

Achilla the Strong
The Nephilim Chronicles:Book 1

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“The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.” –Genesis 6:4

“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” –
Proverbs 22:6

CHAPTER 1

Brendan Johnson sat in the bleachers inside the Central High School gym in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He tied the laces on his black and white Adidas sneakers that matched his black and white windbreakers and black t-shirt as “California Love” blasted through the speakers. Brendan closed his eyes and nodded to the music as more people filed in carrying the smell of McDonald’s fries and the wails of crying babies with them. Today was a rare day off for Brendan. As the best criminal defense attorney in Fairfield County, Brendan worked seven days a week for his startup firm, The Johnson Law Group, and he often worked twelve hour days. Serving the city of Bridgeport was his dream, and he pursued it like a man possessed.

Bridgeport was not an easy city to grow up in. As a product of Father Panik Village, Brendan saw more crime by the time he was fifteen than most adults do in their lifetime. He watched his friends grow from innocent school kids into drug dealers and stick-up kids; some even resorted to murder. However, it wasn’t just his friends doing wrong. Brendan never forgot how many times he was stopped in the street by police officers looking to get their kicks from picking on him; despite the fact that he had a clean record and was just walking home from school. He never forgot watching relatives get arrested for seemingly no reason and sent to prison for things Brendan knew they would never do. By the time he graduated from high school, four of his friends died from violent crime, and ten were serving a prison sentence; only half of whom actually committed the crime. Even then, Brendan considered himself lucky. He was lucky because his mother and father refused to let him run the streets. They ran their household with the sort of relentless, sickening, authoritarian control necessary when your child’s environment could kill him the second he walks out the door; whether the perpetrators were criminals or cops.

That controlling nature rubbed off on Brendan and enabled him to focus in college and graduate at the top of his class at Fairfield University; a small Jesuit school in the neighboring town of Fairfield. That controlling nature gave him the intelligence necessary to receive a scholarship to Yale Law School, and the drive to graduate at the top of his class. Despite the job offers he got from the top law firms in Connecticut, Brendan chose to start his own business to give back to his community. He decided to fight for the wrongfully accused and pursue justice for them when nobody else would. That controlling intelligence turned him into an amazing litigator; the kind who won motions nobody else would win; the kind who challenged judges nobody else wanted to challenge; the kind who cared more about holding his city accountable than playing the political game. Such dedication to his dreams and morals kept Brendan busy. Luckily, he still found time to pursue his hobbies and continue to give back to his community.

Basketball was one of those hobbies. Brendan was a star shooting guard for Central High School and came off the bench for Fairfield University. During his summers as a Yale law student, he coached and refereed boys and girls. Now all he could do was sponsor a team and watch, but that came with the criminal defense profession; all work and very little play. He sponsored a twelve-and-under girls’ team, and it was the team opposite his former classmate Roberto Gabrielli; another defense attorney who wanted to work with Brendan when he started his own firm. Brendan refused his partnership. Johnson and Gabrielli didn’t sound very good to Brendan, but he couldn’t put his finger on why. After hearing Roberto speak about his clients with condescension and disdain, Brendan figured it out. Gabrielli had no interest in justice. All he cared about was money, and he would always work for the highest bidder. Brendan spotted Gabrielli approaching with his dark brown hair slicked back and wearing blue jeans and a green

polo shirt. He held a crooked grin under his pointy nose as Brendan rose to shake his hand. When Gabrielli tried to turn his wrist, Brendan resisted and kept his hand upright. He had a habit of trying to dominate everyone around him. Brendan refused to allow it for a second.

“Ready for the game?” Gabrielli asked with his typical crooked smile and cold blue eyes that made Brendan want to look away. “I hope you’re ready to lose.”

“They’re twelve,” Brendan chuckled. “Let’s be competitive about the things that matter. Like our clients for example. Did I really hear that you let your last guy plead not-guilty?”

“He had no case.”

“You let him get twenty years when he could have gotten five,” Brendan said. “I could’ve gotten him down to five.”

“And that’s why we should work together,” Gabrielli said with his arms wide. “You’re a visionary.”

“Flattery gets you nowhere with me,” Brendan replied. “Especially when you don’t fight for your clients.”

“When will you understand that this thing is a business?” Gabrielli hissed as he stood closer to Brendan. “I know people. Look, you’re a Bridgeport guy. My family’s been in New Haven for generations. We could combine our connections. I could bring you business-”

“I get plenty of business on my own-”

“Punks out of P.T. Barnum who can’t pay you?” Gabrielli said with a snort. “Is that what you want to do; work with lower people?”

“I work with clients who need representation,” Brendan snapped as he stared Gabrielli down. “And time and again, you have proven incapable of providing it. Now I am done talking to you about this. Get out of my face, Rob. You don’t want me to say that again.”

“Yeah, or what?” Gabrielli snapped back.

“Like you just said,” Brendan replied as he stepped forward. “I’m from Bridgeport. You want to find out what that means?”

Gabrielli stared at Brendan for a moment before turning to walk away. Brendan shook his head as his heart beat out of his chest. Something about Gabrielli always made Brendan’s skin crawl. His heart leapt out of his chest again when he passed by his wife and son on his way out the door. Gabrielli was the last person Brendan wanted around his family. Brendan’s wife, Samantha “Sam” Price Johnson approached wearing blue jeans and red t-shirt. Ever the tomboy since they were kids, the last time Samantha wore a dress outside of work was on their wedding day. Their son Samuel held her hand as he trailed behind her wearing a matching outfit and Air Jordans. Sam kissed Brendan on the cheek as she sat next to him.

“I saw Gabrielli on the way out,” Sam said. “He’s not sitting with us, is he? I don’t want him around Samuel.”

“Me neither,” Brendan said. “Don’t worry.”

“Good,” Sam sighed. “Well it was good of you to sponsor these girls.”

“Thanks,” Brendan said. “And thank you for bringing Samuel. I want him to learn the importance of giving back early on.”

“Of course,” Sam replied with a smile as the teams ran out onto the court for their layup lines. “Days like today remind me that I married good.”

“You always had a way with words,” Brendan chuckled. “Maybe you should be the lawyer.”

“Oh no, teaching’s much better,” Sam said as she nudged him with her elbow. “But if I do it well enough, you won’t have too many clients.”

“Which is why we should go into business together.”

“Nope,” Sam quipped with a grin. “I’ll just be the breadwinner, that’s all.”

Brendan and Sam laughed as Samuel walked across them and sat next to Brendan. Samuel’s birth was the happiest day of Brendan’s life, and his career achievements paled in comparison to watching him grow. He had light brown skin, big ears, and a wide smile like his mother, but Brendan saw himself in everything Samuel did. Much like Brendan at his age, he was very sensitive and impressionable. Growing up in Bridgeport knocked that softness out of Brendan. Now that they lived in Stratford, a neighboring suburb with much less crime and heartache, Samuel didn’t have to be so hard. Brendan would teach him how to be tough when he was ready for it. That was a much better option than being forced to grow up like Brendan was. Brendan smiled and patted his son’s head before he turned and looked at him with curiosity blaring from his eyes.

“Dad, why are we watching girls play basketball?” Samuel asked as he crossed his arms.

“Son, girls play ball just as well as anybody else,” Brendan replied. “Sometimes better in my opinion. Besides, I sponsored this team because I believe in giving back to people who need it.”

“How are you giving back if they didn’t give you anything?” Samuel replied.

“Samuel, that’s not what your father means,” Sam said. “He’s doing something nice for someone who can’t pay for a team themselves.”

“Like when you give money to bums on the street?” Samuel asked.

“They’re not bums, Samuel,” Sam said. “They’re homeless people. Don’t call them bums anymore.”

“Your mother’s right,” Brendan added. “Don’t let me hear you say that again.”

“Yes, sir,” Samuel groaned.

“I don’t know where he learned that from,” Sam said to Brendan. “It certainly wasn’t us.”

“He probably overheard your father on the phone with one of his cop buddies,” Brendan said as he watched the opening tip. “Among other things. I told you it was a bad idea to let Samuel ride with him-”

“Please, Brendan, not in front of Samuel-”

“That hasn’t stopped him,” Brendan growled before his eyes settled on a tan-skinned, black-haired girl on his team. She wasn’t any taller than the other girls, but something about the way she carried herself seemed older. Brendan frowned when he watched her catch the ball, dribble twice, and shoot a three-pointer. The ball sailed through the red rim and snapped the net. She then jogged down court and adjusted her green t-shirt as she stood in a defensive stance. She picked up a loose ball and sprinted down court faster than all of the other girls, stopped and shot another three-pointer. That shot also dropped through the net without touching the rim.

“We said we wouldn’t talk about that in front of Samuel,” Sam muttered. “We agreed-”

“Fine, you’re right, and I’m done,” Brendan said with a wave of his hand before pointing at the girl. “Do you notice anything different about that girl?”

“Aside from a future in the WNBA, no,” Sam replied with a shrug. “She sure can shoot.”

“No,” Brendan said as he watched the girl’s every move. “I mean, yes, she has a good jumper, but that’s not it. Something about her seems familiar.”

“She looks like you, Dad,” Samuel said as he pointed at the court. “That girl kind of looks like you. Is she my sister?”

“No, Samuel,” Sam giggled.

“No, she’s not, son,” Brendan said, but as he watched the girl some more, he could see the resemblance. Her face looked nothing like his, but her demeanor was a spitting image. The way she stared at her opponents, the way she exhaled and took long strides as she sprinted down

court, the way she tied her shoes without bending her knees. Brendan felt like he was watching his miniature, female self on the court. When she looked up at the stands for a moment, Brendan nearly rose to his feet. Her eyes were as green as a pair of jade earrings. Brendan had not seen eyes like those in over eleven years.

“I think I know why she looks familiar,” Brendan said as he leaned close to Sam. “Look at those eyes.”

“She’s got green eyes,” Sam said. “So what?”

“Look again.”

“No,” Sam replied as she rolled her eyes at Brendan. “What are the odds, Brendan? Do you really think she’s Ailina’s kid?”

