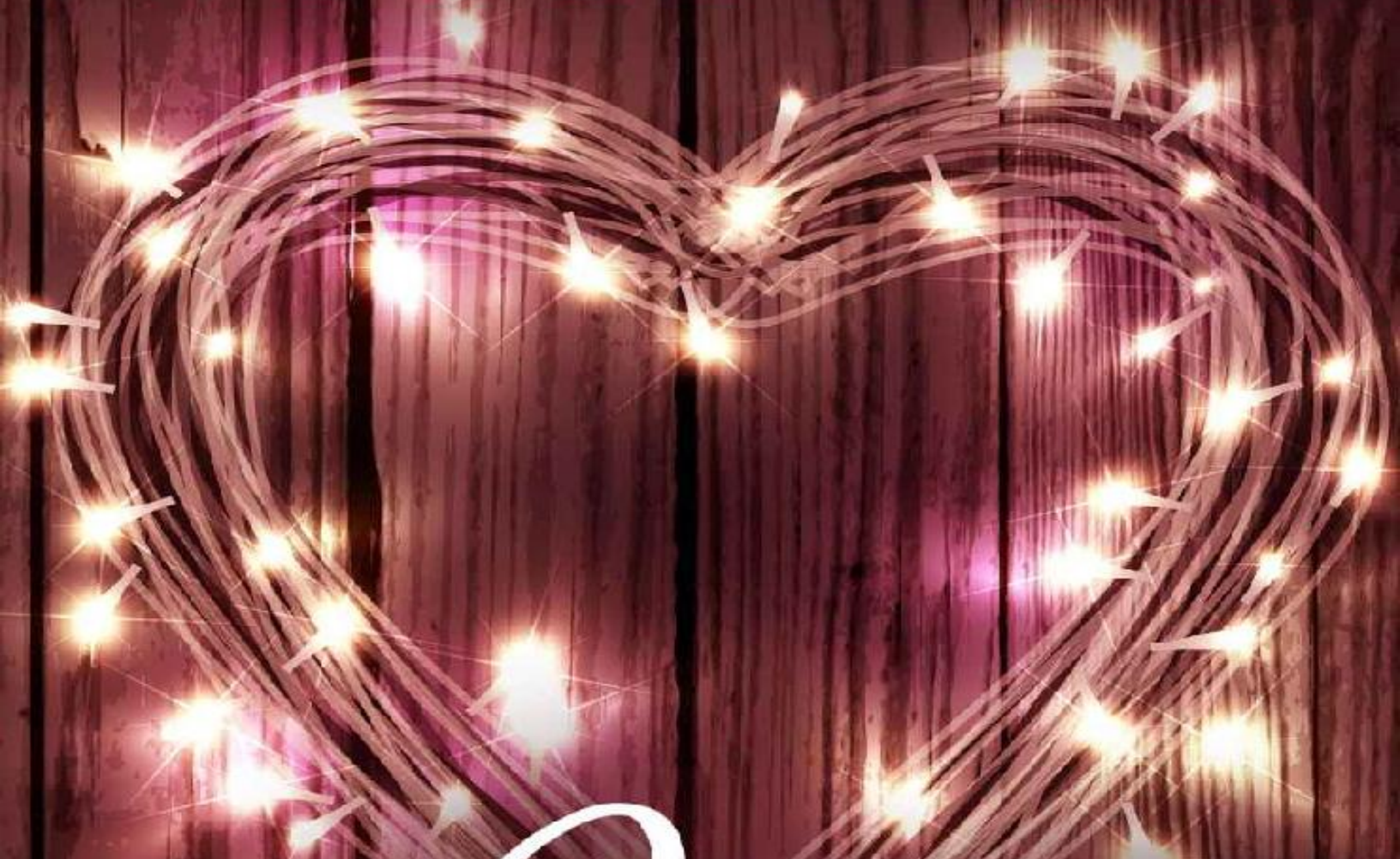


NICOLE FALLS



Grave
Hearts

*a Holliday sisters
novellette*

Brave Hearts

Nicole Falls

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Now...

February 10, 2018

“All right, so I have a question,” Noelle said suddenly, as we sat around finishing up brunch at my house.

We’d been off track for a minute, but now my sisters and I were working to get our groove back. We’d fallen off of our regular gatherings and traditions after the death of our father a few years ago, but we recently made a renewed effort to get back to basics. We had resolved to gathering *in person*, on a monthly basis at the least. We also rededicated ourselves to spending our birthdays together, which is why we were all gathered today—for my birthday. Our tradition was to spend the first half of the day with just us Holliday girls, then the rest of the day as we saw fit. Noelle had been uncharacteristically quiet all morning as the rest of us laughed, joked, and talked cold cash shit about a variety of subjects.

“What’s your question, No?” I asked, clearing the dishes from the table, “Wait, will this question require more wine?”

“It’s Noelle, sis...it’ll definitely require more wine,” Juniper quipped.

Noelle rolled her eyes, but also gave me a short nod, indicating that I should grab the last bottle of prosecco that Francisco had left chilling for us before he vacated the premises this morning. Instead of spending the first half of my actual birth date with my sisters, we were gathering the Saturday before my birthday. My husband planned an anniversary getaway for us that would have us out of the country and in his native land of Costa Rica on my actual date of birth. It had been quite some time since he had been home

and he wanted to share where he spent most of his formative years with me. We were going to be spending ten days between the capital city, San José, the cloud forest, and beaches and I couldn't wait to experience it with a native Tico.

Walking back into the room with the ladies, I uncorked the prosecco, refilled everyone's glasses and sat down next to Noelle. "Ok, chica, spill it. What's your question?"

"Well it's one I think I know the answer to, but I wanted to get you guys' take on it, too," she said, pausing briefly before continuing, "I've just...I've been thinking a lot about this...thing with Jay and how quickly it has seemingly progressed and...I...do you all think we're doing too much too fast?"

Ginger immediately snorted in laughter, "Too fast? Girl, you and that boy have been doing this dance for damn near twenty years. Took y'all long enough to finally give up the ghost and get to the good part with one another sooner rather than later. Too fast...tuh!"

"Well, everyone can't meet the love of their life in fifth grade and live by a meticulous life plan that ensures that whether or not you're the love of *his* life, you will end up together," Juju piped up.

"Yikes!" Noelle exclaimed.

"Flag on the play!" Ginger shouted, "Damn, next time warn me you're going in!"

"You know I just calls it like I sees it," Juju shrugged.

I laughed as Juniper and Ginger continued to snipe back and forth. Once those two got going it was pretty much curtains for anyone else getting a word in edgewise. Noelle managed to wrangle the two of them under control and turned her question on me. I took a few moments to carefully consider my answer before weighing in. One look at Noelle told

me that she was seeking a genuine answer and didn't wanna fall back into the tailspin of ridiculousness caused by Ginger and Juniper.

"What's too fast? Do you feel like Jay is rushing you in any way? Are you on some time crunch to meet a certain relationship goal? Or are you just enjoying the time y'all have to spend together, which is blessedly frequent? You might be overthinking this one, NoNo."

"And of course, you would say time means nothing. You the one who fell in love with and married her husband over the course of five days!" Juju chimed in.

"One—Juniper, you mind everyone's business but your own. And B—I didn't say time means nothing. Time means everything. But I think Noelle is going full Noelle here instead of letting nature take its course."

"Going full Noelle?" my big sister asked, an eyebrow arched.

"Mmmhmmm, you know. Trying to see how it all plays out, counting it out before it begins. Typical defeatist Noelle action," Ginger interjected.

"Not exactly what I meant," I said, quickly, "Goddamn, do you *and* Juju both need to get laid? Y'all are on one today. I meant, *Noelle*, that you need to just relax, boo. Didn't mommy always say, you know when you know? Whether it's been five minutes or five weeks, you and Jay's relationship is progressing how you and Jay's relationship is meant to progress. You gotta roll with it."

"Juniper does make a salient point about your relationship with time though, my good sis," Noelle replied, laughing, "Of course you don't think we're moving too fast. We should be on our third child by you and Frankie's schedule."

"What is this you guys' fifteen-year anniversary in Frankie and Lolo time? What's the traditional gift to give after fifteen years of marriage,

guys? Gotta make sure I get to the store before they take off to the Amazon tomorrow,” Juniper crowed.

“Oh forget you both,” I replied, laughing, “We are not going to the Amazon, you jackass. We’re going to Central America, Costa Rica to be exact.”

“Yeah, well you just be sure he can get back over the border, sis. We don’t need more green card issues,” Ginger piped up.

“More? As in there were former?” Noelle asked, “Is everything okay, Lolo? For real.”

“Yes, everything is fine,” I gritted out, fixing a tight glare on Ginger who was now busying herself with inspecting the tablecloth instead of making eye contact with me.

“Yeah, everything is fine...*now*,” Ginger mumbled.

“Are you fucking kidding me with this Gigi? You really wanna do this now?”

“I mean...there has to be a statute of limitations on the shit and besides, y’all are like in love for real now, so there’s no reason to keep the story on the hush from these two any longer.”

I sputtered in disbelief. Mainly because Gigi and I had always been thick as thieves and I told her about my...*situation*...a few years ago only because she promised she’d take it to the grave. Outside of myself, my husband and one of his friends, she was the only one who knew that our courtship and subsequent nuptials weren’t exactly the whirlwind romance everyone thought it was.

“Valora,” Noelle started, carefully, “What is Ginger talking about? Statute of limitations?”

“Yooooo...” Juju started before breaking down into giggles, “Y’all went full on Sandy Bullock and Not Disney White Boy Ryan. *Oh my*

goooooooood!"

At the rest of our blank stares, Juniper shook her head. "Don't y'all heffas watch fine cinema? Are you not familiar with a little film called The Proposal? In which our main characters find themselves in a little predicament that calls for a green card marriage."

"Wait..." Noelle started.

I put my head down for a moment, knowing this was going to go down a road that I was not even prepared for this day to travel down. Taking a deep breath, I raised my gaze to my sisters once again and started, "Well, ok, see what had happened was..."

Then...

Wednesday, February 6, 2013

"You ready? I don't even know why I asked, of course you're ready for me, baby."

I looked up to see a handsome cinnamon skinned face with a curly mass of long dark hair grinning down on me. Sitting up a bit straighter, I stretched my lower back out and rolled my neck before responding. I'd been hunched over viewing contact sheets, poring over yet another photoset, trying to select the right images. A quick glance at the clock showed me that it was half past noon, the exact time I'd told Frankie that I would be ready for our twice weekly lunch date. We ate together every Monday and Wednesday...sometimes more often if whatever projects we were working on permitted the time. Our standard was always at least twice weekly though.

"Let's roll," I said, pushing back from my chair and grabbing my coat.

Before I had a good grip on it, my coat was taken from my hands and I was directed to turn around as he held it out for me to slide right on in.

"You know don't have to do that every time, right?" I asked.

"You let me worry about what it is that I need to do, okay, Valora?" Frankie responded, cheekily.

I tried valiantly not to let the effect of the way Frankie said my name show outwardly, but felt my skin growing warm in spite of my useless attempt at self-control. I just couldn't help it. The combination of his slightly fading accent and my name sounding like the most delicious treat coming from his lips always did something to me.

"The usual?" I asked, leading the way to the elevators.

"Yes! You know it, baby," Frankie replied, enthusiastically.

Our standing lunch date was enacted pretty much from when we both began working for *Tempo*, a music magazine on par with *Rolling Stone*. We were hired within weeks of one another, found ourselves paired together quite often—he a writer; me a shutterbug, so it was a natural occurrence. In the colder months, we holed up in *Cosi*, a soup and sandwich shop that was steps away from our office building. Over lunch we would talk about office gossip, gripe about the ridiculousness of our respective bosses, and I'd tease Frankie about his bae of the week. And there was *always* one for me to tease him about.

With his smooth cinnamon skin, sensually full lips, and hair that begged to be shorn from his head and put onto a weft, Francisco Mora was mega fine. And he knew it, too. Not in a conceited sort of way, but he definitely leaned on his good looks when they could be leveraged toward his advantage. For a less determined woman, he would be a distraction, but to me he was just my criminally handsome pain in the rear. His lofty ideas of the imagery he wanted to accompany the words he crafted put me at odds with my boss. Most often because I was drawn to the abstract, out of this world visions that he had in his head, but my boss, Kate, was more of a traditionalist who bucked against the changing tides of photography.

