**CHAPTER EIGHT**

*Snakes & Ladders*

“I MUST COMMEND YOUR teamwork today guys,” Josiah broke off the stare. He was in the company of Ma Rubie. They both wore cheerful smiles as they stared in silence.

Treasure could not place the reason for the excitement they wore, it couldn't just be about the cooking tutorial.

“Thank you,” Chance obliged while Treasure nodded.

“How's Pa Henry?” Chance inquired from Grandma, concern written over his face.

She smiled.

“He spoke this morning after Tresh left his room. He could eat too.”

“OMG! Did you hear that?” Treasure screamed, she didn't realize for how long she'd enveloped Chance in a hug, until grandma cleared her throat.

“Treasure, can I speak to you?”

“Yes, Ma. Sure.”

Treasure trailed after Grandma Rubie as she headed for the large breakfast table. She sat first before Treasure followed.

“I..”

“Am…” they both started at once, then paused and smiled.

“Let me go first,” Grand Rubie tried to ease the confusion.

“I might have hurt your feelings yesterday with the way I responded to your suggestion about selling off the restaurant. I understand that you only meant to help…”

“No Ma... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have suggested that in the first place, it was a reckless idea. Myself and Chance have come up with a better idea on what to do,” she intruded.

“Can I hear it?” Ma Rubie asked excitedly.

“We will finalize it today and get back to you,” she reached for her soft palm.

“We would be fine. Grandpa would be okay too,” She assured.

“Thank you. I think I like tteam-up up between you and Chance,” Ma Rubie grinned.

"Ma, it's just for the success of the festival, don't think much about it,” she beamed.

“I appreciate that you think of the welfare of the community.”

"I was just going to check up on Henry, we could go together if you're through,” Chance grumbled, crossing from the other side of the hall.

“Yeah, sure. See you later, Ma.”

Ma Rubie watched with a contented smile that lingered for a while as the two disappeared through the door. It was evident in her look that she would give anything to see that those two become one.

Again.

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"Aunty Tresh,” the doorbell rang announcing the arrival of Trina and her kids.

“Hey baby girl, look at you,” Treasure hollered on sighting Lil Tresh. “Come give aunty a hug,” Treasure emerged from behind the counter, with open arms.

“I was tired of waiting for you to come over as you promised and pick up these girls. What happened?” Trina asked, moving forward to hug her.

“I'm really sorry, I've been busy preparing for the festival. Come see, we just finished a video tutorial for today's practice,” Treasure dragged her along to the counter still holding Lil Tresh to her body.

“Hey, Trina,” Chance greeted, stepping out from behind the counter.

“Chance! Look at you,” She hugged him too.

“How's the preparation for the festival going?”

“Well, we're doing our best, me and my team are working towards feeding you with the best meals ever on that day,” he turned to Tresh and winked. She smiled shyly in return. As if he had just noticed the little girl, he lifted her off Treasure's arm. Trina's eyes widened in surprise.

“Hey, beautiful,” he took her hands and led her to the breakfast table.

“What?” Treasure asked, noticing the smile that played at the corner of Trina's lips.

“I don't know, you tell me. What is this new glow I see in you girl?” She teased.

“I don't know what you're talking about…but if you are staying any longer, come help dice some fruits,” she laughed off her friend's remark.

“I know that smile, Tresh,” Trina laughed after her into the kitchen.

“Wow! Look here, you already have ten thousand likes in four hours, this is big,” Trina exclaimed, looking into the iphone's screen.

Treasure mouthed a *thank you* and adjusted her apron. “I feel excited doing all of this,” she said and turned around. “The team members are so helpful and cooperative, there's so much joy when we cook together,” she batted her lashes excitedly as she explained.

“I know. Right? Have you read the comments? See what they're saying,” she stretched the phone towards Treasure, who equally leaned in to take a peep.

“What did they say?”

“I love the chemistry between the two of you. By Laureen,” she read out.

“There's another from Jane,” Trina continued. “The part where he wiped her sweat felt so romantic.”

“They would both make a powerful couple,” she kept reading.

“Isn't that Treasure Winters, Kendrick's fiancee?” Trina turned to Treasure, mouth agaped.

“Let me see that,” she snatched the phone from her hands and read silently, her smiles disappearing.

“Hey come on. It was just a comment, you don't have to take it personally,” Trina cautioned on seeing the sudden change in Treasure's countenance.

“But you know how things on social media work? Huh? They might start getting ideas.

Trina rolled her eyes. “Ideas? Like?”

“Come on, Trina. This isn't funny. Like we have something going on together.”

Trina pulled a long sigh. “So, you're gonna let that bother you?” she asked.

Treasure ignored her and headed back to what she was doing. “Kendrick mustn't see that,” she grumbled.

“So what do you want to do? Delete it because of a single negative comment? Shouldn't Kendrick understand that this festival is important to the Cajuns and you are only doing your best to make it work?” Trina went on.

“Right?” She asked back, her voice uncertain.

“Look here, I'm proud of what you've done so far, Oakdale is proud of you girl and we await the taste of your sumptuous meals tomorrow. Go girl!” Trina encouraged.

“Thank you so much,” Treasure said and they giggled girlishly, hugging each other.

“Can I ask you for a favor?"

“Sure, what's that?" Treasure raised her brows.

“Can Lil Tresh stay over with you, please?” As Treasure gave her a blank stare, she continued. “Come on, I need to do something in town today. I won't stay long,” she pouted her lips.

“And Emma?”

“Emma is going with me, she has refused to stay back. You know how reserved she can be.”

“Oh okay. That's fine.”

“Thanks girl, you are a lifesaver,” She pecked her and picked up her bag hurrying off.

“Be careful out there,” Treasure hollered.

As Trina made it to the exit, Treasure called her back. “Wait a sec!”

“What?” Trina asked, her eyes splayed in curiosity.

“How about her?”

“Who?”

“Lil Tresh.”

Trina gave her another long quizzical stare. “What's with her?”

“Is she okay with staying with me?”

“She prefers you more than anybody else on the planet. You're never gonna run away from this God motherhood, Tresh!”

**CHAPTER NINE**

*Annual festival*

THE NIGHT HAD CREPT IN slowly bringing the annual festival closer. Aside from the occasional chirping sound of birds the street was quiet, dim-lighted by the moonlight.

From the rooftop, where the trio laid on the smooth ground, they could clearly view the sky above them.

"Do you think she would still come back tonight?" Treasure asked.

"I don't know, but then, I'm enjoying the night." Chance answered.

Lil Tresh was fast asleep between them. Trina had failed to return until now. Chance had volunteered to stay and watch over Lil Tresh until Trina came back, partly because he wanted to spend more time with Treasure.

The idea of cooking together these few days has created a deep connection between them. A connection he feared to open up his heart to. There had been so much laughter between them in the past few hours.

He had envisioned a family like this with her and their little girl. They would cook different kinds of meals together in the kitchen, while dancing to zydeco or countryside music. They would play games together and sleep like this on roof tops.

But then, his brain kept reminding him that she belonged to someone else now. Someone that had opened her to the luxury and glamor of the city life. If she doesn't see the value in a peaceful life like this roof top, then it was useless wishing for it with her. Yet, he hoped somewhere deep within that by the end of her stay, she'd be convinced about what true happiness was.

He was convinced beyond reasonable doubt that she had shown so much more happiness in these few days than when she had come earlier.

He also feared that this would all end by tomorrow night after the festival and she would return to the city where she belonged. But then, he wouldn't let his fear of the feature ruin the present, so he cleared his head of all negative thoughts allowing himself to feel the moment.

"What do you think will happen tomorrow?" She asked again.

"What i think is, from how hard we've worked together over the last forty-eight hours, we would ace the event tomorrow and we would get the money we need for the restaurant." He assured.

"Do you feel nervous?"

"Yeah, a little. You?" He turned to her.

"Tell me a word better than Nervous."

"We would be fine." He reached for her hands.

"That's a phrase, I said a word." She laughed at her own joke and he joined in.

The ringing of her phone intruded in their laughter.

"It's Trina." She Informed him before taking the call.

"Hey Tresh, I'm so sorry I just got back, would it still be possible to come get Lil Tresh?"

"Nah it's fine, we would bring her over."

"We?" Trina inquired.

"See you soon." Treasure ended the call.

They took her car and in no time, they had both arrived at Trina's place. She thanked them profusely for the help and bade them goodnight.

Left alone in the car while returning, Treasure turned on the volume of the radio and they both sang along through the drive to Chance's house. He lived at the north side of the town, not so far away from his parental home. Although his dad was late, his mum still managed their local bakery.

"This used to be your favorite song." She reminded him.

"It still is." He agreed.

"Today was fun. Thank you." He said as the car came to a stop in front of his house.

"I enjoyed your company, as well as Lil Tresh." She responded.

"Yeah. See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. See you tomorrow"

Neither of them made a move to leave. She stared straight at him and he returned her gaze without flinching. Seconds passed by leaving them swallowed in the silence that had been birthed.

He took a bold step and leaned towards her, reaching for her lips, she stared at him not shrinking, like she was in a trance, and just when he got an inch to kissing them, she recoiled realizing what was about to happen.

"I'm sorry, I don't think..."

"Nah it's fine. I shouldn't have done that." He apologized.

"Yeah." She nodded.

"Yeah." He repeated.

"I should get going." He added.

"Yeah." Her heart was thumping loudly in her chest and she feared that he would notice it if he didn't leave now.

"Good night." He opened the door and turned to her.

"Good night." She answered and waited until he had disappeared through the door. A sigh escaped her lips. She had almost given in to that kiss. Her body had badly wanted it, still wanted it, but she knew it was wrong. They had just one task to do, and that was making the festival a success. There was no need to mess it all up by getting cozy. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with enough air before igniting the car to a start.

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Dawn came quicker than she had expected. It was Ma Rubie who had first stepped into her room to remind her of what day it was. The older woman was clearly excited.

By the time Tresh changed into a suitable dress and went down to the restaurant, the hall was already filled with the other staff. Everyone was busy with something.

Mae and Eli as usual worked at the dessert section, designing cupcakes with chocolate icing. Josiah prepared the main course meals, assisted by Chance.

The two girls Treasure had met discussing in the kitchen the other day were busy with the hall design, dressing table clothes and adding flowers into empty vases.

