

Dancing in the Dark

By Gracie C. McKeever

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[Prologue](#)

Summer 1984

Climax, Alabama

Cayle released a breath through his gritted teeth, slumped against the cushions of his mother's mauve country floral sofa and raked a hand through his hair. "I can't believe you're doing this to him."

"I have no choice."

"Bull. You're making the choice that suits you." He glanced up, tried to will her closer, force her to sit down so that he wouldn't have to feel so small and helpless. But Breanna wouldn't oblige, didn't budge from her spot on the burgundy carpet. Cayle finally gave up, tried another tactic. "You're running away," he accused.

She slowly shook her head. "I'm not."

He stared at her, amazed by her calm. "You are one cold bitch, you know that."

"Insults like that are beneath even you, Cayle."

She stood there in front of him in all her sleek, black-haired beauty, delicate and regal, without a care in the world.

And Cayle wanted to wring her neck.

He hated her right then, hated her with the passion and ambivalence of one who hates only himself more for loving the hated object.

For almost two years now she had been flaunting her woman's body when she visited the house to study and make smoochy-face with Cayle's brother, Zach.

And for almost this long she had been professing her undying love for Zach with exuberance matched only by her money and privileged background.

Now she was telling Cayle she was leaving, going abroad to some fancy-smancy finishing school in Europe.

Cayle sneered at the mere idea that he had ever imagined himself remotely fond of her, realized now he'd only succumbed to raging sixteen-year-old hormones. And spite.

He glared at Breanna, made her take a step back.

Good, you haughty, selfish...

"Cayle, please." She came forward, hesitantly sat on the edge of the sofa as if she thought the cushions would bite her. "Don't be like this. I'm doing what I need to do."

"What about what Zach needs?"

"I can't do anything for him."

"Have you tried?" He arched a brow. "You never loved him, Breanna. You teased him. You teased us both, pretended you cared."

"I wasn't pretending! I do care."

Cayle huffed. "You have a strange way of showing it."

"I don't see why I should stop living because everyone thinks we belong together."

"Everyone except your family."

Breanna ignored the barb, continued her defense. "From the beginning everyone pushed us together as the romantic couple."

"Yeah. Like Romeo and Juliet, star-crossed lovers. And now you're just plain tragic," he sneered.

"You always had a flair for the ironic," Breanna muttered, slowly shook her head out of frustration. Her dark hair fell over her closed eyes Veronica Lake style. "I care about Zach. I love him. But I'm not in love with him. I never have been."

He knew only too well how she felt about his older brother. She had more than clarified this when she'd made her final pass at him behind the bleachers last winter during the Climax Cougars' last match against the division leaders, and their cross-town rivals the Mobile Muskrats.

Zach's final game. His last taste of glory.

Cayle winced now as he remembered the pop that had reverberated throughout the entire stadium and had stopped the game cold late in the fourth quarter.

The Cougars had been behind by two touchdowns when Zach had leapt to snatch a Hail Mary pass ten yards from the Muskrats' end zone where a defensive end had converged and had cut him down at the two-yard line.

Zach hadn't gotten up. Cayle had yet to recover.

"Cayle."

He stared down at the hand on his arm. Soft creamy fingers that had never known a day's hard work squeezed his biceps.

"I'm not going to do your dirty work for you."

"You're no innocent in all this."

Cayle shook off her hand, lurched to his feet.

She didn't need to remind him. He'd already committed hara-kiri a thousand times over in his head for his transgression.

Looking at her now, he wondered how he had ever chosen the fugitive pleasures of her body over his brother's loyalty.

Yes, she was beautiful. God she was, with her lustrous long hair and fox-bright eyes. Beckoning. Calling. A body that nightly appeared in the wet dreams of a million teenage boys. He had been one. To feel her lips, lips that had given him his hardest, most memorable erection to date.

Cayle closed his eyes against the images of her hand in his lap during one Thanksgiving dinner. Remy slicing turkey with the electric carver. Mom's voice sweetly rising over the knife's buzz as she giggled at one of Zach's jokes. Zach eyeing Breanna across the table, squeezing her hand over the warmed buttered rolls.

All the while, her other hand rubbed Cayle under the table.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," Breanna whispered and Cayle shook his head, stared at her as she stood beside him with tears glistening in her eyes like the scissors cut diamond in the engagement ring on her finger.

She had started out so unflappable, making him hate her, making him want her, making him want to hold her. Not now.

Don't do this to me. Don't act like it hurts you to leave my brother when he needs you most.

Breanna slid the ring off her finger. "You have to tell him for me." She moved closer, handed him the ring and a sealed pink

envelope addressed to Zach.

Reluctantly, Cayle took them, the faint aroma of her special musk fragrance wafting to him, making him sick. She'd had the nerve to scent the envelope?

"Tell him yourself."

"I can't."

"You're deserting him."

"No..." She covered her mouth with a fist, choked back a sob. "I can't stay...I have to...I have to go."

Cayle jerked his head up and down. "Of course you do," he dug. "The plane's going down so it's time to bail out."

"You don't understand." She cried in earnest now.

He grabbed her arms, shook her. "Stop it with your phony tears. You don't care about him. You don't care about anyone but yourself. I always knew you'd leave him if things got too down and dirty for you and your family's high-born sensibilities."

"No...not true. Not..." She tried to pull away but he tightened his grip. "This isn't easy for me!" She cried.

"But you think it's going to be easy for me?"

She didn't answer, recoiled at his scowl.

"How am I supposed to tell him you're splitting? That you're throwing back his ring only months after he's put it on your finger."

She wrenched herself out of his grasp, coldly returned his glare, composed once again. "I trust you to find a way, Cayle. You're good at telling people things they don't want to hear."

He cursed her right before she leaned in, cupped his face and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"I'm sorry, Cayle. You can tell him that," she whispered then turned on her heels and fled the living room.

"Breanna! Bre!" He started after her but stopped abruptly at the door when he tasted the tears. He licked his lips, unsure if the tears were hers or his. He didn't care. But if he intended to deliver the devastating news to Zach, he needed to pull himself together, wipe away the waterworks and her sweet, oh so delicious and incriminating lipstick.

He fisted the ring, gripped it so hard the gems cut into his palm and drew blood.

Damn you, Breanna Walker. Damn you to hell!

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[Chapter One](#)

Spring 1996

Scarsdale, New York

He grasped the espagnolette, almost caressed the decorative brass with his indecision. Slowly he turned, pushed the door in upon the dimly lit room. It was the only time in his life Thomas Keller had been tentative.

Lately, he had been so cautious with Sharise, like an inexperienced father handling his newborn daughter. He walked as if stepping on eggs, picked his words like a man barefoot and making his way through a field of broken glass.

This had been going on too long now. It was time to stop the madness and handle the situation.

"Sharise?"

No answer. As he had expected. Last week, he would have retreated--another alien concept--but not today. He stepped over the threshold, committing himself as he purposefully strode across the polished oak floor.

"Don't, Dad."

Thom froze midstep, took a deep breath. His kid, a mere babe at twenty-nine years, had him ready to tuck his tail between his legs and run? He, entrepreneur supreme and owner of a thriving chain of art and antique shops? He who had built from the ground up, penny-pinching for years before he'd gotten the business off the ground. Dazzling competitors with his acumen, earning their respect and deference with his gut instincts about the market. Indulging his numerous customers' quirks, fulfilling their wildest needs with his eclectic selection of reasonably priced quality items.

Thom had sacrificed his personal life in the name of success, worked way too hard to let his daughter, a child, intimidate him under his own roof.

He surged forward, stopped only an inch behind Sharise's wheelchair. He felt her brace herself, sitting up straight as he stared past her rigid back through the French window.

The day loomed gray and raw beyond the room and the verandah outside. He tried to put himself in her place, feel what she felt, see what she saw. He glanced out at the glistening, cobble smooth rocks of the shore and the lake's clear, windblown surface. Further in the distance the woods sprouted lush and green, defying Mother Nature's recent winter onslaught with its own promise of the coming season.

"Dr. Graham says your muscles are atrophic."

"Dr. Graham's brain is atrophic."

Thom grinned at his daughter's crack, glad she hadn't turned. He did not want to give her the satisfaction.

"This can't go on any longer."

"Who says?"

"You're acting like a child, Sharise."

"I'm acting like you've always treated me."

Thom sighed, closed his eyes. Touché. "Be that as it may, I won't let you do this to yourself."

She didn't answer, her silence more eloquent than any retort.

"Sharise..."

"Leave me alone."

"No."

Sharise glanced over a shoulder at the simple statement, tried to hold her father's glare but couldn't. She turned back to the French window, directed her gaze at the dreary sky as she ignored him.

Thom grabbed her chair and spun her around.

"Dad!" She stared at his face, gasped when she caught sight of her father's set jaw. She tried to match his look--his dark brown eyes burning into her slate ones--but she couldn't hold it.

Sharise had never experienced her father's wrath, only heard stories from partners and buyers, stories of which legends were made. Her rare glimpse of this side startled her.

"This is going to stop," he stated.

She folded her arms across her small breasts and pouted, a petulant child denied a treat.

Thom would have laughed if the situation weren't so serious. He could not afford humor or to expose a chink in his resolve. "You're going to work with a therapist. I've already spoken to Dr. Graham and he's referred me to Bruckner Rehab. It's an excellent institu-"

"I'm not going to any institute."

"They're sending someone here. Highly recommended."

"They'd have to be," Sharise sniped.

Thom continued as if she hadn't spoken. "It's all been arranged. Intensive one-to-one workouts. All you need to do is meet with the young man. Strictly a formality."

"A formality? You've actually left me something to do?"

"He'll be on my payroll, living here full-time."

Sharise's eyebrows shot up. "God! You haven't missed a trick. Just grabbed the bull by the balls, didn't you?"

Thom winced, hated it when she used that type of barroom, street language. A holdover from her rebellious days of dating and hanging with urban riffraff and hip-hop B-boys, he'd be willing to bet. Or maybe that egomaniacal, no-good bum of an ex had rubbed off on her with his artsy-fartsy, jobless crew. A writer. Thom just bet.

Well, no more of that unseemly behavior, he told himself. Her days of slumming were over as of the accident. As of now.

"Someone had to take the bull by the ba...horns," Thom emphasized.

Sharise smirked at his obvious discomfit. "I knew this would happen," she mumbled. "I knew you'd try to run roughshod over me and take over like I don't have a say."

"Your indifference says volumes, young lady."

Sharise shook her head, incredulous. "You really are some piece of work."

"Look in the mirror before you throw stones, Sharise."

"It's my life, dammit!"

"And I'm not going to watch you waste it."

"If I go back home to the city, you won't have to watch."

He bit back his retort, clenching his teeth. He wanted to ask her, demand to know how she planned to function in New York by herself and in her condition but realized that this would be playing right into her defeatist hand, reinforcing her self-indulgent trip.

"This is your home," he said quietly.

"I don't know how I let you talk me into moving back to this godforsaken mausoleum with you."

"It is what you make it. And, unfortunately, it's what you need right now," he stated.

"Since when did you know or care what I need?"

Thom closed his eyes again, crouched and took his daughter's limp hands in his. He gently squeezed. "Reese, I've always cared." He opened his eyes to look at her. When she averted her gaze, he continued. "It's settled, Sharise. He'll be here tomorrow afternoon."

"Just like that? You've already made the decision for me. Like always. Running my life."

Thom wearily pulled himself to his full height of five-ten, stared down at his daughter.

Why did she have to be so stubborn about this? And why did she have to look so much like her mother?

God, he missed her still. Not a day went by that he didn't think about her. And she'd been dead now twenty-nine years, had

never had the pleasure of knowing her baby who had become such a stubborn, auburn-haired hell raiser.

Thom turned on his heels, marched towards the door. He hesitated at the threshold, almost turned back but thought better of it. She was as bullheaded as she often accused him of being. He couldn't change her mind and he refused to beg for her permission or explain himself or his motives to her. She would do this whether she wanted to or not, whether she agreed with him or not. He knew Rachel would have approved and this was the thought that had kept him going, had made him so adamant with his daughter. Their daughter.

He knew if he turned, he'd have seen his daughter's full mouth set in an obstinate pout.

Let her sulk then. He hoped she'd be as tenacious in her rehabilitation as she'd so far been in her self-pity.

* * *

Cayle didn't know whom he disliked more. The exasperating prima donna daughter wearing her indisposition like a glowing badge of courage, or her high-and-mighty, health-club fit father with the impeccable fashion sense of a top dollar male model and enough green to clad his sleek form in beautifully tailored Savile Row suits.

From his first meeting with Thomas Keller in an opulently furnished back office of one of the man's several shops in mid-Manhattan last week (where Keller had grilled him, mercilessly firing questions at Cayle like a homicide detective interrogating

his prime suspect), to his arrival today at the flawlessly kept Keller estate that oozed all the trappings of wealth, power and success, Cayle found the father and daughter an intolerable tag team.

And the house wasn't a house; it was a 100-room mansion--a Tudor dwelling with enough floors and halls to turn around and confuse an individual with a superior sense of direction--the centerpiece of a 180-acre estate, which boasted, among other things, a stable of horses.

When Cayle had first arrived a couple of hours ago, stumbling behind the black housekeeper who'd led him to an unoccupied study on a lower floor of the mansion, he'd thought Rod Serling had been playing a cruel joke on him. The decor of the room completely duplicated the decor of Keller's downtown office from its dimensions, to the huge vintage sarouk spread across the cherry wood floor, to the wine drapes of Chinese silk framing the windows, to the wall behind Keller's desk faced in white marble.

Too rich for Cayle's blood but he appreciated the luxury and recognized that Keller was his own best customer, exercising a canny and economical source of advertising.

Cayle had settled against the wine cushions of the couch arranged catty-corner to Keller's enormous desk, absently running a palm along the sofa's lambent satin when Keller finally showed up to brief him one last time before taking him to meet Sharise.

Keller quickly outlined the accident that had resulted in his daughter's career- and life-threatening injuries. And by the time the two men reached her room, Cayle thought he was well prepared to face the woman. He was sorely mistaken.

Keller's formal and impersonal narrative did little to prepare Cayle for the sullen mite of a woman who, from the moment he was introduced to her, did everything short of cursing him from her wheelchair to ignoring him or outright insulting his motives and intelligence. Fulfilled every preconceived notion Cayle had ever harbored of individuals of means.

A bourgy rich debutante. Cayle cringed at the image.

He tried patience and understanding. He tried to let his sympathy and training override his inborn dislike. But it was hard for him to be objective in the face of such hostility.

Cayle now glowered at Ms. Keller. "Stop me if I'm boring you," he drawled.

"You were saying?"

"I was saying..." He sighed, ran a palm down his face. She was really making this impossible.

He wanted her to know what to expect from him and what he expected from her, but realized he had just wasted his breath and the last fifteen minutes of his valuable time outlining his treatment plan and summarizing his educational background and qualifications. Ms. Keller was showing about as much enthusiasm as a first grader who's caught sight of the Good Humor Man from her classroom near the end of a sweltering summer school day.

"Do you care about anything I've said?" Cayle blurted.

"Wherever did you get those mismatched eyes?"

He blinked a few times, shook his head. "Excuse me?"

"Actually, I think they're kind of sexy. Weird but sexy."

"You haven't listened to a word I've said."

"I've listened. It just doesn't concern me."

"Obviously."

"Don't sound so indignant, Mr. Miller. I didn't hire you or ask you to come here. That was dear old Dad's idea."

"Ms. Keller-"

"I prefer Reese," she purred.

"Regardless of why I'm here, the fact of the matter is, I am here and you have-"

"A green eye and a brown eye," she murmured, crinkled her brows and rubbed her chin as if she were trying to decide which one to poke a finger in first.

Cayle would have told her to stop being such a smart aleck but he didn't want to give her the satisfaction.

Granted, individuals with mismatched eyes were an oddity, Cayle thought. And he ought to know because he'd reached his twenty-eighth year and lived through years of childish taunts and ridicule without ever once bumping into someone with a pair of eyes like his. He had heard about the particular phenomenon many times but had never seen it.

"Ms. Keller..."

She had finally settled, focusing on his left eye, the green one. "Such an odd, vivid shade."

"You're taking this situation entirely too lightly."

"Hmm, yes. My rehabilitation." She leaned forward in her chair, peered at each eye in turn.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm trying to decide whether or not to 'go'."

He stood up abruptly. He'd had just about enough of this crap and was ready to give her a peek at the old Cayle Miller, post-Breanna and pre-physical therapist: reckless, decadent, misogynistic womanizer.

Cayle reluctantly turned to go, figured even this probably wouldn't have fazed her.

"Leaving so soon?"

He stopped several steps from the door, felt blood rushing to his face and with feline glee, Sharise pounced. "Red ears. Green and brown eyes. You are a colorful little fellow. A walking traffic light, actually."

"When you're ready to take this seriously..." Cayle pivoted when he heard her speeding up behind him to roll her chair over his sneakered toes. He gritted his teeth, squeezed his

eyes shut and grasped the doorjamb. The pain screaming along his nerves stole his ability to speak. Howling would have been a nice release but he couldn't even get a feeble "ow" passed his lips.

Sharise sat on the threshold, fists on her hips as she blocked his path with her chair and took advantage of his painful silence. "Let me tell you something Mr. Miller."

He opened his eyes, goggled down at her.

"My father may have given you the impression that I'm a helpless invalid unable to make decisions for myself but I can

assure you that's not the case."

He hunkered down to gingerly rub his injured foot. "Your father's not the one who thinks you're a helpless invalid," he rasped.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"You figure it out." Cayle grimaced as he hitched by her. "And while you're straining your brain with that one, I think I'll go have a little conference with your dear old dad," he muttered.

And if he's lucky, he'll have a fatal heart attack before I can get to him and wrap my hands around his throat.

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[Chapter Two](#)

A needed change was definitely on the horizon. Ellamae Williams could feel it in her sixty-three-year-old bones.

She stood at the stove, Walkman headphones on as she wiggled her hips to the beat and added last-minute dashes of seasoning to her special beef stew. She dipped her pointer in the pot, tasted. Hmmm, needed just one more speck of oregano to give it an extra kick. Almost everything except the kitchen sink was in it anyway. Lean chunks of beef, potatoes, stewed tomatoes, corn, string beans, carrots.... Down-home cooking to stick to your ribs.

Not that anyone in this here household except herself would partake in the tasty dish. Maybe Mr. Keller, if he remembered he needed to eat something to live.

And that crazy, Lean Cuisine eating daughter of his?

Ellamae had just about given up on trying to get a decent meal down the girl. Ever since the child had stopped eating red meat and had, at ten years old, declared her desire to

become a professional dancer, she'd been living on a diet of broiled fish and skinless chicken breasts, fresh fruit and vegetables, legumes, yogurt, pasta and brown rice. Not as horrible as those grapefruit and liquid diets but where was the sauce and gravy?

Ellamae couldn't get down with all the New Age logic of today's kids. Tofu, frozen yogurt as fattening as ice cream, some new leaner cooking oil substitute (Olestra, yech!) that gave you the runs and was more dangerous than the real thing. Jenny Craig, Slim Fast and Weight Watchers. Anorexia, Bulimia and...Lord have

mercy on Ellamae Williams' soul!

Then you had your health clubs that boasted treadmills and stairclimbers and stationary bikes that got you no further than you'd been before you started your journey.

Hmph. Give Ellamae a cheeseburger, fries and a pair of sneakers to walk off the tonnage after and she was good to go.

Oh, she knew she wasn't as light as she could have been but she had never had any complaints. And it was too late in the game to change her ways. Besides, last check-up her blood pressure had been a respectable 130/75 and her cholesterol had been a healthy 180. And at her age, carrying around 160 pounds on a five-seven frame, this wasn't so bad.

Ellamae bopped around the kitchen, hummed to her new Blackstreet tape (a recent gift from one of her granddaughters who was a die-hard Teddy Riley, New Jack Swing fan) and retrieved Spode plates and silverware from the glass china closet. She set four places at the black-marble dining table.

Somebody was going to share this here filling meal with her, even if she had to kill 'em, doggoneit!

She didn't think that Cayle Miller child would give her much of a problem. Tall, lean boy but he looked solid, like he might be able to pack away one of her hardy meals.

A door slammed with such force, Ellamae heard the noise over her blasting music, thought she was in the midst of an off-the-Richter-scale earthquake.

"Good. Get out! I didn't ask for your help anyway!"

Now that would be Reese, showing her skinny tail.

A low male voice answered, too quiet to be intelligible but Ellamae was almost certain it was angry.

That would be that youngin, Cayle. Lordy, the girl done got to that boy so soon? He couldn't have been in her room more than fifteen minutes, Ellamae thought.

"He can take this assignment and shove it where the--"

"Now don't you go lettin' these here people drive you nuts. Ya hear me, boy?"

Cayle came up short on the dining room threshold, looked up from his raging bull charge to see Ellamae standing near the stove, smiling at him as she lowered her headphones and settled them around her neck.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think anyone could hear that."

"Don't you worry 'bout it none. I've been takin' care of that chil' more than twenty years now. I know she can get on a body's last nerve."

Cayle nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly.

"Just you sit down at that table, count to ten--or a hundred, that's what usually works for me--before you fix yourself to go meetin' with Mr. Keller."

"How did you know--"

"That you were goin' to march into his office and tell 'im to shove his job? Oh, a lucky guess."

Cayle laughed as he pulled up a chair and took a seat at the glossy Nero table. He was disarmed by her warm smile, wondered if

he had finally found a friend in this enemy camp.

"Ellamae Williams." She wiped her palms on her apron, stepped forward and proffered a hand. "We weren't properly introduced earlier. Call me Ella."

"Cayle. Cayle Miller." He shook her hand, reveled in her homey scent, admired her strong grip.

"Cayle. Is that short for--"

"Caleb? No. It's just Cayle."

"Nice strong name. You wouldn't happen to be from the South?"

He blinked, surprised by her perceptiveness. "Alabama. Does it show?"

"That you're not a Yankee? Not really. I just picked up a little drawl."

"I've been in New York close to ten years," Cayle admitted, easily falling into conversation with the elderly woman. He liked her look. Young, almost ageless raisin-

brown skin, prominent high cheeks, shoulder-length afrocentric braids, dark-chocolate eyes that demanded trust.

"I'm originally from Colepepper, Virginia, m'self, but I've got people in Alabama. Whereabout you hail from?"

Cayle flushed, couldn't imagine saying it to this senior citizen, even if she did look hip and comfortable in her Nike lavender nylon wind suit.

"Don't be shy, boy. Cain't be that bad.

The woman must be a mind reader, he thought. "Climax."

"Chil' what you mumblin' for? We're almost related! My people're from Coffee." She reached out a hand to ruffle his thick dark curls and Cayle chuckled, unoffended and charmed by her outrageous sense of humor.

Ella pulled up a chair, sat down beside him and put an arm around his shoulder. "Feelin' all right now?"

Cayle nodded, smiled at her.

"Good. And I've got a homecooked meal that'll make ya feel even better. I ain't takin' no for an answer."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Let's discuss how you're goin' to handle Ms. Sharise."

"I don't think-"

"Where there's a will there's a way, boy. She can be contained. Just have to know how to handle her."

Cayle doubted anyone had ever handled Sharise Keller without getting his or her hand bit. But he was willing to give it a shot. He hadn't yet backed down from a challenge.

"Ella...Ellamae?" Keller poked his head in the dining room, saw Cayle and Ella ensconced at the table, heads together as if they were plotting a royal takeover. "What the heck was all that racket a while ago?"

"Sharise and I-"

"Nothin' at all," Ella chimed in. "'cept I got a case a the butterfingers and dropped a couple a pots from the cupboards. Cayle here helped me clear up the mess a little before you got here."

"Well, how did your meeting go with Sharise, Cayle?" Keller warily eyed him as the young man gave Ella a look before answering.

"As well as could be expected."

Ella nodded her approval beside him.

"Well...good. That's good." Keller hesitated, took a seat opposite the pair. "You'll be staying for dinner then? I'm sure there's more than enough. Ella makes food for several marine companies."

"Actually, I just got an invitation I couldn't refuse."

* * *

"Make yourself comfortable, Cayle. This might take a bit." Keller sat behind his enormous desk, poured cabernet from a decanter into a burgundy glass. "Would you like some?" He motioned to his glass as Cayle took a seat on the wine sofa.

"I don't drink."

Keller raised his shoulders in a suit-yourself gesture, took a long swallow before placing his glass on the desk blotter. "Now, let's get back to our muttons."

"Mr. Keller..."

"I know what you're going to say, Cayle."

"I don't think you do."

"When I first interviewed you, I explained that Sharise would be a little difficult."

"She's more than a little difficult," Cayle muttered.

"Hostile, sullen, uncooperative. Am I warm?"

"Mr. Keller, you and Dr. Graham gave me ample preparation. You warned me so I thought I could..."

"Yes?" Keller arched a brow, waited.

Cayle sighed, forked a hand through his hair.

He didn't want to admit that he doubted his ability to handle the situation. He didn't want to tell the man that his daughter--his pride and joy--was a colossal spoiled brat who could try the patience of a saint and who needed to be thrown over a knee and spanked until she

yelled uncle. He couldn't tell the man this. His own mama had always told him not to say anything if he didn't have anything nice to say. So why was he here? Because he certainly didn't have anything nice to say and he'd certainly had about all he could take of the Kellers for one day. He hated to admit defeat but there it was.

"I know what you're thinking, Cayle. And it couldn't be further from the truth."

"Really?"

"She's not a quitter."

Cayle stared at him across the expanse of the desk, skeptical.

"Sometimes I wish she were. A quitter, I mean. Or at least a little less stubborn. It would make my life a lot easier. But you see, Cayle, Sharise is what you might call...well, she's rebellious and...and she's a little on the spoiled side..."

A little? Cayle thought.

"...She likes to have her way and she'll fight to get it."

And this was the whole problem in a nutshell, Cayle told himself. She's always gotten her way. Well, not now, not this time, not with him. He was not going to mollicoddle a client. She would work and sweat like any of his other patients. She wasn't special.

"I'm not asking you to give her preferential treatment. I'm asking you to give her a chance. She needs that right now. She needs support that I alone don't seem able to give her."

"You need another type of therapist, sir. I'm not a psychologist or an intervention counselor."

"I know that and I'm certainly not expecting you to be either. I just think that you'd be good for her," Keller confessed, hadn't wanted to admit it but knew it was true.

From the first moment when the young man had bounded into his office--clad in Levi's, a cream Henley shirt and a pair of casual black Rockports, looking like JFK, Jr. in his footloose heyday and exuding all the self-confidence of a young cock who'd just lost his virginity to the prom queen--Thomas Keller had instinctively known Cayle Miller was just what the doctor had ordered. He'd known what Sharise's reaction would be at the sight of Cayle--an arrogant and attractive young man. She would bristle. And there would be her provocation.

Of course, Cayle Miller was well qualified in other important areas. Keller had done his research, wouldn't have hired the young man otherwise.

He had a solid background in exercise science, biomechanics,

anatomy and nutrition and had completed an impressive internship at Penn State University's Center for Sports Medicine before becoming a New York State licensed and registered physical therapist.

Dr. Graham himself had sung the young man's praises also, highlighting his exemplary work record and several hard-to-reach success stories, miracles--to hear Dr. Graham tell--that the boy had worked in his two years as a physical therapist at Bruckner in White Plains.

"One of the best in the field, despite his youth," Dr. Graham had explained. "Although his methods can be a little unorthodox at times."

Keller wondered now, as he gave Cayle a look across the desk, just what the good doctor had meant by "unorthodox."

"How can I persuade you, Cayle? If it's the money..."

Cayle held up a hand. "Please. The salary's sufficient," he understated. Sufficient? It was more than sufficient. The money, along with the fringe benefit of living rent and expenses-free, was obscene and astronomical for the assignment, Cayle thought, trying not to downplay his own value. He could help out his mom with Zach's medical bills, the mortgage on the new co-op in New York.... No, it wasn't the money. He just wasn't sure he could deal with a woman like Sharise Keller on a strictly clinical basis. And he was sure he didn't want to test himself that far.

She was annoyingly beautiful and sexy with her dark-auburn hair and slate-gray eyes. Wild, reckless, rebellious. A spoiled self-destructive snob. Hopeless?

Cayle swallowed hard, surprised that most of the list could have easily been a description of him. How he used to be. After Breanna. After Zach. After his own "accident."

He'd gone on a ruinous spree of boozing and drugging and sex. He was lucky he still had a clean enough bill of health to enjoy life, lucky he was alive to enjoy anything.

"I know it's a challenge," Keller said as he stood, circled his desk and took a seat on the edge in front of Cayle. He leaned in. "Personally, I don't think I'd have the courage. Not many people would."

Cayle scowled and stood. You're one sly, smart bastard, Keller. "I'll start tomorrow then, as we previously agreed."

Keller was surprised, hadn't expected capitulation so easily. He quickly recovered, sat up. "Good. Tomorrow it is then." He proffered a hand and Cayle gave it a firm shake. "You won't be sorry, Cayle."

No, but you might be if this doesn't work out.

Chapter Three

Sharise sat in the middle of the sweeping exercise room, folded her arms across her breasts and waited.

She had been preparing herself for this confrontation since last evening when she had had dinner alone in her room (and been severely reprimanded by Ella for her rudeness) until this morning when she'd gotten up and dressed for her workout. Hmph. She'd see about a "workout"

She was ready to read Mr. Cayle Miller, would show him a thing or three about who he was up against. Who the hell had he thought he was, strutting in here yesterday finer than JFK, Jr. and looking like People magazine's sexiest man alive?

Sharise would show him just how "serious" she could be. She'd be just as serious as cancer and he wouldn't like it one bit. Mr. Camelot Miller had gotten on her bad side yesterday and this was something one did not want to do with her. She was like her father in this respect.

Sharise stopped her fuming long enough to notice the liquid whistle floating at her from the hallway. The din grew, reverberating off the walls in a sickeningly peppy Disney tune.

She glowered a second before Cayle peeped his head through the entrance then made his way across the floor in an airy swagger that ticked her off more than his singing.

"Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go!" Cayle stopped in front of her as he finished the song.

"So, you changed your mind and decided to come back?"

Sharise sweetly questioned, taking a different approach than she had originally intended. She had planned to go for his jugular, literally, as soon as he showed his smug face.

"You don't scare me, Ms. Keller."

"Reese."

"If it'll make this go smoother."

"It won't. I just prefer it. I told you that."

Cayle grinned. "Yes. You did, didn't you."

"I don't like that sly gleam in your eyes, Mr. Miller."

"I prefer Cayle." He smirked, put his fists on his hips and pivoted to survey the accommodations.

Keller had spared no expense in setting up a gym. The room had all the state-of-the-art equipment endemic to the day's hottest health clubs: three different exercise centers with separate bench press and butterfly stations; motorized, dual-action treadmills, stairclimbers, bikes and power riders. And--the piece de resistance for the gymnast and recovering motor-vehicle-accident victim--the basic, essential parallel bars.

Housed in an area through the back exit and off to the right was an Olympic-size swimming pool with its own showers, sauna and full-size whirlpool attached.

Anything and everything to promote and encourage proper form, efficient motion and, most important of all, healing.

Cayle couldn't wait to get started with the trademark Feldenkrais method. He would loosen her up with some isometric exercises and vital stretches to prepare her muscles for the

rigorous exercises to come: non-weight bearing ambulation in the parallel bars, cross-training with free weights to sculpt and tone, weight-lifting for power, low- and high-impact aerobics--swimming, walking, bicycling and climbing--to strengthen her and increase her endurance.

Depending on how well their initial workouts went this week, Cayle saw no reason why she shouldn't be ready for the pool and maybe a go at the bars in a few weeks.

She was a dancer after all, and he was sure she wanted to get back to her arabesques, pirouettes, grand jetes and grand plies--or whatever the heck were the equivalent moves in modern dance--as soon as possible.

Cayle turned back to Sharise, rubbing together his hands and eagerly eyeing her body as if she were a juicy steak dinner and he hadn't had a solid meal in days.

Sharise only scowled at him.

He ignored her look. "At least you came ready to work," he observed, took in her slim legs encased in a pair of spandex shorts. A little pale against the black material hugging her thighs, not much muscle tone either. But she had possibilities, like she might once have had a nice set of gams, Cayle thought.

She was just such a damn tiny package, couldn't have weighed more than a buck-five soak and wet. And at, if he pushed it, five-one? Hell, Remy would have said she was slight enough to slip through a flute and not sound a note.

"Work, work, work. Why do you have such a one-track mind,

Mr. Miller?"

"Only way to get things done."

"You might be in for a wait."

"I have all day. In fact, my time is your time."

"Do you have a lot of patience?"

"Actually, you're the only one on my calendar." He smiled and approached her chair.

"Ha-ha. You're a real weisen-"

Cayle slid one arm under her thighs, the other around her shoulders and lifted her from the chair in one fluid motion.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Getting this party started right." He took several steps away from her chair and gently lowered her to the mat.

"I don't think I like your high-handed attitude."

"Join the club."

"You've tried the me-Tarzan-you-Jane act with other girls out there then?" she purred.

"Try again. Besides, I've never seen anyone who needs a severe 'tudinal adjustment more than you, sweetie."

Sharise grit her teeth against the endearment. "You know what? You don't have to like my attitude. As I said before, I didn't ask you to be here...honey."

Cayle grinned, eased her back against the mat, surprised when she complied without comment. He decided to press his luck further, hunkered down and gripped one slim ankle in both his hands. He rotated gently, first one ankle then the other.

Sharise hissed. "Stop."

"We're just getting started," Cayle said, grasped her bare left foot, slowly pushed forward, bending her knee towards her chest. He got half way before she winced.

"I said stop."

"Aw c'mon. You know it doesn't hurt that much," he cajoled, refused to let her give in to the pain.

Caule slid forward, knelt astride her thighs. If she didn't get this part over with now, she would never move on or improve, he told himself, smoothly massaging first her knees, then each thigh, though he had only angled one leg. She squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth the entire while.

"This is the good part," he assured.

"Says who?"

"Fine, lazy. Let's try something else."

"I said, stop. Stop it right now!" Sharise exploded, struggled up on her elbows.

Caule felt the slight flex of her thigh muscles against his. If she had the ability, he thought, she would have probably kneed him. And he definitely didn't want to be a part of that action. Just keep those tiny tootsies and knees clear of the jewels.

"Get off me." Sharise glared at him.

"I'm not on you," he teased.

"You know what I mean. I don't like you straddling me like this. You're invading my space."

"It's the only way we can get this done."

"Says you."

"Maybe later, once you've graduated your workout-"

"There's not going to be any workouts and we're not going to try anything else because I'm finished now." She tried to roll onto her side but his thighs blocked her. Perspiration beaded her forehead as she turned beneath him. "Get off me!"

Reluctantly, Caule leaned back, watched her from his haunches as she searched for her wheelchair. When she spotted it, practically on the other side of the room, Caule saw the question loudly splashed across her small features: How and when had he managed to get it all the way over there?

"You really oughta learn to hide those better."

"What?" Sharise frowned.

"Your emotions. They're spilling right past those lovely, long-lashed eyes of yours."

"You dirty, low-life, smart-ass, son-of-a-" She flipped onto her stomach, breathing heavily as she balanced her upper body on her palms in a girl's push-up.

"You're more outta shape than I thought," he commented. "I thought you used to be a dancer..." Cayle shook his head, tsk-tsking. "You've let your body go to pot. Shame. Real shame."

"Bring me my chair!"

Cayle peered at her red face drenched in sweat as she muttered then flung a string of expletives at him.

He sat back and watched her; surprised she didn't pop a blood vessel. Surprised at some of the vocabulary flying out of

her mouth too.

"Very creative. Now that's one I haven't heard about my mother," Cayle said and thought she had a more foul mouth than some of the bikers he used to roll with back in Mobile right before his own accident. Booze and motor vehicles just did not mix well together, he told himself now.

She was working on his father's side of the family now, drawing colorful pictures of those ancestors with her black-and-blue prose.

Cayle leapt to his feet. Time to split, let her cool off.

Sharise had other ideas. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" she demanded.

He moved to take a step by her and she lunged at him, grabbed for his legs. Cayle gingerly sidestepped. She missed his jeans by inches.

He laughed down at her as he headed towards the exit.

"Come back here! Get me to my chair!"

"Think I'm going to check in your fridge, see if the right type of food is stocked for maximum refueling," Cayle threw over a shoulder. "Don't stop your workout on my account. I'll be back in a jiff."

Sharise swore, slammed a fist against the mat. "Damn you, Miller! Come back-"

He closed the door on the rest, shook his head and chuckled. He felt bad. Maybe a little. But if he had her figured right, she would drag herself to her chair and be sitting in it waiting to

attack the first person within reach.

That is, if she didn't immediately follow him to the kitchen for an expedient ambush.

Cayle looked forward to it.

* * *

He whistled all the way to the kitchen. Hot dog, he was in a good mood! And he didn't even know why. Maybe it was because he had shown that maddening woman who was boss. And God knows she had needed to be shown.

Cayle bumped into Ella in the kitchen, almost mowed her down as he rounded the corner where she was stacking that morning's cleaned breakfast dishes in an overhead cabinet.

"Ooh! I'm sorry, Ella." He caught her by the arms before she would have lost her balance.

"My goodness! Who knew there was such a diesel engine in that lean body?"

Cayle chuckled. There was no denying Ellamae Williams had a wonderful way with words.

"What're you up to, so bright and happy this morning?" she asked as he strolled by her to raid the cookie jar on the Carrara marble counter across the room.

Cayle's hand emerged with three Chips Ahoy. He bit into one. "Oh nothing. Nothing at all," he said between bites.

"Hmm. Sounds like you're making progress?"

"Something like that."

Ella eyed him as he lackadaisically leaned back on his

elbows and crossed his ankles in front of him. She shook her head as she headed for the table, pulled out a chair and took a seat. She peered across at Cayle.

He raised his brows. "Problem?"

"Could be."

Cayle crossed the floor, took a chair facing her, straddled it and hugged its tall straight wooden back as he looked at her. "You think I'm doing something wrong?"

She shook her head again. "Don't rightly know. I'm thinkin' you shouldn't be getting over-confident just yet, the way you seem to be. Don't sleep on her."

"I wouldn't dream of doing that."

She stared at him for a long moment then nodded. "I didn't think you would but it's easy to get comfortable. They draw you in that way."

"They? You mean her and dear old daddy."

Ella nodded, serious. "The Kellers, one and the same."

"They're not so tough."

"Many have tried but few have survived."

"How have you done it? Survived?"

"Me? Oh, I'm tough as a greasy spoon steak. Had to be. By the time I'd gotten here, Mr. Keller and that hellion daughter of his had gone through several nannies and housekeepers. Sharise was five then. And she's only gotten worse with age, if you can imagine that."

Cayle couldn't imagine it, nervously laughed as a shiver

shot through his spine at the very thought. "So...she's always been such a...so...difficult?"

Ella grinned at his uneasiness. "Ever since I've known her." She nodded, her smile growing. "I remember the first week I started working for the Kellers. Got a phone call from the child's kindergarten teacher the first morning asking for someone to come pick up Sharise.

"Seems the girl had put a powerful beatin' on some boy. Bloodied 'im up pretty bad."

"Sounds like Sharise's handiwork."

"You said it." Ella nodded. "But from what I heard, the kid deserved it. Among other things, he'd been botherin' the chil' somethin' awful about Mother's Day and her not being able to make a card for her mother since she didn't have one anymore. Of course, Sharise didn't take too kindly to his teasin'."

"Where is her mother?" Cayle blurted.

"Hemorrhaged to death in the back of an ambulance giving birth to Reese..."

"God, that's horrible."

Ella went on, as if by rote. "The nearest hospital was one of them private do-dads. Wouldn't take her, not even as an emergent case. No insurance. So they re-routed the ambulance to the next available city hospital all the way across town.

"Anyway, the EMTs delivered Sharise in the ambulance on the way. She survived. Her mother didn't."

"God..." Cayle sighed, helplessly shook his head as his

heart softened a little for the tortured five-year-old and the willful woman who had grown up not knowing a mother's gentle touch or a mother's sweet smell. Only the grief of a widowed father. "That's so...horrible," he repeated.

"Mr. Keller thought so too and would have sued but back then, he didn't have the means. Not like he does now. If he had..."

He would have ripped the hospital and every responsible figurehead doctor and administrator to shreds, Cayle told himself and wondered how they could do it. How could they let her die like that?

"She's had it pretty rough, Cayle. Especially since the accident." Ella stared at him and when he didn't respond, she continued. "She was in pretty bad shape directly after. Worse than now. She had swelling on the brain, was comatose for several weeks, had a bout of pneumonia. They really didn't expect her to live, much less walk."

Cayle waited, anxious to hear what type of new spin Ella would put on the she's-not-a-quitter speech since he had already gotten one from Keller.

"Once Sharise came around, understood the extent of her injuries, she dug down, ready to fight. Threw herself hog-wild into rehab, worked like something was driving her. Then, all of a sudden, she stopped. It was like a light had been shut off. Can't rightly put my finger on when this happened."

"So this is where I came in?"

