



Scare
SHAY VIOLET

SCORE

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It had been a hectic afternoon, with ten people in the private dining room for hours and hours. I think they ordered everything on the menu at least four times.

I'd waited on some of them before. Half of them, to be exact.

They're a group of ladies who my boss, Miss Sadie, knows by name. According to her, they're all alumni of Palmetto Women's College, which is the school I'm slowly working my way through. They have a mini-reunion twice a year here in Charleston, South Carolina, and they always have a meal at their favorite restaurant, *Sadie's BBQ*.

For this reunion, their regular group went from five to ten, as each of them were accompanied by a male counterpart.

Thank goodness I thought to myself when the group dispersed, and I dragged my exhausted self behind the other waitress, my best friend Mya to clear off that big table. Like waiters and waitresses everywhere, we looked for what we hoped was a generous tip. It was two weeks until Christmas, and I'd be more than happy to see Santa come in the form of a hungry group of patrons at the restaurant where I've worked since high school.

Lying on the table, tucked neatly beneath a plate with a stack of picked-clean ribs on it, was a wad of folded bills.

The visible bill was \$100.

There were at least five or six more bills folded up, so I figured \$53 each for Mya and me, and with what I'd made from my other tables, I'd be close clearing \$100 for the day. Not my record, which was \$146, but a damn good day, nonetheless.

Mya reached for the money and spread it across the table.

I gasped.

We counted it twice, and there was \$1,000 there.

Ten bills with Ben Franklin and his big bald head and pursed lips staring up at us.

Mya screamed, and Miss Sadie's granddaughter Shayla, who did most of the cooking these days, came rushing around the corner.

"Is everything alright?" Shayla asked. Mya fanned out the cash.

Shayla smiled at us. "Merry Christmas, ladies."

"They paid their bill, right?" I asked. "They didn't leave this to cover the check?"

"Oh yeah, you were waiting on those boys from State," Mya recalled. "When the bill came, and you ain't gonna believe this one, all five of those men pulled out credit cards. Black cards, platinum cards, Shayla said one of them was a titanium card, whatever that is. Anyway, they all wanted to pay. For everything. And that bill was big."

"Yeah, it was," I said, twisting my back and stretching my arms way up over my head.

"Miss Sadie put the cards in a mixing bowl in the kitchen, dropped a towel over it, and shook it around. She pulled one out and ran that one to pay for that whole meal. When I took the receipt back in to get it signed and give back the other cards, they were still arguing over who should pay."

"So, you mean all this money is ours to split?" I ask.

"Looks that way to me," Mya said, scooping up five bills. "Santa is going to be extra good to Keshawn this year."

Mya's son Keshawn just turned three, and he was all in on Santa Claus, Rudolph, and Frosty, even though living in Charleston, he's never seen snow in person.

Before it turned out to be a mirage, I scooped up the remaining \$500, running through my mind what I might be able to do with my windfall.

I'd taken eight years to complete five semesters at PWC, and I was close to saving up enough to take another semester the next Fall. This money would allow me to enroll for the Spring, or I could splurge for Christmas.

Or, the most sensible thing, get caught up on the power bill and replace the bald right rear tire on my beat-up old Camry.

"Should we split this with Shayla?" I asked. "It's a lot."

"She'll say no," Mya replied. "She always does."

Miss Sadie opened her restaurant decades ago when a Charleston entrepreneur who was a woman of color was as rare as finding a kangaroo hopping down Broad Street.

In those early days, *Sadie's BBQ* catered exclusively to black clientele. But once word got out about the food, and after the white folks of Charleston got over the scandalous notion of eating where "the help" ate, things really took off. The restaurant has even been visited by *The Food Network* a few times and hosted mayors, governors, and various other celebrities.

Dr. King ate here back in the early days, and a team of Secret Service agents picked up a large carryout order for Barack Obama's team during a campaign stop in Charleston.

Through it all, Miss Sadie has had countless offers to relocate to "more desirable" locales on and around King Street or to sell her recipes. Still, she's resisted every overture and remained in the same little building with the same homey atmosphere her customers have enjoyed for so long. The area has seen better days, although they were before my time, she'll never leave it. And I must admit, my favorite time of year to work is in the summertime when kids from the neighborhood line up for free lunches, Monday through Friday. And these aren't some scaled-down version of what's served in the main dining room. If you live in the overwhelmingly disadvantaged area around the restaurant, and you can produce a report card that says you've been promoted to the next grade for the Fall, just show up to the side takeout window, and you'll have a hot meal waiting for you.

Handing out those meals doesn't earn me a dollar in tips, but it moves me to tears to see those appreciative smiles.

Miss Sadie's daughter, Shonda, then her granddaughter, Shayla, have taken over day-to-day operation of the restaurant. Still, Miss Sadie spends virtually every minute that the restaurant is open each day greeting guests and helping out in the kitchen. People always ask her when she plans to retire, and she tells them the only way she'll ever leave is when she crosses the water.

For those of you who aren't from the Lowcountry, she means she intends to remain at her post until she passes on.

I have serious doubts as to whether any of us will outlast her. Her energy and passion are inexhaustible.

"Did those Bulldogs take care of you?" Mya asked me.

I'd had a table of three guys all wearing South Carolina State hoodies and t-shirts. SCSU was located up the road in Orangeburg, and their mascot is the Bulldog. They ate well, and were nice enough, but they didn't save much for a tip.

"Five bucks," I said. "And two phone numbers."

"Oh, girl, that one with the dreads was *fine*," Mya said.

"His name was," I stalled, fishing in my pocket for the slips of paper with the names and numbers on them. "Carlos. Yeah, he was alright. But Mya, they were... I mean, yeah, he was nice to look at and very polite. But they were kids. They're current students, you know? I can't deal with any more guys in their early twenties. The next guy I get involved with is going to be a *man*."

"Then pass those digits this way, girl, because I have no shame about robbing the cradle when the baby has dimples and biceps and swagger like he did."

We laughed and started loading the cart with the glasses and plates.

"Good luck with Carlos," I said, handing her his number. "He'll be pleasantly surprised to hear from you."

"Pleasantly surprised or not, he's going to be getting a call from me." Sticking out her thumb and pinky finger next to her face, she used a sultry voice, "*Hey boo, remember the waitress you gave your number to at Sadie's? Mmhm. Well, this ain't her, but this is her best friend, Mya. She said she didn't think she'd know what to do with a man as fine as you, but she knew I only date models, so she gave me your number. When can we get together, sugar cube?*"

"He is all yours, girl," I said once I stopped laughing. "Those ladies who just left have changed my perspective a little bit anyway."

"What do you mean?" Mya asked, collecting the last of the drinking glasses as I pushed the tables back to where they ordinarily sat.

"What I mean is, those women piqued my curiosity." I purposely said the next part with my back turned as I put silverware and napkins in place on one of the tables. "I think I might like to try a little taste of vanilla."

"Wait, what?" Mya asked.

"What?" I asked, "Don't say you've never thought about it."

"Thought about hooking up with a white guy?"

"It doesn't always have to be about 'hooking up' you know," I countered. "What, do you think all those women in here today were just 'hook ups' or flings? One of them was pregnant, and you might have been back in the kitchen, but one of them got proposed to. And the ring was *blinding*. It was the size of a damn apple. Are you telling me you wouldn't like one of those?"

"Be real, girl. Your name, for one thing, okay? Your name is Zaliya. Z-a-l-i-y-a. It's a pretty name, I like it, but what, you expect some trust fund baby from Rainbow Row to snub his debutantes and take a Zaliya home to meet mom and dad?"

Rainbow Row was a part of downtown Charleston facing the harbor, a colorful swath of multi-million-dollar homes owned by elite, old money families.

I waved her off. "I didn't say anything about living down in the Battery, I'm just saying those sisters in here this afternoon seemed awfully happy with those white guys. That's all. And don't tell me you didn't notice those cars out front. A Bentley? What?"

"I was partial to that 'Rari myself," Mya said, referring to the red Ferrari that had roared in and out of the parking lot earlier. "The sound that engine made was so damn *sexy*!"

I high fived her. "Yeah, it was. But the man driving it was sexier!"

"Zee, what do you think your Daddy would say if you brought home a white man?" Mya asked.

"Two of my brothers have babies with white girls!" I protested.

"You know that isn't the same thing," Mya countered.

"Well, if my father actually liked any guy I bring home, it would be a first, whether he is red, blue, white, or black," I replied. "And Jerriah and Steffon will scare him away anyway, so I might as well try to be happy, whatever that means for the rest of my family."

I wasn't allowed to date in high school. Although that policy wouldn't continue once I was grown and moved out, my father wouldn't have minded it if it did. I was his only daughter, his princess. My three older brothers could do any and everything they wanted to, but I was kept on a tight leash and treated as if I were as fragile as a butterfly's wing.

Two of my brothers, Steffon and Jerriah, both had troubled teenage years that extended into adulthood. They'd run with gangs, and both had done stretches in state prison. Guys who'd shown interest in me usually balked once they met my brothers. If they weren't intimidated by them, my father, Josiah, made sure to let them know how unwelcome they were, and they usually disappeared pretty quickly after that.

I loved my brothers, my Daddy, and my three nieces, but my family was toxic when it came to me having a relationship. Only my oldest brother, Jovan, posed no threat to me finding a man, and that was because he was a Marine stationed in Hawaii.

Our mother, Alannah, passed away from breast cancer when I was in elementary school. She cleaned those same houses on Rainbow Row that Mya mentioned earlier, and my dad was a shrimper and oysterman, scratching out a living in the water surrounding the islands south of Charleston where I grew up.

Neither career came with health insurance, so when she fell ill, she couldn't afford treatment at a traditional hospital. Instead, she went to a variety of root doctors, including my great-uncle, Dr. Wren.

Root doctors are traditional healers found in Gullah communities in and around the southeast, from Savannah, Georgia, and beyond up into North Carolina. They use herbal remedies to treat everything from the common cold to arthritis to a broken heart. If somebody wrongs you, Dr. Wren or one of his colleagues can "put a root" on that person and bring them misfortune, illness, or whatever is deemed necessary to balance the scales of justice.

Unfortunately, all my great-uncle's best remedies fell short of healing my mother. It fell to my father to raise four children on his own, something he was ill-equipped to handle.

I rebounded from losing my mother, and I coped by pouring myself into school and dance. I was a model student and did my best at home to keep up with things like laundry, cleaning, and some cooking, doing what my momma had taught me to the best of my ability.

Middle school wasn't so bad for me, as it seems to have been for so many people. I had a close circle of friends, I was a cheerleader and an honor roll student, I sang in the chorus at school, the choir at church, and I was excited about high school and the future.

That all changed during my freshman year in high school.

By then, my older brother Jovan was in the Marines and serving in South Korea. Jerriah had a job at the paper mill, and he split time living at home when he wasn't bouncing back and forth between his two baby momma's apartments.

Steffon was a senior, a full-fledged celebrity at school due to being a record-setting running back on the state-ranked football team. As his little sister, I was instantly part of the "in" crowd, and every girl at school who was interested in Steffon, which seemed like all of them, went out of their way to be nice to me to get closer to him.

He led our school on a magical ride all the way to the state semi-finals, and I get a sore throat even now thinking about how loud I cheered and screamed for his team that Fall.

Once they lost, and football was over, Steffon lost whatever interest he had in school, which culminated in him getting expelled just before Christmas break that year.

Steffon's teacher, Mr. Gates, confronted him about some missing assignments in front of the class. Steffon told him he wasn't worried about "no stupid worksheets," since he already had college scouts fighting over him trying to get him to come to their schools.

"How do you expect to get into college when you fail this class, along with the others you've been allowed to pass just to keep you eligible, Mr. Sherwood? Hmm? Because I assure you, now that football is over, teachers who've looked the other way and let you cruise along will expect you to be more serious."

My brother rolled his eyes, but sat there ready to listen, if not participate, for the rest of the class.

Mr. Gates, however, had to make one final dig.

"Maybe if you hadn't missed that block at the end of the game and cost your team a chance at state, things could have gone differently for you."

Some people in the class gasped, others laughed, and Steffon didn't bite his tongue.

"What the fuck did you say?" he replied, standing up from his desk.

The state semifinal game had ended with our quarterback getting sacked when he dropped back to try to throw a touchdown pass that would have won the game. Never mind the fact that Steffon had rushed for three touchdowns and over two hundred yards. Some people blamed him for being out of position on the final play and letting a defender from the other team come through to smash our quarterback.

Steffon had been devastated, and he cried for hours in his room after the game once he got home, just as he had when momma passed.

"If only you'd shown that much aggression against Central," Mr. Gates replied. "Now sit down before I throw you out of here."

"How you gonna throw me anywhere?" Steffon responded, advancing up the aisle between desks. He reached the teacher and stood toe to toe with the larger man, staring each other down.