Trina had supplied the vases and flowers when she brought the lil Tresh the night before. Now they stood beautifully on each rounded table, surrounded with four seats each.

Steve and one other temporary staff handled the lights in the hall. Grandma inspected every section, giving corrections where necessary.

At the sight of Chance, the event of the previous night had come fresh in her head. She turned away sharply to avoid catching his eyes.

She tried diverting her thoughts by thinking about grandpa instead. She wondered what he'd be doing now if he was fit. Perhaps he'd Join Steve in fixing the lights or checking the taps to make sure they were running smoothly. He would have made sure everything was in place.

In his place, Ma Rubie carried out the inspection. She held firmly to her walking stick, supporting her movement as she crossed the hall into the kitchen and outside.

At the end of the inspection, when everything was confirmed to be in place, the staff returned to their various houses to get ready for the festival which was to commence by noon.

**CHAPTER TEN**

*Runaway*

TREASURE SAT IN FRONT OF the mirror in grandma's room getting ready. Grandma had provided the costumes she needed to dress like a queen. A velvet red, ball gown. A silver crown that glistened in the light. A low heel to ease her movement for the rest of the day.

"Here." Grandma offered her a box.

"What is this?" She turned the box in her hand.

"Open it." The older woman instructed.

It was a set of shining gold jewelries.

"Wow..this is beautiful. Thanks, grandma."

"They were given to me by my own mother, I used them during my wedding, too sad your mum didn't have enough time to use it."

"Grandma, please. Today should be about celebration and not sad memories."

"You're right." The older woman wiped her eyes clean.

Treasure look had taken a transformation by the time she finished dressing up. The guests had started arriving already. Her anxiety grew with every step she took closing up on the sound of music in the restaurant.

Chance was at the foot of the stairs waiting, he offered her his arm when she got near and ushered her into the hall, to the seat that had been reserved for them.

"You look stunning." He complimented.

"Thank you. You don't look bad yourself."

He had chosen a cowboy form of dressing. A hat and boots on a pair of jeans and a simple T-shirt.

"I feel it is out of place though. Considering how beautiful everyone looks. Most especially you, Tresh you're radiating." He teased.

"Don't say that. The people would love you no matter what you dress in. Moreover, we should have a change in fashion." She concluded.

" Wow."

"What?"

"I'm just surprised at you. Back at high school, you had insisted that I wore suits to prom and no matter how I tried, you had stood your ground."

"That was prom." She smiled.

"Okay." He shrugged.

The hall was filled to the brim with the town's people. The feast started with light music playing. Then the king and the queen had to address the crowd. Chance in his speech had appealed to the crowd to purchase the special desserts that had been made in order to support the restaurant in raising more capitals.

And to Treasure's surprise, it worked. The king and the queen walked around the hall in their charming looks, serving dessert to those who were willing to support the restaurant.

Mae and Eli had taken proper caution in making the dessert so attractive that everyone wanted a taste and the bag of the supporters' money kept bulging.

The event was going well until her phone buzzed. It was Kendrick. She handed the bag to Mae and stepped out to take the call.

"Hey, baby." She greeted me excitedly.

"Who is he?" He snapped, ignoring her greetings.

"I don't get, who's who?" Somewhere in her heart, she knew he was referring to Chance. He must have come across those videos she posted. Her heart began pounding in her chest.

"The guy you've been posting about for days now." Jealousy weighed the sound of his voice.

"Oh, that's chef Chance, one of the workers at my grandparents restaurant."

"When did you become so comfortable rolling with the locals and even posting them on your social media platforms? Have you forgotten the legacy you're trying to build here?" He brawled from the other end of the phone.

"He is...." Her tongue had ceased to produce any meaningful words in defense of Chance.

"Treasure, I understand that these are your people and you have to be there with your grandparents, but you have to know that you're different from them now, you are classic and special and you should keep it that way. You can't go about embarrassing me that way. Okay?" She had wanted to say yes, but her lips felt glued together.

It was sad how she couldn't defend herself, nor Chance nor the people in Oakdale.

"By the way, I was able to secure a connection for you with Labels and Brand. They would need to see you within the next twenty-eight hours." He concluded.

Her lips suddenly snapped open and her tongue could move again.

"Are you serious?"

"I don't play with things like this, you know." He sounded very serious.

"I will be there as soon as I can." She promised.

Labels and Brand was one of the biggest cosmetic factories in Los Angeles. How was he able to secure a connection with them? She wondered. She had mentioned it in one of their conversations that it would make her complete to see her face on Labels and Brand.

Kendrick was right. She was different from the rest of the people at Oakdale. She was classic and defined. She was soon going to be the face of one of the most popular brands in Los Angeles. This was finally a big win. One that would change her life forever.

She stepped back into the hall holding her gown in her hands, her eyes darted from one face to another as she searched for grandma Rubie. The festival had tuned up and the people were dancing. Josiah was holding Ma Rubie and whirling her around on the dance floor.

She couldn't see Chance among the crowd.

"Josh please I need to borrow Ma Rubie." Treasure stated snappily.

"I beg to disagree my queen." Josiah jokes.

"This is very important please." She pleaded impatiently.

Josiah noticed the uneasiness in her voice, he bowed and excused himself, giving them room to talk.

"Treasure?" Ma Rubie turned to her.

"Ma I have to leave right now, I would be back as soon as possible, but I have to go now." She sounded.

"Where are you going to?" Ma Rubie asked.

"I have to be in Los Angeles." She rushed out.

"Treasure!" Ma Rubie pulled down her glasses.

"I know what I said, I know, but this is important Ma, please." She hurriedly pecked the older woman and exited the venue in a short run.

She went straight to Pay Henry's room. He was soundly asleep.

"I'm sorry that I have to leave Pa, but I will come back. I promise." She rubbed his hair and dropped a peck on his forehead before running back to her room.

She threw a few things into her luggage. It was better that she didn't see Chance. She wouldn't have been able to face him.

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"Thanks for coming." Chance greeted the guests who were now leaving the hall, as the feast came to an end.

"Hi Chance." Tracy greeted.

"Hey there, Tracy, you look beautiful in that outfit." He pointed out with a smile.

"Thank you. I just wanted to say, you did a great job today, the event was an intriguing one. I enjoyed it." She complimented.

" Thank you very much, but you must know it wasn't just me, my whole team members were supportive especially Tresh." At the mention of Tresh, he looked into the hall again, hoping to see her. He had stepped into the restroom for a moment and when he came back he couldn't find her. He was hoping she'd probably gone to get something and would be back, but even when she was called upon to give a closing remark and thank the people for their support, she was nowhere to be found. He had done that in her place. And even now, she had not returned and no one seemed to know where she was.

"I see." Tracy nodded. It irked her to hear him mention Treasure's name.

"I was hoping you'd be free tomorrow, we could have dinner together." Tracy suggested.

"Umm.. how about I give you a call tomorrow letting you know if I could make it. " He scratched a hand on his dread.

"Okay. That's fine." She smiled sweetly at him, her look lingering on his face. He felt quite uneasy at her stare.

Tracy had also grown up in Oakdale attending the same high school as Treasure and Chance. She now owned the local cafe in Oakdale. Back at high school, she had always been in a secret contest against Treasure. It annoyed her that with all the efforts she made, it was continuously Treasure who first got all the attention of the other teachers and students.

It was Treasure who always got the highest marks, who was the town's favorite and who Chance loved. She felt invisible with Treasure's presence, so it was a relief when she heard that Treasure had left for Los Angeles after their graduation.

She finally felt seen. She was distantly working her way into Chance's life and just when she was getting too close to achieving something, Treasure had returned. Though this time, she was prepared to keep trying until she got Chance to herself.

"Chance please, we need you here." Eli beckoned to Chance, breaking the awkward silence that tarried between the two.

"Excuse me please."

"Yeah, sorry. I got lost starring." Tracy answered.

"Talk to you tomorrow?" She raised her brows.

"Yeah. Tomorrow. I need to go now." He hurried past her into the hall.

The rest of the staff were gathered around the breakfast table. The hall was still littered with dishes and flowers from the event, and soft music played in the background.

"I want to say I'm very proud of what we did today. A big thanks goes to Mae and Eli, for the wonderful dessert that helped us in raising the funds we've gathered today and also to the rest of the other staff. This wouldn't have been possible without the efforts of our hardworking king here and our queen...." Josiah paused in his speech looking around for the queen, Treasure, his eyes seemed to be asking where she was. Chance shrugged when Josiah's eyes met his.

Grandma Rubie had been quiet for the rest of the festival after Treasure left. And even as she sat at the table with the rest of the staff, her eyes stared blankly into the space ahead.

"Ma Rubie, where's Treasure?" Josiah turned to her, the other heads followed suit, all eighteen pairs of eyes waited on Ma Rubie's response.

"She left." Ma Rubie dropped.

"What!?" Chance yelled in surprise.

"Why? Left to where?" He added, a deep frown creasing his forehead.

"She just left." Ma Rubie added.

A chilly silence enveloped the hall. Sad looks descended on the faces of the staff. Chance held a look that was deeper than sadness. He was hurt.

"Okay.. Thank you still, for your .. efforts. Umm.. We would tidy up the hall and go home. I guess we're all tired already. Thank you." Josiah ended.

Chance was the first to leave the restaurant. He couldn't stop himself from feeling the ache in his heart. His head was pounding with a headache that had just developed. Just when he thought they were having a connection, she'd left. She didn't even dim it to tell him she was leaving. She'd left in the middle of a very important feast, when they were supposed to be raising money for her grandfather's health. He had stepped out there to appeal to the people to contribute to that course, when it should have been her, and in appreciation, she'd disappeared on him, on the rest of the team, on the entire town. It hurt painfully and he couldn't stop it.

**CHAPTER ELEVEN**

*Guilt*

TREASURE WAS JUST IN TIME to catch the last train that was leaving Louisiana, her breaths came in short pants from all the hurrying.

The weight of guilt finally settled in when she sloped into the train seat. She knew she shouldn't have left the way she did, but it wasn't like she had a choice. They needed money, and Kendrick was one way of getting money.

If she could close this deal with Labels and Brand, they might just get enough money without having to sell their land or the restaurant. She would have to explain this to the restaurant staff when she gets back.

Thinking about the staff brought the thought of Chance back in her head. He had looked very handsome today, she couldn't help stealing glances his way at intervals during the feast.

