

Leave of Absence



S. Renée Bess

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by

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Regal Crest Books

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to anyone who has ever offered someone a second chance; a “do-over,” and to the sweet joy which rides on the wings of every second chance.

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Chapter One

KINSHASA JORDAN INSPECTED the living room of the two bedroom apartment that would be her home for the next year and a half. She walked toward the brick-faced fireplace and wondered how long it had been since the chimney was last cleaned. Kinshasa made a mental note to ask the landlord, Mr. Bardwell. She'd met him once before she moved in today, and she was still amused by the first question he'd asked her.

“Now, Jordan is easy to say, but how do you pronounce your first name, young lady?” He'd asked her with frank curiosity in his voice, but nary a trace of hostility.

“It's pronounced Keen-shah-sa, Mr. Bardwell. Put the stress on the middle syllable and you'll be fine.”

“Okay. I understand. Keen-shah-sa. Did I say it right?”

“That was perfect.”

Kinshasa ran her fingers along the upright board that bisected the halves of one of the two bookcases that flanked the hearth. She pressed down on one shelf to test its reliability, and immediately decided which chore she would tackle next. After she finished her inspection of the apartment, Kinshasa would begin filling the bookcases with some of her possessions.

Although she had put quite a few of her things in storage, Kinshasa brought a few of her favorite keepsakes with her: a shell she'd plucked from the beach in Maui, two female busts a friend sent her from Kenya, a small mixed wood box from Brazil, and a few photos of her family. These things would give her a sense of home, a center in her new surroundings. They would add texture and warmth to the almost military uniformity of her texts and other books.

Next, Kinshasa stood in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room. Both areas were small but adequate for her needs. Kinshasa didn't enjoy cooking. She considered that activity a waste of precious time. Why cook when she could spend those hours reading or writing?

She stepped into the kitchen and approached the microwave oven perched atop one of the counters. She nodded approvingly.

"Great," she said.

Kinshasa planned to fill the freezer with pre-made microwave dinners she could heat quickly enough those evenings when she arrived at her apartment after remaining on campus later than usual. The frozen meals certainly would fill the bill the nights when new characters and new plots demanded all of her time and attention.

Kinshasa walked back through the living room to examine the furniture that had arrived that afternoon. The moving company's workers placed the Haitian cloth sleep sofa, the two side chairs, and the cocktail table exactly where she directed them. Although it would be quite a while before she hung up the few pieces of art she'd brought with her, she was already contemplating where they should go.

She stood at one end of the room, surveyed the scene, and smiled at its order and balance. If there was one thing she needed in her life now, it was order and the peaceful feeling the order gave her. She craved an end to the disarray that had surrounded her prior to her arrival in Allerton, Pennsylvania.

Kinshasa entered the hallway spanning the area between the living room and the two bedrooms.

"Oh man, look at this," she said.

Boxes stacked like sheer cliffs jutting out from the walls transformed the narrow hall into a canyon. She walked the length of the narrow passageway, and read each box's label written in her own neat script. Some of the boxes were stacked upside down, so she had to contort herself in an effort to figure out what they held.

She located her literature notes and teaching materials inside the containers closest to the smaller bedroom, the one she would use as her office. The other boxes held linens, clothing, dishes, books, CD's, and an unfinished manuscript or two.

Kinshasa breathed in deeply and then began the task of unsealing the boxes, discarding some things she thought were unnecessary, and escorting most of the packed items to their new quarters. Three hours later on this mid-March afternoon, Kinshasa finally exhaled. She gave herself permission to sit down on her bed and ponder what she'd gotten herself into. She thought about her contract with Allerton University. She had agreed to teach one section of creative writing during the pre-summer session, and two literature sections during the fall and spring semesters. As she recalled the terms of her commitment, she felt a familiar discomfort fill her stomach. It was the nagging suspicion she may have bitten off more than she could chew. She was used to reaching out to high school age pupils, not to college age students.

The offer to teach at Allerton had arrived just as she'd been caught between her flush of fame following the release of her third novel, and the pain she felt when she separated from someone she had once loved so fiercely. The two events, timed as they were, plunged Kinshasa into a vortex of emotions, and she grabbed the opportunity to teach at Allerton as if it were a lifeboat. Abruptly she decided to take a leave of absence from the New Haven, Connecticut high school where she'd taught for what seemed like forever. Kinshasa craved a slower pace and different surroundings. Allerton University would provide that. It would be her respectable escape from chaos, from Michael.

Eager to fill the bookshelves, but aware that her anxiety felt more like hunger pangs than nervous uneasiness, Kinshasa decided it was time for her to go out and discover a place to eat that was relatively close to her apartment. She walked down the partially cleared hallway and went into the bathroom. The mirror above the wash basin reflected a copper brown face. Expressive dark eyes stared back at her. Kinshasa's nose always reminded her of her grandmother, who used to pinch it now and then when she was a child. The pinch wasn't a demonstration of grandmotherly affection. It was her elder's attempt at cosmetic correction.

"Child, whenever you're just sitting around not doing anything, pinch your nose. It'll grow straighter!"

Despite her grandmother's efforts, Kinshasa's nose refused to become aquiline. It was as it was destined to be, an ordinary African-American nose.

Kinshasa's mouth usually held an expression of guarded optimism more readily than a smile. Any smile from Kinshasa was a gift which had its origin in her mind. From there, the smile traveled down to her heart. If she was really amused and the smile could survive the trip, it would journey from her heart and take up residence on her lips, for all the world to see.

Kinshasa passed the comb through her hair several times before the reflection in the mirror satisfied her. She had her hair cut three weeks ago, and soon she would need it trimmed again. She recalled a quick conversation she'd had with her landlord.

“Are there grocery stores and pharmacies nearby?” She had asked.

“Oh, sure.”

“How about a good beauty salon?”

“You bet. You’ll be able to get a nice hairdo.” He nodded as he rubbed the stubble on his chin.

Why didn’t I ask him if there was a black beauty salon in the area? She wondered. Probably because I didn’t want to say anything to rock the boat in these new waters.

Kinshasa patted a few errant hairs into place, did a final appraisal of her appearance, and turned off the light in the bathroom. She said a silent prayer that she’d be able to find an African-American friendly hair salon in the little burg of Allerton. If not, she knew Philadelphia wasn’t that far away. She’d be able to locate a black salon there.

She picked up her shoulder bag and stood near the door of the apartment. She scanned slowly from left to right in an effort to collect a panoramic view of the apartment.

“Well, here I am. Just me.” Kinshasa spoke to the air. “What’s your opinion of this place, Michael?”

Kinshasa didn’t answer her query. She knew Michael would find something wrong with her new surroundings. There was no way she could ever please Michael completely.

She shook her head almost imperceptibly and then forged ahead into her neighborhood. The mid-afternoon sun promised enough hours of sunlight for her to walk to the town center and back instead of drive. Kinshasa’s sense of personal safety assured her most sections of Allerton were secure.

She strolled past boutiques, a pharmacy, some antique and consignment shops, an ice cream emporium overflowing with customers, despite the cool edged breeze, a printing service business, several cafés, a bar, and a music store broadcasting a song sung by Anita Baker. As she approached this last store she slowed her pace and her appetite. Nostalgia stood behind her. It nudged her forward, but very slowly. By the time she walked past the music, any gnawing regret Baker’s lyrics might have inspired disappeared into the novelty of being in a new environment.

Kinshasa noticed the diversity of the people she saw walking on the street and she was pleased to see others who looked like her among the steady stream of pedestrians.

After walking two more blocks, she turned right for no particular reason. Although no building stood out from the rest, a black and white awning near the middle of the block broke the plane of sameness and commanded Kinshasa’s attention.

The Luna Negra restaurant beckoned. It seemed to stand at attention compared to its more at ease neighbor, a small cafe whose neatly printed door read, "MKDN'S PLACE."

Kinshasa stepped inside.

An efficient young woman approached her immediately. "Good afternoon. How many?"

Kinshasa smiled. "One."

The woman escorted Kinshasa to a table. She handed her a menu.

"Welcome to the Luna Negra. Have you dined with us in the past?" she asked.

"No, this is my first time."

"Well, I hope you enjoy your meal." The woman turned to walk back to her post by the entrance.

"Do you recommend any of the day's specialties?" Kinshasa asked.

The woman spun around and looked down at Kinshasa.

"Everything on our menu is delicious." She smiled broadly. "The arroz con pollo is especially good today."

Kinshasa ordered her meal from a waitress who was as pleasant and warm as the hostess was. In between forkfuls of food, Kinshasa glanced at the other diners and mentally confirmed what she had heard about the Allerton community. In a national desert of self-imposed racial segregation where people tend to live by and large with those who mirror their sameness, Allerton was an oasis of self-imposed ethnic diversity. Kinshasa felt comforted seeing tables of people of color interspersed with whites. It was different from her town in Connecticut, yet it represented a return to the familiar in the town of her birth.

As Kinshasa finished her dinner, she noticed she wasn't the only person dining alone. There were a few other tables with solo diners. One, a handsome lone black woman, looked Kinshasa's way just as Kinshasa stared at her. She answered Kinshasa's stare with a smile. Kinshasa acknowledged the stranger's with a nod. She thought she saw a momentary flicker of curiosity dance in the woman's eyes. Slightly embarrassed, Kinshasa focused her attention on her nearly empty plate.

"May I take this away?"

"Yes, thanks. Everything was delicious."

"I'll tell the chef. Would you like some coffee or dessert?"

Kinshasa considered the offer.

“No. Just the check, please.”

Anxious to return to her apartment and to more of her unpacking chores, Kinshasa placed her money atop the bill. She arose from the table and stole one last curious look at the diner who had smiled at her earlier. The woman was staring at her openly and unabashedly, as if they knew each other but hadn't yet spoken. Kinshasa felt her cheeks grow warm. She looked away quickly and hoped to discourage any further eye contact.

She was certain she'd never met this woman before. Maybe she recognizes me from my photos on my book jackets, she thought. That's it. I always forget about that until someone claims to recognize me.

Sated, Kinshasa left the Luna Negra restaurant. The late afternoon sun painted the surrounding buildings a rosy pink-gray as the day took on the appearance of early evening.

Kinshasa walked with purpose. She fixed her gaze on the businesses she passed, as if she were trying to memorize where each one was located.

Pharmacy there; dry cleaners across the street; bakery in the next block.

It seemed to her that she arrived at her apartment building in less time than it took her to reach the restaurant.

That was fast, she thought. I'm back safe, sound, and grateful to have six weeks before I begin teaching my first course.

Kinshasa needed that time to get settled into her new place, to plan and prepare her instructional materials, to meet her new coworkers, and to get the lay of the land of Allerton's English Department. She would use that time also, to continue forgetting Michael and all the feelings that still threatened to rob her of any joy she could possibly ever feel again.

Chapter Two

I HAD PERFECTED the art of paying attention to two things at once a long time ago. So it wasn't unusual for me to stand in front of the sink and scrub the dark brown residue from my much used coffee pot while I watched the small television atop a jelly cabinet on the other side

of the kitchen. I simply pivoted from the hip and then glanced over my shoulder to see the face of my favorite female morning news broadcaster spread across the TV screen. I hadn't considered her my favorite news reader until the morning my friend Simone teased me about her. She told me I'd been grinning so mindlessly at the woman on TV, she thought my teeth would dry and never let my lips close over them.

Truthfully, I never cared what news story the woman reported. It could have been the latest atrocity in the Middle East or the width and breadth of the cow pies on display at the Iowa State Fair. What mattered most to me was hearing her spin on the event and watching her as she talked about it. Her electronic presence in my kitchen assured me all was well with the world, even if the news' reality indicated otherwise.

During one of my contortions between the half cleaned coffee pot and the assuring presence on the television, I caught a glimpse of color from outside the window above the sink. I squinted, leaned over the narrow edge of the counter, and pushed my nose against the window.

“The first ones! It's about time!”

There wasn't anyone else other than me, Corey Lomax, in my kitchen, but I was so happy to see those flowers, I just had to shout.

Deep yellow and purple crocuses pointed their round petals toward the morning sky. What a surprise they were. The past three and a half months of winter had been brutally cold and unusually icy, so I interpreted those little flowers as a sign of hope for the warmer weather ahead.

I put the coffee pot in the draining rack, grabbed my jacket from its hook near the door, and rushed outside to the backyard. A cold wind met me. Obviously, the last dregs of winter were still in charge, having their way with the March sun and reminding me how the cold-edged air can cut right through you, no matter how eager you are for spring to arrive.

I bent down to better examine the little flowers. I pulled away the dead leaves and shredded newspaper that had blown on top of the perennial bed and made a wager with the crocuses that they wouldn't be able to break through the earth.

“I've got to help you out or you won't get a chance to bloom with all this trash on top of you.” I told them.

I glanced up and looked toward the house next door. I hoped none of my neighbors were watching. I didn't usually talk to flowers and I didn't think I was old enough to be labeled eccentric.

My best friend, Simone, on the other hand, would find holding a conversation with plants, trees, birds or flowers very acceptable. In fact, she would encourage me to have these chats. She'd say it was like feeding the flowers verbal fertilizer. But that was Simone. She could justify suspending reality more easily than I could.

I rocked back and forth on my heels and considered going into the garage to grab a rake. There was all sorts of trash strewn between the shrubs in the flower beds and borders. The worst winter anyone could remember left a lot for me to clean up.

December through February had been so awful; many of my neighbors were still in shock. How else could one explain the Christmas wreaths and pine roping that were still hanging from various house doors on my block? And the signs of the lingering winter weren't restricted to my neighborhood only.

Everywhere I drove I saw the evidence of "S.A.I.D.," "snow and ice destruction." That's how I referred to the pounding we absorbed when storm after storm rolled over us this past winter. For a while, I was convinced we were living within the pages of a speculative fiction novel. I've always been an upbeat person, but months of snow shoveling, ice scraping and cursing every time I had to drive down a hill, left me uncharacteristically oppressed and depressed by the forces of nature.

That's why this morning's spontaneous appearance of color was a wonderful wake up call. The tenacity of the bright flowers reminded me I too had survived a horrendous fall and winter. There were times during the past half year when I wasn't sure I'd make it with my mind, body and soul intact.

Late last summer, during one of those heat wave breaking thunder storms, Jen covered her tear stained face and confessed she was having an affair. After five years of our being a couple, she had fallen out of love with me and in love with a police officer named Patricia Adamson.

"You're a good person, Corey. You're intelligent and kind. But I'm no longer interested in being in a relationship with you. All of the excitement has died."

It wasn't as if I'd been shocked by Jen's admission. I could feel an ever growing indifference whenever we kissed each other. And we kissed less and less frequently. Jen's voice began to take on a hard edged tone whenever she called my name. Terms of endearment became a thing of the past. More often than not, our conversations were filled with criticism and mutual accusations of wrong doing. We would argue over petty, trivial things. Consequently, when Jen owned up to her unfaithfulness her confession didn't shock me. It did fill me with an ache for which I had no immediate cure.

Now, months later, the ache is a memory. The anger has smelted into a mound of acceptance, and I've grown used to hearing the sound of my own voice fill the rooms of my modest home.

The only things Jen left here, after five years of loving each other and four of living together, were a few of her belongings. A stack of books, a sweater and CD's are hardly a shrine to our relationship, although their presence is a silent reminder of a hurtful time, not a loving one. Those objects have reinforced my resolve to stay clear of romantic entanglements.

I've dated once or twice, but it's been casual. I've considered having a sexual fling with someone because I've missed the sensation of a woman's body touching mine. But I haven't

wanted to pursue any commitments. Not now. Not for a long while. I've preferred to float aimlessly in a lake of calm and tranquility rather than to swim in the muddy waters of deceit. It took time for me to realize I could enjoy simply being with myself without feeling lonely and abandoned.

The Sunday morning's chill wrapped itself around my shoulders as I stood back and admired the new season's flowers once again. I didn't need to rake the beds right away. There was plenty of time for me to do that later.

Right now, I had a lot of work waiting for me on my desk. And since I had to be on campus tomorrow, I didn't want to work this entire day. I'd finally rented the Cheryl Dunye-directed film Simone had raved about. It would be great if I could carve out enough time to see it.

On the spur of the moment, I decided to celebrate the appearance of my crocuses by treating myself to an early dinner at one of my favorite restaurants, the Luna Negra. As I drove toward Allerton's commercial area, I questioned why I hadn't phoned and invited anyone to dine with me. To eat alone in a restaurant and feel okay doing so had taken some practice, but I'd learned to do it with relative ease when my friends had other commitments and I was so bored with my own cooking I couldn't face another meal at home.

Today I might have called my closest friends, Simone and Karin, but I remembered they were away in Massachusetts. I didn't feel like being bothered with another friend of mine, Charlene, who no doubt would have brought her high voltage personality to the restaurant. Besides, I'd heard Charlene was busy cultivating a new relationship with some hot young thing. So this afternoon, I'd keep myself company.

The Luna Negra was a friendly, casual spot that served good Spanish and Portuguese influenced food. Whenever I dined there I saw other singles dining alone, so I knew I'd feel comfortable and not out of place. I knew the restaurant's owners, three women who'd been business partners for years. One of them, Sonia Berceo, was sporadically the subject of some of my best daydreams. I figured Sonia was about my age. She was warm and friendly and had the most wonderfully expressive green eyes, set within the frame of a lovely tan face that exuded the earthiness of her native Portugal. Although I fantasized about dating her, I often wondered if I'd know what to do if she ever paid any attention to me. I hardly knew what to say during our brief exchanges. The truth was, after five years of monogamy with Jennifer, I couldn't remember how to flirt. Simply thinking about a flirtation with Sonia was both harmless and stimulating. Those thoughts also reassured me I was still alive.

I parked my car a block away from the Luna Negra and slowly meandered past the other storefronts. The warmth from the afternoon sun must have encouraged others to leave their houses and apartments and reclaim the ritual of a Sunday stroll. Families, singles, and couples walked past me, some quickly as if they had to meet a curfew; others more slowly, as if they knew the secret to enjoying a late afternoon walk was to count silently from one to five between each footfall.

The fragrance of freshly sliced garlic covered with olive oil pulled me through the door of the Luna Negra.

“Hello, Corey. How are you?” Sonia smiled her welcome.

“I’m fine thanks, Sonia. How are you?” I managed to answer her without swallowing my words.

“Very busy, but grateful business has been so good. Table for one, or are you waiting for someone?”

“Nope, it’s just me today.”

Sonia led me to a table in the middle of the room. I could see that despite what time it was, quite a few of the tables were filled.

“I guess you’re lucky business has been so brisk, especially when you consider the awful weather we had this winter.”

Sonia nodded as she gestured for me to be seated.

“You’re right. We’re happy it’s picked up lately. But Corey, aren’t you the lucky one. The semester has ended, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, but my free time is temporary. I’m going to teach during both of the summer sessions.”

“Aren’t you ambitious,” she said.

“I like to stay busy.”

Sonia bent down closer to me. She lit the candle sitting near the center of the table and then opened the menu for me.

“Enjoy your meal. And enjoy your vacation, even if it’s a short one.” She took a step backward and then added, “It’s always nice to see you, Corey.”

I watched Sonia’s retreating figure as she went back to her post near the restaurant’s entrance and wished I’d been able to think of more things to say to her. But if I had been full of sparkling dialogue, where would I have gone with it?

Would I have asked her that tired old, “What time do you get off?”

And if she’d answered “Every time I have a chance,” what would I have done with that?

I was willing to bet Sonia could be quite a heart breaker. Of course, I wasn't ever going to find out first hand. One experience with a heartbreaker was enough for me. I had no intention of jumping back into that game.

I took a quick look at the menu and decided what I wanted. After I ordered, I counted the number of tables occupied by couples and then compared that total to the tables of single diners. Had this census game been a competition, the former would have won. There were only four of us sitting by ourselves, two men, a woman who was studying the menu, and me.

The woman projected a professional demeanor. She appeared to be in her late thirties or maybe her early forties and she was attractive in a quietly subtle way. As she put her menu down on the table, she looked in my direction. I smiled in acknowledgement of our shared ethnicity. She returned the smile. I never tired of doing this, of sending a silent message that said "I don't know your name, but I know who you are." Somehow I always gathered strength and energy from these moments of mutual recognition. I needed both to feel genuine in an environment where I was so much in the minority. As small towns go, Allerton was not a hostile place. The university campus was especially open and liberal. The seas of academia however, could toss you this way and that if you didn't have a truly strong anchor.

I didn't mean to be rude, but I found myself continuing to look in her direction. She seemed familiar to me, but I couldn't connect her with a name. Did I know her from the university? Surely I knew most if not all of the female African-American instructors. There weren't that many of us. Maybe she was a professor's wife, or perhaps a member of the support staff.

I waited for my dinner to arrive and replaced trying to identify the mystery woman with watching a young guy flirt with a waiter right in front of his dinner companion.

Boys will be boys, I thought. And gay boys can be so outrageous.

"What did you order?" Sonia's question startled me.

I looked up and saw those green eyes blinking at me. I'd been given another chance to overwhelm her with my clever repartee.

"The salmon." That was the extent of my wit.

"Excellent choice. Let me know if there's anything I can get for you."

I prayed for the courage to say what was on my mind. Why can't I be as outrageous as the guy who was just giggling with the waiter?

After I took two bites of my dinner, I resumed spying on the other diners. I noticed the mystery woman was sipping coffee and the two male diners were now fully embroiled in an argument. Dinner and a side show. This was more than I'd expected. Out of respect for the two guys, I stopped watching their domestic drama. Once you've been there, you don't want to visit anyone else's relationship pain.

I trained my gaze on the single woman and felt a pang of disappointment when I noticed the attractive stranger had finished her meal. For some reason I had enjoyed looking at her. If only I'd been able to figure out why she looked so familiar to me.

Someone to the left of the unidentified woman stole my attention from her and refocused it.

“Oh Jesus.” I hissed aloud to my dinner plate.

Sonia led a two-person procession past the other diners. Jennifer and her lover Pat followed close behind. The trio stopped at a table not far from mine.

What are the chances the three of us would be in the same restaurant on the same day and during the same hour? I wondered.

This wasn't the first or even the second time I'd seen them in a public place. After all, Allerton is a small town with a limited number of eateries as well as social and cultural resources. It offered even fewer places for gay men and lesbian women to congregate. I knew the odds were small that I'd run into the two of them anytime and anywhere. If only I didn't have to deal with the gut twisting surprise I always felt whenever I saw them.

Basically, I've felt at peace with my situation, and I've accepted their relationship. But I haven't liked being reminded that their relationship started on my time and in the middle of my relationship with Jennifer.

I sensed their being seated and I talked to myself.

Stay calm, finish your dinner, order a cup of coffee, and take your time paying the bill. If you have to pass by their table in order to get to the door, be pleasant.

For once, I took my advice and felt surprised when I realized I felt more nervous stumbling through my good-byes to Sonia Berceo than I felt when I said my hellos to Jennifer and Pat.

I took the long route home from the restaurant and wove my way through several different neighborhoods. I wondered how long it would take some people to repair the winter's damage to their properties. I saw houses with marred facades; shutters dangling at weird angles and wind torn lengths of siding bent in two or missing altogether; trees with huge expanses of naked exposed woody flesh.

I decided my house and I had been fortunate. The only repair we'd needed was for an ice enrobed downspout that had been ripped away from its corner mooring. I'd done the fix myself.

It was nearly dark when I parked in my driveway. As I opened the backdoor, I heard the phone ringing.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Corey.”

I recognized Simone’s voice. “Hey, Simone. How are you?”

“I’m great. But you sound out of breath.”

“I just got home from dinner. I started to let the answering machine pick up the call, but now I’m glad I didn’t.”

Simone snickered. “Well, I’m happy you made the extra effort.”

“How was P-town? How’s Karin?”

“We enjoyed ourselves. We both really needed some time away, even if it was only for a few days.”

“I’ll bet it was cold up there.”

“Girl, it was freezing most of the time, and it was windy. We tried to walk on the beach one day, but we gave up. We were getting wind burned.”

“But the nice thing about being cold in P-town is the weather gives you an excuse to get close to your honey.”

“You’re right about that. But Karin and I didn’t need much of an excuse to snuggle.”

“Oh, you poor things. Stuck in cold weather up in Provincetown during the off-season. You must have been bored to tears.”

“Hardly. Hey, Corey, do you remember the two women we met up there last year, Terez and Jasmine?”

“Sure I do.”

I pictured the two women Simone mentioned. Jasmine was compact, serious and sincere. Terez was tall and an extrovert in the extreme. I recalled how boldly she had thrown herself at Jennifer, and how cruelly Jennifer had taunted me by suggesting she could leave me in a minute and steal Terez from Jasmine. Of course, Jennifer hadn’t met Patricia Adamson yet. That fateful meeting occurred a couple of weeks after our return from the Cape. In retrospect, I should have figured out if Jennifer were willing to entertain the possibility of having an affair with Terez, she was prepared to survey the playing field in search of anyone new. My number was up.

Simone continued. “We ran into them the day we arrived. They were up there looking at condos. So we made a date to meet them for dinner the next night.”

“That’s nice.” I hesitated. “Did they ask you about Jennifer and me?” I figured they had. How could Jasmine have forgotten Jennifer’s mutual flirtation?

“Yeah, they did. But I kept my big mouth shut. I know how much you like your privacy.” Simone paused.

“Thanks. If I get to P-town this summer, I’ll look for them.” I hadn’t even considered a trip there.

“I’m really glad you called, Simone. What are you and Karin up to in the next couple of weeks?”

“As little work as possible and a lot of play. You know what I’m saying?” Simone’s voice dropped an octave.

“Sort of. But my amnesia keeps kicking in.”

Simone ignored the remark about my memory problems.

“And what about you, my little workaholic? How are you planning to spend the next six weeks?”

“Oh, I have some house projects, like caulking windows, painting, refinishing a piece of furniture, starting my gardening chores. And I’ll need to prepare some of the materials I’ll be using in the essay topics course.”

Simone listened without interrupting me. When I finished reciting my list of tasks, she said.

“You have a lot planned, and all of it sounds like hard work. Do you have any playtime in mind? Any recreational activities?”

“Well, Dr. George told me the class would be filled. And I know once we get started I won’t have a hell of a lot of time to do much pre-reading. I’ll be too busy keeping up with the students’ writing.”

I waited for Simone to contradict me. When she didn’t, I continued.

“And did I tell you I want to sit in on some of Kinshasa Jordan’s creative writing seminars?”

Simone’s quiet listening jammed to a halt.

“Corey! You must be crazy! The summer is your chance to slow down a little. Weren’t you just complaining about being so tired after you finished grading all of your final exams?”

“I know.” I demurred. “Hey, I’ve started my recovery. I haven’t been on campus for five days.”

“I thought you told me you were going to teach one course, and that was it for the summer.”

There was as much concern in Simone’s voice as there was disbelief in what I was telling her.

“Yeah, I know what I said, Simone. But you don’t often get a chance to sit in on a class or two with a writer of Jordan’s caliber.”

“And I know you don’t need to shorten your life by working twenty-four hours a day, eleven months of the year.”

Simone paused. She heard my silence and then asked what she really wanted to know.

“How is everything else? Are things getting any easier for you?”

“Yes, they are. Really.” I thought about my most recent episode with Jennifer at the restaurant a couple of hours ago.

“I had an interesting experience this afternoon.”

“What happened?”

“I was hungry, so I decided to go to the Luna Negra for an early dinner. The best part of the story, other than the great meal I ate, is Sonia Berceo.”

Simone cut in. “That fine looking woman with the bedroom eyes?”

“The one and only. She was working there today, and I’m pleased to report she seemed glad to see me.” I was smiling so broadly I could feel my lips struggling to cover my teeth.

“Anyway, just as I was finishing my dinner, who do I see walking in but Jennifer?”

“Was she alone?”

“Of course not. Pat was with her. They didn’t see me at first, so I had time to make sure I was perfectly composed.”

“Did you all speak to each other?”

“Uh-huh. I had to walk past their table in order to leave the restaurant. They looked up, saw me, and spoke.”

“How did it go?”

“We were all very cool and sophisticated, like Jen and I had been divorced for ten years, sent the kids to college, and then married other people.”

“Well, she has remarried, but you haven’t.”

“And I don’t intend to.” My vocal cords tightened and then relaxed as I added, “You know what, Simone? If you didn’t know the score, you’d think the three of us were good friends.”

Simone feigned a British accent. “How veddy civilized, my dear.”

“I am truly over all of that drama.”

“That sounds good, Corey. You know Karin and I are sorry it didn’t work out for you and Jen. You sure did try. Maybe it just wasn’t meant to be.”

“Maybe not, but I could have done without all the agitation.”

“I know, my friend.” Simone said. “But on to another subject. Are you going to the staff meeting next week?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“No, you don’t. Do you want to bet Dr. George is going to ask you or me to organize a reception for our writer, Kinshasa Jordan?”

I nodded into the receiver.

“Amazing, isn’t it? With six English instructors on campus this summer, he’ll pick you or me to get something together. Why doesn’t one of the deans do it, anyway? That would be more appropriate.”

“Because, love, the deans are either away for the summer, or they can’t be bothered,” Simone said.

We’d discussed the politics of being a black instructor in a white university many times. We understood the rules of the game. It was a given that our survival demanded our knowing the ins and outs of Allerton.

“You’re probably right. But you’d think one of the deans would want to host a tea or something. After all, Kinshasa Jordan is trendy now. She writes like an academic and the only toes she’s stepped on belong to black men, gay black men in particular.”

Simone countered. “Corey, you keep forgetting where you are. We’re here at Allerton University, a school that’s considered liberal compared to others. Yet there are only four teachers of color of the twenty-eight full and part timers in the English Department. The two of us, one black male part time instructor, and a Latina professor doing post-doc work. The four of us are damn good teachers. In addition to that, we provide window dressing for a department that wants to boast about its diversity. We’re all polite, well bred. Not one of us is a radical. We fit here. We allow the rest of the faculty to feel satisfied and comfortable.”

“And our being lesbians?”

“That’s easy to explain. Lesbians don’t really exist for most of these people. We’re a social and political construct. We just think we’re attracted to women because the pool of eligible black men is so limited, what with HIV/AIDS, drugs, jail and brothers on the down low.” Simone completed her diatribe.

“Simone, you’ve got an explanation for everything.”

“I’d rather have my own explanations than be forced to accept someone else’s.” Simone laughed at her cynicism.

“Hey Corey. You’ve read Kinshasa Jordan’s work. Don’t you think her writing is womanist, maybe even a little on the lavender side?”

“A few of her characters could be gay or lesbian, I guess. And after I saw her photo in the book review section of the Sunday . . .” I stopped in mid sentence. “Oh my God, Simone. Now I know who I saw today at the Luna Negra.”

“Other than Sonia Berceo, Jennifer and Pat?”

“Yeah. I saw this good looking woman sitting alone at a table. I couldn’t place her, but she looked so familiar. I think it was Kinshasa Jordan!”

Simone laughed. “So it’s true. You haven’t been struck dumb and blind. There’s hope for you yet, girl.”

I chose to ignore Simone’s comment. “Of course. It was Kinshasa Jordan.”

I held the name Kinshasa on my tongue, and recalled Madame Bernard, a teacher I knew during my undergraduate days. She was an amazingly animated woman from the Cameroon in West Africa. She was so fond of talking about “le Congo before it became Zaire.” Madame Bernard would say, “Le Congo was divided by la France and Belgique. The old capitals were Brazzaville and Kinshasa.” The latter name she would pronounce “Keen-sha-za.”

“It probably was Jordan that you saw.” Simone jumped into my reverie about Madame Bernard. “I heard she was supposed to arrive in town a couple of days ago.”

“I’m sure of it. Mystery solved.” I said.

“Did you say she’s beautiful?”

“Simone. What I said was ‘good looking’.” I wouldn’t fall for my friend’s bait. “But back to her writing. She’s definitely a feminist. That comes across loud and clear. Sometimes though, I think I hear a homophobic note. She didn’t give that character— What’s his name? Raymond? She didn’t paint him sympathetically at all.”

Simone agreed. “And this is not the time to create a psychopathic gay character. Have you noticed that she’s never written about lesbians in any of her novels?”

“And you think there’s a reason for that?”

“Could be. She could be gay, you know, and very closeted.”

“For some reason, I don’t think so.”

“If she’s in the closet, it’s safer for her not to write about gay women. That way she destroys all chances of guilt by association.”

“We’ll be meeting her soon enough. And if I know you, my dear Simone, your gaydar will be on full alert.”

“As if yours won’t be, Corey Lomax?”

“Mine is out of order right now.”

“Right. Like you didn’t enjoy seeing Sonia at the restaurant, and you haven’t noticed how fine Kinshasa Jordan looks in her photos, and, it would appear, in the flesh.” Simone could be tenacious.

“Looking is a far cry from doing anything about either one of them.” I wanted to sound resolute.

“Okay. I hear you. You’re the best judge of what’s good for you.” Simone yawned. “I’ve got to go now. Why don’t we have a drink together next week after the department meeting?”

“That sounds great. Thanks for calling, Simone. And hug Karin for me.”

“I will. And you try to relax a little. You’ll be back on the teacher’s side of the desk again before you know it.”