According to the students in the class who had anything to say about it, Mr. Gates shoved Steffon first. Mr. Gates maintained that Steffon threw a punch first.

Either way, the two of them wound up crashing to the floor cussing, punching, and fighting.

Two of my brother's football teammates pulled him off Mr. Gates before he did any serious damage, but by then it was too late to save him as a student. He was expelled, while Mr. Gates only received a brief suspension.

With pay.

Steffon's coach tried to set him up with an on-line alternative so he could graduate from high school, but after a week he quit, and the college scholarship offers dried up.

He hung around the house when he wasn't running with friends, getting into trouble. He was saved from serious consequences only because he was still regarded as an athletic hero by the local community.

Days after Christmas, Jerriah got pulled over on his way home from work one night and was found to have four stolen guns in his trunk.

On New Year's Day, Steffon got himself locked up on assault charges when he bumped into the mother of one of Jerriah's daughters at a party, and she was with a man who wasn't Jerriah. Steffon beat the man, unleashing all his rage through his fists.

With two of his sons in jail awaiting trial, the stress contributed to our father having a mild heart attack, leaving him unable to work.

After that, my freshman year took a disastrous turn, with my grades plummeting from straight As to barely passing.

I quit cheerleading, stopped singing, and withdrew from my real friends, and started hanging out with girls who were nothing but trouble.

It was decided that for my sophomore year, I needed a new environment, so I moved from St Helena Island to live with my cousins from Charleston.

It was an adjustment, enrolling at a school where nobody knew me or my brothers, a bigger, faster place, but I found my footing and eventually tried out for school musicals and got my grades headed in the right direction, C's and B's, but not yet the A's I knew I could achieve.

* * *

Early on the first day of summer break, a knock on the door woke me up.

"Zaliya, somebody here is asking for you," my cousin Dre called out. I rubbed my sleepy eyes and stumbled to the front door, only half awake.

"Zaliya?" a small woman standing on the porch asked me. "You're kin to Otis Dupree?"

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, I don't think so. I don't know that name," I explained.

"Oh, child, forgive me. I should have said Doctor Wren," she said with a smile.

"Yes, he's my great-uncle," I answered. "Do you need a root?"

"Everybody needs a root now and then," she said. "But today I'm just here looking for you. Your great-uncle is an old, dear friend of mine. He told me you might need a job this summer. Is that so?"

I hadn't considered a job. I expected to wind up back on St. Helena Island hanging out with my friends, working on our dances, chasing boys, and trying to beat the heat. If I was to earn any money it would be from my great-uncle, acquiring ingredients he needed from the swamps, marshes, and beaches on and around St. Helena Island.

"I guess I might, I mean, I don't know. I've never had a real job before."

"You know, you're just as pretty as your momma," the stranger said. "Same eyes."

My stomach seized at the mention of my mother.

"Did you know my momma?" I asked. I was only seven when she passed. I had vivid memories of her, but with each passing year, I feared forgetting things like the sound of her laugh or the way she smelled.

"I figure one way or another, I know most everybody in the Low-country. I've cooked for most all of them," she said. "But yes, your momma was one of the kindest, and prettiest, ladies in all of Charleston. She'd be very proud of you."

"She would?"

My adjustment to life in the city hadn't been easy, but my father didn't feel capable of giving a teenage girl the guidance and support she required, especially with what was happening with my brothers, so he'd sent me away. I felt like I was treading water in my new environment more than doing anything to make anyone proud.

"I checked your grades. Yes, she'd be very proud of you." Another smile.

Checked my grades? What the...?

"I'm sorry, what do you mean 'checked my grades'? I don't even know who you are."

"That's Miss Sadie, dummy!" My cousin Dre called from across the room, where he was fidgeting with his Xbox.

"Sadie Wilkins," she said, extending her hand. "I own *Sadie's BBQ*."

And that's how I came to work at *Sadie's*, first doing prep work in the kitchen and washing dishes before graduating to working the takeout window, and eventually becoming a full-fledged waitress.

The job has helped me pay for my classes at Palmetto Women's College. I'm halfway through a degree, even though I haven't declared a major or figured out what I want to pursue as a career.

Now all that's missing is a man strong enough to make it past the defensive line of my father and brothers.

Nieces are great, and I love spending time with little Keshawn when Mya needs me to watch him, but lately, I've had some serious baby fever. Which goes hand in hand with the "stable man" fever I've also been experiencing. Too many women in my life have hooked up with guys who were all too happy to do the fun part of giving them babies. But they were not nearly as excited about the prospect of sticking around for the hard work of being fathers.

So, yeah, I'm looking for a *man*, not just some guy.

Turns out, that big meal those Palmetto alums had with their boyfriends, husbands, and fiancés didn't only mean a record-setting shift as far as tips go. It meant big things for *Sadie's BBQ* as well.

A reporter for the local paper caught wind of the fancy cars in our parking lot that afternoon, and after some digging, he reported that we'd hosted a lunch for some very wealthy and powerful people.

I read the article the next day. *PWC Alums Host Power Lunch at Sadie's BBQ* was the headline.

If you drove past Sadie's BBQ last week, you may have noticed a collection of high-priced vehicles in the parking lot, the story opened. The automobiles, including a Bentley and Ferrari, brought together a group whose net worth would be the envy of most of Charleston's high society down South of Broad.

The article described the meal as a *reunion of five Palmetto Women's College alums who were joined by the men in their lives, which included:*

Graham Flanagan, a former professional soccer player who'd become a celebrity chef and restaurant owner on two continents.

Ezra Brannigan, the man who ran the company that bore his name; *Brannigan Oil and Petroleum*. He was a *billionaire*. Yeah. With a *B*. And apparently, money isn't the only thing Ezra Brannigan has going for him. He lives in a world where Presidents, current and former, as well as prime ministers and royal families from all over the world, are just a phone call away.

And finally, Lincoln Rawlings. Of *Rawlings Holdings*, which is a real estate developer or something that apparently owns the state of California. I knew I recognized him from somewhere (He's one of the most handsome men I've ever seen, and I don't just mean in person, I mean on TV or anywhere. Tough to forget him. I didn't place him until I saw the newspaper article Miss Sadie brought in.

Ezra Brannigan declined to be interviewed for the piece, but the other two men were both quoted as saying how much they loved the food and the staff and Miss Sadie herself and that they couldn't wait to return.

The article found its way to the national news wire. Suddenly our regulars were rubbing elbows with lots of unfamiliar faces, many with deep pockets, and we were busier than ever.

Miss Sadie herself was interviewed by several news outlets, including a major London tabloid newspaper, who sent a photographer to take pictures for the story.

Sadie's had always closed for the week between Christmas and New Year's to allow everyone to spend the holidays with family, but for the first time, I was disappointed at being off work since the money had been so good.

I put the extra funds to good use, replacing not just the bald tire on my car, but also another that was really worn down. I even had some minor maintenance issues addressed. I got caught up on my power bill and put some money into my tuition account. With the rest, I made sure everybody had a memorable Christmas.

I got new shoes for all three of my nieces, Nia, Gabrielle, and Mariah, as well as two cute outfits for each of them. Jerriah's daughters, Gabi and Mariah, are both 13 now, each living with single moms and multiple half-siblings. My brother is in the middle of a four-year sentence on drug charges, and according to his letters, all he wanted for Christmas was for me to do whatever I could for the girls. I put money on his commissary anyway.

He's still my brother, and I love him.

I get along fine with Mariah and Gabi's mommas and respect the effort they put in, but I wish I could do more to give those sweet girls a more stable environment.

Nia, my third niece, just turned 9. She's Steffon's daughter. Her mother and my brother have such a volatile relationship that I can't blame her for always being cold to me. Either way, Nia's mom

couldn't stop me from being Zaliya Claus and filling in the gaping holes beneath her Christmas tree.

I went over to Mya's in the afternoon on Christmas Day, bringing Keshawn a bunch of Ninja Turtle stuff. His contagious smile reassured me that Christmas was still magical, and that Santa was undoubtedly real.

Sadie's BBQ re-opened on January 1st with the traditional Gullah dish of Hoppin' John featured free with every meal. It's a rice dish with black-eyed peas and some form of pork. Miss Sadie and Shayla had ham hocks marinating for days ahead of time. Cornbread and collard greens complete the dish, although the cherry atop the sundae was a penny under each plate to complete the magical good fortune each dish portends for the upcoming year.

When we opened the doors, the line of *Sadie's BBQ* enthusiasts braving the rain and wind stretched past the edge of the parking lot and around the corner. Some of those people wouldn't get in for an hour, maybe two, but they didn't mind.

First in line, like always, was my great-uncle, Dr. Wren.

He was dressed in a dark blue suit and blue skull cap, with his small round spectacles (Don't make the mistake of calling them "glasses," to him they're spectacles.) He carried a gnarled walking stick and moved slowly but with a purpose. Before anyone else was let in, he walked to each corner of both dining areas and the kitchen, shaking his stick, whispering blessings, and sprinkling goofer dust on the floor.

The ingredients in the dust are a closely guarded secret, but it contains powerful juju. Miss Sadie wouldn't dare open the restaurant for a new year without Dr. Wren delivering some.

In the past, I've helped him source some of the ingredients, which include ash from burning sage and twigs taken from the grounds of Angel Oak, a magnificent world-famous tree out on Johns Island. Crushed eggshells from wren's nests are needed, and my brothers and I became accomplished tree climbers in our youth searching out their nests, which we monitored throughout the Spring. We waited until the little wrens flew away and retrieved the broken pieces before they were scattered by the elements.

Once Dr. Wren solemnly completed his tasks, his demeanor changed, and he warmly greeted all of us, wrapping me in a hug and kissing both my hands. Miss Sadie had a plate of Hoppin' John

waiting for him at her table, and they sat down to enjoy lunch while Mya and I let the rest of our customers in.

Later in the afternoon, when things had died down a bit, I got a chance to catch up with Mya. She revealed that she had, indeed met up with Carlos, the guy from South Carolina State, over the holidays. He lived a hundred or so miles up the road in Sumter, but he came down to Charleston two days after Christmas, and the two of them caught a movie, had dinner, and he wound up staying the night.

"He was almost too big," she confided in me with a mischievous smile. "*Almost*."

"Mya!" I exclaimed.

"Girl, if you aren't jealous, you ought to be," she laughed. "He doesn't go back to school for two more weeks. I'm going up to Sumter to visit him in a couple days. He has plenty of friends... want to come along?"

"Ha. No. I told you, my New Year's Resolution is no more hookups. No more college guys. I'm not getting down with anybody again until it's serious."

"Oh, Zaliya, trust me, it's *serious*," she said, laughing, holding her hands a foot apart.

I threw a wadded-up napkin at her. "Keshawn's gonna wind up with a baby brother if you aren't careful."

"I'm getting that itch anyway," Mya replied. "Keshawn is getting all grown up and independent. I miss having a *baby*."

"Mya, he's *three*!" I replied.

"You just don't get it," she responded. "A *baby* baby is just different."

"Oh yeah," I replied. "I remember how excited you were to change diapers and make bottles and stay up all night and all the rest of that fun stuff."

"See, that's why you should have one, that way I can hold her and let her fall asleep on my chest and then give her back before any of the... *unpleasant* stuff," Mya joked.

"I'll have to double-check with my professors next time I'm back in school, but I'm pretty sure human reproduction still requires a man and a woman," I said. "And I'm short a man at this point."

As if on cue, the front door to the restaurant opened and in walked three athletic men, one black and two white, each more

handsome than the next, dressed in black tracksuits with red and gold striping and a small insignia with two lions on the left side of the chest. The way they looked around told me it was their first time.

Interesting.

"Welcome to Sadie's," I said, and scooped up three menus.

"Hello," said one of the men, with a hint of a Euro-accent. He was the tallest by several inches and had short, spike blonde hair. The other two men smiled and waved.

I led them to a table when Miss Sadie approached from behind. "Happy New Year!" she announced. "I'm Miss Sadie, and this is my place. First time?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the brother said, stepping forward and accepting her outstretched hand. His accent sounded Texan to me.

"You might just be from around here," Miss Sadie said and turned to face the blonde man, "But I heard your voice, and you're not." She gave the third man a close look and said, "But I haven't heard you say anything yet, so I just can't tell." He stepped between the other two and shook her hand. It was my first good look at him, and my heart skipped. He had short, dark hair, a chiseled jaw covered in coarse stubble, and the greenest eyes I'd ever seen. If it wasn't love at first sight, it definitely became so when I heard his voice.

"I'm a local," the man insisted as he shook Miss Sadie's hand, but his faux-Southern accent dissolved into laughter. "Okay, actually, I'm not. I'm from a bit further south."

His accent was pure Australian. I bit my bottom lip and clenched my thighs.

The taller man shook Miss Sadie's hand as well. "I'm German," he said. "We all live in Germany, so now we're all German."