“I think it’s very possible,” Brendan said. What he didn’t tell her was that he was doing the math in his head. Ailina Harris was a tall, brunette woman from Bridgeport’s North End who Brendan dated during his senior year of college. When they first met, her green eyes held a hypnotizing gaze that Brendan couldn’t stay away from. Brendan was a bit of a player in college, but Ailina had a way of making him focus on her alone; especially when they became physically intimate. Having sex with Ailina was like losing his virginity over and over and it consumed his mind every day until the next time he saw her. They broke up when Brendan graduated from Fairfield, but they remained sexually involved during law school; mostly because Ailina would not let Brendan go and because Brendan couldn’t resist her advances. The closer he came to graduation, the more she called, and the more jealous she became around other women. Despite her striking beauty and sexual prowess, Brendan started to feel uneasy around her; the same way he often felt around Gabrielli. The more Brendan backed away, the more controlling and manipulative her tactics. After she pretended to have a mental breakdown and called him over to her apartment “just to see if he would come” as she put it, Brendan decided to cut her off cold turkey. She responded by attacking him.

Brendan had been slapped by a woman before. He had also won a lot of fights against men twice Ailina’s size. He knew how to protect himself. However, trying to restrain Ailina was like holding off a grizzly bear. Every smack and punch sent shockwaves through his body until all he could do was cover his head and hope that she would stop. She grabbed his arm when he tried to run away and yanked so hard that she broke it at the forearm just as he reached the door. As Brendan crawled out of the apartment, he watched her run to the bathroom. Thinking she was grabbing something to throw at him, Brendan rushed to his feet. He had no clue how correct he was. Brendan’s jaw dropped when Ailina pulled her sink out of the bathroom wall and carried it over her head as she stalked toward him.

Brendan would never forget the look in her eyes as she carried that sink through the house; so cold and intense that they seemed to change into a different shade of green. She screamed as she cocked the sink back, but he didn’t wait for her to throw it. Brendan never ran so fast from anyone in his entire life. He made it to his beat up, brown Celica out front and gunned the engine to his parents’ house on the East End. From there, they called an ambulance to the emergency room. Brendan had nightmares for weeks, and they all involved the shine in Ailina’s eyes when she carried that sink. For the first time, Brendan questioned if she was human. He vowed that if he ever saw her again, he would cross the street and hide unless he had a gun on his person; in which case, he would shoot her between the eyes.

That was eleven years ago. After recovering in the hospital and graduating from law school, Brendan moved to Stratford where he reconnected with Sam at an old butcher on the South Side of town. Though she was still a tomboy, she was no longer the girl Brendan played tag with as

kids in the Father Panik Village. She was a brown-skinned woman with braids and a white smile from ear-to-ear who haggled the butcher down to a lower price for a pound of beef. She also had soft, brown eyes that made Brendan smile back. They were married two years later.

It was very possible that this girl, who looked like Ailina and acted like Brendan, was around eleven years old. Brendan held his face in his hands and prayed that he was just being paranoid. Surely, there was no way that he had a child with Ailina. He used protection every time, but condoms were not infallible. Knowing Ailina, she could have found a way to conceive a child without Brendan's knowledge if she wanted one. The question was would she, and why?

"Honey, what's wrong?" Sam asked as she rubbed Brendan's back.

"I'm fine."

"You say that every time something's wrong," Sam replied. "Like during your last trial. Why don't we talk about it later?"

"Yeah," Brendan sighed. "Yeah, maybe later."

Brendan watched the girl's movements the entire game. She carried herself just like a Johnson. She also didn't miss. Brendan estimated that she shot a good sixty percent from the field; a rare percentage for anyone, let alone a girl so young. Samuel played basketball too. He was good for his age and had a future in the sport, but judging from what Brendan was watching right now, this girl had more athletic potential than him.

"I think we should have a talk about this girl to the coach," Sam said with a frown. "She doesn't look like a twelve year old."

"Yes she does," Brendan said. "And she's probably eleven."

"No, she *looks* eleven," Sam said as she pointed a finger at the game. "But she doesn't play like it. I mean look at her. She should be playing with high schoolers. I don't like when people scout older kids to win. It ruins it for the other kids. Somebody did that in Samuel's league, and it cost them the game. It just broke his little heart."

"I honestly don't think she's old, babe," Brendan said as he watched the girl jog down court. He frowned when another girl tried to push her and bounced off. The green-eyed girl didn't seem to notice. When another player on the opposing team pulled her hair, she stumbled backwards. As the referee blew his whistle and ran toward them, the crowd stood up. Brendan stood to see over the crowd and watched the green-eyed girl on his team stomp her opponents foot, back her into a wall, elbow her gut twice, and then turn to punch her in the nose. The girl then grabbed her head and kneed her face, sending her to the floor in a heap. When the referee grabbed her arm, the girl kicked his groin and tripped him to the floor before punching his throat and face.

Brendan frowned as Al, the coach for the green team, ran onto the floor and stepped between the green-eyed girl and the referee. Al was a short, stocky man with curly, black hair wearing khakis and a black polo who must have weighed around two hundred pounds. When Al tried to push her away, she pushed him back and sent him sliding on the floor. How could an eleven-year-old girl knock him down with a simple push? Al got back up for another try. This time, the girl grabbed his shirt and hip tossed him to the floor. He rolled away and rose to his feet as she glared at him.

"What's going on?" Sam asked as she tugged at Brendan's shirt. "Is there a fight?"

"Don't let Samuel see," Brendan said as he watched the girl shove her coach aside like a rag doll.

"See what?"

"That girl's definitely Ailina's kid," Brendan said. "I've never seen a little girl fight like that. God, she hits like a train--"

“Fight like what, Brendan?” Sam demanded with a stomp of her foot. “Can I get some details please?”

“She just beat down a girl on the opposite team and the ref,” Brendan said. “And she almost threw the coach across the court.”

“Ok, please don’t exaggerate,” Sam replied with a cocked eyebrow.

“I wish I was,” Brendan said as he watched parents rush the floor to grab their daughters.

“This game’s over. Could you take Samuel to the car?”

“Sure,” Sam said as she grabbed Samuel’s hand. “What about you?”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Brendan said while stepping down the bleachers. He didn’t wait for a response from his wife as he moved toward this dangerous girl. She stood at half court and wiped sweat from her face with her shirt. The coach stood next to her but not too close. Brendan tapped his shoulder.

“I’ve got it from here, Al,” Brendan said.

“This girl’s crazy,” Al replied in his thick Greek accent. “I do a friend a favor and she does this shit.”

“I’ve got it,” Brendan said. “I deal with crazy every day.”

Al nodded his head and walked away. Brendan stood with his hands on his hips in front of the girl. She stared at him with green eyes that shot lasers through his head; the same way Ailina’s did whenever she was angry. This child was definitely the spawn of Ailina Harris, but she was different. Her eyes were intense, but they lacked the coldness that sent shivers up Brendan’s spine. He stared her in the eye right back without hesitation.

“Looks like Ailina’s taught you some things,” Brendan said.

“How do you know my mom?” the girl asked with the voice of a teenager. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Brendan,” Brendan said. “And Ailina and I used to be friends.”

“So you’re one of her boyfriends?” the girl asked with a slight grin that made Brendan flinch. “It’s ok. The last guy was gone in a week. He tried to tell me they were friends too.”

“Maybe they were just friends.”

“No, friends don’t have sex,” the girl said with a slight giggle. “And they had sex a lot. Mom’s like that with all of her friends, and then she kicks them out. She’ll probably kick you out too so you might not want to leave any stuff around-”

“I don’t think you’re old enough to talk about that-”

“Yeah?” the girl replied. “Then how come I just said it?”

“If you lived in my house you wouldn’t be,” Brendan replied. “I don’t...do that in front of my kid.”

“Why not?” the girl asked with a shrug. “It’s only natural. It’s what adults are supposed to do.”

“Is that what your mom tells you?” Brendan asked before pointing his thumb over his shoulder at the girl from the blue team who still hadn’t gotten up. “Did she also tell you how to do that?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“And I answered yours,” Brendan said through gritted teeth. “Now I need you to answer mine.”

“I guess that’s fair,” the girl said as she walked to the scorer’s table. “Yes, she told me that. She taught me how to fight too. Oh wow, I had forty points all by myself! Yes!”

“You’re quite the ballplayer,” Brendan chuckled. “I was impressed.”

“Thanks,” the girl replied with a smile. “Not bad for a first time, right?”

“What?”

“Yeah, Mom never lets me play,” the girl said with a slight pout. “But she knows I like basketball and said it helped with hand-eye coordination and competitive nature, and some other stuff I can’t really say, but she let me play basketball!”

“How did you know to do all that?” Brendan asked. “Most kids your age don’t have a jump shot that good.”

“Basketball games are all the television I’m allowed to watch,” the girl replied. “That and the news. I watch Kobe Bryant. He’s my favorite.”

“That explains why you don’t pass very often,” Brendan said. “Tell you what, I played basketball in high school and college, and I think you have a ton of potential. Why don’t you let me coach you?”

“No way,” the girl replied as she shook her head. “Mom never lets any of her boyfriends come near me without her being there.”

“Well at least one of them has to,” Brendan chuckled. “Aren’t any of those boyfriends your father?”

“Don’t know,” the girl said. “Mom says my father’s a big fancy lawyer who can afford a fancy car, a new house, and a family, but won’t send me anything on my birthday. She said he’s a deadbeat, and I should never talk to him. That’s why it’s better for me to live with her.”

Brendan’s jaw dropped and he stepped back. This girl was his child. When did Ailina get pregnant? Ailina became a Bridgeport cop after Brendan graduated from college. She had to have taken time off for maternity leave. Sam’s father was the police chief. Why didn’t he tell him? Brendan struggled to stay on his feet as he stared at his daughter with tears welling up in his eyes. How could his flesh and blood walk around for eleven years without anyone telling him?

“Are you ok?” the girl asked. “You look like you’re going to cry. You’re not going to cry, are you?”

“I’m fine,” Brendan said as he wiped his eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Achilla.”

“Achilla?” Brendan asked knowing that only Ailina would think of such a harsh name for a girl. “How old are you, Achilla?”

“Eleven and a half.”

“Does Ailina take good care of you?” Brendan asked as he stepped closer. “What school do you go to? Do you have any friends-?”

“Achilla, who is this man?”