Kate balked at the idea of fusing "special effects", her term for Photoshop with classic film techniques. Her old ass needed to let go of her, "film is the only pure essence of photographic brilliance" mantra and move into the twenty-first century. Hell, the only reason she was still employed at our magazine, according to the rumor mill, was because she was a masthead founder who refused to be ousted. I don't know whose balls she had in that

ever-present fanny pack that she wore, but one thing was for certain, her persnickety nature was going to drive me insane.

“Valora, are you listening?” Francisco asked, drawing my attention back to the present moment.

I’d drifted off just that quickly, letting my annoyance with Kate trickle over into one of the brief moments during my working day where she shouldn’t have been more than a passing thought.

“I’m sorry, Frankie, I zoned out. What were you saying?”

“Oh, nothing important. Just rambling about Kyle’s incompetent ass once again.”

Kyle was Frankie’s Kate...only made worse by the fact that he was the byproduct of nepotism—given the title of editor simply for having a rich uncle, with zero journalistic experience or integrity.

“You know we really gotta get the fuck outta here, right? Your talent supersedes this place and mine? Shit...it’s catastrophically underrated out here.”

Frankie’s full mouth broke into a grin, “Catastrophically, eh?”

“Hell yeah. Made your fine ass look *even better* in those headshots a few weeks ago, you can’t deny that?”

Frankie said nothing in return, just offered a smirk as he ran one of his hands through his already heavily tousled curls. Our eyes met and held for a moment past me being comfortable, so I turned my attention toward my half salad and soup like the combo was the most interesting thing in the world.

“You mustn’t always do that, Valora,” Frankie mused.

“Do what?”

“Back down from a challenge. How else will you finally know when you’ve met your match? If you cannot look him in the eye...”

Here we go, a-fucking-gain. I sighed and rolled my eyes. Frankie and I were four years apart, with him as the elder who took his role very seriously. Once he learned that I was raised in a house of sisters, he took it upon himself to teach me what I truly needed to find myself a man. Never mind that I had no time to even be thinking about men as I was working to build my empire. Men were a dime a dozen; and I had more than a few numbers in my little bronze book who I could call when I needed an itch scratched. Frankie was insistent on these lessons anyway...and since he was one of very few allies at work, I humored him.

“Ah, yes, sensei. Anything else?” I asked, sarcasm dripping from my words.

“One day you will be grateful for these lessons, Valora.”

“Hey! Speaking of lessons, you’ve been slacking, dude! What happened to my Spanish lessons? Every time you roll the r in my name, I get jealous. Teach me how to move my tongue like that, man! That’s the only lessons I want from you.”

A flash of something passed in Frankie’s eyes, then left as quickly as it’d appeared.

“Ah, but that is not something I am sure I can teach. The language, yes. All of that other...” Frankie trailed off with an unsure movement of his head and shoulders, “That comes with practice.”

"So, let's practice!"

A beat passed before I realized how that sounded. Frankie just sat mute, a bemused expression taking over his features before that eventually gave way toward raucous laughter. A laughter so contagious that I couldn't help but join in myself. The few folks who were in the restaurant gave us stares as we kept that up for damn near five minutes—both fighting valiantly, but unable to regain our composure

"And someone thinks she doesn't need the lessons I offer freely," Frankie tsked.

"Oh shut up! Hey, what do you have going on this weekend? I'm booked to shoot a show this weekend—Saturday night, a group named indie kids on the come up. You wanna be my plus one?"

"Can I let you know by Friday afternoon? A friend from college is supposed to be visiting this weekend and--"

Never missing a chance to mess with Frankie, I cut him off, "Oh, no big if you can't. Wouldn't want you to disappoint a *special friend* on my account."

"What is that phrase you Americans have about assuming, Valora? *He* is not that kind of special, just someone I owe a great deal of debt to for how he and his family embraced my orphaned ass during holiday breaks in undergrad," Frankie smirked.

"Whatever," I said, flicking up my wrist to check the time, "Just let me know about Friday by the time we leave work at the latest so I can get your name on the list. Come on, I've gotta get back. I have a meeting with Kate at one thirty and you know how she is..."

Frankie pitched his voice about three octaves higher and trilled, "It is thirty seconds after the hour, Valora. It would behoove you to be on time."

That sent us into another round of laughter as we collected and discarded our trash before hustling back over to the office. I ended up not seeing Frankie at all for the rest of the work day, which was unusual because he usually made his way to my workspace between three and five times a day. He did mention that friend coming into town, however, so maybe he had to rush out of here to retrieve him from the airport or something. It was probably for the best that Frankie was otherwise engaged,

as I needed to spend this evening getting shit together for *Aperture*, my budding freelance photography company.

My baby sister Juniper was working on getting my website together and needed me to pick the images that I wanted to feature in my portfolio. She had requested that I pick the images and upload them to our shared cloud storage account more than a week ago, but I'd been dragging my feet about it. As much as I wanted to break out on my own, the logical part of my brain refused to give way to the *much smaller* caution to the wind side of my brain. So, I procrastinated on actually working to being able to do *Aperture* full-time. Tonight, though, I would focus and get everything done so I didn't have to hear Juju's whining about how I never respected her deadlines. Never mind the fact that she's a self-taught kid who's doing this on the side for extra money. And she refused to give me a discount. She could wait.

Friday, February 8, 2013

Thursday came and went with no word from Frankie. We were halfway through Friday and I hadn't heard from him once. I pulled out my phone and fired off a quick text.

Damn, one of your hoes put it on you so bad you called off two days in a row?

I waited a few minutes, phone in hand to see if he would reply, but radio silence. Whatever was going on, I hoped that he was all right and would reach out soon if he wasn't. Frankie had become, in a rather quick manner, one of the most consistent parts of my life. And consistency was a thing I valued above most other things because inconsistency almost always undoubtedly led to heartbreak. Not that Frankie was in a position to break my heart in any way, I was just a little worried about my buddy.

The rest of my work day passed with no word from Frankie still, so I decided to take a little detour on the way home and stopped by his place. I probably should have called first, but meh...he'll be all right. I just wanted to be sure that he was not directly in any harm's path. It's very unlike him to miss work and not let me know. I just needed to lay eyes on him and see that he was all good. The concierge recognized me immediately once I stepped into the lobby and waved me over to his desk.

"Hey Walt, you seen Frankie?"

"Not since Thursday morning when some suits came here looking for him."

"Suits?"

"Yeah, a group of three dudes looking like extras from Men in Black. He came down to let them up, there were up there for about twenty minutes then left, came back an hour later and took Mr. Mora with them. I left midday Thursday, so I don't know if or when he came back."

Now this here, coupled with him not answering my calls had me hella nervous about Frankie's whereabouts. I pulled out my phone to see if he'd responded to my text from earlier, but still nothing. I tried calling, but it rolled straight into voicemail like the phone was powered off.

"Mr. Mora!" Walt suddenly exclaimed and I turned to see Frankie strolling through the doors looking decidedly...*un-Frankie*. He was dressed in sweats, a t-shirt, and AirMax90s. His hair, which was normally loose and perfectly tousled, was pulled into a low ponytail. Besides him was a handsome ass white man who was suited and booted and looked like a finer Travis Kelce. I wanted to rush over to him, ask if he was all right, but I waited near Walt's stand which was closer to the elevators. As they walked toward us, he and his friend spoke in hushed tones, truncating their conversation abruptly before they reached our earshot.

“Valora, what are you doing here?”

“I...I was worried, you were a no-show at work, and weren’t answering your phone. I just...wanted to drop by and make sure you were okay.”

Frankie reached in his pocket to retrieve his phone, but when he pressed the button to light up the screen, nothing happened.

“Of course, those assholes let it die,” he grumbled.

“What assholes? Where were you? Did you go to jail? Is that why you’re dressed like this? Is this your lawyer? Can you not discuss the case?” I shot off questions in a rapid-fire succession eventually garnering that classic Frankie smirk.

“Valora,” Frankie started, resting his hands on my shoulders, “breathe.”

I drew in a calming breath before continuing my barrage of questions. “Well, are you not going to answer me?”

“You said she was intense bro, but whoa,” said fake ass Travis Kelce.

“Hi, who are you?”

“I’m Kip,” he said smoothly, extending a hand, “An old friend of Cisco’s from college.”

My brows lifted at his peculiar shortening of Frankie’s name.

“Come,” Frankie said, “Let’s go upstairs and I’ll get you up to speed...after I shower that place off of me.”

“Damn, so you were in jail,” I muttered.

“Not quite,” Frankie confirmed.

After his shower, Frankie joined Kip and I in his living room where we sat in silence watching figure skating. Before he’d left the room to shower, Frankie pinned Kip with a glare that I can only imagine rendered

him mute because I tried engaging him in a bit of conversation, but his responses were one word or not at all. I gave up after just a few minutes because I didn't have to force *anyone* to talk to me, let alone some stranger who I didn't give a damn about. Frankie entered the room and sat right next to me on the sofa. I turned my gaze from the triple axels on screen to him.

“So...”

“I don't even know where to begin with this crazy shit.”

“The beginning is usually a pretty solid place,” I supplied, which earned me an eye roll.

“Right. So, Thursday I was getting ready to leave for work when Walt tells me there are some guys waiting in the vestibule for me. I wasn't expecting anyone so I came down to see who it was. Turns out it's INS.”

“INS?”

“My thoughts exactly, what the hell do they want with me? I'm here on a legal visa that is not set to expire anytime soon, so I'm all good. Except they have no record of my work visa ever being filed. Just my student visa, which is well past expired. So, I invite them upstairs and they go into a bit more detail about the paperwork not being accurate and my visa never having been approved. I pull out the copies I have of the notarized application and one of the guys points out some missing signature or initials or some bullshit that nullifies the validity of the visa. At this point, it is all honestly white noise because they're throwing around words like detaining and deportation.”

I'm staring at Frankie, mouth agape at this point because I cannot believe this story. He went on to explain how he was lucky that Kip was in town visiting. Although he wasn't an immigration lawyer, he was an attorney and able to act on Frankie's behalf enough to get him sprung from the detention center.

“Oh my God, so what happens now? They just ship you outta here, just like that?”

“Well, there’s a little more...legalities that we have to contend with first, but if I don’t come out on the winning side of that battle...” Frankie sighed.

“Frankie...” I groaned, feeling myself becoming a bit overwhelmed with emotion.

“Valora,” he replied, pulling me into his embrace, rubbing my back in a soothing manner, “Hey, it’s going to be all right, you know? They can’t just immediately boot me back to San José. I’ve established roots here and I’m hoping that will work in my favor. It’ll be okay, baby, you’ll see.”

“If I may?” Kip interjected.

“Kip, not now, man,” Frankie said.

I’d forgotten he was here, so wrapped up in Frankie’s story. I pooh poohed Frankie’s attempt to shut him down and motioned for Kip to keep speaking.

“Valora, you’d be willing to help out? If Frankie needs you?”

“Of course, however I can. I’ll write letters, be a character witness, whatever,” I said, pulling back to look Frankie in his eye, “You know that, yeah? *However* I can help you, I will?”

“Even if that means marrying him?” Kip asked.

“Huhwhuh?” I replied dumbfounded, sounding like my baby sister Juju.

“Nah, forget it. It’s a silly idea Kip had in the car on the way over here from the detaining station as we were trying to brainstorm ways to show that I had way more ties in the community here than I ever would at home in San José,” Frankie quickly replied, “It was nothing seriously considered. We have other ways.”

“Dude,” Kip interjected, “If it worked for Tom Haverford?”

“Who the fuck is Tom Haverford?” Frankie asked, “One of your little preppy frat bros?”

“Nah man, on Parks and Rec...” Kip started.

“Pause. Your frame of reference is a goddamned television show?” I piped up, “Frankie, I hope you find a real lawyer soon because your friend is buggin’!”

“Sometimes fiction is rooted in reality,” Kip pouted.

“Bro, I thought you told me you knew someone in real life that this worked for, not a damned TV character.”

Frankie sighed deeply, running his hands through his hair, bringing them to rest intertwined at the nape of his neck. His eyes were closed, his breathing steady and deep as he leaned back into the couch. The three of us sat in silence for a few minutes. Kip looking at me and me looking at Frankie willing him to say that this was just an elaborate prank that he and Kip cooked up. Suddenly Frankie popped up, moving through the loft space like he was looking for something. He shuffled through some paperwork on his desk, cussing and fussing until he finally came up with a small address book.

He pulled a business card from between its pages and then ran up the spiral staircase near the back of the loft that led to his room. Since the loft was pretty much open concept, I could hear him on the phone with someone talking a mile a minute. His steady stream of chatter was punctuated with brief moments of silence, during which, I presumed, the person on the other end was speaking. When Frankie returned to the living room, his walk lacked all of the swagger it normally held. With his shoulders slumped in defeat, he slunk back into the room and plopped back down on the sofa next to me.