She thought about the night before, about the kiss that had almost happened. A smile touched her lips. They had been so perfect together. She saw it from the way the people stared at them, just like in high school. She'd caught the triumphant look on Trina's face. She blinked, shaking the thought away. A deep sigh escaped her lips.

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The light of the city greeted her as the train rolled into the train station at Los Angeles. The colorful dresses of the people that waited for their loved ones. The harmonious transition of beautiful cars and the views of skyscrapers. It all reminded her of how much she'd missed the town. Kendrick had sent a cab that was waiting on the outside already.

"Welcome to Los Angeles." The cab man greeted. He helped her with her luggage and held the car for her.

"Thank you." She breathed what seemed like fresh air.

In less than an hour, she had freshened up, changed into a lighter dress and was standing at her balcony viewing the lighted city. Kendrick had sent a message promising to see her after work and she waited patiently.

She had missed him too, she had missed his dominating presence, his soft and alluring touch, the way he kissed, slowly and possessively. She couldn't wait until he came.

The night had traveled into it mid hour, and she'd retired to her bed in exhaustion when she heard his knock.

"I'm sorry I was so busy." He started when she opened the door.

"It's fine." She pulled him by the tie, taking his lips into hers and drawing him into the apartment.

"I missed you." He paused to say, pulling off the jacket of his suit.

"I missed you too." She drawled, pulling him back into the kiss, her fingers undoing the buttons of his shirt.

He swept her off her feet and carried her away into the room.

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"So you were saying something about Labels and Brand on the phone." She resumed, lying naked beside him under the duvet.

"Yeah. I met with the manager, she fortunately happened to be someone I know, she was talking about models and the rest and I told her you are a model yourself." He explained, his eyes fixed on his phone.

"So??" She leaned forward.

"You umm.. hold on." He peeped closer into his phone.

"Yeah, she said she wanted to meet with you." He resumed, not sparing her a glance.

"Just that?"

"Yeah?" He paused, turning to her.

"I thought you said you signed a deal already?"

"I just told you the manager happens to be my friend."

"Kenny I left a feast that was supposed to raise money for my grandfather's health, just to come down here and get acquainted with your friend who's a manager?" She quarreled.

"Of Labels and Brand." He completed.

"Wait did you say raise money?" He dropped his phone to focus on her.

"Yes." She snapped.

"I thought I volunteered to pay handsomely for your grandparents property?" He asked.

"Ken, they are not willing to sell off."

"Why?" He half yelled.

"Because.... Because they have decided not to sell." She shrugged.

"So you'd prefer to beg than convince your grandparents to sell off a property that would soon shut down for lack of resources?"

"I don't understand why you're getting angry about this." She faced him.

"Because that's a good idea.." he paused, realizing what he was about to say.

"Because I care about you and your family." He rephrased.

"No you don't. If you do, you would gladly release the money I'm asking for, rather than asking me to convince my family to sell our restaurant." She fired back.

"So you just expect me to keep pumping money into your family's business and problems?"

"Kenny where's this coming from? Have you forgotten it is a joint account and I have my own share of money in it." She sat up on the bed, the sheet falling off her chest, exposing her breast.

"We both know that whatever share of money you have in that account, was made from me." She stared at him stunned by his reply.

"Tresh listen, all you have to do is help me convince them. This is for us, for our future." He cajoled.

She was still dumbfounded at his outburst. When she didn't say anything. He turned on his side and bade her good night.

She spent hours into the night thinking about the argument they just had. The guilt felt heavier now, it made her chest hurt. She couldn't believe Kenny had said all of that to her. She couldn't believe that she'd abandoned her family for this.

She knew Kendrick to be an egomaniac, but she hadn't expected it to be directed towards her. It was almost dawn when her eyelids clapped and she fell into a slumber.

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Ma Rubie had a difficult time going to bed. Josiah had insisted on taking her home after the party ended. It was with so much effort that she was able to hide the tears that gathered in her eyes.

She sat at the table in her room for long hours just looking out of the window into the dark night, that was accompanied by the sound of chirping insects and the low snores from Pa Henry.

She recounted the times when Treasure was much younger, when she'd blended smoothly into the community, laughed freely and interacted with the town's people. She had been proud of the little girls, she still was, but it pained her to know that her once little girl was now grown and drifting away from the society that she was supposed to love.

She remembered all those times when they cooked together for the restaurant as a family. When Henry and the girl would work at the garden, plugging tomatoes for the kitchen.

She had been glad to witness the relationship between Treasure and Chance while they grew up. She had hoped they would settle in Oakdale or a town that was closer, that they would have kids that she would take care of. But it pained her to know that even at thirty-two, Treasure was making no moves to tie the knot.

It pained her to know that Henry was not healthy enough to help her seek these things out. That she had to bear the whole burden of the family and of the restaurant.

"Rubie." A low voice called.

It was Pa Henry.

"Yes Henry." She hurried from the seat and moved to where he lay on the bed, taking his hand in hers.

"You are awake." He asked.

"Yes."

"You can't sleep?" His voice was low, terribly low, even in the quietness of the night.

"I just needed some air. I'm fine." She lied.

"How was the annual festival?" Henry asked.

"It went well. We hosted and got some support from the people. Eli took some images and clips, you can watch them tomorrow." She smoothened the hair on his arm.

"Where is Treasure?"

Rubie waited a few minutes, thinking if to say the truth. If it would cause any harm to him.

"She's fine. She went into town to see someone, she'd be back soon." Ma Rubie replied.

"Come to bed, Rubie. Please." Henry pleaded.

"Yeah. I will join you soon. Let me freshen up." She pecked his palm and headed for the bathroom

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Treasure woke up to a cup of coffee on her bedside. A short note laid on the tray.

*"I'm sorry about last night, I feel terribly bad about the way I sounded. How about we hangout for lunch?"* The note read.

She dropped the note back to the tray and picked up the coffee cup. It was milky and hot, burning the tip of her tongue. Just the way she loved it. She stood in front of the mirror, staring into her own eyes.

Siri played a song at her command as she practiced a few squats, sipping the coffee at intervals.

When she stepped into the bathroom for a bath, the water was already heated, the tub was designed with red petals that swam at the top of the water. The bathroom was filled with the fragrance of bergamot in place of her usual lavender.

The redolence traveled into her senses, it had a calming effect that she loved. Her face lit up with a beam.

When she arrived at the diner, there was a plate covered on the table. Sandwich. He had prepared a sandwich for her. The smile widened.

She picked up her phone and texted him. "I might be free for lunch."

She ate delightedly, forgetting all about the previous night. She knew Kendrick wouldn't just speak to her the way he did. It was most likely that he had a stressful day and she had been too forward with her questions. She also had a stressful day and she was taking it out on him. Yet, he had apologized in a romantic way.

Her phone rang from the table. It was Trina's face timing her.

"Hey girl." She smiled at the moving image of Trina. She was in the craft shop, the paintings on the wall behind her were In view.

"Tresh how could you?" Trina asked with a straight face.

"How could I what? Oh.. I know, it was awful how I left, but I had to. It was an emergency." Treasure explained.

"Girl, at least you should have waited until after the festival, you just left without telling anyone." Trina quarreled.

"I'm sorry. I really am. Hope grandma didn't take it very seriously?" She inquired.

"I don't know, I haven't seen her today, but I hung around a bit after the feast, and I saw how downcasted the whole staff looked when they heard you had left. You didn't even tell Chance!" Trina's anger came back.

"I didn't want him getting all judgemental about it." She shrugged.

"Because you know it was wrong."

"Yeah, I admit it was wrong of me. I'm sorry." Treasure pouted.

"I was really angry when I heard you left. Everyone was, except Tracy. I saw her talking to Chance." Trina reported.

"Tracy?" Treasure asked, surprised that she hadn't noticed the lady.

"Yeah. she came all dressed up like she was the queen of the day." Trina continued with contempt in her tune.

Treasure went quiet. She wondered what Tracy and Chance might have been discussing. She had never had a good relationship with the lady In question, even though she had tried a few times to be friendly, Tracy had preferred to keep her distance, yet loathed her.

"Are you there?" Trina called.

"Yeah. I'm here." She returned from her thoughts.

"I'm really sorry about the way I left." She pleaded again.

"It's fine." Trina managed.

"When are you coming back?" Trina asked.

"As soon as I'm done here." Treasure answered.

"How are the kids?" She requested.

"They're fine. Emma come say hi to aunty Tresh." Emma's face appeared on the screen.

"Hi aunty Tresh."

"Hey Emma. How are you?"

"I'm fine." She said quietly.

"Where Lil Tresh?"

"She's upstairs. She's angry at you."

"Oh no.. tell her I'm sorry and that aunty would make it up to her, can you do that for me?"

"If you promise not to hurt her again." Emma bargained.

"I can promise you that when I get back. You just tell her what I say, okay?"

"Okay." She handed the phone back to Trina, who sat on a machine knitting a wool muff.

"How's Kendrick?" Trina asked when she collected the phone.

"Opps, I thought you'd never ask about him." The beam reappeared on Treasure's face.

"Well I just did."

"He's fine. He came around last night, but was gone when I woke up."

"I really don't want to know what that creepy smile on your face is for." Trina commented.

"Shut up! It's not creepy." Treasure chuckled this time.

"Okay, I hear you. I've to go now Tresh, I've got a lot of work on my table."

"That's fine. I will see you soon." The line dropped.

**CHAPTER TWELVE**

“*Perhaps”*

CHANCE WAS MENDING THE fence around his garden. Ma Rubie had granted all staff a day off to rest themselves after the stress from preparing for the festival. So the restaurant was closed for the day. He barely had any sleep the previous night. The night had seemed terribly long and filled with memories that taunted him.

He would have probably had less to think about, if he was at the restaurant, interacting with the customers and helping Mae bake pastries, but it was a holiday and he had to bear the silence of his apartment. So he decided to work. Maybe if he dozed himself with plenty of work, he would be able to get her off his mind.

He landed the hammer against the wooden fence with so much force that the wood rattled and some parts broke into pieces.

"Shit!" He had missed the nail and landed the metal on his head. He bent over in pain, a groan escaping his lips.

He decided to weed instead. As he set to it, his phone rang. He ignored it at first, not feeling the urge to speak to anyone. When it rang for the second and the third time he grabbed the phone and pressed on the receiver button.

