

THE LOVE SCARS SERIES

AK
COVERS

AJ PRESENTS

A WIDOW'S
SCARS

M. MONIQUE

A WIDOW'S SCARS

M MONIQUE

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 Created with Vellum

This book is dedicated to Marquita. Even the deepest wounds can heal.

UNTITLED

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR...

Thank you in advance for reading *A Widow's Scars*! With that being said, this book is a fast-paced novella. If you are looking for books of mine that are lengthier, please check out my catalog. Happy reading!

--M. Monique

PROLOGUE

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

CORE MEMORIES ARE A MUTHAFUCKA. At the worst times that shit comes to trigger and haunt a nigga without my fucking permission. Standing over the disrupted earth, I stared down at the plot glaring, wishing I could reach through the dirt and choke the muhfucka who lay in the box beneath. Being here transported my mind to places it need not be.

Yet, I couldn't stop the angry wave of memories as they consumed my mind.

ELEVEN...

“ARE YOU GONNA PULL OVER?”

“No!” Both scared and angry, I answered my brother harshly. Devyn hung his head and held on to the seat belt keeping him strapped into the passenger seat.

Red and blue lights had been following us for about ten minutes. Where they'd stayed back for the most part, up ahead, a line of red and blue lights likely had the highway blocked.

“I’m not goin’ back there. Neither one of us are,” I told him with a little less bass in my immature voice. Devyn normally wasn’t scared of anything. However, this was something neither of us had ever done before.

“You ready?” I asked Devyn. Solemnly, he nodded.

We agreed a few months ago. One that would guarantee we never had to deal with Vivica Tatum ever again. While I wished me and my brother could live to grow old, Vivica made it to where we would never enjoy our childhood.

Tonight, I’d fought for the last time. Covered in blood and angry at the world, I pressed the gas and sped up even more. Once I was confident I was going fast enough, I veered off into the grass, causing the car to fishtail.

Devyn and I both screamed as the car hit the tree line.

Twenty-two...

“WATCH where the fuck you’re goin’!”

The words were out of my mouth before I actually saw who bumped into me.

“Uh-oh! I apologize, young man.” A little old lady’s voice quivered as she apologized.

“*Excuse you!* Who the hell do you think you’re talking to like that?”

A girl appeared next to the little old lady; her face set in a cute mug. She was familiar, a girl I’d gone to school with years ago. If I remembered correctly, she’d been quiet and mousy as fuck back then. The nerve of her to be in my face with her dainty hands on her hips like she could really whoop my ass.

“Obviously yo’ mama and daddy should’ve let the spermicide catch you, ‘cause they damn sure didn’t teach you any manners.”

Before I knew it, I was in lil’ mama’s face, glaring down at her short ass. I hated the bitch who gave birth to me with a fucking passion. Hearing anything that had to do with her touched a spot therapy hadn’t healed yet. I thought my anger had started to subside after starting therapy a few months ago at the request of my father. Turns out a nigga either needed weekly sessions, or that shit just wasn’t going to work on a muhfucka like me.

“Are you gonna hit me?” She glared and rolled her neck at me.

“Do I look like I put my hands on bitches?”

“Seeing as you *are* a bitch, I wouldn’t put it past you.”

I had to swallow to buy me some time for a comeback.

“Now, you apologize to this lady. You act like she meant to bump into yo’ dusty ass.”

“Dusty?” Lil’ mama was already beside herself, and she kept digging the point home that somebody needed to teach her to watch her mouth.

“That’s what I said. Now apologize.” She lifted an eyebrow at me, daring me to say something else sideways.

Gulping down the bile in my throat, I croaked, “Sorry,” to the old lady.

She shook her head at me and pushed her cart to another aisle. I wanted to take my apology back. I partly did that shit because my pops wouldn’t agree with me being disrespectful to an old lady.

“Hasn’t anyone ever told you to respect your elders?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Nothing really. Too bad that wasn’t a man that bumped into you. Someone needs to knock some sense into you.”

“Can’t nobody beat my ass, baby.”

She chuckled. “There are plenty of people I know who will embarrass you. Please stop it.”

With a deep frown, I asked, “Who?” This girl didn’t know me from shit. I was a couple years ahead of her and we didn’t run in the same circles.

“Don’t worry about it. Just know you’re never above an ass beating.” She pushed her cart past me and didn’t so much as glance back to give me another second of her time.

What bothered me is she never once cared that she was talking to a nigga who was on the come-up in our city. Me and my brother were about to put Pensacola on the map. Here this little girl was stepping to me like my name didn’t ring bells around here.

Shaking her negative energy off of me, I remembered why I was in the store in the first place. My therapist told me to try some nighttime tea to help me sleep. Lately, I’d been having the worst nightmares. Somehow, I bet myself that whoever that damn girl was would end up in my nightmares tonight.

TWENTY-EIGHT...

“SAADIQ?”

“What?”

“I’ve called your name several times. Who are you staring at?”

If I knew the answer, I would tell Keva. Baby girl across the section looked familiar as hell. She was smiling and shit, showing off her pretty ass white teeth. Her deep brown skin and soft voice took me back in time.

“Damn,” I mumbled to myself.

Six years and all lil’ baby did was gain a little weight. My eyes took a trip up and down her perfect frame, pausing at the slope of her thick ass. She came to the party late, accompanied by a friend who was bad as hell too.

I watched her head straight for Ace, a nigga I’d known a few months now. He was a rapper from Orlando, who moved to Pensacola not too long before I met him. Ace was already cold in the booth. Adding me and my brother as his producers on his latest album was going to catapult his career even higher.

Although this party was for me to celebrate my upcoming wedding, it figured she was here to see him. She and her homegirl hugged Ace, and he immediately had them deposited next to him. I couldn’t recall him ever mentioning having a woman. But then again in this line of work, niggas stayed having a different woman on their arm at will. Including me before I got with Keva.

All night, I divided my attention between her and everyone else, trying to be discreet with Keva all up in my face. I was a man about to be married in a week and had no business concerning myself with the next woman. She had a hold on me, though. One that tracked her when she got up to go to the bar at the back of the section. It was crowded in here, but I never lost sight of her.

“Samara,” her friend called causing her to look back. “Bring me a Sprite.” Samara nodded.

While Keva was distracted by her homegirls, I stood from the couch and headed to the bar, sidling up beside the woman who had my eye for way too long this evening.

“Evenin’,” I spoke. Fuck, she smelled good. Just like I remembered. Her bare shoulders looked soft and delectable.

She tilted her cola back and side-eyed me.

“Good evening and congratulations,” she said.

Awkwardly, I waited for her to say something else. When she offered nothing further, I smirked a little, perturbed.

“Remember me? You cussed me out some years back.”

“First of all, I didn’t cuss you out.”

“So, you do remember me.”

“Vaguely,” she replied without missing a beat.

“Bullshit. My face is unforgettable, Samara.”

She chuckled with a shake of her head.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re still without any manners.” Her eyes dipped before they met mine. Hell, I could stare into them forever. “Your fiancée is headed this way.”

Sure enough, Keva pulled up right in front of me. She assessed Samara, taking in her beauty the same way I had been all night.

“You’re here with Ace, right?” she asked Samara.

Samara ducked her head, sending her silky strands shifting over her shoulders. “That’s correct.”

“It’s crazy how you’re letting your man flirt with any woman he wants to.”

Samara’s eyebrows crinkled for a split second in confusion.

“Ace is my brother, not my man.”

“Oh,” Keva responded. Again she assessed Samara, a little too hard this time.

“As fine as your man is, he’s the last nigga on this planet I would ever consider fucking with.”

Keva and I were both shocked at Samara’s directness. Although softly spoken, her words cut like hell. She reached for her clutch that rested on the bar top and sat her empty glass down. She accepted the Sprite from the bartender and lifted it to us.

“Again, congratulations to you two lovebirds.”

She switched off, leaving her scent to tussle with me. Twice now her ass left me stumped. I ain like that shit.

THIRTY...

“HERE YOU GO AGAIN, accusing me of something I didn’t do!” Keva threw her arms over her breasts and glared out of the window.

“Accusing means a nigga don’t have proof!”

“What proof do you have, Saadiq? Other than the fact that you’re just a jealous nigga who can’t trust anybody to save his life.”

“I’on trust you. And the proof is the fuckin’ call you got from the clinic congratulating you on the baby.”

Stunned, Keva gasped. “What?”

I mugged her. “Congratulations.”

Once Keva realized she couldn’t lie about the shit, her face contorted into a frown before she broke down crying.

“Nah, don’t cry now. You ‘round here fuckin’ on other niggas. I’m finna drop yo’ ass off right at ya daddy house where I found you.”

“Saadiq!” she cried. “No, listen!”

“Listen?” I barked. “You got me fucked up!”

Just when a nigga thought he could really like a bitch, my wife went and proved me wrong. As I sped up the road, my only thought was getting her trifling ass back to the sorry ass muhfucka who raised her.

“You can’t do this, Saadiq. I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“You didn’t mean to let the nigga cum in you? Or you didn’t mean to fuck him? Which one is it?” I had no clue who *him* was, and I didn’t give a fuck. One nigga could be every nigga as far as I was concerned.

For the past week I’d been sitting on knowing my wife was pregnant by another man. The first stop I made was to my doctor. A nigga was salty as fuck to admit to my doctor that my wife had cheated on me. Once my tests came back clear, I decided that divorcing Keva and letting her live was better than putting her under the dirt.

She cried harder, which did absolutely nothing to deter me from pushing the gas. The exit for her pops’ house was just in view.

“This is all your fault!” she screamed.

“Of course, it is.” I wasn’t about to argue with her. In ten more minutes, she’d be her daddy’s problem. As soon as I dropped her off, I was headed straight to my lawyer’s office.

“We’ve been married for two years and all you think about is the next fucking album. Not to mention, you don’t fuckin’ love me! You barely have time for me and when you do, you act like I’m a burden instead of your

wife.”

“None of that is cause for you to hop on another dick, shawty. ‘The next fucking album’ got them diamonds on yo’ fuckin’ wrists and neck. Yeen worked a day in ya life since you been with me. And don’t even play me ‘bout that love shit. I told you from jump that I’on believe in that shit. Why would you expect something I told you I would never give you?”

“I never expected you to *never* love me, Saadiq! It’s been two fucking years!”

“Two fuckin’ years that you’ve been livin’ lavish. That’s what’s wrong with you dense head muhfuckas. A nigga try to show you a better life, and what you do?”

She sniffled.

“What you do?” I shouted. “Fuck it up! That’s what the fuck bitches like you do.”

I shook my head. “*Yeen never expect for this to happen.* Just like you never expected the next nigga to get you pregnant. Ain’t no comin’ back from that bullshit.”

“But you make it hard for a woman to fucking love you!”

“Aye, shut the fuck up, aight. I’m doing good by giving you a damn ride to where the fuck you need to be.”

A sound that pierced my ears caused me to wince seconds before Keva was over the armrest and plummeting into my lap.

“The fuck?”

Crazily, she screamed and yanked the wheel, sending my speeding Suburban swerving. I pressed the brakes, trying to keep the tank from hitting anyone who swerved to miss me. It was no use. A car swiped my side, t-boning me. My whole life flashed before my eyes as metal met concrete. I lost count of how many times the Suburban flipped. In the aftermath, I clung to life hating the very day I was born to a woman.

SIX MONTHS LATER...

“YOU SUFFERED a terrible tragedy by losing your wife of two years. How are you healing?”

Devyn insisted on doing this fucking interview with this nigga Rock who grew up in the same hood we were from. Rock had a podcast with a sizable following but made a name for himself after scoring an interview with Ace Heat, the hottest rapper on the charts right now.

Rock had been begging Devyn to give him a few minutes. My brother being the kind-hearted nigga he was, finally caved. Being half of Montclair Savage meant a nigga had to show up and do my part. Whatever came out of my mouth, I'd charge to Devyn since he wanted to do this shit in the first place.

"I mean, her family suffered a tragedy. I dodged a fuckin' bullet." The straight face I kept had the collective eyeing each other.

"Damn, bruh," Rock chuckled. "I'm starting to believe the rumor that you didn't even put a headstone on lil' mama's grave."

I shrugged and grit my teeth.

"Does this animosity you have for your deceased wife stem from the rumors that she was cheating on you?"

None of this shit had to do with music, or how fire Montclair Savage was as a production company. One reason I stayed away from this podcast shit, was the messy ass niggas who sat behind the microphones pretending to be uplifting other niggas.

"One thing I'on like is a messy muhfucka. A muhfucka who's always speakin' on rumors. Either you know some facts or you tryna pull some shit outta me that you not gon' get."

Devyn touched my arm to calm me down. He knew what was up. Rock's audience was going to have a lot to discuss in the next few days. This nigga was itching to say something foul. I could smell it.

"I mean, if you wanna speak facts, we can." The tone in Rock's deliverance validated my thoughts.

"Speak up then, nigga." Atmosphere charged, this nigga had no chances to say some slick shit. Yet I could tell by the smirk on his face he was about to get the dog shit beat out of him.

"Was your wife not out here fuckin' other niggas?"

In an instant, I was over the table separating us. Whatever commotion took place outside of me beating this nigga's face in, I couldn't tell. I was too busy making this nigga rethink his whole life. If I left here in handcuffs, so be it. It was yet another reason for me to hate every fucking bitch that ever existed.

One thing was for a bitch to lie to me. But to play me and have me looking goofy as fuck was another thing. Keva had better be glad she killed her bitch ass. Otherwise, I would've found a way to hide her muhfuckin' ass.

At this point, it was fuck every woman that ever walked this earth. They could all go to hell.

CHAPTER
ONE

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

“ANOTHER LATE NIGHT?”

Drying my face, I chuckled at my pop’s tone. Although I was a grown ass man, he hated me being out late at night. My pops had been raising me since I was eleven years old. Back then I wasn’t looking forward to life at all. Moving to Pensacola to live with him was the best thing that could’ve happened to me and Devyn. We were thriving now because of Mac Montclair.

“Yeah, Pops. Album release party, remember?”

“You had one two months ago.”

I chuckled. “That was a different artist, Pops.”

“You and Devyn...” He sighed and fell quiet.

Every now and then, Pops got into this mood. He’d start talking all sentimental like everyone could have a life as simple as he did. He’d been married to my stepmother for over fifteen years. They had no children together. However, Neshia treated us like her own.

“At least I have some hope in Devyn. You on the other hand... Especially with this whole not having kids thing.”

“I’m not,” I thought to confirm. Since I was a kid, I knew I never wanted to have my own. The minute I was old enough, I had a vasectomy. Condoms weren’t enough for me to trust a bitch. There would be no slip ups or fear

from a broken condom.

“Saadiq, that’s ridiculous. I could respect your decision if I knew it was out of pure intentions.”

“Thing is, I’m an adult, Pops. You don’t have to respect my decision. I’m never having children and I’m cool with that.”

He chuckled. “Something my grandfather once told me... Never lie to yourself. Love will make a man change his mind on plenty of things.”

“Love is dangerous.”

“Not with the right woman, it isn’t.”

“Pops, please, aight.” Love was a fucking cancer that ruined everything I ever knew about life. On one hand, I could count how many fucks I gave about anything having to do with a bitch, love, or any of that shit.

“I get what I need from a bitch and keep it moving.”

“What’s gonna happen when what you think you need is no longer enough, huh?”

I peered at the phone with a scowl like he could see me.

“That’ll never happen.” When it came to women, my heart was made of titanium. Wasn’t a woman in the world that could pierce this muhfucka. I didn’t give a damn how pretty her smile was or how capable she was at seducing me. There was nothing in me that ever desired to bend to a woman’s will.

“I really thought I did a good job raising you,” he finally said.

“You did a great job, Pops.” *It was the woman you chose to have kids with that fucked me up.* Whether or not I cared to admit it. Staring in the fogged mirror, I hated to think about that bitch. Pops knew better than to bring Vivica up. After giving up on therapy, I gave it another try just because I couldn’t shake her ass. As far as I was concerned, I was no longer homicidal. That was as much good as I got out that shit.

“Well, text me when you get in, so I know you made it home safely.”

“Did you tell Devyn the same thing?”

“I’m calling him when I hang up with you. At least he’ll pick my feelings up where you dropped them off.”

Laughing, I exited my bathroom and shrugged my shoulders.

“I love you, though,” I said, meaning it.

Although he wasn’t in the household when I was growing up, my pops never let me, nor Devyn go without. The woman who birthed us tried smoking up every dime Pops sent her. He was overseas by the time Vivica

got really bad with her habit. She'd been able to hide it before. Once she started spiraling, anyone was a casualty including her own kids.

"I love you, too, son. Text me," he said before hanging up.

Putting that entire phone call out of my mind, I dressed for the night. I opted for comfortability since I would be in VIP with a bunch of muhfuckas who sometimes got a little rowdy depending on the venue.

Tonight, the venue was a well-known club downtown. Everywhere I went, I prepared for the worst. Wearing a fit that wouldn't allow me the ease of getting to my heat was a no-go for me. The only person I trusted in my circle was my brother. Any of them other niggas could get it should anything spark off.

But I prayed for the best. Ace Heat was having his album release tonight. An album we spent too fucking long on making sure that shit was perfect. His last album went double platinum with the help of Montclair Savage. The production company I owned with my brother was in high demand. We'd been around for a minute and continued to thrive. Since the beginning, we'd worked with some of the top names in the industry. While there were other great producers in the game, our brand was sitting comfortably at the top.

Once I was dressed, iced out, and smelling good, I left my house, bypassing my motorcycle for the Phantom just in case a woman was bad enough for me to take her to her spot for a nightcap.

Soon as I pulled up to the club, I maneuvered right in front of VIP. Media crews along with people trying to get in the venue lined the sidewalk. I was proud of the city for showing up for Ace.

I exited my ride feeling like this was going to be a good night. For some reason, the muscles in my face wanted to create a smile out of nowhere. That shit was weird. Flashes went off around me, but I kept my focus on getting inside the club. There was no stopping to talk to anyone who shouted my name. Those days were over.

Inside the club, I felt that weird ass feeling again as I neared VIP. Thinking my eyes were playing tricks on me, I squinted to get a better look at who was sitting in the section, uncomfortably smiling.

Samara.

Although she was in the company of her brother's crew, she seemed out of place as hell. I found that interesting since she worked around a bunch of niggas five days a week. Yeah, a nigga kept up with her. Not because I was trying to. More like her face was plastered all over social media.

The Destin Hurricanes had a beauty on their staff. They knew it and so did the general public. Every press conference the team held, they made sure the camera panned in on her like *she* was the team.

