's a billionaire—and an adult. Would he really still be on his dad's plan? My thoughts run away from me, and I scramble to keep up. Maybe when they connected our phones there was some sort of mix-up. Did this mean that Silas would get my text messages? My stomach clenches at the thought, my insides already warped with embarrassment. But then I relax. Besides Marcello and Mummy, my phone is pretty quiet.

I am up for an hour watching all of Silas's incoming messages. A twinge of guilt plucks at my insides at the thought that I am committing an extreme invasion of privacy, but I get over it quickly. I remember reading an article about the toxic environments of some of the country's biggest companies. Banks Corps was notorious for conducting multimillion-dollar deals via text message, with some employees getting fired for not responding quickly enough, even though they might've gone weeks not hearing anything from the company's CEO. So I know Silas Banks isn't exactly worrying about the morality of his decisions, which impact tons of people at a time. My little snooping (which I didn't even do on purpose!) isn't a big deal. I *do* want to stop. But every time I think that the last text has come in for the night, the phone goes off again. Turns out when you're a billionaire, someone always needs something from you. And I want to know what people are asking for.

Hey. Silas. Hope you don't mind me reaching out this way. It's been months and we're still waiting for you to give the final confirmation for the literacy foundation's \$5 million donation. A lot of people are impacted by this and they need to move forward with the announcement.

I tap into the message and stare at the words on the screen. Now this is power. With just the push of a few buttons, Silas Banks could help more people than some countries have helped their entire citizenry. In a year. When I think of it, Silas Banks could change me and Mummy's lives too.

The cursor blinks in a consistent rhythm, waiting for my reply ... I mean, Silas's ... reply.

Couldn't I just respond to this message? Who would know? I consider the situation. There are barely any replies to the texts on Silas's phone. Besides, it's only a matter of time before another avalanche of them come in, pushing this one to the bottom of the bunch. And it sounds like this person just needs final confirmation. Silas probably forgot about it. A donation of \$5 million is like lunch money to him or something. He's a busy guy.

I feel a tingle of anticipation skitter down my spine. Now that I think of it, I could come up with a way to help Mummy with her pain pump. But that would easily be traced back to me, wouldn't it? I keep staring at the phone in my hand, thinking about what could happen if I sent a brief response. Nothing too over-the-top. A quick confirmation. A statement of support, if you will. At least *someone* would be getting some assistance.

The phone vibrates gently in my hand with another message from the same number:

Are you in?

I think back to my mother's earlier words. *All I've gotten from this country is a monster for a daughter and a dead husband.* A monster wouldn't care about other people. I wait one more second before sending a response:

Yes, I approve. How does 10 million sound?

In seconds, I've squeezed the button on the top of the phone to turn it off and flipped it face down on the bedside table. If I'm gonna do it, then I might as well do it big. I lean back hurriedly into the sheets, my chest rising and falling like I've just outrun a bear.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*  
It's done.

## CHAPTER 10

# SWAN FREEMAN PETITFOUR

### *Tersi (dance)*

I remember it well. Mummy came home singing for the first time in much too long. That's how we knew something had changed.

Her spirits rose until she was floating and I along with her. I swear our feet never once touched the ground. There was drumming, there was stomping, but we did not ever set foot on land.

The quiet notes Mummy hummed filled me with her joy. She grabbed my hands, and I knew that she loved again. And we danced.

### *Callisse (poetry)*

How can you speak of it?  
What do you know of love?

I do not trust anything that can be  
so rich and deep for years and years  
and then dried up and dead  
in a day.

### *Thalia (comedy)*

That is not fair, Callisse.

Our parents' rupture hurts Tersi most because she remembers the good moments between them. By the time Mummy pushed the rest of us into the world that bond was already withering away, atrophied like a broken arm

bound for too long.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

What must it have been like for Mummy to be trapped with Papi as she was? Choking so long on the fumes of a decaying love? No wonder she was enraptured by the fragrance of a budding romance.

*Clionie (history)*

We were all too young to realize we should pay attention to the first signs of our family's destruction.

But what could we have done to stop it, truly? Yo granmoun.



Valentine is tired. The island sun blazes down on her back, the thin cornrows that adorn her head exposing her parted scalp to its unrelenting heat, each vertical line shining like a healed scar. She has been circling the market for hours in search of the exact shade of blue her husband demands for the new pair of slacks she will make him. There was a time when she sewed his clothing out of love. Now it is another chore. What was once a short excursion to the marketplace has now become an endless journey, thanks to the countless product shortages happening all over the country since the ousting of the last president. When will Haiti be done with coup d'états and chaos?

They say a democratically elected president was removed from office and flicked off like a scab by outside meddling and intervention. This isn't the first time Valentine has heard of such things, as it happens more often than it should in Haiti. Puppeteers pull strings from hundreds of miles away while oligarchs destroy from within. The causes are many. Neutralizing a supposed threat to American democracy. Vengeance for damming the flood of corruption that allows the country's elite to suck Haiti's resources dry and exploit her people. Punishment for embracing the leftist communist ways of neighboring countries. Infinite.

But this is not Valentine's concern. She spends her days worried about things within her control, and even those tethers are frayed. Because there's

only so much ignoring she can do when the capital's problems spread to the northern countryside where she resides. When outsiders speak of Haiti, they say, "She is in disorder! She cannot regulate herself!" There's no acknowledgment of how their actions helped sow this chaos. This corruption. And then they send peacekeepers to administer "stability" to Haiti. How can they claim peace when all they bring is terror to our land? Countless babies to women and girls not ready to bear the responsibility of motherhood? Disease? Their names are lies. Their peace is blood.

Valentine weaves through the stalls of the vendors as they hawk their wares, drenched in sweat and reeking of the singular focus needed to get a good bargain. Outsider soldiers stand among the crowd, their uniforms as out of place as a tiger in a nest of mice. Valentine does what she can to avoid them. She continues her search, stopping every so often to inspect some fruit, appreciate a handcrafted pair of shoes. She really should return home before Franki becomes upset with her delay. She remembers the days when the only thing that upset her husband was when they had to part from each other. Oh how romantic she thought it was, when their love was new. But now the hold suffocates more than it pleases.

His ambition had been intoxicating too, tugging her deeper and deeper into his web until she was ensnared with one child and then another. And another. Five little girls who embody her heart, bonds that she cannot break no matter how fractured hers and Franki's has become. Or that his ambition has transformed into gluttony and greed. Buoyed by the maji that he corrupts to complete his bidding.

Valentine gives up her quest to find the colored fabric, deciding to purchase some Florida water before she returns home for the evening. She waves to the older woman who always sits on an overturned bucket at the entrance of her stall, skirts gathered between her legs to conceal her modesty though her knees open in either direction. She runs a hand along the shelves, stopping at a display of freshly plucked flowers until she notices the prickling at the back of her head. Valentine turns and sees one of them, an anything but peacekeeper.

This Ameriken is not like the others she has seen, his mahogany skin tone setting him apart from his pale brethren. When their gazes touch it sends a



current through Valentine, shocking her into life and out of the complacency she's accepted as her reality. The soldier must see possibility reflected in her eyes, because he takes a step toward her. And then another. Until they stand toe to toe, ready for a face-off of wits.

"Let me get these for you, though they can't compare to your beauty," the man says in English.

Valentine cocks her head to the side, unable to understand. The man tries again in splintered Creole, and this time she smiles. He points to himself.

"Swan Freeman Petitfour."

Valentine does the same, gifting him her name. Already tongues are wagging around them. When Valentine smiles for someone, it is like the heavens opening up and singing your sweet praise. It is comfort and everything good in the world. Their falling was hot and fast, love cushioning their descent until it could not. Swan was an outsider, too naive to wonder if someone like Valentine could be marked for another.

And Valentine?

She had forgotten that Franki had eyes everywhere.

## CHAPTER 11

# ROBIN HOOD

The morning after is ... surprisingly quiet. Until I glance at the screen of my old iPhone and see multiple push notifications from news sites.

*One University Just Received a \$10 Million Donation from Billionaire Silas Banks*

*Billionaire Silas Banks Pledges \$10 Million to University Literacy Organization*

*How Much Does Literacy Reform Need? According to Billionaire Silas Banks, \$10 Million*

I really shouldn't be surprised that this has made the front page of so many publications. For the rest of us peasants, \$10 million is still a lot of money. I scan through as many of the stories as I can, looking for any sign that I've been discovered. From what I can tell, no one knows that this donation was thanks to a Haitian American zombie living in the last-to-be-gentrified part of Little Haiti. The people questioning Silas Banks are willing to overlook the impropriety of conducting big business over the phone when they are getting this much cash. Do not ask too many questions. Do not rock the boat—sorry, ferry—taking you to Hunter Island or you will not collect \$200. Or in this case, \$10 million.

I continue scanning the articles and note that the Banks team appears to be taking it in stride, optimistically discussing the donation with upbeat posts shared on all their social media pages. They even link to a press release on their website. A strange sense of pride fills my chest as it sinks in that I haven't been caught. And this feeling? It's not bad. This must be how it feels to be Robin Hood.

I grab the new flip phone and turn it back on. Messages flood in immediately. As I quickly get ready for the day, I think about how I might be

able to use this little glitch in Silas Banks's security to benefit me and Mummy. If I can give away \$10 million via text that easily, I'm sure I can figure it out.

When I go into Mummy's room to see if she'd like breakfast, I find her under the covers. She is typically an early riser. I stand beside her and place my hand on her forehead.

"Are you okay, Mummy?"

"Yes, cheri," she says. I can hear the discomfort in her tone. "Just feeling a lot of aches today."

Every so often there are times like these. Painful hours when even the brightness of a cell phone's flashlight is too much for her to bear. When I asked Mummy to try to describe how her back pain feels, she said that it was like someone turned on every nerve ending in her body and pressed down to make each one flare simultaneously for hours, sometimes days, at a time. The pain pump's timed release of medication helps reduce the pain to bearable amounts.

"At least you get to recover from being on your feet for so long yesterday," I say.

"If only," Mummy answers, dragging herself into an upright position. "Mr. Len asked me before I left if I could stop by the house to prepare Mr. Beauregard's room for care. Just in case the hospital releases him."

"Uh ... did Mr. Len not see his father on that concrete? He'll be lucky if he's even—"

"I know that, Brielle." Mummy cuts me off. "But I will not take away the little bit of hope that he has about his father. Also, if Mr. Beauregard should ... I ... I'll have to start looking for a new job for the first time in almost twenty years."

I understand what Mummy is refusing to voice. If Mr. Beauregard doesn't make it, we'll only have a couple of weeks at most for Mummy to find work to keep us from falling behind on the bills, more than we already are. Even though Mr. Len is a pain in the ass, there's no denying how much we rely on Mummy's paycheck to make ends meet and send money back to our family in Haiti.

Instead of acknowledging this, I ask, "Do you want me to make you any

breakfast before I head over to Marcello's?"

"No thank you, Bri. I'll just grab some fruit. I don't think I can hold anything else down right now." I nod at Mummy and give her a kiss on the forehead.

Once I've finished eating and say goodbye, I head for the bus stop. Marcello and I are working the afternoon shift so we figured we'd spend the morning together before heading into the restaurant. Marcello lives in Allapattah, which isn't too far away, but will take forty-five minutes to an hour by bus. I spend the entire bus ride rereading the various articles about the Silas Banks donation. I even spot a few stories that mention Mr. Beauregard's accident. Again, I remain unnamed.

I want to tell Marcello all about the phone number mix-up but I know that the second I do, I'll be involving him in something that could get him in trouble. The fewer people who know, the better. Besides, Marcello has already had his fair share of dealing with unsavory billionaires. I'm sure he won't mind that I don't say anything.

When Marcello first started working at Le Grand Fromage, there was a wealthy guest who would specifically ask for him as his server. He would give such great tips that no one ever questioned him, especially since tips that go over a certain threshold are put into a pot to be split by everyone working that day. This suddenly changed when Marcello reported the patron and refused to serve him again. To make sure that Marcello kept quiet, they asked him to sign a nondisclosure agreement in exchange for a check for an undisclosed amount.

In addition to never setting foot in the restaurant again, should any of his wealthy associates need such services, the guest offered to send them all to Marcello's family's business: a funeral home in South Beach. Yes, while out-of-towners are living it up on Ocean Drive, there's an unassuming mortuary lying at the ready just in case eternal slumber should call. It's been a few months since Marcello signed the contract and already the change in the Rodriguez Family Funeral Home is apparent. The loved ones of the dearly departed spare no cost in sending off their very rich relatives. It might have something to do with the fact that the money paying for it all previously belonged to the late family member they're honoring, but such is the cycle of

accumulating generational wealth.

“Hey, girl,” Marcello says as he opens the door and steps aside for me to come in. “I’m almost done getting ready but we have to stop by the funeral home to drop off my granny’s notebook with all her phone numbers. She forgot it again.”

Marcello’s grandmother Tabitha is the director of the funeral home. She’s raised Marcello and his two older brothers since Marcello was three years old, so he basically considers her his second, and real, mother. I wait patiently as Marcello finishes parting his hair at the exact, perfect spot. A couple of squirts of perfume and a swipe of baby pink lip gloss and he is ready to go.

“Ma’am, where have you been?” Marcello asks as he grabs his things and we head outside to his car. “I didn’t hear back from you last night after you texted me from your new phone. I thought you were going to flake on me today.”

I want to say that it’s because his comment bothered me but I don’t. Instead I say, “You wouldn’t even believe me if I told you.”

“Try me,” Marcello says with a smirk.

“Well, I was waiting outside the Bankses’ home for my mom when I saw Mr. Beauregard get hit by a car. And the driver left the scene.”

Marcello’s mouth falls open, his right arm outstretched toward his car to press the door unlock button.

“No friggin’ way!”

“I’m serious.”

“Oh my goodness. Is he okay? He looked pretty frail that one time I saw him when they came to eat at Le Grand Fromage. And that was a couple years ago,” Marcello says after finally opening the car doors for us to get inside.

“He’s been doing better since then actually. At least he was before the accident. Normally he insists on going for a daily walk all by himself in his neighborhood. He was on his way back home when the car hit him,” I say as I fiddle with the AC vents.

“That’s wild,” Marcello says. “How is he doing now?”

“I can’t say,” I respond. “The last time I saw him, he didn’t look good at

all.”

“Dang. And the same day this happens, his grandson decides to donate ten million dollars? Maybe he was in his feelings or something after what happened.”

I keep my eyes trained on the road ahead so I won’t make eye contact with Marcello. If he catches even a whiff that something is up, all he’ll have to do is say *Brieeeeelle?* and the story will come tumbling right out of me. To most of the world, I find it easy to be ice-cold. But Marcello thaws me out like he is the sun.

“Yeah, maybe he was,” I say.

It takes almost twenty minutes to get to the Rodriguez Family Funeral Home. We pull into the parking lot and Marcello makes sure to bring the tattered notebook that Grandma Tabitha insists on carrying around, even though he’s programmed all the numbers into her cell phone. We find her stooped over a body in the back room of the morgue, classical music playing softly in the background.

“Hola, Mami,” Marcello says in a low voice as a sign of respect for the dead. He kisses his grandmother on the cheek. “Aquí está.”

Grandma Tabitha’s eyes brighten in pleasure at seeing the dark blue cover of her notebook. “Thank you, mi amor. Go put it in the office for me?”

Marcello starts to walk away and Grandma Tabitha adds, in a slightly louder whisper, “And while you’re there, check my computer, please. Something’s wrong with the printer.”

Marcello gives an exasperated sigh and turns to me. “I promise we won’t be spending our entire morning running errands.”

“It’s okay,” I say. Marcello leaves, probably to find that the printer is out of ink or is plain unplugged. I stay behind with his grandmother.

“How are you doing today, Brielle?” Grandma Tabitha asks.

“I’m hanging in there,” I say, the same answer I give each time she asks me this question.

“I heard about Mr. Beauregard on the local news. A hit-and-run on Hunter Island? I bet those rich folks are all shook up.”

“Yeah,” I answer. And then, “It happened right in front of me.”

Grandma Tabitha looks up at me and stares for a moment. “Are you all

right, baby? That's a pretty traumatizing thing to witness."

I want to answer but find that my eyes are stinging with unshed tears. I can feel each one shining into existence, almost but not quite spilling over.

"Oh, honey," Grandma Tabitha says, pulling off her gloves and moving from the body she was working on. "Come here."

She pulls me into her embrace and I inhale deeply. She smells like peppermint and formaldehyde, which would be disgusting any other time but is strangely comforting when it wafts off Grandma Tabitha.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asks as she pulls away gently to look at me.

"No, I'm okay. It's just that I haven't really had time to process what happened. I literally have to go into work today after seeing someone almost get killed in front of me yesterday. And before you ask why I don't take a day off, I can't afford to, especially now that Mr. Beauregard's unlikely to recover. What will we do if Mummy loses her job, Grandma Tabitha? We're barely able to make ends meet as it is."

"Shhh, shhh," Grandma Tabitha soothes as she pulls me into her bosom again and rubs my back. "You don't have to worry about that right now, child. The saints will make a way. I know it."

Grandma Tabitha and Mummy have an unshakable faith in our ancestors. Whenever things are falling apart, that's when their prayers increase, altars made ready in the off chance that a drop of favor comes their way. It would be foolish of me, as a zonbi, to not believe that there is something greater out there. But why is it that we're forced to struggle with prayer while people like the Bankses get to live *their* lives of godlike access and privilege without uttering a single psalm? There's no wishing for overtime hours to make up the last of a medication co-payment. The Bankses don't have co-payments with their private concierge service doctors. They don't gather their coins for new school clothes—they go to exclusive one-on-one fitting appointments with luxury designers abroad. Grandma Tabitha and I have spent countless hours lamenting the fact that our whole existence has been to cater to the wealthy. What we would do if the tables were turned.

"Don't stress too much, love," Grandma Tabitha says. "We're all just dust in the end anyway."

I laugh. “Way to talk me off the ledge, Grandma Tabitha!”

“Only you get my sense of humor,” she says with a wink.

I give Grandma Tabitha another quick hug before stepping back from her. My eyes follow the graying skin of the cadaver in front of us, and I gulp back my desire before speaking. “Who do we have here today?”

Grandma Tabitha’s eyes light up as she puts on a fresh pair of gloves and heads back to the body on the table. Her clientele has become almost entirely people with means, so she always has an elaborate story about the origins and demise of everyone who comes across her table. When Marcello comes back to get me, I can tell that it’s taking all his might to hold back his smirk from becoming a full-fledged grin.

“If I didn’t know better, I would think you were trying to steal my grandma,” he says, staring at where me and his grandmother are standing shoulder to shoulder talking softly as she works.

“Now, now, Marcello,” Grandma Tabitha says with a smile.

Marcello and I finally leave to start our morning, and as I get settled in the passenger seat, I’m not surprised to feel my new flip phone buzz in my pocket. I haven’t had a chance to look at it since I got off the bus this morning. I pull the phone out now and see the latest donation request.

This time, I don’t hesitate when I pledge another \$10 million.



## CHAPTER 12

# WORLD HUNGER

Marcello and I are back at Le Grand Fromage for another day of work. And what a difference twenty-four hours makes. I remember when my biggest concerns were convincing Mummy to let me apprentice with Nadia. Now I'm trying my hardest not to spiral about how we're going to pay our rent in the coming weeks. Oh, to be the Brielle of yesterday.

It's an especially busy day at the restaurant with regulars and first-time guests running the whole team ragged with their requests. Even so, we have to be at our absolute best over the next few days because there's a rumor that an inspector is in town (restaurateurs are a talkative bunch). It's no secret that Le Grand Fromage has been trying to get their rating upgraded for the last five years. We know Nadia means business because her usual sleek blond ponytail is mussed. Every demand is a combination of barbed-wire words.

Though Nadia is at her rudest when she's stressed, I don't speak back to my boss. I think of Mummy working for Mr. Len, putting up with his unreasonable demands and inflexibility. I hope this isn't a preview of what the rest of my life will be like. Another fifty years of having someone speak down to me sounds like torture. At least this gig isn't all bad. I can learn from world-class chefs and get paid more in tips in a week than waiters in my Little Haiti neighborhood make in almost a month, even with all the gentrification going on.

I carefully weave my way through the evenly spaced dining tables, checking in with each of my patrons long enough for them to think they know me but short enough for them to enjoy one another's company. As I clear the plates away from a particularly disagreeable group of what I'm guessing are Italian visitors, I overhear a woman seated with her husband

talking about my donation ... I mean, *Silas Banks's* donation.

“Wasn’t that so kind of him?” the woman says with a smile. “He didn’t have to do that. That’s what you call generosity.”

I grab the Italian group’s remaining cutlery to make space for their gloriously warmed profiteroles. Meanwhile, the nearby wife and husband are practically foaming at the mouth as they discuss the merits and sheer holiness of Silas Banks. I have another moment where I stop to reconsider my don’t-tell-anyone-about-the-donation rule. I *need* someone to talk shit with. But I ultimately decide not to say anything. I’ll just have to listen to these people harp on about how great Silas is, even though I know for a fact that \$10 million isn’t even 1 percent of this man’s wealth.

I make my way to the kitchen to hand off the dirty dishes and stop by my locker to peek at my flip phone, AKA the Silas phone. I usually use the moments between tables to observe the chef on duty work their magic, but this time I’m too preoccupied with incoming messages. I scroll through the more than thirty texts that have come in since my workday began. Some are simple greetings while others are inviting Silas to dinner, saying they love their new luxury electric car, or even wanting to go to space.

One message catches my eye, and I press the phone’s thick buttons to open it. The person behind the unsaved number has asked if the recent donations coming out of Banks Corps mean that the philanthropic branch of the organization has started back up again at full capacity. Just as I finish reading the message, another bubble appears in the thread.

If so, when might we hear the final word about your pledge to help end world hunger?

A memory comes to the surface. Banks recently faced backlash after publicly declaring he could end world hunger, but instead of going through with the claim, he threw a lavish party on Martha’s Vineyard with two hundred of his closest friends. What was supposed to be an invite-only soiree of excess turned into a media storm of secret pictures being sold to the highest bidder. I guess in Silas’s eyes, the “world” only consisted of Hollywood, New York, and DC elites.

I know that I’m pushing it with all the donations I’ve made on Silas’s behalf (\$20 million?!) but there’s no way I can pass up this opportunity. It

could help even more people. While I've been fortunate enough not to have ever skipped meals, some of our family back in Haiti haven't been as lucky. Whenever Mummy's paychecks are short, she cries knowing that even though her daughters are fed, there are aunts and uncles and cousins who might not have anything to eat for a few days out of the week. If someone like Silas Banks has the power to make sure that people don't have to suffer for lack of food, why wouldn't they do their part? I roll my shoulders back, releasing the tension that has gathered there, and send a quick text.

Yes, I'd like to double our contribution.

The response is immediate, the person on the other end expressing their gratitude and shock. I respond:

I'm feeling generous.

I put the phone away in my locker and head back to check on my patrons. As I stop by each table to ask how they're doing with their meal, I'm met with happy smiles and no requests. This last donation might be the one that gets me caught, but I think I'm okay with that. Now when I say "If I had enough money, I would end world hunger," I know that I really mean it.

I'm still thinking about the contribution as I watch a busser wipe down a recently vacated table to make way for the next batch of diners. Honestly, I've done a good thing for Silas Banks. A couple of messages and I've already helped rehabilitate his image. That goodwill is more than worth a few million in charity.

I watch as a family of four is seated in my section, and I head over to them soon after. When I start to hand them menus, they wave them away.

"I already know what I want," the teenage daughter says in a bored tone, scrolling mindlessly on her phone. She doesn't look any older than I am. Maybe she would sit behind me in class if I could ever afford the exorbitant tuition at whatever school she attends. Her parents look surprisingly embarrassed on her behalf, so I smile politely as I scribble down the family's requests and head to the kitchen to place their order. Even though what I *really* want to do is snatch that phone from her hand just to shake her up a bit.

When I step through the double doors, the palpable excitement crackling

through the air makes the hairs on my arms stand on end. This is the buzz that arises when someone especially important makes a visit to Le Grand Fromage, someone who is even more rich and powerful than the average millionaire on Hunter Island. I look around for Marcello, the only person I would dare show that even *I* get a little excited about our VVIP guests. Plus, I missed the day earlier this summer that Beyoncé came in, and I refuse to let something like that happen to me again.

I make one more scan for Marcello, but when he still doesn't appear, I decide to take matters into my own hands and figure out who's got my coworkers on edge. When I push open the kitchen doors to step back into the dining room, my eyes immediately fall on the guest. My stomach somersaults down to my toes and I am hit by a wave of nausea so powerful, I'm afraid I might be sick on the pristine, newly retiled floors.

Which A-list celeb is seated in the best seat in the house, you ask?

Silas Banks. Of course.

## CHAPTER 13

# THE PORTABLE

### *Melpo (tragedy)*

Our sister Brielle never cried as a baby. Sometimes, in those rare moments she had a reaction to the typical moments babies light up for—thunderstorm, hunger—her mouth would be gaping wide and her body would shake silently, but there were never any tears or sound.

### *Thalia (comedy)*

How do you raise a child like that?

### *Callisse (poetry)*

There are no guidebooks to turn to, no advice to be asked of anyone. Mummy was utterly alone and in a strange new country. Because even though Swan was with her, he was ... different. Mummy tried her best to soothe her daughter with words, gift her with that soul-awakening smile. Teach her to be human. But it was hard. Almost impossible. Brielle had no interest in what kids her age liked. She didn't have the same motivations.

### *Tersi (dance)*

Enrolling a child like that in a school? Brave choice. But necessary for a woman who works all day. Luckily, Brielle started to understand, hiding some of her idiosyncrasies with practice. Even then, none of her peers dared bully her. Somehow they could tell that she wasn't to be provoked. She had no friends, but no enemies either.

### *Clionie (history)*

Though no one ever bothered Brielle, she always watched out for her fellow

outcasts. Anyone who treats another unkindly or with injustice in mind has always caught our sister's attention. Remember when Brielle was in third grade and Winnie came to school in her grandmother's orthopedic sneakers and everyone, especially a little shit named Thaddeus, made fun of her? The teasing was relentless.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

One day, Brielle led Thaddeus to the back of an empty portable. They didn't stay there together long. But he was never really the same after that.

*Thalia (comedy)*

Never bullied Winnie again, though.

## CHAPTER 14

# HERE'S A TIP

I retreat slowly into the kitchen, letting the doors swing gently behind me. I have seen a ghost, surely. Silas Freaking Banks can't really be here, can he? At one of *my* tables? Crap. Crap. Crap. My feet are stapled to the floor, coworkers stepping around me with annoyance as they grab plates of steak frites and dressed salads to serve.

"Hey! You're not paid to just stand there," the waiter captain barks at me. "We don't keep Silas Banks waiting."

I can't even tie my words together to respond before he is guiding me out of the kitchen and thrusting me in the general vicinity of Silas's table. My belly fills with air as I suck in as much goodwill as I can, letting it swirl in my body briefly before exhaling to the universe my silent prayer that I don't get in trouble.

"Hi there," I say tentatively. Terrified. "I mean—welcome. Can I start you off with a drink?"

"Hey, yeah, that'd be great. I'd like a ginger shot with lemon and a sparkling water." Silas types away on his phone as he speaks, his eyes not meeting mine. It's a rude habit of the wealthy that usually irks me, but today I am grateful for being invisible.

"Sure thing. Do you need more time to decide what you'd like to eat?"

The frantic pummeling of my heart against my chest slows as I begin to spin on my heel until—

He sighs and puts his phone down then crosses his arms.

"Actually ... no. I'll order now."

I turn to him again, my heart rate skyrocketing. Silas pulls on the strings of his hoodie thoughtfully as I take in his billionaire athleisure uniform. Drab

gray sweats he famously wears in his everyday life to be more efficient in the morning. Cost much more than any pair of sweats should.

He doesn't bother to review the menu before saying, "I'd like chocolate muesli, fruit salad, steak and eggs, and four boiled eggs with a side of soy sauce."

I jot down his request. The order sounds familiar. Then I think back to how often Mr. Len raves about every minute thing his son does, including his food preferences. Plus, updates on Silas's life are ubiquitous, thanks to endless puff pieces about *How to Eat, Drink, Live Like a Billionaire*.

Silas's eyes follow my hands as I flip my notepad closed.

"Your meal will be out shortly," I say, darting the corners of my lips up into a smile. My eyes rake over his face, looking for some sign of recognition—*hey, this strange girl has forced me to donate millions of my untaxed dollars to charity!*—from his end. It would be a miracle if he remembered me from Thanksgiving years ago. Mummy was working, and Silas deigned to attend dinner that year to get away from his wife, a French supermodel named Nalda who has disappeared from the public eye since marrying the billionaire, and the son I've never so much as seen a shadow of in an article. But he is looking through me, with the slight air of simple expectation and nothing more. It is what people like him do to people like me. Praise Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. I finally exhale.

I am light on my feet as I move through my shift. Silas's meal is ready in moments—remember, Brielle, we do not keep him waiting—and I float to his table with another waiter to serve the dishes. I try not to worry too much as he sticks around after his plates are mostly empty and he has put down his utensils in lieu of his iPad, which he alternatively presses to his face to read and places down to click through and occasionally highlight.

"I'll have the steak and eggs, medium," says one diner, with a would-be-casual tone. But the excitement in his voice is apparent. He and the other guests glance regularly over to Silas's table; they're all wealthy, no doubt about that, but Silas's star shines brighter, and over a wider galaxy. He obviously knows it, even as he busies himself with his phone. If only I could escape to my locker to check if he's finally responding to any of our shared messages.



Finally, Silas gets up and leaves, having already provided the maître d' with his credit card at his arrival. Providing money for goods and services at the end of a meal is for the common folk. I swing by Silas's now empty table. And freeze. Although not everyone leaves something behind for the waitstaff, Silas has. I gaze at the small stacked mountain of bills on the tablecloth: a tip. Cash. And a note with only three words.

“I'm feeling generous.”

## CHAPTER 15

# MORALLY GRAY

*Melpo (tragedy)*

It was only a matter of time before this all caught up with her.

*Thalia (comedy)*

Oh, but what a wonderful tale it will be!

*Callisse (poetry)*

Her intentions and heart are in the right place ... which is more than can be said about billionaires.

*Tersi (dance)*

Be that as it may, what Brielle has done is wrong. Each person has their role. The part that they are meant to play. By taking the Bankses' money and giving it away, he will undoubtedly turn his wrath against her.

*Clionie (history)*

But is what she's done truly so bad? How many generations of people like us have suffered because men like Silas Banks hoard all the resources for themselves?

*Melpo (tragedy)*

What a slippery slope, contorting morally gray acts so that they are perceived as unambiguously good.

*Thalia (comedy)*

Oh, don't be so righteous. It was a good-natured prank. Perhaps a bit illegal. I

wouldn't call her a monster. Well ...

*Callisse (poetry)*

Is anyone *truly* all good or all bad? Even billionaires have been known to help fund charitable causes.

*Tersi (dance)*

All good or all bad? Of course not. We ebb and flow depending on the direction of our circumstance and our position within it.

*Clionie (history)*

Just remember, no gift is given by the wealthy without expectation of return.

## CHAPTER 16

# KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

Silas Banks knows what I've done. Though no one has come to drag me down the street by my hair, kicking and screaming about wanting to help others, I am on edge for the rest of the day. I see shadows in the corners of our home as I mop. Later on, a creeping dread crawls up my spine, even as I rinse our dinner of chicken thighs with boiled water and drag sliced limes on its raised bumpy skin. The jolt of heat usually calms me, but not now. Sleep is nearly impossible. When I wake up the next morning, still groggy from my inability to slumber, Mummy is nowhere to be found. I have a brief moment of panic where I fear someone has kidnapped her in retaliation for my actions. I move quickly throughout the small apartment in search but my insides stop their quaking once I find a note (I can't take any more of these handwritten messages!) from my mom hanging on the refrigerator door.

*Cheri, I've gone to see someone about my health insurance. I'll be back later. Call me if you need anything.*

I exhale a long sigh of relief as I prepare for my day. Silas Banks's visit to Le Grand Fromage yesterday has definitely left me rattled. And his \$10,000 cash tip was the talk of the restaurant, which meant there was no escaping his presence even long after he had left. Talk about psychological warfare. My coworkers working the shift had already messaged the others who weren't there about what they missed, a portion of the overly generous gratuity. It took everything inside me not to scream until my voice was hoarse each time one of my coworkers clamored on about how "not all rich people are bad" or about wanting to become a billionaire one day so that they too could give

back. If only they knew that all it took was somehow getting access to a billionaire's text messages through a weird technological glitch.

As I finish my Saturday morning routine of sweeping, dusting, and cleaning the house so that Mummy doesn't have to worry about it, I realize that it's almost time for my video call with my siblings in Haiti. The Muses. Even with our attempts to forge a relationship, they still feel a bit like distant cousins that I'm strangely close to. I'm always the odd one out. We've never been all together in one place, thanks to my living in Miami. Yes, we share stories with one another that no one else knows, but there's something about not being able to embrace them, or smell them, or hear them in person that keeps the cementing of our bond just out of reach.

I pull out my original iPhone, double-check that it's connected to the Wi-Fi, and dial up the Muses over the app. My eldest sister, Callisse, answers on the second ring.

"Bri-bri! How are you, darling?"

"Where's Mummy?" Tersi asks, snatching the phone from Callisse.

"She had to go handle something for her back," I say.

"That insurance business is still going on?" Clonie asks out of frame.

"Unfortunately," I reply as I maneuver around the small kitchen to place two croissants in the oven for warming. "How are things?"

"E byen," Melpo says, peeking on-screen. "Same ol', same ol'."

"You know Melpo's only gonna talk about the bad stuff." Thalia gives Melpo a teasing kiss on the cheek. "Let me tell you the latest drama in the neighborhood!"

Speaking with my sisters all at once is like playing a game of Ping-Pong with an octopus. You have to stay on your toes and keep your head on a swivel because the topics will be flying fast. I finish eating my second buttered pastry and pour myself a glass of orange juice, following along as Thalia tells me about a philandering husband who has gotten between two childhood best friends.

"Oh my goodness," I say, taking a large gulp of juice. "Did they teach him a lesson?"

"You have no idea!" Tersi, who has now taken over the reins of the story, cackles into the camera. "They decided to—"

I tune out Tersi's next sentence because I can hear the clicking of expensive heels even from outside. I'm frozen until I hear a knock at the front door, and then I spring up from my seat.

"One second, ladies!" I say to my sisters in a stage whisper. "There's someone at the door."

I wasn't expecting a visitor today. I'm sure that Mummy wasn't either, or she would've made a mention of it in her note. My sisters are still chattering among themselves on the phone, completely oblivious to my growing panic. Has Silas Banks finally come to get back at me? How ridiculous of me. He'd definitely hire someone else to do his dirty work. The doorbell whimpers.

*Knock knock knock.*

I tiptoe silently to the door and look through our foggy peephole. There is a gorgeous woman standing in my view with shiny auburn hair styled into a sharp bob that swishes back and forth across her jawline with each movement. She stands with her arms crossed, taking periodic glances down at a watch that is probably worth more than anything inside our apartment. It must be warm outside because the woman's ivory face is starting to blotch with spots of pink, sweat beading at her hairline.

I'm staring so intently at the visitor's face that I startle when she knocks again. My cell phone slips from my fingers. I have a brief moment of ungraceful juggling until finally it clatters to the floor.

"Hello?" the woman says. I pick up my phone hurriedly and put my eye against the peephole again. "Is anyone there?"

I clear my throat before speaking. "Who are you?"

"I'm Ainsley Wilder," she says. "I'm here on behalf of Silas Banks."

Oh shit.

## CHAPTER 17

# BOX OF ROCKS

There is a pause. I stumble away from the door to consider my options. I can physically take this woman, easy. But what if she has a weapon? I clutch my chest and shake my head, something, anything to gather myself. I force my heart to slow its galloping. I peek into the hole again, willing this stranger to be a mirage. She continues to stand there, solid and unmoving. An air of disapproving boredom radiates around her.

But so does curiosity.

If I were going to be arrested, surely she would have come with cops. And she doesn't look like she'd want to get her A-line wrap dress or handbag dirty with my blood. In fact, she's inspecting one of the fingernails on her left hand as she waits.

The door creaks loudly as I open it to welcome my guest.

"Ainsley? I'm Brielle. Though I'm sure you already know that. Please, come in."

I motion for her to enter and she steps gingerly over the threshold. She walks past me, and the *tap tap* of her red-bottomed shoes quiet as the spiky heels dig into our worn carpet. She looks out of place standing in the middle of our humble home. Her eyes roam over the furniture wrapped in plastic, a mixture of pieces we found at yard sales and Goodwill.

"Would you like to have a—?"

"This won't take long," Ainsley says in a no-nonsense tone that has me involuntarily taking a step back from its force. "Look, Brielle. Your days of playing Robin Hood are over. Banks Corps is aware of the donations you've been making on behalf of Silas Banks. Obviously."

I feel dumber than a box of rocks.

What—what did I *think* was going to happen? It was outrageously obvious.

The silence stretches between us until—*eps!*

“What’s that noise?” Ainsley asks in alarm.

“Nothing,” I say, shutting off the sounds emitting from my phone by pumping furiously at the side volume button. I completely forgot about my sisters, who must still be waiting on the line. I flip my phone face down onto the table but I don’t hang up. I want them to hear me and Ainsley. Just in case.

“You know, you could get into serious legal trouble for the stunt you pulled. Your mother could lose her job as well.” Ainsley looks at me, unblinking, until I am forced to look down at my feet.

“I didn’t mean to—” I begin, but she cuts me off with a lift of her hand.

“You meant to do exactly what you did. Or you wouldn’t have done it three times.”

Well, she’s got me there.

“Against my recommendation, Silas has decided to make you an offer,” Ainsley continues. “Starting this Monday, you will be the newest employee of Banks Corps.”



## CHAPTER 18

# UNREFUSABLE OFFER

I inspect this Ainsley woman as she waits for my response. A job at Banks Corps? Against her recommendation? Of all the things I expected her to say, that was not one of them. I'm buzzing like a hornet's nest that's been shaken awake. What would it be like to work at one of the world's richest companies? And more importantly, how much would they pay? I might finally be able to help Mummy pay for her pain pump's medication refill. This alone makes the prospect of working at Banks Corps worth considering.

But first, I have to ask, "What's in it for y'all?"

Ainsley gives me a sly smile. "Frankly, Silas considered going after you for your thievery. He even wanted to have your mother fired. But as you *were* the one who alerted the family to Mr. Beauregard's accident, that could become a PR nightmare. So instead, he decided to pivot and find the opportunity."

"And that is?"

"Well..." Ainsley looks pointedly around the apartment. "I had the ... pleasure of researching you and your family. Given your financial circumstance, we concluded that this partnership could be mutually beneficial. Banks Corps would receive good publicity, and a family in need would get some assistance."

I bristle, a heat wave of agitation rippling over my body. "I don't need your charity. And neither does my mother."

"Of course you don't," Ainsley says, though her tone suggests otherwise. "The summer fellowship pays handsomely, with many perks."

"Okay, thanks for—"

"Including immediate health insurance with family coverage." Ainsley

looks me directly in the eyes as she speaks. Looks like she really did do her research on us. And she wants me to know it.

“Think about it,” Ainsley continues. “But not for too long. Like I said, the position starts on Monday.”

Ainsley adjusts the strap of her purse in a smooth motion, PRADA label facing toward me like a badge of distinction. *I’m worth more than the entire outfit you have on right now*, it taunts. She crosses our tiny living room in three large strides, and I follow behind her instinctively, pulled into her vortex. Her hand is almost on the doorknob when she pauses a moment and digs into her bag. She turns to hand me a business card.

“My cell phone number. Call me whenever. Or text me, if that’s what you’re more comfortable with.”

*The shade.*

Ainsley doesn’t waste time with pleasantries. She’s gone before I’ve finished reading the card in my hand. I lock the door behind her, my head spinning from the conversation. Was it only a moment ago that she was standing in here, making me hyperaware of what we have ... and don’t have? My chest rises and falls in a deep sigh before I remember my cell phone on the coffee table. I race back to it to find that the call is still connected, though none of my siblings are in the frame.

“Hello?” I say, looking into the screen.

“She’s back!” I hear one of my sisters shout, and then suddenly the phone is jostled between hands as they fight over one another to be heard.

“Who was that?”

“What did she want?”

“When did she say this job starts? You know my English isn’t so good.”

“Why didn’t you tell us about this?”

“Are we rich now?”

The questions are flung out one after the other, and I wait for them to calm down before recapping everything that happened with Ainsley and my well-intentioned Robin Hood scheme. When I finish, my sisters are silent. Finally.

“You really said you didn’t need her charity?” Thalia asks after some time. “You are bold!”

“Or foolish,” Melpo says. “That’s how you speak to someone in a country that isn’t yours?”

“But it is Brielle’s country,” Callisse says. “She is a child of America.”

“I have Haiti in me too,” I say, affronted.

“Without question,” Tersi says matter-of-factly. “You move between both lands. Figuratively speaking.”

“What are you going to do?” Clonie asks. “You can’t pass up this opportunity. This could provide you access that people who come from where we come from couldn’t even *begin* to dream of.”