Chapter Three

KINISHASA TOOK HER time as she returned home from the Luna Negra. While she walked, she made a mental list of jobs she needed to accomplish the next day; arrange delivery

of the local newspaper and the weekend New York Times, finish unpacking the boxes still stacked against the wall in the hallway, call Mr. Bardwell, the landlord, and ask him to place her name on her mailbox and add it to the residents' directory in the vestibule. In addition to all those tasks, she intended to stop at the university and take a look at her office.

Kinshasa stepped into the apartment's foyer and out of her shoes. She went to the kitchen, poured herself a glass of wine and dialed her friend, Gayle's, phone number

Kinshasa listened as Gayle's phone rang four times. The last bell melted into her friend's taped voice. She waited until she heard the tone, and then she began her message.

"Gayle, this is Kinshasa. It's Sunday evening about seven o'clock and I'm—" The answering machine jerked to a halt.

"Shasa? I'm here. Sorry about the machine. I just got in."

"Hey! I'm calling from Allerton. I arrived yesterday."

"I'll bet you've been real busy, huh."

"I have. I've been cleaning and unpacking and putting things away. I'm still not finished. There's so much to do."

"Well, don't try to do everything in one day."

"In reality, I can't accomplish everything at once, but that doesn't mean I didn't try."

"I was thinking about you, 'Shasa, and wondering if you'd gotten there. What's your apartment like?"

Kinshasa surveyed the kitchen. "I like it. It'll be fine for the next sixteen months. It has two bedrooms, a kitchen, a small dining room, a bath and a half and a good sized living room. There's even a fireplace."

"I'll give you a little while to get settled, and then I'm coming down for a visit." Gayle mirrored Kinshasa's enthusiasm.

"Great! I'll be glad for the company." Kinshasa reached over and blotted the wet circle her wine glass left on the kitchen table

"You haven't heard from Michael, I hope." Gayle said.

"Not a word." Kinshasa paused and bowed her head. "I'm so relieved I broke away from that situation, Gayle."

"Does Michael know where you are?"

“No, only that I’m no longer in New Haven.”

“Good. Well on to a happier note. What’s your new English Department like? Have you met any of the faculty yet?”

“Not really. I’ve only met the chairperson, Dr. George. And to tell you the truth Gayle, I wasn’t impressed with him.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a first impression, I guess. But he seems to be a bit full of himself.” Kinshasa pictured the English Department Chairperson and remembered their brief conversation.

“Two minutes after meeting me, he switched from addressing me as “Ms. Jordan” to calling me “Kinshasa.” Nothing about me had given him permission to be so casual. He seemed to assume he could drop the formality of using my last name.” Kinshasa sipped her wine.

“Sounds like male privilege to me. Why don’t you catch him off balance and call him—what’s his first name again?”

“It’s Richardson, I think.”

“Damn, Kinshasa. His name is ass backwards. Richardson George? What was his mama thinking?”

Kinshasa laughed at Gayle’s instant analysis of her new chairperson and his mother.

“So what’s your teaching load?”

“I’ll teach a writing seminar that begins six weeks from now, two African-American literature courses in the fall and two in the spring, and maybe another writing class next May during the first summer session. Compared to my usual teaching schedule, I’m in semi-retirement.”

“It might sound easy, but you’ll be surprised how busy you’ll be.”

“There’s a department meeting next week for the summer instructors. That’s why I wanted to get here as early as I did. I expect to meet more people then.”

“Probably.” Gayle said. “Shasa, have you ever heard of a writer named Corey Lomax?”

“That name sounds vaguely familiar.”

Gayle continued. “She’s written some short fiction, I think. My brother mentioned her name to me when I told him you’d accepted a position at Allerton. He remembered reading she was on

staff there. Then, he found one of her books in his store and read the bio on the jacket. Unless she's on a sabbatical, you'll have company."

Kinshasa pushed her glass aside.

"What do you mean by company?"

"Just that there's another sister writer in residence. Maybe you'll turn out to be friends."

"Maybe so." Kinshasa paused. "If her book was in your brother's store, does that mean she's a lesbian?"

"Either that or she's a gay friendly feminist."

"Well, thanks for letting me know about her. I'll be on the lookout for a Corey Lomax." Kinshasa's voice had "subject closed" wrapped around it.

"Shasa, are you sure Michael doesn't know where you are?"

"I'm pretty certain."

"No chance you'd look up one day and have a surprise visitor?"

Kinshasa shivered involuntarily at the thought of opening her apartment door and seeing Michael standing there demanding an explanation of her move from New Haven to Allerton.

"None whatsoever. We settled everything the last time we saw each other. You know, Gayle, the longer we're apart, the surer I am that Michael and I were simply not right together."

"You sound resolute, 'Shasa."

"More than resolute, I'm at peace about my decision and my move here." Kinshasa revolved the stem of her glass. "And one more glass of wine will make me peaceful about everything else."

Gayle laughed. "It's late, and you're probably tired."

"I am."

"I'm so glad you called me, 'Shasa. The next one's on me."

"That's a deal."

"I'll phone you before your summer session writing course starts, and I'll want to hear all the grit. Okay?"

“I promise, Gayle. You can count on it.”

“Stay well, ‘Shasa.”

“You too. ‘Bye for now.”

As she rested the receiver on its cradle, Kinshasa smiled. She swallowed the last drops of her wine, and let her thoughts wander through parts of her conversation with Gayle.

She knew Gayle would like her apartment because although they had their differences, the two of them shared some of the same tastes. Friends for the past twenty years, since they were in college together at Bryant University in central Maine, she and Gayle were physically and emotionally opposite.

Kinshasa was compact, curvy, and introspective. Gayle was long, angular, and outgoing. Two decades ago Gayle sought out the quietly competent Kinshasa. She needed the comfort of Kinshasa’s serenity and quiet reassurance that life would be okay for her, a black girl plucked from a small semi-segregated South Carolina town and replanted in a practically all-white northeastern college.

In later years, after layers of mutual trust had fused their friendship, Kinshasa admitted to Gayle she’d been just as intimidated as Gayle had been in their new surroundings. Fearful, despite her childhood in upstate New York and her adolescence spent in an integrated academic high school, Kinshasa had been surprised to discover Gayle mistook her quiet caution for confidence.

The two friends grew into womanhood together. Kinshasa’s career took her to Chicago where she completed an internship in teaching and then to New Haven, Connecticut, where she secured a teaching position in a public high school. Writing fiction and teaching “her kids” fulfilled her.

Gayle’s academic circuit included New York University, Howard University in Washington, D.C, and now Hofstra University on Long Island, New York. Having earned her doctorate, and published the requisite articles at regular intervals, she was content and satisfied with herself.

Kinshasa walked the empty glass to the kitchen sink. As she turned on the tap and watched the water cascade over the rim of the glass, her thoughts returned to her friend and to their discussion. She grinned when she recalled Gayle’s remark about Dr. George’s mother. The grin faded when Kinshasa remembered Gayle’s reference to Corey Lomax, another writer who taught at the university.

The presence of Corey Lomax represented the possibility of a situation for which Kinshasa had not planned when she imagined a new life for herself at Allerton University. That new life included an identity not necessarily related to the one she had when she lived and worked in New Haven, Connecticut.

Chapter Four

WHEN DR. RICHARDSON George arose from his chair, his knee joint popped loudly and announced itself to everyone within earshot, whether they cared to hear it or not.

“Ah, good afternoon, everyone.” Dr. George gestured toward his leg. “Too much jogging and tennis for me. My muscles are rebelling.”

I was sitting at a large table directly across from Simone. I hoped she could read the expression on my face. If I could have spoken aloud, I would have said, “Tennis and jogging my ass. The only muscle that’s rebelling is the one in his head.”

I must have gotten my message to Simone, because she smiled at me with total understanding. We shared the same opinion about our department chair. He was purely political; supportive of you if he believed you’d be granted tenure, disinterested and condescending if he didn’t. He tended to treat me with tolerant respect, probably because I’ve published a couple of articles and some short fiction since I’ve been here at Allerton. He’s been fine with Simone because she has a lock on tenure due to all of the journal articles she’s had published and the research money some of those articles have attracted to the department.

I glanced at the other instructors and support staff seated around the table. The group represented a fraction of our entire department. Most of our colleagues opted to spend May, June, and July on vacation away from school. Those of us who remained needed the extra salary we’d receive for teaching beyond our regular schedule. Some of us needed to fill our spare time with some kind of meaningful activity. I needed both.

I drummed my fingers against the edge of the table as I continued to wait for the meeting to begin. I spotted Simone gazing at an attractive black woman seated next to Dr. George. The woman was the same person I’d seen at the Luna Negra last Sunday afternoon, so I put two and two together and figured she was Kinshasa Jordan, our newly arrived instructor.

Simone smiled slyly at me. She nodded toward the woman and mouthed the name Kinshasa Jordan. I interpreted Simone’s grin as her telepathic way of instructing me to take a careful look at Kinshasa, and I was a step ahead of her. I’d taken a careful look at Kinshasa when I saw her at the restaurant.

Kinshasa was better looking in the flesh than she was in the photos displayed on the back covers of her books. She’d been blessed with the smoothest complexion the color of caramel

mixed with copper. Her eyes were framed by thick dark lashes. She wore a whisper of color on her lips. I had taken in all those details in the moments preceding Jennifer and Pat's arrival at the Luna Negra, and despite the distraction of their entrance, I had memorized those few elements of Kinshasa Jordan's appearance.

Dr. George's voice broke into my thoughts.

"Everyone looks rested, so the time off, although brief, must have been restorative."

He looked at each of us.

"We have a short agenda today, so I'll get started if no one objects."

Certain that no one would object, he didn't pause for as much as a breath.

"First, it's my pleasure to introduce you to our visiting writer-in-residence, Ms. Kinshasa Jordan. As you all know, Kinshasa will be with us this summer and throughout the next academic year."

Dr. George deferred to the woman seated to his left. "Kinshasa, may I present you to Allerton University's summer English Arts and Literature faculty?"

"Thank you, Dr. George."

Kinshasa politely glanced at us.

"I'm happy to meet all of you, and I look forward to teaching here this year."

In one voice we responded with a chorus of "welcomes."

Dr. George cleared his throat.

"To continue, you'll find your class lists in your mailbox. And the bookstore's inventory clerk assured me everything you've ordered is in."

The department chairperson picked up a sheet of paper. "The Records Office reminds us of the importance of adhering to their schedule. All final grades must be reported in a timely manner. I've given them my word that we'll comply with their due date." He paused. "Oh, one more point. During the drop and add period, let's have as few drops as possible." He guffawed. "Let's keep that tuition rolling in and staying in."

Dr. George waited for the polite chuckles that never arrived. "Are there any questions?"

Predictably there were none.

“Then we’ll see each other the first week of classes, if not sooner. Anything else for the good of the cause?”

Silence followed.

“Then, this meeting is adjourned.”

Several of the instructors gathered around Kinshasa and offered her their handshakes along with their assistance. As I attempted to negotiate my way past the small congregation, Dr. George derailed me.

“If you have spare moment, Corey.” He said.

“I hate to impose upon you. I know it’s almost time for the first summer session, and you’re scheduled to teach a course, but I’d like you to organize a little tea or reception of some kind for Kinshasa. Nothing grandiose. Small scale. Make it late May or early June. Maybe something outdoors if the weather is nice. The university will cover all of the expenses.”

What I thought was, “Shit.” What I said was “I’ll work on it, Dr. George. Why don’t I get back to you next week after I’ve had a chance to plan something appropriate?”

“Great! Great! I knew I could count on you.” He beamed. “I knew you’d be eager to host a get together for Kinshasa, a sister writer.”

I feared the expression on my face would disclose my disgust for his predictability. As I glided past him, I caught a glimpse of Simone who was talking to another instructor and mutual friend, Charlene Gray. I strolled over and touched Charlene’s arm.

“Charlene, what’s shaking?”

“Anything and everything, Corey. How’s by you?”

“Okay. Busier than I’d planned.” I winked at Simone. “Guess who got tapped to throw a party for our writer-in-residence?”

Simone grinned slowly.

“I should have put money on it. Don’t worry, babe, I’ll help you.” She inclined her head toward Dr. George. “When does he want this to happen?”

I frowned. “Late May or early June.”

“As if you didn’t have anything else to do.” Charlene pursed her lips. She sounded sympathetic.

“Did both of you have a chance to meet Ms. Jordan?” I asked. Charlene and Simone nodded in unison.

“Well, let me amble on over and introduce myself. After that I’ll be ready to leave, Simone. I’m thirsty.”

I turned to face Charlene.

“We’re going out for an early happy hour. Want to join us?”

“Thanks, but not this time. I have other fish to fry.” Charlene grinned as broadly as the proverbial Cheshire cat.

Simone tugged on my arm.

“Go on over and meet Kinshasa, Corey. I’ll wait here. I want to find out what our friend Charlene has been up to.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“And Corey?” Simone lowered her voice. “Remember our phone conversation last Sunday night?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll bet you anything Ms. Jordan goes to our church. Go meet her, and then tell me if I’m not right.”

I shook my head and walked away from Simone and Charlene. By now Kinshasa had been abandoned by her new colleagues. She walked quickly toward the door.

“Ms. Jordan, excuse me.”

Kinshasa paused.

“If you have one more second,” I extended my hand to her.

“I wanted to introduce myself. I’m Corey Lomax, another of the instructors.”

Kinshasa responded with a warm, firm grip of her own.

“It’s nice to meet you, Dr. Lomax.”

Kinshasa acknowledged my introduction with sober formality. She barely smiled.

“I understand you’re a writer also,” she said.

I grasped Kinshasa Jordan's hand with the same firmness she exerted when she took mine, and I tried to decipher exactly why she seemed so reserved. I stared directly into her eyes and tried not to seem rude or intrusive.

"I'm flattered you're aware of that." Why did I feel so clumsy, I wondered. "I've been planning to attend a few of your seminar sessions this summer, if you don't mind."

I hoped I wasn't being too intense. I realized I'd spoken quickly in an attempt to fill an awkward moment.

"That's fine with me. Now I'm the one who's flattered." At last Kinshasa spared a smile. "Feel free to sit in a session whenever you'd like."

"Thanks." Now that the graceless period had passed, I wanted to prolong our conversation. "Have you gotten settled in to university housing?"

"I'm in the process of getting settled, but not in university housing. I've rented an apartment on Rosedale Terrace, not far from the campus."

I nodded my approval.

"That's a pretty part of town. I used to live near there."

Struggling once again for words I added, "Listen, I'll be in my office tomorrow morning. So if you have any questions or need any information, don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you. Everyone's been so helpful."

I could sense the return of my gaucheness. "Oh, Ms. Jordan, I almost forgot to mention how much I've enjoyed your novels. In fact, I've used excerpts from your second one in my topics and composition classes."

"That's gratifying."

Kinshasa smiled slightly and took a step back as she prepared to leave the room. She offered her hand to me.

"It's been a pleasure meeting you, Dr. Lomax."

"Please call me Corey."

After Kinshasa walked away, I waved to Simone and pointed to the door. We left the English Department's office along with Charlene, two women headed to a bar for drinks and the third one off to her fish fry.

Chapter Five

JENNIFER RENFREW KICKED the sheets from her legs and reluctantly rolled her way to a standing position. Walking toward the bathroom, she spotted steam seeping between the bottom of the door and the marble threshold. Pat was already in the shower.

Jennifer entered the bathroom and examined the face staring back at her from the mirror. The moisture distorted her image and made it ghostlike, but she could still see the furrowed lines where smooth, taut skin had once prevailed. Dark brown strands of hair now intermingled with newly gray ones.

Pat wiped the shampoo from her eyes. She stood close to the glass block shower door, squinted and barely discerned her lover's blurred outline.

"Jen, you're awake," she called.

"I'm getting there slowly."

"Come into the shower with me, honey."

"Not this morning. I've got cramps something fierce. Must be those damned fibroids." Jennifer answered. She placed the palms of her hands on her belly and enjoyed the warmth of her skin.

"I'm going to make some tea so I can take an aspirin. I'll shower in a while." She snatched her bathrobe from its hook on the back of the bathroom door. With one of her arms in the garment, and the other still out, she left the bathroom and headed for the kitchen.

As she walked to the kitchen sink, the cool tile beneath her feet felt good. She filled the kettle with tap water and turned the stove's burner to high. Jennifer remained near the stove, as if her proximity to it would convince the water to come to a full boil more quickly.

Seized by impatience, she paced back and forth in front of the refrigerator until the calendar's colorful image drew her to it. She circled each day of the current week with one of her manicured lacquered fingernails, and then paused at the present day's space.

"Oh, God," she said. "Three appointments today, and two of them are before noon."

The pace in Allerton University's Admissions Office hadn't slowed since late fall. Although summer was approaching, final gasp applicants continued to hope for a place in September's freshman class.

Jennifer flipped the calendar's pages. March, April, May, and June disappeared. She stopped turning the pages when she reached July. Sweet July, when she and Pat would be able to go away barring any unforeseen problems, like a rash of violent flash mobs in Philly, or a sudden spike in the number of assaults and rapes.

Pat, a detective in the Special Victims Unit of the Philadelphia Police Department, had been able to nail down a block of consecutive vacation days in July. She and Jennifer planned to drive to Portland, Maine, and from there take a ferry to Nova Scotia.

The tea kettle began to whistle, so Jennifer let the four months drop back into their place in the calendar. She walked to the cupboard, removed a mug from the second shelf, and helped herself to a teabag from the canister.

Jennifer submerged the teabag into the cup of hot water. While it steeped, she reached back into the cupboard and found the bottle of aspirin she kept there. She picked up the cup, blew over the top of it, and then sipped a tiny bit of the clear brown liquid. After she blew the steam away more forcefully, Jennifer placed a little white pill on her tongue. Then she swallowed a mouthful of tea along with an aspirin and a dose of guilt as she recalled the day less than a year ago when she and Corey had talked about going to Halifax and Peggy's Cove for their next vacation.

Corey, not Jennifer, was always the planner. Neither Corey nor Jennifer had planned on the impact Detective Patricia Adamson would make when she visited the university and interviewed Jennifer about the abduction and rape in Philadelphia of an Allerton University Admissions Office employee.

Detective Adamson's blunt, frank gaze traveled right through Jennifer the same time she and Corey were being tossed through rough waters. After the initial interview, Jennifer could hardly wait to dial the phone number imprinted on Pat's business card. While it was true that Jennifer had remembered details about the victim's workday after Pat interviewed her, it was also true that Jennifer's memory surged in tempo with a very sudden urge to know more about the Philadelphia detective.

She hadn't set out to hurt Corey, or to kill their relationship, when Jennifer suggested she meet Pat at a women's bar in the city, instead of at the police station. She became single-minded and gave Corey no thought at all.

After a few drinks and shared lingering looks, it was Jennifer who followed Pat from the bar to Pat's apartment later that afternoon. It was Jennifer who refused to block out the erotic memory of Pat's lovemaking. It was Pat who, after two months of secret meetings, said she would feel more honest if they could stop deceiving Corey. And it was Pat, Jennifer and Corey who dueled in a tangle of guilt, accusations, anger and bitterness as Jennifer severed the five year old ties that bound her to Corey.

Jennifer was certain Corey would get over the heartbreak. She had work, friends, her writing, and her house. Corey would recover quickly and no doubt meet someone new. In time they would run into each other on campus, or elsewhere, and know the wounds they had inflicted upon each other had not been fatal.

Jennifer finished her tea as Pat walked into the kitchen.

“Jen, Honey, I’m running late.” Pat slipped her service revolver in place, put on her jacket and picked up a black leather portfolio.

“Do me a favor, and pour some of that hot water into the thermos. I already put a spoonful of instant coffee in it.”

Jennifer complied and handed Pat her coffee along with a lascivious appraisal.

“You certainly look good to me this morning, Detective.”

“I think I know what’s on your mind, but you missed your chance when you didn’t get into the shower with me.” Pat winked.

“I knew turning you down was dicey, but what could I do under the circumstances?”

Pat chuckled. Then reached for the collar on Jen’s robe and pulled her close. “I could become very attached to you, woman.”

“I feel that way about you too, Detective.” Jennifer paused. “And be careful with any interviews you might do today. You know where they can lead.”

Pat kissed her gently.

“Any interviews I do today will lead me back here to you.”

“If you say so.”

“Bye. See you later.” Pat grabbed her thermos of coffee and then left the apartment.

Jennifer showered, got dressed and thought about calling Corey to set up a lunchtime meeting. They both needed to decide when Jennifer could finally collect the rest of her belongings from Corey’s house.

She picked up the receiver and dialed Corey’s number. At the last moment she put the phone down. Jennifer felt less guilty about Corey these days, but more conflicted. As infatuated as she was with Pat, Jennifer knew damn well there were still moments when she missed Corey. She missed sharing the latest university gossip. She missed their many conversations about films and books, and she missed the heat of their early intimacies.

Chapter Six

ELBOW DEEP IN books and rough drafts of my syllabus, I reached past the glass of lemonade and picked up the telephone.

“Well, dear Corey, what do you think? Is she or isn’t she?” Simone’s voice danced through the phone wires.

I knew what she was talking about, but I didn’t want to make it easy for her.

“Is who or isn’t who what, Simone?”

“Our new writer-in-residence. Don’t you pick her up on your gaydar screen?”

“Not particularly.”

I took a sip from my glass.

“Didn’t we already have this conversation when we went out for drinks the other afternoon?”

“Yeah. We did. But you didn’t see things my way, and I’m persistent.” Simone said.

“I can tell.”

“Why don’t you think she’s gay?”

“Exactly what about her seems gay to you, Simone?”

“I can sense it. I think she’s closeted, afraid her books won’t sell if the public knows the truth about her private life.”

“You know what? You should be the short fiction writer, not me.” I rattled the ice cubes against the sides of my glass.

“Corey Lomax! Are you brain dead or what?”

“My brain works fine. Everything else is numb.”

“I don’t believe you, sister. You’re lying.”

“If I’m lying I’m flying.” I laughed at my own response to Simone.

“I know you think she’s gay and you just don’t want to admit it.” Simone said. “And, you think she’s attractive, right?”

Until now I considered Simone’s interrogation a game. I had to admit I was beginning to feel frustrated with Simone’s tenacity.

“Simone, how did you get from “Point A” to “Point B? You’re acting like a high school girl who’s picked up a juicy piece of gossip about a new teacher.”

“That’s it! You’re pretending you think she’s straight!”

“Don’t play detective, all right, Simone? You lack the talent.”

“I have your number, Corey Lomax.”

I took a deep breath and began to speak slowly and clearly.

“Look, I’m not interested in anything about Kinshasa Jordan except her writing talent. I don’t care if she’s straight or gay or in between. I have neither the time nor the energy to speculate about anyone’s sexuality. And more importantly, there’s not an ounce of my being that cares.”

“Okay. I hear you. But, at least admit one thing, Corey.” “What’s that?” “You find her attractive.” “Honest to God, Simone. I hadn’t thought about it.” Sometimes it pays to be agnostic, I thought. “We’re all here to teach.” I continued. “We’re just colleagues.” “Okay, Corey. I’ll get off your case. For now, anyway.” “See you soon, Simone.” “You bet.” We both hung up. I returned to my stack of books and glass of lemonade, but not for long. I realized suddenly I felt so tired.

Chapter Seven

PAT PLUNKED HER thermos down and glanced at the stack of new files waiting for her attention. The one on the bottom covered the “ke” of “dyke” that someone had carved into her desk a couple years ago. Pat smiled as she recalled her rebellious mood the day she first read that particular bit of graffiti. Instead of attempting to mask it or sand it away, she took a pen and

darkened the letters so they'd be more prominent. Everyone from her captain to the pizza delivery person had noticed that tag.

"It gets all the shit out into the open real fast." Pat once explained to Jennifer. "No games, no mind fucks, no shame. Life is too short to live it under cover."

Pat pulled her chair out from the desk. She sat down and opened the first file. Two photos spilled from the interior and landed in Pat's lap. She retrieved them and one at a time, she examined each picture. The small sips of coffee she'd had time to drink threatened to surge up from her stomach.

"Jesus Christ!"

Pat thought she was hardened to everything the Special Victims Unit had to offer to an investigating officer. But each week there was one more atrocity, one more twist in a never ending circle of horrors the police department had to confront.

"Morning, Pat." Captain Jenson looked down at her.

"I'm glad you didn't put a 'good' in front of that 'morning'."

Jenson permitted himself a quick smile, before he nodded to the folder in Pat's hand.

"That's a pretty bad one. It came in after you left yesterday. Take a minute to read the preliminary report."

"Will do."

"Detective Jones started working on it, but she wanted your help. So bring yourself up to speed. You'll see that D.H.S. is involved. They have a running history on the family." The captain paused. "The victim is in St. Christopher's Hospital."

"You mean she's still alive?"

"Yeah. She survived. I want you and Detective Jones to pay a call on the person of interest. Jones is due here within the hour."

Pat began to plow through the report. The victim, an eight year old named Elisa Rodriguez, was a third grade student at St. John the Divine Elementary School in the Fairhill section of the city. The report indicated the Department of Human Services had a case file on the family as long as the child was tall. It seemed as if everyone, including teachers, school counselors, and neighbors had called in a report of an incident at one time or another. Pat surmised a lot of people had tried to save that little girl.

Pat picked up the photos and took a second look. The body shot showed a ragdoll of a child with her left leg contorted, her right forearm fractured, and the bone pushing through the skin. Her genital area was a combination of various shades of black, blue and red.

The second picture was worse. Elisa's face was a mask with bluish lips that ballooned away from broken teeth. Her nose was flattened. There was blood caked near the top of her face where her forehead met her hairline. Her eyes were puffed shut.

Pat had seen photos like this one before, but they were always pictures of corpses. She'd never had to interview anyone who looked like this little girl. People didn't usually survive this kind of abuse. A face and body this badly damaged usually give up its soul to death.

"Hey, Pat. Sorry I'm running late this morning."

Detective Johnetta Jones sat down across from Pat. She took one look at her partner and knew how she'd spent her first few minutes on the job today.

"You've seen the file, huh?"

"Yeah. Not the best way to start the morning."

"Not a good way to end the day, either. Trust me." Johnetta leaned back in her chair and pursed her lips.

"So, are you ready to go out and pick up the m.f.?"

"You bet. Do we have a warrant?"

Johnetta patted her jacket pocket. "Right here."

Pat openly admired Johnetta and had told her so more than a few times. Johnetta was smart, sensitive, up front with everyone, and efficient. She lived and breathed the fight against discrimination within the police department.

The two women had worked together only a few days when Johnetta watched Pat filling in the etched word, "dyke," on her worn desk. Johnetta just smiled and asked, "Tell me, partner, do you have a good woman in your life?"

Pat laughed and said, "Johnetta, this is the beginning of a beautiful working relationship."

This morning Johnetta drove the unmarked car through the pot hole filled streets of Fairhill. A block away from the targeted address, she radioed for backup.

"Just in case this m.f. thinks he wants to run," she mumbled to Pat.

“This guy is the victim’s brother. He’s nineteen and has a record a yard long. Burglaries, B. and E’s., one assault and a charge of raping a former girlfriend. He beat that one when the girlfriend refused to testify against him.” Pat recited what she had memorized from the report she’d read at her desk.

“Brutalizing his sister must be his new hobby,” Johnetta said. “I guess he thought his repertoire was getting old.”

They parked three houses away from a narrow row house whose brick façade had been painted a garish orange red.

“Is that the house, Johnnie?” Pat pointed to their destination.

“Yeah. An anonymous caller phoned early this morning and said we’d probably find him here. The dumb shit stayed away one day and then came right back home.”

Pat and Johnetta didn’t wait for their back-up to arrive. Eager to find their suspect, they got out of their car. They passed the first of two houses that separated them from the suspect’s home. Johnetta gestured to a narrow pass-through between two houses on the other side of the street.

“We found the victim in the alley out back.”

As they approached the orange red building, Pat unsnapped her holster. Simultaneously she looked up toward the roofs of the neighboring houses. Johnetta climbed the shallow set of steps. She pounded on the front door as Pat continued her vigilance.

“Israel Pagan! It’s the police! Open the door!”

Pat and Johnetta heard the screech of old wood straining against a window frame. Instinctively, Johnetta slammed her back against the door and Pat pressed her back into the front of the house. Huge jagged chunks of cinderblock rained down, barely missing them.

“Shit! Now I’m mad.” Johnetta gripped the handle of her gun. “We’re going in, Pat!” Johnetta was poised to kick open the door. “That back up better get here quick!”

She propelled her foot into the half rotted door and it shattered, sending splinters of plywood in all directions. Pat crouched behind Johnetta as they entered the house.

“Johnnie, look to the left!” Pat yelled the second she saw the glint of a heavy chain, made bright by sunshine cutting through the open space where the door had been.

Johnetta used her forearm and pushed the chain wielding man into a table. Pat removed the safety on her revolver, and said, “If you even think about using that chain, it’ll be your last thought.”

She grasped her gun with both hands and aimed the barrel at the man’s chest.

“Israel Pagan?” Johnetta said

“Yeah?”

“You’re under arrest. You have the right to remain silent—”

“Mierda!” Pagan spit at Pat’s feet.

“Ain’t no mariconas gonna arrest me! Bullshit!”

“Wrong! It’s not mierda! It’s Miranda. Now shut your ass up, and I’ll start all over again.”

Johnetta ignored the bead of sweat that trickled down her cheek. Two uniformed cops stormed into the house.

“Everything under control?” One of them asked.

“Yeah.” Johnetta said. “Cuff Mr.Pagan, Mirandize him and give him a limo ride back to the station.”

Pat signaled Johnetta to pay attention to the staircase leading to the second floor. They climbed the steps cautiously. As soon as they reached the top, they heard a low, whimpering sound coming from a room in the back of the house.

They made their way to the source of the noise and saw the room’s door was ajar. Pat nudged it fully open and went in with her gun drawn. Johnetta entered the room walking in reverse. She kept her back to Pat’s, and she continued to look through the dark hallway. After a second or two, she could feel Pat’s back relax slightly. Then she heard her partner’s command.

“Get up from the bed and hold your arms out! We want to see your hands!”

Johnetta spun around.

A middle aged woman with a tear streaked face stared up at them. The woman wore a torn half slip, a bra and no shoes. Her outstretched arms bore purple bruises.

Pat broke the silence. “What’s your name? Cómo se llama usted?”

“Ana Rodriguez.” The woman began to shake and whimper.

“Are you the mother of Elisa Rodriguez?”

“Yes. Sí.”

Johnetta’s tone softened. “Where are your clothes? In that closet over there?”

“You have to get dressed Mrs. Rodriguez. You have to come with us.”

“Are you arresting me?”

“No. We want to talk with you, to ask you some questions.” Johnetta said.

Pat walked over to the closet and opened its door.

“Did you arrest Issi? Did you hurt my Issi?” The woman was agitated.

“You mean Israel? The kid who came at us with the chain?” Johnetta’s softness dissipated.

“He tried to assault police officers.”

“But he didn’t mean it. He was afraid.” The woman moved toward a chest of drawers and began removing clothes from it.

“Afraid of what, ma’am?” Pat intuited a way to get information from the woman.

“He was afraid you were coming after him about Elisa.” The woman answered. Slowly she buttoned her blouse.

“What about Elisa, ma’am?” Pat asked.

“He didn’t need to be arrested because of Elisa. I told him to punish her.”

Pat gestured to the bed.

“Why don’t you sit down for a minute, Mrs. Rodriguez? Get yourself together.”

They gave her a few seconds to get settled on the bed to continue her story.

“Why did you tell Issi to punish Elisa?” Pat asked.

The woman’s eyes flashed.

“Elisa es mala! She’s evil. She was sent here by Satan. I told Issi, ‘You’re my son. You have to protect me from her.’ I told him to break her in two.”

The woman held her fists together as one and then broke them apart.

“He had to break her in two because all the other times, they didn’t work.”

“The other times?” Johnetta asked as if the woman were telling a fairy tale.

“We tried to burn her with cigarros. She didn’t die. She’s the devil! She’s from hell! We held her feet in a bucket of hot oil! But she still lived! Mala criatura!”

“Did you tell Issi to violate her? To have sex with her?” Pat struggled to keep her voice even and nonjudgmental.

“No! Nunca! That’s someone else! My Issi is good. He does only what I tell him. He wouldn’t do that!” The woman jumped to her feet.

“Where did they take him? To jail?”

Johnetta stood at the woman’s side, ready to restrain her if necessary. Pat walked to the closet and removed two items from their hangers.

“Here’s a sweater and a pair of slacks, ma’am. Put them on, and come with us. You’ll be able to see Issi.”

Johnetta lead the woman downstairs and out of the house. She put her in the back seat of a waiting blue and white car and then rode back to the station with Pat. When they returned to their desks, they began the tedium of writing their reports.

Half an hour later, Johnetta stood and stretched. She looked over at Pat.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m ready for lunch. Want anything from the deli?”

“No, not yet. Maybe later.”

Pat stopped pounding the computer’s keys. She watched Johnetta’s receding figure leave the room. Then, she arose from her desk. She walked to the station’s bathroom and vomited whatever was left of her morning coffee.