Biting back a scowl at seeing her dude sitting next to her, I entered the section and made my rounds.

EightFiveO was known in the city for having large VIP sections that catered to almost anyone. There were mounted televisions, a bar, and even a private chef. Ace didn't play about a lot of people being around his sister, though. Which was why security was heavy as fuck in here. His crew only consisted of a few dudes and whoever they brought along had to go through Ace. Honestly, I didn't blame Ace for his overprotectiveness.

The last time Samara and I shared space was when she popped up at the studio to see her brother. We didn't exchange words, and she barely flicked me a glance. I figured it had something to do with her dude.

I hated to be that nigga sizing up another man. However, being in this industry, I could pick out groupie niggas in a heartbeat. Darius wasn't a part of Ace's crew and was only in attendance because of his connection to Samara. Now, some part of him could truly like shawty. My money was on him looking for an easy come up, though. If he was for real about Samara, his eyes wouldn't stray every chance he got.

Like now. I caught ole boy staring hard at the bottle girl serving him a drink. Meanwhile, Samara tried to pretend like her gaze didn't follow me around the room.

She was still as beautiful as ever, and her smile radiated the darkened interior of the section. Although dressed in all-black, she looked utterly angelic. A few months ago, she cut her long brown tresses into a short haircut that was made especially for her oval-shaped face. I liked how effortlessly she pulled that shit off.

When I made it to Ace, he knowingly checked me as we dapped.

"Aye, bruh. You lookin' a lil' too hard." He chuckled, but this nigga was serious as fuck. I respected him and would probably do the same if I had a sister.

Devyn was right there, shaking his head. "Don't start no shit tonight," he warned when I dapped him. By default I mugged his big head ass girlfriend, Meechy. I couldn't stand her coming or going.

I offered Ace and Devyn a smirk and purposely made my way toward Samara. Before the party got underway, I wanted to speak. Last time we were

in each other's presence, she had no words for me. Tonight, she could forget that shit. She was going to talk to me one way or the other. The closer I got to her the heavier that weird ass feeling dug into me.

The minute I stood in front of Samara and recalled our first encounter, I should've known she was different. She'd always been different. There were only two women I could look at and not hate. Nesha was one of them. Samara was the other.

SAMARA WISE

"Would you like another water, ma'am?"

Smiling, I shook my head at the handsome waiter. He'd been low key watching me throughout the night, studying me. To him, my date must've stood me up. Really, my dad stood me up. It was his birthday. I'd planned this dinner for weeks and made reservations because I knew he loved seafood.

I got all dressed up and prepared all his gifts just for him not to show.

My phone rang, garnering my attention.

"Hello?"

"You still up there waiting?"

"I am."

"He's not gon' show, baby. He told you he didn't want to celebrate his birthday."

"I know... But I hoped he would change his mind."

"When has Ennis ever changed his mind about anything? I know you love him, Mara. But he's a lost cause. Leave him right where he is, come to the club and party with me. Yo' dude just showed up, anyway."

My brother calling our father a lost cause pierced my heart. To me, as long as a person had breath in their body, they weren't a lost cause. It just took extra love and care to help some people live.

"I'm gonna give him a few more minutes. If he doesn't show, I'll be there."

"Aight."

I hung up with Ace feeling bad for missing out on his album release party to try to celebrate our father's birthday. Seeing as how Ennis didn't care about my time, tears clouded my eyes.

A few minutes later, I did as I told Ace, asked the waiter for the check,

and gathered all my father's gifts. I wouldn't send them back to the store. Rather, I'd have them delivered to his house, just, so he knew I still cared and loved him.

Loving someone who refused to heal was tougher than anything I'd ever faced in life.

Saadiq's presence ramped up my level of uneasiness. Not because I was intimidated by him or anything. Quite the opposite. He stoked something deep in me that threatened the very foundation I walked on—loyalty.

He was too sexy to not look. Any time I was in his presence, my eyes forced me to find him. Even if I didn't sneak a glance, his cologne always snagged me.

I was convinced that in a past life, Saadiq was a warrior. His tall, athlete's body, was crafted solely for women to drool over. By now, I'd memorized every visible tattoo he possessed and there were many. If that wasn't enough, his face surely did the trick.

Saadiq's dark features were that of a man who could easily grace the cover of a gangster magazine. His lips were thick and bore the signs of a man who kept them moisturized. The beard he'd always had only seemed to get thicker over time. He kept it low cut, just long enough for a woman to tug on or playfully run her fingers through.

"Want another drink?"

Breaking my gaze from Saadiq's, I smiled and shook my head at my boyfriend, Darius. If I should even call him that shit. Darius was fine as hell but trash as a partner. We had been on and off for a year now. Truthfully, Darius was probably only with me because of my connection to Ace, although he denied it every time I brought it up.

If it wasn't one nigga trying to get at me to get to my brother, then it was a woman. I couldn't keep any type of relationship for the fact that my brother was rapper Ace Heat. The only genuine friend I had was the one I'd had since sixth grade, and she couldn't be here tonight.

"I'm good," I told him.

For someone who should know me, I was confused by why Darius would offer me another drink. Especially because I didn't drink like that in a crowd like this. Not even with my brother here. My only reason for coming was to show my support for Ace. At the earliest convenience, I would find a way to sneak out of here, even if I had to catch an Uber.

Stupidly, I drove my car to Darius' place and caught an Uber here. It was

best since the traffic at the club was packed for more than three blocks over. At this time of night, I couldn't see myself trekking the downtown streets just to get inside the club.

Busy addressing Darius, I nearly jumped out of my skin when Saadiq sat next to me. Darius chucked his head at Saadiq, who casually did the same. His thigh grazed mine, sending me into a heat stroke.

"Hey, Samara."

How could a simple salutation sound like a death sentence?

"Hey," I croaked.

"What you been up to?"

"Working."

Saadiq was all in my space like he didn't see my man sitting next to me. Only he wasn't making me uncomfortable. He was making me hot as hell.

"I'on know how that nigga cool witchu hangin' 'round all them niggas all day."

My head leaned back. Nervous Samara fled for a minute. "It's my job, number one. And number two, he would never try to control my moves like that. He trusts me."

Saadiq snickered. "Of course, he does."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I forgot how much this man tapped on my nerves. From the first moment I had the unpleasure of meeting him, he had been nothing but an asshole.

"That he doesn't think a nigga like me will make you forget that his bitch ass even exists."

My eyes widened as I snatched my gaze to Darius. Saadiq was trying to start problems tonight talking crazy like that and his ass just got here. Meanwhile, Darius was busy requesting another drink from the bottle girl.

"Whatever, Saadiq." I had to tilt my cup to my mouth to drench my tongue in something it was so parched.

"*Whatever Saadiq,*" he mocked. "Sexy ass self. I'ain gon' lie, it can be whatever with us."

"My man is gon' beat your ass," I mumbled, nervous again because Darius glanced at the both of us. The music was too loud for him to really hear Saadiq, but the nigga was sitting so close to me it was disrespectful.

"I thought we already established, can't nobody beat my ass, baby."

Him dredging up old memories was too funny not to laugh at. Then I instantly felt bad for falling for his rude charm.

“Aye bruh.” Saadiq grabbed Darius’ attention without the slightest raise in his voice. “What would you do if you found out another nigga was fuckin’ yo’ girl?”

Darius’ face contorted into a frown. “I’d fuck that nigga up.”

“You’d fuck me up?” Saadiq questioned with a straight damn face.

“Huh?” Confused Darius sized Saadiq up, then burst out laughing. “Quit bullshittin’ nigga. I know my girl ain’t on that type of time.”

“She’s on whatever time I tell her to be on.” The way Saadiq could say something so casually and not even flinch was crazy.

Darius’ eyes jumped between the two of us while I struggled to get the word ‘no’ out of my mouth. Darius had already had a few and aside from alcohol, it didn’t take much for him to act a damn fool.

“You stupid.” Darius laughed, shook his head, and went back to his drink. His non action was suspect and had me staring at the side of his face with mine screwed up.

A set of strong fingers touched my chin and turned my head until I met Saadiq’s handsome brown eyes. His fingers lightly stroked my lips.

“Stop actin’ like you concerned with that nigga.”

Reluctantly, I unlocked my eyes from his and blew out the breath I was holding from his fingers being on me.

What the hell is wrong with this man? Sure I was attracted to Saadiq, and I’d be a fool to deny he wasn’t attracted to me. Still, he was a man hell bent on hating women and fresh off of becoming widowed. Not only was I in a relationship, but fucking with a man as heavily wounded as Saadiq was trouble in every form. My own father taught me not to steer near a man like him.

“Will you leave me alone?” I asked, praying he did. The feelings passing through me were fucking up my moral compass, and I was already an emotional wreck tonight. I was hoping this one drink in my hand would help me unwind so that I could at least pretend to be having fun.

Ace kept looking over here. If it weren’t for the fake content smile on my face, he’d think something was wrong. I wanted him to enjoy his night without thinking I hated being here.

Saadiq chuckled and leaned back on the couch. His arm went over the back of the couch as he motioned for a bottle girl. She smiled brightly and sashayed his way, throwing her hips a little too hard. He ordered his drink and kept mute when I glanced at him.

Great. Now I could enjoy my night.

The DJ dropped the first hit from Ace's album, sending the club into a frenzy. I, too, was hype because this was my first time hearing this track. Everything from the melody to Ace's flow was too hot to deny my brother was the hottest in the game.

"Slower."

"Huh?" I glanced at Saadiq thinking I was hearing things. He'd been quiet since I asked him to leave me alone.

His gaze dropped down to my hips. "I said... slower."

Realizing he meant the way I swirled my hips to the melody of the music, I instantly stopped. Peering to my right to see if Darius was even the slightest attentive to what was going on, I was embarrassed to see he wasn't. Instead, his attention was somewhere across the room. For us to be a couple, this night was spent with us not socializing much either. Clearly, he was more focused on something or someone besides me.

I didn't waste time trying to figure out what or who had his rapt attention. Because I felt something slide up my thigh. Eyes the size of saucers, I peered at Saadiq's finger as it trailed up my bare thigh until it touched the hem of my dress.

"I couldn't resist," he murmured. "All I wanna do is stretch 'em as wide as they'll go."

Maybe Saadiq was as unhinged as I suspected. Any man who beat the breaks off a dude for all the world to hear had to be unhinged. He'd had a couple of drinks since his last words to me. They'd probably gone to his head. Otherwise, I couldn't explain his actions.

A noise at the front of the section caught his attention. Immediately he went from seducing me to standing from the couch. Confused on what was going on, I stood to see around Ace and his crew, who were all on alert and walking toward the entrance of the section despite security telling everyone to chill out.

Seconds later, gunshots warred with the sound of Ace's track. I screamed right along with everyone else in the club. There was no telling which direction gunshots were coming from as mayhem took place around me. Hurriedly, I grabbed my clutch off the couch and frantically searched the section for Darius.

"Get my sister!" I heard Ace yell as his security team rushed him out of the section.

“Darius!” Where the fuck was he? In the middle of dodging all these niggas, I’d lost sight of him.

“Let’s go!” Two of Ace’s security guards rushed me only to be bulldozed out of the way.

Saadiq. Effortlessly, he yanked me up like we were on a battlefield, and he refused to leave me behind. In front of us was his brother who had his girlfriend hemmed up the same way. The difference between me and her was she held on to her man. Here I was trying to pry my way out of Saadiq’s strong ass grip.

Outside, I worriedly watched the exit, waiting for Darius to appear.

“Where the hell is he?” Too many people were filing out, but no Darius.

“I’ll take you home. The police are about to swarm this place, so it’s best everybody get the fuck outta here. I’m sure that’s what he thought.”

I glared at Saadiq. “Why would my man leave me here?”

“Cause he’s a fuckin’ bitch.”

“Don’t say that. You don’t know him.”

“Neither do you, shawty.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means we need to go—now.”

Valet had Saadiq’s ride ready for him. He took my arm and led me to the passenger side, even being nice to open the door for me. Once I was reluctantly inside, he closed the door.

“Where to?” he asked once he pulled from the curb.

I couldn’t pull up to my boyfriend’s house with Saadiq. I had no clue where Darius was and if he just so happened to make it to his house before me; I didn’t want the drama that would ensue. Not after just dodging niggas and bullets.

Shaking my head, I could already see the headlines. First thing in the morning, I had to prepare a statement just to separate the incident from the team. The media was good at painting pictures that weren’t all that accurate. I loved my job too much to allow something like this to threaten it.

“If it’s okay, I’ll catch an Uber from your place.”

When Saadiq chuckled, I should’ve made him pull over, so that I could get out.

One thing about being in a relationship with a man like Darius, our sex life was dead. If it was one department that made me question my relationship with him, it was that. A man who was really focused on his

woman wouldn't let her go without feeling the absolute pleasure of owning him in the bedroom.

Darius always seemed like fucking me was a chore. As if I made it hard for him to be pleased. Because of this, I never truly enjoyed myself when it came to us making love. Most times, our arguments about him only being with me because of Ace stemmed from his lack of wanting to have sex with me.

To say that it fucked with my mind was an understatement. There was physically nothing wrong with my body, and I went out of my way to please Darius. I didn't understand it.

Whereas with Saadiq, he oozed energy that made me want to do the forbidden and test the waters. Never had I thought about cheating on Darius. My conscience was too bad for me to do such a thing.

Yet as I sat in this car, breathing in Saadiq's air, all I could think about was what one night with him would be like. My middle agreed as she purred. Shifting in my seat, I sighed and hoped I could make it through this night without having a taste of him.

"You can get it anytime, Samara."

A deep shudder flooded my body at Saadiq's low drawl.

"I—"

"Don't waste my time with lies. You want me and that's cool. The feeling is mutual."

"Saadiq..."

"That's just how I wanna hear you say my name while I give you what you lookin' for."

"I'm not looking for anything from you."

He only laughed. Somehow I felt like my fate was sealed the minute he hit the interstate to head toward his abode. Now I wished my father would've just shown up for dinner. Then I wouldn't even be in this stupid situation.

CHAPTER
TWO

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

REMOVING my heat from my back, I placed it on the table just inside my front door while my gaze followed Samara. I wanted to be angry at how the release party turned out. However, I couldn't find it in myself to be angry since I had the finest woman in the world pacing my foyer like a caged cat.

I moved toward my living room, leaving her in the foyer to sort out her thoughts. As I unbuttoned my shirt, I let my eyes focus on the way her black dress hit perfectly at her thighs. The slightest tilt would have me seeing all the goodies she possessed. Her breast was barely bound by the fabric clinging to them. One flick of my wrist and I could have them exposed.

"I really need to be going."

Samara repeated herself but hadn't made the first move to walk out of my door. I wasn't holding her hostage and her nigga had already called looking for her ass. I could only laugh at that. Not to mention, her Uber just pulled up in the driveway. Her notification went off, causing her to look at her phone. I chuckled again.

"What's funny?" she asked, perturbed.

"The door is right there, baby. Four steps... that's all you gotta take. Don't keep the driver waiting."

"Stop it, Saadiq." She sighed and went to walk towards the door, slowly at that.

“Good girl,” I mumbled. Two more seconds of being in my space was about to get her fucked up.

She whirled around. “What did you say?”

“I ain say shit,” I lied. It didn’t help. She stalked towards me, scowling.

“All night, you’ve been saying and doing weird shit.”

“Like what?” Innocently, I held my hands up.

She scoffed. “Don’t act dumb. How many times have you put your hands on me tonight? Huh? How many times have you said something that crossed the line.”

“Whose line?”

Stumped, her lips snapped shut.

“Ya Uber.”

“Huh?”

I pointed towards the door. “Ya Uber is waiting, baby. Since you wouldn’t give me the pleasure of taking you home.”

“Oh.” She turned around again, sashaying towards safety.

“’Cause I’d hate to send you back to that nigga demolished.”

This time when she whirled around, I saw the pure curiosity in her eyes. She tried to mask it with an attitude.

“See! That’s the shit I’m talking about.” Now, she was in my face with her finger dangerously close to my lips.

Wrapping my hand around her dainty wrist, I brought her hand down to the hardest dick I’d ever possessed. She gasped and her eyes bugged.

I leaned in until our noses practically touched. “Lemme give you what you want.”

Her eyes grew wider. Before I gave her the chance to change her mind, I backed her into the wall to my right, pinning both her wrists up. Her titties bounced almost spilling from her dress.

“All this back and forth can be settled.” My lips brushed across hers, teasing her before placing them on her neck. She smelled like the rest of my life.

“We can’t,” she mumbled.

“Would you rather continue to lie to yasef, or you want me to destroy you?”

Cleverly, she wiggled her wrist out of my grasp and reached down to grasp the very thing she would soon enough be shattering all over. She bit her lip and applied pressure to my mans. Damn, I didn’t want to read too much

into that shit. It was hard not to, though. If a nigga wasn't knocking the fucking vocals out of her ass, then some shit was off with that nigga.

But anyway... "Say less."

Pleasuring Samara wasn't the issue. Forgetting that I had her would likely destroy my ass. There was just something about knowing a certain woman had the power to change everything about you. Not the superficial shit. But the deeply rooted shit that refused to let you go. For whatever reason, a taken ass woman had me feeling like she held that type of power over me.

Which fucked me up. I'd never known loyalty outside of my brother. Wasn't like I hadn't been with other women who had dudes outside of me. Never would I knock a woman for wanting me. Samara was different. In my mind, she could do no wrong. Her proving to me she wasn't loyal was like cold ice being splashed onto me. She brought me back to the reality that had been built around me my entire life. Therefore, I should be able to fuck her and move on.

However, I knew shit wasn't going to be that simple as soon as I laid her across my bed. Her dress had long since been discarded, revealing the lace panties that clung to her fat lips.

As I undressed, I stared at her barely covered pussy, salivating. I tried recalling if a woman's scent ever drew me. The answer was a stark *hell no*. Even the bitch I was married to held no special place in my thoughts. Samara did, though.

She didn't wait for me, removing her panties and throwing them to the side. It seemed as if the longer I stared the harder her nipples pebbled. Then she part her legs to reveal her naked sex.

"Aye," I drawled to my sound system. "Turn the lights up." Instantly, the dimmed lights perked up. I needed to see every inch of her.

Her eyes briefly danced around my stately room before falling back on me. By now, I was naked. I'd be lying if I said the pleased look in her eyes didn't make me want to beat my chest.

"No music?" she whispered.

"Nah... The only sound I wanna hear is how juicy that pussy is."