The men all laughed. "I'm a Texan," the younger, lighter-skinned version of Shemar Moore said. "But, yeah, we all play football in

Germany. Oh, sorry, soccer."

"Well, isn't that wonderful," Miss Sadie lit up. "What brings you to Charleston?"

"It's winter break, and then we have training in Florida," Mr. Texan answered. "We had a couple days off, and we wanted to go somewhere new. So, here we are."

"And I saw the article on the BBC about this place, so I insisted on Charleston," the tall German added.

I was close enough to read their tracksuits. "*Bayer Leverkusen*." I had no clue, but once I got into the kitchen, I intended to do some research.

More customers came in behind the soccer players, a pair of couples I recognized as regulars. Mya stuck out her tongue at me. They were nice people, but never tipped much, and I suspected she wanted to flirt with the guys at my table anyway. Sorry, not sorry, Mya!

Once they were settled in and Miss Sadie returned to her perch near the kitchen, I introduced myself and handed out menus.

"I'm Zaliya, I'll be your server today. Since it's New Year's Day, we have a special. Hoppin' John is free with every meal." They looked baffled, even the American. "It's a local dish, made with rice, bacon, and black-eyed peas. It's meant to bring good luck for the new year."

"I'm sorry, "Hopping who?" The Aussie asked.

I smiled back and explained that nobody knew how the name originated, just that the dish came from our local Gullah culture and I hoped they enjoyed it.

"Forgive my intrusion," the voice came from over my left shoulder, and a hand touched me gently on the arm. "I couldn't help but overhear." My great-uncle, Dr. Wren, sidled up to the table. "You are asking about a man who lived many years ago, in fact, just after the War."

I knew that when Dr. Wren spoke about "the War," he meant the Civil War. Even though my uncle was born over sixty years after the Civil War, it was one of his idiosyncrasies. He spoke of things that happened long ago as if he had been there. He treated the people in his stories like they were contemporaries of his. Maybe, in some odd way, he could commune with them. I don't know. I was raised to have faith in the root doctors in our community. I'd seen and heard some of them do and say things that bordered on the supernatural.

But I stopped well short of believing my great-uncle was a time traveler.

"An old man, a freed slave named John, John Jeffcoat, used to sell peas and rice on the streets of Charleston. Even to white folks. He could get the peas and rice from the plantation out in Moncks Corner where he'd lived. The house was gone by then, but the fields still produced. So, to support his family, he harvested the peas and sold them. He was hobbled by years of working in the fields, so he walked with a sort of a sideways hop when he pushed his little cart. Folks got to calling him Hoppin' John.

"And when the children would see him coming, they'd be so excited they'd get to hopping, so everybody started calling him Hoppin' John. That's where the dish got its name."

The athletes were captivated by my great-uncle. "Are you a local historian, then?" the German asked.

Dr. Wren laughed. "No, I'm no historian, although I've been around a while, and I reckon I've seen a few things."

"Don't let him lie to you," I interjected. "He's my great-uncle. And he's never happier than when he's telling a story. If you listen to enough of them, you might even hear one that's true!"

Everyone laughed, and they asked me questions about items on the menu as Dr. Wren hovered nearby.

They settled on a platter the menu claims is large enough for a family of six, including fish, chicken, sausage, and brisket, along with the Hoppin' John, cornbread, and a variety of sides.

I returned with drinks, cornbread, and three plates of Hoppin' John. "I'm going to place a penny under each plate, it's a tradition meant to bring good fortune for the upcoming year."

"Ought to give Reg two pennies," the Aussie said, pointing to the Texan. "He's out of contract at the end of the season. He needs all the help he can get."

As the men bickered good-naturedly and dug into their food, my great-uncle approached the table again.

"How long has that knee been bothering you, son?" He asked the Aussie.

"My what?" He asked, spreading honey butter on a hunk of cornbread.

"Your knee. Left knee. It's been bothering you, hasn't it?"

Everyone at the table stopped what they were doing and turned their attention to my great-uncle.

"Knee's fine, mate. What are you on about?"

Things were turning from friendly to tense, and I attempted to defuse things.

"My great-uncle is a root doctor. A traditional healer. I'm sorry, I'm sure he didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.," I offered.

"A *root* doctor?" The Aussie asked. "I'm guessing that doesn't mean the same thing to a Yank as it would back home." Everyone looked perplexed. "Root in Australia means sex. To have a shag," he explained. His friends stifled laughter, and I smiled. Dr. Wren definitely had remedies for sexual maladies, but they didn't involve knees or strangers.

"I didn't mean to offend, sir, I just want to help," Dr. Wren added.

Miss Sadie joined the conversation. "What in tarnation is this old fool yammering about now? Otis, you leave these good folks be, you hear?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied meekly. Miss Sadie was the only person I knew who'd cause my great-uncle to back off of a situation with just a few words.

"Now, how do you boys like the Hoppin' John?" Miss Sadie asked.

"Afraid I may not have room for anything else between this and the cornbread," the Aussie said. He'd practically cleaned his plate in a scant few minutes.

"Excellent," the German said between bites.

"Don't tell my grand-momma, but this cornbread is even better than hers," the Texan confessed with a grin.

"Well, that's just splendid," Miss Sadie said, and we withdrew to the kitchen.

"Otis, you've got to leave the customers alone, especially the out-of-town visitors. They don't know you or about your roots," Miss Sadie said to my great-uncle once we reached the kitchen.

"His knee's about to go, Miss Sadie," Dr. Wren replied. "He may not even know it yet. But I do. I can see it."

While they chatted, I brought up the browser on my phone and looked up the team the men played for, Bayer Leverkusen.

I scrolled down to the current roster on the Wikipedia page, and it was easy to find two of them. Reggie Winslow, from Houston,

Texas, was the sole American on the squad, and Aras Cahill was the only Australian. I clicked on Aras's name, and his personal page came up – his picture matched the rugged hunk of man at the table I'd been waiting on. He was 33, a professional soccer player for fifteen years, originally from a city called Hobart, on the Australian island of Tasmania.

The "personal" section of his page detailed a brother who was also a professional athlete, a rugby player in Australia. Their mother was a local politician. The entry didn't mention a father or any other siblings. It also said that Aras's nickname was "Devil" due to the famous animal that hailed from his island, the Tasmanian devil.

I clicked on Reggie Winslow's name. He was only 22, just a baby. He'd moved to Europe to pursue a pro soccer career while he was still in high school.

The German was tougher to figure out, since the rest of the team, with just a couple exceptions, all had little German flags next to their names. He could have been any of them.

I refilled their drinks and replaced the empty cornbread plate with a new, piping hot one. Then I reluctantly checked on my two other tables, neither nearly as interesting as the one at which Aras Cahill sat.

On my way back to the kitchen to check on their platter, the German flagged me down.

"My friend here had a question, but he was too shy to ask," he said with a grin, looking quite pleased with himself.

"See, Reg, this is why you don't socialize with goalkeepers. They don't get out into polite company often enough to know how to talk to people properly," Aras said to Reggie, referring to their tall friend.

Now I had a clue to discover the German's identity – he was a goalkeeper.

"Go on, then," the goalkeeper said to Aras. Aras rolled his beautiful green eyes.

Reggie the Texan spoke up, adopting an exaggerated Aussie accent. "He wanted to know if Charleston was known for having the most dinkum Sheilas in the States. I tried to tell him he'd find the bonza in Houston, but the old Devil doesn't believe me."

"That's the worst attempt at trying to sound like a bloody Aussie I've ever heard, Reg, you bastard," Aras said, and Reggie laughed until he had tears in his eyes. "And furthermore, I was in Houston

two years ago. The Sheilas there don't hold a candle to the ones here. Present company being exhibit one."

Aras's accent made it a bit tough to keep up, but I was pretty sure he just complimented me.

"Thanks... I think?" I said with a chuckle.

"You're welcome, doll," he said. "Ignore my mates. Reggie has a few kangaroos loose in his top paddock, and Bastian is a goalkeeper. I'm the only civilized bloke at the table.

"But to save them the further embarrassment of butchering my accent or my question... which was more of an observation than a question anyway. We've just been in Charleston for a day, and I remarked that the Sheilas, sorry, the women, here are all beautiful. It's remarkable, really. I thought the prettiest girls in the States were in Miami, but it's a different kind of pretty there.

"Those Miami Sheilas come out a lab, I think. Hours and hours on hair and makeup and special outfits. They all think the sidewalk and the beach are bloody runways. Here, it's just, I dunno, you're all naturally beautiful.

"I mean, we walked in here, and right away, we see two stunners. You and the other server. You're just... effortless. It's refreshing. I dunno, I'm letting my mouth run away from me."

If he wanted to sit there with that voice and those eyes and tell me I was beautiful for the rest of the day and into the night, I didn't care. If it was some weird Australian pickup line or game, I was all the way in and happy to oblige, and I was used to being hit on. I'd venture to guess that most waitresses are frequent targets of male attention, wanted or otherwise. Still, I'd never encountered an Aras Cahill before.

I could feel my face grow hot from his Aussie flirtation, and I was grateful nobody could see. Thanks, melanin!

"On behalf of the ladies of Charleston, I thank you," I said happily, taking a bow.

"Zaliya, are you gonna talk their ears off, or are you gonna fill their bellies?" Miss Sadie asked as she made her rounds.

"I think your food is ready," I said sheepishly and left for the kitchen.

The immense amount of food took three trips, and every inch of the table was covered by the time I was finished setting everything out. The three men marveled at it all.

I left them alone to eat, and I got back on my phone. The German was Bastian Ballack, a 28-year-old goalkeeper who was a hometown product of Leverkusen. He's been with the club since he was nine years old, which didn't translate at all to my understanding of American pro sports. Evidently, things were done differently in Europe.

Hell, I'd never even seen a soccer game; what did I know?

I checked on my other tables and seated a new four top before I could look at my phone again. I went to an English-language version of the Bayer Leverkusen page. It turns out their entire league, was on an annual winter break. The team would have a ten-day mid-season training camp at a sports complex near Orlando, Florida. Their tour would end with an exhibition game in Atlanta against an American pro soccer team from there. I didn't even realize there was such a thing as professional soccer in America.

So why was my next click checking the availability of tickets for the game in Atlanta?

I topped off drinks and cleared away plates for the three soccer players, but they were too busy eating to make conversation. It was kind of amazing how much food they could put away. The only bare skin I could see was their hands and faces, so I couldn't be sure, but I guessed there was lots of muscle happening under those tracksuits; machines that needed fuel.

By the end, they adopted familiar *Sadie's BBQ* poses – pushed back away from the table, holding their stomachs, satisfied smiles on their faces.

"Anything for dessert?" I asked. "We've got pecan pie and peanut butter pie today, both homemade."

To my delight, Aras unzipped his jacket and removed it. I could see muscles rippling in his forearms and biceps as he pulled it off and lay it across the unoccupied chair to his right.

"Not another bite," Bastian groaned. He looked torn between happy and miserably full, just the way Miss Sadie liked her customers.

"I may have room for a slice of that peanut butter pie," Aras said, stretching and twisting in his chair. His pecs stretched the gold t-shirt he wore in a way that made it tough to avert my eyes.

"Not for me," Reggie said, waving his arms in surrender. "I'm stuffed. I don't know where you put it, Devil," he added, looking at Aras.

"Right here," Aras said, grinning and patting his biceps as he folded his arms across his chest.

"The gaffer is gonna run you until you drop when he weighs you in at camp," Bastian said. It wasn't until much later that I learned from Aras that "gaffer" was a soccer term for manager or coach.

(Hope I didn't spoil anything, but yeah, there wound up being a "later" for Aras and me, and I'm guessing most or all of you were as baffled by "gaffer" as I was the first time I heard it.)

"They gave us a few days off. You think the other lads didn't get bloody pissed last night? It was New Year's Eve. You tossers barely had a drink last night."

Half the time, I had no idea what Aras was talking about, but he looked and sounded so damn good doing it that I didn't care. At all.

The restaurant had cleared out by then, and we were already past the normal early evening weekday closing time.

I brought back the pie, and Aras ate it slowly, savoring every bite. When the plate was reduced to a few crumbs, he asked for Miss Sadie. She appeared at the table with her granddaughter, Shayla.

"This was the most bonzer tucker I've had in ages," Aras said, and his teammates rolled their eyes.

"That means he liked the food," Reggie added. "He needs an interpreter sometimes when he talks to people who speak English."

"My granddaughter cooked it all up from scratch," Miss Sadie said, squeezing Shayla with delight.

"All from her recipes," Shayla said, looking at her grandmother. Mya had finished her section, and she joined us.

"Excellent," Aras said. While his friends, both younger, seemed ready for bed, he seemed energized and raring to go. "I know you're Miss Sadie," he continued, "but I haven't gotten anyone else's names." He looked at us, hopefully. "I'm Aras, by the way, and these lot here are Reggie and Bastian."

