

Finding
FAMILY

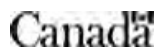
KAMILAH HAYWOOD

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Dedicated to the First Lady, a.k.a. Scottie

Rest in Power, Sister

You will always be loved

To my Day 1, T. C.

Love you long time

CHAPTER I

BREAKING FREE

“To be free like a butterfly is to spread these wings.”

I thought I finally found some peace downtown, escaping to Toronto on my own after months of feeling uncomfortable and unwanted around my family, but all it took was one sentence from my mom to remind me how easily she could bring me right back to that toxic space, no matter where I was. My tense response was still automatic.

“Yes, Mom,” I said politely when I answered my phone. “How can I help you?”

“You didn’t hear me calling you all day?” She had an annoying way of calling me at the worst time and then getting mad at me like I was ignoring her on purpose.

“I was just getting ready to link you back. What’s up?” I closed my eyes, preparing for the argument.

“Didn’t I tell you to call your brother to see if he needed help moving the furniture? You’re really just going to leave him to manage by himself?” Apparently, Javon was creating a new gaming setup with the extra space he now had.

“Excuse me?” I said, taking a deep breath before I crashed out. Again.

Leave him? My mom had pampered her precious baby Javon all his life, even though he was her firstborn and the oldest, now almost twenty-one. When she left Ontario, I was somehow expected to take care of his lazy ass. Growing up, this guy didn’t work, cook, clean, or do anything that I was expected to learn from my mom. He’d be busy online scrolling TikTok and Instagram or playing video games with his friends while I was vacuuming, stewing chicken, and hand-washing clothes.

My brother had zero interest in doing anything to maintain our family’s apartment and didn’t even try to hide it. He literally only cared about bringing different girls over and chilling with his friends and our mischievous cousins. Even though she’d never admit it, I’m sure that helped to bring our mom to the point where she moved to Alberta. She was ready for some peace. Clearly.

I was disappointed when she said she was leaving, but not totally surprised. She ambushed me and Javon one night after

work in the spring, told us to sit in the living room, and gave us what sounded like a well-prepared speech. We had recently graduated high school, and she'd been getting on both of our cases about our future plans and responsibilities.

"Trey. Javon. First of all, I want you to know that it took me a long time to come to this decision about moving. As a single mother who has brought you as far as I can, I think it's time for you both to find your way. You need to be able to stand as men in this world," she told us. Javon looked like he wanted to cry, but I was prepared. Disappointment and disruption were nothing new to me. "I love you both, but I need to take this step for myself too."

"So you're going to pay rent on two homes? Does that even make sense, Ma?" Javon asked her. I rolled my eyes, because even at his big, big age he didn't think he should have to pay his own way. He also didn't seem to understand that Mom was going to be paying a mortgage and that home ownership was something she had always dreamed of.

"That's exactly my point. Why would you assume I'm still going to pay for everything? We've had this place for over twenty years, and the rent is still pretty affordable. When we moved in we were paying about six-fifty, and now it's only thirteen-fifty. You won't find a place this size and this affordable anywhere, believe me. You and Trey, both working

full-time, can afford to pay the rent,” she told him with too much confidence.

I tried not to laugh. I was always good at working, saving, and taking care of my own needs and responsibilities. I had to be. Her baby Javon, not so much. “I’m giving you a head start, instead of making you each go find a new place and giving this one up. Market rate in this building is almost twenty-five hundred a month. You should be thankful!”

“You really expect me to live here with this funny guy?” Javon insulted me. I looked at my mom to see if she’d defend me, but of course she didn’t. “If you’re not in the spot, I’m not staying here alone with him.”

“Then I’ll leave. Whatever,” I told them both immediately. Still nothing from my mom. She would just go along with whatever would make him comfortable, and if he wanted me gone, then I knew I had to just find my way out. That was how it always went down in our home.

I knew our mom loved us. She was a tyrant, but she did her best to raise us. When my Gran Gran was alive, I would often overhear them talking about “the day” she’d be able to pack her bags and finally be on her own...without us depending on her. I just didn’t think it would happen this soon, but one thing about my mom: she didn’t care what anyone said or thought. She was gonna do what she was gonna do.

