

So Done

Chapter 8

“The TAG countdown is real out here in these streets,” Rollie’s voice said from Tai’s laptop.

They’d been on Skyvo chatting for the last thirty minutes and it was the first time he’d mentioned TAG. That was progress as far as she was concerned. She balanced the laptop on her knees, her back against her bed. Luckily, she’d gotten up early and wasn’t looking scary when his chat call came through. Score a point for Nona and her mandatory breakfasts.

Thanks to all the overtime she worked, breakfast was the only meal she and Tai were guaranteed to share. Even when her father was staying with them, it was exclusively her and Nona’s time since he acted like rising before ten would literally kill him.

“You’re so daggone pressed,” she said, hoping it came out as a joke like she’d meant it.

Rollie lectured her. “Naw, it’s called ambition. *Pressed* is when you open for something you might not get.”

“Shoot, you might not get this,” she said. She was almost gentle as she continued.

“Anybody can get cut, Rollie. It’s an audition.”

A flicker of doubt crossed his face, then his chill returned. “I know. But I don’t plan on being one of ’em.” He turned it on her. “You should be the one nervous. I heard the dance joint is the hardest thing to get into.”

There was a part of Tai that didn’t care. There had been TAGs before. Girls Run. Sparking Art. Team Tennis Frenzy. And Urban Vogue, a modeling program. She had just known she was going to be America’s Next Top Model until the coordinator called her “stumpy.” It hurt her feelings enough to send her home crying. Nona had come back, fire in her eyes, and laid Ms.

Jordana out. Tai never returned. A few months later Ms. Jordana stopped showing up and the program disappeared like sand in the wind.

She didn't get why anybody thought TAG was going to be any different than the other stuff that came in barrels blazing to help keep kids off the street. It would be hot for a while then go away or change, just like how the rec used to be open every day for a few hours and now it was only open two days a week. Whenever people called themselves making the Cove better, it was all talk. It was like she was the only one who felt that way, though.

She dared to be honest with Rollie.

"All the papers they gave us about dance seem like it's talking about ballet anyway." Everything was always about ballet. "If it's only about stupid positions in French and boring piano music, they can miss me with that."

"Yeah, well, my cousin Mike be with The Players and they helping put the program together," Rollie said, unbothered by her answer. "He gave me some scoop—said it's already, like, eighty applications in for the dance part."

Eighty? Sounded like they had told the whole world about these auditions. She sucked her lips in then forced her shoulders to shrug. "I guess we just got wait and see."

Her grandmother's voice nagged faintly in the distance saving her.

"Ay, I gotta go." She carried the laptop to the desk. "We gonna chill later with Bean at center court?"

"You mean Mila?" he corrected sternly then laughed.

She loved how cute he looked when he laughed. But she rolled her eyes at him.

"Whatever. Sometimes I remember and sometimes I don't." It was the most honest she'd ever been about the whole thing. "So you coming or naw?"

Maybe she was crazy, but it felt like she was starting to wrap him around her finger, a tiny bit at least.

“Yeah, we be there,” he said.

Tai felt like pumping her fist in victory.

Wait. Had he said “we”? Ugh.

She started to tell him to leave Simp home, but Nona’s voice grew closer. She was in the hallway and Tai didn’t want her to come in and get loud about what was she doing blah-blah.

“All right, later,” she said, logging off before Rollie could say “bye.”

She looked around her room. There were clothes scattered on the floor. Something else Nona would fuss about. She snatched some items and dropped them in the overflowing hamper. Either her grandmother was slacking, or she was waiting on Tai to bring it down. It was a battle Tai could play all day. She packed the clothes tight until the hamper bulged. She checked the room once more, trying to see it through Nona’s eyes.

A plastic bag with several hangers caught her eye. Nona had asked her to recycle the dry cleaning stuff last week. She kept forgetting. She grabbed it and raced down the narrow staircase. One of the hangers scraped against the wall like nails on a chalkboard.

“Metai,” her grandmother called out. “What I tell you about scratching up my walls?”