"He's Devil," Reggie corrected. "As in Tasmanian Devil."

"Mya," my best friend said with a wave.

"Shayla did the cooking," Miss Sadie said, "And this is Zaliya."

"Don't hear many good Z names," Aras commented. "But I like that. How's it spelled?"

"Z-a-l-i-y-a," I replied. "Wish I had a good story for it, but I'm afraid the only thing I know is that I had a great-grandfather I never met named Zebulon. My parents wanted a Z somehow some way, even though my brothers all got J names." I shrugged.

Shayla took Bastian's credit card and the bill to take care of it while we all chatted.

"We're sightseeing tomorrow. Can you recommend anything we should see?" Bastian asked.

"Cold for the beach," I said, but I don't know, King Street is where everybody from out of town goes. And the forts, right?" I asked Mya.

"Fort Sumter. The plantations, Angel Oak," she said, counting them off on her fingers.

"Angel Oak," Reggie said, snapping his fingers. "I saw that on some travel web site. Yeah, I want to see that."

"You two should be our tour guides," Aras suggested.

"We have to work," I replied. "Some other time, maybe?"

"There's no other time," Aras insisted. "We're here tomorrow, then we leave for Florida, after that back to Germany, then we scatter all over the globe once the season ends. I may never make it back here again. Don't you ever take a day off?"

He was locked in on me, those sparkling green eyes burrowing through mine and into my soul. Saying no to him wouldn't be easy. Not like I wanted to anyway.

I looked at Mya. "Do you think Yvette could cover me tomorrow?"

"You know you ain't gonna play hooky, girl," Mya insisted.

Yvette worked weekends and occasionally during the week to cover a shift. I was the good girl who never missed a day of work, the reliable, hard-working one putting herself through school and bypassing fun to stay on track. No matter what.

Take an unscheduled day off to hang out with some guys I didn't really know, who were professional athletes, and probably had groupies all over Europe?

That wasn't me. Not Zaliya Sherwood.

Unless the Devil made me do it.

The next morning, I pulled into a parking garage and walked a few blocks against a chilly breeze to a hotel I'd grown up knowing was beyond the means of any member of the Sherwood Family or anyone we knew.

The Wentworth Mansion is the crown jewel of all hotels in Charleston, and it was where the three soccer players had rooms.

The night before, I'd exchanged numbers with Aras after dinner, and I was thrilled when it turned out Yvette was available to cover me at work. The tip they left also insured that missing a day of work wouldn't hurt my pocket at all.

Mya hoped that a day of sightseeing might turn into an evening of dinner or drinks or something. She had her eye on Reggie, although she knew I had a thing for Aras. Mya offered, "I'll keep both Reggie and that tall Ivan Drago-looking guy busy for you while you hook up with the Crocodile Hunter."

Mya was ridiculous, although I had little doubt she'd be up for the challenge if the opportunity presented itself. Personally, Aras would be all I could or would want to handle. If that sort of thing was even a thing, which I wasn't expecting. Even if the devil on my shoulder hoped there might be a Devil somewhere else on (or in) my body later in the evening.

I'd agonized over what to wear, and finally decided on a pair of jeans. I always thought they did good things for my butt. I paired them with a tan sweater that had a big, floppy cowl that plunged down a bit in front. I tied my hair back with a scarf that matched my sweater and completed the outfit with black boots. I left myself al-

most makeup-free, since Aras had commented how "refreshing" a natural look was. My fingers crossed, I took a deep breath and turned the corner to the front of Wentworth Mansion.

Aras stood on the front steps, wearing a cream-colored, corded sweater, tan pants, and boots. He smiled broadly when he saw me.

"Good morning, Zee," he said, and enveloped me in a big hug. "Just the two of us, I'm afraid. I've hired a car for the day. Reg and Bas wanted to do their own thing."

"Oh, okay," I answered. My anxiety wouldn't let me entertain the fact that maybe Aras wanted me all to himself. I assumed the other two weren't interested in hanging out with some boring waitress, but that Aras felt sorry for me or just thought I'd be an easy notch on his international soccer stud bedpost.

"So, I'm in your capable hands, Zaliya," he smiled. I loved the way he pronounced my name.

Moments later, a sleek, dark gray car glided silently to the curb, and the doors opened straight up, rather than out. I'd never seen such a car in person, only in the movies.

"What is this...?" I asked.

"BMW i8," Aras answered. "I have one at home. I figured if I'm going to be driving on the wrong side of the road, at least I should have a car I'm comfortable in."

We slid inside, and it was all style, class, and luxury.

"I found it on that site where people put their own vehicles up for hire," Aras explained. "It's the same model as mine, just a year older. Like I said, back home in Australia we drive on the left side, the *correct* side. But in Germany, it's just like here. The right side-wrong side, you know what I mean."

He synched the car to his phone and started his Spotify playlist, and "No One" by Alicia Keys filled the car.

He pulled into traffic, and we set out for the destination we'd discussed via text the prior evening, Angel Oak.

Angel Oak is a Southern Live Oak located on Johns Island, south of downtown Charleston. No matter where you've been or what you've seen in your life, she is guaranteed to take your breath away. (I always have and will always refer to Angel Oak by feminine pronouns. You can't convince me otherwise; don't even try.) She has these long, sprawling branches that look like something out of Lord of the Rings.

Legend has it that some people see ghosts of slaves who were hung from Angel Oak's branches back before the War (God, I sound like my great-uncle), but I can't confirm that despite many hours spent admiring her.

It was a little scary driving out to Johns Island, as Aras kept commenting about how much he hated driving in the "wrong side of the road." But we made it okay, and I did my best to prevent him from seeing the famous tree until we parked and made it through the small visitors' center. I held my hands over his eyes as we walked; I wanted him to be awestruck by her enormity all at once.

I stood behind him and counted down "3...2...1" before removing my hands and stepping alongside him. I wanted to see the look on his face, and I wasn't disappointed. His square jaw fell open, and his eyes widened.

"Holy..." he muttered to himself, his head turning slowly to take her all in. He looked at me with a delighted grin, then back at the tree. "I wish I could climb it," he commented. "And hang a hammock up high and fall asleep in her arms."

"She is a she, you know," I asked.

"Absolutely," he agreed. "I could feel that right away. She's the mother tree."

We strolled toward the trunk, and our hands brushed together, making my heart jump. I wouldn't have minded if he took mine in his.

A barricade prevented us, along with all visitors, from reaching the trunk. As a young girl, I used to hug her and wonder if I'd ever grow tall enough to reach my arms all the way around, even though I know now that nobody is that tall.

We meandered around, feeling the bark on her long, heavy limbs, some of which rest on the ground before curving back toward the sun.

"Back home, we have a famous tree called *Centurion*," Aras explained. "It's in southern Tasmania, my home island. It's a eucalyptus tree one hundred meters tall. Tallest in the world. It's like a bloody skyscraper."

"How does Angel Oak compare?" I asked.

"They're both amazing," he answered, "But Centurion has some neighbors almost as tall, so it doesn't stand out, you know? Not like this one."

"Do you remember my great-uncle?"

"Sure, that nutter, sorry, but he came off that way to me, no offense, that nutter who insisted my knee was wrecked?"

I laughed. "Yeah, you could call him a nutter. No offense taken. He's one of a kind, and not everybody gets him. But like we talked about yesterday, he's a healer, a root doctor. When I was younger to make a little money, my brothers and I would go out and get him the ingredients he needed for some of his tinctures and concoctions. One of the places I'd come is right here. I'd collect twigs and leaves, anything that fell from this tree. He'd burn them sometimes and mix the ashes in with other things. This tree has 'strong juju,' apparently."

"Do you believe all that stuff?" Aras asked. "The witch doctor stuff?"

"I don't know if I believe all of it. But I've taken some psychology courses, and the power of belief, of convincing your mind something is real and true, has tremendous power. So, if Dr. Wren tells somebody that rubbing his dust on their foot will relieve their gout or boiling and inhaling the steam from one of his potions will ease their asthma, and they believe it, I think there can be healing there, sure. And some of it I can't explain at all, but I've seen it work."

"He can't use magic like Harry Potter or Doctor Strange, but he absolutely has gifts most people don't have."

"So, I should expect a knee injury since he said so?"

"No, I mean, I hope not, of course, but if he said it, I'm not gonna lie, I'd be a little nervous."

Aras began to limber up, lifting his boots one after another behind him to stretch his quads. "We're short midfielders already. If I go down with an injury, we'll have to let Reggie play!"

"Would that be so terrible?" I asked. "I read his Wikipedia page; he seems like a pretty good player."

"He's as fast as a bloody tiger beetle, but he only knows one speed, full out, all the time."

"And that's bad?"

"Nah, not bad, he'll adjust, he just has to learn to change speeds. Slow down sometimes, then wham! Hit 'em with the speed. He's the opposite of me. I'm just slow as hell all the time, even when my brain tells me feet to move fast, they don't always listen anymore."

"Hmm. That didn't make it to your Wikipedia page," I teased, as we sat down at a nearby picnic table beneath Angel Oak's massive

canopy.

"Eh, mine is boring. Tell me what I'd find on your page, Zaliya..." He held his hand out, palm open, and motioned for me to complete my name.

"Sherwood," I volunteered. "Zaliya Sherwood. Of the Saint Helena Island Sherwoods."

"Of course!" He exclaimed and slapped the table. "Why didn't I recognize you?"

"Shh!" I warned. "I don't want to be bothered. It's so rare I get to go out in public like this without the paparazzi hassling me."

"I'll fight 'em if they do," Aras offered. "Nobody loves to fight like an Aussie."

"My bodyguard, *The Devil*," I contemplated.

"The job doesn't pay all that well, but I get to hang out with you all the time, so that perk alone makes it worth it," he said with a grin. Fuck, his accent was *killing* me. "We're both from islands, then?" He observed.

"Seems that way," but mine is teensy tiny, and yours is pretty big."

"You know Tasmania?" He asked with surprise.

"I didn't until last night," I confessed.

"Alright, Sherwood, spill it. If you've been reading up on me, you've got me at a disadvantage. Tell me about your dad and mum. Any brothers or sisters?"

"My momma crossed the water when I was young," I said, then clarified, since he looked confused. "Sorry, she died when I was in elementary school. She had breast cancer. Her name was Alannah. People say I favor her."

"She must have been a beauty, then," Aras said, reaching across to settle his hands atop mine. "I'm sorry you lost her."

"Me too," I replied. "I miss her every day."

He squeezed my hands. "I can't imagine," he said. His eyes warmed me.

"My daddy still on Saint Helena Island, he's a shrimper, oysterman, and fisherman. If it can be pulled from the rivers or oceans around and somebody will pay him for it, he'll go out and catch it."

"Brilliant," Aras replied. "I've always thought if I hadn't been a sportsman, I'd have earned my living with my hands. Maybe when

my feet stop earning me a paycheck, I'll go out and join your dad on his boat."

"You'd ...stick out like a kangaroo," I said, laughing. "There aren't too many, um, *European-Americans* out there on the shrimp boats where he works." As far as I knew, my daddy had never worked alongside a white man. Sold his catch to them, sure, but not pulled up crab traps or shrimp nets.

"No problem," Aras assured me. "I'm not European or American. Where do I sign up?"

I laughed. "Well, since you put it that way, maybe you'd have a chance. My daddy and brothers have chased away every guy I've ever brought home, and the one common denominator has been that they've *all* been American. Maybe they've been holding out for me to meet an Australian' bloke'."

"I don't care how big and bad the men in your family are if a guy let himself get scared off a Sheila like you, he didn't deserve you anyway."

He held onto my hands, and we looked up as a fresh gust of wind blew through the leaves left on Angel Oak's branches.

"What do your brothers do?" He asked. I considered leaving Jerriah and Steffon out of the conversation since Jerriah was currently incarcerated, and none of us had heard from Steffon since before Thanksgiving except for him sending me a "Merry Christmas" text two days late. I decided it was better to be upfront from the get go.

"I have three," I began. "Jovan is the oldest, he's a Marine. He has a really tough assignment, he's a recruiter in Hawaii."

"Probably is tough, trying to convince people to leave paradise to go do pushups and drag yourself through the mud," Aras observed.

"Still," I replied. "Not a bad place to be. He's traveled a lot during his career. Years ago, he visited Australia, but I think he only got to Melbourne."

"That's where my brother lives," Aras said. "He plays rugby. Complete and utter maniac."

"And I have two other brothers, both older, but they haven't been as... *successful* as Jovan. They've both had issues. Legal problems."

"Are either one of them doing a life sentence?" Aras asked.

I scrunched up my face. "No..." I said, letting the O hang in the air.

"Well, that's where my father is. My mum has people who make sure that stays scrubbed from Wikipedia, her page, my brother's, and mine."

I did a poor job hiding the shock on my face, but I couldn't find the right words to reply.