I listen to my sisters go back and forth on whether or not I should take the job. By the time we get off the phone an hour later, we still haven’t come to a consensus about what I should do. We all decide that I need to talk about it with Mummy when she gets home and get her perspective. She will not be pleased. Though my sisters and I couldn’t all get on the same page about what’s next, we did all agree that, no matter what option I choose, I should remember one thing.

These rich people are dangerous.

## CHAPTER 19

# THE POINT OF NO RETURN

When Mummy gets home, I can see the pain written all over her face. She walks in slowly, feet shuffling and barely lifting off the floor. I race to help her put her purse on the counter, and she smiles at me. My plan to ask Mummy her opinion about the fellowship goes right out the window. I'll mention it in the morning when she's hopefully feeling a bit better.

"How was your day while I was out, cheri?" Mummy asks.

"Good," I say. The less time I spend talking about today, the better. "Were you able to get any help with your pain pump?"

"Not even a little bit," Mummy says. "It was a long day, and right now all I want to do is lie down."

"I'm sorry they weren't helpful, Ma," I say, following her to her room.

"It's not your fault." Mummy sighs. She carefully lowers herself onto the front edge of her bed and this act alone lets me know that she's really feeling the pain today. Mummy never sits on the bed in her outside clothes. "Would you be a dear and heat up some of the bouyon you made the other day while I shower?"

"No problem, Mummy," I say, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

*Beeeeep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Mummy smiles weakly at me. I know she's trying to hide how much discomfort she's in. I wish she didn't feel she had to do that but I don't know how to say it, so I reach my hands out to her instead. "Come on. You can't sit down for too long or you're not gonna want to stand up."

"You're right." My mother groans as she takes hold of my hands to pull herself back to her feet.

"I have good news," I say as I walk with Mummy toward the bathroom. "I

got an eight-hundred-dollar tip from work yesterday. You were already asleep when I got home last night and gone this morning, so I'm just getting a chance to tell you now."

"That's really great, sweetie," Mummy says.

"Yeah, maybe we could use it to help pay for your pump?" I ask, stopping myself from thinking about the health insurance that Ainsley dangled in front of me like a blood-soaked carrot.

Mummy looks at me with shiny eyes, and I fear I've said something wrong. She reaches for my forearm and squeezes it gently, and then she pulls me into a hug. At first I am tense, unfamiliar with the sensation of her bringing me close in a comforting embrace. It's not that Mummy and I don't love each other. We obviously do. But I can't ignore that sometimes she flinches when she's around me. And besides the obligatory peck on the cheek, we don't usually express our love through touch. Eventually, I soften, allowing my mother's arms to bring me a moment of peace, her vanilla and outside smell swirling in my nostrils as I inhale deeply.

"Thank you for such a kind offer, but don't use your tips on me," Mummy says, her voice thick with controlled emotion as she straightens. "The medication is a ridiculous amount of money per refill, so I need the insurance to take care of that."

"How much is it?" I ask. "I could help save for it."

Mummy looks at me for a moment but doesn't say anything.

"Mummy?" I ask.

"It's ... ten thousand dollars per refill," Mummy says slowly. "But don't worry—that's what the insurance is for. They'll take care of it once I'm able to get a hold of them."

I close my gaping mouth. I think back to Silas's \$10,000 tip at Le Grand Fromage, and immediately I know that it was no coincidence that he left us that amount. He was sending me a message. Well, I hear it loud and clear. The goose bumps that sprout up all over my arms are almost painful. Mummy takes my stunned silence as sticker shock.

"I know it's a lot," Mummy says. "But I will figure it out. In the meantime, go heat up that delicious bouyon for me, darling."

I do as I'm told and head to the kitchen. In a few minutes, I've heated up

Mummy's food, the mouthwatering scent of savory broth wafting through the air. I carefully balance the tray I've prepared: a bowl of stew, bottle of Malta, and mint-chocolate pudding parfait for dessert. The process of making this stew is undoubtedly an act of love. Each vegetable must be chopped and carefully placed into the boiling pot of water in the correct order so that nothing is over or undercooked. Exquisitely tender stewed beef melds with hearty potatoes, plantains, and yams. Watercress and carrots brighten each spoonful. I can practically taste the rich flavors of each bite slide over my tongue just from the aroma rising from the bowl. Bouyon is a proudly Haitian dish, but it reminds me most of my American father, of our brief days laughing together in the kitchen chopping vegetables in unison and plopping them into our boiling pot, leaping away from the droplets of heat flying with each plunk. I don't hold many memories of Swan in my head—I was just too young when he left us. But my time in the kitchen is sacred. Sharpening knives or tinkering with a recipe until I have the perfect amount of heat and flavor—it brings me right back to my father. This I feel in my heart.

Mummy is back in bed by the time I return, but this time she's seated upright under the covers. I slide the tray over her and she picks up the spoon. Gratefulness is infused in her movements.

"Thank you," Mummy says. She takes a bite and her shoulders droop in contentment, her eyes fluttering closed. "This tastes beautiful, Bri. I think it's even better now that a couple of days have passed."

My cheeks warm, pride filling my chest, and I wonder again if I should let Mummy know about the job offer. I decide to wait until the morning. Everything feels more hopeful when you first wake up, if only for a little while. I'm turning to go to my room when Mummy stops me at the door.

"I had a dream the other night," she says, pausing a moment from her spoonfuls of soup. "Mr. Banks didn't make it from his injuries. That plus the call I just had with Mr. Len ... I'll likely have to get another job soon."

Mummy's dreams come true every so often. Sometimes they are logical next steps based on our waking lives. And other times they arrive as if they were called for, landing on the doorstep of her psyche with a promise or a warning.

"We'll see what happens," I say as I turn to leave. "Good night, Ma."

When I settle into bed, I can't help but think about the first night that I decided to send those texts. Would I do it again? Probably ... Who am I kidding? Yes, I would. How could anyone have the chance to help others out just a little bit and not take it? My only regret is not figuring out a way to help me and Mummy. Seeing as Banks Corps found out who I was in the span of a day and a half, it worked out how it needed to.

Now, I have to make some decisions about what the rest of my summer is going to look like. It pains me that I can no longer observe the chefs at Le Grand Fromage, but I can't walk away from this position if it means Mummy might get help managing her pain. Not to mention the fact that Ainsley has made it clear that I can't actually refuse the offer. No matter what happens, this summer at Le Grand Fromage can't be my last chance to learn from the best. I won't let it be.

I pull out my phone and send my first text to Nadia.

**Me:** Hey Nadia. I very much appreciate your apprenticeship offer but my mom still needs a bit more convincing. I'm going to have to pass on it for the moment but I hope that I might get another chance in the future.

I don't expect a reply this late but my phone buzzes a few seconds later.

**Nadia:** Can you chat right now?

I groan. I hate it when you text someone and they immediately ask to talk on the phone. I let Nadia know that I'm available and she calls soon after.

"Hey," Nadia says. "I won't keep you, but first I want to say that I totally understand that your mom is still a little on the fence. My parents were the same way when I told them I was going to drop out of medical school and learn to cook instead."

"Thanks. I hope she comes around," I say, waiting a beat for her to tell me the real reason she wanted to hop on the phone.

"Anyway, I wanted to ask if you'd be open to a supper club client," Nadia continues. "She was a guest on the ferry the morning of your soft launch, and she insisted that I ask if you were available."

"Oh," I say in pleasant surprise. "Really? That's great. When would this be?"

"That's the thing. It's super last-minute. Like ... tomorrow."

“Tomorrow?” I say in disbelief. “That’s incredibly short notice.”

“I know, I know.” Nadia sighs. “But that’s how these Hunter Island types are. If you’re not able to do it, then—”

“No, no.” I cut her off. “I can make it happen. Text me the details, and I’ll reconfirm in the morning.”

Nadia agrees, and we disconnect from our call. A supper club dinner already? My heart is aflutter as I close my eyes and let the moment sink in. Right when I thought I’d have to take a step back from what I really love, this opportunity presents itself. Maybe things will fall into place after all. As I start my second text message, I feel less anxious about what will have to come next. Even though I’m doing this for my family, I know that it’ll work out for me too. At least I hope it will. I type Ainsley Wilder’s phone number in the “to” field and hit send.

This is Brielle Petitfour. I’m getting back in touch with you about your offer for the summer fellowship.  
I’ll take it.



# **INTERMISSION I**

## CHAPTER 20

# ZONBI

*Thalia (comedy)*

Many people do not know what it takes to make a zonbi.

*Tersi (dance)*

But in order for you to understand this tale, you must learn.

*Thalia (comedy)*

Yon zonbi, a proper Haitian one, does not bite into the flesh of a human and make them a member of their accursed group. This is the stuff of Western films, American nonsense that twists our truth.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

But fiction comes alive eventually, doesn't it? The stories fill up minds and hearts and bind to the muscle and fat. It is what we see in Brielle, an intersection of zonbi and zombie unlike any we've ever witnessed.

*Clionie (history)*

Making a zonbi requires powerful magic. Some would call it a science. The people strong enough—and evil enough—to create zonbi have their own private rituals for the transformation. Each one a slight variation as different as its creator.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

But the goal is always the same: separate the ti bon anj, the section of the soul that is the essence of an individual, from the body. It is who you are, it is *you*. If you are the master of ti bon anj, then you hold the ultimate power. You

become a god among mortals.

*Clionie (history)*

The method is what you've heard and what you haven't. It's fish poison, toads, tree frogs, and human bones. It's spiders and crushed glass. We have learned terrible things about the process. Terrible. How you are buried alive. How you listen to your loved ones mourn you as you lie paralyzed and powerless in a coffin.

*Tersi (dance)*

Dancing between death and life, never belonging to either. It is your humanity ripped away from you, torn into tiny pieces and blown into the wind.

*Callisse (poetry)*

And that is only the beginning.

*Callisse (poetry)*

Papa would not want us to reveal all of this ...

*Thalia (comedy)*

Oh, Callisse. Your tenderness is based on memories of Papa and Mummy that are more figment than reality.

*Callisse (poetry)*

It's not my fault that I am old enough to remember a time before Swan came and ruined everything.

*Thalia (comedy)*

If you believe that Swan was the cause of Papa and Mummy's separation, you are more naive than I thought.

*Tersi (dance)*

Sisters, there is no point in fighting over our parents' story. We have our own lives to live. Our own mistakes to make.

## CHAPTER 21

# HANDS OFF

*Tersi (dance)*

Shall we continue our tale of Valentine and Swan?

*Callisse (poetry)*

Mummy and *that man*, you mean.

*Clionie (history)*

She speaks the truth. Swan Freeman Petitfour was an outsider, an uninvited guest, a peacekeeper, a pawn. Though he was less outsider than most, given the New Orleans roots that compelled him to come to our island to begin with. But Swan was only one of many worker insects attached to big international wasp nests of diplomacy, faceless entities in need of soldiers to serve the whims of poisonous men in blue suits and oval offices. Ours was a hushed land, quiet but for the whispered rumors villagers bartered about like currency. Our voices rose against this imposition. We did not ask for this.

They did not listen.

*Callisse (poetry)*

His colleagues strutted around like they owned the dirt they were drunkenly stumbling home on. They dumped their shit in the river and killed hundreds, thousands. And they wanted us to say thank you. That is who Mummy loved.

*Tersi (dance)*

And when Papa—known as Bokor Franki by those who only spoke of him in hushed tones—learned this, he needed just the faintest excuse to put Swan in

his place. No. Below his place, beyond any human's place.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

There was no way for a man in love to walk past the beautiful flowers lining the outskirts of Papa's land without stopping to pluck a few for the captor of his heart.

Every day Papa would pass those flowers and never think to gift them to our mother. But Swan? He brought her everything. Baskets of mangoes to take to the beach, where he and Mummy would feed them to each other, sharing stories until the moon made way for the sun. Meals he prepared with his own two hands dripping with love and honey. And yes, even Papa's flowers, though Swan didn't know they were his at the time.

It was then that we understood that Mummy and Papa were irreparably broken.

*Thalia (comedy)*

Papa let Swan steal his flowers for weeks before acting. Perhaps he thought it was only a phase for Mummy. But Papa has never been one to rush revenge. He lets it simmer until his vengeance is falling off the bone, ready for him to act.

Swan, the poor fool, is too distracted with heady memories of his toes in the sand and the heat of love beating upon his brow to notice the rest of the land attached to the field where he'd harvested flowers for his love. The people tending the expansive sugar plantation are invisible to him. He does not notice that they are like robots, untiring and steadfast in their work. His only focus is on procuring these blossoms for the intoxicating woman he has fallen in love with, the fiercely passionate soul who makes his time away from the States not just bearable but a pleasure. *Valentine*. Can you hear him sigh? Even her name is a gift.

*Callisse (poetry)*

The American's hands grasp onto the loveliest blooms, plush petals soaked in

red. Hibiscus, our national flower. Not that he knows this. Swan Freeman Petitfour pulls them out of the earth. From the root. The once undisturbed dirt scatters across the ground for the last time.

*Tersi (dance)*

The last thing Swan remembers for a long time is a voice. Papa's. "You are going to pay for that."

## CHAPTER 22

# SEARCHING FOR A LOVE

### *Thalia (comedy)*

Even the wildest of whirlwind romances will be snuffed out when the protagonists are a village girl and a foreigner.

### *Callisse (poetry)*

The great love was no more—Mummy's broken heart a precautionary tale.

### *Tersi (dance)*

Yet the promise of love is impossible for her to forget. While mocking laughter follows Valentine wherever she goes (*Naive! Foolish!*) she looks for a sign from her missing beloved, avoiding Papa entirely.

### *Clionie (history)*

Though the spirits have forsaken her, Mummy searches still. She leaves Papa's house on her quest to find Swan. She explains to us, even in our youth, that a love forged so fast, so pure and strong, cannot simply end without cause.

### *Melpo (tragedy)*

Papa eventually summons Mummy back home. There is no hiding from him, not when the entire village fears him. It is with dread that Mummy accepts the invitation back to her own home. No affection remains for Papa, for the confidant she once knew is gone and there stands jealousy incarnate in his place. It makes him ill with its potency.

### *Thalia (comedy)*

But a powerful man is a powerful man, no matter that he is sick. And when he uses us, his daughters, as his mouthpiece to entice her return, Mummy is fearful.

*Tersi (dance)*

She finds us ailing with twisted stomachs and heavy tongues, our sickness a sudden mystery. In our bedridden state, we cannot serve Father. He wants her care and no one else's. Since Papa is unable to enchant us, he has bound us to this land, bewitched the ground so that without his explicit permission, escape is futile. We are trapped in a maze that leads to nowhere.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

Though it is far from where her emotions lie, a mother casts aside her heart's desires for the safety of her children. She approaches, knowing with certainty that our father is responsible for the persistent heartache that refuses to forsake her.



## CHAPTER 23

# ANCESTORS' WORST NIGHTMARES

### *Clionie (history)*

Father attempts to ensnare Mummy with past tales of laughter and tenderness but her focus is singular.

### *Melpo (tragedy)*

“My children are languishing from an unknown illness and trapped to this land; my love is missing like a thief in the night. Yet somehow you are able to stand before me with your empty memories and hollow words,” Mummy says.

### *Tersi (dance)*

Father is not moved. “One day your daughters will leave you to have daughters of their own. Your love has already forgotten you. Why not spend a few moments with the last person who will still be there for you?”

### *Callisse (poetry)*

Mummy leaves abruptly, and Father does nothing to stop her. As she walks the land that Bokor Franki owns, she keeps her eyes away from the people who toil, tilling the earth with unrelenting focus. She knows their ceaseless labor is their ancestors' worst nightmares and she refuses to bear witness to their captivity.

### *Thalia (comedy)*

But there is no ignoring the sounds of their work. A groan from swinging the

hoe in perfectly metered arcs, moans from hours of standing beneath the unforgiving sun. A grunt—

*Clonie (history)*

That transports Mummy back in time, to a calm night of hushed whispers and fluttering kisses. The serenity of a leisurely stroll interrupted when her companion stumbles upon a broken shell, the short guttural sound branded onto her memory. She tore the hem of her skirt to bandage the wound and they hobbled back home in companionable silence.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

When Mummy looks out into the field at the people who are tied to the land, she finally catches a glimpse.

The sight of her beloved brings her to her knees.

## CHAPTER 24

# LIGHTNING

### *Clonie (history)*

His inhuman grunt is a whistle, a call to action. The moment Swan's eyes lock onto Mummy's lasts an eternity and no time at all. Even from across the field, with his soul pulled away from him in retaliation, their gaze is lightning.

### *Melpo (tragedy)*

Finally, Mummy understands why she wasn't able to find Swan until now. By their very nature, zonbi don't leave a trace. And how are you meant to find someone who barely exists?

## CHAPTER 25

# INVISIBLE STRINGS

### *Tersi (dance)*

Perhaps it's because Mummy and Swan's love is so strong. Or because Papa's hold on this world has weakened as he splits his power in numerous directions. But he cannot maintain the shackles on his zonbi at the same strength that he once could. Because when Swan sees Mummy, he recognizes her. For months a cold nothing had settled like a stone heavily within his gut, but in seconds, it is replaced with a warmth that spreads like a cracked egg exposed to heat. A sunshine he knows only as Valentine.

### *Thalia (comedy)*

Mummy and Swan run to each other. Lovers lost in their pursuit. They collide, arms patting across faces and shoulders, hands shaking in disbelief. There are still others there, continuing to work the field. A man with broad shoulders slices down on a particularly tall stalk of sugarcane. Sucks his teeth. Valentine glances over at the sound briefly, surprised that he shared his displeasure. The workers are usually silent, resigned to their toiling. But among the lovers' tears and inspection, there is a buzzing rising up around them, bees erupting from a hive they have long overgrown.

### *Clionie (history)*

"It is too hot out here," grumbles a sunburned woman as she mops her forehead. "And these blisters keep ripping open," claims another.

### *Melpo (tragedy)*

Valentine pulls away from Swan to look him in his dead eyes. "Swan, Swan,"

she whispers. Urgently. “We have to get away from here. You cannot stay in this field any longer.”

She understands the pull is weakening. Bokor Franki’s careful puppet show is breaking down around her. But weakened does not mean eradicated. Escape would be difficult. Even as she coaxes, whispers to him, begs Swan away, invisible strings tie him to this land.

*Clionie (history)*

She wipes the blood draining from his nose with each step he takes, dragging him forward even as she hears the tiny clicks of bones snapping, his breathing growing hoarse. But Valentine doesn’t stop pulling and Swan keeps dragging his feet across the ground, over the piles of healthy dirt, away from his fellow prisoners, past the patch of hibiscus flowers that led him here. The invisible strings, at least some of them, snap.

*Callisse (poetry)*

No one stops the pair from leaving.

What Mummy does not know is that Papa watches it all from his window. His revenge stews.

## ACT II

## CHAPTER 26

# ROOTS

When I wake up the next morning, I immediately ask Marcello to meet me at the funeral home, cluing him in that there have been major developments since we were together last that need to be discussed in person. It's too juicy for text messages. Marcello begs and pleads for me to tell him so he doesn't "die right this very second from the wait," but I hold fast and stay silent. There's nothing like a good bit of tea to get Marcello's interest piqued, and I'm hoping that now that I've got him hooked I can convince him to help me with tonight's supper club.

I remember when I first learned about the Rodriguez family business. Immediately I was set on spending as much time there as possible, but after the first couple of mentions, I wondered whether Marcello thought it was strange. I didn't want to lose the only true friend I had ... He had waved away my concern.

"Oh I'm not trippin'," he'd said when I asked him if he minded. "I just haven't met anyone who isn't super creeped out by it all. Just wait until you meet my grandmother. You're going to love each other." He was right.

When I enter the kitchen, I see Mummy sitting on the tattered couch in front of our much too small television, eating a bowl of chocolate ice cream for breakfast. I can tell she is determined to stay in one place all day long to recover from yesterday. I don't blame her.

"Good morning, Mummy," I say, giving her a kiss on top of her head.

"Hello, cheri," she says between bites of thick ice cream. "You're up early."

"Yeah, I need Marcello's help with something," I say. I don't know how Mummy will feel about my first dinner event, so I switch topics. "There's

something I need to tell you.”

Mummy puts down her spoon and pats the lumpy seat beside her. “What’s the matter?”

I sit down and face my mom, a bubble of nerves fizzing in my gut. “I did a bad thing. Well, it was really a good thing but then it was also kind of bad. But now it’s good again.”

Mummy’s face tightens in the way it does when I’m being too zombielike. I don’t want the quiet unease that normally clings to our interactions to return, so I hurry to explain myself.

“Well, you know when you got us those new phones? Mine was kind of glitching, and I started to receive all of Silas Banks’s text messages. When I realized what was happening, I figured I should say something. But then people were asking Silas for money, and I ... made some donations in his name.”

Mummy stares at me with her mouth agape. She looks like the red snappers on ice that we always buy fresh from the local supermarket. “So *that’s* what you did?” Mummy says in disbelief. “The millions of dollars in donations from Banks Corps that they’ve mentioned on the news? That was because of you?”

I nod sheepishly.

“Brielle!!! How could you?” Mummy says, standing to her feet faster than I thought she’d be able to given the pain she’s in. She tosses the ice cream onto the wobbly coffee table. “That’s stealing!”

“I mean, if you want to look at it that way.” Mummy shoots death glares my way, so I change course. “Yes, you’re right. What I did was wrong. Even though my intentions were good. I just wanted to help people, Ma. How could someone have *all* that money and not want to do anything to make people’s lives better?”

Mummy’s face softens a bit and she plops herself back onto the sofa beside me. “I know you meant well, Bri. But that’s simply not how things are done.” She pauses a beat. “How much trouble are you in?”

“Well, that’s the part that makes it good again,” I say. “I got offered a summer fellowship at Banks Corps.” I explain what happened on Ainsley’s visit and my Monday start date.



“She didn’t give me much of a choice,” I say. “It was either accept the offer or see what happens if they come after me. But I’m sure it benefits them as much as it does me. They’re probably going to parade me around as much as they can.”

“Why did you wait until now to tell me, Brielle?” Mummy asks.

“I didn’t want to bother you after everything you went through yesterday.”

Mummy sighs and picks up the ice cream from the coffee table and starts to eat again. “Well, what’s done is done,” she says. “When you go into that office, you will be on your best behavior. Do not do anything that will bring any more negative attention to yourself. Do you hear?” She stops mid-bite to frown at me to let me know she’s serious.

“Yes, Mummy,” I say. “Also, there’s another good part about the summer fellowship. I get full benefits, including medical. I can add you to my insurance plan. That’s the main reason I took it.”

Mummy puts down her bowl of ice cream for a second time and pulls me into an embrace. Two hugs in twice as many days? I’ll do whatever I need to keep things this way. Mummy wipes away the tears that have fallen down her cheeks, and she gives me a kiss on either side of my face.

“Thank you so much for thinking of me, cheri,” Mummy says. “I am so grateful for you.”

I spend my breakfast sitting with Mummy on the couch. Talking more than we have in I don’t know how long. Normally, I would be on punishment for at least a month for such a wild infraction, but when I eventually remind Mummy that I have to leave for Marcello’s, she doesn’t put up a fight.

“Behave,” she says as I close the door on my way out.

“I will!”

I take the bus to the Rodriguez Family Funeral Home and when I arrive, Marcello is seated behind the reception desk, dressed sharply in a pristine white button-down and a slim black tie.

“There she is.” Marcello stands to greet me. “Miss Mysterious herself. Now, what is it that is so important that you couldn’t just tell me about it over text?”

I hug Marcello back and smile widely, trying my hardest to make my eyes

crinkle in that welcoming way Mummy is always talking about.

“My dearest, dearest friend,” I say, smiling wider. “I have a huge favor to ask.”

“Well, can I ask one first?” Marcello interrupts. “I need you to put all them teeth away because you’re freaking me out.”

I let my face droop. “Ugh, okay. Fine. But that wasn’t a question.” Marcello rolls his eyes, but I continue. “Can you *please* help me put on a last-minute supper club? Like ... very last-minute.”

Marcello raises an eyebrow. “And how last is this minute?”

“Um ... like ... tonight at seven. I know, I know! How can I spring this on you? Blah blah blah. But so much has happened since last night, and I can’t let this opportunity pass me by!”

I launch into a—for me—very dramatic retelling of my visit from Ainsley, my phone call with Nadia, and my eventual acceptance of the Banks Corps summer fellowship. I don’t leave anything out, happy to finally be telling him about the donations I made on Silas’s behalf. Marcello stares at me for a few moments, and I hold my breath as I wait for him to tell me off for keeping such a big secret or decide that he won’t help me out with the supper club because I am way too much trouble.

“*Giii-rl*,” Marcello says, dragging out the word so it sounds like two syllables. “How you get into all this mess in just two days but somehow not get sent to jail? In this America? You must have magic in you or something.”

“Honestly, I wish I could tell you,” I say, shaking my head. “You know when you’ve gone too far down one path and you don’t want to turn around because you’re already in deep and just need to see it through?”

“No, I don’t,” Marcello says. “I would’ve turned right back around. I’m not messing with billionaires.”

“Ugh, how can I explain?” I say. “I wasn’t thinking straight. First Mummy wasn’t supportive of my supper club and then Mr. Beauregard gets hit by a car right in front of me and my mom starts worrying about losing her job. Like, this man might die, but we still have to worry about bills. Isn’t that outrageous? On top of that, my mom’s insurance has been giving her trouble. She’s in so much pain...” I sigh, dragging my hands down my face. “And then I start getting these text messages addressed to billionaire Silas Banks.

I'm like, do you know how much easier things would be if I just had a little bit of money? If I could get life to take its big-ass foot off my neck for just a second, I'd feel so much relief. So how could I see these people asking for donations, for help, and do *nothing*?"

Marcello gives me a rueful smile. "Now that, I understand. *I* still wouldn't have done it, but I get it."

I try to laugh but find that my throat is blocked with unshed tears. What is it about the Rodriguez family that makes me share everything I've been holding inside?

Marcello must see the emotion warring on my face because he comes from behind the reception desk and gives me a hug. He looks at me a moment and then says, "Fine, I'll help you tonight. But you owe me big-time! I had my first date scheduled with Chad."

I pull Marcello into another embrace. "You really *do* love me."

"I guess I do," he says, hugging me back. And then with an exaggerated sigh he says, "Let me text this beautiful man now so we can reschedule."

Marcello is tucking his phone back into his pocket when a customer arrives, the man's red-rimmed eyes letting us know that his loss is a recent one. Marcello waves me off so he can attend to the client, so I head to the back to look for Grandma Tabitha. I can still hear Marcello using his "professional voice" as I make my way down the hall into one of the rooms where they receive the bodies. There are five people laid out on separate tables, white sheets covering them from head to ankles. I walk by each one and read the tag that hangs from five big toes to identify each person. I don't recognize any of the names until I arrive at the last body.

Beauregard Banks.

I gasp. Carefully, I fold down the sheet to look at Mr. Beauregard's face. It's definitely him. He looks like he could be sleeping if it wasn't for the absence of the rise and fall of his chest. Black and blue bruises are visible through his paper-thin skin. I think back to the accident. I can't believe someone hit Mr. Beauregard and *just drove away*. There's no way the person was unaware of what they had done. If this is how the rich treat one of their own, what hope is there for someone like me?

I inspect Mr. Beauregard's face and think about how even with all his

money, he still couldn't be saved. And even though we will all one day cease to exist, what happens afterward is different for the haves and have-nots. When the wealthy pass on, there is talk of legacy and estates, impact and influence, while the rest of us are left to worry about whether or not we can even afford the cost of dying.

My gaze is fixed on Mr. Beauregard. I am pulled away. Physically I am in the Rodriguez Family Funeral Home, but mentally I am looking down at my father. I am transfixed as the final signs of life fade from his dark brown eyes. He is gone with a sigh, the peace that he could not find on this plane welcoming him with open arms in the next. Thoughts of death and dying battle it out with present reality, and I shake my head to clear my mind. Losing my dad was one of the most painful things to happen to me. Now is not the time to rehash unsettled emotions.

I haven't really been the most attentive with either of my phones since my philanthropic days abruptly ended, so I pull out my old iPhone to search for the latest updates about Mr. Beauregard. When I unlock the screen, I see all the notifications that I've missed.

*Beauregard Banks Dead at 91 Following Hit-and-Run*

*Silas Banks's Grandfather Has Died. What This Means for the Billionaire*

*The Legacy of Beauregard Banks*

The articles lament the tragedy of Mr. Beauregard's death and mention that authorities are still on the hunt for the culprit who fatally struck the old man. There are countless references to Mr. Beauregard's benevolence as someone who pulled himself up by the bootstraps from his less ideal circumstances. I navigate to social media and, unlike the articles I skimmed, there's no flattery here. People argue back and forth about Mr. Beauregard's role in creating *the* Silas Banks, uber-mega billionaire previously notorious for his lack of charity. One account even breaks down how the GI Bill that helped Mr. Beauregard get an education originally excluded Black servicemen, contributing to the wealth, education, and social inequity that exists between Black people and their white counterparts.

I stop my scrolling and look down at Mr. Beauregard. The randomness of birth had been kind to him while the circumstances of his death less so. I

don't know what the afterlife holds. I consider the way Mr. Beauregard lived. He was kind enough to Mummy, but he was also infamously cheap. He didn't have many remaining friends; every so often he would schedule a cigar and bourbon night that would result in Mummy being volun-told to attend. It didn't matter what Mummy might've previously had planned. Each time, she'd come home with a singular twenty-dollar bill for her time and tales about everyone's entitled rudeness.

What I'd do to give these people even the smallest taste of their own medicine. I scan the four other bodies waiting to be prepared for viewing and the faintest idea begins forming at the edges of my mind. The white tag hanging from the big toe of the person nearest Mr. Beauregard reads AMELIA HANNIGAN in thick black ink. A quick Google search shows me that she is the matriarch of a South African diamond dynasty. Interesting. I move to the remaining bodies, reading about each person's claim to fame and fortune. The idea starts solidifying just a bit more.

The human body is resilient ... until it's not. Supple, save for when it snaps. I drag a finger along the bony hand of the corpse nearest me and let my mind wander. I bend over to get a better look at the gnarled joints, the hinges of my jaw widening ever so slightly, saliva beading reflexively on my tongue ...

"Brielle, how are you?"

I straighten immediately to see Grandma Tabitha leaning against the doorframe.

"Hi, Grandma Tabs," I say, hoping that my steady voice hides any semblance of guilt.

"Marcello is calling you. Something about last-minute cooking for rich people?"

"Yes," I say. "He's going to help me with my first official supper club tonight."

"How exciting," Grandma Tabitha says with a faint smile as she turns to walk away. "I'm sure you'll make something exquisite. Their taste buds will be in for a surprise."

I watch Grandma Tabitha leave. And my budding idea sprouts its first roots.

## CHAPTER 27

# RISK-TAKING

I am alone in the receiving room once again, looking out at the handful of deceased billionaires and multimillionaires before me. I don't have much time before Marcello comes looking for me. My plan has been firmly planted in my mind, and if I am going to pull it off, then I must act quickly.

I look along the shelves and find a small pouch, perfect for what I need. I grab it and return to the bodies. Since Amelia Hannigan is nearest, I head to her first. If someone were to walk into the room right now, they would see me holding her hand in somber acknowledgment. In an instant, I snap off her pinky finger and drop it into the bag. I head to the next person and the next and the next. It doesn't take long before I have acquired a middle toe, a sliver of skin from the back of a calf, and a few teeth that were surprisingly easy to pry out.

Finally, I am looking down at Mr. Beauregard. Though I wouldn't wish his death on even my worst enemy, I find that there is a limit to my pity. In the nearly twenty years Mummy has worked for the Banks family, she has missed only two days of work. Two days off that they granted her to grieve my father. Maybe she could've asked for some more leave, but when you hear not-so-subtle whispers about how difficult it is to find good help these days, you're constantly in fear that your work might not be deemed quality enough, and the risk of losing a job that is barely able to help make ends meet is already too high.

I think back to the two days Mummy spent mourning my father. She wailed as if her heart had been ripped out of her chest, the gaping hole of his absence unable to be filled again. No matter what I made for her to eat, it was left completely untouched. Sobs racked her body and she trembled beneath

her sheets, inconsolable. I thought she'd never be whole again. But on the third day, she pulled herself out of her tangle of blankets, a zombie in her own right. I watched her ice her face to reduce the signs of her sorrow, apply makeup as if it were just another day. She was slow but deliberate in her movements. When she walked out of the house that third morning, she told me that I could spend the day at home. The week, if I needed to. I asked her why she wouldn't do the same, and she gave me a watery smile in return.

"I can't afford to stay behind. As your mother, I make these sacrifices so that you won't have to."

That moment has stayed with me till this day, tucked away in the back pocket of my heart. A memory of the time I bore witness to my mother's agony, when she was forced to walk through the shards of her broken heart. For me. I can't know what the future will hold for our family, now that Mr. Beauregard is gone. But in the present, I choose to act.

I slide a thumb along the side of the old man's face, almost tender in my caress. The rage that fills my body is not new, since it's always simmering just below the surface. But today it boils with another element. For so long I have suppressed the darkness inside me. Whenever it threatens to bubble over, Mummy reminds me that I have to contain it. That I have to be good. But where has adhering to all these rules gotten us? What would happen if, just once, I released the power that courses through me, let it stretch into its full glory? Already, I hear the whispers of an ancient magic roiling inside. These bits and pieces of people who've never had to want for anything, ingredients of power. Control.

The gentle pop when I remove Mr. Beauregard's eye from its socket is comforting to my ears. I look around for something to replace it with—and I see a small bowl of grapes that Grandma Tabitha must've been snacking on as she worked. I love her for many reasons, her lack of squeamishness being one of them. I reach for a grape and compare it to the eye in my hand, twisting them both this way and that. The sweet juice splashes against my tongue as I bite down softly. Carefully, I twist the grape around and around after each bite until it resembles an apple bitten down to the core. I compare the fruit with the eyeball and grin when I lightly press the grape into the empty hole of Mr. Beauregard's eye and slide the lid shut without issue.

For once, I will let my true nature shine.



## CHAPTER 28

# THE FIRST SUPPER

Marcello and I are standing in the modern industrial kitchen of my first client, taking in our surroundings. Stainless steel appliances glisten under the shine of strategically placed incandescent light bulbs. Dazzling copper pots and saucepans hang along the wall, equal parts function and design. Three metal barstools with matching wooden seats are on opposite sides of a perfectly sanded wooden island, each chair an invitation. Truly, this is heaven on earth. At least for me.

I pull out my phone for the millionth time to go through the menu that I've prepared for Mrs. Newhouse and her guests. I remember her and her son from the soft launch, just a few days ago, two of the first people to come over to the tasting station. She'd lost my business card but since she is a regular at Le Grand Fromage, she reached out to me through Nadia.

Marcello's phone buzzes.

"Chad is here!" he says excitedly, hands flying over his face to make sure that he's presentable. "He's parking right now."

"I can't believe he really decided to come help when you told him you had to cancel," I say. "That's so kind of him."

"Isn't it?" Marcello beams. "If a guy is into you, he'll show it. If you're ever up late at night trying to figure out what you mean to somebody, the answer is nothing. Otherwise you'd know. Wipe the tears away and keep it moving, honey."

"Thank you for the wise advice, O' great relationship expert." I smirk.

"You know I'm right!" Marcello says, heading to the side door that leads directly from the parking area to the kitchen. This house is so fancy it has an entrance for the help. Us. I try not to dwell on it.

I don't have a uniform for my club yet so Marcello and I, and now Chad, are in black slacks and black button-downs. I clear my throat to greet Chad. He's already spent the last thirty seconds of his arrival making out with Marcello. He breaks away from Marcello and grins goofily at me, dapping me up.

"Well damn," he says, impressed, turning slowly in a full circle to get a 360-degree view of the kitchen.

"Outrageous, isn't it?" I say in awe. And then I shake it off and clap my hands twice. "Well, that's all the time we have for admiring. Let's get to it!"

"She can be a tyrant when she's in work mode," Marcello warns, rolling his eyes. "Try not to let it get to you."

I swat Marcello on the arm as I lay out our plan of attack for the evening. Marcello will be my sous-chef and Chad will help us serve the courses, along with some assistance from two of Mrs. Newhouse's housekeepers. The third housekeeper will be working with the hired mixologist to create drink pairings to complement each course of the meal.

With such short notice, I've decided to prepare a classic French-inspired menu, a nod to Le Grand Fromage. We start with spinach timbales as the entrée and move to sole à la normande (a special request from Mrs. Newhouse). Marcello and I can hear Mrs. Newhouse and her guests laughing from the immaculately decorated dining room as we work side by side. We are a well-oiled machine, singularly focused on our task of creating the best meal possible.

Each vegetable that I wash, each piece of meat that I slice receives my full attention. All the hope I have for this meal seeps into every morsel that passes through my hands. The energy that always lies just under the surface of my skin is buzzing to be released. And for once I listen. A surge of heavy emotion suddenly washes over me. I freeze, remembering this feeling but unable to place it. I cannot let it overtake me. Not now. I take a breath and try again. Contentment slides into position and I relax, bringing that energy to the forefront as I work. I can do this. I can stay in control.

When the roasted porcini and apple stuffed pork tenderloin, served with a petite side of fondant potatoes, are brought out to the guests, I can hear them inhaling deeply to fully enjoy the aroma. I wait with bated breath. This is the

moment of truth. This isn't simply my first official soiree. It's also the first time I'm setting my nature free.

I chose to roast the fondant potatoes in the customary butter and stock. But my stock is a special blend, the essence of crushed power made from the ingredients I procured earlier today, and others that called to me as I boiled and stirred, strained and simmered. The overwhelming sensation of being lost in a wide expanse lurches forward again as I place a lid on the final pot of food for the night. I gasp for breath and clutch my chest, waving Marcello away when he turns to see what's wrong. I breathe deeply, think of all that went into making this meal. The collections I had to make to get things just right. Again, I refocus. The final component, and perhaps the most important piece, is my intention for the meal. But I don't know when it'll come to pass, if at all.

The subsequent *Mmmms* of pleasure after my club guests take a bite of their latest entrée bring a smile to my face. No matter the outcome, at least I know it tastes great. We finish with dessert, a salted caramel crème brûlée that makes the entire kitchen smell like warmth and happiness when we're done torching their tops.

I use a paper towel to wipe up my face before Marcello and I make our way out for the final check-in with our diners. Periodically we would peek our heads out into the dining area while cooking to see how things were going. Now we get to celebrate our success. We are greeted with thunderous applause from the six guests. I can feel my face heat from the attention. Marcello nudges me in the side, grinning with pride.

"Thank you, thank you," I say, trying my hardest to keep the shyness that is attempting to creep into my bones at bay. "I truly appreciate it."

"I must have you for my next dinner party," one of Mrs. Newhouse's guests says after suppressing a hiccup. Her martini glass is almost empty and it's clearly not her first.

"After I've had her for mine!" another woman cuts in. "I'll pay you double whatever this lush says she'll give you. I swear, I've never felt this ... satisfied!"

The women laugh and shout over one another as they argue, each making a case as to why I will cook for her event next. They don't even ask if my

schedule is free—they simply assume that I will make myself available. I watch as they squabble over me and though I would normally be annoyed by their presumption, right now I am filled with glee. It actually worked. My goal for tonight was to secure my next gig and I definitely have my pick. But tonight is a test run and even without my special addition, I would've probably secured at least one client. Next time, I won't be afraid to push things a bit further.

As I gather up the last of my supplies, I briefly wonder why I haven't felt my power manifest this strongly earlier. Was it because of Mummy's constant precautions? Did it only take my disobeying my mom to finally feel the most myself I have ever felt in my life? Mummy and Marcello have both eaten my food countless times but I have never felt that I could sway them with my intention just through my meal. I know there's something that I'm missing. I'll let future Brielle figure it out. Tonight, I will bask in my win and let visions of Silas Banks eating my creations lull me to sleep.

"That was absolutely delicious. I'm so glad I got to bring you before any of my girlfriends. Even if Heather Acland is going to have you at her place next, it's going to eat her alive for weeks that she didn't discover you first!" Mrs. Newhouse says blissfully as she leads me out the front door at the end of the night. Marcello and Chad are chatting (read: making out) in the car as they wait for me to wrap up the evening.

"Thank you very much," I say for the millionth time that night. I'm not tired of saying it yet.

"Seriously, I've never tasted anything like it," Mrs. Newhouse says. Conspiratorially she adds, "Tell me. What's your secret?"

"Oh, just a lot of soul," I say as I take the envelope stuffed with cash from Mrs. Newhouse and put it into my knapsack.

"I can't tell you more than that, though. A true chef never cooks and tells." I wink.

## CHAPTER 29

# A LETTER

*Beep.*

*Beep.*

*Beep.*

For once, the alarm is mine, not that I need it. I have been awake for probably over an hour, still buzzing from last night's success. I think I looked the most excited I have ever appeared, watching diners share in the meal I put together, with all the passion and fire I carry with me. I smile even now as I lie in bed alone.

If I'm being honest, I am also up early from the anticipation rumbling in my gut. Today is the first day of my fellowship with Banks Corps. This is not a dream come true. But working there, even if for a few months, will yield us more money this summer than I would make in my waitressing gig by far. If I can get Mummy on my insurance, however briefly, this will all be worth it. In just a few days, Mummy's pain pump can be paid for and she'll get some reprieve.

I am mulling this over as I walk into the kitchen.

"Bonjou," Mummy says.

"Oh! Morning. What are you doing up so early? I hope I didn't wake you," I say.