“You remember Maria Paz from undergrad?” he asked Kip, “Long brown hair, ridiculous body and that little mole near her upper lip? Used to stay kickin’ it with...”

“Beautiful ass Susan Delfino,” Kip interrupted, “Yeah I remember her, why?”

“Ran into her and ol’ Suzy a few months ago at a bar randomly. They still looked good, too. But we exchanged cards, with plans to meet up for drinks at a later date that never came to pass. But my point here is that as I sat racking my brain for solutions to this problem, I remembered Maria saying she was an immigration lawyer. That’s who I was on the phone with.”

“Fantastic! So, what’d she say? Can she be with you at the preliminary hearing on Friday?”

“She absolutely could...if she were in the country. But it just so happens that she and Suzy are off in Japan for their honeymoon. She’s going to get in contact with some of her colleagues to see if one of them can help though. Hopefully one comes through in the clutch,” Frankie sighed.

“Shit,” Kip swore lowly.

A few more minutes passed in silence and I finally couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’ll do it,” I said, “I’ll marry you.”

“Valora, I can’t ask you to do that,” Frankie replied, immediately.

“Well technically, *you* didn’t. *He* did,” I said, pointing to Kip.

“I can’t put you in danger of potential jail time if they find out. This is serious, Valora. Fraud is a punishable offense. You’re not thinking clearly and this isn’t television.”

“You know I hate it when you talk to me like a child, Francisco.”

“Well then do not make decisions so rashly and behave like one.”

Kip whistled.

“Okay, time out. Frank, c’mere, dude.”

“Nah. Don’t go anywhere,” I said, grabbing a hold of Frankie’s wrist and directing his attention to me, “Look, I know you might think I’m acting rashly, but honestly I’m not. You need help and as far-fetched as this may seem? It could help. And I want to help you. There’s nothing and no one back in Costa Rica for you, so if we have to fake it for a few months to a year in order for you to stay here? It’s nothing.”

“Valora, baby, try five years?”

“McScuse me?”

“Yeah, part of the conversation I had with Maria? I told her about our crazy hail Mary marriage for green card slash permanent residence option that we had on the table and she said while it’s cute in the movies and on television, the actual process of naturalization is one that is lengthy and time consuming. I cannot ask you to put your life on hold to deal with my mess.”

“Again...*you* didn’t ask, *I* volunteered,” I insisted.

“Valora, you’re not thinking clearly.”

“Stop saying that! I am of sober and sound mind. I know what I’m saying.”

“Valora, just...please, take a few days. Think about this a bit more deeply. And if you feel just as strongly on Monday as you do in this moment. Perhaps we will revisit.”

I huffed before just shutting my mouth because I knew that it was fruitless to argue with Frankie right now. His mind was set and there was no changing it. And true, my offer was definitely ruled more by emotional rather than rational thought right now, but I really did want to do this for him.

“Fine, we’ll table this until Monday,” I agreed, finally.

“Now that this is out of the way...” Frankie started, as Kip and I looked at him like he’d lost his mind.

The hell if anything was out of the way. Everything was still up in limbo.

“Okay,” Frankie acquiesced, “Perhaps out of the way wasn’t the best way to put it, but...there is nothing we can do about any of these matters until Monday, so...anyone up for drinks?”

I couldn’t help the smile that unfurled across my face at his suggestion. Of course, Frankie was ready to turn up in the face of...well hell, it wasn’t danger, but the circumstances certainly seemed dire. I got it though, he was likely fatigued of thinking about the looming situation and wanted to blow off a little steam. I, on the other hand, had plans for a day with my sister Ginger tomorrow and could not get through any activity with her nursing a Frankie induced hangover.

“Hell yeah,” Kip said, “Let’s go to that place we went the last time I came out to visit. The joint where you walked in and the shit was like cheers with everyone calling out to Frankie as soon as walked through the door.”

“You must be talking about Brady’s,” I said.

It was a bar Frankie and I went to often, situated halfway between the office and Frankie’s place which was a bit West of where we worked in city center. Further west, in the suburbs was where I lived, so it was kind of, but not exactly on my way home as well. More often than not I found myself there chatting with the bartenders and witnessing Frankie do his thing once he started feeling his drinks. He never abandoned me completely when we went to Brady’s though, always ensured that I was cool and made

it home at the end safely at the end of the night. Now what happened once I was safe and sound was a whole ‘nother story.

“Actually, I was thinking about staying in. Got a bottle of this nice ass Japanese whisky I heard about...somewhere. Was thinking about cracking it open.”

“What’s the name of the whisky?” I asked.

“Yamazaki,” Frankie replied.

“Never heard of it. Sorry. You guys are on your own tonight. I’ve got some heavy thinking to handle over the weekend. Can’t be wasting time drinking with the likes of you,” I said, standing up to put on my coat.

As usual, before I could even begin the maneuver to swing it over my shoulders, Frankie grabbed it from my hands, assisting me into it. I just shook my head before buttoning it up, draping my scarf and grabbing my bag. A brief hug and exchange of pleasantries with Kip, then Frankie was walking me to the elevator. Before pressing the call button, Frankie pulled me in for another hug. My eyes closed of my own volition as his arms bracketed my body, pulling me in tight for a significantly longer squeeze than usual. He was slow to disengage, pulling back and looking at me for a long moment.

“What?” I asked, growing increasingly uncomfortable beneath his gaze.

“You know you don’t have to do this. You don’t even have to think about it. I’m giving you the out here. This would be a really big inconvenience for a really long time, Valora.”

“You let me worry about what’s inconvenient, Francisco,” I trilled, trying and failing to roll the r in his name, which earned me a grin. “No seriously, I’m going to give this some thought this weekend. Even make a

pro/con list. And if I find that I can't or am longer willing to do it? I'll let you know on Monday, how about that?"

Frankie said nothing, just pulled me into another of those tight hugs and dropped a quick kiss on my forehead before pressing the elevator call button. When the ding sounded, announcing the elevator's arrival, Frankie said, "Thank you for coming to see about me. I'll see you on Monday."

As I stepped into the elevator, I remembered something.

"Hey," I called to get Frankie's attention, hanging halfway from the elevator, "You never let me know if you were gonna be my plus one for the show?"

"Show?"

"Yeah, the one I'm shooting...indie kids on the come up?"

"Ah yes, I had forgotten all about it. Let me check with Kip, I'll text you."

"Aight. Later," I replied and slid back into the elevator.

On the descent, the weight of everything that Frankie had dropped on me over the past couple of hours came bearing down on me in a remarkably rapid fashion. *Holy shit, did I really volunteer to be his green card wife? Could I really go through with that?* God knows I was barely trying to let a man make me his real wife. What in the hell possessed me to volunteer to be Frankie's fake one? And for multiple years? Thankfully, he didn't jump right on it, but this was definitely going to take a lot more thought on my end. I wanted to do whatever I could to help him for sure, but I didn't know if my whatever could truly extend this far.

Saturday, February 9, 2013

I might have been biased, but my nieces were definitely two of the cutest little girls I'd ever seen in my life. If Ginger and Josh did nothing else well in life, they created perfection with these two. Payton looked like Josh had zero to do with her conception and could pass for Gigi's mini-sized clone. They shared the same warm, peanut butter colored skin, delicate small-boned form, and dark almond-shaped eyes. Jordan was all Josh from her deep chocolate hue, large, wide-set eyes, and an adorably full, incessantly puckered set of lips that gave her a cherubic look. Initially Gigi and I were supposed to be going to lunch alone and doing a little shopping, but Josh had a work emergency that threw a slight kink in those plans.

So instead we ordered in and were cyber shopping, which actually worked to my advantage. I'd had my eye on a pair of booties for a few weeks and had planned on finally pulling the trigger to buy them from Nordstrom while we were out today. Not only did Ginger find the boots marked down twenty percent off retail, she also managed to find some extra promo code for the shoe website that took an additional fifteen percent off. The delay of waiting five to seven business days was worth the savings.

"So what's new, Lolo? You've been super low key lately, hadn't heard from you in a minute and wasn't sure you would actually come today. You like to cancel all willy nilly these days. Boss still unbearable? Still in denial about your crush on that fine Spanish nigga at the job?"

I rolled my eyes, "Ain't nobody crushing on Frankie. And *he's Costa Rican*, not Spanish. Like I've told you fifty times before. But speaking of him, so...okay, before I go into this I need for you to have an open mind."

“When do I not have an open mind?” Ginger asked.

“Ever. You never have an open mind, but I’m going to tell you this anyway. And you cannot tell a fucking soul. Not even Joshy.”

“*Oh my goooooood*,” Ginger started.

“What?”

“You fucked him didn’t you? You let him give you some of that pingalinga?”

“What?! No! I told you we’re just friends!”

“Then what, pray tell, could be so dire that involves him that you need to swear me to secrecy about. He ain’t kill nobody did he? Are you a witness to the murder? Are y’all about to go on the lam? Am I aiding and abetting a criminal right now? Are my babies in danger?” Gigi asked, laughing.

“You know what? I really cannot stand your ass sometimes. Forget it. Never mind,” I said, annoyance coloring my words.

Ginger quickly sobered, “Ok, fine. I’m done. For real, what’s up? You have that look on your face like you have the BGs, so whatever is going on must be serious. I’ll behave.”

I let out a deep breath and then ran down everything that was going on with Frankie to Gigi. Her eyes grew increasingly larger as I recounted everything I knew about the situation so far. When I finished, the room was pin drop silent.

“Well?” I asked.

“I...” Ginger started before completely losing it and breaking down in shrieks of laughter.

“So much for you behaving,” I muttered before getting up and going to get a glass of water.

When I returned to the den, Gigi was still doubled over in laughter, trying valiantly to right herself and tamp down her amusement. I gave her a few minutes more and she finally pulled it together.

“So, you’re seriously considering this? Like, actual factual.”

“Yes, I am. I mean...okay I know it would be a lot, but there are some things here that would benefit me, too.”

“Like finally being able to see what that fine ass mouth do?” Gigi asked.

“No, Ginger Marie, other stuff...like financial benefits!”

“He’s paying you to do this?!”

“No, dummy! I’m just saying, with the eventual consolidation of our lives there should be considerable reductions in overhead expenses since we’ll be sharing a space. Which, high key, I’m hoping he tries to force me to move into the loft because that damn place is way nicer than my apartment. And do you know how much more money I could put toward *Aperture* if I was paying a fraction of what I put out now for rent and utilities and that ridiculous ass parking fee? Frankie’s place comes with parking already included in his mortgage price and since he doesn’t have a car, his space would be my space and...” I trailed off.

“Oh shit, you’re serious about this? Like for real for...wait, let me see your phone?”

I passed it over to her, confused to her awkward transition. She unlocked it with my passcode and went straight to my Notes app. I laughed because Ginger probably knew me best of anyone on this Earth. I now knew what she was looking for as proof of my level of seriousness. Whenever I was faced with a major life decision, I made a pro/con list. I had been doing this since I was a child, weighing my options tied to choices that had the possibility to shift my entire world on its axis. Last night, after I

left Frankie's, I was barely in my car before I began dictating to Siri entries on the pro/con list for actually going through with this and marrying Frankie. I looked as Ginger scrolled through the short doc, chuckling to herself as she went along. Some of the items on the list were valid, like the financial benefits, but others were downright silly like the potential likelihood of having to put up with Frankie's ridiculous ass soccer obsession. Satisfied with what she'd seen I assumed, Ginger passed my phone back to me and grabbed her tablet again.

"So...you tryna wear white to this wedding or nah?"

I laughed, "You don't think I'm crazy? For even contemplating this?"

"Oh, I absolutely do, but I know that while Noelle is the outwardly stubborn one of us all, you're the absolute most stubborn. The pro/con list doesn't lie. Your mind is made up and you're about to become Mrs. Fine Ass Spani...*Costa Rican Papi*."

I opened my mouth to say something, but was momentarily stumped. Gigi was taking this a bit too in stride. I just knew she would launch into a whole monologue talking me out of making this decision. It was part of the reason I even brought it up to her, to see if she could debunk any of the pros on my list. The fact that she couldn't solidified my answer even further.

"Mora...I'll be becoming Mrs. Mora."

"Wait...your married name will be Valora Mora? That shit sounds like part of The Name Game," Ginger said, breaking down into giggles once again, "Valora Mora Bo Bora Fee Fi Fofora..."