I knew she wanted to travel and be free. Who didn't want that? After things didn't work out with our dad, I always had the feeling that she felt tied down to a life she didn't sign up for and was just waiting for a way out. Once I'd turned sixteen and started working, I could see her start plotting her escape. She tried to keep it on the downlow, but when her whole vibe changed, I knew she had found something to look forward to—outside our humble home.

When one of her school friends from Jamaica came to visit from Calgary, gushing about the mountains, slower pace, and fresh air out in Alberta, I could see my mom get excited. She looked happy and optimistic for once, and I knew she would try to chase whatever that happiness was. She deserved it. And so did I.

“So you don't even want us to come? Wooow,” Javon said to her, shaking his head. Of course she didn't! She probably wanted to date, build a new social life, and take back those years she'd spent working to feed and take care of us. She loved her baby Javon, but that didn't mean she needed to continue to pamper him.

“Look. I know for a fact neither of you want to leave Toronto. Plus, I want you both to find your paths as men,” she stressed again. “My mother prepared me to find my own way and never let me get too attached or dependent on her. That's

why I left Jamaica. I'm trying to pass that same lesson on to you," she continued. "There is no way I can raise independent warriors by keeping you both coddled. Don't worry. I'll always be just a phone call away."

And that was that.

Since she left, about three months ago, Javon had relied on me to cook, clean, and buy groceries. And he still had the nerve to scold me about being a "likkle gyal" because of how well I handled our household.

I knew the arrangement wouldn't work for long, so I constantly searched for apartments close to the city. I was accepted to go to university downtown and study business. I actually wanted to take care of myself, and I wanted to get as far away from Javon's comments and judgement. Javon harassed me every day, and with my mom out of the apartment, he was free to have his bredrens and our troublesome cousins up in the spot 24-7. It was too much, and I even started to feel unsafe.

"Really, Mom? Nope. Javon is no longer my problem, and I don't have time to talk about babying dat yute—he can figure his own life," I told her. The crashout had begun.

"Don't make me feel guilty. We're family. We need to work together, Trey. Through thick or thin," she said, raising her voice.

"And what part does Javon actually play, if we're all working together?" I had to ask.

“He’s taking care of our apartment,” she said, causing me to laugh. “I don’t know why you can’t even at least try to be decent with him. He doesn’t deserve to be left alone like this—we’re all adjusting right now.”

“Are you being for real?”

“Look, I talked to him before I called you, and I told him he needs to get a proper job to manage his half of the rent with Donnie,” she said. “It’s not like he’s in school or doing anything else constructive with his time.”

Our older cousin Donnie, who was single and worked full-time with the TTC, was looking for a place to stay where he could stack his money. Since our Peel Housing apartment was subsidized and not expensive at all, Donnie took advantage of the opportunity to save.

“I told Javon, ‘Whatever it is you think you are doing is not going to pay the bills,’ and I told him to stop waiting around for some woman to carry him or save him. And I warned him to watch out for your cousins, because they’ll have him in some mix-up and get him locked up if he’s not careful. Donnie’s a responsible young man. Maybe his habits will rub off on him.” She sighed deeply. “You and Javon were always so close. This is still strange to me that you have this beef all of a sudden.”

I rolled my eyes. “Mom, he’s the one that decided to spread my business across ’Sauga. He’s the one that said he’s not going

to share the apartment with me unless I change my lifestyle. He messed up our relationship, for the record, so he can deal with that choice.”

She knew, but she was acting like she didn’t remember how Javon snooped in my stuff and found things that clearly showed I was not into women like I was “supposed” to be and then demanded an explanation from me, in front of her. Or the time when I had a crush on Andrew, this boy in our neighbourhood, and was saving pics from his social feeds, Javon caught me and started asking pure questions. Then he ran with my phone and confirmed what he suspected: I was collecting tons of pics of hot and handsome (shirtless) boys I wanted to date. He showed them all to my mother and they both questioned me, trying to make sense of what was staring them in the face.

“Trey, you don’t have to be difficult.”