"No, no," she says. "I wanted to see you off."

Mummy takes a step toward me. "I am very proud of you, Brielle."

*I have done nothing to deserve it.* I nod and try to smile.

"I know that this internship is a result of your ... misguided, though well-intentioned, desire to help. But I think it'll still be a wonderful chance for you to figure out what you want in life. It's important that you take your future

seriously, Bri. Don't let this experience go to waste. You hear?" Mummy says.

Ah. Only the promise of ensuring a Good Future™ could have my mother downplaying all the laws I must have broken to end up at a place like Banks Corps. I'd like to think it has more to do with a shared spirit of justice, but I don't think so. Mummy grabs a plastic bag on the counter holding from what I can tell is a glass bowl covered in thick layers of foil.

"Anyway, enough of the lecture. I've made your favorite for you to take to work on your first day. Liver." She hesitates a moment. "I didn't cook it as long as I usually would. I know you ... prefer it that way."

"Thank you, Mummy. You really didn't have to. And I promise to make the most of this opportunity."

"Good," Mummy says with a small smile.

I quickly kiss her on the cheek and gather my bag. She does not flinch, and I can't explain why it makes me feel sick to my stomach. I am almost out the door when Mummy stops me with a gentle hand on my arm.

"You might've heard by now, but Mr. Beauregard passed away yesterday," she says. In the last few days, Mummy and I have gone from taking the ferry to work together almost every morning to hardly being in the apartment at the same time. We give life-changing updates in breaking news bursts. *New Summer Internship After Donation Fiasco. Job Termination Imminent Following Untimely Death of Billionaire's Patriarch.*

"Mr. Len hasn't let me go yet, but I know it's only a matter of time. Don't worry; we'll figure it out," she reassures me with a quick squeeze of my forearm, then nudges me along to leave for work.

For once in my life, I don't have to run to catch the bus. But I walk quickly anyway, hoping the wind licking my face and the sun slicing into my skin will distract me from the anxiety creeping into my bones. My earlier unease returns, twisting and growing in my stomach. My internship is only for three months. What if Mummy can't find a job in that time? What will we do? I shake away the dread that threatens to overwhelm me and decide to refocus my energy. These concerns are future Brielle's problems.

Instead, I concentrate on being happy about starting a new job, thrilled to interact with my mother in this way and feel her hold on to me with love and

tenderness.

The 9 bus arrives right on time, and I take a seat near the middle of the bus. Sitting at the front means I'll be subjected to each person's initial entry, while sitting toward the back means I'd be hanging out with the people who are usually doing things they shouldn't. I'll be on for almost an hour to get to Brickell, so I want to be away from the action. As I adjust my bag, I feel something sharp poke me from the lunch Mummy offered me this morning. I untie it to find the jagged teeth of a broken comb looking up at me, in addition to one of my mother's bottles of oxymorphenol and a small bandana. My mouth waters from the scent of liver but I know better than to open that in a packed bus. Instead, I remove the assorted items and am about to retie the plastic bag when I spy one more thing. A folded piece of paper. I open it, recognizing my mother's scrawl immediately.

*Your father would have loved to see you today.*

I hold on to this note as I shakily place my lunch into the bag. Sometimes Mummy is in a liminal space where she still suffers from intense pain but is ... wiggly. Things will be misplaced and she won't remember where she put them. Her guard will be lowered briefly and she'll write a note about the dead husband she never talks about that will mean everything to her daughter. It's complicated.

When the bus pulls into the stop near the front of the Banks Corps building, my mom's scribbled words are still ringing in my ears. I wait my turn to climb off, and when I finally exit the vehicle, I am greeted by the towering reflective surface of hundreds of windows. The Banks Corps building gleams in the Miami sunlight, flashing a Morse code of greeting. I bet it's saying *don't be fooled by the glitz. Watch your back if you know what's good for you.*

I square my shoulders and make my way toward the imposing building. Here goes nothing.

## CHAPTER 30

# CAMERA READY OR NOT

The Banks Corps corporate offices are located in the penthouse suite of one of the tallest buildings in Brickell. Not to be confused with the once bustling Downtown Miami, Brickell is where all the hotshot finance and corporate types work. I sign in as a guest for my first day, carefully following the instructions that Ainsley texted me the night before.

The ride up to the eightieth floor is packed with people dressed in the navy blues, drab grays, standard blacks, and khakis of office chic. The elevator is silent as it makes its way up. Everyone is either half asleep or pretending to be engrossed in their phones. My heart races faster with each stop and then I realize: This is my first time being this high off the ground ... ever. The one time Mummy went to Haiti, she went alone, so I haven't even been on a plane. I force myself to forget the fact that she was adamant that I not go with her to Haiti. Instead, I breathe out slowly and tell myself to relax. One crisis at a time.

A loud ding announces my arrival and I get off with the last of the people on the elevator. I am met with a floor-to-ceiling view of the city skyline. It is breathtaking. Miami is all crystal blues and ceruleans and cotton candy skies. I stop a moment to admire its sparkling beauty and know my eyes are saucers. I can't believe I'll have this view all summer long. And that this is the part of my city I never get to see.

"Do you need some help?" a young woman in a sharply tailored pantsuit asks.

"Um ... yeah," I say. "It's the first day of my summer fellowship."

Tailored Pantsuit smiles and signals for me to follow her. "You'll need to sign in with the receptionist. They'll call whoever you need. Welcome."



She deftly herds me over to the receptionist, and with a small wave, she returns to her day. Though the waiting area is full of many plush-looking seats, I stay on my feet. I am pulled to the view of that expanse of water in a way I've never felt before, a physical ache right in the center of my chest. Ainsley finds me standing with my hand over my heart. She clears her throat.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" she says in a flat tone that suggests she has long since grown bored of this view.

"Yes," I say, and drop my hand. I smile tightly. "Thank you for having me. I'm looking forward to this summer."

"Of course," Ainsley says. She directs us through the expansive office. The entire floor is made of glass and light. I wouldn't be surprised if I ran into my own reflection at least once during this whole ordeal.

Ainsley takes me to fill out my welcome paperwork and doesn't even acknowledge the five other people she cuts in front of to speak with the HR professional overseeing first-day requirements. In a few more minutes I have officially become an employee of Banks Corps, and Ainsley Wilder is my boss. No one says a thing as I follow Ainsley out of the room, and I get the impression that she is seriously no one to mess with. Once I've received my own badge and company laptop, she leads me to a studio that is set up for filming. A bright light faces a curved couch "casually" decorated with strategically placed throw pillows. Another light shines on a modern-looking bookcase. Only, the books on the shelves must be decorative books because there are no words on the spines. Fake books? Somehow, it feels like an ominous sign.

"So," Ainsley says as if we've been having a conversation instead of standing in prolonged silence, "we're going to film a social post about this new summer fellowship that we're starting, thanks partly to your little stunt."

I know Ainsley is trying to get me riled up. Still, I have to fight the urge not to mention that my "little stunt" had them so shook that she had been personally sent to my home for damage control. I hold my tongue.

"And I'm going to be a part of this how?" I ask, not taking her bait. No point stating the obvious when I have bigger fish to fry.

"You're just going to stand there and smile. Silas will be doing all the speaking."

Ainsley hasn't even finished her final sentence when in walks the billionaire himself. Silas Banks looks directly at me as he's mic'd, and I feel the zap of recognition in his gaze. My tongue dries in my mouth.

I guess he knows who I am after all.

## CHAPTER 31

# CONCOCTIONS

“Do you have any other questions?” Ainsley asks, breaking my eye contact with Silas.

It’s clear that the only right answer is no, so I shake my head. I turn my attention back across the room. Two assistants follow closely behind wherever Silas goes, notepads and pens always at the ready. It’s only been a few days since I last saw Silas at Le Grand Fromage, but already it feels like a lifetime ago.

A young man with wire-rimmed glasses motions for me to stand beside Silas as another crew member continues to fiddle with his microphone’s buttons. It’s clearly already been decided that I will be a part of the PR promo, whether I knew about it in advance or not. I stand where I am told and glance at Silas out of the corner of my eye. He is not even a foot away from me and listens intently to something one of his assistants explains to him.

I dart my eyes to the side again for another look. Silas Banks is standing *right* there, and he is completely ignoring me. It’s practically like our earlier staring contest hadn’t even happened. He has the same vague look of nonrecognition from our last encounter at the restaurant. But now I know it’s a charade. I’m not saying that I need him to point at me and shout “Thief!” with rage blazing behind his eyes. But a little acknowledgment wouldn’t go amiss.

Soon, they clear the set and the cameras start rolling. Silas is an obvious pro at speaking to the lens and still appearing natural. I am so focused on watching him in action that I am startled when I hear him say my name. His pronunciation isn’t even half bad.

“Brielle Petitfour is the first fellowship recipient of our new summer immersion program in which we’ll be preparing young people of various backgrounds to enter the pharmaceutical industry and beyond. I am especially glad that Brielle, in particular, will be launching our program because my family owes her a great debt.” Silas smiles at me with what seems to be genuine goodwill, and I am convinced he’s taken acting classes. Where is he going with this?

“Though my grandfather Beauregard Banks is no longer with us, God rest his soul, it is because of Brielle’s quick thinking that we were able to learn what happened to him and rush him to medical care. This is a small token of my and my family’s appreciation.”

The camera swings my way, and I know that I am looking into the lens like a deer caught in headlights. With each second the camera stays trained on me, I feel hundreds of beads of sweat gather under each of my arms. If this lasts any longer I’m going to look like I was tossed into a pool. They can’t possibly expect me to speak under these conditions, right? Just as suddenly, the camera refocuses on Silas, and I am able to lower my shoulders from my ears.

“Brielle’s selfless act made me think about how I could do my own part to help the world, one family at a time. Over the last few days, Banks Corps has made donations to support a few wonderful causes. But now we’ve decided to take stock of our own business. Starting today, we’ll be taking résumés for the next wave of our summer immersion program, and we plan to hire many more folks from around the country. We hope to make you a part of the Banks Corps family soon.”

Silas delivers his last line with practiced delivery and is quickly de-mic’d. “Anything else you need from me?” he asks one of the crew members.

“Nope, we’re all set,” the cameraman says, not even looking up from the device’s preview screen. Silas Banks walks off without another word, nor a glance my way, as his two assistants keep up behind him. So *this* is how they’ve chosen to spin the donations that I made. I’m glad that I did what I did, and I would definitely do it again, but still, I am annoyed. They really just took credit for everything and explained away my presence as another act of charity.

“Thank you for your participation,” Ainsley says, though she clearly doesn’t mean it at all. “That turned out wonderfully, didn’t it?” The smirk on Ainsley’s face seems to imply that she must’ve played a major role in erasing my part in the Banks Corps donations. Ainsley doesn’t wait for me as she turns to leave, and I know that I am expected to follow.

One by one, Ainsley introduces me to what she calls “key individuals” throughout the company. The woman in the tailored pantsuit who led me to the receptionist at the start of the day turns out to be Clarissa Jacobs, a junior VP of marketing and clearly a friend of Ainsley’s. As I meet more and more new coworkers I can’t help but notice that I am one of very few people of color in the office.

Ainsley shows me to my spot at the end of the open concept workstation, and I settle into my seat. It’s the first time all day that I’ve had a moment to myself, so I pull out my phone to send Mummy and Marcello each a text. I tell Mummy that I made it to work without incident and that I’m having a nice time. I’m more honest in my message to Marcello, where I may or may not have used words like *horrible*, *mean*, and *rude* to describe my new manager.

“Are you texting on the job?” Ainsley says, startling me just as I hit send. My phone clatters to the table. There’s a brief lull in the conversations around me, but they pick up again as I grab my cell. “That’s not what you’re being paid to do.”

“And what, exactly, am I being paid to do? Besides be paraded around on the internet to make Banks Corps look good, that is?” I ask with a plastered-on smile, even though I know this is pretty much the exact opposite of behaving myself, like Mummy asked.

Ainsley narrows her eyes at me. “I want you to get coffee and doughnuts for the upcoming welcome meeting.” This is my first time hearing of said meeting, but I say nothing, even as I pray that she doesn’t expect me to buy the drinks and snacks with my own money to be reimbursed. “There’s a coffee bar on the first floor of the building. Try not to get lost.” She recites a list of twelve different orders, and I use one of the notepads and pens placed along the table at intermittent intervals to keep track.

I get up from my seat and stand there for a moment, trying to figure out

the best way to ask how I'm supposed to pay for it all. Ainsley must understand my pause because she says, "You can use your ID card at the coffee bar downstairs to make purchases. You'll have a couple hundred dollars added on there every two weeks." I nod and grab my phone and my purse, stuffing the notepad inside to go downstairs.

"Oh, and Brielle," Ainsley says. "Get me a large iced double dirty chai latte with oat milk, extra caramel drizzle, extra foam." Why does it feel like she waited until I had put my notes away to give me her order? I repeat the drink back to her to make sure that I've gotten it right, resisting the urge to pull out my phone to write it down.

"Great, try not to take too long," Ainsley says. Then she adds, "By the way, the money on the card is nontransferable. So it's *only* good at the establishments in this building."

My face heats at her not so subtle jab and I nod. "Thanks."

"Why are you thanking me?" Ainsley says. "We're already waiting. Hurry back."

I actually bite my tongue to keep myself from growling and head to the elevators. As soon as I'm inside, I send myself a text with Ainsley's complicated order so that I don't forget it. The last thing I need is to give her another reason to hate me.

Ordering the drinks is simple enough but carrying the trays back up feels like a tightrope exercise. I slowly return to the eightieth floor and enter Ainsley's office. Though the door is open, she is not inside. I wait for her to return and think about having to deal with Ainsley's attitude for the entire summer. *She really needs to relax*, I think to myself. And suddenly I consider the pills Mummy had mistakenly packed into my stuff this morning. I remember that the prescription had made Mummy slightly loopy the first time she'd taken it. I sigh wistfully. Oh, what I would give for Ainsley to be a little out of commission for the rest of the day ...

I glance around the open floor plan. My coworkers are absorbed in their tasks. Would they notice if I added a little something extra into one specific drink? Shoot, after watching Ainsley with her colleagues all day, they'd probably welcome it if they *did* notice.

Mummy definitely wouldn't approve of what I do next, but I only

promised her that I'd lie low. Not that I'd become a doormat. I look around one more time, taking special care to use my body to block the view of the camera hanging right at the entrance of Ainsley's office. I open my purse and find the half-full pill bottle at the bottom of my bag.

Should I have taken more time to really contemplate what I was about to do? Maybe. I watch as the two peach-colored pills dissolve almost immediately in the overly complicated frothy drink Ainsley requested.

What's the worst that could happen?

Besides, I'm a zombie, not a saint.

## CHAPTER 32

# COMMUNITY COFFEE

I've been waiting in Ainsley's office for fifteen minutes when she finally comes in.

"Where have you been?" she asks in exasperation. "It's been over half an hour, and we still don't have our coffee. Come on."

I resist the urge to mention how long I was *actually* gone and carefully maneuver the trays so that I can pick up the beverages without spilling anything on the floor. Before I'm able to pick them up, Ainsley reaches into one of the carton trays and plucks out a cup of plain American coffee from the batch.

"Um ... this one is actually yours," I say, holding up the frothy drink she originally ordered.

Ainsley doesn't even spare me a glance as she exits her office, barely saying over her shoulder, "I changed my mind. I don't want that one anymore."

"But what about the person who—?" This time Ainsley does turn to face me, and I wish she hadn't. The look on her face is bored annoyance. "Never mind," I say.

"Everyone is in the conference room," Ainsley says, leading me out. Surprisingly, she holds the meeting room's door open for me to enter as I walk past her. "When you get inside, make sure to give everyone what they ordered."

All conversation immediately halts upon my arrival. Thirteen pairs of eyes focus on me standing just inside the doorway. I want to look at Ainsley for reassurance but she's long gone. It feels as if I've been dropped off at a brand-new school, weeks into the semester, long after cliques and alliances



have been formed for the year. But I'm used to being the odd one out. I don't let it deter me from stepping further into the room. I briefly wonder how I'm supposed to know who's ordered what but decide that I'll leave the drinks on the snack table at the back of the room for everyone to choose from themselves. Name cards have been placed in front of each person, uniform black letters perfectly scrawled on expensive embossed paper.

A thin blond man dressed in a light blue button-down and khaki slacks stands at the front of the room. The name card in front of him reads JAKE. He picks up from where he must've left off before I entered, his voice high and reedy, speaking almost too quickly to be understood. "As I was saying," Jake continues. "Banks Corps has been around for forty years, but the last ten have been especially crucial for our growth."

Everyone's attention refocuses on his presentation, and I diligently move along, trying not to distract them with my presence. As I walk past Jake, he reaches toward the tray and pulls out the drink that was previously meant for Ainsley. The drink I doctored with Mummy's medicine. The cup is already halfway to Jake's mouth when I try to intervene.

"Oh, I think that drink might be for—"

Jake takes a large gulp of the tampered-with iced latte, closing his eyes as he savors its cold sweetness. He uses the back of his hand to wipe off the foam mustache that stains his upper lip and, with a flick of the wrist, shoos me along. No he did not. I look at him a moment and he resumes his speech, not a "thank you" or a second glance given. The entitlement oozes from his pores. It would appear that all the people that I will be working with at Banks Corps are no different than the guests I serve at Le Grand Fromage.

Noted.

## CHAPTER 33

# SEEING GHOSTS

My first instinct was to figure out a way to prevent Jake from taking a sip of the latte, but the urge quickly dissipated when he flicked his hand at me like I was lint that needed to be brushed away. Instead, I place the coffees in a neat row on the table at the back of the room and toss the carton trays in a trash bin. I finally take a moment to look at the people around the table and I'm taken aback by the fact that they all appear to be my age. And that I am the only person of color, Black or otherwise, in the room. It's not a big deal. After all, it's not the first time I've been the "only" in a space. But that half a second of acknowledgment is reflexive.

I wonder how there can be a group of teenagers in the office that I haven't interacted with even once ... except to serve them. Someone definitely didn't consider those optics. The teens sitting around the table have the look of wealth about them. Though they too wear the expected clothing options of corporate executives, their accessories give them away. Maybe they're visiting from a local private school? While this might explain their presence, the thought makes me feel lonely. They're probably just as new as I am, but they at least have familiar faces they can turn to.

Jake is still speaking quite animatedly at the front of the meeting room, sweat starting to bead on his shiny forehead. He asks, "What is a major holding of Banks Corps?"

The students sitting at the table stare blankly in his direction and do not respond.

"Come on," Jake coaxes. "That's an easy one."

"Pharmaceuticals," I mutter, thinking about Mummy's pain medicine—which has definitely fully dissolved in the latte by now.

“Yes!” Jake says excitedly from the front of the room. He looks at me as if seeing me for the first time, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he really did only notice me because he could hear me in the silent room. “Pharmaceuticals is our most profitable division by far. What are some other Banks Corps holdings?” Jake continues, begging for even a crumb of engagement from his audience, and I take it as my cue to head back to my seat.

I feel a tap on my shoulder right as I push off the table. When I turn, I am looking up into the warmest brown eyes I have ever seen. I take in the rest of this stranger’s face, and I’m surprised to realize that he looks familiar. The broad forehead, high cheekbones, and strong jaw remind me of someone I know. The white guy I’ve been scrutinizing for the last however long gives me a nervous smile.

“Hi, I’m Preston,” he says.

“Preston,” I repeat, finally tearing my eyes away from his to look at the card on the table with his name. Preston. Preston Banks.

“You’re Silas’s son,” I blurt, staring at him again. I immediately regret it.

Preston smiles. “Well, you have an advantage over me. You know who I am, but I don’t know you.”

My face heats. I glance down at my worn loafers and bite the inside of my cheek to collect myself. I hear Marcello in my head telling me *Girl, you better keep it together. He’s cute and all but he shits just like the rest of us.* “I’m Brielle Petitfour.”

“Ah. The summer fellowship recipient who cost my dad millions of dollars,” Preston says.

I look up again, which I have been trying to avoid, and see him smirking in barely concealed satisfaction. So there’s at least one person besides Silas and Ainsley who knows the truth about my role in the recent Banks Corps donations. And it happens to be Silas’s paparazzi-averse son, Preston. Interesting. My answering grin is involuntary. “I guess you know about me too,” I say.

As we stand there smiling at each other, I know why he looks so familiar.

“You look just like Mr. Beauregard,” I say in awe. Where the older man was winter and icy blues, Preston’s features are a welcome comfort. “I’m

sorry for your loss,” I add.

A frisson of dread trickles through me as I watch Preston’s open face tighten immediately. I rush to apologize, hoping that it’ll bring back our earlier teasing. “I didn’t mean to bring it up. It wasn’t my place—”

“No, no. It’s okay,” Preston says. His tone doesn’t reveal whether or not he actually means this. “I appreciate it.”

“Preston. New person. Do you two care to join us?” Jake asks in his too-fast way, and I am grateful for the interruption.

“Yes,” Preston answers Jake. To me he says, “Come take a seat with us.”

I consider finding Ainsley to let her know where I am after all this time but decide against it. She’d definitely be able to sense the tiny ball of excitement growing in my chest from Preston’s invitation to sit down, and I have no doubt she’d crush it in an instant. Preston makes an exaggerated sweep of his arms to make way for me, and his fingers brush my forearm as I pass by. The brief contact zips through me, electricity crackling in my veins.

Preston smiles and I return it, morbidly fascinated. Because though I look at him, all I see is Mr. Beauregard lying on the pavement, crimson aura pooling beneath him.

## CHAPTER 34

# WRONG SIDE

*Thalia (comedy)*

Who would've thought that falling for the worst possible guy is a genetic trait?

*Callisse (poetry)*

Now, now, sister. Don't let their connection fill you with jealousy.

*Clionie (history)*

Though jealousy may not be needed, caution is prudent, for Preston Banks is more than he appears.

*Tersi (dance)*

Friendly turns of phrase have been known to sour in the mouth, especially when confronting one's father about a possible love child.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

Two days. That's how long Preston waited before telling Silas Banks the news that would change the course of his life for good.

★ ★ ★

It was their family tradition to have dinner together whenever Preston returned home from school, so he'd spent the whole day at Grandpa Len's house, knowing that his father would eventually arrive. Though he'd assumed the conversation with his father would be a difficult one, Preston hadn't thought that it would go this poorly, that he'd be shut down so quickly.

Preston and his father, Silas Banks, are facing each other in his

grandfather Len's study. Silas sits behind the enormous mahogany desk, typing away on his laptop, refusing to have this conversation. But it doesn't matter how many times his father tries to dodge these questions. Preston will not lose focus. He'll make him answer. "So you're telling me that you have never, ever slept with this woman?"

Finally, Silas lowers the screen of his laptop an inch. This isn't a conversation that Preston could have imagined having with his father, not now or ever. But the message that he received only two days prior made sure that he would have to broach the uncomfortable topic.

"She looks familiar enough," Silas says with a shrug. "I may have ... indulged."

Silas says this casually, as if having an affair is no different than getting a second slice of cake for dessert. When the server from Le Grand Fromage messaged Preston, he almost deleted it as spam. He gets so many messages from people requesting access to his father. But it was the blurred image that wouldn't display unless he accepted the message that piqued Preston's interest enough to check. A couple of taps, and then ... Preston was looking at a photo of Silas, cropped just so to hide anything explicit but still clearly showing his father in a very compromising position with an unmistakably nude woman.

"I don't mean to message you like this," the woman had said in his DMs. "But I've tried everything to reach your father and he won't get back in touch with me. I don't want to leak this anywhere. I just wanted to prove that I wasn't some random person making up a story. I need help and didn't know what else to do."

Maybe Preston shouldn't have answered. The woman was clearly distraught, the tone in her messages showing her desperation. But it wasn't like Preston to turn away from someone in need.

"What do you want with my father?" he'd asked. "I'm not going to put you in contact with him unless I know exactly what's going on." She refused to answer at first, surprisingly shy after sending such a bold photo, but finally she gave in. She told a story of recklessness and split-second bad decisions, one that cost the woman her job. Just as she had finally picked up the pieces, ready to refocus and move on from her mistakes, she'd been hit with a

curveball.

Silas Banks is still staring at his son in his can't-be-bothered way. Preston resists the urge to lunge across the desk to wipe the smug look from his face.

"She's pregnant," Preston says to his father.

Preston watches Silas's face for any sign of alarm or recognition but finds nothing.

"How is that my problem, exactly?" Silas asks. He genuinely sounds confused.

"She's carrying *your* child," Preston answers.

"And you believe what she says?" Silas says. He shakes his head. "You're much too naive, son. We'll have to work on that if you're to carry on the family name."

Preston persists. "She has pictures of you, Dad. I think you should at least hear her out."

"There's no need," Silas answers. He starts to reopen his laptop but Preston is faster. He reaches across the table and pushes the screen down so forcefully the loud smack of the device shutting causes Silas to sit back a little bit in his seat.

"Yes, there *is* need," Preston says. "You might not care about this, but Mom will. And I'm not going to stand by and watch her be publicly embarrassed because of your stupid decisions."

Silas folds his hands across his stomach, now fully settling into his seat. "Well, if you must know, I had a vasectomy to avoid situations like this one. She's just a server from a restaurant trying to make a quick buck. She doesn't matter."

This isn't the first time that Preston has heard his father speak so callously about the people who make his life's day-to-day run smoothly. "But what if there's a chance that—"

"Enough!" Silas cuts Preston off. "I'm done with this ridiculous conversation. I don't want to hear another word about this woman or you speaking to her again."

Silas says this with a finality familiar to Preston. When Silas Banks issues a command, there's no discussion to be had. Your only choice is to accept—there's zero tolerance for disobedience. Preston shouldn't be surprised by

this. So much of his life has been curated by his father. Preston is a student at one of the world's top boarding schools—located in the UK—because Silas wanted him to be educated alongside the children of other international elites. Preston's summer internship had already been waiting for him as soon as he was back in the States. Silas thought it was time for him to learn the ropes of leading the company.

Preston pushes his luck and speaks again. “You can ignore it all you want, but this is going to come back and blow up in your face. And it'll be all your fault. The least you can do is clean up your mess so Mom doesn't have to suffer.” Preston turns abruptly, heading out of the study without waiting for a response from his father.

A few of Preston's classmates had decided to treat themselves to a month-long European excursion, but Preston had opted to go home. Good luck that turned out to be. Preston hadn't really wanted to come to Hunter Island in the first place. But he couldn't rationalize not seeing his mother, Nalda, for a whole extra month, especially when her phone check-ins had started coming daily, a clear signal that she was missing him terribly. Preston tried not to think about what would have happened if his father's infidelity had made national news while Preston was away. He pictured his mom crying inconsolably with no one to support her. He would've never forgiven himself.

Preston is still fuming with rage when he finally makes it to his destination. The seven-car garage is located on the west side of the property, and when he clicks the button on his keys from feet away, the slow grinding of the garage door is a balm to his anger. He eases himself onto the plush leather seats of his white Mercedes S-Class convertible, the luxury vehicle quietly purring as he accelerates away from the Banks compound. The car is sleek, superbly customized, and costs a small fortune. It was Grandpa Len's sixteenth birthday present to him. Preston's mother had tried to get his grandpa to return the car, but the older man had insisted on it. Preston was familiar with this too, his grandfather's extravagant gifts, a product of the complex he'd developed when his son's success eclipsed his own. Preston is grateful for the gift now, the nearly silent ride helping him to hear his spinning thoughts more clearly.

Preston races up the street, thoughts of love children and egotistical



fathers swirling in his mind. Just once he'd like to make his father face the consequences of his actions. He presses down on the gas a bit more, on autopilot now. He's defaulted to driving on the left side of the road—as he did in England—and he's been heading down the wrong side of traffic since he exited the garage.

He doesn't realize this until it is much too late.

## CHAPTER 35

# REMEMBER YOUR PLACE

I follow Preston to the table and sit beside him at the end of the row, pulling one of the notepads and pens closer so that I can take notes. The brunette sitting across from me gives me a tight-lipped smile as I take in my surroundings. It's the universal I'm-lifting-my-lips-to-be-polite-but-I-can't-actually-be-bothered-to-show-you-these-pearly-whites-because-who-the-hell-are-you smile. You know the kind. I don't bother returning the acknowledgment because I know it won't reach my eyes. At least I have a reason (being undead) for being a jerk. What's her excuse?

Jake continues his Banks Corps rundown, hands flying more animatedly with each passing moment. The front of his shirt clings to him in wet patches, sweat making his clothing transparent enough to show the outlines of the vertical ridges of his undershirt. His chest rises and falls like he's on the last mile of a marathon.

"He's really into this company," I say to myself as I write in my notepad.

"You don't even know the half of it," Preston says out of the side of his mouth.

At the end of the hour, I've learned more about Banks Corps than I ever thought possible. Jake took us on a meandering journey that started at the organization's humble beginnings as a medical sales company and ended at the behemoth that it is today. We are broken up into groups for an icebreaker. I'd hoped to be paired with Preston, but I am forced to work with the brunette, Blake Calloway. Of course. As the youngest daughter of a media magnate who has recently set his sights on expansion into Latin American markets *and* a luxury lifestyle influencer with more lines of home goods than should be humanly possible, Blake is a textbook example of an overachiever.

She's spending the summer working at Banks Corps as a favor to her father, who seems less than happy that her ambitions lean more on the creative side—her passion being in fashion instead of business.

Our entire time working together becomes a one-sided monologue as Blake unloads her stresses on me. All I can do is nod. I don't mind her nonstop chatter, especially since it gives me a bit more time to think about what I will say when we're asked to introduce ourselves to the larger group. One by one everyone talks about the numerous internships they've had in the past, or the nonprofit companies that they are already leading on their own. It's about to be my turn to speak. I am still racking my brain to find something that might sound even marginally impressive.

"Brielle," Jake says, looking at me expectantly as he pulls the front of his shirt away from his body. "It's your turn."

"Well," I begin shyly. "I love cooking. I started a supper club this summer. I had my first client a couple of days ago." To my surprise, everyone seems very impressed. They immediately ask me a ton of follow-up questions. How did I know that I liked cooking? Have I trained under anyone notable? Did I plan to expand the supper club to other locations?

"I have a few plans, but I'm still figuring them out," I say, when really what I mean is *Um, I just started?* I don't even know what I'm going to be doing by the end of the summer, let alone years into the future.

"Mysterious," Preston says with a wink. "Real g's move in silence like lasagna." I hate that my face warms from his attention when I know he's quoting Lil Wayne lyrics to look cool. And I hate that it's working.

Eventually, we all file out of the meeting room and head to our respective seats. I don't get a chance to walk very far, though, because Ainsley is waiting for me at the door.

"Follow me," she says in greeting. Great.

Ainsley closes the door behind us when we walk into her fishbowl of an office, and she motions for me to sit down in the seat across from her.

"Why did you disappear for almost two hours without giving me a heads-up?" *Two hours?* We're really going to have to work on this woman's sense of time.

"Preston and Jake asked me to stay for the rest of the presentation after I

delivered the coffee, so I did,” I answer.

“I am your boss, not Preston or Jake. Next time someone asks you to do something, you need to run it by me first,” Ainsley says.

“Well, why wasn’t I in there in the first place?” I ask. “It seems that it was everyone’s first day too.”

“That’s because they’re in a different program than you are. You don’t have any reason to interact with them.”

“Who am I supposed to interact with, then?”

Ainsley starts to answer but pauses mid-speech to look at something behind me. I turn to see Preston and one of the guys from the internship group lifting a table from one end of the hall to the intern corner, right across from Ainsley’s office. Preston and his companion place the table down. As he straightens, he looks up and his gaze meets mine. A slow smile spreads across his face. I feel my body temperature inch up. At this rate, Jake and I are going to be neck and neck for the best just-got-out-of-the-pool couture.

Ainsley clears her throat, and I break eye contact with Preston. She looks at me for a beat before speaking. “This summer fellowship is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for someone from your background,” Ainsley says, looking pointedly between me and presumably Preston in the distance. “Though you may interact with many impressive people during your time here, they’re all a little out of your league. You’d do well to remember that.”

Her words are a frigid bucket of ice water. Though my insides have clenched in embarrassment, I don’t let it show on my face.

“How could I forget?” I say, standing. Ainsley turns to her computer without another glance, dismissing me.

Robotically, I return to my seat. I can feel someone staring as I open the company-issued laptop on the desk before me, but I refuse to turn and look. I already know that it’s Preston.

Ainsley is right. I *am* out of my depth. But not because the people here are better than me. Preston’s attention makes sense. Like he said, I’m the summer fellowship recipient who cost his dad millions of dollars. And while Silas Banks is always in and out of the media, they hardly ever mention his son. This might be intentional on his parents’ part. But I am willing to bet there’s something more.

If there's one thing I've learned working for the rich, it's that appearances are everything to them. Preston's thinly veiled pleasure at my spending his father's money tells me that the tension between father and son runs deep. I am a curious new puzzle, and Preston is eager to figure me out. But, just like with any new toy, I'll eventually become outdated and tossed aside for the next shiny new challenge. Ainsley underestimates my understanding of this fact.

So I'll play along and pretend that I am second. But if I'm going to play this game, it's going to be on my terms.

## CHAPTER 36

# LIFE AND DEATH

### *Tersi (dance)*

The boundary between life and death requires careful consideration. There are points on the path that twist and curve, malleable to the touch and forgiving of error. Other portions are straight and unyielding, where a slight misstep brings you to the end of this life's journey and into the next.

### *Melpo (tragedy)*

We don't always know which road we are on until the moment is upon us. Do we push back against the tide or allow ourselves to be swept away? Do we even have power over the outcome?

### *Clionie (history)*

Preston Banks contemplates this as he looks down upon his great-grandfather Beauregard. Tubes and wires crisscross around him as he lies in the center of the hospital bed, a map of his wandering between planes visible if one looks closely enough.

### *Callisse (poetry)*

His sleep is not restful, though his eyes are shut. Do you see them move beneath the lids? He searches for the path that will bring him back to life. But he is lost.

### *Thalia (comedy)*

Fate follows close behind, watching. Waiting between planes for the instant the next phase chooses itself. Whether this decision is swift or presents itself slowly, it is of no consequence. Fate is patient. And it enjoys the chase.



Preston stands just inside the doorway of Grandpa Beauregard's room for minutes or hours. He cannot say. It is the first time he's come to visit since the accident. And that's what it was. An *accident*. A mistake. A mishap. A tragedy in three acts. Boy confronts father. Father dismisses boy. Boy unintentionally kills great-grandfather. Well, not quite. The rise and fall of Grandpa Beauregard's chest means that there is a possibility for a different conclusion. Can this story be rewritten?

Preston takes a step into the room, moving quietly as not to disturb him. It's only the two of them in the too-silent space. Another moment passes. Preston inches closer. Is he imagining the quickened pace of his great-grandfather's breathing?

"I'm so sorry, Grandpa," Preston says. His voice is hoarse with emotion. Guilt. It is always present in his body. Sweaty palms, racing heart, pleading eyes. But everyone mistakes it for grief. "I didn't mean to."

He reaches for his great-grandfather's hand, more for his own comfort than for the old man's. When Preston feels the fingers clench in his grasp, he looks up and sees the crystal blue eyes of Grandpa Beauregard staring back at him. The shame that races through Preston is different than what he's felt before. Now he thinks of his future. What it might mean if his great-grandfather recovers and shares the truth about how he was injured. Does he know that it was Preston who left him for dead in the middle of the road? Abandoned by his own family.

Grandpa Beauregard squeezes Preston's hand again in rapid succession. The tubes in his throat prevent him from speaking. Now he communicates through touch. Through the quickening beeps of the monitors.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa." Preston chokes on his tears. "I had just been fighting with Dad. He made me so angry, and I needed to get away. I didn't see you. Please forgive me."

Preston watches as Grandpa Beauregard's eyes fill with tears. The fluttering of his fingers is weakening in his great-grandson's grasp.

"Forgive me, forgive me," Preston sobs, repeating the words like a prayer. Like penance.

The nurses find him muttering silently to himself when they race into the room, his great-grandfather's cold hand still clenched in his own.



## CHAPTER 37

# GRATITUDE AND GRUNT WORK

I am bone-tired as I step off the final bus after my first day of work at Banks Corps. My feet drag with each step. Zombielike, one could say. Being “on” all day is a special kind of torture, mentally and physically draining in a way that nothing else can replicate. As I walk into the apartment complex, I am comforted by the familiar smells of island food wafting through the building’s outdoor corridors. Though my neighbors may not have the most luxurious kitchens, the mouthwatering scent of tender meats, grilled veggies, boiled plantains, and heaping piles of rice are evidence that a humble home is still home. And one with much better food at that.

The distinct scent of Mummy’s cooking hits my nose as I round the corner. I walk a little faster. It’s not every day that she’s able to stand before the stove and throw down, but when she does, I am reminded that everything I know about cooking is because of her. I feel closest to the island that I’ve never visited when I make a meal of Haitian food. It is culture. Family. And I will always be grateful that she has given me that bit of home.

“Bri-bri!” Mummy says when I step inside our apartment. “Perfect timing.”

The table is set for the both of us, with many of my favorite foods. I can smell the aroma of fried pork from the platter overflowing with griot. Black mushroom rice greets me next, and I inhale the djon djon deeply. There is a bowl of stewed conch perfectly decorated with slices of onion and red and green peppers, with boiled cashews sprinkled throughout. Mummy places a just-fried pile of bannann on the table then heads to the fridge for the final

dish. When she removes the plastic wrap I see and smell the well-marinated, spicy scent of pickled cabbage, grated carrots, and Scotch bonnet peppers.

“You made pikliz too?” I ask. “Thank you, Mummy! But what’s the occasion?”

I kiss her on the cheek, and she hugs me. I’m still not used to her newfound affection, but I don’t let it stop me from wrapping my arms around her and holding on tight. After the day that I’ve had, it feels nice to let go of the first-day jitters that have been coursing through my body all day.

“It’s the first day of your very first big-girl job. This is cause for celebration!” she says, beaming at me. “Go wash your hands and then you can tell me all about it.”

After I’m settled at the table, I answer all of Mummy’s questions between heaping spoonfuls of food. One, because it’s delicious and two, because it gives me enough time between bites to figure out what I can say to make my day sound way more glamorous than it actually was.

“I’m all signed up for my benefits,” I tell Mummy while wiping my mouth. “They said that it’ll take one week for the insurance card to arrive but coverage starts immediately, so you can get your pain pump filled now.”

Mummy reaches across the table and squeezes my hand in hers. “Thank you so much, sweetie,” she says. “You know, this isn’t how I imagined things would be when your father and I came to the States. I thought I would be able to provide for you. And yet here I am, relying on you.”

“Mummy, it’s okay,” I say. “It’s not—”

“No, no. Let me finish,” she says. “I know that I haven’t always been the most forthcoming about my emotions. I’ve counted on you more than I ever thought possible, and I am so grateful for you. I wish I said it more, but it’s not easy for me. One day, I’ll repay you for all that you’ve done for our family.”

The look on Mummy’s face is so earnest and open. I watch her features as she speaks, and I tell myself to remember this moment. My mother’s love reaches to me through her words, and my body is warm with affection. There is a tightness on my cheeks. I lift my hand to brush it away and realize that I am crying. I glance down at the tears on my fingers, stunned. I can’t remember the last time I cried. This loosening within my spirit is just as

soothing, just as foreign as my mother's hug.

"Thank you for saying that, Mummy," I say, my ears adjusting to the wateriness in my voice. My Banks Corps fellowship lasts for only three months. I am determined to use this time to continue helping my mom and family in Haiti. I will not waste it.

Mummy and I clear the table and wash the dishes together. I pass each newly rinsed vessel to her, and she dries it as we stand in companionable silence.

"I just realized, I didn't even ask you how your day went," I say to Mummy when the last plate is dried.

"It was not nearly as exciting as yours, but that might be because I expected this time to come," Mummy says with a small smile. "Mr. Len had the talk with me today and he laid me off. In addition to six months of pay, he gave me a parting gift."

I watch as Mummy heads to a box on the kitchen counter that I hadn't noticed before. She opens it carefully and pulls out ... an urn.

"You're kidding," I say as I walk over to where Mummy has now placed the golden container next to the box it came in.

"I wish I was," Mummy says. "Mr. Len called me 'family,' but said that it is more efficient for the cleaning service to take care of the household. Since they no longer have any work for me..."

"Is this all of him?" I ask, lifting the lid carefully to peek into the jar.

"No, but it's more than I should have," Mummy says.

"Wow," I say in disbelief, resealing the urn. "What are you going to do next?"

"Well, since I have a bit more money from the severance, I want to go to Haiti. I could visit your sisters. Pay my respects to Matant Vercia."

"Wait ... what do you mean, *you're* going to Haiti?" I say, taking a step back from her.

"Yes," she says hesitantly. "I don't want to leave you so soon after you just started this position. But I don't know when I'll get another chance to visit."

I stare at Mummy in disbelief. So *that's* why she made this lavish meal. To soften the blow of her leaving.

“Well, if you’re going, then I want to come with you,” I say, crossing my arms.

The look on Mummy’s face is one of extreme alarm. “No, Bri, you can’t.”

“What do you mean I can’t? I’ve always wanted to go to Haiti, Mummy. I’ve never even met my sisters in real life. Don’t you find that strange?”

“It’s not safe!” Mummy says so forcefully that I retreat some more. She sighs heavily. “For ... for you to take days off from your job. You’ve only just gotten it.”