Brendan turned and saw a five-foot eleven brunette with lightning green eyes wearing a tight, green t-shirt that hugged her breasts and waist with matching jeans step past him and stand behind Achilla. Ailina’s appearance hadn’t changed much. She still had olive skin, her hair still flowed past her shoulders, and she wore very little make-up. Her eyes set on Brendan and she grinned before patting Achilla’s shoulder. She then stepped around Achilla and stood between them. Flashbacks of that day ran through Brendan’s mind, and his throat dried up. Brendan clenched his fists to stop their trembling. If this little girl was their child, Brendan couldn’t imagine what kind of abuse she was suffering while living with Ailina. No matter the risk, Brendan had to confront her. He thanked God that Sam and Samuel were outside as he forced himself to look Ailina in the eye.

“Ailina,” Brendan said. “Don’t play with me. Is she…ours?”

“No, she’s mine,” Ailina replied. “She’ll always be mine, Brendan.”

“*Am I the father, Ailina?*” Brendan asked. “She just told me that her dad was a big fancy lawyer.”

“You’re not the only lawyer in town,” Ailina laughed as she wiped a strand of her hair away from her forehead. “I know lots of lawyers; mainly prosecutors. They tend to be more of a challenge. They don’t run away and hide like defense attorneys.”

“Don’t dodge my question-”

“How do you plan on getting me to answer, Brendan?” Ailina asked with slight tilt of her head. “You know, I forgot how cute you could be when you think you’re in control.”

“I’ll find a way,” Brendan said as he watched Achilla peek around Ailina’s waist. “After what I just saw and heard, you are not a fit parent.”

“Oh, come on, the girl defended herself-”

“She incapacitated a sixth grader and a grown man,” Brendan snapped. “She shouldn’t even know how to do that or be able to. You’re raising her to be as violent as you.”

“Kids and their cartoons,” Ailina said with a shrug. “I don’t know where she gets it from-”

“You said I couldn’t watch cartoons, Mom,” Achilla said with a frown.

“Not now, Achilla,” Ailina said with a sharp stare. “I’m having an adult conversation. Be Quiet.”

Ailina glared at Achilla until she lowered her head. The intensity of her stare showed Brendan everything he needed to see. After working years in criminal defense, Brendan knew the abusers when he saw them. Ailina was an abuser. Brendan would bet money that if a doctor examined Achilla right now, she would find all kinds of bruises on her body. It was settled. He had to get this girl away from Ailina and soon.

“I’m not falling for your games, Ailina,” Brendan replied. “If she’s my daughter, I’m taking her from you. God knows what kind of damage you’ve done already. I won’t let you do anymore to her!”

“I told you,” Ailina said as her eyes zeroed in on Brendan with such intensity that his view of the entire court faded away. “She will always be mine.”

“Not anymore,” Brendan said before he pointed his finger. “I’ll see you in court, Ailina; in my domain! And I guarantee you I won’t run or *lose* there!”

Brendan stormed off the court, glancing behind him to see Achilla staring at him with wide eyes and an open mouth. He walked out of the gym and saw Sam parking his black BMW just outside the sidewalk. As soon as she parked the car, Sam walked out and approached Brendan with her arms crossed. Her brown eyes were a refreshing sight. Brendan sighed and embraced her before kissing her forehead.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked. “Is everything all right?”

“I don’t know how else to say this,” Brendan said. “But that girl’s name is Achilla.”

“Who names their daughter Achilla?” Sam asked with a scowl. “That sounds so mean.”

“Ailina did,” Brendan sighed. “She’s her mother.”

“Oh, so I guess you were right-”

“And I’m pretty sure I’m the father.”

Sam jolted and stepped away from Brendan. Her eyes teared up as she held her hand on her chest. As she turned to walk away, Brendan bounded to cut off her path. In his rush to break the news, he forgot to explain the details. He scrambled for a way to get it out before she served him with divorce papers.

“She would’ve been born before we got together,” Brendan said with his hands raised. “I had no clue. I promise I’ve never cheated on you. I wouldn’t do that, Sam. I love you. I would never hurt you like that. You have to believe me.”

“Ok,” Sam said after taking a deep breath. “Ok, I trust you. Knowing that we’re dealing with Ailina, I can believe that you didn’t know about your own child for.....at least ten years. I can...I can work with that.”

“I know this is sudden,” Brendan said, “And it’s not your responsibility, but-”

“I agree that she needs to live with us,” Sam said. “No way can that woman raise a child; especially your child. Whatever you need, I support you one hundred percent.”

“Ok,” Brendan said as they walked to the car. “You’re an amazing wife, Sam.”

“I know,” Sam said. “Just let me know what I can do to help.”

“Absolutely.”

“Just one question.”

“Sure,” Brendan said as he stepped into the driver’s seat and checked on Samuel behind them. He was fast asleep and spread across the back seat. Normally, he would tell Samuel to get his sneakers off of the leather, but now wasn’t the right time. Right then a fleeting thought passed in Brendan’s head. How did Samuel know Achilla was his daughter? Brendan shook that thought out of his mind as Sam stepped into the car.

“Did my father mention anything to you about this?” Sam asked with a low voice. “She had to take maternity leave at some point, right? So he would know something, but he never told me....He never told me that my husband might have another kid walking around Bridgeport. Did he at least tell you?”

“I’m sorry, Sam,” Brendan replied as he pulled off the curb. “He didn’t. Maybe he wasn’t sure.”

“Yeah, but he could connect the dots, right?” Sam said. “He could’ve at least told one of us to check.”

“I don’t know what to say, Sam,” Brendan said. “But you know your father hasn’t spoken much to either of us since we got married. As harsh as this may sound, I’m not surprised that he didn’t say anything.”

Brendan watched Sam look out the window. She reached into the glove compartment and grabbed a handful of tissues. She ripped a tissue loose and wiped her eyes with it as she sniffed. She continued to look out the window as he reached over and massaged her shoulder. Sam let out a short whimper as she wiped her eyes.

“Sam, I’m sorry-”

“If you ever want Samuel to visit him, I understand,” Sam said with a catch in her voice. “Samuel needs to see his grandfather, but I won’t be going. No real father keeps that from his daughter.”

“I’ll talk to him,” Brendan said with a set jaw. “I’ve had a few words for him anyway.”

“No, please don’t,” Sam replied. “Let’s take care of this first. You deserve to see your daughter. It can wait.”

“Thank you, Sam,” Brendan said as he stopped at a stop light. The red light shined into the windshield and illuminated the dashboard like a red sun. Brendan gritted his teeth at the thought of his daughter living with Ailina; the same woman who tried to kill him. He would do whatever was necessary to keep all of his children under his roof and away from her. He wasn’t running away this time. He had to do something.

Brendan's first step was proving that Ailina was an unfit mother. If he could get DCFS to take Achilla away, he could then prove his paternity. He paid Perry, one of the firm's investigators, overtime to stake out Ailina's house in Bridgeport's North End. He warned him that Ailina was a detective who could spot subpar surveillance a mile away. He also told him about Ailina's freakish strength. In response, Perry charged him double time before going out. It took the investigator three weeks to call Brendan. They met at Brendan's house in the South End of Stratford. Brendan and Sam sat at the kitchen table as Perry handed him an envelope with photos inside.

"I'm going to need that check a.s.a.p.," Perry said as he ran his hand through his ruffled brown hair and stuff his hands in his khakis. "I don't like getting too close to that woman's house. Something about her just isn't right."

"We appreciate it, Perry," Brendan said as he studied the photos. "Sam, hand him the check please."

As Sam pulled out a check from her purse, Brendan noticed that there wasn't a single photo of Achilla by the house. They were all photos of Ailina pulling in the driveway, leaving for work, bringing home groceries, and even mowing the lawn. Not a single photo of Achilla could be found. Brendan frowned and raised his hand. Sam pulled the check back just before Perry could reach it. Brendan slammed the photos down on the table.

"Where's the girl, Perry?" Brendan asked. "You can't even prove Ailina's a mother in these photos, let alone an unfit one."

"Oh, there's proof," Perry chuckled. "See this is the difference between a lawyer and a private eye. Look at the driveway. What do you see?"

"Look, honey," Sam said. "There's a basketball hoop with a ball under it."

"That proves nothing," Brendan barked. "Ailina could just say that she plays basketball in her spare time."

"Yeah, what about the pictures with her trunk open?" Perry asked. "See those gloves and pads. I practiced and taught martial arts for thirty years, and the way you described this girl, she's already proficient in krav maga, muay thai, and western boxing. Those gloves and pads are training tools. And as you can see in the next picture, she carries them into the house."

"Is she an instructor too?" Sam asked.

"No," Perry replied. "This chick's work is her life. Aside from grocery shopping and bar hopping, she lives at the Police Department. She's training someone and whoever it is; she's got real small hands to fit those gloves. Those are the gloves I used for kids."

"I believe you now, Perry," Brendan said. "But it doesn't necessarily prove that she's unfit."

"Did you forget your own words, Brendan?" Perry chuckled. "How come the kid's never outside? Where are her friends? Look, she's not even in the windows. This kid is inside all day, and I bet she only comes out when she's sure her mother won't be home for a while. I'll bet money she's locked up in a basement."

"The girl had to learn how to shoot somehow," Brendan said. "She had to come outside before that tournament."

"Well, you did tell Ailina you'd take her away," Perry replied. "Maybe she's hyper vigilant. Maybe she's keeping her inside because she knows you've got investigators."

"Wait, there's more than one car in these pictures," Sam said. "Who else is over there?"

"There's something else," Perry said. "She's got at least four different fellas coming over."

"What kind of guys are they?" Brendan asked.

“Good question,” Sam said. “I wouldn’t have just any man around my child. Brendan’s the lawyer, but I bet you can find her unfit if her men are dangerous.”

“You’d win the bet,” Brendan said before kissing his wife on the cheek. “Sam’s right. We need to know what kind of people she’s bringing around. We also need to know if any neighbors have seen the girl, and if they have, how often? What have they seen, heard, even smelled coming out of that house?”

“Look, you told me to get as close as I could without getting noticed,” Perry said with his hands raised. “No cop with half a brain isn’t going to notice that someone’s snooping around their friends and neighbors. I like you guys, but I’m not trying to get a kitchen sink thrown at me or worse-”

“It was a bathroom sink,” Brendan said. “And I’ll pay whatever it takes.”

“You can’t afford what I would ask for,” Perry replied. “Not with a wife and kid. I’m selfish, but I’m not an asshole. I won’t do that to you.”

“Will this help?” Sam asked as she ripped off her champagne strapped, white-faced watch. “It’s got to be worth at least a thousand dollars.”