Her orbs stretched. She did that shit so often; I wondered if she was truly as famished as she acted. As if a nigga never talked shit to her before. It didn't matter. I was about to make her forget that nigga.

I watched her breathing change as I joined her on the bed.

"Where do those feet go, baby?"

Without hesitation, she propped her feet on my shoulders and let her legs fall open until her pussy was wide open for me. I hadn't laid a hand on her, yet she was breathing like she was already near her climax.

Just to tease her, I kissed the hood of her pussy while staring dead to her shocked eyes.

"We agree it's mine from now on?"

Her reply died on her lips as my tongue sailed up her slippery folds. This was my first taste of pussy since being a widowed man. Either I was starved as fuck or Samara tasted this fucking good. Whatever the reason, I devoured her from the hood of her clit all the way to the hole where my dick would soon slide in. Once I had her good and weeping, I took control of the hard bud that would shock the life out of her.

"*Saadiq!*"

She sounded too fucking good to my ears. Taking her legs from my shoulders, I opened them wide as I sucked her into a nut that viciously squirted out. Thirsty as I was, I missed not one beat slurping her down.

"You hear that, Samara?" I breathed into her ear.

She shuddered around me and cried my name.

"Now why would I want music ruinin' the sound of you cummin' all over me, hmm?"

Because I couldn't help it, I dug deeper, despite the vice grip she had on me. She was cumming so hard, she was speechless and gasping for breath. I couldn't help but taunt her, though.

"Huh, baby?" I was about to cum hard as fuck too. "You would've missed the sound of the best nut you've ever had." Because, damn, she was soaking me.

No, I had no mercy for the water spilling from her closed lids, nor the panting coming from her lips. She wanted this. I gave her every inch. And, yes, I released inside of her with a deep growl. Because at this point, she belonged to me.

I awoke to the sound of the bedroom door. Sitting straight up, I pointed my heat at the door. Samara jumped.

"Shit, my fault," I grumbled, placing my gun back on the nightstand. My gaze observed her clothed body and disheveled hair, smirking because I sweat her finger waves out. It was still dark outside, meaning it wasn't too long ago that I had her in here screaming.

Climbing from the bed, I never took my eyes off her. However, hers

trailed down my naked body.

Reluctantly, I said, "You're welcome to stay."

"I can't."

"You're right. I forgot you got a whole nigga." My comment could've been my hand the way Samara flinched. Instead of arguing, she turned and left my room. I was right behind her, following her down the hallway leading to the living room.

"The way you ate my pussy, I can't tell," she quipped seconds later.

I had to smirk to keep from responding. Toxic shit wasn't my thing. Not after the bullshit I'd been through. Arguing and all that shit was a good way to keep me ten feet from a woman.

"Let him know how good I ate it," I said. "Since we both know you won't let him touch you again after what I did to you."

She smirked. "You know what, Saadiq. Just so you can understand how much last night meant absolutely nothing to me, I'm gonna record *everything* my man does to me the next time he has the pleasure."

"Well, shit. That's right up my alley." Going to the monitor hanging to my left, I flipped through and found exactly what I was looking for.

Grabbing Samara's hand, I brought her to stand in front of me as we both watched the video play.

"Damn..." I groaned and tilted her head to get better access to her neck. Her eyes were wide as she watched the screen. "Look how pretty that pussy is wrapped around my dick. You see how wet she got for me?"

She was stuck on mute watching me tear her pussy up. In my arms, she panted and her eyes fluttered. My dick was so hard against her ass that she pushed against it. Knowing her clit was throbbing while watching me slide in and out of her, I slid my hand up under her dress to relieve the pressure.

Sliding my fingers through her wet folds was addictive as fuck. A smile donned my face the moment she fell apart. I'd barely played with her taut nub.

"The next time you try to throw a nigga in my face, I'ma see to it that you confined to a bed for a few days."

She snatched away from me, still shuddering, with anger dancing in her eyes.

"Bye, Saadiq." She yanked her purse off the table and flung the door open.

"Later, Samara."

When she walked out my door, slamming it behind her, I stared at the wooden structure like it had done something to me. Meanwhile, I really wanted to snatch it open and demand Samara get her ass back inside here.

Unable to take the sound of her whimpering, I cut the video.

Back in my room, I sat on the end of the bed looking through my phone. It was nearing three in the morning. I laughed, because wasn't any way my woman could bring her ass home at no damn three in the morning.

Forgetting Samara, I called Devyn back. He'd blown my phone up the last few hours.

"Aye, you seen Samara?" he asked. "Darius been callin' everybody tryna find her. Ace ain't trippin', so that nigga Darius confused as fuck."

"Whatchu askin' me for?"

He chuckled. "She left the club witchu, nigga."

"As far as I'm concerned, that's all she did."

He laughed. "You hell, mane. See you later."

I placed my phone on the nightstand and crawled back under the covers. While I would've loved another round with Samara, her leaving was for the best. As I dozed off, I realized how badly I fucked up. Because all I wanted to do was roll over and hold her muhfuckin' disloyal ass.

SAMARA WISE

"SAMARA! SAMARA!"

Gritting my back teeth, I slowed my step and allowed Naseef Dunkin to catch up with me. If I wasn't in these high ass heels, I would've booked it and pretended not to hear his thirsty ass.

Naseef was a behemoth, one who was able to catch a woman's eye for the simple fact that he was built like a tank. It didn't help that his face was a solid *yes sir*.

"I've been tryna catch up with you all week."

I simply smiled. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah," he chuckled. "You never gave me an answer about having drinks one night."

Clearing my throat, I really hated to hurt this man's feelings. A 'no' was

just that simple. However, to a man like Naseef, a ‘no’ wasn’t really that.

“I did answer you, Naseef. Besides that fact that it’s unethical, I have a... boyfriend.” Half-lying was crazy right now. Darius and I weren’t exactly a thing anymore although he was on my line more now than he ever had been.

“He ain’t ‘round here. I’ve been watching you since you got here. The only niggas I see ‘round you work with me.”

It disgusted me that he was watching me. However, I was in a male-dominated field and knew very well to keep my boundaries very clear with anyone who approached me.

“I’m the team’s communications manager. Of course the only men you’d see me around are your teammates. My job is to make sure you guys look good to the press. How hypocritical would it be if I’m around here fraternizing with the players or anyone in the organization for that matter.”

Naseef grit his back teeth, then chuckled. “Oh, aight. I see you tryna keep things professional.”

“Exactly,” I replied, nonplussed.

Awkwardly, he stood here looking at me, look at him. He didn’t just look at me either. His eyes were like laser beams, burning through my thousand-dollar dress. I wasn’t impressed.

“Okay! See you around.” I walked off, my stride quick this time, speaking and making my way toward the exit without stopping again. Somehow, these people seemed to think everybody wanted to be at fucking work all day. Not me. There was a clawfoot tub and a glass of wine waiting for me at home.

I barely had my car door closed when my phone rang. An instant smile appeared at seeing my brother’s name.

“Hey!” I sang.

“Sup, baby girl?”

“You must have a sensor on my car or something,” I teased.

Ace didn’t so much as chuckle.

“Ace!”

He laughed. “You really want me out here not knowing where the fuck you at?”

No, I didn’t. My brother was unhinged as hell.

“I know when you unlock the car, when you lock it, and where it’s goin’.”

Unhinged, I thought with a crooked smile.

“What do you want, crazy?”

“I need yo’ pen.”

A broader smile covered my face. “For real?” The last time I wrote a verse for Ace was years ago.

“I can’t really drop the details yet, but I agreed to feature on a major project. Only she needs the track laid by tonight.”

“*She?*” Intrigued, I lifted a brow. He ignored me though.

“I need it tonight, and I know my blood is quick with the words.”

“Yeah, but so are you.”

“Not when it comes to no love type shit. I’ on know shit about it.”

I laughed. “Are you serious?”

“Mm, hm. You’re better at articulating my thoughts when I’ on know what the fuck to say.”

“Please! You articulate your words just fine.” My brother was a beast in these rapper streets. Most things rappers rapped about could seem farfetched. With my brother, I knew he was every bit of the shit he rapped.

He and I grew up in separate households but still managed to be the closest of siblings. After his mother left our dad and moved them to Orlando, Ace and I stayed in contact by talking on the phone every day. Nothing had changed over time. Ace moved back to Pensacola and our bond only grew deeper.

“I thought I just admitted I’ on know shit about love.”

“When do you plan on finding out about love?”

“When a nigga don’t wanna shoot a bitch for playin’ with my fuckin’ heart.”

“No woman has ever played with your heart.” If she had, I would’ve handled it.

“I know, baby. Just the thought of a woman playin’ games with me gives me homicidal thoughts. It’s better I stay right where the fuck I’m at—single.”

I loved that Ace was able to understand his boundaries. Men often downplayed the fact that they too could get played, and that their hearts could be broken.

“So, you got me?”

“Of course,” I replied.

“Come through the studio.”

Sighing, I really wanted to go home and get in the damn tub. I would have to settle for a shower and change of clothes.

“Okay. I’ll see you soon.” My mind was already in overdrive by the time I pulled out of the parking lot. Smiling to myself, just like that, I knew exactly what to write for my brother.

Seconds from my house, Darius called. He’d been trying to get back in good with me since the night at the club. Only I wasn’t over that night for other reasons that had nothing to do with him ditching me during a fucking shootout.

“So, you comin’ to the city tonight?”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“I heard Ace is making sure security is tight. He only does that when you come through.”

I giggled a little.

“Damn, you was gon’ sneak in and not tell me? I’ve been begging for dinner for two months now. You keep tellin’ me you’re busy, but since you gon’ be my way, we might as well link up.”

He sensed my hesitation.

“Come on, mane, just dinner. If you gotta stay the night, that’s cool too. I just wanna lay eyes on you. It’s been a minute.”

The night after the club, I officially called things off with Darius. To this day, I had no idea where he’d scurried off to, and I wasn’t going to ask. At this point, it didn’t matter.

“Just dinner, Darius.” A girl had to eat, and Darius was a stickler about food. He like fancy shit.

“Cool,” he said. I heard the smile in his voice which didn’t tug at one single string of my heart. Darius lost that part of me a long time ago.

Hanging up, I shook my head in resignation. Just when I thought I was going to enjoy my weekend...

“Ugh!” My phone rang again, shattering the two seconds of peace I had.

“Samarraaaa!”

Lady was always so damn dramatic. Her whisper scream had me cracking up.

“What is it, girl?”

“Why is this nigga Jerell posted outside my job like a fuckin’ repo man?”

The way I laughed made her smack her teeth.

“That’s what happens when you give the pussy to a fool. I warned you.”

Lady whined while I laughed harder.

“Bitch, I’m a get fired! Everybody lookin’ at me ‘cause they know I’m the

only fool in here with a nigga who drives a fuckin' green apple, box chevy with forty-inch rims!"

I hollered, because per usual she was being dramatic.

"His rims are not forty inches, girl!"

"They might as well be the way they're drawing so much damn attention! See, that's why I'm moving out of this damn city. *Come to Destin*, you said. *It'll be nice*, you promised."

"*First of all*, you're not going anywhere. Second of all, Destin is nice. Just because you chose to fuck with a football player who's flashy as hell doesn't mean the city is crazy. *That nigga* is crazy!"

She groaned. "Not him getting out of his car. Oh shit! He's coming inside!"

I was too busy laughing to try to help my girl calm down. She sounded too hysterical for me to keep it together.

"I fucking hate you," she hissed into the phone. "Welcome to Destin Financial! How may I help you?" she politely sang in the next breath. The next thing I heard was a click.

Stomach hurting, I leaned over the armrest to catch my breath. Once I gathered myself, I grabbed my things and got out of the car. Happiness nipped at my heels as I sashayed up my driveway.

Despite growing up with a bitter ass dad who tried to make me hate my existence, life was great for me. I had a beautiful house in a wonderful neighborhood, my dream job, a nice bank account, and two wonderful people who I'd do anything for. My faith was good and my health great.

Although alone, contentment was my best friend. Aside from those nights I wanted to have my back caved in, I was surviving singlehood. Wasn't like I wasn't craving a good meltdown before Saadiq because I was. That's how I ended up underneath his warlock ass.

Two months ago, hands down, I had the worst and best night of my life. First to be involved in a shootout was insane. What was more insane was allowing a man who wasn't my man to shoot up the club. Birth control saved my physical, but my mental was shot as fuck.

If someone would've told me letting a heavily wounded man have me would ruin me, I would've run from Saadiq. He'd tried to warn me. However, at the moment, I didn't hear one word he said. I thought once he scratched my itch, I could easily forget the way he scratched it.

No such thing with Saadiq Montclair.

I still shuddered at the thought of his tongue parting my netherlips. I couldn't comfortably sleep without bringing myself to a thunderous release recalling the way he whispered my name. And to know he recorded us... To think that maybe he sometimes replayed the video whenever he thought of me...

As I showered, I toyed with the idea of bringing myself pleasure. Then I told myself, no. Whenever I released to the sound of Saadiq's voice, it left me spent and lifeless. There was no way I'd have enough energy to drive all the way to Pensacola after such pleasure.

So... I reluctantly disbanded my brain from thoughts of Saadiq. He was a man angry with the world... well women. The public destruction of his marriage, the death of his wife, and the subsequent rumors of his wife being pregnant by another man, made Saadiq one hateful nigga. That was some shit I didn't need in my life.

Sighing, I focused on more important matters. Ace needed my fire pen. Recalling his take on falling in love, lyrics immediately began to pour into me.

Unlike my brother, I believed in love, although I never experienced it. My mother died when Ace and I were young. Since then, my father was never able to fully recover. He was a bitter man who never moved on with his life. Somehow, I still loved him.

So, as I rinsed off, I first hummed to myself until the words became bars.

A smile donned my face as I rapped Ace's lines to no one except the porcelain walls of my shower. Hype off my own creativity, I repeated the bars even louder. Love would find me one day. It would also find Ace whether he wanted it to or not.

CHAPTER
THREE

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

MY DAY WOULD'VE BEEN perfect had the scent of her not wafted up to touch my nose. I didn't need to glance over my shoulder to know that Samara had entered the studio room. Still, I tortured myself by turning around to have a look at her.

Fuck! She couldn't look a mess if she tried.

"My brother asked me to meet him here," she said.

She was stale, like the last time I saw her she wasn't drunk off the way I delivered her body the best orgasms she'd ever experienced. For her to ghost a nigga was comical. Then I had too much pride to break down and ask Ace to put me on. She did me a favor, anyway. There could be no future with us. And although I hated to admit it, my unwillingness to yield to a woman would break her.

"Well, he ain't here yet. You can sit over there and wait for him." Hell, yeah, I was salty. She should be anything but stale around me.

"Actually, I don't have time to wait. I'm meeting Darius for dinner before I head back home."

Hearing that nigga's name triggered the fuck out of me. Especially since that nigga was 'round here being anything but loyal to his woman. But I wasn't here to bash on no nigga no matter how much I wanted his bitch. So, I hid my disdain behind a smirk.

“Can you just give this to Ace when he gets here?” She handed me a folded piece of paper. “It’s some lyrics I wrote for him.”

As long as I’d been working with Ace, I never knew Samara wrote any lyrics for him. Unfolding the paper, I read the few lines.

She beamed with pride. “Trust me, it’ll flow nicely with whatever song he’s working on.”

While I wanted to praise Samara for the bars on this paper, I had to remind myself that she was the enemy. She ghosted me, and she was still fucking with ole boy. That shit put a sour taste in my mouth.

“I don’t trust no-fucking-body. Especially not a woman who fucked another nigga behind her nigga’s back.”

The gorgeous smile on her face dimmed to a straight face, void of emotion. It was a low blow to say the least. Seeing the way my statement stung her had me wanting to backtrack. But I didn’t. To know she was still fucking with this nigga had me bothered like a muhfucka.

“Fair enough. My bars still eat, though. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

Samara was too calm as she walked out of the studio.

Fighting to ignore the fact that she just ruined my day, I unfolded the paper to read the lines again.

You tap on my heart

I tap on yo’ grave.

You play in my face,

It’s a closed case.

You try and cut me,

But I am the blade.

I gave you the game,

But I do not get played.

This shit went so hard I had to smile. She treaded too close to the way my mind was set up, causing the smile to drop.

Devyn walked in a minute later, confusion lining his face.

“What is it?” I placed the paper on the soundboard and went to sit back down to relieve the way my dick cut up behind the fly of my jeans. Samara brought her ass in here, disrupting my fucking peace after weeks of not physically seeing her.

He motioned over his shoulder. “Just saw Samara in the hallway. She had tears in her eyes.

Everything in me wanted to pretend like it didn’t bother me. But seconds

later I found myself rushing down the hallway.

“Samara!” I called after her, quickening my step to catch up to her as she exited the building.

She glanced over her shoulder but didn’t break her stride towards her car. My footsteps ate up the distance between us, and I grabbed her arm. She yanked away with a marred expression on her face.

“Don’t touch me!” she hissed.

Her ass was looking all fine for this nigga. The distressed denim skirt she wore was perfectly cut and paired nicely with a simple black tank top. Diamonds accentuated her neck and ears. Low-key I wondered if Darius had bought that shit. Samara was that woman on any day. Nothing needed to be done to make her look more beautiful than she already was. And still she added burgundy and nude lipstick to her plump lips to create some type of ombre shit. This woman was fucking phenomenal.

“Stop and let me talk to you,” I gently demanded.

Huffing, she snatched from my grip and defiantly plopped her hands on her hips. Sure enough, remnants of shed tears were in her eyes.

“I apologize, aight.”

“I don’t accept it,” she quickly replied.

“Hol’ up!” I had to grab her again when she went to walk off.

“Leave me alone, Saadiq.”

Growling, I rushed in front of her until she had no choice but to slow her ass down and talk to me. By now, we were standing behind her car. Two more feet, and I could have her pinned up against it.

“I said I fuckin’ apologize, aight.”

“And *I said* I don’t accept. Feel how you wanna feel about me. I don’t give a damn.”

“Those tears say otherwise.”

“So what does your mean ass running behind me say? ‘Cause last time I checked, you don’t give a fuck about anything or anyone but yourself. Why the hell should I accept anything from you? Especially when it’s coming from a place of hatred and bitterness.”

Those two steps were devoured in an instant. Samara bringing my past into this was dangerous as fuck.

“Watch ya fuckin’ mouth.”

Her eyes narrowed on me. “Or what? Big bad Saadiq can’t take the truth. Don’t apologize to me when your heart isn’t in a place to understand what an

apology is. It's a waste coming from your lips."

"What happened to the quiet Samara who never had a word to say to anyone?"