Mummy and I look at each other, unmoving. Am I really supposed to believe that she’s only concerned about my job? Unless she’s thinking about the fact that she would lose our newly acquired health insurance. I hate that my mind immediately goes there. What else am I supposed to think when this is how she tells me that she’s already decided to go to Haiti?

“You’ll be safe without me?” Mummy says, signaling that our conversation is coming to an end. Mummy says this as a question, but it sounds like a plea. A faint glimmer of our past dynamic shines through, lurking in the shadows. The fear that is always simmering beneath the surface of our interactions. What she wants to ask is if people will be safe around *me*.

“I’ll be safe,” I say with what I hope is a reassuring smile.

Mummy and I finish tidying up in the kitchen and prepare for bed. I am showered and dressed for sleep when my phone buzzes on my bedside table. I reach for it, thinking that it’s Marcello, but it’s not. Ainsley. I groan. What could she possibly want?

I reread her message three times and then glance at the clock. It is 9 P.M. after my first day of work, and my new boss has just texted me with an assignment. She wants me to narrow down the additional candidates for the summer fellowship program to my top twenty selections from a stack of résumés. And she needs it by morning. Really? She couldn’t have told me to do this earlier in the day? When I was sitting at my desk, bored out of my mind? I toss and turn on my bed, flopping around like a fish on land. I feel childish, but it’s either I let myself have this tantrum or I say something that gets me fired. I breathe deeply and text Ainsley back, telling her to consider it done. I get out of bed for a moment to grab my company laptop and then log in to my email.

There are 150 résumés to go through, each one with an attached photo. I grind my teeth in frustration. It is going to be a long night.

## CHAPTER 38

# DOUBLE SHOT TO SHOCK

The day has just started and already I'm exhausted. I was up until one in the morning sifting through applications, and though I've had a double shot of espresso, I am yawning every few minutes like I can't get enough of tasting air. I press the proper buttons on the office printer, and soon I have a small stack featuring the top twenty options from the candidate pool along with their photos. I place the printouts in a manila folder and make my way to Ainsley's office.

It's only my second day but as I walk through the Banks Corps halls, I can tell something is amiss. People stand in clusters throughout the office, their whispers like the rustling of a million sheets of paper. Ainsley's office door is shut, but I can see her in her seat, phone to her ear. Her back is to me, and the way she leans forward in her chair gives the impression that the person on the other end of the line isn't speaking fast enough to relay the message. I am looking for someone to ask what's happening when Blake plops down in the seat next to me.

"Hey," I say in greeting. "Is it just me or is there something going on this morning?"

"You haven't heard?" Blake says with owl eyes. "It's terrible."

I don't get to ask her what exactly is terrible because we are interrupted by an announcement over an intercom system that I didn't even know the office had.

"Everyone, please head to the main conference room. Everyone, please head to the main conference room."

The disembodied voice completes its dispatch, and the office comes alive as all around people do as they are instructed. I am ready to ask Blake what's

up again, but she's gone. I see her disappear into the crowd heading to the conference room. I grab my purse, notepad, and pen and try to catch up with Blake. In my haste to reach her, I bump into a heavyset man who frowns at my clumsiness.

"Sorry," I mumble, bending down to pick my notepad up off the floor.

When I straighten, my eye is drawn to an unlocked computer screen. Jake, the guy who led yesterday's welcome meeting, looks back at me. Strange. I step closer and read the headline plastered across the top of the page.

*Banks Corps HR Director, Jacob O'Brien, Dead from Apparent Overdose*

My body hums as if I've just stuck a fork into an electrical socket. Jake is dead? From an overdose? I think back to the pills that I had placed in the iced latte meant for Ainsley. There's no way that can be the cause of his death ... Can it? I don't know how many times I read the article, hoping for a different outcome. But no matter how many times I scan the page, Jake is still dead by the end of it. In my mind's eye, I imagine him lying face up on the floor of his home, but when I look down, it's my father's face that I see instead.

"Hey, we should be heading to the office."

I jump a foot into the air and turn around with my hand to my throat. Preston Banks is standing behind me. He looks over my shoulder at the article that I've been reading, and I look at it again. Jake is staring back at us from his corporate headshot with a stiff smile.

"Wild, isn't it?" Preston says. He must see the terror written on my face because he takes a step forward, stretching out a hand to place on my forearm. "Are you okay?"

I move away before Preston can touch me, and I don't answer his question. I can't trust myself not to vomit at his feet. I try to nod my head but my head bobbles in confusion, a mix between yes and no. I force myself to inhale deeply and point in the direction of the conference room and leave without a goodbye.

I race to join the rest of my coworkers, my eyes unseeing. But I'm wide awake now.

## CHAPTER 39

# NOT-SO-MICRO AGGRESSIONS

When I enter the main conference room, Silas Banks has just taken his place at an elevated podium, a shepherd before his flock. I lean against the wall at the back of the room. My skin still feels charged from reading the headline.

“I am saddened to come before you today with the somber news that our friend and colleague Jacob O’Brien has passed away,” Silas begins, reading from a teleprompter that hangs above the audience. A ripple of murmurs passes through the audience.

Silas continues. “Jake joined Banks Corps seven years ago and quickly rose through the ranks to become one of the organization’s youngest HR directors. We will miss his energetic presence and zest for life.”

“Energetic from all the coke,” someone stage-whispers to my left. I almost turn to see who it is but stop myself. I don’t want to appear overly interested, though my ears are straining for another drop of gossip.

“We know Jake’s death comes as a shock. We have counselors available should anyone need to speak to a licensed professional to process. Today will be a difficult day for us all, so let’s be kind to one another.”

Silas knocks his knuckles once at the podium gavel-style and then he turns, disappearing through a door behind him. That’s it. Seven years of toiling for a company and your death is mentioned in a meeting that lasts less than three minutes before everyone gets back to work.

I’m one of the first people out of the conference room given my spot at the back. As I return to my seat, I notice that the earlier shock over Jake’s death has now morphed into not-so-hushed speculation.

“I’m not surprised,” a woman in what must be a custom-fitted black suit says. “Did you see him at the last company party? He wasn’t even on this



planet he was so high.”

“Yeah,” the man walking beside her says. “Where did Silas think he got all that ‘zest for life’ from?”

There are multiple conversations like this happening all around me. Though it makes me sick to my stomach that so many people speak this callously about their coworker who *just* died, I hate to admit that my anxiety eases a bit. The article I’d read earlier said that Jake’s death had been tentatively ruled an accident based on what was found in the room with him. It wasn’t mentioned exactly what was discovered but they heavily alluded to potential drug use.

If I was a more optimistic person, I would let myself believe that the chance someone would uncover I put two of my mom’s pills in a drink that Jake gulped down just hours before his death is slim to none. But the report also said that the investigation was ongoing. That single line is enough to keep me on edge. And even if Jake was a heavy user of recreational drugs, what if my tampering is what sent him over the edge?

I am the pinnacle of self-discipline as I stop short of searching the sentence for accidental homicide while I sit at my desk. I want desperately to text Marcello about what happened. But I know it would be foolish to put that in writing. I glance around and check that Ainsley isn’t around, and I shoot him a text anyway.

**Me:** Marcello! It’s my second day and it’s already crazy here. One of my coworkers died!

**Marcello:** Bitch what?! Are you serious? Oh hell no. Don’t tell me someone killed him. You know how cutthroat those corporate types can be.

My stomach sours. Maybe texting Marcello wasn’t a good idea after all. I send him another message saying I’ll catch up with him when I’m out of work and he answers, “I’ll be waiting.” I have read my tenth article about Jake when Ainsley arrives at my desk, motioning for me to follow her. At first, I am annoyed by her lack of greeting. The fact that she hasn’t said a hello, good morning, good day, goodbye, *nothing* to me since I started working here doesn’t sit well with me. But then I wonder if her failure to properly address me might have something to do with the fact that I may have killed a coworker, even if by accident. Anxiety grips me by the throat again, drying out my mouth, as I follow Ainsley to her office after grabbing

my things from my desk. I've barely closed the door behind me when she launches into conversation as if this isn't the first interaction we've had all day.

"So who are your top twenty?" Ainsley asks.

"Top twenty ... what?" I answer.

"Candidates for the summer fellowship. Or did you already forget about your assignment?"

I am relieved that Ainsley isn't asking me any questions about Jake but also offended that she would think I wouldn't get the job done. I don't say a word as I pull the candidates' résumés out of my folder. Ainsley looks through the small stack, sorting them into two piles with three papers on the right and the remainder on the left. Once she's done examining them all, Ainsley takes the papers on the right and tosses them into the trash. She does this again and again until only four candidates remain. This takes her no more than ten minutes. When she's done, Ainsley spreads the pages out on the desk, nodding.

"Good work," she says. I am momentarily stunned by her praise, until I register the four remaining résumés and the ever-present annoyance that I feel whenever I interact with Ainsley returns. I was intentional in narrowing the incoming fellowship recipients to a qualified, diverse group. And yet the remaining candidates are all white.

I clear my throat, squaring my shoulders to mention this. "Thank you," I say, acknowledging Ainsley's compliment. "However, I can't help but notice that the candidates you selected are all white. There were some really talented and diverse options in the candidate pool." I reach for the stack of papers at the top of the trash, shuffling through them for a couple of my favorites.

"There's no need to go through them all again," she says. "I've already made my decision."

"Yes, but don't you think you could take another look?" I ask.

"Why would I consider those other candidates? We already have you," Ainsley says.

I look up from the résumés in my hand to see Ainsley looking at me with genuine puzzlement. She's being serious. At least I think she is. That is, until I see the almost imperceptible uptilt of her lips.

“Anything else?” Ainsley asks.

I shake my head. But oooh, if only looks could really kill.

## CHAPTER 40

# AN INVITATION

I am still fuming even after stopping in the restroom to splash some water on my face. If I had called Ainsley out, then I would've looked like I was being irrational and too sensitive. And while it is objectively true that Banks Corps has me as a fellowship recipient, why should I be the only person of color to get this opportunity? What exactly do people like Ainsley think will happen if there's more than one Black or brown person working in the same place at the same time?

I round the corner to return to my seat, and I'm surprised to see Preston standing beside my desk. I'm perturbed by the twinge of pleasure that rolls through me at the sight of him. I didn't know I could find a plain white button-down and navy slacks so enticing. And yet, I find myself inexplicably attracted to the combo on Preston Banks.

"Can I help you?" I ask when I arrive at my desk.

Preston turns around and the smile spreading across his face feels like spring, soothing sunshine and blooming flowers. "Hey," he says. "I've been looking all over for you."

"Oh really?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"You seemed a little shaken up earlier. I wanted to check that you were doing okay."

I try not to let any semblance of guilt appear on my face. "Yeah, I'm fine now. I was just a little shocked by the news." I am shuffling and reshuffling the papers on my desk, refusing to look at Preston.

"Pretty intense start to a new job, right?"

I nod impatiently. I don't want to make small talk, and I definitely don't want to spend any more time talking about Jake.

“Besides all of that,” Preston says, now taking a seat on the edge of my desk. “How are you liking the new gig?”

I think back to Ainsley’s earlier jab, and I inspect Preston closely. “Why are you so interested?”

He laughs, and the joyous sound is unexpected. “Well, if I’m being honest, anyone who can get under my dad’s skin is all right in my book.”

I grin. “Fair.”

“But really, how’s the fellowship going? I know Ainsley can be a total hard-ass. If you want her to lay off you a little bit, just say the word. I’d be happy to help.”

I glance over at Ainsley’s office and see that she’s away from her desk. “I’m not sure she’d like that very much. But I appreciate the offer.”

“She wouldn’t, but sometimes Ainsley needs someone to call her out on her shit,” Preston says. “Try not to take it personally, though. I’m sure my dad has only ever encouraged her sharklike instincts.”

“Of course,” I say. “Well, I should probably get back to work now. I don’t want to give her even more of a reason to dislike me.”

“I hear that,” Preston says. “Before I leave, what are you doing later?”

My tongue is suddenly a tangle of knots. Is he...?

“A group of us interns are going out tonight. You should join us.”

Of course he’s inviting me to a group outing. There’s no way he would be asking me out on a date after having, like ... two conversations. I try not to let the disappointment show on my face.

“On a Tuesday?” I ask. And then I add, “Right after one of our coworkers died?” And yes, I’m ignoring the fact that I would’ve been more than okay with going on a one-on-one date the Tuesday after one of our colleagues died if he had asked. Remember: zombie, not saint.

“To be honest, as tragic as it is, Jake wasn’t exactly the most well-liked,” Preston says. “And he did a *lot* of drugs. He’d probably expect us to party in his honor. Going out with a bang and all that.”

“I dunno,” I say reluctantly. And it’s not because I’m morally conflicted. I can only imagine that wherever these rich kids choose to go will be super expensive.

“Come on,” Preston urges. “What do you have to lose?”

“Money,” I say automatically.

“My dad is a literal billionaire,” Preston says, flashing that honey-drenched smile. I hate that I find it charming. “You think I’m going to let anyone else pay?”

I hesitate a moment longer and then make my decision.

“Okay, I’m in.”

## CHAPTER 41

# EVERYDAY RUBY TUESDAYS

It's not every day that a girl like me gets invited to one of the most exclusive restaurants in Miami, with no expectation of spending my own money. When I log out of my laptop for the day, I am giddy with excitement. I still don't know where we're headed, but I know that it'll be good because the restaurants in this part of town are top-tier, catering to corporate elites and international tycoons. I'm about to stuff my laptop into my bag when Preston sees what I'm doing and stops me.

"Uh, where do you think you're going with that?" he asks, looking amused.

"I go home with my laptop every night," I say. "Well, every night for the last two days, anyway."

Preston laughs. "That's your first mistake. Don't make yourself too available to Ainsley. She'll have you working all day and night."

I don't tell him that ship has already sailed, and slowly remove the laptop from my bag with an awkward smile.

"Don't worry. It'll be safe overnight," Preston says. "Security here is no joke."

I follow Preston to the elevator and while we ride down, I send my mom a text letting her know not to wait up for me because I'm attending a work get-together. Mummy isn't much of a texter, so I don't expect a reply, but she sends me a thumbs-up and a "Have fun, cheri." Then I let Marcello know that I'll have to catch up with him later.

"Dang, two days with the beautiful rich people and you've already forgotten about me? 😞," he texts back. I send him a hug emoji, promising to make it up to him.

“You’d better,” Marcello replies.

When we’re outside Banks Corps, I see three of my fellow interns standing off to the side. Preston heads toward them and I follow. Blake Calloway adjusts her black oversized sunglasses. Even though half of her face is covered, I can feel her scrutiny.

“I didn’t know you were bringing a guest,” she says to Preston.

“Brielle isn’t a guest,” Preston says. “She’s one of us.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” Blake says with a small hair flip. “Speak for yourself.”

“Ignore her,” one of the other interns says. He runs a hand through his black hair. “Blake just hates that you’re the new kid. It means she’s no longer the most interesting person around.”

“Shut up, Kwan,” Blake says, swatting him on the arm.

Preston reintroduces me to the third intern, Mason, who is so blond and pale I wonder how he makes it even a minute in the Miami sun without immediately getting sunburned. After a quick debate the group settles on Tatsu, an Asian fusion restaurant where it usually takes weeks to be added to the reservation list.

“It’s way too hot for walking,” Blake says once the group has decided. Turning to Preston she says, “Can you order us a car?” Within minutes a sleek, luxury SUV pulls up to collect us, a frivolous expense since the restaurant is less than a ten-minute walk away.

There is no wait when we get to Tatsu. We are whisked away to a semi-secluded seating area, and each of us are immediately presented with a menu. Not one item has a price beside it. Thinking about how expensive this place must be makes my heart clench. Our server, a tall, modellesque Black girl with tiny braids twisted into a low chignon, springs into action, bringing sparkling waters to the table and quickly taking drink orders.

“Tasting menu?” Preston asks the table just as the server finishes taking Blake’s drink request.

“Tasting menu,” the others reply. I would have gladly settled for an appetizer so I am delighted by this development. I am about to taste multiple options from one of the top restaurants in Miami, if not the country. It would take me months to save up for an outing half as glamorous as this. To think, this is simply another day in their life.



One by one small plates of food are brought to the table, each one more impressive than the last. Expertly roasted shishito peppers topped with dried bonito flakes. Yellowtail, salmon, and tuna sashimi so fresh I can't resist closing my eyes to fully savor the briny tang of each raw morsel. Preston is looking right at me when I float back down to earth. My face heats from the attention. I glance around at the other people in the restaurant, hoping to appear unbothered. There are couples and friend groups, even a few families. I visualize going to a place like this with Mummy in the middle of the week, just because. Even if I could afford it, she'd probably still be uninterested.

*Give the money you spent on that meal to me and we can send it to our family in Haiti instead,* I imagine her saying.

Preston and the others spend the meal talking about their woes as the children or family friends of C-suite executives at Banks Corps. While the point of the fellowship is for them to pad their résumés for college, they're really using the time to live it up in Miami before they leave for university after senior year. Though Mason jokes that his dad would simply donate a wing to a prestigious school if he doesn't appear impressive enough on paper. Can't relate.

By the end of the meal, I am full to bursting, stomach solid to the touch. I couldn't eat another bite even if I wanted to. Preston takes the bill when the server returns, and I thank him for treating us.

"Awww. Isn't that precious?" Blake says.

"Well, I think it's nice of her to say it," Preston says, watching me. "And it was my pleasure."

"Okay, enough of that," Kwan says with a smirk, glancing between me, Preston, and Blake. "We should go check out the second floor. The night is still young."

I follow the group as we walk through the dimly lit restaurant until we are upon a beefy bouncer in a seam-bursting shirt that has SECURITY stretched across his chest. He is precariously seated on the edge of a stool, a velvet rope barrier pulled across the entrance to the staircase behind him. I have a brief moment when I want to tell the others that we should maybe turn back because I'm pretty sure none of us are even eighteen yet. But they all seem so sure of themselves as we weave through the restaurant that I fall back to

watch.

“Hey, Bruce,” Preston says, dapping up the mountain of a man standing between us and the second floor.

“What’s up, Preston,” he says. “Is this everyone in your party?”

Preston confirms we are and our group is personally led up the staircase by the bouncer, where we’re transported to another dimension. The already faintly lit restaurant darkens even further on this level. It’s sparsely brightened by ambient lighting that paints each section blue, the main dance floor an ocean. Music bounces off the walls, so loud that I am shocked that we couldn’t hear this from the first floor while we ate. We are seated in a VIP booth. I must not be able to hide the absolute awe on my face because Preston leans over to speak in my ear as he nestles into the spot beside me.

“My dad is a silent investor in this place, so we’re able to get away with a few things,” he says.

“You don’t say?” I answer, unable to mask my impressed tone.

I look around at some of the other sections and notice ice buckets of booze and mixers before them. There’s no way that we’ll ... yup. I haven’t even finished that thought before a bottle girl in the shortest shorts I have ever seen steps into our section with a selection of alcohol. She pulls the privacy curtain behind her when she leaves.

“Treat yourself,” Mason encourages me over the music. He’s mixing himself a rum and Coke while Kwan and Blake are already dancing in a corner.

I notice other people from Banks Corps sprinkled throughout the lounge. On the dance floor, at the bar. Someone leaves the VIP section directly across from us but doesn’t shut their privacy curtain fully after they exit. I’d know the flawlessly sharpened auburn bob of the woman bent over the table from anywhere. Ainsley straightens and rubs furiously at her nose. The curtain is suddenly drawn shut.

All *this* on a Tuesday?! I am shook. The people at Banks Corps are really living life on a completely different plane. Light-years from everything that I’ve known. I wouldn’t be surprised if they don’t even bother throwing surprise parties for one another because, honestly, they’ve probably seen it all already. Maybe Ainsley is right and I really am out of my league, after all.

A very drunk man stumbles across the dance floor, bumping into quite a few people as he tries to head to the bar. There's no stopping him when he steps into our section, just as the bottle girl returns with another bucket of ice and tequila. He loses his footing, and I see the second his teetering tips him over into the bottle girl. She fumbles with the tequila, but her grip isn't strong enough, and it bounces off the side of the table. She juggles the container, trying to prevent it from hitting the floor, but is a second too slow, and her hand closes around the jagged edge of the broken glass.

The scent of blood rushes to my nostrils, and I feel my pupils dilate until each ruby drop shines brilliantly to me alone, individually suspended in my vision. Half the people near us are revulsed by the sight of so much blood while the other half is straining to see what will happen next. The smell of copper becomes stronger as the bottle girl waves her hand around. She runs out of our section. It takes everything inside me not to chase after her.

But not to comfort. To devour.

## CHAPTER 42

# LUNCH, LOST AND FOUND

### *Clionie (history)*

Brielle has always been fascinated by blood. The scent of one's life force is one of the most powerful kinds of magic to resist.

### *Tersi (dance)*

When it courses through our veins, it fortifies us with strength to live, dance, thrive.

### *Melpo (tragedy)*

But spilled onto the earth, it takes many forms. Offering or curse. Libation or heartbreak.

### *Callisse (poetry)*

It is the intent of the person who summons it that dictates its purpose.

### *Thalia (comedy)*

And sometimes, its presence is nothing more than an ill-timed mistake or unexpected mishap.



Eight-year-old Brielle plays alone in the school courtyard, bouncing a basketball that is two pumps shy of being fully inflated. It makes a squishy splat every time it hits the ground, forcing Brielle to bend down to retrieve the orange globe following each rebound. She picks up the ball for the hundredth time, an expert at entertaining herself while the other children frolic together. Her attention is so absolute that she doesn't notice when the

earlier shrieks of delight from her classmates transform into shouts of alarm.

“A wolf!” they screech, short legs carrying them across the hot asphalt.

It isn’t until the mangy dog is only feet away from Brielle that she realizes they were not playing a new game. It’s been weeks of the students telling their teachers about the elusive canine that visits the schoolyard. But each time the adults investigate the cause of their fright, the dog is gone without a trace.

In seconds, the creature is on Brielle. She uses her right arm to shield her face from its foamy, saliva-drenched fangs. The dog is not deterred. It pushes against Brielle’s arm. When it finds that it can’t reach her face, it settles on the fleshy part of her preadolescent limb. Teachers come running, one carrying a folding chair over his head to scare the dog away.

While the chase continues, Brielle’s teacher crouches down before her to check the wound. She recoils at the sight of Brielle poking at the gash, index finger coated in red.

“Don’t touch that, Brielle!” her teacher exclaims.

And then she loses her lunch—though it appears that Brielle has found hers.

## CHAPTER 43

# PRIVATE PARTY, PUBLIC TRANSPORT

I need to get away. I don't know where I find the strength to not go after the bottle girl. The strain of resisting brings beads of sweat to my forehead, warmth to my cheeks, shallowness to my breath. The scarlet droplets on the floor gleam purple under the club lights, tiny black holes yanking me into their orbits.

"Are you okay?" Preston asks.

My eyes snap up from the bloodstains and see that Preston is watching me intently. I am grateful for his interruption. A few more seconds, and I'm pretty sure I'd be licking the floor.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine," I say, sounding anything but. "I just need to go to the restroom."

I don't wait for Preston to respond and swiftly exit our VIP section. Luckily, it doesn't take long for me to find the bathroom, which is thankfully empty when I enter. I head to one of the sinks and splash my face with water three times. When I look up at my reflection, I almost don't recognize myself. My pupils are so wide. My eyes wild. I shake my head and look again. Slowly, I return to myself. I've never had a reaction like this before, this uncontrollable urge. I am caught in my image in the mirror, hoping that I can pull myself together before some unsuspecting soul comes in only for me to attack.

There is no denying that I have different needs from the people I interact with every day. My mother has always been aware of this. She does her part to help me behave and keep me safe from suspicion and persecution. And

while I know that it's for the best, I sometimes wonder what would happen if I simply let myself fully be who I am, with no concern for respectability and societal expectations.

This isn't the first time I've let my thoughts go down this path, imagining what it would be like to truly be free. But nearly losing control? This is frighteningly new. It makes me wonder whether working at Le Grand Fromage was keeping me in line more than I had previously thought. Stolen morsels of grade A beef, ripping shards of meat clean from the bone with my bare hands when no one is watching. I don't get those moments of reprieve at Banks Corps. Their cutthroat behavior is psychological, not the animallike hunger with which I'm familiar. In fact, my worst qualities are being brought to the forefront here. I *can't* lose myself and become the monster Mummy already thinks I am.

I splash my face with water one more time and use a plush paper towel to wipe my face. I am back in control, my bloodthirsty instincts safely tucked away once more. When I return to the VIP section, everything has returned to normal. Blake, Kwan, and Mason dance to the thumping bass that blares from the speakers as Preston refills his cup at the now clean table, the surrounding floor wiped down thoroughly of any crimson droplets or shards of glass.

"Blood makes you squeamish, huh?" Preston asks when I join him, mixing a drink of my own.

"Something like that," I say.

Preston pours straight tequila into two more cups and extends one toward me.

"A shot?" I ask skeptically. "I already have a drink," I say, lightly jiggling the beverage I just made.

"It's a palate cleanser," Preston says. "Then you can nurse that one for the rest of the night."

I shrug, taking the cup from him, and we both give a little cheers. The alcohol burns as it goes down, its liquid flame igniting my insides. Preston directs me over to the rest of our group, and we join them in their reveling. The night goes on without any further incident. I'm surprised to find that I am having a great time. We laugh and dance until midnight. When we finally leave, I am floating on cloud nine.

After spending the last few hours working up a sweat, we all decide to walk back to Banks Corps since the wait for a ride is over thirty minutes. Brickell is surprisingly alive for a weeknight, with more groups of people lingering about than I can count. The cool night air is refreshing, but I find that each step back to the office fills me with a little bit more anxiety. Public transportation in Miami is terrible on a good day, so there's no telling how long it'll take me to get home now so late at night.

When we're all standing in front of the office building, I say my goodbyes and tell everyone that I have to run to the restroom. Though the summer fellowship will pay me more than I have ever made in my life, I won't get my first paycheck for another two weeks, one week if I'm lucky, so I can't afford a ride to Little Haiti yet. My hope is that by the time I return, everyone will have gone home, and they'll be none the wiser that I had to spend the rest of the night waiting for the bus.

Just as I planned, everyone has left by the time I get back outside. I settle onto the bus stop bench. All I want to do is go to sleep, but I have to stay alert if I'm going to be waiting for the bus at this time. I am mindlessly scrolling on my phone when a flashy black sedan pulls up right in front of the bus stop. I look up, ready to run or cuss someone out if I have to, but when the tinted backseat passenger window rolls down, I am greeted by Preston's smiling face.

"What are you still doing here?" he asks, looking puzzled.

I hesitate a moment, not accustomed to the twinge of embarrassment that courses through me. Then I sit up a bit straighter, shoulders back. I've never been ashamed of my everyday reality, and I refuse to start now.

"I'm waiting for the bus," I say. I am looking Preston directly in the eyes, daring him to say anything.

"Want a ride?" he asks without missing a beat or a hint of mockery in his voice.

A small part of me wants to resist. It's a simple yes or no question, but it feels like a world of possibility waits just around the corner. But it's well past midnight and my exhaustion is hard to ignore, especially after dipping my toe into the well of opulence that is Preston's life.

"Sure," I say.



Preston opens his door and slides over for me to enter. I close the door behind me, already noting the difference between the cool, hard bench and plush, heated seats. If this day is any indication, a life of luxury would suit me just fine.

## CHAPTER 44

# CHARACTER-BUILDING

After I've given Preston's driver, Benito, my address, followed by a "Yes, we're going to have to go to Little Haiti at night because that's where I live...", Preston presses a button to pull up the privacy screen.

"I'm sorry about that," Preston says. He has the decency to look embarrassed.

"It's fine," I answer, fighting off the mini moment of panic trying its hardest to manifest. I am sitting in a luxury sedan with Preston Banks, the only child of one of the richest people on earth. My mom has done the light housekeeping duties of a CNA for his late great-grandfather for years. We might live in the same city but we are from two totally different worlds.

My throat constricts with a growing anxiety. When I look over at Preston, the expression on his face is so earnest that I exhale deeply. What do I even know about this guy besides the fact that he has a shit ton of money? I need to worry less about how I'm coming off to him and more about the impression he's making on me.

"Uh..." Preston clears his throat, breaking the silence. "Did you have fun tonight?"

"Yeah," I reply. "It's the most fun I've had on a Tuesday since ... ever."

"I'm glad to hear that."

The pause that follows is so awkward that I have to resist the urge to tuck and roll out of this car. Why did I agree to this ride anyway? Would it *really* have been the worst thing ever to wait a couple of hours to take the bus? The brakes of the car in front of us flash red, brightening the backseat. I exhale slowly. I decide in that moment that I need to relax. If I'm going to have to be in this car with Preston for another fifteen minutes, then I might as well enjoy

it as much as I can. Preston must have the same idea because I see him opening his mouth to say something, but I beat him to it.

“So,” I say bluntly, “what did your dad *really* think about those donations?”

Preston laughs, sitting back in his seat, appearing a tiny bit more at ease. “Honestly? He was furious. You’d be surprised by how uncharitable he is for someone who has so much money.”

I’m taken aback by his tone. Even if my mom and I had had an argument the very second before, I wouldn’t say anything against her, especially not to a stranger. “That’s not the most flattering way to talk about your dad,” I say.

“Well, he’s not my favorite person in the world right now,” Preston says.

“Do you ... want to talk about it?” I ask haltingly. Truly this is absolutely none of my business, but what else was I supposed to say? He clearly has some things he needs to get off his chest.

Preston is about to speak again when he shakes his head and looks at me, confusion etched into his face. He shakes his head again. “No...,” he says. “I’d rather not.”

“That’s fair. He *is* your dad,” I say. I get comfortable in my seat and face Preston more fully. “I’m not surprised that he’s not the most generous person. Billionaires tend not to be.”

“Now, that’s a big generalization,” Preston says, finally slipping back into the easy banter that we had started in the office. “I know people with a lot of money who give away good amounts of their wealth.”

“Mmm, sure, but a good amount is relative, isn’t it? There’s no denying that a ten million dollar donation is generous. But when it’s only a tiny fraction of someone’s net worth it’s more like they’re giving away spare change. It’s not like they’re actually committing to making something better for humankind.”

Preston scrunches his face at me and bursts into laughter. No, this boy did not. “I’m sorry,” Preston says. “I’m not laughing at what you said. I think that’s a great way to think. I was only trying to imagine my dad and his friends doing things to make other people’s lives easier just because. I couldn’t picture it. What would be in it for them?”

“Does something have to be in it for them to care?” I ask, spikes of

annoyance bristling within me.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Preston says. We sit silently, though not in discomfort.

“This is the exact opposite of what you’re supposed to talk about with someone you just met, you know?” Preston says.

“It couldn’t be avoided,” I say, looking out the window to watch the city lights blur past in neon streaks. “Well, what else do you do besides intern for Banks Corps and make excuses for the ultra-wealthy?”

Preston howls with laughter again, and this time I can feel the corners of my mouth twitch in response. “You really aren’t afraid to speak your mind, are you?” Preston asks.

“Don’t stall,” I say, smirking now. “Answer the question.”

“Okay, okay,” Preston says. “I really love traveling. I’ve been away at school in the UK and being able to travel all over Europe on a whim is pretty incredible.”

Though this does sound amazing, Preston’s response seems a little more generic than I expected. I can’t stop myself from wishing he’d be more open with me. It would make for a much better conversation.

“Actually,” Preston says, breaking into my thoughts. “Traveling is cool, but I don’t think I’ve had a chance to really figure out what I want to do. My dad’s made it pretty clear since I was a kid that I’m supposed to take on the legacy of Banks Corps. It would be nice for me to figure out on my own whether or not that’s what I actually want to do. But...”

I feel a strange niggling at the back of my mind at his openness but I don’t let myself dwell on it. “That’s really honest of you,” I say. “Thankfully, you have a ton of time to figure it all out. You don’t have to know everything right now.”

“Yeah,” Preston agrees. “But I love seeing people who are passionate about things. Like you and your supper club. When you were talking about it the day before, I could tell that you really care about your cooking. I want to feel like that about something.”

“Awww,” I tease. “Look at you romanticizing labor.”

Preston chuckles. “What? You don’t like cooking?”

“Oh, no, I love it,” I say. “I feel my most connected to other people when

they're eating something I made. But I also know that if I have to work, then at least I can spend my time doing something I enjoy."

Preston looks at me a moment. "That's pretty cynical."

That isn't a question but I say, "You could say that. Or you could say that I'm just in touch with reality."

We sit in thoughtful silence for another moment. I can see the familiar sights of my neighborhood drift by. I know that I'm being a little hard on Preston, even though he's been strangely open the entire ride. But how many times has Preston had to fight for something? He probably gets everything handed to him before he even has to ask. A little bit of resistance from me is probably very character-building. I sigh.

"I want to be taken seriously," I say. "I want my cooking to be seen as something important, not just a hobby." I think of Mummy and her fear that I will be subjecting myself to a life of serving people with no recognition and no money. "And I want to be great at it."

"I think you'll make it," Preston says. His tone is clear and strong. "No. I *know* you will."

My face heats from his vote of confidence. He's right, of course. I know that I'll make it. But it's still nice to hear someone else say it, even if that someone barely even knows me. Then, I am hit by a stroke of genius.

"Would you like to see me in action?" I ask Preston. "I have my next event on Friday if you'd like to come."

"I'd love to," Preston says without hesitation.

"Great," I say. "I'll let you know the place and time."

We pull up to my apartment complex, and the night around us is quiet. My limbs suddenly feel awkward and gangly as I adjust my purse to get out of the car. This is partly because I have just gotten Preston Banks to agree to attend one of my supper clubs. Once he's gotten a taste of my food, I'll have him on my side. And the other reason my legs are feeling like a baby giraffe's? Well ... I won't let myself go down that path. Not when I have more important things to worry about.

"Thank you for the ride," I say. "I really appreciate it."

"Any time," Preston says.

"Don't say things you don't mean," I say with a smirk.

“I’m serious,” Preston says. “You’re on the way.”

I laugh. “I’m actually not. I’m in the opposite direction.”

“I’ll make it on my way,” Preston says. He holds my gaze longer than he should. Why is my face so warm? I have to get out of this car.

“Spoken like someone who doesn’t have to drive himself,” I say as I climb out of the car. Preston’s face tightens imperceptibly at my comment, but I notice. “I’ll think about it.”

“That works,” Preston nods.

“Thank you,” I say to the driver, Benito, who nods.

I wave a final goodbye and walk away, trying my hardest to ignore the feel of Preston’s eyes following me as I disappear into my building.

## CHAPTER 45

# PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE

The remainder of my first week at Banks Corps is pretty calm. But, after having a coworker die on only my second day on the job, everything else was going to seem tame in comparison. I am about to head out to join Marcello and Chad downstairs. They've both come to pick me up from work so that I won't spend the valuable time needed to get ready for tonight's supper club riding the bus. I grab the small duffel bag filled with a change of clothes and do a final glance around my desk to make sure that I haven't forgotten anything. I'm already in prep mode, thinking about the last-minute items that I need and dishes I am making for Mrs. Acland's event when Preston stops me on the way to the elevator.

"Hey," he says, adjusting the stack of papers he's carrying in his arms. "I'm really looking forward to joining you later."

"So am I," I say. For reasons that he can't even begin to imagine.

"Should I bring anything with me?" Preston asks.

"Bring what to where?" Blake asks, popping up behind me, stealthier than you would think possible in a pair of four-inch heels. I can't even begin to imagine what it would feel like to wear that all day.

"To the dinner party Brielle is curating tonight," Preston volunteers.

"Oh, already hanging out after work, are you?" Blake says in a tone that is eerily similar to Ainsley's.

"It's not like that," I say, and I see Preston visibly deflate. I try not to dwell on what that might mean. "Preston is only coming for moral support."

"Moral support, eh?" Blake asks skeptically. "Well if that's the case, then you won't mind if I join. You know, for moral support."

I clench my jaw in annoyance. "Sure," I say, acting as if Blake's presence

won't irk me. "Preston, can you share the details with Blake?"

"We could even ride there together," Blake says, looking at Preston and coyly batting her eyelashes at him.

I cut Preston off before he can respond. "I have to head out to start getting ready for tonight, so I'll let you both handle those logistics," I say. Blake smirks at my abruptness, clearly aware that she's getting on my nerves. I nod at Preston and head to the elevator for a second time.

I press the button for the doors to close, grateful that I am the only person on the elevator. Someone pops their perfectly manicured hand between the closing doors, causing them to stop with a loud jerking noise. In steps Ainsley, and I have to wrestle the urge not to let my inward groan escape. Just what I needed.

"Brielle," Ainsley says in her imperial way.

"Ainsley," I reply.

"How have you enjoyed your first week at Banks Corps?"

"Um ... it's been interesting," I say, watching the digital interface displaying the floor numbers decrease as we slowly make our way to the lobby. "I've learned so much in such a short time."

"Good to hear," Ainsley says.

There's a lingering pause as we continue our descent, and I rack my brain for conversation. I've suddenly forgotten how to engage in any of the mindless watercooler talk that I learned while working at Le Grand Fromage. And then I remember something that my old coworkers always asked one another.

"Any plans this weekend?" I ask.

The look that Ainsley gives me lets me know that it is nowhere near any of my business and that I am foolish for even asking her.

"Never mind," I say, this time barely disguising my displeasure at this interaction. Last time I try to engage in polite chitchat. As the elevator finally dings on the first floor, I quickly escape being confined with Ainsley.

"Oh, Brielle," she says, stopping me from making a beeline for one of the glass doors that stand between me and freedom.

I turn to look at Ainsley but say nothing.

"I couldn't help but overhear your discussion with Preston and Blake. I



hope your little catering hobby won't interfere with your job?"

I silently remind myself to check my Banks Corps dental insurance because with how tightly I'm clenching my jaw this summer, I'm going to need a whole new set of teeth. "No, it won't interfere," I say shortly. "And it's a supper club, not catering."

"Right," Ainsley says dismissively. "Oh. And do try not to fall over yourself getting to Preston. I'm fairly certain he and Blake have been a thing for years."

Ainsley breezes past me. I am left standing in a cloud of her perfume, which smells infuriatingly pleasant, so unlike her in every way.

When I finally climb into Marcello's car, I'm sure both Marcello and Chad are able to pick up on my foul mood. All thanks to the likes of Blake and Ainsley.

"Uh-oh," Marcello says. "Are you hangry? We can't have you crabby before we've even started the event now."

"I'll be fine," I say with a sigh. "I'm just tired of the passive aggression from white women in the workplace."

"You've already said a mouthful," Chad says, turning to look at me with sympathy.

It takes an hour and a half for us to make our way out of Brickell and get the remaining items that we need, but finally we are set. The three of us head to Marcello's house to change.

When we arrive at Mrs. Acland's penthouse suite, we are taken to the kitchen—though not before she gives us a mind-numbing tour of her home. It's outfitted in that sparsely decorated way that screams new money, minimalist haute couture decor. Mrs. Acland points out that the sleek, long black benches by the front entrance are by Hermès but the geometric-looking coffee tables and couches in the living room (that barely looks lived in) are all Fendi Casa. There's even a room that holds nothing but an enormous Gucci tiger-print tapestry that is apparently a placeholder for a commissioned oil painting by a reclusive European artist.

At last we are left to our own devices in the kitchen, and we promptly get to work. The space is designed in what Mrs. Acland calls adobe, which, given the unfinished wooden fixtures and clay plates and random terracotta vases,

feels like a fancy farm more than anything. Marcello, Chad, and I set up quickly. We glide around one another in a synchronized rhythm, our many months of working together at Le Grand Fromage permanently etched into our muscle memory.

Tonight we are making a Mexican-Peruvian fusion of tequila-lime shrimp ceviche and gazpacho with a twist, fajitas a la Peruana with mezcal-marinated lomo saltado served with a side of pollo a la brasa that's drenched with a savory pozolo verde. For dessert, Marcello and Chad create a sweet and spicy dark chocolate blend to go with a helping of picarones and churros. The lovebirds are lost in a world of their own making as they work shoulder to shoulder, giggling every so often at jokes that I am not meant to hear. Perfect.

I carefully make my way over to the oversized purse I brought with me, stopping briefly to check on a simmering sauce. If anyone happens to notice, they'll see a micromanaging chef. Expected. I turn to the bag and open it as silently as I can. It doesn't take long for me to find what I'm looking for nestled deep within a separate zippered section. The weight of the small black pouch in my hand is unmistakable. With a glance over my shoulder, I untie the pouch and take a whiff of the now pulverized ingredients. The tiny hairs inside my nose stand at attention. Goose bumps ripple down my arms, the raised flesh reminding me of a freshly plucked chicken leg. I carefully tilt the contents of the bag into an unmarked pepper shaker and drop the shaker into the front pocket of my apron.

Marcello, Chad, and I have finished the last of our prepping when my phone buzzes on the counter. I flip it open to find a message from Preston.

Blake and I are parking right now.

And that's when I remember that not only have I forgotten to tell Marcello and Chad that we would be having guests today, but Mummy also has no idea where I am. When I check my phone, I have three missed calls from her.

Crap.

## CHAPTER 46

# FIRST TASTE

“Marcello. Babe. Darling,” I say in what I hope is a placating tone.

“Oh Lord. What is it,” he says, putting down the knife that he was sharpening.