“Sorry, Nona,” Tai called back upstairs. “I’m going to Bean’s.”

Before she could race out the door Nona was already coming down the stairs, fingers inspecting the wall. She looked Saturday-morning clean with her hair freshly done, wearing a black T-shirt that hugged her curves and a pair of black linen capri pants. The word *wine-o* and a wine glass were jeweled across her chest. Satisfied there were no scratches, she turned her scowl into a smile.

“You know the supe call himself charging me extra if he has to do anything but repaint,” her grandmother said, no longer upset. She spied the hangers jutting out of the recycle bin. “I can’t believe it. I didn’t have to remind you to recycle that mess. Is my baby girl growing up?”

As bad as Tai wanted to roll her eyes, she let her grandmother win that one. “Um-hm,” she said, mostly tuning out Nona’s teasing about how that should mean the overflowing hamper should make its way downstairs any day now. She kept her eyes on the action across the street.

Bean was heading inside until Mr. Jamal yelled, “Ay, you forgetting something, Ms. Phillips?” His head gestured to the open hatch of the truck and the dozen or so grocery bags inside.

“I thought that’s what dads were for?” Bean teased back.

Metai wasn’t positive, but Bean sounded more proper than usual. Looked like being in The Woods all summer had rubbed off on her after all.

Her jet black micro braids, a big, fragile bun at the top of her head, bobbed as she laughed. She backtracked to cuff three of the bags at a time, then disappeared into the house. Mr. Jamal grabbed up a bunch more, then bellowed for his sons to get the rest.

Tai watched it unfold with restless envy.

They were all corny close. Mr. Jamal never had a problem sending her home when he wanted “Phillips time.” Tai always lingered, thinking if she dipped out slow enough Mr. Jamal would include her. Her and Bean were practically sisters, they were together so much. But to her annoyance, he never did. Like, what did they do different when she stepped out of the house, anyway?

She didn’t notice her own father, stretched out across Nona’s couch, until he propped himself up on one elbow and yelled over to her. “So it’s just me and you today, Booty Boo?”

He knew she hated that stupid nickname. She also hated repeating to him how much she hated it. It was like he played dumb on purpose. For real, what grown man enjoyed arguing?

Yet if she said something back, it would be she was acting too grown. Then Nona would start talking yang about respecting her father. And Tai wasn't about to go there. He needed to respect his self, first. Grown and still living at home whenever he was in between girlfriends. The latest had kicked him out, probably for being an overgrown child.

His icy mint eyes sparkled as he grinned. They looked so much alike in the eyes, it was like looking in a mirror. The only difference was how his got wider, hers more narrow when they smiled.

Ignoring him, she frowned at Nona. "Where you going today?"

Nona's arm went around her, escorting her to the sofa so the three of them were huddled. "I'm going to the Food and Wine Fest, baby girl." Nona's arms folded across her chest. "Bryant, didn't I ask you to text Tai earlier this week? So you would know what's on her schedule this morning?" She shook her head, disgusted. "Look, I won't be back until about eight or nine. I don't want Tai out there running the streets. I thought you'd made plans, boy."

Tai's mouth disappeared as she pressed her lips together to keep from saying anything. Her father plan something for the two of them? Please. Until she was eight, Tai had thought he was her older brother. He was as useless as one.

Her father didn't even have the good sense to look ashamed. It wouldn't be the first time he hadn't done what Nona had asked him. And her grandmother was a fool on some other level if she thought it was the last. Tai rushed to get herself out of it. He wasn't the only one who didn't want to be chained together all day.

“I was just going to chill with Bean all day anyway.” She barely glanced his way as she pressed. “He can do what he want.”

Nona’s hands flew to her hips. “Jamila just barely getting home, Metai. I couldn’t ask Jamal to watch you all day. The man probably want to spend some time with his daughter.”

The truth hit Tai like a hammer to the face. Her father made it worse.

“So you still need me or what, Ma?” He sat up fully alert, smelling a way out. “Cause I got some business I got take care of down Fourth, anyway.”