Ella shook her head. "Not right away. Took a while for Mr. Keller to put his foot down.

"Sharise had been on a tear for a spell. Didn't want to work with any of the therapists. Abused the home attendants, went through several in one week. Got so bad, Mr. Keller finally sent for her. Persuaded her to come out here for her rehab."

Cayle smirked, didn't believe it had been that easy. Persuasion was not a method he would have used to get Sharise Keller to do anything. A woman like her didn't respond to anything but iron will. Something of which he was well acquainted and had an abundant supply. He could fight fire with fire right up there with the best of them.

"What you thinkin' on, youngin'?" Ella waved a hand in front of his face. "You got a mite too quiet over there for my comfort. Looked like my son for a second." She shook her head and chuckled at the thought. "I always knew when that boy was up to somethin'. He'd get real quiet and have a look like yours in his eyes. Plottin'."

Cayle nodded. "I'm making plans."

"Well, take everything I said into consideration."

"Definitely."

"You know, deep down I think Sharise wanted to come back. She needed to."

Cayle looked at her doubtfully.

Ella nodded. "She won't admit it, of course. She'd rather kick and scream, cry foul, try to make people feel sorry for her.

Like a child, she wants attention. Any kind."

Cayle thought of his own days being the runt younger brother, the "problem" kid because of his early bouts with ill health. All the while living in Zach's favored shadow.

He swallowed hard, tried to block out the guilt and grief. Bury the resentment.

Ella saw his struggle, didn't comment on how much his face gave away; boy couldn't have hidden a thing if he tried, she thought, knew the poor chil' was torn up about something other than Sharise's story. But she also knew when to keep her trap shut and when to speak. Now was the time for silence.

She got to her feet. "Well look at me. I've spilled about enough of this here family's secrets to last a body a lifetime. Better get to rustlin' up some lunch." She squeezed one of his shoulders as she passed him and Cayle looked up into her liquid brown eyes. "You're a good man. I feel it in m' bones and these here bones haven't steered me wrong yet."

He stared at her, waiting.

"She's not as bad as she makes herself out to be, Cayle. Just try not to be too hard on her."

Cayle didn't respond right away, unsure if he could do Ellamae's bidding and still get the job done. Except when he looked up into her compelling brown eyes, he was almost able to believe in miracles, to believe he could get Sharise back on track.

Finally he muttered, "I'll do my best, Ella."

-

Chapter Four

When Cayle made it back to Sharise he fully expected to see her up and about. If not in her chair--arms folded across small breasts as she huffed and puffed like the Big Bad Wolf--then, at the most, trying to lift herself up into the parallel bars.

He was prepared to shake in his boots at her estrous wrath, shoot out suitable retorts to any outrageous fits of invective and, if necessary, totally ignore her jeremiad.

He had not been prepared for withdrawal and submission. But these were exactly what he faced when he returned to find Sharise in the same position she had been in when he'd left her a little over an hour ago.

He refused to believe she'd stayed in the one spot all that time, fought every impulse in him that told him to run and see if she was okay.

Cayle strolled to where she lay, planted his feet astride her and put his fists on his hips superhero fashion as he stared down at her.

Sharise stared up at his face. "Get me my chair," she demanded, then rolled her eyes so hard, Cayle thought she had fallen asleep. Until she scowled at him.

"I don't believe you. You've been here all this time?"

"Where else would I be, asshole? This is where you left me, remember? And I wouldn't call an hour 'a jiff'."

"You're not a cripple, Reese."

"What the hell would you know about it!" She swung a fist in an upward arc, her aim true. Cayle lurched back in the nick of time, his instincts saving him serious pain.

"You're acting like a--"

"Spoiled brat, child, bitch. Save them for someone who gives a damn, okay? I've heard them all before."

"Obviously, it hasn't done you any good."

She cursed, gave him the finger then flung herself back against the mat.

He squatted next to her, rested his forearms on his thighs. "I'll make a deal with you."

She frowned at him.

"Give me two...no, one leg-lift, each leg, and I'll fetch you your chair."

She silently glared at him, motionless as a statue.

Cayle stood, pivoted to go, his conversation with Ella haunting him all the way to the door. He stopped at the threshold, turned back. Sharise hadn't moved an inch, wouldn't even look his way.

He sighed, retrieved her chair and wheeled it back to her.

Damn she was stubborn!

Sharise didn't say a word, didn't even smile as Cayle picked her up and placed her in her throne. She should have been gloating over her victory. Instead, she was as gloomy as a wet holiday.

Cayle thought of his self-imposed deadline, told himself this might take longer than a month. Definitely longer.

* * *

Every day, he felt like Tyson in the ring with Holyfield. Bobbing, weaving, ducking. Cajoling, bullying, fencing, jousting. You name it and, in the last two weeks of his stay, he'd done it. But nothing he tried seemed to work.

Cayle didn't want to admit defeat but was beginning to feel the end of his rope.

She was the most troublesome case he had ever encountered, strong-willed to a point of endangering her own well being.

He didn't think he had come across anyone so bent on sabotaging his or her own recovery. Except for maybe him. But as hardheaded as he had been, he'd eventually come around. Cayle didn't think Sharise would, had a feeling she was just a plain old devil woman sent to earth to point up his inefficacy, a view of his past come to torment him.

She'd only gotten worse (if this were at all possible) since that first scene two weeks ago. She refused to do one leg-lift, refused to get out of her throne from where she wielded her hostility like a royal scepter, lording over everyone in the house as if she were princess of the manor. Which, he guessed, she was since her daddy was the king in residence.

Since their first skirmish over a workout, Cayle had decided to steer clear of touching her uninvited, which made it almost impossible for him to get her to exercise.

Whatever he decided to do, he knew it had to be drastic.

* * *

Cayle made it down to the dining room bright and early.

He figured if he was to endure another day of aggressive apathy from the enemy, he needed do it on a full stomach.

The one saving grace of living and working at the Kellers was Ella's meals and her witty anecdotes and conversation.

This morning she didn't disappoint, hit him with one of her famous "momalisms" before he took a seat at the table.

"Chil', you look like a chicken hawk that come up on an empty chicken house."

Cayle groaned as he sank into a chair.

Ella set a plate of sausage, scrambled eggs, hominy grits and pancakes in front of him. She followed this with a tall glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice.

"Thanks."

"Now you gonna have to pick y'self up if you intends on eatin' at this here table."

Cayle weakly grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

Ella placed a bottle of Aunt Jemima syrup and a saucer of stick margarine on the table. Cayle dug in as she went back to the stove and fixed herself a plate.

"Guess we'll be dining alone?" he asked.

Ella chuckled as she took a seat opposite Cayle. "Now you know them two's about as social as the Grim Reaper."

Cayle laughed, welcomed a forkful of eggs into his mouth, speared a piece of sausage, gobbled then washed down the mouthful of food with a big swallow of orange juice. Without missing a beat, he cut a corner from his syrup-smothered pancake stack then reached for his grits.

Ella gaped. "Boy, what's ya hurry? Got a train to catch?"

"I wanna get a headstart," he grunted around his food.

"On what? Indigestion?"

Cayle grinned, continued wolfing down his meal.

"Whoa." Ella reached across the table to grasp a wrist, stopped the fork a couple of inches from his mouth. "Slow down. Ms. Sharise'll wait."

"You don't have to tell me that. She's about as anxious to start our session as a whore is to go to church."

Ella chuckled. "Am I startin' to rub off on you or is it the other way around?"

Cayle laughed, set down his fork for the first time since he'd taken his seat. "Guess I'm a little nervous."

Ella arched a brow.

He sighed, shook his head. "I've been hitting a wall. This has never happened to me before. Not like this."

"You'll get past it."

He nodded. "I've got plans to."

"Well, don't let me stop you. Finish on up. Just don't choke. I don't know nothin' 'bout no Hime-lick maneuverins."

Cayle giggled, feeling better already.

* * *

"Just where is it you think you're taking me?"

"Surprise." Cayle steered her through the gym, straight to

the Olympic pool. He stopped a foot away from the edge, put on the brakes.

"Now what?" Sharise tilted her head back to look at him standing behind her.

"Since you refuse to cooperate on land, I thought maybe a change of scenery would help. Besides, swimming'll be a breeze compared to the other stuff I'll have you doing soon. The water counters the forces of gravity."

She folded her arms across her breasts, doing her irritable two-year-old imitation.

Cayle thought she was getting disturbingly good at it. Hell, he'd seen two-year-olds more agreeable than this woman.

"I suppose you're waiting for me to do my Esther Williams imitation now," Sharise grumbled.

"Little Mermaid."

"Ha-ha."

"You have to give in eventually."

"Oh yeah?"

Cayle didn't answer, turned from her to strip out of his T-shirt and black Levi's, revealing a pair of red swim trunks.

Sharise peeked over a shoulder and smiled. "Is there a Baywatch audition I don't know about, Mr. Spitz?"

"You're a real laugh riot, Alice."

"It was a compliment. You look like one of the young lifeguards from the show. One of the cute sexy ones." She puckered her lips and blew a kiss at him.

"That would be all of them, including the females," Cayle drawled, left her side and climbed the ladder to the diving board. He ran to its edge and smoothly jackknifed into the pool, cleanly cutting the water like a professional diver.

Sharise watched as he flutter kicked to the pool's side. "Impressive, Louganis."

Cayle gripped the edge of the pool, shook his head like a pup shaking water from its coat. "Now you."

"Yeah, right." She smirked.

"Why not?" He splashed her. "You chicken?"

"Don't even try it."

Cayle reached for a foot, felt her hackles rising from his place in the water as he started to pull.

"You've had your fun splashing me." She bristled. "So stop."

"Is that all you know how to say? 'No', 'Don't', 'Stop'? You need to expand your vocabulary, positive terminology like 'Yes', 'Do', 'Go'."

"The only thing I need to do is be rid of you."

"Good luck."

She huffed, rolled her eyes at him.

"Reese-"

"Did it ever occur to you I don't want to swim?"

His eyes suddenly lit up. "Oh, I get it!" He climbed out of the pool, stood behind her chair. "If you don't know how, I can teach you. Piece of cake."

Sharise gritted her teeth and shook her head. "You men think you know everything. Did I say I don't know how? I said I don't want to."

"Well then we have a problem because you're going to get into this here pool one way or another."

She looked up at his face, daring him with her eyes.

Cayle sighed, tried again. "Sharise, just one stroke. One kick. Please." He hated begging but saw no other way. Unless...

"No."

That did it. He'd had enough.

"Fine." He stepped behind her chair, gripped the handles, disengaged the brakes with a foot and eased the chair closer to the edge of the pool.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Something you've been begging me to do for a long time." He pushed the chair until the front wheels dangled over the water.

"Cayle, stop it!"

"This is your last chance to go in on your own."

"I said no!"

He tipped the chair forward, neatly dumped her in then rolled the chair out of his way and leaned over the side. He waited a moment for her to come up sputtering and screaming.

Nothing. Okay, fine. She was playing hardball.

He waited another minute. Nothing.

Cayle's heart leapt as he knelt at the edge and peered into the water. What the hell was she doing? She was at the bottom of the pool and it had to be at least twenty feet down!

He checked his watch. How long had she been under? Three minutes? Four?

Still, he didn't jump in, knew she was manipulating him, having fun at his expense. Fine, let her think she was getting back at him. She had to come up for air sometime. She couldn't hold her breath forever.

Cayle checked his watch again. Going on five minutes. Okay. Enough was enough.

"Sharise! All right now, playtime's over. Come up here!"

She's trying to kill herself!

The thought hit him a second before he dived in after her.

Her eyes were closed and it almost looked like she had just taken time out of a busy schedule to meditate.

Cayle skillfully grasped her around the chest, kicked them both back to the surface. He gulped air as he pulled her from the water, lifted then placed her on the edge of the tile.

Sharise lay on her back unmoving and unbreathing as Cayle sprang from the pool, panting as he knelt beside her. He checked her airways, listened for breath sounds. Nothing.

He started artificial respiration.

Dear God, he hadn't meant for this to happen. He'd figured she'd come up, indignant, kicking and screaming and ready to rip out his mismatched eyes. Instead, she'd sunk like a rock. On purpose. He'd only wanted to get her mad. But...God...she...

Still wasn't breathing.

Damn! How stubborn and contradictory could one person be? Cayle wondered. What was she trying to prove? That she could kill herself out of spite? To spite him? Jesus! The woman was crazier than a monkey chasing shit around a tree.

She had tried to kill herself, he thought. And he had almost helped her. Almost. No way was he going to let this woman die on him. No way.

Come on, dammit! Breathe!

He rhythmically pumped her chest, pinched her nostrils together and blew air into her lungs. He went through the process several times--that seemed more like a thousand times--before she finally spluttered out a mouthful of water and convulsively coughed.

Sharise homed in on his livid expression and quickly closed her eyes.

"What was that all about?" Cayle demanded, voice shaky.

She opened her eyes, focused on him for a long silent moment before averting her face.

"Reese! What the hell were you trying to do?" he yelled then began muttering expletives, stringing them together until he was sounding like a mentally challenged street person or a Tourette's patient. Sounding as crazy as he thought she was. "Well?" He arched a brow, waited.

"I was trying to get you to leave me alone," she rasped then licked her lips and stared at him before she cleared the hoarseness from her throat. "I just want everyone to leave me alone. Think you can do that? Just leave me alone."

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[Chapter Five](#)

Cayle entered the living area of his compact three-room walk-up in the White Plains area of the Bronx. Nothing fancy. Just cozy, neat and functional. Black leather camelback sofa, leather match reclining chair and ottoman and strategically placed oval brass and glass cocktail and end tables.

There was one eclectic piece he'd gotten from his favorite uncle who'd passed on: an oak finished curio style Ridgeway Grandfather clock which featured Westminster chime, interior light and two glass shelves. Like its former owner it was tall, sturdy, handsome. A classic. Cayle loved the piece for the familiar warmth and nostalgia it generated in his chest whenever he looked at its mirrored back or listened to its musical tolls.

Cayle now broke one of his own cardinal rules and tossed his keys onto the glass table adjacent the recliner. He clicked on the black standing halogen lamp adjacent the sofa and checked his machine for messages. The light loudly, urgently flashed at him--check me now!--seven messages waiting to be heard. Obviously, he'd been away longer than he'd thought.

He pressed "Play" then headed for the kitchen.

"...I bullied your number outta Dr. Graham and...well, sorry for botherin' ya at home, but I...well, I never had a chance to thank you for...you know...what you done for my kid. He's a... you're.... Thank you, Mr. Miller and...well, just thanks...."

Cayle recognized the deep Brooklyn accent of Mr. Delmonico, the father of one of his former clients, Danny Delmonico.

He remembered the father well, a gruff hard hat who never seemed able to get all the dirt of construction sites from under his nails, and as big and rough-hewn as the day was long. But when it came to his son he was like melted chocolate bunnies.

Cayle remembered the kid even better. A skinny twelve-year-old with an unruly mass of black hair, owl-sharp brown eyes and the heart of a competitor. The kid had been mowed down by a car drag racing on a notorious stretch of Queens's highway. The driver (a teen strung out on immortality, testosterone and youth) had hit Mr. Delmonico's son and had never looked back.

Danny'd lost a leg below the knee, the other suffering compound fractures. Like Sharise, he hadn't been expected to live. Unlike Sharise, he'd fought to regain the use of his remaining leg and master his new Du Pont limb. Today, the kid played back-up shooting guard on his school's basketball team.

There were a few messages from charitable organizations to which Cayle donated his time, money and soul--the Boys Clubs of America and Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association--both thanking him for his "generous donation". He'd sent his entire first check from Keller to both associations--half to one, half to the other.

Cayle opened the fridge, stood in front of it browsing the way his mother had always warned him not to do.

"You're going to let all the cold air out..."

He smiled at the remembered harangue then reached in, grabbed the quart container of milk and tipped it up to his mouth, breaking another one of his mother's sacred edicts as he

listened to the next message from March of Dimes confirming and thanking him for his registration to the annual WalkAmerica.

The next message didn't bode tidings as gracious.

"Cayle...? I'm assuming you're not there, young man or you would have picked up the phone. Unless you're screening your calls and in this instance..."

Keller, the arrogant, high-handed...

"...I think this behavior of yours is very unprofessional, not to mention rude. Call me when you get this message..."

He'd gotten half-a-dozen of these messages from Keller since he'd quit. Once, Dr. Graham had left a message, more diplomatic but expressing Keller's basic sentiments.

"Cayle, I know she might have gotten on your nerves but you mustn't lower yourself to her level..."

Rude. Unprofessional. The accusations pricked for their unfairness. He had been more professional than a lot of people would have been in the same circumstances.

But Keller and Dr. Graham were both right, he realized. Sharise's atrocious attitude didn't excuse his awful behavior.

Rude? Unprofessional? Try insane.

And who had made him this way? That suicidal maniac.

Okay, granted, dumping her in the pool might have been a little "unorthodox", but no more so than Sharise Keller. That devil woman was more unorthodox and batty than he'd ever been during one of his really bad binges. Far as Cayle could see, he had been justifiably unorthodox.

Keller's voice filled the room again, more irate.

"Cayle, I want to know exactly what you've done to my daughter. She's worse now than she was before you got here! This certainly wasn't what I hired you for. If you don't start returning my calls soon, I'll be forced to take legal action."

Legal action? Cayle thought and smirked as he drained the quart of milk on his way to the sofa. Good luck. He could try, but he wasn't getting blood from this here stone.

Besides, Cayle hadn't "done anything to her" except gotten her a little wet. She, on the other hand, had taken ten years off his lousy life with that cute stunt she'd pulled.

The next message was from his mom.

"Hey honey! Just called to say 'Boo', make sure you're still alive...invite you to dinner..."

Cayle grinned and listened to tussling in the background as Zach took the phone from their mom.

"I could care less whether you come or not, Wheezer!"

Mom got back on, laughing. "Anyway, we want you to come over and fill up on some down-home southern cooking. It's past due and I know you're letting yourself waste away to nothing..."

Cayle smiled, thought of the big "down-home" meals that Ella had been shoving his way for the last couple of weeks.

"Call us, hun. Or drop by. You do still remember where we live? Love ya, baby!"

That was that. Thank God his messages had closed off on an upbeat, positive note. He needed this now more than anything,

positive energy. He'd gotten enough of the negative growing up under Remy's militaristic reign.

Remy Miller, athletic, macho taskmaster. World traveler. Noncommissioned officer--formerly stationed at Air University in Maxwell, AFB, Alabama--currently doing time at the Electronic Security Command in San Antonio, Texas.

And only his son Zachary had been able to live up to his exacting expectations.

Cayle had never been able to do right.

Thomas Keller had nothing on Remy, Cayle thought. At least he--as pompous and self-important as he appeared--cared about his daughter, cared whether she lived or died.

Sharise Keller didn't know how lucky she was to not have to deal with a father like Remy Miller who would've just as soon returned Cayle to the hospital from where he had been delivered rather than put up with all his youngest son's frailties.

One day Cayle had learned how deep Remy's intolerance ran when he and Zach had returned home earlier than expected from a fishing trip with Remy's older brother, the boys' Uncle Jack.

Remy's raised voice and Mom's sobbing had pierced the den's closed oak doors, floating out to the two boys as they'd entered the house through the back screen door. They flung their fishing poles to one corner of the floor, dumped a bucket full of the day's catches into the kitchen sink and ran through the swinging doors connecting the dining area to the living room--racing to tell their parents about their adventures with Uncle Jack.

"Wait." Zach pulled up short.

Cayle ran into his back headlong. "Hey!"

"You hear that?" Zach cocked his head to one side, perked up his ears like Spiderman did when his Spidy-senses tingled. "It's Mom and Dad. Fighting."

Between trips on overseas assignments and his rare stints at home with his family, Remy Miller was always finding a rhyme or reason to blow his stack with their mom, and the reason was usually his youngest son.

Cayle figured this time was no different than the others.

"...He's always sick, Dianne. I can't keep up with all the times he's been to the doctor for one ailment or another. His leg braces, the hospital admissions for his asthma..."

Cayle felt Zach glance at him over a shoulder. He shuffled to the sofa, threw himself back on the cushions. "Remy's at it again," he muttered despite knowing how Zach felt about him referring to their dad by his Christian name. But Cayle didn't care. Why should he be respectful?

He couldn't stop the tears from welling, hard as he tried, and he knew Zach could see them, knew Zach could get past his tough act like no one else, not even their mom.

Cayle buried his face in the crook of an elbow, tried to muffle his sobs but Zach sat down beside him, put an arm around his shoulder in an assuring manner that belied his nine years.

To Cayle, Zach was the smartest, biggest, bestest athlete in the world next to Remy. Everyone else thought so too, always

saying things like "That Zach Miller is going places." or "Kid handles the pigskin like a pro already."

Cayle agreed with the praise, wanted to earn the same, be just like his older brother and make Remy proud, or at least less disgusted with him.

But it was hard to soothe his seven-year-old ego with thoughts of being like Zach and making Remy proud when Remy was busy summarizing all his faults as if they were symptoms of some detestable disease.

"...The bills are mounting, Di. Even my insurance is having a hard time covering his ER visits."

"It's not his fault, Remy. He didn't ask to be born, but he's here now..."

"C'mon, Cayle." Zach grabbed an arm, pulled his brother from the sofa. "We'll go over to Uncle Jack's, play cowboys and Indians with the runts. We'll be the cowboys this time."

"I don't wanna go." Cayle dug in, sat back down. The idea of being a cowboy or playing with his tomboy twin cousins, Jessie and Josie, not enough to lure him away from this argument.

"...What do you suggest we do, Remy? He's our child!"

Their mother almost never shouted like that and both Cayle and Zach cringed as if they'd each been cuffed upside the head.

The two strained to hear Remy's next grumbling.

"If he were a fish, I'd throw him back..."

The study door flew open and Remy banged out, stalked through the living room and out the front door without noticing

his two sons at the sofa.

Their mother trailed behind Remy, red-faced and weeping. "That's cruel, Remy. You're a cruel, heartless man!" Dianne stopped short as she saw the boys out the corner of an eye. "Oh dear God..." She headed towards the sofa, arms spread wide to catch Cayle as he tried to run by her. She hunkered down, pulled him to her breasts and cooed in his hair.

"It's not my fault, Mommy. Why does he hate me so much?"

"Oh baby, he doesn't hate you. He just doesn't know how to handle everythi-"

"He does hate me!" Cayle jerked out of her embrace, stepped back. "But it doesn't matter none, cause I hate him too! I hate him double!" He pushed past her and flew up the cream-carpeted staircase.

Dianne started after him but Zach ran by her too, stopped two steps above her, turned to fix her with dark-brown, old-man eyes. "I'll go to him, Mama. I don't think he wants to be around grown-ups right now."

"Zachary..."

"It's okay, Mom." Zach reached out to squeeze her shoulders, reversing their roles as he comforted. "I'll talk to him, calm him down. I'm used to handling him when he's upset like this."

* * *

Maybe he would go see Zach and Mom, Cayle thought now.

He needed to see friendly sympathetic faces attached to bodies that didn't have hidden agendas. He needed a new perspective, sound advice. He needed Zach.

This was something in his life he had always been able to count on. No matter what he was involved in or where he happened to be, Cayle had always been able to turn around and go home to his brother knowing that support and an open ear would be handy.

Zach would know how to handle this Keller situation.

Steady, dependable Zach. He hadn't yet let down Cayle, though Cayle had let down himself a thousand times in the past, had let down Zach at least once. When it had counted most.

* * *

At forty-nine with two grown sons, an educational and career revival ten years behind her--after the end of an ill-advised, questionable union with an Air Force Senior Master Sergeant joined to his military career stronger than to his wife and two kids--Dianne Miller seemed the footloose and fancy-free divorcee personified.

Cayle thought his mother didn't look a day over thirty-five. Tall and slim with indigo eyes and honey-blond hair trimmed in a bouncy Dorothy Hamill bob framing a beautiful, oddly Polynesian face, she was the picture of youth and grace.

And when Dianne Miller opened her apartment door and took in the strapping, broad-shouldered figure of her youngest son, her eyes lit with both surprise and satisfaction. She pulled him into a hard embrace, inhaling the fresh, sandalwood scent of his bronze skin.

"It's been longer than I thought. You must have grown three

inches since I last saw you," she murmured.

"Mom, I've been six-two for the last nine years." Cayle chuckled as she took him by a hand and led him through the vestibule and arched doorway into the modestly furnished sunken living room. "You've seen me more recently than that."

"Well, it certainly doesn't seem like it, boy."

She didn't need to tell him that he hadn't kept in touch with his family as often as he should have. And if she'd brought it up, Cayle would have told her life and work--especially his most recent stint--had gotten in his way. He knew these weren't valid excuses, especially not for his mama but...well.... He was here now.

"So, how do you like the place?" Dianne waved a hand Vanna White style, indicating the spacious room as they stood in the middle of the polished parquet floor.

Hunter green, cherry finish damask sofa and love seat, cherry oval cocktail and end tables all set off by a chaumiere karastan rug. Everything was unpretentious, gender-neutral with an accent on coziness.

"I like it," Cayle stated, marveling at the homey personal stamps his mom had been able to accumulate and put on the co-op in so short a time. The swarms of colored framed photos--all of him and Zach during various stages of their lives, infants-toddlers-teens-men--monopolizing various shelves of the oak entertainment center and the mantle above the fireplace opposite. The large round, oak finish wall clock that Cayle remembered from

his childhood, was still going strong like a Timex and hanging above the fireplace. Framed art prints were meticulously placed and hung throughout the room with rich voluminous potted plants occupying each corner.

Mom and Zach had only been in the apartment a little more than a year--Dianne laterally transferring from her computer company's Atlanta office to their New York digs with an eye towards promotion--but the apartment already felt like home.

"I more than like it," Cayle admitted. "Actually, I'm impressed."

"You were always a smart mouth, you." Dianne took a playful swipe at his head and Cayle ducked, caught her around the waist in a one-armed hug.

Zach shot from his bedroom at the end of the long hallway, skid to a stop on the living room threshold.

"Hey Wheezer!" He tipped back his streamlined racer; precariously balancing as he popped a mean wheelie then did several revolutions before gliding toward his mother and Cayle.

Cayle left his mother's side to meet Zach halfway. "Watch who you call 'Wheezer', Show-off," Cayle joked. Zach was the only one in the world who could get away with calling him by the childhood moniker. All others had better beware. "I'm taller than you now."

"Shucks, I can still knock your runty ass down to size, anytime anywhere." Zach leaned forward and reached for him. Cayle bent, intending to squeeze his brother in a bear hug, instead got

crushed in one himself.

He exaggeratedly gasped as he pulled away. "Somebody's been working with weights, I see."

Zach made a muscle. "Hard as Swarzenegger's."

Touched, Cayle squeezed his brother's biceps and whistled.

"I need to stay in shape for the ladies, you know."

"Okay, enough with the male bonding." Dianne clapped her hands over her head. "Time for some family bonding."

Cayle and Zach chuckled at their mother and for a moment, he felt like he was really home; he wished he were here to stay.

* * *

He collapsed against the sofa cushions, stuffed with his mother's smothered pork chops, homefries, collard greens and cornbread from scratch.

Cayle had noticed during dinner that his mother had barely eaten a bite but it didn't concern him too much. Her appetite had never been as robust as the men in her life had. But still, Cayle wondered at her unusual and detached dinner-table conversation.

Zach rocketed into the living room, parked his chair on a dime beside the sofa.

"You're getting good at that, Show-off."

"Keeps me in shape. At least my arms." Zach flexed his muscles again, took in his brother's relaxed form. "You look wasted," he observed.

"Eating all that food was work." Cayle motioned to rise. "I should be in there help-"

"I already tried that, and she told me to 'tell that smart aleck brother of yours to forget it too'."

Cayle smiled at how accurate was his brother's imitation of their mom's bossy drawl.

"She enjoys waiting on you. Do I need to tell you she's been missing you?"

"And you?"

"I live here. Why would she miss me, Wheezer?"

"Smart aleck." Cayle swiped at his brother's head and Zach bobbed and weaved in his chair as he threw up his dukes.

"She said she's got a surprise for dessert." Zach smiled, gripped one of Cayle's thighs. "I am glad you came by."

"I had such a gracious invitation."

"Yeah, that you did." Zach nodded, silent for a long moment, peering at his brother.

"So, how are things? You and mom seem to be settling in nicely."

"She's a natural decorator and organizer."

Cayle nodded. "But how are you guys doing?"

"I should be asking you that," Zach said, feinting.

Cayle frowned, knew something was up. Whether it was with Zach or Mom or both he couldn't be sure.

"Something's bothering you. Tell me," Zach pushed.

Cayle groaned, didn't know how to broach it.

"Women problems? Job?"

"A little of both. Remember that special assignment I mentioned to you and Mom? The rich art dealer's daughter?"

Zach nodded, leaned forward in his chair.

Cayle gave his brother an abbreviated version of the last month, highlighting his two-week stay at the Kellers, his friendship with Ellamae. He didn't mention why he had left.

"It wasn't working out," he finished simply.

Zach nodded again. "Ellamae sounds like quite a character," he said instead of addressing his brother's omission, deciding for the moment to let it slide.

"That she is."

"A female Uncle Jack. No nonsense."

Cayle nodded. "You'd like her."

"I'm sure." Zach slyly eyed his brother. "But would I like Sharise Keller?"

Cayle shook his head, closed his eyes and wearily sighed.

"Is that a 'no'?"

"Originally, she was the reason I came over here. I needed to talk about...I needed some distance. A neutral ear..."

"Advice?"

"Originally. But now..."

"Cayle-"

"I'm worried about you and Mom, Zach." They were notorious for keeping things from him in the name of protecting him. Like he needed protecting. He was a grown man, not a hysterical seven-year-old. "I know things aren't as well as you guys're pretending," Cayle said, flipping the script on his brother.

"Pretending?"

"How's the transfer working out?"

"Mom's indispensable, Cayle." Zach averted his glance.

"That's not what I asked you."

Zach snatched a look over a shoulder; listened as their mother turned off the water in the kitchen before he leaned in. "She'd kill me if I tell-"

"Tell me what? Something's wrong, isn't there? I knew-"

"There's nothing wrong," Zach said.

Too quickly, Cayle thought, uneasy and feeling as if his brother was trying to brush him off. "Zach, spill it."

"Mom's okay, I'm okay. There's just...well..."

"Zach..."

"There's been some talk of downsizing at the computer company. Mom hasn't said anything but I know she's worried."

Downsizing? It was an ugly term, an all-inclusive proviso management had been tossing about with increasing frequency, its effects felt by the Fortune 500s and the Mom and Pop upstarts. Of late, it was a vicious trend occurring all over the country.

A trend by which Cayle had never thought he'd be personally affected. Downsizing. He shivered at the thought.

"When will she know anything definite?" he asked his brother, dreaded the answer.

"Management's assuring there's nothing to worry about, not to put any stock in gossip about takeovers and mergers. But Mom's not letting the grass grow under her feet. She's already dusted off her resume, sent it to several companies."

No. Mom wouldn't sit around complacently and wait for an ax to fall. She'd done that once before when she'd taken a chance and believed her marriage would last forever. Cayle knew she would never trust or depend on the kindness of strangers again.

Zach took another peek over his shoulder, heard silverware gently clinking against ceramic. Dessert was on its way. Anxious, he looked back to his younger brother. "Don't say anything, Cayle. You know how Mom is. She wants to work this out on her own. I don't even think she thinks I know how tense things are."

Cayle could imagine. His mom had probably been evading and reassuring Zach the same way Zach was evading and reassuring him.

"Zach..."

Zach squeezed his brother's shoulder, speared him with a look right before their mother emerged from the dining room balancing a tin of homemade peach cobbler and three saucers and spoons on a tray.

Peach cobbler, Cayle thought. His favorite and his mom made some of the best this side of the Mason-Dixon Line. She usually only pulled out the culinary treat when she was trying to ease some fretting--hers or someone else's. But Cayle didn't think even his mama's peach cobbler could ease his fretting.

"Hope you boys have room for dessert!" Dianne exclaimed, and cheerily doled out heaping servings before settling down beside Cayle on the sofa and digging into her own cobbler. "Mmmm. This is pretty good, if I say so m'self." She stared at each young man in turn. "You're never too full for cobbler. You boys better dig in before I skin your hides."

Cayle and Zach both grinned to cover their preoccupation as they reached for their plates.

"How is it?" Dianne asked, anxious as they shoveled spoonfuls of the cobbler into their mouths.

"S'great," Zach mumbled around his pie.

Cayle silently nodded, decided.

Mom was a sole provider, shouldering most of the costs of a gigantic move, a new co-op and the care of a disabled son. She'd long ago refused any financial assistance from Remy, preferring to make her own way through school and not wanting to be beholden to anyone, even if the anyone was her boys' father. Remy had reluctantly obliged.

If there was the smallest chance his mother might lose her job, be out of work for even a short period of time, Cayle wanted to be able to cover her, give his mama and Zach

something to fall back on. Savings wouldn't begin to cover expenses and even if they could, he wouldn't dare let her dip into them.

He wouldn't be put off as easily as Remy, Cayle determined.

He would go back.

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[Chapter Six](#)

Sharise sat in her favorite spot out on the verandah overlooking the estate's lake, enjoyed the early signs of summer. Acres of lawn moist with last evening's downpour, rainwater still glistening on tree leaves and petals in the parterre. The air was redolent with spring flush.

Distantly, she heard the door to her bedroom open and close. Several heartbeats later, Ellamae came through the French window and joined Sharise out on the balcony.

"Chil', you must be part Eskimo. It's freezin' out here!"

Sharise grinned, briefly turned to see Ella cloaking herself in a red cashmere, "Mr. Rogers" sweater, a gift from her son last Christmas.

"It's beautiful out. Your blood's thin," Sharise said as Ella took a seat beside her on the lawn chair.

"My blood's old."

"There's nothing old about you, Ella."

"Don't try and flatter your way out of a talkin' to."

Sharise looked at her, arched a brow in an innocent what-did-I-do expression.

"You know doggone well what you did. Ran that nice boy away from here, is what."

Sharise sighed, glanced out at the gently rippling lake, remembering his face, the way he had looked when she'd finally opened her eyes. Remembering his anxiety. His anger.

Nice? Yeah, Sharise guessed he could be considered "nice".

She would have considered him even nicer if he hadn't been so overbearing. If he hadn't been trying so hard to boss her around and make her abide the stupid rehab program her father had seen fit to strap on her.

Why couldn't they just leave her alone? Concerned and well meaning and the whole shebang be damned. She didn't need it and wished they would all just stop being so meddling. She wouldn't have needed to resort to such extreme measures if they had all just left her alone. Alone and in peace.

"Chil', you ain't never been one to back down from a fight. And I know you weren't intimidated by Cayle."

Sharise smiled at the obvious warmth that crept into Ella's voice when the older woman uttered the name of her father's miracle-working saint. She wondered why he hadn't been able to elicit anything from her except wrath and spite. Shouldn't she have at least tried to work with him? Even if she didn't like him? Hell, if Ella liked him, he had to have some redeeming qualities hidden inside that well-cut frame.

"Sharise, are you listenin' to me?" Ella put a hand on her arm and Sharise shook her head, tried to blink away her carnal images of Mr. Miller without much success.

"Sharise?"

She jerked her eyes to Ella, cleared her throat. "Of course I wasn't intimidated by him. He's not so tough."

Ella grinned at how like Cayle Sharise sounded. "So, should I ask? Who ran who off?"

Sharise shrugged. "I guess he couldn't take the heat."

"I doubt that. I mean, you can be a mean ol' rattlesnake, but I don't think that was enough to scare 'im off."

Sharise smirked at Ella's lofty visions of Mr. Miller. He wasn't any big deal. She'd proven that already, made him quit. He was the quitter, not her. So there.

"Remember the way you whupped that Phillips boy's tail?" Ella now asked, educing a small smile from Sharise.

She remembered it well; ashamed of the overwhelming pleasure that warmed her blood at the thought of Gerard Phillips' overdue thrashing at her hands.

Gerard had been nothing but a five-year-old bully, bigger than all the kids in Sharise's kindergarten class. Bigger, meaner and with a chip of jealousy firmly planted on his shoulder.

And none of this had stopped Sharise from challenging his reign and paying with a visit to the principal.

She had been sitting in Mr. Kaufman's outer office waiting for close to an hour before Ellamae, harried and flustered, had shown up to take her new charge home.

Sharise leapt to her feet, ran headlong into her new nanny's strong thighs, wrapping her short arms around the woman's hips as she started to cry. "It wasn't my fault, Miss Ella! He kept teasing me and teasing me, I begged him to stop, I told him to leave me alone, but he kept on-"

"Hush up this here crying now and tell me what happened, chil'. Who was bothering you?"

Sharise took a deep, shuddering breath, hiccuped several times in succession. "Stinky Gerard Phillips. He's been bothering me all week."

Their teacher, Miss Martin, had paired off the class of sixteen four- and five-year-olds to make Mother's Day cards.

Sharise had been paired with Gerard and had known from the moment Miss Martin had settled them down at a table near another pair in the rear of the classroom, that there would be trouble because Gerard Phillips had been tormenting her all year about one thing or another, like her "dinky orange hair" or her "stupid dimples" or "the dumb hole" in her chin.

When Sharise would tell her daddy about the teasing, he'd tell her to just ignore Gerard, said the boy wasn't being mean but acting "so dumb" because he actually liked her.

Well, Sharise didn't like him. He was a fat evil boy with beady little eyes and he liked to pick on kids smaller than him. He did it all the time! And today had been no different.

"You can forget about making a dinky old Mother's Day Card, stinky Sharise Keller!" He'd pulled a long auburn braid, jerking back her head.

"Ow! Stop it!"

"No." Gerard licked out his tongue. "Sharise can't make a Mother's Day Card, nah-nah, nah-nah-nah!"

"Yes I can so."

"No yooooou caa-aan't cause you don't have a mother!"

"Do so! Everybody has a mother, stupid!" She flung her body at Gerard, scratched at his eyes like a small wild animal.

Miss Martin sprinted over to break apart the pair. "What are you two doing?"

"Gerard's teasing me. Make him stop." Sharise cried, hysterical tears streaming down her cheeks as the teacher held her wriggling body away from Gerard.

Miss Martin glanced at the boy, took in the bloody scratches on his pompous face and wondered how she was going to explain them to the child's equally pompous and rich parents.

She got down on her haunches, pulled Sharise in a one-armed embrace, and smoothed the top of the little girl's head. "Sharise, there's no excuse for what you did." She knew she should have reprimanded the child much more firmly but her heart just wasn't up for it. Sharise was one of her favorite students and she figured if the girl had seen fit to fight with the class bully, she must have had a very good reason. And right now Miss Martin needed to find out what that reason had been. "Sharise?" She gently set the child away from her and Sharise lowered her head and whispered, "He's mean, Miss Martin."

Miss Martin agreed, but couldn't very well say it. "What did Gerard say to make you act this way?"

Sharise shook her head, hot tears still streaking her chubby cheeks.

"Miss Martin, I didn't do anything!" Gerard whined and the teacher shushed him with a glare over a shoulder.

Sharise released a couple of wet, convulsive hiccups then stuttered, "He said I didn't need to make a Mother's Day Card cause I don't have a mother!"

"Oh dear."

"But I do to have a mommy. She's just gone away for a while. I asked Daddy and he said I could give my card to him and he would make sure Mommy got it in heaven. So there." Sharise licked out her tongue at Gerard. Gerard reached around Miss Martin to punch her arm and Sharise kicked his shin with the tip of one of her oversized patent leather Mary Janes and made him howl right before Miss Martin broke them apart for the second time that day.

* * *

"Gerard cruised for that bruising," Sharise said now.

Ella chuckled. "And you certainly gave it to him."

And she had given it just as bad to Cayle Miller, Sharise thought and told herself he'd needed knocking down a peg or two. Granted he wasn't a bully brought in to hurt her--had only her best interests at heart--but he couldn't have been more dangerous to her piece of mind if he had been a vicious urban gang leader.

"What's wrong with you, girl? I thought you were tougher than this. Tougher than a Cayle Miller."

Sharise shrugged, used to Ella's mind-reading abilities.

She could have swum. She could have done the breaststroke, the butterfly stroke, and the flutter kick. She could have shown Mr. Miller exactly what Sharise Keller was made of.

How could she explain why she hadn't? How could she say she was tired? She was tired of proving herself, tired of being tough, tired of rebellion, tired of being lied to, tired of being told what to do, when to do and how to be. She was tired of trying to live up to the memory of a woman she had never known and--because of her--would never know.

Sharise remembered the first time she had asked about her mother and why she didn't have one like all the other kids she knew. She'd been three years old. And Daddy had lied to her, had told her that story about God needing another angel to help him with his good works so he had sent for Sharise's mommy, wanted her to assist him for a while in heaven.

"Is he going to send her back to us?"

"Reese..."

"Cause he's gotta let her come down for my next birthda-"

"We'll see, Sharise."

"I need her to come, Daddy. Please."

"We'll...we'll see what he says, sweet pea..."