“I forgot to mention that Preston will be joining us today.”

“Who’s Preston?” Chad asks, wiping up a spot on the counter.

“Only the son of one of the world’s richest people!” Marcello says. “And you have me in my boring work clothes? How could you?”

“If it’s any consolation, I’m in my work clothes too,” I tell Marcello.

“Yeah, but it’s different for you,” Marcello says, and I know if his hair was long enough he’d be flipping it over his shoulder right now.

“So different, babe,” Chad says, giving Marcello a kiss on the cheek as he wiggles his eyebrows at me in a *you better agree with him* way.

“Totally,” I echo, nodding solemnly. “We also have another guest. Her name is Blake. She is one hundred percent snobby. She’s probably gonna get on your nerves. I’m so sorry in advance. Oh, hi, Preston and Blake!” I rush through the second half of my announcement, walking toward them. I glance over my shoulder at Marcello and Chad, and they wear twin expressions that say, *Oh great, here we go*. They really are perfect for each other.

“Hey, Brielle,” Preston says, giving me an unexpected hug. We pull away from each other awkwardly, and it’s only when Marcello clears his throat that we step apart.

“Marcello and Chad, this is Preston and Blake,” I introduce. Everyone smiles tightly at one another. I am at a total loss on how to proceed. Just as the thick silence is starting to suffocate us all, Mrs. Acland walks in. She’s dressed in a flowing, calf-length emerald green kaftan and strappy gold heels

that meet the hem of her dress.

“Preston? Blake? What are you two doing here?” Mrs. Acland gives them air-kisses. I should’ve known that all these rich people know one another.

“I was wondering that myself,” Blake mutters under her breath, and Preston looks at her with daggers in his eyes.

“Brielle is an intern with us at Banks Corps this summer. We’re here as a show of support,” Preston says.

“That’s so kind of you,” Mrs. Acland says enthusiastically, as though Preston told her they had just saved a pack of freshly born puppies from the jaws of a ravenous alligator. “Brielle, I’m sure you won’t mind if I take them off your hands? The guests are starting to arrive, and I’m sure you need to focus.” Mrs. Acland doesn’t wait for me to reply as she ushers Preston and Blake out of the kitchen.

“Brielle Swan Petitfour,” Marcello starts, “the next time you want to invite your crush or anybody else to supper club without even so much as a heads-up, I will make it my sole mission to embarrass you from now until kingdom come.”

“It wasn’t *that* bad,” I say sheepishly, and when Marcello opens his mouth again to speak I continue. “Okay, okay! My fault.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” Marcello says, prepping the plates with appetizers for the party of now ten, given Blake and Preston’s arrival. “That girl hardly opened her mouth, and I could already tell I am not going to like her. I need a warning before being around people like that for extended periods of time. AKA more than a minute.”

“Imagine working with her every day.” I groan. My phone rings again. I’m holding it in my hands, so this time I see “Mummy” pop up on the screen. “I have to take this. It’s my mom.”

I head to the nearest bathroom to answer the call.

“Hey, Mummy,” I say.

“Brielle, where are you?” my mom says on the other end of the line. “I’ve called you three times already.”

“Sorry about that, Mummy. I’m at Marcello’s house. I meant to tell you that we were going to hang out today, but it totally slipped my mind.”

“Mm-hmm,” Mummy says. I sense that she’s going to ask me some more

follow-up questions, so I interject.

“Did you need something?” I ask.

“Yes, actually,” Mummy says. “I’m making my suitcases for Haiti, but I can’t find the really big one. Do you know where it is?”

“We had to throw it out, remember?” I say. “It was when we had that mouse that kept eating through everything. It left a huge hole.”

Mummy is silent, and then she sighs heavily. “I remember now. Well, I’ll have to bring less stuff with me on this trip for your sisters. That’s okay. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“I can send you some money to get one,” I say quickly. “I have my summer internship now. And my sup—” I cut myself off. I was just about to tell my mom that I’ve been running this supper club, after she explicitly told me not to. If I’m going to juggle all this, in addition to ultimately getting Silas Banks to taste even just a little bit of my cooking, then I need to be on top of things. Sloppy revenge is not what I’m trying to serve. I take a deep breath and try again. “What I mean is I have my internship now. I can send you some money to buy a new suitcase, Mummy.”

My mom is silent on the phone for so long that I look down at my screen to make sure that she’s still there. “Mummy?”

“Yes, cheri,” she says. I can tell that she’s crying even as she tries to hide it. “Thank you for that, Brielle. I would really appreciate it and so would your sisters.”

I say goodbye to my mom and send over some money for her to get the suitcase and to take a rideshare to and from the store. Just because I can. A small part of me wonders if Mummy might’ve pushed back on my not telling her where I was if she hadn’t been preoccupied with her trip to Haiti. An even smaller part of me thinks about how Mummy might’ve asked more questions about where I was and when I’d be coming home if I didn’t offer to buy the suitcase in the first place. And while there’s something to be said about our shift in dynamic, what sticks out to me most is this feeling of having options, of knowing that what might seem like a simple purchase to someone else means essentials like new clothes, toiletries, and over-the-counter medicine for my sisters in Haiti.

When I return to the kitchen, Chad is taking the last tray of appetizers—a

refreshing tomato gazpacho with a Mexican twist—out to Mrs. Acland's guests. For this supper, I decided to marinate all the meats with my special blend. While Marcello and Preston had been preparing themselves for the evening, I had gone to work using a pestle and mortar to grind my procured items into dust. I focused my intention as I steadily mashed, thinking about what I wanted to accomplish with this meal, altering the finely ground bits into something more. Even in the middle of Marcello's kitchen, I was overcome by that soul-crushing expanse of energy. Thankfully my recovery time was quicker than before.

I deftly remove the pepper shaker from my apron and sprinkle a bit into the pan before me as I stir. I wish for each person to enjoy the meal and for them to tell at least two friends about their experience. But I have special requests for Mrs. Acland and Preston. Marcello and Chad have only just left to serve the entrées when Blake strides into the kitchen.

"Hi, Bri-elle," she says, dragging the second syllable of my name. "How's it going?"

"Good," I say. "Busy."

"I can see that." Blake leans on the counter as she watches me plate the final dishes of this course. "You're really good at serving."

I look up at Blake as she reaches across the counter to pluck a morsel of shrimp off the plate nearest her. I grip the spoon in my hand tightly, ready to smack it across the back of her hand before I decide to go a different route. To truly test what I am capable of.

"It's all part of the experience. How are you liking the meal?" I look Blake directly in the eyes when I speak. "Be honest."

Blake straightens where she stands, and her eyes go slightly out of focus. "It's really delicious," she says earnestly. "I am pleasantly surprised."

Blake stands in the same position, almost as if she's waiting for me to say something else. She looks ... mesmerized. I take the plate that Blake ate from and set it aside, plating another one for Marcello or Chad to take to the guests when they return.

"So...", I say as I work, "how is Preston enjoying everything?"

"Ugh, so much," Blake says. "He keeps asking people if they can believe how good everything is. I'm jealous."

“Oh really? Why is that?” I ask.

“Because I’ve had a crush on Preston for the longest time, and he’s never paid me any mind. Then you come along with your Cinderella vibes, and you’re literally all he can talk about. *And* you cook? I never stood a chance.”

With each question Blake answers, I feel power unfurling in my belly, my first real taste. I reach for it, hungry for its depth. It feels limitless. Its newness calls to me. My senses, which are already better tuned than the average person’s, are even more heightened. The footsteps that approach the kitchen echo so deep within my ear that it reverberates down my throat and rumbles in my chest.

“You’re free to go, Blake,” I say, and just like that her eyes clear. Blake blinks a few times, looking confused for a moment, and then I watch her return to herself.

“What are you looking at?” she asks, spinning on her heel to leave.

When the night comes to an end, Mrs. Acland’s guests’ appetites are sated and happiness radiates from everyone in waves. Marcello, Chad, and I walk back and forth to Marcello’s car, packing away our final items. Just when I realize that I haven’t spoken to Preston all night, he appears at the kitchen’s entryway as if summoned.

“Hey,” I say as I stack some empty cartons.

Preston comes up beside me and helps, grabbing a few of the leftover things on the counter.

“Hey,” he says. “I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to come back in here. I wasn’t much moral support, was I?”

“Not really,” I say with a smile as we weave throughout the expansive house.

“Mrs. Acland refused to let me go. She was dragging me around in a pretty obvious attempt to make it seem like she’s much cooler with my father than she really is,” Preston says.

“That must happen a lot.”

“It does,” Preston says. “Also, you have no idea the grip that woman has.”

I laugh as we toss everything into the trash can located at the end of the hall outside Mrs. Acland’s home because a filled garbage bin doesn’t fit the aesthetic of her kitchen.

“Everything tasted really delicious,” Preston says, following me back into the house. “Thank you for inviting me. And next time, I’ll make sure that I stick around right beside you. All night.”

“Only if you’re not dead weight,” I say. “According to Marcello, I can be a bit of a diva when I cook.”

It’s his turn to chuckle. “I promise to be more help than trouble.”

“Good,” I say. I don’t know if it’s the recent taste of my power, but I am feeling completely at ease. The anger that’s always waiting to unleash itself within me has morphed into something sleeker. Just as beautiful as it is dangerous.

“Well, I’ve got to go now,” Preston says, still not making any move to leave. He is in my web now. If I wanted to, I could use its glistening threads to fashion him into my puppet. Soon.

“I’ll see you on Monday, then?” I say, releasing him as I casually wipe the last of the crumbs off the kitchen counter.

“Yeah,” Preston says, shaking his head lightly. “Have a nice weekend.”

I hum to myself as I survey the now clean kitchen. Already, I have secured my next event and this time I didn’t even have to manifest it. I think back to my earlier interaction with Blake. I have all the confirmation I need that I am stronger than I would’ve ever known had I not taken this risk, this chance on myself. Blake’s short transformation to pleasant truth teller was clear proof of the power within me. And I have only just tapped into it. When I figure out how to use Preston to get to Silas, I will be able to help my family (and myself if I’m being honest). When Marcello comes looking for me, he finds me grinning. He gives me a look.

“Who’s got you smiling like that?” he asks.

“Me,” I say without hesitation.

“I know that’s right!”



## CHAPTER 47

# FUNKY CREOLE

It seems that Preston and I have become a bit inseparable since he came to my supper club. Every day he's insisted that we go on what he calls an executive lunch, also known as a lunch that takes an hour and a half to two hours instead of the hour we're technically allotted. No one ever calls Preston out on it, and the only reason Ainsley doesn't make my life miserable is because Preston will walk me back to my desk each time, stopping at Ainsley's desk to ask "You cool?" Ainsley reluctantly says "Right" every time, and I know that the day Preston forgets to tell her that he was with me, my ass is grass.

"Let me walk you to the door," Preston says when his chauffeur pulls up to the front of my building. I agree, and we stroll close enough to have the tips of our fingers brush but never hold the other's hand outright.

"Thanks for the ride," I say to Preston with my hand on the doorknob.

"Any ti—"

Preston's words are cut off as Mummy yanks open the front door. Clearly, she has been waiting for us.

"Allo!" Mummy says, a little bit breathless.

"Mummy?" I ask. "What are you doing here?"

"I am an adult. I can come and go as I please," Mummy says with a smirk. "And more importantly, I live here."

My face heats and I turn to Preston, who is trying (and failing) to stifle his laughter.

"Don't encourage her," I mumble.

"And who do we have here?" Mummy says, looking directly at Preston.

"Hi, Mrs. Petitfour. I'm Preston Banks. I work with Brielle at the summer

internship,” he says, beaming his brightest smile.

“You forget to add ‘son of Silas Banks,’” Mummy says, clearly unfazed.

“And son of Silas Banks,” Preston admits.

“Interesting,” Mummy says, looking him over. “Well, come in for dinner.” Mummy turns to walk back into the apartment.

“But, Mummy,” I start, “Preston has other plans. This really isn’t necessary.”

“Oh, yes it is,” Mummy says, ready to head back inside. “This young man has dropped you home every day this week, and I have not been introduced to him until just now. It is very necessary.”

Mummy enters the apartment without another word. I sigh. “Are you able to stay?”

“Of course,” Preston says. “I’ll just shoot my driver a text and let him know that I’ll be here for a little bit.”

Preston pulls out his phone and quickly taps out a message. “And don’t look so sick,” he says to me. “It’ll be fun!”

“Yeah. Fun.”

When Preston and I walk into the apartment, I take everything in, imagining that I am seeing it all for the first time. Our couch is shredded in two places, and we don’t even have a cat. The small bookshelf along the far right wall is brimming with books, tossed in haphazardly. The television, which is bigger than any we’ve ever had but so old that it loads anything from a streaming service in fits and starts, is tuned into the local news. Though everything might look a bit run-down, it’s all very neat and tidy. If there’s one thing Mummy is going to make sure we do, it’s keep our home clean.

“Come have a seat,” Mummy says, gesturing to our kitchen table.

Preston and I head over to do what we’re told just as the anchor speaking on the television moves on to the next news segment.

“It’s been almost two weeks since the hit-and-run that claimed Beauregard Banks’s life, but authorities are no closer to finding a culprit.” I snap my head in Preston’s direction. The look on his face is tight with grief. I walk over to the couch in search of the remote.

“Silas Banks has issued a one-hundred-thousand-dollar reward for anyone

who may have witnessed the incident that claimed his grandfather's life. And it would appear that the billionaire is juggling multiple fires."

I walk around the couch a second time, still looking for the remote control. Where is the damn thing?

"Medical reports are claiming that a Banks Corps employee who recently died was found to have oxymorphenol in his system, the most profitable drug sold by the pharmaceutical company. Investigators have yet to determine—"

With a yank, I pull the television's plug straight out of its outlet. "Okay. Enough of that," I say.

Preston and I stare at each other for a second too long and then burst into laughter.

"Thanks," Preston says once we've settled down.

"No problem," I say.

We sit at the table and chat quietly while Mummy finishes cooking in the kitchen. In no time at all she's prepared white rice, drizzled in black bean sos pwa, and poul nan sos, the chicken's savory aroma so tantalizing that my mouth waters each time she stirs the pot. When Mummy finishes, I get up to help her make the plates.

"Oh, I can make my own plate," Preston says, standing. I want to laugh. First of all, why is he lying? I'm fairly certain that Preston has never had to make a plate in his life. I'm about to say just that when Mummy simply turns to look at Preston, not uttering a word. Preston slowly lowers himself back into his seat. Smart guy. I finish ladling the black bean sauce beside the rice and head over to Preston with his food.

"This is the one and only time I will ever be making you a plate like this. Do you understand?" I say, looking at Preston seriously.

"Oh ... um. Yeah," he stammers. "Because of how patriarchal it is, right? It's really—"

I laugh at Preston and place the food down in front of him. "You're right. But also, I'm a chef, Preston! I serve people food—it's part of the gig." I grab my own plate and sit down at the seat across from him. "It's only a big deal if you make it one."

"Be nice, Brielle," Mummy says, coming to the table with her plate of food. "So ... Preston. How is my daughter really doing at her internship?"

Every time I ask it's always fine, fine, fine. Give me the details."

My jaw falls open and it's Preston's turn to laugh at my expense.

"Brielle is great, actually," Preston answers. "She helped pick the next round of people in the upcoming apprenticeship season."

Mummy and Preston continue on like that, chatting and asking each other questions as if they were old friends. This is the first time I've introduced Mummy to anyone besides Marcello, and while I was prepared for some potential awkwardness, this easy rapport between them catches me completely off guard. Preston spends the evening learning how to say different phrases in Creole. His accent is so terrible that Mummy and I collapse into a fit of giggles each time.

"You sound like your grandfather," Mummy says. "I was on the phone with him earlier today, and even after working for Mr. Len for nearly twenty years, he still can't figure out how to ask 'how are you' in Creole."

Mummy and Preston continue their laughing, but I almost want to interrupt the moment to ask Mummy why she's still speaking with Mr. Len when she doesn't work for the Bankses anymore. Right when I decide that I *will* in fact ask, Mummy stands up to clear the table. Preston pops up to help less than a second after.

"Please, sit," Mummy says.

"It's the least I can do after this wonderful meal," Preston says. I can't help the smile that tugs at the corner of my mouth. He sure is trying very hard to make a good impression.

Once we've cleared everything away and washed and dried the dishes, Mummy and I walk Preston to the door.

"It was really nice meeting you, Mrs. Petitfour," Preston says.

"Likewise," Mummy says with a smile. "Hopefully I'll see you again soon. If you're going to be Brielle's boyfr—"

"Yup, it's time to go!" I say, interrupting Mummy before she embarrasses me even more. Sheesh. This woman is on a roll. "Let me walk you out."

Preston gives Mummy a final wave goodbye as I guide him hurriedly out the door. "You know," Preston says, "if you wanted to spend some alone time with me, all you had to do was ask."

"Oh please," I say, rolling my eyes even as my face warms from his

teasing.

“I had a great time tonight.” Preston smiles when we reach his waiting black car. “It was really nice meeting your mom.”

“Yeah, it was unexpected, but it wasn’t bad at all,” I say as Preston and I lean against the car side by side. We linger there in comfortable silence for a moment, then I feel Preston looking at me intently. I turn to him, my cheeks heating again from his focus.

“What is it?” I say slowly, reflexively putting a hand up to one of my jumbo braids.

“You just look really happy,” Preston says softly. “It looks good on you.”

“Thanks,” I say, trying to accept a compliment without any snark for once. Preston and I stare at each other for longer than we should, his gaze gliding down to my lips. I feel my pulse quicken. While it would be nice for us to have this moment, Mummy is way too close for comfort. In fact, her Haitian mom senses are surely tingling right now. She’s probably lurking behind some bushes waiting for the moment our lips touch so she can run out screaming “Anmwe! What are you doing with my daughter?!” And that level of humiliation would just be unacceptable.

“Well, have a good night,” I say, cutting the moment short. Preston smiles but says nothing, getting into the car. He rolls down the window and clears his throat exaggeratedly and says, “Mèsi pou manje a.”

His terrible accent makes me laugh. A few bites of food to eat, and he clearly thinks he’s Haitian. “Pa dekwa. It was nothing,” I say with a smile before turning away to return home. I’m still grinning when I tuck myself into bed for the night.

Who knew jacked-up Creole could sound so good?

## CHAPTER 48

# TIME IS MONEY

I have become a well-oiled cog in the Banks Corps machine. These last two weeks have been filled with meetings, meetings that could've been emails, and yet more meetings. Note-taking. Busy work. And so many coffee runs. I'm pretty sure I've gotten almost every person in this office a cup to start their day. Thrice.

Life outside of Banks Corps has been going pretty smoothly too. Mummy has purchased her ticket to Haiti and will be leaving for the island in the coming days. Every so often she asks me about Preston and teases me that we're getting serious. She doesn't say it, but she is happy that I'm being ... normal in that way. I switch the topic of conversation every time. My sisters are so excited about Mummy's visit that they've called practically every day to ask if they should prepare one meal or another for her arrival. And I've had the chance to practice even more of my own cooking with a couple of supper clubs, thanks to Mrs. Newhouse's and Mrs. Acland's guests raving about my talent.

If there's one thing the ladies of Hunter Island love, it's the exclusivity of "a rising chef who's still under the radar." Marcello's words. He's been using the publicity skills he's learned managing his family's funeral home to add a certain *je ne sais quoi* to my supper clubs, and I have to admit, it's working. Plus, Chad has continued to join us. I'm grateful for the help, paying him and Marcello for everything they're doing to support me.

I've even taken Preston up on his offer to pick me up for work a few times. I was reluctant at first but eventually caved. Having a bit more time to sleep, especially since I spend so much of my weeknights prepping for the upcoming weekend's dinner events, has been a life saver. Even though life

right now is nothing but work ... and getting paid.

Between cooking and the summer fellowship, I've made more in two weeks than I've made my *entire* time working at Le Grand Fromage. This is the most money I've made in my whole life. Maybe even Mummy's life too. I know that my mom left Haiti partly for these opportunities, for me to do better than she did and our ancestors before her. But this is on a whole other level. Though I grapple often with this truth, there's no denying that things have been pretty great lately. But we all know that whenever things are going a little too perfectly, it's only a matter of time before it all comes crashing down.

I push these thoughts aside as I reread the pointless assignment Ainsley has me working on, checking for any typos. When I am certain that I've done everything that she's requested, I minimize the window and open up the email I use for the supper club to catch up on messages from Marcello and any potential clients who have reached out to us. I am hunched over my seat, eyes glued to my screen, reading an ingredient list that Marcello sent me not too long ago when a shadow stretches across my keyboard.

"Hi, Preston," I say without looking up, assuming he's come to ask me to go to another executive lunch.

"Hello, Brielle," a familiar voice answers. But it isn't Preston. I snap my head up, and standing right before me is Silas Banks.

"Oh! Hello, Mr. Banks." I say, trying subtly to lower my laptop screen so that he doesn't see that I am spending work time working on anything but. "How can I help you?"

The unnatural quiet of the office should've been my first clue that Silas was on our floor. Even now the office remains graveyard silent while people shuffle papers at their desks and drink from empty cups of coffee, hoping to make it seem like they're not watching my every interaction with the billionaire.

"Just checking in on our first-ever fellowship recipient," Silas says. "How have you enjoyed the summer so far?"

What I want to say is: *Actually, it's been exhausting working with Ainsley's countless microaggressions and condescension.* But what I really say is, "It's been great. Thank you for asking."

Silas continues standing at my desk, smiling a too-wide, Cheshire cat smile. “Good, good,” he says. “And how has it been interacting with your ... peers?”

His hesitation before saying *peers* makes my hackles rise. First an unannounced visit, and now this? Either Silas likes keeping people on their toes, or I’m being tested. I take a calming breath and say, “It’s definitely been a learning experience. I’ve even had the chance to get to know Preston. He’s so very kind.”

I am not imagining the flash of emotion that passes over Silas’s face at my response, am I? It’s so quick that I can’t quite place my finger on what emotion that is exactly. Rage? Hurt? Disgust? I knew that my answer would get under his skin, but now I’m thinking I should probably cool it if I want this job to last the entire summer.

“Yes,” Silas says, teeth still on display. “Preston can’t stop singing your praises. I’m glad he’s stepped into his role as the future leader of the company and has welcomed you enough to reduce any potential culture shock you may have experienced.”

Any warm fuzzy feelings at the thought of Preston talking nicely about me are immediately drowned by the venom dripping from Silas’s words. I haven’t even recovered from his verbal jab when he asks, “And what are you working on right now?”

“Nothing important,” I say, partly because I don’t want him to ask to see my computer screen—currently filled with meal planning—and partly because I clearly want to get fired.

Silas bristles. “Do you know what this is?” he asks, stretching out his arm to show me the watch on his wrist. It looks more like a missing part of a rocket ship based on its complex gears and widgets than a luxury timepiece. He continues without waiting for my answer. “It’s a Breguet, perfectly synchronized with NASA’s Deep Space Atomic Clock. My entire day is scheduled down to the second—my time is *that* valuable. And since Banks Corps is an extension of me, there’s no way that you could possibly be working on ‘nothing important.’”

I might as well get some jumbo tubs of stale popcorn to pass around because any pretense that the entire office isn’t eavesdropping is completely



out the window now. Maybe it would've been better for Silas to see my plans for the weekend after all ...

"If you're going to be here, you're going to work," Silas says. He signals for me and turns, not waiting to see if I'm keeping up. I stand, grabbing my bag and notepad before following him as he leads us through the room. My insides have clenched in on themselves, my shoulders ache to hunch over in shame. But I'm not going out like that.

I keep my head held high as I walk behind Silas, eyes unseeing until Ainsley pops into view. She's standing right outside the main conference room, one hand covering her mouth, not in shock but in barely contained glee.

## CHAPTER 49

# OVARIES

I walk with Silas Banks, one of the richest men in the world, through the winding Banks Corps hallways. He says nothing, so I follow his lead. After a time, he chuckles.

“Gosh, I’m sorry about that,” he says, stopping in the hallway. “I know what you were doing was a waste of time. But I can’t have everyone else knowing that. It would be bad for morale. To be honest, none of the interns are working on anything worthwhile—I didn’t become a billionaire by having clueless teenagers do my work for me.”

*No, just children from impoverished countries,* I stop myself from retorting.

“But,” Silas continues, “I do want you to do real work this summer. I watched you in action at the restaurant, putting out all those fires. I like your hustle. It honestly reminds me of myself.”

*We are not the same.* But I fix my expression into something that says, *Wow, I am flattered.*

“You’ve got an amazing head on your shoulders,” Silas continues. “And I believe this arrangement can be mutually beneficial to us both. But you’re a little reckless.”

He laughs. “Ballsy, even. Can I still say that?”

“Probably not, sir,” I say dryly.

“At first, I was pissed that I was forced to donate that money that you effectively stole from me. But then I thought about how *funny* this whole thing is. Before I had all this, I would have done something like that, easy. As long as the money wasn’t mine! Can’t hate the player.”

As we near a door at the end of the many twists and turns of hallways

we've walked, Silas continues to speak without stopping. I am fascinated by how ... into himself he is. It is so apparent that he has lost his grip on reality because people probably tell him *Yes, go on, please* all the time. I'm sure he doesn't get awkward silences or have his stories go unheard. Every word he utters is a sticky drip of honey, sweet nectar that may hold the secret to "earning" a life like his. When we get to the door, Silas pauses and motions for me to do the same.

There is a flurry of conversation happening on the other side, some laughter, coughing.

"Watch this," Silas says. He turns the doorknob.

## CHAPTER 50

# LOCKED

A hush blows through the room almost instantly, like an exhale snuffing out a candle. The people milling about quickly find their way to their seats—standing desks. Before I started this internship, in an effort to have a sense of what I was getting myself into, I read a profile about the culture of Banks Corps and the new way meetings were conducted. Silas had decided that standing up was more efficient. He ordered his board members to follow suit. Silas steps up to a desk and points to the lectern beside him, so I walk up to it silently. Right beside me is Preston. He looks at me questioningly, a tiny frozen furrow in the middle of his brow, but says nothing.

“All right, hit me,” Silas says. He stands straight, his back as flat as an ironing board, but somehow still emits vibes of casual-CEO-looking-for-updates. It has always been fascinating to observe how the ones with the most power pretend they don’t wield it; they have the privilege of being laidback and “fun.” Meanwhile, the nerves of their employees are crackling across the air of any room they step into.

In all the turn taking of reports and updates no one mentions the man who died only days before. It’s like he’s been erased from the story of Banks Corps. Everyone is expendable here. Everyone but Silas.

“I have the latest oxymorphenol numbers, sir,” says a woman. This seems to be what we have been waiting for. Even Silas perks up.

The light in the room flickers a few times. I blink.

The clothes I wear are now a boa constrictor around my body, squeezing too tight. And it is hot. So hot.

“I think we can double down on reaching the influencer market,” says someone. “Doctors try to pretend they aren’t paying attention to what internet

personalities are up to but there's been strong correlative studies that suggest otherwise.

"Retraining our sales team on highlighting the therapeutic benefits will be helpful. We need to update the language on potential side effects anyway."

"What about the national dentists conference coming up?" says another person. "Will we have enough ready in time for that?"

They are talking about a powerful drug like it's a ... a sandwich.

"This wouldn't be Banks Corps if we weren't ready for such a huge opportunity," adds someone else.

"That's all exciting, but what I'm most concerned about is the hydroxymorphone rollout. It has to be seamless," Silas says.

Preston glances over at me, but I cannot maintain eye contact. Bits and pieces of the words spoken in this room are reaching me as if through a fog.

*Reverses overdoses.*

*Mitigates addiction.*

What...?

Suddenly, understanding dawns. My eyes widen. There isn't enough air in this room for my lungs.

Oxymorphenol killed my father. It consumed him until he was just a husk of himself, the little bit that wasn't already zonbi erased, and then he was gone. And these people are brainstorming ways to spread it to people who don't need it. *Then they want to sell the antidote.*

My breath quickens, each shallow gasp feeling as if it's being pulled through a narrow straw.

"Brielle?" The sound of my name comes from so far away. I turn my head to hear the voice more clearly, but somehow the floor lurches up to meet me instead.

Everything goes black.

## CHAPTER 51

# WAKE UP

I am in a room I do not recognize.

“You must have locked your knees,” Preston says. “Those standing desks are such a pain. Are you all right?”

I stare at him. Stuff down the rage I feel congealing around my heart.

“A nurse came in to check on you while you were unconscious,” he says as he rubs his head.

This is life for the wealthy. Medical assistance the moment you need it, no need to wait for co-payments and insurance backlogs.

“My mom takes oxymorphenol, you know,” I whisper. “She needs it because of her chronic pain.”

My father died of an overdose, something I try to forget every day of my life, and there are well-dressed business execs meeting and calmly discussing how to get the same powerful drug responsible for his death into the hands of more people. People who will only suffer from its use, drowning in a human-made sea of addiction. All so they can make more money. If Banks Corps truly cared about the impact they’ve had, their life-saving antidote would be free for all who needed it. A way to atone for what they’ve done. Instead, they think about profit margins and economic return.

Preston hugs his body, seemingly unsure of what to do with his arms.

“I’m—I’m so sorry,” he says.

“It’s not your fault,” I say.

But I do blame his grandfather.

I was too young to realize what happened to Mummy after the day our world changed. But I remember her not picking me up anymore. Her needing to lie down more and spending entire weekends in bed. Life got smaller. It

took me time to understand what getting hurt at work meant. Maybe she could have found a lawyer from one of those commercials and sued her employer for not even giving her enough time to heal. But an immigrant in need of a job to pay bills and send remittances isn't likely to be the most litigious person, and a man like Mr. Len could and would take advantage of that reality.

And the beeps.

The one drug that helps with her pain is developed by her boss's company. And we still can't afford it half the time. Ironically, cruelly, the person who should be able to use oxymorphenol ... can't.

So the beeps continue.

It is not right.

It is not fair.

I am more than livid. I am determined.

I will get what I—we—deserve.

## **INTERMISSION II**



## CHAPTER 52

# MATRIMONY

### *Tersi (dance)*

Reunited at last. Valentine and Swan are sewed together, fingers burned into one flesh, linked for eternity. This is what Valentine would want, to somehow keep her love safe if she could. The days of Swan and Mummy hidden away in his government-provided lodging grow to weeks, moons wax and wane to months.

When Mummy returns to the marketplace, she is humming, more quietly, but her song has returned.

### *Callisse (poetry)*

They are not special. What often happens when two people are in love is their story too. Valentine's belly still rests, but soon it will be one more mountain standing in the way of Father's quest to return Mummy to this land. What happens within Mummy's belly is a secret between her mind and her body. No one's business but her own.

Eventually, Mummy and Swan marry. Mummy is wearing cream, and though we cannot join her, we are in pink. A garden of roses, firmly planted on Papa's land. He doesn't ask us why we are dressed similarly. We know that he knows. Mummy tells us that Swan wears black, as for a funeral. He is dead, after all. But we don't speak of it then, nor do we now.

### *Melpo (tragedy)*

The audience is sparse. Who wants to witness this union? Who wants it to get back to Bokor Franki that they were present when his beloved chose someone

else? A few tatis and tontons squirm nervously in the pews, forced by blood and loyalty to be there. They dart disapproving frowns across the aisle where peacekeepers sit in support of one of their own.

The rumors of their thoughts on the matter have long spread across the village. Swan is silly, lovesick. He disappears, is almost thought dead. And when he resurfaces, he chains himself to a local. Why? With what witchcraft did she hex him?

*Callisse (poetry)*

We can only imagine the light on Mummy's face as she walks up to her love, the man we do not call "Father" or anything at all. He is Swan. He is hers.

*Clionie (history)*

In the shadows, Bokor Franki, our papa, mops the damp humidity from his forehead. His resolve grows stronger.

*Thalia (comedy)*

In their bed later, Swan speaks.

"Have you given any thought about us moving to the States? I'm an American citizen, so it would be no problem."

"I know."

"And the girls. The girls would come too, of course! I would apply for their papers, and—"

"The girls want to be near their father."

"Just ... just think about it, okay?"

*Melpo (tragedy)*

Valentine hugs her belly and the secret she is carrying. She nods and turns her back to her new husband. Her "no" hangs in the air, unsaid.

## CHAPTER 53

# FAR AWAY

*Thalia (comedy)*

Valentine kneels at the altar with Tati Farah by her side. She needs her sister as she calls on the spirits for guidance.

She and Swan are in love, she tells herself. It is indisputable. Her rising belly reminds her of this.

But ...

*Callisse (poetry)*

Swan is not the same. That becomes clearer each day. He smiles sometimes. And will laugh if everyone around him is laughing. But he has changed. This morning when Valentine cleaned and marinated raw chicken, he licked his lips at the sight of its flesh. She pretended not to notice that her love is no longer quite human.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

His skin flakes off in layers. His groans scare the stray cats in the neighborhood enough to keep them away. Mummy knows what Franki did to her beloved. Swan moves quickly and is still fastidious in his tasks, but something sets him apart from the zonbi she has seen before. The ones she made up stories about, to explain how they ended up in her ex-husband's field. The ones she made excuses about to defend her doing nothing for them.

*Clionie (history)*

"I think this is because of where he is from," Farah says, opening her eyes.

“Franki took the whole of him. You know what a zonbi is over there.”

The words speak to Valentine—they are confirmed in her heart. What leads her to the saints is this:

*Tersi (dance)*

Swan drags himself out of bed in the hours that hold nothing but darkness. Valentine pretends to be asleep as her heart breaks once again. He stands at the window, staring out into the distance.

Valentine knows where he yearns to be. Franki’s compound. So long as Franki is the keeper of Swan’s ti bon anj, their tie will last. The bile creeps up her throat even as she tries to swallow it down.

*Thalia (comedy)*

She must do something.

## CHAPTER 54

# MARKET

### *Clionie (history)*

Valentine walks carefully. Each foot in front of the other, with confidence. The oversized basket on her head does not teeter, let alone topple over. Even in a crowded market filled with—

“Akasan!”

“Kenep!”

“Avanse, *avanse!*”

She commands attention. Her basket carries essentials for sale: green onions, garlic, limes, bouillon cubes, sour oranges. For those who choose not to bother with the labor of making their own epis, Valentine sells jars of the seasoning base as well.

### *Callisse (poetry)*

The village-famous chunky bright green sauce is not what leads him to her, however. Bokor Franki feels Valentine’s essence. Drawn to their old memories, back when they were one and their family whole. It hurts to think about, still.

### *Tersi (dance)*

Valentine feels him too. She exhales sharply, as if the breath will push him away. But she knows that will not work. And she will not be scared into hiding.

So Valentine stops. Waits with hands on her hips. She will not sway.

He strolls toward her, leisurely, calmly.

Smiles.

The busy, loud market drifts away, and it is suddenly silent and bereft of people.

*Thalia (comedy)*

It is just the two of them in this place.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

The world.

## CHAPTER 55

# A PROMISE

### *Tersi (dance)*

Valentine is brave, but she is afraid. Her arms cross over her torso instinctively, providing a barrier between what grows within her and the man who would take it all away from her if she let him.

### *Melpo (tragedy)*

Yet up close, it is clear that Bokor Franki is not the same man who fathered five of her children ... the one she even loved, before Valentine realized the true monster he was. He looks older. Almost frail.

### *Clonie (history)*

The sickness is more firmly embedded in his body. Pumping through his veins and casting an almost green tinge to his skin, to the dark rounds under his eyes. Some whisper of evil eating him from the inside out.

“What do you want with me?” she demands.

“Everything,” he says simply. “You know that.”

“You do not get that from me anymore. You deserve *nothing*,” Valentine hisses.

“I know, I know,” Bokor Franki says. “You are with your American. *Swan*.”

He stresses on the one syllable until it is as long as a song that no one wants to hear. A taunt.

*Callisse (poetry)*

“You are with your little American. Growing your family.”

He looks meaningfully at her belly, and dread invades her body.

“I will always be with you, my sweet,” he whispers. “And with Swan, *in* Swan.”

*Thalia (comedy)*

“And I will be with that little seed growing inside you too. Come, now, I’ve known you pregnant far too many times by now.”

“She will be like Swan. She will be a zonbi, a *zombie*, a monster. More diabolical than myself, even.”

She is shocked. Horrified.

Mummy runs.



## CHAPTER 56

# MIND CHANGED

*Callisse (poetry)*

How would you feel if your mother left you? If she took everything she possessed and left all she knew to start over with a man who was not your father, away from your people?

I will say it.

She abandoned us. We've been telling her tale. We know why she felt she had to run away. But what about us? The ones who were already here? Who were also tied to the man she once loved?

*Clionie (history)*

We've never said this to her, now or then. But we have felt this way since she rushed into the house that day, huffing as she searched for Swan.

*Tersi (dance)*

"I changed my mind."

Swan stares.

"I don't do it often, but I am doing it today. I changed my mind," Valentine repeats. "Let's go to America. I will get my affairs in order, and then we can start a new life there."

"Are you ... are you sure?"

*Melpo (tragedy)*

“We need a new home. We have to start over. The land where anything is possible, that is exactly where we need to be.”

*Thalia (comedy)*

Swan allows himself a ghost of a smile.

## CHAPTER 57

# OXYMORPHENOL

*Clionie (history)*

Life is a blur. We say goodbye, Mummy's belly grows, we are alone, she and Swan leave for America. Even as the pair of them find their seats on the plane and the aircraft takes off, Mummy has the terrible fear that Papi's ties will be too strong, that perhaps they will all crash into the sea before a zonbi of Bokor Franki's escapes. But he is not God. They fly away from our land. Swan is sick on the plane and after they touch ground. A supreme sadness plunges deep into the depths of his essence. Nothing about him seems healthy.

But.

They make it.

Valentine finds a job taking care of moun blan rich.

Swan is still broken. Disconnected. He has so few smiles. When they come, they are for Mummy and soon-to-be Brielle. Those moments are fleeting. With each passing day, the distance between Swan and the world stretches into an even larger expanse. Look how alone he is, even with love around.

Valentine's nerves are alight, pulsing sharp sparks of pain across her body, swirling around her limbs. Doctors call it fibromyalgia, but that does not tell the whole story of the trauma coursing throughout her temple, the spiritual manifesting into physical.

She takes pills:

Codeine.  
Hydrocodone.  
Morphine.  
Oxycodone.  
Hydromorphone.  
Fentanyl.

Until at last, Valentine is prescribed oxymorphenol.

*Callisse (poetry)*

Swan is not himself. But he still has the phantom of a memory of the smile Valentine once reserved just for him. The days grow even longer between these moments, as they find a place to stay, as Brielle is pushed into this world.

*Tersi (dance)*

So he takes the pill. And a window with a bright light shining through appears, and life is good for some time. Little by little the point of just being able to exist shifts.

One day, one day it goes too far. His usual dose's effect is dampened. It no longer sings. Swan swallows more pills, aching, hoping to get to a neutral baseline. He starts to feel again.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

But they wash through his system, coating organs and the inside of veins and arteries. Swan's body jerks about. He is mid-convulsion, foam spewing out of his mouth, when his daughter enters the room. She treads over to him gently, watching as the light seeps from his eyes.

*Thalia (comedy)*

Brielle stands over Swan in curious horror. She cannot look away.

## ACT III

## CHAPTER 58

# RELIEF

A seed of an idea begins to sprout. I water it with tears that do not fall, coaxing it to bud and ripen into a plan I dare not share. Not yet. The axis of my earth has been knocked askew. Oxymorphenol, with all its vowels and syllables, has been in my vocabulary for a long time. It has been an invisible member of the family for almost as long as I can remember. A lifeline for Mummy, something to make this painful existence a bit more bearable. For my father, it was a poison he couldn't stop taking until the inevitable happened and he was gone. I can never unlearn what I heard in the Banks Corps offices. About antidotes and money-making schemes. I don't want to.

“Are you okay up there, there, there...?” The doctor cups his hands over his mouth like he is shouting from a great distance. My mother lies on the examination table and smiles faintly. It is a typical day at the office for this man, who is quick with jokes and friendly conversation about my age and what my favorite classes are. But he was silent—invisible—when Mummy needed someone to speak up and say what she needed to hear. Before we switched insurance, all she heard from him were firm denials of treatment.

*We already told you that we are having trouble with your insurance ...*

*You're really going to have to talk to them about it ...*

*The doctor unfortunately will be unable to see you until this is sorted out ...*

It wasn't the front desk staff's fault. Nor the doctor's. I fully understand the connection between offering services and receiving compensation for those services. Everyone has bills to pay and families to care for and groceries to buy. But this isn't just any old service, is it? It's the key to bringing a woman back from the brink, a magnet yanking her to a more

hospitable environment. Less pain. More humanity. I look around the room, with its sponsored drug posters and sterile needles and scalpels, and I bite back a scream. How did we get this way? Why do we have to fight so hard to simply be treated like a human being?

Mummy wears a gown that covers her torso but for a cutout circle. The doctor pierces her belly. The anesthetic he applied earlier does its job and she does not seem to be in discomfort. He chats as he presses down on the syringe, seemingly innocuous clear liquid disappearing into her body.

“All right, there you go!” He places the now empty syringe down and snaps off his gloves. “You should start feeling the effects within twenty-four hours.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Mummy says. Relieved.

He pats her on the shoulder. “You did a good job.”

It’s always a job, isn’t it? Something to do to prove your worth. I am sick of it. I help my mother off the table. Slip on her shoes and tie the laces tightly. I offer my hand to help her plant her feet on the floor, but she slides off on her own.