“Now *I’m* difficult?” I could almost cry, but I had already come too far to crawl back into discomfort. “You keep telling me I’m difficult or I’m stubborn or I’m too sensitive. But, Mom, I’ve been on your side most of the time. I’ve been helping to make your life easier, and you know this.”

Mom had decided to move out west to Calgary when one of the city’s hospitals was offering incentives to nurses, including some nice pricing on new houses. She was able to get a cute

three-bedroom with a low down payment. Something she had always wanted, but it was difficult to afford in Toronto while raising two sons.

Mom used to argue with my grandmother, who recommended she build a property in Jamaica instead, but since my mom left the island as a teen, she had no interest in returning. Not even for vacation—Gran Gran would have to visit us in Canada when we were young.

Mom always loved the pretty Canadian landscapes, the canola fields, and the mountains—she loved the idea of living outside of The Six, and big-city life had officially exhausted her.

“I would never intentionally try to hurt you boys or leave you in a situation you couldn’t handle,” she’d said to us before beginning her road trip to Alberta in her Nissan Altima, with one of her male friends driving a U-Haul full of her clothing and personal things. “You’re the most important thing in the world to me. I hope you know that.”

When I graduated high school earlier in the summer, things with my brother and I were still kinda cool. I grew up hangin’ out with Javon and the man dem around me in Mississauga that came from all classes, races, and backgrounds—mainly Black and South Asian parents that had migrated from countries like Jamaica, Trinidad, and

Pakistan. It was amazing how quickly things changed once my big secret was exposed. When I finally told them: *I am gay*. Javon and I always fought, like most siblings do, but this made everything different. Toxic.

“I’m just asking you to lend a helping hand and stop being so stubborn.” My mom switched back to her blunt tone that made me want to scream.

“Stubborn? What about Auntie Sharon and her unruly sons? Why can’t they pitch in? But *I’m* the stubborn one, though?”

“Trey, I am not concerned about your cousins right now. You know they’ve always been careless with their words...and actions. As for Sharon, she’s too busy helping with the new grandbaby. Why can’t you just co-operate? Please.”

She sighed loudly. I didn’t want to fight with her. I was trying so hard to put me first, the same way she was putting herself first.

“Did you call Javon stubborn for not co-operating with me? Actually, have you even addressed his disrespectful, *homophobic* behaviour toward me?” Silence. She hated when I referred to my sexuality in any way, but I owed it to myself to remind her what the real issue was. The issue she kept avoiding, that might have also helped convince her to jump provinces. “I gotta go, Mom.”

“Okay, Trey.” She paused after a big exhale. “I love you.”

The back of our high school cafeteria was chaotic—music blasting, rap battles, dominoes, and checking out girls. We made it our home away from home, especially because those guys were barely in class. They came to school to play basketball, listen to the latest rap or dancehall tracks, and wear the latest sneakers and fashions.

I tried my best to fit in but also get my education. Even though Javon was almost three years older than me, we somehow still ended up graduating at the same time. Yup. As much as we fought at home, he looked out for me at school and in our neighbourhood. His friends respected me because they idolized him. They idolized him because he got any and every girl he wanted. It was pretty messed up.

“Yo, Trey, you coming to play ball after school?” Javon asked just a few weeks before he sabotaged my reputation. I was chilling with my boy Clive, a friend who also dropped me after the rumours started circulating. “Come through. There’s gonna be nuff new girls there, bro!” He threw the basketball he was dribbling around by the back of the cafeteria doors at me.

“Aight! Bet!” I said and threw the ball back at him playfully, almost hitting him in the head. Everyone started laughing when he quickly caught the ball and hid it behind his back as

the principal came around the corner. Javon caught my eye, and we both chuckled.

We had a few ballers from our school, Lincoln Alexander Secondary, who had recently made it to the NCAA. My brother could have easily made it too, but he was more focused on girls and hanging out than practicing or going to class.