"My mum was is in politics. She's just wrapping up a term in the Tasmanian House of Assembly. I'm not sure what the equivalent would be in the States. She was a nurse before she changed gears on her career. She started small, in local school stuff, but she loved it and moved up and up. She was in an election and my old man was in a pub and some blokes started arguing politics, not knowing that the husband of one of the candidates was sitting right there.

"He'd had a few. Probably more than a few. And one of these guys started running my mum down, calling her a daffy cunt and heaps of awful stuff."

He squeezed my hands. "Sorry, back home, we use cunt every fourth word. I know it's not like that here. I apologize. Bad habit."

I nodded.

"So, yeah, my dad had his fill of it, and he beat the bugger to death with his bare hands. He was a boxer in his younger days, so has hands that hit like concrete. He jumped on the bloke and then when his mate got involved, he did the same to him. Two of them. When the coppers arrived, he was sitting there sipping his beer. Two dead guys on the floor, and there's my old man, bloody knuckles, having a pint." Aras shook his head.

"He never hit any of us. It just wasn't in him. But he had a temper. And that guy just pushed him too far. The funny thing is my mum still won that election. Couldn't have happened anywhere in the world but Australia."

"That's... wow." I had no idea how to respond, even though Aras had told the entire story very matter-of-factly. "My brother Jerriah is doing four years in state prison on drug charges. Steffon, nobody really knows. He got out of his latest stretch inside back in October, and he disappeared a little while later. Texted me Merry Christmas. Otherwise, I wouldn't be sure if he was alive or dead."

"We all have demons," Aras commiserated.

"And some of us are devils," I teased.

"And others are angels," he responded and squeezed my hands again.

"I'm no angel," I insisted.

"I hope not," Aras grinned. "What fun would that be, being good *all* the time? But you definitely look like one."

I scrunched my nose and shook my head.

"Have you ever been kissed under this tree?" Aras asked out of the blue.

I was taken aback and stammered my way through a half-hearted reply. The fact was that I had not, and I shook my head.

"I've never kissed anybody under this tree either!" Aras declared. "What a coincidence! What are the chances?"

He stood up and walked around to my side of the table, never letting go of my hands. When he arrived next to me, he pulled me to my feet.

Once I was upright, he pulled me in close. "I just realized another thing – I've never kissed an American before. Have you kissed an Aussie?"

I shook my head and smiled.

"Do you think we should rectify that?" He asked.

I'd have been profoundly disappointed if we didn't.

He placed a hand on my cheek and looked into my eyes, tilting my face slightly to my left as he did the same, lining up his delicious mouth with mine.

The kiss began cautiously, our lips playing hide and seek, grazing each other and moving away, pulling back. We kissed quickly, small, exploratory pecks from different angles, trying to find the perfect fit. Once we did, it was on.

We kissed deeply, a soft moan in his throat as I matched his passion rather than surrendering and letting him lead.

My hands found his arms and confirmed my suspicion that he was solid muscle. My nails dug into the thick ropes of steel that passed for his upper extremities.

I had no interest in breaking the kiss, and it soon became evident that he had the same idea. Our tongues joined the fray, and we were in full make-out mode right there among the branches of Angel Oak.

Only a laughing call of "Get a room, you two!" from what sounded like a Sullivan's Island frat boy broke our heated embrace.

We looked toward a small crowd nearer the trunk. Nobody acknowledged being the one who took offense to our very public display of lusty affection.

Aras inhaled deeply through his flared nostrils. "I guess as an Aussie, I'm supposed to be the whole 'That's not a knife, this is a knife' thing at some point," he said once he'd regained his composure. "But I can't. That was one hell of a kiss, Zaliya. And I don't think I can credit the tree for it. You kiss like you've got a bloody PhD in it." His expression revealed that he was at least as impressed as his words indicated. He was marveling at me.

"Just a Master's," I joked quietly. "But with your recommendation, who knows? I might get that doctorate after all."

"I can't sign my name to that sort of paperwork on the basis of a one-off," Aras pleaded. "I'll need either testimony to corroborate my experience - which I don't want - or I'll need to go back in for fifths or sixths or however many it takes to convince me."

I initiated the kiss this time, holding the back of his head and giving it everything I had. On instinct, our bodies pressed forward, grinding together. If it's possible to have sex standing up, fully clothed, we were doing it.

His arousal pressed insistently against me, making me twitch and tingle inside. When I felt him throb powerfully, I whimpered and clutched at his shoulders frantically.

He pulled back and wiped his bottom lip with the back of his hand. There was a fury in his eyes, overwhelming a desire his rational mind couldn't process.

"Zee..." he gasped, as he struggled for words.

I smiled and touched his face. "Do you want to go back to the hotel?" I asked. I'd never in my life been so forward, but Aras ignited something deep inside me that was rapidly becoming a raging inferno. I wanted him badly. I *needed* him. I had a space inside me that could only be filled by him.

"Yeah, sure," he stammered as his eyes darted up and down my body and searched my face. They came to rest finally on my mouth, and he took my face in both hands and kissed me again.

When the kiss ended, he took me by the hand and led me back in the direction of the parking lot. I couldn't help but glance over toward where most of the people were congregated, and a few were staring at us. A girl wearing a Clemson hoodie grinned and flashed me a thumbs up.

Aras turned for one last look at the tree, and he shook his head in continued disbelief. He opened the door to the visitor's center and

stepped aside. "My queen," he said with a flourish of his hand and ushered me through. He opened the door to the car for me, and we were off.

We arrived back at Wentworth Mansion in record time, and I was happily surprised we didn't get pulled over en route. We traveled at speeds that could only be forgiven by law enforcement if we were bound for the emergency room with me deep in labor.

Which come to think of it...

Stop, girl, don't put the cart twenty miles ahead of the horse!

Aras left the car the curb for the valet to park, and we bounded up the steps and into the lobby, hand in hand.

I'd never been inside, but it was as stately and genteel as I would have suspected. "Welcome back, Mister Ca..." the woman at reception called after us, but we were already gone.

We reached the elevator, and alone at last, he pushed me against the wall and began kissing me hungrily. His hands roamed across my clothed body as I did the same.

Before we were ready to break, we'd reached his floor. We practically fell into the lap of an older gentleman wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase when we sidestepped through the elevator doors, mouths still pressed together.

"Sorry," we said in unison, and the older gentleman made a "Harumph!" as he stepped reluctantly into the elevator, shaking his head.

Aras fumbled with the key but finally got us inside. It was a beautiful room that looked like it must have looked well over a century ago when it was built.

I shuddered when I wickedly considered how forbidden it would have been back then for a handsome white man to sneak me up here to his room. He would have risked his social status, his fame, possibly everything in his desperate need to have me.

Gauzy curtains made the sunlight soft and hazy. An antique desk sat along one wall next to a massive armoire, everything in the room was elegant.

His sweater came off first, revealing at last the muscular chest and arms I'd been exploring through his clothing at Angel Oak and in the elevator. He had the lightest scattering of dark hair across his pecs and a trail leading down from his belly button across the flat, hard expanse of his lower abdomen, and disappearing into his pants.

I kissed his chest and shoulders and then his intoxicating mouth once more.

"Zaliya, are you sure?" He whispered as I nibbled across his collarbone and up to his throat.

In reply, I stepped back and pulled off my own sweater, letting it fall to the floor, leaving me in just my lacy black bra.

He grinned appreciatively and then bent down to scoop me up into his arms.

I'm not some frail, little thing, but he lifted me effortlessly, like one of the stuffed animals that covered my bed when I was a girl.

He lay me down gently on the huge, pillow-soft bed, covered in a pretty flowered comforter.

"You're so beautiful," he said as he moved to the end of the bed where my feet, still in boots rested just off the edge.

He lifted one, then the other, and slipped the boots off, kissing my soles of each foot while its opposite number rested on his impressive chest.

I writhed a bit on the bed, his mouth on my feet equal parts erotic and ticklish.

My hands undid the clasp on my jeans, and he reached up to tug them over the expanse of my hips and down my legs. I honestly had no hope that anybody but me would be seeing them when I got dressed this morning. But thankfully, I'd worn my best matching bra and panty set, and he seemed impressed.

As the jeans joined my sweater on the floor, Aras reached down to adjust his dick through his pants. It stretched the material awkwardly, tenting it outward with his arousal.

He abandoned my feet with a pair of tender kisses on my big toes and straddled me on the bed, kissing his way up my thighs. As he did so, his fingertips strummed behind my knees, which sent little shocks into my sex. He advanced up to my tummy and then between my breasts.

He advanced to my neck, lingered there, kissing its sides and across the front of my throat. He guided my hands above my head and kissed my arms, finding hidden places that had never before drawn attention from a man. He even kissed around and across my armpits, making me moan softly as an erogenous zone I never knew existed was stimulated.

I was soaked and aching for him.

"Aras... please..." I gasped. I moved my arms down and tried to remove my panties, but his strong hands captured my wrists and moved them back to where he'd put them.

"There's no rush, luv," he reminded me, and he began to kiss his way back down my body as I squirmed in frustration.

No man had made me boil like this.

He kissed the top of my breasts, everywhere that was visible above my bra, before he tugged the cups down so that my nipples sprang free.

They were swollen and pulsing, aching in a way only his mouth could cure.

But he wouldn't give me the relief I needed so badly. He flicked his tongue all around the bases of the erect nubs, and they began to painfully throb in a way I'd never felt before.

I tried to speak but could only gurgle something incomprehensible from the back of my throat.

Aras positioned himself between my thighs, kneeling at the foot of the bed and easing my hips down so that my legs were draped over his broad shoulders.

He kissed the wet crotch of my panties, pressing his lips against mine just hard enough to stimulate me further but not allow me to find the climax I desired.

He kissed around the edges and then returned to kissing the center more forcefully before flattening his tongue, giving me maddeningly long, slow licks through the silky material.

My hands could no longer be denied. I grabbed the top of my panties and forced them down, and he leaned back just far enough

to allow my left leg to join my right and kick them off before I revealed my treasure to him again.

He wasted no time, lavishing me with licks and kisses, using his mouth to take me across the threshold into a climax that shattered my soul. I pulled the comforter across my face and screamed into it as my thighs tried to close involuntarily to regain some control over the intense pleasure that consumed me.

He'd have none of it, as he drank my sexual nectar and worshipped my pussy with his entire face.

I frantically pushed his face away as I was too sensitive for him to continue orally stimulating me. He rose to his feet and licked his lips, savoring the flavor of my orgasm.

His belt and pants opened and fell to the floor. Boxer briefs hugged his heavily muscled thighs, between which his hard dick rested in an expanding pool of his precum.

He climbed back up onto me, this time going directly for my nipples. He captured them between his teeth, flicking them with the tip of his tongue, my hands wadding up the blanket beneath me as I groaned with pleasure.

He found the space between my legs, the slab of granite his cock had come to rest at my opening, separated from me only his boxers. I pulled him up to my face, kissing him deeply, tasting my ecstasy in his mouth.

I moaned and rolled my hips, my empty core starving to be filled by Aras.

His hardness mashed against my clit as we kissed, grinding and rubbing... and I tensed as a second climax washed over me. I undulated below him, and he whispered "good girl" in my ear as my eyes rolled back from the intensity of the orgasm.

I regained my senses just in time to realize he'd shimmied his boxers down and was poised to enter me. He held himself at the base, running the head of his dick up and down my opening maddeningly. I struggled to lift my hips, to engulf him, but he pulled back just enough to make it impossible.

"Beg for it, Zee," he said through gritted teeth. This game of teasing was evidently as difficult for him as it was for me.

There was only one way it was going to end, however, and he knew it. I *had* to have it. To have him. I'd do anything to feel him fill me and stretch me. Debasing myself was a small price to pay.

"Please fuck me, Aras! I need your cock so fucking bad, baby. Please!" I gave it all I had, but my lust-glazed eyes, churning hips, and the scent of my lust wafting through the air said more than any words I could muster.

He gave me a slow, searing thrust, his wide dick stuffing me with pleasure.

My ankles crossed behind his ass, fighting to keep him right there, throbbing inside me, but he withdrew halfway and plunged in again, a bit harder. I yelped as the speed and power of his thrusts increased, again and again, each time, battering me toward my third release.

"You feel so fucking good, Zaliya," Aras growled. "So tight."

I thrust up to meet him each time he drove down into me. I couldn't get enough. I reverted to a primal state, completely consumed by desire. Desire to keep coming. Desire to please this wild, amazing man. Desire to do nothing but *fuck*. For forever.

We stayed in that bed for hours, and he had me in every position I knew, plus a few I didn't. He came inside me not once, but twice, and I lost count of my climaxes after the eighth one. It was a life-changing afternoon, against which all other sexual encounters would forever be measured. Hell, against which all other life experiences would be compared. My life would consist of two parts. BA (Before Aras) and after.