"She grew up and realized that silence is wise, and words are powerful. If I have to say it, I will. When I need to be silent, I am that."

"So what the fuck do you want me to say then, huh? Either you gon' accept that I didn't mean to say the shit, or you not."

She clicked her teeth and sighed. "I don't accept your apology for you, Saadiq. I accept it for me. I refuse to be the type of person you are. Grudges aren't my thing, not even to someone like you. I gave you the ammunition to say some foul shit to me and that's my fault. I won't give you another chance."

She turned her back on me to open her car door. Just the thought of her running to another nigga had me slamming the door back causing her to gasp.

"That ain't good enough for me. If you knew how hard it was for me to apologize to any fucking body you would understand that I really mean it."

"That's the thing. When you're wrong, it shouldn't be hard for you to apologize to anyone. Especially when you're angry at the wrong person."

"I said watch ya mouth." Here I was trying to be nice, and Samara wanted to keep bringing my past into this shit.

"I won't. Your problem is people have kept quiet and allow you to be the asshole you so badly love to be. Although I was just a quick fuck and essentially a nobody to you, *I* won't give you the luxury of being an asshole to me without calling you on it. Because one thing's for sure, *I've* done nothing to you."

Samara's career centered around communication. Without too much thought, she formed logical statements that had me storing them in my mind to unpack at a later time. Right now, I was focused on making sure we were on the same page before she left my presence. The last thing I needed was to know she was running to that nigga for emotional support.

"I apologize for being an asshole." Somehow she could reduce me to the twenty-two-year-old me she'd first met. The day I met Samara was sealed into my brain and one of the only bright spots in my past that I loved to recall.

After a few ticks passed, she mumbled, "Thank you."

That was as good as an invitation for me. There was only a minute amount of space between us. I rectified that by leaning in to taste her lips.

She placed her hand on my chest, but I took it and banded our fingers together while using my other hand to cup the back of her neck.

It took little effort for me to deepen the kiss. Tomorrow I'd overthink about how I was kissing her like she belonged to me or something. She wrapped her tongue around mine, just as her other hand skated up my chest to cup my jaw. Her fingernails grazed through my beard, tingling my skin.

"See... I was gon' let you leave with just a kiss."

I had Samara off her feet and against the car before either of us could form another thought. She positioned her legs around my waist and brought her center to rest on my dick. If she thought I was going to be polite and resist fucking her in this parking lot, she had shit twisted.

Knowing exactly where the security cameras were, I maneuvered us until we were cloaked enough for me to remove her panties with a flick of my wrist. Next, I released my dick and poked at her wet, tight opening.

Once I was in, didn't shit else matter except marking my territory.

"You gon' go 'round ya nigga with ya pussy all swollen?"

Her head leaned back on her shoulders as I sank her onto my dick. She was too fucking tight and wet as hell.

"Mmm..." I praised. "I'm the last nigga to touch this pussy, huh? You've been obedient, baby. I should reward you."

Holding her hips, I guided her up and down my stiff length, ever so slowly.

"Ooohhh..." she brokenly sobbed. I knew I was touching every spot inside her slippery tunnel. The way she suctioned at me had me fighting to stay inside her.

"Get what you need, baby. Ya pussy misses this stroke."

She clamped around me, her flutters doing shit to me that should be illegal. Using my lips, I maneuvered my way into her tank top and inside the cup of her bra. I had to suck on something sweet and plump.

"Fuck," I groaned around her pebbled nipple.

A couple of strokes later, she exploded around my dick, clutching the back of my head and holding on with her other hand as best as she could. She didn't have to worry, though. I wasn't going to drop her even a little bit.

Holding her still against the car, I pumped into her with a need I couldn't explain. My hands firmly gripped her thighs while my dick sought release. But so did something else. Unlatching from her nipple, I traded her lips for it. Here I was again, kissing her like she was mine. This time, she sucked my

tongue as my nut shot out and sprayed the best pussy I'd ever had.

SAMARA WISE

What are you doing?

The question ran through my mind too many times as I sat across this dinner table pretending to listen to Darius. It was scandalous of me to just have been all over Saadiq's dick and now I was enjoying dinner with someone other than Saadiq.

Having a key to Ace's house finally came in handy, as I rarely used it. Before meeting Darius for dinner, I had to run to Ace's to shower and change into something else. I arrived late, using the traffic as an excuse. Darius wanted to see me so badly that he didn't even care that I showed up an hour late.

"See, you thought I was under you the way I was because of Ace. Me not being at the studio proves this shit wasn't about him."

I stuffed my mouth full of shrimp to keep from saying anything. The only reason Darius hadn't been around the studio was because he was scared. His ass left me in the middle of a shootout, and although Ace didn't mention anything of it, I knew my brother would address it at some point.

"I really think you should give us another chance. Outside of the studio. Then you'll see I'm serious about you."

Despite of what he was saying, I was already shaking my head 'no'. Besides the fact that Darius and I had played this game way too many times, Saadiq was heavy on my mind... and body.

"That's not a good idea. We've tried this, Darius. Our time was alright, but being a couple is definitely not the fit for us. Couples shouldn't repeatedly break up and get back together. Especially if the two people aren't meant for each other. I can understand misunderstandings and a *first* break up. But the repeated misunderstandings is just too much."

He pursed his thick lips. I had to shake my head because Darius really was handsome. His smile was infectious, and his dark brown eyes bewitching. He had a great career in tech even though he lowkey wanted to be a rapper. However, I saw no future with him. It would be a waste of both of our time to continue pretending like we were happy together.

"I'm cool with that, too. I just don't know how I'ma find another woman

as beautiful and ambitious as you.”

“Please,” I chuckled. “There are plenty of women who fit your preferences. If niggas would stop looking at the physical and see beneath all that, then a lot of you would find your happiness.”

“I was happy with you,” he countered.

“No, you weren’t.” Placing my fork down, I stared him dead in his eyes. “For instance, when’s the last time you tasted my pussy?” My question shocked him. He covered his mouth to keep his food from falling out.

“What?”

“When’s the last time you felt my pussy clench so hard around your dick that you couldn’t help but come back for seconds?”

His eyes widened.

“I know the answer to both questions, Darius. Which means, you weren’t happy with me. Whether you just weren’t into me remains a mystery seeing as we’re here right now. You left me confused at my role in our relationship. That’s also a blaring reason for why we don’t need to be together.”

Once he came out of his stupor, he cleared his throat and glanced around.

“Work sometimes...” He couldn’t even finish the lie that was on his tongue. I appreciated him for not even trying.

“It’s okay. Seriously.” Insecurity didn’t live inside me. At least not after Saadiq chased it away. Being with him solidified the fact that my body worked just fine. *He worked my body* just fine.

Suddenly, my throat was tight. I no longer had a taste for shrimp although my plate was partially empty. To keep Darius from thinking I wasted his money on this upscale shit, I kept eating, forcing the food down while observing him fight with his thoughts. Surely, he was thinking of a way to refute the way I saw our relationship.

“So we’re gon’ remain friends? I can’t see being without you.”

I smiled and flushed my food down with the cola I ordered. “You’ve been without me for two months and you’re looking the same, smiling the same.”

His face contorted into a handsome mug. “I’m faking it. I miss you.”

“Aww.” I had nothing else to say and really should feel bad that I was being so callous. However, we couldn’t come back from the whole club situation. There was no way I’d be able to trust him in a crisis. The type of man I needed had to do exactly what Saadiq did that night. Either shoot back or haul my ass up out of there.

Saadiq. I wondered what he was doing right now and if he was still

drowning off the high of us in the parking lot. Sadly, our tryst was probably on video, and I didn't want to think about anyone seeing me hemmed up the way he had me. Not that I was ashamed of that part. Sex tapes were messy. I could dig a pro athlete out of such things, but not so much myself. I'd look like a complete hussy.

"Your mind seems to be elsewhere anyway," Darius said, breaking into my thoughts.

"You know what..." I had somewhere else to be. "I really appreciate tonight. Maybe we can catch up again sometime."

A small smile plastered his face as he signaled for the check.

"At least text me and let me know you made it home," he said.

Standing from the table, I went around and hugged him. "Thanks, Darius."

Walking away from him had never felt so easy. Not even when I walked away two months ago. Inside my car, I drew in a deep breath and contemplated if my next move was the right one. I just walked away from a man who didn't fulfill me. Sighing, I cranked my car and left the restaurant in my rearview.

To prolong the time and give myself time to change my mind, I stopped by Target. I bought a few things I would need—toothbrush, toothpaste, clothes, lotion, and a hair bonnet. I'd never had a spend the night bag and felt like a complete mess buying one now.

As I started my car and left Target's parking lot, I berated myself for running to a man who undoubtedly wouldn't be able to fulfill me. While Saadiq could do wonders for my body, he would do nothing for my heart except break it.

Knowing all this, I still pulled onto his street and parked in his driveway. The object of the war inside my mind sat on his porch watching me as I exited my car with my purse and overnight bag. Taking a deep breath, I breathed in the night air which smelled heavily of weed and exhaled. On wobbly legs, I started for the porch.

Saadiq didn't so much as flinch as I walked his way. Nope. He sat there pulling at the joint, his eyes only moving up and down to take in my body covered in the two-piece black set that showed off my rib cage. I was an all-black girlie, wearing any and everything black. Coupled with the diamonds I wore, black just looked good on me.

Taking a chance, I stepped to Saadiq's door without even stopping to

speak. Our eyes connected until I turned the knob and entered his home. Inside his foyer, I removed my shoes and placed my bag and purse next to the table. His home smelled like everything I needed to surround me right now.

The television was on, blasting a documentary on producers in the industry. I had to chuckle. Music was something Saadiq breathed. It was obvious from the paintings and photographs on his walls depicting different instruments in different mediums. Aside from the photos of his family, music dominated his space.

Plopping on his couch, I laid myself right down and tucked my feet underneath me. This felt too comfortable. I even propped my head on one of the gray accent pillows. When he was ready, Saadiq would come in and we could figure out what the hell it was we were doing.

I didn't have to wait long. Just when I was settling into an interesting part of the documentary, the front door closed. My heart raced knowing Saadiq was now inside the house too.

His scent reached me before his partially clad body did. He was dressed in nothing but a pair of night pants. From the looks of it, that was all he had on. My eyes zoomed in on his dick as he stood in front of me, then stooped down to his haunches.

At this hour, his beard was less kempt but still too sexy on him. His skin smelled fresh, and his tattooed chest was too much to look at without imagining running my tongue across it.

"He get you these?" His fingers flicked the diamond bracelet on my wrist, and then the dainty chain around my neck.

"No," I answered, breathless. "Ace did."

He studied me for a second, his lids low and orbs assessing. "From now on, the only diamonds I want you wearing are the ones I buy you." I lay here on mute as he removed my jewelry. Every piece of it. "No other man needs to put a thing on you."

Mesmerized by him lowkey claiming me, I wasn't going to ask him what he planned on doing with the diamonds. He placed them on the end table like they weren't worth thousands of dollars. The bracelet alone could pay someone's ten-bedroom, six-bathroom home mortgage.

Saadiq climbed on the couch and playfully tickled me as he lay behind me but more so on my back. A stupid smile covered my face when he made himself comfortable. Within minutes, he was lightly snoring. I giggled to myself, glad I made the decision to come here. I'd probably regret it come

morning.

Over in the night, I was awakened by Saadiq's soft kisses up my naked back. He'd brought me to bed a little while ago and stripped me of everything except my panties and bra. I thought he would ravish me. However, he lay next to me, and we fell back asleep.

Rolling over, I took complete control and pushed him on his back. Sleep fled as the thought of him being inside me ignited a storm within me.

With little effort, I removed his pants, hypnotized by his stiff dick as it reached for the ceiling. Before anything, I wanted to taste his lips. He didn't disappoint me, taking my tongue into his mouth like kissing was his favorite sport.

I didn't expect a man like Saadiq to enjoy something like kissing. He was so hard and unpliant at times. But when I had him like this... he seemed to be the most affectionate man in the world.

Breaking our kiss, I trailed my lips down his neck, and placed those kisses down his chest. Each peck of my lips caused a ripple through his body. I was too high to bask in the fact that I was breaking him down.

When I made it to the bulbous head of his dick, I swirled my tongue around it, spurring a hiss from him. Mouthwatering to taste him, I wrapped my lips around his head and used my tongue to slowly learn each vein he possessed. I found every spot, memorizing it for the next time I pleasure him.

He groaned deep in his throat the more I took of him.

"Shiitt, Samara."

I was aware my hair was barely two inches long. But the way Saadiq played in my strands while I deep throated him gave me life. He was too deep, though. Causing me to gag. Snatching me off his dick, he guided me until he was poking my center, pushing me down on his hard length.

"Fuck," he swore.

I bit into my lip as I found the pace that gave us both maximum pleasure. He liked when I rolled my hips slow. At least that was what I remembered. My memory served me well, earning me a stinging slap to my ass as I rode him.

One of his hands traveled up my abdomen and between my breasts to clutch my throat. Once pinched closed in euphoria, my eyes popped open.

"What I told you 'bout throwin' a nigga in my face?" He sat up then, meeting my wide eyes.

"I didn't, baby." Saadiq mugging me only made me wetter. My pussy

gripped him tightly, responding to the way he looked at me. Only my answer didn't do anything but seem to anger him. He grabbed my hips, bringing me down on his dick until I gasped.

“You like playin’ in my face, Samara?”

“No, baby. I promise.” He felt so good, I was going up in smoke.

“You promise?”

“Yes!” An orgasm meant only for him snatched the rest of my breath.

Flipping us over, he took control, holding my legs apart while he drove into me like a man content on dying off the nut I was giving him.

“Oh, shit!” he grunted.

His head fell into the crook of my neck, but his pace didn't slow. Underneath my hands, the muscles in his shoulders and neck tightened to the point I thought they would snap. A few strokes later, he grunted loudly and stiffened above me. As I felt his dick jerking inside me, all I could think was, this was how a woman should feel after fucking her man.

Completely drained and still wanting more.

CHAPTER
FOUR

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

I ROLLED over with my dick on hard, expecting to encounter a still sleeping Samara. Only she could calm the beast raging on the inside of me. The empty spot caused my lids to shoot open. Sitting up, I listened for the slightest sound that would indicate she was still here. There was no smell of breakfast being cooked. Neither was there any running water indicating that she was in the bathroom. Furthermore, her discarded clothes were no longer strewn about the floor.

Checking my phone, there was only a message from my pops and Devyn. I bypassed them and went right to recent calls. Last night, I made sure to call myself from her phone, so we could keep communication. I wasn't going to give her the room to ghost me like she did the last time.

My call went to voicemail. That was cool. I called again. This time when it went to voicemail, I squeezed the phone like it was my problem.

Getting out of bed, I left my room and casually strolled through the house, hoping she was just being quiet so as not to wake me. Finding my crib empty of her, pissed me off to the point I stalked back to my room, incensed. I flew through a shower, handled my teeth and face, aggressively moisturized, and dressed while staring at myself in the floor to ceiling mirror.

“Hello?”

“Yes, is Kevara Montclair available.”

“Nah, she’s in class. This is her husband. How can I help you?”

“Oh! Hi Mr. Montclair. She has you down as her emergency contact. We’ve been trying to reach her in reference to some test results.”

“I’m listening.”

“Mrs. Montclair’s blood HCG levels were elevated, which means she’s pregnant. Dr. Sun would like to schedule her an appointment for follow-up, but we haven’t been able to get in contact with her. We’ve left voicemails that she hasn’t returned.”

“Aight. I’ll set her appointment for her.”

“Awesome! Congratulations to you both by the way!”

Recalling the day I found out Keva was pregnant, I distinctly remember not being angry. The woman who gave birth to me and should’ve loved me beyond measure let me down in the worse way. So to expect any other woman to not let me down was absurd. Keva wasn’t cut from any different cloth and, honestly, it was a matter of time before she did some foul shit.

Same went with Samara. I just knew she ran back to that nigga after laying up under me all fucking night. The thought had me storming out of my house and to my bike. Twenty minutes later, I pulled up in front of Darius’ crib. Finding him wasn’t hard. This nigga stayed posting his location, like a nigga like me wouldn’t be looking for him.

I activated the kickstand on my bike and jumped off that bitch with murder in my eyes. Taking the heat from my back, I used the butt of it to bang on the door, hoping Samara was inside. Scanning the street line on this beautiful ass day, I caught a couple of little kids peering at me from the house across the street. I jumped at them, scaring them.

As my gaze made it back to Darius’ front door, it didn’t occur to me that Samara’s car wasn’t in the driveway. I was too heated to think logically.

“Who is it?”

“Open the do’!” I barked.

He snatched it open, shirtless and smelling like pussy that didn’t belong to Samara.

“Where’s Samara?”

“I’on know. And why you showin’ up to my crib lookin’ for my girl?” He stepped out of his door and into my face. I promptly mugged the fuck out of his ass, crashing his head against the doorjamb.

“Get the fuck out my way.”

I stormed into his crib, going from room to room until I reached the one

he occupied. Two bitches squealed and jumped while clutching parts of a sheet to their breasts.

“Aye, mane! Get the fuck out!”

Turning, I found Darius behind me with his own heat. As I neared him, he backed up into his living room, aiming like he didn’t know how to handle the nine. We both knew he wasn’t ‘bout that life, but anybody could fire a gun. If I wasn’t angry right now, I would’ve left his house without making shit worse.

“Tell me where the fuck she is.” To keep this nigga from being trigger happy, I tucked my gun, then crept toward him, playing it cool until we stood toe to toe.

Just like I thought, he let his guard down, tossing the gun on the couch like he really didn’t need it right now.

“I told you she ain’t here! Why the fuck you wanna know anyway?”

I throat chopped him, then sent my knee to his gut. He doubled over in pain and fell to the floor. That wasn’t enough for me.

“If I ever see you ‘round her, I’ma crack yo’ fuckin’ skull, nigga!” I stomped his ass until those two bitches came running from the back, screaming like I took a knife to this nigga.

“Aight, mane! Aight!” He conceded, holding his hands up and grimacing in pain.

I left out of the house angrier than when I arrived. If Samara were ghosting me again, I wouldn’t take that shit lightly.

My phone rang as I hopped back on my bike. I ignored it and sped toward the studio. Knowing Ace, he was there this fucking early in the morning. It was time me and him had a talk about his fucking sister.

As I rounded the corner and saw the studio’s parking lot, Samara’s car sat parked between her brother’s Bentley and Devyn’s Mercedes. Admittedly, some of the wind exited my sails as I parked my bike. If she was up here, there was no fucking reason she should be ignoring my damn calls.

