

head. "That's so sweet of you but it's no big deal. You should enjoy the day with your kids."

"I'll have plenty of time with them today, don't worry," Vanessa said, leaning in. "Besides, how else can I get my kids in the shots?"

Shay laughed. "Oh, I'll get them in. Don't worry." As she bent over to retrieve the camera, Vanessa pulled it from her, tucking it underneath her arm.

"Listen, you don't want to miss these moments with your grandmother. Believe me."

Shay's expression softened. Not wanting to elaborate, Vanessa continued. "Anyway, I outrank you. So scoot!"

"Ok, ok," she relented.

After updating Vanessa on the locations and the general feel of the project, she picked up her bag and offered Vanessa a smile through her vibrant hazel eyes. Giving Vanessa's arm a gentle squeeze, she whispered.

"Thank you."

8

Shay

HAVE YOU EVER seen so many candy wrappers in your life?" Shay said, retrieving a piece of golden Rolos foil from the gray carpet and tucking it into a nearly full garbage bag.

Mimi laughed from the kitchen, drying the last of a pile of dishes. "Yeah, those kids acting like it's their last Halloween," she said.

There had to be at least twenty of them in and out of Mimi's house all night. Sunday dinners were always busy but Halloween brought the neighbors out as well as family members. The parade of costumes were as varied as their personalities. The most intricate, a home-made take on wonder woman, earned three pieces of candy. The absurdly lazy teenager who cut holes in a bedsheet got one piece. Plus a threat from Mimi that she'd tell his mama he ruined her sheets.

Sunday dinner usually took Mimi all day to cook. On the rare occasions where Halloween fell on this day of the week, she was actually able to relax. AJ always came by and grilled

burgers on Halloween, sparing her the duty of roasting a chicken. His carefully carved cheese slices in the shape of jack-o-lanterns, laid neatly over the patties brought joy to the kids for a moment before they were smothered in ketchup and topped with a bun.

As Shay closed the garbage bag, Mimi patted her shoulder and slowly lowered herself onto a chair at the kitchen table.

“Tea?” she asked.

“Hmmm,” Mimi moaned.

She looked older than her sixty-seven years. The inevitable toll of diabetes. Her skin was always dry, her vision had become blurry, and even simple tasks like washing dishes seemed to drain her. Only an hour ago she was getting dizzy just getting up from her chair. The diagnosis came much later than it should have. Partly because Mimi insisted she was just getting older. Partly because her doctor agreed without asking more probing questions. Shay was on a fellowship in Paris at the time and she was furious to discover that Mimi had no one at her side to advocate for her health. Something she quickly rectified when she got to Chicago and found a new doctor.

The low hum of the kettle interrupted her thoughts. Opening the cabinet, she reached around a dozen mugs (gifted to her but rarely used) to find Mimi’s kitten mug. In recent years, she had become the woman who insisted on specific mugs for certain times of day.

“Thank you baby.”

Mimi wrapped her frail fingers around the base of the cup, warming them as the temperature dropped outside the open window. Sipping from her own cup, Shay watched the sheer curtains gently flowing in the breeze, feeling herself descend from the chaos of the evening.

“Great party, Mimi,” she said.

“Yes, it was,” a voice from behind them agreed.

They both turned to see AJ returning from the basement with storage boxes. Although Halloween was his favorite holiday, he was the first to pack it up when the final bat-shaped Reese’s cup had been eaten.

As Shay began peeling the bloody gel hand prints from the windows, AJ tried rolling up the police line tape. When the sticky side of it clung to other decorations, he began to curse. Shay and Mimi looked at each other with raised eyebrows. He’d been so much fun early in the day. But something shifted in his mood. They hadn’t quite been able to work out the cause but they knew better than to ask. Wrapping the yellow plastic into a ball and throwing it into the bag, he lifted his head to meet their eyes.

“Sorry,” he said.

Mimi and Shay sat motionless. This was how to deal with AJ. He knew when he was wrong. He just needed a few moments of non-judgmental silence.

“Got a text after the kids went out to trick or treat,” he said. “I didn’t get the job at ACF.”

Shay felt her heart sink.

“AJ, I’m so sorry. Did they say why?” she asked.

His eyes turned dark as he glared at her. She knew why. No matter how well he explained the situation during interviews, no business wanted to hire someone from the Chicago PD gang database. On the way to a club one night, he was arrested along with his friends for marijuana possession. Because two of them were members of the ViceLords, the entire group was placed in the database. Just the week before, he'd lost his initial appeal to be removed. He was hoping the office administration job at the American Culinary Federation would lead to a career as a chef.

"I'm sorry, baby. I thought that would be a good job for you," Mimi reached out, taking his hand.

"Yeah, well, I just texted Leroy over at Jackson Street BBQ. I was gettin' take out last week and he said they needed help with catering. I told him if I didn't get it, I'd call. I start Wednesday."

Shay felt a wave of relief. AJ hadn't been himself lately. He had trouble finding his way as an adult, but he was always a devoted grandson. Recently, though, despair started to settle in. And Shay feared he was becoming the person the system believed him to be. A pot smoking dropout who hung out with gangsters and only looked for work when he needed club money. This was the first sign in weeks that he wasn't ready to give up.