He held me and kissed the back of my neck and shoulders as we lay in that cloud of a bed, and I couldn't wipe the silly smile off my face. I'd never felt such total relaxation, peace, or happiness.

Until a pounding on the door broke our reverie.

"Devil!" a voice called out. German-accented English. "Devil, are you in there? You're not answering your phone. We're supposed to go to dinner."

"Ugh," Aras groaned. "Just a minute," he called out, and he climbed slowly from the bed and grabbed a towel from the bathroom to obscure his nakedness. I was facing away from the door, but I rolled over and pulled a sheet up to cover my breasts.

"Hey Bastian, Reg, what's up lads?"

"Been calling and texting you for hours, yo, our reservations are in fifteen minutes," Reggie said. I couldn't see him, but I knew his voice.

"I'm starving, but I'm a bit, ah, indisposed at the moment," Aras said, and he reached his sculpted left arm behind his head to stretch and scratch his upper back. His body was fucking perfect. And I've

barely mentioned his legs, which looked like they belonged on a statue. Or a stallion.

"Do you know how tough it was to get a table at that place?" Bastian asked. "Supposed to be one of the best steakhouses in America."

"You boys enjoy it," Aras replied. "I have a feeling I may become a frequent visitor to Charleston. I'll get another chance."

His two teammates objected, but Aras shut the door and locked it over their voices.

He let the towel floor and returned to bed with me, kissing me deeply.

"Where was dinner supposed to be?" I asked.

"*Crowley's on King*," Aras answered. It's the most expensive 5-star steakhouse in town.

"If I'd known that, I'd have insisted you go!"

"Have you eaten there?" He asked.

"No, never, I couldn't afford a place like that. Their menu doesn't even have prices. I've heard for just a couple, if you have dinner, a couple glasses of wine and split a dessert, you're talking at least \$500, and that's before tip. If you have a chance to eat there, you have to go. Seriously. You can still make it, call the guys."

"Why would I want to eat that when I can eat this?" He asked, and reached his hand across my hip and took hold of my ass, giving it an ample squeeze and lift before letting it fall back.

"I mean, be my guest, but there's no way you're still horny, right? And after everything we did, I haven't showered or anything."

"Zaliya, I've been horny for you ever since I walked into *Sadie's* yesterday. You're the sexiest woman I've ever seen.

And the next thing I knew, he knelt behind me and lifted me up halfway onto my knees, his strong arms wrapped around my thighs.

I tried to talk him out of it, but admittedly my protest was half-hearted. He started kissing all over my ass, getting closer and closer to my center.

"Aras, nobody has ever... I mean... it's not...I... Oh!"

When he reached his goal and dragged his tongue as deep in the cleft of my ass as he could. It was like every nerve ending in my body caught fire all at once.

My face fell into the oversized pillows, and I began to curse and babble and praise God for this man who was doing things to my

body, giving me pleasure I never could have imagined. My muscles trembled all over as something like climaxes shot through my body. But they were different from regular orgasms. My pussy clenched violently around nothing, and my clit pulsed and ached. He kept going, deeper and faster, making out with... my ass. That tongue that kissed so well and ate my pussy so divinely was sending me to heaven and beyond via my most private little place.

And I was instantly addicted. If this was something he preferred over the best steak in South Carolina, bless his heart, his tongue, his cock, every inch of him. He could get back there whenever he wanted. I only hoped he'd do it whenever I wanted.

But as my mind wandered to having his face back there again and again and again... I realized that in just a few short hours, he'd be heading to Florida, then back to Germany, maybe Australia. As indescribably perfect as this day had been, it might be the one and only time I was ever with Aras Cahill. And I began to cry.

Poor Aras. In retrospect, I feel terrible for him. There he was, performing one of the most intimately sensual acts one person can do for another, giving me pleasure beyond bliss, past ecstasy, more than the English language can come close to describing, and what was my reaction? Tears. Come on, Zee!

"What's wrong, Zaliya?" A concerned Aras asked, climbing back up next to me as I stretched out to my full length, his hand rubbing the small of my back. "I thought you were enjoying that, luv. I'm sorry, I was too aggressive."

"No, no, no, that's not it at all," I responded. "I *loved* it. Couldn't you tell the way my body was responding? That's not it, I promise. It's so stupid. You're going to think I'm so weird."

"Hey," Aras said, placing his hand on my chin and turning my eyes to meet his. "Talk to me. Please."

I swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and decided the truth was my best out of a terribly awkward moment.

"It's just... Aras, I have never... it's never been like this for me. I've never had anything like *this*. These past few hours. It's overwhelming, what I feel inside; what you've been making me feel. And so unexpected..."

Aras interrupted when I paused to gather my thought. "I'm sorry, I don't mean *sorry*, exactly, as that would imply regret, but I hope

this all hasn't happened too quickly is what I mean. I didn't expect this either, it just sort of--"

I placed my index finger on his delicious lips.

"Let me finish, baby," I said. "What I mean is that I know you're leaving tomorrow. You have to be with your team. I get that. And then back to Germany, I guess, and after that Australia is home for you, right? But Charleston is home for me. I'll be here, you'll be there... It's like I've had a glimpse, a taste of heaven, and then the gates are being shut. I thought of that, and it made me cry."

He looked into my eyes with a puzzling expression on his face. It seemed to indicate deep thought and bemusement all at once.

Aras kissed the tip of my nose, my forehead, and then, softly, each of my eyelids.

"Zaliya, when I walked into that restaurant yesterday, I was expecting to be wowed by the food. I'd never had authentic American barbecue, real Southern American food, direct from the source. And believe me, the meal more than lived up to its reputation. I was blown away.

"What I didn't expect was to walk in there and lock eyes with the most beautiful girl I've ever seen in my life. And then to have her turn out to be sweet and smart and funny and so bloody sexy it made my heart race just to watch you walk by the table? And then somehow, I convince you to spend a day with me, and we see that tree, and we wind up kissing and then all of this?

"Do you think I ever want to leave this town? Or this bloody bed? Hell no. But the sad truth of it all is that I've got a contract, and a team that pays me quite well to do a job, to play a game I love, and yeah, come morning, I have to head to Orlando, rejoin my mates, and get on with training. There's no way around that. But it doesn't mean that it's the end of us, of you and me. There's a way to make this work if that's what you want."

"Is it what you want?" I countered. "A famous athlete like you with fame and money, and you're so handsome. You must have a girlfriend, or if you're anything like professional athletes here in America, a different girlfriend in every city you visit."

"Did these past few hours feel to you like I'm just trying to get my rocks off?" Aras asked. "Like you're just some throwaway to me? Because if they did, I've done you a tremendous disservice."

“Never for a moment have I felt like that,” I confessed. “Like I said, it’s been the most beautiful, hottest, most passionate thing I’ve ever experienced.”

He smiled warmly. “For me, too, Zee. For me, too. It’s like our bodies were crafted just to fit perfectly with each other. To give and receive maximum pleasure. I never want to stop kissing you and making you come. I want to be the only one who gets to make you moan and scream. I get off on it. It drives me insane. There is nothing better than this body of yours. Except maybe that smile.”

I grinned at him. I couldn’t help myself.

“In that case,” I said, shimmying back up onto my knees and sliding the sheet I’d wrapped around myself off my body, “I’d very much love for you to make me ‘moan and scream’ some more.”

“You wicked minx,” Aras said in that drop-dead sexy accent of his. “It would be my absolute pleasure.”

We never did leave his room that night, making slow, exquisite love until we were utterly exhausted and ordering exquisite room service.

The next morning, we rose early, showered together, and had breakfast with Bastian and Reggie, who seemed surprised when we strolled into the restaurant hand in hand to join them.

Their dinner at *Crowley's* had been good, but they both admitted that they enjoyed their meal at *Sadie's* more.

"What did you... or you *two* do for dinner last night, Devil?" Reggie asked between bites of his pancakes.

"Room service, mate," Aras replied. "A surf and turf combo. Quite good."

"Okay," Reggie replied, "But I thought you two were going to see that tree. You ditched our trip out to Fort Sumter and then dinner. You didn't con her into spending the whole day and... *night* with you, did you?"

"Zaliya is a *lady*," Aras said. "And I a gentleman. And our doing would be a conversation for grown folks. Maybe when you're older."

Bastian shrugged and pointed his empty fork at himself.

"Use your imagination, mate," Aras answered. "We went up on the roof, looked at the stars, and recited poetry. It was lovely."

Aras squeezed my hand below the table.

"Are you coming to Atlanta?" Reggie asked, referring to their team's exhibition game a week down the road.

"If I'm lucky," Aras said with a grin. "I mean, I hope so. Zee?"

We'd discussed it the night before, between him making me come umpteen times. I didn't know the first thing about soccer besides that you can't use your hands and that the best players come from Brazil. But I wanted to make every effort to see Aras play.

"Yes," I confirmed. "I'll be there. One way or another."

I didn't know if I could take off work or not or how I'd get there or where I'd stay, but I wouldn't miss it for the world. My answer seemed to please all of them.

After breakfast, we returned to Aras's room, where he finished packing. His local rental car got picked up, and the three teammates piled into the SUV they'd rented in Orlando, Bastian behind the wheel, and they prepared to set out for Florida.

Aras put his hands on my hips and made my insides turn to butter by giving me a hard squint into the sunshine with those gorgeous eyes of his. "This is goodbye, but just for now, sweet Zee," he said. I wiped a tear from my cheek and sniffled. "Now, now, none of that. We'll see each other soon. In Atlanta, right?"

I nodded and closed my eyes. My body didn't want him more than an arm's length away. Ever.

He took my face in his hands and kissed me deeply. "Zaliya, this is going to sound crazy I know it is, but hey, we Aussies aren't known for being the rational, logical types, right? But if I don't say it now, face to face, I know I'll regret it. Zaliya, I love you."

With that, he kissed me again, and I threw my arms around his neck. We'd have stayed right there in front of *Wentworth Mansion*, kissing like lovesick teenagers on the sidewalk in the sunshine, if Bastian hadn't honked the horn.

"I don't want to be late and piss off the gaffer," Bastian complained.

Aras flipped him off and kissed me again before climbing into the SUV and rolling away down Smith Street.

"I love you too, Aras," I whispered as they disappeared into traffic.

"Enjoy the day off?" Mya asked when we arrived at work a few hours later. "You didn't miss too much. Kinda slow."

"Girl," I said, stretching the "I" for about ten seconds.

"Okay, hel-lo," Mya said, setting her bag down on the table in back and snapping her fingers. "Spill the tea, Zee."

"I..." I began but broke into a fit of giggling.

Mya put her hand on her hip and cocked her head. "Seriously?"

"Sorry," I wheezed. "It's just... okay. I'm okay. Remember the soccer guys?"

"Did you think I'd forget them?" Mya asked. "What was the one guy's name? Reggie? He looked like Shemar Moore, girl. I'm not gonna forget him anytime soon."

"Not Reggie. I mean yeah, his name is Reggie, but the other guy. The Australian guy. Aras."

Mya's mouth fell open. "What about him?"

"I spent the day with him." I covered my face with my work apron. "And the night."

"Zaliya!" She exclaimed. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"That and more. Yes."

"And judging by how you're acting and *walking*, I'm guessing it wasn't terrible?"

"If you told me today that I never got to have sex again, I think I could be okay with it, knowing that was my last time," I admitted. "Beyond belief."

Mya looked at me a while before asking "Did he-"

I cut her off. "He did *everything*. Things I didn't even know two people could do. So, so good. Crazy insane. I can't even..."

"We have customers outside. The two of you might want to let them in at some point," Shayla said from the doorway separating the kitchen from the tiny break room.

"I'm gonna need details," Mya said as she moved into the dining area to unlock the front door. I finished setting the tables and organizing the menus.

Over the next few hours, between slinging brisket, sweet potato pie, and cornbread, I shared some of the details of my time with Aras. When I'd told her everything I could think of, she looked me dead in the eye and said, "Okay, when are we going to Australia, so I can meet his brother?"

I laughed, but I'd be lying if I said there wasn't part of me that was dying to go to Australia, to meet family, friends... kangaroos. I was obsessed with Aras, and more than just my body ached in his absence.

He texted me throughout the day as he traveled, and made no secret of the fact that he missed me. It was refreshing to have a man interested in me who wasn't trying to hide his feelings behind a macho front or play games with me. He was confident and secure enough in himself to let me know how he felt, and I loved every mushy bit of it.

The game in Atlanta would be on a Thursday night, giving the team time to travel back to Germany and have a week to get practice before their regular season resumed.

With a promise that we'd be back for the lunch rush on Friday, Shayla gave her blessing for both Mya and me to take that Thursday off.

Aras had explained that he didn't figure they'd have much free time in Atlanta, that it was a business trip for them, so as much as he'd love for me to come, he couldn't promise he'd be able to spend time with me.