After putting my code into the locked back entrance, I yanked the door open and stalked inside the studio down to the unit we used whenever Ace was here. Samara had better have a damn good excuse for why she left my fucking house and couldn’t answer a nigga’s calls.

Several pairs of eyes shot my way when I slung the door open with a scowl. One set of shocked eyes zeroed in on me with her mouth agape.

“You cool, bruh? I’ve been callin’ you.”

“Yeah.” I half answered Devyn because I was focused on Samara. She was dressed in a simple graphic t-shirt dress and leather canvas shoes. Her hair was molded beautifully to her head and her face was fresh as fuck. Her cheeks turned a deep red as I stared.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as I approached her.

Dropping a kiss on her surprised parted lips, I replied, “Nothing.”

Seeing her caused all my anger to flee. I stood behind her as she returned to what she was doing before I barged in here like a maniac. Standing behind her, I wrapped my arms around her waist, something I thought would feel awkward. Surprisingly, it felt natural as fuck. Especially when she conformed to me and continued talking to Ace as if she and I were coupled up like this all the time.

Ace and Devyn both had questioning expressions on their faces. My past wasn’t exactly a secret. At least not when it came to them. If anybody knew the fuckery I went through with Keva, it was Devyn. While Ace witnessed the fallout, Devyn was right there doing his best to keep me sane.

But shit went deeper with me and my brother. Our secrets dated back years. He knew how I felt about women. Devyn could also be protective of someone he considered cool people. To him, Samara was cool people.

Disregarding both their looks, I kissed Samara’s cheek and listened to her recite lyrics for Ace. Her word play was definitely fire and if she wasn’t careful, I was going to put her in the booth. But I wanted all her talents to myself. No one outside this unit would know she wrote the lyrics for Ace, which was her request.

If I had answered my phone when Devyn called, I would’ve learned that the artist requesting Ace on her track loved his lines so much that she wanted him to lay another verse. Samara, Ace, and Devyn had been up here since a little after dawn.

To think, I slept through Samara crawling out of my bed for the second time. Her ass literally put me to sleep. She owned my fucking body that much. If I weren’t careful, she would wiggle her way into something that was off limits. As much as I liked Samara, she couldn’t have that part of me. Everything else, I would freely give her.

SAMARA WISE

Back in high school, I used to think Saadiq was the finest thing walking. He carried himself like a boy much older than what he was. Rarely did I see him associate with anyone outside of his brother, who was just a grade ahead of me.

Saadiq was like the guy in school who every other boy wanted to be but couldn't. He had always been confident, brooding, and a little mean. Although I didn't show it, now I could admit that our first face-to-face encounter left me shaken. I was a twenty-year-old, painfully shy young woman, with no inclination of how to deal with men outside of my brother and father.

Standing up to Saadiq that day gave me hope that going into communications was the right path for me. In many ways, he introduced me to my voice.

“Why didn't you wake me?”

For the last thirty minutes, I'd been sitting in Saadiq's lap questioning what on earth had gotten into him. He stormed in here with death written on his face. However, when our eyes connected, he transformed right before me.

I handled it well when he kissed and hugged on me in front of Ace and Devyn. On the inside, I was a melted mess. After he put his arms around me, I had to still my heart from beating out of my chest. Whatever had gotten into him, I liked.

“For the record, I thought you'd wake while I was getting ready to leave. Your phone was going off, and since that didn't wake you either, I decided to let you sleep. Your body seemed to need it.”

Mine surely did. Sleeping tucked under Saadiq was a drug I didn't want to get hooked on. One night would turn into several. I feared I was already too comfortable, having reveled in his space and scent.

“I'on usually sleep that hard,” he said.

“Maybe it was the person sleeping next to you.” I said it jokingly. But when he only pursed his lips, my cheeks grew warm.

Saadiq and I were in the studio room alone after Ace finished up his verse and Devyn went to have brunch with his girlfriend. I needed to be heading back to Destin and could only imagine what Lady was thinking since I hadn't spoken to her since yesterday. My phone was buzzing off the hook, but I hadn't made a move to answer it. If she knew I was over here playing with fire, she would think I'd lost my mind.

“Will you be sleeping next to me tonight, is the question.”

Oh, how I'd love to. But...

"I *do* have an entire job in Destin. And a house. A life..."

"I'm not welcome at ya crib?"

Butterflies were having a field day in my stomach and for the wrong man. Saadiq and I weren't anything right now and I was already in too deep. After my display of affection last night, I needed to chill out.

"Of course, you are. You have to work, too, though."

He chuckled. "You forgot I own all this. I make my own schedule."

Leaning back against his chest, I said, "I'm aware of that."

His arms banded around my waist at the same time as he snuggled my neck.

"Aight, then. Gon' 'head and clear out some space in the closet and drawer for me."

I giggled just as the door opened. One of the security guards stuck his head in. Chuck was nice to me and went out of his way to make sure I never had any issues whenever I was here.

"Boss, we got that nigga Darius out front askin' for you." Laughing, he glanced at me. "Somebody already beat his ass. I'm 'bout to make his day even worse."

What? Fishing my phone out of my purse, I balked at the number of missed calls from Darius. My gaze shot to Saadiq. He smirked and brought me to stand with him.

"Stay here," he ordered.

"Like hell, I will. Did you put your hands on Darius? *When* did you put your hands on Darius?"

"Does it matter?" Saadiq's raised brow drew a mute response. He turned to go out of the door with Chuck. Instead of listening to him to stay here, I marched right behind them.

"Tell that fuck nigga to come out here!" Darius' voice carried down the hall, causing Saadiq to chuckle.

Meanwhile, I didn't like this one bit. We made it to the front entrance, where security had Darius blocked from coming inside.

"You rang," Saadiq sarcastically asked.

As soon as Darius saw Saadiq, he began struggling against security to get to Saadiq. Saadiq on the other hand calmly laughed.

"You want another round." Saadiq's teasing caused Darius' face to contort into some type of evil I've never seen before.

Ace's ride rode by. He let his window down to see what was going on and kept going to the back of the parking lot.

Great! Ace didn't do well with confrontation—meaning he shied away from drama so as not to end up in prison. When provoked, my brother had a nasty temper. I'd already successfully dodged any backlash from club incident, probably had a whole sex tape about to drop, and now this. Either chaos followed Saadiq, or my life wasn't interesting enough and needed a little boost.

"You want that nigga?" Darius shouted while glaring at me. "Muhfucka didn't even love his own wife, and you 'round here fuckin' with him like he gon' be different witchu! Fuck you and him!"

Before Saadiq or security could react, Ace was like a bowling ball, knocking niggas over to get to Darius. Ace got in several punches, before security pulled him off.

"Get off my fuckin' property!" Here came Devyn, who smoothly kept Saadiq out of the mix.

"Fuck you niggas!" Darius was so angry, Chuck and the rest of security had to pick him up and haul him off the premises.

"I thought I told yo' ass to stay inside." I didn't realize Saadiq was talking to me until he took my arm and gently led me back inside the building.

"Did you have to put your hands on him?" I snatched away from Saadiq and scowled at him.

"What? You wanna follow him?" He was deadass serious, not even blinking as he stared at me.

Blowing out a deep breath, I narrowed my eyes at him. Darius just said himself how Saadiq didn't even love his wife. Although Saadiq was never in any scandals while married, it was common knowledge how he felt about Keva. No one would know he didn't love her by the way he treated her. Keva seemingly had it made. The rumors about her pregnancy were just that. It wasn't any of my business.

What was my business, was my heart. I was playing a very dangerous game thinking I could fuck with Saadiq and it not break my heart to pieces. Right now, we were nothing, just two people who were enjoying each other's company and already my heart wanted to take it there.

If he didn't love Keva, he won't love you.

The doubt in my mind was slapped out by Saadiq's fingers tweaking my chin.

“Why don’t you head home. Once I’m done here, I’m heading your way. Cool?”

Deflated at the contact, I curtly nodded. He kissed my lips and walked me back to the studio unit to retrieve my purse.

Devyn grabbed Saadiq’s attention, leaving me with Ace.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized.

Ace waved me off although a little anger still oozed from him.

“Nigga better find somebody else to play with.”

Glancing over my shoulder at Saadiq, I made sure he was occupied, then turned back to Ace.

“This thing with Saadiq...”

Ace raised his hand to stop me with a grin on his face.

“That’s all you, baby. You’re a grown woman. Just like I stayed outta shit when it came to that fuck nigga Darius, I’m a stay outta this. I knew sooner or later you would see Darius for who he was. That’s why I made it a point to never put that nigga on. I want you to make your own decisions when it comes to these niggas without me tainting that shit. The only way you learn is by going through it. Now if a nigga ever put his hands on you, that’s some other type of shit that I would handle. Otherwise, my sister ain’t no pushover. You know how to handle yaself.”

He took me in for a hug that made me tear up. My brother really loved me.

“And as much as I hate to say this, you’re good for that nigga.” He whispered the last part while motioning to Saadiq.

My head leaned back on my shoulders. He shrugged.

“Niggas know,” he said. “And that nigga right there, is serious about you.”

I shook my head in denial while Ace nodded.

“Never seen him with his wife, the way he is with you. Trust me, shawty. If I thought otherwise, I’d be hell bent on making sure that muhfucka stay away from you. ‘Cause he’s straight hell when it comes to women.”

Yeah, I knew. That’s why on my ride home, I continued to question what the hell I was doing. When I pulled into my driveway, Lady was there standing outside of her car. Hurrying and parking, I cut the engine and jumped out.

“Hey boo!”

“Hey girl!”

We hugged like we didn't see each other several times a week. Lady was truly my girl, though. She came from an upper crust life back in Pensacola. Her family was wealthy and owned a few cattle farms out in the country. Although she complained about being in Destin sometimes, she wasn't in a hurry to leave either.

"Mm, mm..." She stepped back, sniffing the air.

"What?"

"What nigga got you smellin' like him? I thought you left Darius alone." She squinted her face at me in mock anger.

Damn. "I wasn't with Darius." Leaving it at that, I went into my car to get my purse.

Lady gasped like I told her I'd been on a rocket ship.

"Who the hell were you with then? Oh, Ace?" She chuckled to herself. "Of course. He always smells so fuckin' good."

I turned my nose up and threw a look at Lady.

"Don't give me that look. You know I love your brother. The *real* Jacen." She beamed. Not Ace Heat." A scowl covered her face then.

This time I laughed.

"You never explain why you don't like *Ace Heat*." Of course, I knew Lady had a crush on my brother. I would think something was wrong with her if she didn't find him attractive. She wasn't the groupie type and went out of her way to avoid Ace whenever we were all in the same space. So, although she *loved* my brother, she was intimidated as hell by him.

"Anyway, we're not talkin' about me. Who. Were. You. With."

Lady followed me up the driveway to my front door, not letting up. Once I opened the door, I decided spilling the beans was for the best. Saadiq said he would be over here later, and Lady only lived a block from me. She popped up too often not to tell her about Saadiq.

"Saadiq," I mumbled.

She gasped louder this time. "Hold the fuck on! The producer, Saadiq? Saadiq whose wife died not too long ago, Saadiq?"

Dropping my purse on the couch, I followed right behind it, exasperated.

"Yep, that one."

Lady fell on the couch next to me with her mouth agape. She looked me up and down like I was foreign to her.

"He fucked the hell outcha didn't he?" Lady's straight face sent me to orbit. I burst out laughing.

“Why is that the only question you have?”

“‘Cause you glowing like a fire in the middle of dry desert. You’re bright as fuck.”

I touched my cheeks as if I could really feel the glow.

“How did you end up with him anyway? And Ace is cool with it?”

“I dunno and yes.” I refused to divulge what happened a couple of months ago. Lady wouldn’t forgive me for not telling her.

“Honestly, friend. Saadiq gives off mean, scarred, and crazy. But he’s fine as fuck.”

Which reminded me...

“He’s all the above.” I shook my head, recalling the last few hours. Saadiq was too calm dealing with Darius. He was too calm having just kicked Darius’ ass. And I hadn’t the slightest clue as to why they even came to blows. I gave Lady a rundown of events, then groaned when she cackled.

“You were just ragging on me about Jerrell and now look at you. Dealing with a crazy nigga!”

“It’s not funny, Lady.”

“But you laughed at me, though, boo.” She cackled again when I glared at her.

“There’s just so much opportunity for my name to end up in some shit I don’t want it in.”

“Is that really your problem?”

Sighing, I thought about telling Lady the truth. I wasn’t as concerned about my image as I was about my heart.

“What if I really like this man?”

“Which translates to you *really* like this man.”

Lady placed her hand on my back and consoled me when I started pouting.

“He’s my father all over again. How am I supposed to be okay with that?”

I leaned on Lady’s shoulder and deeply exhaled.

“Has he directly reminded you of your dad? Or do you just know he has the possibility of becoming him?”

“The latter. He’s sweet as hell to me, gentle even. When I lay next to him, it feels like he’s not the man I know he truly is. I know Darius triggered him today. I saw it all over his face. The fact that he can still be triggered about his deceased wife heavily reminds me of my father. Lord knows I don’t want to put up with anyone who’s constantly triggered for whatever reason.”

She rubbed my back and shook her head. “I feel you on that. Are you thinking this is something long term? Because that’s what it sounds like. If this is just the two of you having fun, then go with the flow. Don’t get so invested that you can’t walk away when and if it comes a time when you’ll have to.”

Sitting up straight, I nodded. “You’re right.” Switching the subject, I glanced at her attire. “Where are you going dressed like that?” The green bodycon dress was stunning on Lady’s thick, petite frame.

“Dinner. I came by here first to let you know if he proposes to me tonight, I’m saying no.”

I hollered. “Why?”

“Bitch, I’ve known him for two minutes. His delusional ass will not stop talking about *when I become his wife.*”

Lady had me laughing so hard, I missed my phone ringing. Quickly, I called Saadiq back.

“Hey,” I answered.

“I’m on my way to you. Shoot me ya address.”

“Okay. Drive safely.” I hung up and shot him my address before placing my phone on the coffee table.

“That’s my cue to get up outta here. Cook that man a nice dinner and put him to sleep.”

Howling, I led Lady to the door. “I’m gonna order us some food in and think about all that other shit.”

Lady left, and I quickly showered, moisturized, and changed. By then the food had arrived. By the time Saadiq rang my doorbell, I was already walking to the door with two glasses of wine.

That night, over dinner, I drowned in the way Saadiq explained his love for music. He talked about music like it was the basis of his existence. I figured, if he could love music this much, then his love for a woman shouldn’t be so complicated. But it was.

Deep down inside, Saadiq’s wife had a hold on him. It was in the way he went out of his way not to talk about her, not even for a second. I hated rumors and didn’t spend much time believing in them. However, I feared that there was some truth to the rumors about Saadiq. I hated that for myself.

CHAPTER
FIVE

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

A FEW WEEKS LATER...

“What’s up, Pops?”

I walked into my dad’s house, with him assessing me under his low, bushy, eyebrows. Clearly something was on his mind from the way he continued to assess me even as I made it to the living room.

“Did I grow another inch?” I asked jokingly.

Nesha came from the back hallway, a smile on her face.

“Hello, there. Long time no see.”

I hugged Nesha and disputed her claim. “I was here a few weeks ago.”

“Exactly,” Pops pitched in. “Haven’t seen ya face. You wanna text and call like we live in two different cities...” He was still studying me, causing me to laugh.

“Aight, mane. What is it?” I finally asked. Nesha giggled and left us in the living room to go into the kitchen.

“It’s you. You’re different.”

“Different how, Pops.”

“I’ on know.”

He circled me like I wasn’t the man he’d raised since I was eleven.

“That young lady...”

“What young lady?”

Pops was acting strange as shit. He was getting up in age. Going to the couch, he grabbed the remote and switched to the sports network.

“*That* young lady. I saw a picture of the two of you on that damn podcast that the local news is pushing. That boy sure can’t get over the fact that you beat his ass.” Pops’ was right. Rock was still on his fuckboy shit, mentioning my name whenever he had the opportunity.

Forgetting Rock, I focused on the television.

On the screen was the beautiful woman I’d woken up to this morning. She woke me up with her gushy walls wrapped around my dick. I wondered how much makeup it took to cover up the bite mark I put on her neck. Lowkey I chuckled. The collar of the beige blouse she wore did nothing to hide the assault my teeth caused her. Because I knew it was there, despite the makeup, I stared, biting into my bottom lip.

She looked fine as fuck sitting at that round table amongst four muhfuckas I knew wanted to have their day with her. Why production placed her right in the center of the four men was bothersome. She was the focal point of each of their gazes. They couldn’t even answer a question and face the camera without their eyeballs shifting to catch another glimpse of my woman.

For a few weeks now, I’d been cautiously learning Samara. Trusting a woman wasn’t my thing and never would be. The most I could do was pay attention and catch her fuck ups at the slightest implication of one. My guard wasn’t coming down for shit. Not even for Samara.

Which really was a shame.

The first night I slept in her bed, I was so attached to the smell of her that I played hooky from work and slept in that bitch all day. Since Samara, my sleeping patterns had drastically changed. I was noticeably more rested than ever. Sleeping next to her kept my nightmares at bay, too.

One morning I woke up, not realizing I’d slept the whole night without a single sweat. The small victory didn’t go unnoticed. I planned to celebrate with Samara under the guise that our three-month anniversary was approaching. While we hadn’t fully been dating in that time, it was three months ago that I first had her. According to me, she was mine from that moment. She knew it too, keeping her body untouched from any other man.

So, yeah, it was a shame that I couldn’t offer Samara more. She was beautiful, confident, and ambitious beyond anything I’d ever paid attention to in a woman. Our breakfasts, lunches, and dinners were intimate and fun. We

cooked together, showered together, and ultimately laid together. Shit was sweet right now.

No lie, it irked me that she worked around hella men, dealing with whatever bullshit they tossed her way. They weren't just dusty muhfuckas either. Majority of them were like me—well off and stable. Not by a long shot was I insecure. However, the temptation for a woman to fuck up increased in such an environment. It was easy and in no way was I knocking a woman for doing her. She just couldn't do it while attached to me.

Observing her conduct herself in front of other men was impressive. I watched every nuance, checking to see if I got any hint that she was being flirtatious. Her eye contact was brief, and her responses direct. She managed to be engaging without the banter one would find between two people who liked each other.

“You're gon' break that young lady's heart.”

Pops' comment drew a side-eye from me. Nesha walked back past me and pat my shoulder. The shake of her head said she agreed with my father.