Lies. All lies. How could he make allusions to something he could never deliver? An allusion or a "we'll see" was as good as a promise written in blood to a three-year-old.

And once her father had explained the facts to her and she had realized her mommy wasn't going to be away for a "while" but for "ever", Sharise had vowed never to believe or trust a thing anyone told her. Especially not anything her father told her.

If he'd said it was blue, she'd have to do research and check before she would agree with him. Even then she might not and still call it red. If he said right, she'd go left. Even to her detriment. It didn't matter. As long as her father thought it was bad or dangerous or "inadvisable" (his favorite word), Sharise was doing it.

When she turned twenty-two, she took her biggest step to oppose him, shutting out his "sound judgment" speeches and ignoring her own good sense to elope with the first guy who asked her nicely: Dwyer McMillan, a local grease monkey and aspiring writer.

Everything about him was sexy. His black T-shirts and Levi's that fit him like a second skin. His broody dark eyes set beneath lush black eyebrows. His full-lipped mouth that promised carnal pleasures.

Sharise fell into the romance of his darkness, his sensuality. She fell for the facade, blinded by his image of competence and strength. Blinded to the fact that he was a bum.

It took her the better part of two years--enduring Dwyer's paranoid-induced verbal abuse and his detached, rushed and rough attempts at lovemaking--before she came to the same glaring conclusions her father and Ella had reached years before: Dwyer McMillan was a ne'er-do-well wastrel, a high-maintenance man on the verge of chemical dependence, hiding his lack of sophistication, talent and purpose behind the idealistic "writer" title and a beautiful young woman of means.

Okay, so her father had been right about that one.

"You know he'll be back, don't you?" Ella asked, breaking into her memories.

Sharise frowned at her. "Dwyer?"

"Lordy, I swear your head must be up your heinie thereabouts..." Ella mumbled and shook her head. "What on God's green earth would make you bring up that no-count man?"

"Please, Ella. Don't remind me of what a fool I was."

"Well, can I remind you of what a fool you are?"

"I'm assuming you were talking about Cayle a few seconds ago?"

Ella nodded, her brown eyes twinkling. "He'll be back," she repeated, looking too pleased with herself.

"What makes you so sure?"

"You can pout and huff all you want, missy. Ain't gonna change fate."

"You've been looking into your crystal ball again?" Sharise chuckled, her first genuine display of amusement in a long while. Leave it to Ella to have brought it out.

Ella stood to go, pat Sharise's shoulder then squeezed. "I know men, chil'..." She headed for the French window, turned back one last time before leaving. "And that one there? That one will be back, sure 'nough."

Chapter Seven

Sharise was surprised when she heard the rhythmic squeak-boomp, squeak-boomp, squeak-boomp emanating from the gym. Even though she lived in a house with two workaholics who got up with the chickens, she would have never expected to hear activity coming from the gym, especially so early in the morning.

Come to think of it, who would be working out, besides her father? And she had just seen him--already clad in a shirt, tie and suit--in his office upstairs, poring over reams of client files. Tons and miles of paper.

What the man needed to do was get himself a computer and become user-friendly, Sharise told herself. She had been bugging him for the last several years to modernize, get online and join the Twenty-first Century. But the dinosaur would have none of it, shocked her with his very illogical and unbusinesslike logic.

"Clients like the personal touch," he often reasoned. "I've made it this far successfully. Why should I change now?"

The personal touch was nice, but clients, the always-right-customer, also liked to have their wants and desires met with lightning speed and super efficiency, both of which could be provided by a good PC, the right software and change.

Hell, Sharise thought, it wasn't like it was a financial issue. Her dad could easily afford a top-of-the-line system with all the peripherals. It was just a matter of showing him the need, making him want to invest the time to set one up.

Maybe a consultant? She'd have to throw this one at him.

Sharise stopped her ruminating as she neared the gym, realized there was someone working out in there.

Her father couldn't have made it down here and changed into the appropriate gear that quickly. And the idea of him working up a sweat in his dressed-for-success uniform elicited a giggle from her gut. It was almost as funny as the idea of sixty-plus Ella flipping around on the parallel bars in one of her calico aprons.

Warily, Sharise turned the corner, peeked around the gym entrance and gasped when she was met with a sight almost as surprising as her previous imaginings. But not quite. She had half-expected something like this, especially after listening to Madam-Seer Ella the other day.

Sharise held her breath, transfixed as she watched Cayle Miller, suspended above the parallel bars for an endless moment, easily holding a handstand. His form, the perfect straight line of his body, fascinated her.

Cayle pivoted suddenly--almost as if he knew he had an audience--twisting his body at an impossible angle as he prepared for his dismount. He swung through the bars, building momentum until, on his third revolution, he flung his body high over the bars. He tucked his knees close to his chest and rotated in the air twice before gracefully pinning his landing on the mat and raising his arms over his head as if in triumph.

Sharise impulsively whistled through her teeth and clapped her hands, splitting the silence with her appreciation.

Cayle jerked his head in her direction, watched as she

wheeled herself over. "I didn't know I had an audience," he drawled.

Sharise parked her chair adjacent the bars and Cayle grabbed a towel from the handles of a nearby bike to pat dry his face.

"I didn't know you were such an athlete," Sharise commented, openly amazed and glad she had lucked up on the display.

"I'm not really. I used to play around with gymnastics when I was in junior high," he said, sat astride the bike, leaned his forearms on the handlebars as he stared at Sharise.

"Well, for someone who played with it, you're pretty good."

Cayle arched a brow, surprised by her praise. "Think so?"

"Definitely. How come you never pursued it?"

She actually seemed interested, but Cayle shrugged, downplaying. "It was just a hobby. Something to do for fun."

Sharise nodded as if she understood.

"Actually, my brother was the star athlete of the family. Three-letter man in high school. Captain of the football team. The whole nine." Cayle paused, glanced at her open face. Her eyes coaxed him. "I wanted to be just like him." He shrugged again, draped the towel around his neck. "Didn't quite have what it took."

"That's a load of crap. You've got more than what it takes."

"I do okay." He stared at her. Keller's messages reverberated in his head. He wanted to ask Sharise how she'd been getting along since he'd quit. He wanted to ask her why her father was under the impression she was a basket case. He wanted to ask her why she had wanted to die.

But Sharise leaned forward in her chair, elbows on her thighs, chin in her cupped palms as she peered up at Cayle with those soulful slate eyes. All thoughts of Keller, of death and defeat, flew out of his mind. "What?" he asked, dazed.

"I asked, what made you come back? Certainly not me," she joked, throwing him more off-balance.

Cayle chuckled, shook his head. "I never did have the good sense God gave a dog to come in out of the rain."

Sharise laughed, still staring at him.

"I wanted to make sure you were all right," he whispered.

Sharise reached out to squeeze one of his knees. "I am."

She left it at this and so did Cayle. If she didn't want to talk about it, he wouldn't push her. Not now anyway.

"What made you become a PT?" she blurted and Cayle groaned, covered his eyes with his hands.

"So it's not an original question."

He looked at her, silent.

"Okay, it's a lousy cliché but so? I wanna know. What got you into it?"

"My reasons might seem as much of a cliché as your question."

"Let's here 'em."

"Well, like you, I was in a motorcycle accident."

Sharise goggled. "You've ridden a motorcycle?"

"I wasn't always the goody-two-shoes you seem to think I am.

Yes, I owned and rode a motorcycle."

"When I woke up in the hospital after the spill," Sharise said, "the doctors told me I was lucky to be alive, that I should count my blessings I had survived. Said they didn't call bikes 'donor-cycles' for nothing."

Cayle nodded, had heard similar after his own wipeout. "I used to hang with these bikers. Had all the Harley gear. Jacket, boots, hog, tattoo, the whole sheba-"

"Tattoo!" Sharise sat up arched her brows. "Where?"

"Never you mind. Are you going to let me finish my tale?"

"Sure. But we will get back to it. The tattoo."

Cayle rolled his eyes. "Anyway, I thought I was pretty hot stuff back then. Out on my own, hanging with the cool chopper dudes. I was a regular Marlon Brando. Until one day I wiped out under a tractor trailer, dragging against another biker."

"Whoa..." Sharise whistled.

"I was lucky. The other guy wasn't. He got killed."

"How awful," Sharise stated and he looked at her gaping at him, suddenly wondered about Keller's thorough background check, wondered how it had missed this little bit of his past. Or, had the old man found out and decided to ignore it and entrust the care of his daughter to a more-than-qualified physical therapist who just happened to be a former roughneck?

"Pretty awful," Cayle agreed. "But look what I came away with."

"Brain damage?" Sharise joked; surprised she could after his story.

"No, smarty." Cayle chuckled. "I got a wonderful career in an ever-growing field of medicine."

"How so?"

"The PT who nursed and worked me back to health. I fought and cursed him tooth and nail..." He left out "the way you did me". Cayle didn't want to antagonize her when things were going so smoothly. He shrugged. "It wasn't that my injuries were all that bad. Miraculously, I'd only suffered a fractured fibula and tibia. But I still required some rehab to strengthen my legs, get them back to form. And my PT helped me do this."

"I admired him for getting me back on my feet despite all the negative energy I threw at him. I admired his patience and ability to put up with my steady hostility."

He would have added that his stint with the physical therapist had only been the beginning of his "rehab". There'd been months of twelve-step--AA and NA--programs, meetings, pep talks from his sponsor when Cayle had thought he was losing his edge and on the verge of backsliding. Until finally he'd been ready to take the step and go back to school for a degree, focus on sports injuries and sports medicine.

But he didn't want to get into all this with her, not now.

"And that's how a PT was born?" Sharise prompted when he didn't continue.

"It was something to do. And I needed a job." Cayle grinned, downplaying his accomplishments.

"Your parents must be proud."

Cayle shrugged.

Sharise noticed the grimace playing across his features and skipped to another subject. "So, how did a small town country boy like you wind up in the big ol' wicked city?"

He raised his brows and grinned. "Ella told you."

"Climax, Alabamee!" Sharise drawled and laughed.

"Ha-ha. I took a lot of ribbing for that when I first came to New York."

"I can imagine. And for those sexy eyes." She was only half-teasing. She thought his eyes were incredibly sexy.

"Yeah, that too," Cayle admitted. "Growing up was the worst. Kids can be real cruel."

"Tell me about it."

"But my brother had my back, always came to my rescue when I needed him to. I nicknamed him 'Roger'."

"Roger?"

"For Roger Moore. You know. The Saint."

"Oh. Clever. Real cute."

"We thought so. We were kids. Everything's clever and cute when you're a kid."

"I guess so."

"I was a scrawny boy coming up. Had asthma, wore leg braces for several years..."

Sharise arched a brow, surprised.

This specimen of excellent physical conditioning? This Adonis who had just finished a routine on the bars that would have made Kurt Thomas genuflect in awe? This guy with a body that could make a girl scream out his name? Scrawny? Asthmatic?

"...kids used to call me 'Gimpy', 'Wheezer'. You name it."

"How mean."

"One day a group of boys had jumped me on the way home from school. Caught me out there by myself. Zach was home sick with the Measles. Otherwise, he would've been with me."

"What happened?"

"Got my a...tail whipped bad. Two of 'em held me down while the other slugged away. Just barely made it home before I had a full-fledged attack."

Sharise gaped.

"I know. Sounds pretty bad. But Rem...my pop wasn't having any crybaby stuff. He said he didn't care how many of them there'd been. I shoulda picked up a bottle, a stick, anything and started swinging on the leader. 'Kill the head, the tail's gotta die' was his motto."

"Your father's from the streets. New York?"

"Hell's Kitchen, born and raised. Used to run with a gang. Did time in reform school, the whole shebang. Went into the military to keep from going to jail. Got straightened out but he was still a tough guy. And he wasn't for weakness. Told me he wasn't raising no punks."

"But you were just a kid."

Cayle nodded. "Didn't matter none, though. Remy said I had to learn to stand up for myself."

"Don't tell me. He gave you boxing lessons."

"He would have, but my mama put her foot down. Said I was too little to be taking up that type of violence."

Sharise smiled at how strong his twang had become in the last half-hour of his nostalgic waxing.

"Zach caught me alone, grilled me about who the boys were. I told 'im some fifth graders who went to school with 'im. He knew all of 'em. But I didn't think nothin' 'bout it 'til the next week when the boys showed up at my house during supper, all three of 'em sporting busted noses and black eyes. They apologized for working me over. Seems Zach had gotten out of his sick bed to take a pipe to 'em. But he let Remy believe I had gotten to 'em."

"No wonder he's your saint."

"Next best thing to my own personal body guard."

Sharise chuckled. "I bet you two were a handful coming up."

"We raised our share of hell."

Sharise was sure this was only half of the story, wondered about the rest. "Tell me more about him," she said.

Cayle looked at her.

"Roger."

He grinned, but Sharise saw the wariness in his eyes. She put a palm on his thigh. "Is he still in Climax?"

"No. He's here, in New York with my mama."

"Oh. Well, that's good. You're not up here all alone."

He nodded, would volunteer no more.

"So..." Sharise paused, tried again. "He still into sports? Don't tell me he's in the NFL and I've been missing hi-"

"He got popped in a high school game. Never got up. He's in a chair now...like you, Reese." Cayle peered at her. "Only he's not going to walk again. He...he wasn't as lucky as you and me."

She blinked several times, sat back in her chair. "I...I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"How could you?" Cayle took her hand, gently squeezed. "Don't worry about it."

She looked at him for a long moment then nodded.

Cayle quickly changed the subject. "So, what's on the agenda now that I'm back?"

"You mean you didn't come out for a friendly visit?"

"No ma'am. 'fraid not."

"Darn!" She snapped her fingers. "Here I was thinking you'd been lured back by my haunting charming personality and all you have on your one-track mind is work, work-"

"Is never done."

Sharise laughed, strangely comfortable in his company now after what he had just shared with her. She grinned at him, ready to make a deal but he beat her to the punch as usual.

"Let's do it like this." Cayle climbed off the bike, draped his towel around Sharise's neck, hunkered down in front of her chair. "We'll start this afternoo-"

"Tomorrow. Bright and early."

He arched a brow. "Tomorrow? Not next week? Not two weeks from now or next month?"

Sharise shook her head. "I really mean it. Tomorrow."

Cayle smiled. "Great. Tomorrow."

Sharise quickly put up a hand, raised her eyebrows in a warning. "I didn't say it was going to be easy, Mr. Miller."

"I didn't think it would be."

"Good."

"I can handle whatever it is you throw at me"

"So can I."

"You hope." Cayle grinned like a cat. "Any other storm warnings?"

"Nope."

"No other strings?"

"Well..."

"Uh-huh. I knew there was a catch."

"I just want to see your tattoo."

"That's all?"

"You mean it's not an old flame's name stamped on one of those really secret, naughty places?" Sharise teased, ogling the T-shirt clinging to his well-muscled chest.

"Not in the least." Cayle chuckled.

"That's no fun."

"Too late. You already made a deal."

"And so did you," Sharise murmured and when he tried to stand, tossed the towel around his neck, fisted each end and

pulled him forward.

"Sharise..."

"Hmm?"

She was too close and this was so wrong, Cayle thought. He could feel her breath on his eyelids. His instincts took over as she lowered her face further. He angled his head. She closed her mouth over his and he shut his eyes, pulled each of her lips in. Licked them, nibbled them. Tasted her. So sweet. So dizzying.

Sharise explored his mouth with her tongue, tentative at first then more boldly, almost tipping out of her chair before he reached out, eased her back against her seat. He felt himself harden behind his jeans when his knuckles brushed a nipple and she groaned against his mouth.

"Reese?" He pulled away his head, tried to stand but she held the towel firm. Cayle finally gripped her wrists, pried the towel out of her fists and stood to glance down at her.

She looked up at him, eyes glossy and enigmatic.

Desire or triumph? He wondered, afraid of either and both.

"Tomorrow," he rasped then cleared his throat. "Bright and early."

"Bright and early," she repeated.

-

[Chapter Eight](#)

"Cayle? Cayle, are you awake?"

Distantly, he heard her, felt a beam of light from the hallway slash across his face as she cracked open the door. He groaned, pulled the covers over his head.

"Cayle? Get up. It's six o'clock."

Six o'clock? And? What the hell was she doing interrupting his beauty rest when he had only fallen asleep an hour ago? Damn, he hadn't felt this bad since his Jim Bean days.

He'd tossed and turned for hours last night, drunk on another chemical besides alcohol: adrenaline. He'd finally given in to exhaustion near dawn.

And here in the tiny annoying flesh, merciless and wicked, was the auburn-haired succubus at the root of his insomnia.

"Cayle?" She tapped his shoulder then reached for the comforter. She tugged and he burrowed deeper. Sharise sighed, tried again, to no avail. "Well, if you're going to be so stubborn about it..." She wheeled herself back towards the door, stopped when she heard him mumble into his pillow.

"What was that you just said to me?" Sharise whirled, headed back. It had sounded like he'd said "What a bitch". Okay, granted, she had been at her bitchiest with him before. But what gave him the right to keep throwing it in her face?

Cayle flung the covers off his head, sat up and met her glare with his own. "I said, how rich. Now you're finally eager and ready to work when I'm wiped-out."

"And why, pray tell, are you wiped-out? Late night partying? Sneaked in a girl after curfew?"

"I wish."

"Well, you said early."

"Not this early. The sun's barely up."

"When do you want to start, Cayle? We have to eat and I'm sure I can't do what you have in mind on a full stomach. We need time to settle, digest-"

"All right, all right." He lurched from the bed, stumbled past her to the bathroom and banged the door closed.

Sharise listened as he ran the shower, sat back in her chair and smiled, pleased with herself. She didn't know what it was, but there was something about him that made her want to get under his skin, although this hadn't been her original intention when she'd barged in. She'd only been anxious to start.

And see him, vulnerable and tousled from sleep.

She closed her eyes, shook her head against the images.

That kiss, she thought. That had been meant to get to him too. Show him who was boss, knock him off-kilter. What it had accomplished was the opposite. She'd unsettled herself.

Sharise took a deep breath, opened her eyes. She could handle this, she told herself. She could handle him. She'd done it once. He wasn't so tough. He wasn't God's gift sent to save her. She didn't need him that urgently.

The water stopped running and Cayle emerged from the bathroom, hair and torso wet from his shower, a white terry bath towel hanging low on his hips.

He came up short and goggled when he saw her still sitting by the bed and Sharise half-expected him to run back into the bathroom and hide.

"Do you mind?"

"Not at all." She folded her arms across her chest, leered at him and he instantly flushed.

"You're gonna have to get outta here." Cayle warily maneuvered around her chair to the room's chest of drawers. He glanced at her over a shoulder. "Do you mind?"

"Don't be modest. I've seen it all before."

He turned to her, leaned back against the dresser and arched a brow.

"How old are you?" she blurted.

"Not that it's any business of yours, but I'm twenty-eight."

"Hmm, I wasn't too far off the mark. I had guessed a couple of years younger than me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm twenty-nine."

"I'm shocked you'd admit that. Most women wouldn't."

"I'm not most women."

Cayle was coming to realize this more and more every day.

Wearily, he raked a hand through his damp hair. "What's your point, Sharise?"

"My point..." She licked her lips, rolled her chair forward, stopping an inch in front of him. She glanced up at his face and smiled. "My point, Mr. Miller, is that I'm not a kid. I've been around. I know about male and female anatomy and all the other stuff we're going to be doing. Exercise, workou--"

"Therapeutic. Not recreational."

"Why can't it be both?"

Cayle sighed, turned away from her to search the drawers for something to throw on. He didn't know what her game was, but he knew he would have to put a stop to it here and now. He turned back, stared at her. "Look Sharise, let's keep this strictly professional. Okay?"

"Of course."

He peered at her, doubtful, didn't trust himself to speak.

Sharise saved him from answering, spun around in her chair and glided to the door. She turned back at the threshold smiling wickedly. "You're a story teller, Mr. Miller."

He arched a brow. "Beg pardon?"

"You said your tattoo wasn't in a naughty place. But since I don't see it anywhere on your beautifully muscled torso or those long legs peeking from that towel, I have to assume otherwise." She waited for her meaning to sink in, watched him deeply flush before she pivoted to leave. "See you downstairs for breakfast."

* * *

The woman was a menace to his senses. Maddeningly schizo. Since their fist meeting weeks ago she had changed her faces more times than Sybil, alternately going from mutinous brat--kicking and screaming like a child who didn't want to take a nap--to sniping bitch on a search-and-destroy mission; from a submissive

quitter feeling sorry for herself, to a tough sparring partner who could have put Remy to shame; from a lunatic bent on suicide, to purring siren prone to seduction; from captive audience for his childhood woes, to playful tease with her witty black-and-blue humor.

From minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour, Cayle didn't know what face she would have on. And he didn't trust her.

Forget that she had been a sympathetic confidante yesterday, had, for the first time since he'd met her, shown real regard for someone other than herself. Cayle had seen her change too often, knew that she could switch her moods faster than a pickpocket could steal a wallet.

The woman was dangerous, he thought and more hazardous than a golfer's sandtrap.

"Ow!"

Cayle glanced down at Sharise as she lay face-up on the mat before him.

"Take it easy, Miller. It's just the third day. And those legs you're pushing against are attached to a living body, not a Barbie Doll."

"Sorry." He relaxed his grip on her feet, eased her legs flat on the mat. "That's enough for now."

Sharise sat up. "Already?"

Cayle didn't answer, reached for a towel draped over a bike handlebar. He tossed it to her and she grabbed it from the air, pat dry her face. "You've worked up enough of a sweat."

"The way you were talking before, I expected the rack, tote that barge, lift that bale."

"That's coming." He grinned.

"Whips and chains."

"That t-" He stared at her. "What?"

"Whips and chains. For the slave driving."

"I'm not a slave driver."

"What was all that earlier talk about isometric exercise and felde...felden-"

"Feldenkrais method. It's a trademark system of exploration and adjustment of movement patterns for flexibility, coordination and dynamic posture," he recited.

Sharise raised her brow. "Mmm. Impressive. And it sounds...exciting," she murmured.

"About as exciting as isometric exercise," Cayle said, ignoring her innuendo. "Which, I might add, we've been doing for the last couple of days. And the last hour."

"Really? It doesn't seem as bad as you made it sound."

"You're in a little better shape than I first thought."

"Thanks for throwing the dog a bone." She scowled.

Cayle smiled. "What I mean is, I didn't want to overwork you your first week. It may seem easy now, but we really haven't gotten to the good stuff included in isometrics and the Feldenkrais method. Paschimottanassana-"

"Whoa." Sharise grimaced, put up a palm as if in a "Stop" sign. "Say again, Kemosabe."

Cayle grinned at her bewildered expression, forgot how dangerous she was and straddled her thighs. "It's like this." He put his hands on her shoulders, piloted her back against the mat.

"Be gentle with me, big boy."

He chuckled at her Mae West imitation, playfully slapped her thigh. "Hush that and be serious."

"Yes sir."

"Now, come up."

"Like I'm doing a sit-up?"

"Exactly. But you're not going to stop at a sit-up."

She frowned at the high Tiepolo ceiling and did as he instructed.

"Keep your legs straight." He held her knees.

"All right, all right." She sat up, stared at him.

"Don't stop. Keep going."

"Go where?"

"Here." He crawled behind her, put his palms on her back and pressed her forward.

"Hey!"

"Go forward until your forehead touches your knees."

"You want me to fold my body?"

"Exactly. C'mon, you used to dance. I'm sure you did something like this in-"

"Dance. I wasn't a contortionist," Sharise grumbled but complied, finding it harder and harder to breathe as she bent.

"Good. You've got it. Now hold it."

"Hold it?" It came out muffled against her thighs. She felt Cayle move back around to her front, refused to change her position. If he thought she could do this, that it was so easy, hell, she'd do the best pashi-whatever that had ever been done.

"Good. You're doing great."

"How much longer?"

"A few more seconds," he lied. She'd been holding the position for a full minute already. And this was a difficult stretch but perfect to work out the kinks in her underused hamstrings. Let her do another min--

"How much longer?"

Cayle looked at his watch. Two minutes. She'd had enough. She'd done good. "Okay, you can--"

Sharise began to unfold.

"Easy. You don't want to reverse everything you've just accomplished. Come up slow, slow...like a flower opening."

Sharise shot up huffing and glaring at him. "How poetic and romantic you are."

"I just want to make sure you don't wreck yourself. You should never come out of a stretch suddenly. Eeease out."

"How considerate of you."

"That's the kinda guy I am." Cayle took the towel from around her neck, gently wiped dry her face as she peered at him. "There. Now that was Paschimottanassana."

"God bless you."

Cayle laughed, slung the towel back around her neck. "Great hamstring stretch."

"I feel it. And I'm sure I'll feel it tomorrow even more."

"No pain, no gain."

"Speak for yourself."

Cayle continued as if she hadn't spoken. "A poor warm-up and inflexibility can lead to hamstring muscle strain. And after that it's a chainlike reaction towards tightening of all posterior muscles--neck, back, and calves and--"

"Please, no more words of doom, Nostradamus."

"It pays to be prepared, get to know your body and make it your friend. It'll never betray you if you treat it right." Cayle paused, saw the sly grin creeping up her face. "What?"

"Are you sure you're just talking about bodies?"

"What else?"

She wanted to ask him who in his life had betrayed him, who had hurt him, but finally decided against it. Instead, she reached for her chair.

Cayle was quicker, bounded to his feet, rolled it to her side and put on the brakes. "Your chariot, ma'am." He extended a hand but Sharise refused his help, inched around until she had positioned her back against the edge of the seat. She reached behind her, gripped each side of the chair, hoisted herself up into the seat and collapsed against the back with a loud groan.

"Now if we can get the quads and hamstrings working like your bi- and triceps, we'll be all set," Cayle commented.

Sharise made a muscle. "You like?"

Cayle looked at her, smiled and thought of Zach.

"Come. Feel it."

"Always room for improvement."

Her face fell. "Of course. And I'm sure you're the one who can improve it. The only one. Like I didn't get this far without your help."

"Sharise-"

"This may come as a surprise to you, but I did have some rehab before I met the Mighty Miller. You're not the only rehab therapist around. In fact, you're just the clean-up crew."

"I didn't mean it the way you're taking it."

She gripped the wheels on her chair, turned and aimed herself at the exit.

"Reese-"

She whirled on him, nostrils flaring. "Is there anything more for now? Any pashiwhateverhell or feldemajig?"

Cayle silently gaped at her.

"I'm going to lunch. Just hope I can make it to the kitchen without the master's help."

* * *

"Oh my Lord, they's at it again," Ella muttered when she heard the shouts rising from the bowels of the house as the elevator climbed from the exercise room.

She took away one of the three settings at the table. She didn't know which one would be barging into the room any second now, but definitely there would only be two for lunch: her and

one of them hotheaded youngins.

Mr. Keller was out tracking some unique piece.

He would be spared this treat, Ella thought. Lucky him.

Sharise scooted into the dining room, looked like a paraplegic Speed Racer as she skidded to a stop half-an-inch from Ella's toes.

Lord, this dining area was a dangerous place to be after one of their workout sessions. Obviously, they weren't working out nearly enough or they wouldn't have had so much negative energy left over for bickering.

Ella just wondered what had started those two up this time. Didn't take much. Just put them in the same space for longer than five minutes and countdown.

"Sorry El-"

'Sharise!' Cayle stopped on the threshold and took in Ella and Sharise in the middle of the dining room.

Ella rolled her eyes, shook her head and went back to the china closet. Lord have mercy! She set the third place again.

"None for me, Ella," Cayle muttered.

Ella stopped in the middle of the floor, glared at him, put a hand on a hip. "Now look here you two..."

"Don't not eat on my account," Sharise said.

"For your info, I'm not hungry."

"Why not? We worked up quite an appetite in there. Worked up quite a sweat," she purred.

Cayle stared at her, his anger slowly building to meet hers.

How dare she make insinuations in front of Ella, bringing his professional ethics into question! He'd had enough of that from her father. Unwarranted. He didn't take it lying down from Keller and he wouldn't take it lying down from his daughter either. "Now you look here, Sharise..."

"You know Ella, Daddy did a great thing bringing this young man here. He's a legend. In his own mind."

Ella groaned.

"He might even be related to us by default. I think I detect a definite hint of Helen Keller's teacher walking among us mere mortals," Sharise sniped.

Cayle took a step towards her and froze when she trained her chair at him. "Shari-"

"Don't come a step closer. I'll run you down."

"Lord..." Ella shook her head. "Now I've had about enough of you two's foolishness. I've seen better behaved chimpanzees in the zoo."

"It's not me, it's h-"

"Hush!" Ella stopped their chorus with her shout, clapped her hands over her head and glared at them. "You howl and claw at each other like wild animals in heat and I'm sick of it. Now, you're both gonna start acting like civilized human beings and we're all gonna have a nice peaceful meal."

It would be a first, Ella thought. She hadn't seen the two together in the kitchen for more than ten minutes. Sharise made it a point to eat most of her meals in her room--out on the

verandah, or any other area of the house where Cayle was not. And it seemed Cayle couldn't have been happier with not seeing her face over his toast and juice; boy seemed to heave a sigh of relief whenever he realized Sharise wouldn't be joining them for one meal or another.

In fact the only time they were together for any considerable length of time was in that doggone gym and when that happened, look out, Ella thought. Cause there was going to be violence, sudden as a stitch in a side.

Ella stared at the pair now, their passion whirring around her like lightning bugs on a hot summer night in the country, their air rank with hankerings. If they'd been her cats, she'd have had a good mind to send them off to the vet for a fixing before they could get into anymore trouble.

Lordy...two blind fools, is what they are.

"Sit!" Ella pointed each of them to a chair, waited--it must have been--a good fifteen seconds before either of them made a move to obey. Standing there staring each other down and looking like Lee Van Cleef and Clint Eastwood!

Ella shook her head again as Cayle took a seat at one end of the table and Sharise took a seat at the other.

That did it. Now she was really mad!

Ella slammed down forks and spoons, overturned empty glasses as she bumped an ample hip into the table on her way to the fridge, unmindful of Cayle and Sharise staring at her as she went on a rare tirade.

"...young folks just don't know what they want..." She came back to the table and slammed a pitcher of homemade lemonade onto the table. Some of it sloshed Cayle and he stood to wipe at his sweat pants. "You sit rat back down there, you here me boy!"

He plopped into his chair, warily looked at Ella over a shoulder as she headed back to the fridge. "Ella..."

"...don't know what's good for 'em. Want everything quick and perfect." She banged the refrigerator door shut with a foot and slung a bowl of tossed garden salad onto the table. Sharise caught the crystal before it could crash to the floor, placed it in the middle of the table.

Ella was already back in the fridge, hunkered down and searching the shelves for something else. "That's what's wrong with the world today. Why we got wars all over the world. Folks ain't got no patience. Don't know how to get along. Husbands beatin' and killing wives. Wives settin' fire to they men and cuttin' off they little weenies. Kids shootin' each other down in the street..." She found what she was looking for, went back to the table and clapped down a plate of fresh sliced turkey breast and a bottle of blue cheese dressing beside the salad then stalked back to the fridge without missing a beat. "Doin' drugs, zonin' out on video games and in cyberspace. Babies having babies. Babies throwing out babies like garbage and waste. Everybody wants instant gratification, instant everything. Don't nobody got no patience! Don't wanna sit down and communicate no more. Y'all is crazy. Alla ya youngins is just plain crazy!"

Ella set a saucer of Cracker Barrel sharp cheddar on the table, took a seat between the dumfounded pair then glared at them in turn. "Now if'n I hears another swipe or negative word coming out nare one a ya mouths, I'ma take a switch from one a them trees out yonder and tan ya tails. Understand me?"

Sharise stopped gaping long enough to quickly bob her head up and down.

Cayle choked back a snicker, immediately covered his mouth with a palm when he looked into Ella's eyes and saw she meant business and was just a step away from

committing the violence she'd threatened. And since he didn't want to risk getting the worst whipping he'd had since he'd been thirteen, he quickly nodded too.

"I thought so." Ella nodded once, satisfied with their compliance. "Now please pass me that pepper over yonder."

Cayle and Sharise each eagerly reached for the black marble shaker but Cayle got to it first, handed it to Ella lickety-split. "Here ya go, ma'am."

Ella peppered her salad and no one said a word for the rest of the meal.

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[Chapter Nine](#)

Ella's outburst yesterday had been so sudden and total Cayle had felt like he'd witnessed someone who'd been caught in the grips of the Holy Spirit. He'd seen enough old women caught like this in his mama's Baptist church back in Climax, enough to recognize the symptoms in someone else, enough to scare him for a lifetime.

Cayle didn't know exactly what it was that had set Ella off, only knew that her reaction had scared him enough to make him take a harder closer look at his relationship with Sharise--such as it was.

The woman was making him crazy and reckless, irrational and emotional. Making him revert to behavior he had left behind with his booze and drug days.

He hadn't been as ambivalent and passionate in a relationship with a woman since his brother's girlfriend.

He'd been brash, callous, wham-bam. He'd had premeditated one-night-stands with beautiful Ms. Right-Nows because he'd needed to scratch an itch. But he hadn't cared, hadn't cared to care, in a long time. Not since the young woman who'd claimed to love his brother but had lusted after him and had him running behind her with his tongue dragging along the floor.

Breanna Walker.

He never wanted to want another woman so much again. He never wanted to need or love like that again. He never wanted to be so out of control with someone else the master of his emotions. Never again. He couldn't chance it. The trip back to earth and reality was too painful and bumpy and treacherous.

He didn't know if these new developments with Sharise were a good or bad thing. He just knew he didn't want to deal with them, didn't like the idea that he might have to.

He needed to put a stop to the situation before something worse than yesterday's episode blew up. Before someone really got hurt.

God, she was the most volatile woman he'd ever met!

Communicate? Cayle thought. With Sharise Keller? Ha! When they did "communicate" in a civil manner, somehow somewhere it degenerated into sexual innuendo or outright violence. How was he supposed to deal with someone so unbalanced? Someone so bent on being unreasonable?

He wouldn't quit. He'd gone this route before, had let her drive him away. He wouldn't let her do it again.

* * *

Cayle peeked around the dining room wall, hands folded behind his back. "Ella?"

She looked up from cleaning away the last of the breakfast dishes. "Don't you come in here looking like you done just tracked mud on my shiny kitchen floor, Gloomy Gus."

He grinned, took one step over the threshold as if he were playing Mother May I. "Okay to approach?"

Ella laughed. "Get in here, boy." She waved him over as she took a seat at the table.

Cayle strolled over, took the seat opposite Ella and gave her a long searching look. "Are you okay?"

"Chil', I'm fine. Don't mind that blow-up yesterday. I...I had some things on m' mind."

"Anything you wanna talk about?"

Ella reached out to pat his hand on the tabletop. "Nothin' you can help me with."

"I'm a good listener. Sometimes that helps."

She sighed. "My boy and his wife...they're...they're gettin' a divorce."

"I'm...I'm sorry, Ella." He felt impotent, wanted to say something, anything more soothing and constructive.

Ella smiled at his confusion. "People usually don't know what to say when you tell 'em somethin' like this. I think we as human beings take news of death better than news of illness or...somethin' like this. At least with death there's closure. No more pain, no more problems. But illness? Could be long or short sufferin'. And divorce? It can be a beginnin' to sufferin', not always an end to it."

Cayle sat quiet as a mourner, felt like she'd just hit him in the chest with a two-by-four, wanted only to ease her pain or run away from the sadness in her dark-brown eyes if he couldn't.

Ella patted his hand again. "Didn't mean to make you so fretful." She smiled. "Actually, I don't know why I'm takin' it so hard. You'd think I was one of their kids."

"Are there? Kids?"

"Two girls. Grown women, really. Twenty-five and twenty-three. They're takin' it better than me."

"Divorce is never easy on anyone."

"I know. Like I said, it's only the beginnin'...I just hates to see two people I love and care about at odds with each other. It hurts m' heart." She fixed him with a look and Cayle fidgeted in his seat, ducked his head.

"Yeah, well..."

Ella chuckled and gently squeezed his fingers. "There's one thing a body can say about you two. Y'all are sure an entertainin' pair to watch in action. Almost as good as George and Gracie...."

* * *

Sharise sat just outside the dining room listening to the musical lilt of Ella's voice raised in laughter. She let out the breath she had been holding, hadn't known what to expect from her long-time nanny and friend.

Yesterday had badly shaken her. She'd never seen Ella so out of control. So...much like her.

What's wrong with me? Sharise suddenly wondered. Why did I behave like that yesterday?

She'd thrown herself at him, had made herself as accessible as a prostitute plying her trade, had acted like a slut and a floozy. And when he hadn't risen to her lure, she'd backslid to her former self: Sharise Keller The Bitch.

What was wrong with her?

She had never let a man affect her this way, get under her skin, infiltrate her senses, her waking moments as well as sleeping. Reviving senses other than motor. Renewing feelings she'd believed unreachable, long extinct.

She hadn't felt this alive since she'd left Scott for Dwyer.

Sharise smiled now. Scott had been sweet, but on the dispassionate side. Ella had once described him as "nice but a bit of a cold fish."

Most people who met Scott came away with similar impressions but Sharise knew otherwise. He wasn't cold. He just didn't share things easily, detached himself from situations like a zipout lining.

Sharise had never been able to let go with him, had never been able to make him let go. And God knows she had tried. Hell, he wasn't even ticklish! And, worst of all, and as sincere as his feelings for her had been, he'd never been able to do anything for her. Sexually. There'd never been any heat between them. Not like there had been between her and Dwyer. Not like there was between her and Cayle.

They had been getting along so well together, Sharise told herself. She had felt so close to him the day when he had talked about his childhood and his brother, Zach. She had been making such progress. And then he'd thrown that let's-keep-this-professional speech at her.

Professional, when they were around each other for hours on end like a couple?
Professional, when he was bending and manhandling her limbs by day as if she were Playdough, and stirring her by night with a memory of his laugh and smile? Professional, when he was nightly invading her dreams like a demon lover that she had never had the pleasure of touching?

He was all business during their workouts. His maneuvers quick and sure. His kneadings efficient and aberrantly impersonal. It was all she could do not to punch and scream at him--I'm here, look at me!

How could he not be as affected by her as she was by him?

She didn't know which was more maddening. The knowledge that someone was neatly rejecting her--someone she would have thought beneath her months ago--or the idea that she was not in control of the situation, couldn't make him bend to her will the way she had with so many other men in her life.... Except her father.

Cayle's low chuckle drifted out into the hall and Sharise's heart lurched. She took another deep breath. Facing those two peas was not going to be easy. She needed to do it while she still had some nerves in tact and before she chickened out.

She turned the corner, looking more contrite and sheepish than Cayle had just minutes before her.

Both Cayle and Ella turned to her, their smiles instantly fading and making Sharise feel about as welcome as salt to an open wound. Talk about a wet blanket.

"Did I interrupt something?" she muttered.

Ella arched a brow. "Just clearin' up the breakfast dishes."

Cayle leapt to his feet and stretched. "I have to go make a phone call." He walked by Sharise without acknowledging her.

She guessed she couldn't blame him for his meanness, but....

"'bout what time you kids supposed to start today?" Ella asked, searching for something neutral to say.

Sharise shrugged. "We usually meet up around nine, work for a couple of hours. But I don't know what his plans are today." She shrugged again, turned her chair. "I guess I'll go wait for him in the gym."

Ella shook her head as Sharise wheeled herself away like a morose child.

Blind youngins.

* * *

"Hey, bro! How's everything?" Cayle asked.

"What's wrong now?"

"Who said there's anything wrong?"

"That's the only time you call, Cayle. When something in your life is going wrong."

Cayle gaped, hurt by the sweeping generalization. He hadn't thought that this was what he'd been doing, didn't think himself capable of such selfishness. Not anymore.

Zach's voice filled the quiet, contrite and weary. "Cayle, I'm...look, I'm sorry I jumped on you like that. Guess I'm a little tired."

"That all it is? You're feeling okay, otherwise?"

Zach had been in the chair a long time and he had been such an athletic and vital young man before he'd been paralyzed. Cayle worried about how the reversal affected him, worried about the mental and physical maladies that could beset a paraplegic. Depression. Hopelessness. And a whole host of other things he didn't even want to associate with his brother. Wouldn't.

"I'm okay. Just tired, like I said."

Cayle sighed, ambivalent about changing the subject but wanting to ask about their mom. "So...um...how's Mom's job search? Or has everything settled down at her company?"

"Things are coming to a head-"

"They're letting her go?"

"Not quite. At least nothing's definite."

Cayle hated the suspense and being jerked around. But he was sure his mother hated it even more. "Is there any good news?"

"Actually, there is. One company has shown some serious interest. Mom's been on an interview already. It's some new technology consulting firm. The founder and president is some young, Bill Gates type whiz ki-"

"Zach."

"Sorry. It's just that Mom's so excited and I guess it's rubbing off on me."

"So, what's the name of this big deal company?"

"Slater Software Consultants. They're real hot right now."

"I've heard about them."

"Mom's got another interview in a week for Technology Analyst. She'll be flexing her muscle drawing up specialized software programs."

"Does she want this?"