“Sam, your father bought you that watch,” Brendan muttered. “I can’t ask you to do that. Achilla’s-”

“Not my responsibility?” Sam asked with a cocked eyebrow. “Let me tell you something. I’m not sitting back while a child lives with her. Besides, you have your own firm now. You can afford to buy me a new one.”

“I don’t think the monetary value of the watch is the issue,” Brendan replied.

“Oh, to hell with what my father thinks,” Sam snapped. “If he finds out, he’ll just have to tell us the truth, won’t he? I told you I was going to help you save your daughter. That’s what I’m doing.”

“Perry?” Brendan asked with his arms crossed. “Will you take the watch?”

“You’ve got a good woman, Brendan,” Perry said as he took the watch from Sam’s extended hand. “My ex-wife takes money from me every month and makes it hard to see my kids even if I pay on time. Yours gives stuff away at a moment’s notice to save another woman’s kid. I envy you.”

“Well, she is amazing,” Brendan said with a smile and a wink at Sam. “How soon can we hear back?”

“You’ll hear back from me in a week.”

A week went by and Brendan and Sam waited at home for Perry’s arrival. They even sat in the same seats at the kitchen table as if their last meeting never ended. Samuel, wearing a navy blue Stratford Academy t-shirt, brought them glasses of water and sat at the table with them. Sam smiled and kissed him on the forehead before she guzzled her drink with a trembling hand and spilled some water on her yellow dress. Brendan sighed and rose from his seat. He toyed with his red tie as he paced the kitchen.

“Something’s wrong,” Brendan said. “I can feel it.”

“Samuel, go upstairs, honey,” Sam whispered to Samuel. “We have to talk about something.”

Samuel nodded his head and walked out of the kitchen. Brendan paced in front of the refrigerator with his hands on his hips. He noticed Sam studying him, but he paced anyway. When he turned his back, he felt her hug him from behind and kiss his neck. Brendan kissed her back as she rubbed his chest. The sweet smell of her perfume gave him a slight relief.

“Relax, baby,” Sam said. “It’ll work out.”

“Perry’s never late,” Brendan said. “What if Ailina found him?”

“Then he’s in God’s hands,” Sam replied as she patted Brendan’s chest. “Just like Achilla and everything else.”

“Yeah,” Brendan sighed. “It’s just that you didn’t see what I saw that day. I’m lucky to be alive.”

“Lord God,” Sam prayed as she gripped Brendan’s waist and rested her head against his back. “We thank you that Brendan is alive and well, and we thank you that his daughter is ok. We ask for your favor tonight as-”

Brendan and Sam jumped when the doorbell rang. Brendan looked at Sam and she nodded her head at him. He took a deep breath and turned the corner toward the front door. As he walked toward the door, Brendan continued his wife’s prayer under his breath. He opened the door and saw a tall, brown-skinned man with salt-and-pepper hair wearing a navy blue uniform with more badges than Brendan could count. It was Chief Gregory Price; Sam’s father and the chief of the Bridgeport Police Department. Brendan crossed his arms at the sight of him.

“Can I help you, Chief?” Brendan asked.

“May I come in?”

“My boy’s upstairs, so I guess it’s fine,” Brendan said as he turned and walked into the kitchen.

“Is that a shot?” Chief Price asked as he stepped inside.

“Yeah, but we can talk about it later,” Brendan replied as he strolled into the kitchen. “What brings you here?”

“I’d like to know that too,” Sam said as she leaned against the kitchen counter.

“Samantha,” Chief Price said with the slightest of nods before facing Brendan. “I understand that you’ve been conducting an investigation in my city.”

“You mean the one you should’ve conducted?” Sam snarled before sipping her water and slamming the glass down.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say,” Chief Price replied.

“You should’ve told us,” Sam said with a catch in her voice. “You should’ve told me. How could you hide something like that from your own daughter?”

“I get that we’re on opposite sides of the system,” Brendan said. “But my daughter, Chief? I don’t have to tell you how bad this looks.”

“It wasn’t up to me,” Chief Price said. “Your blame is misplaced.”

“Oh, that’s debatable,” Sam snorted. “This isn’t the first time you’ve put your job over your family. God, you were always so selfish-”

“I paid for your school, Samantha,” Chief Price barked. “Even if you wasted it to become a schoolteacher-”

“Wasted?” Brendan asked with a scowl as he walked toward Chief Price. “She didn’t *waste* anything! Look, I don’t care if you’re the police chief. You can’t talk to my wife like that in my house, and you can’t yell at her either-”

“Oh, is that right?” Chief Price replied as he looked Brendan in the eye.

“Yeah, it is!” Brendan snapped. “Test me if you want to find out-”

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” Chief Price barked.

“You!” Brendan roared back as the two men converged on another until Sam darted across the room.

“Babe, no,” Sam sighed as she stood between them and held her hands against Brendan’s chest. “No, it’s ok.”

“No, it’s not ok,” Brendan said before staring at Chief Price. “Get out.”

“Fine, I’ll leave,” Chief Price said. “But before I go, you may want to hear about Perry.”

Brendan and Sam looked at each other before they faced him. Chief Price cleared his throat as he pulled out the watch that Sam gave Perry a week ago. He walked past them and set it on the kitchen table. He then pulled out a roll of hundreds wrapped in a rubber band and set it next to the watch. Sam snatched up the money and the watch and extended it back.

“Sam read my mind,” Brendan said. “We don’t need you reimbursing us.”

“I’m not,” Chief Price said. “Perry’s in the hospital. He got in a car accident and broke both of his legs in the course of his investigation. Still, he felt so strongly about this case that he decided to do it pro bono.”

“I work in criminal defense, Chief,” Brendan said. “People lie to me every day. You can’t bullshit me. Ailina got to him and broke his legs, didn’t she?”

Chief Price stared at Brendan before turning to Sam. That confirmed everything. Perry got close. Perry got caught. Perry got hurt or worse. Brendan held his hands on his hips. One day, he would pay Perry back for his dedication.

“He wanted you to have the money and the watch back,” Chief Price said to Sam before looking back at Brendan. “You can ask him yourself. He also took the liberty of reporting Ailina to DCFS a few days ago. Apparently, he felt like what he had learned warranted immediate action. However, Perry plans to retire after he recovers. He’s been dying to take a trip to Puerto Rico-”

“What did he tell you, Chief?” Brendan asked. “You wouldn’t be over here if it didn’t make you concerned, and I doubt it had anything to do with retirement.”

“You want the girl, right?” Chief Price replied with a wave of his hand. “Consider it done. I’ve made arrangements to have her escorted to your home by tomorrow morning.”

“This is way too easy,” Brendan said.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “If someone came to take Samuel, they couldn’t have him without a fight. Lord knows what she would do.”

“Sam, by now you should know that every mother isn’t as caring as you are,” Chief Price replied. “Ailina will not be a problem. In return, no DCFS, and no lawsuit.”

“You’re protecting her,” Brendan said as Chief Price walked toward the door. “Why? What are you hiding, Chief?”

Chief Price stopped just short of the door and took a deep breath. When he looked at Brendan, his eyes were moist. Brendan also noticed his hand was shaking on the door knob. There was a lot that Brendan didn’t know, but he knew this. Chief Price grew up in the same Bridgeport streets as Brendan. He then spent his life fighting crime in them. It took a lot to frighten a man like Chief Price, and Brendan highly doubted that he or Sam was the reason he was trembling so much. He was afraid of Ailina.

“You may not believe this,” Chief Price said as he opened the door. “But I’m protecting all of you.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Sam said. “You always say it’s for my own good.”

“I’m afraid that it is,” Chief Price replied. “Maybe one day I’ll be able to tell you why. Achilla will be here in the morning. I suggest that you prepare for her. You’ll find her to be very different from your son.”

Chief Price walked out and Brendan frowned as he stared at the door. Something about the way he spoke made him uneasy. If Ailina was abusing Achilla, and injured Perry in an effort to cover it up, this whole arrangement protected her from any civil or criminal liability. But had

Chief Price just fired Ailina, her legal issues would no longer be his problem. Why did he keep protecting her no matter how much she blatantly violated the law? And why would Perry suddenly retire and leave the state? The sole reason he worked for Brendan was because he could hardly afford his alimony and child support payments. Chief Price had to have paid him off, but why go through so much effort to protect a cop who could tarnish the reputation of the entire department? Why would a man with so much power fear Ailina? Before Brendan had time to ponder further, Sam rubbed his shoulder and kissed his cheek.

“Well, I guess we’ll get ready,” Brendan said. “Something doesn’t feel right, Sam. I don’t like how this was done.”

“Me neither,” Sam replied before smiling. “But we got your daughter. Sometimes God makes a way that we don’t understand.”

“I get the feeling that God had nothing to do with this,” Brendan said as he walked to the window next to the front door and watched with his hands on his hips as Chief Price’s Range Rover drove down the street. “That’s the part that bothers me.”

“I believe that God always has a plan,” Sam replied with her hands on her hips.

“Me too,” Brendan said before turning around and passing by Sam into the kitchen. “I just doubt that this is a part of it.”

CHAPTER 2

Achilla Johnson was in trouble. Her skirmish with that girl in the basketball game, her conversation with Brendan, everything about that day broke the rules. She wasn't supposed to use her training in public. When that girl pulled her hair, Achilla was supposed to wait for her after the game, isolate her, and punish her. Instead, Achilla reacted in the moment and defended herself. She then injured a referee and her own coach; the latter of whom was one of her mother's boyfriends, but not anymore. Achilla not only broke one of the rules but ruined one of Ailina's relationships in the process. That alone was grounds for punishment.

Achilla also wasn't supposed to talk to any men without Ailina's approval. No questions asked. Her entire conversation with Brendan, the tall man with wavy hair and brown eyes who asked so many questions that it made Achilla wary of him, was direct insubordination. Still, Achilla couldn't help but think about him. Why did he care so much? How did he know Ailina? What made him question if she belonged to him? Was that man really her father? Those questions swam laps in Achilla's head, but she knew they would go unanswered. Tonight, Achilla would receive her punishment. Unnecessary questions would only make things worse.