Chapter Eight

THE DAY BEFORE yesterday, Charlene and I were in the Quick Print Shop when we saw Kinshasa. I knew very well I should save my money and have the work-study students assigned to the English Department run off the copies of M. L. King’s “Letter Written from a Birmingham Jail”, but I was in a hurry. My time was as precious as my money, and the course was set to start next week. I suppose it would be helpful if I stopped wasting so many minutes sitting on my

porch, drinking iced tea and lemonade. What I needed to do was spend more time preparing my course notes.

While I waited for my turn at the copy center, Charlene strolled to the media area to select a few display boards and markers. I noticed Kinshasa standing not far from me. She seemed to be studying the store's service's price list. I studied her profile.

Her face held the same serious expression I saw that late Sunday afternoon at the Luna Negra. There was something about the quality of her concentration I didn't want to disturb. I wanted to avoid making a surprise entry into her space, so I spoke softly, while I was still yards away from her.

"Ms. Jordan? Kinshasa? Hello."

She pivoted in the direction of my voice.

"Oh, hello."

"I see you've found the fastest copy service in town."

"It looks that way," she said. "I stopped in to check out the prices, although Dr. George assured me the university's copying facility is at my disposal."

I nodded and noticed I felt happy and also nervous as I spoke to her.

"They do a decent job at school. You just have to be sure you get your material to them in plenty of time, especially during the summer when they're short on staff."

"I thought about that. And I learned their hours are shorter this time of year. In case I'm ever pushed for time, it's good to know what other resources are available. This place is so close to my apartment."

"That's smart of you."

I stood there stupidly, at a loss for words. Kinshasa looked down at the floor. I began to feel awkward, as if I were trying to force a conversation while she was searching for a way to end it.

"That woman standing near the art supplies, isn't she in our department?" Kinshasa gestured to the left, but I couldn't tell if she was talking about Charlene or another woman standing next to her.

"The white woman or the black one?" I seized the most obvious descriptors.

"The white woman with the mixed gray hair."

"Oh sure, that's Charlene. You probably remember meeting her at Monday's staff meeting."

Charlene told me that she had introduced herself to Kinshasa, but she hadn't said anything other than her name and "welcome." I knew Charlene well. I knew she wouldn't have missed an opportunity to try to impress an attractive woman.

"I thought I'd met her, but I couldn't remember her name."

Kinshasa continued to stare at Charlene. So much for my ability to hold her attention.

"She's Charlene Gray. She's a colleague and also a friend whom I admire quite a bit."

Kinshasa looked at me, a question mark taking shape on her forehead.

I went on. "Charlene was the first female to be granted tenure in Allerton's English Department. They used to have a habit of hiring women as part timers. But Charlene hung in there and became full time. Then she applied for tenure. She's had some very interesting experiences here in the land of academia."

The entire time Kinshasa listened to me she never stopped staring at Charlene.

"A few of us have been encouraging her to write a book, but she's a procrastinator. Maybe having an author here on campus this year will give her the nudge she needs to get started. You could be her motivator."

Kinshasa looked at me skeptically.

"Oh, I doubt that."

Charlene walked toward us. "Kinshasa, it's so nice to see you again." "It's nice to see you as well." Kinshasa's weak smile and tepid response belied her response. She began turning away from us although Charlene and I continued to stand there. "I have to be going. I have so much to do. I'll see you back on campus." She walked away quickly.

I glanced at Charlene and thought I saw her ego plunge to the floor. I decided to say nothing about Kinshasa's abrupt departure. We barely knew this woman, and I preferred to avoid hurling petty criticisms of her manners. The downcast expression in Charlene's eyes meant her pride was wounded.

"Do you think I make her nervous?" she asked.

"You make a lot of people nervous, Charlene. You used to make me nervous many moons ago."

Charlene chuckled at the memory of our ages old attraction to one another.

Dr. Charlene Gray is five feet six inches of incredible intensity. Her hazel eyes unmask everyone she talks to, male or female. If you're a woman, though, Charlene invades your skin.

She enchants you. She makes you feel caressed in supportive arms even if she's fifty feet away from you. She has this way of leaning into your space, just as one voice inside your head is asking her to, and the other voice is screaming a warning.

During my first year at Allerton, I went into a tailspin over Charlene. What saved me, was getting close enough to see her flaws next to mine, and being able to imagine the scorching heat of her flame as it burned from one woman to the next. It didn't take a genius to see Charlene had taken serial monogamy to a new level. What had been an overwhelming crush lead rather smoothly to a friendship based upon mutual respect and our similar talent for coupling with the wrong women.

"So how do you interpret our new writer-in-residence's escaping us the moment I arrived?" Charlene asked.

"Probably, she has a lot to do." I tried my best to sound convincing.

"Corey, you're so cute when you're being naive."

Charlene tapped the end of my nose.

Naiveté had little to do with my answer. I believed Kinshasa left us in the dust for an obvious reason. She felt only semi-comfortable with me and totally uneasy with Charlene. Beneath Kinshasa's calm and polite exterior lay a pool of anxiety. The only question was why Charlene made her so tense.

I've spent time looking at women. I haven't simply "clocked" them, as my young lesbian students would say. I have appreciated them. I've loved watching the way some women walk. I've seen them hold their heads erect and be in complete charge of their body language. I've admired the beauty of their eyes. From time to time, I have rested my soul on the beautiful faces of truly intriguing women.

I've looked carefully at Kinshasa twice now in the space of a few days. And I've noticed her color, polished bronze. My eyes have toyed with the mass of dark tendrils that cover her head and trail part of the way down the course of her soft neck. I've wondered what endearments would give encouragement to the smile-etched indentations at the borders of her mouth. As of today I have looked at Kinshasa a few times, and each time that I've seen her, what I've recognized in her eyes is beauty and a kind of loneliness so poignant, it's reminded the deepest part of me to ache for someone whom I do not know.

My dear friend Simone decided immediately Kinshasa is a gay woman. Charlene agreed with her. I've dusted their assertions away with my doubts.

I'm not ready to deal with all I've seen in Kinshasa. I cannot tolerate thinking about any possibilities with our visiting writer-in-residence. Why should I make myself available to any more pain?

But indeed, I have looked carefully and deeply at Kinshasa Jordan.

Chapter Nine

“I TOLD YOU the next call was on me.” Gayle’s voice chirped through the phone.

“Gayle, how are you?” Kinshasa asked.

“Just fine and dandy, and you? Is everything going okay at Allerton?”

“Everything’s great. I’ve gotten my class lists. I’ve been to the building where I’m going to teach, and all of my materials are prepared.”

“Yup, that sounds like you. Have you met the other department members?”

“Just the ones who’ll be here during the summer sessions.”

“How about that writer, Corey what’s-her-name? Is she teaching this summer?”

“Yes.” Kinshasa answered hesitantly. “Along with a few other folks.”

“Is everyone friendly, or do they have their butts in the air because they’re at the university and you’ve come from a high school?”

“So far everyone’s been very collegial. In fact, there’s one woman who’s been a bit too friendly.”

“Oh? What has she done?”

“She hasn’t really done anything. It’s her mannerisms that bother me. She could be Michael’s evil twin.”

“Oh no, ‘Shasa. What’s her name?”

“Charlene Gray.”

“How is this woman like Michael?”

“Everything about her; her smile, which she flashes too quickly and easily, the way she uses her pseudo-serious stare to infer “what you’re saying is the most profound idea that’s ever been expressed,” the way she imposes her body into other peoples’ personal space, all those behaviors remind me so much of Michael.”

“Surely you can avoid being in her company. There must be other people you’ve met with whom you’d like to socialize.”

“There are, Gayle. I’m not planning to be in Charlene Gray’s presence unless I absolutely have to.”

“Have you had a chance to explore the town yet? How’s the shopping?”

Kinshasa smiled when she thought about her friend’s proclivity for buying clothes.

“I’ve eaten in one restaurant, gone to the pharmacy, a food market, and a print shop to get some things ready for my classes. I’ve been told there’s a movie theater and there’s a bookstore nearby, but I haven’t had time to find either one.”

“Well get it together, girl. One of these weekends I’m planning to visit, and I expect to see everything Allerton has to offer.”

“I hear you.” Kinshasa said.

“Okay. This was just a quick call. It’s your turn next.”

“Thanks for checking on me, Gayle. Talk to you soon.”

“Take care, love.”

Kinshasa returned the phone to its base.

Why had I talked so much about Charlene Gray, she asked herself. And when Gayle asked me about Corey, why didn’t I tell her Charlene and Corey may be more than simply colleagues? I guess I didn’t mention it because it’s none of my business if Corey’s taken in by Charlene’s deceptively seductive personality.

How long would it be before Corey discovered the cruelty that undoubtedly exists beneath Charlene’s charm? I wonder if Charlene would explain away her infidelities with the back of her hand, as Michael did to me.

Kinshasa walked to the bookcase on the left of the fireplace and switched on the music system housed on one of the shelves. She sat down and began to read the latest copy of the Allerton Gazette, the small town’s newspaper. She examined the paper’s masthead and then blinked quickly four or five times in succession. For a second, she thought she had read, Allerton Gayzette.

“Oh God, I’m tired,” she said aloud. “I’ve spent too much time thinking about Charlene Gray and Corey Lomax.”

Silently, Kinshasa chided herself for being overly concerned about Corey’s welfare. Corey said she and Charlene were coworkers and friends. Kinshasa hoped that was so, for Corey’s sake. If it weren’t true, or if the two English instructors were at the beginning of their relationship when everything is fresh, that would mean Corey hadn’t yet discovered any signs of Charlene’s betrayals. She hadn’t yet experienced unexplained absences, or listened to excuses so poor they were embarrassing. She hadn’t been the recipient of phone calls from a woman who knew more about Charlene than Corey did. She hadn’t launched accusations only to have them ricochet off Charlene and come roaring back as a slap across her mouth.

Kinshasa let the newspaper fall to her lap. She realized she had turned page after page and not read a single word in any article. She’d been fully submerged in her memories of Michael.

If she concentrated on her recollections, Kinshasa could still feel the flesh of her left eyelid pulsing in pain the day she recoiled from Michael’s fist. The second blow Michael unleashed slit a half inch gash over her cheekbone. The reality of her blood sadly drifting down her cheek was her rescue call. She’d had enough, finally. Her mother’s words became her balm and salvation.

“No man ever hit me, Kinshasa. Your father and I might have argued and yelled the thirty years we were together, but he never once raised his hand to me. He knew better. Don’t ever live with anyone who would hit you. That’s not love. You’re better off dead and in your grave than alive and afraid.”

The day Michael’s fist slammed into her eye, Kinshasa touched her face gently and then screamed as her blood fell to the floor.

Michael didn’t try to contact her for weeks. That blood had been too much, even for the abuser.

Chapter Ten

PATRICIA ADAMSON SHUT her eyes tightly, determined at least to rest, if she couldn’t sleep. The dull fluorescent green backlight of the alarm clock assured her she had three more hours before she had to get up and face another brain battering day.

Events from the last forty-eight hours flowed through her mind in stream of consciousness rivulets. The eighth grader, violated and broken by her mother's boyfriend, a cretin unable to see anything wrong with raping a thirteen year old whose mother wasn't "putting out" often enough to satisfy him; the legal secretary dragged into a stairwell and beaten into unconsciousness after being forced to masturbate her attacker until his semen soiled her; the high school boy pulled into the gym locker room and taunted by a half dozen of his schoolmates determined to "beat the faggot out of him;" Elisa Rodriguez and her insane mother and brutal brother.

Unable to keep her eyes shut any longer, Pat reached to the night table and retrieved her iPod. With her earphones pumping soft music into her brain, she concentrated on how to extricate herself from her present assignment without appearing to be giving up. The cumulative lack of sleep along with her steadily increasing paranoia about her safety and Jennifer's were building a wedge between them.

Six years ago Pat reveled in her promotion and assignment to the Special Victims' Unit. She had worked diligently since her first day at the police academy, and she knew she had earned her rank. The unit was top heavy with male officers. Pat, Johnetta, and two other female detectives represented the Department's attempt to be more sensitive about women and the crimes they endure.

Competent and compassionate, Pat was a model officer. She delved into each case with a gritty drive unequaled by any of her peers. For a while, she truly loved her new assignment, especially when one of her cases brought Jennifer into her life.

Their beginning had been far from ideal, but over the past few months their life together had evolved into the kind of relationship Pat craved. She truly loved Jennifer.

Pat had all but forsaken her small condo in the city, and spent most of her off-duty time in Jennifer's Allerton apartment. They talked about buying a house together within the city limits, because Pat was obliged to live in Philadelphia as long as she continued to work for the city's Police Department. Right now though, the prospect of continuing her career as a detective in the Special Victims Unit felt like a jail sentence.

Jennifer moved slightly and reached out for Pat. Her hand brushed the thin metal headset and knocked it askew.

"You can't sleep? Again?" Jennifer opened her eyes. She focused on Pat's face. "Damn it, Pat! You've got to leave that job. You can't keep going on like this."

"I can't, or you can't?"

"I can't. I deserve a full night's sleep, too."

Pat pulled Jennifer close and rubbed her back. "I know, babe. I'm sorry I keep waking you up. I feel like I've got an alarm clock in my head, and it's permanently set for two-thirty a.m."

“You do have an alarm clock in your head. It runs on stress.” Jennifer said.

Pat covered her face with her hands. She sighed. “This is the first time in my life I haven’t known what to do. I can’t just quit the unit.”

“What about that new program your captain mentioned? The one in the high school? He said you’d be perfect for it.”

“I’d forgotten about that project. He said they were going to start it at a second high school; Jefferson, I think. They needed someone in law enforcement to supervise it.”

“And”, Jennifer added, “He said you’re so calm and levelheaded in a crisis, you’d be perfect for that job.”

Jennifer touched Pat’s cheek. “Why don’t you volunteer to leave Special Victims and transfer to this new unit? That way, it won’t seem like you’re quitting, just changing your direction.”

Pat stared at the ceiling. “I don’t know, honey. I’ll think about it.”

She turned to face Jennifer, lowering her head until her mouth reached Jennifer’s breasts. Then, she began to kiss the soft, warm contours of her flesh. Awake and now aroused, Jennifer kissed the top of Pat’s head and pulled her closer.

“Are we going back to sleep or making love?”

“Let’s do one, and then the other.”

Pat banished all her work related thoughts and gathered Jennifer to her. She covered her shoulders and breasts with small, quick kisses. She licked the slightly rounded plane of Jennifer’s stomach and filled her navel with her tongue. Jennifer abandoned sleep and wrapped her legs around Pat’s thighs.

“Oh, Jen, I do love you.” Pat murmured in satisfied moans. She caressed Jennifer’s back and then, gently, lowered one hand toward her inviting center.

“Pat, come in to me now.” Jennifer cajoled Pat’s fingers deep inside of her. Her legs tightened their grip around Pat’s thighs. There was no place to go, no place Pat wanted to go other than further inside Jennifer. With her other hand she cradled Jennifer’s hips, but Jen’s rhythmic contractions made holding on impossible.

“Pat! Oh God! Pat!” Pat shuddered as Jennifer trembled and then loosened her hold on her. Pat’s smile covered all of Jennifer, like a soft summer mist.

“Since I woke you up, I figured the least I could do was help you get back to sleep.”

Jennifer's barely audible "Thank you" got lost in her haste to return to sleep. Pat watched her close her eyes.

"I love you, Jen. I truly do."

She glanced at the clock and sighed. She was determined to fill the last two hours before dawn, figuring out how best to leave the Special Victims Unit. As she mentally composed her transfer request and imagined how sad she would feel leaving her sidekick, Johnetta Jones, a small voice whispered, to her. "Why hadn't Jen offered to return the lovemaking to her?"

Chapter Eleven

I WATCHED KINSHASA park her car across the street from my house, make her way up the driveway, and stop to smell the sweet scented honeysuckle growing alongside the walkway. She was precisely on time for the Saturday afternoon reception I had organized in her honor. Grudgingly, I had to admit I'd enjoyed all the planning and arranging I'd had to do to throw this little shindig. Simone had enjoyed the process also. She'd gotten a kick out of teasing me about my enthusiasm.

"Corey, I haven't seen you this excited in a long time. What's so special about this little event?" she asked me the day I finalized the catering details.

I ignored her.

When I first discussed the party plans with Kinshasa, I suggested she might want to read a couple of passages from her last novel. I thought it would be a good idea for her to showcase exactly why she'd been hired to be Allerton University's current writer-in-residence. She agreed to the reading. During a subsequent phone call though, I told her she didn't have to do that unless she really wanted to. We'd all been working long hours, and the early June weather arrived disguised as mid-July's furious heat and humidity. Our plan wasn't set in cement, and there was no good reason for Kinshasa to stress herself with the pressure of having to do a public reading.

"I want you to feel comfortable and relaxed. Get to know the staff a little better."

"Thanks, Corey. I appreciate your understanding the amount of energy I've spent getting used to my new surroundings."

I appreciated Kinshasa's graciousness. I hadn't had a chance to go to any of her seminar sessions. Actually, I'd had the time on a couple of occasions, but I decided against it. I wasn't sure why I'd made that decision. Simone kept pushing me. She told me one writer could always learn at least one thing from another one. I trusted the veracity of Simone's statement. I did not trust her motive for saying it.

Kinshasa climbed the four steps up to the front porch and I was right there, holding the door open for her.

"Welcome! Did you have any trouble finding your way?"

"No not at all. Your directions were great." Kinshasa smiled shyly.

I felt my cheeks grow warm as silently I admired Kinshasa's appearance. Her dress epitomized a summer day somewhere in the Caribbean. There were more colors swirling through its fabric than I could name. Was it possible I was a bit overwhelmed by her celebrity?

"Come on out to the back and see everybody." I gestured toward the rear of the house and lead her past the living and dining rooms. When we paused in the kitchen, I became aware of her gazing and taking everything in.

Kinshasa pointed to the freshly waxed planks. "These oak floors are beautiful."

"Thanks. Believe it or not, they don't take too much work. A quick polish once in a while."

Why had I lied? She wouldn't believe that tale for a second.

"Your home is lovely, Corey."

"Thanks for the compliment. I'll show you the rest of it a little later, if you'd like."

The happy jolt I felt at the thought of showing Kinshasa a part of my private world surprised me.

"Let me know if the party gets boring, or if Dr. George is beating your ears to death."

We both laughed.

"Did I say that?" I feigned shame.

"Yes, you did." Kinshasa smiled conspiratorially.

"Well, I'll keep an eye out. If Dr. George does grab your ear and act like he's never going to let go, I'll come by, grab your arm, and take you on the grand tour."

I wasn't sure where that came from. The words just tumbled out under their own control, not mine. I barely said that last complete sentence without stuttering.

Kinshasa may have sensed that I felt like the engineer of a runaway train getting ready to derail, because she spoke and gracefully saved me from melting onto the highly polished kitchen floor.

"I doubt very much that any party you throw could be boring, or that Dr. George would monopolize my time. But I'll remember your offer, just in case."

We reached the back door and I ushered Kinshasa out to the yard. I had worked like a dog on the lawn and the landscaping, and I was sorry I couldn't take the time to show her all of the carefully mulched perennials and annuals, and explain all of their names. Maybe I'd do that some other time, certainly not today.

"Our guest of honor is here, everyone."

I walked beside Kinshasa long enough to reach a small knot of people, and listen as she eased herself into the conversation.

Then I slipped away, but not too far away. I stayed close enough to hear bits and pieces of several of Kinshasa's conversations.

I saw Simone hovering near a table of hors d'oeuvres. She stood there chatting with Owen and Gary, two friends I'd hired to cater the party. Simone picked up one of the arugula and shrimp canapés waiting to be either admired or eaten by my guests. She popped it into her mouth, gestured to the guys how delicious it was, and then slowly strolled away from the food offerings. She must have seen Kinshasa had arrived, because she ambled close enough to greet her.

"Hi, Kinshasa. It's good to see you."

"Good to see you too, Simone." Kinshasa pivoted one hundred eighty degrees. She pointed to a nearby hedgerow bordered by an assortment of red, purple, and white petunias.

"Corey's home and yard are beautiful. I love all of these flowers."

"Please tell her how much you like it. She works as hard out here as she does at school or with her writing."

Simone always had my best interests in her heart. I'd told her many times she couldn't do a better job promoting me if I paid her.

"But sometimes I worry about her," Simone continued. "She's so serious and she works too much. She doesn't get enough recreation."

A pang of self-consciousness forced my gaze to the ground. Even so, I could feel Kinshasa looking my way.

“Is Corey working on her next short story anthology?”

“Not yet. She’s told me she’s at the stage where some new stories are floating around in her head.” Simone explained.

Kinshasa nodded.

“I know what that’s like.”

Simone reached out and touched Kinshasa’s arm.

“Oh of course. I bet you do understand that. Hey, would you like something to drink? I’ll get your first one for you, then you’re on your own for all the rest.”

“Thanks. I’d love a glass of white wine,” Kinshasa said.

“Coming right up.”

The second I saw Simone head to the area to the left of the patio where Owen and Gary had organized a temporary bar, I saw Dr. Richardson George and Dr. Carter Washington take the spot Simone had just vacated. Kinshasa was not alone when Simone returned with two glasses of wine.

I read the expression on my friend’s face. Simone knew she’d have to spend some time shooting the breeze with our department chairperson, but she hadn’t expected to see Carter until the end of the summer at the university, certainly not at this reception in my backyard.

I studied Carter. He looked more like a fashion model spread across the pages of Ebony Magazine or G.Q., than he did an English professor. Dr. Carter Washington always seemed to be well cared for, with his hair and mustache impeccably groomed, his trousers perfectly creased, his face shaved to a palpable smoothness, and exuding just the right amount of cologne.

“Carter, I thought you were away.” Simone didn’t smile as she spoke to him and handed Kinshasa her glass of wine.

“I am away, technically.” Carter turned to Simone and bowed stiffly from the waist. He shook her hand. “Now and then I come home to check on things.” He included Kinshasa in his gaze.

“I stopped in the Department office yesterday and saw the announcement Corey posted.”

When I heard Carter mention the party announcement I had tacked on the staff’s bulletin board, I grimaced and literally turned my back to the group. If Simone knew I’d been able to

hear what Carter was saying, she'd have sent me one of her most evil glares. She had warned me not to display the information about today's party.

"You never know what fool might show up at a party that's advertised publicly."

Carter proved her point.

"It said all English Department faculty was invited. So here I am, popping up like a bad penny."

I thought of several rejoinders Simone might have hurled, but I had to settle for her silence.

I noted Carter's physical proximity to Kinshasa along with his frank stares.

Carter extended his hand to Kinshasa.

"You must be Ms. Jordan, the guest of honor. I'm Dr. Carter Washington."

"It's nice to meet you, Dr. Washington."

"It's Carter, Kinshasa. And it's my pleasure."

"Carter, how are your wife and children?" Simone broke into their extended introduction. She'd probably espied Carter's leers just as I had.

"They're fine, thanks."

Always the master of discretion when discussing his family, Carter knew how to short circuit a conversation he wanted no part of.

I couldn't read the meaning of Kinshasa's half-hearted smile. Was she disappointed to learn Carter was married and had a family, or was she amused by Simone's question? Had she heard Simone's reproach filled tone of voice and thought Simone was trying to protect her from Carter's predatory behaviors?

I heard Charlene's voice before I actually saw her. Her laughter preceded her larger than life presence. I left my vantage point and began to walk in the direction of Charlene's last chortle.

"Here we are at last, my friend." Charlene opened her arms and greeted me with a huge hug.

"For a minute, I thought you'd forgotten about the reception," I said.

I stepped back and smiled at the young woman standing next to Charlene.

"I hope it's okay that I brought a date."

“Of course it’s okay. Welcome to the off campus version of the English Department. I’m Corey Lomax.”

“I’m Kate Anderson.”

Kate offered me the weakest and briefest handshake.

“Isn’t this a great backyard? Have you ever seen so many different kinds of flowers and plants?” Charlene asked her.

Charlene paid little attention to Kate’s monosyllabic response. She was busy scanning the cast of party attendees. When she spotted Kinshasa she smiled and waved at her.

I saw Kinshasa barely return Charlene’s enthusiastic greeting. Still huddled with Carter, she tipped her wine glass to him as if she were conferring a toast.

Charlene and I traded glances. I wondered if she too thought Kinshasa’s lukewarm response to her hello was strange.

“The weather’s been cooperative, Corey. You’ve got a beautiful day for your event,” Charlene said.

“I’m grateful for small blessings, Charlene.”

I refocused on Charlene’s companion.

“Kate, are you a member of the Allerton community?”

“Oh let’s not talk shop, Corey. Not when we’re here to celebrate Kinshasa Jordan’s joining our faculty. Come on, Kate. I want you to meet our famous author.”

If I thought our famous author’s disdain for Charlene was odd, what I saw next was even more unexpected. When I casually glanced in Kinshasa’s direction, I saw her park her hand atop Carter’s forearm and then absolutely slay him with one of her grins.

I was annoyed that Carter was here. And I was surprised by Kinshasa’s flirting with him. I tried to decipher which would be the worst of two evils: that contrary to what Simone believed, Kinshasa was straight, or that she might genuinely find the ass-hole Carter, interesting.

I watched the two of them for a few seconds longer. Kinshasa smiled, tilted her head, and continued to touch Carter’s arm. She seemed to be attracted to him.

For as long as I’ve known him, Carter has been attracted to every female he’s ever met, and that includes lesbians. He’s one of those guys who believe some women are gay only because they don’t want to be lonely while they’re waiting for someone like him to come into their lives.

“Hey girl, you’ve done a nice job here.” Simone stood in front of me, holding a plateful of appetizers.

“Owen and Gary are the ones who’ve done the nice job. They cooked, brought the glassware, set up the tables, ordered the cut flowers, had the wine and liquor delivered and dusted and vacuumed every inch of the first floor. They insisted they wanted to do a super job because of Kinshasa.”

Simone flashed one of her I-told-you-so smiles.

“I wonder why they would go out of their way to do such special things,” she said.

“Because they’re special guys?”

I knew where she was going with this dialogue.

“That’s true. Plus they’ve heard Kinshasa is family.”

Simone leaned in close.

“The word is out there, dear. You’re the only one who’s not convinced.”

“I had my doubts, but now I’m not convinced at all, Simone.”

I inclined my head toward the guest of honor and Carter.

“Take a look over there.”

We watched Carter and Kinshasa appear to be thoroughly besotted with each other.

“I’d hate to think I’m wrong. Frankly, I don’t care if she’s gay or straight, but I wouldn’t want to think she’s stupid and easy. I mean, Carter Washington? Seriously?”

Simone shook her head and then fixed her intense gaze on me.

“So how are you doing? What do you think of the party so far?” Simone must have felt the need to change the topic.

“I think it’s going well.”

“Do you believe Charlene brought a date?”

“That’s our friend.” I said.

“I heard her name is Kate-something. She’s a grad student.”

“Really?” I spoke to Simone without taking my eyes off Kinshasa and Carter.

“A mere child. Looks like Charlene’s reached her mid-life crisis. How does that old song go—danger, heartbreak dead ahead?”

“Charlene knows what she’s doing. We’d better warn Kate, though.” Simone and I grinned at each other.

“Corey, did you know Carter was in town?”

“Nope. I was as unpleasantly surprised to see him as you were.”

“He said he was making a pit stop; that he’s going back to Martha’s Vineyard in a day or two.”

I looked at Simone just as she stole a glance at Carter and Kinshasa.

“He seems to be getting along so well with Kinshasa, we might see more of him this summer than usual.”

That thought had crossed my mind, too.

“And she seems to be getting along very well with him.” I added.

“She’s got to be acting, Corey. He’s so obnoxious even straight women with common sense can’t stand him after a minute.” Simone rubbed her forehead. “Why would a good looking unattached gay woman want to spend any time with him?”

“You won’t give up, will you?” I turned to face my friend and confidante. “I keep telling you, Kinshasa is not a lesbian, Simone.”

“And I tell you, she is.”

We watched Carter bring Kinshasa another glass of wine.

“I think you’re wrong. But I wouldn’t be surprised by anything that happened.” I hoped my facade of nonchalance wasn’t transparent.

We saw Kinshasa accept the drink from Carter. She excused herself after another moment and joined a different group whose smoke stack of laughter arose above everyone’s head.

We observed Carter as he watched Kinshasa walk away.

I wondered if he had decided she possessed the potential to make his periodic trips home from the Vineyard worth his while.

“I’m going to find out what Charlene and Katey are up to.” Simone pulled up anchor.

“Her name is Kate, not Katey.”

“Whatever. Charlene loves ‘em and leaves ‘em so quickly, there’s never time to memorize their names.”

I clicked my tongue, but Simone didn’t hear me. She’d already gone off in search of Charlene.

“Wonderful party, Corey, wonderful! I knew you could pull this together. Of all the instructors in our little summer group, I knew you were the one who would do a splendid job!” Richardson George lavished his praise.

Although I smiled at him, my heart wasn’t in it.

“Thank you,” I said. “I imagine Dean Phillips will want to host a more formal reception during the fall semester when the entire faculty is on campus.”

Dr. George looked at me as if I’d just told him the wine he was drinking contained arsenic.

“Uh, yes, yes. Good idea. Remind me in September, won’t you?”

“I sure will.”

I eased away from him. I wasn’t in the mood to tolerate his inane chatter.

After a while, the guests began to leave. Some trekked through the house while others followed the driveway toward the street.

Charlene, Simone, and Kate gathered with Gary and Owen. I started to join them, but then decided to be the proper host and see how Kinshasa was faring. I looked around for our number one guest, but I didn’t spot her at first. Then, in what was left of the twilight, I saw a quick jerking movement. Kinshasa wrenched her hand from Carter’s. Half drunk, he tried to pull her into an embrace. I walked toward them quickly and cleared my throat noisily as I closed in.

“Kinshasa, I’ve been looking for you. Did you want to take the grand tour of my house now?”

Kinshasa looked up at me, her expressive eyes filled with gratitude.

“Yes. I’d like to do that.”

She turned toward Carter.

“I’ll see you at the university in September, Dr. Washington.”

Carter stood as straight as the alcohol in his bloodstream would permit. “That all depends on how your house tour goes. Right, Corey?”

“You’ve had too much to drink, Carter. Why don’t you get someone to drive you home?”

I pointed at my house and gestured for Kinshasa to take the path to the back door. We left Carter in our wake. When we reached the kitchen, Kinshasa leaned against one of the counters and I propped myself against the one opposite hers.

“You really don’t have to take a tour, Kinshasa. You’re probably tired.” I tried to sound sympathetic. “Being in the spotlight for several hours isn’t easy.”

“You’re right, especially when you have to fend off a very aggressive person. Thanks for understanding.” Kinshasa flashed a smile and instantly I understood why Carter had been attracted to her. I had witnessed Kinshasa’s smile and found it could be deadly, especially if you were defenseless.

I couldn’t blame Carter for his feelings, although I was ready to indict him for the crime of acting on them. Certainly Kinshasa was not blameless.

“I thought you and Carter were getting along quite well until a few moments ago when I saw you pulling away from him.”

Kinshasa looked directly at me but she avoided responding to my last comment. Instead, she asked a question.

“What did Carter mean when he said his seeing me in September depended on how well the house tour went?”

I paused for seconds that seemed like an hour. I hadn’t anticipated disclosing my most basic truth to Kinshasa. I didn’t know her that well.

“It’s a little complicated.”

I began to speak. I realized it was another one of those times when I didn’t know where my mouth would lead me.

“Carter is rather competitive with most of us in the department. Sometimes I think he’s especially competitive with me, professionally and personally.”

I knew this explanation was as oblique as it was incomplete, so I forged on.

“Carter and I have very different personalities, but we do share some things in common.”

Kinshasa listened in silence. I had no choice but to continue. Exactly how I would continue, I didn’t know. I’d have to trust my instincts.

“We like the same writers, and we’d both prefer to be writers who teach instead of teachers who write. We were tenured within a year of each other. He was first.”

I couldn’t think of any more fillers. I was going to have to be candid.

I inhaled deeply and returned Kinshasa’s direct gaze with my own.

“And as it turns out, we’re both attracted to women.” I paused before going on.

“If you’re aware of my writing, then you must know I’m a lesbian.”

Even though I spoke forthrightly, I felt that familiar buzzing in my ears as my anxiety level catapulted skyward. I was crouched and as prepared to retreat defensively as I was ready to leap joyously if I heard the words of acceptance. Sharing my truth had become easier through the years, but there was always that sense of taking a great leaping risk whenever I came out to someone.

“I guess Carter thinks that my showing you the house is part of some grand seduction scheme on my part.”

I stopped talking and waited for a reaction that didn’t surface. “I assure you that it isn’t so. Seeing my house is simply that. There’s nothing more to it.”

Kinshasa stood erect, her back no longer leaning against the kitchen counter.

“I suspected you might be gay, Corey. I know your book was reviewed by the gay press, and my best friend’s brother, who owns an LGBT book store, mentioned you were on the Allerton staff.” Kinshasa didn’t lower her gaze.

“For the record, your being gay is not an issue with me. So, if you’re uncomfortable, there’s no need to talk about it any further.”

“I’m not uncomfortable.”