“Pops,” I drawled. “Samara and I are just...”

He pointed the remote at me, disappointment in his eyes. “That's the thing right there. You don't even know what you want to be to her. Yet you're wasting her time. Look at her. I've never met her a day in my life, but I can look at her and tell her soul is good. Do you not think other men look at her and see pure perfection?”

“No one's perfect.” Although Samara was damn near close. That's what triggered me to stay vigilant. Everyone was flawed. Those who appeared to be perfect most times had ghosts haunting them most.

Regardless of the fact that she had space in her closet for me and I had space in my closet for her, at any time I was ready to say fuck all that shit if she even thought about doing anything foul.

“Saadiq, stop it. I've had enough of yo' sour ass. One thing a woman doesn't like is a man who loves playing the victim. You're too old for that shit and by now, and I would've hoped you let some of the past go.”

Because he was my father, I had to bite my tongue from being disrespectful to Pops. On the inside, though, I seethed.

“I apologize, but I think you were in Iraq when my life fell apart. I don't think you get to determine when I let anything go.”

Pops chuckled which really didn't mean I didn't piss him off. He was just good at keeping shit cool.

“I *don't* want to determine when you let anything go. All I'm sayin' is trauma has never been something good to hold on to. You destroy everything around you 'cause you refuse to stop letting the past have a hold on you.”

“In case you haven't noticed, I'm making money, on top of my game, and healthily thriving. I'd say my life is great.”

Pops started to respond until Nesha poked her head into the living room. Her wise brown eyes bounced and forth between us before she fully came back into the room.

“Baby, you stop trying to force something on him that he doesn't want,” she said to Pops.

“Exactly.” I knew I liked Nesha.

“Saadiq, you're right. Your life *is* great and we're proud of you. Also, healing isn't for everyone. Those who can live as great as you and pretend like they're not inwardly hurting are some of the strongest people in the world. The load they carry is *very* heavy. And someday, that load has to unpack itself whether it be amongst the living, or in a grave. Because in the end, where does all that pain go?”

The front door opening had Nesha and Pops distracted as I fumbled her words around in my brain. She lowkey cursed me out without using a single curse word. She read me too.

Devyn walked into the house with his girl hanging off him like she was a fucking arm baby. That shit pissed me off so bad, everything Nesha just said got pushed all the way to the back of my mind.

“Sup?” Devyn dapped me, and I didn't even speak to his girl. It was something about her that I never liked and never would. Maybe it was because she reminded me a lot of Keva. In some ways, they were too much alike.

“Bout to head out,” I said. “Got a game to catch with Samara.”

This was her first time inviting me to come to a game. Normally she skipped out on games but tonight the team was hosting a special tribute to the team's general manager, whose wife had passed a year ago.

Although I could give a fuck about dude's wife, I wouldn't let Samara down and not go. We were too heavy right now. If I wasn't at her crib, she was at mine. While I had hope that she and I would stay cool, shit was bound to ruin our 'honeymoon' stage.

“Oh, aight.” Devyn smirked. “Behave yaself.”

I chuckled and chucked the deuces to Pops and Nesha at the same time.

They were disappointed that I didn't continue the conversation we were having, but I saw this as my exit to get the fuck up out of here.

No one was going to change how I felt about my past. That shit was ingrained in me like a fucking birth mark.



ONE THING about a Hurricane's team six and two, they brought out all the big hittas. Niggas I knew from working in the industry showed up tonight in droves, rooting for a team many didn't expect to be this good.

I was in a skybox with Samara half watching the game, more concerned with the watching my surroundings. This was Samara's element and people she knew. I didn't fuck with too many people outside the studio, so I casually had my head on a swivel. A couple of the women looked familiar, like I'd probably smashed them before.

Currently, I was doing my best not to interrupt Samara talking to a colleague of hers. Ole boy was thirsty as fuck and doing the most to keep engaging my lady. I was trying to behave for the sake of her job. He was talking about work which kept me out of the loop. However, if he laughed like a gorilla one more time, I was going to have to intervene.

Other than this nigga, Samara took about a thousand pictures. Honestly, I snagged a few myself, disregarding the fact that I was creating memories. That was some dangerous shit.

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

Samara's hand cascaded up my thigh and lightly squeezed. My arm was around her bare shoulders keeping us locked in. She smelled heavenly tonight, and her outfit had me ready to take it off of her. The midsection baring two-piece fit consisted of a high split skirt and strapless top. It conformed to her body nicely. She dressed down the black outfit with a pair of Gucci sneakers.

On her ears, neck, and wrist were sets of diamonds that I'd purchased for her just because. Her old diamonds were tucked inside my safe. One day she could give them to our daughter.

My brain stopped dead in its tracks just as the horn sounded for half-time. I glanced at the cup in my hand, wondering if the server put some shit in my fucking drink.

“Baby,” Samara called, regaining my attention.

“Oh, yeah. I’m cool.” No, the fuck I wasn’t although I tweaked her chin and grinned. Placing my cup on the ledge in front of me, I deduced I wasn’t having another drink for the rest of the evening. Surely I had lost my fucking mind.

Ole boy finally left Samara alone, leaving us to enjoy the half-time ceremony and the rest of the game in peace. After the game was over, the Hurricanes had another win under their belt. Samara waved bye to her coworkers and told them she’d see them in the morning.

Holding tightly to her hand, I led her out of the skybox, ready to get home and strip her the fuck down. As we walked the hallway toward the exit, a face I cared not to see came into my viewpoint.

I hated triggers. Those muthafuckas ruined a fucking good day even when a muhfucka wasn’t looking for them. The smirk on Rock’s face boiled every blood cell I owned. It wasn’t enough that I fucked him up the first time. He had it out for me as if I were the one who created this fucking tension.

As hard as it was, I kept my cool and walked past that nigga like everything was cool. Meanwhile, I grit my teeth hard as hell to avoid turning back and beating the absolute fuck out of that nigga.

Being with Samara changed the way I moved. Denying it at the moment was deceiving myself. Because the truth of the matter was, if I weren’t with her right now, I’d give that nigga *another* reason to keep and my life out of his mouth.

Unfortunately, I knew all too well that I would be the highlight of his podcast come tomorrow. As long as he kept shit off Samara, I would maintain my cool. If he said any sideways shit about her, all bets were off.

All I could think about was the shit Pops and Nesha put in my ear. Dealing with my triggers was one part of healing even though I didn’t need to be healed. If I needed some... tuning, I’d just passed a major test. Because never did I walk away from a nigga who was begging me to crush his fucking throat.

SAMARA WISE

SIGHING at the pictures of me and Saadiq flooding Rock's Instagram really had me bothered. It wasn't the pictures so much as the caption: *Nigga was just crying about his wife cheating and now he's out here holding hands with a woman who clearly doesn't know her worth. Ms. Wise, I expected better from you.*

First of all, I'd never seen Saadiq cry one tear over his wife—not even at her funeral. Second of all, Rock and I had never crossed paths like that. We could be in the same venue, and I wouldn't even waste two seconds on him. Rock reminded me of a man who hated himself. He wasn't ugly, but his personality sure was.

There were so many comments under his post it was disgusting. If it wasn't one person calling me stupid, it was another alleging that I was Saadiq's mistress and had been messing with him long before his wife ever died.

To say that I was furious was an understatement.

“Samara?”

Glancing up from my phone, I placed a fake ass smile on my face and addressed one of my coworkers. Marnie rarely came to the office for anything since she worked from home. She was at the game yesterday and walked right past me like she didn't know who I was. Her eyes had been on Saadiq anyway.

“Hey, girl!” She walked into my office and crossed her arms over her breasts.

“You and Saadiq Montclair are really together?”

It occurred to me that any other time I was anywhere with Saadiq, no one was concerned about photographing us together. If they did, it wasn't all over social media, painting us in a negative light. Then here came Rock, blasting us like he had some stake in the situation.

“We are.”

Marnie smacked her teeth.

“Not to be rude or messy, but take it from somebody who knows, that man ain't shit.”

My head cocked so quickly, it startled Marnie.

“*Not to be rude or messy*, but neither is your makeup, boo. Who am I to call that out, though?”

She gasped. “I'm just saying. He's negative press. Besides that, he's emotionally damaged. Those types of men are never redeemable.”

I had to smile at Marnie. She and I were the same age and thriving in a world dominated by people who didn't look like us. Yet, we never made a point to get to know each other. We'd never had the first lunch together or anything. Which was crazy seeing as we both worked in communications. She handled the teams' global communications since she could speak several other languages.

Truthfully, a part of me figured Marnie looked down on me. It was the way she went out of her way to not know me. Our relationship was computer and phone based. Meaning we only dealt with each other when we had to.

"Anyone is redeemable, Marnie." I thought about my father and wanted to take back the lie. Yet I still had hope for him.

"I beg to differ. I know several women who've dealt with Saadiq, not just myself. They can tell you that he isn't worth the time or effort."

Crossing my arms atop my desk, I coolly glared at her. "What's your purpose for coming in here? Huh? Is it because he didn't acknowledge you last night? Or is it because he's never held your hand?"

"None of that matters."

"Oh, it matters. Why else would you need to put me up on game?"

"Alright, I won't." Marnie left my office with her straight black hair flying behind her. I wanted to take a pen and throw it at the back of her head. I needed no help overthinking things with Saadiq.

When I arrived home that afternoon, everything Marnie said fled my mind. On my doorstep was a delivery that rendered me speechless. A teddy bear with several large balloons attached to it sat propped against the door.

I ran to it with a smile as wide as the Pacific ocean. Before I had it in my arms, I smelled Saadiq. Bringing the teddy bear to my nose, I inhaled its deep brown wool coat. It smelled just like my man. Smiling hard, I picked the box up, then carried everything in the house.

Once I sat on the couch, I opened the box. Inside was a card and another smaller box. I read the card first.

Thought about sending flowers, but I want you to hold on to something that smells like me. Hate I can't be with you tonight. I'ma make up for it.

Things like this were going to make me fall headfirst for Saadiq. No way had any gift ever brought me to hold the card just a minute longer to keep the words close. He was working late tonight which really made me want to pack a bag, go to the studio, and spend the night with him there.

I rolled over to my phone going off like crazy.

“Hello,” I groggily answered Lady’s call.

“Why the fuck is yo’ man beating the breaks off Rock?” Lady’s background was so loud it sounded like she was in the middle of a stampede.

“What?” I quickly sat up, heart racing.

“*Ooohh! Damn!*”

“*He fuckin’ that nigga up!*”

“Girl! I just watched this nigga body slam Rock like a fuckin’ rag doll!”

Throwing my covers back, I threw my feet over the side so that I could ground myself. I felt my head spinning.

“Saadiq is at the studio.” *That’s where the hell he’s supposed to be.*

“No, he ain’t! Get off the phone and look on IG!”

I hung up with Lady and frantically went on Instagram. All the notifications were from people tagging me in videos. I pressed the first one that came up.

Right on my screen in full color was fool ass Saadiq. The person streaming was so close to the action, I could hear Saadiq’s deep voice threatening any and everything that was connected to Rock. He had Rock in a headlock, and although several people tried breaking it up, he was clearly unfazed.

“*Bitch ass muhfucka... Don’t you eva speak on my woman. Keep her fuckin’ name outcha mouth.*”

The fact that he was talking to Rock like they were having a normal conversation really blew me. Meanwhile, Rock looked like he was about to black out.

Unable to look at the rest, I clicked off and groaned. Stressed, I got up and paced before it occurred to me to call Saadiq. Of course, he didn’t answer. His ass was probably in the back of a police car. I was tempted to go back on Instagram and see if that was the case.

Ace: Ya mans is cool. Go back to sleep.

Ace’s text came just as I plopped back on my bed to try to figure out what the hell to do. If I had to go bond Saadiq out, I would.

Me: I can’t sleep until I hear his voice.

Ace: I said he’s good. Go back to sleep.

Clicking my teeth, I lay back on my bed and placed the phone by my head so that in case I fell asleep, I wouldn’t miss Saadiq’s call.

Within a couple of hours, my eyes were burning, and my gut was churning. No call or message from Saadiq had me too worried. I was about to

break down and text Ace again when my phone pinged. There was movement in my driveway, signaling my cameras.

I jumped out of bed the minute I saw Saadiq's motorcycle parked outside my house. Within seconds, I had the front door open. He came up the walkway, scowling and still wearing his clothes from the club.

"So you're just gonna lie to me and show up like everything is okay?"

Without saying a word, Saadiq picked me up and began kissing over my face. He had no liquor on his breath, but I did smell the blunt he'd had. It stuck to him like I wanted to. I took his tongue and sucked on it while he carried me to the bedroom.

In no time he was naked and positioning himself over me. We needed to talk about his actions. None of that mattered as his dick poked at my wet center. This nigga had me all worried and was here now, pushing into my pussy like he hadn't had it in a while.

I must've needed him badly, because I barely had all of him in me, and I was already moaning from the pleasure. He kissed and nipped at my neck as he filled me up, then retreated just a bit. I fit my legs over his shoulders and allowed him to go deeper, causing him to grunt into my neck as his pace quickened.

"Oohhh, Saadiq..." He hit several spots, triggering my body to instantly convulse. The way this man could bring me to an orgasm that always caused me to tear up was mind blowing.

"I'm finna nut real good, baby." Him grunting that shit in my ear signaled the walls of my pussy to clamp around him so tightly, I gasped in shock at the powerful surge that went through me. My eyes widened with the loss of breath and sweet ecstasy I was feeling.

He pounded into me, smacking our bodies together hard as hell. Deeply growling, he came seconds later.

Coming down off that high wasn't easy. I lay here quietly, trying to slow my heart rate. But if he thought I was going to pass out without addressing him beating Rock's ass, he could forget it. Sliding from under him, I tapped his shoulder to wake him up.

"I watched a video of you... nearly killing Rock."

"Nigga shouldn't have spoken on ya name."

"Saadiq..."

"Hush and lay wit' a nigga."

"No, we need to talk about this. What if he presses charges? You could be

arrested.”

“I’on give a fuck.”

“Why the hell are you so calm?”

“Why shouldn’t I be? You just fucked a nigga so good, I’m tryna sleep ‘til next week.”

I giggled, then remembered this was serious.

“So are you gonna fight everyone who left a comment on anything he’s said? ‘Cause that’s just ridiculous.”

“The thing is, lil’ baby. You have a puppet and a master. Whatever the master does, the puppet follows. I’on give a damn about followin’ ass muhfuckas ‘cause they playin’ their role. The master... he gon’ get his head split every time he fuck with anything that’s got to do with me. He wanna be a fuckin’ master, he gotta reap a master’s penalty.”

Sighing heavily, I hated how much sense Saadiq made.

“You’re putting my expertise to work. It’s like every other week I’m making a statement on one thing or another.”

He smirked. “Leave allat shit to me, Samara. You don’t need to speak a word. I got you.”

“But—”

“No butts, baby. Come on and lay down.”

This time, I rolled my eyes and laid back under my man. Hopefully, this shit with Rock passed quickly without Saadiq getting into any trouble.

CHAPTER

SIX

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

TO MAKE up for having Samara's name all over social media for the wrong reasons, I invited her to Pop's and Nesha's house for Sunday dinner. She had a game to get to tonight, so we wouldn't be staying late. Really, I just wanted her to know how fucking sorry I was for dragging her into the middle of some shit that had nothing to do with her.

"Are you really a Hurricane's fan?" Pops asked her, shaking his head in mock disdain. He was a diehard Cowboys fan.

She chuckled. "I'm actually a sports fan in general. The Hurricanes have just made it possible to do what I love and reward me lucratively for it."

"I heard that," Nesha intoned. "Being around all those men has to be tiresome. I can only imagine how obnoxious they are."

"Very," Samara quickly responded. "I went in with strong boundaries and a fine-tuned ear. A couple have tried to sway my judgement, but I don't play that. It isn't about just loving my career, my integrity is everything. In this line of work, it'll follow me everywhere."

That had better be what the fuck she said. Her talking about niggas at work had my face balling up. Pop's tried covering up a laugh when he peeped my face.

"I know you're not jealous." Samara peered at me, her eyebrows raised.

"Nah, baby." I had to play that shit off because I was already in the

fucking doghouse. After Samara and I fucked the other night, she hadn't let me touch her since. I thought it was because it was that time of the month, but she quickly informed me that she was mad at the continued talk swirling around me and Rock.

That shit was a week ago, and still muthafuckas were having a field day clowning Rock. That was his bad, though. He put his mouth on the wrong woman. Like I told Samara I would, I released a statement about the whole incident via my lawyer.

Rock wasn't even threatening to have me arrested because he knew he'd fucked up the moment he saw me coming for him in the club. His own fucking entourage didn't have his back. I beat that nigga's ass, then threatened his whole lineage if he didn't keep my woman's name out of his fucking mouth.

As far as the internet, that shit was what it was. Another story would come along and boot this shit right out of the way. Until then, I was treading lightly as fuck.

"Why'd you make that face then?"

"'Cause, baby. Nesha has something more important to talk about. Like what she's making for Thanksgiving. We should definitely switch the subject from niggas at ya office. I'on need to make no trips up there."

Samara smacked her teeth, while Pops and Nesha burst out laughing. Samara joined in.

"Has he always been this unhinged?"

"Whew, chile," Nesha mumbled.

Pops added his two cents. "He means well."

"See." I winked at her. She fought the smile playing on her lips.

"This pot roast was fantastic, Nesha."

"Thank you, sweetheart. Saadiq has to bring you around more."

Samara's eyes met mine as her cheeks darkened. They didn't get as dark as they did when I was buried deep inside her. Her blushing did some shit to me, though. The fact that I hadn't been inside that pussy in eight muhfuckin' days really said too much I didn't want to put energy into.

You brought her to meet Pops and Nesha, though.

Sometimes I wanted to reach inside my brain and ball that muhfucka up for reminding me of shit I already damn knew. Checking me about some shit I already know was wild as fuck and disrespectful.

"What *are* you doing for Thanksgiving, Samara? Is your family getting

together, or can we expect Saadiq to bring you here?”

Something flashed in Samara’s eyes that had her briefly glancing down at her empty plate.

“Hopefully, Saadiq won’t mind me coming.”

“And if he does mind, you can come, and he can stay at home.” Pops thought his comment was funny and so did Nesha and Samara. I mugged all of them.

So far, my baby had a smile on her face. Getting back in her good graces wouldn’t take any time.