"Cayle, it's double her current salary with excellent benefits. Mom said she's almost glad about the downsizing at her current firm. And if she gets this new gig..."

"You sound excited." Cayle smiled against the receiver.

"I'm excited for her. She's been so positive and optimistic lately. It's like this company wanting her, at her age, has validated her, opened her eyes to her own worth in the industry. It's given her a new outlook."

Cayle had felt the same after he had endured arduous years of college and, shortly after completing his training requirements for licensure and registration, had earned a coveted position at Bruckner Rehabilitation Center. A proven facility sprawling over a sixty-acre campus in White Plains New York and founded in 1915, it was world renowned for its quality care and specialized treatment of spinal injuries.

Several old timers, established rehab therapists in the field, had questioned his good luck and the legitimacy of the assignment, hinting at shades of nepotism.

No nepotism. Just a competent and respected doctor in his field who implicitly believed in Cayle and his ability to help other people get back on their feet the way others had helped Cayle--Dr. Reynold Graham, his mentor and father of Cayle's former Narcotics Anonymous sponsor, Benjamin Graham.

Well, maybe a little nepotism, Cayle thought now.

Validation. A new outlook. He could well-empathize with Zach's estimation of their mother's emotional state; his own had run the gamut from contempt to praise over the years.

"Had she been feeling down?" Cayle asked, curious.

"Not to hear her tell it but...well, with her job being threatened and her nearing the half-century mark, I guess she

started to think about her worth, her mortality...just everything. You know?"

Sounded like he was talking more about someone else than their mom.

Far as Cayle knew, his Mom hadn't worried about what anyone thought of her or her actions in a long time. Not since Remy. She'd worried even less about pleasing anyone except herself and her sons.

But Cayle guessed it wasn't beyond the realm of possibilities that at her age she was starting to feel her years. Vulnerable, maybe lonely?

He and Zach saw her as their ageless, indestructible, resilient mother and all these labels entailed. A lot to live up to but she'd been doing it for so many years now without fail that Cayle had expected she always would.

"Look Cayle, I have to go. I'm working on some research for Mom and-"

"Slater Software?"

"Yeah and some others. She asked me to finish up some programs and packages she was working on. Then I'm off to the library."

At least he's keeping himself busy. He's got his job; he's not idle. These have to be good things.

But the self-assurances did precious little to extinguish the nagging ache in the pit of Cayle's stomach. He had the strangest feeling his brother was hiding something from him.

"Tell Mom I called," Cayle said.

"I will."

"And Zach-"

"Yeah Cayle?"

"You'd tell me if...if anything else was going on?"

"Anything like what?" Zach played dumb.

Cayle searched for the right words, the right opening.

"Look Wheezer, I really have to g-"

"Okay. Sure. Just let Mama know I called. And you guys remember to keep in touch. You have the number?"

"Got it. I will. See you, Wheeze."

Zach broke the connection and Cayle stood with the dial tone buzzing in his ear for a long moment before he hung up.

"Everything okay?"

Cayle jerked up his eyes to see Sharise sitting directly in front of him. He hadn't heard her roll up, wondered how long she'd been sitting there. "Copacetic. Why wouldn't it be?"

Sharise shrugged, uncharacteristically timid.

"Ready for your workout?" Cayle asked without his usual enthusiasm, voice dispassionate and dry. He started to walk by her but Sharise grabbed his hand as he passed. He stared down at her. "Sharise-"

"Before we go anywhere, we're going to have to do some..."

"Communicating?"

Sharise smiled and nodded. "I'm...I'm sorry."

His eyebrows shot up. "And you didn't even choke on it."

She tugged his arm, forced him to bend. "No." She playfully wrapped a hand around his throat. "But I might choke you." Sharise reached up to caress his smooth jawline with a thumb, angled her head, and easily flicked her tongue over his lips. Cayle moaned and opened his mouth to her teasing. She plunged in her tongue, explored the fullness of his

lips, drew her hand from his jaw up to his head, buried her fingers in his hair, luxuriated in the thick silken curls.

Cayle pulled away his head, panting as he stared at her. "Reese, this isn't a good idea."

"I know."

"So we shouldn't-"

"Haven't you ever done anything you shouldn't have?"

He gave her an ironic look.

"I know you have," Sharise said when he didn't answer. "You told me before you weren't always such a goody-two-shoes."

"I told you that in confidence."

"And I won't tell anyone if you won't," Sharise whispered.

Cayle laughed, helplessly and softly as he snatched a peek over his shoulder. "C'mere you." He got behind her chair, wheeled her towards the elevator.

"To the gym, Jeeves?"

Cayle chuckled and nodded.

Dazed, Sharise turned and took in his tousled hair. She smiled at how like a little boy he looked; surprised he had allowed her the privilege. She'd been with several men who'd had conniptions at the mere thought of hands other than their own

going near their hair.

"What?" Cayle asked at her look.

Sharise quickly shook her head. "Nothing, just..."

He arched a brow.

"C'mere for a minute."

He hunkered down in front of her, staring at her as she cupped his face, eased her hands up to his hair where she wildly ran them through his longish curls once more. When she was done, she sat back and looked at her handiwork.

"Did you enjoy doing that?" Cayle grinned at her.

Sharise grinned back. "I was just checking something out."

"You could have asked me if it was a rug or not."

She laughed, punched his arm. "Still looks the same."

"So you're saying I always look mussed?"

"No. Like you just woke up."

"Thanks," he drawled.

"It looks good on you."

He bowed his head. "I'm honored."

"You should be. Not many people can pull off the Sonny Crocket, just-rolled-out-of-bed-and-threw-on-some-clothes look."

"And I do?"

"You're fishing for compliments."

"Have to get 'em while they're hot."

"Yes. You pull it off incredibly well. And you look...you look outrageously sexy," she murmured.

He gaped at her, sensed she was being sincere and not

totally teasing. "And you're being an outrageous flirt," he said, trying to make light as he stood and got behind her chair again.

Sharise glanced up at him, a liquid make-you-weak-in-the-knees look in her eyes and a sensual smile on her lips.

Cayle's eyebrows shot up. "What now?"

"Truce?"

He nodded, proffered a hand.

She quickly shook it. "Forgive me?"

"Let's not get crazy."

Sharise laughed out loud.

Cayle just stared down at her, wondering why God had seen fit to punish him with Sharise Keller and what he was supposed to do with the woman.

-

Chapter Ten

Summer 1996

Scarsdale, New York

"Gang way, Wheezer! I'm Sharise Racer."

"All right, Your Shariseness. You've had it! Nobody gets away with calling me Wheezer."

Keller threw his gold Waterman pen down on the desk, ran a hand through his wavy salt-and-pepper hair and sighed.

What the heck were those two crazy kids up to now?

Okay, he had to admit since Cayle had started back working at the estate with Sharise, that she had made some giant strides towards getting out of her chair and walking again.

Since they had gotten over extremely bumpy and touchy terrain at the beginning of the rehabilitative program, Sharise and Cayle had been collaborating. Where once they'd been as far apart as an atheist and a born-again Christian, now they agreed like pickpockets on a crowded subway car during the Christmas shopping season.

This was what he'd wanted, why he'd hired Cayle months ago then browbeat and harassed him to return when he'd quit. He'd wanted to get his daughter well and back on her feet.

So why was he feeling so uneasy about this new goodwill between his daughter and her very capable therapist?

"Now you're playing dirty..."

Cayle's deep voice echoed through the manor several doors down the hall, his levity evident. And it irked Keller.

Was this what he was paying exorbitant amounts of his hard-earned money for? His only daughter racing the halls like a maniac, endangering her well being more than she ever had on the back of some low-life's motorcycle?

What kind of exercise regimen was this? They were playing, for Chrissakes. Not working out.

"You're cheating, Miller..."

The noise increased to deafening levels outside his office as Cayle and Sharise rocketed past his door in a blur of spinning wheels and well-muscled biceps.

He rued the day he had bought his daughter--at Cayle's insistence--a new, streamlined chair.

"It's lighter, better for maneuverability and racing...to speed up her rehabilitation, of course," Cayle had stated his case, showing Keller a medical/surgical appliance catalogue, pointing out the make and model chair he had in mind, one which "would perfectly suit" his purposes and Sharise's needs.

Now they were screaming through the manor like two New York City cabbies, wrecking the halls and his nerves.

Keller was tempted to put down his foot and stop this childish nonsense.

But Sharise had been making such progress in the last month. Mental as well as physical.

Keller hadn't seen his daughter so lighthearted since she'd been a teen.

Her laughter daily filled the house, usually at the dinner

table and after some nostalgic anecdote Cayle had shared about his childhood in Climax.

Keller didn't even want to guess at what other things Cayle Miller was doing to his daughter during their "workouts" to get her laughter to fill the halls like it was doing now.

So sweet and lilting, music washing over him, warming his body and expanding his heart in his chest.

Dear God, she sounded like Rachel. Like Rachel on their wedding day.

Anxious and sweaty-palmed. Him in his Sunday best charcoal suit, his only suit. Rachel, beautiful and delicate in a simple floral print dress that gently clung to her slim curves and looked like royal regalia instead of a hand-me-down from her oldest-of-six sister.

Standing in front of the Justice of the Peace at City Hall. Sweltering heat outside and inside the old city building. Them and several other couples, all bright-eyed and eager and patiently waiting their turn to take vows that would seal them together. Forever. Or at least the rest of their lives.

Within three years, he'd lost her. But he'd gained their gorgeous baby daughter. Sharise Rachel Keller. Named after his French immigrant mother and his recently deceased young wife.

Over the years, there'd been other females. Discreet affairs and relationships with the "right" kind of women--independent, well heeled, sophisticated. Unattached. Women he could walk away from without guilt. Women without maternal attachments and

uninterested in acquiring any. Women he didn't have to bring around his daughter.

He would not risk it again. Starting all over, falling in love, securing new ties, only to have them severed by tragic circumstance. He would not put himself or Sharise through it.

"You're a real creep, Miller. A cheatin' creep..."

A duet of laughter followed this joking accusation as the pair wheeled back towards the manor.

Progress. She was so close to walking, to getting back on her feet. Back to normal. And independence. Closer to leaving.

Sharise's doctors, some of the best in the country, had talked of "incremental progress". Painfully slow and they had not been optimistic about her future in dance, unsure of her ability to regain full use of her legs.

Within three months Cayle Miller had--between one shaky start to now--educated what the top men had doubted possible.

Just the other day Keller had gone down to the gym--the first time he'd done so since Cayle had started working with Sharise--to check on them, see for himself how their exercising was coming along.

He was almost sorry he had.

They had not been in the gym but in the pool.

Keller'd heard their voices reverberating from this area, slowly headed through the gym and froze on the threshold.

Sharise and Cayle were in the shallow end of the water, facing each other. They stood between the built-in aluminum parallel bars that jutted from the pool wall, six feet into the water.

Sharise's face was soaked in perspiration, her features contorted in pain as she grasped the bars and balanced herself.

Keller watched as Cayle took a step away from her remaining reaching-distance, his body tilted towards her and his arms spread, prepared to catch her if she lost her balance.

"C'mon Reese."

Keller held his breath as he watched the young man he'd hired so many months ago coax Sharise into supporting herself. She gripped the bars for dear life, unsteady as a newborn colt and drenched in sweat. But she was standing on her own!

"I knew you could. I knew you could do it!" Cayle shouted, jubilantly pulled her into his arms.

Sharise collapsed against him. "I did. I did, didn't I!" She hugged him hard, tightly closed her eyes until tears streamed down her face to mingle with her sweat.

Keller remembered it now. He'd slowly turned away from the scene, impressed and feeling like a useless voyeur as he left without letting them discover his presence.

Progress. Independence. From him, from Ella, from the estate. Independence from everyone and everything.

Except Cayle Miller.

How long would it be before she left and went back to her old life? How long before she didn't need him anymore? How long would it be before he lost his daughter again?

Keller had other plans before this occurred.

He knew he had to play his cards just right and carefully. He was dealing with a sharp and impulsive young woman. He was dealing with his daughter and Sharise would smell a rat a mile away. And act accordingly.

He'd learned his lesson the hard way last time.

Whatever he said or suggested, Sharise would do the opposite. The harder he pushed, the harder she'd pull.

He'd made this mistake with Dwyer.

He wouldn't make the same mistake again.

* * *

"I want to try and walk."

Cayle glanced at her. "You don't want to move too fast."

"Don't you have faith in your rehab regimen?" Sharise fluttered her eyelashes at him and grinned.

"Of course I do, Reese but..."

"But? You don't think I'm ready."

"Do you?"

"I wouldn't have brought it up otherwise."

Cayle took a deep breath, let it out on a long sigh as he raked a hand through his hair.

"Your body language is unmistakable, Miller. I believe I heard every skeptical syllable loud and clear."

"Sharise, you've made some gigantic strides in the last couple of months."

"I want to make more."

"Why the rush?"

She looked at him. "I know I can do it. I feel it."

"Reese-"

"Hey, if I look like I can't make it, you'll be here to catch me right?"

"Of course."

"So, what's the problem?"

Cayle didn't answer.

"You think I might crack if I have a setback?"

He stared at her, still didn't say anything.

"I've got news for you. I'm not as fragile as I look."

"Don't I know it."

She swung her fist at him, stopped just short of slugging his rib cage, and made him wince.

Cayle grinned. "Guess we'd better hop to it before you bust me up."

"I want to be able to walk into the dining room. Surprise Ella. And my dad."

"Today?"

"Whenever." She shrugged. "Someday soon."

Cayle shook his head, wheeled her chair between the parallel bars and put on the brakes before he got in front of her and offered his hands.

Like before, she refused his assistance.

"I want to try getting up on my own. Stay close. Just in case, I mean."

He rolled his eyes, took several steps away and folded his arms over his chest, tried to relax. It was impossible, of course. As soon as she reached out for the bars and pulled herself up between them, his heart did a somersault in his chest.

"Okay. I'm going for it."

Cayle tensed as she stood. "Remember, this isn't the pool. There's nothing to counter the-

"Forces of gravity," Sharise finished for him and smiled. "Except you."

"All right, smarty. C'mon."

Her face suddenly got serious as she grasped the bars. She glanced up at Cayle in front of her then back down at her feet.

Please, please, please, let her be able to do this. Please...

Sharise gritted her teeth, looked up at Cayle again.

"You don't have to do this n-"

"Shush. I'm concentrating." She licked her lips, glanced up at the ceiling, dragged her left foot forward, and drew her hands along the bars. Her arms shimmied. Cayle stepped forward, his own arms out as if ready to scoop up a toddler.

Sharise bit her lip, shook her head. "Back off, Miller."

He stepped back and she dragged her right foot even with her left.

Cayle released his breath, stood and watched her. "Tired?"

"You wish."

He chuckled, waited as she hauled her left foot forward again. Perspiration popped out on her forehead, despite the gym's comfortably cool AC.

Cayle licked his own lips as she took two more faltering steps forward. He couldn't take this anymore, was ready to make her quit before he lost his nerve.

"I'm almost there," she muttered, closed her eyes and took another step.

Cayle gasped when he realized she was only a step away from him. Her eyes were still closed. He didn't think she realized it herself.

"Reese-"

"Shh! I'm coming."

"You're already here, kiddo," he whispered, reached out his arms for her.

Sharise opened her eyes and blinked. Sweat stung her eyes and blurred her vision.

"Sharise?"

"Hold me."

Cayle grabbed her as she fell forward, held tight. "Sharise?" He pulled away slightly to look down at her. "You okay?"

She nodded against his chest, smiled up at him. "I'm fine. I just wanted you to hold me," she murmured then buried her face against his chest again.

Cayle laughed, shoveled her into his arms.

"Hey! I can w-"

"Don't even try it." He carried her back to her chair, gently placed her in the seat. "You don't want to overdo it."

"I'm not using a walker."

"Who said anything about a walker?"

"I want crutches. Soon. And then a ca-"

"Whoa, whoa, Speed Racer. Take it easy."

Sharise laughed, reached out for him. "C'mere."

Cayle hunkered down, easily resting his forearms on her knees as he glanced up at her.

He'd been so good the last couple of months. Occupying himself and her with thoughts of improvement, of Sharise walking on her own. He'd been so good at his spiel, in fact, he'd forgotten all about his desire, had successfully buried it under hours of sweat and tears. Pushing her. Coaching her. Cheering her towards accomplishment.

But now the pretense was over.

God, why couldn't this stay innocent?

"What?" he asked.

"You afraid of me?"

"Don't flatter yourself, kiddo."

"Not flattering myself. I...it just seems like you're trying to avoid me."

"An impossibility under the circumstances."

"You know what I mean. Emotionally."

"Emotion has never been a part of this relationship,

Sharise," Cayle said sternly. "This is strictly business. All about getting you well."

"Bull." She reached out to ruffle his hair. Cayle jerked his head away and stood. Sharise grabbed the bottom of his shirt as he turned to walk away.

"Reese-"

"I promise I won't bite."

Her biting him was the least of his worries, he thought.

Cayle went back, squatted in front of her.

"You'll get me some crutches?"

"Lickety-split."

Sharise laughed, reached out to smooth his brow with a thumb and this time he sat still, stared at her.

"What are you so afraid of, Miller?"

"Who says I'm afra-"

She leaned forward, covered his lips with hers.

"Shablee-"

She crushed his mouth beneath hers, smothering further protest, easily driving her tongue through his parted lips, sliding it over his teeth. She reached down between them, found his belt buckle, crept her hand lower to trace her fingers over his arousal. He moaned against her mouth. She threw her arms around his neck, tilted out of her chair and tumbled them both to the mat on the floor.

"Sharise!" Cayle chuckled as she lay flush on him, her breasts fitting nicely against his chest. She moved against him and he felt himself harden more.

"Yes, Miller?" She lowered her face, pecked his forehead.

"Now what?"

She raised her eyebrows. "You mean you don't know? Guy comes from a place called Climax, and he doesn't know what now?"

"You would have to bring that up..."

She dipped her head again, covered his mouth with hers, and kissed him slowly, deliberately as she pressed her body into his.

"Mmm...God, Sharise...please..."

"Please what? Stop? Go?" She stared at him as he opened his eyes. "If I look at your left eye-"

"No, Reese. Stop. We have to stop."

"Why?" She pouted, looked like her old defiant self.

Cayle took a deep breath. "Because, I want to have energy for our celebration."

Warily, she stared at him, her interest piqued.

"Celebration?"

"Don't you think what you did today warrants one?"

"Of course I do but-"

"But?"

"Just us, right? It was our doing. No one else's."

"Right."

"I want to have you all to myself."

Cayle thought she sounded like a kid giving Santa her Christmas gift list. He smiled, tried to sit up but she wrestled him back down.

"Deal?"

"Definitely." He maneuvered her body so that he could lift her in his arms, then slowly got to his feet, put her back in her chair.

"We'll have a picnic," Sharise said, planning. "I'll ask Ella to fix us up a nice lunch. When's good?"

"After you walk with your crutches." Cayle winced, expecting her to fuss.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"What'd you think? I'd put up a fight?"

"Yeah. Or at least a little hissy fit."

Sharise laughed at him. "I'm willing to wait, Miller. Besides, it won't be too long before I'm able to keep up with you."

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[Chapter Eleven](#)

Summer 1996

Slater Software Consultants - Midtown Manhattan

"Of course, Thom. I'd be delighted to come. One of Ella's meals is more than enough of a fringe benefit to talking business...Whatever would be convenient for you...Okay, I'll put it down in my calendar. See you then." Scott Slater pressed "Off" on his cellular as the elevators opened on the Penthouse. He stepped out, instantly feeling at home as his Gucci loafers sunk deeply into the lobby's plush gray carpeting.

"Morning, Syl. Any messages yet?" He briefly paused at his secretary's desk.

"A Mr. Keller call-"

"I got that one already, thanks. Anything else?"

"Your message sheet is right here." She handed him a computer printout, ten lines long.

It was only nine-thirty, Scott thought. And he'd bet every one on the sheet was of "an urgent nature."

"You had several e-mails. I took the liberty of answering them already. You have your weekly directors' meeting at eleven. Your senior staff at two."

Scott nodded as he glanced over his sheet.

"Great. That everything?"

"So far."

"Good." He nodded. "You know where I'll be until then."

Sylvia McDonald smiled, entranced as she watched his broad

back when he proceeded into his office and closed the heavy oak door behind him. She let out the breath she'd been holding.

Two years since she'd started working for the man but she had yet to get used to his matinee idol looks.

Tall and lean with longish, wavy blond hair and dark-blue eyes hidden behind a pair of gold-framed glasses, Scott Slater was the epitome of sensual, constantly surprising Sylvia because he seemed so oblivious to his appeal. The Brooks Brothers suits enhanced rather than detracted from his charm. Far from the nerd he appeared to others, Sylvia saw the potential beneath the geeky glasses and tailored suits, saw the Chippendale dancer's body.

Sylvia wondered what kind of woman had been lucky enough to explore beneath the braniac, sterile veneer.

* * *

Scott cut on his personal computer, accessed his private box, paged through several screens of e-mail, answered the most pressing ones, and made notes on the others that could wait. He then returned several phone calls listed on his sheet, left messages for the few who were unavailable.

The entire process took less than a half-hour.

Scott did not believe in wasting time on the phone. He could effect more deals, get more accomplished in a day by communicating through his PC than he could ever get done on several phone calls to people.

Give him a PC or a laptop over this volatile breed any day. He'd always been able to articulate his thoughts more effectively

with machines rather than people. Computers were dependable. GIGO (garbage in, garbage out) was the motto by which he lived and breathed. A computer only did what one programmed it to do. Nothing more, nothing less. Forget the horror movies that would have one believe anything different.

People, on the other hand, were an unreliable and unpredictable case altogether. A real horror story.

Scott sank back against his large swivel chair, engulfed by the luxurious smell of Corinthian leather, as he leafed through several file briefs and statistical readouts to prepare for his first meeting.

Next to working on his PC and creating new software programs and technical games, this was one of the more enjoyable components of being the Founder and President of Slater Software Consultants: the solitary research he performed behind the scenes. He shined in this arena where only his mind and logistics were his limits, knowing that if he worked at any one problem long and hard enough, he could transcend both.

Charity events, fund raising, hundred-dollar-a-plate dinners and brown-nosing he could not tolerate or transcend. So he avoided these activities as much as possible, preferring to send one of his many willing minions or colleagues to handle this necessary but unpalatable duty on his behalf and as needed.

Scott hated the dealing with people part of his business. It wasn't him. He was capable, could hobnob with the best, make proud Miss Manners and Emily Post with his bootlicking skills.

He'd learned from two masters: his tycoon father, Edmond Slater the Second and his mother-the-socialite, Vivian Whitney-Slater.

But it was not their ideas of accomplishment and proper etiquette that had compelled him to success in his own technology firm, Scott told himself now as he hunched over his keyboard to work out the kinks in his latest program. He'd started writing it at home the night before. This, he thought, was his love, why he had started it all.

When he'd been an only child growing up in Scarsdale with a succession of maids and butlers and nannies and tutors at his beck and call, he had often escaped into the world of machines, enjoying hours of solitary interaction, building, taking apart, and applying his problem-solving abilities.

At four, he'd been able to sit for hours figuring out how his Lionel trains operated. And by the end of the day, Christmas 1970, he'd taken apart several of his engines then put them back together again all with a scarf tied over his eyes.

Edmond worried about his son's eccentricity, thought he'd soon be blowing up his trains like Gomez Addams.

Vivian assured her husband it was just boyhood curiosity.

"At four? It's too curious."

"Nonsense. You're never too young to be curious. You worry too much. Why, we could be raising the next Einstein."

"Or Frankenstein."

Scott had been too young then to grasp all the nuances of his mother and father's conversation but by six he'd compiled

reams of information, researching texts and magazine articles to learn about the two individuals of which they'd spoken (as well as other people of infamy and note) and he'd come to two important conclusions: his mother thought he would make her proud; his father envisioned him a madman.

"Approval" and "Disapproval" were the ideals for which he shot. "Love" and "Hate" never came into play for Scott. He knew he was batting a thousand if he could get a "That's nice dear" from his mother and a half-smile from his father when he brought home an "A" on a history paper.

Once he'd even aced the science projects at his school's annual fair, bringing home First Place. This feat only garnered him a brief pat on the head from both his mother and father.

Forget hugs and kisses. His parents managed him with asbestos handler gloves. Scott couldn't even remember his parents kissing or hugging each other!

One day he had run home from school screaming and waving an eighth-grade science test he'd passed. Scott'd flown into the house past Marianna--the new Guatemalan housekeeper who'd opened the door--and raced into the dining room.

His mother was entertaining several of the wives of his father's tennis club cronies.

Scott intercepted Vivian on her way back from the bathroom to the table to rejoin the ladies, crashing headlong into her abdomen and mussing her starched entertaining-at-home-on-a-weekday linen dress as he threw his arms around her, yelling,

"Mother! Mother! I got an A+ on my science test!"

But it wasn't just an A+. He was used to getting these all the time, in every class. It was the suggestions Mr. Kazinski had made when he'd pulled Scott aside at the end of the class that had the boy feeling so giddy.

"Scott, I know you're only nine but your parents should seriously consider enrolling you in high school next semester. There's really nothing more we can do for you here at the academy, as fine an institution as this is. And I'd hate to see you waste away here in boredom. You might want to consider Bronx High School of Science. I know there are other fine schools that your parents probably have in mind but I think the social setting at Bronx Science would be more beneficial."

Scott liked Mr. Kazinski best of all his instructors at the academy. He was one of the only adults in Scott's life who treated him just right. He didn't talk down to him and he didn't talk too far over his head. He didn't put him on a pedestal as a child prodigy, didn't treat him special because his parents and forefathers were some of the academy's more loyal and generous benefactors. Mr. Kazinski treated Scott like a normal kid. And this, above all else, was what Scott craved. Normalcy.

But Bronx High School would be a little too normal for his mother's tastes, Scott was sure. She would think his attending school with the children of upstarts and common riffraff an abomination, like transplanting a Rottweiler's head onto a Chihuahua's body.

Scott glanced up at his mother now to tell her his news and

she wrinkled her brows at him in distaste, her nose pointed to the ceiling as if to avoid an unpleasant odor. "Young man, you know better than to run into this house like some wild banshee."

"But Moth-"

"Enough!" Vivian clapped her hands over her head twice for silence. She pushed her son away, and steered him to the center of the dining area where he faced his mother's guests. "Apologize for your barbaric behavior."

Scott looked back at his mother then faced the women. He gritted his teeth, chest out, shoulders back. He would not cry. His father always told him that crying was a sign of weakness.

"I'm sorry I interrupted your tea, ladies."

"That's better. Now go up to your room and think about what you've done and what an appropriate punishment would be."

"But Moth-"

"Go, young man!" She smacked his bottom; the closest Scott would ever get to a hug from his mother in his life.

He was nine years old, not a baby. He wanted to go to Bronx High School. Or else. He didn't know what the "or else" would be, but he would put this to his mother later at dinner.

That evening over bland mashed potatoes and tasteless roasted chicken, Scott brought up the high school issue and his mother loudly sighed and gave her husband a harried, what-are-we-going-to-do-with-this-child look.

"Edmond, you must tell him to stop entertaining this crazy notion of going to school in..." Vivian grimaced as if she were swallowing down castor oil then finished. "...the Bronx."

"Mother, I want to go."

He didn't whine, just made the remark in his firmest, most adult tenor--thanks to several years of the best diction classes and a succession of speech teachers to "rid him of that horrible, childish lisp." His mother had told his father that the impediment was "an intolerable characteristic for any Slater to exhibit" and had promptly brought in an instructor to help Scott with his enunciation when he'd been three.

When Edmond said nothing now to Scott's request, either negative or positive, Vivian jumped in again.

"Edmond, surely you're not agreeing with this insanity. It's an outlandish request."

"Mother, it's not insanity. Bronx High School is a perfectly decent institute. And it's not a request. It's a demand. I'm going to Bronx High School."

Vivian sputtered her tea. "Edmond! Did you hear the way he just spoke to me? It's only a sample of what he'll be bringing home from those bunnies, Jews and wetback roughnecks at that blackboard jungle."

Her husband made no comment, only smirked.

"Edmond? What do you have to say about this?"

"Let him go."

"Surely you can't be serious."

Scott glanced from his mother to his father and saw that his father was very serious.

It was the first time his father had ever supported him or sided with him against Vivian.

The next semester, at ten years old, Scott started his first year at Bronx High School of Science.

He survived four years of courageous and unpredictable commuting and endured daily name-calling-"dweeb", "egghead", "nerd", from his less-enlightened counterparts--on his way to becoming a first-place finalist for the coveted Westinghouse award, earning a regents diploma and acceptance to his first-choice college.

By the beginning of his fourteenth summer, only a couple of months away from starting his first semester at MIT, Scott Slater had met Sharise Keller.

Scott smiled now as he pictured the hard-nosed, auburn-haired imp he had one day run into outside the gates of the Slater Estate.

He had been so impressed by her grown-up attitude and her subtle grown-up curves camouflaging a thirteen-year-old girl.

Sure, he'd been smart and on his way to one of the finest colleges in the country. But Sharise Keller smoked cigarettes!

"I only do it to put a bug up my dad's ass," she'd explained as she snuffed out a butt beneath her small Keds.

And she cursed! Like a sailor. This was the type of girl his mother had always warned him against. Upstart white trash.

"Where do you live?" Scott asked her.

"Right passed that drove of leafy timber." Sharise pointed over her shoulder, indicating the lush forest behind her.

Scott gaped, wondering how far she'd had to travel through that brush before she'd reached civilization. And she'd come all the way through it by herself?

"So, you're the child gee...prodigy I've been hearing so much about?"

"From who?" Scott asked her after he had finished gaping.

She was so pretty. Full lips smacking together as she cracked and blew her bubble gum. Almond, slate eyes glinting with intelligence and a little bit of wickedness as she stared at him with that I-know-all-about-you glance.

"My dad. He seems to think you're the second coming of Christ or somethin'."

"Oh."

"You don't look like it."

"Oh."

"But he wants me to be more like you for some reason."

"Oh."

"He says you're smart and well-behaved and you listen to your elders." She glared at him as if daring him to refute her information.

"Oh."

"Is that all you can say? You're not so smart."

Scott swallowed hard, glared at her.

"So, you have a mother," Sharise said around her wad of bubble gum.

"Of course. Don't you?"

She didn't answer, just reached around the fence separating their property, grabbed his shirtfront and pulled him along.

"Hey..." She was rumpling his shirt. His mother would kill him. And his father always told him a man should try to look his best, no matter where he was, where he was going, or what he was doing. "Clothes make the man, Scott. Remember that..."

"C'mon!"

"Don't pull me. I can follow you on my own."

Sharise froze in her tracks, turned to look at him, saw the defiant jut of his chin. And he had spoken with such a deep mature voice too.

Sharise smiled at him. "I think I'm starting to like you."

Scott beamed, chased after her as she turned and ran through the woods towards her house.

* * *

Sharise Keller, Scott thought now. His first.

Before Sharise, Scott had never even touched himself "down there." So of course, no one else had. His mother had once claimed this type of behavior was lewd and unseemly. Had--upon discovering her young son was learning all about "it" during his hygiene classes--told him he might as well just put on a sleazy trenchcoat and lurk outside a playground fence to molest other young children.

But when he had been seventeen and home during the Christmas holidays, Sharise had taught him otherwise in the back seat of his father's Bentley. Had opened him to the sweet pain of self-titillation. Had shown him the wonders of hand jobs and oral sex. Had shown him the miracles of giving and receiving love. Not lewd. Not unseemly and dirty. Just pleasurable.

Sharise had been his first crush. She had been his first official girlfriend, his first love. She had been the first girl with whom he had ever shared a soul kiss. She had been the first girl to touch him and give him an erection.

The first girl to break his heart.

Impatient with Scott for his staidness, his obsession with education and starting his own computer consulting firm, Sharise had grown tired of waiting for him to make a "real commitment" to her and had run off with the low-class creep, Dwyer McMillan.

She and Scott had been dating off-and-on, semi-seriously for eight years before she'd taken the final plunge and left.

Scott hadn't blamed her.

She'd been young and hot--oh so hot--and beautiful. Any man would have been a fool not to have grabbed at a chance to be with her. And he had been that fool, denying her access to him--the whole, real him--and denying Sharise her true nature. He would have given her the world if he could have. His undying love. His loyalty. But he hadn't been able to give her the one thing for which she'd hungered more than anything else. Passion.

* * *

Scott emerged from his executive bathroom, freshly shaven and contemplating Thomas Keller's earlier and out-of-the-blue invitation.

He hadn't been kind earlier when he'd told Keller Ella's meals alone were an incentive to come out to the house, whether for business or pleasure. He'd been honest.

Growing up, he'd always enjoyed being at Sharise's house more than his own home, had spent enormous amounts of his free time there. And during visits to Scarsdale from MIT and graduate school he'd always been able to count Sharise's home as a refuge to where he could escape the austere, look-but-don't-touch atmosphere of his parents' estate.

Dinner at the Kellers'. Dinner with Ella and Thom.

And Sharise.

He would see her again. For better or worse (probably worse, knowing Sharise), he would see her.

Scott could hardly wait.

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[Chapter Twelve](#)

Sharise sat on the edge of her canopied bed idly swinging one leg to and fro. She eyed her wheelchair across the room, folded her arms over her breasts and licked out her tongue.

She wouldn't need that hated contraption much longer. Not if she could help it.

Cayle knocked on the door, peeped in his head. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Wait." He ducked back outside.

Sharise had a moment to crinkle her eyebrows and wonder what he was up to.

He popped back in wielding a sleek pair of aluminum crutches with big red-velvet bows attached to the top of each. "To make your big debut. These are customized for your little ol' height."

She grimaced at his joke then smiled at his thoughtfulness.

The last few weeks she'd been utilizing a second-hand pair of crutches Cayle had dug up for her to practice on. They were too long-made for someone much taller--and hurt her underarms and biceps but he'd said she could use them "for the time being" to adjust to the feel of walking without his assistance.

Sharise had a sneaking suspicion he'd purposefully "dug them up" to discourage her from walking too fast. He'd claimed crutches in her size were hard to come by, even on order they'd have to wait for a pair to be made and since they wanted to keep her progress a secret between them for the time being....

Blah, blah, blah, Sharise thought now.

At least he had finally come through for her.

"Here ya go." He held them out to her with a flourish, stepped back as she grabbed them, snatched off the bows then cradled the cushioned tops under her arms. She slid her hands down the sides like he'd shown her, as if she were gripping a ladder, then she smoothly lifted herself from the bed and stood.

"Are Ella and my dad ready?"

"Both blindfolded."

"They're going to know something's up."

"That's fine. They don't know exactly what. They'll be surprised when they finally see you."

Sharise nodded, followed him out into the hallway.

They took the elevator down to the main floor and Cayle made sure she was okay before he ran ahead to the dining room.

"No cheating!" he yelled as he caught both Ella and Keller lowering their blindfolds back over their eyes when they heard him coming.

The trio waited an anxious several minutes before Sharise toddled in, meticulous and slow, perspiring lightly as she made it to the threshold.

It was a lot harder than she had anticipated, despite all her training and rehearsals with Cayle-"Okay, you can look."--but worth it when she saw the expressions on their faces.

Simultaneously, and none too slowly, Ella and Keller ripped off their blindfolds and jerked their eyes to the entrance.

Her father openly goggled.

"Dear Lord..." Ella gasped as the tears welled then streamed down her brown cheeks.

"My baby's walking, yes she is." She stood and tip-toed across the floor to where Sharise was standing, as if she did not want to step on the floor too hard for fear a vibration would whack her little girl over.

"Don't worry, Ella. I won't break," Sharise stated as if reading her friend's mind.

Ella chuckled, pulled Sharise into a gentle embrace, careful of the crutches. She kissed every part of the younger woman's face, leaving a trail of neutral lipstick and a light scent of perfume in the wake of her affectionate attack.

Sharise giggled as Ella stepped back and Keller stood to face his daughter.

He stared at her for a long moment, speechless before he finally pulled her into a hard hug and kissed the top of her head. "Congratulations baby."

"Thanks Daddy."

He turned to Cayle and grinned. "I'm in your debt, Cayle."

"Sharise did most of the work, sir."

Ella loudly clapped her hands for attention and giggled as everyone glanced at her. "Let's eat! I'm ready to celebrate this here Kodak moment with a big breakfast."

* * *

"I hope you know what you're doin', chil'. You don't wanna be pushin' y'self too hard."

"I can handle it."

"I ain't just talkin' 'bout the walkin'." Ella raised a brow, gave Sharise a pointed look as she passed the younger woman one of the last breakfast dishes to dry.

Though Daddy had installed a state-of-the-art dishwasher long ago, Ella refused to use it, preferred giving the china and silver her personal touch.

"Don't trust that washer. Don't care how much no-spot Jet Drying, Cascading you put in it. Not as clean as by hand."

Sharise laughed now, shaking her head at the thought. Ella and Dad were two of a kind.

"You hear what I said, girl?"

"Loud and clear, ma'am. And I know what I'm doing." Sharise dried the last dish, put it in the overhead kitchen cabinet before making her way to the dining table. She pulled out and collapsed into one of the chairs.

"Well, as long as you're sure."

She had never been surer of anything in her life. Had never wanted anything as much as she wanted Cayle. Except succeeding at her dancing. And right now even performing came in a distant second to having Cayle Miller. All to herself. Finally.

She didn't know if it was right or wrong. She just wanted to make the move. She would deal with the consequences later.

Ella joined Sharise at the table. "I've got your lunch all packed and the little surprise you asked for."

"Thanks Ella." Sharise leaned forward, pecked her cheek.

Ella sat back and stared at her, drummed her fingers on the tabletop. "I hopes you-"

"Know what I'm doing." Sharise smiled. "I do, Ella. I do."

* * *

Cayle hesitantly punched out his mother's number, dread and anxiety prolonging his dialing. From one day to the next he never knew what type of news or attitude to expect from his mother and brother.

Zach picked up on the third ring.

"Hey Zach!" Cayle greeted, left-over enthusiasm from Sharise's earlier accomplishment still pumping through him, coloring his demeanor and Zach's demeanor instantly matched his.

"Cayle! What's up?"

"I should be asking you. You sound peppy."

"No more than you, Wheeze."

"So, what's the deal?"

"Since you asked so nicely," Zach began, "Mama got the job!"

"At Slater?"

"They loved her."

"Why wouldn't they?"

Zach giggled. "Anyway, she aced the last interview and she's in as Technology Analyst."

"That's great. When's she start?"

"ASAP. She's already given her present company her two weeks' notice. Then she's taking a two-week vacation, then..."

"That's really great, Zach. I guess she's been busy with all the arrangements and everything."

"Busy as the devil in hell, but not too busy to celebrate with her favorite son...Oh, and you're invited too. She wants you to come by next week for a special dinner."

Cayle stopped chuckling to say, "We should be taking her out, Zach."

"You know I suggested it, bro. And you know what she said. So, you are coming?"

How could he say "no"? It was his mama. But he worried about leaving Sharise so soon after a major victory like today's. Even for a little while. She was at her most vulnerable now, prone to overdo things. He mentioned his concerns to Zach.

"Bring her along. Mom's mentioned it before, said it's about time we met this little city slicker who's been driving her youngest close to drink."

Cayle smiled at the accuracy of the remark--whether it had been his mother's or brother's. "Things have cooled down some. In fact, Sharise had a major breakthrough today."

"Yeah? Well, more reason to bring her. Double celebration."

"I'll be sure and ask her if she'd like to come."

"You're coming regardless," Zach insisted.

"Of course."

"Great. See you then."

Cayle hung up, adrenaline still flowing.

Originally, he had only brought up the idea of a

celebration--which Sharise had quickly jumped on with her plan of a picnic--as a last resort to escape a tight spot. But he'd only delayed the inevitable, putting himself in a tighter spot.

Okay, sure, when he got right down to it, he and Sharise really did have a lot to celebrate. He hadn't been joshing her. They both deserved pats on the back.

He should have been happy, ready to sit back, relax and enjoy it all. But he knew Sharise's notion of "enjoyment" and his were two different matters.

And the idea of his mother and Sharise Keller meeting and occupying the same space and time was even a more frightening concept than spending time alone with Sharise himself. It actually struck a chord of horror in his heart so deep he felt as if he'd just been hit in the chest with a heavyweight's fist. He couldn't explain his anxiety, tried not to attach too much weight to a simple and innocent dinner at his mom's. Hell, that would be putting the horse before the cart, after all. He had plenty of time to prepare between each function.

First Ms. Sharise.

Then Ms. Sharise and his mama.

Cayle hoped he could emerge from the next two weeks emotionally and physically unscathed.

* * *

"No chair, Miller." Sharise sat at the dining room table, pouted and folded her arms across her breasts.

"It's just in case you get ti-"

"No chair!"

"I'ma let you two youngins slug this out on your own. Lord have mercy on my soul!" Ella threw up her hands, mumbling prayers in her wake as she left the pair to their own devices.

Keller, again, was missing this special treat, had left earlier to keep some "business lunch appointment".

"Why're you being so difficult about this, Reese?"