This time, however, I couldn't help but join in because she was right. It did sound a bit silly. But it also had an undeniable musical flow to it as well. I stayed at Gigi's until Josh got home, then went back to my place

and continued to stew about this whole marriage thing before getting ready to shoot the indie kids... show. I was bugging because in my mind, I thought it should have been a bit more of a struggle to come to this affirmative decision, but every other part of me shut that down because saying no felt like a betrayal. The dinging of my text tone prevented me from going too far down the rabbit hole of these thoughts.

Is the invitation to be your plus one still good? – F. Mora

I smiled before responding.

Sorry. Window of opportunity closed. Decided to take Walt instead.

I made empanadas and gallo pinto. – F. Mora

Say no more. Walt's dropped. See you at 7.

Looking at my phone's clock I realized that was only forty-five minutes away so I needed to get a move on. I quickly showered and moisturized, then donned what I'd coined the official uniform of *Aperture*—black leggings, a dolphin-hem black tank, and a very worn pair of Doc Martens. I pulled my hair up into a messy bun atop my head, added my leather jacket, double checked my camera gear and called the *Lyft*. Much to my satisfaction there was a less than a minute wait for a *Lyft* and virtually no traffic which got me to Frankie's in record time. Walt was working concierge again and just waved me up toward the elevators.

"Mr. Mora told me to just send you right on up when you arrived," he said.

I got off the elevator and my stomach groaned at the wonderful array of aromas permeating the hallway. I damn near dashed down the hall and rushed into Frankie's place. He and Kip sat at the table, plates full, just getting ready to dig in.

“Damn, couldn’t wait for me?” I teased, dropping my gear and discarding my coat before walking to the kitchen to wash my hands before joining them.

Frankie flicked up his wrist, looking at his watch, “It is five after seven. You’re late.”

Rolling my eyes, I dried my hands and sat in down across from Frankie, a plate already filled with everything I liked and a glass of wine poured. I quickly tucked into eating, reminding Frankie that I needed to be at the venue by 8:30. He assured me that we would be there way before when I needed to be there and to finish my meal and wine. I rolled my eyes at his daddy routine and tried not to get too annoyed.

“So, what kind of music is this show tonight?” Frankie asked.

“They’re doing...a lot of different things. A lil soul/r&b adjacent stuff, bit of hip-hop, bit of weird experimental shit that can’t be classified. They put me in the mind of Odd Future, are you familiar?”

“That kid Tyler the Creator’s collective?” Kip asked, “Damn, I love them. Maybe I should be tryna roll with you guys.”

“It is called a plus *one* for a reason, Kip. Sorry,” Frankie said, “Don’t worry. Maybe I’ll bring you back a signed album or something.”

“Shut up, dude.”

I laughed at their back and forth before hustling Frankie out of the door so we could get to the venue. I liked to be there half an hour before I was assigned to be so I could get a feel for the venue. Shooting shows, especially ones like this one—general admission, filled with young kids and high energy, required a different style of shooting. I found myself in some crazy wild positions trying to grab unique shots that captured the energy in the room while I was shooting. I honestly don’t even know why I invited Frankie since I’d likely be moving all over the place, shooting for a nice

portion of the show, but at least he could take advantage of the open bar wristbands that were a perk of which I could not partake.

We arrived at the venue and the promoter of the show met me up front, which was odd. He was insistent that the leader of the indie kids on the come up, Mario, wanted to meet me to discuss my shooting style. Apparently, the kid fancied himself a budding photographer, so instead of having time to maneuver through the space prior to doors opening, I spent thirty minutes listening to this kid go on and on about his preferences for shooting as if they had anything in hell to do with how I would do anything. My already thin patience was just about frayed completely through when Frankie approached with a drink in hand, a kiss to my forehead, and a complete redirect of the current conversation to one about the comparison of indie kids on the come up to Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All. That set Mario off on a rant that I was sure was going to get us put out before the show began.

While Mario was ranting and raving, Frankie caught my eye and gestured his head toward the door. Finally catching onto what he'd done, I mouthed thank you and moved from backstage into the main area where the show would be taking place. My time alone in the space was mad short, but just enough for me to peep a few key areas in which I could perch to get some dope shots of the kids while they performed.

Soon the empty general admission space was packed wall to wall with some folks who looked like they were barely out of middle school and others who looked who looked like they were at least twenty years older than me. Some of the content of Mario's raps were highly questionable, but the damn production was so smooth I could help boppin' to the beat as I moved around taking pictures. Normally when I shot music events, my camera was hyper focused on the act on stage, but this crowd's energy made

it damn near impossible for me not to catch snaps of them as well. I typically shot for the first five songs, took a break, then captured the last two songs of the night. It was almost my scheduled break time, so I scanned the crowd to see if I could spot Frankie.

Despite how thick it was in there, I was able to spot him instantly. He stood near the bar, head moving in time to the mid-tempo beat of the current song being performed. His eyes were closed slightly, as if he were really into the song—a burner about unexpected love sang by the lone female of the group, Cheyanne. I couldn't resist snapping a couple frames of Frankie before tucking my camera away and moving over to that side of the room to check in. Chey transitioned to a slower song just as I was walking up to Frankie and he pulled me into him, whispering into my ear, "Dance with me, Valora."

"With this? Where am I supposed to put it?" I asked, holding up my camera.

Instead of providing me with an answer, he relieved me of my camera, handing it over to the bartender before wrapping his hands around my waist from behind and grooving to the beat. Instinctively, my hips began to move in time with the percussion as my entire body sank into Frankie's hold. We'd danced together before, *plenty of times*, but something about the way his fingers sank into my waist, encouraging me to roll my hips increasingly harder this time? There was something decidedly different about this dance.

"I'm having a better time than expected," Frankie spoke lowly into my ear, "Are you enjoying yourself?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to answer without releasing a moan. I could feel...*little Frankie*...who wasn't very little at all pressing into my backside and it felt a little too good for me to move away. I did move,

however, turning in his arms to get a better look at Frankie. Something about him felt...different...*odd*, in some way. As I stared at him, he just smiled and continued to move, still keeping our hips fused as they ground together in time with the beat. Soon Chey's set was coming to a close, which was my cue to grab my camera and get those last few shots before the night would come to a close. The show ended up dragging on a little bit longer than anticipated as the crowd dictated three separate encores. The energy in this place was insane and my fingers were barely depressing the shutter button quickly enough to capture it all.

After the show, Frankie insisted on going to a diner in Greektown because he was craving a gyro. I was really ready to go home, but when he turned those impossibly full lips downward into a pout and pleaded with me, I was powerless to do anything but acquiesce. Which was how I found myself half asleep, draped all over Frankie as he devoured a gyro plate. It seemed like Frankie ate incessantly, but looking at his slim physique you would never be able to tell. And it made me sick, since it seemed like I had to work out incessantly to maintain my own slim physique. Meanwhile, Mr. Eight Meals a Day just ran a few miles a couple times a week and played a weekly pickup game of soccer and looked like...*that*. Ugh, it just wasn't fair.

"Can I get you anything else?" the waitress asked, reappearing out of nowhere.

"Ah, no thank you, just the check is fine," Frankie replied.

"Um, if you don't mind me saying it, you two make a striking couple," she said.

I raised my head to tell her that we weren't, in fact, a couple, but was cut off by Frankie.

“Thank you. It’s all her. She makes me look good,” he replied smoothly, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

The waitress damn near swooned out of her shoes before turning to retrieve the check. We settled up and then caught a *Lyft* home. Frankie rode with me to my place, making sure I made it safely. I insisted that he just stay the night, but he was resolute in returning home. I was too tired to put up too much protest, but insisted that he text me as soon as he was safe and sound in his place. No sooner than he’d crossed the threshold of my door to begin his journey home, however, I was completely knocked out.

Monday, February 11, 2013

"Come on, man!" I said, plopping down on Frankie's desk, 'It's half past twelve and I am starvin' like Marvin!"

"Who's Marvin?" Frankie asked, his face scrunched up.

"It's an idiom. Come on dude, aren't you the writer?"

"Yeah, the writer with a powerful enough command of the English language who doesn't have to rely on silly native speaker tricks to get people to understand my intent," Frankie snarked.

"Touché! But seriously, I'm mad hungry, are you ready?"

"Let me just," he trailed off, typing quickly, scanning what he had written and then clicking send on the email he was composing, "All right. Let's go."

"Can you take the full hour today? You know we have some important things to discuss," I said softly, looking around to make sure no one was paying attention to us.

"We do?" Frankie replied.

"Uh...yeah...unless something has changed? Has something changed?"

"Let's go," Frankie said once again.

Instead of heading toward Cosi once we left the building, Frankie strolled in the opposite direction, pulling me along with him. We walked about a block and a half before stopping in front of a place that looked way too swanky for lunch. I looked over at Frankie with an eyebrow raised and he just pulled me inside where we were quickly seated by the maître d. Because it was midday, the restaurant was damn near empty so our food and drink orders were taken and filled with a quickness. That meant that Frankie and I could have our conversation uninterrupted.

"What made you decide to come to this place instead of our usual?" I asked after we'd been settled in.

"Privacy. You never know who's listening to what at Cosi. I didn't want to take any chances," Frankie replied.

"So, like I asked back at the office...has something changed with your situation?"

"Nothing has changed. I had a brief conversation with one of Maria's colleagues this morning and he will be able to represent me, but just will not be available for the preliminary hearing that was set for Friday, so he is working to try and get it rescheduled."

"And if he can't?"

Frankie ran his hands through his hair and shook his head, "I'm not sure how we proceed then, Valora."

"Which is all the more reason that you should be thrilled that after giving it a considerable amount of thought this weekend, I decided that my offer of marriage is still on the table."

"I told you that I cannot allow you to do that."

"And I've told you on multiple occasions that you're not my daddy. Frankie, please...I know that you want to work this all out on your own, but I'm here telling you that you don't have to."

"Valora."

"Francisco."

We sat there glaring at one another until he broke into a grin, mumbling under his breath about me being a stubborn ass.

"I heard that! Takes one to know one," I replied, despite knowing he hadn't uttered those words for me to hear.

"You're willing to disrupt your life for five years for me?"

"Five years is an exaggeration. Worst case scenario. I did some investigating of my own this weekend and most people were granted their naturalization papers way quicker. Between one and three years, with five years being the absolute maximum. Besides, you're not the only one who stands to benefit from this arrangement here..."

"Oh?" Frankie replied, one brow quirked in askance.

"Mmmhmm," I nodded, "I also took the liberty of doing a little research to see exactly how soon we could tie the knot and we could totally get it done before your hearing. Just in case you needed a bit of extra insurance to shore up your case."

"You have really...been focused, eh?"

"Absolutely. I may have initially entertained the thought of going through with this on pure emotion, but I really did give it serious thought over the weekend as requested."

That reply earned me an amused grin.

"The hearing is Friday, though? When exactly would you propose that we get married?"

"So glad you asked, my good man. We can get married on Thursday. It's my birthday so I'll expect some nice bling for my ring," I joked.

"It's also...Valentine's Day," Frankie replied.

"Does that pose a problem for you?" I shot back, a little annoyed.

"No. Not at all. It's just that statistically, couples who are married on Valentine's Day do not tend to have a very long shelf life on their marriage."

"Why do you know this?"

"I'm well-read."

I couldn't help the giggle that escaped before I continued, "Also, that factoid is irrelevant for our circumstances, right?"

"You do have a point there."

"So?"

"Don't we need to have a license or something prior to just marching into city hall and saying we would like to get married?"

"Yep, which...we'd have to get it between today and tomorrow if we're to be married on Thursday."

"I..." Frankie started before blowing out a long stream of air, "You really did do research."

"I didn't take this lightly, Frankie. This is literally life or death. Okay, not like death *death*, but I just know that going back home isn't what you want and again, if I can help prevent that in some way? I'm all in. Besides..." I trailed off.

"Besides?"

"Now I can reap the benefits of city living at a fraction of the cost!"

"What if I wanted to move into your place though?"

"Bullshit. You hate my place. You hate the burbs in totality."

"That is not true. I am rather fond of many of the chain restaurant establishments that frequent the suburbs."

"You're so full of it," I laughed.

Frankie's low rumble of laughter soon joined mine before he quickly sobered and looked me in the eyes.

"Are you sure?" he asked, grabbing my hand.

"More than anything," I replied with a squeeze of his hand.