Days later, I wasn’t any closer to tasting the pussy. A nigga was frustrated as fuck, doing any and everything to put out the fire I’d caused. A couple who was known for being in the spotlight came right in a couple days ago and kicked me and Samara’s story all the way to the curb. I went to her place that night thinking shit was back sweet. Her ass had me take a shower with her, just to torture the fuck out of me.

I’d been with her through a period or two, so I knew her schedule like clockwork. While a little flow wouldn’t stop shit between me and her, I respected that she had rough cycles. Therefore, if a nigga didn’t bust her shit down this weekend, come Monday, my muhfuckin’ ass was out of luck for another few days or more.

Good thing for me, she was horny as fuck on the days leading up to her monthly demise. That’s why every chance I got, I put my hands on her, touching her in places I knew would spark the desire deep within her until she couldn’t avoid me any longer.

“The flight was nice.”

I swam out of my thoughts to catch the small smile on Samara’s face. We had just touched down in Atlanta and now were on our way to the hotel. Tonight Ace was performing his new collaboration with R&B artist Denver. The song hadn’t hit the radio yet and was a surprise extra on Denver’s upcoming album.

My non-sentimental ass figured I’d earn some points by bringing Samara to hear her lyrics rapped in front of Denver’s sold-out crowd.

Once we hit the hotel, we freshened up and took the car service I’d ordered to the mall. Not that Samara needed anymore diamonds, but the minute I saw anything that fit her, I got it. Even before I fucked up, spoiling her had become second nature. Without her asking, I’d drop stacks on her just because. While we shopped, Chuck and Big B kept any unwanted approaches

at bay.

Back at the hotel, we enjoyed room service and a movie before getting ready for the night. All-black was her thing, so I decided to coordinate with her black graphic t-shirt dress. It didn't bother me one bit when she added a pair of black sneakers with her outfit instead of heels. Her toned and moisturized legs were begging for me to bend them back. Hopefully, tonight, I would be.

We made it to the spot an hour later, joining Ace and the crew inside VIP. A few of these niggas I hadn't seen in a minute. Since working on Ace's last album, he'd been chilling with me and Devyn more than the homies he normally fucked with. By the end of the night, I'd know which niggas took offense to that shit.

One nigga, I mugged right off. Rajon had his eyes on Samara, staring at her as we entered VIP. Every nigga looked. This nigga stared with his mouth open. It wasn't like he didn't know me and her were together. Which triggered me to check his ass.

"I feel like you fuckin' my girl in front of me. Put ya eyes on something else besides her."

Rajon shut his mouth and promptly turned his attention to the crowd below. I dapped Ace and Devyn, then signaled for a bottle girl. Ace hugged his sister, then left VIP with security to head backstage. The show would be starting soon.

It was crazy that I couldn't wait to see her face and experience her reaction. At this point, it wasn't even about us fucking. I wanted to please her. Until Denver took the stage, the DJ played a few songs to keep the crowd alive.

Although Samara didn't have any liquor, she was loose and enjoying herself hugged up with me as we vibed to the music. A couple songs later, the DJ introduced Denver with the crowd going crazy. Her pretty and shy ass won many over by the way she was so humble. This song, though. It was on another level for her.

"Y'all ready for something new?" she asked the crowd, who responded in loud shouts.

I brought Samara's back to my chest, bracketing her with one arm while we continued to sway. As soon as the DJ dropped the beat to Denver's newest song, Samara's body froze. Quickly, she turned to face.

Smiling big, I said, "Sound familiar?"

She'd heard the beat repeatedly while working with Ace on his lyrics.
*I normally say fuck love,
'cause, shit, that's really how I feel.
'Cause what's love?
I mean fuck love.
A bunch of blue faces in the bank,
I do blue love.
But you got me on some find out,
What the fuck it is about true love,
That got me doin' shit I don't normally do.
Like thinkin' only 'bout you.
Makin' plans that include you.
Sayin' fuck the world, and gimme you.
Shit, it's really only 'bout you.
So I guess it's love.
Fuck.
Who knew?*

Ace came out, sending the crowd into even more of a frenzy. He rapped his bars, with his and Denver's on-stage chemistry likely to make headlines tomorrow. Denver went right into her melody, her pipes blowing the house down.

Samara's watery eyes shone brightly under the club's lighting. Word for word, I recited her lyrics straight to her face, acting like we were the ones making a video. She was stunned into silence.

Bringing her in for a hug, I laughed at the stupefied expression on her face. I kissed all over her cheeks and then her lips.

"What you think?"

Her hands slid up my chest until her arms linked around my shoulders. She was short as hell, so I had to bend my body for her to do such. We settled for her wrapping her arms around my waist and mine around her shoulders.

We stood here staring at each other, her with stars in her eyes and me with admiration in mine.

This woman was too damn perfect.



I SMOTHERED my face in Samara's pussy, greedy as hell having not tasted her in too long. We weren't in the hotel five seconds before she jumped me. After starting in the shower, we transitioned to the bed where I'd been buried between her thighs, devouring her from front to back.

"Shit, baby..." She moaned as her thighs violently trembled.

I loved how she pushed my head deeper, though, like she couldn't get enough. Fuck, I couldn't either. That shit made me suck several lives out of her. By the time my dick made his way home, a nigga was full and covered in her juices. On her knees with her face buried in the sheets, Samara took my blows like a fucking flick star.

"Wear my shit out, Saadiq."

That earned her a thrust so deep, her pussy choked the fuck out of me.

"You ain't gave me my pussy in days, baby. You lucky I'on tear this bitch out the frame."

Samara squirted so hard and long, that it triggered my own release. I fell on top of her back, pumping into her until the last drop of me was planted in her.

SAMARA WISE

Weeks had passed since going to Atlanta with Saadiq, yet I was still on a high I'd never experienced before. There was so much potential in Saadiq to be more than the man his past was trying to make him be.

Meeting his parents and seeing the way he was so relaxed around them made me face the fact that I really did like him.

Then again, I was emotional as hell today and moody. Saadiq was at the studio for a few more hours, so I left his house to go grab my essentials. I stopped at the grocery store to buy myself some snacks, to get through this rough four days of cramping and craving. I threw myself some snacks in the basket and added some things I knew Saadiq liked.

In the frozen section, I debated which flavor ice cream I wanted.

"Damn, hoe! Watch where you goin'!"

Mistakenly, I bumped into another lady on the aisle, perusing the ice cream as well. She was rude as hell and mugging me like I bumped into her stale-faced, funky ass. It was already that time of the month and this lady was about to make me punch her into a new decade.

Recognition ran through her roughened, dark yellow gaze.

“You the girl ‘round here fuckin’ my son. Figures I come to the city to see my people and bump into you. The world *is* actually small.” She laughed loud, blowing her breath into my face as she did so. When it registered what she said, my brows slammed together.

Saadiq never once mentioned his mother to me. He’d never disclosed his relationship to Nesha, but the fact that he called her Nesha spoke volumes. Standing in front of his mother, I saw him in her. Her smile was actually really pretty. It was clear that life hadn’t been too kind to her, though. Her eyes told of the devastation whatever coping mechanism she dealt with played on her body.

“Can’t believe his ass got another bitch to fall for him.”

Saadiq’s mother or not, she was about to get her head knocked off. “Lady —”

“Ask him how does it feel to have his wife fuck around and get pregnant on him.” She laughed again. “He thought having that vasectomy was gon’ keep him from having kids, but that triflin’ bitch turned right around and showed him shit can’t always be his way.”

Baffled, I stood here with my mouth open.

“Lil’ bitch came cryin’ to me like I was gon’ help her keep him once she knew she was pregnant. Stupid hoe thought she was gon’ be able to trick him into thinking his vasectomy didn’t work.”

Her finding this funny really irked the fuck out of me.

“I told her she was dumb as hell. Then she was gon’ have an abortion. I told her she was better off killing that damn baby, ‘cause Saadiq wasn’t gon’ love it. He don’t love nothin’ but his own ugly ass. Boy damn near killed my boyfriend back in the day. It’s only a matter of time before he *does* kill somebody with that nasty temper of his.”

“You’re evil,” I muttered, causing her to double over with laughter. I went from being angry at how she came at me, to being angry about the way she talked about her son.

“Evil? Lil’ girl do you know that man you fuckin’? He put a whole knife through a man tryna put food on our table.”

“I’m sure he had a reason.” I had no clue why Saadiq would stab anyone. But I was going to stand up for him, regardless.

His mother looked at me like I was stupid. “Oh, you think you got him? Listen carefully, lil’ girl. No woman owns Saadiq. *I* made sure of that.” She

whispered the last part so devilishly that I had to get away from her. I really wanted to wring her fucking neck, but that would put me in an orange jumpsuit.

“He’s damaged. Just accept it and leave him alone.”

Stopping in my tracks, I retraced my footsteps.

“What is your name?” I asked her.

“Vivica,” she proudly answered. “Make sure you tell my son I said his ass should’ve been locked the fuck up. Him and his slow ass brother.”

“Vivica... Saadiq is going to be just fine. Genuine love is going to cause him to be the best man *he’s* ever known. Once he understands he can be that man, nothing will stop him.”

She glared at me before bursting into laughter once again.

“You believe in fairytales, don’t you? Sad shame. He won’t even give you a baby, you stupid bitch.”

“His father gave *you* babies. I’d say anything’s possible.”

With that, I shoulder checked Vivica and hurried to leave the store. I was sick to my stomach and didn’t want shit anymore, leaving the cart behind.

The rest of the evening, I plastered on a smile I didn’t feel. Thankfully, Saadiq chalked it up to me being down from my period. Sweetly, he catered to me, massaging my back and cooking me dinner. But I couldn’t get the encounter with his mother out of my head. Neither could I bring it up.

Meeting the person who undoubtedly shaped his view on women was heartbreaking. This whole time, I thought Keva was the sole cause of Saadiq’s issues. Clearly, all Keva did was further break a man who was already broken.

I pleased Saadiq that night, sucking him until he came and dozed off to sleep. I poured more of my feelings into him while knowing I’d never receive the same. I was literally torturing myself with this man.

So deep in my head, I found myself leaving work early the next afternoon, to drive to my father’s house. Since meeting Vivica, thoughts of him warred with thoughts of Saadiq, and I couldn’t go another day without attempting to see him.

The yard wasn’t as kept as it usually was and his car had collected leaves and dust on it. Parking behind him, I cut the engine and got out. Before I reached the porch, he snatched the door open with a scowl. He was visibly unkempt, his beard scraggly, hair uncut, and it looked like he’d been wearing the same clothes for days they were so stained.

“What’re you doing here?”

“I’m here to check on you, daddy.” It had been months. Even before his birthday, I hadn’t seen him in weeks. As a father, he should be happy to see me. But as a widow, he couldn’t get past his pain to see the love I was still trying to offer him.

After all these years, it hadn’t settled in yet that my father hated me. He hated everything about me from the way I talked, to the way I looked. All because I reminded him of my mother. His love for her was so deep that when she died, he did too.

Moving on with Ace’s mother didn’t help my father any. She couldn’t deal with his declining mental health. Her leaving was just another layer of pitifulness he tacked on to himself. His “woe is me” attitude compounded over the years. The older he got, the worse he got.

His scowl deepened. “I told you to stop comin’ by here checkin’ on me. When is it gon’ get through your thick head that I don’t want you here?”

Shocked, my steps stuttered, and I paused in the ankle high grass leading to the porch.

“Daddy, you don’t mean that.” I didn’t give a damn how bitter he was. Saying he wanted nothing to do with me was just evil.

“I do,” he hissed. “Now get yo’ ass out my yard!”

I jumped at his last statement, turned on my heels and sprinted back to my car. I was inside and hauling ass down the street in a split second.

Broken, I dialed Ace, hoping he wasn’t in the booth or too busy to talk to me. Only he would understand me right now.

“Sup, baby?” he answered. From the noise in the background, I could tell he was in the studio.

I broke down crying without getting a word out.

“Calm down and tell me what’s wrong.” His voice went from lighthearted to serious in a second.

“I went to see dad. Why is he so evil to me?” Tears enveloped my eyes so much that they distorted my view of the road. Undaunted, I hopped on the highway to get as far away from him as possible.

“I told you to leave that nigga where the fuck he’s at. I’m go over there and check him for making you cry like this.”

“No, don’t.” Ennis would say something vile to piss Ace off and I didn’t need my brother locked up.

“I’m on my way home and just need to talk. Do you have a minute?” The

few second interaction with my dad had me irrationally thinking, and I needed Ace to help talk me off the ledge.

“Of course, I do. I’m leaving now. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Drive safe, Ace. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Knowing Ace was on his way to me didn’t stop the tears from pouring out. By the time I made it home, my eyes were red, and I was exhausted. Heavy-hearted, all I wanted to do was climb in the bed. First I showered, dressed, and prepared for work tomorrow. Once I laid down, I didn’t want to get up and do anything else.

Once done, I grabbed the blanket from my bed, a pillow, and went into the living room to wait for Ace. He had a key, so when I flicked the television on and laid across the couch, I let exhaustion have its way. Tears slid from my eyes until sleep found me.

What seemed like just a few minutes later, a kiss woke me up. Saadiq’s cologne met my nose before my heavy and swollen lids fully cracked open. He scooped me up, sat down, then placed me in his lap.

“How’d you get in?” I’d never given Saadiq a key which was crazy seeing as he practically moved in on me. He just used my key whenever he was here.

“Ace gave me his key. Why wasn’t I your first call?” I could tell it made him salty that I called Ace before him. Furthermore, I couldn’t believe Ace sent him instead of coming himself.

“You wouldn’t understand,” I simply answered.

Saadiq grit his teeth, then glanced at me. “Try me, Samara.”

Since he wanted to hear it, I decided to open up. If he saw himself in anything I said, then it would give him the option to walk away from me.

“My father is a bitter ass man who can’t handle that his wife died. He got remarried just for his second wife to divorce and leave him because he couldn’t reconcile his past demons. My mother died when I was five. Ever since, my father started slowly treating me like I’m shit beneath the soles of his shoe. I’ve tried everything I know to do to make him love me. Nothing’s ever worked. The older he gets, the worse he’s gotten towards me.”

“Fuck him.” Saadiq’s statement was so much like Ace’s response. Only Ace wasn’t the one exhibiting the same signs as our father.

“What if I said the same thing about you Saadiq?” I climbed from his lap and put some space between us.

This was the reason I needed to talk to Ace. My father's disdain for me had me ready to walk away from Saadiq. A woman having daddy issues was a muthafucka when it came to relationships. Ace was a man and could counsel me on how to not compare the two.

Lady wouldn't have understood. Her parents were happily married and raised their children with enough love to dish out to the rest of the children in the world. She had not the first negative thing to say about her dad.

Saadiq leaned forward and positioned his elbows on his knees.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Do you not see yourself in anything I just said?"

The way he maintained eye contact without batting an eye was intimidating. I didn't know whether he wanted to haul off and curse me out, cry, or laugh.

"So were you cryin' 'cause of me or him."

"Him."

"Therefore, this isn't about me. Have I treated you like shit?"

Reluctantly, I shook my head.

"So how do I compare to him?"

You're bitter. Angry. I know you'll never love me.

As much as I knew how to communicate, none of those things could pass my lips. I struggled to open my mouth and say what I wanted. But getting it off my chest was for the best.

"I met Vivica."

CHAPTER
SEVEN

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

MY EARS PERKED up as soon as I heard Ace asking Samara why she was crying. I threw my headphones off and was headed out of the door before he stopped me and put a key in my hand. Without knowing the what or why, I hopped in my ride and flew to her.

Listening to her describe her pops had me heated. It was “fuck that nigga” to me because anyone who made her cry deserved to be beheaded. She was the simplest and purest form of adoration if I’ve ever seen it. A kid should never beg for their parent’s love. She said her pops had past issues, and I couldn’t even give him grace for that.

I could admit that I was angry about a lot of shit from my past and rightfully so. Anyone who faced the shit I did wouldn’t simply walk away without some wounds.

That was why something akin to lava rolled down my back at the mention of the woman who birthed me. My neck tightened and an instant migraine formed. Blinking past the rage was difficult. I tried dispelling images of Vivica from my brain, but the flashbacks were coming too quickly.

“You gon’ do what the fuck I said, Saadiq! Get yo’ ass in that fuckin’ room!”

Hearing Devyn screaming to the top of his lungs had me doing the opposite of what Vivica said. I ran to the kitchen and grabbed the largest

knife I could find.

“What you gon’ do with that?” she cackled. The white shit around her mouth caked up more and more, turning my stomach.

“Move out my way,” I warned, rushing down the hall to Devyn’s room. She was trying to block me from getting in there, but I was determined to get to my brother.

“Saadiq?”

“Help!”

Devyn’s loud screaming drove me to push Vivica to the floor and rush to Devyn’s locked bedroom door. With tears in my eyes, I kicked at the door, using my anger to drive my foot into the wood. Finally, it gave.

“Saadiq?”

“Saadiq! Help me!”

Eyes wide and fear running through me, I ran towards the monster with the knife over my head. With all the force I could, I drove the knife into his back.

“Saadiq!”

Samara gasped as I snatched my arm away from her touch like it burned me. Standing, I stalked towards the front door. I had to get the fuck out of here. With the type of anger I felt, I’d destroy everything in the house.

“You’re just going to leave?”

Samara was on my heels. Scared of how this could turn out, I ignored her and continued to the door.

“Sometimes it helps to talk about things, Saadiq.”

Whirling around, I growled at Samara. She proved Vivica did just what Vivica loved to do—say whatever the fuck she could to ruin everything about me.

“No the fuck it doesn’t! Don’t you think I fuckin’ tried talkin’ shit out?”

I advanced on her, seeing red because my past never stopped fucking with me. Not even when I was trying to do good. I came here to console her, only to be thrust back into a time I loathed with a passion.

“I tried every fucking thing, Samara! I even tried takin’ my fuckin’ life! When that shit ain’t work, a bitch who was supposed to be my wife tried to take my fuckin’ life for me! That shit ain’t muhfuckin’ work either! A nigga still fuckin’ here, still dealin’ with the same fuckin’ bullshit!”

Samara’s solemn gaze pissed me off even more. I didn’t want her fucking pity.

“Don’t you fuckin’ cry for me!” I barked even as her eyes watered.

“Saadiq...” Cautiously, she stepped towards me.

“Stay the fuck back Samara.” I needed to leave. Now.

“I’m not your enemy,” she tearfully whispered. Another step, she was in my space, carefully reaching out to me. Her hands cupped my hard-set face.

“I said, stay back.”

“I won’t. You can walk away from me, Saadiq. But I won’t walk away from you. If that’s what you’re banking on, then you can forget it.”