I stared into Kinshasa’s eyes and searched for some evidence that would betray her claim of benign tolerance; some signal that would tell me it wasn’t an issue for her because she also, was gay. I saw neither. Instead, I watched her look down at the floor boards in search of some way to end, or at least divert our conversation. I wanted badly to ease her discomfort.

“Why don’t we leave Carter in suspense about the house tour?” I said. “You and I will know we were both too tired to traipse around this place, but we won’t tell him.”

I beamed and felt relieved to see Kinshasa grin back at me.

“I don’t really know Carter, having just met him this evening, but I’m inclined to say the hell with him.”

“I’ve known him for a long time, and I’m inclined to agree with you.”

Kinshasa winked at me, and I tried to ignore where I felt the wink land.

“Corey, I can’t thank you enough for doing all of this on such short notice. I know you’ve been bogged down with your course work and your students’ papers. This party was probably the last thing you wanted to be saddled with.”

I felt the atmosphere change. Kinshasa had switched gears and become more formal, so I followed suit.

“It was no problem. Your reputation is doing wonders for our department.”

“You’re kind for saying that.” Kinshasa stepped away from her place by the counter. She began walking toward the hallway that leads to the front door.

“Do me a favor. Please tell the others I thank them, also.”

In silence we proceeded forward.

“Uh, this is a little awkward,” I said. “I hope what I told you about my personal life won’t intrude upon our professional relationship.”

I thought I saw a trace of uncertainty flutter past Kinshasa’s eyes.

“You haven’t told me anything I didn’t already suspect, Corey. I respect you as a teacher and as a writer. And I envy your courage. I imagine not everyone feels free and brave enough to be so honest.”

She opened the door.

“Good-night. And thanks again for the party.”

Kinshasa turned and walked out to the porch, leaving her last words and the scent of her perfume draped all over me.

Chapter Twelve

IMAGES OF THE reception floated by Kinshasa and lulled her to sleep. Warm green grass underfoot, the crisp taste of chilled wine, a rough insistent hand grasping hers, and Corey's guarded confession swirled about her when the telephone suddenly rang.

Jolted from sleep, Kinshasa sat up. She reached for the source of the jarring noise, but it took two more rings before she could find the phone.

"Hello."

"Kinshasa. Baby, it's me."

"Who? Michael?" Kinshasa shook her head in disbelief.

"How are you? I know it's been awhile." Michael's voice was soft and low.

"How did you get this number?"

"When I'm determined, I get what I want." The tone of Michael's voice thickened with the threat of an unspoken but menacing promise.

"What is it you want?"

"To see you, baby. We've been apart too long."

"It hasn't been long enough, Michael."

"Is someone there with you?"

"That's none of your business! I'm hanging up. I don't have anything more to say to you."

"You're just not ready yet. But you will be, and I can wait. We had too many good things going for us to just piss it away."

The sound of menace moderated. It was now laced with an artificial deadly sweetness, similar to an overdose of saccharine.

"We didn't have any of the right things going for us, Michael."

"That's not what I remember, Kinshasa."

"Don't call me again."

"I can't promise that, baby."

The phone line went mute.

Kinshasa slammed the receiver onto its base. She turned on the lamp sitting on the night table next to her bed, and then reached behind the table and yanked the phone's plug from its receptacle in the wall.

“Damn it to hell!”

Hours later Kinshasa drifted into a fitful sleep. Her reawakened memories of Michael prevailed over those of Corey Lomax's party. It was Michael's image that greeted her when Sunday morning arrived.

Chapter Thirteen

SIMONE AND KARIN, my favorite duo, stopped at my house one Saturday evening. Despite my objections, they insisted I needed a play date with them. So they ordered me to shed my paint splattered jeans and tee-shirt and put on a decent pair of slacks. Ignoring my whimpers of protest, they dragged me out to their car.

“Come on. We're tired of your sorry-ass excuses. You're going out with us tonight.”

Karin drove while I continued to explain why it wasn't a good idea for me to go out when I had so many things I needed to do at home. Under Simone's direction, she parked the car as close to MKDN's Place as possible.

MKDN's Place was next door to the Luna Negra restaurant. The restaurant purposely eclipsed its neighbor's entrance. The black and pink awning jutting over the façade of the Luna Negra all but hid the subtle gray door of the women's bar. Its discretely lettered name went unnoticed, I'm sure, by most of the restaurant's customers as well as most pedestrians who walked past it.

We entered the club and gave our eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dimly lit atmosphere. Karin pointed to a vacant table. As we walked to the other side of the room to claim it, I was aware of the bar's super efficient air conditioner. Coolness settled over our skin. Arms that moments earlier had been sweaty with July's steamy heat were now tepid and slightly damp.

“What would you ladies like? The first round's on me,” I said.

Since tonight's plan had been their idea, and Karin had driven us here, the least I could do was buy us all drinks.

“I’ll have a club soda,” Simone said. She had already proclaimed she would be the designated driver.

“And I’ll have a beer,” Karin added.

I walked to the bar, a large rectangular island in the middle of the room. Almost every barstool was occupied. Some spots at the bar were two and three people deep as friends gathered to drink and talk. With one comprehensive glance, I could see most of the women were younger than we were. Some of the bar-goers appeared to be college-age. Indeed, they exuded a collegiate air. Other women projected more of a hard-edged urban sophistication. I wondered if they had driven from nearby Philadelphia to sample a taste of gay night life in a small college town.

“What can I get for you, Corey?”

I’m not sure what startled me the most, hearing my name spoken or looking directly into Sonia Berceo’s green eyes.

As soon as my ears and eyes recovered from the shock, I remembered the Luna Negra and MKDN were owned by the same trio of women.

“Hi, Sonia.” I tried to keep the surprise out of my voice. “I’ll take a Coor’s Lite, a club soda and an Old Grand Dad with a twist.”

Sonia grinned. “You must be thirsty.”

In no time at all, she set down the beer and the other two drinks in front of me.

“Here you are. That’s eleven even,” she said.

I handed her a twenty dollar bill. I was on the brink of asking if she was working until closing. At the last second I decided to hold the question hostage. I realized I wasn’t in the mood to flirt.

Just then, a woman standing next to me leaned forward and waved dollar bills at Sonia.

“Can I get two beers?” Her voice commanded more than it asked.

Sonia nodded and then looked at me with a semi-apologetic expression.

“It’s really crowded tonight,” I said.

“This is typical for a Saturday in the middle of the summer,” she said. “I’ll try to catch up with you later.”

I gathered some napkins, left most of the change on the bar, and made my way back to the table, carefully balancing the three drinks.

“When I saw the bartender, I figured Karin and I would have to wait a long time for our drinks.” Simone glanced in Sonia’s direction as she tossed her remark at me. “Did you leave your last paycheck for her tip?”

“I tipped her appropriately, thanks. You know I have undying respect for working women.”

“Yes, dear. You’ve said as much many times in the past.”

“You have to admit she’s cute,” I said.

“So I’ve noticed.”

Karin jumped in the ring to defend me. “Come on, Simone. Corey can look all she wants.”

Simone tilted her head pugnaciously.

“Then why doesn’t she take a good look at Kinshasa Jordan? She’s just as attractive, if not more than Sonia Berceo?”

“You never miss an opportunity to go there, do you?” I went on the offensive as Karin and I traded playful smirks. I appreciated her running interference for me.

The more I got to know Karin, the more I valued her qualities. I liked Karin and Simone as individuals and as a couple. Simone was quick tongued, clever, and loyal. Karin was more inclined to process her thoughts before she verbalized them. She seemed to care about her friends’ feelings. It must have been her compassion that helped her become such an effective social worker.

Simone turned her attention to the bar’s entrance. “Here comes Charlene, our diligent cradle robber.”

As soon as she could focus through the crowd and the muted light, Charlene saw us. She approached our table. “Hey, everybody.”

“Hi, Charlene.” The three of us spoke in one voice.

“Corey! As I live and breathe, is it really you? Here? At a bar having a drink and relaxing?” she asked.

“Yeah. I was thirsty.” I smiled broadly.

“Very funny.”

“What have you been up to, Charlene?” Simone asked.

“Oh, a little bit of this, and a little bit of that. Actually, I’ve had a busy summer so far, between teaching, working on a proposal, and romancing.”

Karin moved her chair so Charlene could sit down with us.

“This is pure luck, running into you all, especially you two.” Charlene gestured to Simone and me. “I need to talk to you about a project I’m organizing for the fall semester.”

She leaned forward and locked us in her stare. We knew better than to divide our attention between Charlene and anyone or anything else.

“Before you get started, Charlene, would you like a drink?” Karin offered.

“No thanks, sweetie. I’m meeting Kate upstairs in a little while. I’ll wait for her before I order a drink.”

Charlene leaned even closer to Simone and me. She sat with the heels of her hands braced against the edge of the table.

“My project consists of a partnership between the university and an inner-city high school.”

“You mean a black high school?” I said. I had no patience with folks who used certain euphemisms. ‘Inner-city’ always meant the word ‘black’ to me.

“Uh-huh.” Charlene nodded.

“And you need two sistuhs to be involved, right?” Simone cut to the chase. Satisfied with her own perceptive abilities, she grinned widely.

“You guys are double teaming me.” Charlene said.

“I need a few Allerton professors who’d be willing to work with the English teachers at the high school.

Charlene paused for a second before she continued.

“Here’s the deal. Our goal is to facilitate the students’ creative writing, especially their short stories and poetry.”

“This sounds like it’s similar to the city’s playwriting program,” Karin said.

“It is. I’m not claiming it’s an original idea,” Charlene said.

“Who’s funding the project?” I asked.

“We have matching grants, one from the university and the other from the Paul Foundation. I’ve already visited the school twice and I’ve talked to the administrators.”

Charlene sat back in the chair. She looked at Simone and me as if she were trying to determine our reactions to her plan.

“Interested, Corey?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t heard enough of the details. What exactly would we do, Charlene?”

“I need you to work once or twice a week at the high school. You’ll have a group of seven or eight tenth graders who are interested in creative writing. We’ll guide the kids’ writing, critique it gently, and then show them how to work as a group, supportively.”

Charlene’s enthusiasm fueled her explanation. She’d spoken so quickly, she was nearly out of breath.

“And the final product?” Simone was curious.

“They’ll develop portfolios and by the end of their semester the university will publish a collection of their work. Ta-dah!” She slapped the table.

I pictured a group of eight kids displaying a bound book of their writings. That’s all it took to hook me into the project.

“I’m pretty sure I’m free on Thursdays. But let me remind you, Charlene, I don’t have any experience teaching high school age kids.”

“I already thought about that. No worries. Just think of them as students you’ll be teaching three years from now in a freshman composition class.”

Charlene’s answer rolled off her tongue too easily.

“I’ll consider it.” I thought it safer to leave a way out, in case it was my glass of bourbon that made the idea more attractive than it really was.

“Well, let me know soon, Corey.”

“Okay.”

“And what about you, Simone?”

Simone shook her head vigorously.

“No thank you, ma’am. It’s all I can do to handle my freshmen. If I had my druthers, I’d be teaching only senior English majors.”

Charlene smiled sympathetically.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait until some of the old guard retires before you receive an enviable teaching load like that one.”

“Charlene, our new staff member Kinshasa Jordan is on a leave of absence from a high school position. Since she’s also a writer, she might be a good person to tap for this project.”

Simone nudged my foot under the table. I ignored her, but added,

“She does have a point. Kinshasa knows how to work with teenagers.”

“That sounds good to me. Thanks for the suggestion.”

Charlene winked at me. “If Ms. Jordan doesn’t bolt the moment I approach her, maybe she’ll be interested. The assignment could provide a comfort zone for her.”

I nodded.

“So, Corey, if she agrees to participate, are you in?”

“I guess so.”

“Good! Now one more item. You’ll earn a small stipend, enough to cover meeting time and your gas into the city and back.” Charlene leaned all the way back in her chair. She glanced at her watch. “Well, gang, it’s time to party. Is anyone going upstairs to dance?”

I looked at Simone and Karin. Neither seemed inclined to move.

“Not tonight,” Karin said. “But why don’t you go on up? Kate might be waiting for you.”

“Okay.”

“Karin, Simone, it was great running in to you here. And congratulations on getting our friend Corey out and about.” Charlene stood. “Corey, if I don’t see you on campus next week, I’ll give you a phone call.”

“After this evening of frivolity, I hope I can make it to the campus next week,” I said.

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, Corey, although it’s amusing as hell.” Charlene left us.

“How about another round for everybody?” Karin ambled to the bar.

Simone rubbed her hands together. “If Kinshasa agrees to work with Charlene, you owe me fifty per cent of the stipend you’re going to earn.”

“And why is that?”

“Call it a finders’ fee, honey.”

“Will you please give up, Simone? Kinshasa is a colleague. If she signs on for the project, I’ll enjoy working with her. She’s a fine writer, so I know I’ll learn a lot.” I tried to sound convincing.

“You said you were going to learn a lot by attending her seminars, but you didn’t go to a single one. Why is that?”

“You are relentless, woman.”

I realized that response didn’t answer Simone’s question. I had an answer, but I wasn’t ready to offer it.

After missing all of Kinshasa’s summer classes, I finally confessed the reason to no one other than myself. To spend time in Kinshasa’s presence, even in the safety of a sterile college classroom, threatened to awaken feelings I wanted to leave buried. The last thing I needed in my life right now was to feel even the smallest bit of desire for a woman who might not be gay.

“Yeah, I am relentless. So why didn’t you sit in on one of her sessions?”

“I was too busy. And remember how interested she seemed to be in Carter Washington?”

Simone leveled her gaze at me. “You told me you thought the possibility of a fling with Carter wasn’t going anywhere; that Kinshasa could see what a jerk he was. Remember, I did my best to let her know he’s a married jerk and he has children.”

“Yeah, you did do that, didn’t you?”

“So what’s standing in your way?”

“You’re pushing me again, Simone.”

“Sorry.” She backed off. “I’m just trying to look out for you. I want you to be as happy in a relationship as I am.”

As if on cue, Karin returned with fresh drinks. I welcomed her back, along with the opportunity to discontinue my uncomfortable conversation with Simone. We sipped our drinks and noticed the over taxed ventilation system was not inhaling all the cigarette smoke some of the bar’s customers were exhaling. I rubbed a napkin over the sides of my glass, and then blotted my eyes with the cool damp square of paper.

“Simone, is that Kinshasa Jordan sitting at the other end of the bar?”

Karin gestured to a woman a couple dozed yards away from us.

“Where?” Simone asked.

An adrenaline rush snapped me to attention. I turned my body around and strained to see through the smoky haze. The woman Karin had pointed to spun around on her barstool and revealed herself fully. She was not Kinshasa; only someone who, from a distance, bore a strong resemblance to her.

“Nope. It’s not Kinshasa. False alarm.” I said.

I hoped Karin’s and Simone’s preoccupation with each other would let me hide the disappointment that suddenly settled between my shoulders.

Chapter Fourteen

KINSHASA STOOD BY her window and watched Gayle Miller’s car pass in front of her apartment building twice before Gayle parked. She knew the Saturday morning drive from Long Island was a tedious one. When Gayle got out of her car, stretched her legs, and picked up her overnight bag, Kinshasa grabbed her keys and closed the door behind her. She figured by the time Gayle entered the building’s lobby and scanned the residents’ names listed on the intercom system’s display board, she could take the elevator from the fourth floor and welcome Gayle.

“Hello, Dr. Miller.”

“Shasa! Hi!”

They hugged, genuinely happy to see each other.

“You look great.” Gayle said.

“So do you, Gayle. So do you.”

Gayle fingered the fronds of a potted palm placed between the two elevators. She inspected the lobby’s furniture and wall hangings as she rocked from heel to toe on the thick carpet.

“Nice lobby,” Gayle commented. “You can tell a lot about a building by its public spaces. I’ll bet your apartment is beautiful.”

Kinshasa laughed at her predictability.

“Somehow, I knew you’d say that.”

Kinshasa trusted Gayle’s openness and honesty. She’d always felt comfortable with her habit of expressing herself frankly. There was nothing hidden or subtle about her personality. To the contrary, everything she thought jetted to the surface.

The elevator door opened, and they walked to the end of the hallway where they turned right. The door to Kinshasa’s apartment was the third one after the turn.

“Oh, ‘Shasa, this place is roomy. And it looks like you’ve been here at least a year.”

Gayle took in the living room and nodded approvingly. “I can really tell it’s your space.”

“Because you recognize the furniture?”

“It’s more than that.” Gayle walked to the fireplace with its twin bookcases on either side.

“I see your little precious keepsakes here, and your favorite photos.” Gayle picked up a portrait of Kinshasa’s family.

“I always loved this photo of you and your father. How is he anyway?”

“He’s fine. Still trying to understand why I left a stable teaching job in New Haven to come here for a temporary one.”

Gayle shook her head.

“Did he know how Michael was treating you?”

“No, I never told him. I never wanted him to find out about it.”

“Were you trying to protect Michael from your dad’s anger?”

“I was trying to protect myself. If my father had known how badly Michael damaged me emotionally and physically, I wouldn’t have been able to face his disappointment. I was too ashamed to let him know what was happening to me.”

Gayle put the photo back on the bookshelf. She turned to Kinshasa and spoke to her gently.

“What gave you the strength to leave, ‘Shasa?”

“The night I got down on my hands and knees to clean my blood from the floor, I wiped away my shame as well as those droplets. I realized I no longer cared what other people thought

of me. Other people couldn't save my sense of self. I was the only one who could do that. I was the only one who had to do that."

Gayle hugged Kinshasa. "I understand, 'Shasa." She said. "Whew! Let's lighten the subject."

"Agreed."

"So, where do you do your writing?"

"Well, I haven't done much writing yet, but I use the second bedroom as an office. All my school things and my computer are in there. Go take a look if you want."

"I'm going to tour the whole place, so I hope you've dusted."

"I knew you'd want to see everything, so I dusted, scrubbed, and polished everywhere. You don't miss a trick."

As Kinshasa guided Gayle from room to room, memories of the aborted tour of Corey's house flitted through her mind. Kinshasa felt off balance and awkward about how that evening had ended. The pebble-sized awkwardness grew to the girth of a boulder by the time Kinshasa's writing seminar ended without Corey's having attended a single class.

Kinshasa chided herself for having sounded so flat and cold that evening when Corey shared she was gay. She couldn't blame Corey for feeling put off by her reaction to her admission.

Gayle broke through Kinshasa's reverie. She tapped her on the shoulder.

"'Shasa, you look relaxed and happy. This place must agree with you."

"I do feel good, Gayle. Better than I have in a long time. I'm comfortable here."

"That's obvious."

The two friends went into the kitchen.

"How about a cup of coffee?" Kinshasa asked.

"I'd prefer tea, if that's okay."

"Perfect."

Kinshasa filled the kettle and put it on the stove. She sat across the table from Gayle and grinned at her.

"So, tell me all about Allerton University."

Kinshasa paused before she spoke.

“There’s a lot to tell. First, the learning curve is steeper than I’d thought it would be. University politics seem different than those in a public high school. I’m so busy fulfilling the demands of my syllabus and learning how to deal with college-age students, I haven’t figured out all the ins and outs of the English Department yet. I can say I’ve enjoyed teaching the writing seminar.”

“When you compare your teaching experiences in New Haven to your summer experience here at Allerton, you must feel like you’ve died and gone to heaven, ‘Shasa.”

“I have to admit it’s much easier talking to older students than younger ones. I might not ever want to go back to a high school classroom.”

Kinshasa stood. She took a few steps to the stove and then filled two mugs with boiling water. She fetched the wooden tea box from its place on the counter and put it on the table, along with the mugs, two spoons, and a container of pink, blue, and yellow parquets of artificial sweetener.

“Why don’t you resign from the New Haven district?” Gayle asked.

“Oh, I’d have to think long and hard about that. I still have a commitment to city kids.”

Gayle stirred the contents of one of the pink paper sacs into her tea. She picked up the mug and blew across the top of the steamy liquid.

“Maybe you could teach part time, or tutor in the city. Maybe you can live off your royalties.”

“That won’t work. My accountant has assured me my royalties won’t keep a roof over my head.”

“I suppose I didn’t realize that. The only things I have published are articles in academic journals, not novels. What do I know about book royalties?”

Kinshasa nodded.

“A girl’s gotta eat and keep herself sheltered, so that means I need to remain gainfully employed, probably in New Haven, after my leave of absence expires.”

“I hope you have a wonderful experience here, ‘Shasa, although I admire your dedication to public education.”

Kinshasa sipped her tea.

“I won’t be totally out of touch with high school kids while I’m here. I’ve been approached about working in a collaborative program with a high school in Philadelphia. A professor in the English Department is organizing it.”

Gayle pushed aside her mug.

“What will you be doing?”

“I’ll be a member of a small team of instructors working with the high school teachers and their students on a creative writing project. I don’t know all the details yet, but I understand the goal is to help the kids publish some sort of journal or magazine.” Kinshasa’s voice took on a new level of animation.

“If you’ve got the time and the energy, it sounds great. But what are the drawbacks?”

Kinshasa looked puzzled. “Drawbacks?”

“Who gets the major payday? Who gets rewarded for all the hard work?” Gayle asked. “You and I both know altruism is a myth. Somebody’s going to receive money or good press or dissertation material. Who do you think it will be?”

Kinshasa measured Gayle’s words. She respected her experience-honed opinions.

“The project is the brainchild of a Dr. Charlene Gray. She’s already tenured, so she can’t be doing this for her own advancement.”

“Isn’t that the person you mentioned to me shortly after you moved here? Isn’t she the one whose personality reminded you of Michael’s?”

“She’s the one. But since I’ve had a chance to listen to her during several staff meetings, I’ve begun to reconsider my first impressions of her. She’s contributed some very well thought out ideas about collaborative learning, and she’s sounded sincere, like she cares about how students learn and how we can help them learn.”

“And it sounds like you’ve removed her from your people-to-avoid list,” Gayle said.

I suppose I have. I’d hate to think she’s planning this high school program for the sole purpose of furthering her own career.”

“If something about her reminded you of Michael, I’m not ready to let her off the hook.”

Kinshasa reached across the table and patted Gayle’s hand.

“Not to worry. Simone, one of the other instructors I’ve befriended, invited me for coffee one day. While we were chatting, Simone mentioned the new high school program. She convinced

me Charlene was on the up and up.” Kinshasa paused. “But hey. This is too serious a discussion for such a beautiful Saturday afternoon. What would you like to do?”

“Why don’t we go for a ride? I’d love to see the town and the campus. If you play chauffeur, I’ll treat you to a late lunch afterward.”

“It’s a deal.”

They stood and Gayle hugged Kinshasa spontaneously.

Kinshasa suddenly realized how long it had been since anyone had hugged her or since she had embraced anyone. She was stung by the irony of having the company of a friend here in her apartment at the same time she sensed a cloud of loneliness pass over her head. She knew there was a mighty void in her life; a deep and hollow place in her world.

By the time Sunday arrived the two friends had filled many hours with constant conversation, laughter, and personal news. There was nothing too trivial to report to each other.

Gayle gushed about every detail of her love life with an older man, Stephen, a psychologist with whom she felt a strong attachment, but no illusions that their relationship was the one great love of her life.

“It’s possible I’ll never marry, and I’m good with that, ‘Shasa. My brother Gerald is my family’s best example of marriage material. He and his partner, Keith, have been together for eighteen years.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“The bookstore they own in New York is their joint venture. I’m so proud of both of them.”

Kinshasa related as many incidents from her new life in Allerton as she could remember. The one anecdote that inspired Gayle’s curiosity the most was about Kinshasa’s reception at Corey Lomax’s home.

Gayle pressed Kinshasa for an accurate portrait of Corey Lomax. Of all the English Department members Kinshasa described, Corey was the person Gayle most wanted to bump into during her weekend visit.

Kinshasa could barely keep up with Gayle’s rapid fire questions about Corey. After a particularly intense set of queries, Kinshasa felt annoyed. It seemed no matter how exhaustively she described Corey’s appearance and personality, Gayle demanded further details. Finally Kinshasa went into her bedroom to retrieve Corey’s book, a collection of short fiction which bore the author’s photo on the rear cover.

Gayle turned the book over and examined the portrait.

“So you bought her book?” Gayle asked.

Without giving Kinshasa a chance to answer, she said. “She’s attractive, “Shasa. No, I’d say she’s handsome. Don’t you think so? How old is she?”

“I don’t know. I never asked her.”

Kinshasa didn’t hide her sarcasm.

Gayle pressed on.

“So what’s her story?”

“I really don’t know her story.”

Kinshasa had carefully omitted that Corey had come out to her the evening of the reception.

“Does she go away on the weekends?”

“What? How would I know that information?”

Kinshasa watched Gayle put the book down with the photo side up.

“Well, I’m sorry we didn’t run into her this weekend. I’d like to have met Corey Lomax.”

“Why?”

“Because Gerald told me she’s an excellent writer. It would have been nice seeing and talking to her.”

Kinshasa eyed Gayle suspiciously. She knew her well enough to suspect there was something she wasn’t saying.

“And?”

“And nothing. Have you ever called her? She went to all that trouble to give you a welcome party. And you mentioned you felt you could trust her more easily than some of the other people in your department.”

Kinshasa smiled guardedly.

“Trust her? I believe I said I liked her straightforward manner.”

Gayle pressed on.

“That sounds like trust to me. You could invite her out for a drink, or lunch. What could it hurt?”

“Gayle, you would make someone a wonderful pushy mother.”

“You need more friends here, Kinshasa. I can’t come visit you every weekend.”

“Thank God for small favors.” Kinshasa smiled. “You know, you’re a pest when you worry about my social life.”

“So what about calling her?”

“That won’t be necessary. Our project team is getting together tomorrow for a working lunch. I’ll see Corey then.”

“Oh, that’s great. A working lunch. What fun, and what a perfect setting for getting to know someone.” Gayle’s smile softened her sarcasm.

“Gayle.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll back off.” Gayle sighed and looked at her watch.

“I’d better get on the road now if I want to beat the late afternoon Sunday traffic.”

She bent down to pick up her bag.

“Next time it’s your turn to visit me.”

“We’ll have that next time before you know it.”

They left Kinshasa’s apartment and walked down the hall, arm in arm. Kinshasa pushed Gayle and her suitcase into the elevator.

“Good-bye. Drive safely and give me a ring when you get home.”

The elevator door closed in the middle of Gayle’s good-bye.

Kinshasa returned to her apartment, eager to restore her home to its pre-visitor order. She checked the bathroom to make sure Gayle hadn’t left any of her belongings. Then she picked up the magazines and books Gayle had given her. She saw she needed to put Corey Lomax’s book back where it had been, on the top shelf of the small bookcase in her bedroom.

When she picked up the book, she automatically looked at the back cover. Kinshasa thought the photograph of Corey was a good one. It captured Corey’s easy smile and the light drew attention to the dramatic waviness of her black-touched-by-silver hair. Corey’s clear hazel eyes

provided a window to an openness and strength of character Kinshasa suspected Corey possessed.

Kinshasa figured she and Corey were approximately the same age, both kissing their mid-forties. She considered letting the book remain on the coffee table where Gayle had left it. She took a second lingering look at Corey's picture and then changed her mind. Kinshasa decided to rest the book on the night table next to her bed.

Chapter Fifteen

AFTER SHE CHECKED next week's weather forecast for Nova Scotia, Jennifer decided to add a light weight jacket and a sweater to her other clothes already in her garment bag. As she hung the fully packed bag on the hook on the back of the bedroom door, the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Jen? It's me."

Pat's voice was unusually low.

"Hi, honey. Is everything okay?"

"No, not really. There's some kind of intestinal bug floating around and we're understaffed." She paused and waited for Jennifer's response. When none came, she continued.

"I have to work my full shift. I'll be lucky if I can leave then."

"You mean you can't get away before four o'clock?"

Jennifer made no attempt to conceal her displeasure.

"Yeah. I'll get to the condo by four-thirty, pack and be at your place by six-thirty or six-forty-five. Don't hold dinner for me, just in case I get there later than that."

"Well, I hope you can get some sleep tonight. We're leaving for Portland at three a.m."

"Don't worry, babe. I'll go to bed as soon as I get there."

“Pat, with all the detectives there are in your precinct, why do you have to pick up the slack? Why can’t someone cover for you? It’s the day before your vacation, for Christ’s sake!”

“That’s the point, Jennifer. It’s the day before I leave, not when I leave.” Pat became defensive. “My vacation starts tomorrow.”

Jennifer scowled at the phone but said nothing more.

“Look, if I can leave any earlier at all, I will. If I can’t, then I simply can’t. It’s as easy as that.”

“All right. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, hon.”

Jennifer threw the phone onto the bed. It landed perilously close to the brass headboard.

“Dammit! Why does she have to be so freaking dedicated to that job? If she worked half as much on our relationship as she does being a cop, we’d be better off!”

Jennifer strode to the bed and picked up the telephone. She stabbed the buttons of a familiar phone number, only to hear a robotic voice answer.

“You have reached the office of Corey Lomax. She’s not at her desk right now. After you hear the tone, please leave a message.”

Jennifer disconnected the call and dialed Corey’s home number. This time she heard Corey’s voice, but it came from another answering machine. Jennifer spoke into the phone.

“Corey, I’ve been thinking about you, and I just wanted to hear your voice. Why don’t we get together for lunch soon? I’ll be out of town for the next ten days, but let’s plan on seeing each other when I return. Take care and good-bye for now.”

For a moment, Jennifer wondered why she’d placed that call. Was she angry because Pat had to renege on her promise she would leave work early? Was she disappointed because she had planned for them to spend the night before their trip sharing a bottle of wine and relaxing? Or was there some other reason she had for phoning Corey? Were there still some unfinished feelings she had for her?

Jennifer returned to the hanging garment bag. She zipped it in one decisive effort.

“What’s done is done,” she said aloud. “Why should I question my motives?”

Chapter Sixteen

“THANK YOU, DR. Washington.”

Kinshasa labored to be both polite and formal as Carter opened the office door for her.

“Don’t mention it. And remember what I told you at Corey Lomax’s party, call me Carter.”

Kinshasa felt uncomfortable sharing the small space with Carter.

“How do you like your office?” he asked her.

“Compared to what I’m used to in a public school, this is luxurious.” Kinshasa answered him, but withheld her smile.

“I was afraid this space might seem small to you compared to my office over here.”

Carter touched her elbow lightly and guided her from the open area of the office pod to his work space which occupied a large corner.

“One would think the area is small because it’s a corner office. But it’s actually quite spacious.” He pointed to a window. “Just look at the view out there.”

Before she knew it, Kinshasa found herself standing in front of the larger of two windows in Carter’s office. Outside was the campus green with its huge maple and oak trees that provided shade for the grassy oval. Carter had organized the office itself neatly. Framed diplomas, certificates and journal articles adorned one wall, and bookcases lined another one.

When Kinshasa glanced at the bookshelves she noticed a few photos of Carter in formal attire, Carter in tennis whites and Carter posed with small groups of students. She saw fraternity paraphernalia placed atop a wide credenza.

“You’re right, Carter. This view is beautiful.” Kinshasa made a move toward the door. She seemed eager to return to the common area where there were more people. “I’d better get back to work,” she added.

“Feel free to visit my office to look at the view anytime, Kinshasa.”

Kinshasa glared at Carter and passed in front of him.

Chapter Seventeen

IT COULDN'T BE the end of August. I wasn't ready for the summer to end. But already I'd seen the formations of Canada geese flying over my backyard, and I'd shrieked at my sky high electric bill, the result of using the air-conditioner night and day for weeks at a time. Back-to-school ads were plastered throughout the newspapers and the local office supply stores were filled with wild-eyed parents desperate to send their kids back to the semi-academic babysitters.

All the signs were there. I knew it was time to deal with reality. The fall semester was as close to me as the eyeglasses I needed to wear more often than not, and it was past time to start planning for Charlene's high school project.

I looked at the calendar hanging on the wall in my home office. A whole year had gone by since Jennifer moved out. Exactly one year and two weeks ago I began living here on my own. I'd replaced her furniture with new pieces I'd picked up here and there. I'd learned to enjoy the serenity empty spaces provided, and I hadn't ever missed her clutter. The few things Jennifer left behind were stacked against a wall in the den. I knew sooner or later she'd come over to get those items, and I figured that's why she left a message on my answering machine a couple of weeks ago. What I didn't understand was her saying "I just wanted to hear your voice." We'd be better off if she forgot about that, and simply came over and collected her things.

I didn't dread Jennifer's visit because it seemed more like a post mortem than anything else. When I mulled over the possible outcomes of my first foray into a high school, I expended more emotional energy than I did when I thought about Jennifer's coming by to retrieve her belongings.

I poured myself a glass of lemonade, added a shot of vodka with a splash of cranberry juice, and recalled yesterday's main event, a mini-staff meeting at Charlene's condo.

At Charlene's request, I arrived early.

"So who are these Jefferson High people, and what are they like?"

"They're ordinary teachers, each with his or her own personality quirks. And there's an administrator in the group, Marsha Riley. I expect you'll like her even more than the others."

"Why? Anything special I should know about her?"

“You’ll figure it out soon enough.”

Charlene winked at me, as she got up from her chair and went to answer the knock at the door.