For the past five years, Ailina had been training Achilla in martial arts. She never explained why, but one night she shoved Achilla down their basement stairs, gave her some shin pads, hand wraps, and boxing gloves, and told her to fight. From that point on, Achilla spent every day sparring with her mother. She also homeschooled Achilla and didn't allow her to watch any cartoons, eat any sweets, or play with other kids without her approval; which never came. When she wasn't studying, eating, or sleeping, Achilla was training. When she wasn't training on her own, she was sparring with Ailina, and Ailina never lost. The only encouragement Ailina gave her was that she was a superior being destined to rule. If she trained hard, she would be superior, and Ailina would settle for nothing less than her best effort. Who was Achilla to argue? She trained and fought hard every day, hoping that Ailina would be satisfied. That satisfaction never came either; only beatings, bruises and cuts. Of course, when getting beat up every day is a normal occurrence, punishments must be extreme. So for the past three weeks, Achilla could no longer use any protective padding or gloves. They sparred bare knuckle, and every day brought the same results with a lot more pain.

Achilla stood in the middle of the concrete floor basement wearing black basketball shorts and a black t-shirt. She huffed and heaved as sweat drenched her entire body. In front of her stood Ailina; the tall, olive-skinned, brunette image of herself wearing gray sweatpants and a white t-shirt. She glared at Achilla with green eyes that locked onto her like a heat seeking missile. As Ailina stalked toward her, Achilla held a fighting stance with her left hand in front and her right hand by her cheek. She took a deep breath as she tried to calm her trembling fists.

"I haven't gotten over my anger with you," Ailina said. "It's been three weeks, and I still can't forgive you. You really pissed me off."

Achilla forced herself to not cry out with another excuse. She forced herself not to ask why she couldn't talk to people and why she couldn't defend herself when attacked. What was the big deal? Why was she so angry? Why did Achilla have to fight all the time, and when would it stop? When would she be good enough for her mother to stop hitting her? Achilla shook those thoughts out of her head. She had to focus on the task at hand.

Just as Achilla calmed her body, Ailina lunged forward with a knee that she blocked with both forearms. Stars burst out of Achilla's eyes when Ailina struck the back of her head. Achilla

hit the floor face first with her forearms out and rolled out of the way just in time to avoid her mother's foot. By the time she made it to her feet, Achilla blocked a kick that sent her bouncing against the concrete wall and falling to her knees. She gritted her teeth and rose to her feet as Ailina stood with her hands on her hips.

"You reacted faster against that inferior girl," Ailina said with a slight snarl. "You were so quick! Do you want the whole world to know about us? Do you?!"

Before Achilla could respond, Ailina rushed her with a punch to the gut that knocked the air out of her body. Achilla gasped and held her midsection as she fell to her knees again. Ailina then lifted her up by her shirt and pinned her against the wall; staring into Achilla's eyes with a gaze that made her look away. Achilla's feet dangled in mid-air as Ailina held her fast. Her heart beat out of her shirt and her face flushed as she held her Ailina's forearm.

"It's going to take a lot of beating for me to feel better," Ailina said with a hard stare. "I'm still angry."

Achilla decided that if she was going to get her ass kicked, she could at least fight back. She gritted her teeth and kicked Ailina's midsection, but it caused no effect. Achilla kicked again with the same result, and Ailina punched her in the head before throwing her to the floor. Achilla hopped up and threw a punch that missed wide-left before receiving a knee to the gut and a kick to the face. Achilla held her nose as she stumbled forward, but she shook off the pain as she whirled to face her mother. She then uttered a growl and sprinted toward her opponent.

Achilla threw a flurry of punches and kicks. They all missed their mark. Every last one. It was like Ailina was made of a special gas that only solidified itself when it punched Achilla in the face. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she bared her teeth and swung. Why did Ailina always have to make her suffer? What was so great about being superior? Those questions replayed in Achilla's mind as she threw a left hook, a right straight, a left side kick, a right front kick. Her attack was relentless but ineffective. After another missed punch, Ailina grabbed her wrist and pulled Achilla behind her; sending her toward a wall face first. Instead of letting her nose crash into the concrete, Achilla lifted her foot and stopped herself before propelling her body at Ailina. She shoulder rammed Ailina's left side and threw a looping punch at her head. It connected to Ailina's chin, and Achilla dropped to the floor as her opponent stumbled back. It was a small victory, but Achilla was now on all fours with sweat dripping down her face while her mother remained standing.

"Not bad," Ailina said she rubbed her chin. "That was better reaction time. Now I can proudly say you're a superior being like me. I think you're ready."

Achilla raised her hand. For the past few weeks, that was literally the only way she had permission to speak during their sparring sessions and homeschooling. Everyday felt like an excuse for Ailina to dominate her, but after her basketball fight, Ailina took it to another level. Achilla's arm trembled as she held it over her head and waited for Ailina to grant her the right to speak. If she didn't wait, the sparring would continue, and her trembling limbs could no longer last another five minutes after four hours of fighting.

"Speak," Ailina said with her chin raised. "But only if you have a question."

"Ready for what?" Achilla asked as she dropped her arm.

"You'll be living with your father," Ailina said. "Apparently your little skirmish caught his attention and he pulled some strings. I have to give you up."

"When were you...," Achilla huffed and swallowed before finishing her statement. "When were you going to tell me?"

“Raise your hand!” Ailina roared as she charged across the basement and punted Achilla’s ribcage. Achilla cried out and rolled on the floor. Her mouth gaped and tears rolled down her cheeks, and she struggled to catch her breath as she held her throbbing left side. Ailina rolled her over with her foot. She then kneeled over her and stroked her hair as she sobbed.

“Shhhh...please don’t cry, Achilla, it makes you look weak,” Ailina said with a slight pout. “I only broke three ribs, but at least I feel better now. You leave in the morning. Pack your things.”

Achilla lay on her side as she watched her mother turn her back and walk to the stairs across the basement. She then marched up the stairs without a sound except her feet pounding against the wooden steps. After an hour of writhing on the floor and inhaling the dust they kicked up during their sparring session, Achilla rose to her feet. The pain in her ribs still stabbed at her, but she was able to walk. Like every night in this house, Achilla would stumble to the bathroom, disinfect any cuts, shower, then ice any bruises or lumps, and then go to sleep. As much as Ailina said that this training would help her realize that she was a superior being, the pain in Achilla’s ribs told her a different story. Achilla didn’t know how to identify how she felt right now, but superior didn’t quite cut it.

Achilla winced as she walked toward the basement steps. When she made it upstairs into their yellow linoleum floor kitchen with white countertops, she leaned against the plain white wall to keep her balance as her legs trembled under her weight. Her head was a little hazy from all of those punches, but Achilla knew she would be fine. She always managed to wake up the next morning. As she made her way down the blue carpeted hallway, she passed by Ailina’s dark, mahogany door and stopped for a break.

Behind the door, Achilla could hear the creaking and knocking of a queen-sized bed taking serious punishment. Ailina apparently called one of her boyfriends over. She always called them after Achilla’s training sessions and kicked them out when they were done. Achilla walked past the doorway and kept moving until she heard the bed stop. Achilla frowned. They usually didn’t stop that quickly. Achilla flinched when she saw the door burst open and a naked, black male with dreadlocked hair flew across the hallway, banged against the wall, and fell on the floor in a heap. Ailina stepped out wearing nothing but her glistening skin and mussed up hair as she stood over him.

“What the hell do you mean you have to go?” Ailina snarled as she stepped on the man’s neck. “You don’t leave without giving me what I want!”

“Babe, I got a flight in the morn-”

“Reschedule your flight!” Ailina snapped as she kicked the man in the face with a flick of her ankle. “I am your priority, and don’t you forget it.”

“Ok!” the man said with his hands raised. “Ok, fine!”

“I’m getting some water,” Ailina said before pointing at the bedroom. “When I get back, you’d better be in there, and you’d better be ready to do what I called you here to do. Got it?”

“Yes, of course,” the man said as he scrambled to his feet and stumbled back into the bedroom. Achilla wanted to walk away, but her feet refused to move. She always froze when she watched how Ailina kept her men in line. It was almost comforting to know that someone else suffered as much as she did. When Ailina looked at her, Achilla turned her back to walk away. She stopped when she felt a hand grab her shoulder and looked behind her at her mother.

“Don’t be upset,” Ailina said. “It’s all he’s good for, and he needs to know that. One day, you’ll see it too.”

“Ok,” Achilla replied.

“You have to remind him who’s in charge,” Ailina said as she squeezed Achilla’s shoulder. “It’s good for him. I haven’t let you have a boyfriend yet, but I want you to remember that.”

“Um...yeah, ok,” Achilla said.

“Now go pack up your things and go to bed,” Ailina said as she turned her back and strolled to the kitchen. “Your ride should be here early.”

“You’re not driving me?” Achilla asked before clamping her hand over her mouth. Ailina stopped in her tracks. Achilla wanted to sprint to her room and lock the door, but all her legs managed was a small step back. She clenched her eyes shut in preparation for another hit, but it didn’t come. Achilla opened her eyes and saw Ailina looking over her bare shoulder. Her eyes glowed in the dark hallway as she stared at her.

“No,” Ailina said with a slight grin before stretching her arms and scratching her side. “I have work in the morning. Besides, I think it’s about time you stretched your legs a little. The more independent you are the better.”

Ailina walked into the kitchen, and Achilla caught her breath. She then turned and ambled down the hallway to her room; a small bedroom with white walls, a twin-sized bed with red sheets and a wooden dresser. There was a small bathroom attached to the furthest wall. In there, Achilla would tend to herself before getting some sleep. She looked out into the hallway and saw Ailina returning to her bedroom with an orange bowl. A few minutes later, the bed creaking began again. Achilla sighed and ambled to the bathroom. The sooner she got started, the sooner she could get some sleep. The next day, she would leave this house. That thought made a smile creep onto Achilla’s lips as she opened her bathroom door and stepped inside.

Two Bridgeport police officers picked up Achilla at around eight the next morning, and she stepped out of her house wearing a green, oversized t-shirt and black basketball shorts. As expected, Ailina wasn’t home when they came. Ailina never acted like those touchy-feely mothers Achilla watched hug their children from her bedroom window. A proper goodbye was out of character for her. As Achilla handed a tall, blonde police officer her gym bag full of clothes, a lump grew in her throat as she looked back at her white house with red shutters. She fought back the tears in her eyes and hung her head as she followed the police to their navy blue cruiser and stepped in the backseat.