"Hey chance." The light voice slanted through the line, sounding familiar.

"Hey" he greeted back trying to place the voice.

"It's me, Tracy.

shit! He had forgotten all about her.

"Hey Tracy, what's up, I was going to call you after mending my garden fence." He lied.

It had not crossed his mind even for a second since they spoke the previous night. She was the last person he wanted to think of at that moment.

For a split second, he had been angry at himself for not having enough money. Though he was comfortable with the way he lived, he had all the necessities of life, he could afford what he wanted, but what the Winters needed was a lot, he knew he wasn't going to be able to help completely and it angered him.

It angered him to know that Tresh had to follow all of kendrick's demands and instructions just because she needed money from him.

"Okay, I saved you the stress then. Are we still hanging out tonight?" Tracy's voice rang through the phone.

He thought of it for a while, perhaps, it was a good idea to hang out with someone, a few drinks wouldn't be bad either. That could clear his head.

"Yeah, we can still hang out." Chance replied.

"Okay then, I will see you later." Tracy hung up.

She tried very hard to stifle the smiles that had grown into an urge to laugh and bubbled in her belly. She was standing in the middle of her cafe, ignorant of the staff's eyes and customers. She finally burst into a happy laugh, startling the staff around. She couldn't believe he had said yes. She was finally going to have alone time with him.

Chance felt reluctant after the call. It was readable from Tracy's reaction that she hoped for more from the intended date. He didn't need a seer to tell him she liked him. It was evident. He reasoned that going out on a date might raise her hopes.

He wasn't ready to go into a relationship with just anyone right now, not especially) when he'd realized that all his feelings for Treasure never left, that they were still there, bundled up in his heart. He would make it clear to Tracy when he saw her. He promised.

**\*\*\***

"You like the meal?" Kendrick asked over the meal at the table. Treasure sat opposite him digging into the plate.

"It's nice." She simply answered, not looking up at him.

He had gotten her message at the office and had come down as soon as it was time. If she was surprised that he kept strictly to time, she concealed it with the fact that he probably didn't have much work.

"I'm really sorry about the things I said last night." He dropped his Cutlery and paused to watch her.

"You know, I saw that video of you and that guy you posted and I went through the comments, I couldn't help feeling jealous." He defended.

"I told you who he was right?" She paused as well.

"Yeah you did. Hey, Treasure, I love you and I love you so much, it makes me mad to know you're far away, back there, and I can't reach you." His face dropped.

She could see the point he was making and she felt guilty about posting the videos. It thrilled her to know that he could be jealous about something like that. It meant he truly loved her right? Although, she'd never doubted his love for her. He hadn't given her enough reasons to.

"I'm sorry ..." She was going to say, but was interrupted.

"Kendrick William!" A pretty woman called from behind. She'd just stepped into the eatery with a young man.

"Sharon." Kendrick rose from his seat to greet her.

"Who would have thought I'd run into you twice in a week." Sharon announced.

"A blissful coincidence, I would say." Kendrick answered her.

"Oh, meet my personal assistant, his name is Truce. Truce meet Kendrick, one of the most prominent attorneys in Los Angeles." Sharon introduced.

"It's nice to meet you." Both men gripped each other's palm in a handshake.

"And..." Sharon tilted her head towards Treasure who had been quiet through the introduction.

"Shiii.. forgive my manners. This is my fiancee, Treasure. Baby this is Sharon, the manager of Labels and Brand I told you about and her assistant." Kendrick briefed.

"It's nice meeting you." Treasure smiled.

"Hmmm." Sharon returned, with what could be confused for a smile.

"We should grab a seat. We came for lunch." Sharon added.

"Of course. Wait.. can I talk to you for a second?" Kendrick called back at Sharon.

"Okay..." She turned to face him, giving a questionable look.

"Outside please? He pleaded.

Sharon led the way towards the egress.

"I will be back, Princess.." He pecked her forehead briefly, then went after Sharon.

Treasure sat at the table waiting, her mind wandering. She couldn't help but notice how coldly Sharon had answered her. It gave her an uncomfortable feeling. Her eyes kept darting to the entrance, expecting to see Kendrick.

"Hey guess what." He came upon her when she wasn't looking.

"What?"

"We just spoke about you being the face of the company's brands." He announced.

" You did?" She asked without the usual enthusiasm.

"Yeah, she wants you to go over to the studio tomorrow for some shoots." Kendrick explained.

"That's nice. Thank you." Her smile remained weak.

"Are you okay princess?" He leaned on his table taking her hands.

"Yeah, I'm fine, just a little migraine." She rubbed her forehead.

"Let me see that." He moved over to her side, rubbing soothingly, his fingers on the sides of her head.

"How's that?" He asked.

"Yeah, it's effective." She moaned.

"I should take you home." He offered her a helping hand, she took it and rose from the table.

"Gently." He called, leading her to the parking lot.

Treasure could feel Sharon's eyes behind them. She had been watching keenly from her table, when Kendrick rubbed her head. It was refreshing to Treasure that Sharon had watched the whole process.

\*\*\*

It was early evening, Tracy stood beside her car parked at Chance's apartment, she had arrived earlier than planned.

"I realized I had to be somewhere later at night and I didn't want to reschedule the date for another, so I thought I should come early, so I can spend some time before leaving." She lied.

She couldn't really get her mind off Chance after the call. The minutes seemed to have been rolling very slowly. She'd gotten impatient and left the cafe back to her cottage to prepare.

She picked out a red fleece dress that clung tightly to her skin, revealing her cleavages. Her hair fell straight behind her back in a cascading manner. She'd been satisfied with her elegant look before stepping out.

Chance was surprised to see her, he couldn't deny that she looked beautiful. Her fair skin blended with the color of her dress. He was outside the house, trimming the edges of the flowers when her car drove in. She insisted on waiting, while he got ready.

"Ready?" She asked when he stepped out.

"Umm.. yeah, do you think this is okay?" He pointed at his dress.

A black sleeved shirt, with golden buttons, on a Jean trouser and a brown cowboy boot.

"Yes. You look great." She complimented.

"Cool. Let's go then."

They drove through the heart of the town, the lights from the open shops brightening the streets. One of the beautiful features of Oakdale are the reserved parks, designed by nature that it owns.

The car slowed to a stop at the front of a local dinar. The two emerged from the car into the almost dark hall of the dinar. There were short table lamps on each table, that was only bright enough to illuminate the faces of those seated at the table.

"It's nice here." Chance acknowledged.

"Yeah, I come here when I feel the urge to spoil myself." Tracy smiled.

Chance smiled along. The waiter appeared with the menu.

"You know as a chef, you should probably do the picking, anything you think would be nice." Tracy suggested.

"I wouldn't want to subject you to my menu. You should choose." He chuckled.

"I insist on being subjected to whatever you eat." She teased. They both laughed.

Tracy could feel her inside tingling. It felt awesome watching Chance laugh. She watched as he gave a detailed description of the meal to be served.

"It is charming how you've remained in Oakdale Ridge, with all the extraordinary qualities you possess." She started.

"I'm flattered." He dapped around his lips with a souvenir.

"I'm serious. You're so smart, you can cook, you are hardworking..." She was staring into his face admiringly.

"You can't be sure I am all of that." He interrupted.

"I am."

"And how's that?" He gave her a sweet smile.

"Cause I've been watching you." She shrugged.

The smile on his face thinned, until it disappeared.

"Did I say something?" She probed.

"No, not really. It just, I feel you might be wanting something more than being friends. Yeah?" He asked.

She studied his face for a while, "Yes. I think I like you." She retorted, her eyes not leaving his.

"I do not want to be giving you false hopes, I feel I should let you know that it won't be possible to go beyond just friends, if you know what I mean." He explained.

She was quiet.

"You are beautiful and hardworking and every other thing you just mentioned, but, right now, I'm battling with some emotions and it would be unfair of me to lead you on as a wedge for my emotional instability." He added.

"It's fine. Let's just eat." She gave him a smile.

He breathed with relief. She was fairly quiet for the rest of the meal, only speaking when necessary. The drive back to his apartment was accompanied by the sound from the radio.

"Goodnight." He turned to her when the car stopped at his gate. She slanted to his side of the seat, delivering a quick peck to his lips. He was taken aback, but remained calm.

"Good night." She answered, settling back in her seat, her eyes staring ahead.

"And thank you, for coming out with me." She went on, when he opened the door. He nodded in response, before alighting.

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

*Scandal*

"CLICK!"

The room was filled with many more clicking sounds of the camera. Treasure stood facing the cameraman, the long blue dress she wore, extending her feet, covering the floor before her. A weak smile covered her face.

"Cut!" Sharon Instructed.

She was repeating the word for the tenth time since the photo session started.

"I don't like this pose. Your smiles are weak. We are not getting this." She complained.

Treasure was obviously tired from the woman's complaint. She kept finding faults in every pose and picture that was produced.

"I don't think you can do this." She sounded.

"Ma, I think these ones are nice." The cameraman tried.

"I don't like it!" Sharon yelled.

"We could try again tomorrow." Truce chipped in.

"Whatever." Sharon stormed out of the studio.

"I think you did great. But we will try again tomorrow." Truce consoled Treasure.

"Thank you." She answered exhaustedly.

"Try to be at the party tonight, you will be introduced to some of the shareholders at Levels and Brand." Truce reminded her.

"I will." She nodded.

She collapsed into a nearby sofa, when everyone left the studio. Sharon had made sure to make the session as tiring as possible. It was the worst photo shoot session she ever had, it left her drained and thinking.

She still had to attend Brand's party at night. For the first time since she met Kendrick, she would be attending a party without him. It scared her. Especially with the feeling of disdain that Sharon was pushing her way.

She dialed his number.

"Hey princess."

"Kenny."

"How's the shoot going?" He inquired.

"We're done. It was strenuous." She answered, unhooking her heels and stretching out her toes.

"I'm sorry about that." He apologized.

"It's fine. You really can't make it to the party, can you?" She tried again.

"Treasure, you know I wouldn't hesitate to come with you if I could. I would be so busy."

"Okay. I will see you later then." She rubbed her hand roughly through her neatly packed locks, that they fell from the bundle into her face.

"Have fun." He ended.