Which was how we ended up in the Dunne Building, Suite 500 signing the necessary paperwork in order to receive our marriage license. Flashes of few pieces of identification plus sixty dollars seemed such little to exchange for a piece of paper that would ultimately alter the trajectory of our lives going forward. After we filled out the paperwork, Frankie double and triple checked to ensure that we left no i undotted or t uncrossed. A part

of me wanted to laugh at his extreme precision, but knowing the reasoning behind it, I couldn't in good conscience. The entire process took about twenty minutes with the clerk reminding us upon leaving that it took twenty-four hours for the license to be valid so that a ceremony could take place.

I got back to my desk and realized that I was in such a rush to go to lunch earlier that I'd left my cellphone sitting on my desk. I had three missed calls and five texts from Gigi. I'd told her that I was giving Frankie my answer today and she insisted that I call her immediately after everything went down. Knowing she would want to have a full-fledged conversation that required less decorum than I usually presented at work, I shot her a quick text to let her know that I'd call her on my commute home. That wasn't good enough because my phone rang immediately.

"Didn't I tell you I'd call you later?" is how I answered my phone instead of hello.

"But I wanna know *noooooow*," Ginger whined, "This is the most exciting gossip I've heard since they kicked Lynsi out of the mom's group."

"My life isn't exciting gossip, Ginge. Like I said, I'll call you later."

"Okay, okay. But..."

"But nothing, go make sure JoJo isn't waterboarding Pay and leave me be!"

"Bye!"

A few hours later, I was walking to the car and back on the phone with Ginger.

"You're wild annoying, you know that. I literally just walked out of the door and told you I would call you back, but here you are again."

"Whatever, spill it. What happened? What did he say when you told him yes? Does he still even need you to do this crazy shit?"

“Hold on a sec,” I said, getting into my car and starting it, “You know it takes a minute to switch over to the Bluetooth.”

When the phone finally connected to the car I could hear Ginger trying to mediate an argument between Jordan and Payton and I had to stifle my laughter. For someone whose vocabulary was a solid twelve words, Payton stayed coming at Jordie in her jibber jabber language. I honestly don’t know how Gi was able to hold it together when she had to break up their squabbles. Her patience was running thin as it seemed like the girls were not interested in whatever compromise she was trying to talk them into.

“Come get your goddamn children right now, Joshua,” Ginger yelled.

“Damn, Gi, not in my ear!”

“My bad, sissy. C’mon girls, let’s go sit with daddy in the den while mommy and Te-Te Lolo have some girl talk.”

A few seconds of her shuffling holding the phone and a muffled conversation later she was back. I brought her up to speed on Frankie’s and I’s lunch time conversation and subsequent acquisition of the marriage license.

“So, you’re really doing this, huh?”

“How many times are you gonna ask me that?”

“As many times as it takes me to believe it, shit. I knew you guys were work friends, but I guess I didn’t realize how deep your connection was. Like...if this was on the reverse, do you think he would do this for you?”

“I don’t know and don’t care about that Gi. Getting riled up over hypotheticals is your thing; not mine.”

“Touché. So, when’s the big day? Do you guys need witnesses? I can see if Shirley can watch the girls for a few hours.”

“I think we’re going to go on Thursday.”

“VALENTINE’S DAY?” Ginger boomed.

“My birthday. Yes. What is everyone’s deal with that day? Frankie lowkey freaked when I suggested then, too.”

“Valentine’s Day wedding are almost always a recipe for disaster, though.”

“I think our faux marriage will weather the storm long enough for Frankie to get his green card unscathed.”

Ginger made some sort of noise in the back of her throat then said, “So what are you wearing?”

I had to laugh at her swift change of topic. Of course, what I was wearing to my sham wedding would be top of mind for her. Ginger was always the most fashion conscious out of all of my sisters. Noelle and I championed comfort over everything while Juju went through random phases of...interesting sartorial choices. Gigi, however, had subscriptions to *Vogue*, *Bazaar*, and all of those other fashion forward magazines. I for sure thought she would end up leaving us and going off to study fashion and become a super famous fashion designer.

“I don’t know. Whatever I wear to work on Thursday? We’re just gonna run over to City Hall on lunch and do the lil quick ceremony or whatever. We don’t need witnesses in Cook County, so it should be a ten-minute excursion at the most.”

“Sissy, it’s Valentine’s Day. You guys should probably plan on taking the afternoon off work because that place is probably going to wall to wall with everybody and their mama tryna get married on the alleged most romantic day of the year.”

Shit, she was right, I didn't even think of that. I should probably send Frankie a message about that. I also needed to find some time to get him a band. Despite this wedding being a sham, we did say we would do the whole ring exchange for real. Frankie was insistent that I didn't spend too much on his band, but hell I didn't even know where to begin with regard to ring shopping.

"You think you can get Josh to watch his children for a little longer? I need you," I said to Ginger on a bit of a whine.

"Watch? You mean parent? That nigga put half his DNA in, it is no inconvenience for him to be a dad while I go on a super-secret mission with my big sis. How long will it take you to get here?"

"Maybe fifteen...twenty at the most. Wanna go to Oakbrook?"

"Yep! See you soon."

We hung up and the album that I was streaming on the way to work picked up through the Bluetooth, which happened to be Kendrick Lamar's *Good Kid, M.A.D.D City*. It had been in heavy rotation in my whip for the past few months. I pulled up in front of Gigi and Josh's with my music blasting as I rapped along to "Backseat Freestyle". A part of me almost blew the horn to alert my arrival because I knew it would get on Gi's nerves, but I called to let her know I was outside instead. She must've been sitting by the door with her shoes and coat on because she breeched that threshold and hopped into my ride quicker than a mofo.

The mall was just a ten-minute drive from Ginger's and five minutes after arriving there she had me in a dressing room in Nordstrom with an armful of dresses in varying shades of white, off white, and blush. I don't know how she managed to find so many considering that white wasn't really a winter color, but she and the woman who was working in the cocktail dress section saw each other from across the room and instantly it

was on. I was banished to the dressing room to shed my clothing while they cycled through every dress they thought would work well on my frame. I wasn't really a dress kinda girl, most often opting for leggings and a tunic, so some of their choices were automatic noes before I even took it off the hanger. Despite their repeated insistence that clothes on the hanger are often done a disservice, I knew that I wasn't wearing a damn bodycon dress to City Hall for a ten-minute ceremony. I asked Ginger to come along for her fashion expertise, but I was beginning to regret even asking. She was taking this excursion a bit too seriously, damn near about to turn this into an episode of *Say Yes to the Dress*.

"Last round, I promise," Ginger said, peeking her head into the dressing room, "I think we may have finally found one that you'll like.

I just rolled my eyes. She said that the last two rounds.

"Can this be the last round for real, Gi? I'm tired and we still have to go find Frankie's ring as well."

"I super promise this is the last round. Jillian found a dress that she'd forgotten to put on the sales floor after the customer didn't come pick it up. And it's your size! I'll be right back."

I sat down on the tufted bench in the oversized dressing room and heaved a sigh. How silly of me to think this would be a simple excursion to find a dress. I'd tried on a couple that were fine to me, but since my reaction didn't move the needle Ginger insisted that we needed to keep trying until we found *The Dress*. In spite of my protests that I was unsure any dress would give me the reaction she deemed acceptable, Gigi insisted that we would find it. A quick tap of knocks sounded on the door before Gigi peeked in again holding a garment bag. I motioned with my hands for her to come in and get on with it so we could just pick a dress and go. She placed the garment bag on the hook and unzipped it, revealing a mid-length, ivory

colored, beautifully delicate combination of lace and satin with which I immediately fell in love.

I couldn't even help the grin that split across my face as I gushed, "Oh my gosh how pretty is this?!"

Ginger wisely said nothing, just nodded and began unbuttoning the twenty or so buttons that lined the back of the bodice. I was damn near chomping at the bit to get into the dress and she had only gotten through maybe half of the buttons before my hands were extended, grasping at the fabric. I quickly tore through the rest of the buttons and slid into the dress. As Gigi buttoned me back up, I ran my hands down the slightly full skirt. When Ginger was done, she stepped back and gave me some space. I walked right up on the mirror, closely examining the dress, loving how it molded to my body, but then flared at the waist. The lace shell around the shoulders was composed of a beautiful abstract floral design and looked amazing against my skin. Because of the fullness of the skirt, I couldn't help but give at least one Kenya Moore twirl, watching the skirt flutter around my thighs then settle back against them. When I met Gigi's gaze in the mirror, she quickly averted her eyes, but not before I saw that she was on the verge of crying.

Through sniffles she asked, "So...you like it?"

"Meh, I guess it'll do," I responded, only to have her eyes snap back to meet mine in the mirror.

When she saw the smirk on my face, she knew I was messing with her. It was perfect and all of the annoyance I felt prior to trying on this dress had dissipated. I was totally in love. I barely wanted to take the dress off...that's how good I felt in it, but knowing I'd be donning it again in a few short days was enough to get me out of it tonight and back into the store to

find accessories and shoes to match before we headed over to *C.D. Peacock* to pick out Frankie's band.

That process was markedly shorter than the dress mission was since I was in the driver's seat for this one and knew him best. I wanted to get something that was low key, but still had a little razzle dazzle to it and the black titanium band with a rose gold inlay that caught my eyes upon entering the store was perfection. The sales guy tried his best to get me to look at a few more rings, but I was resolute. The band screamed Frankie as soon as I saw it and I was not to be deterred. It was slightly outside the range I'd given myself to spend, but I wasn't pressed. I'd be saving hella money soon and would make it up on the back end I thought, with a giggle.

On the way home, Ginger asked if I was sure I didn't want her to come downtown for the ceremony on Thursday. I assured her that since her commute to get down here would likely eclipse the amount of time the actual nuptials took I was fine. I told her that she could be first to arrive for my real first wedding. She just laughed and shook her head as she exited the car.

Thursday, February 14, 2013

I was nervous. I shouldn't have been nervous, but I was and it was freaking me out a little bit. I had a shoot that kept me out of the office for the entirety of the morning, but was set to meet Frankie at City Hall at one thirty. I hoped that our wait wouldn't be egregiously long and purposefully planned to get there half an hour before the marriage and civil union's office reopened after their lunch recess. I was grateful to have this shoot take me out of the office so that I could change into my pretty...no *gorgeous* dress without anyone looking at me crazy or asking too many questions. The plan was for things to be wrapped up with this shoot at or around noon so I could drive back into city center, then change and spruce myself up a bit at Frankie's before meeting him at City Hall.

He and I met up last night after work so he could provide me with his spare key and he tried giving me a final chance to back out of the whole thing. Which of course led to an hour-long discussion, sparked by me about whether or not he really wanted to even stay here. He was being incredibly glib about the whole thing which kind of set me off.

"I still can't comprehend why you would do this?"

"And I don't comprehend why you won't just go with it? Do you not want to be here? Am I overstepping my bounds? Do you think I have some sort of nefarious intentions? I...look, do you feel like I've backed you into a corner here because we can just dead this shit now. Honestly. I'm doing this because I care about my friend who may be sent back to a country with which he has zero ties or job prospects. And okay, I'm not saying that you can't or won't make your own way if it comes to that, but I don't understand even chancing it?"

"This is chancing it, too. This marriage thing? Honestly, the INS could see right through this ruse and deport my ass anyway. Then what? You'll have to go through the trouble to annulling the paperwork."

I laughed, shaking my head, "I don't care about any damn paperwork, Frankie. This just...this feels like something else. And...I don't want to feel like I've backed you into a corner when I'm just trying to help. You can see that, right?"

"I can. And I appreciate you for that. More than you could ever know. I just..." Frankie trailed off, "I don't want this to affect us, you know? How we are now? I don't want to lose that."

"No worries, you can discreetly keep your hoes," I joked.

Frankie shook his head on a slight chuckle and moved closer to me, encasing both of my hands within his while looking me in the eye.

"No, I mean us. I've grown very...fond of our bond and I'd hate for any...residual or latent bitterness to do anything to weaken that. You're very special to me, Valora. I don't want to lose you, okay?"

"And you won't."

"You cannot promise that."

"Yes I can. The same way we are now...open, honest to a fault? That won't change because of cohabitation and a lil signed piece of paper, Frankie."

"Okay, we'll revisit this after the INS is so far up our asses that we're shitting detainment threats."

"Hey, I thought you said you were a writer that was too superior for idioms?"

"That is a metaphor, my dear Valora, which is why you should stick to clicking your little photos. Don't try to distract me, I see right through you," Frankie grumbled, frustration creasing the space between his brows.

I smiled and pressed my thumb to the area, rotating it in small circles to release the tension building there. Frankie's eyes closed as he gave way to my ministrations.