As she watched the smoke stacks and high rises of Bridgeport pass by, Achilla thought about Brendan again. She noticed that he was different from all of the other men Ailina brought home. He had a voice that boomed like a trumpet., and he spoke with a clarity that made Achilla want to listen to him. What stuck out to Achilla the most about him was his rippled hair that held a peculiar scent that Achilla had never smelled before; it reminded her of an unlit scented candle. That smell and his voice lingered in Achilla’s mind as she watched the street signs change from blue to green. Within a few minutes, the police stopped their car.

When Achilla stepped out, the blonde police officer took her bag out of the trunk and dropped it on the ground. Achilla never forgot how he just dropped her stuff like it didn’t belong to another person. It made Achilla wonder if other police officers actually liked her or her mother. She frowned as she picked up the bag and carried it up the driveway while the officers drove off without another word. If she never saw them again it would be too soon.

Ailina always described Achilla’s father as a rich lawyer who was too selfish to pay child support. Upon her initial arrival, the first thing Achilla noticed about Brendan’s house was how normal it was. It was a two-story colonial home with green siding and black shutters; not the big fancy mansion that Ailina always claimed it was. There was a black BMW in the driveway, but it looked at least five years old. Achilla also noticed that the BMW was spotless, the grass was

well-mowed all around with an adult oak tree in the middle of the backyard, and they had a garden on the side of the house without a single weed. Brendan may not have been any richer than Ailina at first glance, but he certainly kept up his house better. At Ailina's house, Achilla did all of the cleaning.

Achilla rang the doorbell outside of a dark green painted door. It had hardly finished its tune when the door swung open and a brown-skinned woman with ear-length hair wearing a blue t-shirt under a denim jacket and jeans stepped outside. Achilla dropped her bag and stepped back as the woman stared at her with brown eyes and a smile on her face. Something about the way she smiled made Achilla avert her gaze at first, but she forced herself to stare back. The woman held her hands on her hips and shook her head.

"Brendan was right," the woman said. "You do look just like Ailina, but that face you just made at me, that's a Johnson face. You've got Brendan written all over you, girl."

"Who are you?" Achilla asked.

"I'm Samantha," the woman replied with a soft voice. "But please call me Sam. Let me take your bag--"

Achilla snatched her bag away when Sam stepped forward. Sam recoiled but her movements were slow. If she were as fast as Ailina, she would have taken the bag already. Achilla took note of that as she clutched her bag and stared at her. Sam held her hands on her hips again and sighed before rubbing the palm of her hand on her forehead. She then turned and opened the door.

"You poor thing," Sam sighed. "You must have been through so much. Well, if it makes you more comfortable, you can carry your own bag."

"Where's Brendan?" Achilla asked without moving an inch. "The cops said this was Brendan's house. Do you know Brendan?"

"Yeah, I think I know Brendan pretty well," Sam replied. "I'm his wife."

"Where is he?" Achilla asked with a stronger tone than she intended as she looked past Sam's shoulder into the house.

"You don't trust me," Sam replied.

"I don't know you," Achilla said.

"Right," Sam replied with a nod of her head. "I should've known this would be difficult. Your father had no clue when exactly you would be here. He walked to the corner store to grab some ice cream."

"For what?"

"For you," Sam said. "Most girls your age like ice cream, and he wanted to make you feel at home; kind of like I'm trying to do right now--"

"I don't eat ice cream," Achilla replied. "Too much sugar."

"Wow," Sam said with wide eyes. "I'm impressed. Ok, then what kind of food do you like? Do you have a favorite?"

"Steak."

"Luckily, we have some steaks in the fridge," Sam smiled and pointed into the house with her thumb. "I'll leave it up to you. If you need to see Brendan before you do anything else, you can wait out here for him to come back; or you can come inside and get settled first. Your call."

Achilla looked at her feet for a split second before bending over and picking up her bag. She then kept her head lowered as she extended the bag toward Sam. When she felt Sam take the bag out of her hand, she followed her inside the house. Achilla's eyes adjusted to the change of light as she watched Sam's back and trailed her into a kitchen with an off-white tiled floor and white counter tops. Achilla's head snapped to her right when she noticed someone sitting at a table on

the other end of the kitchen. It was a boy with a strong resemblance to Sam, but with wavy hair like Brendan. Achilla picked up the same scent of unscented candles from his hair and noticed that he had the same waves flowing around his head.

“Samuel, this is your sister,” Sam said as she stood next to Achilla. “Though she hasn’t given us her name yet.”

“If you knew I was coming, don’t you already know it?” Achilla asked.

“Yes, but it’s rude to walk into someone’s house and not introduce yourself,” Sam replied with a smile and gritted teeth.

“Oh,” Achilla said. “Sorry, I’m Achilla.”

“Cool, I’m Samuel,” Samuel replied as he hopped out of his chair and extended his hand.

“You’re also supposed to shake his hand,” Sam chuckled. “Did Ailina teach you any manners?”

“I can do a handshake, sure,” Achilla said with a shrug as she gripped Samuel’s hand. Samuel cringed and dropped to one knee as Achilla shook his hand. She let go when she saw a tear leak out of his left eye. Samuel stayed on the ground and held his hand as Sam rushed to his side. Achilla frowned and stared at her own hand before looking back at him.

“Are you...injured?” Achilla asked.

“He’ll be fine,” Sam said. “He’s just a sensitive boy, that’s all-”

“Mom, my hand hurts!” Samuel whined. “I think she broke my hand.”

“No, I didn’t break anything,” Achilla said to Sam. “I would know if I did.”

“Your hand isn’t broken, honey,” Sam said to her son with a soft voice as she rubbed his hand. “Look, I’ll shake her hand and show you.”

Sam extended her hand to Achilla, and she gripped Sam’s hand just the same. She didn’t fall to her knees, but Sam yanked her hand away. She then massaged her hand as she stared at Achilla. Achilla looked back with a blank face. What was the big deal?

“Achilla, honey, you may want to loosen your grip,” Sam said with a frown. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you could beat your father in an arm wrestling match.”

“I’ll do better next time,” Achilla replied with a shrug before she turned and walked toward the black refrigerator to her left. “When do you want me to cook those steaks?”

“I don’t,” Sam replied. “I’ll cook. What made you think I would ask you to do something like that?”

“I always cooked at home.”

“Well, this is your new home,” Sam said. “It’s going to be a lot different around here.”

“So...what do you need me to do?” Achilla asked. “Maybe I can clean these countertops?”

“I already cleaned them.”

“You...did?” Achilla asked as she ran her finger across the counter next to the refrigerator and flicked a speck of dust.

“Is my cleaning not up to your standards?” Sam asked as she stood up with her hands on her hips.

“I don’t know,” Achilla said with a shrug. “But last time I left a counter looking like this, I got a broken nose.”

“Well there won’t be any broken noses around here,” Sam replied with a soft voice. “And I’m sorry Ailina did that to you.”

“I’m used to it,” Achilla sighed as she heard the front door open. She followed Sam’s gaze as she smiled and stood in the kitchen doorway. Achilla heard the sound of sneakers stepping against the hardwood floor as Sam wiped a strand of her hair and stepped back. Brendan walked

into the kitchen wearing a white t-shirt and navy blue basketball shorts over his navy-blue Air Jordan sneakers. The look on Sam's face made Achilla frown. She stared at Brendan with a wide smile and bright eyes; a look Ailina never held when a man came to visit her. Sam kissed Brendan's cheek and leaned against his shoulder as she pointed at Achilla.

"You got her, baby," Sam said. "She's here."

"Is she staying, Dad?" Samuel asked with a smile that Achilla did not expect considering the pain she inflicted on his hand.

"Yeah," Brendan replied before kissing his wife and stepping forward. "Achilla, we would like you stay here. We'll be taking care of you from now on. You won't be going back to Ailina's house anymore."

"Ok," Achilla said with a smile she couldn't suppress.

"I'm sure Sam has already tried her best to help you feel at home," Brendan said as he pulled out a grocery bag from behind his back. "I figured I'd surprise you with this, but obviously I wasn't home in time. For that I do apologize. You'll find that I'm not late very often."

"She doesn't eat ice cream, honey," Sam whispered.

"I figured," Brendan replied as he pulled out a box of strawberries, and a handful of bananas. "Which is why I'll be making everyone fruit smoothies for dessert. How does that sound, Achilla?"

"Never had one, but I can try it," Achilla said with a shrug. "What's dessert?"

"It's what you eat after dinner," Samuel snickered. "Where've you been?"

"Samuel, stop it," Sam snapped.

"Samuel," Brendan replied with a slight growl. "We discussed this."

"Sorry," Samuel said with his head low.

"Well dinner isn't for another ten hours or so," Brendan said with a shrug that Achilla noticed looked just like her own. "Why don't we take the day to set some ground rules and give you a tour of the neighborhood?"

"I counted eight houses and around four children on my way here," Achilla said. "But there could be more because of the six basketball hoops and five bikes; two with training wheels."

"You don't know what dessert is?" Sam asked. "But you noticed all of that? That's....impressive."

"We discussed this too, Sam," Brendan whispered.

"Right," Sam replied as she grabbed Achilla's bag. "Come on, Achilla. I'll show you your room."

After getting acclimated to her surroundings, Achilla realized that Sam was right. The Johnson house certainly was different from anything she was used to. In fact, the more time that Achilla spent with the Johnsons, the more she realized that her life with Ailina wasn't normal. The Johnsons gave Achilla a set of chores to do every week, and expected them to be done by a certain time. Ailina just expected Achilla to clean everything without having to be told. The Johnsons gave Achilla an allowance every week. Ailina would have thought that giving her money was preposterous. Since she was a high school English teacher for Central High School and off for the summer, Sam cooked dinner almost every day, and Brendan cooked whenever he was home early enough. Ailina left food in the fridge and told Achilla to figure it out. Whenever Achilla's new brother, Samuel, talked back, he got grounded. If he was especially out of line, he got a spanking. Achilla received bare knuckle punches, elbows, and kicks from Ailina when she didn't follow instructions. She still had bruises and scars on her back for every time she did not

do something exactly the way Ailina liked it. The concept of grounding a child, without physically showing his face into the ground, confused Achilla to no end.

Still, there was one glaring difference above all. Ailina made Achilla train every day until she could barely walk. She taught Achilla how to hit, when to hit, and where to hit someone for almost any situation, and forced her to spar with her until she got it right. She told Achilla every day that she was a superior being above everyone else and that she should use her hands to keep the lower people in their place. She was destined to rule everyone around her.