**\*\*\***

The party was indeed a grand one. The guest trooped in with some of the most expensive styles and materials of clothings she'd seen. Sharon was exquisitely dressed too, she seemed to know everyone at the venue, she smiled easily, hugging and pecking the guest.

Sharon tagged along lamely, like a sheep, following behind Sharon and Truce. She was introduced to a few people and at other times, she was completely ignored.

She felt so unseen without Kendrick, which was sad. She had lived in the city for almost ten years, she expected flow with the rhythm of the parties with or without Kendrick.

Sharon disappeared almost immediately after she came. Treasure was relieved that she was gone, yet she wondered where she'd be, since she had appeared to be the light of the party.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Truce crossed over to the table where she was sitting.

"I was just filling my eyes with all of the colors here." She smiled.

He took a seat opposite her, turning to a waiter that was passing by, he ordered two glasses of wine.

"Are you enjoying the party?" He asked.

"Uhh... I'm not really blending in as I expected, but it's a nice party." She shrugged.

"You would do very well with time." He encouraged.

She wanted to tell him it wasn't her first time at a party like this. That she frequented such events with Kendrick, that she was a party goer herself, but the chiming sound of her phone disrupted.

She smiled at his comment before taking her phone, it was a picture on a blog. A picture of two very familiar persons. She could feel her heart thudding against her chest. It was a picture of Kendrick and Sharon, somewhere in a yacht at the middle of the sea, with a sordid caption that read;

*"Is our most popular attorney engaged to yet another person?"*

She blinked swiftly trying to be sure she had seen rightly.

Sharon?? She wondered.

"Are you okay?" Truce shaked her.

"Yes..yes. I'm fine."

"You seem to be far away."

"I was wondering, is there something else I would need to do here?" She asked.

"I don't think so. This is the moment where you relax and enjoy the party." He grinned.

"Great. I'd rather go home now, there's something I'd need to handle." She hurried up, packing her pause and phone from the table.

"Why the sudden rush?"

"Like I said, I just realized there's something I should do right now."

"We have to inform Sharon at least." He tried to persuade.

It was at the tip of her tongue to tell him that Sharon could go fuck herself. But she swallowed hard and forced a smile.

"I'm sorry I can't." She brushed past him in one swift move and headed for her car parked outside. Inside her car, enclosed by the tinted windows, she took a few deep breaths, relaxing her mind.

"I'm fine." She said to herself. Yet, her eyes itched with tears that she didn't let down. The car revved out of the venue at a frenzied speed, heading back to her apartment.

**\*\*\***

The restaurant was buzzing with patrons trooping in and out the door, with the staff working fervently to satisfy the customers. Grandma Rubie was up and agile, there was a shade of happiness that intruded her look.

Pa Henry had improved greatly in health. He had sat with her at the dining that morning, it filled her with so much excitement and energy that left the rest of the staff baffled.

She sauntered from the kitchen to the counter and to the hall, making sure all was okay.

"We're happy to see you feeling this way." Josiah had complimented.

"Thank you Josh. I appreciate your effort in keeping this place afloat." She replied.

The restaurant was unusually full with the town's people. From the counter, Chance smiled at the improvement. He knew it was the people's own way of supporting the Winters.

Grandma went from table to table, acknowledging each customer and making sure they were satisfied with the service they were offered. A few patrons were concerned and asked after Treasure, causing a small ache in her heart.

As she strolled into the kitchen at noon to supervise the meals, she met two of the temporary staff and Mae gathered over the phone staring at something.

"Do we have a problem?" She asked with concern.

The crowd scattered back to their duties, leaving Mae who looked red-faced.

"Mae? Is everything okay?" Ma Rubie asked.

"We just saw something." She started.

"What could that be?" She shifted further into the kitchen.

"We saw a picture of Kendrick and another lady." Mae announced."

"Can I see it?" Ma Rubie requested.

Mae moved slowly to where the older woman stood and handed her the phone. Ma Rubie peered silently at the photo.m, her expression blank.

"They're so many customers at the hall, they might be needing dessert Mae, try to hurry up." Ma Rubie replied, handing the phone back to Mae.

The other staff were stunned at the woman's composure. It was hard to tell if what she just saw had stirred any emotions in her. She turned and walked quietly out of the kitchen.

The picture soon circulated among the staff, who wondered if the rumor was true. Could it really be that Kendrick was cheating on Treasure? Did she know or not?

When Chance saw the picture, he was bemused. He couldn't understand why she was putting up with Kendrick. Even when he was cheating. He refused to think that it was a rumor.

Ma Rubie was delighted in a way. Finally, there was something to kick against. She always had a strong feeling that Kendrick was not the right man for Treasure. However, she was ready to support whatever pleased her grandchild, including letting her marry the man.

She hoped ardently that someday, Treasure would understand and know exactly what suited her. Now, her prayers were finally coming through.

**\*\*\***

Treasure had willed herself to sleep when she returned from the party the previous night. She woke up with another migraine the next morning. She struggled out of bed to get her coffee ready. Then, she settled at her porch, watching the city in the morning sun.

She knew the moment he stepped into the apartment, she felt his presence, she knew when he crept into the porch and stood behind her seat. She sat still, not turning, not acknowledging his presence.

"Hey princess." He settled into the seat beside her.

"Hey." She didn't return his smile, and didn't want to.

"I'm sorry I couldn't check on you after the party, I got so exhausted."

Exhausted? She reasoned. She'd never thought of the reasons why he was always busy and never available.

"Still having the migraine?" He asked with concern.

"hmmm," she nodded slowly.

"We should go to the hospital." He suggested.

"No. I will be fine."

"I insist." He tried to push.

"I would rather go home." She answered.

"Oh, okay. You still have to talk to your grandparents about selling off the ..." He was trying to say. She turned this time and shot him a glare.

"Treasure, think about it, if they sell off the restaurant.." he tried again but was cut off.

"They are not selling anything to you." She dropped.

"Why? I thought you were supposed to be on my side?" He was puzzled at her reaction.

"I thought so too, until I realized how peaceful, how better off It would feel,living at Oakdale, the same city you seem to detest and belittle so much." She retorted

"You can't argue that it is actually a small town and cannot be marched to the peace of Los Angeles." He bragged.

"I can argue that it is a lot more peaceful and would feel like home than Los Angeles would ever be." She started quietly.

"Is the migraine that serious?" He asked.

She smiled, but it was a bitter one.

"You think I'm sick?" She rose from her seat.

"Obviously Treasure." He followed her move.

"Well, I'm not too sick to know that Sharon has been behaving rudely to me because you both have something going." She dropped.

His face dropped. He had also seen the picture, but was hoping fervently that she hadn't.

"What are you saying?" He tried to defend.

"I saw you, I saw you and Sharon on the yacht. I wonder where you both were heading." She dropped and moved past him Into the house.

"Treasure wait.. please wait." He ran after her and pulled her hand, halting her movement.

"It's not what it looks like, we were just hanging out, we haven't seen each other for a long time, so when we met, we just wanted to do a little catching up." He explained.

"Catching up?" She asked.

"It's not what you think, Treasure."

"What I think is that you're trying so hard to lie about this, when you can just come clean." Her calmness was disturbing.

"I'm sorry. But it is not what it looks like." He continued.

"So explain to me why she was so cold towards me when she was meeting me for the very first time?" She posed.

"I don't know, I honestly do not know."

"Kenny, I think we need a break. I would go home and think over all of this, I'm stressed." She strolled off into her inner room.

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

*Regreso a Casa*

TREASURE SAT IN THE TRAIN was heading to Louisiana. She is full of memories. She thought of the times when she sat with grandma Rubie, listening to her teachings, her words echoing in her head.

*"Time will tell what is to be.*" She had once told her.

*"Try not to lose diamonds while chasing after stones.*

*"The things that glitter on the outside are not always so pure on the inside."*

She had cherished those moments when Ma Rubie told her impactful stories about the past, filled with lessons. But somehow, she'd forgotten all of that when she traveled to Los Angeles.

She had forgotten to love her little beginning. She had forgotten to be there for those who mattered. She had abandoned her passion. She had changed herself to fit into Kendrick's world.

She thought of the times with Trina. They had both shared a friendship that was bonded by genuine love. She tried to think of one friend, just one person that she had shared the same bond with in Los Angeles. There was no one. All the friends she made were solely to make ends meet, to make connections, to fund each other's party and be high profile guests.

Everybody she ever met in Los Angeles was all about the glitz of life, being rich and gaining power. Elise crossed her mind.

Everyone except Elise. She remembered her conversation with her. She had not thought about their meeting after she left the airport terminal, nor had she called on the number Elise had given her.

It became clear what Elise had been trying to say. What she meant when she said she wanted to be away from the screen, wanted a peaceful and quiet life.

She didn't think she would ever want that, but now it was the only thing she craved. She wanted to disappear from the noise and lights that filled Los Angeles.

She understood why Elise had called off the engagement with Kendrick. Prior to this moment, she would have assumed that the lady was sick to have broken off an engagement with someone like Kendrick. He was so perfect in her eyes, still was, but now he didn't just suit her craving.

She couldn't decide at the moment if this was the end of the road for them. She knew she needed some space. She needed to go back home, she needed to reconnect with her family, to look after them. And that was what she was going to do.

Although, a large part of her heart was soaked in guilt at the way she'd left Oakdale the last. She imagined what they would think of her return this time. She wouldn't be surprised if they treated her with hostility. She deserved it, especially from grandma Rubie. She knew she'd hurt the poor woman, when all she wanted was to be with her only grandchild.

Tears welled up in her eyes. She allowed it to flow freely, she didn't bother about the other people in the train, she didn't give a thought about shame.

The train honked loudly to a stop at the station. As she stepped down, A watery smile creased her lips, the cold air hitting her face. She was home, she told herself.

**\*\*\***

Her heart whammed against her chest as the reflective doors of the restaurant came into view. She paused for a moment , staring at the sign. "**It's all Cujan"** she could see few movements inside the hall from where she stood. She could see Mae serving at a table, a wide smile on her face. She could see Josiah speaking to someone at the corner, his face contented.

She tried to think of the reason she had left this place at first. What had driven her? She imagined what accomplishments she would have made if she stayed back.

The restaurant door opened and Chance stepped out. She had been so lost in her thoughts she hadn't seen him coming out. He stood there for a while, equally shocked at seeing her.