I heard the sounds of two new voices as a young man and an older woman entered the condo. Oliver Sullivan and Sarah Grossman walked in to Charlene’s living room. Sarah’s energetic pace traveled slightly ahead of her voice. Oliver walked behind her. His tentative pace communicated an air of uncertainty. It was as if he wasn’t sure he’d arrived at the right condo unit.

“I bet you’re Corey Lomax. I’m so happy to meet you.”

Sarah thrust her vein marbled hand toward mine. She gripped it tightly and pumped for all she was worth.

“It’s a pleasure meeting you, also,” I said.

“Hello.”

The young man offered me his hand. He pulled it back before I could grasp and really shake it.

“I’m Oliver Sullivan.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Corey Lomax.”

I knew it was wrong to form an instant impression of someone solely based upon the firmness of a handshake, so I hoped Oliver Sullivan wasn’t as weak as his listless grip. He was pleasant looking, neatly though not stylishly dressed in a dull colored plaid shirt and khaki slacks. His hair and mustache were trimmed short. Because he appeared to be in his twenties and was African-American, I’d like to think his students related to him. But something told me his efforts to connect with them might fall short of their goal.

“Does anyone want a glass of iced tea?” Charlene took our beverage orders. Before she could fill them, the doorbell summoned her.

“I’ll get the drinks, Charlene,” I offered.

I went into her kitchen and filled the glasses she had set out on the table. As I picked up the tray and started back to the living room, I heard Oliver and Sarah introduce themselves to Kinshasa.

“Are you writing a new book right now?” Sarah asked.

“Not in earnest. I’m too busy getting used to my new teaching environment.”

Kinshasa smiled politely. She looked up at me as I arrived with the drinks.

“Hello, Corey. It’s nice to see you somewhere other than behind the desk in your office.”

“Yeah, it’s a miracle I can still do things other than read, write, and grade papers.”

I glanced at Kinshasa’s tailored slacks and colorful print shirt. Suddenly I thought about my own appearance. I questioned if the jeans, tee-shirt and running shoes I was wearing were too casual for this meeting.

Kinshasa might have read my thoughts.

“You look great, Corey; relaxed and less serious.”

I followed the path her eyes must have taken. Was it the rainbow colored ‘Provincetown’ graphic emblazoned on my shirt that she admired?

“Thanks.”

I prayed the heat I felt spreading from my face to the tips of my ears wasn’t obvious. What with the green of my shirt and the newly arrived red of my face, I didn’t want to look like a Christmas display, turned on four months early.

Mercifully, we all heard another loud knock at the door. Charlene walked over to welcome one additional guest, a woman who immediately filled the entire condo as she strode into the living room.

Based upon the number of lumens sparkling from her presence, this woman had to be Marsha Riley, the administrator Charlene mentioned. She hugged shy Oliver and energetic Sarah. Without waiting for an introduction, she took two giant steps toward Kinshasa and wrapped both of her hands around one of Kinshasa’s.

“Kinshasa Jordan, I recognize you from your books. We’re absolutely thrilled you’re going to work with our kids!”

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to it. Believe it or not, I’m starting to miss the annual back to school rituals. Doing this project at Jefferson High will fill that void.”

“And we’ll be the richer ones for it, I’m sure.” Marsha shot a look in my direction. She took two giant steps away from Kinshasa and glided toward me. She reached for my hand.

“And you must be Corey Lomax. I’ve read your books as well.”

On first glance at Marsha Riley, I wouldn’t have thought she’d read my books.

Oliver stared at me with an expression of bewilderment. “You’re a writer, too? What have you written?”

“Some short fiction.”

For some reason, I just knew a three word answer would be enough for Oliver.

“Excellent short fiction.” Marsha punctuated my brief answer with her adjective and a wink.

I’d figured out why Charlene thought I’d like working with Marsha Riley. She was stunning, and if possible, even more intense than Charlene. A full two inches taller than I, she had casually arranged reddish brown hair whose every wave screamed life. Her smiles rose right to the surface. Deeply dimpled cheeks were a bonus. I’m cursed with this writer’s imagination, so I speculated Marsha had dimples in at least one other place, as yet undiscovered.

Charlene invited us to be seated. Methodically, she listed her objectives for the writing project, and then listened to our feedback. The six of us set up a schedule and we paired off. I worked with Sarah and Kinshasa teamed with Oliver. It was Charlene’s job to coordinate everything as Marsha jotted notes and told us from her vantage point as assistant principal, which activities were feasible to do and which ones weren’t.

Once in a while I peeked at Kinshasa and her teammate Oliver. I heard her continually guide him away from the land of, “I don’t think we can do this.”

He seemed to be more impressed by the enormity of the task ahead of them than with Kinshasa’s celebrity. More than once I heard Kinshasa cajole him.

“Let’s give it a try, Oliver. We’ll never know if we assume the students can’t do this.”

She was kind and gentle with him; kinder, gentler, and more patient than I would have been.

Marsha generously distributed her smiles to all of us. Occasionally, she stopped to listen to Sarah and me and nodded her encouragement as she patted my arm. She didn’t make that same gesture to any of the others, so I considered the taps less than a subtle flirtation. I didn’t know if any of the others took note of the contact, although I wondered what Kinshasa might have thought if she had seen it.

After three solid hours we reached the point of diminished returns, so we decided to pack it in for the day. Sarah left with Oliver in tow. Marsha dashed out in a blur of hurried good-byes, before I had a chance to resurrect my flirting skills and after she had asked Kinshasa and me to give her an index card with our contact information.

I promised to call Charlene later and then left with Kinshasa. The two of us walked toward our cars.

“Whoa! It is one hot afternoon, isn’t it? It’s hard to believe September is on our doorsteps,” I said.

The sun bounced angry waves of heat off the parking lot’s macadam. A second before I proposed we go out for a cool drink, I noticed Kinshasa massaging her forehead.

“Do you have a headache?” I asked.

She nodded and put on sunglasses.

“I’ve had one all day. It’s probably my sinuses acting up. The humidity does a number on them.”

“Did you take anything for it?”

“A couple of aspirins a while ago. Right now, I just want to go home, take a shower, and sit in front of the air conditioner.”

“I understand. I was going to ask if you wanted to have a drink and maybe get an early dinner. But if you’re not feeling well...”

Kinshasa shook her head.

“Thanks, but maybe some other time, Corey. I’m really not feeling too great.”

I slowed my pace, took a deep breath, and hoped my voice didn’t reveal the nervousness I suddenly felt.

“This probably isn’t a good time to ask, but would you like to get together for dinner or perhaps a movie sometime in the near future?”

Kinshasa lowered her head a bit and gazed at me over the rims of her sunglasses,

“I don’t think so, Corey, but thanks.”

I tried to regroup, albeit awkwardly.

“Okay. That’s fine. I hope this didn’t sound like I was trying to make a date with you. I didn’t know if you had met many people here in Allerton yet. Certainly I didn’t want to embarrass or offend you.”

I stared steadily at Kinshasa. I tried to penetrate the darkness of her sunglasses and see the expression in her eyes. I wanted to convince both of us I was sincere when I said I hadn’t been trying to make a date with her.

“I’m not offended, Corey.”

We stopped in front of Kinshasa's car. She stood perfectly erect.

"Actually, I haven't met many people here. I expect that situation will change as more time elapses. In the meantime I prefer to socialize with people with whom I share things in common."

Kinshasa paused. Maybe she thought I'd walk away angrily without giving her a chance to finish her speech. Instead, I stayed and asked her a question because frankly, I didn't understand what she was trying to tell me.

"You and I don't share anything in common?"

She sighed, then continued.

"Unlike you, Corey, I don't open up right away to virtual strangers and talk about my private life. I guess I think certain issues are no one's business but my own."

I nodded slowly, weighing Kinshasa's admonitions. I felt like I'd shrunk in stature. I'd been duly chastised for coming out to her the night of the reception, and my ego smarted.

"You must be referring to the evening of the party when I told you why there was some friction between Carter Washington and me."

"Yes," she said. "That was too much information."

"I assume hearing about my sexuality made you uncomfortable."

I didn't intend to stand in a parking lot and defend myself. On the other hand, I didn't intend to let anyone try to make me feel less than they were simply because our choices of whom to love were different. I'd traveled down that road years ago and I wasn't about to make a return trip.

"Learning about you didn't bother me. I feel uncomfortable when people make assumptions."

Kinshasa's tone remained even, almost academic.

"Do you think I've invited you to dinner or to the movies because I've made an assumption about your identity?"

Jesus! This conversation was going much further than I would have imagined.

Kinshasa removed her sunglasses and looked me dead in the eyes.

"I should think you are too intelligent and sensitive to make assumptions about someone you barely know."

I had no comeback. Kinshasa was correct. I should not have told her such personal information. I could have explained the friction between me and Carter some other way. As I stood there, I wished to hell I'd followed my initial reaction to the news of Kinshasa Jordan joining our staff at the university. I'd felt pleased for the department and hopeful for the students enrolled in the creative writing program. I entertained no plans for any kind of friendship with Kinshasa. I did wonder if I'd have an opportunity to learn a thing or two from her about procuring a literary agent or appealing to a mainstream publisher.

My friend Simone enjoyed concocting dreams in which everyone she knew found a soul mate. Starting last winter, when we learned Kinshasa was named our newest writer-in-residence, Simone began mentioning Kinshasa with regularity, as if we already knew her, or at least knew all about her.

Simone needed to forget all of her fantasies about Kinshasa being a closeted lesbian. Kinshasa was beyond closeted. She was beyond accepting my offer of platonic friendship, for God's sake.

"I stand corrected, Kinshasa. And I hope your headache gets better."

I turned to walk to my car, and mistake or not, I assumed Kinshasa got into hers.

Without knowing it, Charlene had done me a huge favor when she recruited me for her project. How else would I have met Marsha Riley? I hoped Marsha's touchy-feely flirtation wasn't leading me down the path to one more false assumption, because Marsha looked better and better to me as each minute ticked by in that blazing parking lot.

Chapter Eighteen

THIS WAS THE first week in months Pat Adamson drove to work wrapped in a vague haze of sleepiness, but not depression and dread. She was headed to her new job at Jefferson High School. Before she parked and went into the building, Pat drove along the school's perimeter streets. One of her new responsibilities was to remain on the lookout for truants. She varied the times she drove through the neighborhood. No matter what part of the school day she chose to leave the building and take a short ride, she usually caught sight of teenagers going in and out of nearby stores and the local fast food restaurant.

This morning as Pat turned the corner and coasted to a stop in front of the school, she spotted two girls dawdling near the entrance. They glared at Pat's car and then jettisoned their cigarettes

to the ground. Pat set her car's parking brake and the two girls picked up their book bags and sauntered into the building.

Pat released the brake and tapped the car's accelerator pedal. She was half the distance to the next corner where she intended to turn and then enter the staff parking lot when a vision of flailing arms and fists flying wildly caught her attention.

Instinctively, she steered the car to the curb, set the brake once again, and shoved the gear shift into park. Pat exited her car. When she saw there were no signs of a growing crowd, she walked quickly and deliberately toward the combatants.

“Get the fuck into that building!”

A spare and wiry wisp of a woman held onto a young boy's shirt collar.

“No! You can't make me!”

The boy grabbed his shirt and tried to twist his body away from the woman.

“The hell I can't! I'm your mother! You're going to mind me!”

The veins in the woman's face pulsed from the upper edge of her cheekbones to the middle of her forehead. Her eyes emitted sparks and her raspy smoke cured voice strained itself to its limit. She grasped one of her son's arm and held it in a vise-tight grip.

The boy was skinny and small, just shy of five feet tall. He wore his pants slung low; not because it was the prevailing style, but because his waist was rail thin and his hips were non-existent. His hair was longish and uncombed.

“Let me go.”

He reclaimed his arm, but in doing so he gave his mother the split second she needed to grab the other one. The boy kicked his mother's shin and forced her to take a step backward. But he lacked enough strength to extricate himself from her powerful grip.

“You goin' into that school! And you goin' to learn. You hear me?”

The woman didn't loosen her hold. She began to drag the boy with one hand and reach for the door handle with the other. The boy swung his fist. He did everything he could to land punches on his mother's chest and face.

“Hey! Stop!” Pat stood close to them and flashed her badge. “Both of you, stop!”

She looked down at the boy and spoke slowly and calmly.

“Your mother's going to let you go, and you're going to stop trying to hit her. Hear me?”

The boy stared back at Pat. Gradually he let his fighting arm drop to his side but he kept his fist furred in a tight knot.

Pat turned to the woman.

“Let go of his arm, ma’am.”

The boy’s mother slowly relaxed her grip. She released his arm.

Pat noticed the bloody imprints left on the boy’s arm. The woman’s fingernails left a series of short curved indentations, a dishonorable tattoo.

The boy stared at his wounds.

“You see what you done to my arm? I’m gonna call DHS.”

“I wish you would call DHS, ‘cause I wanna go to Family Court with you, boy. Then we’ll see who’s not going to school.”

The therapeutic softness left Pat’s voice.

“Right now, we’re all going to go inside the building. Are you a student at Jefferson?” She glared at the boy.

“Yeah, he’s a student here. And he keeps cuttin’ all his classes. He don’t wanna go, Miss. But I’m here to tell you he has to.”

Pat opened the school building’s door.

“Let’s go to the administration office.”

She directed the mother and son toward a row of vacant chairs outside the office area.

“Why don’t the three of us sit down here and talk for a minute?”

Pat looked at the women seated at their desks on the other side of the office counter. She spoke to one of the secretaries.

“Mrs. Stewart, could you call the Dean of Students and ask him to please come over here? Thanks.”

She turned to the boy.

“What’s your name?”

“His name is Raheem Ellis, and he’s in the ninth grade.”

The mother didn't give her son time to answer before she robbed him of his voice.

Pat ignored her and stared into the boy's eyes.

"Raheem, why aren't you attending school regularly?"

"I don't like it."

Although Raheem answered Pat's question, he did so without looking at her.

"But it's only October. It's early in the semester. How do you know you don't like it?"

"He don't hardly ever bring work home. And when he does, he can't hardly do it."

"I can so do the work."

Raheem's eyes bore a hole into his mother's forehead.

"Then why don't you do nothin'? He's all the time tellin' me the teachers, they don't give no homework. I don't believe that crap. Ain't that much changed since I went to school."

The mother sucked her teeth and oozed a look of disgust at her son.

"You gonna fail! You know you gonna fail!"

"Calm down, Mrs. Ellis. Let's give Raheem a chance to speak."

Pat turned to him. "So what's the story? Do your teachers give you homework? Did they give you textbooks?"

Raheem stared sullenly. "Yeah."

Pat ventured another question, this time she directed it at the frustrated mother.

"Is Raheem a special education student?"

"I ain't in no special ed! I ain't dumb!" Raheem fired back.

"He used to be—in his old school. But here they put him in all regular classes. They say he ain't special no more. He's in the mainstream, or somethin' like that."

The mother abandoned her anger long enough to eke out a smile along with her last sentence. She sat up straighter in her chair and continued to talk about her son.

“It’s like he learned so good, and accomplished so much at that old school. Now he’s smart like all the regular kids. He got a regular roster, and he’s gonna be bringin’ home a report card with grades in regular classes.”

She beamed.

Raheem recoiled from her praise. Huge tears rolled down his narrow cheeks, and he hung his head and muttered. “I can’t do the regular work. It’s too hard for me. I be tryin’, but the books—they don’t make no sense to me. And when I ask the teacher for help, the other kids be callin’ me “faggot boy and bitch ass”.

Mrs. Ellis touched her son’s arm. Her hand covered the welts her nails had left.

“Raheem, why didn’t you tell me all this?”

Raheem swept his hand over his face and wiped dry his tears.

“Cause you be mad at me all the time, and it ain’t my fault.”

“Detective Adamson?” Mrs. Stewart called. “The Dean doesn’t pick up. He’s not in his office. Is there anyone else you’d like me to call?”

“Try the counselor, please. This student’s last name is Ellis, and he’s in the ninth grade.”

Pat turned to Raheem and his mother.

“Ma’am, it’s still early in the semester. Early enough, I would think, for Raheem to be able to succeed. When his counselor gets here, we’ll explain the situation and get Raheem the courses he needs. Okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” She nodded.

She leaned closer to Pat and lowered her voice.

“When we was outside the building I thought you was going to arrest us.”

Pat smiled. “For a second, I thought I’d have to. But we got the situation under control. This is a talkable problem, right Raheem?”

“Yeah.”

Raheem let his jaw relax. His hands were still as they rested on his lap.

“Thank you for helpin’ us get all this settled, Officer.”

Raheem’s mother smiled at Pat.

“That’s okay. The counselor should be here soon.”

Pat stood.

“I’ve got to get going now.”

“You did a good thing for my son and me, and I know it wasn’t easy.”

Pat gazed at Raheem and his mother.

“Believe me, this was far easier than some other job tasks I’ve had to do.”

Pat walked down the hall and to the school’s entrance. She remembered she’d left her car parked with its front tires aimed awkwardly at the curb. She waved at the non-teaching assistant who stood near the door.

“Mornin’, Officer Pat. Off to another hard day?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Willis. No day here is as hard as the days I used to spend at work.”

Chapter Nineteen

“YOU NEED TO get over it, Corey.”

Simone launched into a lecture.

“Just because Kinshasa didn’t want to go out for a drink and dinner doesn’t mean you can’t show up to support her at her bookstore reading.”

Simone felt duty bound to go to Kinshasa’s book event and drag me along with her and Karin. After all, Simone wasn’t the one Kinshasa had scolded for disclosing personal information. She hadn’t been forced to defend herself for simply being honest.

“Lesbian or straight, she’s a black woman living alone in a new place. We have to stand by her,” Simone said.

“Oh, please.” I rolled my eyes. “Next you’ll start singing ‘That’s What Friends Are For.’”

“We won’t get that carried away. But we do need to support her.”

The reading and signing event was scheduled to take place at Ex Libris, a brand new and very large bookstore. Allerton’s two smaller book shops closed a year or so ago. This new emporium struck a deal with the university. Ex Libris agreed to sell all the titles taught at the university, along with all the university-logo merchandise. This agreement would keep the new store afloat.

I walked the short distance between my house and the book store, and arrived before Simone and Karin. With time to kill, I wandered the aisles and picked up and examined books here and there. Mostly, I enjoyed the store’s atmosphere. A mixture of chocolate and coffee wafted down from the upper level’s espresso bar while the muted tones of a tenor saxophone caressed my ears. Jazz, coffee, and books; my idea of perfection.

Slowly I moved toward the section of the book store where guest authors sign their books. I noticed an easel with a poster showing Kinshasa’s latest book, her photo, and today’s date. A few chairs flared away from a small table burdened with a stack of Kinshasa’s books. Two women stood in front of the table; their bodies and heads inclined forward.

Although Kinshasa’s view was dominated by the two fans standing there, my view was unimpeded. I took advantage of being semi-hidden and studied Kinshasa carefully. I saw her lift her smiling face upward to acknowledge one of the reader’s comments, and then shift it downward to autograph a copy of one of her novels. I watched her interactions with both women and I tried to read the words flowing from her lips.

“Glad that you came, Corey?” Simone whispered in my ear and cupped my elbow with her hand.

I turned and faced her.

“I haven’t come in quite some time, thank you.”

While Karin laughed, Simone just looked at me pityingly.

“Well, who’s fault is that?” She asked me.

Eager to change the direction of our repartee, I took a deep breath.

“That coffee smells good, doesn’t it? Do you two want any?”

“No thanks. We had dinner before we got here. But you go right ahead.”

“That’s okay,” I said. I nudged the tip of my shirt sleeve up past my watch and I checked on the time. “I think the reading is supposed to start soon.”

I felt at loose ends and I shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

“Should we say hello to Kinshasa so she knows we’re here?” Karin asked.

“I don’t think that’s necessary. Besides, we don’t want to make her feel nervous.” I said.

“I don’t think we’d make her nervous,” Simone said. “Karin, do you think she’d be antsy knowing we’re here?”

Karin shrugged. “I couldn’t say. I don’t know her as well as you two do.”

We watched Kinshasa for a few seconds and saw her tap the table with the end of her pen.

Simone pursed her lips and turned to me.

“Maybe you’re right. She might be a little anxious right now. Corey, before I forget to ask, have you decided if you’re going to join us for Thanksgiving dinner?”

I slapped the side of my head with my hand. I had completely failed to remember Simone’s and Karin’s invitation. There was something about my being single that derailed most of my thoughts about holidays. On a good day I was ambivalent at best.

“I hope you’ll say yes, Corey. I’ll need company to watch the ball games,” Karin said.

“I’m grateful you two invited me, so, yes. Let me know what I can bring.”

Simone answered by nodding toward Kinshasa.

“Uh, I said ‘what’, not ‘who.’”

“You can bring one of your famous sweet potato pies.” Karin put in her request.

“And maybe you can pick up Kinshasa and drive her to our house. You know, since she’s new in town.”

“She seems to be finding her way around town just fine,” I said.

“Simone, have you invited her to the dinner yet?” Karin asked.

“No, not yet. But I’m going to. Maybe tonight after her reading.”

“Well, good luck with that,” I said. “Maybe you shouldn’t tell her I’m going to be there. She seems to have an aversion to the idea of having dinner with me.”

Although I smiled as I delivered this comment, part of me meant it in a non-smiling way.

We watched a young man approach Kinshasa and say something to her. She arose from the table and followed him to the elevator.

“That’s our signal, girls. It’s time to go upstairs for her reading.”

Simone shepherded us to the stairs leading to the store’s upper level. We saw the area where Kinshasa would read. The chairs were six deep and arranged in a semi-circle facing a platform with a lectern in the center of it. Almost every seat was occupied.

The same man who escorted Kinshasa to the elevator greeted the audience and introduced the guest writer. Kinshasa stepped up to the platform and rested her book on the lectern. She acknowledged the polite applause offered by her listeners. She began to read passages from her latest novel, the one about the black singer from Boston.

The audience was quiet, respectful, and more than ready to hear Kinshasa’s poetic prose. Hers was a style that sounded as good to the ear as it meant to the mind of the reader. Kinshasa’s rich, controlled voice infused each character with his or her own personality.

We sat there listening to her breathe her protagonist to life, as she imbued the character and the scenes with color and texture.

Suddenly, the aural and visual magic imploded.

“You’re a homophobe! You’ll have the blood of the LGBT community on your hands!”

I saw half a dozen people stand at the edge of the seated audience and hurl a barrage of verbal assaults. One of the hecklers held a sign that screamed, “ZERO TOLERANCE FOR AN INTOLERANT WRITER! Another protestor chanted, “Ask Jordan about Raymond.”

I knew the sign carrier. She was a former student of mine, and I knew she was a fervent member of RESIST NOW!, a militant lgbt civil rights group whose model was the older organization, ACT UP.

For the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why RESIST NOW had staged a protest during Kinshasa’s reading. My mind raced. Was all of this uproar really happening? Why had these protestors accused Kinshasa of homophobia? Who the hell was Raymond?

Karin reached behind me and put her hand on Simone’s shoulder. Simone grabbed my arm.

Kinshasa stopped reading. She held onto the sides of the lectern and looked at us. Fear seemed to galvanize her.

The bookstore’s security guards forcibly pushed the demonstrators toward the staircase and then down to the bookstore’s lower level. We heard the protestors’ shouts gradually grow fainter and then silent as they were ejected from the building.

“Do you think she’ll be all right?” Karin mouthed.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled softly. “It’s going to be hard for her to continue.”

A few members of the audience got up and drifted away. Those of who remained began to applaud and encourage Kinshasa to continue with the reading. We held our breaths as we watched Kinshasa take in deep lungfuls of air. Silently we cheered her on as she adjusted her composure along with her eyeglasses.

She took one last look at our expectant faces before she looked at her book, found the phrase she'd been reading before all hell broke loose, and let her voice continue. It was clear she'd lost her honey-toned pitch. Distracted, she never regained her confident delivery. The narrative's secret little nuances, known to her only, were lost every time her eyes left the page and looked up furtively in an effort to protect herself from another surprise disruption.

When at last Kinshasa finished her reading, the audience applauded long and loudly. Our hands sent her a message of appreciation and relief. The store's manager made his way to the lectern and escorted Kinshasa behind a closed door. Without being told, we knew she wouldn't be signing any more of her books tonight.

"Come on. We should see if she's okay," Karin said. She made the first move and Simone and I followed her.

"You all know I support RESIST NOW!, but they've picked on the wrong person," Simone said. "Look over there!"

She pointed toward the bookstore's expansive front window.

"They're still out in front, demonstrating."

Karin and I looked through the window. We could read the angry expressions on the protestors' faces as clearly as we could decipher the messages splashed across their signs.

"By the way, who is Raymond?" Karin asked.

"A villain in one of Kinshasa's novels," Simone said.

"A gay villain who committed horrendous deeds," I added.

"Kinshasa shouldn't drive home all by herself."

I shot a look of incredulity at my friend

"What are you suggesting, Simone, that we should be her three woman security force?"

"Something like that."

I didn't know if this was Simone's wisest idea or her most foolhardy one.

"Whatever it takes to make sure she's safe," Simone said.

Karin and I remained silent. At that point, neither she nor I knew what might be involved to accomplish ‘whatever it takes.’ I doubted Simone knew either. She was shooting from the hip and saying the first thing that entered her mind.

Most of Kinshasa’s audience dispersed quickly. The three of us sought out the manager who had guided Kinshasa away from the lectern. We had no reason to believe he would do what we requested, but we had nothing to lose in making the request.

“Excuse me. Could you tell Ms. Jordan, when she’s ready to leave, her friends from the university are here?” I asked.

He arched his brow, regarded each of us with suspicion, and then led us past a cashier’s station and to a huge brightly lit stockroom. Like an island in a sea of boxes, there stood Kinshasa. The woman who always appeared to be cool and composed whenever I’d seen her in the English Department office, now seemed to be undone. She was wringing her hands while fear and concern stretched across her forehead.

“Simone thought we should take you home. You know, like bodyguards,” I said.

I winked at Kinshasa and tried to lighten a whale-heavy moment.

She smiled back wanly.

“Sorry about the protestors, ladies,” she said.

“You shouldn’t be sorry, Kinshasa. Those fools outside are the sorry ones.”

Simone could be a great cheerleader when she needed to.

“Did you walk or drive here, Kinshasa?” Karin asked.

“I drove. My car is in the parking lot behind the bookstore.”

“Give Corey your keys. She’ll get your car and pull up to the back door. You’ll get in on the passenger side,” Karin said. “Simone and I will follow the two of you to your apartment building, and then we’ll take Corey home.”

Kinshasa nodded. “I really appreciate this.”

When she gave me her car keys, I thought I saw Kinshasa’s hand tremble.

My friends gave me a couple of minutes to walk to Kinshasa’s car and steer it close to the bookstore’s delivery entrance. Kinshasa, Karin, and Simone exited the building. Kinshasa got into her car and Simone and Karin retrieved theirs. When we left the parking lot, we turned our cars toward the opposite direction of the front of the store and bypassed all the remaining protestors.

We drove without incident to Kinshasa's apartment. As I parked Kinshasa's car, Karin steered hers next to it. She lowered her windows and signaled for me to do the same.

"It doesn't look like anyone followed us. Do you feel pretty safe, Kinshasa?" Simone asked.

"I'm sure I'm safe," she said. "If you're free right now, why don't you all come in for some coffee? I'm so grateful you were there tonight and were willing to help me."

Simone shook her head. "Oh, thanks, Kinshasa. Maybe some other time." She looked me square in the eyes. "But Corey, why don't you stay? You never had a chance to buy a cup of coffee at the bookstore."

"And just how will I get home?"

"I can drive you home," Kinshasa offered. "It's the least I can do to thank you for the rescue service."

"That's a great idea," Simone said. "And Corey, please mention our Thanksgiving plans to Kinshasa. She smiled sweetly. "It's not really a third person invitation, Kinshasa, because we're the hosts and we're the ones telling Corey to let you know about it. Okay, talk to you later."

Simone motioned for Karin to drive away. She had wrapped herself in a blanket of smug satisfaction, pleased her impromptu scheme had played out.

I removed the car key from the ignition and gave it to Kinshasa. We walked into her building and she paused to punch in her entry code. Having coffee with Kinshasa in her apartment was not how I'd envisioned spending part of this evening. I'm sure it's not what Kinshasa had imagined either. I couldn't help but wonder if she remembered how she had refused my dinner and movie invitation the afternoon we sweltered in Charlene's condo parking lot. And if she did recall that refusal, how was she feeling this minute as I was about to enter her home?

"My apartment is on the fourth floor."

We stood in front of the elevator.

"I'm glad the members of RESIST NOW! don't know where you live," I said.

"I'm glad about that as well."

Moments later, we walked in to the living room of her apartment.

"Why don't you have a seat while I start the coffee?"

"Thanks."

Instead of sitting down immediately, I approached one of the bookcases and began to read the titles I saw there. I examined the photos poised on a few of the shelves.

“Are the people in the large photo your parents?”

Kinshasa peeked out from the kitchen.

“Yes they are.”

“You look like a younger version of your mother,” I said. “You share the same smile. She’s very attractive.”

“Thank you. I needed that compliment. My mother died a few years ago, and I still miss her terribly. My father just retired, and he seems to be doing well. Between golf and fishing, he stays very busy.”

Kinshasa’s mood seemed to brighten when she talked about her family. She smiled at me and I wondered if we could be friends after all. Despite what she might believe about me, I do know how to be a woman’s friend. I don’t consider every single female a potential lover.

“Is it all right if I join you in the kitchen?” I asked.

“Sure, come on out.”

I resisted the temptation to retort I’d come out a long time ago. No sense in muddying the waters at this point.

I sat at a small bistro table tucked in the corner of the kitchen.

“Do you take sugar and milk?”

“Nope. I drink it black.”

I accepted the mug of steaming coffee Kinshasa set down in front of me. Looking over the top of it, I braved asking a question.

“Has anything like that ever happened to you before at a public reading?”

“No. This was the first, and I hope last time,” she said. “My writing has been criticized of course. I’m used to that. But this felt like a personal attack.”

Kinshasa looked up at the ceiling, as if she were searching for a memory.

“A reviewer for a gay magazine once accused me of being homophobic because of that character Raymond, but I’ve never been the target of a demonstration.”

I stared down at the dark liquid in my mug and then looked directly at Kinshasa.

“This might be poor timing on my part, but I need to ask you something. Do you think it’s possible you are homophobic? I’m mindful of two things, that character’s villainy, and how quickly and vehemently you said you wanted no part of going out to dinner with me, even though I assured you having dinner or seeing a movie didn’t mean we were on a date.”

Kinshasa didn’t blink before she began her response.

“First of all, I had the right to create Raymond’s character any way I wished. There have been gay villains as well as gay heroes.”

“I don’t disagree with your right to describe a character any way you want. But lgbt people are very sensitive right now about how we’re portrayed in books, on TV, and in films. If I remember correctly, Raymond was a psychotic killer who mutilated four people before he succumbed from AIDS, right?”

“Correct.”

The curtness of Kinshasa’s reply warned me to tread lightly.

“Well, I don’t have the gall to sit here in your kitchen, drink your coffee and sermonize, but can you understand why RESIST NOW! would stage a demonstration at your signing event?”

“Of course I understand. I just can’t accept it easily.”

Kinshasa paused. She seemed to select her next words very carefully.

“Corey, I need you to understand and believe I’m not homophobic. I’ve written about all kinds of African-American characters; all types of heroes and villains. Some of them have been righteous, while others have been downright evil. When I wrote about the evil ones no one labeled me blackphobic.”

We both grinned when she pronounced her manufactured word.

“Besides,” she continued, “if I were homophobic, would I befriend you, Simone and Karin?”

Had she befriended us? Did she consider me her friend? I thought, but didn’t ask aloud.

“And what was Simone saying about a Thanksgiving invitation?”

“Oh, thanks for the reminder.” I sipped my lukewarm coffee.

“Simone and Karin always invite a few people to their house for Thanksgiving dinner, and they wondered if you’d like to join us.”

I looked in Kinshasa's eyes in search of a shadow of indecision. I saw none.

"I'd love to join all of you."

I was amazed at how quickly Kinshasa accepted the invitation. Apparently, she felt okay about being in Simone's and Karin's lesbian presence, just not in mine.

"Can I bring something? A salad or a dessert?"

"You'd better ask them about that. I've already signed up to bring a sweet potato pie."

"Is that one of your specialties?"

"It is."

Sweet potato pie, along with a few other things you'll never get to taste. I hid my real thoughts behind a sweet smile.

"How about you, do you have any Thanksgiving specialties you like to prepare?" I asked.

My question got tangled in the ringing of the telephone. Kinshasa answered the louder of the two inquiries.

"Hello?"

A frown made its way across her forehead.

"No. I have company. It's not a good time to talk."

She arose from her chair and turned her back to me.

"A friend. No, just a friend, Michael."

Her tone hardened, fell, and broke into little brittle syllables.

"We've already settled that. Please don't call here again."

Kinshasa hung up the phone. She continued to stand and her shoulders caved in under the weight of what appeared to be her second verbal assault of the day. She turned around and faced me.

"Is there anything wrong, Kinshasa?"

"Not any longer."

She returned to the table, picked up the empty coffee mugs, and carried them to the sink.

“That was my ex, Michael.”

