

1 : Holiday Cgetaway

December 23rd

Conayla

“Darling, are you almost ready?” Marcus’s voice comes from down the hall.

“Just gotta grab my charger!” I call out, as I rush around my room.

I trip over a pile of shoes, crashing into my nightstand, as I try to unplug my cord, from the wall. My shirt sleeve gets stuck on the knob, yanking the drawer out, and my bedside lamp falls, with me and my mess.

“Shit!” I exclaim, as I examine the small slice on my forearm. Then, I survey the contents of my clumsy mishap, to see what scratched me.

“You good in there? What’s all that noise?” Marcus’s voice gets closer.

“I’m fine! Stay there!”

I’ve been dating Marcus, for a few months, and he’s cool, but currently a little too interested in getting into my childhood bedroom. I finally let him come inside the house, today—while I get the rest of my things—but I’m not interested in letting him all the way into my personal space. This already feels a little too close, for comfort.

As nice as he is, I'm not even sure I'm as into him as I should be. Some days, he's really great, but there's definitely something missing. Also, he seems to lack situational awareness, and I'm learning that's not something I enjoy in a man.

I unplug my charger, and use a Kleenex to wipe my arm. When I pick up my lamp, I see the penguin figurine Kieran gave me, for Christmas, my freshman year of high school. I pick it up, seeing the bill is broken, and frantically search for the missing piece. As I stand, ready to destroy this entire room, it falls from my shirt. I pick up the tiny piece of glass, and my heart aches.

"Damn it, Nayla," I chastise myself, as I press the pieces of the penguin together, "you stay breaking your own heart."

"The car is waiting," Marcus says, from just outside my door, and him being so close to my personal space just about sets me off. I'm pretty sure we'll need to have a conversation about boundaries, when we get back from Aspen.

"Go wait in it, then! Take my bag outside!"

"That's what I have Leon for. Should I just tell him to come in?"

"Yeah, whatever," I say, putting the figurine and it's broken bill into the inside pocket of my purse.

Then, I pull out my phone.

Me:

Marcus is suddenly irritating my spirit

SissyPoohLaLa:

Girl...

Me:

I know. Are y'all otw?

SissyPoohLaLa:

Yep. We're in the car.

Me:

Ok, be there soon.

“Darling, what’s taking so long?” Marcus opens my door, and looks around my room, sending a burning rage down my spine.

“I fell.”

Before he can step inside, I grab my purse, toss in my phone and charger, then rush out of my room, trying not to snap on him for ignoring my *explicit* instructions to stay by the stairs.

“Looks like you have plenty to trip over. Do you all not have a cleaning service? My housekeeper is available on her off days, if you need one.”

“You saying my house is dirty?”

“Well, not the rest of the house, but *your room* needs some tending to. No wonder you prefer my place.”

My stomach turns. I’m very turned off by glimpses of his judgy, uppity-negro attitude.

“I always create a mess, when packing. I’ll clean it up, when I get back.”

“I can send Yasmine, if it helps,” he takes my hand, “I want you to have a clean space, so you can have a clean mind.”

I smile, trying not to be irked by his sneak dissing. “Thanks.”

“Careful of that arm,” he says, as I put on my jacket, “don’t want you getting any blood on my coat.”

I smile, weakly.

We get outside, and Marcus's driver, Leon, reaches for my purse, but I shake my head, and climb in, keeping my bag safe, on my lap. As soon as we pull out of my driveway, Marcus is already on his phone, tending to whatever pompous nonsense he's got going on.

I thought he was so cool, when we met. He was in my philosophy class, and he seemed so insightful. During the second week of class, he asked for coffee, and we talked for a while. It was a good time. He seemed so mature, and so into me. He said he admired the way I love my kids, and that he wanted to make sure life was easier for me. He said his goal was to make me feel like the most important person in the whole world.

Naturally, I fell for it.

Marcus began spoiling me, and treating me like the princess of his universe. I've received more flowers in the last few months, than I have in my entire life, because he says I'm as "*as precious as a petal*," and need endless reminders. The only time he really gets on my nerves, is when he makes little comments about my kids—referring to them as my *ex's children*. I know not everyone understands that being a parent doesn't look the same for everyone, so I let it slide, but it's been getting more annoying, over time.

My parents are away, being all cute or whatever, in the Caribbean. In all my life, my sister and I have never been away from them, this time of year. So, because Rizz is *literally* Prince Charming, he asked La to spend her holiday in Aspen, with him. He also invited me, so I wouldn't have to be without my sister, and alone, for the weekend. He's literally the best brother-in-law a girl could ask for. When I told Marcus I'd be going away, he asked if he could tag along, and turn it into a couples retreat. For me, it felt too soon for a romantic trip, but I thought it would be fine.

All three of my kids are with their moms, and *their families*, for Christmas. I actually don't know what Kieran's doing, and I'm trying not to care, because he hasn't even cared to talk to me. Last I heard, he was spending the holiday alone. That's probably fuckboy code for, "*he's got bella bitches lined up, to pretend he still doesn't love me.*"

I don't care, though.

Whatever.

I reach into my bag, checking that the penguin and broken bill are both still there, when my phone dings.

New message from SissyPoohLaLa:

Head's up, Kieran's joining.

I stare at the message, feeling my chest tighten, and I try to pull my thoughts together, because they aren't making sense, in my head. The only coherent thing I can make out, is that I'm turning that place into a *murder house*, the moment I see Kieran with someone else.

Me:

Who'd he bring?