"I'm not being difficult."

"You're being difficult and unreasonable. All I want to do is bring it along. I didn't say you had to sit in it."

She stared at him.

"Shari-"

"If I don't have to sit in it, then why bring it?"

"It's for just in case. As I said before."

She scowled at him.

"It isn't an option. I bring this or we don't go."

She swore then glared at him. "Talk about being unreasonable...." She mumbled. "Fine! But I'm walking out to your SUV." Sharise struggled up onto her crutches. "Bring the basket, please." She walked out, leaving Cayle alone in the dining area.

Geesh! He had never seen anyone who could flounce on a pair of crutches. But leave it to Sharise to achieve the feat.

Once he got outside and settled into the Blazer, she directed him to a cozy spot five minutes from the house and over a slight ridge.

Five minutes after parking, he had them unpacked, a big

green army blanket--his contribution--spread under a towering elm several yards away from the gurgling lake.

Cayle heaved the wicker picnic basket onto the blanket then flopped down beside it and Sharise.

She eyed him from her position leaning back on the tree, amused at his exhaustion as she rested her crutches against the tree trunk beside her.

"What did you and Ella pack in here?"

"The essentials, of course."

Cayle looked at her, shook his head. "Women."

Sharise laughed, punched his arm then reached over to lift the lid of the basket. She unpacked and spread the wrapped contents on the blanket. Several well-stacked turkey-and-Swiss sandwiches, a large pan of fried chicken drumsticks and thighs, a Tupperware container of deviled eggs, fresh Italian garlic bread, potato salad. And a large bottle of wine.

"So that's what was making it so heavy!" Cayle gaped as Sharise removed the bottle from the basket.

"A jeroboam. Holds three liters. Should tide us over for the rest of the afternoon."

"There's enough Kool-aid in there to tide us over until early next year."

Sharise giggled. "There's enough of some of the finest red Bordeaux from my father's wine cellar here to help us celebrate."

When Cayle didn't comment, Sharise stared at the look of distaste on his face, mistook its source. "Too fancy, huh?"

You'd prefer to kick back with a beer. I knew I should have just played it safe and--"

"No, no. It's not that."

"What then?"

"It's just I...I..."

"I could have brought champagne," Sharise muttered.

"The Bordeaux's fine, Reese."

"Really?"

Of course he wouldn't drink any. He was already high and off-balance enough just being near her. How could he tell her this without ruining their time together? Did he even need to? God, why was this so complicated? Or was he just making it so?

"Earth to Miller. Hel-lo!" Sharise snapped her fingers in his face. "Zoning out already. Maybe you should refrain."

"Whatever works."

"Fine. Let's eat then."

"Where do we start?"

"Wherever you want to."

* * *

Cayle lay supine on the blanket, hands folded behind his head, face aimed at the fading sun peeking through the tree's lush, overhead branches. He closed his eyes against the slight glare, contentedly sighed.

Sharise lay on her side next to him, rested her chin in a palm as she watched the gentle rise and fall beneath his T-shirt and imagined the finely carved chest and abs there, a six-pack to

turn a male model green even after all the food he'd just stuffed in his face.

He was so ripe, sensual and available.

She wanted him.

The five glasses of wine she'd earlier consumed prodded her now, not that she needed much prodding when she was around him. She needed nothing at all. Except to touch him.

Cayle opened his eyes, saw her staring at him. "You look like a jewel thief casing the scene of her next heist."

Sharise giggled. She was so tipsy. But not so tipsy she didn't know her own mind. She reached out to brush errant hair from his eyes, smoothed her palms down his cheeks and cupped his face.

"Sharise..."

"Shh..." She leaned in, closed her eyes and willed him to meet her halfway. She felt his lips, sweet and moist against hers, and briefly opened her eyes to make sure she wasn't dreaming. She wasn't. He was there. Returning her kiss. Piloting her back against the rough surface of the blanket. Unbuttoning her dress, muttering curses. "This is wrong...so wrong..." Chastising and castigating himself for his need.

"Shut up, Miller. Hush."

He fumbled with each button; fingers trembling until he finally just got disgusted with his own clumsiness and popped the last several right off. "You hush," he whispered, dipped his head to bury her giggles beneath his lips. He finally tasted the wine, exploring inside her mouth, greeting places he had only dreamed of visiting, heart speeding with a memory of past intoxications.

Figuring on future elations.

"Cayle wait. Here." She pressed a foil pack into a palm, momentarily breaking through his haze.

He smiled against her mouth, fisted the pack. "I thought it was the Boy Scout who was supposed to always be prepared."

"Not that you're a Boy Scout."

He laughed, hugged her tight, buried his face against her throat and suffused himself with her piquant scent.

"I had on a helmet when I wiped out on that motorcycle. I do play it safe with--"

"Say no more." He tore into the pack with his teeth and one hand then struggled into its content. He worked his fingers under her dress. She helped him slide off her panties in one fluid motion. His hands slid around her back, pulled her against his hard chest. She could feel his heart pounding against hers.

He wrestled off his Levi's, revealed lean-muscled thighs before pitching into her, neatly fitting his long body to her petite dimensions.

She steered him to her, drawing him nearer, luxuriating in his full arousal--firm and heavy between her thighs.

"I want you, Reese...I want you so much," he murmured and glided his hands down her body. Caressing soft curves, stroking her sides until he clutched her buttocks and guided her to his rhythm.

She arched her hips to better welcome his tumescence, pull him in deeper. He covered her mouth with his, lowered his head to nibble her throat, kiss her breasts.

She vibrated beneath him and he rocked with her to the calming ripple of the lake in the near distance. She gasped unintelligible half-sentences, squeezed her eyes shut against bursts of rainbow color. His heat generated out into her chest and pooled down to her stomach. Spreading. Slowly increasing until it blanketed her entire body in one gigantic climax.

She opened her eyes, surprised when she felt him still hard inside her. "You didn't..."

He smiled at her, roughly kissed her and rotated his hips. It was all she could stand without screaming. She felt him there, right on the edge. Right...there. God, he felt so good inside her, too good to end this prematurely. "Don't come yet, Cayle."

"So wicked...so beautiful and wicked..."

Lazily, she tilted her pelvis, felt him drive into her simultaneously. Felt his shuddering release as a million sparks of fire radiated over her limbs, igniting every nerve ending in her body. He collapsed against her, cradling his chin on her shoulder.

"Hold me," she whispered and he gently wrapped his arms around her, pulled her close and held her.

* * *

Cayle looked at her as she sat up to clasp the buttons down her dress front. He reached over and put his hands over hers. "Let me help."

"You've already helped quite enough, thank you." She winked at him. "I had no idea you were a tailor as well as a physical

therapist. You're a man of many talents."

"You're referring to my unique peekaboo design? It's a Miller original." He grinned. "At least the damage is at the bottom and not the top." He eyed the opening several inches above her knees where the buttons were missing. Ripped off by him.

The shirtwaist flowed down and billowed around her ankles, maxi-style--so feminine and soft on her. A dangerous garment to wear around him on any occasion but even more so since she was navigating on crutches. And now half the buttons were gone.

"It's not too bad. The opening stops about where a mini would land," he observed, smoothing his hand along the inside of an exposed thigh, getting lost in its silken texture.

"A micro mini." She leaned in to kiss his lips, grasped his wrist and guided his hand to her. She was so hot down there. Warm and moist and cozy...Sweet Jesus, he wanted her again.

"You're lucky it's hot out. You can get away with showing a little skin." He slid his hand inside her panties, caressed the springy hair there.

"Make love to me, Cayle."

"Isn't that what I just did?" he teased, pushed her back against the blanket as she chuckled beneath him. He eased a finger inside, experimented. She was still wet. So very wet and ready. He added another finger, slowly thrust and wriggled.

She closed her eyes, panted as she pushed herself against his hand, forced his fingers deeper, closer to The Spot. She felt him withdraw, ever so slightly, jerked open her eyes to

stare at him smiling at her.

"Don't play with me," she growled.

"Ooh, feisty."

"And don't you forget it."

He smiled, hiked up her dress and submerged his fingers.

Sharise gasped. "Don't rip any more buttons."

Cayle laughed, carefully slid her panties over her hips, down her thighs so that he could look at the world once more. He bent his head, pressed his face to her, deeply inhaled her musk--his own scent and hers mingling. He slid his mouth up her body, reconnoitered twisting terrain and soft flesh. From the tips of her breasts, languidly circling and roaming with his mouth and tongue before he finally found his way back to her center and fulfilled her request.

Once more. And again.

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[Chapter Thirteen](#)

"You did good today." Cayle offered Sharise an arm and she took it as he helped her out of the SUV. He was surprised, but then she was a wee inebriated and unsteady. He just thanked God she wasn't foolish enough to deny it.

"I tol' ya I didn't need that silly ol' chair."

"Remember, we didn't walk far, to or from any one place."

"Okay. I'll give you that."

Cayle arched a brow, more surprised still by her acquiescence. Maybe she was drunker than he'd thought. He should have stopped her from finishing the jeroboam right before they'd started back.

"C'mere, Miller." She wiggled a finger at him as she stabilized herself on her crutches.

Cayle stood in front of her, waited.

"C'mere!" She leaned towards him, almost tipped over. He caught and steadied her against the side of the Blazer.

"Am I gonna have to carry you in and hide you from Ella and your father?" he questioned only half-joking.

Sharise slowly licked her lips, closed her eyes as she leaned her head on his chest. "I'm not ashamed of what we did," she whispered.

He pulled away, peered down at her. "You think I am?"

"You had so many qualms about it. And you didn't heshi...hesitate to berbli...verb-a-lize."

"That was before-"

"You had some a thish," she slurred, grasped a hand and led him to her warmth. Cayle allowed his palm the pleasure of touching her. Briefly. He lowered his head to kiss her, eyes fixed on the house behind her.

"You don't like me drinkin' do ya?"

"Do you care?"

She glanced up at him, said nothing.

Cayle sighed, drew a hand through his hair.

"Why didn't ya drink wif me? I brought it for us. For our cele..." She hiccupped two times. "...bration."

"I didn't have a taste for it." This was true enough, he thought. He hadn't.

"I wanted us to have fun."

"Sharise." He cupped her face, tilted her head to stare at her. "I had fun. More than fun. I was with you."

"Oh Cayle!" She threw her arms around his neck, sobbed on his chest. "Boo-Boo baby's such a sweetums."

She was really toasted. How was he supposed to invite her to his mother's now? He could have done it earlier but no one minute had seemed like the right time to bring it up. He could always do it later but delaying seemed almost as bad as asking her while she was under the influence. Did he want her to say "yes" later or would asking her now secure the "no" he was sure he wanted?

And besides all this, how could he bring her into the house in this condition? If Keller were home, he would kill Cayle. Ella would kill him. He should never have let this happen. But how could he have stopped her without having flung a wet blanket over their festivities?

Celebration and alcohol-such a deadly combination that usually went together like New Year's Eve and Time Square. Cayle Miller and trouble.

"Sharise?"

"Miller?"

He grinned. "You wanna...come with me to my mama's for-"

"Oh! I love ya, Miller!"

He laughed at the familiar refrain. Seemed drunks loved everyone and everything.

Cayle remembered his own I-love-you-man periods. He'd gone through them hundreds of times in the past, slinging the phrase at dozens of Good Samaritan bartenders whose ears he'd bent, various designated buddies and faceless cab drivers who'd all had the decency to get him safely to his door at one time or another. He owed his life now to many a perfect and kind stranger.

"So, I guess that's a yes? For dinner?"

She loudly kissed him on the mouth. Cayle thought if he had taken a breathalyzer test right then and there, it would have registered him under the influence, maybe off the scale.

He laughed, shook his head as he took her crutches and tossed them onto the backseat of the Blazer. "C'mon you."

"Hey!"

He scooped her into his arms. Sharise leaned her head on his shoulder, wrapped her arms around his neck.

She felt so cozy and right in his arms. He just wished the circumstances were a little different.

"My hero." She sighed against his throat and Cayle shivered from her breath gently blowing in his ear. He bent slightly to turn the knob on the kitchen door then pushed it in with a foot.

"Well, it's about time you two..." Ella froze when she saw Cayle carrying in Sharise. She rushed over from the sink. "Lord, what happened to the chil? Is she okay?"

Sharise muttered in his arms.

"A little too much celebrating."

"And you? No celebrating?"

"She did enough for both of us." Cayle hooked a foot around a chair leg, slid the chair away from the table. He gently sat Sharise down. She opened her eyes, gave him a clear gaze, shocked him. She was full of surprises today. He crouched in front of her.

"Sharise?"

"Miller."

Cayle chuckled, glanced over a shoulder. "Is her father back alre-"

"Ella? Was that Sharise and Cayle I heard? I've got a surprise for-" Keller stopped on the threshold, quickly took in the scene then scowled down at Cayle. "You got her drunk?"

"Sir-"

"Daddy, I'm not drunk," Sharise stated. "Just..." She hiccuped twice more. "...a little ineber...inebre...tipsy."

"God in heaven." Keller groaned, turned to the man who had

followed him into the kitchen.

Cayle stared past Keller at the blond stranger, raised his brows as the gentleman stepped forward and Keller started the introductions.

"Cayle Miller, this is-"

"Scott!" Sharise lurched to her feet, stumbled past Ella and Cayle and collapsed into the stranger's arms.

* * *

"...the same Sharise..."

The words came at her from far away, softly falling on her awareness until she thought she was coming out of a dream.

Sharise blinked open her eyes, glanced at the figure hovering over her, saw the sharp blue eyes behind the John Lennon specs. On him they looked better than they ever had on John, she thought.

"Reese?"

She concentrated on his face--Nordic symmetrical features she just remembered--tried to bring it into focus. Blinked a couple more times, felt a cool cloth pat and wipe her forehead.

"She's coming around." Scott turned to the three people fluttering just behind him: Ella, Keller and Cayle.

Cayle! She needed to speak to him before her father...

"Good. We'll leave you two alone to catch up then."

...took over. Damn. What was he saying? Catch up? On what? And where was he going with Cayle and Ella?

No, Cayle. Don't leave m--

She couldn't make her dry mouth form the words, licked her lips as she tried to make eye contact with him.

"Come Ella, Cayle. They'll be okay."

Who says? Hey, wait!

Sharise helplessly watched her dad hustle the two from the study. Even through her fog she felt Cayle's green-brown gaze settle on her before he reluctantly followed her father and Ella out into the hall.

She glanced up at Scott smiling down at her, watched him shake his gold-blond head.
"Don't say it." She weakly grinned.

"Actually, I'm glad to find you this well. You weren't doing as well when I last saw you."

She frowned.

"I conned my way into your hospital room one evening directly after your accident."

"My father never said anything."

"He didn't know," Scott said then nodded at her incredulous look. "I managed to catch you alone during one of the rare moments he wasn't sitting vigil. I had to see you, know you were all right."

Sharise sat up on the chaise with a groan, squeezed her eyes shut against the dizziness. "And was I?"

"You weren't doing too well."

"After our fallout, I didn't think you'd care to remember I existed, much less come see me in the hospital."

"That fallout happened a long time ago."

"We didn't part on nice terms."

Scott nodded again, smiled at her without rancor or malice.

Staid, sensible Scott Slater, she told herself, still couldn't believe he was there in the flesh. More handsome than she remembered him being. Not that he'd been an intolerable troll as a teen. Sharise just couldn't recall him being this attractive. She'd always looked at him like a brother, even when they'd been going together.

Perverse, she admitted to herself. Even more perverse was the fact that this moment she wasn't feeling very sisterly towards him.

God, what was wrong with her?

"You were my first, Sharise," Scott murmured. "I could never forget you."

Did he have to remind her? Hell, she had forgotten him quite handily. Well, maybe not so handily.

"When I first heard about your accident-"

"You mean Dwyer?" she joked.

Scott grinned. "No, but now that you mention it..."

"Please, let's not. I'd rather talk about your-"

"Accident?"

She giggled and nodded.

"Happened a year after yours. I waited, but..." He shrugged, gave her a shy smile.

"You wouldn't have had to wait much longer. We got divorced after two years."

Scott guiltily raised a hand. "One," he admitted and they both shared a hardy laugh at their past marital woes.

"What happened?"

"Rebound. And you?" he countered.

"Still the same evasive Scott."

"I was never evasive with you."

"Aloof and elusive."

"I never hid anything from you." He gave her an expressive look, sweetly sober and sincere.

She felt herself melting inside. Uncomfortable, she hastily cleared her throat and shifted on the chaise.

"As I was saying, when I first heard about your accident, and then saw you in the hospital, I never thought you'd...I never thought I'd see you doing so well, up and around again."

"I wouldn't be if it hadn't been for Cayle," Sharise said.

"The young man I met earlier."

He said it like he had five or ten years on Cayle instead of just two. Sharise grinned at the irony, nodded. "Daddy hired him away from some renowned rehab center in White Plains," she explained. "The best thing he's ever done for me." She realized she meant it.

"He knows quality when he sees it," Scott said.

"And goes after it."

"Which brings us to why I'm here."

Sharise frowned at him again. "I wondered about what brought you back out to these parts all of a sudden."

"Aside from a very gracious invitation to one of Ella's delicious homecooked meals, nothing but business."

She arched a brow.

"Your father wants me to help him design a software program for his outfit."

"Well, I'll be..." So she'd finally gotten through to him after all her pestering? And how convenient and neat that it would be Scott's consulting firm to which her father would turn.

Too neat, Sharise told herself.

"You'll be seeing a lot of me in the next couple of months or so. I'll be setting up his system, acquainting him with his new playmates, getting him user-friendly."

Couple of months? Setting up her dad's system? Here? Now? Why now? Not now. She would wring her father's neck.

"Sharise?" Scott waved a hand in front of her face, smiled once he got her attention. "You look a million miles away."

"Only a thousand." She grinned. "So, you'll be staying for dinner this evening."

"You don't have a problem with that, do you? I was under the impression-"

"No problem at all. It's a surprise. A very pleasant one."

"I was hoping you'd feel that way." Scott leaned in and covered her mouth with his. He tentatively explored with his tongue and teeth, lightly nibbled her lips before pulling away. He caressed her face as he stared at her. "I've wanted to do that since I saw you earlier this evening."

Sharise could barely remember earlier this evening, wondered how much of a fool she had made of herself.

"Don't worry, you didn't do the lampshade-on-your-head dance on a table, if that's what you're thinking."

Sharise grimaced at Scott's joke, shook her head at his ESP. He had always been able to read her like no one else and Sharise wasn't too appreciative of that ability right now.

Scott noticed her look, mistook it as displeasure instead of the bewilderment that it was. "Sharise? I didn't mean to be forward. It's just that I...I've missed you."

She hadn't realized she'd missed him until just now but worried that she'd enjoyed his boldness more than she ought to have. She had enjoyed his kiss and she wanted him to kiss her again. Was afraid that he would.

Scott stood from the chaise, grinned down at her. "You'll be okay on your own now? Need any help to the-"

"I'm fine, Scott. Tell everyone I'll...I'll be down directly."

"You bet. See you then."

She watched his tall, broad-shouldered frame as he left, a familiar circle of warmth swirling in her belly. Only this time it was accompanied by a knife-like ache of desire.

What did all this mean for her and Cayle?

-

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

Once Sharise got off the elevator, she followed the familiar squeak-boomp, squeak-boomp to the gym. The cadence picked up speed, matching the thump of her own faltering steps before she sped her gait, using her crutches like a set of pole vaults, swinging her body between the braces as if they were a piece of exercise apparatus instead of walking aides.

Hindrances, Sharise told herself as she peeked into the room and found Cayle flying through the air with the greatest of tension, pushing his body like a mad man with a purpose. And it looked like that purpose was suicide.

She'd known he was upset but she'd had no idea just how great was his agitation until she saw him flinging his body above the horizontal bar with such force she thought he'd go through the ceiling if he let go.

Sharise silently watched him, afraid to interrupt his flow, afraid to shatter his concentration. She was afraid she might cause him to break his neck!

Cayle made one last revolution, released, rotated in the air three times before he came down hard on the mat. When he grabbed at an ankle then limped toward another piece of equipment, Sharise decided she needed to put a stop to his self-destruct mission.

"Hey Miller! Keep it up and you won't be healthy enough for the next Olympics. You'll break your neck before the qualification rounds."

He didn't crack a smile, stood between the parallel bars, grasped the ends and prepared to mount.

"C'mon Miller. Give it a rest. Just for a minute."

Cayle heaved himself inside, swung his legs up and over, sat astride the bars. He glowered at her as she made her way over and leaned against an adjacent bicycle.

"Whoo! You sure do put a body to work." She swiped at her brow with a palm then rested her crutches on the side of the bike and worriedly stared at him, searching her brain for a way to broach his earlier demeanor at dinner.

Throughout the entire meal he'd been sullen and broody, mechanically passing condiments and the breadbasket, speaking only when specifically addressed. He hadn't donated any of his famous quips or yarns to the dinner table conversation, had just sat and watched Keller and Scott hold court. He'd silently listened to the two men and Ella reminisce about the "good old times", all sharing their favorite remember-the-time-when-Sharise anecdotes, each person trying to outdo the last with accounts of her wild teen antics.

What must have been going through Cayle's mind? Sharise wondered. How alienated must he have felt?

She took in his grim expression now, feeling as if she had killed her mother. Again. Somehow, she thought, in the last couple of hours, she had managed to betray someone about whom she cared. "Can we talk?" Sharise asked.

Cayle just looked at her and worked his jaw muscles.

"Okay, I'll start..."

"No. Why don't I?" he said through his teeth and Sharise stared at him, surprised by his ferocity.

He had every right to be ruffled, she thought, but he seemed much angrier than the situation warranted. "Cayle, what's the matter with you?"

"As if you don't know."

"What...?"

He leapt down from the bars to confront her. "I don't like the idea of being bought and sold like a piece of property. No one does."

"What are you talk-"

"You damn well know what I'm talking about! How dare you presume you can take control of my life and the people in it to suit your impulses."

"Cayle, you're starting to worry me." She put a hand on his arm and he jerked away from her.

"First your father thinks he can buy me. Then when that doesn't work, he threatens and bullies me."

"Cayle-"

"And now you or him or both of you--I haven't quite figured out which of you is behind this--but now you're reaching out to my family." He poked her breastbone with his pointer, glared down at her. "I'll tell you this right now. It's going to stop. It stops right here and now. Understand me, Sharise? Understand?"

She scowled at him, slowly boiling. "What the hell are you ranting about?"

He looked at her.

"Maybe if I knew what you were ranting about-"

"You're really good at playing dumb. Maybe you should have gone into acting instead of-"

"All right! That tears it. I've had just about enough of this crap." She turned and reached for her crutches but Cayle swept them to the floor. "What do you think-"

He grabbed her chin, crushed her mouth beneath his so hard her lips smashed against her teeth. She pushed against his chest with her palms and he eased up a little, pulled back to look down at her. "Just who the hell do you think you are?" he bit out. "You think I'm some wind-up toy for hire? You think I just exist for your amusement? That you and your high-and-mighty father can buy me with your money!"

"Why are you being so mean, Cayle?" she asked, hurt.

He glared at her, seething.

"I swear I don't know what you're talking about!" she blurted, tears welling in her eyes.

He drew away more, frowned down at her. "Sharise, I..."

She hauled back a knee with all her might and only Cayle's instincts made him jerk away. She missed his crotch by mere inches. Her knee solidly impacted with a hipbone instead. She reeled past him, aiming for her crutches. Cayle grasped his side with one hand, lurched after her and caught Sharise's arm with the other.

"Get your hands off me!" She swung a fist at his head,
missed and stumbled to the mat when he ducked.

Cayle grabbed her legs, advanced up her body until he was straddling her.

"I said get your hands off me!" Sharise squirmed beneath him, wildly swiped at his face as she turned onto her back. Cayle caught her wrists, pinned her arms to the mat, over her head.

"Sharise, calm down. I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

"Get...off...me!" She bucked beneath him, her chest heaving as she glared up at him.
"You don't even know why you're apologizing. I don't even know why you were mad in the first place. I just know I want you to get off me." She sobbed.

"Not until you promise to calm down."

She scowled at him, tears streaming down her face. She was angrier than she'd ever been with him. The other times were mere pique. But he had just now accused her of something of which she knew she wasn't guilty. And she could see from his look that he was coming to realize it as well.

He bent his head to kiss her, like this would erase his behavior and make everything all right with her. Sharise averted her head and he buried his face in her exposed neck. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"A lotta fat good that does either of us now, you arrogant, inconsiderate jerk!"

"I didn't meant to...I didn't mean to jump you like that." He raised his head to look at her.

"I hate you," she whispered.

He nodded resignedly and grinned at her.

"Now are you going to let me up?"

He nodded again, released her and she sat up beside him, indignantly wiped at her face with the back of a hand as he watched her.

"You men are such...such assholes," she hissed. "Are you jealous of Scott? Is that what this is all about?"

Cayle shook his head. "Not exactly jealous. I..."

She arched a brow, prompting.

He took a deep breath, felt like an idiot now.

"Maybe it would help if you explained why you were so furious." She stared at him in awe, still shocked and reeling from the intensity of his outburst. If that had been his bad side, she never wanted to be on the other end of it again.

"Maybe it won't."

"I'm not going to sit here and play Charades with you, Miller. Either talk to me, or I'm outta here."

He sighed, sadly grinned at her tough girl pose as he raked a hand through his hair in a way that was becoming so achingly familiar to her. "Slater-"

"Even though you deny your jealous, I've already established he's at the root of all this."

He chuckled, shook his head. "No, it's not like that. It's his business. Slater Software Consultants. My mother...my mother just landed a job with his company."

"So?" Sharise stared at him before recollections flashcarded through her mind. Snippets of overheard conversations.

Inconsequential tidbits. Cayle on the phone with someone. She'd heard him mention Slater's name a couple of times but would never have made anything out of it. Before now.

Oh...Oh Damn. He'd thought...he must have been thinking....

Sharise stopped gaping long enough to give him an earnest look. "Cayle, I had nothing to do with your mother getting her job. I admit, I barely remember you saying the name 'Slater' a couple of times. But I never made the connection." He had to believe her, she thought. This was one time she was actually innocent of any wrongdoing.

She would kill her father for this, Sharise told herself now. She'd do it nice and slow. Make him suffer, she decided.

"You look like you're plotting a body's murder," Cayle observed as he looked at her.

Sharise smiled. "Don't worry. It's not yours."

"Good to hear it." He laughed. "So...um...I guess you don't want to come with me to my mama's for dinner?"

"Are you taking back your invitation?"

He shook his head. "No. Still stands."

"Well, thanks. I feel so wanted," Sharise drawled.

Cayle laughed. "It's just that I didn't think you'd remember. And I definitely figured you wouldn't want to go anywhere with me now. Mother's or not."

"I take it this dinner is being held in observance of your mother landing the job? Like a celebration?"

Cayle nodded. "A double celebration, actually. Her new job and your walking."

Sharise goggled, quickly gathered herself. "Well, I'm...I'm honored to be included," she said, uncharacteristically humble.

"My brother twisted my arm. Otherwise..."

"I'll show you arm-twisting, Miller." She flung an arm around his neck, glad they had gotten passed this hump as she pulled him close to kiss his cheek. "No way am I letting you renege. You're stuck with me."

"Is that a threat?"

She wrestled him back against the mat, sat astride his legs and stared down at him. "That..." She slowly lowered her head, "...is..." Covered his mouth with hers in an easy, sensuous kiss. "...a promise," she murmured, dipped her head again, thrust in her tongue and he met it with his. She reached down her hands, fumbled with his belt.

"This isn't a good idea," Cayle panted as he helped her unbuckle then struggled out of his jeans.

"It never is for you." Sharise laughed, leaned in to try and kiss him into submission.

"I mean...I don't feel right doing it...here like thi-"

"Shut up, Miller," she whispered. "Kiss me."

He did.

-

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

Keller whistled and hummed "Mack The Knife" as he winnowed his client files, tried to decide which ones he would take with him, ultimately including in his new data base, and which ones he could afford to let go and would finally chuck.

He was immensely pleased with himself and even Sharise--who had so far surprised him by not calling him to task for his Scott stunt, but should be arriving any minute to do just this by his calculations--would not be able to ruin his mood.

Four, three, two...

Sharise whacked the door open with a palm and stormed over to her father's desk.

A fantastic feat for someone on a pair of crutches, Keller thought and recanted his previous notion as he looked down the barrel of his daughter's rage. Maybe she could ruin his mood.

"I want to know exactly what you thought you were doing by inviting Scott over here for dinner the other night!"

"Good afternoon, dear. And how has your day gone so far? Did you and Cayle have a good sess-"

"Don't give me the innocent routine, Dad! How could you do it without consulting me?"

"I had no idea I needed your permission to invite an old friend over for dinner. To do anything, actually, Sharise."

"You know what I mean. What'd you think you were doing?"

"I thought I was doing what you've been pestering me to do for the last several years now. You should be flattered I finally

took your advice."

Sharise patiently sighed, leaned on her crutches, closed her eyes and spread her fingers wide through long auburn waves.

Worried, Keller leaned forward in his chair. He knew she and Cayle were still following a rigorous workout program. But she looked tired from more than just physical exertion.

Perhaps it was time to reconsider just how much intensive rehabilitation his daughter needed, Keller told himself now. It was definitely time to re-evaluate the conditions of Mr. Miller's employment.

Sharise opened her eyes and fixed him with a look that said she knew exactly where his thoughts were going. "Don't think your bringing Scott into the picture is going to change things between Cayle and I, Dad."

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're referring to, Reese."

"I'm sure you do."

"It's no secret the young man has effected a miraculous recovery. And I thank him and God every day for bringing you back to me. To us."

"Dad--"

"But I'm certain that even you would agree his services are no longer needed. At least not his therapeutic duties."

Sharise shook her head and chuckled. "I said it before and I'll say it again. You really are some piece of work. Just get right to the point."

"I see no reason to beat around the bush."

"No one would ever accuse you of that," Sharise mumbled and her father continued as if she hadn't spoken. "And unless you have some other plans for Cayle that I should know about..."

"Oh, I have plans for him. Would you like me to share them with y--"

"Please Sharise." Keller put up a hand in a "Stop" sign. "You needn't be crude."

"Dad, please. I'm twenty-nine years old."

"And that's no excuse for ill manners. I raised you better."

"I am what you made me."

"Don't lay the blame for your disagreeable behavior on me. I'm not the one who flounced in here on her high horse, flinging around snide remarks like darts."

Sharise wearily raised a hand to a temple and massaged with her fingers. "I didn't come in here to argue with you."

"Pardon me. I was under the impression you had." Keller stood, stalked from behind his desk and circled it once before settling on an edge of the curving oak. He didn't want to drag this on, tried to change the subject when he finally noticed his daughter's odd appearance for the first time since she had banged into his office. "You look rather nice," he commented as his eyes traveled the length of her indigo maxi. Smocked bodice with a jewel neckline and empire waist in crepe de chine and satin Mary Jane's to match. Elegance with a casual flair.

To say her look was anything except unusual would have been an understatement. In fact, Keller couldn't remember his daughter

looking so soft and subtly sensual in a long time. Before the accident, the girl had lived in threadbare jeans, T-shirts and sweats--staples of a distastefully androgynous grunge/hip-hop wardrobe.

"In fact, you look quite beautiful," he murmured, giving her the achingly earnest look a father might grant a daughter going out on her senior prom.

"Thank you."

"I don't remember seeing it before. Is it new?"

"This old thing?" Sharise downplayed as she swiped at the skirt of the dress.

"Old thing." Keller smirked. "What's the occasion?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

Sharise shrugged, averted her gaze.

"You're blushing!" Keller blurted, didn't know what shocked him more: the ruddy color in her cheeks or her outfit.

"Don't be silly." She turned from him to leave.

"And where are we off to, young lady?"

Sharise turned on her crutches, stared at him. "Daddy, I'm not a teenager. I don't have to answer to--"

"I am just curious, Sharise. Nothing more."

"If you must know, Cayle has invited me over to his mother's for dinner."

Keller arched a brow, said nothing as he took in his daughter's elevated chin. The last thing he wanted to do now was alienate or let her know she had gotten under his skin. He was already skating on thin ice with her. But his concern was like a pair of pliers working on his jaw hinges.

"So, is this some kind of special event I should be aware of?" Keller asked, saw his daughter's instantaneous shutdown and lockout as she stiffened her back, stood straighter and slid her chin up another notch before turning and heading for the door.

"Nothing special at all," Sharise flung over a shoulder before leaving.

Keller let it go, knew better than to push her.

At least not now.

* * *

The term "typical female" flashed through Cayle's brain as he sat in the front seat of his Blazer waiting for Sharise. He knew it was a misnomer and quickly got it out of his head because the biggest mistake he could ever make in his life was to put Ms. Keller into any category labeled "typical". He knew the moment he entertained such a notion she would do something to prove him wrong, reveal him a fool, surprising him with her passion and indignation one minute then turning him upside-down with her acquiescence and magnanimity the next.

Cayle smiled as he envisioned her the way she had been a few days ago, before and after their fight. Fire and ice. Affectionate and wanton. Forgivably relentless. Bittersweet.

This situation was so dangerous. He had genuine feelings for her, feelings that were growing by the second. Not love--no way, no how, he would never succumb to that illusion again--but

something almost as deep and close enough to scare him. Something that made him weak when he thought about losing it as he knew he eventually would, especially if her father had anything to say about it.

Sharise was on her feet now, would not need his therapeutic services much longer. And knowing Keller as he did, Cayle was sure the man would waste no time in giving him his pink walking papers. The man had already started walking a wide berth around him, treating him with the cool distance prison inmates and guards reserved for the condemned on death row.

And he already had a replacement lined up: Scott Slater.

The name and all it implied left a nasty taste in Cayle's mouth, made even nastier because he couldn't find a valid reason to hate the guy.

He was handsome and intelligent, his charming lack of pretension belying his lofty station. Unlike Keller he wore his wealth with the modesty of one who knows he belongs to that exclusive club and knows he always will.

He spoke fondly and without restraint of the times he had spent at the Keller household, had something genuinely nice or flattering to say about everyone in it.

Cayle hadn't missed the secret looks Scott had thrown across the table at Sharise all during dinner, wasn't sure if she'd returned anything that could be construed as more than the innocent amenities of good breeding.

He was sure of one thing. They had shared memories--of rough

times and smooth, good times and bad. They shared a history, their past lives irrevocably linked. All of which made Scott Slater the most formidable and dangerous of contenders: an appealing ex who harbored powerful feelings for his first.

The kitchen door now banged shut behind Sharise and Ella.

Cayle watched as the older woman hugged the younger to her breast, lovingly smoothing her hair then kissing her cheek before scooting her along. As if she were a mother sending her baby off on her first Big Date.

He watched Sharise make her way over to the Blazer. Delicate and feminine in her long dress.

She wore maxis well, he thought, seemed to realize it and capitalized on it every chance she got when she was around him. As if she sensed his fetish for unwrapping gifts.

Cayle got out of the SUV to meet her halfway, leaned in and gave her a quick peck on the cheek as he walked her to the Blazer and opened the passenger side door for her.

He got in on the driver's side, watched her settle in--unruffling, flattening and tucking her skirts around her thighs and legs with much ado.

Sharise looked up at him when he didn't start the SUV right away. "What?"

He smiled and shook his head as he finally keyed the ignition. "Just admiring the view."

She blushed and giggled as she slapped his hand like a retiring debutante from the antebellum south.

He wouldn't let her go without a fight, Cayle told himself suddenly. He would take on all comers--the arrogant father and the wealthy sainted flame from the past included.

* * *

From the moment she had walked through the door earlier in the evening until now, Sharise had been able to do no right for Dianne Miller.

It wouldn't have been so terrible if she had been able to pinpoint one single word, one single miscue, and one tiny faux pas she had committed that could have caused the rancor. Trouble was, she couldn't.

Nonetheless, Cayle's mother seemed to think Sharise was the second coming of Eve or the anti-Christ, and treated her with the same barely veiled hostility Sharise had only experienced from one other mother in her life: Vivian Slater.

"She's not usually so...so sensitive," Zach said now, trying to reassure Sharise after his mother had abruptly excused herself from the table to rush off to the kitchen.

Sharise still gaped after her and Cayle, who'd immediately followed. "I don't understand. Was it something I said?"

Zach chuckled at her cliché. "You could say that." And when he wouldn't volunteer anymore, Sharise raised her brows, silently coaxing him.

"Cayle's a...he's kind of a...recovering alcoholic."

And how could she have possibly known this? Sharise wondered, remembering the way she had joked about Cayle's being a fuddy-duddy and a party pooper for not imbibing when he'd joined his brother's toast to their mother with a glass of Coke on ice instead of the champagne everyone else was consuming.

She'd goaded and teased, never once noticing Mrs. Miller's discomfiture and anger.

God, what must the woman be thinking of her? That she was some ill-mannered Trailer Park Refugee, unfit for her youngest baby boy?

"He didn't tell you," Zach said at her horrified silence.

Sharise shook her head, still flabbergasted at the new intelligence on her lover, now recalling earlier hints. At the picnic when he'd looked at her like an ant who'd crawled across their food when she'd pulled out the jeroboam. Later, when he'd said he "didn't have a taste for it."

He'd gently hinted, had done everything except told her. And she'd overlooked the gentle hints, so wrapped up in getting him--getting into his pants--that she hadn't heard him.

Sharise groaned and threw her hands over her face. "I feel like such an ass."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. It's not your fault he didn't tell you," Zach said by way of apologizing. "I'm surprised he hadn't covered this with you already."

And when would he have had a chance to? Sharise wondered. Squeezed in between their first-of-many fights? Before or after he had thought he'd drowned her? After they'd made love? Or even better, after Scott's momentous arrival?

Really, there'd never been any opportune moment and it wasn't exactly something he could have blurted out over dinner. And even though Sharise realized all this, her knowledge did nothing to ease the sting of Cayle's omission.

"I'm sure he would have told you sooner or later," Zach said, as if sensing her train of thoughts.

Sharise knew he was right, knew that Cayle wasn't the type to intentionally keep something so important from her.

She glanced over her shoulder, wondered what was taking them so long in the kitchen. How long did it take a mother to rip apart her son's romantic interest?

"She'll get over it," Zach assured

Yeah, but will I?

-

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

Cayle hadn't said a word to Sharise since right after he'd returned from the kitchen with his mother earlier in the evening. Not during the rest of dinner. Not during after-dinner coffee and pound cake and ice cream. Didn't speak to her.

Zach, the dear sweet older brother, had been her link to the inside track, speaking to her when no one else would, dragging her into conversations no matter the issue, attempting to keep her abreast, including her in the events of their lives.

Now that dinner was over, her command performance at the Millers a mere memory, Sharise expected the silent treatment to end any minute.

She was close to angry but she didn't know at whom this emotion should be directed or upon whom it should be wasted. Cayle's mother for her understandable defection at dinner? Cayle for treating her like a pariah? Herself for agreeing to come to the stupid celebration dinner in the first place?

Cayle closed the door on his side and she felt him staring at her as he put his key in the Blazer's ignition.

"You're mad at me."

She turned to glare at him, said nothing.

He sighed. "I'm sorry."

"What for this time?"

"I'm not really sure but I figure since you're giving me the evil eye with a dash of the silent treatment, I must have-"

"I'm giving you the silent treatment?" Sharise bristled. "You haven't said 'Boo' or 'Kiss my ass, Sharise' since we..."

since your...since--"

"You didn't exactly look like you were ready for dinner table conversation, especially from me. I figured I'd let you cool off and--"

She roughly cupped his face and pulled him close. "You've been doing a lot of figuring lately. I wish you would have just said something to me."

He grimaced. "About the drinking?"

"The drinking, your mother, your withdrawal at dinner. Everything, dammit! Instead you were quiet, barely talking to me and making me think I had done something wrong."

"You didn't."

"And if I did, it was only because I'd had no idea. I didn't know. Am I supposed to read your mind?"

"Sharise, will you please stop venting for one minute."

"Huh?"

"You're right. I should have said something to you. I just didn't know what that should have been after what my mother...after the way my mother treated you."

"She didn't do anything." She shrugged, trying to play off her chagrin.

"She hurt you, Sharise. I know she did. And I wish I had an explanation or an excuse for her behavior, but I don't. I've just never seen her act that way before."

"It's okay. I seem to have that effect on mothers. I just rub them the wrong way, bring out the worst in them."

Cayle laughed, reached over to smooth her cheek with a palm. "Forgive me?"

"Can you forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive, brother Chip."

Sharise giggled at his allusion to the solicitous and super polite chipmunk brothers, Chip and Dale, but quickly became serious again. "I am so sorry, Cayle. I didn't know. Can you? Forgive me?"

"It was an honest mistake. No harm done."

"How can you say that? Your mother probably thinks I'm some cretinous obnoxious wicked piece of sludge."

Cayle reached around her back, pulled her close against his side, kissed the top of her head.

Sharise looked at him when he didn't refute. "Does she?"

"Not sludge."

She chuckled, punched him in an arm and he put a finger under her chin, tilted up her head to tenderly kiss her mouth. "What's important is what I think."