Mya and I figured we'd drive to Atlanta Thursday morning, spend a few hours visiting with some friends of hers, go to the game, and then drive back, leaving a few hours for a nap before work. Not ideal, but it would let me see Aras, and that's just about all I wanted. My car was running a bit better than hers, and had the new tires, so we decided it would make the drive to Atlanta, which could take

five or six or more hours each way, depending on traffic. Worth it if it took twenty hours, in my opinion.

Over the next few days, Aras and I were in constant contact, texting, talking, and video chatting.

The training was going well, and he felt good. Some young players showed up for camp who were better than expected, so he was excited about the future of his team.

On the Tuesday before the game, I got a surprise email from one of the big travel web sites with confirmation numbers for a pair of first-class round-trip tickets to Atlanta, my luxury rental car, and my hotel suite for the night of the game.

When I was next able to speak to Aras, I was near tears at his generosity. He waved me off and told me I actually deserved a private jet, but he hadn't been able to swing it on short notice.

Mya lost her shit when I told her about the new travel arrangements.

The one who was less than pleased was my father.

I drove out to his house on Saint Helena Island with a couple racks of ribs Shayla had prepared for him, and we caught up over dinner.

Neither of us had heard from Steffon, which was troubling. Jovan had met someone in Hawaii, a local girl named Keala, and things were apparently getting serious.

Casually, I mentioned my upcoming trip to Atlanta.

"I thought you were saving up to do another semester, Zaliya," my father said between bites. "What sort of fool thing is flying to Atlanta to watch what? A soccer game? This must be Mya's doing."

He always thought Mya was too wild for me, even though she had been my best friend through thick and thin for many years and never let me down.

"Actually, it's all being paid for," I replied. "The airfare, hotel, everything."

My father set his bones aside and wiped sauce from his hands and mouth.

"No man tosses around money like that unless he's after something," he said sternly.

Little did he know.

"Daddy, I am 26. I'm in college. I make my own money, and I think I should have made you proud by now. I know I'll always be your baby, but at some point, I deserve to be an adult and be treated like one, okay? And who knows, I might even fall in love one day, and you might have to walk me down the aisle. How about that?"

"Oh, Lord," my father said, leaning his head back and searching the ceiling for answers. He looked at me and started to speak but couldn't find the words. He stood up and walked across the kitchen and pulled a beer from the fridge. He drank half of it in one gulp and rejoined me at the table. "I didn't think any black folks played soccer," he said, and drained the bottle before resuming picking at the rib bones for any meat he may have missed.

"Why does he have to be black?" I asked, and the room suddenly fell as silent as a tomb.

He picked at the ribs for a few minutes until he was satisfied that there was nothing more to eat. "What the hell else would he be, Zaliya?" He asked.

"He's from Australia," I explained. He plays for a team from Germany. He's white."

My father leaned back from the table and crossed his arms.

"What's that look?" I asked. "Did Jerriah and Steffon get that look?"

"Your brothers are... *different*," he replied.

"Different how?" I asked, getting irritated. "Because they're boys? That gives them free rein to do anything and anyone they want?"

"Zaliya, watch your tone, this is my house," my father said, narrowing his eyes.

"No, Daddy, I don't think so. Those two do anything they want, get in any trouble, have babies, come and go, and they're praised and respected and treated a certain way.

"I go to school, get and keep a job, come visit you all the time, take care of my nieces as best I can, and when I meet somebody, it's wrong? Even though all you know about him is that he's white? And has an accent? Oh, and that he plays a sport you don't think is what, *manly*?" I was near tears, years of frustration boiling over.

I'd never spoken to my father without sugar-coating my feelings, without taking care to avoid all the emotional eggshells that lay on the floor around him.

Shaking his head, he got up and walked back to the fridge for another beer, but I bounced out of my chair and intercepted him.

I put my hands on his arms and forced him to look at me.

"Daddy, yes, I have met someone. I haven't even known him for very long, and maybe it's crazy, but I've never felt about anyone like

I do about him. And I'm going to Atlanta to see him and then from there, who knows? Never forget how much I love you, because I do, but I can't remain the same little girl I was when momma passed. I deserve to grow and to move past that pain. I have to.

"I miss her every day. I always will. But don't you think she'd want me to be happy? I know she'd want you to be happy. I just know it. Everything I've ever done has been to make you proud of me. Trust me, trust that you *and momma* have given me the tools to become who I'm supposed to be. Okay? Please?"

My big bear of a father looked down at me with tears in his eyes. He shuddered once and began to cry. I wrapped my arms around him like he'd done for me so many times, and I began to cry.

We stayed that way for a long while.

When we finally separated, with his voice hoarse from emotion, he said, "I just miss her so much."

"I do too, Daddy. I do, too."

We wound up in the living room, where he peppered me with questions about Aras, many of which I frankly couldn't answer. The truth was that I just didn't know. But I knew enough to fill in most of the blanks, and I showed him a few pictures of Aras on my phone.

"Good looking fella," he conceded. "A little old for you, though."

"Daddy..."

"Okay, okay. Well, I'm not going to Germany and damn sure not to Australia, so how do I ever get to meet this young man and put the fear of God into him?"

"Don't worry, I told him all about you. He's *bloody* terrified," I said in my best Aussie accent.

"Maybe I should come to Atlanta. You know my cousin Ivory lives near there. I haven't seen him in ages."

"Let's save the meetup for another time and place," I joked. It was getting late, and he needed to be out on the water before sunrise, so I hugged him goodnight and headed back to Charleston.

I called Aras on the way back and told him about dinner with my father.

"Why doesn't he come?" Aras surprised me by asking. "And his cousin, too, to the match, anyway. I can arrange tickets for all of you. And a room for him if he wants one."

"Aras, I don't think..."

"It's settled, then. His name is Josiah, yeah? Josiah Sherwood?"

I'd already learned that arguing with a determined Aras Cahill was a futile activity.

"Yes," I sighed. "And better leave an extra ticket for Ivory Whitaker as well."

"Ripper!" Aras exclaimed, sounding very Aussie to my American ears.

My father, at 54 years of age, climbed onto a plane for the first time. I'd only flown once before, to attend a wedding of a college friend in Baltimore, so it's not like I was an old pro. But it was all new to him, and he clutched the armrests as if by the strength in his hands alone he could will the plane to remain airborne.

The flight was short and easy, and with a grand total of two flights to my name, I could authoritatively declare that I preferred first class.

Daddy elected to stay with Ivory rather than accept Aras's offer of a room at the hotel downtown where Mya and I had rooms. The hotel would be "way too fancy" for my father, in his words.

After a brief reunion with Ivory, Mya and I got into the Land Rover Aras had arranged for us, and we drove downtown to the hotel. In the lobby, we saw several people wearing Bayer Leverkusen jerseys, some fans who had made the trip from Germany and other Americans who supported the team from afar.

We checked in and found all-inclusive spa passes waiting for us, which we'd have all the next day to use before heading over to the stadium that evening. Aras had also left us a note telling us to order whatever we wanted from room service. When Mya turned on the television, it was on a local news program, and the sports anchor was interviewing Aras's teammate, Leverkusen's young American star Reggie Winslow. Reggie! So cool! The interview had been taped at practice on an outdoor field, and in the background, we watched Aras stroll past and shout to someone off-screen. My heart skipped.

I'd texted him when we landed and when we arrived at the hotel, but I figured he was busy with team functions, which explained why he didn't reply instantly.

We got comfortable in the room and found a Denzel movie I didn't recognize to watch while we awaited our room service steaks.

I was just coming out of the bathroom when we heard a knock on the door, followed by "Room service."

When I opened the door, I was face to face with the man of my dreams, dressed in his familiar team tracksuit.

Aras had large bags in each hand, which he set down to scoop me up in his arms, swinging me around and kissing me as if we hadn't seen each other in a decade.

Once he set me down, he brought the bags inside and greeted Mya warmly. The bags were filled with all sorts of Bayer Leverkusen team swag; t-shirts, hats, hoodies, and jerseys.

"Had to guess on sizes," Aras explained. "But hopefully there'll be something there for everybody."

We just kept pulling stuff out of the bags, and I heard Mya squeal with delight when she pulled a little jersey out that looked perfect for Keshawn.

"This is all too much," Mya said. "I don't know what to say."

"Least I could do," Aras replied. "Can't get any proper Aussie stuff here in Atlanta, so this'll have to do."

He apologized that he couldn't stay longer, saying we should enjoy the spa and that he hoped we could all meet after the match the next night.

When he went to leave, he pulled me close "Two of the young blokes got sent home from Orlando for sneaking Sheilas into their rooms, so everything's on lockdown. Sorry, Zee. I was hoping to find some way to get a little alone time with you. I miss hearing you scream."

My pussy clenched at the reminder of how loud and how many times he'd made me scream back in Charleston. I'd have knelt and sucked him off right then if Mya hadn't been around. And if the room service cart hadn't just arrived at our door.

Fuck, he was gorgeous.

We got up early the next morning and drove out to Ivory's house, where we had a big breakfast, and I met distant cousins I hadn't seen in years. I delivered some of the new gear for my dad and Ivory to wear to the game.

We hung out for a while before returning to the hotel for manis, pedis, facials, and hot rock massages. Amazing.

"You have to marry this man," Mya insisted as we had our toes done. "I'm getting very used to this lifestyle."

"I'm sure he has some single teammates," I offered. "I think Reggie is available."

"Mya Winslow has a nice ring to it," she considered.

We had the grandest of all spa days, a late, light lunch, and we returned to our room to get changed. I put on a Cahill #17 Bayer Leverkusen jersey, and Mya picked out a gold fitted t-shirt with the two red lions' logo on it. Down in the lobby, we met my dad in a South Carolina Gamecocks t-shirt and a Bayer Leverkusen ballcap. Ivory had on an Atlanta Falcons jersey. Sigh.

A group of fans was walking to the nearby stadium, and the weather was unseasonably warm, so we joined them. They sang songs in German, and we acted like we had a clue what was happening.

Once inside, we found seats just a few rows up, near midfield. The crowd was loud and excited, and it was thrilling watching Aras jog out onto the field. He came out at first with his socks down near his shoes, and the muscles in his calves just about made me drool. They warmed up a bit then went back in. When they returned, he

had his socks pulled up over shin guards (Boo!) and a serious countenance.

My father and Ivory kept asking us questions, but what we knew about soccer could barely fill a thimble, so we were of no help.

"Just enjoy the food and the game!" I shouted over the music blaring through the speakers.

The game finally began, with Aras and Reggie both starting in "midfield," whatever that meant. Bastian had warmed up in his goalkeeper uniform, but he didn't start the game.

Being so close, and the players being professionals, the action was way more intense than I expected. My father and Ivory wasted no time in shouting their support for a team whose German name they could barely pronounce, so they settled on "Lions."

After ten minutes, Reggie and his blinding speed tore down the side nearest us with the ball and passed it to the middle, where Aras ran onto it and hammered it into the net. Suddenly, I was in the middle of a hurricane of high fives and hugs from strangers who only knew that I was wearing a Cahill jersey.

A chant went up around us in German celebrating the goal. One word in English kept getting repeated. "Devil."

The celebration, however, turned somber only a few minutes later.

Aras chased a ball that was going out of bounds, and an opponent lunged for it. They collided as the ball rolled away.

The Atlanta player got up slowly. Aras did not.

He lay on the ground, rolling, groaning, and clutching his knee.

"That's his left knee, Zee," Mya whispered into my ear. "Just like Dr. Wren said."

I felt a chill go down my spine.

Aras carried off the field on a stretcher, and we sat dumbfounded as the action resumed.

Leverkusen scored again, but I didn't care. I wanted to know how Aras was. Halftime came, and I kept checking my phone but had no messages. When the teams came back out for the second half, Bastian went out to warm up with the starters. A golf cart rolled toward us with Aras on the back, his left leg immobilized.

As it neared us, he waved to me, and I walked down to the barrier. I could barely reach out and touch his fingertips from where he sat. He chatted briefly with a security guard as warmups went on behind him, and the guard opened the gate for me to step down onto the field. Aras hugged me. "Sorry, Zee. Bit of a letdown, huh?"

"Oh my God, no, how are you? What do they know?"

"It's pretty well wrecked, they think," he explained. "Probably have surgery tomorrow on it. Any chance you could stay a couple days in Atlanta? Nice to have a friendly face around."

"Yes! Yes, of course," I agreed.

"Can I meet your dad?" Aras asked, and my heart skipped. I guess I wasn't as prepared as I thought I was for my two worlds to collide. "I'm sure the guard will let him come down for a minute," Aras said. He gave my dad a "come here" wave with his free hand.

Moments later, Aras Cahill and Josiah Sherwood were shaking hands.

As I'd expect, my dad was straight to business. "How bad is it?" he asked, pointing to the wrapped knee.

"Heard a couple pops, pretty painful. Won't be doing any dancing for a while," Aras said.

"Nice goal you scored."