"Hey." She sniffed in her watery nose and blinked, producing a smile.

"Hey." He replied coldly. Or maybe she had imagined his voice sounding cold because of the guilt that was sucking at her chest.

He rubbed off after a moment of silence, not saying a word to her. Maybe she hadn't imagined it after all. Perhaps he was mad at her, or too surprised to see her that he couldn't speak. Whichever it was, she deserved all of it.

She had intended to step in quietly but that was, the bell at the door jingled, announcing her present. It was Josiah who first noticed her, standing there with her luggage.

"Treasure!" He announced in a loud voice drawing the attention of every other person. All eyes turned to her direction. There was a long pause as nobody moved or spoke.

Grandma Rubie stepped out of the kitchen to meet the scene. Her face was blank, everyone waited for her reaction. She approached Treasure, their eyes gazing steadily at each other. While Ma Rubie's eyes were strong and hard, Treasure's eyes were moist.

Gasps filled the hall as Ma Rubie collected Treasure into a hug.

"Welcome home." The older woman said. Treasure could only sob.

A thunderous applause erupted through the whole, as the people cheered the two women. Mae joined in the hug, her eyes also watering.

The others approached for a hug, following grandma Rubie's step, all welcoming her.

Treasure was surprised and grateful at the gesture, she didn't believe they would be that warm towards her. She sobbed hard tears, until it turned into smiles and then laughter.

**CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

*Glow*

“GIRL, YOU LOOK DIFFERENT. I'm telling you,” Trina insisted.

"I just got here yesterday, what are you saying?" She laughed.

"You look happier than you have been in a very long time. Nothing compares to this look." Trina straightened on the bed.

"Okay.. if you insist." She shrugged.

"So you're back for good?" Trina propped from the bed, with all seriousness.

"I guess." Treasure shrugged.

"This calls for a celebration." Trina clapped.

They both laughed, lying the morning away in her room and chattering over the happenings in the town. Ma Rubie had insisted that Treasure took the day off to rest from her trip.

She strolled into grandpa's room later in the evening, when Trina had departed, promising to visit with the kids the next time.

Treasure staggered backward, seeing grandpa sitting on his own, reading from a paper.

"Pa!" She screamed and ran to him.

She came into the room earlier, but he was sleeping and she didn't want to disturb him.

"Surprised to see me?"He asked.

"Yes! I mean, I'm happy, but I'm surprised too." She laughed.

"What would be, would be. I guess it was to be that I would get well. So I did." He shrugged weakly.

"I missed you so much Pa. I thought I'd never speak to you again." She hugged him again.

"I wasn't going to leave you now, there's a lot I still have to teach you." He replied.

"I can't wait for you to fully recover Pa."

"I can't wait either. I will be back on my feet before you know it." He promised.

She spent the rest of the day in his room, reading the paper to him. She left when his snores filled the room, signaling he was fast asleep. She felt even happier by the time she left his room.

She was the first person at the restaurant by dawn. She had thought of Chance the whole night and had decided to speak to him by morning. Knowing he was usually the first staff to arrive at the restaurant, she had tried to beat him to it and she did.

He was quite surprised when he approached the door and found it open. The first thought that came to his mind was that of shop thefts. He sneaked noiselessly into the hall. He jumped off his skin when he sighted Treasure at the counter peering into the half dark hall.

How had he not seen her?

She tried to stifle the laughter that threatened to burst out, seeing the look on his face. He glared at her, before moving to the switches on the wall and turning on the lights.

"Hi." She greeted, then walked up to the counter.

"Hi." He replied.

"Umm.. I wanted..."

"It is not necessary ,Tresh. It really isn't." He cut off.

Her heart squashed in her chest, but she was determined to set the peace.

"I know I might have hurt you, I don't.. "

"Stop! Just stop Tresh." He shunned.

"Why?" His voice broke.

"Because you don't owe me any of it. You have your life to live and you don't owe me an apology for taking your own decisions. Not like I can understand what you were going through. Not like I could help." He shrugged.

"No..oo... No Chance, that's not it.." she shook her head, her eyes were clouding again.

"I'm glad you're back ,Tresh." He replied and walked out through the door back to the street that was only beginning to get busy.

She couldn't help the tears that crawled through her cheeks. She sniffed and wiped her cheeks, she couldn't let customers come in and see her that way.

**\*\*\***

"She's back, I was there." A chubby teenage girl announced to Tracy at the cafe.

"She would still be gone." Tracy paid her no heed.

"I don't think so." The girl answered.

"What do you mean?" Tracy paused and turned to the girl.

"She looked like she was back for good." The girl insisted.

"What look was that?" Tracy's interest pricked.

"She was crying and there were plenty of hugs." She explained.

"that's it?" Tracy asked.

"Yes."

"You think she's back for good because she was crying? You probably don't know Treasure. She's a good actress, she can make anyone believe whatever she wants. Tell you what, Treasure cannot survive Oakdale Ridge, she's been away for too long, I bet it is one of her three days trip to flash herself around and get attention." Tracy discussed, not trying to hide the scorn in her voice.

The chubby girl watched her with surprise and attention.

An evil smile twitched at her lips after she spoke. She returned to her laptop, typing quickly. She didn't care that Treasure was back if she was going to spend just a few days. Moreover, she was doing well, better than Treasure. She was known in the town, known for her hard work and contribution in the society, it wouldn't be easy for Treasure to just steal all of that. But if she stayed longer than planned, then she'd have to think of something to do.

She made a mental note to check up on the Cujan's place later on. She'd make sure Treasure was around, she needed to see what extra development was visible on her. She would also make sure Chance was around. Even if he had stated that he wasn't ready for her, she was going to let him know that she was still waiting until he was ready.

If she got Chance, it would be a blow to Treasure and that's what she wanted. She was going to do anything to frustrate her efforts in Oakdale Ridge, until she returned back to wherever she'd come from.

She stood up abruptly, and headed for the door.

"Ma'am Tracy, you are leaving?" The chubby girl asked.

"Yes. I need to be at the Cujan's place." She smiled.

"I need to welcome the almighty Treasure. Lock up, I might not be coming back." She instructed, stepping out of the cafe.

**CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

*Chances*

TRACY WANDERED HER WAY INTO the Cujan's place, when it was nearing its closing hours. The staff were packing up to go home after the day's work.

Treasure was at the counter struggling to balance the account. Chance had ignored her for the rest of the day, she had tried to speak to him in the kitchen but he had excused himself back into the hall.

If he could just listen to her at least, she was going to apologize for hurting him. She wouldn't care if he refused to be her friend, she just wanted to know that he'd forgiven.

"Treasure!" Tracy feigned surprise at seeing her.

"Hi Tracy." Treasure greeted back, shocked that Tracy was greeting her with smiles. It was strange.

"OMG I heard you were back and I couldn't believe it." Tracy faked.

"Why?" Treasure was puzzled.

"Huh?" Tracy looked around, as if confirming that she'd been asked a question.

"Why did you not want to believe that I was back? Treasure repeated the question, keen on hearing her reply.

"I was hearing words that said you weren't coming back." She dropped her shoulders.

"Hmm, where did you hear that?" Treasure pressed

"I had dinner with Chance the other day, and he mentioned that you had left in the middle of the fix. So a lot of people assumed you wouldn't be coming back." She explained.

"I'm glad you referred to it as an assumption, cause that's what it is. I left the festival because I had an emergency I had to see to. But as you can see I'm back." Treasure answered.

"It's nice to have you back." Tracy smiled.

Treasure was suspicious about her warmness. "Is that why you came?" She couldn't help asking.

"Yes. You see, in Oakdale we're a tight-knit family, it would have been unfair of me not to come see a sister whom the whole town welcomes." She delivered.

At this point, Chance had worked into the restaurant and was strolling towards the counter.

"I need Gumbo stew." Tracy stated to Treasure.

"We're closed for the day. Everything is finished." Treasure answers.

"But y'all are still here, can't anyone quickly prepare it for me?" Tracy pretended to be looking around, her eyes fell upon Chance. He had seen her too.

"I'm a customer and should be treated like one." Tracy began. Treasure was completely taken aback by Tracy's switch.

Chance had reached the counter by this time and Treasure tried reporting the case hoping that he'd help.

"Hey Chance, I was hoping you could help me explain to her that we're closed and...."

"Good evening Tracy. Welcome to it's all Cujan. What can we do for you?" Chance asked, ignoring whatever Treasure had to say.

"I was just making an order for Gumbo stew and your colleague here has refused to sell. I'm so famished, Chance." She rubbed a hand over her forehead.

"We're almost closed for the day. But I would see how fast I can get something done for you." He promised.

"Thank you so much." She flung her arms around him in a hug. He didn't reciprocate, but he didn't push her away either.

Treasure was shocked and angry, she stormed out, leaving the account book lay there on the counter. Tracy smiled girlishly.

"Take a seat, I should be done in a jiffy." He pointed to her before disappearing into the kitchen.

"Thank you so much, Chance." She called after him.

Chances could see that Tresh was trying to warm up to him. He wanted so badly to talk to her, to hear her laughter and maybe hold her hands. But he was afraid for his heart. She had played with his emotions a few times and left him in a fragile state. He wasn't ready to be hurt anytime soon.

He was going to wait, to make sure she was really back. He had to see that she was sincere this time. He wouldn't just let her in like the last time and watch her leave the way she always did.

Yes he had intended to spit her by cooking for Tracy, but it was also because he felt indebted to her after the dinner. He wanted to do something for her too and after this, he would be okay with himself knowing that he didn't owe her anything.

**\*\*\***

Treasure fumed, as she paced the room in the library. First, he had dinner with Tracy, now he was going to stay back and make a meal for her even though it was the restaurant's closing hour. What exactly was he trying to prove? Of all people he chose Tracy to use in his spitting game?

It pained her that she had actually been trying to apologize and he had the nerve to ignore her like that, in the presence of Tracy. She was about to storm out of the house again, to go see Trina, when grandma Rubie called from the sitting room.

"What's wrong?" Ma Rubie asked, from the dining table where she sat.

"Nothing Ma. I'm fine." She denied.

"No you don't. Is it Chance."

Treasure's eye flashed at her guess. She wasn't too surprised that the older woman could guess that accurately.

"Come and sit." She patted to the empty chair beside her.