“Dat’s what’s up! MAN DEM, WE HAVE BOTH TEAMS FULL. Link up in the gym. One-on-one cutthroat. First to twenty-one,” Javon shouted, and we all began packing up to follow him to our school basketball court. I loved playing ball because I felt like I belonged. The amount of trash-talking on the court was wild, but it was all out of love.

It hurt me to see how Javon and I went from being playmates to strangers. Enemies, almost. Animosity also grew between us after years of me witnessing him disregard, lie to, and steal from our mom.

“I can’t believe a big man like you wants to look like a man and act like a gyal, cooking and cleaning all day like the daughter Mom always wanted. All you need is her wigs and one dress.”

That was the ish Javon would say to me, especially after he went through my phone, saw the pics of my crushes and the icon for the gay dating app I’d recently joined. He’d drop comments when we were alone and ramped it up in front of

our friends. He loved to act bad around them—an audience who enjoyed laughing while Javon gave them permission to add to his disrespect.

My coming out wasn't by choice. I was exposed by Javon, and since then he used anything and everything to find a way to shame me. Thanks to him, I became the talk of the 'hood and our family in Canada and in Jamaica were in shock that I was the first family member “out” and not on the downlow.

When they spoke about me, they were embarrassed and ashamed. They made continuous calls for my mom to send me to Jamaica so they could “sort” me out or to send me to church so God could “fix” me back to “normal.” Suddenly everyone forgot about how smart I was and how I was on my way to university. This overshadowed everything.

I was beyond hurt and lost as I tried to understand how my own family and friends could diss me at a time in my life they knew was important. Especially with Mom leaving. Just because he had revealed I was gay, I was suddenly evil? After years of being the kindest and most considerate cousin and friend? After being the person they could call to chat with or for advice or for two jokes? They acted like I was a stranger instead of supporting and accepting me, even though I was still the same person they used to love and rely on.

It was hard enough to go through life just being Black.

They really thought I would want to heap more issues and hatred on myself by *choosing* to be gay? Why would I choose another obstacle to face every day and have the whole damn family bunnin' fiyah after me?

After deciding to leave Javon in our Mississauga apartment with Donnie, I searched for a room to rent in downtown Toronto so I could work, be close to my new school (soon), and continue to explore who I was becoming.

Javon would have to figure out how to cook his own rice and peas and how to use the mop. I was ready to grow. I wouldn't have to force myself to be a gangster, or to wear name brand clothes and expensive shoes, and get a fresh braid-up every week to keep up the image of confidence. I would no longer have to lie about how many girls I was hooking up with just to gain acceptance from the man dem. It was tiring, and I really just wanted to feel like...myself, and maybe find a boyfriend one day.

Even Clive let me down, blocked my number, and unfollowed me on social media. I could still hear them guys all singing in my face, laughing, "*boom bye bye inna batty bwoy head.*"

I would never change the way I grew up, surrounded by Caribbean culture, music, and food. Before I was born, my parents would party it up downtown in the Toronto

nightclubs. Javon and I loved to hear their stories of dance routines and all the different crews back in the day—what they would wear, the hip hop rap battles, reggae fashion styles, and bold hair and jewellery. Carefree and full of vibes.

So carefree that our dad ended up meeting and moving in with another lady before Javon and I were teenagers. Mom filed for divorce, but the bitterness never left her spirit. Dad and his new family were now back in Jamaica, enjoying life in the sun. We kept in touch with him, but it wasn't anything serious. He did his thing, and we did ours.

CHAPTER 2

BIG CITY, BRIGHT LIGHTS

I had to start chanting to remind myself I was making a good decision. I was going to be happier in the long run. I was going to be free, and I was finally going to live my truth. I said this as I looked up at the small, old, rundown two-storey rooming house I was going to view near Mutual Street and Dundas.

The panelling on the house was painted white and peeling, with rust everywhere. The rail around the front porch looked sharp with loose pieces of wood sticking out, and the concrete steps were uneven with large cracks and chips on the surface. I shivered and then forced a smile. I thought about the future where I'd have my degree, I'd be confident, I'd be dating a kind, handsome cutie, and living an exciting professional life in the city.