## CHAPTER 59

# GOODBYE

Mummy has been preparing for her trip to Haiti for what feels like months and the day of her departure has finally arrived. She spent almost the entire night before speaking with the Muses, their excitement at Mummy's impending visit palatable, even distilled as it was through the phone's screen. Mummy has way too many oversized bags that need to be checked, so taking the bus is out of the question. Normally, Marcello would be the first person I'd call for a ride to the airport, but he has a breakfast date with Chad that I don't want to interrupt, especially not after he already postponed their first date to help with my last-minute supper club.

Before heading to sleep the night before Mummy's flight, I briefly consider just ordering a rideshare, but at the last minute, I shoot Preston a text. I almost talk myself out of it, worried that it's too much to ask. Airport runs are kind of a big deal, especially to Miami International Airport during weekday morning traffic. The commute is no joke. But Preston agrees so enthusiastically that you would've thought that I was the one doing *him* a favor.

"Allo, Preston." Mummy waves when the back window of Preston's chauffeured car rolls down and the vehicle comes to a stop in front of our building. Preston smiles brightly at us and is about to speak when Mummy begins dragging the nearest bag to the trunk of the car. Preston jumps out to help her.

"Hi, Mrs. Petitfour. Hey, Brielle. You don't have to worry about these." Preston's chauffeur exits the driver's seat to come join us and begins hefting the bags into the storage compartment. "My driver, Benito, can put the bags away."



“These are just the first batch,” I say with a laugh. “I’m heading back inside to get the rest.” Preston’s eyes widen, and I motion for him to help me grab the other bags while Mummy instructs Benito be “very careful.” The vast majority of the luggage carry presents and necessities for various family members. You never go home empty-handed.

When we enter the apartment to grab the last of Mummy’s stuff, I notice something on the floor and pick it up.

“What’s that?” Preston asks.

“Just one of my business cards,” I say, tucking it into the back pocket of my jeans. I try not to wonder whether this was here when Mummy was in the apartment. She would’ve brought it up, wouldn’t she?

Once everything is stored, we are finally on our way. The ride to MIA is easy enough and I’m glad. I don’t say much, but Preston and my mom volley words across the seats, Mummy’s laughter tinkling like chimes. When Preston agreed to give Mummy a ride, I shouldn’t have been surprised. He swings by to pick me up practically every day now, even though I know it’s in the opposite direction of his route to work. And each time Mummy has been home when he drops me off after work, he’s always polite and cracking jokes. And now he’s taking Mummy where she needs to go too ... The unpleasant sensation of inconveniencing someone wiggles in my gut, but I try to still it and come to peace with the idea that perhaps someone is being kind to me because they want to. Because that’s what friends do. Yeah ... friends.

When we arrive at the airport, Preston gets a few attendants to help Mummy with her bags. He tips them all, and when I try to intervene, he insists that it’s no trouble at all. At last, Mummy is all checked in, and the only thing left for her to do is go through the security line.

“Okay, Bri-bri,” Mummy says, using my childhood nickname. “I’ll talk to you when I land in Haiti.”

“Wi, Mummy,” I say, pulling her into an embrace. We hold each other tightly and then finally pull away. “Have a great trip.”

“Yes,” Mummy says, tears suddenly springing to her eyes. “I have much business to handle.” Preston and I stand by the security entrance and watch Mummy enter the line, waving a final goodbye.

It’s easy to forget the unique privilege and frustration I feel living with

Mummy every day. It's only right that she gets to spend some time with the Muses too. Mummy disappears into the belly of the airport, swallowed by the crowds of people heading to their own destinations.

I miss her already.

## CHAPTER 60

# STAR

“Brielle is such a star,” Silas booms in our meeting. The conference room shuffles about at their standing desks, not quite disagreeing out loud but reticent to follow up with any affirmations of their own.

I give what I hope is a smile but know to be a cringe since Mummy has scolded me on it enough times. “Star” seems an over-the-top descriptor for what I’m doing. I am just getting my tasks completed, and quickly.

“Now, don’t look at me like that!” Silas commands. “In addition to the tower of responsibilities I’ve thrown at her, Brielle took it upon herself to create a curriculum for the next wave of fellows.”

He pauses and looks at me. Oh. I straighten up at my standing desk.

“Yeah ... uh, I proposed three cohorts: one for fall, summer, and spring. Even though I’ve created a skeleton structure for them to work from, I really hope future members are inspired to tweak and edit what they do here to make it work for them. Since Banks Corps has, uh, so much to offer.”

I wish I could take a seat. Instead, I just nod and avoid eye contact to signal the end of my short speech. Preston is a few desks away, nodding almost imperceptibly. His thumbs flash up and then disappear. For some reason, my breathing slows and my hands stop shaking quite as much.

The rest of the meeting moves along, but I only quarter-listen. I may not be failing at my new gig, but I miss the bustle of a kitchen and the aromas of everything mixing together.

“Quick reminder before we adjourn,” says the latest in a string of speakers giving updates. “Banks Boat Day is coming up, and we hope you and your plus-ones are ready to really get to know one another. We’re a big family, but still a family!” It takes everything in me not to snort. Any place of work that

says they're a family is toxic as hell. But I'm glad that their faux collegiality gives me an excuse to bring along Marcello.

The meeting ends and snippets of conversation float by, ready for the taking.

"I bet Silas would give me special attention if I were a diversity hire too," someone whispers under their breath to the other interns in the room. But the message is for me. It doesn't make me sad. It makes me angry.

After work, Preston sits before me, plowing through the quick meal of chopped beef kidneys and potatoes I throw together. The brief moments where I can touch the ingredients and prepare them for dinner feel like a gift, a reprieve.

Preston is around a lot now. Maybe he's avoiding his own life. Or he knows I'm all alone while Mummy is back home in Haiti. I can't say that I mind.

"How have things been?" Preston asks, pausing to close his eyes to take in his forkful. "And like for real, not my father's hyperbolic language."

I'm not usually good at lying. And more importantly, I don't want to now.

"Well, I heard some of the interns writing off all of Silas's positive feedback for me as a bonus for being a 'diversity hire.'"

"They're just jealous," he shoots out. "They don't deserve your attention."

The truth doesn't make the comment inflame me less.

I pause and wonder if I dare ...

"I want to share something with you," I say. My nerves electrify my body. I take a deep breath.

"As you know, I've been running my supper club for weeks now," I blurt. "And I really want to invite everyone in the office to one. Maybe if they knew me a little better, they would think differently."

"That's a great idea," Preston says. "Everyone is going to lose their minds when they taste your food."

I smile at his choice of words but say nothing.

"I'll bring it up to my dad. Maybe we can all go as a team."

"I'd really appreciate that," I say.

## CHAPTER 61

# REUNION

*Thalia (comedy)*

We all converge on Mummy like a swarm of bees attending to the queen.

*Tersi (dance)*

I squeeze her hand so tightly my own fingers begin to ache. I don't want to let her go.

*Callisse (poetry)*

*How are you? How was your flight? Are you hungry? What do you want to eat?*

*Clionie (history)*

*How is Brielle?*

*Melpo (tragedy)*

*Did you miss me? Do you know how much I missed you?*

*How long will you be ours again?*

## CHAPTER 62

# BOAT TO BANK

“Hey, friend!” Marcello says, waving excitedly as he walks down the hall to my apartment. I could hear the sound of his flats clattering down the hallway for a good thirty seconds before I even made it across the living room, so I am already waiting for him at the door. Marcello is dressed for a day on the water, extra-short blue-and-white-striped swim trunks, pristine white shirt, and enormous floppy straw hat. As soon as they mentioned that we could bring a plus-one on this day trip, I knew that I would invite Marcello. First, because he’s my best friend. Second, he’s just the person I need to get the first steps of my forming plan to work.

We exchange air-kisses and hug. “Ugh, when’s the last time we were together and *not* working?” I ask Marcello as I guide him inside.

“I don’t even know,” Marcello says, placing his giant beach bag on the kitchen counter. “Let’s not let it happen again.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” I say to Marcello, giving him a once-over.

“You noticed my motif!” Marcello says with glee, hugging me again. “Now what are you wearing?” he asks, holding me at arm’s length to inspect my outfit.

“This,” I say, awkwardly attempting to sweep my hands with a flourish as Marcello makes me do a twirl.

“I knew you were gonna say that,” Marcello says, rolling his eyes. “And that’s why I brought you something cute to wear.”

I look down at my dark gray one-piece swimsuit from Target and clear plastic flip-flops. It’s what I’ve worn to the beach for the last three years. Even though we live in Miami, it’s not often that Mummy and I get to go there.

Marcello pulls out a few articles of clothing and holds them out to me. "Go ahead and change."

"But—"

"Aht-aht! This isn't up for discussion. This is gonna be the first time you're seeing Mr. Billionaire Heir in something other than work clothes, and I already know you're not putting any effort into *those* outfits. I need you to change into something cute so you can seal the deal and snag a rich hubby so we can live the fabulous life we're meant to."

I laugh and do as I'm told, entering my bedroom to change into the clothes that Marcello has given me. I'm not trying to snag anybody, but it couldn't hurt to look a little cuter than usual. For myself. Yes, completely and totally for me and no one else. The extra care I took in applying body oil and sunscreen to keep my dry skin calm was absolutely for my sake as well.

When I'm done, I dramatically open my bedroom door and strike a pose. "Okay, you were right," I say. The tangerine bikini and sheer white cropped top and matching pants I wear as a cover-up fit me wonderfully. "I look amazing. Where did you get this from?"

"If I tell you, I'll have to kill you," Marcello says, passing me a paired of oversized sunglasses.

"Don't tell me this belonged to someone at the morgue," I say as I check my reflection in the mirror that hangs by the front door.

"Only you and Grandma Tabs crack funeral jokes." Marcello shakes his head. "But if you must know, Chad's sister works at the mall. She gets crazy discounts on all kinds of stuff. I got these for you because I know how you are."

I hug Marcello as we gather our things to head outside. "I won't apologize for who I am."

We hop into Marcello's car and before we pull off, I place a hand on his arm to stop him. "I have a favor to ask," I say.

"What's up?" he asks.

"I've already mentioned this to Preston, but I want to throw a supper club for my coworkers. If I can pull it off, it'll really raise my profile. It would be my biggest guest list yet. It would elevate our dinner parties from a fun hobby to something more official. A real business."

“That *would* be a big deal,” Marcello agrees. “What do you need me to do?”

“I want to bring it up today while we’re on the boat,” I say. “I heard Silas is going to be there. If I can get the ball rolling with him, we’ll be set.”

“Ooooh,” Marcello says, jiggling his shoulders in anticipation. “It feels like we’re on a mission. I’m in!” He looks at me for a moment before pulling out of the parking spot and says, “And don’t think I didn’t notice how you dropped Preston’s name all nonchalant.”

I stick out my tongue and turn up the music that has been playing softly in the background. It doesn’t take long for us to arrive at the marina and board the mega yacht that Banks Corps has rented for the day. In an attempt to maintain our cool, Marcello and I get all our squeals out during the car ride. Our forced aloofness goes right out the window once we’re aboard, though, and we speed walk around, taking everything in. How else are we expected to act when every few feet there’s a server standing with a perfectly balanced tray of champagne and cider?

We move through the different floors, where I recognize many familiar faces enjoying the ship’s amenities. It takes me a moment to recalibrate the office version of my coworkers to the out-in-the wild versions in front of me. One of Silas’s tightly wound assistants uses one hand to wipe himself off with a company-branded towel and his other to slosh the contents of his frosted cocktail glass onto the floor. Not even seconds later, a crew member wipes away the spill.

Marcello and I have gotten a good lay of the land when we decide to head to the circular pool that sits in the center of the yacht, surrounded by beach lounge chairs and throw pillows. When I spot Preston standing on the other side, I give him a little wave in greeting and he signals for me and Marcello to join him. He watches intently as we approach, eyes trailing me from head to toe and back again.

“There he iss,” Marcello says in a singsong voice out the side of his mouth when we’re only a few feet away. “Mr. Billionaire Heir is ca-yuuute. And it’s obvious that he thinks you are too.”

I poke Marcello in his side and he squeals, then we are upon Preston, Blake, and a few of the other interns—including Mason and Kwan, who I



haven't had a chance to hang out with since our Tuesday turn up at Tatsu. I introduce Marcello. Everyone greets him warmly, even Blake, who is apparently already a little tipsy from the minis she's snuck onto the ship.

"You're not afraid of getting caught drinking at a work event?" I ask Blake as she takes a big gulp of her drink.

"Not even a little bit," she says, delicately wiping at the corner of her mouth. "By the end of the day it's going to be a free-for-all anyway. No one will be paying attention to whether or not we've gotten a drink or two." I take one of the drinks that Blake extends to me, but Marcello passes since he'll be driving later on.

I watch with pleasure as Marcello quickly carves out a space for himself within the group. He's neck and neck with Blake for baddest bitch here, and he is not number two. Kwan and Mason can hardly stop laughing at Blake's and Marcello's increasingly ridiculous outbursts to claim dominance over each other. Eventually, I am pulled to the ocean, so I stand at the ship's railing, a few paces away from the rest of the group. I feel a moment of gratitude and pray that this first time on the water won't be my last. I am still basking in appreciation when Preston joins me.

"Hey," he says. "Enjoying the view?"

"Definitely," I say, pulling my eyes away from the water to ask something I had wondered about. "How come I'm the only one who brought a plus-one?"

"Well, the rest of the crew isn't from Miami. They don't really know anyone they would want to bring with them." Preston smiles easily. "And I don't need a plus-one. The person I most want to hang with is already here."

"Very smooth," I say with a breathy laugh, trying to sound way more casual than I am actually feeling.

"Who said I was talking about you?" Preston teases.

"Ha ha," I say, swatting him. I can practically feel Marcello's eyes bugging out at me, pleading, *Girl, you better not injure this boy*. I pull my hand away quickly.

"In all seriousness, you look great," Preston says. He looks down at me out of the corner of his eye and then back out at the water.

The yacht is about to sail away when Silas Banks boards the vessel, the

final guest. A few people try to hide their drinks when he comes into view. Silas raises a hand and all the passengers on board quiet almost instantly. “Everyone. This is a day of fun and leisure. Please, act as if I’m not here.”

Ainsley walks up to Silas in that moment and whispers something in his ear, and the two of them disappear onto the lower level of the ship. Soon after, the yacht has officially set sail, and Marcello and I stand side by side at one of the ship’s railings, looking out at a bejeweled ocean of cerulean and aquamarine, water foaming white as the yacht glides through.

“Daaang,” Marcello says, in awe.

“I told you I’d make it up to you,” I say with a smile, though this is more than I could’ve imagined. Again I am stunned by all the different angles of Miami that people with money get to witness, to experience. On any given day they’re looking down from the heavens or out at her fathomless blue soul.

We spend the day at the pool, switching between splashing in the water and taking pictures to capture the moment. When the crew extends a slide down into the ocean, the group is almost too tired to go, but I talk everyone into taking a couple of rides before finally heading back onto the ship for something to eat. The lower level of the yacht is filled with artfully decorated tables, each one set for ten people. As my group searches for a place to sit, we all notice at the same time that there is only one available table left. And Silas and Ainsley are already there. Preston audibly groans as we make our way to the table, but I inwardly cheer. I had hoped that by going down the slide we would’ve missed the prime seating arrangements, leaving us with this option. I look over at Marcello and he nods at me almost imperceptibly. We’re ready.

We all take our places, nodding politely at the people who are already seated. I have managed to snag a chair right next to Silas, and Marcello quickly drops himself into the one on my other side. I try to ignore the look of annoyance that flashes across Preston’s face at missing his chance to sit next to me. It isn’t long before servers are making their way around the dining area, carefully placing plates of food before us. What should be a delicately flaky bite of mini beef Wellington is a lukewarm morsel of rubber. I can’t bring myself to finish it, even in the name of politeness, but I swallow

the piece that I have in my mouth. The grumbles of protest around the room mean that I'm not the only one struggling through the appetizer.

"They should've gotten you to prepare the meal for this boat day," Marcello stage-whispers.

"Shhh," I say, hoping that we don't seem too obvious in our complaints. Though we didn't plan for the food today to be terrible, it serves our purpose wonderfully.

"Who should've prepared the meal?" Silas asks, clearly eavesdropping.

I open my eyes wide at Marcello in feigned horror, secretly hoping that everyone watching thinks it's real.

"No, Marcello, is right," Preston says. He gives me a reassuring smile, clearly remembering his promise. Preston turns to his father. "Dad, did you know that along with being a great intern, Brielle is an aspiring professional chef with her own supper club?"

"I did not," Silas says, looking at me, impressed.

"We should totally have a Banks Corps supper club," Preston tells his dad. They stare at each other for a beat too long, tension rising in the air. I cut in before my plan gets derailed.

"I can definitely make that happen. For the right price," I say with a laugh.

Silas breaks eye contact with his son. "A businesswoman through and through. I think that's a wonderful idea."

"While it may be a wonderful idea," Ainsley cuts in, "the execution of it would be very involved. We'd need permits and—"

"Come on, Ainsley!" Preston interrupts. "You're going to ruin the moment by talking about permits?"

"But—"

Ainsley is interrupted again, but this time by Silas. "I have to agree with Preston. We don't exactly worry about permits and the like when we're discussing the Thanksgiving potluck, right?"

"Of course not," Ainsley says through gritted teeth.

I pretend not to notice the exchange, but I am absolutely gleeful.

"Preston, work with Brielle to find the best date for the department supper club," Ainsley says. "I'm looking forward to it already."

The rest of the meal progresses, each course just a little worse than the one before. I'm so lost in thought that I thankfully don't taste a thing. I don't know how much of Preston's support is his own and how much is influenced by all the meals I've made for him. A small part of me wonders what it would change if his support was all his own. Then I remind myself that I didn't go down this path just to worry about *why* people think what they think of me. Instead, I can influence people, powerful people, to see things my way with just a bite of something my hands have made. That's worth more than anyone's support. Isn't it?

When Marcello and I are in his car heading home, we are squealing all over again, a repeat of how the day started.

"You are gonna make *bank*," Marcello gushes.

And that thrills me. But he doesn't know that I've got bigger plans.

## CHAPTER 63

# NOT CHICKEN

*Callisse (poetry)*

What does human flesh taste like?

*Thalia (comedy)*

I know! Chicken!

*Tersi (dance)*

Hmm. Maybe like bacon. Or prosciutto.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

We don't really know, do we? But there are those out there who compare it to a not yet mature piece of beef. And the flavor is said to be mild, not overly persuasive in one way or another. Our flesh is most similar to the cow, stained red with myoglobin, for instance. Others have likened human meat to pork but—

*Clionie (history)*

Eps! What are you doing? Don't scare them this way. Instead, we should wonder ... What happens when a zonbi makes a zonbi?

## CHAPTER 64

# FIRST CLASS

I exhale loudly, placing my phone face down beside me. It's been one week since Banks Boat Day, and I am swamped with planning for my next supper club. And not even for the upcoming department edition. It didn't take long for Preston and me to schedule a date for it, but that's all the time I've had to devote to the event. Working with my most recent client has been headache upon headache.

"Whoa, what's up? That sigh sounded like it came from deep within your soul." Preston looks up from his own cell phone in concern. We are at what Preston calls our "weekly working lunch," slurping up spoonfuls of delicious ramen at a local food hall. It always takes everything inside me to stop myself from saying, *You don't have to work too hard when your father owns the company* each time Preston stops at my desk to pick me up for our lunch excursions.

"My latest client keeps asking to switch the venue because she feels like it isn't making enough of a statement. I want to tell her that I'm a chef, not a party planner." I ignore the buzz from my flipped-over phone because I already know that she's messaging me again. "Plus, I don't exactly have a list of all the 'it' places in Miami that would meet her ridiculous standards anyway."

I sigh for a second time.

"You know she asked if I could host the dinner party at the zoo? I told her no, and she actually has been putting up a big fight about it."

"Wait—is her name Ellen Worthington?" Preston asks, spoon halfway to his lips. I try not to stare.

"Yes?" I say, looking at my phone to stop myself from looking at him too

long. “How’d you guess?”

“Oh, I know her,” Preston laughs, gulping down his bite. “She used to throw zoo parties all the time when I was growing up, and my grandparents would force me to go. It was the worst. No one ever wanted to eat because she would always choose the spots closest to the animals, and the smell of poop was just way too strong.”

“That’s what I told her!” I say, laughing. “You have no idea how hard it is to professionally say ‘Ma’am, do you want your guests to think they’re eating elephant shit?!’”

Preston laughs. “Well, my place is no zoo, but maybe you could see if she wouldn’t mind throwing her dinner party there,” Preston says. “If there’s one thing my house makes, it’s a statement. I might even know someone who could help you with logistics,” Preston adds, almost too casually.

“Some help with organizing everything would be amazing. You don’t think your family will mind us using their home in this way, though?” I ask.

“Are you kidding?” Preston says. “My grandpa lives to show off that house. Honestly, I think he bought it just so he could show it off to as many people as possible.”

I chew the inside of my cheek, debating Preston’s generous offer. It would be a great event space if I could get Ellen to agree, even if something about the way Preston brought it up feels like he has his own reasons for having it there. But I’ve been up to my ears in planning this event. I haven’t even started thinking about the upcoming one. This would really clear up some mental space for me, and I could use all the help I can get. The more I think about it, the more it feels like a genius idea. I’m so appreciative of Preston’s offer that I don’t even think before I lean over and give him a quick hug.

“I am going to take you up on *all* of that!” I say excitedly. I pull away from Preston, but the way his arms are wrapped around me make me reluctant to completely remove myself from our embrace. Preston looks across my face. This time he’s the one looking at my lips. Focused. My phone buzzes on the table, and we quickly dart away from each other. It’s another text from Ellen. I respond, pitching Preston’s family home as a possible venue location, trying to shake off the sparks that are suddenly

dancing across my skin. I have barely hit send on the message when Ellen shoots back a response to my latest suggestion.

What a great idea!!!

★ ★ ★

I have been coming to the Bankses' home for as long as I can remember but I have never seen it look like this. The front of the mansion, which is already over-the-top on a regular day, looks like a luxury car dealership with all the variations of Jaguars and Benzes and other vehicles that I don't recognize lining the driveway. The lawn has been manicured to perfection, and they've even brought out a red carpet. Stepping into the foyer feels like I have walked onto the set of the hottest Miami Swim Week runway show that Marcello could gush about, bright lights and step and repeats positioned for photos.

I peek my head into the dining room before walking to the kitchen, and again my breath is taken away. An orchestra of four musicians play classical versions of Top 40 hits, and their presence has Preston all over it. Eight round tables of five are set for guests who have already taken their seats, a few of whom happen to be my very nosy coworkers. Preston was so excited that his suggestion to use his home as a venue worked that he told more people than I would've cared to know about tonight. Of course everyone he spoke to said that they were coming to show their support, but I know that it's really to judge my cooking. I'm up for the challenge, though.

Where the rest of the Bankses' home is carefully curated ambience, the kitchen is pure chaos. This supper club is the largest that I've put on to date, so I've hired a few of my old coworkers from Le Grand Fromage as cooks and servers. As the night progresses, I race around the kitchen, making sure that I have a chance to touch or alter at least one thing on every plate. I am about to reach for the last entrée—roasted vegetables, grass-fed beef flank steak, and organic rice pilaf, topped with a drizzle of chimichurri sauce—when Marcello swoops in to take the plate.

*Oh no, no, no, no.*

"Talk to me," Marcello orders, looking at the panic that has chiseled itself into my features. I haven't had a supper club yet where I haven't personally cooked or fixed a plate. I don't want to find out now what might happen.



Marcello continues, “Bri? Are you okay? You look like you just watched a hamster eat her babies.”

His sordid description hits a little too close to home right now.

“Oh! I’m fine. Yeah. Don’t worry. Are you taking that dish out now? Let me go with you. Just to check on how the guests are doing!” I say, hoping that I don’t pull Marcello into my shower of nerves. We can’t both be running around here rattled.

Marcello shrugs, and I follow closely behind him as we make our way to the dining hall. Marcello looks over his shoulder at me as he steps inside, an obvious *Girl, if you don’t back up* etched on his face. I stay a few feet away from the table, watching intently as Marcello places the meal in front of Ellen. She is busy speaking with the man to her right, so she doesn’t start in on her food immediately. Marcello walks past me to return to the kitchen and I smile tightly at him, nodding as he leaves. As soon as he’s gone, I make a beeline for the table.

“Hello! How is everything going today?” My eyes bore into the food in front of Ellen, and I don’t wait for her to respond. “This dish isn’t up to our usual standards, so I will return shortly with another plate.” I lift the plate from the table without warning. “Please let me get you another.”

I am gone before Ellen can even say a word. When I step out into the hallway, I look left and right and find that I am alone. The plate is still hot in my hands, and I glance around again before lightly tossing the vegetables and adjusting the steak ever so slightly with my fingers. I wait another minute before heading back inside and place the meal in front of Ellen for a second time. This time she doesn’t delay before cutting into the meat, taking a bite, and closing her eyes as she chews.

“Delicious,” she says.



I have survived dinner. My ankles feel twice their usual size, and I pray that the pain in my right big toe isn’t a sprain, but I made it. The guests have all finished their final bite, and though some of them have gone home for the night, many of them remain in the dining room, dancing to the live orchestral music. Preston forced Marcello and me to join the party for a bit, where we

were met with thunderous applause. My coworkers couldn't stop talking about how much they enjoyed the meal and how they couldn't wait until the next one. Somewhere in the midst of all their celebration, I was hit with a stroke of genius for the upcoming Banks Corps dinner. I look around but can't find Marcello anywhere, so I race to the kitchen to tell him my idea.

"Marcello! I've got it," I say, out of breath.

Marcello grunts lightly without looking up from his phone, which I take as my cue to continue. He's probably even more tired than I am after having to deal with my micromanaging all night.

"The Banks Corps supper club can be a culinary tour of communities throughout Miami. The spaces that are overlooked. Overtown. Allapattah. Liberty City." I grab a cloth that is sitting on the side of the counter and begin wiping down the mess that our cooking has left behind. "We could finish in Little Haiti, *my* home base. And celebrate all those cultures' amazing cuisines along the way."

"Yo," Marcello says, ripping his gaze from his screen. "That's an amazing idea. Those Banks Corps rich people will get a kick out of being around the 'authentic common folk' ... They'll eat it right up. Ooh, and what if—actually ... I'll talk to you about it later."

"No, tell me now—"

Marcello shakes his head and grins, looking over my shoulder. I turn around to see Preston leaning against the doorway to the kitchen.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says in a tone that suggests he isn't sorry at all. "You ran off so fast I couldn't find you after your standing ovation."

"Ooooh, Mr. Billionaire Heir knows how to pursue," Marcello says so only I can hear. Louder he says, "I'll see you later, girl." I say goodbye to Marcello, and he wiggles his eyebrows exaggeratedly at me in response.

Preston walks over to where I am standing by the barn-style kitchen sink. With just the two of us in here, the vastness of the empty room makes me hyperaware of how close we are. Preston gently takes the cloth I've been using to wipe the counter and puts it down to grab my hands.

"I'm so proud of you," he says with a smile so bright it warms me to my bones.

"I'm proud of me too," I say happily. I mean it. I'm living what I've

dreamed of my entire life. Mummy might not have been pleased about it at first, but maybe if she could see me now her mind would change. Maybe she'd realize that my success is due to her inspiring me with her hard work, day by day.

"Where do you get your drive from?" Preston asks. He looks at me so earnestly that I can't help but answer truthfully.

"My mom," I say. "She was injured a few years ago and now has to manage chronic pain. But she gets up and does what she has to for me and our entire family, every single day. One day I want to be able to take care of her the way she's always taken care of me."

"Wow," Preston says. I can feel his respect for me steeped in that one word. "I had no idea your mom had to deal with all that."

"Yeah. They call it an invisible illness because there's no way for you to tell by looking. Not at first glance anyway," I say.

"I'm familiar," Preston says with a sad smile. "My mom has lupus. It's part of the reason she doesn't really make public appearances anymore."

"I didn't know that," I say, reaching for Preston's hand.

"Yeah," Preston says. He shakes his head, presumably to clear it. "Sorry to get so somber after you just had a wonderful event."

"Are you kidding?" I say. "This is probably one of the first times I've ever spoken to anyone about this. I'm grateful for it."

Preston takes a deep breath and drags his free hand through his hair. The tendrils fall askew. "So am I," he says. "But ... that's not actually what I came back here to say." Preston looks at me with intensity but doesn't say anything for a long while.

"Uh ... Preston?" I say with a little laugh, hoping to temper the frenetic energy that is radiating from him in waves. "You're making me nervous."

Preston still holds one of my hands in his as he pulls out two folded pieces of paper from his back pocket and hands me one. I look down at the printout in my hand and gasp. *A round-trip ticket to Paris, France.*

"I know this might be coming on pretty strong, and the timing isn't perfect. But I like you, Brielle. I've never met anyone like you before. You're smart, sarcastic as hell, and beautiful. And so calm. Nothing rattles you. And you go after your dreams in a way that I haven't seen anyone do before.

Tonight was absolutely amazing. If you'd let me, I would love to celebrate you. Would you ... want to go on a trip ... with me?" Preston says all of this in practically one breath. I'm pretty sure I can hear the thumping of his heart in my ears, or maybe it's my own?

"I..."

Preston looks at me with so much hope in his eyes, and the fluttering in my chest lets me know that this hope is reflecting back on my face. How much of this is coming from the actual Preston and how much is because of my ... power? He's been eating my food for weeks. I could tell from the first day we met that he was intrigued by me, but enough to take me to Paris?

Mummy's voice echoes in my head. *You need to be wary of this white boy offering gifts. He probably wants something in return. That's how most men are.*

"I don't..."

The light starts to dim in Preston's eyes, making my heart ache. Why *wouldn't* Preston like me? I know I haven't had many friends, let alone a love interest of any kind, but I think I'm pretty awesome. Why is it so hard to believe that someone would want to treat me to a fabulous trip for all the hard work I've been doing? This is a big deal to *me*, but it's nothing to a guy like Preston. Another round of Mummy's precautions starts to form in my mind, but I quiet them.

Mummy isn't here to tell me to be careful. She's not here to stop what she considers my worst impulses. To scare me with hypotheticals. In fact, tapping into what makes me *me* has been the best thing to happen to me. Ever. I smile at Preston. Though it doesn't reach my eyes, I can tell he senses my response because the grin he gives me makes his face even more devastatingly handsome.

"I'd love to."

## CHAPTER 65

# PERMISSION

Preston insists on joining me on the ride home even though I point out that it'll be a lot of back and forth for no reason and that I'll be just fine with his chauffeur. I end up caving when he gives me exaggerated puppy dog eyes, and we spend the drive from Hunter Island to Little Haiti brainstorming ways that I might tell Mummy about the upcoming trip to Paris without making her erupt like a volcano. Or worse, hop on the next flight back to Miami to put me in my place.

"I could say it's reparations?" I say to Preston. "Since your mom is French and all?"

Preston's face reddens. "Are you trying to make your mom hate me? I was working really hard those last few weeks before she left for Haiti to get her on my side."

"Yeah, I could tell." I laugh. "Giving her a ride to the airport was a nice touch, I'm not gonna lie."

When we pull up to my building, I force Preston to stay inside the car. "I'll text you when I'm inside," I say.

I've had an amazing time tonight. I want to avoid the awkward moment at the door when I know we'll be hovering around each other, wondering if we should go in for a kiss. We've already had a few close calls. But after the action-packed day I've had, I don't want such a special moment to get lost in the mayhem of it all. Besides, I've already spent this much of my life without kissing anyone. What's one more day? Not to mention, if I play my cards right, my first kiss ever could be in Paris, the City of Love. I can already hear Marcello's sound barrier-shattering scream when I tell him ... if it happens.

When I am safely inside the apartment, I text Preston, as promised. He

asks me to be ready at 6 A.M. for the flight, adding that I don't need to worry about missing a couple of days of work because he's already handled Ainsley. I know that she'll make me pay for my absence when I return, but I honestly don't care. Once I've packed my bag, I shower and crawl into bed, picking up my cell phone to look at the time. It's only 9 P.M. but it feels so much later. Even though the only thing I want to do now is sleep, I have some calls to make. I pull out my old iPhone because I need video for these conversations. Marcello answers on the first ring.

"Finally!" he says, sitting up straight in bed. "I've been trying so hard to stay awake waiting for you to call. Tell me everything! What did Mr. Billionaire Heir need when he came into the kitchen all serious and whatnot?"

I laugh and quickly recap my conversation with Preston, him telling me that he likes me.

"And....," I continue, dragging out the moment so long I know it's taking everything inside Marcello not to reach through the phone and shake it out of me, "he's taking me to Paris."

"What?!" Marcello screeches. I was right. The sound barrier is now broken. "Paris?! I really like me some Chad, but I truly did not play my cards right!"

"Don't play, Marcello. You know you're two seconds away from loving that boy." I laugh. "But yes, I am so excited. I haven't even been on a plane before. Now I'm going all the way to Paris. I can hardly believe it."

"Do you have your passport ready? What does your mom think about this?" Marcello, always asking the questions that matter.

"Yes, I have a passport, thankfully. Mummy keeps mine updated even though she's gone to Haiti twice now without me," I say, rolling my eyes. "But ... she doesn't know about the trip yet."

"Brielle!" Marcello breathes. "You said yes to Preston without even running it by your mom? You've been spending too much time around these white folks."

"I know, I know." I sigh. "I'm actually going to call her after I get off the phone with you. Depending on how she sounds, I might have to go the 'ask for forgiveness and not permission' route."

“Well, it’s been nice knowing you,” Marcello says grimly. We spend a little bit more time on the phone, recapping the event and thinking about what worked well and what needed improvements. Once we’ve finished our preliminary planning for the upcoming Banks Corps supper club, we end the call with Marcello wishing me a final good luck.

I open my WhatsUp app to my group chat with my sisters. Taking a deep breath to calm my nerves, I press the video dial button. Tersi answers the phone immediately.

“Sister!” she says, out of breath. “How are you? This is later than you normally call.”

“Yeah,” I say, looking around the screen hoping to catch a glimpse of the others. “I had to stay out late for an event tonight ... Um. Where is everyone?”

I hear what sounds like the beating of drums and Tersi looks over her shoulder at something off-screen. She looks back at the camera. “Oh. They’re around. So ... what kind of event was it?”

I pause, considering whether or not I should tell Tersi that I’ve been not-so-quietly running my supper club for weeks, even after Mummy caught me at my soft launch and was none too pleased about it.

“Oh, just some work thing,” I say. No point in dropping two major bombs tonight. The sound of drums increases, the pace more frenzied than before. “Are you having a party? Is Mummy around?”

“A party?” Tersi repeats. “If there was a party, I’d be dancing. And Mummy ... um ... she’s a little busy right now,” Tersi says.

“Tersi! Where are you? Don’t keep them waiting!” someone that I can’t see says in a hurried tone. Is that Melpo?

“Is everything okay?” I ask. Tersi’s behavior is making me suspicious. Clearly there’s some kind of get-together happening.

Suddenly, Callisse is on the phone, Tersi yanked out of the frame. “Yes, yes, darling. Everything is fine. What did you need from Mummy? I can relay the message.”

“Oh, I wanted to ask her about a trip I have to take ... with someone from work. But if she’s busy then no worries. I can talk to her about it later.”

“Yes, it might be best to speak with her another time. Maybe tomorrow

morning?”

“Afternoon!” I hear one of my sisters shout off-screen.

“Afternoon,” Callisse corrects with a too-wide smile.

“Uh ... yeah, sure. I’ll call back tomorrow afternoon,” I say. And again I ask, “Are you sure everything’s okay?”

“Mmm-hmmm. Perfect,” Callisse says. “Okay, we’ll talk to you tomorrow. Bye.”

I don’t even get a chance to reply before the call ends. Something is definitely going on. But I can’t do anything about it from here. I’ll just take it as a sign that I was always meant to go first and then tell Mummy about it later.

Right? Right.



## CHAPTER 66

# CITY OF LOVE

My neck aches from looking up at the Nike of Samothrace. Her body is sculpted perfection, and she stands with her wings open as if she is about to take a running start and leap right off the prow of the warship she stands on. I close my eyes and imagine it. But instead of the marbled goddess floating off into victory, it is me. Triumphant.

Preston and I have spent the last two hours strolling through the Louvre. Usually, it is packed with large crowds, tourists from all over elbowing their way through to get as close as possible to some of the world's most famous works of art. Today, besides critical employees, the four-story building is completely empty of visitors save for me, Preston, and our chauffeur, Gustave, whose looming presence trails behind us no matter where we go. It's clear that in addition to his duty of getting us around Paris, he is serving as bodyguard and chaperone.

It isn't long before we've walked the first two floors of the museum and decide to call it a day. There's so much to see and not enough time to enjoy it all. In the forty-eight hours we've already spent in Paris, we have gone to a private wine tasting, eaten dinner with ridiculous views of the Eiffel Tower, stopped at more pastry shops than I ever thought possible, and more. It isn't lost on me that so much of the glamour and extravagance of Paris is thanks to France's colonizer past. Though I have definitely been enjoying myself, it bothers me that I've visited the land of my family's historic oppressors before ever stepping foot in Haiti. So I've mentioned this every chance I've gotten. I could've sworn that Preston's face would remain permanently tomato red when I told the curator at the Palace of Versailles that if they sold some of their gold artifacts they could pay reparations to all the lands they'd occupied

in the past—starting with Haiti—and still have plenty of wealth left over.

When we leave the Louvre, the sun is just starting to set. It melts into the horizon, its warm hues coloring the sky in a kaleidoscope of colors. Preston asks Gustave if we could make the short walk to a crepe shop that he loves. It's not too far from the museum. Gustave agrees with a grunt, and we take a leisurely stroll to the restaurant. Preston stops here and there to point out different sights that I gladly soak in. The crepe shop is so quaint, painted in pastel pinks, blues, and yellows with wooden tables and matching cushioned chairs. Almost every wall is covered with watercolor paintings of people exploring different parts of the city. Groups of friends laugh and kissing couples sit on picnic blankets around the Eiffel Tower. Ducks in a pond are fed by rosy-cheeked toddlers as their parents look on. We are quickly whisked away to a cozy spot in a tucked-away corner and as every variety of crepe is brought out, Preston and I talk about everything and nothing all at once.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Preston asks when we leave the crepe shop, doggie bags in tow. We're headed to the Pont Alexandre, sipping our to-go cups of hot chocolate even though it's warm outside.

"How is that even a question?" I ask. "Of course I am. This has been great."

"Good," Preston says. He hesitates a moment, and I fight the urge to fill the silence with something witty. He glances over at me sheepishly after tossing our empty drinks as we begin our walk across the bridge. "I've never done anything like this before."

"Like what?" I ask.

"Like ... *this*," Preston repeats, gesturing. "Ask a girl I like to go on a trip with me. I've come here alone plenty of times, but it's great to be able to share the experience with someone. And I'm really glad that someone is you."

I feel my cheeks heat but try to play it off. "That's really sweet of you to say. Although, I will say, I def had a moment where I wondered what your intentions were."

"Oh yeah," Preston says. "I had been thinking about inviting you for a while, but it was only an idea. And then I saw you let everyone's praise soak

in after your event and, I don't know, I wanted to keep that look on your face, so ... I just had to ask."

The view from the center of the bridge is breathtaking. The pedestrian path is filled with people stopping to take pictures or simply standing to admire. Ornate lampposts line either side of the bridge, shining like miniature versions of the sun that just set. I look over and see the Eiffel Tower in the distance, twinkling like a disco ball, and I am filled with awe.

"It's beautiful," I say, gazing appreciatively at the monument.

"Not as beautiful as you," Preston says.

I turn to look at him and the smile that slowly spreads across my lips can't be helped. "Preston?" I say, batting my eyelashes. He steps closer. "Why don't you have any game?"

Preston blinks at me a moment and then bursts into laughter. "It's you!" he says, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I swear it's just because it's you. I'm not usually this sappy."

"I dunno," I say with a smirk. "You've been awfully mushy from the start."

"You secretly love it," Preston says with a grin.

"I wouldn't say that now," I answer. Preston steps back as if affronted, and I reach out to gently grab his arm to stop him. The moment I do, our playful energy shifts. Preston moves back over to me, standing closer than he was before.

"Then what *would* you say?" he asks. His voice is low, and I can barely hear him over the sounds of passing cars and people walking by on the bridge.

"Okay, fine," I say, my voice lowering to match his. "I like it a little."

"I can work with that," Preston says.

We are standing only a breath's distance apart now. I can feel my heart pounding in my ears, and then faintly, I hear a second beating. It's Preston's heart, thudding in time to my own. I can sense the blood rushing through his body, his pupils dilating. Though my senses have sparked to life, all my concentration is focused on him. His dark brown eyes mirror the city's lights, and I see myself reflected back in them.

"Would it be too sappy for me to kiss you right now?" Preston asks, his

lips hovering over mine for permission.

“Yeah. But that’s okay,” I say in a whisper.

Our lips are featherlight when they meet, almost tickling in their gentleness. I lean into Preston, and he pulls me into a deeper embrace. I sense something shift within me, and when I look up at Preston’s goofy smile, I know what it is. I *really* like this boy. But how in the world did I let that happen? I feel the urge to inspect all our past interactions to pinpoint the exact second I fell for him, but I stuff it down. For now, I will let myself enjoy this moment and create a memory that will stay with me always.