"Does this mean we get free short ribs?" Shay teased.

AJ smiled. "Finish putting away the decorations. Then we'll talk."

"Deal," she said, reaching for the box he brought from the basement. Realizing the one labeled *Halloween* wasn't entirely empty, she reached in to find a framed picture. It took just a moment for her to recognize the young couple in front of a house with a *Sold* sign. It was Mimi and her grandfather.

"Mimi, look at you!" she laughed, handing the photo to AJ. His mouth dropped at the sight of them. They couldn't have been older than twenty. Mimi reached over and smiled.

"Oh yeah. Damn, we was so young," she laughed.

"What house is that?" AJ asked.

Mimi's eyes widened. "I never told you? Before we moved in here, Pops and I had our eye on another place. A beautiful three bedroom ranch."

She beamed as she told them about the kitchen with new appliances, the big bathroom, and a screened-in porch off the master bedroom. She'd dreamt of sitting there with her tea watching the squirrels climb up the huge oak tree in the backyard. Each detail nearly brought tears to her eyes.

"So did you move out before we were born?" Shay asked. "I don't remember that at all."

"We never moved in," Mimi said. "The offer was accepted and we took this picture just before we signed the papers. The seller's agent even sent that as a housewarming gift."

In the picture, Mimi held a beautiful rainbow colored vase. "It was kinda their thing to find a unique present for each place they sold. I was so excited to put it in my dining room. Did I tell you it even had a dining room?"

“So what happened?” AJ asked.

“When we showed up to sign the papers, folks started to get frantic. They came in and said there was some confusion and they had accepted another offer. Pops was furious. He argued and argued but they wouldn’t budge.”

Mimi returned her gaze to the photo, grazing the edges with her finger.

“He wanted me to have that vase. In that dining room. In my dream house. He was sad his whole life he couldn’t do that for me.”

Shay cast her eyes downward. Although he died when she was eight, she remembered him vividly. The way he’d twirl Mimi on the kitchen floor whenever *At Last* played on the radio. The wildflowers he’d pick for her every Friday on his way home from work. Next to her grandfather, Shay found it hard to find anyone who could compare.

“Wait, Mimi. If they gave you the letter, how could they sell it to someone else?” Shay asked.

Mimi shot her a look.

“They didn’t realize you were Black.” AJ’s lips tensed.

Mimi nodded. The deliberate effort to keep certain neighborhoods white was well known in Chicago. Although most Black families were guided to non-white areas by their own realtors, some agents refused to comply only to find that the seller’s agency refused to honor the contract. To discover her own family was cheated out of their dream home was almost too much to bear.

AJ stood abruptly, shoving the chair to the floor before grabbing a box of decorations and stomping down the

stairs. He would pout for a while. It happened with the men in her family anytime they were confronted with racism. The anger had no place to go so they held it in their chests until something happened to release it. The women mourned the situation briefly and moved on. Shay could never be sure which approach was best.

“Well,” Shay rose, taking the cups into the kitchen, “I think we should get you a nice new vase. How about we go to the flea market on Saturday?”

“Oh, that would be nice,” she said, pulling her blanket up over her mouth as she coughed.

As Shay rinsed and dried the cups, she could feel the anger rise. She didn’t want to upset Mimi, so she kept quiet. If AJ had told her this news, she would have screamed. That one event set her family back years, if not decades. Taking a cleansing breath, she glanced around the kitchen for any other stray spoons or bags of chips left open. Satisfied she was leaving it in better condition than she found it, she made her way back to the living room.

“You know Mimi, I was thinking...” Shay trailed off as she realized Mimi had fallen asleep in her chair. Smiling, she pulled another blanket from the sofa and draped it over her, kissing her forehead.

“Nite, Mimi,” she said.

As AJ emerged from the basement, he dropped another box on the counter with a thud. Shay glared at him and nodded toward Mimi. AJ mouthed a silent apology..

“Does her breathing sound different to you?” Shay whispered.

"She's had a cough for about a week. I tested for mold on Wednesday so it's not that," he said.

"Ok. I'll see if I can get her into a doctor tomorrow," Shay said.

Shay collected her bag and coat and kissed her cousin on the cheek.

"Thanks for everything today, cuz," she said. "And congrats on the gig."

AJ shrugged. "It's just barbecue."

Shay smiled. "Great redemption stories gotta start somewhere."

9

Shay

SHIT!

Shay realized she was almost ten minutes late as she hustled through the staff entrance of the museum. She carefully balanced four scalding hot lattes in one hand and her messenger bag in the other. She hoped this gesture would excuse her tardiness but some people preferred promptness to free caffeine.

"Sorry!" Shay called breathlessly from the hallway as she rounded the corner into Vanessa's office. Vanessa sat alone, laughing from behind her computer screen.

"No one's even here yet."

With one final keystroke, she closed the laptop and smiled. "Ooh! Caffeine." Setting the cardboard tray on the desk, Shay gently pulled one cup from its secure grip. Vanessa removed the lid and blew before taking a long sip.

Shay slid into the chair opposite and retrieved her own drink. "Well, I wanted to thank you for yesterday."

"It was nothing," Vanessa said.