"Relax, it's going to be fine. You'll see," I whispered.

"I hope you know what you're talking about," Frankie muttered.

Shit, me too, I thought.

His reservations weren't unfounded. I mean despite he and I not being in any sort of romantic entanglement, stress has a way of permuting even the strongest of bonds. I hoped that ours was strong enough to withstand whatever bullshit would come our way as we journeyed through this process.

I arrived at City Hall at ten minutes after one. The wind was blowing like mad as I walked over to the building so my first stop was the restroom to salvage the cute chignon I'd pulled my hair into. Luckily, the wind didn't do as much damage as I anticipated so it only took a few minutes for me to right the slight disarray. As I exited the restroom, I saw a woman walking toward me who looked an awful lot like Gigi. I attributed that to me buggin' and everyone in the world having a doppelganger until she was right up in my face waving her hands in my face.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, simultaneously amused and annoyed with her presence.

"You really thought I'd let you get married alone? Tuh. Not *my* favorite sister!"

"But..."

"I know, I know. But you only get married for the first time, once, Lolo. So, I'm here," she said, grabbing me by the elbow and ushering me toward an empty bench nearby, "You know I'm the sappy sister, so bear

with me here. I know this doesn't seem real to you, but to me it is. No matter the circumstances. So, I wasn't letting you do this alone."

"Technically..." I started.

"Shut up. Unless you don't want the stuff I brought you..."

"Oooh, I got presents? What you get me?"

"Well...as tradition dictates..." Ginger started, reaching into the bag that was resting on her forearm, "Something old...mommy's pearl earrings that I wore to my wedding. These are on loan just for the day since I'm supposed to pass them onto Jordie or Pay when they're of age. So technically they're your something borrowed as well. Something new...the fascinator your cheap ass refused to buy Monday night, but I had Jillian set aside anyway. And finally, something blue," she said with a flourish, reaching into the bag once more to retrieve a beautifully constructed bouquet of silk flowers—gorgeous ivory roses surrounded by stargazer lilies in varying shades of blue.

Before I could help it, I felt my eyes welling up with tears that I tried and failed to keep at bay. My wedding day...my *real* one that is...wasn't something I'd ever given much thought, but a small part of me did feel like I was being a bit cheated here. Ginger was right, you do only get married for the first time once and despite the circumstances of this wedding not exactly being the intent of living happily ever after, I was a little bummed about getting married in a quickie ceremony at City Hall. I'd also thought that my special day would include my dad walking me down the aisle and, in this moment, the combination of those thoughts sent me into an emotional tailspin for which I was not quite ready. Gigi's thoughtfulness, however, assuaged some of the sadness so these tears were a combination of happy and sad tears. And as if she could sense what was going on inside my crazy head, she ushered me into the restroom to help me clean my face,

reapply my makeup, and meet Frankie so we could join the queue of folks ready to get hitched.

We exited the restroom just in time to see Frankie strolling in and...

"*Goddamn*," Gigi groaned.

My thoughts exactly. Objectively, I knew Frankie was handsome...ok, fine as hell. But today? Outfitted in a slim fitting navy suit that seemed to be tailored to precision to accentuate his broad shoulders, narrow waist, and long legs, paired with a crisp white button down with the top three buttons undone, a navy pocket square and cognac colored shoes, he looked downright edible. And I clearly wasn't the only one who thought so as the woman who sat in front of me remarked about wanting to sop him up with a biscuit, much to the ire of the guy who was besides her that she was presumably in this place to marry.

At his glare she said, "What? I can look. I got eyes. They stuck in this body that's stuck with your ass, but I can look. Ain't that what you always say when I catch your ass drooling over Serena Williams' ass?" and I couldn't help the giggles that escaped.

The sound of my giggle caught Frankie's attention as he scanned the room looking for me and when our eyes connected from across the room there was a spark of...something different that traveled between our gazes. He made his way over to where Gigi and I stood slowly, his eyes traveling down my body before slowly coming back up to meet mine. I squirmed under his appraisal, simultaneously unnerved yet thrilled by the heat I saw in his eyes as he finally reached us.

"Valora, you look incredible," he said, pulling me into a quick embrace.

"Thank you," I replied softly, feeling my face overheating.

"Bitch, are you *blushing*?" Gigi whispered, laughing.

"Damn, a brother can't get a compliment back," Frankie pouted, "And here I thought I cleaned up well."

"Now you know you look better than well," Gigi ribbed Frankie.

"You must be Ginger," he said on a chuckle, taking the teasing in stride.

"Yeah, since my sis here is momentarily stunned into silence by your fineness, I'll overlook her rudity and introduce myself. Nice to meet you, brother in law to be," Gigi giggled.

"I don't know about fineness, Ginger. My bride to be here is still oddly silent. What's the matter, baby? You don't think I look good?"

Shaking off my stupor, I replied, "Nah you don't look good."

A shocked gasp came from the woman in front of me, "I know she fuckin' lyin'."

I bit down on my lip and continued, "You look delicious enough to sop up with a biscuit, boy!"

That caught Frankie off guard, his unbridled chuckle sending shockwaves through my body as he pulled me close again, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"You ready for this, baby?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

At a quarter of two, a woman from the court clerk's office came out and began passing out numbers so there wouldn't be a mass rush to the doors once the Court was back in session. Frankie and I were fifth in line, so while we waited, he and Gigi chatted as I sat there staring off into space. Before I knew it, the judge was calling out our names to stand in front of him and exchange our vows.

"Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and woman in holy matrimony," was all I heard before my mind drifted off. I

glanced over at Gigi who was trying to record the ceremony and simultaneously trying to tamp down her tears. That video was probably going to be a shaky hot mess. In the distance, I heard Frankie agreeing to take me to be his wife and figured I should shake off my mental wandering and tune back in to the ceremony. I was a half a second too late, however, as just when I refocused both Frankie and the judge were looking at me expectantly.

“Ooh! Yes, I do!” I quickly agreed, my response underscored by Gigi and the court clerk’s giggles. Frankie squeezed my hands and threw a quick wink my way before the judge continued on asking if we had the rings. Once we both answered in the affirmative, he asked that I place Frankie’s on my thumb and he place mine on his pinky so there would be no fumbling to find them once we began the ring exchange. When we got to the call and response section of the vows during which we vowed to take each other as husband and wife “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part” was when it finally hit me that we were *really* doing this. The conviction with which Frankie spoke as he repeated after the judge while looking me dead in the eye made my chest constrict a bit. I felt the tears welling, tried valiantly to blink them back, but they fell freely as I hiccupped my way through the first half of repeating after the judge before Frankie interrupted.

He leaned in a bit closer, using the pads of his thumbs to wipe away my tears before asking, “Are you okay, baby?”

I closed my eyes, taking a deep, cleansing breath before opening them and refocusing my gaze upon Frankie. The genuine depth of concern in his eyes almost sent me back in to tears again, but I swallowed that emotion, nodding before responding almost inaudibly, “yes.” Then I turned

to the judge and apologized and asked him to continue the call and response. This time I got through the whole thing without breaking down and we continued on to exchange our rings. By the time the judge pronounced us man and wife I don't know what I expected, but it certainly was not for Frankie to wrap me up tight and fuse our mouths together in a kiss that damn near took my breath away. I was expecting a chaste peck on the mouth, but instead what I got was a tentative series of small pecks that quickly gave way to him taking my lower lip between his as his tongue snaked out seeking entry to my mouth. I gladly capitulated on a moan, our tongues tangling for God knows how long before the judge cleared his throat and Gigi called out, "Damn, let her breathe, bro!"

That made the both of us laugh as we pulled back. Frankie wiping my lipstick from his mouth and me pulling my lower lip between my teeth, trying to savor the remnants of a taste that was uniquely Frankie. Our eyes met again and he pulled me close, going in for round two, I thought, but instead he landed a chaste kiss on my forehead, wrapped an arm around my waist, and led me out of the courtroom. Gigi followed behind, ribbing us the whole time. After we got back in the hallway I quickly rounded on Frankie.

"Yo, what was that?"

"Been that long, Valora?"

I blushed and lowered my eyes, quickly regaining my composure.

"I...wasn't expecting that."

"I know," Frankie responded with a twinkle in his eye as he grabbed my hand to lead us out of City Hall, "Come, let's go have a celebratory cocktail. Ginger, will you be joining us?"

"Wish that I could, brother in law, but I've gotta get back to the burbs before my babies drive their Nana crazy," Ginger said, "But

congratulations again, you guys.”

She gave both Frankie and I a quick squeeze—which I think surprised him—before turning to walk in the direction of where I presumed she had parked. She took about three steps before doubling back to us.

“Oh,” she said and snapped her fingers, “I hope this isn’t overstepping my bounds because I didn’t clear this with you first, Lolo, but I thought it would be cool to have a little something out at the house to celebrate you guys’ nuptials. Let the rest of the crew see the wedding. Nothing too big, just my family, Nono and Juju. Won’t be able to get Mommy here on such short notice but we can Skype her in so you can introduce everyone to our new addition.”

“I...” I trailed off, completely forgetting that not only did I not tell my other sisters and mother that I was getting married, but they were also under the impression that I wasn’t even seeing anyone. I’d wanted to keep this charade between as few people as possible, but I didn’t think about the fact that this wasn’t just a marriage in name and paper only. We’d have to be living as man and wife as well as acting as man and wife in the real world. My shoulders sank at the thought of having to lie to mommy to keep Frankie’s...*our* secret.

“That’s fine, Ginger. We haven’t any plans this weekend. See you on Saturday!” Frankie answered for me as I still stood there in a stupor.

“Fantastic!” Gigi exclaimed before turning on her heel and strutting off once again.

“Hey,” Frankie said, waving a hand in front of my face to get my attention, “Are you okay, Valora?”

I didn’t have an answer as I uttered my favorite four-letter word in response, “Fuck.”

Now...

February 10, 2018

"Yo! Do y'all remember how mommy wilded out on Frankie when we Skyped her in that day?" Juju giggled, "Lo, you had to end up taking the iPad into another room to calm her down. Wait...but when you came back she was markedly relaxed. Did you tell her that day?"

I nodded, "Sure did. Wasn't finna have her going in on for too long about making rash decisions and wishing doom and gloom on our situation."

"When she called Frankie Rico Suave I almost lost it," Noelle giggled, "Whew, mommy was fed up. Hell, we were all surprised to get that call from Gigi saying she was throwing you a wedding reception. Juju and I were like who the hell did she marry, I thought the heffa was in a committed relationship with her Nikon."

"I can't front like I still ain't a little tight that you didn't tell us what the real was back then though," Juju said, "I mean, you trust Gigi more than you trust us or something?"

"What?! No. No! It wasn't like that. We just...we needed as little people to know about it as possible considering that there was a possibility that you all could be questioned by the INS regarding our relationship and marriage, too. Frankie, in particular, didn't want to put you guys in the situation of having to lie and possibly having that lie found out. I promise it had nothing to do with the level of trust I had in either of you," I said, making sure to make eye contact with both Noelle and Juniper, "Y'all gotta believe me that this was not something I purposefully left you guys in the dark about."

"But once he got his green card you definitely could have told us," Juju said, hurt clearly evident in her tone.

"It was a total non-factor by then, Junie B," I said, reaching a hand out to grab hers in mine and squeeze it, "By the time everything was official, we were both head over heels, totally and unequivocally in love with each other. How we began didn't even matter because we were where we were and not going anywhere."

"Ok, that's sweet and all, but...I mean...we don't get to learn how y'all got there, too?" Noelle asked.

"I gotta agree with NoNo on this one," Ginger piped up, "Y'all definitely slid from homies to lovers in what seemed like an eye blink. So... you gon tell us how you were from that's just the homie to I'm smashing the homie, or nah?"

"You can leave out the...*good stuff* if you need to, but I am genuinely curious about the evolution of you guys' bond," said Noelle.

"Nah nah, leave the good stuff in," Juju chimed in, "This long ass story ain't worth it without the good stuff."

I just rolled my eyes and laughed at her.

"Well if I'm being perfectly honest, everything changed with that kiss at the wedding. Before then it was like ok I know Frankie is fine, but he looks at me like I'm his little sister or child so I never even entertained there being anything further between us than that. But then he went and flipped the script on me."

"Sis, I promise if you would have told me that kiss was fake when we first saw you guys' wedding video, I would have called you every kind of liar because that shit there? Fuego. Fire. Hot." Juju said while fanning herself.