Preston and I are walking hand in hand, almost back to Gustave, who stands beside our black car smoking a cigarette, when I feel my phone vibrate in my bag. Besides one quick text to Marcello before taking off, I haven’t spoken with anyone for the last two days. Cold dread pools in the pit of my stomach. I pull out my cell phone and swallow the groan that wants to escape my freshly kissed lips.

It’s Mummy calling.

## CHAPTER 67

# MOTHER-DAUGHTER TALK

Preston sits in the front passenger seat with Gustave to give me a little bit of privacy as we head back to the hotel. Though the blackout screen is rolled up, I know that he is glancing at it in the rearview mirror to get a clue as to what is happening on the other side. I'd let Mummy's call go to voicemail so that I could get settled in the backseat, but I know I can't avoid this conversation any longer.

The entire time I've been in Paris, I haven't used either of my phones. I left my flip phone at home because Mummy and I don't have an appropriate international plan. And though I brought my old iPhone with me, I've just been using Preston's, which has a better camera. Even though my phone is connected to the Wi-Fi in the car, I'd stuffed it into my bag while we were in the museum.

If only I had taken a beat to let the phone connect and look down at the damn thing, I would've seen that I had almost twenty missed text messages from Marcello and practically double the missed calls from my mom. Just as I am about to open WhatsUp to finally return Mummy's call, the phone vibrates in my hand. This time it's a video call. I take a fortifying breath and answer.

"Hey, Mummy!" I say, trying to sound chipper and not like I'm quietly panicking about the fact that she's been calling me for days without any answer from me.

"Brielle?!" Mummy says, and she looks absolutely frantic. "Oh Bondye! Brielle? Where are you? I've been calling and calling you! I finally remembered that I had Marcello's number. He said that he didn't know exactly where you were because you're out of the country. Brielle, what are

you doing in Paris? Are you okay? And who are you with? No matter how many times I asked Marcello, he refused to tell me who you left with.”

I send a silent prayer thanking the saints for giving me a real one like Marcello for a friend. Because if he had told Mummy before I did that I was traveling with Preston, this would’ve been even more of a shit show. I seriously owe Marcello for life. Ask for forgiveness and not permission is all fun and games until you *actually* have to ask for forgiveness.

“Mummy, I’m okay,” I say, trying to soothe her. “Yes, I’m in Paris. I came here with Preston.”

“Preston?” Mummy says, her voice lowering just a fraction of a decibel. “Are you on a work trip?”

“Um ... not exactly,” I say. “It was a surprise gift.”

Mummy is absolutely silent on the call, and she sits so still that I almost think the video is frozen. I’m about to check whether the connection has gone bad when Mummy speaks. Her voice is so frosty that I shiver involuntarily.

“You mean to tell me,” Mummy begins slowly, “that you went to Paris. With a boy. And didn’t think that you should let me know?”

“Well I—”

“You have been in a foreign country with said boy for two days. And I am *just* now hearing it from you?”

“I tried to—”

“Brielle! You have lost your entire mind!” Mummy’s screech is so loud that I am positive Preston and Gustave can hear her through the privacy screen.

“I tried to call you!” I say, trying to get this conversation back on track. Though “back” implies that it had been going in the right direction at all.

“When?” Mummy asks.

“Before I left! I called, but my sisters said that you were busy. And I couldn’t pass up this trip, so I figured I’d tell you once I got here, but then time got away from me. Mummy, it’s *Paris*!”

“Brielle Swan Petitfour.” Mummy says my full name, and I know that I have officially lost any semblance of control of this conversation. “Èske w ap fè sèks ak ti gason sa?”

“Sex?!” I screech. “What? No! Preston and I aren’t doing that! *Mom!!*”

“Well I had to ask,” Mummy says, gesturing in a way that says, *What did you expect?* “You go on an unplanned trip to Paris like you’re an adult. You don’t ask your mother for permission like you’re an adult. Therefore, you must also be doing other adult things. Like having sex.”

“Mummy, please stop saying sex!” I whine. I know that I sound like a child, but I don’t care. If only she knew that I just had my first kiss ever, but I am absolutely not mentioning that. At this point, she’ll think that I said I’m pregnant with triplets.

“Now, I know that sometimes our relationship as mother and daughter is different than most, because of my condition,” Mummy says with a tremor in her voice. “But *I* am the mother here, Brielle. I am still responsible for you. What you’ve done is unacceptable.”

Guilt twists in my stomach like a dirty washrag being wrung out, and I look away from the screen. Everything is a blur from the tears in my eyes, glistening but never falling, as I watch Gustave weave in and out of traffic. I hate that I have hurt my mom, but I also hate that so much of my existence is weighed down by shame. Shame for being a zombie. Shame for being poor. Shame for wanting to pursue my love of cooking instead of doing my daughterly duty and forgetting all about my dreams. I don’t want to carry that shame any longer.

“I’m sorry that I left without telling you,” I say, turning back to my mom on the phone. “But I’m not sorry I went.”

“I needed this, Mummy,” I continue. “Because I’ve been working super hard. Not only have I been interning at Banks Corps, but I’ve also started a supper club. And it’s been going really well.”

“And you don’t think I know this? About your supper club?” Mummy asks.

“Wh-what?”

“You haven’t exactly been discreet, Brielle,” Mummy says, shaking her head. “You’ve left your business cards lying all over the house. And the walls of the apartment are paper thin. When you get loud on the phone planning your supper club with Marcello, I hear a good amount of it.”

I am gawking at my mother. “And you never said anything?” I ask.

“There are a lot of things I never say,” Mummy says. “Like how I saw the

video that you have on your old phone. Of that time earlier this summer.”

My jaw hangs comically agape.

“I was hoping that you’d mention it to me when you were ready,” Mummy says. She sighs deeply. “Brielle, I only want what is best for you. I want you to be happy. I love you very, very much. But I’ve been worried about you.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Ma,” I say.

“Oh really?” Mummy asks, switching to Creole. “Then what do you think I should feel when you tell me that you stole from one of the wealthiest people in the world, someone whose father I happened to work for? When Mr. Len called to tell me what you had done, I was shocked. It’s only because I worked for them for as long as I did that they didn’t call the police on you. They had Mr. Len speak to me about this as a courtesy. But as luck would have it, I’d seen that video on your phone. It didn’t take much for me to convince the Banks family to let you work for them in exchange for your silence.”

“Wait, so *that’s* why you kept speaking to Mr. Len after...” I lower my voice, though there’s no way Preston can hear. “... after what happened.”

“Yes,” Mummy says. “I thought having this experience would be the best thing for you. It would show you the benefit of working a safe, respectable office job. And then the first thing you did was tell *me* that you had added me to your insurance plan.”

Mummy sniffs, her eyes shining brightly as she watches me attentively. “I thought that I was looking out for you, and there you were doing the same for me. Yet, every day, I see your powers manifesting in all the ways I’ve tried to prevent for so long. I fear that all of it will have been for nothing.”

I don’t know what to say.

“Why do you think I’m in Haiti?” Mummy asks suddenly.

I shrug. “To visit my sisters since you have the time off now?”

“That is part of the reason why I am here, yes,” Mummy says. “But I am also here because of you.”

“But why?” I ask, confused.

Mummy looks at me on the video, and I can tell she’s trying to see what or who else is around me. Instead of asking if I’m alone she says, “Ann pale



an kreyòl ankò.” I nod and agree to speak in Creole.

“Before you were born, I was married to another man named Franki,” Mummy begins. “He is your sisters’ father.”

I bring my phone closer to my face, listening intently. Mummy never talks about her time on the island. Or anything before my dad’s death, really. I breathe slowly and carefully, scared that even the slightest interruption will cause her to stop sharing what I’ve so desperately wanted to know for years.

“There was once a time when I thought that Franki and I were in love. But I was young. I was drawn to his power and he to my youth and beauty. Our marriage became a loveless thing that I could not escape. I had my daughters, your sisters, to think about. But one day, that all changed. I met your father.”

Even now, the smile on Mummy’s face when she thinks of my dad is wistful. “We were drawn to each other like bees to flowers,” Mummy says. “Eventually, I had an affair with him. I’m not proud of what I did. But I was following my heart after so long a time of not using it. I just couldn’t let that feeling go. When Franki found out, he was furious. And he did something unforgivable. He cursed your father to be tied to his land, to live like a zonbi.”

“Daddy was ... like me?” I whisper, gripping the phone tightly in my hand.

“Yes,” Mummy says. “In many ways but also in that. Franki had control of your father. I searched for him for so long. Even when everyone said that he had left me. When I eventually found him, I somehow was able to pull him from the land, though he always seemed to yearn for it. We left Haiti to come to America, and it got worse. I cried for months after we left, guilty for leaving your sisters behind with Franki. But also because I was terrified. The final time I spoke with Franki, he told me that he would always be with me. Through you.”

A rippling of recognition vibrates through my body. “When he cursed Daddy, he cursed me too,” I say intuitively.

Mummy nods. “Yes. At first, I didn’t understand what Franki meant. But then as you grew older and your father became more withdrawn, I knew. After he died, I went to Haiti to try to reverse whatever it was that Franki had done. I didn’t want to lose you too. I was worried that the heartache from

losing your father might hollow you out into a shell of yourself, just as Swan had become. I went from bokor to bokor, manbo to manbo in the hope that someone would be able to help. And nothing. But when time passed and you didn't worsen, I thought that maybe everything would be okay. I'm still not sure how to explain it. Perhaps it was because Franki hadn't made you himself. And then you stole the money from Silas Banks."

I listen as Mummy describes everything she's done in the time she's been in Haiti to try to save me from becoming like this Franki person. A man that I've never met has had so much control and influence over my life. And while it's true that I might've become what I am because of his curse on my father, I am still my own person. Mummy only knows about the donations I made on Silas's behalf. She doesn't know about the other things I've done. That I had planned to slip Ainsley her pills. That I may or may not be responsible for one of my coworkers dying. That I've used my powers to get all of Hunter Island's elite to hire me, not only taking their money but their self-control.

What would Mummy say if she knew that I've made more money in these last few months than I have in my entire life? Or that this wonderful trip to Paris is probably because Preston has eaten so many of my meals? I am so close to changing our circumstance in life. Not because of Franki's power over me but because of my own choices. *I* came up with a way to get Silas Banks to come to my next supper club. *I* decided that we had suffered enough and would do what I had to do to make things better. For us. Mummy might think that this makes me a bad person, that I have done all these things because of someone whose existence I wasn't aware of until this moment. But I know what I am doing is only leveling the playing field. I have claimed my power for myself just as these wealthy people have done time and time again. And I will not feel bad about it, even if I am bending the rules to my will.

"I've tried everything I could think of to release you from Franki. Now there's only one thing left to do," Mummy says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"What's that?" I ask.

"I must confront him," Mummy says. "I was able to leave Haiti all those

years ago because he loved me. No matter how much he was able to control other people, he could never bring himself to harm me or your sisters. It was a limit to his power. But he didn't have those ties to Swan. The only way he would've been able to leave is if Franki let him."

"But it's been so long, Mummy," I say. "What if he doesn't love you anymore? Wouldn't that mean that he could do to you what he did to Daddy?"

Mummy gives a small smile. "That's a risk I'll have to take. I can't let you continue down this path without knowing that I've tried everything I can to make sure that you don't suffer your father's fate. You cannot lose your humanity, Brielle. And I would never forgive myself if I didn't do what I could to make sure it doesn't happen."

"So you're going to put yourself in harm's way instead?" I ask incredulously. My heart flutters in my chest, remembering what it felt like to lose my father. My whole life it's been hard for me to let people in. And after Daddy died, I decided that I would maintain that distance. I couldn't go through that pain again. But no matter how hard I tried, the force field I have built around my heart has slowly weakened. Because of my mom and my sisters. Marcello and Grandma Tabitha. Even Preston. It took so long for me to open up to people. The thought of losing Mummy to forces I can't control makes me want to scream. I am only now figuring out how to stitch my heart back together. But if something happens to Mummy, will I be strong enough to do it for a second time? And if I can't, would it mean that there's truth to Mummy's fears about Franki's power over me? I can feel the carefully formed confidence I've built these last few months begin to crumble with this final thought.

"You can't do this by yourself, Mummy," I say. "You shouldn't have to."

"I'll be fine," she answers. "Remember, I'm the mother."

## CHAPTER 68

# SODO (SAUT-D'EAU)

### *Callisse (poetry)*

We are northerners. But we give that up to bathe in the rushing white waters of Sodo in Haiti's Centre department. The syncretism of our people, the pluralities of our identities, culminate here among glistening rocks covered in jade moss, beneath a crashing waterfall that cleanses as it comforts.

### *Clionie (history)*

They say that the waterfall erupted into existence from an earthquake in 1842. The nineteenth century seems too late for miracles. But a few years after Sodo was born, enough people believed a claim that the Virgin (or a prominent lwa, depending on who's telling the story) appeared on a palm tree there.

A priest attempted to cut down the tree. And he died the same day.  
Another priest tried again and much harm came to him.

### *Thalia (comedy)*

I don't know if these stories are true, but I want them to be. And I think that is enough.

We come to the waterfall for guidance, for love, for answers to life's biggest questions. And the spirits reply here. This should have been the first place we turned to when Mummy fell all those years ago working for that family. But she was thousands of miles away. From us. Everything she knows. For Brielle.

Now, it is the height of the prayer season, and the area is full of acolytes searching for deliverance. The water is cold as it laps against our bare skin, but we do not shiver.

We seek healing.

More than healing. Restoration.

We bathe and sing, going our separate ways in this communal space to make way for the spirits to speak with us alone. And when we are done, we return to our group, dry off, and pull on the fresh clothing representing our new circumstances. The answers we seek will take the time it takes to find us. The Iwa follow another clock.

*Tersi (dance)*

And yet.

When Mummy returns after submerging herself in Sodo's depths, it is a reset she feels deep in her bones. She's almost afraid to admit that this reprieve is real. It cannot be. After all these years ...

*Melpo (tragedy)*

Mummy is still wiping tears of relief from her eyes when the sounds of someone splashing interrupts her celebration. A man approaches.

## CHAPTER 69

# MAGNETISM

It doesn't take much to convince Preston to cut our trip short.

"All the more reason for us to come visit again," he'd said.

In a few hours we are packed and on the next flight to the land I've heard about my entire life. The rolling green of Haiti's landscape pulls me in immediately. I can't fight the lump that forms in my throat as the plane makes its descent, the constant tug that has grown more persistent in these last few months pulling taut at our approach. I've always known that I would one day go to my home country, but I wasn't prepared for the physical reaction it would elicit in my body. My skin buzzes with anticipation, a tingle that grows with the decreasing distance as we near our landing. My scalp feels alive. Even the fine hairs on my arms are electric. When the center of my chest vibrates from the inside out, I wonder if anyone around me can sense that I am undergoing a transformation. An intangible part of my soul is finding rest at my arrival. And I know that this is the same force that called to my father after Franki got a hold of him.

Preston doesn't ask any questions as we make our way through the capital's airport, following the instructions my sisters provided when I reached out to them following my conversation with Mummy. Gustave is a shield as we navigate the private exit reserved for diplomats and other important dignitaries, acting as a buffer between us and the many people that mill about outside the airport hoping to make some money for the day. In moments we are in a private car, racing to meet my family. Though I understand my mother's desire to handle things on her own, it goes against everything I am to let her confront Franki alone. And I have a sneaking suspicion that I am meant to be there when they finally meet after all these

years. When Mummy and I disconnected from our call last night, I immediately reached out to my sisters. The action was involuntary and also foreign to me. I opened myself to their care. I spoke whole truths for assistance and they listened. I sit quietly in the car, praying that I am not too late for what we have planned.

“Is everything all right?” Preston asks softly in the seat beside me. I have been sitting silently throughout the hour-long ride, too wrapped up in the tangle of my thoughts to hold conversation.

“It will be,” I say.

A part of me wants to let Preston know exactly what is going on. But I am a creature of habit, falling easily into the pattern of creating distance between anyone and anything that has the potential of providing too much comfort. Preston looks at me a moment longer before he nods, probably deciding that it’s better to let me come to him when I am ready. I appreciate that he already knows this about me. I reach out to hold his hand, the only way that I am able to show my gratitude. Something that is also new for me.

When we arrive in Sodo, I instruct Preston and Gustave to wait in the car until I am done. Gustave ruffles at my command and Preston attempts to fight me on it, but I do not budge. I don’t know what’s going to happen next. I can’t have the responsibility of their well-being on my hands when I need to focus on my family.

“Brielle, you’ve brought us all the way to a country that I’ve never been to before, without explaining why, and you expect me to just let you go out there by yourself? Gustave and I don’t speak Creole. How are we supposed to find you if you get lost?” Preston says in exasperation. He’s right, of course, but I am taken aback by his combativeness. Usually a mere suggestion is enough to encourage him to go along with what I want.

“It’s a religious site, so I can’t bring any outside guests,” I say. “I really appreciate your flexibility in even making this trip, but right now, I have to be a good daughter. And that means leaving you both in here.” I must have made a convincing argument because Preston relents, motioning for Gustave to wait with him.

The sound of Sodo’s waterfall is a chant, and the tropical birds hiding in the surrounding forest happily answer its call. I watch as people from all

walks of life bathe in the rumbling waters, using calabash bowls to drench themselves. I remember my sisters' instructions. I wade slowly into the waterfall's depths, lowering myself beneath its cool surface until I am completely submerged. As I hold my breath, I say a prayer and allow myself to believe that the desires of my heart align with the will of the saints. I rise, the water tumbling from my body in small cascades. I am compelled to turn around. When I do, my gaze falls on a group of women, and instantly I know that I've found my family. I resist calling out to them. Their attention is fixed, and the tugging that has plagued me since my arrival yanks me toward them. As I approach, Mummy's voice rises above the rushing waters.

"You look strong," she says.

I am mere feet away when I see him. The thrumming in my chest is almost painful in its frantic pulsing. Franki considers my mother and sisters, his ex-wife and daughters. Mummy's quiet strength. Thalia's pleasant demeanor and Tersi's ready-for-anything attitude. Clionie is aloof, arms crossed in front of her, while Melpo anxiously twirls a strand of her hair. And though I can't see her face from this vantage point, I know Callisse's moonlike eyes are stretched wider than the Milky Way.

"I was on the brink of death, just a toe hanging on to the ledge." Franki's deep voice resonates within me. "But I pulled myself back. I had to stay alive for our children. Especially when their mother has abandoned them."

Tersi takes a step forward, but Mummy puts her arm in front of her to stop her.

"I am surprised to see you here alone, Valentine," Franki continues. "I didn't know you trusted that evil girl enough to leave her without supervision. I, myself—"

"My daughter is not your concern," Mummy interrupts. I silently cheer.

Franki tilts his head, considers her with pity. "But isn't she? After all this time, you've come to see me. Used our daughters to lure me here. Have you finally come to realize that there is no way to forget me? That I was the best thing to happen to you, a poor girl from the countryside? Yet you tossed it all away for a man who is nothing. *Was nothing.*"

I think Mummy is about to speak, but the sound that escapes her lips is not one of language but of pain. She is pulled forward against her will. My



sisters rush to her side, trying to save her from this unavoidable confrontation. I can stand by no longer.

I don't know how I've made my way over, but in seconds I am standing between my family and Franki. My sisters gasp behind me, and Mummy's strained protest stops abruptly when Franki's gaze narrows on me.

"Step back," I say. My voice trembles, but the words are clear. Franki grins at me, teeth shining like pearls. Though there are other people at the waterfall, they are blind to our exchange. Franki's eyes glint in the sunlight. His stare electrifies my skin. I grind my teeth against the pain and when I feel someone take my right hand, I turn to see Mummy looking at me with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I am the mother," she says softly.

"And I am a daughter," I answer. One of my sisters steps beside me, grabbing my other hand. Callisse squeezes me gently and I return the gesture. One by one Tersi, Melpo, Clionie, and Thalia close ranks. "We all are."

I turn my attention back to Franki and think of my father. What must it have been like for him to be cornered by this man and separated from the love of his life? Was he aware of what was happening? Or was he completely lost to Franki's power? I grasp my mom's and sisters' hands again, and I am strengthened by my family's presence. Grateful that I am not alone to end the curse that has dictated my entire existence. I'm done with having my every action be influenced by people who believe it is their right to control me. Because of power. Wealth.

Franki takes a step toward us and a current runs through me. Though we have no blood ties, we are connected. His hate is a tangible thing. But I'm ready for it. I embrace the darkest parts of myself and join them with the light. I can feel the pieces of my soul fighting against Franki's attack, propelled from each other like the positive poles of two magnets forced together. He is strong. Too strong. The shadow of Franki's presence wants to overtake me, and I almost let it. But then I envision my father. He's so clear before me that when Franki holds my gaze I wonder if he can see him too. So long I've kept the weight of my father's death away, afraid to let my emotions devour me until I am nothing but all-consuming, solitary pain. I hear my family call for me, and I remember that I am not alone. I never am. I

raise my hands, and my mom and sisters follow suit. We are a church, exalting each other, together for the first time but not the last.

The bottomless expanse of grief that I've worked so hard to suppress swells to the surface. Mummy and my sisters do not look away. Even at my most ghastly, they envelop me with their love. The white-hot fury that surges forward does not overtake me like I always imagined it would. Instead, I am able to hone it to a fine point, stretching my control this way and that. When I refocus my energy on Franki, I feel his fear ripple through me as if it was my own. I magnify his horror, thinking of the families whose grief knew no bounds because their loved ones had simply vanished in the night. Of my mother, who was so desperate to escape the suffocating clutches of her once husband that she left her own daughters, my sisters, behind. Of my father who was a shell of himself that I never really got to know. With each constricting spiritual tug, I loosen Franki's control of his prisoners until I feel what can only be described as an irrepressible urge to turn north and, though I've never been, I know it is coming from the direction of the compound. A place that has been both prison and sanctuary for my sisters. Energy ripples through me as I breathe as one with the people who toil on that land, connected in spirit though we have never met, and with a collective gasp, we are freed.

I sense the moment Franki realizes that he's lost before I see it with my eyes. The tether between us has frayed to the point of collapse. Too late he realizes that his defeat is inevitable. And like a coward, he tries to turn away.

We breathe as one as Franki falls.

## CHAPTER 70

# AN INSPECTOR

One week has passed since Preston and I returned to Miami from our international expedition. Even now my head spins at how fast life moves for the rich whenever I think about us hopping on flights from Miami to Paris to Port-au-Prince. Multiple split-second decisions that would've required months if not years of saving and planning on my part, and Preston hadn't even flinched.

Mummy is still in Haiti with the Muses. I wish I could've spent more time with them in the flesh. I've always known that I was missing out by never getting to meet them in person, but to be able to kiss and hug them, to wipe away their tears or hold on to them as we danced ... It was more than I ever could have hoped for, but it showed me just how much our video calls fail to capture the truth of them. But I had to return to Miami. Even though we had gotten to the root of our problems in Haiti, I still have unfinished business here.

The Banks Corps edition of my supper club is tomorrow. I have been a ball of nervous energy all day. In between dealing with passive-aggressive Ainsley and catching up on the work I missed while I was gallivanting around the world, I've exchanged countless messages with Quinn, the woman that Preston has connected me with to help out with event planning following my last supper club at his house. She's been a godsend. Preston really wasn't kidding when he said that she knew her way around luxury occasions. Since this is the first time my dinner event will be mobile, there are so many more things that I have to anticipate to make sure that everything goes as close to how I want it as possible.

As soon as I get home from work, I immediately set out to finalize the

recipes that I will be cooking for tomorrow. I flutter around our small apartment kitchen, in the zone ... that is, until Preston pops into my mind. I'll be checking the seasoning of one of the appetizers when my thoughts wander to what he could be doing. Or I'll wash some of the plates that have started to pile up and feel my face flush at the memory of all the stolen kisses we've managed to exchange on our executive lunches. I gently stir the simmering okra stew I've prepared, admiring as it glistens an emerald green. I dip my spoon and wipe the back of it on the palm of my hand and lick. A seed bursts in my mouth just as my taste buds register the spice from my Scotch bonnet sauce. Delicious. I'm so lost in my taste test that when my old iPhone chimes with an incoming video call, I nearly jump out of my skin.

"Hello?" I say as I wipe down the counter where a spoonful of okra stew fell in my surprise.

"Hey. Are you busy?" It's Preston. It looks like he's walking along the edge of the infinity pool at his home. "Should I call back later?"

"No, no. I'm just finalizing the meals for tomorrow," I say, going in for another spoonful of stew. "What's up?"

"Well, I actually called to talk about that." Preston is trying his hardest to stop his smile from spreading across his face, but it is a losing battle. "I have good news. Great news, actually."

"Oh yeah?" I say, smiling back because how can I resist. "Tell me."

"A little bird told me that the folks over at The Guide have heard about your gathering. And they are, quote, unquote, *very intrigued*."

The spoon I still hold clangs to the floor, making another mess.

"Wh—" I catch myself from falling on the slimy okra. "Wait. What? *The Guide*? Like The Guide that Le Grand Fromage has been trying for the last however long to give them a higher rating?"

Preston nods. His smile is luminescent.

"I might've reached out to someone I know and mentioned how popular your supper club is becoming. Funnily enough, he had already heard about it through a couple of his friends," Preston says. "Next thing I know, we were talking about maybe having The Guide inspectors come to one of your events to try out your food for themselves."

Preston's smile falters as he looks at me expectantly, waiting for me to

celebrate with him, for me. I do feel a surge of gratitude for him. There's something else lying right under the surface too, but I'm not ready to deal with it right now. The more that I think about his act of kindness, the more conflicted I feel. While I know that this would be an amazing opportunity and that Preston was only talking about my supper club because he's proud of me ... I don't want any of my success to be thanks to someone that I'm dating. Especially not because of who their father is. I want people to see that I'm too gifted to deny. The last thing I need is some inspector thinking that they're only there as a favor for someone they know. I'm really not trying to hurt Preston's feelings with my less than enthusiastic response, but how could I just let all my efforts be overshadowed by his simple phone call?

"I really appreciate you talking to someone about my supper club," I start. "But I would've liked it if you spoke with me about it first."

From the look on Preston's face, this is not the response he expected. "I didn't plan it that way. It just sort of happened. I figured that it would be cool to have your work acknowledged after everything you've had to juggle to get to this point. I didn't think it was a big deal."

"Maybe it isn't to you because opportunities have just fallen into your lap your whole life, but that's not how things are for people like me."

Preston pauses a moment, mulling over what to say next. "I don't get why you're reacting this way. This is good news," he says slowly. "And it's not my fault that my dad is Silas Banks. Trust me, I would change it if I could."

"Would you really, Preston?"

"You weren't worried about who my dad was when we were on our way to Paris or stopping in Haiti for reasons you still haven't explained to me," Preston mutters. If I was someone else, I probably wouldn't have been able to hear. But because I am me, his words ring clearly.

"What did you just say?"

"Forget it," Preston says with a sigh. "I was talking to myself."

"No, you meant it," I say. "You're mad that I'm not falling over myself with gratitude. I'm sure you're used to other girls being blown away by your grand gestures. But I'm not. Besides, you could use all of that access to really help people, you know? Your dad could literally eradicate world hunger. Another billionaire friend of his could tackle homelessness. They could each

choose a plight on this earth and improve the lives of billions of people. And they'd *still* be rich! But you expect me to be excited that you made a phone call for me?"

Preston stares at me open-mouthed but recovers quickly. "You know what this is about, Brielle? You hate letting people in. From the moment you started at Banks Corps, you've had a humongous chip on your shoulder. Now that you and I are working toward something, you're scared. And instead of owning up to that, you're pushing me away.

"And why wouldn't I *want* to do this for you, Brielle?" Preston continues. "It's not because you can't do it on your own. It's obvious that you can. You don't need me. But if you're talking about helping the world, and I'm not saying I don't agree, why can't I start with you?"

It's my turn to stare open-mouthed.

"Preston—" I say.

"It's fine," he says, cutting me off. "I've already distracted you enough from your prep. I'll see you tomorrow."

Preston hangs up and I stand in the same spot for a long while, replaying our conversation. I hate that there's some truth to what Preston is saying. Yes, he should absolutely do more than he has, because he can. But why does that mean that he can't help me too? Isn't this what I've been fighting for this entire summer? Access? And power?

When I climb into bed for the night, I settle into my sheets and close my eyes, hoping that sleep will find me. When it does, I dream that I've fallen into a vat of my okra stew. When I call for help, there's no one there to hear me.

## CHAPTER 71

# SCREAM

My Banks Corps supper club is still underway. I've been stopped by no fewer than fifteen people, each one complimenting me on the delicious foods they've tried and hidden gems they've uncovered throughout Miami during the tour. We started in West Coconut Grove, learning about the Bahamian settlers who helped put Miami on the map, and then headed north to Little Havana, stopping at the domino park where the neighborhood's elders meet up for hours of play. By the time we reach Overtown, the second-to-last stop, my nerves have ratcheted up to one hundred. After this we will be in Little Haiti and will move from the appetizers our guests have been sampling to the main course.

"We are now in Historic Overtown, a bastion of Black culture in Miami over the years," booms Jimmy, one of the tour guides I hired to lead us across the different neighborhoods. There are three buses full of Banks Corps employees and their guests. I sit in the back of one of them with Marcello making final adjustments while Chad and Quinn ride in the other two. I've been able to avoid Preston so far, but it's been difficult. Though he sits at the front of this bus with Blake, Kwan, and Mason, he has been turning around periodically to glance my way.

"Trouble in paradise?" Marcello asks when he catches Preston staring again.

"Something like that," I say. "But I do *not* have time to deal with it now."

Marcello motions as if he's zipping his lips, and we finish what we're working on. Our tour guide continues with his history lesson, informing our guests about the two freeways that were built through Overtown in the 1960s, displacing the thousands of Black residents who had built a thriving

community there despite the Jim Crow laws that dictated where they lived.

“Can you tell us more about the real estate opportunities you mentioned?” one of my coworkers’ plus-ones asks from his spot near the middle of the bus.

I can’t help but groan. This guy has been eyeing every stop on the tour like a shark sizing up a prime selection of fish. He’s gonna eat them all eventually, but for now, he’s deciding on which one to devour first.

“Well, sir, I didn’t exactly describe the neighborhoods as such,” Jimmy says tightly. He’s been fielding this guy’s gentrifier questions all day long. I can tell he’s over it too. “I was stating that since Black residents were forced to move inland because of segregation, white residents had access to all the most attractive homes and buildings on the beach. However, with continued sea-level rise thanks to climate change, those inland neighborhoods that were once deemed subpar are on much more valuable land today. Some developers are hoping to force longtime residents out of their homes to build more expensive and safer homes for the more affluent who aren’t quite ready to say goodbye to Miami yet.”

The man nods curtly and begins sending furtive texts without looking at his phone. Probably rallying his developer friends this very second.

At last we make it to the cultural heritage center in Little Haiti, where we’ll be hosting the main meal. The director of the venue, a tall, dark-skinned woman with a fade and large hoop earrings, welcomes everyone inside. She beautifully explains the history of the neighborhood that Haitian people have flocked to for decades in search of a better life, and as she finishes her presentation, a troupe of women and girls dressed in flowing, jewel-toned skirts and tied crop tops, as well as a few in the traditional karabela dress, file into room. Their skirts and the long ends of their headscarves twirl in unison as the thunderous sounds of drums overtake the conversation in the room. As they perform, Marcello, Chad, and a few other people I was able to hire for the night from Le Grand Fromage walk around the room offering small bites of fried plantain topped with two options of pikliz. The first selection is packed full of the heat of the pickled slaw that I have grown up eating and the second is a milder version for the uninitiated palates of my Banks Corps coworkers who aren’t daring enough to try the former. When the performers



have finished, the sound of the audience's claps and whistles rival that of the drums.

"We are so glad to have you all with us tonight." The director of the center grins, showcasing a lovely gap between her two front teeth. "And it is all thanks to Brielle Petitfour, a local to the Little Haiti community. Brielle, please come say a word or two."

The audience claps again and suddenly Marcello is behind me, gently shoving me to the front of the room. When I stand before the audience, my eyes are immediately drawn to Preston. It seems that no matter where I am in the room, I am always able to find him. Ainsley steps up beside where Preston stands, and Silas follows seconds later. I feel a cold sweat break out across my body. My gaze lands on Preston's again, and this time, he mouths *You've got this*, and I nod in thanks. He's right, I *do* got this. And there's no getting out of it now. I take a deep breath and reach for the director's mic to speak.

"Thank you, everyone, for joining me tonight," I say. My voice wobbles slightly, so I clear my throat to continue. "I am so honored to be able to share some of the heritage neighborhoods that are so often overlooked in Miami. As a product of Little Haiti, it gives me nothing but pride to showcase these areas as well as a bit of my own culture. Thank you again for coming, and I hope that everyone enjoys the rest of the evening."

The crowd claps again, surprising me with their enthusiasm. Employees of the cultural center usher the guests to their seats, and I head to the back room. Chad and I are plating the first course when Marcello walks in.

"You were fantastic!" he says, giving me a hug.

"Thank you," I say, returning the embrace. "I was terrified."

"Couldn't even tell," Marcello says.

"Everyone is seated," Quinn says from the entrance of the back room, clipboard in hand. Her dark blond hair is pulled into a low ponytail, accentuating her long neck and delicate features. "We can start bringing out the courses whenever you're ready."

"All right, everyone. Let's get to it!" I say, grabbing a plate from the counter.

The menu for the final stop of the tour is all about Haitian food. With the

budget that Banks Corps provided, I was able to pull out all the stops. There are grilled vegetables of all kinds, breadfruit and tomatoes, carrots and broccoli. The bright red of the beets in the salade russe adds a colorful flair to the trays. Marinated conch served two ways, grilled and topped with red onions and a version an sos paired with red and green bell peppers and onions, the orange-red sauce enticing in its aroma. There are three kinds of rice to choose from: diri kole ak pwa, a staple rice and bean combo; diri blanc, or white rice; and diri djon djon, whose fragrant mushroom smell is my favorite. No festive Haitian meal is complete without griot, so I've carefully marinated it with the blend of epis that my mom taught me to make, along with the essence that I've added to each meal since my first supper club for Mrs. Newhouse. The menu that I created is extensive and delightful. I beam with pleasure as I watch cooks and servers and my friends rush around to make sure that everything is perfect.

Each time I head into the dining room, I am overcome by the pleasure written on each person's face as they eat spoonful after spoonful of my creations. I take the crowd in. Marcello commands the room with his presence, periodically blowing air-kisses to Chad when he thinks no one is watching. Chad deftly catches each one, tucking them into the front pocket of his shirt. Their adorable display makes me think of Preston. I scan the crowd to look for him, but my eyes fall on Quinn, who keeps to the outskirts of the room, only stepping in when needed to guide a server in the right direction or answer a guest's question. Quinn is turning away from directing a server to the appropriate table to place a dish when she bumps right into Silas Banks. He holds his arms out to steady her, but the moment that his hands grasp Quinn's shoulders, he releases her so quickly you would've thought that Quinn was on fire. The two of them spring away from each other without exchanging a word and make an about-face in the opposite direction. Quinn glances around nervously, clearly hoping that no one saw the collision. I disappear into the back room before she can feel me staring.

I briefly wonder what *that* backstory might be but eventually decide to keep myself busy looking through the meal list again. My three hundredth time, if I had to guess. Again, my mind wanders to Preston. I really want to apologize to him for how our conversation went yesterday, but my sense of

discipline keeps me in place. A yawning pit of despair begins to stretch its wings within me, but I restrain it swiftly. I've fought way too hard to get to this point. Now that Silas Banks has finally tasted food from my supper club, I'll be able to get inside his head in no time at all. All I have to do is make it until the end of the night.

*How hard could that possibly be?*

No sooner have I thought this than a bloodcurdling scream slashes through the air.

## CHAPTER 72

# SHEEPSHEAD

I rush out of the kitchen searching for the source of the commotion, but when I arrive among the guests, there is no mistaking the sound of laughter.

“Is everything all right?” I ask, walking up to the table that seems to have gotten the crowd’s attention. Ainsley is seated with Preston and Silas on either side of her and holds a plate of food in her hands at eye level, inspecting its contents.

“No, it’s *not* all right,” she says, eyes still fixed on the plate.

Something about Ainsley’s response sends the guests into another fit of laughter. Silas wipes a tear from the corner of his eye. “What did you *think*, Ainsley? That we’re all snacking on human molars?” It’s true that I am only just learning to tap into my power, but there’s no way that my original concoction could’ve been reversed ... could it? I think back to the collection that I pulled from Marcello’s family funeral home. I *did* grab a few teeth.

“You should’ve seen your face!” Silas chuckles again, and I join in with everyone else, hoping to mask my panic. I listen to Silas continue poking fun at Ainsley, but inside my wheels are spinning on overdrive. I can’t let all my efforts come to nothing. Not when I’m so close. But I’ve only ever gotten the opportunity to weave my control *after* having someone eat my food. If I wait until I can get a hold of Silas again, will I lose the potency that I need for my plan to take hold? It’s now or never. I grab on to Silas’s mind and weave in my intention, using his chatter to help alleviate the restlessness that has gathered in the room as I plant the seeds of my revenge. My strength is stretched to capacity as I juggle it all while hoping that my bigger plan can properly take root in Silas’s psyche.

“The surf-and-turf course had multiple variations.” I use the now tentative

peace in the room to improvise. “Though the turf portion is standard across all dishes tonight, the surf has various options. For instance, some of you have shrimp, others lobster, and a few have fish. But there was only one dish with sheepshead fish, an animal famous for its ... *humanlike* incisors.” My audience is captivated by my explanation, and some of them shoot glances at Ainsley, who is seething in her seat. “We included the sheepshead as a new take on the classic surf and turf dish. You are quite lucky to have received it!”

I start an applause and everyone joins in. I am about to excuse myself to return to the back room, confident that I have distracted everyone from Ainsley’s outburst, but as soon as the clapping dies down, Ainsley speaks up again.

“That dish did not taste like sheepshead fish. I’ve had that fish before,” Ainsley says coldly.

My heart thumps as the other diners’ attention bounces back and forth between us. There is an uncomfortable tenor to the room now at the unspoken accusations Ainsley is catapulting my way. I take a deep breath.

Ainsley starts to open her mouth again, and this time I will her to stop speaking, throwing every ounce of my power in her direction, praying that I don’t snap. At last, I can see the instant that I am able to take hold of Ainsley. Her shoulders droop reflexively, the clench in her jaw slackening as her gaze softens, and I know that my grasp is firm. Beads of sweat have started to gather on my brow, but I don’t wipe them off, afraid that any movement will cause me to break the hard-fought connection.

“You’re probably not used to Haitian cuisine’s flavor profiles,” I say calmly, trying not to grit my teeth with strain.

Ainsley nods slowly and another diner asks, “Oh, are you talking about that epis base?”

“Yes, that is something we use a lot!” I reply as cheerfully as I can. Thankfully, that is all it takes for everyone to finally resume their conversations and finish their meals.

The rest of the night glides along smoothly. I am practically limp with gratitude as I give Marcello and Chad final instructions and we pack everything away. Once they’ve started their tasks, I leave in search of Quinn

to tie up any loose ends, ready to go home and collapse with exhaustion. I spot her standing in a corner with her back facing me. When I tap her on her shoulder she spins, eyes bloodshot and puffy.

“Quinn? Are you all right?” I ask, concerned.

“I’m fine,” she sniffles, though it is clear that she is not. “I’m going to head out. Can we touch base tomorrow?”

I don’t get to respond before Quinn has already stormed past me. I call out her name but she walks faster, leaving me all alone with my thoughts. Tonight was a success, even considering Ainsley’s outburst, my rushed influencing on Silas, and Quinn’s strange behavior. The pride that courses through me makes me giddy, delirious.

“Brielle.”

I would know that voice anywhere. I turn to look into Preston’s warm brown eyes. All I want to do is forget yesterday’s argument and go back to the way things were. It’s not that I’m sorry about what I said, because I’m not. But I can’t deny the truth in Preston’s words. Maybe he can see all this churning within me because he steps closer to me, and I meet him halfway to erase the space between us, wrapping my arms around him. When I look up at him, there is longing in his expression but also something else that I can’t quite place. I stretch onto my tiptoes until our lips are a whisper apart. Preston closes the distance and I lean in, glad that we’re able to move past this.

Preston pulls away first and the earlier expression takes a more solid form. There’s confusion there.

“Preston—” I begin but he interjects.

“I know you didn’t cook sheephead fish tonight, Brielle,” Preston says. He speaks slowly, carefully. Fearfully.

“What’s going on?”

## CHAPTER 73

# A GIRL'S GOTTA DO WHAT A GIRL'S GOTTA DO

In the last few weeks, Preston and I have spent increasingly more time together. He's come to every supper club since he first learned of it, playfully peer pressured me into taking many an executive lunch to Ainsley's annoyance, and brought me home from work more often than not. It's in those times when we would be seated at my rickety kitchen table that I would talk about all the meals that I wanted to create for the next event. He learned about everything that I was tapping into for an upcoming dish. French cuisine, Japanese cooking techniques, and of course every Haitian food imaginable. When Preston confronts me at the end of the Banks Corps dinner, I know that I cannot lie to him. What should've been bonding moments between two people getting to know each other has also become my undoing. Almost.

