

The energetic Son music poured outdoors from the live band playing inside. Sasha loved the twangy sound of the Spanish guitar, while I was partial to the percussions pounding out African rhythms.

We made our way to our table as we followed our hostess. Without having to look, we knew we were attracting numerous stares. It wasn't unusual. Although my daughter and I didn't look anything alike, people often stared when they saw the two of us together. She may not have had the dark beauty with strong African American features I had, but she had an exotic beauty of her own, stemming from her Latino father.

After being escorted to our table, she looked around and finally ventured to ask the question she wanted an answer to. "So, Mom, why are we here tonight?" she asked in her rich, husky voice.

"I just thought that maybe we needed some bonding time. I mean, I know that you're on punishment, but you were right, that doesn't mean we can't still spend some time together. I had a moment to think about what you said, and I agreed with you."

"But why Havana's?" she asked. She knew something was up.

"I want this to be a new relationship between the two of us. Today is the start of something new. You're going to be a young adult soon. And I've done everything possible to raise you the right way. But so often, I have fussed at you and told you what not to do, rather than what you should do. You'll be leaving home in a couple of years, and I want these last two to be beautiful. I'm going to miss you, Sashaberry," I shared, calling her by her nickname.

"Aww, Mom, I'll miss you, too." She smiled that dazzling smile my way. She swayed to the beat of the pulsating, soulful rhythms. The atmosphere made me want to get up and dance, as well, but now was not the time.

"I want us to form a relationship where you feel comfortable talking to me about anything and asking any questions. I don't want you to feel like you have to go to your friends or complete strangers to find out what you want to know. And unfortunately, I've been pushing you in that direction the last several years."

"Mom, talk to you about what?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. Her once loose, shaking body suddenly went still as if the music had stopped. She was on full teen alert.

"Anything, honey. Books, school, college, your changing body...boys." I didn't have to fend off defensive comments, because the waiter chose that moment to pop up. He took our orders and politely disappeared.

"So, Mom, what's this new relationship you're trying to create?" she asked, folding her hands beneath her chin.

I thought I had escaped. Not quite. I had some 'splaining' to do to my sixteen-year-old. "Honey, I am honestly worried about what's going on with you." I decided to be truthful.

"What's going on with me?"

"Your reputation. I'm worried about—"

"Mom, are you talking about what Anthony said?" she asked, putting her hands on the table.

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm referring to. Not to mention that I saw two other boys all over you on that same day." I had to struggle to keep my emotions under control. I felt myself getting angry at my

daughter all over again. I wasn't trying to be her friend, but I wanted to develop a close relationship where she could talk about anything with me and trust me. We wouldn't get there if I kept blowing up. I realized through the years my daughter had a certain fear of me. That was good, but she also needed to know she could trust me. And I wasn't sure she felt that way.

She sat shaking her head and turning two different shades of red. "Mom, that's so unfair. Anthony lied on me. I told you he did that to get back at me. He was upset about getting busted. I don't have a reputation at school."

"What about Principal Jacobs? She seems to think you're quite often 'friendly' with the boys around school." I shared the principal's disclosure with Sasha, because she needed to know how people viewed her.

"Mom, she's wrong. I have lots of male friends. But that's all they are. I don't get along with females too much, because some of them are jealous of me and downright mean. Other girls don't have the same interests I have. I mean, I have a couple of girlfriends at school that I kick it with from time to time, but not so much. Guys are cool, they don't judge you, and I can talk to them about anything."

"Guys are quite often trying to get to one thing, Sasha. They'll tell you whatever you need to hear or want to hear to get you to drop your panties. I'm not saying there aren't good ones out there, because I truly believe there are. But, at your age, guys aren't thinking about settling down or being serious. They're out to satisfy the desires of their flesh. And truthfully, I'm not mad at them, because they're still young. They have so much to learn and go through before they're sure that's what they want to do. And truthfully, females play a lot of games of manipulation and control. These young boys aren't trying to get tied down with that. I don't want them using my beautiful, intelligent daughter to fulfill their desires."

"Mom, you think I'm stupid? I don't allow anyone to use me. If I were to find myself in a situation, I would know how to handle myself. They can't tell me anything and I just believe it. Yes, I like some of the guys I've met, but it's nothing more serious than going out on dates, kicking it, and that's it. Sometimes it gets a little physical, but I know how to take care of myself Mom."