"Girl, imagine how I felt being on the receiving end. I was all fucked up. Between trying to reconcile the sparks that kiss set out, navigating living with a man who was acting like it didn't happen, and growing increasingly frustrated with being ignored, I'd had it to my breaking point," I said.

"That still doesn't explain how you came to smash the homie though," Gigi said.

"Can you stop saying smash the homie, Ray J? Damn. And if you'd be patient I was getting to that. So yeah...like I was saying, we were maybe a month into being married and..."

Then...

Tuesday, March 13, 2013

Living with a man was...*different*. I'd packed up everything from my apartment and officially moved in about two weeks after Frankie and I tied the knot. The immigration hearing that was set for the day after we got married ended up actually ended up just being a cattle call explaining the deportation process and assigning Frankie a new evidentiary hearing that would be taking place March fourteenth. This hearing would be when he and his lawyer had to provide evidence that supported his right to stay in the country. So, for the past few weeks we've been gathering as many character reference letters as possible from anyone with whom Frankie had significant contact during these years in the States. Between the stress of getting all of that together plus the normal adjustment period of me invading his space, Frankie had been...*testy*. Admittedly, I probably could have alleviated some of the strain by being a bit more cognizant of the things that set him off, but I was battling some shit of my own as well. Besides, it seemed like everything I did set him off, so I didn't know how much more cognizant of his...triggers in order to avoid being treated like a piece of furniture in our now shared space.

I also couldn't stop thinking about that kiss from our wedding day, but Frankie never brought it up after that day. After Gigi left us, we went to Brady's to grab a couple drinks, garnering quite a bit of double takes based on our attire. I'd lost the fascinator and undid my up-do to let my hair cascade down my back, but kept on my dress and heels. Frankie ditched his suit jacket, but still was way overdressed for the atmosphere in his slacks

and crisp button down. I'd expected him to explain the kiss that night, but he talked about everything but. I learned even more of his childhood story of abandonment after his parents passed away and he was put into foster care. The things he'd endured until he aged out of the system began working and eventually made his way to the states were unthinkable. My impression of him was heightened ten-fold as he spoke of the adversities he'd overcome. And that night I'd definitely felt like our relationship had elevated.

But then he turned...surly. The first weekend after we exchanged vows we had that reception Ginger threw us, then the weekend after that he, Josh, and some of Frankie's friends moved all of my stuff between Frankie's loft and my storage. But every weekend after that he'd been absent. Kip had recently moved to town—he was here interviewing when all of the drama with Frankie's citizenship kicked off—so I assumed that was with whom he was spending his time, but I couldn't be sure. When we were at work, he was still the same Frankie—and our relationship was the same for appearance's sake. But at home he was withdrawn, surly, and downright mean some days. I'd suffered through it for these few weeks because of growing pains, but this shit was dead now. Tonight, we were going to clear the air once and for all.

My plan was to leave work a little early, go grocery shopping and have a hot meal awaiting Frankie once he got in from work. Time ended up getting away from me, however, and I ended up leaving work a little later than I initially planned. Still before Frankie was due to be home, so I nixed the grocery shopping and decided to make do with some things I knew we already had at home.

I planned on grilling us a couple of steaks on his cast iron stove top grill, accompanied with potatoes au gratin and herb butter haricots verts. A

simplistic meal, but one I'd prepared for us in the past and Frankie enjoyed a whole lot. I made one stop on the way home. I wanted to pick up a pricey bottle of Grenache, a red wine that I knew Frankie favored. That way after his belly was full and his mind was relaxed from the wine, I could continue with my plan to string him up and grill him with a few questions to get to the bottom of this hot and cold ass treatment I was getting from him. I was hoping to catch him with his guards down so that we could have an open and honest conversation.

As I crossed the threshold of our loft, I could hear movement from his bedroom area which alerted me to Frankie being home. I decided to go up and let him know that I was making dinner ahead of time just in case he had plans to skate out and leave me home alone yet another night. I took off my coat, being sure to hang it on one of the hooks behind the doors instead of splaying it across one of the dining area chairs since I knew it was a thing that could possibly set Frankie off. I hung my work bag next to my coat and placed the bottle of wine on a kitchen counter before proceeding to the area of the loft where I assumed Frankie was. The bedroom door was ajar, so I knocked once before striding in and talking.

"Hey, I...." I trailed off.

As soon as I stepped into the room I realized that he couldn't have been expecting me to be home any time soon because he was fresh out of the shower, dripping wet with one towel slung low around his waist and another in his hands wringing out the excess water from his hair. Whatever words were coming next were trapped in my throat as I watched a single drop of water cascade from one of his dripping wet curls, down his chest, through the ridges of abs I'd only felt, but never seen, down into...

"Is there something I can help you with here, Valora?" Frankie asked brusquely, redirecting my attention to his face and why I came in here in the first place.

"I'm sorry...I was coming to tell you that I planned on cooking for us tonight, so you know...you don't have to go out for dinner. I mean unless you had plans with Kip or someone else...I'm not trying to dictate your life or anything. Just...I thought it would be nice if we had dinner together since it's been a while. And I figured we could talk about tomorrow."

Frankie sighed before responding, "Fine. Was there anything else?"

"No...tha-that's it."

"All right well if that's all can you get out of here so I can finish drying off and get dressed?"

"Oh. Yes. Sorry. Dinner should be ready in about ninety minutes, if that works for you?"

"It's fine."

With that I scurried back downstairs and into the kitchen to get things going for dinner. After washing my hands, I turned on an Anita Baker Pandora playlist and began prepping and cooking dinner. I danced and sang my way through a plethora of late 80s R&B hits from everyone like Whitney Houston, Patti LaBelle, and Big and Little Luther Vandross. While cooking, my mind kept wandering back to Frankie in that towel. My gosh, I knew the brotha had body, but I didn't know he had BODY. Seeing him in so little had me ready to say fuck talking and just attack him—fuck him into acting right. A small giggle escaped my mouth at that thought, Frankie would probably think that I lost my mind if I had just straight up mounted him. Didn't keep the thought of doing just that from blossoming in my mind as I finished up our meal.

Exactly ninety minutes after I rolled up on him in his bedroom, Frankie appeared in the kitchen area. Instead of offering to help like he would have in the past, he just grunted a greeting and slid down into a chair as I sat his already made plate in front of him. I retrieved my own plate, took a quick minute to say grace—more for me to ask for the strength to be patient with this man than exaltation for the meal that I'd whipped up. I'd picked up my fork to eat when I remembered the wine. I hopped up to retrieve it, the cork screw, and two glasses. I set the glasses down and angled the bottle and opener to him, hoping he'd take the hint. I sucked at using manual openers to uncork wine. Undoubtedly pieces of the cork ended up inside the wine every time I attempted.

Frankie accepted the proffered bottle with a slight smirk before uncorking it and filling both of our glasses. We sat there eating and drinking in almost complete silence, the music streaming from my Pandora station was our only saving grace. After a few minutes Frankie finally spoke up.

"You wanted to talk about tomorrow?" he asked with a slight edge to his voice as if he was spoiling for an argument.

"Actually, I want to talk about right now. And the last nearly thirty days. And your funky ass attitude. What happened to all that "*I don't want to lose you and us*" shit you were talking before, Frankie? You've been stomping around here like somebody stole your bike for the past few weeks while I'm walking on eggshells, praying that I don't say or do anything to set you off."

"Valora..."

"I'm not done. I'm tired, Frankie. I don't like feeling on edge in my own home. Hell is this even my home? I feel like an interloper who has worn out her welcome. And for all of that we could have kept separate

residences, coming together only when necessary for your processes," I finished on a half sob, feeling myself getting worked up even though I'd had a mental pep talk with myself while cooking dinner and had decided that I would not cry. But I was frustrated and flustered so my natural inclination was to cry, but I'd be damned if I lost my composure and broke down. After few cleansing breaths later I continued, "I don't like it, Frankie and I want to know what I need to do to make it better. I miss my friend. I want him back."

"Valora," Frankie said, rising to come squat in front of me, "baby I promise, there is nothing you can do. This has noth...that's a lie. This has everything to do with you, but also nobody but me can actually solve the issue."

"What kind of double speak is that Frankie? See that's what I mean. Just say what's wrong, so we can work together to fix it."

"I don't know that you want me to do that, baby," Frankie replied on a chuckle.

"I'm asking you to, so clearly I want to know. What. Is. It?" I gritted out.

"Are you sure?"

"Francisco Aurelio Mora, if you don't..."

"The problem is the fact that I'm trying so desperately not to fuck things up with us because every time I'm near you my only thought is how badly I want to bury myself inside of you. I want to be so deeply embedded here," he said, rubbing my inner thigh, dangerously close to my pussy, "that you feel it here." He trailed his other hand up the side of my body, his thumb pressed against the pulse at the base of my throat.

I swallowed hard, affected by words I clearly hadn't expected and before I had a chance to fully absorb them, Frankie stood pulling me with him and into a kiss that made that kiss from our wedding seem chaste. My eyes drifted closed as I gave myself over to the ministrations of Frankie's warm, plush lips pressed against mine. With my head cradled between his large palms, Frankie explored every crevice of my mouth with his tongue as I moaned, trying to keep up. His kisses came with a sense of urgency, as if he were convinced that I would somehow disappear so he had to make sure he got his fill. When the necessity of breathing prevented us from keeping our mouths fused Frankie pulled back slowly with little soft nibbles to my lips. After we fully disengaged, Frankie said nothing, just looked at me as if to say your move, so I just did what came naturally—intertwined our hands and led him to his bedroom.

I'd barely gotten three steps before Frankie backed me up against a wall, gripping my ass to haul my legs around his waist so that we were nose to nose as he once again leaned in to ravage my mouth with yet another torrid kiss, then pulling back to look me in the eyes for a long moment.

“Valora, baby, are you sure? I don’t want you to feel like...”

Before answering verbally, I tightened my thighs around him, bringing his hardness to rest right against the heat at the juncture of my thighs, moved forward enough to snag his right ear lobe between my teeth before whispering, “I’ve never been more sure that I want you to fuck me right now.”

That was all it took to spur Frankie on. He emitted some sort of animalistic growl before throwing me over his shoulder and stalking his way to the bedroom. When we reached his bed, he laid me down with a tenderness that belied the urgency he previously expressed to get inside of

me. Instead of the frantic shedding of clothing that I was expecting, Frankie took his time with me, slowly peeling off the clothing that I wore, peppering each piece of skin revealed with soft open mouth kisses that traveled from my clavicle to the edge of my panty line. I lifted up slightly so he could remove my leggings completely, then laid back slightly uncomfortable under the hot perusal of his gaze—wishing I'd worn something a bit sexier under my clothes now that we were here in this moment. My uncomfortable feeling quickly turned to desire as Frankie made quick work of my underwear, sliding them down and over my legs as he held them aloft in the air. I looked up to see him gazing down upon me with a frantic darting of his eyes focusing on various parts of my anatomy as if he didn't know where he wanted to begin.

That decision was quickly made however as he lowered himself to me once again connecting our lips as his hands made quick work of my bra. Then he trailed those same soft, open-mouthed kisses from earlier down my neck to the top of my breasts before he buried his nose between them, inhaling deeply. I squirmed impatiently, the slow caress of his hands gliding from where they were placed on my hips up the sides of my rib cage until he firmly palmed both of my breasts, giving them a squeeze that instantly drew a moan from the depths of my soul. My nipples beaded immediately and my back arched into his caress.

“Why do you still have clothes on?” I whined, hands gripping his shoulders, the fabric of his t-shirt bunching in my grasp.

His answer was drawing my left nipple into his mouth, suckling, then running the flat of this tongue around my areola, before applying such deep suction again, making me cry out. While his mouth blessed one nipple, he kneaded and pinched the other. My breasts had always been incredibly sensitive and it was almost like Frankie had a honing device that alerted

him of this fact as he moved back and forth between them, bringing me to fever pitch, on the precipice of orgasm. My thighs began the slight shivers that warned of my impending combustion and Frankie paused mid suckle, shaking his head.

“Don’t you dare think about cumming without me inside of you,” he growled.

And I’ll be goddamned if that shit didn’t make me wetter than I already was as I watched him make quick work of the t-shirt and sweats he was wearing, then quickly sheathed himself in a condom from the bedside table.

“Last time to back out,” he teased, the tip of his dick millimeters from penetrating me.

Instead of answering, I wrapped my legs around his thighs, grabbed his ass and guided him right into my opening. At the first stroke, we let out twin sighs of relief which made me chuckle slightly. That humor was short-lived as Frankie’s rhythm took control of my body, long, impossibly deep, mind-blowingly slow strokes that had me right back on the edge of cumming within minutes.