"Thanks, mate," Aras replied. "Glad you could make it."

They chatted for a minute before warmups were concluded, and Aras was expected back behind the bench.

"You've raised a spectacular lady here, sir. Zaliya is the genuine article," Aras said as my dad and I headed back to the stands.

"Thank you, son," he replied. "I'm real proud of her."

Bayer Leverkusen won, 3-0, with Bastian playing the entire second half, and making two saves that to my untrained eye seemed pretty spectacular. On the second save, Ivory stood up and screamed, "Not in my house!" which made us all laugh.

Aras's injury aside, I could see why the fans were so into it. It was exciting, and we had an absolute ball.

The next morning, Mya and my dad returned to Charleston. Shayla gave me a few more days off, which Yvette was available to cover.

Aras had surgery the next afternoon, performed by the team doctor from the Atlanta Falcons football team, to repair two torn knee ligaments.

The team had flown back to Germany earlier that day, leaving behind one of the teams' athletic trainers and an assistant coach.

At Aras's request, I was in the room when he was wheeled back in. Also, at his request, since he knew he'd be too groggy to make sense, he had me call his mother in Australia to update her on his condition. She seemed puzzled as to exactly what my connection to her son was, but she expected my call. She was delighted, of course, to hear the good news that surgery had gone well.

I spent large chunks of the next few days at Aras's bedside, and the more we conversed, the closer I felt to him, and the more deeply in love I fell. We traded stories of our childhoods, of friends and family and favorite foods and music and movies, and we developed a rapport beyond the mind-blowing physical chemistry we shared.

On the second day post-surgery, among the many flowers that decorated his room, a small package in plain brown paper arrived.

It was addressed to me, in care of Aras, with the only return address being "Saint Helena Island."

I opened the box to find a small pouch of what I recognized immediately as my great-uncle's goofer dust. It was in a vial of clear liquid labeled "Night Water." There was also a piece of charcoal, and directions for me to scrawl a series of symbols on Aras's bandages with the charcoal. He had included a small piece of blue fabric that I was to hang above the doorway to the hospital room "to keep the haints out."

Aras had mentioned on the day of his surgery that it looked like "that Dr. Wren bloke must have known something after all."

I showed him the contents of the package, and he had a million questions. The fact that he showed such interest and was willing to indulge all of Dr. Wren's remedies was further evidence that he felt the same way about me as I did him.

I'd return each night to my hotel room, but he asked me to sit with him and hold his hand until he fell asleep. I left him with a glass of Dr. Wren's night water at his bedside.

Those few days at that Atlanta hospital convinced me that I was destined to spend the rest of my life with that magnificent man, whether in South Carolina, Tasmania, Germany, or on Mars.

FIFTEEN

ARAS SET about rehabbing his knee with the same maniacal intensity that allowed him to build his body into a dynamic machine in the first place.

He returned to Germany so that his team could oversee his physical therapy and workouts, and I reluctantly came home to Charleston.

We arranged for me to visit him in Germany, and I put off school for another semester and took an extended leave from work. Shayla hired a new full-time waitress.

I met his mother and brother in person when they came to Germany, and we got along famously. By mid-summer, Aras was back to near full strength, working out with the team again and preparing for another season.

One afternoon he returned to the flat we shared. After he tasted every inch of my body and I rode his big dick until we were both quivering, sweaty messes, he turned to me in bed and said, "I think I'm finished."

I was taken completely aback. I wasn't sure if Aras meant finished with sex for the day or with me or what in the world he was getting at.

I propped myself up on my elbow and gave him a look.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll have them call a presser tomorrow."

My confusion abated, but only just.

"Aras?" I asked. He had a faraway look in his eye.

"Oh, right, sorry," he said, clearing the mental fog. "What I mean to say is, I can play again. I'm back. I feel like I could play five more years. But I don't want to. All I want is *this*. All I want is *us*. I'm retiring. I've been playing this game I love as a job for long enough. It's time to move on to the next thing. The best thing... You."

The next afternoon, Aras had a meeting with the team, at which they offered a new contract with more money. He politely declined and thanked them for everything. He had a small press conference, and that was it. His agent and the team ironed out the details, and it was over.

Two days later, we were off to the Land of Oz and the rest of our lives.

SIXTEEN

AUSTRALIA WAS COOL, and meeting his friends and family was fantastic. We even went to see the most famous tree on Tasmania, the one he'd told me about, *Centurion*. Although it didn't possess the haunting beauty of Angel Oak, it was still a majestic sight that barely seemed real.

After a time, as a daughter of the Lowcountry, I felt home calling to me. Aras could sense it as well, and he admittedly had grown fond of Charleston during his brief time there. He knew I needed family nearby and that the swamps and marshes of Charleston and Saint Helena were in my blood.

By early November, summertime in Australia, we'd begun to talk seriously about relocating to South Carolina together. He was comfortable in his Tasmanian surroundings, doing some local commercials, and helping out coaching at his old soccer club. If he'd found a nice Aussie girl, a "Sheila" to settle down with, he'd have the Down Under version of a scripted Hollywood retirement.

But he hadn't. He'd fallen in love with an American, a South Carolinian, a strong, beautiful Gullah queen from Saint Helena Island. He said he'd do anything in his power to make me happy and provide me with my best life.

We were walking down the beach one evening with the sun setting ahead of us, making it tough to see. I had an ache inside me where he'd given me an aggressive pounding with his thick manhood hours earlier. With every step, I felt tiny little tremors go through my core. When we came around a bend and scampered over some rocks, we saw silhouettes of a group of people ahead. There was a circle of chairs, music, laughter, and the smell of meat cooking wafted through the air. A festive scene reminded me of so many good times on the beaches of Saint Helena Island.

As we got closer, I could hear music over the crashing waves – it was *Groove with You* by the Isley Brothers.

I started to sing along and leaned into Aras, "This is one of my daddy's favorite songs. I'm surprised anybody down here would be playing it."

He grinned down at me. "We're full of surprises, Zee."

We headed up the beach, going around the group when a football – an *American football* – zipped through the air and landed near Aras's feet. I hadn't seen one since we'd been in Australia. Aras picked it up and went to throw it back, but I snatched it out of his hands. "Give me that! You don't know what to do with that!"

"What makes you think you do?" Out came a booming voice off to my left. A voice that belonged to only one man. My oldest brother, Jovan!

With a wide smile, Jovan walked up and clasped hands with Aras, giving him a half-hug as I stood there, dumbfounded.

Within moments, we were surrounded by the rest of the partygoers – Jerriah, Steffon, Mya, Aras's mother and brother, and a few others I didn't immediately recognize... and my father.

When the shock and surprise wore off just enough to allow me to regain conscious control of my motor functions, I turned to find Aras on one knee, with a massive diamond ring in his hands.

"Zee, you're the most beautiful, incredible, and sweetest woman in the world. All I want from this life is to wake up each day to your smiling face. I'll do everything I can for the rest of my days to make you happy and proud. Will you marry me?"

I dropped to my knees in the sand and threw my arms around him, causing a momentary panic when he dropped the ring, and it was lost in the twilight sand.

Before that, however, we rolled and laughed and hugged and kissed, and I just kept repeating “Yes, yes, yes!”

Then, of course, everyone knelt in the sand and searched for the ring. Once it had been found, and things settled down, I was introduced to those I didn’t know – my brother Jovan’s Hawaiian girlfriend, Keala, Aras’s brother Will’s girlfriend Liane, Aras’s uncle Clete, and a couple of Aras’s childhood friends, Alex and Geoff.

When Aras knew he wanted to propose, he called my father to ask for my hand and then set up the entire thing, flying everyone in from home who could make it.

Steffon had recently resurfaced after being “away in California,” in his words. I figured it had something to do with a pretty blonde, knowing my brother. Jerriah’s sentence had been reduced for good behavior, and he’d recently been released. Aras’s mother knew people who knew people who knew the right person to speak to so that Jerriah would be allowed to leave the United States and make the trip.

“Since everybody’s here, I figured we could get married here, Aussie-style,” Aras mentioned. I didn’t immediately understand, but once we strolled up the beach a bit farther as a group, it all became clear.

Chairs and an arch were set up just out of reach of the tide, and a million stars began to twinkle far overhead.

“We’ll do it again in South Carolina,” Aras promised. “With all your family and friends there. Any way you want it. It’ll be perfect, just like you.”

Mya was my maid of honor, Aras’s brother was his best man, and my teary father walked me down the sandy, makeshift aisle.

I couldn’t stop smiling. I smiled so long, and so hard my jaw ached for two days after.

We originally planned a Spring wedding in Charleston to get it in before the weather got too muggy. We'd moved into a house on Edisto Island, right on the water, with a dock extending into a small river that led to the ocean. We had a large live oak in the backyard, Angel Oak's little cousin.

We set a date for early April, reserving one of the large plantations out on Ashley River Road.

Zaras, however, had other plans.

Who's Zaras, you ask?

He's the result of one too many unprotected sessions of spectacular sex with my gorgeous hunk of a husband.

We'd been back in the States for a few weeks when it occurred to me that I was late. With all the commotion of moving, I hadn't been paying attention.

Aras was napping in the hammock on our wraparound porch overlooking the water when I knelt next to him and kissed the tip of his nose.

"Wake up, Daddy," I said softly.

"Oi?" he said, sitting up out of deep sleep. "What did you say? What's wrong, Zee?"

"I called you Daddy," I said with a mischievous grin. "Because that's what you're going to be." I showed him the test I'd taken. The little plus sign was unmistakable.

I only wish I had his reaction preserved on video. He tried to get up too quickly from deep in the hammock, and it spun twice like in a cartoon before depositing him on the deck.

He jumped up without missing a beat and let out a shriek of delight.

"Woo-hoo! Baby, I love you!" he said, picking me up from the floor and kissing me. Then he set me down gently and kissed my tummy. "Baby, I love you, too!"

I had planned to be married in my mother's dress, into which I could fit, but I didn't have much time. We could have had it altered to contain my bump and wherever else might swell, so instead, we moved the location and the date.

Our wedding took place on Valentine's Day in the same tiny church on Saint Helena Island, where my parents had been married. The church no longer hosted a regular congregation, but it remained standing and was available for weddings, funerals, and such.

My father wept like a baby walking me down the aisle.

Keshawn was Aras's best man, with my three brothers filling out his line. My line included Mya and my three nieces, who were all thrilled to have their hair and makeup done professionally.

Miss Sadie was there, Dr. Wren, Ivory, and his family from Georgia, and just about every teacher, classmate, cousin, aunt, uncle, and friend I ever had growing up. The church overflowed with people and with love.

The reception was catered, at Miss Sadie's insistence, by *Sadie's BBQ*. Shayla and company managed to feed everybody there until they were ready to burst, and the best part for me was that I didn't have to fill a single glass or carry any plates.

Baby Zaras came in the Fall, a round little ball of joy weighing 9 pounds and 7 ounces. He has my skin and Aras's sparkling green eyes. He's going to be the most handsome young man in the Lowcountry.

Steffon already has designs on making him into a Clemson running back, but Aras intends to have him kicking a soccer ball just as soon as he can walk.

The one who can't get enough of that baby, however, is my father.

After three granddaughters, none of whom want anything to do with crabs, oysters, or fish, he's thrilled to have a grandson who he plans to raise to become the "best dang fisherman who ever bent a pole in Charleston Harbor."

I'd love to chat more, but Mya just pulled up outside. She's dropping off Keshawn on her way to the airport. She has a flight to Germany to catch. Reggie has a big match this weekend, and she wouldn't miss it for the world.



If you love Sadie's BBQ and are curious about the five ladies Zaliya served... check out the Broken Resolution Series.

Ameera's Story

Soldier Beast

My resolution: Get over my lying, cheating ex-boyfriend. The best way was to focus on my job as a nurse. Falling in love with my patient was never part of the plan.

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*

Naughty-Nice Nanny

Savannah's Story

My resolution: No s*x for a year. But it's hard to be nice when your boss is trying to get you on the naughty list!

*

Sweet On You

K.K.'s Story

My Resolution: Lose 40 pounds. But after sharing a kiss with a London chef, I'm eating out of his hands.

*

Two Weeks Notice

Sweet-T's Story

My Resolution: Quit my job. But my boss says he can't replace me in two weeks. In fact, he doesn't think he can replace me...ever.

*

Losing It

Paris' Story

My Resolution: Lose my virginity! After almost thirty years, how hard could it be?



Interracial Fairy Tale Series

*

The Sheikh's Pregnant Cinderella

Cindy's Story

I stole my boss' ex's designer gown, crashed his Christmas ball...and got knocked up at midnight!

*

The Sheikh's Sleeping Beauty Nanny

Aurora's Story

When I see my broken-hearted little girl smiling up at Aurora, *nothing* will stop me from making her my nanny.



Want to learn more about Shay and her books? Visit her website!

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