"And you don't think I'm some cretinous obnoxious wicked piece of sludge?"

"Not anymore."

* * *

Cayle took full advantage of their freedom from the estate, decided to take Sharise out on the town as much as either of their depleted emotional and physical energy levels would allow. He had no real plans, only wanted to prolong the night and show

Sharise a good time.

He took her to one of his favorite haunts in the Village: Club Wha? on Bleeker, a combination dinner and music/comedy joint that catered to all types--the Brooks Brothers and the Gappers, hip-hoppers and punk rockers--from the inner city and suburbs and all walks of life in between.

Sharise was surprised he knew such a spot existed and more shocked he seemed to fit right in with every sort frequenting the place and being entertained by the blue and raunchy acts.

From the first moment they arrived, Cayle circulated like a seasoned nightclub entertainer himself, dropping wisdom to four young hip-hop kids at one table near the entrance then knowledgeably discussing the stock market and international politics with several preppies at a table near the stage.

Cayle finagled a prime table adjacent this group, facing center stage and just as the evening's headliner went on. He and Sharise ensconced themselves on cheap squeaky vinyl chairs, tried to stay out of range of the young comic's sharp, wicked tongue.

He played the dozens with several people who'd heckled him from surrounding tables before he pushed on to more fertile ground, snapping on inept politicians, crime in New

York, the miserable state of the world's economy and, finally, O.J.'s second "Trial of the Century".

After a half-an-hour had past, Cayle helped Sharise out of her seat and led her to calmer, quieter territory at an isolated booth in the dining area.

"You never cease to amaze me," Sharise commented once they were seated and had their menus in hand.

"That I'm still hungry after my mama's humongous meal?"

She shook her head. "Just...just you being you, I guess."

He frowned at her, glanced over his menu. "Are you going to order? Believe it or not, I am still hungry. My mama threw down but that was hours ago and-"

"Okay. You don't have to do anymore convincing. I'm up for some dessert. If you'll share it with me."

He leered at her over his menu, broke her out into gales of laughter as he put it down and waved over one of the waitresses.

When Sharise saw the lithe young woman slinking over in her tight red T-shirt with the club's logo emblazoned across her perky breasts and her full bottom swishing in form-fitting black Levi's, she sank down in her chair. She wanted to melt into the floorboards as she grabbed her crutches from against the booth and easily slid them down under the table. But she'd settle for a little invisibility.

Cayle wouldn't oblige, frowned at her and opened his mouth to question. Sharise kicked him just as Ms. Perky made it over.

"Reese? Reese Keller!"

"Hey Jetta!" Sharise greeted more cheerfully than she felt, watching Cayle from the corner of an eye as he grit his teeth, swallowed a yelp of agony and rubbed his shin under the table.

This was not the way she had wanted to make her way back into circulation. She probably should have thought about it before now but had seen no harm in Cayle's suggestion of a night out. Had welcomed it.

"Girl, how've you been?" Jetta asked.

"Pretty good," Sharise said and meant at least this.

She didn't not like Jetta, wasn't displeased to see the girl. Jetta had always been Sharise's favorite dancer out of their clique. Always seeing the bright side of every situation, she'd been Sharise's-everyone's--best cheerleader and confidante.

But Sharise had turned her away at the hospital the one time the kid had come out to see her a little after she'd been taken out of Intensive Care. And after that.... Sharise had always regretted her surliness, the way she had treated the friends and loved ones she'd needed the most right after the accident. But there was nothing she could do about it all. Except what she was doing now, lend an ear. Which was easy to do with Jetta since she was such a little chatterbox, always had been.

"...We heard about the accident right after you got the part and then, nothing. You just dropped out of sight like Hoffa."

"Not quite." Sharise grinned.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're okay." Jetta leaned in, gave Sharise a gentle hug. "You ain't nothin' but skin and bones, girl. We need to fatten you up, but not too much if you're going to make a comeback with the troupe. Chil' so much's been goin' on you wouldn't believe..." Jetta waved at her. "After you and Del wiped out the night of the party, Kevin went on a binge to blow Nancy Reagan's mind."

"No!"

Jetta quickly nodded to confirm. "Got himself kicked right outta the show. So you know Mr. Glaser was p-ohhed. Three principals out in the span of a month. He was frantic."

"But you guys still managed to get the show up and running."

"We're doing okay, but it wasn't the same, you know. All the flavor and spice was gone."

"You were still in it."

"Yeah, well you know. There's but so much a body can do by its lonesome." Jetta playfully blew on and wiped her fingernails across the front of her shirt. "I needed the team."

Sharise grinned, thought how much Jetta sounded like Ella, and had always reminded her of Ella's youngest daughter: tough, no-nonsense, pretty, flamboyantly talented and as sharp as the box cutter she carried around in her pocket for "just such an occasion."

"I've been reading the reviews. You're doing pretty well without 'the team', Ms. Thang."

Jetta shrugged, finally turned her attention to Cayle on her right. She pleasantly smiled. "I'm sorry I'm monopolizing all her time, but we haven't rapped in so long."

"No problem." Cayle grinned.

Jetta turned back to Sharise with a fresh gleam in her eyes. She growled under her breath as much as she could--which with Miss Loud and Nasty Jetta, wasn't enough--and Sharise laughed when the younger woman's eyebrows inquiringly shot up.

"Jetta Michaels, this is Cayle Miller my...my physical."

Cayle arched a brow at the omission but shook Jetta's outstretched hand without comment.

"Nice to meet you, Cayle."

"Same here."

Jetta put a hand on her hip, scowled down at him. "So, you been takin' care of m' girl, huh?"

"Trying."

"Cause she's a little on the light side."

Cayle helplessly laughed, liked the girl's audacity. "I think Reese will always be on the light side."

Jetta nodded. "That's true enough," she agreed. "Cause I did always used to hate her for her tiny tight little figure. No wiggle, no jiggle. Unlike me."

"You wiggle and jiggle in all the right places."

Jetta brightened. "You think so?"

"Definitely."

Sharise cleared her throat and Jetta turned back to her, slapped her arm. "Girl, keep him. He's cute and smart."

"Hmph." Sharise smirked, but her pique seemed to go right over Jetta's head. Homegirl just continued as if Sharise hadn't grunted.

"Know whose part is up for grabs again?"

Sharise frowned. "Whose?"

"The part you beat all those other girls out for. Chil' the principal is leaving."

"Really?"

"Yours truly is going to be in there for the open call."

"Open?" Sharise gaped.

"So I know you're coming."

Sharise closed her mouth, still shocked.

"C'mon girl. I need you there to give me some competition. Keep me on my toes."

"What if I get it?"

"More power to you. Cause I'ma be on your tail the whole time. C'mon, it'll be like ol' times."

"I don't know..." Sharise shrugged, threw Cayle a questioning look.

Jetta turned back to Cayle, bent and hooked an arm in one of his as she batted her lashes at him. "Oh, c'mon. You can spare her for a few hours one day, can't you? I need her for a while."

Cayle chuckled.

"I'll go," Sharise stated. "When is it?"

"Yo Jetta! What up?" A young B-boy balancing a couple of loaded trays yelled at her from the kitchen area. "Table four, girl. Git bizzzy!"

"Yeah, yeah. Comin'." Jetta waved at him, ripped off a receipt from her pad and hurriedly wrote on the back. "This is the place, date and time." She handed the paper to Sharise, leaned in, hugged her again and pecked her cheek. "Hope I see you there. I bettah see you there, girl." She turned back to Cayle. "Take care of her, or I'm comin' after you." She playfully punched his arm. "Peace guys!" Then she was off.

* * *

"It's a good thing you only live on the second floor!" Sharise huffed as she collapsed against the leather sofa cushions.

"What're you complaining about, Miss? I carried you all the way up. You didn't do any work."

"I worked. Holding on to you."

"Yeah."

"Besides, didn't we establish I'm not that heavy? I'm so light. Remember?"

"Oh-oh," Cayle mumbled as he busied himself cutting on the halogen lamp and peeking at his answering machine. The message light blinked three times. He pressed "Play" and slanted a look at his watch. He had a feeling he knew whom the messages were from and the next few seconds proved him correct.

"I didn't know this was going to be a slumber party you were taking my daughter to, Cayle. I expect to hear from you as soon as you get this message."

Sharise shook her head and laughed. "Dear old Dad."

"I don't know about the 'dear' part." Cayle rolled his eyes as he got a soda from the fridge. He filled two tumblers with Coke and ice, made his way back to the living room as his mother's voice sweetly filled the air.

"Cayle honey, I just called to see if you made it in okay. You left here in such a huff. And I...I wanted to apologize for

my...my behavior and attitude.... I guess she's all right but I...she's just not what I expected of you. She's so...so...."

Sharise glowered and whipped out a hand to stop Cayle from shutting off the machine as she perked up her ears to hear more.

"...and uppity, for want of a better description..."

"Raw! The nerve. Who does she think-"

"Your father would probably have said 'uncouth'."

Sharise laughed, surprised she could after Dianne's dig.

"...anyway, Cayle, give me a call when you get some free time. Love ya."

"How sweet." Sharise smirked as the next message came on.

"Cayle, I thought better of you. Frankly, I find this irresponsible behavior of yours quite unacceptable and if it wasn't for Ella I would have already called the poli-"

Cayle pressed "Stop" then erased all the messages.

"No fair. I listened to your mom," Sharise teased.

"Yeah, but she only left one."

"One was enough."

Cayle chuckled as he sat beside her, handed her a tumbler.

Sharise stared at him as she sipped.

"What?" he asked.

"I was thinking."

"About? Oh no, let me gue-"

"You know you're in the doghouse."

"What'd I do now?"

"Not so much you. But you didn't...help matters."

"She's your friend."

"She couldn't wait to put her hands on you."

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

Oh, his carefree innocence pissed her. She wanted to scream at him. How could he not have noticed? Jetta had been salivating over him from the introductions on.

"Are you plotting her death or mine?" Cayle smiled.

"I haven't decided yet."

"I was just being friendly."

"Jetta's friendly enough for everyone." Sharise hated herself for sounding so peeved. She really did like Jetta. But not when it came to the girl fawning all over Cayle. Now that was intolerable.

"Look Sharise, I didn't want to be rude, that's all."

"Oh, you certainly weren't that. 'You wiggle and jiggle in all the right places', huh?"

Cayle blushed. "I was being nice," he muttered.

"Hmph."

"Jealous?" Cayle took a gulp of his Coke.

"Me? Now why would I be jealous? Or even insecure. I mean, we're such a perfect couple. My father only wants to send my 'irresponsible' lover to jail. My lover's mother thinks I'm 'raw and uppity' trash. My dad adores you. Your mom is enchanted with me. We're a match made in hellven!"

Cayle spewed soda across the room, choking on his laugh. He put his tumbler down on a coaster, grabbed a Kleenex from the box on the glass table and wiped his chin as Sharise glared at him.

"I'm glad you think this is so funny."

"Not this. You." He put an arm around her, pulled her close and kissed her head like he had earlier in the SUV.

Had that only been mere hours ago? Sharise wondered.

"You almost made me choke."

"Serves you right." She pouted.

"You wiggle and jiggle in all the right and wrong places," Cayle murmured as he guided her back against the sofa. "How's that?" He kissed her neck, undid the top buttons on her dress.

"Hmm...you're getting there."

"And no one wears a maxi quite as sexily as you do." He tenderly caressed and kissed each breast.

"Better."

He went to work on her nipples until each proudly pebbled, glanced up into the storm slowly receding from her slate eyes, leaving them the mild silvery shade of the sky right before the sun comes through after a rain. Her lazy smile as she returned his stare, turned his heart to butter. "Can I sleep in the house tonight?"

Sharise giggled. "Miller, you can even sleep in the bed with me tonight."

-

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

Sharise woke before him, her new internal clock coercing her from sleep, her increasing curiosity propelling her out of bed.

She wanted to explore, see and feel Cayle Miller. Feel him, his place, where he had hung and cooled out before an overbearing father, his spoiled brat daughter and a charming

housekeeper had invaded his life. Where he had gone for refuge when Sharise had run him away from the estate.

So long ago, she thought. It seemed like a lifetime instead of months. So much had happened with her, changed for her. For the better. Because of him.

Sharise reached for a crutch, stumbled from the bed as quietly as she could. She froze at the foot of the bed when Cayle sighed in his sleep, turned from his back and onto his side, facing her. She glanced at him over her shoulder, waited for him to reach out but he didn't, only kept his eyes closed and settled back into his slumber.

Sharise let out the breath she'd been holding, stood and hitched toward the door leaning on just the one crutch. Her gait wasn't as smooth as it could have been, not as light as it used to be, but it was getting there. Hell, just months ago, she'd been wallowing away in a chair, she told herself. This was quite an improvement.

She made it to the living room, poking her nose everywhere like a hound-dog whose caught the scent of a fox.

She went from corner to corner, looked in nooks and crannies and smoothed her hand over wood and glass surfaces as if she could absorb his aura, easily discover new sides and deeper aspects without having to ask him. Afraid to ask him.

He seemed like the secretive type, like he would tell her something important only under duress, never volunteer it, especially if he thought revealing the information would do more harm than good.

These thoughts struck Sharise as she ran her hand along framed pictures showing him, his mother and Zach in a group shot at Cayle's college graduation.

There were several other photos--of the trio at family outings, holiday parties--exhibiting a close-knit clan of mother and her two sons. But no father in any of the shots.

Remy? Sharise recalled the name, wondered why Cayle didn't refer to the man as "Dad."

Geesh, as much as she sometimes wanted to strangle her own father, Sharise could think of Thomas Keller as nothing but "Dad." Bad or good, right or wrong, he would always be her father.

Sharise got a warm feeling in her chest when she thought about her dad, unnerved by her sudden realization: being around Cayle and his things brought out the mushy and sentimental in her, made her feel weak and needy--character traits she abhorred in others but especially abhorred in herself.

"Get your fill?"

Sharise pivoted and saw Cayle leaning against the door

frame, arms folded across his bare chest, clad in a pair of threadbare Levi's. She fumbled the picture frame in her hand and he rushed over to catch it before it hit the floor.

"Oh...I'm sorry!"

He replaced the picture to the shelf. "No harm done."

She looked at him and frowned, baffled by his serenity. "Have you always been so cool-headed?" she blurted.

He arched a brow, put a palm on his chest and grinned. "You're calling me cool-headed? The man who unceremoniously dumped a semi-paraplegic into a twenty-foot pool and almost drowned her?"

Sharise giggled, shaking her head at the memory. She couldn't believe she had been such an outrageously spoiled brat. She was lucky he hadn't done worse than the dunking. Lord knows she had deserved it. "Have you always been so collected?"

Cayle shook his head, gave her an ironic look. "Took a lot of time and practice before I became the wise and calm Grasshopper you see before you." He bowed and Sharise laughed, slapped his arm.

"See what I mean? You always have a comeback, a quip."

"It helps to have a good sense of humor in my job."

"Especially when you're handling someone like me?"

He shrugged and grinned. "Remember, you said it, I didn't." He slid an arm around her back and led her to the sofa. Sharise compliantly followed and plopped in a cozy well-worn corner.

"So?" She looked at him as he sat down beside her.

"So what?"

"Where'd you learn to be so wise, Grasshopper?"

"I guess Zach rubbed off on me somewhere along the line. He's always been my...my rock. My calm eye in the middle of a storm. Him and my mom."

Sharise nodded, envied his family ties. A brother to emulate and be protected by. A mother to soothe scraped knees and defend him against his father's dictatorial presumption.

"So, did you find what you were looking for earlier?" Cayle asked now, interrupting her thoughts.

Sharise shook her head. "Some, but I'm still looking."

"Should I be worried?"

"Should you?"

"Whenever a woman starts poking around your personal stuff, it means trouble."

"You don't have anymore skeletons you haven't told me about, do you?"

"Not that I know of. Although Zach could probably make a liar outta me on that." He looked at her and chuckled.

"I like Zach. At least he didn't treat me like a leper."

"Oh-oh..."

"Don't worry. I won't press it."

"Thank God for that."

"But I do think we should call my father."

Cayle's eyebrows shot up. "What for?"

"Cayle, he's worried about me. He needs-"

"Ella will keep him from calling out the dogs." Cayle wrapped his arms around her, pulled her close and kissed a cheek. "Besides, I need to talk to you about something."

"Sounds serious." Sharise snuggled in his arms, feeling at home as she deeply inhaled his scent--a blending of him and the leftover aroma of the sandalwood cologne he wore.

"Should I be worried now?"

"I'm worried enough for the both of us," Cayle said and she grimaced. "I hope you know what you're doing."

She knew what he meant immediately. "The audition?"

He nodded.

"I do."

"It's only a couple of weeks away. That's not a lot of time for you to prepare."

"Don't you have faith in me?"

"I do but I just don't-"

"Want me to move too fast," she finished for him and sat up to peck his nose. "Don't you know by now that's the only way I know how to operate?"

"I worry about you."

"That's sweet but don't. I'll be fine. Besides, I need to get back in the swing."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Why? You can sit back and enjoy your leisure. You don't have to-"

"Work?"

Sheepishly, Cayle nodded.

"It's not work. It's...it's..."

He leaned over to bury her mouth beneath his then whispered, "I think I understand."

"Do you?" She looked at him, hungry for his approval, his empathy, wanting him to know that she wasn't just an insipid and aimless debutante getting a free ride from her rich father. Wanting him to know she had a purpose of her own.

Cayle nodded. "It's your passion. You have to do it."

She nodded. "If someone took it away from me, I think I'd...I might die."

"Let's not get drastic. You're a survivor."

"Yeah, but it would be that much more difficult to survive if someone took away my dancing. It's my... direction. And it took me a while to find one, believe me."

He smiled, feeling the same way about his "calling" as a physical therapist.

Sharise kissed his cheek and stood. "We'd better get this show on the road."

Cayle arched a brow, stood next to her.

"Calling my dad."

"Aw, we could let him sweat a little more longer. Won't hurt him none."

She giggled. "I like your thinking, Miller. You're evil. And to think, I had you pegged as a good guy."

"Still am." Cayle seized her in his arms, pulled her against him to feel his arousal. "It's you who brings out the bad in me," he murmured, lowered his head for a kiss. "And I think turnabout is fair play, Your Shariseness." He lifted her in his arms, carried her to his bedroom as she slid her arms around his neck.

"As I said before, I like your thinking, Miller."

* * *

From the first minute when Scott had arrived at nine this morning until now, Keller had been giving him only half an ear, almost less than this much of his brain.

They'd shared a couple of gibes about Keller's prehistoric approach to business before Scott had dug in to explain exactly what he hoped to accomplish for Keller by helping him computerize his firm.

The younger man's entire approach was informative and detailed dissertation.

"See Thom, over the last decade there has been dramatic growth in various market segments of wireless communications, which has sparked increased activity in the technical, business and regulatory aspects of the industry."

"Mmm-hmm."

"What I want to do with you is focus on the fundamental principles, technologies, and spectrum-sharing issues and applications in the wireless communications field."

"Mmm-hmm."

"The best course I see for you at this juncture is to help you develop an air. The package I'm going to design for you is especially suited for entrepreneurs like yourself and other small business managers and corporations looking to develop an online global business presence. You'll be able to utilize e-mail, the World Wide Web as well as other sources to reach both new and established customers and clients."

Keller nodded, reminded himself not to yawn.

Though his excitement about computers was infectious, Scott's presentation skills left a little to be desired. Keller wanted to get past all this to the meat and potatoes, see how he would be able to use the program to compose and edit advertising and marketing materials designed to be integrated into web sites and home pages, develop order forms, product/service and information forms, even online surveys.

It was at this point of Scott's delivery when Keller's interest had been at its highest, and he had been eager to get hands-on experience.

At least it was all something to keep his mind occupied and off of where were Sharise and Cayle. And God knows he didn't want to think about what the two of them were doing.

Several times during the previous evening Ella had had to calm him down and literally restrain him from calling the authorities.

"...by my introducing computer organization and capabilities to-"

"Scott, will you excuse me for a moment?" Keller squeezed the younger man's shoulder as he passed him on his way out of the office. He'd heard Cayle's SUV in the driveway.

Ella intercepted him on the way to the front door. "Now Mr. Keller, you leave those two youngins alone." She blocked his path, put her palms on his chest and gave him her most stern, evil eye. It had always worked with her youngins and grands.

"El-"

"At least let 'em get in and settle down."

"Settle down? I should think they've done quite enough of this during their little sleep-over in the city."

"They're both grown. And you'll look like a fool reprimandin' 'em as if they're teenagers who've broken a curfew. They ain't kids, you know."

"I know that, Ella..."

The large ebony door opened behind Ella and Cayle entered the towering vestibule behind Sharise.

Ella headed off Keller, went to Sharise, grabbed the girl by an arm before the child could open her mouth and dragged her to the dining room, one crutch and all.

Keller glowered at Cayle; impressed that Sharise had just walked by him on one crutch and not two, ambivalent because it seemed every time she went out with Cayle she returned stronger and more self-supporting than when she'd left.

How could he be angry about progress? How could he not? he wondered now as he faced the younger man.

"Sir, I can explai-"

"You're lucky Ella's so fond of you, Cayle."

"I understand your concern, Mr. Keller. But Sharise is a grown woman and she wa-"

"I am sick to death of everyone telling me how grown and old Sharise is. She may not be a little girl but she is my daughter. My child. She always will be. And until you have one of your own, young man, you don't have a case to plead with me!"

Cayle snapped shut his mouth, recognizing the wrath of a worried father and that he himself didn't have a leg on which to stand. He knew that Keller was right.

Keller sighed, drew a hand through his hair. "We need to talk about your employment here, Cayle."

"If it's about last night..."

Keller wearily shook his head. "No, of course not. I should have spoken to you sooner as I don't want my reasons misconstrued as pique or spite. But, since you're here and I'm here, this is as decent a time as any to...to let you go."

Cayle barely hid his smirk, nodded.

"You'll be duly compensated, of course, per the terms of our last agreement. This is your notice, effective two weeks from today. You'll receive six months severance pay." Keller looked at him, waited for Cayle to fill in. When he didn't, he continued. "Words can't express how grateful I am for all you've done for my daughter, Cayle. She couldn't have come this far without...without your help and dedication..." Keller paused and cleared his throat. He didn't appreciate how much he sounded like a campaigning bureaucrat. Or the salesman that he was. He took a deep breath, gathered himself.

"Like I said before, sir, Sharise did all the work."

Keller nodded. He really was grateful to Cayle and was sorry that things had to end. Had to end now and this way. But... "Be that as it may...I thank you. For myself and for Sharise."

"No problem." Cayle proffered a hand and Keller firmly shook it. "I'll be gathering my things then."

"There's no need for you to rush. You do have two we-"

"It would be better for me not to drag this on, sir."

"Of course."

Cayle passed the older man and headed for the spiral staircase.

Keller turned to watch his familiar swagger. Head high, shoulders back, smooth gait. Arrogant youth personified, he told himself, and relieved the scene was over so quickly, happy that Cayle had made it so easy for him.

Too easy, perhaps? Keller wondered, felt more guilt than pleasure as he anticipated Sharise's angry tirade and watched Cayle's figure disappear up the stairs.

-

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

Fall 1996

New York City/Scarsdale, New York

"Big shebang is in a few weeks, huh?" Zach wheeled into the living room, came to a stop near an arm of the sofa in an unusual caricature of his customary wheelie-popping, skid-stopping entrance after one of their mother's big meals.

Cayle nodded now as he eyed his brother, curious and distracted. He raised his cup to his mouth, sipped the strong hot coffee then tipped the cup to his brother. "You're not having any?"

"Nah. I'm trying to cut back on my caffeine consumption. Makes me jumpy. I'm surprised you're...imbibing."

Cayle grinned at his brother's warped sense of humor. "Hey, I don't drink, smoke or do drugs." He counted on his fingers. "You gotta allow me something."

"Speaking of vices," Zach segued, slapped his brother's arm. "I know you're excited about this opening..."

"Pretty much."

"So how come you haven't mentioned it to Mom? You hiding it or something?"

"Nothing like that. I just don't like to talk about...about her in front of Mama."

"I guess 'her' is 'Sharise'?"

Cayle slanted a look at his brother, silent.

"You're serious about her, aren't you?" Zach pushed.

His brother sighed and spread his fingers wide through his hair, looking as stressed as the seven-year-old he used to be.

"Talk to me, Wheezer."

"I'm worried about her."

Zach arched a brow. "Mom?"

"Sharise. She's moving so fast with everything. The audition, the rehearsals.... I just don't want her..."

"To relapse."

Cayle nodded.

"From what you've told me and from what I've seen for myself, she's made of tough stuff. She'll be fine."

"She's always telling me she's tougher than she looks. It's hard to believe just how tough when you first meet her. She's so damn tiny."

"Big, explosive things come in small packages."

"Don't I know it."

Zach punched him in an arm. "You dog. Don't talk about my girl like that."

"You started it."

"I guess you know I kind of have a crush on her, Wheezer."

"Stand in line," Cayle muttered, took another sip of coffee.

"Slater?"

"Shhh." Cayle jerked his head toward the kitchen where his mother was finishing their dinner dishes. He took a peek over his shoulder, turned to his brother.

"Sorry," Zach whispered.

"It's just that I don't want Mama to think anything's fishy about her getting the job. If she had even a hint that S.S. and S.K. were entangled in any way..." Cayle just let the rest hang as his brother nodded in understanding.

From the first moment he'd discovered Scott Slater's status as an old friend and confidant to the Keller family who also happened to be Sharise's ex flame and Dianne's boss, Cayle had decided not to mention the connection to his mother. He'd only mentioned it to Zach under duress. His brother could be like a Cong interrogator when he wanted information

but he could also be a blabbermouth and this entire deal was too important to let out of the bag. Too many nerves were already on edge, too much pride on the line, too many fragile psyches and egos in danger of being cracked. Namely his.

"So, this Scott guy, he's in it for the long haul?" Zach peered at his brother.

Cayle nodded. "Looks like it."

"How does Sharise feel about him?"

"It's hard to tell. She says they're just friends, that there's nothing more than fondness between them."

"And you?"

"I see the way he looks at her. She may not think there's anything more than friendship but Scott has different ideas."

"Have you talked to her about it?"

"You're starting to sound like Mom."

"Mom wouldn't ask you about the current state of your love life. She's trying to forget it exists."

Cayle chuckled, shook his head. "I should have said you sound like a mother. Your advice and questions."

"You should be asking the questions, Cayle. Asking Sharise how she feels, what she wants."

Cayle stared at him.

"What do you want, Cayle?"

"Whoa, whoa. Where's this third degree coming from?" He stood from the sofa, took several steps away to lean on the wall beneath the arched doorway.

Zach turned to him. "Do you love her?"

Cayle folded his arms across his chest, defensive. He was a step away from addressing Zach's previously mentioned "crush"; a breath away from bringing up Breanna and he didn't know why he was feeling so vindictive when he was worried sick about Zach. He needed to change the subject and get some distance from the whole Sharise/Scott deal.

He shuffled back to the sofa and took a seat. "Look Zach, I don't want to talk about them anymore. Whatever happens, I'll handle it like...like I always do."

Zach looked at him, doubtful as he nodded. "If that's the way you want it, li'l bro."

Cayle cringed at the memory this moniker elicited.

Him trudging up the stairs to deliver Breanna's perfumed envelope and Zach's engagement ring. Zach peering out his bedroom window, watching Breanna as her family's chauffeured limo pulled out of the modest Miller driveway. Zach slowly turning as he heard his brother enter the room.

"Hey li'l bro! What's goin' on? That was Bre's limo I just saw pulling out, wasn't it?"

Cayle closed his eyes now against the memory of Zach opening the envelope and reading the letter. His stoic features when he finally glanced up at Cayle, gripping the ring in a hand as fiercely as Cayle had earlier, before finally turning from his brother to hurl the ring out the open window.

Neither brother had ever spoken of Breanna after that day, by osmotic accord had remained tight-lipped about her existence and abrupt departure.

Cayle now nodded. "Yeah. That's the way I want it. When I want to talk about it-"

"Hey, I'm here for you when you're ready. I always will be."

Cayle frowned at him, uncertain. He wanted to believe it but something rang false. "Everything okay with you, Zach?" He saw it as soon as he asked. His brother's face closed up as if a gate had been drawn down over his features. "Bro?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"You know you have an annoying habit of doing that. Answering my questions with one of your own. Remember what Remy always said that meant?"

Zach grinned before they both recited their father's immortal, pre-whipping admonishment: "If you answer a question with a question, boy, I'll know you're lying before you say another word and I ain't tolerating liars in this here house!"

Both young men had gotten a couple of avoidable beatings for violating this credo in their youth.

Cayle eyed Zach, curiosity still not slaked. "You've been looking tired lately," he observed.

"Me?"

"Please Zach. Don't gimme this routine. Are you okay?"

"I said I'm all right. My word's not good enough for you?"

Cayle stared at his brother. "I'm just worried about you."

"Worry about someone who needs worrying about, Wheeze. Like yourself. And your little Keller-Miller-Slater triangle."

"Why are you being like this?"

"Like what?"

Frustrated, Cayle shook his head. "Evasive. Trying to throw me off the track."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Zach muttered.

"Rog, you're keeping something from me," he persisted.

"And you should know all about that, shouldn't you?"

Cayle gaped, stunned by his brother's barely veiled attack. He bristled. "Look Zach, if there's anything you have to say to me, just say-"

"You're all packed and ready, baby." Dianne sailed into the room carrying a shopping bag well stocked with Tupperware for her youngest son to take back home with him. She came up short at the threshold as she eyed her two sons. They looked almost ready to come to blows. She frowned at one then the other. "What's going on you two?"

Cayle shook his head, quickly stood and went to his mother. He slid his arms around her middle, leaned in to peck her on a cheek. "Nothin' that these here leftovers can't cure," he murmured as he slid the bag out of her hand.

Dianne stared at Zach. Zach averted his gaze and Cayle leaned in for another kiss.

"I'll see you soon, Mama."

"Okay, hun."

Cayle went to his brother, locked him in a one-armed bear hug. "See you soon, bro. I'm sorry and please take it easy," he whispered in his ear.

Zach blushed, hugged him back. "I'm sorry. Good luck and...and I'll be talkin' to you," he mumbled.

"Okay." Cayle nodded and Dianne walked him to the front door, flinging wary glances over her shoulder at her oldest.

The questions were right there in her throat, pushing at the surface but Dianne kept her mouth shut, only prayed Zach hadn't said anything to his brother. She didn't think he had. After all, it had been Zach's idea in the first place to keep it from Cayle and Dianne only hoped he hadn't changed his mind. Not now when Cayle was enmeshed with that Keller clan.

He doesn't need this on top of everything else, she told herself.

* * *

Ella's interest in tennis had started when a lot of people's had, she figured: when John McEnroe had hit the scene. Before him, she had only vaguely followed the sport. Bjorn Borg and the so-called "Bad Boys" of the game--Mac, Connors, "Nasty" Nastasi--had existed as only peripherals in the sports section of the papers and TV news right behind the Knicks, the Yankees, the Mets, the Giants and the Jets. She didn't even give hockey a play. Ella loved sports but she had her limits and her interests could only be stretched so far.

She was stretching her interests now watching Scott Slater take on Keller and Sharise in a lopsided match that featured Scott whipping younger and older Keller butt.

The outdoor tennis court had been a part of the estate grounds since Ella had joined the Kellers but she had never seen it get much use from either father or daughter, except when Scott visited.

Ella smiled now as she watched the trio enjoying one of the last vestiges of the season. Glaring sun. Temperatures in the high-eighties. Perfect Indian Summer day. And them fools prancing and bouncing around the court in their stylish tennis whites and colorful headbands and caps.

Scott, in particular, was stunning in his gear--tall, tanned and athletic--Ella had to give credit where credit was due. And he could cut and whack the fuzzy ball right up there with some of the best Ella had had the pleasure of seeing. But he was no Sampras or Agassi.

And he wasn't a Cayle Miller either, she told herself now as she watched Scott gracefully stretch for a forehand Sharise

had tried to lob over his blond head. Scott got the ball back into play, almost smashed a winner but Sharise ran down the ball in the backcourt and returned a crosscourt backhand that nipped the line.

Ella loudly cheered and clapped, more for her baby than Mr. Keller. Sharise was the one doing all the legwork, providing Scott all his competition this afternoon. And Lordy, did Ella love seeing the girl so fit, active and healthy.

Thanks to Cayle, she thought. Everything always came back to her youngin, no matter how much she tried not to think about his abrupt departure. Lordy, did she miss that chil'. Sure, he came by often enough--he and Sharise were still dating hot-and-heavy--but he wasn't in residence. Ella missed his presence, his devilish grin and deep voice when he chuckled at one of her momalisms, his wicked sense of humor at the dinner table when they traded jokes, his hardy appetite when he wolfed down her meals with as much relish as she. She just missed her Cayle being at the estate, shouting distance. He wasn't close, not here enough. Not nearly as much as that Slater youngin.

Would have helped, she guessed, if somebody else missed Cayle as much as she did. But she couldn't really blame Sharise. This was her father's home not hers and what Keller said went. As had Cayle once Sharise had gotten up on her feet. It wasn't like Sharise had had a choice whether Cayle left or stayed. And if shouting were an indication of how much she'd wanted him to stay, or could have prevented his leaving, well then Cayle would have

been at the estate right then cause the child sure had shouted into the morning and night for several days after Keller had fired Cayle. Finally she'd threatened her father with her own departure, among other things, and had just plain made a nuisance of herself. But in the end, nothing had swayed Mr. Keller. Cayle was out and Sharise could stay as long as she wanted to continue her healing.

At least Sharise was seeing the boy, Ella told herself now, still had some genuine feelings for him and wasn't afraid to show them around her father. Or Scott. This was a comfort.

Ella had no idea how long the kids would last, but took more comfort as she now saw Cayle's red Chevy Blazer pull up in the driveway right beside Scott's champagne Lexus.

She smiled and sipped her homemade lemonade when she noticed Keller's grimace from her seat at one of the several umbrellaed picnic tables lining the court.

Right on schedule.... Let the real games begin.

-

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

"Miller!" Sharise dropped her racket and left the court, her slow stride easily turning into a moderate jog as she met Cayle on the sidelines, enthusiastically threw her arms around his neck as he lifted her off the ground and into his arms.

One would have thought they hadn't seen each other in weeks or even months, instead of just a couple of days ago, Keller thought, frowning as the pair made their way over, hand-in-hand.

He had a flash of himself with Rachel, leaving the courthouse after they had taken their vows in front of the Justice of Peace and had made their commitment legal.

"Daddy, I'm going to take a walk around the grounds and cool off for a while. With Cayle."

"Of course," Keller murmured.

Whenever he came over her face lit up like sunrise, a smile easing across her lips, brightening her whole face as if it was the most natural thing in the world for a churlish and stubborn Sharise Keller to glow and flush like a young girl experiencing her first taste of love and romance.

She was totally different with Scott, comfortable and cozy instead of wild and uninhibited, treated him like a brother instead of a man hopelessly and madly in love with her.

Scott came over, spinning his tennis racket in a palm as Keller ruminated over what he could possibly do to remedy and reverse the situation.

"Cayle, how are you?" Scott stuck out a hand, cordial and pleasant as ever and Cayle returned the shake.

Keller wished he could be so magnanimous and disregard what he knew in his heart was a bad condition: Cayle and his daughter together as sweethearts.

Scott hastily excused himself to the guesthouse for a shower and a change before he would go downtown to Keller's main office and oversee and help out with the refurbishing as he had been doing for the last couple of months at the estate.

Ella strolled over, took a seat beside Keller on the old-fashioned wooden spectator bench as the three young people went their separate ways. "Beautiful out today," she commented.

Keller looked at her from the corner of an eye, pat dry his throat and face before he draped the white towel around his neck and drained his Perrier bottle. "Have to enjoy this gift while we can." He nodded and tipped his bottle to Ella.

"Did you really think sending that chil' away would stop them from seeing each other?" she asked.

"Ella!" Keller's eyebrows shot up as he looked at her.

"Don't 'Ella' me. You know what I'm talkin' 'bout."

"I'm sure I don't. And this accusatory tone isn't very becoming on you, Ella."

She grinned, continued as if he hadn't spoken. "Now, you ain't asked me for my opinion but I'ma share a little bit of my sixty-three-year old knowledge wicha."

Keller glanced at her, waited.

"Now I would never pretend to tell you how to handle your

daughter, Mr. Keller-

"Don't be silly. You as much as raised her as I or any mother would have," he said honestly.

She nodded. "I'm glad you feel that way cause I was thinkin' that's about the size of things too."

"Ella, you obviously have something on your mind. Please, out with it."

"This is just an opinion, mind you..."

Keller arched a brow.

"But I think you should stop interferin' with those two and leave the girl be."

"I don't understand what you mean. Leave Sharise and Scott alone?"

"Leave her and Cayle be. Let nature take its course."

"I already did that and you see what happened."

"See, that's just what I mean. It's not you who lets anything happen. It's fate, God's will, whatever you want to call it. But whatever you do call it, Sharise has made up her mind and she wants to be with Cayle."

"I don't see it that way."

"Cause you don't wants to."

Keller sighed, forked a hand through his hair. "Ella, if you saw someone you love in a bad situation or engaged in an activity that you knew would be detrimental to him or her in the long run, you'd do everything you could to stop them from getting hurt, wouldn't you?"

"I certainly would but-"

"Well, that's all I'm doing. For my daughter."

"But, there comes a time when you have to let her make her own mistakes. Especially if you love her."

"Even at the expense of her well-being? Even when I know she'll only wind up hurt and disillusioned?"

"Who are we talkin' about, Mr. Keller? You or her?"

Keller blushed, cleared his throat as he stood from the bench. Ella reached up and grabbed his hand, jerked him down to sit back beside her. She stared at him as he goggled at her.

"What makes you think you know what's good for her better than she does?"

He recovered enough to say, "Ella, you know who we're dealing with."

She nodded. "I most certainly do. And she's made her mistakes along the way. We all have. But they're her mistakes to make. So let her."

"You mean to tell me if you thought there was another young man more suitable for Sharise, you wouldn't try and push them together?"

"You're twistin' my words, Mr. Keller. Besides, the question is moot. Sharise has made the decision and we have to go along with it."

"Not if I can avoid her getting hurt, making a mistake-"

"And what if you can't? What if after all is said and done and you're finished with all your matchmakin' and interferin', she still winds up hurt?"

Keller wanted to give her the definitive answer, one that would cease her interrogation. But he couldn't formulate the words. He just knew how he felt, what his instincts were telling him about his obligation to his daughter. He had a duty to see her happy, didn't he? It was his job to ensure this at all costs. Rachel would have--

"I don't think any father or mother would consider Cayle Miller a 'mistake' for their daughter to make," Ella said as if she had read his mind. "He's not going to hurt our chil'."

"But-"

"Oh sure, he's not wealthy and perfect Scott Slater with his own business."

"It's not just that, Ella. And you know it."

"He sorta reminds me of you before your stores took off."

Keller gaped. "Scott?"

"There you go again with that Scott business. He's a nice young man, don't get me wrong. I like him but he's a...he's a little on the square side."

"Ella! I'm surprised at you. Square?"

"I'm only sayin' what I feels. Square and cold and detached. He's nothin' like Sharise. Or you, for that matter."

"Opposites attract."

"Don't throw those ol' platitudes at me. I was probably around when half a them was invented."

"Be that as it may-"

"Be that as it may nothing"! Now, I was trying to make a point which, granted, you didn't solicit but I'ma make anyway."

Keller snapped shut his mouth and stared at her.

"Now where was I? Oh yeah. Cayle. He puts me in mind of you around that age."

"Cayle?"

"You heards what I said. Cayle," Ella affirmed. "You don't see it?"

Keller didn't answer.

"Well, it's as plain as the nose on your face."

"I don't think-"

"Proud, arrogant, don't take no lip from your daughter. As hot-blooded and passionate as your favorite Scott is cold."

"That's not fair, Ella. They're two different people."

"Exactly. And as different as Scott and Cayle are, so is Sharise from you. You're two different people with different wants and different needs."

He didn't have a comeback for this, just peered at her.

"It doesn't mean you care for her any less if you let her make her own decisions."

"Ella..."

"I'll say this for you two. Differences aside, you are both stubborn and blind as all get-out."

"Ell-"

"And as much as you've expounded upon your dead wife and how warm and spontaneous she was, how could you think her daughter would settle for anything less in a mate?"

* * *

Their laughter floated over the grounds in lawn sprinkler-style jets. Rising and spreading sweet liquid, then punching out big concentrated bursts of moisture before subsiding and starting the process over again.

Keller leaned a forearm over his head against the window frame as he looked at them from his office. Music and more music. He envied them, hated that he allowed this green monster to rear its head in his thoughts. But he did. He envied their ability to carelessly gallivant and tussle in the grass. Like two overgrown kids.

Was that what this was all about? His whole attitude concerning Sharise and Cayle? Was he jealous of what they had? Jealous that Cayle still had a chance at happiness with a beautiful and vibrant young woman when his own chance had been taken away decades ago?