“The only business you gon’ take care of is your child, Bry-ant,” Nona said, splicing his name so he knew she wasn’t playing.

He looked about as happy about it as Tai. Knowing he wouldn’t come up with a convincing enough argument—he never did when he wanted his way—Tai pushed despite the finality in her grandmother’s voice. “Nona, Mr. Jamal already said we could hang out.” Her mouth puckered as she forced out the rest. “And if he get tired of me, trust, he’ll send me home.”

Nona walked into the kitchen. She went about packing a small cooler with waters and fruit. She worked through their small kitchen stacking the cooler far beyond its capacity. Her face was a mix of concentration and frustration.

“Even if you go over for a while, you not staying all day, Tai,” Nona said, before whipping around to lash out at her son. “And don’t be asking if I need you like you some paid babysitter. Metai is your child. Not mine.” She huffed, adding a hasty, “Baby girl, Nona don’t mean no harm by that. But your father”—she raised an eyebrow at him—“needs to start taking on more responsibility.” She went on muttering, focused on packing. “Boy twenty-eight years old and he gon’ sit there and act like he doing me a favor by spending time with the child he done made.”

She furiously threw things in the cooler.

Tai's father shook his head, like Nona was the one crazy, and laid back down.

Metai's stomach cramped. She moved away from the sofa and closer to her grandmother's ranting in the kitchen. Whenever her father came around, it always came to this same scene. She wished he'd just stop visiting or whatever he called himself doing. For as much as Nona fussed about wanting him to step up his daddy game, things between them were always better when her father was gone. Tai figured Nona felt guilty. And that was fine. Whatever it was, Nona let her do more and did more for her when time between his drop-ins stretched out.

He always messed stuff up by showing up randomly. She blew out a loud breath to remind her grandmother she was still there.

Nona's face was tight. She put down the cooler, came over, and wrapped her arms around her granddaughter. "Have fun today." She directed her voice to the living room. "You can stay over Bean's till four, then come on home. All right?"

Tai managed to nod over the huge lump in her throat. She didn't return Nona's hug and instead of giving her grandmother a kiss, only put her cheek to Nona's puckered lips. Four o'clock. How was Nona gonna make her sit in the house all day like that?

She shouldered the door open and sulked across the street to Nona's mild reprimand about not getting a kiss back. But when Tai glanced back, the door was already shut.

Her father ruined everything. All he had to do was act like they had plans. Once Nona was gone, Tai would have been in the wind and he wouldn't have said nothing, because then Nona would have known he didn't have squat planned for them to do. He was so stupid.

Life without him would be perfect, right about now.

Chapter 9

The music was sky-high. Mila and Tai were in her room, home alone, removing the last bit of evidence of summer with giant cotton balls and smelly nail polish remover. Mila felt lighter for the first time in hours.

A day really did make a difference.

It was one of those things her dad said to them whenever one of them didn't get their way. Sometimes he acted like he was giving them some kind of prize by letting them be mad or pout as he predicted, "You'll be all right tomorrow. Watch what a difference a day makes."

JJ usually outright disagreed with their dad. Mila always kept quiet. She couldn't remember the last time any of them had ever changed their dad's mind once it was made up. Besides, he was usually right.

In twenty-four hours she'd gone from feeling hopeless to believing that if she kept to her new plan, everything would work out—she wouldn't go over Tai's when Mr. Bryant was home. She almost laughed at the simplicity of the plan. Like, duh!

She still wasn't totally sure how she was going to find out if Mr. Bryant was home every single time, or if she'd still go over as long as Ms. Sophia was there. She was leaning toward yes on that second one. But like her dad always said—cross that road when you get to it.

There was also the fact Tai could beat you down with every reason in the book to get you to do things her way. But it had worked with Operation Stop Calling Me That and faster than Mila had expected.

She wasn't blind. It was obvious Tai hated having to remember to call her by her real name. Every time she corrected herself, her mouth would purse like she'd tasted a lemon. But it

seemed like she was trying and that was a lot coming from Tai. There was no reason Mission Stick Up for Yourself couldn't work, too.