“Goddamnit, Valora,” Frankie breathed.

“Goddamn yourself, Francisco. You feel so *good*,” I panted, “This shit ain’t fair.”

He smirked before pressing even closer somehow, settling my legs atop his shoulders as his strokes increased in speed. I could barely catch my breath, his pounding into me feeling so good that I just said fuck breathing and gave myself over to him as I whined my pleasure in panting moans, imploring him to never stop. His dick was now my oxygen, each deep thrust somehow compelling me to breathe so I could take him as he pressed

deeper and deeper. Before I knew it, I was tumbling over the edge of ecstasy, screaming out combinations of curse words that didn't even make sense as my body erupted in a frisson of feeling. Everything else in the world ceased to exist, I could see, hear, nor feel anything but Francisco Aurelio Mora. After minutes of floating in pleasure I finally felt myself coming back to my body only to be triggered back into the stratosphere as Frankie finally came. He collapsed on top of me, body weight be damned as he pressed into me, our bodies still intimately joined, breathing hitching, then falling in synch with one another. I felt completely sated—boneless and relaxed, as my eyes closed and I drifted into slumber.

Wednesday, March 14, 2013

Hours later I was startled awake by loud ass snoring directly in my ear. Disoriented at first, I blinked a few times to get my bearings and when I shifted to sit up the weight of Frankie's arm slung around my waist reminded me of all that transpired earlier. My movements made him snuggle a bit closer, decreasing the incremental space between our bodies. A glance at the night stand next to where I lay told me that it was the middle of the night, nearly three in the morning, to be exactly. Knowing we had to be up in just a few hours, I tried settling back in and getting back into my REM cycle. Unfortunate for me, I remained wide awake, which gave me all of the time in the world to send what had transpired between Frankie and me over the past few hours on a one-way trip Disasterville. By the time I'd finally wound myself down enough to fall back asleep, Frankie's alarm was going off. Before he had a chance to fully wake up, I sprung from his bed and retreated into the bedroom in which I'd been sleeping since I moved in.

I managed to avoid Frankie until it was time for us to head over to the court. The hearing was set for ten am, but we were meeting up with his lawyer at the law office to go over last-minute details as well as do another mock testimony. When I walked into the living room, Frankie looked up from fastening his watch and smiled. Quickly he made his way over to me, enveloping me in his arms.

"Buenos dias, cosita," he crooned, dropping his head to place a kiss upon my lips, but just before he connected I turned my head, giving him a cheek.

He frowned in question at this and I simply replied, “We’ve got somewhere to be and you saw where last night got us.”

Throwing his head back in laughter, Frankie replied, “Touché. Are you ready?”

I nodded and he walked over to the coat rack, putting his coat on and retrieving mine to hold it out for me to put on—as usual. I slipped into the pea coat quickly, buttoning and tying the sash around my waist as Frankie’s hands dropped from resting on my shoulders to wrapping around my waist, pulling me into another embrace. I allowed myself a brief moment to relax into his embrace before pulling away and striding to the door.

“Don’t wanna be late,” I said with a smile.

The immigration court proceedings were interesting to say the least. As we awaited our turn, I engaged in one of my favorite activities—people watching. There were folks from all walks of life coming through this building, fighting for their chance to remain in the alleged land of the free. In the time that we had been sitting here, we witnessed three sets of people go through the double doors that led to the courtroom. Two of them came back out wearing looks of satisfaction and triumph while the last one came out looking dazed and confused, heartbreak clearly reflecting in the plaintiff’s eyes. It was at once heartbreaking and thrilling the parity of emotions that paraded through the space. Almost made me wish I’d had my camera to capture the scenes.

Soon enough it was time for Frankie’s hearing and as we walked into the courtroom, he tightened his grip on my hand. I looked up to see his mouth pulled into a flat line, the normal mirth in his eyes clouded by uncertainty and strain. I squeezed his hand to get his attention and when he

looked at me, mouthed, “You got this.” In return, I got a wan smile. I listened to his lawyer defend his case, submit the character letter references, then motioned for Frankie to speak on his own behalf.

“Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak to defend myself this morning, Your Honor. I have lived in this country for nearly ten years, having come here at the age of nineteen, seeking a better way for myself outside of my homeland. I had no family nor future there—and I say that not as a slight to my native land because I believe it to be one of the purest places on this Earth. But I had a strong desire to change the world through my God given talent with the written word and knew that the opportunities that would be afforded to me in this country would allow me to do just that much. I went through all of the proper legal channels to not only obtain my visas to gain entrance into the States, but to also ensure that I could remain here as I built my life and career.

It is only because of an unfortunate clerical error that we have come to be acquainted right now. But in light of that, I do ask that you grant me a bit of leniency allow me to remain in this country. I came to this country seeking purpose and direction in my life, but have been rewarded with so much more in my years here. I have found not only my purpose, but also found my passion in the heart of my wife. I earnestly implore you to take into account what a possible deportation would do to my family before it has even been given a chance to begin. Save my beautiful wife some heartache and allow me to progress through the naturalization process so that I may become a citizen of this great nation. Thank you for your time, sir,” Frankie finished with a slight nod to the judge as he sat.

That impassioned speech had me waist deep in my feelings and I became a blubbing mess when it was my time to speak on Frankie’s behalf. My previously rehearsed speech devolved into more begging than a

Keith Sweat featuring Drake song would include. I went full on soap opera heroine, pearl clutching and all. The judge took a few minutes in silence to read the letters of character witness submitted by Kip and a couple of Frankie's other college friends and old colleagues.

"Mr. Mora," the judge said suddenly, bringing our attention back to the bench.

"Your Honor," Frankie addressed, which caused the bailiff to chuckle.

"After reading these," he said, shaking the sheath of papers in his hands, "As well as listening to the impassioned pleas of yourself and your wife, it is with great pleasure through the power of this court that I grant you permission to stay in this country as you seek citizenship."

Everything he said after those words faded into white noise as Frankie first shook hands with his attorney, then swooped me up into his arms in a crushing hug. We exited the courthouse to the congratulations of the attorney once again and made our way home to the loft. I thought for sure that Frankie would want to hook up with Kip and the rest of his friends, go out for a night on the town and celebrate, but he shocked me when he insisted we go straight home.

Once we crossed the threshold of the loft, I understood why he was in such an urgent rush to get home as I'd barely gotten out of my coat before he had me hemmed up against the front door, mouth grazing my neck in a series of nibbles and bites that had me squirming immediately.

"W-wait," I panted as Frankie snaked his hand up my dress and into the waistband of my pantyhose.

His marauding hands kept moving as Frankie kissed a path to my ear, snagging the lobe between his teeth before he breathed inquisitively,

“Wait?”

“Please, I need a minute,” I said on a low moan as his fingers played in the immediate wetness that begun as soon as our lips connected.

“You sure?” he asked, fingers still moving, his thumb now joining the party, rubbing my clit in a slow circular motion.

Despite the immense pleasure, I was becoming increasingly annoyed as Frankie seemed to be ignoring my wishes. I steeled myself, willing the sensations of pleasure that were brewing in my lower abdomen to dissipate before answering with a firm yes. Frankie immediately acquiesced, letting my feet hit the floor and I moved away from him quickly, straightening my dress and fixing him with a stern glare.

“What’s the matter, baby?” Frankie asked, looking completely confused by my reaction in this moment.

Of course, he was confused because I was confused. But when I laid awake at three this morning thinking about what was happening between us I couldn’t help but think if this was just a matter of attraction by proximity, a fleeting emotional fling that would disappear as soon as he got the green card and ruining our bond forever. I turned every decision that we’d both made to get us to this point over and over in my head, trying to make some sense of it and unable to do so.

“Is...is this our new normal? We’re just gonna screw like rabbits? Make the best of it until you’re a citizen, then peace out? I mean...I just, I want to go into this with some clarity. If you need me to be that girl...the one who has sex without emotion, I can be that girl. I just...need a little adjustment period you know? I mean...this was a stark shift for us,” I blurted out.

Frankie stared at me, mouth agape, for what felt like an eternity, but was maybe a full thirty seconds before emitting a low, throaty chuckle. Which immediately flared anger in me because I didn't see anything funny here.

"Care to clue me in on the joke?" I asked, annoyed.

"You," Frankie said before his chuckles escalated into full blown laughter, "You're something else, Valora. What is it you need me to do? Hire a skywriter and a plane? Were you not there in the courtroom as I confessed to finding my passion in you, my love? That was not merely poetic language to sway the judge's decision. That was me speaking from the heart—pure and simple."

"I..."

Moving to pull me back into his arms, Frankie continued, "And this? Right now? This is nothing but your fear manifesting. Damn shame, I managed to fall in love with a woman's whose name means bravery, but she's the biggest coward in this room right now."

I bristled at being called a coward. No matter how close it might have been to the truth.

"Oh, where is all of that famous Holliday girl mouth now? Cat got your tongue?" Frankie teased, "You think you're the only one with something to lose here? You think you're out here having to be brave on your own? Trusting your heart to someone else is never an easy task, *cosita*, but when it's the right one...it's amazing how simplistic it becomes. So, what do you say? Are you willing to take a chance with me? Follow our brave hearts into the unknown?"

Choked up with emotion, I didn't trust myself to speak without falling into a hot, sobbing mess; I simply nodded and threw myself into

Frankie's arms tighter. If someone would have told me that within the span of a couple months I'd go from nowhere near looking for love to swimming in it so deeply that I needed a life raft, I would have called them every damn fool in the book. But here I was...no, *here we were*...two brave hearts, floating along in an ocean of love.

Back to the present...

February 10, 2018

“I know you are not crying,” Ginger giggled as Juju tried covertly wiping the moisture from the corners of her eyelids.

“Oh, shut up, Gi. That was a beautiful story, Lolo,” Juniper said, reaching over to give my hand a squeeze.

“It really was Lo, but...er...ah...” Noelle stalled.

“And there’s the NoNo we know and love, bringing it back around to herself,” Ginger snapped.

“Gi, be easy. Damn, you’ve been more combative as usual. You ok, sis? You need to talk it out. You know we’re here for your ornery ass too,” I said before turning my attention back to Noelle, “In case you didn’t get it, the moral of the story my good sis is to follow your heart. If it’s leading you to love then you gotta follow. Fight through the fear and you too can end up *here*.”

“Don’t get too cute. Your ass almost wasn’t *here*. It took Frankie dicking you down for you to finally show any emotion, robot. What was up with that? How could you not see that man loved you the whole time? Hell, I saw it at your lil sham wedding or whateva.”

Ginger again with the probing questions. I ignored the slight edge in her tone once again as she addressed me because Noelle had her entire attention directed toward me as if she too was seeking the answer to this question.

“Oh, that’s simple. I was just dumb.”

Everyone burst into laughter at that utterance.

“But for real, y’all. I was daft and dim. And taking for granted that all of the many ways Frankie had been trying to show me over the years that he cared for me in a much deeper way than I was even able to recognize then. I’m not saying that a dose of dope dick opened my eyes or unlocked some magical part of my brain, but it definitely did do something to change the way I saw...the way Frankie saw me, if that makes sense? It’s like my subconscious recognized his love for me, but my brain refused to process it as more than lust because anything else would have been crazy. Except it wasn’t crazy at all.”

“Ok, but like...why was Frankie such a punk? What if all this immigration mess had never come up and the fake marriage never happened? He was going to continue pushing his feelings aside and staying in the friend zone?” Juju asked.

“You know I asked him that same question on our one year anniversary and you know what he said?”

“What?” all three of my sisters asked in unison.

“That the timeline of destiny may have been shifted, but would have never been permanently altered...we would have ended up together at some moment in time because we were fated.”

That response drew a chorus of “awwwwwws” and heavy sighs from my sisters.

I continued, “and he also said that he was comin’ for my ass within six months of my twenty-fifth birthday, guns blazing. So, our little nudge from the universe just pushed that timetable up some. So to answer your question, NoNo...no you and Jay aren’t moving too fast. The universe

proceeds in its own timing and you'd do well to give in to its flow instead of bucking against it."

Fin.

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xo,

nic

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About the Author

Nicole Falls is a contemporary Black romance writer who firmly believes in the power of Black love stories being told. She's also a ceramic mug and lapel pin enthusiast who cannot function without her wireless Beats constantly blaring music. When Nicole isn't writing, she spends her time singing off key to her Tidal and/or Spotify playlists while drinking coffee and/or cocktails! She currently resides in the suburbs of Chicago.