Achilla learned more by watching how Ailina treated her men. She had a steady rotation of at least three men a month, but if one of them didn't follow instructions, he received a terrible beating. Achilla once watched her choke slam a man to the kitchen floor when she suspected him of sleeping with another woman. Another man tried to rob her of sixty dollars and suffered a jaw fracture so extreme that he couldn't close his mouth without using his hands. Ailina never bothered to hide her partners, nor her victims, from Achilla, and in turn Achilla learned how to deal with an enemy. That girl during the charity basketball game didn't know what hit her. Literally. Achilla overheard her new parents talking about it. The girl suffered a concussion and couldn't remember what happened.

Achilla's new parents did not expect her to train. Achilla once waited in the basement all night only to find that they had gone to sleep. They didn't call her a superior being. Instead, they expected her to behave, never talk back to adults, and play with the neighborhood kids. Achilla did as she was told and introduced herself to her neighbors. They let her play basketball with them and invited her to play every day after they saw how well she could shoot. Ailina's superiority never left Achilla's mind, but Brendan's lack of it made her smile a lot more.

Though they were not all that close yet, Achilla had an intense desire to protect Samuel from all harm. He was so sensitive that he would cry from the slightest bump, and all Achilla could think about were ways to stop him from crying. Achilla once stood over him in their driveway when he started crying again during a game of one-on-one. He tried to steal the ball from her, and she turned her body to protect the ball. She ended up ramming her shoulder into his chest and knocking him on the ground. Achilla sighed as Samuel sat in the driveway, wailing as he held his head.

"Why are you crying?" Achilla groaned.

"I hit my head!" Samuel cried.

"I saw that," Achilla said. "So what?"

"So it hurts!"

"Just because something hurts doesn't mean you have to cry," Achilla said as she walked up to their basketball hoop. "Watch this."

Achilla cocked her head back and slammed her forehead against the pole so hard that she shook the rim. A sharp pain rang throughout her head, but it was mild compared to an elbow to the temple from Ailina. As far as head wounds went, Achilla knew this was no big deal. She turned and smiled at Samuel as blood seeped down her forehead from the lump she knew she would have to ice later. She held her smile as Samuel stared at her through his tears.

"See?" Achilla said as she forced herself to not wince from the throbbing sensation in her forehead. "I'm not crying, and that really hurt. Trust me."

Samuel stopped crying. He then pointed and laughed. Achilla smiled at the sound of his laughter; so gentle and playful. It reminded her of a stray puppy she once played fetch with in her driveway until Ailina came home and beat her for taking in stray animals. When Samuel

laughed so hard that he held his side and rolled on the ground, Achilla held her mouth and giggled under her breath. Within a few seconds, they laughed together.

One day Samuel went off to play with the neighborhood kids. Achilla didn't feel like it and stayed at home. She sat on the porch in her jean shorts and gray t-shirt and basked in the quietness of her new neighborhood. It wasn't much different from her old neighborhood with colonial homes lining the street, dogs napping on their porches, blue jays screeching from the rooftops, and the smells of lunch and dinner wafting through the air. Still, something about it was more peaceful. There was no fear of Ailina coming home early and catching her outside playing basketball. There were no miles to run on the treadmill or number of punches to throw before her next sparring session. Everything was so relaxed. Today, the scent of barbecue chicken filled Achilla's nose as she stared at the cumulus clouds sitting in the blue sky and smiled. She could get used to this.

Achilla stood up when she saw Samuel ambling up the sidewalk. When he looked up at her, she saw that his left eye was blackish-purple. Achilla jumped off the porch and rushed toward him. She held his shoulders as he started crying. This time, she felt no need to make him stop.

"Samuel, what happened to your eye?" Achilla asked.

"He took my basketball," Samuel sniffed as he rubbed his black eye until Achilla pulled his arm away from it.

"Who did?"

"Marty O'Brien," Samuel said. "Some big kid down the street."

"You just let him take it?" Achilla asked with a stern tone.

"No, I punched him in the face!" Samuel said with a slight snarl as more tears fell down his cheeks.

"Good," Achilla replied as she patted Samuel's shoulder and then pulled him in for a hug. "You did well, Samuel."

As Samuel sobbed into Achilla's shoulder, she felt a lump in her throat. Tears welled up in her eyes as her face burned, and her hands balled into fists. Achilla had never met Marty, but she heard about him from the other kids. Marty was the oldest boy on their block, and from what the other boys said, he was at least twice Samuel's size. The thought of him picking on Samuel made Achilla grind her teeth.

"Samuel," Achilla said as she held him by his shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "I want you to show me where he lives. We're getting your ball back."

Samuel led the way as they marched to Marty's house; a plain yellow home with black shutters and a driveway with lots of dips and cracks. The lawn had brown grass and a water hose strewn across it like a snake that succumbed to the summer heat. Achilla noticed a group of boys wearing matching red "Raphola-Taylor Center" t-shirts playing with Samuel's basketball in front of a hoop attached to their garage. Two of them were tall and skinny with blacktop dark skin and identical short haircuts with diagonal dashes etched in the sides. One of them was shorter, but pudgy with pale skin and oily, dark brown hair that fell over his forehead. He also had a small scratch under his eye.

"Which one's Marty?" Achilla said to Samuel as she stepped forward.

Samuel pointed at the pale kid just as one of his friends pointed at Achilla and Samuel. Achilla clenched her fist as she walked up the driveway. Marty held the basketball on his hip as Achilla stood under his nose. Based on Ailina's training, Achilla assessed her opponent. He had four inches of height on her and at least fifty pounds. However, his midsection looked soft and

doughy, and as he stood with the ball in his hand, he didn't bother to protect himself. This would be an easy fight.

"That's Samuel's ball," Achilla said. "Give it back. Now."

"Your brother's beat for his ball," Marty replied as his blue eyes stared down at Achilla.

"Just because your brother's a punk doesn't mean you can come over here asking for shit."

"I didn't *ask* for anything," Achilla snarled as her eyes turned bloodshot. "I *told* you to give my brother his ball back, and I'm not going to tell you again!"

Marty chuckled as he threw the ball back to one of his friends who caught it. The other one stepped forward with a frown on his face. As his twin shot another jump shot, the look in his face puzzled Achilla. He just looked back and forth at Achilla and then behind her, probably at Samuel. He hesitated and then placed his hand on Marty's shoulder.

"Hey, man, just give them the ball," he said.

"Nah, punks get no respect," Marty snapped. "I thought you were my boy. Why can't you back me up?"

"They're little kids, man," the twin said.

"So what?"

"Fuck this, I can't hang with you no more, man, this is crazy," the twin replied before turning to the other. "Yo, we out, man!"

"But--"

"I said, we out!" the twin snapped. "Put the ball down! You know that ain't right!"

The other twin sucked his teeth and dropped the ball before they both walked past Achilla's shoulder. Achilla kept her eyes trained on Marty as his friends left the driveway. She continued to stare at him as she stepped toward the ball. Marty blocked her path. When Achilla stepped forward again, he blocked her path again.

"That's my ball now," Marty said. "Go buy a new one."

Achilla faced him with a hard stare. Marty chuckled and pushed Achilla back by her shoulder. Achilla grabbed his arm and pulled him forward as she poked his right eye with a finger jab. Marty cried out as she held him in place, and she kicked his groin twice before shoving him against the house. He bounced against the yellow siding and slumped to the ground while holding his hands between his legs. His face turned red and tears rolled down his cheeks as Achilla stalked toward him. When Marty tried to get up, Achilla kicked him in his gut, causing him to grunt and fall back to the ground. She then gritted her teeth and stomped his ribcage. She continued to stomp him as she thought about Samuel getting beat up for his basketball. She stomped him as she remembered Samuel's black eye and the tears leaking from his eyes. Samuel was a good kid. He didn't deserve that. Marty wasn't a good kid. He deserved this beating. So Achilla was going to stomp this no good motherfucker until-

"Stop!" Samuel screamed as he grabbed her shoulder. "Look at him!"

Achilla looked down at the red-faced, pudgy boy who held his hands over his head. When Marty looked up at her with one eye shut, and the other blue eye squinted, she raised her chin and stared back. Achilla then shoved Samuel aside and lifted Marty upright by his shirt. She held his shirt with one hand and punched his nose with the other, bouncing his head against the house. Marty groaned and held his face as he rolled on the ground.

"Achilla!" Samuel yelled. "Stop it!"

"That was for my brother," Achilla snarled as she kicked sand into Marty's face. "You stay away from him from now on, or I'll come back."

Achilla walked up the driveway and picked up the basketball. She bounced it a couple times before making a lay-up on Marty's hoop. She then picked up the ball and carried it against her hip as she approached Samuel. She handed him the ball and he took it. Achilla then wrapped her arm around his shoulder and led him toward Marty.

"Next time he bothers you," Achilla told Samuel as she pointed at the writhing, moaning, chubby boy on the ground. "Hit him in his eyes and groin, just like I did. After that, he's yours to do whatever you want. If that doesn't work, come get me. I'll take care of him again."

Samuel nodded his head and bounced the basketball between his legs. After they walked home, Samuel ran straight to his room without as much as a thank you. Achilla frowned and watched him run up the stairs before lowering her head and walking outside. She didn't leave the porch until Sam called them in for lunch and then grilled Samuel on why he had a black eye before Achilla explained that she handled it. After that, she went back out until her father came home. Something about the way Samuel avoided her made her want to sit outside for the rest of the day.

The neighborhood kids stopped playing with Achilla after her incident with Marty. Marty's parents threatened to call the police until Sam gave them the whole story and reminded them that this wasn't the first time Marty had picked on Samuel or the other neighborhood kids. After that, nothing came of their complaint, but Achilla noticed that the O'Briens crossed the street whenever they saw her. After a few weeks, the Johnsons were the only people who would give Achilla the time of day. On the bright side, all of the kids were extra nice to Samuel from that point on; or so Achilla heard.