SissyPoohLaLa:

Himself.

I check for the penguin parts again, then lean back, in my seat.

Marcus is finally off the phone, and he scoots closer to me. "Sorry, Darling. I was making sure everything is all set up for us. I wanted to make sure we had a suitable place to stay, and it seems Reelin actually knows how to travel in style. I expected him to put us in something regular—or to try outshining us, with a better room—but

it seems he ensured we're in comparable accommodations. I *like* him. I wonder if he'll share his travel agency, because the house we're in was booked through the next three years, when I last checked."

"Rizz always goes above and beyond," I shrug, "and he always manages to make everything *absolutely perfect*, for La."

"We're in good company, then."

"Yeah."

I don't tell Marcus Kieran's coming, because I don't even know how to say it out loud. Marcus isn't even very fond of hearing Kieran's name. He's got this weird jealousy thing, even though I've told him that there's nothing to worry about, because Kieran has barely spoken to me, in months. So, this could still get awkward.

It should be fine, though.

...*I hope.*



"Welcome," Charlene, the Houldover's regular stewardess greets Marcus and I, "champagne is already waiting, and your candies are in your seat, Miss Lo."

"Thank you." I smile, and walk past her, seeing my sister and Rizz, but not Kieran.

"You good?" Rizz stands, hugging me. I nod, and he gives me a knowing look, before greeting Marcus, "whaddup?"

"Reelin, I checked on our accommodations, and I have to say, I'm glad you seem to know how to do luxury travel." We sit, and Marcus continues, "which agency did you book with? The Morreaux House is known for being booked out, years in advance. I've only actually

been to that house once, in high school, but the family who owns it was staying there, that week. So, we never even made it through the door. We tried for *years*, after that. I *need* your connection!”

“We are the connection, bruh.” The sound of Kieran’s voice ignites every fiber of my being.

Marcus looks at him, with a confused expression, but quickly adjusts his posture, and reaches for my hand. “Kieran Michaels. I wasn’t aware you were coming.”

Kieran smiles, winking at me. “Surprise.”

I look at La, and she gives me a shrug, nodding to my drink. I chug my champagne, and Charlene appears, just in time, to fill my glass.

“What do you mean, *‘you’re the connection?’*” Marcus asks.

“Morreaux House is *our* house.” Kieran shrugs, sitting in the seat across from me.

Marcus chuckles, putting on his seat belt, with a shake of his head. He also checks that I have mine on, then Rizz and La, before turning his attention back on Kieran.

K smiles, starting on his fruit tray, and completely ignoring the weird energy.

Marcus waits a beat, before saying, “I think we’re waiting on *you*.” Charlene looks as confused as me, when Marcus looks at her, for confirmation. “Is that right?”

“What about me?” Kieran asks, and I’m suddenly distracted by his tongue, as he pops a grape into his mouth.

“Your seatbelt.”

La makes a noise in her throat, and Kieran smiles at her, before lifting the bowl, and asking, “what about it?”

Charlene gives Marcus a pitying look, then turns her focus back to the tv screen, preparing to turn on whatever movie Rizz requested for my sister.

“I didn’t see you put it on. My apologies.” Marcus leans back, but then, he sits up, again. “And the Morreaux House is owned by the Morreaux siblings. *They* are the Black descendants of a notoriously racist family, who came into their wealth in the most unexpected of ways. They’re part of a richly important history, that many can learn from. This house is a celebration of Black excellence, and it is incredibly lucky that you’re even allowed to piggyback on our holiday, to witness it.” He glances at me. “Fabricating a story, to impress your *ex*, who has clearly moved on, and is in a happy relationship, is *very odd* behavior.”

Kieran’s smile makes me smile. “Okay, man. My bad.” He glances at me, with an expression that says he’s choosing to leave this alone, *for* me.

I hate that I love him, but I love him, *so bad*.

Dreamgirls plays for the duration of our flight, because any movie with snow anywhere in it, becomes a Christmas movie, to my sister. Thankfully, Marcus left his need to talk about all the things he knows on the Atlanta jetway, because I really didn’t want to be stuck in the air, with petty back-and-forth. I can’t help but to feel a way, though, because Kieran acted like he didn’t notice Marcus being extra touchy-feely, with me. I’m not a fan of his nonchalant energy.

He’s obviously playing a game, knowing I hate to lose.

When we step off the plane, Lailani immediately whines, “ew, it’s *so cold!*”

Rizz wraps her in his arms, and they walk to the car. Marcus steps off to the side, on his phone, insisting he *also* has a car that should have been waiting for us.

Kieran comes next to me. “He afraid to ride in the car with me?”

“Are you gonna tell him you’re really a Morreaux?”

“He’ll figure it out. Come on, it’s too cold to stand out here, waiting on that nigga.” His hand meets the small of my back, guiding me to the car, as he shouts, “ay, Marcus! Let’s go, man! You’re holding everyone else up, and your girl is freezing!”

I suddenly feel sick.

Kieran just referred to me as *Marcus’s girl*. I know Marcus is here with me, but in my entire life, no matter what K and my relationship status was, I was still *his* girl. So, what the hell is going on?

Marcus begrudgingly walks over, and climbs into the car, ahead of me, with a slight pout.

Kieran’s hand moves around my waist, as he says, in a low voice, “what a gentleman.”

I sit between him and Marcus, in the third row, watching Rizz and Lailani be the cutest freaking chocolate snuggle bunnies, and jealousy greets me, with a heavy thud, in my stomach.

It stays there, the entire ride to the house.