“This hasn’t been a very good day for you,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s history.” Kinshasa leaned against the edge of the sink.

“I remember you telling me you don’t hang your dirty laundry in public, so I know better than to ask you this question.”

Kinshasa’s stare failed to censor me.

“Is Michael the reason you took a leave of absence and accepted the position at Allerton?”

I saw Kinshasa’s eyes shut me out the second my question left my lips.

“Michael is one of the reasons I decided to make a change.” She paused. “The short version of my tale is simple. I was in an abusive relationship. I was abused emotionally and physically. After a while I became healthy and I broke away. End of saga.”

I remained silent. I had no words to convey the sudden sorrow I felt for her. I wanted to extend my arms and envelop her in a hug, but I knew better than to offer that gesture.

“You seem to have a lot of inner strength, Kinshasa.”

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

“It just looks that way, I guess.”

The quiet overwhelmed us.

“I just realized I took away your mug without asking if you’d like more coffee.”

I held up both hands in front of me.

“Oh no, no thanks.”

Suddenly, I felt exhausted; perhaps because I’d learned more about Kinshasa than I’d wanted to.

“I need to get going. I could take a cab, you know. There’s no need for you to drive me home.”

“Not on your life. You, Simone and Karin were real friends to me tonight. Please let me return the favor.”

There was little conversation between us as Kinshasa and I rode to my house. So much went unsaid. The very volume of the unspoken words hung silently over our heads. Kinshasa kept the engine running as I got out of her car. Now it was my turn to thank her. I did so quite solemnly as I locked the car door behind me along with my denials about being drawn to Kinshasa.

Chapter Twenty

THE CORNERSTONE AT Jefferson High School read 1989. Like the students it served, the building had grown old before its time. It witnessed life, injury and death before it reached its twenty-fifth birthday.

Kinshasa, Charlene and I marched into the school during the first week of October. Kinshasa had a pretty accurate idea about what awaited us. I was full of plans I wanted to try with my students, but I was devoid of any realistic concepts about the everyday existence of a teacher in a large city high school. I figured it wouldn't be the same as my experiences had been in my own high school, but I didn't have the first clue how very different it would be. Completely unaware of the realities of my new teaching environment, I steamrolled into Sarah Grossman's sophomore English class.

The graffiti pockmarked entrance to Sarah's classroom was only a prologue to what I encountered when I walked in. Posters five feet in length surrounded me. Literary quotations, pictures of famous writers, and inspirational messages covered most of the walls. Thirty or so students slouched, sprawled or spilled out of desks loosely arranged in a circle.

"Class, this is Ms. Lomax, the writing professor from Allerton University. She's going to work with us this year on a writing project."

"Hello, everyone."

I acknowledged Sarah's introduction. That was the last coherent thing I remember doing that entire fifty minute period. I'm sure I lost the battle when I tried to compete with the restless loud voices that all spoke simultaneously. That first day, as I tried to estimate just how badly I'd failed, I noticed a student struggling against the tide of departing bodies. Like a salmon swimming upstream, she reached me.

"Hey, Allerton! You gonna teach us to write?" She asked, almost daring me to answer her.

"I'm going to try."

“Good, ‘cause I still have trouble makin’ some of the capital letters in cursive. Ever since the third grade I been havin’ trouble with that.”

I was speechless. Numbly, I watched her walk away.

I told Sarah I wanted to see more of the school, so I’d learn my way around the building.

“Why don’t you wait until the next bell rings? It’s the late bell,” she said. “Until then, the hallways are pretty crowded. We wouldn’t want you to get lost.”

I wondered if Sarah’s “pretty crowded” was code for something else. I was headed toward the classroom’s door when I heard a huge rolling thunderclap of adolescent voices. As the verbal storm got closer, Sarah walked quickly to me and pulled me back into the room. Then she went back toward the cacophony. She peered beyond her doorway, into the hall. Without uttering a single word my way, Sarah ripped open a metal box that housed a wall mounted phone. She pounded four of the phone’s buttons.

“Girls fighting, building five, second floor west,” she said calmly.

Sarah waved me further away from the entrance to her classroom. Although I obeyed and kept my distance, I was able to hear and sense more than I wanted. The air was electrified. It was charged with screams and expletive combinations I hadn’t ever imagined. I felt like I could touch the seething anger and see the waves of fear that billowed throughout the hallway near Sarah’s classroom. I heard electronic bells chime some sort of code and then disappear into the crackle of adult voices, distorted by the poorest quality walkie-talkies the school district’s purchasing office could buy. I saw the blur of two blue uniforms fly past the doorway. I couldn’t see who filled those uniforms, males or females, or one of each.

“Corey, why don’t you sit down at my desk? Things are going to be in a shambles for a little while.” Sarah offered me her chair.

“Does this happen often? Are there a lot of fights here?”

“It depends upon the time of year, the phase of the moon, and who’s occupying the thrones in Harrisburg and D.C.”

I didn’t know which part of Sarah’s answer was serious and which portion was facetious. My hunch was all three segments were true.

“This fight was between two girls, so it was probably one of those he-said-she-said deals.” Sarah looked at me apologetically. “Sorry you had to witness that, but it’s all a part of high school, you know.”

“At least I hadn’t begun my self-guided tour. I wouldn’t have known what to do.”

Sarah agreed. She ventured back to her door and stood there, looking out into the hallway for more than a minute.

“By now Charlene and Kinshasa are probably waiting for you.” She said.

That may have been so, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to brave the trip from here to the first floor.

“You’ll be okay. It’s quiet out there now.” Sarah beckoned to me. She smiled kindly.

“You’re not going to be scared off, are you? Our kids really need this writing program.”

“Don’t worry, Sarah. I’ll be back next week. I’m eager to get started. I just need to figure out a different way to approach the students.”

I could talk a good game when I had to.

I went out to the hallway. I swore I could still hear battle cries. As I walked by the area where the fight had taken place, I spotted tufts of hair and splotches of damp blood left behind in the worn carpet. By the time I reached Kinshasa and Charlene on the building’s first floor, I could hardly conceal the alarm I felt.

“Was it like this in the school where you taught?” I asked Kinshasa.

“Once in a while.” She looked closely at me. “But, you can’t dwell on the negatives, Corey. You learn very quickly to look for the small victories and to celebrate them.”

I clamped my teeth together, lest I say something that dripped with pure skepticism.

Two hours after zealously entering Jefferson High, I walked with a wounded spirit toward the exit. My level of enthusiasm was like putty, and I realized I needed to be remolded in order to fit this new situation.

Chapter Twenty-One

I’D JUST RETURNED to the university and sat down in front of my computer in my office when the phone rang.

“English Department. Corey Lomax speaking.”

“Corey? Hello, it’s Marsha Riley at Jefferson High. I’m so sorry I missed you yesterday.”

“Oh, that’s okay, Marsha. I figured you didn’t have any time to spare. The pace seems pretty hectic there.”

“You’re right about that. Listen, Corey, I know there was a fight while you were here yesterday. Sarah told me you were quite upset. I hope that incident didn’t influence your plans to work with our students.”

I picked up a pencil from my desk and began to draw loops and doodles on the sheet of paper atop my memo pad. While I listened to Marsha’s voice, I visualized her sitting in her own office at Jefferson High.

“I’m not easily discouraged, Marsha. You can count on me to be back there next week.”

“Oh, thank goodness. I didn’t want us to lose you.”

I felt a familiar sensation of warmth rush to my cheeks. I wondered how tempted I’d be to ask Marsha out if she were seated right here in my office directly across from me.

“No. Sarah told me fights are one of the facts of life in a city high school, and when I asked her, Kinshasa concurred.”

“We try to prevent them, but we’re not always able to do that. Fortunately, most of our days here turn out better than yesterday did.”

I hoped Marsha was telling me the truth.

“So, I’ll look for you next Thursday?” she asked.

“That’s right. I’ll see you then.”

I hung up and thought about Marsha. Although there was something about her energy I found exciting, there was something about her aggressiveness that made me wonder if I wanted to see more of her or simply feel flattered because she seemed to want to see more of me.

“There’s no sense in getting ahead of yourself,” I said to the computer screen.

Half an hour later, I finished reading my email messages and decided to stretch my legs. It occurred to me I hadn’t seen Simone in a couple of days, so I meandered to the building next door. I waited until the last of Simone’s students were out of earshot before I peeked into her classroom.

“Here’s some news that’ll sharpen your little cupid’s arrow, my friend,” I said.

“Hey, what’s up, Corey?” Simone motioned for me to come closer.

“Remember I told you about Marsha Riley, the Assistant Principal at Jefferson High?” I didn’t give Simone a chance to answer.

“She just phoned and told me she was so sorry she missed seeing me at Jefferson yesterday.”

Simone flashed a broad smile.

“So now you think Marsha’s going to give you some play?”

“I didn’t go that far, Simone.”

“Then where are you going with all this?”

“Back to my office to do some work before the staff meeting begins.”

“Smart ass.”

Simone’s chuckle followed me halfway down the hall. I was well on my way when I heard Kinshasa’s voice.

“Corey! Wait! Are you headed to the office?”

“Yes, you too?”

Kinshasa fell in step with me and we covered the distance between the two buildings quickly. Lately we’d begun to talk with each other more casually and comfortably than we had a few months ago. I was about to make a snide comment about our impending staff meeting, when I noticed two familiar figures standing not far from us.

“Do you know what time the meeting begins?” Kinshasa asked.

I looked at my watch as we kept walking.

“In half an hour.”

The two figures were closer to us now. They stood side by side and faced the elevator. The door must have opened, because the taller of the two gave the other one a quick, furtive hug, and then disappeared into the lift’s open space. The shorter woman continued to stand in place. She looked to her left, saw us approach, and waited until we arrived.

“Hi, Corey. How are you?”

“I’m fine, Jen.”

I turned toward Kinshasa.

“Have you two met each other?”

“No. Not yet.”

Jennifer stepped forward and extended her hand.

“Hi. I’m Jennifer Renfrew. I suspect you’re the reason the number of our admissions applications has increased; especially for the Creative Writing division.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” Kinshasa looked downward.

“Well we’ve been busier than we usually are this time of year.”

“Is that good or bad?” I asked.

“It’s very good for the university, and especially for your department.”

Jennifer knew how to be charming when she wanted to be.

“Corey, did you get my last phone message?”

“Yeah, I did, Jennifer. Sorry I haven’t gotten back to you.”

I sensed Kinshasa had moved a few yards away from Jennifer and me. I wanted her to stick around because I found the charming version of Jennifer almost delightful. I didn’t feel I could trust Charming Jennifer, but I liked being reminded of at least one of the positive characteristics that had attracted me to her once upon a time. No one wants to think they were completely stupid, deaf, and blind when they gave in to an infatuation.

“That’s all right. I know you’re busy. I called because I never finished collecting everything I, uh, left behind.” Jennifer’s tactfulness jump started a stutter.

“Come over whenever you’d like,” I said. “And feel free to bring Pat. Wasn’t she here just a minute ago?”

“Yes. We had an early lunch. She had to get back to the city.”

“Come over any time, Jen. Just give me a call first.”

I meant what I’d said. I had wanted to divest my home of Jen’s belongings for months now. At long last I was at peace about Pat Adamson. I even suspected I might like her if we had a chance to talk for any length of time. I imagined being a cop and having a relationship with Jennifer were not the easiest things to do simultaneously.

“Thanks, Corey. It’ll be very soon.”

Jennifer acknowledged Kinshasa.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Ms. Jordan. I hope you enjoy all of your experiences here this year.”

It might have been my imagination, but I thought I saw Jennifer tilt her head in my direction and suppress a smirk as she said, “all of your experiences.”

“I’m sure that I shall.” Kinshasa smiled graciously.

“I’ll give you a call, Corey.” Jen locked my eyes with hers. She sighed audibly.

Kinshasa and I continued the trek to our offices. As we walked in silence, the tension I’d felt in Jennifer’s presence lessened. From the corner of my eye I noticed Kinshasa staring at my profile. I wondered if she were curious about my interaction with Jen. I knew she wouldn’t ask any questions, so I offered an explanation.

“That was my ex.”

“It must be difficult for you to run into her at work.”

“Not really. Our relationship ended a while ago, so running into her isn’t nearly as difficult as it used to be.”

Kinshasa poked me in my arm.

“Excuse me for saying this, but if you continue to flirt with Marsha Riley every time we meet with our project groups, pretty soon you won’t have any memory at all of your ex.”

I cocked my head to the side.

“Do you think I flirt with Marsha Riley? Am I that obvious?”

“Most assuredly.”

“And I thought I was being subtle.”

“No, you’re not subtle at all.”

Kinshasa grinned as she teased me. Nevertheless, I thought I detected the slightest trace of reproach in her voice. Or did I want to hear the reproach? I watched her retreat to her office and effectively end our discussion about Jennifer and Marsha.

I sauntered to the half wall of mailboxes and retrieved the day's delivery. I took my pieces of newly arrived mail into my office and sat down at my desk. Instead of opening the envelopes or listening to my phone messages, I stared straight ahead. I thought about Jennifer, Kinshasa, and Marsha, and I wished my flirting with the last one would bother Kinshasa, if only just a tiny bit.

Then, I returned to reality. Reality sounded like Kinshasa's saying she had no desire to go out to dinner with me. Reality looked like a faceless someone named Michael who had been an important part of Kinshasa's life. I concluded my reality should resemble a high school administrator named Marsha Riley.

Chapter Twenty-Two

UNAWARE CARTER HAD watched her chatting with Corey, Kinshasa stepped into her office. She didn't have to be at the staff meeting for another ten minutes. She opened a drawer of her file cabinet and withdrew a folder. Engrossed in examining its contents, Kinshasa never heard Carter's stealthy approach. The carpet silenced his footsteps, and Kinshasa was too absorbed in her work to sense his presence. Suddenly, she felt two hands encircle her waist.

"How's it going, Kinshasa?"

Kinshasa spun around. She grabbed his wrists, forcibly removed his hands and pushed him away from her.

"Don't you ever do that again, Carter!"

Carter raised both of his hands in mock defense.

"Sorry." He mumbled.

"I never gave you permission to touch me."

"I said I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were so sensitive. I was only trying to be friendly."

"Friendly means you knock on the door and say hello. You don't let yourself in and sneak up behind me. And you certainly don't wrap your arms around me."

“The first time we met you gave me a different impression of your concept of friendly. It involved a few glasses of wine and a lot of friendly touches on the arm and friendly pats on the back of the hand. Remember that version of friendly, Kinshasa?”

Carter verbally taunted Kinshasa.

“What you’ve done today was uninvited and unacceptable. You’ve skated close to harassment, Carter.” Kinshasa said.

“All I’m saying is you didn’t seem concerned about harassment a couple of months ago when we touched each other at the party.”

Kinshasa flashed back to the negative feelings she had harbored about Charlene Gray’s similarities to Michael; to the feelings that led her to flirt with Carter. She cursed herself now for having encouraged Carter’s attentions then. She recoiled from his mocking eyes and patronizing posture.

“What do you want, Carter?”

“I simply wanted to say hello and see how the semester was going for you.”

“You could have done that without touching me.”

Carter sat down in the chair next to her desk. Kinshasa remained standing.

“The first time I saw you, I had an inkling we might enjoy each other’s company. But I remember Corey was going to show you her house, literally and most likely figuratively.” Carter paused and then asked, “Did she?”

Kinshasa recalled the secret pact she made with Corey. They agreed they wouldn’t tell Carter whether Kinshasa had seen the house or not. Foregoing her pledge, Kinshasa decided to be forthcoming.

“No. I didn’t get to see her house. We were both pretty tired that evening.”

Carter leaned back in the chair and leered at every part of Kinshasa. He cleared his voice.

“So I can assume you and Corey haven’t become close friends.”

“You can assume whatever you wish.”

“What’s your schedule like? We could go out for a drink sometime soon.”

Kinshasa felt pure anathema for him.

“I’m very busy, Carter. I don’t have much free time. And any free time you have should be spent with the wife and children you never seem to mention.”

Carter grinned.

“I heard you’re working with Charlene Gray’s project down in that city high school. I heard also, you caused quite a commotion at your bookstore reading.”

“You’ve heard quite a lot, haven’t you?” Kinshasa knew she was obliged to go one on one with him. “I managed to survive the ‘commotion’, to use your word.”

“What was it now? That RESIST NOW! group?”

He sat back in the chair and rubbed his chin.

“Those faggots and dykes are outrageous. They staged a demonstration on campus last winter. Something about the university’s health service bending to the will of the Board of Trustees after they changed the policy and took away the free condoms and the HIV testing. Then they wanted to ban the military from recruiting here! Who the hell do they think they are? Damn faggots and dykes!”

Carter’s face was distorted in self-righteous anger.

Kinshasa rooted her feet firmly in front of him.

“Despite their having accused me of homophobia, you need to know where I stand on that issue, Carter. I support the gay civil rights movement. That group, RESIST NOW! had every right to protest during my signing event that evening.”

She paused to make sure Carter was listening.

“And I have trouble hearing you use pejorative terms to describe a minority group. I would have thought someone with your education and worldly experiences would be more tolerant.”

Carter’s lips spread into the thinnest smile of an insinuation.

“Well, it looks as if we could add a few more words to writerin-residence under the name on your office door. The placard should read, ‘Ms. Kinshasa Jordan, standard bearer for faggots, dykes, the sexually harassed, and the gender confused’.”

Kinshasa strode to the door and yanked it open.

“Dr. Washington, you are as ignorant and insensitive as you are arrogant.”

As Carter passed in front of Kinshasa, he leaned close to her and said in sotto voce, “Know what I think? I think you should spend more time with Charlene Gray and Corey Lomax. In fact,

why don't you go across the hallway to Corey's office right now? Tell her you're ready to take that tour of her house."

Kinshasa refused to respond to the bait. She waited until he was yards away from her door before she shut it.

She went to the chair he'd been sitting in and she moved it away from her desk. She didn't want it near her. She sat down and examined her calendar. She flipped the used pages and counted how many months it had been since she left Michael, salvaged her self esteem and had last been held in loving arms. The total number of days and nights that had passed absolutely astounded her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I POPPED THE two sweet potato pies in the oven, poured myself a second cup of coffee, and sat down with the morning newspaper and the TV's remote control in front of me. I wasn't a fan of daytime television, but I was relatively sure the parades had begun. I picked up the remote and switched back and forth between the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade and the one taking place in Philadelphia. Naturally, I felt an allegiance to the latter because it was more local than the other one.

In no time at all, the odors of cinnamon and nutmeg teased my nostrils. Thanksgiving dinner with my friends provided me a perfect reason to bake. I never minded robbing time from my yard or house projects to do all the prep work sweet potato pie required. I considered this particular dessert my *pièce de résistance*. My rewards were the words of praise my friends rained down upon me.

"Where did you learn to bake this well, Corey?"

"Man, this tastes good. Is this a family recipe?"

"Girl, I will pay you to bake me one of these pies."

Over the years I'd learned to mix exactly the right amounts of all the ingredients. My pies' fillings were a heavenly combination of flavors with a smooth satisfying texture. And after more than a few false starts, I'd perfected my technique with pastry dough, a food item that challenges the most skillful chefs. All my attempts to create the very best crust finally culminated in

success. How had I achieved this victory? I discovered Food Source, a trendy little market that sold the tastiest premade pie shells.

The oven's timer beeped and reminded me to check the firmness of the pies' fillings and decide what time I was going to leave to drive to Simone's and Karin's dinner.

There would be the six of us today, Karin and Simone, Charlene and Kate, Kinshasa, and me; two couples and two singles. Now that I knew for certain Kinshasa was unattached but definitely not family, I could relax in her presence. There was no need for me to impress her with my wit, my intelligence, or my appearance. I believed her when she told me she wasn't homophobic. Maybe she accepted the invitation to share Thanksgiving dinner with five lesbians because she needed to research new characters for a novel.

A few days prior to Thanksgiving, when I ran into Kinshasa on campus, I asked her if she knew where Simone and Karin lived. She assured me her car's navigation system would get her there. I turned right around and assured Simone I didn't have to bring Kinshasa to their dinner. She could get there under her own steam.

As it turned out, we all arrived on our hosts' doorstep at the same time. Everybody that is, except Kate, who decided at the last minute to fly home to Chicago to see her family.

Simone and Karin lived in a single story house, an anomaly in Allerton where most of the houses had at least two levels, and some of the older ones, three. Their block was home to several ranch style houses which stood proudly, if not strangely, among the pre-existing American and Dutch colonials. One would think a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright had been given five empty lots, along with orders to construct houses built in the style of their architectural master. The exterior of Simone's and Karin's house was an expanse of fieldstone, wood and glass.

"Come on in, everybody! Welcome!"

Simone led us inside. She took our jackets and hung them in the coat closet near the entryway, while Karin helped us unload the goodies we'd all brought.

"I thought you'd like some wine, but I couldn't decide what kind to bring. So I bought four bottles, two reds and two whites." Charlene laughed at the result of her indecision.

Simone divested her of two of the bottles.

"This is a dinner party, not a wine festival. And there's only five of us now that your sweetie decided to go home for the holiday."

"I know that. But since Kate can't be here, I'll be drinking for two."

“Then you might as well turn in your car keys now, because we’re not going to let you drive yourself home.” I grinned at Charlene as I walked toward the kitchen, balancing a sweet potato pie in each hand.

“Please, please don’t trip over anything, Corey. I couldn’t bear to see those pies hit the floor,” Karin said.

“Kinshasa, the flowers are wonderful.” Simone took a huge bouquet of multi-colored mums from Kinshasa. She held them at arm’s length and admired their beauty. “I’ll go get a vase.”

I agreed with Simone. Indeed the flowers were lovely. And so was Kinshasa. She wore brown tweed woolen slacks and a soft gray knit top, whose light color was the perfect foil for her caramel hued skin and dark brown eyes. As I gazed at her I thought it ironic that I hadn’t cared what I had chosen to wear, yet here I was paying a lot of attention to Kinshasa’s outfit. Inwardly I smirked at my inconsistency.

“Did you get these flowers at that new shop on Central Avenue?” Charlene asked.

“Yes I did. They had so many different arrangements, I had trouble making a selection.”

“Looks like you chose a winner,” I said.

“Thanks, Corey.”

“You can trust Corey with flowers and pies.” Simone grinned. “Let’s go into the great room. We already lit the fireplace.”

Simone led us into the largest room of their house, an open space with a wall sized window on one side and a fireplace whose stone covered surround filled another wall. The surround and hearth were made of the same gray, tan and yellow-beige fieldstone that covered part of the house’s exterior. Whenever I visited Simone and Karin, I always gravitated to the fireplace. Today was no exception.

I could feel the warmth radiating from the firebox before I sat down in front of it on a large square pillow. I felt the smallest thump of pleasure when I noticed Kinshasa kneeling and then taking a seat on my pillow’s twin. Simone offered everyone a glass of wine.

Kinshasa turned her head to look at her surroundings.

“Simone, your home is beautiful. This room is so big.”

“Thanks, Kinshasa. Do you like modern architecture? Or are you more like Corey and Charlene who prefer the older more traditional styles?”

“I admire some elements of both, I suppose. The only style I don’t like is minimalism. It’s too sterile and cold for me.”

Charlene sat near us on the sofa. “Me neither. There’s no evidence human beings inhabit those spaces. And it’s much too neat for me. I could never maintain it.”

“What about you, Corey? What kinds of houses do you like?” Kinshasa asked.

“I like features of almost every kind of house, colonials and federals because of their symmetry, Cape Cods because of their coziness and because they remind me of New England and Provincetown, contemporaries because they’re unique and individualized, traditional farm houses because they remind me of good times with family.”

I held up my hand and gestured toward the room where all of us were sitting. “I love how Karin and Simone have furnished their house. This room in particular always feels so welcoming.”

Kinshasa smiled at me. “The fireplace adds a lot of warmth to this room. I’m so glad I have one in my apartment.”

“You’re lucky. It’s not always easy to find an apartment with a fireplace,” I said.

“Hey, don’t you all know there’s a football game on TV? Can we move this party to the den?” Charlene asked.

“Not now,” Simone said. “We’ve got a roaring fire, great wine, and good conversation going on.”

“Aw, come on, Simone. We’re lesbians. Most of us love football.”

“Speak for yourself, Charlene. I don’t love football. And we’re not all lesbians.” Simone turned to look at Kinshasa. “Excuse her please. When it’s football season, she doesn’t always know what she’s saying.”

I was almost afraid to hear Kinshasa’s reaction to Charlene’s linking lesbians with the love of football.

“No problem. I’ve been known to enjoy an NFL game from time to time, but I never suspected being a fan of the game had anything to do with one’s sexuality,” She said.

I heard lightness in Kinshasa’s voice, so I chanced sneaking a peek at her. Thank God she was grinning.

“I promise we’ll keep the volume turned low so we can still hear the conversation in here.” Charlene pleaded her case.

“If you turn on that TV, there won’t be any more conversation in here. Karin and Corey will desert us. Kinshasa might abandon us also,” Simone said.

“No way,” Kinshasa said. “Not when there’s the potential for so much good talk.”

“Wrong answer, Kinshasa.” Charlene tried to muster her troops. “Corey, you up for watching the game?”

“Usually I am. But Simone and Karin have gone to so much trouble to make today special.”

I pointed to the large glass cocktail table in front of the sofa.

“Look. She’s put out hors d’oeuvres for us. There’s soothing jazz playing in the background. We can smell the turkey roasting. There’s a great fire burning here in the fireplace. I don’t have the heart to leave this room. The two of them have worked too hard to give us all this.” I feigned sadness.

Besides, I realized I’d been enjoying Kinshasa’s company. I wouldn’t be able to continue doing that if we were sitting in two different rooms, I reasoned silently.

“Thank you, Corey. At least someone appreciates all the preparation I’ve done.” Simone playfully glared at Karin who in turn looked mournfully at Charlene.

“Sorry, Charlene. But if I want to continue living here, I’ll have to settle for seeing the game highlights on the news tonight.”

“Coward.” Charlene responded as playfully as Karin had spoken.

Karin kept up her banter with Charlene. “I hope you’re not taking it out on me because Kate decided to go to Chicago.”

“Not at all. When you’re involved with a beautiful younger woman, you have to accept the good with the bad. Kate is good looking, very bright, and very energetic, if you understand what I’m saying. Once in a while she goes out of town to visit her family and I get a chance to catch my breath.”

“Okay, Charlene. You’ve listed everything that’s good. What’s in the bad column?” I asked.

“Absolutely nothing, Corey. Absolutely nothing.” Charlene gloated smugly as she cast a glance at each of us, one person at a time.

“You’re a lecherous peri-menopausal woman, Charlene. Now let’s change the subject before we scare Kinshasa out of her shoes,” Simone said.

“I’m fine ladies. I don’t scare easily. But don’t be surprised if you find yourselves in my next novel, disguised with fictitious names, of course.”

I held up my glass to toast Kinshasa. “To your next novel! And to the joys of research!”

“I’m just kidding. I’m not doing research,” Kinshasa said. “But, I do have a question. Does the university have an organization for lgbt students?”

Simone shot an arrow of a look at me as she got up to walk to the kitchen. She seemed as surprised as I was by Kinshasa’s query.

“Yes, there is a Gay-Straight Student Alliance. It’s a couple of years old now. The faculty representative is a staffer in the School of Social Work. Right Corey?” Charlene said.

“Yeah. A guy named Frank Windom,” Corey said. “I’ve met with him a couple of times about some lesbian specific issues. Why do you ask, Kinshasa?”

I hoped my question wasn’t too pointed.

“Well, I’ve recently heard some anti-gay remarks on campus.”

I felt the needle on my interest meter ricochet to life.

“Were the remarks directed at you? Did they have anything to do with your novel?”

“No. Not at all. They were about lgbt students in general.”

“Who made the remarks? Some of your students?”

I wasn’t surprised to hear Kinshasa mention this issue. I was disappointed though. The four of us forgot all about Charlene’s football game. Like magnets, we were pulled into this discussion.

“No students were involved. They’re probably more tolerant. A faculty member made a remark to me about gay people.”

Simone interrupted Kinshasa. “Let me guess. Was it Dr. Potato-head, our department chairperson?”

“It couldn’t be him, Simone,” I said before Kinshasa could. “Dr. George doesn’t believe gays and lesbians really exist. He thinks we’re all literary devices.”

I’d come to the conclusion the man was not stupid, just a victim of his own sheltered parochial life.

“No. It wasn’t Dr. George,” Kinshasa said.

“Then it could only be that ass-wipe, Carter Washington,” Charlene said.

Kinshasa clasped her hands together. She blinked quickly, nervously. "I'd rather not identify the person. I was curious though, about there being some way or someone to whom a student could complain if there were a question about anti-gay bias."

"I would think filing an official complaint with the Dean of Students would be the first step." Karin looked at us expectantly. She waited for one of us to confirm what she'd said.

"Probably." Charlene nodded. "I'm sure I can speak for all of us when I say we would rush to file a complaint and to seek a remedy if any of us were victimized by bias of any sort."

"Ladies, I hate to interrupt such a serious discussion, but dinner is ready," Simone said.

"This is your first special meal here, Kinshasa. So let me explain the ground rules. Karin and I have put everything out on the kitchen table, including the wine and the other beverages. Everybody picks up a plate and helps themselves to as much as they want as many times as they want. Okay?"

"Thanks, Simone. That sounds great."

Today was turning out to be a better Thanksgiving than I had imagined it would be. My friends' home welcomed us, the conversation had been lively and interesting, the wine was especially enjoyable, and everyone seemed relaxed.

Most of all, I began to feel I had a friend in Kinshasa. Maybe the times we'd spent working together on the Jefferson High project were responsible for her laid back demeanor. Whatever the reason, I was grateful for it. I saw Kinshasa in a different light now that she acted less rigid and allowed herself to be more comfortable with us.

"So listen guys," Simone said, "the three of you are working so hard on the high school writing project." Her gaze took in Charlene, Kinshasa and me. "How's it going?"

I put down my fork and looked off into space. "I think pretty well, although sometimes I wonder if I'm genuinely communicating with the students."

"It's normal to ask yourself that question, Corey," Kinshasa said. "Don't give up. They'll surprise you when you least expect it."

"I hope so."

"Does it feel like the Jefferson faculty is behind your efforts, Charlene?" Karin asked.

"Definitely. The teachers we're working with are terrific, even Oliver Sullivan, right Kinshasa?"

Kinshasa laughed. "Yes, even Oliver is coming around."

“You know, Simone, you could have had the viewpoint of one of Jefferson’s administrator’s right here at your table today.” Charlene punctuated her remark by stabbing the air with her fork. “But you chose not to.”

Kinshasa and I looked at Charlene for some explanation.

“I told Simone she and Karin should reach out with their sisterly generosity and extend their dinner invitation to Marsha Riley. Marsha told me she didn’t have any plans for today.”

“And I advised Charlene it’s bad manners to tell the hosts whom they should invite. Besides, we don’t even know Marsha Riley,” Simone said.

“You might not have met Marsha, but you know her by reputation,” Charlene said. “And don’t try to tell me Corey hasn’t mentioned her to you.”

“Keep me out of this please, Charlene.”

I got up to get more mashed potatoes. I was more intent on Kinshasa’s not seeing my Marsha-related discomfort than her thinking I was eating too many carbohydrates.

“Yeah, she’s mentioned someone named Marsha,” Karin said. She must have been oblivious to my embarrassment.

“Is that the hot principal you said you could be interested in, Corey? The one who flirts with you?”

“No. She’s not a principal.” I yelled from the kitchen. “She’s an assistant principal.”

I hoped my short answer would discourage Karin from any further questions.

“Whatever. We’ve never met her. So we felt funny inviting her to come to Thanksgiving dinner.” It was clear Simone was determined to put a period on the conversation and end it.

Charlene pointed her fork in my direction.

“I was just thinking about our Corey, that’s all. I was trying to look out for her.”

“Sounds like you’ve got such loyal friends, Corey.” Kinshasa tossed in her contribution to a conversation that was increasingly uncomfortable for me. I couldn’t tell if she was teasing me or if she was sincere. I leaned toward the former, since she had commented once about my flirting with Marsha Riley.

I was desperate to divert the talk away from the assistant principal.

“Kinshasa, what do you think about Karin’s and Simone’s culinary skills? They’ve got talent, don’t they?”

“Everything was delicious,” she said.

“Wait til you’ve tasted Corey’s sweet potato pie, Kinshasa. Talk about cooking skills.”

“Oh stop.” I held up my hands in mock protest. “All that praise goes right to my head.”

Karin removed our empty plates from the table. She and Simone busied themselves in the kitchen.

Half an hour later, we had forgotten Marsha Riley. We’d also consumed one pie and a pot of coffee. By the time the second pie was sliced and the pieces were wrapped to travel, all I had left to carry home were the two empty pie plates. Our dinner party wound down along with our conversations and our energy.

“You two have outdone yourselves. It was another wonderful Thanksgiving feast.” I hugged both Simone and Karin. “Thank you.”

“Our pleasure, Corey. Thank you for dessert.”

Charlene embraced our hosts. “Do you guys want help doing the dishes?”

“No, honey. The dishwasher will do the honors. But thanks for offering, and thanks for the wine,” Simone said.