"...you've got 120MHz microprocessor, 16MB of RAM for spectacular home computing..."

Scott's usual discourse drifted up and over his head, evaporating beneath the cumulous laughter outside.

Keller turned from the window to try and focus on what Scott was saying this time.

The young man and several of his own hand-picked analysts and techno wizards had been installing, upgrading and testing Scott's software program for the last month. The analysts laid their groundwork at Keller's several office sites. But the estate was Scott's baby. He'd been going out of his way--weekends, after work--to bring to fruition his vision of what and how Keller's home office should be and operate.

Keller was thankful for the personalized, meticulous attention but wondered if there weren't a Sharise connection,

would even his money and prestige buy Scott Slater for an hour.

That wasn't fair, he knew, because although the younger man was a keen captain of industry who wouldn't have been involved with any project so altruistically, Scott had practically been donating his time and efforts to this project, had been giving Keller his full consideration.

The least Keller could do was return the favor. But sometimes it was just so hard to follow or match Scott's enthusiasm where computers were concerned. Keller saw them as useful tools to improve his company and get him what he wanted: more business, more customers.

To Scott, computers and the technology behind them were a passion, companions and mates. A way of life.

He flashed back to his discussion with Ella and the words "square" and "detached" jumped out at him like a glaring fireworks display.

Was she right about the young man? Keller wondered, still hearing the echoes of Cayle and Sharise's laughter as he now joined Scott at the desk. Was it fair to pigeonhole him as a cold-fish-by-the-numbers-control type? Would just this issue alone make him wrong for Sharise as Ella surmised? Just because he wasn't as arrogant and warm and impulsive as Cayle did all this make him a bad catch for his daughter?

"Thom? Are you all right?"

Keller glanced at Scott behind the desk, a bunch of colorful wires that he could make heads nor tails of, clutched in the

younger man's hands as he peeked at Keller around the monitor.

Keller shook his head as if to clear it. "I'm fine. What were you saying?"

Scott frowned, stood and took the seat across the desk from Keller. "Something's bothering you?"

"Not at all. I was momentarily distracted."

"Well, I have been going on and on. I forget I can get a little carried away with this stuff."

Could he ever, Keller thought, wearily rubbed his eyes and sighed. When he looked up again, Scott was leaning forward in his seat, peering at him. Keller raised his brows.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you and I hope you won't take this the wrong way."

The opening surprised Keller. It sounded so much like hedging, so unlike Scott. He wasn't one to beat around a bush. He usually just jumped right in. Much like himself, Keller thought.

"Not at all, Scott. What's on your mind?"

"I've been thinking about asking Sharise to marry me."

Keller goggled, quickly caught himself to peer at Scott. Did the young man know something he didn't? As far as Keller knew, outside of the estate, Scott and Sharise hadn't been together long enough to form any kind of bond that would have misled Scott to a proposal of such magnitude. Unless he was assuming past affections were so enduring.

"I understand your shock, Thom," Scott said at his look. "Sharise and I haven't exactly been courting."

"She can be a hard woman to romance," Keller said.

"I intend to try. With your permission, of course."

"Young man, you don't need my permission. Sharise has a mind of her own. As you well know."

Scott chuckled in a charming, self-effacing way that made Keller remember Ella's description of Cayle, and how the young man reminded her of him.

...Proud, arrogant, don't take no lip from your daughter...

All the qualities Scott would need if he intended to win over Sharise. And then some, Keller told himself.

"Scott, whatever you decide, you have my blessings. Of course, I can't give you any guidance or guarantees about-"

"I wouldn't expect you to, sir. I just wanted to inform you of my intentions, although your blessings do encourage me a great deal."

He sounded so much like a politician running for office, searching for the vote of confidence and approval that would put him over the top with his main constituent: Sharise Keller. Not like Cayle, who could have cared less about Keller's approval or disapproval, or even Sharise's for that matter. He just went after what he wanted with all the passion and nonchalance Ella had earlier attributed to him.

Scott could use a few lessons, Keller thought and stood to shake the younger man's hand. "Good luck, son," he murmured.

"Thank you, sir."

"Please, don't thank me." Because if Ella's right-and, God help me, she usually is-then you're going to need all the luck you can get, son.

-

[Chapter Twenty](#)

Fall 1996

Midtown Manhattan - "Funk Off-Broadway!"

Sharise looked into the brightly-lit mirror and saw her own reflection swimming before her eyes as she tried to apply her stage make-up.

All around her the troupe buzzed with activity. Yelling directions and encouragement at each other across the spacious floor and over and around vanities. Tossing stage gear and clothes. Members undergoing costume changes with the speed of an eyeblink and the exactness of a blueprint.

Sharise had never felt so out of place and nervous in her whole life. And she didn't even have the principal part. She was a lead player, but not the lead. That part had gone to her friend Jetta and Sharise couldn't have been happier. But the thought of her cheering section out front made this night as big and significant to her as if she did have the lead. She was finally going to perform in the production for which she had won a part almost a year ago. And she would either make a fool of herself in front of the four most important people in her life, or really impress them when she strutted her stuff.

Sharise thought of Scott and the additional pressure he was putting on her, making it no secret he wanted to be "more than old friends". For the last couple of weeks, he had been relentlessly pushing her to accompany him out on a "real" date as if he had a do-or-die mission to complete before time ran out.

He'd been in his element the last time they'd been together, extolling the virtues of Pentium microprocessors and 630MB hard drive and expandable MBs-but so unlike himself. And all Sharise had been able to concentrate on had been Cayle's hard and expandable drive.

"I think you like this stuff as much as I do," Scott had commented, misinterpreting her wicked smile.

"Oh it's...it's interesting stuff."

"It can be when your mind's on it."

"And yours isn't?" Sharise asked.

Scott pulled her from her father's swivel chair where she'd been seated behind his desk while Scott had been explaining the finer points of 16-bit expansion slots and 14.4 internal fax/modems.

Now he pulled her reluctant form into his arms, slowly kissed her eyelids then her nose. It was the most erotic thing he had ever done with her. Obviously, he had come away from his one-year marriage with some insight, Sharise told herself as her blood warmed. She had to make him stop before this got out of hand. His lips and hands were starting to feel too good.

"Scott..." She pushed her palms against his chest but he bent his head, covered her mouth with his. She gave herself over to his mouth, allowed in his tongue, deliberate and sweet as he slid his arms around her back and guided her back onto the desktop. Sharise felt his hands under her blouse, fingers gentle and nimble as they worked at her bra.

"Scott...Scott, please,"

she murmured against his mouth. He had never been so assertive with her before. And it turned her on!

"I love you, Reese."

Relieved, Sharise pulled away, the declaration knocking her back to earth when her own good sense hadn't been able to.

"What's the matter, Sharise?"

She shook her head, said nothing and he smoothed a palm down her cheek.

"You knew how I felt about you."

She nodded, speechless, had never been so shaky and tongue-tied in her life. What was he doing to her?

"I won't push you...much." Scott smiled down at her, made her grin. "At least go out with me. Give me, us, a chance."

"Scott, we tried this before."

"We were younger. I was stupid."

She shook her head, couldn't agree. Scott was Scott, far from stupid. She didn't think he could change. She didn't want him to.

"Sharise, you owe me this. At least a chance."

"Cayle and I-"

"Are serious?" he scoffed. "You've been going out for a long while now. Has he made a commitment of any kind?"

"Not that long," she defended. He had hit a nerve. "And not that it's any of your business, Scott but we have an understanding."

"You're free to date other people?"

"Yes...no! I mean, that's not what I meant. We just have our own kind of commitment. That doesn't always include love, you know." Not that the thought hadn't crossed her mind before Scott had brought it up. Sharise often wondered about Cayle's feelings, wondered why he hadn't yet said the almighty three words. Usually, she didn't make a big deal about it, accustomed to male reticence. Hell, they were just words. But this time she wondered. She had said them, more than once and had meant them. Cayle had always shied away, dodged the bullet with the good old standby "I care about you, Reese" or the ever popular "I need you" and, let us not forget the immortal and more-than-likely-said-in-the-throes-of-passion "I want you".

Sharise frowned at Scott as he helped her button her blouse and pecked her cheek when he finished.

"Think about it, Sharise. Just a chance. One date and we can work from there. That's all I ask."

Sharise couldn't remember Scott being so compelling and forceful. She couldn't remember him being so much fun to be around, couldn't pinpoint a time when he had been as instinctive and responsive as he had been in the last few months. She couldn't remember him being so easy to talk to. She couldn't remember him being so open.

Was it that he was older? Had they both changed so much? Was he trying so hard because of Cayle or in spite of him?

Whatever it was, Sharise was enjoying herself, hadn't felt so wanted and wooed since she'd been in her early twenties and Dwyer had swept her off her feet, away from Scott.

Finally, Sharise nodded. "I'll...I'll think about it."

Not so hard. No commitments yet. Just think. Don't act.

* * *

Would she get through this evening? Could it go off without a hitch, despite her opening night jitters? Sharise wondered and hoped the show and her performance set precedents and surpassed any previous executions. And, above all, she wanted it to tease and touch her cheering section with a view of what she did, what she was capable of. Show them she wasn't just the spoiled debutante daughter of a wealthy man.

This last was more for Cayle than for Ella, Scott or her father.

He had patiently endured the last several weeks of tedious rehearsals, chauffeuring her back and forth to the city from Scarsdale. When he was playing cheerleader and doling out encouragement to check her ugly self-doubts, he was giving her the most relaxing, therapeutic full-body massages this side of any professional masseur, easing the stress and pain of her workouts.

Cayle deserved to enjoy this night more than anyone did and she needed him to see her in her glory, excelling at her craft and passion as she had assured him she could. She needed him to like the show as much as she did, be impressed with her ability and the final product.

Her physical therapist and so much more, Sharise thought now. Her physical, plain and simple, she told herself and smiled

at the slang then frowned just as quickly when she realized that since she'd first tried it out on Jetta months ago, she and Cayle weren't as close as physicals could be.

Scott's swipes came back to haunt her.

Ever since her father had dismissed Cayle and he had moved out weeks ago, they'd grown distant. Of course it was expected for them not to see as much of each other since he wasn't living at the estate. Sharise had even managed to convince herself that their separation was a good thing; she just hadn't entertained the possibility that its growth would be so major and quick since she and Cayle still saw each other with relative frequency and were in the midst of a full-blown affair. But not only had they grown apart since Cayle had moved out, Sharise felt him emotionally distancing himself, shutting her out as if to deprive her of fully appreciating his essence. Shutting her out the way Scott used to do.

How could she go from hot to cold so fast? Be as close to Scott as she was distant from Cayle? How could she have changed so much, growing to care about two men who were so totally opposite?

Sharise leaned forward, tried again to apply her mascara. Her hand shook, nerves kicking in big time. She was even feeling nauseous, couldn't remember this ever happening to her before.

"Hey girl, you're white as a Ku Klux Klansman's covering!"

Leave it to Jetta to put things into perspective, Sharise thought as her friend grabbed her in a hug.

Sharise looked at Jetta's reflection above her own in the mirror. She was so young and beautiful and sweet and Sharise couldn't have hoped for a better person to get the lead.

She was just glad she had won the honor of sharing the same stage with a talent of Jetta's ilk.

"Don't look so sick, girl. You'll do fine. Better than fine."

"Thanks. You will too."

Jetta pulled back, held Sharise at arm's length and stared at her. "Girl, you're shaking like a leaf. You coming down with something?" She put a palm on Sharise's forehead.

"Nothing except nerves."

"That bettah be all. Cause I ain't goin' out there alone."

"I'll be okay."

Jetta jerked her head up and down once, gave Sharise another quick hug. "Wish me luck."

"You don't need any, witch. You'll do fine."

Jetta laughed, headed out of the dressing room. "Break a leg, girl," she flung over a shoulder.

Sharise knew it was the standard way to wish someone luck in the theater, but she wished Jetta hadn't put it quite that way this time. Breaking her leg was all she needed tonight on top everything else that could go wrong.

* * *

Cayle sat in the darkened theater between Ella on his left and Scott and Keller on his right. Prime real estate, not too far front or back. Center stage, compliments of either Sharise's passes or Keller's money. Cayle didn't care which at this point, was just glad to be here, glad Sharise had thought him important enough to include in her big moment.

After months of rigorous workouts that had been replaced with just as grueling rehearsals and run-throughs, weeks of driving her to and from the theater and witnessing the rough work, tonight he would finally see the fruits of their labor.

Cayle rubbed his hands together, just avoided smoothing moist palms against the wool material of his brown tweed slacks. He felt like he was about to go on, took a deep breath as the curtains went up on the dimly lit stage.

The orchestra brought the silent hall to life with a rousing and jazzy opening set right before two lithe males leaped across the stage from opposite wings to get the first number going full swing. Several females who sailed and spun around, over and between the males quickly joined these guys. Within minutes the stage was overrun with toe-tapping,

arabesqueing, plieing, splitting, break-dancing and tumbling bodies. A fusion of hearts, bodies and minds, sensuously communicating enthusiasm and kinetic energy to the audience in a visceral vibe as the production kicked off in grand and earnest style.

In the middle of it--smiling brighter, leaping higher and gliding smoother than anyone else on the stage--was Sharise.

Cayle knew she was good, but had had no idea how good until

he saw her in full regalia and on stage with the other dancers, flawlessly performing the elements of her routine, dancing a significant portion of the opening number behind Jetta. He felt like a proud father as he watched, swept away and surprised by the talent of an ignored offspring.

During the last few weeks he'd been subjected to the painstaking, the lackadaisical, the ho-hum rote. Everything had always seemed so disorganized and jumbled in the near-empty theater and had had him thinking the players would never be able to fill up the hall or put the show together in a semblance of order. But they had, currently kicking, tapping and stomping their way through a weird salmagundi of organization and bringing to life the perceptions Cayle had gleaned when he'd read up on "Funk Off-Broadway!" and gone over critical raves and magazine and newspaper reviews of the show.

She was pulling it off, he thought and his chest filled with anxiety, anticipating the end when he would be able to rush backstage, join his girl and tell her how much he had loved her in the show.

* * *

This was one instance when Cayle allowed impatience to get the best of him. Directly after the show broke for intermission, instead of going to the lobby or visiting the restroom--as had Keller, Ella and Scott--he went backstage where the players glittered and sparkled with triumph and perspiration between costume changes and congratulated each other with loud

whoops, high-fives and slaps on the butts. The atmosphere reminded Cayle of the winners' locker room after a major sporting event, missing only the bubbling and flowing champagne.

He now made his way across the crowded floor, weaving around half-clothed bodies, peeking over brightly-lit vanities and over and around heads, finally accustomed to the perpetual motion and frenetic pace of everyone on the floor. He realized now hidden behind what he had originally thought was disorganization was actually a deep order of things where efficiency reigned supreme.

Several of the dancers shouted their "hellos" and slapped his back as he passed, used to seeing him around, knew he belonged to Sharise.

"Hey Cayle!"

He turned to see Jetta waving at him from one of the dressing tables and made his way over. Cayle watched as she put the finishing touches on the outfit for her next number, slowly rolling a leotard over her feet all the way to her full breasts.

"Help me." Jetta turned her back to him as she wiggled the slinky electric-blue outfit over her shoulders and he zipped it up. "How's it look?" She struck a pose, spreading her arms wide as she made a three-sixty before facing him again.

Cayle grinned, gave her an okay sign. Anything else would have made him more uncomfortable than he was already. He remembered all too well Sharise's reaction to Jetta touching him. Jesus help him if he grabbed her in a good-luck hug, which was what he wanted to do instead of standing in front of her like a shy school boy afraid to ask a girl to dance.

Jetta wouldn't let him off the hook with so lazy and silent a salute. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Have you seen Reese?" Cayle feinted and Jetta gave him a knowing grin, cursorily glanced over a shoulder. "She's around here somewhere." She turned back to peer at him. "Have you been takin' good care a m' girl?"

"Try to."

"Don't try. Do." She stepped closer, put a hand on his shoulder and stood on her toes to peck his cheek. "Thanks Cayle. For bringin' her back to us," she murmured.

She reminded him of Ella when she looked at him with that grateful smile and Cayle smiled too.

Jetta grabbed his hand. "C'mon. Let's go find yo woman before the next set!" She led him through the crush of bodies.

* * *

Sharise bent her head over the bowl and waited for the next eruption. She tasted hints of bitterness from her previous surge, prayed that it would be her last. She heaved again, but nothing came up and she sat back against the wall, grabbed a fistful of toilet paper to wipe her face and mouth. She felt so cold and clammy. The nausea was kicking her butt and she didn't know if it was remnants of stage fright or the remembered sight of Jetta and Cayle in a lovey-dovey clinch.

How could they do this to her? Or was she over-reacting, making too much of an innocent peck? Had it been innocent or a

promise of more serious, carnal things to come?

She'd never been so sensitive, had never felt so shaky in a relationship before and wondered if she were letting Scott's concerns and accusations get the best of her. How else could she explain her behavior, fleeing at the sight of her friend and man together? Running away like a frightened rabbit.

She knew this wasn't her, wondered why she was acting this way with Cayle, wondered why she was letting him mess with her ego and psyche as if he were a child taking her apart like a toy to see what made her tick. Testing her. No one else had ever had this effect on her. She hadn't allowed them to, perfecting an aura of nonchalance and imperturbability to avoid herself ever falling victim to a lover's whims and fancies.

When had she become such a whimp?

"Reese! Girl, yo man is here to see ya."

Sharise scrambled to her feet, tried to collect herself as Jetta burst into the outer room, Cayle close on her heels. She flushed the toilet and hurried past the pair as they shared confused looks behind her back.

Cayle grabbed her arm. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She quickly nodded, pulled her arm out of his grasp and headed for the room's comfortably worn sofa.

Cayle frowned, went past Jetta to peek in the bathroom. He came back and went over to Sharise. "Were you throwing up?"

"It's called opening night jitters, in case you're wondering. It's nothing more serious than that."

"You're sure?" He peered at her, unconvinced.

"I'm sure. Ask Jetta."

"Girl, I'm out of it." Jetta threw up her hands, laughing as she headed for the door. "Don't take too long you two. Intermission's almost ovah." She closed the door behind her, gave them some privacy.

Cayle sat next to Sharise on the sofa, arched an eyebrow when she scooted away. "You're sure you're all right?" he asked.

"I said I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?"

He chuckled. "You sound like my brother."

"Have you been making him sick too?"

Cayle grimaced, moved closer. "Is that what I'm doing? Making you sick?"

Sharise quickly shook her head. "I'm not sick. It's just the stress of the show. You know?"

He nodded, smiled at her as he draped an arm over her shoulders. "You were great tonight, Reese," he murmured.

She smiled, guard momentarily dropped. "You think so?"

He pulled her against his side and Sharise snuggled in his embrace, allowed herself this small luxury.

"I know so. You were...poetry in motion."

"Not very original," she teased.

"It's the best I can do. Your performance took my breath away, sapped all my creativity and originality."

"Obviously not all of it. And at least your blarney is still intact. 'Miller' must have Irish roots somewhere down the line."

Cayle chuckled, the lilt of his deep baritone soothing, caressing her ears and making her skin tingle. For a moment, everything was all right between them.

Sharise couldn't imagine staying upset with him for too long, not anymore, but she wanted to know, needed to know what he and Jetta had been up to. They'd looked so cozy. Too cozy. What had Jetta been saying to him earlier out in the dressing room? She would have asked him--curiosity a demand churning in her stomach along with her nerves and tension--but she feared she'd ruin the moment, feared she'd ruin them.

I love you, Reese...Think about it...That's all I ask...

She allowed thoughts of the other, let his words invade her soul, let his earnest bid sway and induce, let his spirit intrude on her and Cayle. She didn't want to, couldn't understand why she allowed the imposition. But she did, allowed him into her mind, into her heart with the one simple notion: they were overdue.

-

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

Ella watched Sharise swish into the kitchen, make a beeline for the Carrara counter and the well-stocked cookie jar and take off the top. She almost gasped when the girl reached in, emerged with a handful of Oreos and nervously nibbled one.

Ella could vaguely recall a time when Sharise had allowed herself such sinful indulgences as cookies or candies; her charge had sworn off sweets since she'd turned ten, religiously denying herself and strictly adhering to her self-imposed and aberrant--for a child anyway--diet.

Lordy, the girl must be beside herself, Ella thought now, to give in to a sweet tooth at this late stage of her life.

Sharise turned to Ella, leaned her small rump against the edge of the counter, half-sitting, half-standing as she munched on her second cookie, oblivious to the black crumbs decking the front of her new outfit.

Ella thought she looked like a young hoyden trying hard to be grown-up and feminine.

A beautiful hoyden this evening, Ella told herself, had commented on it earlier when the girl had been in the midst of her date preparations, the Three Ps--pampering, primping and preening--being the order of the day. First an hour-long hot bubble and oil bath. Then shampooing, conditioning, brushing, blow drying and styling her naturally curly hair until it flowed down and over her shoulders in brilliant riotous waves.

Then came a touch of Revlon, so light an application of

mascara, blush and lipstick as to seem non-existent, subtly highlighting already sensual assets--full lips, long-lashed eyes, and high cheekbones.

Finally came the velvet-touched coatdress, a fit, flare and flourish of dark teal perfectly complimenting and emphasizing the child's auburn locks and slate eyes.

A beautifully wrapped gift waiting to be unveiled, Ella told herself and thought it would have been ideal were Cayle the intended and lucky recipient.

Sharise strolled to the table, took a seat opposite Ella and smiled at the wicked look on her friend's face.

"What plots are a-brewing in that mind of yours, El?"

Ella grinned, reached across the table to brush off the cookie crumbs on Sharise's dressfront then gently put a finger under the younger woman's chin and tilted up her head to get a better look at her eyes.

"What?" Sharise frowned.

"You don't really want to go on this thing do you?"

"Is that an observation or a suggestion?"

Ella looked at her doubtfully.

"Ella, stop being silly." Sharise nervously giggled, stood and walked back to the counter.

"Junk food, gettin' all gussied up for a man. It's not you, never has been."

"Nothing wrong with getting gussied up every once in a while. And it's not for a man. It's for me. Besides, I got 'gussied' up for Cayle," Sharise finished, trying to head off Ella because she knew where this was going and didn't want to hear the arguments.

"That was different. You got gussied up for his mama. Cayle would have taken you in rags."

Sharise sighed, speared her hands through her hair and closed her eyes. She didn't want to deal with this right now.

"Don't cut off your nose to spite your face, girl."

Sharise jerked up her eyes and peered at Ella across the room. "I don't understand what you mean."

Ella shook her head and chuckled. "You and that darn stubborn father of yours are some of the slowest people I know. Haven't quite figured out if it's all an act or a stalling tactic."

"Ella..." Sharise groaned. She really didn't have time for this and didn't feel like defending her motives.

"You know how you feel about Cayle."

"I'm not sure he feels the same way."

"You're sure. You're just looking for somethin' wrong, somethin' that will give you an excuse to call it off."

"It's not like he's making it difficult for me to find anything wrong," Sharise muttered.

"Pardon me for being a budinski-"

"You wouldn't be you, Ella, if you weren't."

Ella didn't miss a beat. "There's no perfect, Sharise. No perfect man, no perfect woman. There are no perfect relationships, Reese."

"I know."

"Do you really?"

Sharise somberly nodded, unwilling to speak.

"Then why are you running off with Slater?"

"Ella-"

"Don't get me wrong. I was just saying to your father the other day that Scott's a nice young man."

Sharise nodded, not surprised that Ella and her dad had been discussing her love life. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Maybe it's time I gave 'nice' a chance. I've already tried 'roughneck' and 'nasty' and look where it's gotten me."

"Cayle may be a little rough around the edges. That's his charm. But he certainly isn't 'nasty'."

"I wasn't referring to Cayle, specifically. I just meant in general. It seems I gravitate toward the...the hard-asses."

"Easy enough to do when you're one yourself..."

"It's time I tried my sea legs, see how rough the waters are."

"You've gone this route before with Slater. What makes you think anything's changed."

"He's changed. We both have. We're older, wiser..."

"People don't change, Sharise. Not really. They may get older and wiser, but they don't change." Ella peered at her across the table and when Sharise averted her eyes and didn't respond, she went on. "Computers can't change their programming."

Sharise snapped up her eyes, stared at the older woman, shocked by the dig. "That's not fair, Ella."

"I know, honey. It's downright cruel, is what it is. But it's the truth and sometimes the truth hurts."

"Don't I know it." Sharise smirked.

"I don't mean to knock Slater or your tastes, baby. I like Scott. I don't want you to think any different."

"But?"

"Well, he's...he's just not right for you."

"Because he's not Cayle?"

"Because he's not warm and down-home like Cayle," Ella stressed. "You know how I feels about my youngin. And I know how he feels about you. He cares about you. I think these facts alone make him the right one for you."

"Sounds like you're trying to sell me on the grandson you always wanted," Sharise teased and when Ella winced, she remembered her friend's only, now-divorced son. She wanted to kick herself for the faux pas, immediately reached across the table to grab her hand. "I'm sorry, Ella. I didn't mean to-"

Ella squeezed her hand and smiled. "Like I said. There's no perfect. Things don't always go the way we want them to."

Sharise looked doubtful and Ella put her other hand over their clenched ones, held Sharise's small hand in both of her soft and slightly wrinkled ones.

"Don't fault me for meddlin', girl. I only want to see you with who'll make you happy and I just think you can do better than Scott Slater."

"Better than Scott? Most people consider Scott the best. A real catch."

"You're not most people, Reese. You're you. And what matters is what Sharise Keller considers a catch. What do you want?"

That was one question, Sharise thought.

Who did she want was an even better one.

* * *

Sharise sat across from Scott at a table in one of his favorite haunts, Smith and Wollensky, a chic steak and chop house on the East side that catered to droves of well-heeled leaders of industry, tycoons, bears, bulls and other traders and Wall Streeters the way BBQ's in the Village attracted loud-rap-music-playing B-boy drug dealers and their glittering, numerous-pierced, cellular-phone-carrying, rough-talking hip-hop molls.

Sharise felt more out of place here with the well-to-do, Bordeaux-sipping, cigar-savoring "right" crowd than she ever had at the mercy of the so-called thugs and dregs of society who frequented cheap barbecue joints downtown, smoked pot in Washington Square Park, lived hard and fast, cursed even harder and guzzled Forties by the blasting Jeep-load.

Stuffy. Down-home. The terms warred in her mind, tipped her mental scales back and forth as she glanced around and listened to the shoptalk.

"...in the Riviera needs repair. And the one in Versailles

is in appalling shape..."

"...fired her. I warned Harry, once a thief, always a thief. I honestly felt sorry for the girl but I had to send the insufferable thing back to Ecuador. Good help is so hard to..."

"...beautiful island but the natives are so filthy. And the water! Susan had the bends the entire time we were there. Next year we'll visit the Ruins in Greece..."

"...Dow flutters I know how those poor devils must have felt Black Friday. I tell you, I break out into a cold sweat. Remember Black Monday in Eighty-Seven...?"

Greek Ruins? Hmph. In the Bronx and Harlem they were called "slums" and "ghettos". Where was the Disneyland crowd? Didn't anyone get loose at Great Adventures? Kick back with Fritos and a brew in front of a great boxing match on HBO instead of white wine spritzers and caviar in front of a PBS special?

Most of her life, Sharise had been surrounded by these same people--the wealthy. She knew the opportunities their money afforded but the hypocrisy that usually went along with being wealthy created an ugly aftertaste, diluted the value and watered down a rich bouquet with trivialities and pettiness.

Sharise felt cursed instead of blessed, wanted out of the life, away from the pretension. She wanted something different. Something more. Something real.

Down-home.

"Reese? Reese, are you feeling all right?"

Sharise glanced at Scott, vaguely aware of his scrutiny.

She stared at his mouth, concentrating on his lips as if she were

a deaf mute trying to read them.

"My shrimp?" She stared at his face, thought she might better understand what he had said from his eyes. Silly thought.

"Sharise?"

She saw the frown plastered across his features, knew he was worried but didn't know what to say to reassure him. She glanced back down at her salad, a wonderful seafood

medley of shrimp, crabmeat, lobster and scallops, all her favorites and if it had been another day, another time, Sharise would have been scarfing it up. But not now, not today.

She lurched to her feet, stumbled from the table.

"Sharise!" Scott gaped at her back as she bolted towards the Ladies' Room.

* * *

Several minutes later, Sharise returned to the table drained and pallid, most of her natural blush gone as she reseated herself across from Scott.

"I could say you're bulimic but you hardly ate anything," he commented, trying to make light of her trip.

Sharise gave him a weak smile.

Scott reached around the salad, took her hand. "Better?"

She nodded, averting her eyes.

"Want me to have them take this away?" He indicated the large crystal bowl and Sharise nodded again. She didn't want to look at it, couldn't imagine consuming it.

Scott summoned a waiter and the salad quickly disappeared.

"How long has it been?" Scott asked her once the waiter had left and Sharise grimaced at him.

"How long has what been?"

"Your last menstruation."

"What?" Sharise goggled. Leave it to Scott to use the technical term and not "period", she thought, nonetheless shocked he had managed to say anything at all hinting at a woman's bodily functions.

"You are pregnant, aren't you?"

She frowned at him again, surprised at his instincts and feeling like an idiot because she hadn't even considered it before now. Between Cayle's pursuing, Scott's wooing, anxiety-filled auditions, nerve-racking rehearsals then finally the show's much-touted opening, Sharise hadn't had much time to worry about the mundane. She'd never been regular, remembered a couple of times in her late teens when she had gone a stretch of six months without having a period. She'd gotten over these female difficulties a long while ago. At

least she thought she had. But...well, besides, she'd had a semblance of a period, oh maybe two...three.... God, it had been three months ago!

She couldn't be. Not now. Not when--

"Sharise, I want you to marry me."

"If I am pregnant, Scott, it's not yours."

"That's not why I'm asking you..."

"Don't be noble on my account," Sharise sniped.

"I'm not. I'd already made plans to propose this evening. The most opportune moment just presented itself and-" Scott shook his head, took a deep breath. "That didn't come out quite right."

"Or quite romantically."

"I'm sorry, Sharise. I wanted this to be special..."

Sharise grinned, softened by his solemnity, taken in by the earnest gleam in his blue eyes. She reached across the table to squeeze his hands. "It is special. More special than you know."

"Then...you accept?"

"Scott--"

"Before you say no, hear me out." He released her hands, took off his glasses and began cleaning the lenses with his handkerchief as he sat back against the high-back chair.

Sharise held in a laugh, amazed he still had the habit.

Since they'd been kids, he used to distract himself from daunting uncomfortable situations by putting his full energy into the simple act of cleaning his glasses. His brows would furrow as he vigorously polished and blew on the lenses as if he were waxing the chrome on one of his father's expensive collector's item cars.

As a matter of fact, Scott had almost cleaned the lenses right out of their frames once when Sharise had molested him in the back of his father's Bentley one Christmas.

She smiled wider at the memory of a teenage Scott stuttering and polishing his glasses as she'd climbed onto his lap, straddled him and unbuttoned his shirt before she'd unzipped his pants and eased her fingers into his open fly.

"...listening to me?"

"I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

Annoyed, he shook his head again. "This is an important moment for us, Reese. I can't believe you're trivializing it by zoning out like this."

"I'm not. I was just thinking."

"About him?"

Sharise almost laughed at his pique but held it in.

"Has he asked you to marry him?"

She shook her head. "He doesn't know about this yet."

"I didn't ask you that."

"No Scott. He hasn't."

"Does he love you?"

Sharise frowned. "I told you before, love isn't the end-all and be-all. We have our own commitment."

"And I want to make a real commitment."

"It's not your kid, Scott."

"That doesn't matter. It's yours."

Sharise shook her head. He was really making it hard to turn him down. But she had to do just this. She couldn't...

"Sharise, I'd love any child of yours as if it were my own."

"God, Scott, you've got everything all mapped out and I haven't even decided if I'm going to keep it!"

His eyebrows shot up as Sharise glanced around the brilliant and expansive dining room to see just how many of the urbane had heard that ejaculation.

"As I said, I don't care whose it is. I'd love it. If you did decide to have it."

"Why?"

He looked at her as if she were dumb. "Because I love you. And I don't want to make the same mistake again," he murmured.

Sharise groaned, closed her eyes as she spread her fingers wide through her hair. "This is just too much to take in now."

"I know and I don't expect you to decide right away."

"Scott--"

"Sharise, not a day would go by that I wouldn't cherish you, take care of you the way you deserve to be taken care of. You wouldn't have to worry about anything, wouldn't have to work unless you wanted..."

Sharise scowled at this last; it wasn't exactly a selling point for her.

Scott finally put his glasses back on, peered at her as he grabbed both her hands across the table and gently squeezed. "I know how important your dancing is to you, Sharise," he said, as if he knew he had stepped over the line. "And you can do that if you want."

"Gee, thanks for allowing me to do what I want." She smirked.

"I didn't mean it that way."

Sharise sighed, returned Scott's squeeze as she leaned in. "I'm sorry, Scott. I know you mean well. It's just...I need time to take in everything you've put on the table."

"Of course." He nodded. "I won't pressure you. But know that I'm not going anywhere."

Did he have to remind her?

-

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

No more playing off her bouts of nausea and vomiting. No more fobbing off her morning sickness to pre-performance nerves or remnants of a seafood dinner at some expensive restaurant.

Confirmation and refutation were staring her in the face.

It wasn't supposed to be like this, Sharise told herself. Why was this happening to her? Why now, when everything was starting to fall back into place?

She sat on the edge of the bathtub, like a young child trying to deny that her parents had forgotten her birthday; she closed her eyes against the plus sign glaring up at her from the

stick. But she knew it wasn't wrong. She had taken the test, had used three different brands, three times each.

She should have been taking this as a positive (ha! Pun intended) a sign that maybe she and Cayle were right for each other, should be together, stay together. Destiny right? She wanted to see things this fatalistically, be optimistic and calm and correct. But she couldn't quite manage it, couldn't help feeling like she was being punished for her wild and frivolous past instead of rewarded for her turnaround; cursed and trapped instead of blessed.

How could this be happening? They were so careful, always had been, using condoms meticulously for exactly this reason, among others. "Be careful out there", "Better safe than sorry".... Contrary to how reckless and fearless her father thought his headstrong daughter, "careful" and "safe" had always been Sharise's mottoes in most things.

Now this.

All her life Sharise had known affection and comfort.

She'd even experienced unconditional love. She'd been spoiled by her father and pampered and coddled by her nanny-cum-confidante. She'd never wanted for much, never been bereft of the basic; her wishes always indulged. But all she'd ever wanted was a chance to be her, an opportunity to succeed and accomplish on her own without her father's money or repute backing her. She'd never wanted fame or fortune or even recognition. Just had one simple goal: to excel at her dancing.

Sharise had messed up big time, she knew, wiping out on the back of that motorcycle with a carousing friend, not only missing her first chance to realize her dream, but almost getting herself killed in the name of celebrating.

Reckless and stupid ideas of immortality.

Over the next several weeks afterward, she'd shed a million tears, flung a thousand curses at her misfortune. She'd felt sorry for herself, damned God for damning her to a life of paraplegia, a life in a chair--deprived of her desire, deprived of her one and only love, deprived of her dancing.

Her father had had other ideas about her self-deprivation and despite her kicking and cussing to the contrary, Sharise had had to admit bringing Cayle Miller into her life had been the most selfless thing her father had ever done for her. He'd placed her care and well being in the hands of another man. He'd trusted someone else to be there for her.

She opened her eyes, swallowed hard as she stared at the plus sign one more time before she discarded the stick.

Could she be as selfless as her father had been?

* * *

Something was wrong with her, Cayle told himself now as he watched her sluggishly flitting behind the other players, out of step and off beat. He had suspected something the night of the opening, and now he was almost certain since earlier in the evening, before the intermission when he'd noticed her stumble off the stage and into the wings to await her next cue. She'd been lethargic and lackadaisical through the entire first half, as if she didn't really want to perform. Or couldn't. He was sure something was up, just not sure of what. Not sure of what he should or could do to remedy it.

Sharise's coming back so soon after her rehab had always worried him, but seeing her like this now, so off-kilter, had him questioning his own professional judgment in allowing her comeback, in pushing her so hard.

Sure, once she'd gotten used to the idea of him, the idea of him driving her to new limits, she'd never wavered in her own determination to recover. And through all her workouts and drills, no matter her exhaustion or soreness, she had never appeared as listless as she seemed on the stage right now.

Cayle knew she was under a lot of stress, knew he was responsible for some of it. She'd told him so herself.

"I need a little space, Cayle. Room to make some decisions about my life, room to...room to circulate, go out with old

friends-"

"You mean old 'flames', don't you?"

"Maybe."

"Why bother telling me? You've already made the decision," Cayle bristled, more shocked that she'd bothered to confide in him than angry that she was actually going to go whether he liked it or not.

"I just want you to understand, it's not because of anything you've done. Not because we're not working."

"How comforting," he muttered.

"Cayle, please understand. I need to...I need this."

He felt her small hand on his arm, welcomed the warmth as she gripped his biceps. He looked down at her on the sofa beside him, softened at her earnest look. He didn't want to be unreasonable and felt that denying her would be.

"I still love you, Cayle. Only you." Sharise murmured and he pulled her into his arms as he tried to convince himself that maybe this was a good thing. Maybe she should get him out of her system so that when she finally came to him, she would be sure of her feelings, totally unfettered by the past and memories of it.

"Make sure he realizes it's only a brief loan." He kissed the top of her head. "Very brief."

"I'll be back in your possession before the first interest payment." Sharise laughed then kissed his mouth.

* * *

All around Cayle the audience got to their feet, stomping, whistling, clapping and yelling "Encore! Encore!"

The curtain lifted and the players drifted back onto the stage. Each took a bow as the announcer introduced them.

Cayle stood and joined the applause and when the five lead players came out, he clapped louder than anyone around him, started such a chain reaction with his patented stadium whistle that by the time Jetta and Sharise were finally heralded, the ovation seemed as if it would bring down the house.

He watched Jetta come forward and take her bow. Then came Sharise, looking wobbly and weak, almost stumbling before Jetta stood beside her and steadied her with a one-armed hug.

Good save, Cayle thought, but he knew what was wrong.

He just didn't know what he was going to do about it.

* * *

"Girl, I don't even know why you went on in your condition. You should be home in somebody's sick bed!"

Sharise raised her face from the toilet, felt as if she had thrown up her and the rest of the cast members' guts. It was horrible to feel this bad all the time and she wondered if it would ever let up. Certainly this couldn't go on for six more months!

She pulled herself up to a squat, rested her face against the cool porcelain of the bathroom sink as she glanced up at Jetta hovering over her with her hands on her hips.

"I'm not sick, mother hen," she whispered.

"You ain't well. I don't care what you call it."

"Try pregnant."

Both women jerked up their heads to see Cayle's broad frame filling the small doorway.

"Hey Cayle! What's up wicha?" Jetta greeted, stood up and pecked him on a cheek.

"I'm not sure," Cayle murmured, vaguely noticed Sharise's grimace as he glanced at her over Jetta's head. "Why don't you tell me. Reese?"

Jetta warily looked over her shoulder then crouched at Sharise's side and wrapped her in a soothing hug. "You gonna be okay, girl? Want me to stay?"

"I'll be okay." Sharise slanted a look up at Cayle. "You can leave us alone, Jetta. We need to talk."

Jetta nodded and gave Sharise a squeeze before backing out of the cramped bathroom.

Cayle closed the door behind her as soon as she was in the outer room, glowered down at Sharise.

"I had no idea you were going to be here tonight. Had I known, we could've made arrangements to meet somewhere and celebrate."

"I wanted to surprise you. But it seems you beat me to the punch." Cayle hunkered down beside her, forearms resting on his thighs as he peered at her. "When were you going to tell me?"

"I wasn't sure before now. I...I would have let you know as soon as I was."

"But you suspected." Cayle stared at her. "So, you didn't take a pregnancy test yet?"

"I-I took one but-"

"You were going to get rid of it, weren't you?"

"Cayle, you're jumping to conclusions."

He lurched to his feet, steadied himself against the doorjamb, suddenly drained. He couldn't believe he hadn't seen it before now, hadn't been able to tell. She was so damn small. And she still was, a slightly rounded belly the only tale tell sign of her condition, a tale tell sign Cayle had put down to Ella's and his own continuing efforts to fatten her up. If she hadn't just quasi-confessed, he would never have been sure. But now....

"I'm jumping to conclusions?" he croaked.

Sharise averted her eyes. "I didn't want to say anything until...until-"

"You got rid of it," Cayle accused, numb as the old epithet (I'd throw him back) hammered through his brain.

Sharise slowly got to her feet, sat on the edge of the sink and took both of his hands in hers. "Cayle, I need you to understa-"

"I've been understanding." He glared at her. "More than understanding. What other man would let you go out with your ex and not give you an argument?"

"And I appreciate that you were so agreeable. But you didn't let me do anything. You're not my...we're not married."

Cayle closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he drew a hand threw his hair. When he opened his eyes, Sharise was staring at him challenging him to pick up the gauntlet she had just flung down. He wouldn't rise to her bait.