Sam was especially different from Ailina. She was warm and gentle to the point that it made Achilla wary of her intentions. Unlike Ailina, Sam always smiled when she saw Brendan come home unless she was angry at him; even then they argued behind closed doors. She also always asked Achilla how her day went and if she had made any new friends. When Achilla told her that nobody spoke to her after she beat up Marty, she laughed. Even her laughter was softer than Ailina's who tended to cackle in a way that always felt like she was mocking your very existence. After yet another day of playing basketball by herself, Achilla came inside wearing her white t-shirt and black basketball shorts and joined Sam for lunch. Sam rubbed her hands on her jeans before she patted Achilla's shoulder and walked away from the kitchen table to the cabinets above the refrigerator.

"Everyone acts all up in arms after you beat up a boy," Sam said as Achilla read the Price family reunion list of names on the back of her purple t-shirt. "After I beat up a boy in seventh grade people thought I was from outer space."

"You can fight?" Achilla asked.

"Always could," Sam replied as she pulled out a pair of mugs. "I had a mean temper growing up. It's not a good thing though; especially as a black woman. You'll learn that sooner or later."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you're so young," Sam sighed. "I'm actually glad that I have to explain this, and I hope you never have to deal with it. As a black woman, the world doesn't like it when you get angry; even if you're right. You know, they'll say you have an attitude and all that. It's not fair, and if I could change it on my own, I would, but that's our situation-"

"Wait, you're calling me black?" Achilla asked; a question that made Sam jolt and almost drop a plate.

“Girl, have you looked in the mirror lately?” Sam asked as she faced Achilla with her hands on her hips. “Honey, you are darker than Samuel. That’s that Johnson blood in you. Brendan’s dark as midnight just like his father, and you take after him. I don’t know what Ailina’s been telling you, but when you walk out the door, you’re black, honey. ”

Achilla looked at her hands. Her skin was now chestnut brown and only a few shades lighter than Brendan’s. She normally spent so much time inside while living with Ailina that she never noticed how dark she could get. Ailina never called her black. She just called her superior. At that very moment, Achilla realized that there were a lot of things Ailina never bothered to teach her about herself. From that day forward, she pressed Sam with Black History questions until her twelfth birthday when Sam walked into Achilla’s room with a box full of books. Achilla ruffled through them and noticed that they were all biographies, starting with Martin Luther King Jr.

“That’s every Black History book I could find in a week,” Sam huffed as she wiped her hands on her jeans and rubbed her sweaty forehead. “Did Ailina at least teach you how to read? Lord knows she didn’t bother to tell you much else.”

Achilla was starting to notice that whenever Sam made comments like that, they were not intended to insult her. They were demonstrations of her frustration with Ailina’s lack of parenting. Achilla shared in that frustration as she stared at all the books that she could have read by now. Achilla snatched up the biography of Malcolm X and tossed it between her hands. She smiled as she ran her fingers through the pages.

“Yeah, she taught me how to read,” Achilla said. “I read better than most kids my age. At least that’s what my last test said.”

“You were homeschooled?” Sam asked. “At least she did that right.”

“It was really hard,” Achilla said with a frown. “We left off on trigonometry, Portuguese, Russian, and Greek.”

“You know trigonometry?” Sam asked with her hands on her hips. “And three foreign languages?”

“My Russian sucks-”

“Achilla, in this house-”

“My Russian needs work,” Achilla corrected herself with a snap of her fingers. “But I’m conversant in Portuguese and Greek because Ailina spoke both languages around the house. After Russian, we were going to move on to Farsi.”

“You’re still moving on to Farsi,” Sam replied with a nod of her head. “I’m starting to think that public school may not be much of a challenge for you. If you were in my classroom, I would move you up a couple grades. Let me talk to your father. Maybe we can hire a tutor for you.”

“Thanks,” Achilla said. “I was actually excited for Farsi.”

“Did Ailina ever tell you why she wanted you to learn so many languages?” Sam asked as she leaned against the doorway. “Or why she insisted that you learn how to fight so...well? Did she explain any of her reasoning for teaching you anything?”

“No,” Achilla replied as she ruffled through her new book. “She just said it would make me superior.”

“Hm,” Sam hummed as she crossed her arms. “She used that word a lot, didn’t she?”

Sam walked out without waiting for an answer. Achilla shrugged and turned to the first page of Malcolm X’s biography. She ran through all of her books before the first day of middle school, and read even more in her free time. As promised, her parents hired language tutors for her, and Sam drove Achilla to their homes three times a week after school. America’s treatment of black people didn’t sound much different than Ailina’s behavior toward her boyfriends; the

expectation of obedience, the inferior services and treatment, the language that one set of people was superior to another. Achilla saw her mother in these books and wondered if she was just like the Ku Klux Klan and the lynch mobs. It disturbed her so much that she had to keep reading until she found herself wandering in her school library looking for more books so often that the librarians had books waiting for her as she walked through the doors.

One day, Achilla was going to play basketball outside after school when Sam made her stay in and take a test. After she was done, Sam took it to her bedroom and told Achilla to go play. Achilla shot jump shots and performed handstand pushups by herself for hours until Samuel came home. Then she played him in one-on-one again. Achilla loved the feeling of playing outside in October; a time of year when Ailina usually clamped down on their training. The air was just cool enough to give her goosebumps, but warm enough for her hands to feel the ball as she dribbled around Samuel. One play, Samuel reached for the ball and Achilla turned her shoulder and bumped him again. This time he didn't cry when he fell. Instead he jumped to his feet and kept playing. Even though she beat him every time, watching Samuel play so much stronger made Achilla smile. She was still smiling when she came in the house and saw Sam and Brendan looking at her test at the kitchen table. Sam had changed out of her blue dress and wore a white t-shirt and sweatpants as she tugged Brendan's white button down shirt. She smiled at the test and kissed him on the cheek before looking up at Achilla.

"Achilla, baby," Sam said. "Why don't you take a shower and come downstairs? We need to speak with you."

Achilla showered and changed into a pair of black sweatpants and a baggy, blue "Bridgeport Bluefish" t-shirt before scampering back down stairs in her bare feet. She sat at the kitchen table in front of her father, who still wore his white shirt, and sky blue tie. Brendan frowned as he read the test, and Sam patted his shoulder as if he missed his queue to start speaking. Brendan cleared his throat.

"Achilla, I know I haven't been home much," Brendan said. "Your father works very hard."

"It's ok," Achilla said. "You're actually home during the day more than my mom ever was."

"Oh God, I was afraid of that," Sam said as she rolled her eyes.

"Yeah," Brendan replied as he nodded his head at Sam. "So Sam gave you an IQ test. Your IQ is...over 200."

"Is that high?" Achilla asked.

"It's the highest I've ever seen," Sam said with a giddy smile. "You're extremely gifted."

"What's Samuel's IQ?" Achilla asked. "Is he gifted?"

"Samuel's gifted too," Sam replied with a nod before her smile faded. "He's actually scheduled to start advanced classes for his grade next year, but he hasn't had the...training that you've had. We're concerned that you never had much of a childhood."

"What do you mean?" Achilla asked.

"From this point forward we're going to put you through some training of our own," Brendan said. "You'll still learn foreign languages and martial arts if you wish, but we'll also find a few other things for you to do that involve making friends."

"I've never taken martial arts," Achilla said. "My mom just taught me how to fight."

"Oh, boy," Sam sighed as she shook her head. "She treated her like a little slave and didn't tell her anything."

"Huh?" Achilla uttered with a frown as she remembered the devastating conditions of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Surely, Ailina's parenting didn't compare to that. Did it? Achilla

shook her head before looking up at her parents. Brendan gave Sam a side-eye before taking a deep breath.

“Ailina never explained this to you,” Brendan said with a raised hand. “But do you remember that basketball game where we first met?”

“Yes.”

“Well on that day, along with your incident with Marty,” Brendan continued, “you demonstrated advanced knowledge of at least three forms of fighting. I didn’t want to tell you this yet, but I think Sam has a point. You’re intelligent enough to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“We don’t know why,” Brendan said. “But Ailina seems to have trained you the same way you would train someone for combat or espionage. I still can’t believe I’m actually saying this-”

“Think about it, honey,” Sam chimed in as she leaned forward. “You know how to speak foreign languages, and you know how to hurt people, but you’ve had a hard time making friends, and up until now you knew next to nothing about your culture or even yourself. I’m glad your father acted when he did.”

“Oh,” Achilla said as she looked at the table. “So what do I do?”

“Developmentally, it’ll be difficult to change what she’s done,” Sam sighed. “But it’s not impossible. We’ll guide you every step of the way. I do have one thing to ask of you.”

“Ok,” Achilla replied.

“Whenever you get angry,” Sam said as she looked Achilla in the eye without blinking. “Whenever you think you’re about to get angry, call one of us, ok? Talk to us.”

“I’m giving you a cell phone,” Brendan said. “Call either of us when that time comes. I’m sure there are things you would rather talk to Sam about, but I’m your father. I’ll love you no matter what you tell me.”

“Why are you guys talking like this?” Achilla asked. “You act like I’m going to kill someone.”

Brendan and Sam passed a glance at each other that Achilla would never forget for the rest of her life. Achilla frowned as they stared at her. Sam’s eyes moistened a little. Brendan looked down at the table. Then they both smiled at her. Sam stood up and walked toward the kitchen doorway.

“Sorry,” Sam said with a slight crack in her voice as she walked out of the kitchen to the front door. “I just...have to step outside for something.”

Achilla frowned as Sam stepped outside and closed the door behind her. What was she going outside for? It was almost dark and both Samuel and Achilla were home. Why did they look at her like that? What did Achilla say? Achilla swallowed hard as she scrambled to think of what she did wrong.

“Sam’s had a long day,” Brendan said as he watched the door. “But she cares a lot about you, and she knows a lot about child psychology. Whatever she tells you to do, do it. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Achilla muttered.

“All right,” Brendan said as he rose from the table. “I think I’m cooking tonight. Want some steak and fries?”

“Yes!” Achilla said as she pumped her fist. “I love your steak and fries!”

“Steak and fries it is,” Brendan said as he leaned over and kissed Achilla on the forehead. “You’ll be all right, baby girl. I promise.”

Achilla flinched as he walked toward the refrigerator. She stared at her hands. They still had scars from her days of living in Ailina's house. By now her hands were so hard that she could hit any part of the human body without the slightest pain, but the look that past between Brendan and Sam bothered her. It was the same look Samuel held when he stepped in to stop her from beating on Marty. It was the same look Marty's parents held when they saw her and crossed the street. It was the look of fear, and Achilla was becoming all too familiar with it.