If anybody knew about all her missions and operations, they'd think she was crazy. Good thing nobody was peeking into her head.

She sat on her bed, head bobbing to the music, swiping the cotton ball over her fingernails. Wearing polish on her nails to dance was like being out of uniform. She might as well show up to ballet in jazz shoes—Mademoiselle would be just as annoyed.

Tai sat across from her on the desk, her feet on the back of the chair, toes wiggling as she painted them.

The entire room was smothered in fumes.

"I can't believe it but I'm ready for school to start," Tai said, talking loud instead of turning down the music that was right beside her.

Mila scrubbed at the stubborn purple stain on her thumb a few more seconds before giving up. Her own feelings about school's pending start were mixed. She liked school. Not loved but liked. It had a familiar and comfortable rhythm that she understood. More importantly, it left only a few hours a day for things to pop off in the hood. Was she ready? Yes. Was she excited? Not about school, really. But she'd awakened with a new thirst for things to be different, and the only change out there was TAG, which, of course, she had zero control over. But again—she'd cross that road when she got to it.

"I guess I am, too," she admitted begrudgingly.

Tai squinted over at her. "You guess? Shoot, usually you have your notebooks, folders, and everything ready." She clasped her hands together and fake begged, "Don't tell me you turning in your teacher's pet card. Don't say it."

Mila threw a cotton ball. Tai batted at it like it could actually reach her from across her room.

Tai could joke all she wanted, but she was closer to the truth than she knew. If Mila could help it, this year was going to be about change. It was their last year in middle school; they weren't kids anymore.

She tested her theory carefully. "I asked my dad if I could move to The Woods for high school—"

"I knew it," Tai declared. Her head shook in disappointment. "I knew you staying over there all summer was just a way to stay in bougie town forever."

Mila snapped back. "Calm down, Tai. He said no." She took a deep breath, hating that she felt like bawling again. She waved her hand in front of her nose, pretending to clear the fumes as she pushed on, trying to sound like none of it mattered. "I'm tired of the Cove. It's the same thing all the time." She glanced up. "Don't you ever wish you could live somewhere else?"

"Hello, have you met my father?" Tai asked, her laugh fake. "When he home, yeah, I wish I lived anywhere else." The nail brush hung over her toe. There was something like sympathy in her eyes, then she blinked and it was gone. "But this our last year at Woodbury, girl. We be in high school soon. That's why I'm excited."

"True," Mila said neutrally.

The nail polish clacked softly as Tai shook the bottle. "The Cove really ain't that bad. Why you so pressed to leave?"

Mila's mind pictured the answer her mouth would never say: "Your father."

She saw Tai's backyard in her mind. The two of them outside, playing. Laughing. Tai's father on the step. Shirtless. He was on the phone, eyes staring past them. Or Mila had thought.

She slammed brakes on the images before they went any further. Even before *it* happened, there wasn't any love for Mr. Bryant in her house. Whenever her dad saw him, he went off like Tai's father's failures were his fault.

Grown man still living at home (sort of).

Irresponsible.

Lazy.

Everything that was wrong with the Cove.

Tai didn't have much love for her father, but how do you tell your best friend her father is the reason you wish you lived somewhere else?

The only other answer Mila could come up with wasn't much better, that getting out of the Cove was normal and staying forever wasn't. Her and Tai saw that differently, for sure. Shoot, Tai still expected her to come over her house as if nothing had happened that day. Hadn't she seen what went down?

Mila was too scared to ask now. Worst, she was afraid if she did, Tai would accuse her of imagining it.

Her arms goose bumped in the warm room. "I figured he'd send me since he sent Cinny." She ended the conversation before hurt could crawl into her voice. "I know it's dumb. Like getting upset when you don't get what you want for Christmas."

It was her turn to fake laugh. She was relieved when Tai ran with it, talking about the year she'd asked for a trip to Disney World and got a gift card to the Disney store. It wasn't

funny at the time, but the memory had them rolling. She gladly switched subjects, relieved to talk about something else.