“You’re welcome. And you’ll notice I didn’t drink for two after all. So I’m capable of driving myself home.”

Karin touched Kinshasa on her shoulder. “We hope you’ll come back soon. You’re always welcome in our home.”

“I’m very grateful you invited me to spend the day with you. With all of you.” Kinshasa beamed at us.

Simone grabbed Kinshasa’s arm. “Whew! What a relief. Charlene didn’t frighten you with the tales about her love life?”

“Not in the least. And I got a kick out of her making Corey blush when she mentioned Marsha Riley.”

I zipped my jacket and launched my most condescending stare at Kinshasa. I would have achieved my goal of forcing her to wither under my gaze had she not high jacked it with one of the sexiest smiles I’d ever received. I forgot all attempts to dominate her with one masterful look. I gulped and tried not to stammer.

“Well, troops. Time to hit the road,” I said.

Charlene, Kinshasa and I followed the bluestone pavers that lay between the house and the street. When we arrived at the common sidewalk, our paths took opposite turns. Kinshasa peeled off to the right. Charlene and I turned left.

“Let’s wait until we see Kinshasa get into her car,” I said.

“How gallant of you, Corey.”

We waited there until we saw the headlights of Kinshasa’s car illuminate the road in front of her.

“I’m glad she was here today, aren’t you?” Charlene asked.

“Yes, and now that it’s just the two of us, I have a question for you, dear Charlene. Why did you introduce that mess about wanting Simone to invite Marsha to dinner?”

“Sorry if that was a problem.” Charlene rocked back and forth on her heels. “You’re lucky I didn’t quote Simone’s reaction verbatim, honeycakes.”

“What did she say?”

“She said there was no way in hell they were going to invite Marsha if Kinshasa was going to be there. It was Kinshasa, not Marsha who made your blood beat.”

“Oh for God’s sake. That’s a dead issue.”

“I don’t think Simone is convinced there’s nothing happening.” Charlene stopped talking. She stood still and looked carefully at me.

“You know what, Corey? I watched you this afternoon and part of the evening, maybe more than I’ve watched you in a long time. You might believe your attraction to Kinshasa is a dead issue. But I can tell after watching you look at her, it’s not.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

I WAS BUSY at my desk in the English Department office, so I let the phone continue ringing. I was so convinced whoever was calling would hang up, I lost count of the number of

times that annoying clang tried to destroy my concentration. After the umpteenth ring, my patience broke and I picked up the receiver.

“Corey? It’s Jen. Are you doing anything for lunch today?”

“Yes. I’m working through it.” I had planned to snack on cookies and a cup of tea while I finished grading my students’ essays.

“What time will you be at home later on? I want to come by and pick up my things.”

“That’s fine. I’ll be home by four.”

“Good. See you later.”

That afternoon I had completed evaluating all the essays, and I’d met with two students before my self-imposed three-thirty deadline. When I closed the door to my office I saw a light reflected through the transom above Kinshasa’s doorway. I stood in front of it and tapped lightly.

“Kinshasa. It’s Corey. Are you in there?”

Kinshasa told me to always announce myself. Otherwise, I couldn’t count on her to respond to my knock. Apparently, she’d had some kind of run in with our tenured prick-in-residence, Carter Washington, and after that, she never wanted to be in her office alone with him. When she told me about that, her stock immediately rose in my eyes. If she weren’t a lesbian, at least she had good taste and good sense.

Kinshasa’s failure to answer the knock on her door disappointed me. I had an article about a young African-American filmmaker from Philadelphia and I wanted to share it with her. Also, I missed seeing what she was wearing today. Kinshasa had an amazing wardrobe. I didn’t know if I’d seen her wear the same outfit twice. Varied wardrobes and no worries about the rent represent what royalties from the mainstream publishing world can do for you, I suppose.

I trundled on home, tired but eager for Jennifer to arrive, gather her things, and leave. The doorbell rang at four-thirty. There was Jennifer. She leaned against the porch railing and she had a bag tucked under her arm.

“Hi!”

Jennifer stepped into the foyer and hugged me. I returned the embrace with my best imitation of a straight woman hug. I kept my body a foot away from hers, while I reached out and circled her shoulders with my arms. After two seconds I patted her back in a sisterly way.

“I’ve already packed your books, music, and CD-ROM’s in boxes. We just have to put the boxes in your car.”

Jennifer hoisted her bag waist height and peeled back the top of it. She extracted a bottle of wine.

“I thought we could have a drink, and then maybe go out for dinner.”

That creepy trapped feeling that overtakes me whenever I suspect I’ve been manipulated began to settle over me.

“The dinner idea is definitely out, Jen. I’m too tired.”

I saw disappointment shade her eyes.

“But a glass of wine would be nice. Give me the bottle, and I’ll pour while you start bringing the boxes downstairs.”

“You packed all the books that I left in our bedroom?” She asked.

“You bet.”

I wanted to add,

“Why the hell would I have left things in ‘our’ bedroom, if it isn’t ‘our’ bedroom anymore?” But, I didn’t.

By the time I came back with the two glasses, Jennifer had sunk herself into the living room sofa and she’d opened one of the boxes. She had taken her shoes off and was kneeling on the floor, sorting music CD’s.

“I still love this room,” She said. “It’s so warm and cozy.”

“How’s Pat?” I asked.

“She’s all right. She’s been doing a lot of overtime recently. She’s working with an anti-violence program at a high school in the city.”

Immediately my mind returned to the sounds I heard and the odors I smelled every time I entered Jefferson High School. I wished I wouldn’t always connect profanity and danger with that place. I wished I could ignore the palpable threat of violence that assailed me every time I entered that building.

I lifted my glass and concentrated on the aroma wafting from the wine. Jennifer kept talking.

“Pat’s excellent in a crisis. She knows exactly what to say to calm people down. So they took her out of the Special Victims Unit and reassigned her to this new project.”

“Do you worry about her safety little less now?” I was sincerely interested. I imagined when Jennifer fell in love with a cop, she’d bitten into a huge apple.

“No, not really. I read all the newspaper articles about kids bringing drugs and automatic weapons to school. It’s not as if she’s working in the best neighborhood. And she has to go to these school meetings at night, so she can talk to parents and community leaders.”

“I guess that leaves you with time on your hands?” I suddenly understood why Jennifer was here this evening.

“Yeah. And what about you? Do you have a lot of free time now?”

“Absolutely none. I’m working on Charlene’s project at Jefferson High in the city.”

“I don’t believe it, Corey. Jefferson is Pat’s school. That’s where she’s assigned. Haven’t you seen her there?”

“No, but I’m there only once or twice a week. And, it’s a huge place.”

I began putting the CD’s back into their box.

“I’ve heard good things about that project, but I never knew it was at Jefferson.” Jen sipped some wine. “You and Kinshasa Jordan are the two Allerton profs there, right?”

“Uh-huh. She used to teach in a high school, so I lean on her for advice.”

I thought I’d better not mention Jefferson’s lesbian assistant principal.

Jennifer scanned the room, and then looked back at me. “Are you sure you don’t have time for dinner?”

“I’m positive.” I took the last sip of my wine.

“So what’s Kinshasa Jordan like when you get to know her?”

“She’s competent, talented, and straight as the proverbial arrow.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Jennifer said. “The straight part, that is.”

“Nor I, but I guess we heard wrong. I was in her apartment once and I overheard her talking to her ex-boyfriend. His name is Michael.”

I bent down to secure the filled box.

“So maybe RESIST NOW! knew what they were doing when they protested at her reading,” Jennifer said.

“I’m not so sure about that. She’s straight, but I don’t think she’s a homophobe.”

“Have you really gotten to know her?”

Jennifer seemed as determined to continue this interrogation as I was to finish it.

“Not very well.”

Of all the people I had tried to fool about my on again-off again attraction to Kinshasa, Jennifer would be the most difficult.

I was afraid she could still see right through me just as she’d always been able to.

“We work together, that’s all. I see her on campus and at Jefferson, but we don’t socialize much with each other.”

Jennifer refused to be mollified. “I remember when we ‘just worked together’.”

“That was different, Jen. We’re both lesbians.” I stamped my voice with a tone of finality.

Jennifer stood and slipped her shoes back on.

“Okay. I’ll take everything out to my car.”

“I’ll help you, and we can do this in two or three trips.”

We loaded the boxes into the car’s trunk and slammed it shut. Before I could withdraw my hand from the trunk lid, Jennifer placed hers atop mine.

“How about a quiet dinner, Corey? We could go to that Italian restaurant at the edge of town.”

“Sorry, Jen, but I can’t.”

“Then why don’t we go back inside and finish the wine?”

Jennifer moved closer to me. Her intentions were obvious.

I felt suffocated by her willingness to spend time and share intimacy with me; time and intimacy that belonged to Pat now.

“Jennifer, I do believe I have more respect for your relationship with Pat than you do.”

“Go to hell, Corey.”

Jennifer got into her car and drove away without uttering another word. I went back inside the house and picked up the two used wine glasses. As I walked to the kitchen, I felt lighter on my feet. Even though I knew air offered no resistance, I still felt weightless. I'd been released from an onerous burden. I was free. Free of Jennifer's belongings, and free from all her manipulations.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“SHIT! I'M GONNA be late again.”

Pat jerked the stick shift into second gear and pointed the Jeep toward the city. She didn't want a few late arrivals to work to encourage suspicious minds to investigate where she lived. Pat maintained a Philadelphia address but most nights she stayed at Jennifer's apartment, outside the city limits. The commute from Jen's was only thirty-five minutes if Pat left the apartment promptly. A delay of only five or ten minutes thickened the morning traffic and made a late arrival a certainty.

Pat wouldn't consider changing her wake up time. What had changed was the ease with which she could leave Jennifer. Only months ago their parting ritual had been an affectionate one replete with deep kisses and loving caresses. Now it was different.

As their relationship ripened, Jen began to trust Pat less and less, although Pat had given her no reason to doubt her fidelity. More often than not, breakfast had become coffee laced with angry words. Jennifer suspected Pat of seducing every other woman she came in contact with during the course of doing her job. Pat suspected Jennifer of feeling unnecessarily guilty about leaving Corey and of missing that relationship.

Today was another one of those heated mornings. They'd skipped coffee altogether. A good twenty minutes behind schedule, Pat decided to go directly to Jefferson High instead of stopping for something to eat. She'd already spent three days this week trying to resolve a gang dispute that threatened to explode into something much bigger.

Then there was Tashna Barnett. Pat wanted one more crack at convincing the seventeen year old to press charges against her abusive boyfriend. When Pat first interviewed her, Tashna nodded a mute “yes”, she would file a complaint. Through tears and a swollen split lip, Tashna described how Kareem had punched her the night before. She confessed to Pat the attack wasn't the first time he had visited violence upon her.

“The first time was when I got pregnant with his baby. I needed money to get an abortion. Kareem got real mad and punched me. My nose broke.”

“Did you report him, Tashna?”

“No. I thought he was just nervous and confused about me having his baby. He didn’t really mean to hurt me. He loves me.”

“What happened the second time he hurt you?”

“The second time, he got mad cause I told him I needed some new clothes. The baby was makin’ me fat and I couldn’t fit in my regular things. So he yelled at me and pushed me down on the floor. Then he kicked me in the belly. He said he was gonna give me the goddamn abortion hisself.”

“What did you do? Did you tell anyone? Did you go to your counselor here at school?”

“One of my teachers found out from one of my friends. He reported it to my counselor, Mrs. Bridges, and she wanted me to tell the cops.”

“Did you do that? Did you file any kind of a report?”

“No.

“Why not?”

“I didn’t want Kareem to be in trouble with the police. Besides, I knew he was just feeling under pressure because he didn’t have much money and I was askin’ him to help me.”

“What happened to you two nights ago, Tashna?”

“I don’t know. We was just jokin’ around and all. He wasn’t even angry with me. Next thing I knew, Kareem pulled back his fist and wailed into the side of my head. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t even yell or nothin’. Then he punched me square in my eye and I couldn’t see. I couldn’t see if he was gonna punch me again.”

“And did he continue to punch you?”

“Yeah. He punched me hard on my mouth and I heard something crack. Kareem kept punching me until he screamed.”

“What did he scream?”

“He hollered ‘My fist is bleeding! You bitch, your broken ass teeth cut my knuckle!’ That’s when he stopped.”

“Tashna, I want to help you. It’s very important for you to file a report with the police.”

Tashna looked down at the floor. “Okay,” she mumbled.

Pat escorted Tashna from Marsha Riley’s office to the curb outside the front of the school. She helped her get into the squad car that awaited them.

Two hours later, after Tashna and the SVU detective assigned to her case finished all of the necessary paperwork, the pregnant high school student desperately wanted to take her empty eyes and defeated torso far away from the refuge of the police station. That foreign place didn’t feel like a refuge to Tashna. It felt more like her first stop on a trip to hell.

Tashna refused to sign any forms.

“I’m not signin’ those papers. I’m scared of what will happen if I sign them.”

“Who are you scared of, Tashna?” The detective asked her.

“Who do think?” She said. ”I’m scared of Kareem, I’m scared of Kareem’s “boys,” and I’m scared of his family.”

“But we need to arrest him, Tashna. If we don’t, he’s only going to hurt you again and again.”

“Yeah, and what happens when you arrest him and then he gets out on bail? Are you and that Detective Adamson from school gonna protect me twenty-four seven?”

This morning Pat parked her car in the high school’s faculty lot. She strode into the building and went directly to the assistant principal’s office, where she paced in front of its closed door. Finally, the door belched open. Out came an obscenity screaming parent. A young girl, probably the mad woman’s daughter, looked straight through Pat as she absorbed the litany of her mother’s tirade. Pat watched them grow smaller and smaller in their retreat toward the school’s exit. She stepped across Marsha’s threshold.

“Good morning. Looks like your day is off to a rollicking start,” Pat said.

Marsha returned the greeting.

“I have a feeling today is going to be a buster. How can I help you, Detective?”

“I thought I’d make one final attempt to talk Tashna Barnett into charging her boyfriend with assault.”

“You’re persistent. I’ll say that about you. Let me call her out of class.”

“Thanks.”

Pat stood while Marsha searched for Tashna's roster in her data base and then phoned a classroom. She liked the assistant principal's efficiency. She figured helping run a school as big as Jefferson High was probably as stressful as a cop's job.

While Pat waited for Tashna to arrive, she witnessed constant foot traffic through Marsha's door. Two different people needed her signature on school district forms. A couple of students and their parents awaited post-suspension interviews. Public address announcements got tangled with ringing telephones. Marsha handled all the confusion with ease and met every situation with a gracious smile.

She looked up at Pat.

"I'm sure Tashna is on her way. Her classroom was on the—"

Four short bells in succession buzzed past Pat and Marsha's ears. An emergency somewhere, Pat thought.

Pat looked beyond the office's open door. She watched Tashna's slow dawdle of an approach. A second series of quickly rung bells zipped staccato-like through the air.

"Somebody needs security officers," Marsha said. She divided her attention between the code and her walkie-talkie which had sprung to life suddenly.

As Tashna arrived and sat down in front of Pat, they listened to the frantic taps of a third emergency alert. Marsha jumped up from behind her desk.

"Feel free to use my office, Detective." She pointed to her two way radio. "We have three fights going on in different parts of the building. I have to go."

Marsha picked up her keys and her radio. Less than a second later, Pat told Tashna to wait there, that she'd be back shortly. Pat left the office. She trailed Marsha, and the static coming from Marsha's walkie-talkie.

The two women broke into a trot and climbed a flight of stairs two steps at a time. When they reached the second floor, they ran through a narrow hallway lined with classroom doors that had been locked from the inside. Several students who had watched their assistant principal and in-house police officer scale the steps quickly, formed a human wake behind Pat and Marsha.

"They say you shouldn't run to an emergency. It makes the situation worse," Marsha shouted over her shoulder.

"Instinct takes over, doesn't it?" Pat said.

Pat and Marsha shifted their pace from a trot to long strides. Pat noticed a mass of teenagers had formed a thick circle around an unseen nucleus. The circle kept moving, first to the left and then to the right. It grew alternately looser, then tighter and more dense.

Pat heard an adult's voice; perhaps a security guard's or maybe a teacher's. The voice yelled incoherent words at Marsha. Pat couldn't understand what the man was saying, but she saw the anguish spread across Marsha's face.

The crowd swept Pat into its inner band. Instinctively, she felt for her service revolver. She ripped open the leather strap that kept it in place under her jacket, near her left breast. She fingered the safety but didn't release it.

The crowd of screaming, frenzied students swarmed onward and took Marsha and Pat with it. Marsha yelled something unintelligible into her radio seconds before someone stripped it away from her hand.

Pat focused on the radio thief's yellow jacketed form. She reached out to collar the teenager when she felt her body slam against a wall. The impact her head, shoulders and spine absorbed was so profound, she never sensed the hand that reached in, grazed her breast, and removed her gun from its holster in one slick movement. Dazed, she thought she saw the flash of the cold blue-black metal as it reared back. She heard a scream rising through the air, and felt fire sear through her chest.

The swarm of people disappeared as quickly as it had gathered. It was as if a sudden winter freeze had paralyzed a hive of bees. Sulfur, blood, fear, and disbelief billowed throughout the hallway, gushed down the stairs, and emptied into the dangerous streets surrounding Jefferson High School.

Chapter Twenty-Six

JENNIFER FINISHED PROOFREADING the last part of the revised admissions policy. She set the document aside, rubbed her eyes, and stood up to stretch.

I need to get more sleep at night, she said to herself.

Before she could sit back down to begin her next task, her telephone rang. She scowled at the interruption and wished she wasn't obliged to answer it.

Jhonna Jones, Pat's former partner in the Special Victims' Unit, was on the other end of the line. She seemed barely able to speak. Jennifer listened without saying a word as Jhonna spoke to her. She struggled to understand the short sentences Jhonna spoke. It was hard to decipher

what Johnetta was saying because her voice, usually vibrant and booming, quavered so much it almost made the phone tremble in Jennifer's hand.

After Johnetta's words went silent, Jennifer shook her head slowly. She hung up the phone and stared into a black hole that threatened to swallow her.

An hour passed; then two. Jennifer let the phone ring unanswered. She refused to acknowledge the knocks that arrived at her door. Instead, she thought about the first time she and Pat met each other here in this very office. She recalled the rush she'd felt when Pat introduced herself and grasped her hand. That first contact had been more like a familiar embrace than the formality of a police detective's interrogation of a total stranger.

Jennifer remembered her ironclad determination to be coupled with Pat; to be consumed by her. She could still recall the afternoon they first made love in Pat's apartment in the city. Her body covered in sweat, her fingers entwined in Pat's short blond hair, Jennifer believed she'd never before felt that kind of passion. Her need to be possessed by Pat made committing the act of infidelity so easy for Jennifer. Easy, but not guiltless.

Jennifer replayed their parting words to each other; words spoken less than six hours ago. The heat they generated this morning had been fueled by anger, not passion; by suspicion, not unconditional trust. Why hadn't she accepted Pat's declarations of love? Why had she failed to believe in Pat's loyalty?

Jennifer pulled herself away from her memories. She picked up the phone and tapped out Corey's number. There was no answer. Her next call, to Charlene Gray, ended with an invitation to Charlene's voicemail. Jennifer rested the phone on her desk. Desolate as well as desperate to talk to someone who would understand how much she had just lost, Jennifer felt totally alone.

Another hour passed. She turned off the lamp on her desk, shrugged her coat over her shoulders, and walked out to the cold that awaited her in the parking lot.

"Jen." A voice called her name.

"I've been waiting here for you. I knocked on your office door, but you didn't answer. Then I tried calling you, but you didn't pick up your phone. I heard what happened. It's all over the radio and TV. I was so concerned for you I canceled my class and decided to wait here near your car."

Corey looked carefully at Jennifer. She was non-responsive.

Trance-like, Jennifer stared at Corey.

"We argued this morning before she left for work. If she had left home on time, she might have gotten there earlier. She might have been doing something else in some other part of the school. She might still be alive."

“Jen, you can’t blame yourself for this. It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have stopped this from happening.”

Corey reached for Jennifer’s arm.

“Why don’t you leave your car here? I’ll drive you home.”

“No. I can drive myself. I need to be at home. Some of Pat’s things are in my apartment. I need to touch them.”

“I don’t think you should be alone now. I can come over to keep you company. I can call Simone and Charlene. They’ll want to be with you, too.”

“Maybe tomorrow, but not tonight.” Jennifer looked away from Corey. “I thought I wanted to talk to someone, but I don’t. I just want to be by myself so I can think and remember things.”

Jennifer unlocked her car. She threw her briefcase into the empty passenger seat and then got in. Before she closed the door, she looked up at Corey.

“This is the first time someone’s left me behind. I usually do the leaving.”

Corey saw no need to respond. She watched Jennifer pull away and head toward the parking lot’s exit gate. She waited until she saw the barrier swung up, open, and close behind Jennifer’s car’s taillights.

Jennifer drove away from the university and headed toward the first of many painful, tear filled nights.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

KINSHASA LABORED OVER the final page of her letter to Gayle. The first part had flowed effortlessly from her mind. She wrote about her students at Allerton, her fractious run in with Carter Washington, and the writing project at Jefferson High. She described the horror of Pat Adamson’s death at the high school, and the joy of sharing Thanksgiving dinner with new friends.

Now, her computer’s keys seemed to be stuck in the embarrassment of RESIST NOW’s! demonstration during her signing event at the bookstore. She described the incident as

objectively as she could. She reduced it to a chronological list of events. What was difficult for her was describing her rescue from the bookstore. Kinshasa stuck to the facts and avoided reporting her feelings. She touched upon the moments she spent with Corey, as the two of them sat in her kitchen over mugs of coffee and discussed whether or not the anti-homophobia demonstration had been warranted.

Kinshasa mentioned that evening's contentious phone call from Michael. When she admitted she'd been abused, Corey had listened to her and offered no censure.

Kinshasa was more than ready to click "send," and sign off the Internet. She sighed when she realized describing the accusations of homophobia had been a breeze compared to trying to conceal her ever growing suspicion that Corey Lomax had begun to occupy more and more of her thoughts.

She stared at the empty expanse on the email template. She knew she couldn't end her message to Gayle with a simple, stark,

"I was grateful Corey and her two friends made sure I arrived home safely."

Gayle would know such an event in Kinshasa's life would have been laden with all kinds of emotions. To end her epistle with a pat statement would only precipitate a phone call and verbal grilling from Gayle. Gayle would force her to admit to her feelings. She would compel her to own up to feeling more than friendship for Corey. She'd have to confess she nurtured an ever-increasing attraction to Corey.

Kinshasa hovered above her computer. She accepted the inevitable, and began typing what resided in her heart. After spending eight months away from her former home in Connecticut, and more than a year in self-exile from Michael's alternate affection and anger, Kinshasa felt drawn to a new homecoming in a new place. When she ceased her denials and admitted her feelings, she knew home was beginning to look like Corey.

She had no idea, however, how to begin that journey to Corey. She had no notion of how welcoming Corey might be if only she could express her feelings honestly. To protect herself from possible hurt, she had sent Corey the wrong signals time and time again.

Lately, Kinshasa found herself looking for Corey when she was at the university, and hoping for a chance to talk with her when they were at Jefferson High. She'd watched Corey smile at her Jefferson students, and she'd found herself smiling also. She'd looked through Corey's open office door and spotted the grimace Corey wore while she looked down at a stack of ungraded papers. Those were the times when Kinshasa longed to reach for Corey and assure her the task wouldn't be as bad as she might think.

Kinshasa never acted upon her wishes. The fear of losing herself in another person loomed as real as Michael's slap in her face. That fear kept her thoughts and longings about Corey just that, thoughts and longings. She'd been abused once by a lover, and now she feared it was possible

she'd find herself in the midst of that abuse once again. The distance and ambiguity she'd shown Corey were her defense system.

Kinshasa completed her letter to Gayle. She reread it before sending it off to virtual space. When she reviewed the passage she'd written about the awkward, silent drive to Corey's house after her rescue from the bookstore, Kinshasa counted on Gayle to fill in the missing pieces; to know instinctively how she had felt.

The clock on the mantle in Kinshasa's living room sounded like it wore a microphone as it rhythmically reminded her how late it had become. Today it was her turn to host the "Allerton-Jefferson Six", and she had only one hour left to do the final preparations for the get-together.

Kinshasa went into the kitchen, cut some fruit, and arranged it on a platter with a variety of cheeses. She sliced French bread and gathered the mulling spices for the apple cider. She had peach cider also, because she'd heard Corey rave about a particular juice stand at a local farmers' market.

Methodically, she took out napkins, mugs, small plates, and the coffee maker. Every time the group met, Kinshasa had noticed Marsha Riley had a voracious thirst for coffee. She'd also witnessed Marsha's need to attract Corey's attention. The amusement she'd felt about Marsha's proclivity and had expressed publically to Corey, had changed to a quiet annoyance she kept private. She wondered if Corey had continued flirting with Marsha outside of everyone's view. Her curiosity felt inappropriate. It felt closer to jealousy than Kinshasa wanted. She preferred to be in the dark regarding Corey and Marsha's seeing each other socially. Who Corey dated was not her concern.

With a little more than an hour left before the start of the meeting, Kinshasa stepped into the shower. She shampooed and let the water flow from her head down onto her body. She leaned back against the shower's cool tile wall and caressed herself with her smooth, soapy hands.

Too relaxed to suppress the notion, she thought of Corey. Immediately Corey's smiling image competed with the waterfall as it cascaded down the length of Kinshasa's body. After a moment, she pulled herself away from the wall and away from wanting the woman who occupied her thoughts more and more frequently, more and more intensely. With every rough stroke of her bath towel, Kinshasa chastised herself for desiring Corey. She covered her head with the towel and then buried her face in its folds. She tried so valiantly to dry Corey out of her heart and mind.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

SARAH AND I arrived at Kinshasa's apartment at the same time. I had to admit we worked well together. I liked Sarah's "let's do it" attitude, and Sarah felt good about my willingness to learn how to work with younger students. She was a great mentor in a mothering kind of way.

"Half of the gang is here, Kinshasa," Sarah said.

Our host smiled her greeting.

"Come on in and hang your jackets in the closet."

I waited for Sarah to hang her coat before I walked to the closet to hang mine. I sensed Kinshasa looking at me, and I hoped my slacks and sweatshirt were presentable. We never dressed up for these meetings, but I didn't want to look too casual in front of her, nor in front of Marsha, for that matter.

Sarah preceded me to the living room.

"Kinshasa, your apartment is wonderful." She said. "All of these windows must give you great light on a sunny day."

"Thank you, Sarah. They do. It's too bad it's so cloudy today."

I looked through the largest window and thought I noticed rain beginning to fall lightly.

Kinshasa counted the chairs in the living room.

"Corey, could you do me a favor? I need two more chairs in here. Could you help me get them?"

"Sure," I said. "Where are they?"

"There's a hassock in the den. I'll get a chair from the bedroom."

I followed Kinshasa to the den and picked up the hassock.

"Is this the room where you'll write your next novel?" I asked.

"I've barely had a chance to think about the next one, although my agent is pressuring me." She paused. "How about you? Have you written any short fiction lately?"

I pointed to my head. "There's one up here, but I haven't committed anything to paper yet. Lately, life has been stranger than fiction."

“I think I know what you mean.”

“Do you need help with the chair?”

“I don’t think so.” Kinshasa smiled. “I don’t think you could help as long as you have an armful of hassock.”

I knew it was silly of me to follow Kinshasa to the bedroom instead of returning to the living room with my hassock delivery, but follow her, I did.

I wanted to see the rooms of her apartment I hadn’t seen the night we came back from the bookstore. I suppose what I really wanted was to see Kinshasa in a more intimate space. I ignored that she hadn’t invited me to accompany her there.

I walked behind her and when we arrived in the room, I looked at the quilted floral fabric atop her bed. I tried to memorize its colors, so I could add them to my fantasies of Kinshasa the very next time I forgot we were not more than friends and colleagues. I looked all around the room and tried to take in everything as quickly as I could. On her night table was an all too familiar book, mine. I said nothing about it. I did my best not to stare at Kinshasa, but it was difficult to keep my eyes from lingering on hers. Seeing Kinshasa in this place and finding something intelligent to say proved to be impossible.

Kinshasa broke the silence. “We’d better take these chairs into the living room.”

Just as we put the seats in place, Oliver and Charlene arrived. They walked in accompanied by two wet umbrellas, which Oliver wanted to leave out in the hallway near the apartment door.

“No, that’s all right. Put them here in the entryway. A little water won’t hurt anything.”

Kinshasa took the umbrellas from him and put them on the tile floor near the door.

“I’m afraid we brought the rain with us,” Oliver said meekly as if he were kneeling at confession.

“What a surprise.”

Sarah, whose dry sense of humor delighted everyone except Oliver, couldn’t resist making a remark. She looked at her young colleague and stifled a frown. More than once she’d thought she’d never known a young person to be so negative.

Charlene began the meeting before Marsha arrived.

“We can discuss some things without Marsha, especially since it looks like she’s going to be late.”

“Maybe she had car trouble, or maybe she’s been in an accident,” Oliver said.

I stole a look at Sarah in time to see her wince. Kinshasa's expression was inscrutable.

"I seriously hope not, Oliver." Charlene arched her eyebrow and kept talking.

"I've arranged for the university to print and bind all of the students' work. Their price is well within our budget. In addition, the Fraternal Order of Police is tossing in a nice donation, because the journal will be dedicated to Pat Adamson's memory."

Sarah nodded.

"And Marsha has cleared the way for the kids to use the word processors in the computer lab during class time instead of after school. You know how they hate to stay one minute after the last bell."

As if on cue, the phone rang. Kinshasa got up and responded to the intercom's signal.

A moment later Marsha arrived. She stormed into the foyer, her blood red raincoat draped cavalierly over one arm. It was obvious she enjoyed making a flashy entrance.

All of us thought we knew what was on the meeting's agenda, but it was clear Marsha had an agenda of her own. She gazed only at me as she said,

"Hello, how is everyone?" She seemed not to have heard our responses, nor Oliver's exclamation of relief that she hadn't been killed on a rain slicked road. She ignored all that was said and tried to undress me with her eyes as she sat down—next to me. I figured I must have been at the top of her agenda. To hell with whatever Charlene wanted us to accomplish today.

"Sorry I'm late, but you know what happens as soon as the streets get wet. Traffic was crawling. Now what did I miss so far?" Marsha asked.

I decided to enjoy Marsha's aggressive brand of charm. Sarah remained tolerant but watchful. Oliver was oblivious to it. Kinshasa was an easy read. She seemed royally pissed off about Marsha's diva entrance.

"You haven't missed that much." Charlene picked up the pieces of the interrupted flow and repeated what had been said before Marsha's entrance.

The meeting clipped along faster than the traffic on the rain soaked street four floors below us. We quickly reached a consensus about a lot of the students' writings, and decided to take a break for refreshments.

Sarah followed Kinshasa to the kitchen. "Let me help you serve everything, Kinshasa."

I attempted to stand, but Marsha grabbed my forearm and held me back.

"I missed seeing you this week," she said.

“I was there on Tuesday, as usual.”

“I had to leave the building for a meeting. The investigation of Detective Adamson’s death is going to take a long time.”

“I imagine it will,” I said.

“Come on, everyone. Wait ‘til you see all the goodies Kinshasa has for us,” Sarah called out.

We wasted no time filling our plates with cheese, bread, fruit, and cuts of vegetables.

“Thanks for remembering us vegetarians,” Oliver said solemnly.

Kinshasa watched me select one of the two carafes she offered, and then pour a mug of hot peach cider.

“You found it! Did you drive out to Reed’s Farmers’ Market?”

“Yes, I did. I followed your directions. I got the fruit and cheeses there, too.”

“You should have called me. I would have driven out there with you,” I said.

I saw the slightest tint of red color Kinshasa’s cheeks.

“Peach cider? I’ve never heard of that. May I taste some of yours, Corey?”

Marsha inserted herself between Kinshasa and me. Deftly she cupped her hands over mine and drew the mug to her mouth.

“This is wonderful! You certainly know what tastes good, Corey.”

Now it was my turn to feel crimson burn my cheeks. Kinshasa turned away from Marsha and me as the others decided to try a bit of peach cider. After everyone had poured a sample, I picked up the half empty carafe and headed to the kitchen to refill it.

Marsha followed me. As I filled the carafe with hot cider, I thought about the incongruity of this situation. Ever since I’d met Marsha, I’d looked forward to sharing a moment alone with her. Now, for some reason I was more concerned about having moments alone with Kinshasa than talking with Marsha. By the time I’d picked up the cider and filled carafe, I’d forgotten most of what she’d said to me. I do recall our little *tete-à-tête*’s conclusion. I remember Marsha’s definitive,

“Then it’s settled. MKDN’S Place at nine o’clock tonight.”

I believe I nodded obediently and replied, “I’ll be there.” I know I looked over at Charlene. She was the only other person in the room who knew about MKDN’S Place. And I’m certain I saw Charlene steal a look at Kinshasa from the corner of her eye.

Our little group reassembled in the living room, refreshed and ready to finish the meeting’s business.

“You don’t need any more input from me, do you, Charlene?” Marsha stood and walked to the coat closet.

I wondered if her exit would be as dramatic as her entrance.