"What do you mean, get a little physical, and how do you take care of yourself?"

"Momm, really? Are we really having this conversation?" Sasha asked, looking around to make sure no one could overhear us.

"Well, if I have to learn to trust you again, you have to learn to trust me. You've definitely betrayed my trust, Sasha. This is about you taking on self-responsibility, and you won't make me feel guilty about it. I love you, and it's my job to protect and guide you. And I will do it with every breath in my body."

The band had switched to another, more engaging number. The guitar player and trumpeter had come from the stage and began dancing around the restaurant and out through the patio doors. Many of the patrons had left their seats and followed the musicians. Their bodies swayed to and fro, while others engaged in more frenetic movements, keeping up with the beat of the music. I loved this place but thought maybe it hadn't been the best choice for the conversation I wanted to have. We needed a quieter place with more solitude. There was too much going on around us for either of us to stay focused on the conversation at hand.

The waiter popped up and served our food. Sasha had ordered Enchilado de Camarones. The big shrimp in the Creole sauce was releasing mouthwatering scents. They sat on a bed of white rice with onions and peppers. A steaming serving of plantains was placed next to her plate. Then he sat my Palomilla in front

of me. The top sirloin was pounded to perfection, the way I loved it. I inhaled the scent of the lime garlic sauce with sautéed onions and began salivating. I loved Havana's food. I also had a side of plantains with my dish, but I had ordered the house special of Frijoles Negros. There was nothing in the world like Havana's black bean soup.

We dug into our food after saying our grace. Food was a common denominator among most people, which induced a peaceful atmosphere. And my daughter and I were both enjoying one now. But that peace only lasted so long.

As we finished our meal, I heard a distantly familiar voice behind me. I hadn't heard that voice in a while and thought maybe I was mistaken. Something told me not to turn around in my seat, but I ignored that natural instinct and turned.

My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach as I watched a very familiar face making its way in our direction. When he passed our table, I felt a sense of relief wash over me. But it lasted only for a moment. I set my napkin on the table and looked up at my daughter.

"Mom, are you okay? You look like you just saw a ghost."

"I'm fine, Sashaberry. I'm not feeling so well. I don't know if it was something I ate or what. Come on, I'm ready to leave."

"Just like that, Mom? What about dessert? We always have dessert."

"Not tonight, Sasha. Come on, let's leave."

"But Mom, you haven't even paid your bill, yet. Can we at least order it to go?" she pleaded.

"Sure," I replied. "Look, I'm really not feeling well. Baby, let's just pay it at the bar and order your dessert from there."

"Okay, Mom," she stated. "But you sure are acting strange."

We left our table and headed to the bar. I paid for our food after ordering the dessert. It seemed as if that dessert couldn't get there soon enough. It arrived ten minutes later, and I was relieved we could finally leave.

"Come on, baby, let's go. I just need to lie down for a while. I'm sure once we're home and I get some rest, I'll feel better."

"I hope so," Sasha replied. "What came over you anyway?"

"Oh, nothing, baby. I think just the taking you back and forth to school and the altered schedule is taking its toll on my body."

"Do you want me to drive home?" Sasha had had her license for six months. I quite often allowed her to drive for small errands in our community or drive to her friends' homes. But I wasn't about to let her drive that far at night in my baby. It didn't matter if I would be sitting in the passenger seat.

We had discussed getting her a little vehicle, because I wasn't comfortable with allowing her to drive my baby. I had recently purchased that Mustang as a rare gift for myself. But I knew with all the hard work I put in, I deserved something special. So on my thirty-third birthday, I had gone out and paid cash for her. No car notes, no strings attached.

“Uh-uh I’ll be just fine, baby. I can make the drive, come on.”

I headed towards the door as we passed the restrooms, and my heart stopped once again. “Naomi.” My heart plummeted to the floor. That smooth smile carved that honey-colored face into a familiar grin. And those smoke-grey eyes shined brightly at me. I had been looking at that smile and those grey eyes for the last sixteen years. And now they were back in the flesh to haunt me.

“How’ve you been?” Jaime asked.