It took me a couple hours to load everything from the

apartment and make my way downtown. I parked the small moving van from U-Haul out front when I arrived. I was told to look out for the son of the homeowner at the property; he was waiting at the entrance.

I ignored the broken window on the second floor and the security bars on the main-floor windows. The cluttered garbage bins and dingy grass. I wouldn't be there all day, after all, just to sleep. This was a totally normal and acceptable home. I kept repeating this when I slowly walked up the pathway made of loose gravel.

"Rent is due on the first of every month, no later. My dad said six-fifty. If you're late, you get evicted. There's no drug dealers, no drug use, and no prostitution allowed in this house. If I find out, I'll call the police. Oh, and no loud music after 11:00 p.m." He waved a small, skinny, pale hand, gesturing to follow him.

Whoa. Just like that. No "hello." No "how are you?" My mom had her flaws, but she definitely taught basic manners. I almost tripped up the concrete stairs as I entered. The hallway stank of cat piss and cigarette smoke. This short, awkward kid with long hair seemed no older than sixteen, but the lines on his face and dark bags under his eyes made him look older. His baggy black track pants, white hoodie with a faded logo, and black-and-white suede kicks were on their last leg of life. He walked with a stoop, like he came out of a gaming dungeon

in his room. Wired off the energy drink he was slurping, he probably hadn't slept all night and he continued to talk fast and rock from side to side.

"Okay. No problem," I said, extending my hand to him, but he disregarded my handshake. "Your name?"

"Kyle," he said quickly, nodding for me to follow him.

The room for rent was on the first floor, a few doors down from the front entrance. The paint on the walls was fresh, but even the smell of the paint and pale blue colour couldn't hide how yucky and moldy it felt. The wood flooring was almost new, but it creaked when we walked through and Kyle pointed at the features.

"There's a double bed, a dresser, and a decent-sized desk. You're a student, right?"

"Yes. Well, I've been accepted to U of T, but had to defer until I get settled," I explained. Being a student was a requirement for living there.

"Okay, that's fine," he said, pointing to a kitchen-like area in the corner. "You can fit a little microwave and store your food here. There's a kitchen that we share, and if you have something special to do with the oven, you can book a time on the schedule. There's a bulletin board that I'll show you with rules and other notes. Everyone has to play their part to keep the place clean."

Clean? I almost laughed, but didn't want to lose my new spot—it was the cheapest I'd seen. Kyle showed me the rickety kitchen, the small bathroom, and the washer and dryer in the back. I had already glimpsed everything online when I discovered the place, but each room looked worse than the last in person, and I wasn't in a position to be picky. I held my breath and hoped that disinfectant wipes and an air purifier could protect me from whatever germs were lurking in the mold and filth.

There were two floors in the house and an attic with rooms and a grungy bathroom on each floor. Five bedrooms in total.

"You're new to this area?" Kyle asked, looking me up and down.

I nodded. "Yes. From 'Sauga."

"Okay. Please take the rules seriously. Especially the one about opening the door. If they don't have a key, don't let them in, and I mean absolutely no one."

The place was definitely weird, but it was a start. I had to watch TikTok videos and YouTube influencers roam around and uncover the reality of living downtown to prepare. It didn't look like anything I couldn't handle, overall.

I had a little financial support from my Gran Gran stashed away; she left me ten grand in her will when she passed just before Christmas. I wasn't the only one in our family who

received a gift from Gran Gran, but no one else seemed satisfied. Javon was left jewellery from our grandfather and some old classic books, and he was vex. I just kept the money in my savings account and shut my mouth.

Gran Gran knew I had tuition to think about, and OSAP could only do so much. She always had my back.

“Yes, Mom!” I answered the phone as I was rushing to our apartment before Javon got home—I wanted to avoid him when I went to collect some things I forgot to pack, like a few dishes, cutlery, and groceries I had left behind.

“Watch your tone!”

She was yelling on the other end of the phone, with heavy bassline pounding in the background.

“Mom! I can barely hear you!”

“I’m just at Jammin’ Jerk getting some food.”

“Calgary has nice Jamaican spots?” I asked, trying to bring the conversation back down a level.