“No. I don’t think so.”

Charlene looked down at her notes. “In fact, we’re just about finished for today. We’ve made some important decisions. Does anyone have anything else for the good of the cause?”

“Yes.” Kinshasa spoke stridently as she turned her gaze directly to me.

“I’d like to talk with Corey for a few more minutes. There are some details about editing the portfolios I need to discuss with you. Can you stay for a moment longer?”

“Sure.” I couldn’t refuse such a forceful request, although I needed some down time before I went somewhat reluctantly on my date with Marsha.

“And I’ll help you take the chairs back to the other rooms if you’d like.”

“That’s not necessary. I can do that myself.” Kinshasa’s tone hadn’t softened in the least.

“Kinshasa, I’ll see you at school next Tuesday.” Marsha tightened the belt of her raincoat.

“MKDN’S a little later, Corey?”

“You bet,” I said.

Charlene’s eyes telegraphed “what’s up?” a second before she walked out of Kinshasa’s and entered the hallway. I answered her with a shrug of my shoulders. Oliver and Sarah put on their jackets and hurried to board the elevator Marsha summoned.

I waited for Kinshasa to close the door.

“What’s going on? Is anything wrong with the portfolios?” I asked.

She stared back at me, as if she were waiting for her unexplained anger to travel from the boiling point to simmer.

“Kinshasa,” I spoke softly. “What’s so important about the editing that it can’t wait until we’re at school?”

When she didn’t answer my question, I lowered my voice and mocked a sexy whisper.

“You realize, don’t you, that I can’t be late for my rendezvous with Marsha.”

“What’s so important about your date with Marsha?”

Her question threw me, but I was willing to answer her candidly.

“Let me count the ways.” I held up my hand and prepared to bend back each finger, one at a time.

“First of all, I like the way she looks. Second, I like the way she looks at me. And third, I haven’t had a significant date for over a year now.”

I let my hand drop to my side and smiled mischievously. In offering Kinshasa an answer to her question, I had totally missed its antagonism.

“And I miss the significance of you having a date with her,” Kinshasa said slowly and clearly. Her voice dropped at least two octaves.

“May I ask you something, Corey?”

She didn’t wait for me to say yes or no.

“I’ve met Jennifer Renfrew and I know she’s your former partner. Now you seem to be interested in Marsha Riley. Do you only date white women?”

I wasn’t prepared for Kinshasa’s question, nor was I ready to confront the anger I sensed seethed behind it.

“In fact, I don’t. But since we’re talking about my dating habits, you might remember a few months ago, when I wanted to have dinner with a woman of color, you declined my invitation.”

Kinshasa glared at me. She remained undaunted by my answer.

“You told me your invitation to dinner wasn’t a date.”

“Maybe I wasn’t totally honest with you, or with myself for that matter. The point is, you wanted no part of going out with me.”

“You’re saying I’m the one who’s responsible for the choices you make regarding the kinds of women you want to spend time with? Simply because I didn’t want to go out with you for a drink or dinner? I don’t think so.” Kinshasa glared at me.

“Quite frankly, you’re not responsible for anything in my life, Kinshasa. And I resent your implying I’m not attracted to black women. Whose business is it, anyway? Surely, not yours.”

I could see Kinshasa begin to withdraw her ire.

“You’re right, Corey. It’s not my business. We don’t need to have this conversation at all. You should leave now while you’re still on time to meet Marsha at that women’s bar.”

She went to the closet and got my jacket. She shoved it into my hands.

“Thanks.”

I turned toward the door, but I didn’t want to leave Kinshasa draped in anger and recrimination. I felt completely undone. I couldn’t understand her fury and resentment. I wanted to forge a truce.

“Look, Kinshasa, I don’t know how we got to this place, but I’d like to leave feeling at peace with you. We’re friends. I don’t want to argue with you.”

The lines of fury that had appeared on her forehead moments ago disappeared. The hardened set of her jaw softened.

“Corey, I’m sorry. Really. I was way out of line, and apologize. I intruded into your personal business and I shouldn’t have.” She offered me her hand.

I accepted her apology along with her hand, and I sighed deeply when I thought about moments that might have passed between us. I knew I didn’t want to let go of her hand. I didn’t want to break the little bit of physical contact we had, as fleeting as it might be.

“Good-night, Kinshasa. I guess I’ll see you at school.”

I walked, somnambulant, along the hallway. When I arrived at the elevator, I leaned into its call button. The door opened and I walked in, eager for the elevator to swallow me and my feelings.

I was angry with Kinshasa. More than that, I was confused. I hated the mixed messages she’d sent me these last few months. I hated wanting her to care about me, and being afraid to care about her.

I went out into the wet darkness, crossed the street to my car and slumped into the driver’s seat. Sheets of cold penetrating rain rolled down the windshield as I sat there and considered the reality of my unanswered desire to be with Kinshasa, and the hurt of her continual rejection.

A friendship with her was not enough for me, although at one time I’d been willing to settle for that. The sooner the Jefferson High project was completed, the better. I’d only need to run into Kinshasa in the department office or in the classroom building where we both taught.

I put the key into the ignition and mentally replayed our argument. Damn it! Why did she care about my meeting Marsha Riley at MKDN'S? How did she know that place was a women's bar?

I gazed up at the fourth floor windows of her apartment building. Instantly I knew I'd never have another opportunity like the one in front of me; another chance to pursue someone I truly wanted.

I left my car and re-crossed the street. Once inside the vestibule, I picked up the entry intercom phone and dialed Kinshasa's memorized number.

"It's me, Kinshasa. Please let me in." I didn't recognize my own voice. I felt disconnected from it.

The door buzzed its permission to enter the building. I stepped into the same elevator I'd just left and I rested against its rear wall as it lifted me slowly to her floor. When I arrived at her apartment, Kinshasa was there by her open door.

She held me in her gaze.

"Did you forget something?"

All of the earlier fight had deserted her.

I stepped into the foyer and stood very close to Kinshasa. I inhaled and smelled the same fragrance she had left like an echo, in my home months ago, the night of the reception in her honor.

"Yes. I've forgotten a lot of things lately. Like being persistent when I want something or someone fervently."

Kinshasa looked down at the floor, then back up at me, cautious but willing.

I searched her face and stopped at her eyes. Without asking if I could, I leaned toward Kinshasa and kissed her gingerly on her mouth. Her lips formed a silent "no", so I stepped back in deference to her refusal.

"Please, Kinshasa. I want you. Spending time so close to you, but not being able to be with you is robbing the very breath from me."

"Being with me would be a mistake," she said.

Her eyes held such sadness.

"I keep searching for the mistake, but you seem so right."

Kinshasa took a step backward. Her eyes flashed defensively.

“How can you want to be with me and with Marsha Riley at the same time?”

“I don’t really want to be with Marsha. But you haven’t given me half a chance to really know you.”

I was closer to pleading with Kinshasa than I’d ever been with any woman. And I didn’t give a damn. I didn’t care about how I sounded or how desperate I appeared in her eyes.

Kinshasa shook her head vehemently.

“I don’t believe you, Corey. Thirty minutes ago, you were hot to meet Marsha at that bar. You didn’t want to be late for your significant date. Remember? You know your date would have ended in your bed or hers.”

“Kinshasa Jordan, I don’t believe you just said that to me.”

I spoke quietly, evenly. And I smiled faintly at the picture her anger had painted.

She didn’t answer right away. She walked over to the window and stared out at the rain. Seconds later, she wheeled around.

“I said it, and I mean it, Corey! You’d fuck Marsha in a New York minute. And then, you’d try your best to get me into bed. Inevitably, you’d screw over both of us!”

I approached Kinshasa and spoke to her as if our lives depended upon my next words.

“I’m not Michael, you know. It sounds like you’re describing his behavior.”

“You’re right. You’re not Michael. But Michael taught me some valuable lessons.”

Kinshasa had an answer for everything I said to her.

“Michael taught you pain.”

“Pain and not to trust anyone with my feelings.”

I stepped closer to her. “You could try trusting a woman.”

“I’ve tried that already. Michael is a woman.”

The fire in Kinshasa’s voice extinguished itself.

I gave her words time to filter through my mind and land in my heart. I chanced touching her cheek with my fingertips, tentatively, softly, yet determined to continue.

“I’m going to kiss you again, Kinshasa, because I can’t be this close to you and not kiss you. Wanting to be with you without being able to hurts.”

Very lightly and delicately, I covered Kinshasa’s mouth with my own. This time, her lips telegraphed their assent. This time, when I looked into her eyes, I saw a world of hurt, along with the promises that arrive with all the possibilities of love. I glimpsed the fear she felt and I tried to temper it with hope.

Kinshasa placed both of her hands on my face. She sketched an outline of my cheekbones before her hands came to rest on my mouth. I kissed each finger, made a shelter of my arms and circled Kinshasa. We spoke in half whispers, our voices muffled by months of mutual want. I whispered the words, “I want you. Please trust me.”

The raindrops that clung to the living room windows photographed Kinshasa as she draped her arms over my shoulders, and opened her mouth to meet my kisses. She pulled away long enough to find my hand and lead me through the hallway.

I followed Kinshasa until we reached the darkened bedroom. My legs threatened to buckle under the weight of the realization that what I had wanted to happen for so long was about to begin. So many times I had imagined undressing Kinshasa. It was always slowly. I always imagined I’d enjoy the disappearance of each piece of clothing.

Contrary to my imagination, it was Kinshasa who took charge. She pulled my rain dampened jacket from my shoulders, and then my sweatshirt up and over my head. She smiled her appreciation when she saw I wasn’t wearing a bra. She kissed both breasts and awakened my nipples.

I unbuttoned Kinshasa’s shirt and slipped it past her shoulders and arms. Very gently, I removed her bra. Kinshasa’s breasts were as I had pictured them, rounded, the color of burnished copper, and accented by darker nipples that grew along with her desire for our lovemaking.

We began to kiss, tentatively at first, and then almost uncontrollably. Kinshasa’s throat vibrated with barely audible sounds. So great was my want for her.

“Please make love to me, Corey.”

I unzipped Kinshasa’s slacks and guided them and her panties to the floor. She hooked her thumbs in the belt loops of my jeans and eased them down and over my hips. Together we removed them completely and smiled at each other shyly when we felt how wet my panties had become.

We began to kiss again, determined to touch every inch of each other. I sat on the bed and Kinshasa stood in front of me. I caressed her hips as I leaned forward and made small bites on her rounded stomach. With my tongue, I drew small circles around her navel. I listened, as our passion built and Kinshasa called out my name.

As I guided Kinshasa onto the bed, I never interrupted my kisses; never ceased the caresses. I let my hand travel from her hips to her thighs. She understood my message, and opened herself to welcome my loving.

“Corey, I want you so much. I want you inside of me.”

I lost my mind with that invitation. My eyes misted over with the wonder we were creating. I entered Kinshasa’s center with one finger, and then with two. I moved in and out of her with passion’s grace, stroking her in her most tender place. Wracked with feeling, Kinshasa wrapped her legs around my waist. Our pleasure had increased to such a fine intensity.

“I’m loving you so much, Kinshasa. Baby, I can’t stop myself from coming.”

“Corey!” Kinshasa lost all the control she’d ever truly had.

We lay together, facing each other. Our bodies were merged by sweat and sweet secretions. When Kinshasa looked in my eyes I willed her to see a calm sea, even as she continued to shudder from the storm of our lovemaking. When I looked at her, I saw clear to the bottom of the ocean. In Kinshasa’s eyes, I saw all the refuge love promised, all the joy and freedom we had earned by taking this one last chance to find each other.

We pulled the bed covers near, and I asked Kinshasa if I could stay for the night. She smiled her assent and we slept peacefully, nearly until dawn, when we awoke and rolled into lovemaking once again. It was good. It was so very good for both of us.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I COULD SENSE Kinshasa was in her office, even before I smelled her perfume or heard the muted sounds of a phone conversation drift through the open space under her door. During these past few weeks it seemed every one of my senses had become attuned to her presence. I was unalterably in love with Kinshasa Jordan and I didn’t hesitate to admit it. All the months I’d denied my attraction to Kinshasa had only increased my urge to love this woman.

Since the afternoon when we first made love to each other, we’ve spent as much time together as possible. We’ve talked endlessly without running out of new things to say. We’ve asked each other questions and we’ve listened to each other’s responses. We’ve learned that each of us views the world differently. Our next step is to learn to understand those differences and respect them.

Of course, we've spent a lot of time making love. Sometimes we've been in a furious rush. We've grabbed, pushed, pulled, turned, demanded loudly, only to rest for a moment and then do it all again. Other times we've touched each other slowly, caressed each other lightly, whispered, tasted, and enjoyed the pleasure of our mutual touches. No matter how we made love, every time was an opportunity to enhance the trust that had begun to bloom within both of us.

I liked to remember the first time I saw Kinshasa. It was at the Luna Negra on a Sunday early last March, the same day I looked out my kitchen window and spotted the spring flowers bursting from their bulbs into blooms. At the time, I hadn't realized those tiny crocus faces were harbingers of a wonderful fate.

Mid December has arrived. In the past, I've faced winter's approach with dread. I've mourned the disappearance of the late fall's flowers, and I've sent the snow blower off for its annual check-up with the secret hope I wouldn't need to use it more than once or twice. When I glanced out the kitchen window this morning, I saw the last leaves from the winterberry holly had fallen to the ground. Nothing more than sheer stubbornness had kept them attached to their branches until now. Nothing less than sheer generosity had encouraged them to leave gorgeous bright red berries in their place. During the winter months, the birds would have many meals and I would have many spectacular views. This winter I wouldn't mind clearing the sidewalk of ice and snow, especially if I were clearing a path for Kinshasa. This winter I would be warm. I would be loved. I knocked on Kinshasa's office door. I was confident she and I would make our way through any adversity the winter had to offer.

"It's me, Kinshasa."

I nudged the door open just as Kinshasa swung around in her chair.

"Hey—come on in. Good morning."

"Hello, baby." Aware of the building's thin walls and the even thinner veneer of tolerance at the university, I whispered my greeting to her. "I missed you last night."

"I missed you too, honey. But I knew I had to stay at my place. It was the only way I was going to be able to work on my students' grades. There are too many distractions when I'm alone with you." Kinshasa winked. "Do you have time to sit down and have a cup of coffee with me?"

"I'm afraid not. Besides, we're safer with me standing a few feet away from you. If I get any closer, I can't be responsible for my actions."

I looked at her and felt such tenderness mixed with desire. I wanted to glide closer to her and explore her mouth with mine. Sometimes my impetuous self didn't care who might see or hear us.

"Did you finish your grades?" I asked.

"Yes. I emailed them to the records office about an hour ago."

“Good. So we’re on for tonight?”

“Tonight? Are we supposed to see each other tonight?” Kinshasa teased.

“Well, I should check my schedule. I believe I penciled you in for dinner. Today is Friday, right?”

I teased her in return.

Kinshasa grinned.

“Touché. What time should I be there?” She asked.

“I’ll be home by three. Can you be there at three-o-one?”

“Corey Lomax, isn’t three o’clock a little early for dinner?”

I stepped closer to her, bent down and blew into her ear.

“Dinner is at six. You’re the appetizer. Please be at my front door at three o’clock, and in my arms a minute later.”

Kinshasa smiled and turned toward me. Her mouth was just inches from mine.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. I’d ask you what’s for dessert, but I don’t want to risk Dr. George’s seeing and then firing us.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Unemployment isn’t pretty. I’ll tell you all about dessert when I see you.”

I inhaled her fragrance as I took a step backward. “Better pack your boots. We’re supposed to get some snow later on tonight,” I said.

“You cook and forecast the weather, too? I’m impressed.”

“You’d better be impressed, woman.”

I stood in the doorway and gazed at Kinshasa.

“You know, Kinshasa, in the short time since we’ve been seeing each other, I’ve become a better person.”

“Is ‘seeing each other’ how you’d describe our relationship, Corey?” Kinshasa matched my serious tone with her own.

“It’s much more than that, and we both know it.” I smiled. My gaze remained steady and serious. “I’ll see you about three o’clock, honey.”

“Yes you will.”

Chapter Thirty

KINSHASA ENTERED THE den in her apartment. She sat at her desk and sorted two days of mail. She tossed the circulars into the waste basket and stacked the bills and periodicals in front of her. She examined an envelope her landlord had mailed to her. It was too early in the month for her to receive the rental remittance coupon, so she wondered if the envelope contained a lease renewal letter.

No one from Allerton University had said or sent anything to her about a contract extension. Both Corey and Simone had wondered aloud if her writer-in-residence status could either remain in place for an additional year or change to whatever title the university’s hierarchy determined. If either of those two possibilities came to be, Kinshasa would have to contact the New Haven School District about her leave of absence. Clearly she had to make some decisions soon.

She and Corey needed to talk about the future of their relationship. Kinshasa trusted they could have this discussion free of pressure. If Corey harbored any reservations about building a lasting relationship with her, Kinshasa wanted to halt it before their bonds grew any stronger.

As she fingered the sealed envelope, Kinshasa imagined part of an email she planned to write to Gayle.

“There’s no doubt in my mind about Corey and me. I know I want permanence with her. Even after Corey professed her love, I held parts of myself back from her. It was difficult for me to give her everything, because I didn’t know if I could trust her. I didn’t know if our infatuation with each other was just that, an infatuation. Then, I wasn’t sure if the physical pull we experienced would lead to a meeting of our emotional selves. I listened to Corey so closely. If I’d heard any angry words of criticism, or if I’d picked up on signs of her dissatisfaction with any part of my heart, mind, body, or soul, I was ready to renounce the relationship. If Corey showed me any evidence or any remnants of Michael’s behaviors, I was prepared to make an escape once again. She hasn’t done that. She has been kind and loving. Early on, the evening of the welcome party she hosted, Corey revealed to me her most intimate truth. She revealed it openly, honestly, and fearlessly. She has shown me who she is from the very beginning, although I didn’t share with her who I was. It’s time for me to stop holding back, with the expectation I’ll find Michael’s cruelty lurking within Corey. I love this woman and I want very much to make a life with her.”

Kinshasa put down the envelope and glanced at her watch. She couldn't believe it was two-thirty already. The drive to Corey's would take at least twenty minutes, this time of afternoon. She smiled when she recalled how Corey referred to Allerton's afternoon traffic. She called it "the senior speed trap," because it seemed like all the senior citizens were driving between ten a.m. and four p.m. The men always wore hats and many of the women wore slacks and floral print pastel-colored over blouses. Not a single senior ever drove faster than twenty-five miles per hour. If you happened to get stuck behind one of them, you were in "the trap". Kinshasa laughed when Corey shared her midday traffic theory. Then she teased Corey.

"We're not that young, Corey. We'll be contributing to those traffic jams before we know it."

Kinshasa had left her briefcase in the trunk of the car, so all she had to do was grab a change of clothes, and put it in her overnight bag. Always eager to spend more time with Corey, Kinshasa had learned the fine art of reducing half a dozen domestic chores into one continuous motion.

She remembered Corey planned to cook salmon for dinner, so she grabbed a bottle of chardonnay. She glanced out the living room window and noticed snow had begun falling lightly. She pushed her arms into the sleeves of her jacket and scooped up her boots just as her phone rang the entry system's abrupt signal.

Maybe it's a delivery, she thought. Maybe it's the books I ordered from Gerald's store.

Kinshasa put down her boots and answered the phone.

"Yes?"

She heard the electronic crackle of static. Then she heard the voice.

"Kinshasa? It's me."

For a second she froze.

"What are you doing here, Michael? What do you want?"

"To see you for a few minutes."

Her mind raced. She knew it would be smarter to see Michael in the lobby, instead of up here alone in her apartment. A public setting would be the wrong place to stage an emotional scene.

"Stay there. I'll be down in a minute."

Kinshasa picked up her boots. She made sure her keys were in her jacket pocket. She hoisted the over-night bag over her shoulder and marched to the elevator. When she emerged, she saw Michael peering through the vestibule door's window.

Kinshasa strode forward and opened the door. Michael reached out and tried to embrace her. Kinshasa stepped back and turned slightly to avoid the embrace.

“It’s so good to see you, baby.” Michael licked her lips.

Kinshasa stared at Michael. She struggled to recall what had drawn her to Michael in the first place.

“I can’t return the compliment,” she said.

Michael cocked her head to one side.

Kinshasa readied her immunity against Michael’s predictable fail proof charm.

“You look as good as I remember, baby.”

Kinshasa stood toe to toe with her.

“I hope you can remember everything, Michael. Do you remember the last time you saw me? I had blood dripping from my face.”

Michael looked down at the tile floor and summoned her frequently rehearsed expression of contrition.

“I’m so sorry about that, Kinshasa. I’ve changed. You know what I’m saying? I’m not the same Michael I used to be.”

“I’ve changed too,” Kinshasa said.

Michael straightened her posture. She eyed Kinshasa from the top of her head down to her feet.

“Looks like you’re going somewhere,” Michael said. “Want company, or is this a solo trip?”

“I am going somewhere. And no, I don’t want your company.” Kinshasa made no effort to hide her impatience. “Let’s end this conversation quickly.”

“Quickly? I’ve driven all the way down here from New Haven. And you want to rush me?” Michael’s voice grew louder.

“Driving all the way here is totally on you, Michael. No one sent you an invitation.”

Michael held her hands up defensively.

“Okay. Okay. I’ll accept that from you.”

She moved closer to Kinshasa, who stood her ground.

“If you’ll hear me out, you just might want to change your mind about wherever you’re going, honey.”

Kinshasa wished this weren’t happening. She envisioned Corey at home waiting for her to arrive. She imagined she could feel Corey’s arms encircling her waist, pulling her close. That’s where she longed to be. Not here in this apartment building’s lobby, but held by Corey’s arms. Kinshasa leveled her gaze and her anger. She lowered her voice.

“Hear me out, Michael. There is absolutely no one on this earth who could change my mind about where I’m going. If you think I’m the least bit interested in you after the way you abused me, you’re out of your damn mind.”

Kinshasa inhaled deeply.

“This is the last time I’m going to say this to you. I do not love you. I don’t even like you. If you come here again, I’ll get a restraining order against you.”

Michael’s mouth twisted oddly. It personified cruelty.

“Yeah, I can see you’ve changed, Kinshasa. You’re not even giving me a chance to talk to you. You’ll get a restraining order? You’re just mouthing off.”

Michael paused for air, then reloaded.

“You know all those times I called you a bitch? I didn’t know what a bitch really was. But you’re showing me now, aren’t you?”

She glared menacingly at Kinshasa, took a couple of steps backwards, and then came forward again, quickly. She stood so close, Kinshasa could feel the waves of heat radiating from her body.

“And you think I hit you hard before? You don’t fucking know what hard feels like.”

Michael’s hands knotted into fists.

Kinshasa released her boots and let them fall to the floor. She stood as erectly as she could. With her chin thrust forward, she dared Michael to follow through with her implied threats.

“Go ahead, Michael! Hit me! Show me how much you’ve changed, damn it!”

Michael glared at her for what seemed like hours. She unfurled her fists and began to plead.

“You can’t leave us like this, Kinshasa. Look, I know I was wrong, and I hurt you. I’m sorry. I apologize. I want you back. Please, baby.”

Kinshasa exhaled.

“Go on back to Connecticut, Michael. I have a life here now, and I’m happy.”

Aching for Corey’s presence, Kinshasa retrieved her boots and stepped around Michael. She walked out into the snow, toward her car. She never looked back. Instead, she drove away, certain she had done the right thing.

Chapter Thirty-One

“COREY” I’M HERE.”

Kinshasa let herself into Corey’s home. She arrived half an hour after her confrontation with Michael. Shaken and preoccupied with how close she’d come to absorbing another blow from Michael’s fist, she had taken her time and driven slowly over Allerton’s snow slickened streets.

“I’m in the den, baby.” Corey stood up from her desk and met Kinshasa at the doorway to the room. “What took you so long? I’ve been waiting for you.”

They lingered through a kiss as Kinshasa cradled Corey’s face in her hands.

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Come on out to the kitchen with me. We can make dinner together,” Corey said.

She put her arm around Kinshasa’s waist and reveled at the welcome Kinshasa always offered whenever they hugged each other.

“I brought a bottle of wine, honey.” Kinshasa handed the bottle to Corey. “What are you going to serve with the salmon?”

“How about some rice and a salad?”

“That sounds good.”

“Want to be in charge of the salad?”

“I think I can handle that.”

As Kinshasa washed the salad greens, she looked through the window and watched the snow fall silently and then nest on the branches of the stately evergreens that bordered the rear of the property.

“Your yard is beautiful, even in the winter,” Kinshasa said. “I remember how lush everything was last June when you had my ‘welcome to Allerton’ party.”

She turned around and faced Corey.

“Simone did such a good job to promote your gardening talents. She could be your agent, you know.”

Corey grinned. “Sometimes I think she is.”

“She pointed out all the flower beds you’ve established since you moved here, and all the trees and shrubs.”

“Yup. That’s Simone. She and Karin have given me most of the spring and fall blooming bulbs as Christmas and birthday presents. They turn out to be special gifts, especially if we’ve had a rough winter.”

Kinshasa turned from the sink. She wanted to give all her attention to Corey.

“When do the first springtime bulbs begin to bloom?”

“Usually in early March. But sometimes in late February, if the winter’s been mild.”

“And when do the pine trees sprout their new needles?”

“In early May,” Corey said. She walked over to Kinshasa and wrapped her in her arms. Very gently she placed kisses as delicate as rosebuds on Kinshasa’s neck.

“That’s five months from now. Maybe, by that time you’ll be living here with me.”

Kinshasa gazed steadily into Corey’s eyes. She got lost in the pools of sincerity she saw there.

“I want so much to live with you, Corey, here or anywhere.”

She remembered the piece of mail she’d left on her desk in the apartment, and she knew exactly how she would respond if the letter from her landlord was a lease renewal form. Perhaps Allerton University would offer to renew her contract; perhaps not. Either way, she supposed she would have to write to the New Haven School District. She intended to change her one year leave of absence to a permanent resignation.

About the Author

Renée Bess is a Philadelphia native, and she and her partner reside in a northwest suburb of that city. Renée taught Spanish and French in a city high school for quite a few years. At the age of six, she was captivated by the plot of Dr. Dan The Bandage Man. She subsequently became enamoured of Nancy Drew, the Hardy boys and years later, Celie and Shug. Books became a necessary part of Renée's life, and writing became the natural corollary. She expects that there are more stories eager to come tumbling forth.

Other S. Renée Bess Books

Breaking Jaie

Jaie Baxter, an African-American Ph.D candidate at Philadelphia's Allerton University, is determined to win a prestigious writing grant. In order to win the Adamson Grant, Jaie initially plans to take advantage of one of the competition's judges, Jennifer Renfrew, who is also a University official. Jennifer has spent the past ten years alone following the murder of her lover, Patricia Adam-son, in whose honor the grant is named. Jennifer is at first susceptible to Jaie's flirtation, but is later vengeful when she discovers the real reason for Jaie's sudden romantic interest in her. A lunch with an old cop friend reveals that Jaie may very well have ties to Adam-son's death.

Jaie is confronted with painful memories as she prepares an autobiographical essay for the grant application. She recalls the emotional trauma of her older brother's death, the murder of a police detective, her dismissal from her "dream" high school, and her victimization at the hands of hateful homophobic students. She remembers her constant struggles with her mother's alcohol-fueled jealousies and physical abuse she had to endure. This wake-up call causes her to look at her life in new ways.

But Jaie is not the only student applying for the grant. Terez Overton, a wealthy Boston woman, is Jaie's chief competitor. Jaie is drawn to the New Englander immediately but is also unnerved by her. She has no clue that Terez is trying to decide whether she wants to accept an

opportunity to write an investigative article about an unsolved murder. Writing that article could put her budding relationship with Jaie in jeopardy.

And just when the angst of old memories and the uncertainty of her future with Terez are complicating Jaie's life, her manipulative ex, Seneca Wilson, returns to Philadelphia to reclaim Jaie using emotional blackmail. Seneca's actions serve to wound and break Jaie in many ways. Will Seneca drive the final wedge between Jaie and Terez? Who will win the Adamson grant? And what did Jaie have to do with the death of Patricia Adamson?

The Butterfly Moments

After a twenty-plus year career as a Parole Officer in Philadelphia, Alana Blue is more than ready to leave her job and move on to more rewarding work. Jaded and burned out, Alana is given the difficult assignment of supervising Rafe Ortiz, a renegade Probation and Parole Officer who arrives in Alana's office by way of a disciplinary transfer and with a reputation for accumulating meaningless sexual conquests.

Alana's life is more complicated by the frequent conflicts she experiences with her homophobic daughter, Nikki. Convinced that the transparency of her mother's sexuality doomed her first marriage, Nikki is obsessed with keeping her second union intact, even if it means constantly repudiating Alana. Nikki's husband, Owen Reid, doesn't always agree with his wife's opinions regarding same-gender relationships; nor does he always support their marriage by remaining faithful to Nikki.

As Alana is reaching for an opportunity to pursue a new career, the body of a brutally murdered university student is discovered partially hidden on a property very close to Alana's neighborhood. Detective Johnetta Jones, recently retired from the Philadelphia Police Force, and hired by a suburban law enforcement department, is assigned to the murder case. When the investigation leads her to one of Alana's parolees, Johnetta remembers having interviewed this particular Parole Officer once before. Although her memory of Alana is mostly pleasant, Johnetta remains more emotionally connected to her work than she is to any woman she's ever met. Vaguely discontent, she is reluctant to forge a romantic connection with anyone...until her path intersects with Alana's once again. Their renewed contact suggests the possibility of love and the end of loneliness for both women. As Johnetta and her work partner, Detective Harold Smythe, get close to solving the university student's murder, Johnetta realizes arresting their suspect will imperil her tenuous relationship with Alana.

Alana becomes caught in the war between her impulsive attraction to Rafe Ortiz's flirtatious pursuit and her realization that her feelings for Johnetta Jones are growing deeper with each

passing day. Will everything in Alana's world disintegrate when lies are revealed, true identities are exposed, and the murderer is unmasked?

Re: Building Sasha

Sasha Lewis, the uber-competent manager of Whittingham Builders, finds herself drowning in a riptide of distrust as she struggles to maintain her relationship with Lee Simpson. A genius at balancing details, Sasha commits a career-derailing error while being distracted by Lee's threat to burn down their house and its contents.

Lee's flagrant sexual liaisons with a business client, Angela Jackman, and her escalating deeds of emotional cruelty rip apart Sasha. In self-imposed exile from most of her friends, Sasha recalls a brief encounter with Avery Sloan; an encounter destined to become more meaningful when Avery's social service agency hires Whittingham Builders to rehab an old Victorian house.

What hateful acts will Lee perform in an effort to degrade Sasha? How much damage will Sasha endure before she begins to rebuild her spirit? Will Sasha grab Avery's outstretched hand and accept the gentle yet exciting offer of love she sees in this woman?

Other Regal Crest Books You Might Also Enjoy

I Heard the Pastor's Daughter Is Gay

by Luana Reach Torres

Katie North breezes through high school as an undercover nerd helped by the fact that her best friend is the most popular girl in school. Katie has no clue that she's smokin' hot and the object of a few varsity athletes' drool. She's a pastor's daughter-Miss Goodie Two Shoes--and up

until now, her number one priority has been graduating with the highest honors. But, everything changes when Katie falls in love for the first time with a girl. Her world is blown wide open, and everything changes. Will Katie find her true self at the cost of her father's love?

Running With George

by Charles Lunsford

A week after Chester (known as Chick) turns forty-nine he views his reflection in the mirror in his dining room and vows to get his "sorry ass in shape." One day as he is bending over to tie his running shoes, he hears someone coming up behind him and looks up to see the finest ass and legs in a pair of black spandex shorts he has ever seen. What starts out as a possible love interest becomes more than a friendship that helps Chick rejoin the human race. Running with George, proves that anything is possible through love dedication and a good hard sweat.

The Secrets of the Other Side

by Eric Gober

Neil Ostwinkle is growing up in a Las Vegas trailer court where he realizes early on that he'd rather marry the Professor, not Mary Ann or Ginger. He prefers Aunt Louise's colorful makeup kits to drab green army men, and he swaps clothes with his best bud Rebecca Mooney because her silky dresses feel like magic on his skin. But in school he learns that being different has frightening consequences and keeps his desires secret.

Neil can't understand why his mom, Ellen, shackles him with one bad stepfather after another. She marries and divorces a mooch, a two-timer, and a pyromaniac. When he hits puberty, he learns you can't always keep your heart from going wild. Or stop your heart from breaking. His first relationships are traumatic, but when Neil meets Clark Martin at a Halloween party, he grabs hold of him tight. Finally, he's convinced love is here to stay, only to discover that AIDS may steal Clark away from him. With help from friends and from Aunt Louise, Neil fights a bitter battle on Clark's behalf. Neil summons help from unusual friends like Jacaranda "Jackie" Stump, a king-sized drag queen with dreams of being a Hollywood wardrobe artist who becomes a friend for life.

Will Neil find and keep love? He comes of age in the Eighties and Nineties, a tumultuous time for a young gay man. Will he be able to make a life of his own when he's battling societal prejudice, family strife, loss, and marriage inequality?

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