Preston continues looking at me expectantly, waiting for me to explain what exactly is going on. I could tell him. I could let him know that I am part zonbi and that I've been using my dining experiences to earn money, explore my culinary passion, and, oh yeah, slowly gain control of all the people who feel that they are untouchable. People who have no sense of the abundance of privilege that they contain in just the tip of their pinky finger. Who have no clue how other people suffer for what they take for granted. People like his father. People like him. Someone looking from the outside in might think that Preston is different from his dad. And in many ways, that is true. But I know something about Preston. Something that I've known since we first met, that proves that he and Silas are cut from the very same cloth.

“Brielle,” Preston says again, this time more forcefully. “What is going on? You never mentioned a sheepshead fish in your prep. You’ve been meticulous about your ingredients. So much so that even I can remember what you plan on cooking based on what you’ve told me.”

“Preston, I—”

“And don’t lie to me, Brielle,” Preston says, taking a step closer. “Enough with all the secrets. Ainsley might be an asshole sometimes, but even I could tell that there was an actual tooth on her plate. Everyone else might’ve been fooled, but not me.”

“Seriously, Preston,” I start, taking a step back. “It’s really not that—”

“Brielle,” Preston cuts me off again. “I’m not kidding. What was that in Ainsley’s food? I’m not trying to sound like a jerk, but we took a detour to Haiti just a week ago. Did this meal have something to do with that? Was it part of some ritual? There is absolutely nothing wrong with you practicing whatever you want to—and you don’t need my permission at all to do that. But if you’re putting something extra in your meals without people’s consent, that’s not okay.”

The more I let Preston speak, the more he seems to work himself into a frenzy. Apparently, yesterday’s argument was only the beginning of my hold on him breaking. Already, my control is completely severed. When I reach out my power to him, fill him with my intention, nothing happens. It is a gaping void that I am not strong enough to bridge, especially not after having strained myself to tap into both Silas’s and Ainsley’s minds tonight. Maybe everyone else’s too, if I think about it. And then it dawns on me. Mummy’s words from our phone call while I was in Paris.

*... he loved me. No matter how much he was able to control other people, he could never bring himself to harm me or your sisters. It was a limit to his power.*

The hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. I can hear my heart pumping in my ears, feel all the blood in my body shoot to the tips of my fingers until they tingle. At first I want to lie to myself and say that my feelings for Preston are purely mercenary. But there is no point in ignoring the truth. Especially not when I’ve already made contingency plans in the event that something like this were to happen. It was only a matter of time



before I let a detail slip and found myself caught like an unlucky sea creature in a fisherman's net. But if I am anything, I am prepared with the equivalent of sharpened shears to break myself free.

Preston is still staring at me intently. The earlier concern and longing that I glimpsed in his eyes at dinner is now clouded by anger and growing distress. I hope that he'll look at me with affection again one day. I slowly pull out my phone as he continues to watch me, distrust radiating off his body.

I've kept this old iPhone of mine for a few reasons. Habit. The fact that it holds all my pictures and videos. But there is one video in particular ... Still out of service, I tap through the various albums on the phone briefly and land on the clip that I am looking for. Preston moves in closer to gaze down at the screen with me, his lips pulled taut into a flat line. We watch together as the camera focuses on a close-up of a plump dead caterpillar. Ants march into the screen, stealing pieces of its carcass, strategically engulfing the caterpillar until it is almost entirely concealed by countless legs and thoraxes.

The beginning of summer was a lifetime ago now.

Preston opens his mouth to speak, but I put up a finger to silence him. The video continues and the shot widens to provide more context. Gravel. Shrubbery. The sun illuminates the scene that has materialized before us. The soft thuds of steps on the ground grow louder as an old man jogs into view. Mr. Beauregard.

We both know what is coming, but we watch anyway as the elderly man raises his hand in greeting. As a lightning-white car speeds into view, colliding with Mr. Beauregard. The person behind the wheel is a blur, but there's no mistaking that dark head of hair. The panicked expression on someone whose face matches almost exactly that of the old man who is now tangled in a heap of brittle bones, bent this way and that, on the scalding hot pavement.

When the video ends, our eyes do not meet. Preston and I stare down at the phone even as the screen goes black. I am the one who snaps out of the device's digital trance first, and I look up at Preston, waiting for him to return my gaze. When he does, all I see mirrored back at me is horror. Eyes opened wide in shock. A brow furrowed in worry. Mouth held open in a silent

scream.

I don't want to enjoy this moment. But I do. I relish the fact that I hold power over Preston's future, all thanks to a phone that hasn't been paid for in months. Even as my will over his mind has dissolved. I don't want to have to use the footage, but I will if I have to. Even if that means blowing up anything that's been building between us.

I smile. For the first time, it reaches my eyes.

## CHAPTER 74

# TAPESTRY

It's a gamble showing Preston this footage. His father is one of the richest men on the planet. If he felt threatened enough, he could probably have me taken care of before I even stepped foot out of this venue. Or even if he didn't go total Mafia on me, his father could hire the best lawyers money could buy, the ones who fabricate airtight alibis and stack juries in their clients' favor. I can hear their opening arguments now.

*He's just a kid.*

*He has his whole future ahead of him.*

*His life of privilege has made him incompatible to life in a penitentiary.*

It would work. Probably. More likely than not. But there's still a risk, no matter how infinitesimal it may be, that a trial wouldn't go in Preston's favor. And that small sliver of doubt, along with his inability to be fully cutthroat, must give him pause. Because even if Preston were to be found innocent, would he want to go through life as the guy who evaded a prison sentence because his father bailed him out? Would he want to be remembered as the person who hit his great-grandfather and left him bleeding in the street to die? I can see all of these thoughts warring on Preston's face as he weighs his options. Finally, he speaks.

"You knew this whole time?" Preston's voice is low, beaten down.

"I did," I say.

"But ... how could you not say anything?" Preston asks. He speaks softer still, even though we are the only two left in the room now.

"It's not exactly a subject for polite conversation," I answer.

We stand in silence, each lost to the separate journeys that our minds have taken us on. So many decisions have led us to this moment and whatever we

decide will dictate the rest of our lives. There aren't many times that the decisions that we make have such reverberating consequences. Sometimes, the little choices are just that. What to wear today. What to eat for breakfast. Tiny strokes of mundanity that eventually add up to a much larger picture, one that we can only see once time has gotten away from us, when we can finally step back and admire the artwork of life that we've created.

But then there are the instances like this. When we can feel the gravity of our decisions already weighing on us into the future. Our bodies shift and contort to accommodate the pressure of uncertainty, creating a snapshot that we'll always look back on and think *ah, this is when everything changed*. Though Preston and I started this summer in two separate realities, we have now been inextricably woven into the tapestry of each other's future. We can allow these threads to fully ensnare, to engulf one another until they are fused, and decide that we'll guard each other's secrets forever. Or we can bring each other to the light, leaving the frayed edges of our decisions forever visible to the world around us. And who would that help?

I can sense the moment when we each come together, when we decide that we have tied the borders of our lives' tapestries together in an unbreakable knot. When we are old and gray, and all our memories have disintegrated into dust, we will have this.

"So it *wasn't* sheephead," Preston says. Already his tone has eased, his shoulders, which were tense with anxiety, have found their way back into the comfort of nonchalance.

"It wasn't sheephead," I say definitively.

Preston nods. "Will you ever tell me what it actually was?"

"One day. When we can fully have faith in each other," I say. And then, "Quinn is more than just someone you know who happens to be good at running events, isn't she?"

"Yup," Preston says.

Preston and I walk out of the cultural center, looking for Marcello and Chad. We find them leaning against Marcello's car, Chad's arms wrapped around Marcello as Marcello leans back against him, chatting away.

"Hey y'all," I say. I feel weightless with this new and unspoken pact between me and Preston. "That's it for tonight. Thanks for waiting for me."

“Of course,” Marcello says, dragging out the second syllable. “Are you ready to go home or...?” He leaves the question dangling in the air, glancing pointedly between me and Preston.

“I think I’ll ride with Preston, if that’s okay with you,” I say.

“Not a problem at all,” Marcello says. He leans in to hug me before leaving, and I promise him that I’ll text him when I get home.

At first Preston and I sit side by side in the back of his privacy-screened, chauffeured car in companionable silence. But then, we speak, laying plain our intentions and hopes. The ways we want our lives to change for the better. How we might be able to accomplish that together. The air between us holds the tension of something unsaid. I try my hardest not to squirm beneath Preston’s gaze. We’ve already said so much. There’s no rush for anything else. When we arrive at my apartment, Preston gets out to walk me to my door, no matter how much I try to deter him and remind him that it’s late. I pull my keys out of my bag when we get in front of my unit but I don’t immediately unlock the door.

“I wanted to tell you something,” Preston starts. “Before Ainsley found ... what she found. I wanted to tell you that I didn’t like us fighting. I had originally planned to find you at the end of the night and tell you.”

“Well, we got to the same ending anyway,” I say with a small smile.

“Yeah,” Preston says. Both of us stand on the straw mat placed before the front door, facing each other. We inch toward each other leisurely as we talk, slowly letting ourselves give in to the pull that is forever tugging us closer.

“We’re pretty messed up,” I say with my arms wrapped around Preston’s neck. His hands lie lightly at my waist, but I feel them as if he had dipped them into lava. Even as I battle myself for control, I don’t forget that we’ve both kept things from each other, used half-truths to get what we want. And instead of getting upset for it, we chose to accept the other for who we are and not who we say we are.

“We’re pretty messed up,” Preston says. “At least we don’t have to hide that from each other.”

“Nobody’s perfect,” I say before Preston touches his lips gently to mine.

## CHAPTER 75

# RIGHT AND WRONG

*Callisse (poetry)*

Look at how easily Brielle has drawn him into her web.

*Thalia (comedy)*

He goes so willingly—I wouldn't say she had to do much drawing in.

*Tersi (dance)*

He *waltzed* right in, if you ask me. Maybe even dropped a one-two konpa step.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

I hope our sister knows what she's doing.

*Clionie (history)*

Only time will tell.

★ ★ ★

“De cabez!”

Mummy slams the domino on the table, dancing in her seat at the snake eyes looking up at her in the pieces.

“Again!” she exclaims with glee. “And don't forget to bring out the bonbon this time.”

The Muses groan, but intertwined in the final note of their indignation is happiness, the joy of spending enough time with their mother that they can say, *Enough, must you continue to beat us at this game we don't even like to play?* is not lost on any of them. But this feeling is finite because their time

together will soon come to an end. Mummy must return to the States, but she won't be away for long. Neither will Brielle. Before leaving, as they huddled together during their tear-filled goodbye, Brielle made a promise that they would all be in one place before long. And when that happened, it would be permanent.

There are two tables placed outside, one holding the game of dominos and the other propping up snacks and things to drink. Tersi blows on a steaming mug of ginger tea held delicately between her hands as she watches her mother and sisters reset the game for another round. The trail of mist from the beverage dissipates, away from where they sit on the front porch of their childhood home, over the well-maintained bushes that mark the outskirts of the large front yard, out into the wide field that has long been filled with zonbi, lost to the cares of the world or their own desires, ceaselessly toiling away.

But the field stands empty now as there are no more zonbi. Just regular people gone home at the end of a workday. Neighbors still glance over at the plot of land, some spending hours looking on with curiosity and confusion. They whisper about the day not long ago when countless of the missing, forgotten, and thought-to-be dead escaped the compound.

It is almost time for Valentine to leave for her flight back to Miami. One by one her daughters have inched closer to their mother, for one final kiss on the cheek, one last hug. Valentine brushes away the tears that line each of her daughter's faces, trying hard to contain her own emotions lest she break down and lose herself to the grief and guilt of having to leave them all behind again.

Callisse, who was always the most impacted by Valentine's separation from her father, places a comforting hand on her mother's shoulder. "It's okay, Mummy," she says. "We know you'll be back."

And that's all it takes for Valentine's wobbling smile to melt into the tears she's been trying so hard to hold back. "Thank you for not losing faith in me," Valentine says, drawing her daughters in until they are standing together in a circle, arms looped through arms. It's a physical manifestation of their unbreakable bond. "I've carried you all within my heart since the day that I left. I wish I hadn't been a coward, that I could've made a better decision—"

“We love you, Mummy,” Melpo says, halting her mother’s words.

“It hasn’t always been easy,” Clonie says, nodding, “but we understand. Brielle needed you. And though Papi was a tyrant who tied us to this land, he couldn’t harm us the way he did Swan.”

“You may have left in flesh, but you were always with us, Mummy,” Tersi says. “We’re free now. All of us.”

Valentine embraces her daughters again, and when they have finally collected themselves, Thalia brightens the cloud of reconciliation with an exuberant “Now where are those bonbon?” And they all burst into giggles.

Franki exits the house, right on time. Eyes lifeless, back erect. An echo of Swan all those years ago. Franki places the tray of cookies on the table and waits for instruction.

“That is all,” Valentine says, knowing that the Franki she once knew is no more; has been gone for quite some time. Lost to the pursuit of power. He returns to the house without a word.

A part of Valentine wonders if this was the right way, turning Franki into this shell of a human. But then she releases this version of right and wrong. Because it is always the people who have been victimized who are asked to consider their reaction to the harms done against them and never the other way around. At least this way, there is no blood on their hands.



## CHAPTER 76

# LOVE, ALWAYS

Preston and I pick Mummy up from the airport in a limo, the only car available to him that will comfortably accommodate all three of us in the backseat. And something tells me that we're going to need all the space we can get. As soon as we are settled, Mummy sitting across from me and Preston beside me, we realize that this is the first time that we have all been together since our short time in Haiti ... after I left for Paris without giving my mom so much as a heads-up. I thought that Mummy would've been okay with moving past it, all things considered, but I was wrong. She spends almost the entire ride chewing me out in Creole. Though Preston can't understand a word she says, he looks sufficiently contrite enough that Mummy eventually remembers herself and thanks Preston for coming with me to pick her up.

Preston latches on, desperate to be back in Mummy's good graces.

"You're very welcome, Mrs. Petitfour!"

Now that Preston has sufficiently ingratiated himself to Mummy, I am left with the task of telling her our plan, the seed of which was first planted by Preston. At first I was surprised, writing off his proposal as the whim of a flighty rich boy. But then I wondered, *What is one more absurdity?* Especially one like this. Mummy will not be happy. Again. I try to figure out the best way to begin this part of the conversation, but she, who has been looking out the window for the last couple of minutes with an increasing look of confusion on her face, beats me to it by asking a question.

"Where are we going?" Mummy asks, eyeing me and Preston. "This isn't the way home."

Well, I guess now is as good a time as any.

“That’s because we’re not going home,” I say.

Mummy looks at me suspiciously, and I glance repeatedly between her and Preston, who is definitely turning a funny shade of green. He nods for me to go on, and I take a deep breath for strength and continue.

“Mummy, Preston and I are getting married.”

She doesn’t say anything at first. She blinks at me, like a robot malfunctioning and unable to compute this unaccounted for human error before her.

“Excuse me?” Mummy says.

“I asked Brielle to marry me,” Preston clarifies, taking my hand.

“Brielle Sw—”

“I know, I know,” I say, interrupting my mother in Creole. “Brielle Swan Petitfour. Mummy, I’m telling you this so we don’t have a repeat of Paris. Since I’m seventeen, I technically need parental consent, but I’m sure that with Preston’s money we can find a way around that. But I’m letting you know because I want you there, Mummy.”

My mom sits back in her seat, seemingly waiting for me to finish, so I keep on. “And yes, I’m aware that this might be a huge mistake. But it’s a mistake that’s mine to make. My entire life I’ve tried to be the daughter that you want me to be. To say all the right things, to do what you want for my own good and for the good of everyone else: our family, other people, even you. I want to make my own decisions. Including the decision to marry Preston. I’m tired of having to sneak around to follow my heart. I would love it if you could accept my decision and support me.”

“And if I can’t?” Mummy finally says.

I take a deep breath. “If you aren’t okay with me taking my life into my own hands, then I guess I’ll have to live it without you.”

It’s my turn to ease into my seat, exhaling to release the tension that has gathered in my shoulders and neck. Preston squeezes my hand in quiet support, and I can almost hear him saying *good job* for getting through my speech. We had discussed it before leaving to get Mummy and agreed that I would do most of the talking. Preston had assented, understanding that this was a long-overdue conversation between me and my mom.

Mummy silently watches our exchange. She sighs heavily, shaking her

head slightly, and the movement makes my stomach clench in anticipation of what she will say next.

“Brielle,” Mummy begins, and she sounds so, so tired. “I am not disappointed in you. How could I be? If I have been too strict, it’s only because I was trying to protect you. I didn’t want what happened to your father to repeat itself with you. His inability to feel. There were so many times that I was afraid that someone would discover who you are, *what* you are, and take you away from me.”

Mummy wipes a tear from her cheek, and I leave Preston to sit beside her, curling into her side the way that I would have when I was a little girl. Before I built the protective layer around my heart that kept me from feeling hurt but also from feeling anything at all.

“I’ve already lost so much,” Mummy continues. “My daughters, who I had to leave behind in Haiti, who grew up without me because of my decisions. My precious Swan, your father, who I loved so much. The thought of losing you, for any reason at all, was unbearable. I tried to limit you for your protection. But you have made me realize that you can take care of yourself. I only wish I’d seen it sooner.”

Mummy pulls away from me slightly, and I look up at her. The hand that she places on my cheek is tender with care, and the tears that spring from my eyes, that have always been there but never able to fall, cascade down my face in sweet relief. “I will always love and protect you, Brielle. I am your mother. If the choice is between me remaining in your life, even if I don’t understand all the decisions that you are making, and turning my back on you, I will always choose you. Always. And I am so sorry that I ever made you feel that would not be the case.”

It feels as if sorrow and grief have made a home within my soul for a hundred years and finally they are gone. The echoes of their presence remain, but I am free. This is what I thought it would be like to capture Franki and make him pay for what he’s done to my family. But it hadn’t even come close. The sense of weightlessness I am left with transforms my streaming tears into shoulder-racking sobs, and I hug Mummy with all the strength I can muster, careful not to hold on too tightly to avoid causing her any pain.

“I love you, Mummy,” I say, and she holds me tighter.

“I love you too, cheri.”

When we pull away from each other, our faces pulled tight from the tears that have finally stopped their overflow, we smile. And then we hear a snuffle and remember that Preston has been here the entire time.

“I have no idea what you ladies just said, but it was beautiful,” Preston says, using a tissue to wipe his face while holding out the box for us to take some for ourselves.

“Usually the tears come at the wedding ceremony,” Mummy says. “But I guess we are a little early.”

Mummy, Preston, and I take a few more minutes to collect ourselves and then step out of the limo. I look up at the building before us and can’t help but laugh. A funeral home isn’t exactly the most conventional place for a wedding, but what’s tradition for someone who’s part zonbi, part human, and finally able to accept both halves of the whole anyway?

## CHAPTER 77

# THE CEREMONY

Marcello opens the door to the Rodriguez Family Funeral Home with a flourish and ushers us inside. When Preston and I made our decision on the night of the Banks Corps supper club, I knew that we would need someone to marry us. But that person had to be discreet. And available with fairly short notice. I had texted Marcello and waited with bated breath for him to let me know if Grandma Tabitha might be able to marry me and Preston. In addition to being a mortician, she was also a wedding officiant. After all, if she could be there for one of the worst days of someone's life, she could very well be there for them for the happiest. Balance.

"Hello, hello!" Marcello says when we're inside, but when he turns to face us he frowns slightly. Now that he's taking a closer look at our faces, I'm sure he notices that we have all been crying. If Preston's face is any indication, we are a puffy-eyed, blotchy-messed trio.

"Is everything okay?" Marcello asks, concerned.

"Yeah, it is," I say. "Don't mind us. These are happy tears."

We follow Marcello into one of the back rooms of the funeral home that I have gotten to know so well since making friends with Marcello. The room is empty for once, and any trace of the five stretchers that held up the bodies of my samples from earlier in the summer are completely gone. I guess having any nonliving witnesses to the ceremony was too much even for Grandma Tabitha. *We want to breathe new life into your relationship. Anything else is a bad omen*, I can imagine her saying.

The four of us stand around chatting for a bit when Grandma Tabitha enters the room and joins us, greeting me, Mummy, and Preston with a kiss on both cheeks. And because Marcello acts jealous at being left out, she rolls

her eyes and gives him a kiss too.

“Are we ready to begin?” Grandma Tabitha asks me and Preston. We nod and stand before her as Mummy positions herself beside me. Marcello holds up a paper that Grandma Tabitha will be reading from, but he fidgets this way and that, clearly holding something back that won’t remain that way for much longer. I look at Marcello pointedly for a moment. When he doesn’t say anything, I fully turn to Preston. We hold each other’s hands, the sweat on both of our palms causing us to hold on tighter than we have to.

Grandma Tabitha reaches for the glasses that are hanging from her neck on a golden chain and places them on the tip of her nose. She opens her mouth to speak, but it’s Marcello’s voice that comes out instead.

“You know this is really heteronormative of y’all, right?” Marcello interjects, looking between me and Preston. “Are you sure there’s nothing you need to tell us? Like ... oh ... I dunno ... Brielle will you be expecting a permanent visitor in the next nine months or so?” I can feel Mummy’s eyes piercing into me like a physical weight beside me. There’s no doubt that she wanted to ask this, but after our heart-to-heart in the limo, she probably couldn’t find the best way to maneuver this question into the conversation.

“No, I am not pregnant,” I say to Marcello with a smirk, and Preston’s face flushes a deep red. We are really going to have to work on this boy’s poker face. Especially if we’re going to execute the rest of our plan.

“All right now,” Marcelo says skeptically. “I just had to ask because everybody was acting as if this was completely and totally normal.”

“Don’t worry. If anything remotely close to that were to happen, which for the record, it hasn’t and won’t be anytime soon, you’d be the first to know,” I say, and when I hear Mummy go “Oh—oh!” I add, “After Mummy, of course.”

“Any other questions before we continue?” Grandma Tabitha asks with a smile, looking around the room.

Marcello taps his chin as if thinking and then finally says, “No, you may proceed.”

We all laugh and Grandma Tabitha adjusts her glasses once more, finally beginning the ceremony.

“We are gathered here today...”

## CHAPTER 78

# MUG SHOT

When Preston and I enter Banks Corps on the last day of my fellowship, I am buzzing with anticipation. No one at work knows that we are married. Though we plan to keep it that way, I find myself bubbling with excitement when we catch each other's eyes from across the room. But it's not entirely because of our elopement.

I spend the day saying goodbye to my coworkers, thanking them for their time and letting me tag along when Ainsley had left me to my own devices. They mostly thanked me for getting the coffee orders all summer long. As the workday draws to an end, I have packed the few possessions that I've collected on my desk into my bag. I debate whether or not to keep the final item that can't fit, a free mug I got on my first day. The frugal Haitian in me imagines an infinite number of uses for it (like, holding cough drops). I am attempting to squish the cup into my bag when a din cloaks the room. Preston is already glancing my way when I look up to find the source of the commotion. It's time.

There is the unmistakable fall of heavy footsteps making their way into the office. My soon-to-be-ex-coworkers scurry about to get out of the way and find the best spot to see what's going on. When the doors to the office swing open, what feels like hundreds of people in dark blue and black jackets, FBI and DEA written in stark white across their backs, stomp into the room. They walk with intention, straight for the only conference room on the floor that isn't surrounded by glass. Some people stand about, holding up their cameras to record while looking over their devices to see the scene play out with their own eyes. I don't miss that there are a few people who attempt to sneak out, only to be stopped at the door.

I give up on trying to fit the coffee mug into my bag and hold it in one hand instead. I log out of my laptop for the last time and snap it shut. As I adjust the bag on my shoulder, someone bumps into me, causing me to lose my grip on my mug. It bounces between my hands as I hope to stop it from clattering to the floor. The last thing I need is attention turning my way in this cacophony of corporate suits and law enforcement. The mug slips through my fingers one last time, and right as it clips the side of the table, a hand reaches out and catches it.

“You really want this thing, don’t you?” Preston says, holding the mug between his thumb and forefinger. “I’ve watched you try to fit it into your bag for the last five minutes.”

“Oh hush,” I say, taking the cup from him. “Not everyone can turn their noses up at free swag.”

“Hmmm. I think you can afford to now, all things considered.” Preston smirks mischievously.

“Shhhh,” I say, my face heating.

“What do you think is going on in there?” a man from IT says loudly, pointedly darting his eyes over to Preston to make sure that he heard him. “Right before they cut off the surveillance cameras in that part of the office, I heard them mention the latest product in development.”

The antidote.

“I’m just as lost as everyone else,” Preston says in a clipped tone. The IT guy actually looks embarrassed.

Everyone else is glued to their phones, greedily reading the breaking news alerts that are streaming in from major news outlets. Some gather whatever intel they can at the informal town square desks of the most popular employees. When the conference room door opens, a hush immediately falls over the office. The silence feels heavy against my ears after the fevered chatter of moments ago. When the volume returns, it is ratcheted up to one hundred as a collective gasp ripples out like a sonic boom.

Without thinking, I reach for Preston’s hand. Even though we know what’s coming, I can only imagine how he’s feeling. Preston squeezes my hand gently but doesn’t look at me, and I follow his gaze to find what has grabbed his attention. And then I see. Silas Banks is being ushered out of the



conference room with his arms behind his back, wrists held together in handcuffs that sparkle as if newly buffed for the occasion. He looks around the room, and when his gaze lands on Preston, Silas grinds his foot into the floor to stop the forward momentum of him being escorted out of the office.

At last, father and son see each other with bone-chilling clarity.

## CHAPTER 79

# BREAKING HEARTS AND BREAKING NEWS

*Melpo (tragedy)*

On a scale of one to ten, how offended should we be that we weren't invited to Brielle's wedding?

*Thalia (comedy)*

Easy. Ten. Next question.

*Callisse (poetry)*

Oh come on, sisters. It was a quick decision! They love each other. Let's not take it to heart.

*Clionie (history)*

Love? This was hardly a decision made in the pursuit of love. Those words have never been exchanged between them. This was strategic.

*Tersi (dance)*

Our youngest sister is intelligent—that's for certain. She's really balancing the fine line between emotion and cold-hearted calculation.

*Melpo (tragedy)*

Not to mention that she's going to break that boy's heart ...

*Thalia (comedy)*

Trust me, he'll be fine. He has all that money to keep him warm.

*Callisse (poetry)*

That's not how love and heartbreak work.

*Clonie (history)*

Look at how we stress ourselves over things that Brielle hasn't even concerned herself with. Meanwhile, our baby sister is taking down empires.

★ ★ ★

## **BREAKING NEWS ALERT**

**Billionaire Silas Banks Arrested in Connection with Banks Corps Fraud Investigation**

(Miami, FL) Billionaire Silas Banks was arrested at the Miami offices of Banks Corps following a yearslong investigation into the pharmaceutical company's practices surrounding the prescription of oxymorphenol.

The opioid crisis has reached immeasurable heights in recent decades. Though overdose from opioid usage was declared a national emergency in 2017, approximately 3 million Americans struggle with opioid addiction. Visits to emergency departments related to opioid abuse and overdose have increased consistently year over year and one out of three Americans report that they personally know someone who is addicted to pain killers or opioids.

Federal investigators have turned their attention to the pharmaceutical companies that have played a role in exacerbating the epidemic via the overprescription of addictive pain killers. Major organizations have already begun to face repercussions with multibillion-dollar lawsuits and sanctions. However, one organization stands out above the rest.

*Miami Daily Times* has acquired thousands of documents demonstrating the sinister underbelly of Banks Corps, the multibillion-dollar pharmaceutical company created by the eponymous family. Like many other big pharma companies, Banks Corps has engaged in the harmful practice of incentivizing doctors to overprescribe pain killers. Banks Corps' oxymorphenol is a veritable cash cow for the organization, raking in over \$2 billion in revenue last year, an increase of more than 120 percent compared to the previous twelve-month period.

While this information is enough to bring major sanctions against Banks Corps, the company has also created what many are calling an antidote to the highly addictive prescription. That's right. Banks Corps has gotten millions of Americans hooked on oxymorphenol but has now created a follow-up pill to reverse the harmful effects. The only catch is that patients will have to take the prescription for the rest of their lives in order to prevent relapse.

Though Silas Banks was arrested in connection to the Banks Corps investigation, it was largely for show as he was immediately released. But it certainly sent a message. Now, pharmaceutical brands around the world are scrambling to get their affairs in order as they prepare for the increased scrutiny that will inevitably be turned their way.

In recent weeks, investigators have had a major, though unexpected, breakthrough in the case. Silas Banks, usually meticulous with his PR efforts, has had a string of personal and public issues make their way into the media spotlight. The untimely hit-and-run death of Silas Banks's grandfather Beauregard Banks is still an ongoing investigation. An employee of Banks Corps is said to have had oxymorphenol in his system at the time of his passing, though it is still unclear whether or not the drug played a role in his death. Nalda Banks, Banks's wife of nineteen years who has largely stayed out of the public eye, has filed for divorce following allegations of infidelity on Banks's end, which resulted in an as-yet-unnamed child. It's estimated that the separation will impact upward of 45 percent of Banks's fortune.

Prosecutors have been unable to identify what has caused the carefully curated world of the billionaire to collapse so suddenly, but it's been a stroke of good fortune for the investigation, which has spanned the last three years. "Banks has painstakingly disguised the inner workings of the organization for years, so we've waited quite a while for the perfect opportunity to strike. And that time was now," says Attorney General Crocker. "This is just the first step of many to gain retribution for the American people."

This story is developing.

## CHAPTER 80

# BLUE RIBBON

I tuck my passport into my carry-on bag and settle into the fourth row, first-class aisle seat. In just a few months, I've gone from never flying on a plane to having lots of opinions about air travel. For example, I'm convinced that part of what people pay for with first class is the opportunity to watch haughtily as fellow ticket holders jostle between rows in an attempt to get to their own seats. I reach over to grab Mummy's carry-on as she buckles herself in beside me. I'm about to stand to stow her bag when Preston motions for me to stay seated.

"I can take that for you," he says with a smile.

I pass him my mom's luggage, and Preston heaves the bag over his head to stuff into one of the spacious storage compartments.

"I'm surprised you even knew where to put them," I joke. "Mr. I-only-fly-private. You've really settled into common life."

"Hmm. I don't seem to remember you complaining when we had to hop on a last-minute flight from Paris to Haiti," Preston says with a smirk and the side-eye. We have this faux argument all the time.

"That was a special exception," I say in all seriousness. "And though the jet really came in clutch that day, they're just so wasteful. I'm glad we got rid of it."

We. I've started doing that now. Referring to Preston and me as a unit. Who knows what will come of this little partnership we've got going on, but for now, I'm enjoying the ride. I'm not naive enough to forget that we each have our own reasons for being together. When Preston first suggested we get married, I almost turned him down. I figured that his request had something to do with whatever remnants of my power lingered after a summer of eating

my cooking. If that was the case, I couldn't say yes in good conscience. I'm not actually a monster. But then I thought, what rooms might now be open to me simply off the strength of a new last name? Sure, I might be able to get the keys to these inner sanctums on my own. With time. But where's the fun in that?

It didn't take long to have Preston convinced that it was *his* idea to exchange my silence about the video for more power and access than I would've thought possible. Maybe with time Preston might delude himself into thinking that it's all under the guise of love and our joint commitment to taking down his father. Since it just so happens that we *actually* love each other, I guess there's no harm in his thinking that. When the summer started, I had no idea that mixing a little bit (okay, more than a bit) of do-what-I-want-for-once and good-ol'-fashioned-payback would result in all this. A better future for myself. For my family. There's really no limiting me now. I spend lots of time imagining what will come next.

"Passengers, welcome to Flight 2201. We will be arriving at the Charles de Gaulle Airport in approximately eight hours and forty-nine minutes," a flight attendant announces over the intercom once everyone has boarded.

Preston reaches over from his seat across the aisle and gently squeezes my hand. I squeeze back, only for a second. He's a French dual citizen through his mother, and in four years, I'll be able to apply for citizenship too. In the event that I can't buy my way to a passport earlier than that. I was a little reluctant to apply for it. But France is notorious for refusing to extradite its own citizens.

Mummy digs into the oversized bag she's using as a personal item and pulls out a Tupperware bowl wrapped in three tightly tied plastic bags that would take a mere mortal thirty years to loosen.

"Are you hungry?" she asks, holding the bowl in front of me. The scent of brown rice and beans smothered in spinach legume and spicy goat wafts from the bags, even though they're multi-tied to keep the smell in.

"No, I'm okay, Mummy," I say. "Also, they'll be feeding us on the flight."

Mummy sniffs, tucking the Tupperware away. "Well, as soon as I'm hungry, I'm going to eat Haitian food, the best food."

I smile at Mummy and think about how far we've come. Here she is, tapping me every few minutes to get my attention for one thing or another, that small contact a stark difference from the flinches of fear I remember from a few months ago. Time is sneaky. I know that even when Mummy was afraid, the decisions she made were all in the hope of making a better life for me. But now, I can release that fear and walk in my own truth, embracing the parts of me that aren't perfect or nice. It's okay for me to make mistakes. To be messy. To learn from others around me and choose to do what I want anyway. So far, it's worked in my favor.

Preston extends his seat to get more comfortable, with a blanket draped across his legs, already prepared to fall asleep. Although we've bonded over the fact that our mothers both have chronic illnesses, the circumstances of the rest of our lives are entirely different. When Preston's mom, Nalda, was pregnant with her only son, she'd convinced Silas to create a rainy-day fund for Preston that is now valued at nearly half a billion dollars—\$442,500,892, to be exact. You learn the hard numbers when you're married. And that goes both ways. Preston was silent for a very long time when I told him that all I'd inherited from Mummy was her willingness to take big risks to seize better opportunities and her wits to actually get it done.

"Hi there," one of the flight attendants says, interrupting my thoughts. "Is there anything I can bring you?"

"Just some water, please," I say. "Thank you."

The flight attendant places a water bottle in front of me and turns to Mummy with the same question. When Mummy gets her ginger ale, she takes delicate sips, glancing around the plane from her vantage point in first class. She's doing her best to act natural, but I can tell she's impressed by all the space and special attention. I think of how the Muses would react to this luxurious display. We'd all be so loud, they would definitely kick us off the plane. I chuckle, thinking about the video call we had together before getting to the airport.

"Are you all *sure* you don't want to come with us?" I had asked, holding up my phone so that Mummy and I could both fit in the frame.

"Positive," Thalia said with a shudder. "I can't go from never being able to leave home to being suspending in the sky for eight hours. I need to ease

into flying.”

“What if something happens while we’re in the air?” Melpo said, tone ever somber. “That would be such a tragedy.”

“It doesn’t happen that often,” I said reassuringly.

“When will you be back?” Tersi asked, dancing into the frame.

“At the end of August,” I said. “I still have to finish my last year of high school.”

“I’m going to be studying with you,” Clonie said. “I can’t wait to go to school.”

“Do you know what you want to study?” I asked Clonie, but instead of her responding, Callisse grabbed the phone from her, interrupting.

“Who cares about school when we have so much living to catch up on!”

Callisse is right, of course. My sisters’ entire lives have been spent within the confines of their home, unless given special permission by Franki to leave. This is the first time they’ll be able to go where they want, when they want. A long-awaited trip to Miami will happen in the coming weeks but, in the meantime, my sisters wanted to spend time together, as a final hurrah. There’s no doubt the Muses love one another but they’re long overdue to explore who they are individually and away from the unit. I wonder how different we’ll all be in a year.

I sink into my chair and take out my brand-new phone. I’ve finally retired both of my old devices but I keep them locked away. For safekeeping and sentimentality. I scroll through the material I downloaded to keep me entertained and finally get to what excites me most. The electronic brochure for admissions information for Le Cordon Bleu culinary school in Paris. *The* pathway to becoming a chef to the world’s elite, and the reason for this trip.

“You’re going back to Paris ... for school?” Marcello had asked incredulously when I told him a few days ago that I would be headed to Le Cordon Bleu’s two-week culinary immersive. “Wasn’t the summer apprenticeship enough for you? I swear, some people get all the luck and don’t know how to use it.”

“I mean, I was gonna ask you to come and join me for a little bit, but since I don’t know how to use it and all...,” I say, teasing.

Marcello had practically pulled me through the phone to see if I was



joking or not and, when I promised him that I wasn't, I swear his squeals could be heard around all of Miami-Dade County.

If there's anything I've learned this summer, it's that no one, not even the people who love you, is immune to fearing what they don't understand. And maybe in my case, everyone *should* be a little scared of me. I've grown to be more than okay with that. Because if this is where I've ended up just by following my instincts—whether those instincts are fueled by being part zombi or part Haitian American girl from Miami—what more could I accomplish with a plan?

Already I see a new reality unfolding before me. One where I am admitted into Le Cordon Bleu and learn everything there is to know from the best chefs in the world. Where my raw talent and power combined with Preston's connections produce a cornucopia of cuisine that is too delicious to deny. And as the world's most powerful people clamor to eat their portion from the palm of my hand, the delectable flavors of every meal I prepare bursting over their tongues, I know that I'll be able to help out more than just my family.

Because no matter what anyone says, there's always more than enough to go around.

## **AUTHORS' NOTE**

*Beeeeep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Imagine hearing that sound every ten minutes, all day, every day.

*Beeeeep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

It feels like torture, right?

*Beeeeep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Well we don't have to imagine it because that's exactly what our mom went through for weeks following a medical procedure for her lower back. Due to a convoluted issue with her insurance company ... oh right. You just read the story.

The inspiration for *The Summer I Ate the Rich* came from our mother's very real, lived experience. Where a pain pump that was supposed to provide her with relief following an on-the-job injury became an auditory torture device for her, our family, and anyone who happened to be around her.

But unlike Brielle, who was able to ... creatively ... use her powers to help get her family out of their precarious financial and medical position, we were helpless. And because we're writers, we channeled those frustrations into this story.

Interestingly, when we began thinking about *The Summer I Ate the Rich*, we knew so many things about Brielle and the world around her. She would be the only one of her many siblings to reside in the United States. Her mother was a domestic worker for one of the wealthiest families on the planet who lived on one of the glitziest islands on the globe. Our hometown of Miami made the perfect backdrop. But even as the world around Brielle began to materialize, we couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing.

And then it came to us. Brielle was a zombie. But not just any zombie. A Haitian American zombie, a combination of the duality of the immigrant experience manifest in the meeting of two cultures. A mixture of the American undead who crave brains and guts and the powerful zonbi of Haitian myth, rooted in the fear of eternal forced servitude, even in death, that sprouted from the nightmares of the enslaved. The combination provided the perfect backdrop to also unpack Brielle's long-suppressed grief over the passing of her father, something that we know all too well.

The omnipresent call to "eat the rich" that has emerged in the last few years (or centuries if we take it all the way back to the French Revolution) created an irresistible opportunity to analyze the injustice of poor or absent health care and the insensible poverty around the world as others live in unimaginable excess thanks to their preternatural ability to find every loophole imaginable to avoid paying their fair share of taxes.

The fact that the American zombie was taken from Haitian mythology and never properly accredited isn't lost on us. *The Summer I Ate the Rich* was our opportunity to tackle the very real class inequalities in America *and* to give Haiti her flowers. All while feeding the greedy, fictional characters in our story—the privileged few who hold the power to significantly improve the existences of billions of people—their just \*desserts.\*

We hope you brought your stretchy pants,  
*Maika and Maritza*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Getting *The Summer I Ate the Rich* published has been a wild ride, and there are so many people to thank for getting us here.

Before we honor all the wonderful folks who helped make this book possible, we want to take a moment to acknowledge ourselves. Is that weird? Yes. But authors are weird in general, so here we are.

Anyway, thank you to us for sticking it out and finishing this story. We have gone through life-altering events in our family throughout this entire process, and there were moments when we didn't think we would make it. But, somehow, we are here celebrating this book with you all. Thank you to us.

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To our readers, thank you for embarking on this journey with us. We hope you'll stick around for many more years to come! To friends and loved ones: Latrice Ferguson, Giuliana de Grazia, Adam LaRose, Ayoung Lee, Daris

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Daddy. Nou telman sonje ou! You always made it clear just how proud you were of us for writing our books. Though you aren't here physically, we feel you with us. We promise to keep making you proud.

**ALSO BY [MAIKA MOULITE](#) AND [MARITZA MOULITE](#)**

*Dear Haiti, Love Elaine*  
*One of the Good Ones*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Maika Moulite** is a Miami native and the daughter of Haitian immigrants. Her acclaimed young adult novels frequently explore themes of identity, family, and vengeance. Her work has been featured on *TODAY* and in *Essence* magazine. Maika is also a doctoral student at Howard University, exploring the intersection of artificial intelligence, culture, and media. She's the eldest of four sisters and, when she's not writing, loves listening to audiobooks, dancing and singing at the top of her lungs, and journaling (which actually means ... more writing). You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



**Maritza Moulite** graduated from the University of Florida with a bachelor's in women's studies and from the University of Southern California with a master's in journalism. Her work often examines the lives of marginalized people and revenge, and has been featured on NPR and *Late Night with Seth Meyers*. Maritza's favorite roles have been as a Head Start literacy tutor and a pre-K teaching assistant. She is now a PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania, exploring ways to improve literacy through children's media. She clearly couldn't get enough of school. Her favorite song is "September" by Earth, Wind & Fire. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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