Treasure delayed for a second before obliging to the older woman's command. She hauled herself into the seat.

"You're angry that he's not talking to you." Ms Rubie started. She didn't need Treasure to say yes, she was sure she was right.

"If I was him, I'd be scared too." Ma Rubie stated.

"Why?" Treasure asked, confused at her grandma's reply.

"Because the heart is a very fragile place in the human body. It is like a piece of glass. Shatter it once, you might still be able to manage a few large pieces to see through. But shatter it twice and thrice, it would be gone, completely damaged." The older woman explained. Treasure listened with rapt attention.

"But I do not intend to hurt him Ma."

"But you have a few times and what he is doing is protecting himself. If you get burnt by a flame once, you should be careful the next time you see a color that looks like flames." Ma Rubie went on.

"I just want his forgiveness. I've been trying to apologize, he won't even listen to me." She complained.

"Trust me when I say he longs to speak to you too. You just have to create a common ground. Let him know how sincere you are."

"I don't know if that would be possible." Treasure face dropped.

"Why?" Ma Rubie adjusted in her seat.

"He's been hanging out with Tracy." She blurted.

A knowing smile appeared on Ma Rubie's face, but disappeared almost immediately.

"Winning a competitive battle is the best way to win any battle my dear. Your win is worthless, when it has no struggle in it." She sounded and rose from her seat.

"Wait for me." She instructed and wobbled into the room she shared with grandpa.

Treasure allowed Ma Rubie's word to sink into her as she waited for the older woman to return.

"Take this." She handed Treasure a bowl that contained a plant.

"It's a Crocus plant." Treasure observed.

"Yes. Take it, water it everyday when you wake up." The older woman instructed.

"Ma crocus doesn't really need to be watered everyday." Treasure argued.

"I know. It doesn't really need to be watered daily because it is strong to survive, but what if it really wishes to be watered everyday?" Ma Rubie asked.

"How do we know that? Plants can't speak." Treasure wondered deeply the significant meaning of this.

"Exactly, most people won't tell you what they want, but they would wish that you knew, and that you could do it without having them ask." Grandma Rubie explained.

Treasure nodded in understanding.

"Now can you show this crocus a little love by watering it daily, even if you don't have to?" The older woman asked.

"I think I can try." She accepted.

"I want you to do more than trying. Make it a duty." She requested.

"Yes Ma." She answered.

Ma Rubie raised from her seat quietly and disappeared into her room without another word.

Treasure sat for a while, admiring the plant. Then it struck her, the significance of the plant. The plant was to represent Chance, if she kept watering, showing it some love daily even though he doesn't ask for it, it might make a difference. She smiled in amazement of Ma Rubie's wisdom.

**\*\*\***

"You won't get this another time." Chance warned as he delivered the meal in front of Tracy.

"Yes chef." She smiled.

By this time, half the number of staff were gone. Mae and Eli waited at the counter watching the two.

"You know, I don't get why you haven't opened your own place. You're so good at this." Tracy commented.

"It's much better to be with all of these people. They have grown to become family." He responded.

"Okay." She raised her hand in defeat.

"I would leave you to your meal. Good night Tracy." He stood up from the seat and walked to the counter.

He spoke with Mae and Eli for a while before bouncing out of the restaurant.

As he took the now quiet and dark streets that led to his house, he plugged in his headphones, listening to songs to clear his head. A hand grabbed on his hoodie from behind, stopping his movement. He whirled to face Treasure.

"Treasure." He called quietly wondering how she was there behind him. Has she been following him?

"Chance please listen to me this once, please!" She curled her fingers nervously.

In response, he unplugged his headphones and stood straight.

"I am sorry Chance. I know I haven't been a good friend, I have done more irrational things than I can ever imagined and I have hurt the people around me a couple of times, that includes you, and I'm sorry Chance. I truly am. I've realized my mistakes and I'm ready to change, I'm willing to turn a new leaf, you don't have to be all friendly with me, I just need you to forgive me. Please. I can't bear you ignoring me the way have been doing, it hurting me terribly, I know I deserve it, but please, Chance." She pleaded, her voice laced with tears.

She waited for him to say something but he didn't move a body part.

"I won't stop trying even if you keep ignoring me. I will keep bugging you until you eventually say something." She sniffed and turned on her way.

"Treasure." He called back after she'd taken a few steps.

She paused in her tracks and turned back at him, watching with teary eyes. He moved silently until he was just an inch away from her, he closed her in his arms in a snug embrace. She whimpered in his arms for a long time. When she finally went quiet, he pulled her away and looked down at her wet face.

"So when are you returning to Los Angeles cry barbie?" He asked, his voice firm.

She giggled, then giggled louder, before bursting into laughter. He joined in the laugh. As he led her back home, they laughed more. As he held her hands, her inside fluttered. As he waved her good night and turned to leave, she was almost certain that it was the best night of her life.

She'd missed sharing those laughter-filled moments with him. As she laid on her bed, turning off the light, gazing towards the ceiling and watching the bright light from the moon that sneaked through the window into her room, a smile of satisfaction crossed her face.

She was finally home to Oakdale Ridge. The smile remained on her face even hours after she'd drifted off into sleep.

**CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

*Break-up*

THE DAY SEEMED PROMISING with the brightness of summer renting the air. The sky was a lining of sunshine and colors, warming not only the streets, but the hearts of those who walked along briskly.

Treasure greeted the people with smiles, asking after their families and their work and school. They responded with the same energy and a few hugs too.

Her flowery dress danced to the gentle push of the wind. Her cowgirl boots landed gingerly on the dusty ground, her hat shielding her from the soft heat of the morning sun. Her twisted locks fell in single strands underneath the hat, it was so lengthy, it touched down to the local basket she held in her hands. She approached Trina's apartment in high spirits.

"Look who we have here!" Trina announced.

Lil Tresh was flying towards her in no second.

"Come here baby girl." She caught her in the air and held her in a hug.

"Aunty Tresh!" She screamed.

"Yes baby. I missed you so much!" She dropped her.

"I missed you too. Why did you leave?" Lil Tresh questioned.

"I'm sorry girl, I'm never leaving again." Treasure promised.

"Promise?" She raised her pinky finger in a swear.

"Yeah promise." She curled her fingers around hers.

Trina stepped forward and hugged her friend.

"Where are we going this morning?" Trina asked.

"I was hoping we could go grocery together."

"Umm.. how about you go with the girls, I'd join y'all later at the restaurant, still have some work to finish." Trina declined.

"Okay, so girls, who's ready to go with aunty?" She asked.

"I'm coming with you aunty Tresh." Lil Tresh announced.

"That's my girl."

She looked questioningly at Emma who was hiding behind her mother's dress.

"Emma?" She called.

The quiet girl shook her head negatively. Still holding onto her mother's dress.

"Baby girl, you should join your sister, so you can look after her." Trina tried to cajole the girl.

"Mum, I can look after myself, beside, I'd be with aunty Tresh, she won't let anything harm me. Right aunty Tresh?" The younger girl looked up at Tresh with innocent eyes.

"Right." She answered.

"So Emma can stay with you. She's boring after all." Lil Tresh added.

"Don't say that about your sister. She's not boring, she just enjoys being alone." Trina explained.

"Okay, we will be on our way now, catch you both later." Treasure announced and left.

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"Why are we shopping plenty of wines aunty Tresh?" Lil Tresh noticed.

"Cause we are going to be celebrating."

"What are we celebrating?" The little girl asked.

"Grandpa Henry. We are going to be celebrating his recovery." Tresh explained.

"Do they celebrate things like that?"

"You celebrate whatever is important to you." Tresh told her.

"Can I drink the wines too?"

"No hunny, you are still below the age to drink wines, but you can pick any of the soft drinks."

"Okay then." The little girl disappeared down the lane for drinks happily.

Left alone, Treasure thought about the response she had just given the little girl, about celebrating whatever was important. She thought back to her relationship with Kendrick.

They had dated for seven years, but only celebrated an anniversary once in all those years. He had the money to mark expensive dates and host parties to celebrate their union, but he'd rather work.

She had initiated the idea for an anniversary on their first year together. It was a simple and quiet one in her apartment. She had prepared home made dishes and decorated the house with red roses and candle lights. She had worn his favorite dress and added a seductive perfume.

She had turned on calm, romantic songs and waited for him to return from work. He did come back late as usual, but she didn't care. They danced in each other's arms in the space in the sitting room after dinner.

The day had ended with a sweet bath together in her bathtub and a passionate sex after it.

The next year she had waited for him to plan something, he told her it wasn't his kind of thing. So in the third year, she had to prepare another simple date for them. This time, she waited in her lingeries until the next morning. He didn't show up. He called the next morning to apologize for not coming, and said he was "busy".

How come she never thought of these things back then? How was she always calm and understanding and able to put up with all of his numerous excuses? She only wondered now.

Chance stepped into the store, his eyes darting through the shelf for flowers and cards.

"Uncle Chance!" Lil Tresh interrupted his search.

He was surprised to see her all alone in the store.

"Hey Lil Thresh." He lifted her above his head playfully. She laughed heartily and slapped her hands in the air.

"Where's your mum?" He dropped her to the floor and asked.

"She's at home." The little girl answered.

"How did you get here?" The lines on his forehead gathered with concern that the little girl might have wandered away from her mother's watch.

"I'm here with aunty Thresh, we came to get wines to celebrate Pa Henry's health." She narrated.

"Oh, where's she now?"

"She's picking wines over there." Lil Tresh pointed.

"Okay, so I need your help Lil Tresh." He bent low to her level.

"With what uncle Chance?"

"I need to pick the best flowers among the others and a beautiful card too. It is for a friend. Do you think you can help me with that?" He asked.

"Hmm.. who's this friend? I might know what to pick if I know them." She placed her hand on her chin, acting to be in thoughts.

"Smart girl!" Chance complimented.

"Well the flowers and card are for aunty Tresh."

"Oh. Okay, I think I can help you." She turned to face the rolls of cards that lined up on the shelf.

They took a few hours selecting through different cards and reading through their contents, until Lil Tresh picked a particular card.

"This is the one." She announced.

"Why this?" He collected the card from her tiny hands, looking it up. It was a nice pink card with red ribbon binding it.

"It looks special and aunty Tresh is special isn't she?" The little girl asked.

"Yeah she is."

"Then it's this one." She stood her ground.