"We're getting off the subject. This isn't about a lack of some legal certificate that says we're committed to each other. This is about you being pregnant with our child-another commitment entirely."

"And we need to discuss our impending commitments and parenthood like a mature consenting couple."

Cayle folded his arms across his chest. "I'm listening."

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what? Like I'm waiting for you to drop the other shoe? C'mon Reese. Out with it. What has the princess decided?"

Sharise gritted her teeth, scowled at him. "That's not fair."

"Why isn't it? This is all about what Sharise wants, what Sharise needs. Not once did you think about what I need."

"This is ridiculous. You don't know what I've thought about." Sharise threw up her hands, motioned to walk by him and Cayle seized an arm to stop her. She stared at him. "Let me by."

"We're still discussing 'our impending parenthood like a mature consenting couple'."

She pointedly looked at his fingers wrapped around her biceps then raised her eyebrows at him and he dropped his hand back to his side. "You've already got your mind made up about me, about what I'm going to do. You're not willing to listen to me and you're certainly not trusting me to do the right thing."

"Do the right thing." Cayle smirked. "Maybe I'd trust you a little more if you weren't such a liar."

"I haven't lied to you. I just haven't-"

"Decided what you want to do."

Sharise sighed and looked up at him. "Cayle, try to under... Look at this from my point of view."

He glared at her.

"I've wanted to dance since I was ten years old. It's all I've ever wanted to do."

"And?"

"And? I'm not ready to give it up yet. Not when I'm finally getting back on my feet with my career."

Cayle nodded. "Oh I see. This is all about what you want."

"I'm not discussing this anymore, Cayle. We're only going around in circles. We need some time, need to sleep on this."

"I'm not going to change my mind about this tomorrow or the next day. I want you...us to have it."

"So now it comes out. This is about what the king wants?"

"I should have a say about this."

"I never said you shouldn't. Just so long as you know the final decision is mine."

"You've already made it haven't you?"

"Cayle, please..." Sharise pushed by him, opened the door and got as far as the outer room before he went after her, grabbed an arm and whirled her around. She stared up at him ready to scream but only gaped when she saw the hurt and frustrated look in his eyes. The look contrasted so drastically with the way she thought he should feel--with the way he had grabbed her--that she stayed silent and almost relaxed.

Cayle took a deep breath. "So, you're just going to do this? Flush it out, throw it away like worthless garb-"

"Stop it! Just stop!" Sharise wrenched away from him, covered her ears with both hands. "You're being malicious and crude. It's not like that."

Cayle swallowed hard as he peered down at her. "I knew you were selfish. I just didn't know to what degree."

"Cayle..." She put a hand on his arm and he tugged away from the grasp, picked up as if she hadn't spoken.

"I thought you'd changed, Reese. I thought that maybe you'd grown enough to care about someone other than yourself."

"You're wrong and you're being short-sighted and one-sided."

"Am I?"

"I'm being selfish because I want to pursue my career?"

"And not have this baby."

"It's not that simple, Cayle."

"When has life ever been simple?"

"Don't throw banalities at me. I'd like to see just how selfless you would be if the shoe were on the other foot. If you had to give up...a piece of yourself for this baby."

"If I could trade places, I would. Unfortunately, I don't have the option."

Sharise rolled her eyes and sighed. "Look, I have a chance here, a real chance to see my career take off."

"So kill our baby."

"Not kill it. It's not killing..."

"I don't care what medical, scientific or technical terms you give it, Sharise."

God he was being bullheaded. How could she make him see her side? How could she make him understand her need, her...her fear?

Dancing wasn't just some idle hobby or game for her. It was her life. He should at least understand since he was the one who'd worked so hard to help her get it back.

"Cayle, I'm almost thirty years old. I don't have much time left to pursue this. I'm at my peak. If I'm going to make it at all, now is the time."

"What about children? A family? Don't you want any of that?"

"Of course I do." She hadn't realized how much until just now with him forcing her hand. "Eventually..."

Cayle smirked. "But not now."

"I'm...I'm not ready now."

"How will you know when you are?" He studied her face, disconcerting her. "You're at your peak for starting a family too. How will you know you're ready if you don't just do it?"

"I'll know," she lied. She didn't know anything and she wouldn't know until she could trust her instincts enough to trust Cayle the way he trusted her.

"You want guarantees?"

Sharise bristled at his accuracy. "You're deliberately misconstruing what this is all about."

"And I'm sure Scott didn't." Cayle sneered and continued before Sharise could formulate a decent comeback. "Tell me something just so I'm clear on this. Would he be so understanding if it was his?"

"Cayle-"

"Or maybe it is his and you just haven't told him."

Sharise slapped him across the face so hard her palm tingled from the pain. She stared at the glaring tattoo of her right handprint against his left cheek. "Get out," she whispered.

"With pleasure."

-

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

Cayle took the stairs two at a time, didn't wait for the elevator, couldn't delay another minute before getting to his mother. He'd waited as long as he could before the need to cradle his head near a bosom of comfort and cry on a sturdy shoulder had overwhelmed.

He flew past each landing like an Indy 500 racer, covered the six flights in record time barely winded as he reached the top of the final landing.

Dianne opened the door almost instantly after he'd rung the bell, stood gaping for several seconds before she exclaimed, "Cayle!" Still recovering, she pulled him into a hug, felt his body tense and warm against hers before he slowly relaxed in her arms and returned her hug.

She led him into the living room to the sofa where Cayle took a seat in his favorite corner. Dianne sat a few inches away and turned to him. "So what brings my baby by so unexpectedly?"

"Mama, I...I just needed to talk to someone. I-" Cayle shook his head, leaned forward and buried his face in his hands.

Dianne goggled, frozen like a mouse caught in the middle of a floor after someone has suddenly turned on a light. She wrung her hands, looked around as if searching for assistance.

She had not seen Cayle like this since he'd been a little boy tormented by Remy's too-high expectations.

"We've split," he murmured, dragged his face from his hands to stare at his mother. His cheeks were dry but tears shone on the surface of his eyes.

Dianne moved closer, wanted to wring that little hussy's neck for breaking her baby like this. There was no excuse, no explanation she wanted to hear or would accept from that holier-than-thou wench.

She wrapped an arm around Cayle's shoulder, pulled him close. "I honestly can't tell you I'm upset. I'm not," she said and he chuckled at her through his distress.

"I know how you feel about her, Mama."

"Then you know I don't think she's good enough for you."

"Some would think the opposite."

"Who? That high-and-mighty, rich father of hers? Their ritzy neighbors near their upscale address?"

"I love her," he blurted, shocking himself with the confession.

His mother, however, was not surprised. Despite her own sentiments and opinion of the girl, Dianne knew how her son felt about Sharise Keller. She'd seen it written all over his face, had heard it in his voice when he'd brought the girl over for the double celebration dinner.

Dianne reached out an arm, pulled him tight against her side. "Tell me what happened," she whispered and he did, pouring out his heart in one giant rush of exhaled air.

When he was through, he sat back and fixed his mother with a searching look.

Dianne only stared back, at a loss.

"Maybe I was wrong. I might have over-reac-"

"Don't you dare think that," she managed. "You have every right to feel the way you do. You shouldn't have to change your views or feelings for anyone, especially her."

Cayle giggled at his mother's blatant animosity, glad he could find the humor in it, but needing to change the subject. "So, where's the wise Speed Racer?" he asked, saw his mother flinch as if he had smacked her. He frowned. "Mom? Where's Zach?"

Dianne's face gathered into a massive expression of loss and pain. She looked like she wanted to run somewhere and hide. Her lips moved, producing no sound as she wrung her hands again.

Cayle stared at her--her silence, her look shocking him, flooding his limbs with an electrifying current that made his fingers tingle. He seized her shoulders, felt her slim body tremble under his fingers as, unlike him minutes before, she let the tears flow. "Mama! Where's my brother?"

* * *

He'd been so self-involved, he thought now, so worried and immersed in his own agenda he hadn't been able to get past it and see anything else that mattered.

He'd only come to the city to vent and receive comfort like a little kid who'd been bullied or shunned during recess at his brand new school, running to his mom and big brother looking for help and a sympathetic ear.

Zach had been right. And now he was dying.

"He was diagnosed seven years ago, Cayle. The doctors hadn't expected him to last this long but you know us Millers. We're contrary. And fighters..."

Conditions and statistics floated around in his head as he remembered his mother's words. Cancer. Kidney and renal pelvis. Fifty-three percent survival rate five years after diagnosis. Most patients don't live half as long. Seven years surpasses the odds....

For Cayle, there was no comfort in the numbers. He didn't like thinking of or seeing Zach as a statistic, didn't like to trivialize his brother's thirty years of life, diminishing and rolling his blood, sweat and tears into a neat ball of facts and figures for some mad scientist to tout as a better-than-hoped-for success story.

Cayle groaned as he sat back against the waiting room's ugly, orange vinyl sofa, disbelief and anger permeating every cell in his body, dulling his senses.

His brother was dying. He repeated the words in his head, tried on the idea, tried to reconcile himself to the thought of Zach's mortality but he couldn't convince himself, didn't want to give credence to a Zachless world, so void and lonely.

His mother's earlier explanation only rankled no matter how much she'd tried to justify it to him; no matter how much he tried to justify it to himself.

How could they have kept something like this from him?

"Zach wouldn't let me tell you. He insisted you be kept in the dark about his...his condition," she'd explained.

"Why?"

"He said not to bother you with it because you had enough on your shoulders."

Bother him? Cayle wondered now. Never mind that they both had known about Zach's "condition" for years and not just months ago. How could they have thought it would be a bother for him to know at any time in his life? Whether he had anything on his shoulders or not. Wasn't he still part of their family? Or had he been summarily excommunicated and disowned and they had just forgotten to tell him?

The omission alone hurt but Cayle was so stunned by the betrayal, so hurt by the slight, he could barely muster righteous indignation at their arbitrary presumption.

He just wanted to see his brother, be with him, soothe him, tell him.... No. He wouldn't do that. These were Zach's last few days, maybe hours. This was his time to vent and not be vented upon. Cayle wouldn't disturb his brother's waning moments with trivialities, especially not the trivialities of his love life.

Dianne came back from the vending machine at the end of the hall, proffered a cup of hot black coffee and Cayle gratefully took it.

"Thanks." He cradled the warm Styrofoam in his hands, welcomed the distraction holding it afforded him.

"Cayle?"

He turned, saw his mother's face ravaged and wet from tears. He swallowed hard, speechless as he set the cup on the glass coffee table, went into her arms.

Dianne held him for a long moment; pulled away to look at him and smooth tousled hair away from his face. "Don't be too angry with me, Cayle."

He frowned at her.

"For not telling you sooner. We...I didn't want to burden you with this."

"Mama, it wouldn't have been a burden. I should have been told. You...you should have said something to me."

She nodded, glanced at him with dazed blue eyes. "I always regretted not standing up for you more, baby."

He grimaced. "When?"

"When you were a boy. When Remy-"

"Mom, that's old history."

"But I...I let him bully you and...and I just should have protected you better, defended you. You were my baby."

"I did okay."

Dianne looked at him, sadly grinned as she remembered the years of alcoholism, narcotics abuse. Hitting the road after Zach's accident. Running with the fast and wild crowd.

"You did better than okay, Cayle," she whispered. "I knew you would. I always knew. Despite all the obstacles...my being exposed to the measles during my pregnancy with you. We spent a lot of hours worrying over that. Especially Remy. He just knew you were going to come out blind or without arms or both. He even suggested...wanted me to...to..."

"Mom." Cayle touched her arm. "You don't have to do this."

She continued as if he hadn't spoken. "I used to browse through the baby books all the time before you were born, the same way I'd done with Zach. I wanted to find just the right name. Never knew how much you would live up to the one I finally picked out.

"By the time you were born, Zach certainly had. Healthy and strong and so athletic as a toddler. We just knew God had remembered him and was smiling down on our child and us. Then you came along, Cayle. You had arms and you weren't blind. But you were premature, jaundiced and so puny.

"When the doctors talked about your slim chances of survival, I kept my nose buried in the baby books, still looking for the right handle for my new baby boy. Remy told me I was wasting my time to name you since you were probably going to die. He warned me not to get 'attached' to you. That's how he put it. Attached. Not get attached to my own child.... I knew I wasn't wasting my time though. I knew I wasn't....

"We finally brought you home after several weeks. And I swear you did everything late. Talked late. Didn't start walking until you were almost three. Your legs were so bent and rickety and you were so pigeon-toed you used to trip over your own feet. Remember?"

"I remember, Mom."

"We thought you'd always need assistance of some kind to walk. Braces, crutches, walkers..."

"Mom." Cayle squeezed her arm, his eyes welling with tears.

Dianne looked at him, gently touched his face. "You were so bold as a child, Even with all your illnesses and problems you never complained, never stopped trying to be like Zach and please Remy. You never stopped fighting. You stood up to Remy, bore every snipe and insult, stood up to everything like the brave, game child I'd always known you'd be." She peered at him, cupped his face. "Zach just wanted to let you have a little peace, Cayle. Please don't hate him. Or me."

"I don't, Mama. I understand. I do."

Dianne nodded, sniffed and swiped at her tears with the back of a hand. "Now go in there and visit with your brother. I've held you long enough and he's been asking for you. I just...I just needed to let some things off my chest and tell you..."

Cayle nodded, left her on the sofa and headed to Zach's room at the end of the corridor opposite the vending machine.

He stood on the threshold for a long moment, gathering himself as he peered across the room where his brother lay in the far bed at the window.

"C'mon in here, Wheezer. I'm not sleeping."

Cayle started, surprised by the strength of his brother's voice. He crossed the room and pulled the vinyl chair up to the head of Zach's bed, scowled at his older brother for a long time before he finally said something.

"I oughta clobber you," he opened.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You and what army?"

"You should've told me, Zach."

"And then what? What would you have done? Cured me?"

Cayle shook his head, recognized a brick wall when he saw one. He knew he would get no further with this line of conversation.

"So, Mom tells me you're having problems with my main squeeze," Zach opened, and Cayle averted his eyes and blushed.

"I promised myself I wouldn't talk to you about it."

"Why? Trying to get back at me?"

"No. Not at all. I just...I just-"

"Didn't want to burden me?" Zach arched a brow.

"Zach, I can handle it."

"That why you came home crying to Mama like a big baby?"

"She ratted me out?" Cayle joked.

"Big time." Zach giggled then suddenly turned serious. "Look Wheeze, if I wasn't sick in this bed, you would have been pouring out your soul by now. So do me a favor and act like I'm not sick and in the hospital."

"Zach-"

"And before you decide how you're going to handle this, let me cue you in on a little secret, li'l bro."

"Yeah?"

"I knew about you and Bre."

Cayle gaped, felt as if Zach had rammed a fist in his gut. "You...you knew?"

Zach calmly nodded.

"But you didn't...you never let on."

"I wouldn't be doing it now except I think it's something

you need to hear. Something I've been meaning to tell you for a while. To get you over that stupid guilt hump you're riding."

Cayle gaped, speechless.

"Fight for her. If you don't, you'll never know what could have been between you and her and you'd always regret it."

"But-"

"Listen to me, Cayle! This is why I told you what I knew. So you won't be like me. So you won't risk losing her. So you'll go after her. The way I didn't go after Bre."

"But you did-"

"No. I didn't." Zach shook his head. "I told you, Cayle. I knew about you and Breanna. I knew she...I knew she had her eyes on you. What girl wouldn't?"

Cayle blushed again.

Zach chuckled and started coughing but when his brother rose from his chair, concern clearly imprinted on his face, Zach roughly waved him away. "I'm fine."

"Bro..."

"And I didn't just say that to flatter you or swell your head. I was being truthful. Maybe for the first time in a long time with you...with myself."

"Zach, stop. Please..."

"You were a hot, mature sixteen-year-old. A dangerous but sensitive Bad Boy. Everything any good girl from the right side of the tracks could ask for. You were Breanna's James Dean."

Cayle shook his head. "I wasn't you. She loved you."

"But she wanted you. I knew that and I turned a blind eye. I thought she'd get you--the rebellion and adventure--out of her system. But she only fell harder the more she came around you, the more she noticed the contrasts."

"You threw us together," Cayle accused, too confused to be angry. "What were you doing? Testing us?"

Zach took a deep breath, stared at his brother. "Ever wonder what happened that day I got popped on the field?"

Cayle gawked, wondered where Zach was going with this.

"I saw you two leave the bleachers early in the second quarter. I had an idea where you were going, what you were going to do. The way you two couldn't get enough of each other back then.... Hell, it was so obvious."

"Zach, it's not the way you think it was."

"It's exactly the way I thought it was. But it doesn't matter now. I'm not pointing fingers, at you or her. And I don't want you to feel bad about it, kiddo. I know you've been carrying this around for a long time. Too long. It's time for you to let it go." He reached for Cayle's hand and Cayle clung to him, squeezed as hard as he could without hurting his brother's hand.

"I lost it after I saw you two leave. Fumbles, dropped passes, passes I would have caught had I been concentrating and not thinking..."

"Zach-"

"That last play before...before I got hurt, I..." Zach took another deep breath, swallowed and pushed his eyes shut. "Coach had been ready to take me out but I told him I could pull it together, get us back in the game. I begged him to keep me in for just one more play. Just one more...."

"I forgot about you guys, blocked out what you were probably doing behind the bleachers. I dug in for my game. And when that Hail Mary pass came at me, my mind was only on one thing, where it needed to be. I disconnected from everything else except that ball. There was no you, no Bre, no Mama and Daddy, no crowd. Just me and the ball. It was beautiful, bro. Just like a hundred other times. I did my job and it was sweet, Cayle. Just...so sweet."

"Zach?"

He opened his eyes, glared at his younger brother. "I made a choice to stay in the game, Cayle. I stayed in because I wanted to. I stayed in instead of going after my girl and fighting for her when I had a chance. I let Breanna go when I could have at least tried to challenge the allure and glamour of my little brother. But I didn't try. I let her go."

"She loved you," Cayle murmured.

"I know she did."

"I love you, Zach."

"I know you do, Cayle. But just do me one more favor and get outta here." Zach turned his face to the room's row of windows, gave his brother the back of his head. "Please."

Cayle slid his hand out of Zach's, stood and reached out to smooth his brother's sable hair. "See you tomorrow," he whispered.

Zach turned back, gave his brother a wan smile. "See ya, Wheezer."

-

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

"Break, break! You're trying to kill me and the baby?"

"Ha-ha, Slater. You're lucky I'm willing to overlook your corny sense of humor." Sharise answered as she left her spot in the far court and headed for the sideline benches.

Scott scuffled over as if to emphasize that she had royally whipped his butt, something she had never done in all the matches they had played--for fun or serious, do-or-die bragging rights.

Sharise pat dry her face, draped her towel over her left thigh. She reached for the Perrier bottle at her feet, squirted water over her face then put the built-in straw to her mouth and eagerly drained half the quart bottle. She turned to Scott as he sat down beside her; offered him a drink and he gratefully took the bottle.

"You better not had let me win just now, Scott."

He finished sipping, handed her back the bottle. "You beat me fair and square, lady. And quite handily, I might add. I should be embarrassed but then it was two against one."

Sharise giggled, loved his levelheaded and good nature.

He was so gracious in so many things that it was hard for her not to love him--as a buddy, a confidant and a mentor. She wished she could be in love with him--as a partner, as a lover. It would have been so easy and perfect if she could overcome her hang-ups and impossibly high standards, if she could adjust her tastes to love the one she was with and just allow Scott into her life as more than just a friend. But she couldn't, too enmeshed in memories of what had been with Cayle. What could have been if she had just told him the truth and not...?

Drove him away.

"The proposal still stands, Sharise." Scott peered at her as he slid off his glasses and polished the lenses with his towel.

Sharise sadly smiled, shook her head. "Scott--"

"It needed to be reiterated. In case, you know..." He shrugged like a lost boy, gave her an intense look. "My feelings for you haven't changed."

"And neither have mine for you," Sharise said, not unkindly. She put a palm against his cheek. "I love you, Scott but as a--"

"Friend? The kiss of death!"

She playfully punched his thigh as he fell back against the chainlink fence behind them and slapped a palm over his chest as if he were having a heart attack. "I'm serious, creep."

"I know you are and I respect that."

"Well, thank you." She bowed her head then reached for her Perrier and drained the bottle.

"You love him, don't you?"

Sharise gagged on a swallow, coughed convulsively and Scott gently pounded her back.

"You okay?" he asked once she'd caught her breath.

She nodded, lowered the water bottle to the turf beside her racket.

"Tough question, huh?"

"No," Sharise stated. "Being in love and a buck fifty will get me on the train."

"Sharise-"

"I love you too. So what does that get me? Do I get a round trip on that same train?"

"Don't be bitter. It's not you."

"Who says?"

"You like to pretend you're a bitter hard-ass, but you're really just a pussycat at heart."

"Don't be so sure."

Scott chuckled and his amusement irked her.

"What is so funny?"

He shook his head, smiling. "You're in love with him."

"And you're trying to read minds, Mr. Slater. I thought computers were your specialty. Not humans."

"Ooh." He winced, still playful. "Low."

"Scott, I'm sor-"

"I have been known to exhibit quite a bit of insight when dealing with humans too, pardon me."

Sharise laughed, nodded her agreement.

"And I've never known anyone who could change the subject better than you, Missy."

"You should have been an attorney or a detective, Columbo." Sharise sighed when he didn't respond to her lame attempt at humor, finally leaned her head against the fence and closed her eyes. "Yes, dammit. I love him. And I hate him."

"He can't help the way he feels about...about this. It's a touchy issue for most men. Most people."

"You would say that. It's a dick thing."

Scott colored at the risqué phrase, cleared his throat. "You should give him another chance."

"To dismiss my feelings and hurt me again? No thanks."

"You were both caught up in the heat of the moment. As I said. It's a touchy and hot issue. There's almost no way to straddle the fence on it."

"Why are you defending him so hard? I would think you of all people would be happy to see us apart."

"Not at the expense of your happiness. And this estrangement is a definite threat to your well-being."

Sharise stared at him, silent.

Scott laughed at her.

"Now what's so funny?"

"You two are the funniest couple I've seen outside of a Tracy-Hepburn movie..."

"Or the most tragic since Romeo and Juliet."

"It's plain to see you're crazy about him. I'm willing to bet he is just as crazy for y-"

"Hmph." She folded her arms across her petite breasts, digging in. "Obviously being crazy about each other doesn't count for much these days."

"Make it count. Too much is at stake. It's not just about you and him anymore." He gave her still-flat belly a meaningful stare then looked her in the eyes.

"I told you what happened the last time we spoke. He stormed out, didn't want to listen to reason. Hell, we came to blows."

At least I did." Sharise averted her eyes and blushed at the recollection of her fury. She had actually struck him, she thought, ashamed of herself for letting her emotions drive her over the edge.

"Reese, you hurt hi-"

"He hurt me!"

Scott solemnly nodded. "Yes. You both hurt each other. Now it's time to heal the wounds. Call him."

"Why should I be the one to make the first move?"

Exasperated, Scott rolled his eyes at her and sighed as if he were dealing with a dense and stubborn child. "I don't believe you. I thought you'd matured some since us."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She frowned, thought of Cayle's similar accusation. Was she missing something?

"You're thinking with your emotions, letting your anger and your impulses lead you. Don't let a moment of spite come between a life together. The way it came between us."

"What?"

"Maybe we were already at that 'just friends' stage by the time your writer came along and swept you off your feet. But be honest, Reese. If you hadn't been angry with your father, hadn't wanted to get back at him and me, would you have eloped with the guy?"

"Of course I-" Sharise gaped when Scott arched his brows.

"Honestly Sharise?"

She snapped shut her mouth.

Was Scott right? Had her whole life so far been based on spite? The club and barhopping as a teen? Her premature marriage? The hard-drinking, smoked-out crowd? The accident? Had she wiped out on purpose? Drinking and riding when she'd known the possible consequences?

And now the baby and Cayle.

She was pushing him away with her stubbornness. Denying her chance at a stable future in a solid relationship and family of her own, denying Cayle a chance to be a father.

Wasn't it her who was being arrogant, expecting him to come around, to trust her when she hadn't trusted him enough to be honest with him?

"Call him, Reese," Scott murmured, put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her arm. "Let him know you're keeping the baby. He deserves to know at least that much."

She nodded, rubbed her belly, worried and frightened as she remembered how things had ended for her mother ages ago.

"Don't waste time."

She smiled at him, took the cellular phone he proffered and dialed Cayle's apartment, surprised when his mother picked up the phone on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Hello Mrs. Miller. This is Sharise."

Arctic silence.

"I'd like to speak to Cayle."

"He's not available."

"Is he okay?" Sharise blurted, concerned.

"He's fine. I just don't think it would be appropriate or wise for him to talk to you right now."

Sharise grit her teeth and took a deep breath, wondered how much of their situation Cayle had entrusted to his mother.

She decided to plunge headfirst. "Look Mrs. Miller, I don't know how much Cayle has told you, but if it's even a little, I'm sure you must be thinking the worst of me right n-"

"Does it matter what I think Ms. Keller?"

"I really do need to speak to Cayle, Mrs. Miller."

Sharise heard the next as if the woman had the mouthpiece mashed against her mouth as she whispered-hissed.

"Well he doesn't need or want to speak to you. We're on our way out...to a funeral."

"A...a funeral?"

"His brother Zach passed away earlier this week. So the last thing he needs is you telling him you're going to kill his baby on top of everything else."

"But-"

"Good-bye, Ms. Keller."

Sharise numbly listened to the click of disconnection then the purring dial tone before she handed Scott back his cellular.

"Was he still upset?"

"That was his mother. She said...she said..."

"Sharise? What happened? Is he that mad? Is he oka-"

"He's fine."

"So what was the discussion about?"

"A death in the family."

* * *

"Who was on the phone?"

Dianne started, calmed herself before turning to Cayle as he entered the living room. She crossed the floor, met him halfway and reached for the black silk tie at his collar. She curled her fingers around his to help him knot it since he had never been very good at this particular, manly chore.

But then, he'd never had a real father to show him, Dianne now told herself as she glanced up into his mismatched eyes. They had never looked more beautiful than they did right then. Innocent, open and trusting. So beautifully trusting.

"Mom?" He arched a brow.

She peered at him, her heart slamming her chest. She had lied to him on only one other significant occasion and that had been because Zach had asked her to. She was sure God would forgive her another lie of omission. It was for a good cause.

"The phone, Mom? Who was it?"

"Oh, just one of those pesky telemarketers." Dianne grabbed his arm, hastily led him to the vestibule closet for their coats and tried to forget all that her son had confided to her about the tough motherless girl he had fallen in love with.

-

Keller strolled by the dance studio he'd had put in years ago in the hopes of luring his daughter back home, long before he'd installed a gym that would become essential to her rehabilitation. He poked his head around the doorframe and saw a scene that had become frighteningly and all too familiar over the passed several days: Sharise pushing her body to limits it had never been built to reach.

Rehabilitation and rehearsals were one thing, but this self-destruct mission she seemed to be on since Cayle's and her break-up was quite another.

This couldn't be good for the baby, he thought, wondered if she had a clue as to whether or not he knew. He wondered too if Ella or Scott knew and if so, how long each of them had been in on the little secret and whether they had found out on their own or maybe Sharise had seen fit to inform them but not her own father.

He wouldn't have been surprised at any of the above, wasn't hurt by his daughter's dereliction. He knew very well how she felt about his interference, that she thought he was the most overbearing, high-handed parent on earth who didn't deserve any details of his only child's life, or any opportunity to make amends. He would have liked to think she had outgrown this view but he knew better.

He watched as she took a tumble to the floor, instinctively rushed forward, thankful that the well-cushioned mat had broken her fall.

"What are you trying to do to yourself?"

"Dad, I'm fine." Sharise tried to tug out of his grip as he helped her to her feet but he held firm, led her to the barre in a far corner of the room.

"This has gone too far, Sharise."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Does Cayle know?"

She jerked up her eyes to stare, surprised.

"Yes, I know despite your trying to hide this from me. Do you think I'm a complete idiot?"

"I never thought tha-"

"Well I'm not. And contrary to whatever else you may think of me, I do care what happens to you."

"Please Dad..."

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "You're my child, my only daughter, Reese. And I'll always love you, no matter what you do or say."

Sharise leaned her rear against the barre as she looked at her father.

"Does he know, Sharise?" he pushed.

She nodded, unwilling to speak.

"He didn't want it?"

"Dad-"

"If that dirty son-of-bitch abandoned y-"

"He didn't, Dad. I abandoned him."

"And in what way is that possible?"

"It's a long story."

"I've got all the time in the world."

Sharise stared at him, saw the sincerity. Saw the love. She burst into tears and Keller wrapped his arms around her, pulled her against his chest. She had never felt more comfortable and whole as she did right then in her father's arms.

"I messed things up so badly with him, Dad. I don't know if I can make them right again." She sobbed.

"I'm sure it's nothing we can't fix. Tell me everything from the beginning and we'll see what we can do."

* * *

He hadn't been this unsure and hesitant since he'd forced Sharise's hand so many months ago and brought in Cayle Miller as her therapist.

Now he was about to come full circle.

Keller listened to the phone ring, envisioned Cayle on the other end, listening. Screening his calls? Perhaps.

If everything Sharise had told him about their fight was true, Keller couldn't blame the young man for wanting to be alone for a while. And away from the Kellers, certainly.

The machine picked up after the third ring and Keller cursed under his breath, didn't want to talk to a damn machine. He needed a live person, whether it was Cayle or Cayle's mother or--

The tone sounded and Keller took a deep breath. He let a few seconds of dead silence go by as he ruminated before he opened his mouth.

"Cayle, this is Thomas Keller. I--"

"Hello!"

Keller heard the young man's anxious baritone when Cayle picked up the phone and cut off his machine.

"Cayle, how are you?"

Dead silence. Keller could imagine Cayle gaping on the other end.

"I know you must be a little surprised to hear from me, young man, but--"

"Is Sharise okay?"

The anxious tone grew.

So, he still cared, Keller told himself. Good. That would make this a bit easier.

"She's fine, Cayle."

"And...and the--"

"I know about the baby and yes, the baby is okay too." Keller listened to Cayle's sigh, grew hopeful.

"So, is she going to..." Cayle took a deep breath. "Is she going to keep it, sir?"

"I can't answer that one for you, Cayle. You need to come out here and discuss the options with Sharise in person." Number one rule in business: Give the customer just enough to keep him interested, tease him with the paltry, never let him know you have exactly what he's looking for. Then, when customer is near the end of his rope, slap his fancy on him and relieve his anxiety before he can go to your competitor to fulfill his needs.

Had to time it just right though. Timing and instinct were everything. And computers couldn't teach good timing and instincts, Keller thought.

"Sir, I don't think that would be such a good idea. Sharise made it perfectly clear to me how she feels about this pregnancy. About me."

Keller decided to use another tact. The truth. It was the only way to get through to him. "Cayle, she...she needs you."

"I don't think-"

"I would appreciate it if you'd come out here to see her. She's not doing so well."

"You said she was."

"Physically."

There was a long pause on the other end. Keller decided to tip his hand and beg, something he hadn't done since before Rachel's death. He'd begged God for mercy then and hadn't gotten it. Now he would beg for the only other person in the world who meant anything to him.

"Please Cayle. Come and see about my daughter." Keller paused then played his trump. "She still loves you, son. And I know you love her too."

"I...I..."

Keller was sure he could hear Cayle's heartbeat over the telephone line, waited with his own heart in his throat.

"I'll be right over, sir."

* * *

Sharise lifted one leg to the barre, bent forward as far as

she could go, touching her chin to her knee in a variation of Cayle's Paschimottanassana.

She frowned now at the term and the memory it evoked, heart heavy with regret and pain.

God, she missed him terribly. Missed his smile, his wicked sense of humor, his earthiness.

But she knew she would have to go on missing him, missing it all, the light and down-home now lost to her. Mrs. Miller had made this perfectly clear to Sharise, how Cayle felt about her, how he felt about her decision.

Sharise tried to block out everything--their fight, his anger, her tears, her shock and grief at the news of Zach's death, her abbreviated conversation with Cayle's Mom.... She blocked out everything except the David Sanborn/Al Jarreau collaboration that she had

put into her CD player and programmed to repeat in the background as she'd started her routine.

"Since I Fell For You", one of her favorite jazz pieces before Cayle but now it had even deeper meaning for her as she listened to the mellow melange-Al's faceless smoky voice raised in symphonic verse, silken and smooth and Dave's melodic saxophone laments wailing--a soothing dirge, instruments and vocals intertwining. Suffusing her, matching her mood.

Sharise lowered her leg from the barre, brought her foot down to the parquet, hugging herself as she closed her eyes and

the music sent her gliding and reeling across the floor. First she executed a series of maneuvers--slow, sustained and graceful

adagio--then built herself up to a complicated combination of leaps and jumps--brise, fouettes and grand jetes--that left her breathless but pushing herself until she finally quit, exhausted and moist as she collapsed back against the barre. Just bouncing and rocking to the beats in her head, the rhythm of the lyrics and music filling the studio.

"May I have the next dance?"

Sharise froze, thought she was imagining the deep voice as it washed over her in waves warmer than the music.

Slowly she opened her eyes and saw him standing tall and solid in front of her. "Cayle," she whispered his name and before she knew it he had gathered her in his arms, crushing her against his chest in a fierce hug that told her she would never again be without the shelter of his love.

Cayle lifted her off the floor and held her in his arms, like the day of their picnic--probably the same day they had conceived the child she was now carrying--protective and gentle in his new role.

"I should have never let you push me away," he said, and leaned in, kissed her hard and possessively on the mouth. "I should have never left you."

"I should have never left you in the dark." Sharise cuddled her face in the crook of his throat, felt his pulse, felt light and eternity.

Finally felt her home.

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[Epilogue](#)

Spring 1999

Montefiore Medical Center

Bronx, New York

Cayle's chest swelled with elation and unbridled pride as he watched little Zach scamper across the wide expanse of spotless acrylic tile, chubby arms outstretched.

"Daddy! Mama dwopped it! Mama dwopped..."

Cayle scooped up his two-and-a-half-year-old and crushed him in a big hug before planting a sloppy kiss on a round cheek.

"Daaaa-dee," the boy chastised. "Too big for kisses."

"Well, how am I going to greet my li'l man now, I wonder."

"Paw says big boys shake."

"Paw" would, Cayle thought, but mentally forgave Thomas Keller this small interference. As grandfathers went, he was as devoted and giving as they came. It was just as a father-in-law that his existence stuck in Cayle's craw sometimes. But the package deal was a small price to pay. After all Cayle had acquired his prima donna in the bargain.

Ella made her way over from a row of vinyl lobby chairs, complaining about her "old creaking bones" as Cayle firmly shook his son's hand before lifting the boy over his head to sit on his shoulders.

"Them there chairs is barely a step up from a Baptist church pew, I'll tell you."

Cayle chuckled, leaned in and gave Ella an affectionate peck on the cheek. "What's all this about 'Mama dropped it'? Don't tell me she had the baby already." He smiled only half-serious until he saw the look on Ella's face. His own face instantly fell. "I couldn't have missed it. I got here in record time."

Cayle briefly glanced at his watch as if to emphasize the point.

He'd fobbed off two of his clients on a colleague as soon as he'd gotten Ella's page. And even though she hadn't sounded too panicked when he'd called her back, he'd still sped out of Bruckner like a cat with a big dog on its tail.

Ella shrugged. "That cub wasn't waitin' for nobody, you hear me? We barely had time to get Sharise in a cab before the little sucklin' was poppin' out her head to check things out."

"For Christ's sake..." Cayle mumbled. The kid was only six weeks late--according to Sharise and her obstetrician's calculations--had all types of bets and pools going among

Cayle and Sharise's co-workers and relatives about how much longer Sharise would carry the tiny cave dweller. Kid couldn't have waited another lousy hour? "I told her to stop teaching those dance classes so close to her time."

"So she could go bored out of her mind between shows?"

"Ella..."

"Aw, she wasn't doin' nothin' that strenuous. She wouldn't risk it."

"I know but-"

"It don't make a difference no how. Baby's here now."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Cayle muttered, unable to hide his disappointment. He had wanted to be there for his second just like he'd been there for his first. Like he would be there for his tenth, if it came to that. Course, that would take persuading his little lady. "Are they okay?" he blurted and turned to Ella.

Ella grinned. "I was wonderin' when you was gone get 'round to askin'."

"I'm sorry, Ella. I was just so caught up-"

"C'mon." She looped an arm through his and led him to the elevator bank. "I'll tell you all about it on the way up."

"How Mama dropped it?" Zach piped up from his perch.

"How Mama dropped it." Ella giggled.

* * *

A weird sensation struck Cayle as he paused on the threshold of his wife's semi-private hospital room in front of Ella. Something off kilter.

He noticed his mama and Thom standing at his wife's bedside and was vaguely aware of their proprietary posture-hands held, fingers easily locked between them, heads inches apart, each gently cooing as they watched Sharise nurse their grand-daughter. Everything about their body language boldly proclaimed couple.

Cayle puzzled over their obvious familiarity, unconsciously cleared his throat a second before Zach demanded, "Git down! Wanna go with Paw and Gammaw. Git down..." and squirmed on Cayle's shoulders.

Thom and Dianne broke apart, both guiltily flushing-Thom straightening his expensive stylish paisley-print tie and Dianne smoothing the front of her gray linen skirt with both palms.

Cayle lifted Zach from his shoulders and planted the boy on the floor. The kid instantly ran to his grandfather and Thom hunkered down to greet him. Cayle could do nothing but smile, his heart filling again. Thom had his faults, but he was the best "grampaw" Zach could have ever hoped for.

"You two didn't gang up on my wife while she was here all alone and defenseless?"

"Now what reason would we have to do that?" Dianne glanced up from smothering her grandboy with kisses, innocently fluttered her eyelashes at Cayle. "I mean, you two aren't living in sin anymore. Not since Sharise proposed and got the ball to rolling in the right direction. Smart woman." She winked at her daughter-in-law and Sharise beamed back.

Cayle only smirked, unable to come up with a proper retort that wouldn't put him and Thom into the doghouse. He made his way over to the bed instead, leaned in and planted a long deep kiss on his wife's mouth.

"Mmm..." Sharise smiled and caressed the silken stubble along his jawbone. "I missed you, Miller."

"Missed you..."

"C'mon Zach. Paw and Gammaw'll take you to get some ice cream." Thom lifted Zach onto his shoulders like Cayle had earlier, surreptitiously grasped Dianne's hand as they all turned to leave.

"Auntie Ella go too? Pwease, pwease..."

"Yeah, yeah, baby. Auntie Ella go too." Ella groaned as she pulled herself from the window chair where she'd just settled and joined the trio in the corridor where they were waiting.

Cayle arched a brow, jerked his head at the door as soon as he and Sharise were alone. "What was up with them?"

"You noticed that too?"

"Couldn't help it."

Sharise shrugged. "Proximity. Necessity..."

"Insanity."

"You think so? I think it's cute."

"Cute?" Cayle gaped.

"Where's your sense of romance, Miller?"

He wondered for only a moment before he glanced into her dazzling gray eyes to find it. Finally, sheepishly, he shrugged. "Okay, so maybe you're onto something."

"Granted, it may be a little creepy-"

"A little?"

"But they look right happy together."

He guessed his mom and Thom having hankerings for each other wasn't totally beyond the realm of possibilities. Since Scott had assigned Dianne his computer consulting obligations to Keller Arts and Antiques, Dianne and Thom had been in constant contact-both physically and electronically. Add their grand-parenting duties to the mix, and opportunities for "proximity and necessity" were boundless.

Cayle wondered if Scott had known what he was doing when he'd promoted Mom and changed her role at Slater Software Consultants. Possibly playing matchmaker? Christ knew he had enough experience at it with the Kellers and Millers.

"Scott stopped by earlier. You probably just missed 'im."

Cayle barely concealed his grimace. The man was Zach's godfather after all, doting on the boy as much as his parents and grandparents did. Cayle guessed he could forgive the guy his history with Sharise.

"Stop sulking," Sharise teased, reading his mood. "He only popped by for a second. Dropped off a present for Kayla."

"Kayla...?" Cayle gawked. "That's a beautiful name."

"I thought it was appropriate. You'll see..." Sharise easily handed over their daughter, grinning as her husband pulled back the swaddling blanket to better see his new daughter.

Cayle stared at her for a long moment; her tiny face surrounded by a halo of rich auburn curls the same color as her mother's.

"She has your eyes," Sharise murmured and as if on cue, the baby opened her eyes wide to stare up at her father with one green eye and one brown.

"Sweet Jesus..."

Sharise laughed. "Don't be so shocked. Your genes are as dominant and persuasive as the rest of you."

"And aren't you glad?" he bantered.

"You could persuade me any time, Miller."

He stopped himself from smiling too widely as he leaned in to give her another deep kiss. He didn't want to give himself away. They had plenty of time, after all, to work on those ten kids, to create and perfect their choreography. "I plan to hold you to that, prima donna. Every day, the rest of our lives."

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