“I hear this is the best one. They seem to have a good selection, and it’s run by real Yardies—the kitchen, the waitresses, everyone.”

Growing up, at Christmastime we had family gatherings at our house where Gran Gran and Mom would make oxtail,

curry goat, rice and peas, potato salad, plantain, macaroni salad, brown stew fish, and all of our faves.

Our apartment or my aunt's house would be packed up with family for the holidays, filled with the aroma of jerk seasoning and coconut, and then of course my uncles and older cousins would be cussin' over dominoes while drinking rum and playing reggae music.

"Oldies but goodies," Mom would call them.

"Big tune!" someone would agree. "Turn up the bass, Javon!"

"It's too loud," the brat would complain while he'd be on the phone trying to sweet-talk one of his girlfriends.

"But when you want to put on your mumble jumble rap nonsense, I gotta listen, though," our mom would complain. "What are they even saying in those songs you play? This music right here is timeless. What do you know 'bout Beres Hammond?"

She always told us she didn't want to be stuck living a life she didn't enjoy. Mom worked hard in nursing school and held down her full-time hospital job, usually along with a side hustle for a nursing agency or at a seniors' home in the evenings and on weekends. She said she did it to set a good example for us, but somehow the irritable, old-fashioned, militant lady in her always came out in anger or annoyance to disrupt our joy.

Mom had left Jamaica when she was fifteen. She worked nights as a PSW as she went to college and then eventually university, until she became a registered nurse. She was always working or at school, leaving my brother and I alone. That meant I prepared a lot of the meals and made sure the house was always looking clean and smelling fresh.

“I got a new job,” I told her.

“Oh?” No congratulations or praise, just doubt.

“Yeah. I got a job at Zara in the Eaton Centre.”

“Okay.” She paused. “So you quit KFC already?”

“I needed something in the city.”

“They were so good to you at KFC. Look, just try to avoid Javon so you don’t have any problems.”

I rolled my eyes because I definitely wouldn’t speak to him even if I did run into him at the apartment. While I had hustled through high school working at KFC, Javon always came through to beg me for popcorn chicken, flexin’ with the man dem while getting free refills. He was such a nuisance, I didn’t even want him around me anymore.

The trip from ’Sauga back downtown with my full backpack and two duffle bags full of groceries and other items was about two hours on transit.

Growing up in Mississauga was different to downtown life. We had different blocks, like Toronto, though. I was from

Malton, close to Rexdale. I had the same crew of friends from elementary all the way up to high school — a lot of younger siblings of Javon's crew, including Clive, who was supposed to be my best friend but had pretty much ghosted me.

We all repped our block hard, and when the OGs took on gang life, we wanted to follow in their powerful footsteps. They gave me my first drink at fifteen—Jamaican white rum, or as Gran Gran would call it, “Devil's Soup.”

“Yo, Trey, tell Shawty to grab the juice on his way down here. Tell him I'll etransfer the funds,” Javon demanded one night, making plans for a session at our apartment.

“You know Mom is working tonight,” I had to remind him.

“So? Who cares?”

“Everyone can't come over here.”

“You gonna rat to her?”

“No.”

“Then just do what I'm asking and stop with all the mommy crap. If you want to hang out with man dem, then start acting like one.”

That was how my brother would deal with me when he started to suspect something was different; he'd include me but still disrespect me. He questioned my manhood, even though I chilled with them and learned about all different kinds of drinks and blends because of him. I knew everything

they knew. It was a brotherhood, so of course it was hurtful when Javon tarnished my name to everyone.

When they all sided with him and cut me off without even asking for my side of the story, it hurt me deeply. Even Clive became an instant stranger. He didn't answer my texts or my calls. He didn't come to the door when I tried to visit his apartment to clear things up. As much as I wanted to be heard and explain that I was still the same Trey they'd grown up with, I realized I had to move on. I knew how deep their judgement was because I used to think like them too.

It was like trying to change my mom. There were some things that I knew from experience were just going to be impossible. I had witnessed a lot growing up in Malton, good and bad, and I would never forget where I came from. Hopefully those lessons would be enough to keep me strong.