"Okay. So we still have to pick a nice flower to go with the card you know."

They cornered the shelf that held vases of flowers. It was easier choosing a small stick of rose. By the time they had chosen both items, Treasure had rounded the corner looking for Lil Tresh.

"Where have you been, I was looking for you." Treasure asked, not noticing Chance at first.

"Hey." He greeted with a smile.

"Chance! I was so worried about her, I didn't see you. What are you doing here?" She turned to him, returning his smile.

"Came to the window shop." The card and flower were hidden perfectly in the pocket of his jacket.

"Well, now you are here, you might just actually help us shop."

"It would be my pleasure." He bowed, making her chuckle.

They held Lil Tresh on both sides, walking through the store, picking items and arguing on the best products of some kitchen spices.

**\*\*\***

The previous day had been a bit hectic. After shopping with Lil Treasure and Chance, they went into her grandmother's farm, plunging grapes and tomatoes. The rest of the day was spent at the restaurant, cooking and serving meals. By the time she took Lil Tresh home and returned to the house, she'd been so tired, she slept almost immediately she touched the softness of her bed.

She yawned lazily as she gathered herself from the bed. She strolled to grandpa's room, but he wasn't on his bed neither was grandma Rubie insight. Her heart skipped a few beats with the worst thoughts of what might have happened.

She quickly hurried back to her room and changed out of her pajamas into a simple dress. Her pace was quick and steady as she rushed down to the restaurant.

"Happy birthday!!!!!" A chorus shout welcomed her as she opened the door and stepped in.

"OMG!" She stepped in, her hands covering her face in surprise.

How did she not remember her own birthday? Grandpa was seated at his position at the dining table, he looked healthy. The smile on his face straightened the freckles that lined his forehead.

"Thank you all."

"Happy birthday Treasure." Grandpa wished, handing her a wrapped box.

"Thank you Pa." She accepted the parcel.

"Happy birthday my beautiful granddaughter." Grandma stood up and handed her a box.

"Thank you Ma."

Josiah followed suit, the rest of the staff handed their gifts to Treasure, all wishing her a happy birthday with smiles.

"Happy birthday." Chance handed the card and flower to her.

"Thank you." She stared at the card, then hugged him.

"I'm so grateful for the gifts and everything. Thank you all." Treasure greeted.

"Let the celebration begin." Josiah announced.

Steve tuned on the music and the dancing began. To the surprise of all, grandpa rose to his and held grandma for a dance. Shouts of excitement erupted in the hall, followed by applause from the staff.

"May I have this dance?" Chance moved to Treasure.

She beamed and slided into his arms. They rocked slowly to the sound of the music.

"We're slowing aging." Treasure commented, resting on his shoulder.

"Soon we would be like Ma Rubie and Pa Henry." He responded. They both chuckled.

"We would own our restaurants." She resumed. He paused to look at her.

"We would go grocery shopping together." He continued.

"We would visit the beach at Los Angeles every summer holiday." She added.

"We would build a cooking school, where the younger ones would learn culinary arts." He dropped.

"We would..." The door burst open, cutting off her next statement.

"Happy birthday!!!" Trina entered the hall, raising a bottle of wine and a flower bouquet.

Lil Tresh rushed over and handed a card to Treasure.

"Thank you baby."

"Emma has a gift for you." Trina announced.

"Okay... " Treasure beamed in anticipation.

Emma walked over to a seat and dragged it close to Treasure. She climbed onto the seat and commanded Treasure to turn around. She pulled out a locket necklace and placed it on her neck.

"Aww.. thank you so much Emma." She hugged the girl.

Trina walked over and hugged Chance before setting down the gifts on the table.

"I'm hungry, who else is?" Trina announced.

Trina followed Mae into the kitchen, moment later the table was filled with different types of dishes. They settled to eat. Grandpa made a toast to Treasure birthday and to good health. Glasses were clinged, chatters filled the table as they were happily.

Treasure could feel her phone buzzing from her pocket. It was a message from Kendrick. She read each word carefully, surprised that he would send her a message. He never did. It was not his thing to send texts. He'd usually come bearing the most expensive gifts, but never sent a text.

The car she used was one of the gifts he had gotten for her during her birthday. He believed more in action. He didn't care what it was she valued most. Now he was sending a text.

"Are you alright?" Chance broke her thought.

"Yeah. I'm fine." She smiled, dropping the phone.

She didn't pick it up when it rang. She didn't want to ditch this moment for anything. She remembered the day of the annual festival, everything had been fine until he called and she picked up. She'd learnt her lessons.

Amidst the clattering of spoons against plates and the loud chats occasionally interrupted with laughter, the restaurant's door swung open.

Kendrick stood at the entrance, a teddy in one hand and a flower bouquet in the other. He stood for a while searching for her.

She had turned instinctively and met his eyes. Her own eyes widened in shock.

"Kendrick!"

The rest of the people at the table turned to the door, gasping too. She stood up and walked towards him at the door.

"Treasure, I'm sorry for everything I've done, I haven't been the best dude and I know it. I haven't been okay without you. I've tried calling and texting but you wouldn't take any, so I decided to come over. Happy birthday." He stretched the gifts towards her.

"This wasn't necessary."

"It is. Treasure I miss you. I really do." He stepped forward.

She collected the gifts and hugged him.

"Join us." She pointed to the table. He followed behind her to the table.

"Hi." He greeted the faces at the table. They responded with nods and were mostly silent.

He sat next to Treasure and kept his head down.

"Is he here?" Kendrick asked quietly, referring to Chance, who sat opposite her.

"Kendrick." She warned with a glaring look.

"I'm sorry." He continued picking at the meal on his plate.

"I planned a little something, I want you to come with me." He told her.

"I can't leave here now."

"It doesn't have to be now, I can wait until you are done with this." He replied.

"Okay." She shrugged.

**\*\*\***

"I might not even spend the night, I promise." She told Ma Rubie.

"It's fine. Do take care of yourself."

"Thanks Ma." She hugged her.

The party had ended at the restaurant and the staff were tidying up the place.

"Hey Chance." She returned to Chance who was at the counter.

"Tresh."

"I would be away briefly. Kendrick says there's a little something he prepared. I need to go see it." She explained.

" You'd be back?" He asked.

"Definitely. Might not spend the night." She assured.

"Alright. Take care." He bade her.

She strolled out to join Kendrick who was waiting at the door.

"Shall we?" He asked, offering her a hand.

"Yeah." She followed him into the sports car that parked at the front of the restaurant.

**\*\*\***

Kendrick had planned the party at his apartment. There was a small crowd that had gathered. All drinking and dancing around the pool.

"Welcome back." He greeted her.

"Kendrick, I'm not back to stay."

"What if I convince you to?" He kissed her neck seductively.

"Kendrick, I have things to look after at Oakdale." She insisted.

"What? A restaurant?" He asked.

"Treasure I'm ready and willing to change. Look, we could transform your grandparents' restaurant into an estate, it would fetch us plenty of money, we would take your grandparents to a nursing home and look after them. You would become a star and be famous. Think about Treasure." He coaxed.

"I saw Elise at the airport the day you sent me off." Treasure began.

"What does she have to do with us?" He frowned.

"She told me the real reason she broke up with you."

"Okay, what was the real reason?" He relaxed on the iron rails of the balcony.

"I didn't understand what she said at first, but over the past few weeks since I left Los Angeles, I have realized that we have something in common. We both want a quiet and simple life. Something away from this noise that surrounds your life. Kendrick, I don't think we can continue this." She pointed.

"What are you talking about Princess??" He asked, drawing closer.

"I didn't understand what she said at first, but over the past few weeks since I left Los Angeles, I have realized that we have something in common. We both want a quiet and simple life. Something away from this noise that surrounds your life. Kendrick, I don't think we can continue this," she pointed.

"What are you talking about Princess?" He asked, drawing closer.

Treasure smacked her lips in hesitation, her left foot shifting behind, creating a gap between them.

“We both seem to want different things right now. I want to be at Oakdale Ridge, I want to work at my grandparents restaurant rather than sell it off. I want to be around the people I love. This clearly doesn't align with your want and I can no longer compromise,”she stated.

“Are you breaking up with me?” Kendrick asked, the lines on his forehead drawing together in a frown.

“Yes Ken. I have to.”

“You would regret this,” he promised, his lips curling inward, with a wicked grin.

“Why?” A bemused look appeared on her face.

“Tresh I brought you this far, if it wasn't for me, you wouldn't be this! You won't survive without me for long,” his eyes had grown darker in color.

“I would love to see how true that is, Ken.” She turned facing the direction they had come from, her steps steady and calculated.

**\*\*\***

Kendrick was certain in his heart that Treasure would come back. She was probably just pissed about the picture that had circulated online. For that, he was going to talk to Sharon, how could she have let those pictures out on the media? Now he was about to lose an engagement of seven years.

Yes, she wouldn't go that far without him. Yet, he couldn't control the anger that surged through him. His fingers tightened around the fragile glass he held, trying to stabilize the trembling feeling that had developed in his body. A Few drops of the red color liquid spilled to the neatly mopped floor, creating a shape like a map.

As the music grew louder from the poolside, the drumming sound in his head increased, the figures around the pool became blurry in his eyes, but he wanted more, more of the bitter taste alcohol that he had been drinking since Treasure left through the door. He staggered to the bar section, grabbing a full bottle of whiskey.

“She would regret this…” he mumbled inaudibly to himself.

“Hey, where's the birthday girl?” Derek, his colleague, strolled over to the bar.

“She's gone,” he took a big gulp directly from the mouth of the bottle that went through his Adams apples in one swift move.

“What do you mean gone? Gone to where?” Derek drew a bar stool and sat beside him.

“Back to her home”

“I thought the party was for her?”

“She broke up man,”

“Does that mean she's not convincing her grandparents about the deal anymore?” Derek straightened on the stool. A serious look replaced the casual smile he had walked in with.

“That's it,” he nodded, taking more glups.

“Shiii… this is bad.” Derek drummed a finger against the bar table.

“What do you intend to do?” He resumed after a brief pause.

“I would make her pay,” Kendrick promised as he rose from the stool.

“She would pay” he resounded, wobbling off, the sound of a crashed tumbler following his movement.

“Be Careful,” Derek cautioned, a little surprised at seeing this part of Kendrick.