“You think you’re in here cryin’ over ya pops. The fuck you think I’m do to you?” Because I could never love her. I hated that I wanted to keep her close, knowing I’d never be able to love her, yet also knowing she deserved it.

“You can love.”

“I can’t! Just ‘cause a nigga treat you like a queen don’t mean shit. I treat you better than I treated my bitch ass wife. That still don’t mean shit.”

Samara’s hands slowly fell from my face. I’d crushed her. The evidence was in her soft brown eyes. I hated to be this nigga. But I had to be in order to protect myself.

“We can agree on one thing, Saadiq,” she mumbled. “I can’t love either.”

A deep ass pain flooded my heart. Her saying what I already knew validated everything I felt about women.

“A scarred man, I can love. A wounded one, I cannot.”

The fuck.

“Because no matter how much love I give, it’ll never be enough to close the wounds that only you can dress. Whoever has hurt you in the past, they can’t heal you, Saadiq. *Nothing* they say will ever heal you. An apology is just words. Healing is deeper than that. It requires you to forgive even when the person you’re forgiving doesn’t give a damn if you ever live another day in your life. Forgiveness is healing for you, Saadiq.”

After a minute passed, I chuckled.

“You just said you weren’t walkin’ away from me. Now you’re contradicting yaself.”

“I’m not walking away. I’m running. Just like you choose to protect yourself from me, I have to do the same with you. For a minute I had hope in you, in us. I’ve enjoyed you treating me like a queen. But I won’t be a fool to settle for someone who boldly declared that he’ll never love me. I deserve better. I deserve love. I deserve a man who’s willing to freely give it to me.”

I laughed at her, really a bit surprised that she was actually standing on her shit and not accepting just anything from me. Truthfully, my respect for her increased.

“So are you threatening me?”

Her head tilted to the side, and her eyebrows drew together in question.

“If I don’t tell you about all the demons in my closet, then this is it for us?”

Fuck, because I didn’t want it to be. Regardless of my ability to love Samara, I cared too much about her to just walk away. I’d never be cool with her having another nigga. The nigga she claimed would freely love her. I was too selfish to give her that.

“It’s more you opening up to me about your past. I want you to be free for you.”

Sighing, I pursed my lips and contemplated whether divulging my life to her was worth it. Since I was old enough to remember, there had always been a level of evil in my life. Unpacking all that shit was bound to make me spiral.

“I’ve talked to counselors,” I muttered.

“But you haven’t talked to *me*,” she rebutted. “I’ve lived a life without the love of my dad. One thing I will never carry is guilt from the way he has treated me. There was nothing I did to cause him to hate me. We take on other people’s burdens in the wrong way. If I’m sad, yes it’s okay for you to cry with me. But when it comes to shame, guilt, anger, and bitterness... Don’t let someone else’s burdens be your own. Free yourself from it.”

Because I couldn’t be without her, I asked, “Will you do me a favor?”

A few clicks passed before she simply nodded.

“Will you have patience with me? I know it’s selfish, but I hear you, aight.”

Pulling her into my arms, I wondered how in the fuck I was going to love this woman. Letting her go wasn’t an option.

“I hear you.” I repeated it in her ear, then kissed her.

I came here to chase away her demons, only for her to make me confront mine. She was breaking down a wall I thought was strategically built to combat any force known to man. To have peace with my past, was to have her. I couldn’t have one without the other. Better yet, she refused to let me have her without the other.

Samara was fast asleep when I left her in bed to go outside for some fresh

air and to catch up with Devyn. He answered on the third ring.

“She okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, she’s sleeping.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and walked deeper into the backyard to spark up. “You got a minute?”

Delaying the inevitable was just another way for me to start back rebuilding the wall that was quickly crumbling.

It’s been crumbling since you met her.

“Yeah, what’s good?”

“Listen...” I hit the blunt and blew the smoke out on a heavy sigh. “I’d do that shit all over again. The only thing I would change is us agreeing to end it all. I’m ya big brother. There’s no way I should’ve made that a last resort for us.”

Devyn was quiet, I know reflecting on that fateful night. Damn, things could’ve turned out so differently. The thought of him passing and me living... I would be bat shit crazy. I’d definitely be crazier than I already was.

Or the survivor’s guilt he would’ve carried had I died, and he lived. So much shit a kid shouldn’t have had to deal with, Devyn and I did.

“Bruh, are you serious? If it’s one nigga I’m ridin’ behind win or lose, it’s you. You the only fuckin’ reason I get up and get at it every day. Had you not stepped the fuck in, a nigga would’ve been dead, anyway.”

I shook my head. Had I not stepped in, Devyn would’ve been a statistic that had my stomach turning just to think about it. Thankfully, that wasn’t his story.

“I just want you to know, I love you. There’s nothing I won’t do for you. Ever.”

Devyn was silent again, then he lowly chuckled. “You aight, bruh?”

His question generated a genuine smile. “Yeah, just getting some shit off my chest.”

“Oh... What else you unpackin’?”

Leaning my head back, I blew out another plumb of smoke into the air. The difference between me and Devyn, he’d made peace with shit that happened. To him, he dodged a bullet and was grateful he had another chance at life. Therefore, he couldn’t find it in himself to hate anybody. Which was cool since I had enough hate inside me to supply the both of us.

“Too much shit.”

“Well, I’m happy for you. You know I got ya back on whatever. And I love you too.”

“Bet.”

Hanging up, I took one last hit of the blunt before tracing my steps back to the house. While Samara slept, I’d make her some dinner and figure out how the fuck I was going to keep my woman.

SAMARA WISE

“THE HURRICANES ARE HEADED to the Superbowl. Not only have they had a superb season, but they’ve been able to do so without the slightest scandal. How does it feel to be a part of one of the best teams in sports?”

Laughing at Phillip’s question was the only thing I could do. If he only knew the fires I’d put out over the course of the season.

One player had a hand problem with his wife. Per the wife’s request, the team quietly handled it by cutting him and placing him in a substance abuse program. She thought his aggression stemmed from alcohol abuse and didn’t want the media dragging him when he really needed help.

Two other players were causing a rift in the locker room. Every other day they squabbled over one thing or another. The media got wind of it, only for me to quickly contain the draft. I had to spin that shit to make it look like the two were really best friends. Photoshoots and sit downs together made the two finally come to an amicable agreement to put their differences aside and play football.

“I can’t complain. It’s definitely one of the best organizations to be a part of.” Smiling, I was really just ready to get this over with. Being in front of the camera doing what I loved to do hadn’t felt so pleasing in the last several weeks.

On the surface, things between me and Saadiq hadn’t changed. We still did most things together and remained just as close as we were before the day I met Vivica’s trifling ass. Underneath, a part of me had closed off to Saadiq. My smiles didn’t fade, and the way I made love to him didn’t wane. I just felt different.

His declaration of never loving me crushed the majority of hope I had for us. Feeling like I was biding my time until he tired of me caused me to shut down internally. While I faked it for him, behind closed doors, I was a basket

case.

Loving a man who so adamantly stated that he'd never love me did more damage than that of my dad. Which was really my issue. I believed in love despite of the shit Ennis put me through. I wholeheartedly believed that pouring into the man who seemed so perfect for me would cause him to want to love me.

Saadiq mishandling me caused me to take a step back to really evaluate my emotions. Since, I'd been doing more silent observing. If he recognized the change in me, he didn't mention it. Although I was well aware of the level of delusion I was under to stay with a man like him, I loved him.

"It is a great organization," Phillip stated, pulling me back in the moment. I was thankful when he wrapped up his segment without another question. Fifteen minutes seemed like forever when your heart wasn't in it.

The cameras shut off, and I promptly stood from the sofa to leave the set.

"Samara," Phillip called as I made it backstage.

Placing a welcoming expression on my face, I turned to face him.

"Hey, you seemed a little down out there. Everything okay?"

For a minute, I started to overthink.

People are going to think there's trouble with you and Saadiq.

Being in the public eye made it hard to continue to play into the happiness that really wasn't there. At some point, someone would see through that shit.

"Yes, everything is fine." I made it sound as genuine as possible.

Skepticism covered Phillip's handsome face. He and I had done this dance many times before as he covered the team. His older, wiser eyes smiled although his lips didn't. For a man in his late forties, Phillip could easily pass for someone half his age.

"I call bullshit, but I'll let you have it. Just know, there are so men out here who wouldn't have you walking around faking the funk. He'd have you shining from every angle."

That was the thing. Saadiq before Vivica *did* have me shining from every angle.

"I said I'm fine." One thing I wouldn't do was feed into anything Phillip believed he saw. All I'd need was shit getting back to Saadiq that I was out here spilling my feelings to another man. He hadn't put his hands on anyone since Rock, and I wanted to keep it that way.

"Alright, alright. I understand." Phillip did smile this time and went on

about his way. Not before his eyes cascaded up and down my body.

Shaking my head, I turned on my heels and strutted to the area where makeup and hair was. Once I retrieved my belongings, I was out of there.

On my way home, Lady called, hysterical.

“Girl, calm down,” I laughed.

“I can’t. What the fuck am I gon’ do with a baby?”

My mouth dropped.

“You’re pregnant?”

“Yes, girl! Shit!”

Gathering my composure, I said, “Congratulations!” I meant it from the bottom of my heart even though the same heart stung a bit.

“Congratulations? Girl, I can’t have this man’s baby!”

I pulled into my driveway and sat there staring at the screen like Lady was in front of me.

“Yes, the fuck you can. You’ve been with Jermaine for months and *never* have I heard you say a negative thing about you. Not once have you *cried* over this nigga. He hasn’t had you out here lookin’ crazy although he’s a fuckin’ NFL player and has enough women at his leisure to do what he wills. Not once, Lady.”

Just last week she was ecstatic that he professed his love for her. The words only followed his actions. Clearly Jermaine was more about Lady than Lady realized.

Lady sniffled. “You’re right, I’m trippin’.”

“You are. No, he hasn’t put a ring on your finger, but as your best friend, I know it’s coming. Give him time.”

Giving Lady advice on her man caused me to look at my reflection in the rearview mirror.

He said he heard you and asked you to be patient with him.

Patience wasn’t the issue. Wasted time was. Weeks had passed, and I was no closer to him opening up to me than before. Not even after I spent Thanksgiving and Christmas with him and his family. Not even after he gifted me a thirty-thousand-dollar watch did he break down and give me some type of feedback on anything pertaining to his past.

So, I was stuck somewhere between loving him through it and loving myself enough to realize that the longer I was with him, the more I was hurting myself.



“THANK you for taking off to come and do this with me.”

I hugged Lady and shooed her off. If my friend needed me to hold her hand while having her first obstetric appointment, I would do that. According to her doctor, all was well so far. Right now we were at a café, having salads for lunch.

“Where else would I be?”

“Somewhere with Saadiq,” she quipped with a giggle.

I giggled, too, to keep from making it awkward.

“He’s out of town for the next two weeks.” Much to my dismay. This morning I woke up without him next to me which had me in my feelings. If I wanted to walk away from this man and couldn’t be without him for one night, I was up shit’s creek.

“He would skedaddle *after* I become with child. The fucking nerve.”

I burst out laughing. “It’s not like Jermaine is letting you too far from him. Honestly, I love that for you.”

Lady smiled serenely.

“He asked me to go with him to the Superbowl game. What do you think that means?”

I low key squealed. “You better go! You would’ve come with me anyway.”

Her smile grew. “He’s so fucking crazy... and sweet. It’s the fact that he has a healthy balance of it that makes me just fall for his ass so much.”

“Exactly. I love Saadiq’s crazy just as much as I love his calmer side.”

Lady stared at me before smirking. “Mm, hm. We’re not gon’ talk about how you’ve been avoiding telling me what’s going on. You think I don’t know you’ve been down?”

Sighing, I picked over my salad and thought about lying. Then again, Lady was my best friend. The only interactions she’d had with Saadiq was when she popped up at my house and he was there. That happened every so often. Outside of that, she really never shared space with him. Speaking on him without her really knowing him would automatically make her want to take my side. I didn’t need that right now.

“It’s just everything with my dad. And Saadiq has some things in his past that I’ve been wanting him to open up about.”

“You still haven’t spoken to your dad since the last time?”

I shook my head. “Not even a text.”

“Aww, boo. I hate to hear that. Hopefully, one day your dad will wake up. If he doesn’t, it isn’t on you. Now as far as Saadiq... Give that man the same grace you would want him to extend you if the shoe was on the other foot. Demons are evil, we get that. But there’s a devil controlling the demon. Some people’s devils and demons are eviler than the next person’s. Which is scary as fuck to think about.”

Lady was right. I personally met the devil named Vivica. The demons she sicced on her son were unyielding and desperately holding on to him no matter how much he probably inwardly fought.

Here I was again, back on the side of the fence of staying with him. Something had to give, though. And soon.



I’D BEEN OBSERVING Saadiq for the last hour, wondering why his mood had suddenly changed. We were in the middle of playing a game of Scrabble when Ace called. Since, Saadiq had been moving funny.

He’d arrived back in town last night and made sweet love to me. Any time we came together he showed my body just how much he missed being with her. Whether it was one day, or several days, he showed her every single time.

Our game continued. However, he’d gotten quiet on me.

Several minutes later, the doorbell rang. He was already up and going to answer it before I could ask him who had stopped by. It was late as hell, and soon, we’d be going to bed.

Ace strolled into Saadiq’s house looking like he hadn’t slept all day. I’d talked to him earlier, and he seemed fine. Seeing the heaviness on his face wasn’t a good sign.

“What’s wrong?” I stood from the pallet Saadiq made in the middle of the floor and went to Ace

“I went to see Ennis today.” Ace never went to see our dad. “Found him in the living room. Right now it’s looking like he had a massive stroke. He’s gone.”

“What?” Devastated, my legs gave out. I didn’t even hit the floor as Saadiq lifted me in his arms. Not only was breathing difficult, my heart

seemed to break right in my chest. There was no way things ended this way. How could he leave without once telling me that he loved me?

Sadiq sat on the couch with me in his lap and rocked me like a newborn child as I cried. I was angry at him for leaving us this way. So much unsettled hurt, and he wanted to die without reconciling shit!

My heart bled heavily. How could I even survive this pain?

CHAPTER
EIGHT

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

LYING to Samara about where I'd been the last couple of weeks played with my mind. Especially after Ace called me to let me know that their pops had passed. I felt sorry for my brother and even more sorry for Samara. The love she'd been craving from her pops, she would never receive now.

Death was so fucking final. People always say to live life, make memories, and make amends with the people you love. It wasn't for you necessarily, but for those left behind. Since Ace left, I'd been keeping a close watch on Samara, and at the same time questioning what my own legacy would be. As much as I loved my Pops, I wondered how *she* would remember me.

Would she think that I'd given her absolutely everything I could give? Or would she hate me for leaving her with so many unanswered questions and feelings? She didn't have to tell me she loved me for me to know that she did. As hard as it was for her, she was patiently waiting for me to show her the same.

Going outside on the patio, I found her where she had been for the past two evenings, curled up on the patio sofa, staring at the sky. Holding her hand while she and Ace prepared to bury their father was a task I wasn't sure I could face again. When it came to burying Keva, it was fuck her and everything she stood for even in death.

Yet I sat by my woman's side and comforted her without the slightest complaint. Easing her up, I positioned myself underneath her, then lay her head back on my lap. Slowly I ran my fingers through her short strands, playing with them like I loved to do.

You love her.

"Samara, I'm sorry about your pops." I've told her this several times. But I needed her to hear me. I wanted her to know that I felt her pain and wished I could take it away from her. Her brokenness broke me.

"I want to be angry. At first I was. But now... Now I just want peace."

Her voice was low and filled with defeat. She thought she was playing a nigga, but I'd noticed a change in Samara after everything went down with Vivica, and the shit I said to her. Despite her misgivings, she was toughin' it out with me, wearing smiles I know she didn't feel.

No lie, that shit ate at me. Words wouldn't do justice for how I felt about her. So I'd been putting into motion other things. I thought I'd talk to her about the past when *I* was ready. But... now was the time. Whether or not I was ready.

"When I was eleven, Vivica was at the worse stages of her drug addiction than she had been in previous years. She hid the shit so well, Pops didn't even know it was as bad as it was until he came to get me from the juvenile facility. I spent overseas most of his military career, so we rarely got to see him."

Samara turned over until he was on her back, with her feet propped on the sofa. Her eyes were red as shit and her nose was too. She'd cried too many tears over the last few days. Some of them, I knew, were because of me.

"For the most part, I tried taking up for Vivica. When school administrators would threaten to send child services to our house for whatever reason, I would tell them that Devyn and I were just rough kids. For a time, it worked."

Sighing, I distracted myself with her beautiful face, while I recalled the worst night of my life.

"The particular night I ended up in juvenile, Vivica's boyfriend had been tryna rape Devyn. She claimed we needed money and that he would only agree to give it to her if she did what he told her. I got up to go to the bathroom and saw the nigga go into Devyn's room and close the door. I immediately knew something was wrong, so I tried to get in. That's when I heard Devyn start screaming."

Gulping past the disgust, I never took my eyes off hers. She was keeping me calm, so I trudged forward.

“I ran back to the kitchen to grab a knife, then busted Devyn’s door down. After I stabbed that nigga, we ran. I drove us as far as I could before the police caught up to us. We both promised each other we wouldn’t go back there, so I purposely wrecked the car, hoping it would free us from the clutches of Vivica.”

The memory didn’t suffocate me as much as it had in the past. Instead, I felt relief. God had other plans.

“At eleven, I wasn’t thinking that I could just call my pops, and he would save us. Vivica had us thinking he was off living his life and didn’t give a fuck about us. Every dime he sent us, she snorted up. Once cocaine was no longer enough, she went to stronger, more expensive shit. That’s when all the fuckin’ random niggas and inviting them into our crib started.”

I shook my head. “Dude after dude, every night, sometimes twice in one night. Shit was just crazy as fuck. Whole time she had a nigga who sat back and let her do that shit. Come to find out, it was ‘cause he had his own shit goin’. In the end, Arlon went to prison. Turns out he had done this shit to other boys and Vivica knew about that shit. My pops came back stateside, retired, and raised me and Devyn since then.”

Samara sat up, then brought herself into my lap, facing me. I thought she would say something. Instead, she hugged me. We embraced each other for a few minutes, each of us needing the little energy the other had.

When she pulled back, I kissed her lips, then her cheeks.

“I wasn’t honest with you about where I’ve been these last couple of weeks.” Running my fingers down her face, I knew my decision was the perfect one. “When I was eighteen, I had a vasectomy. I never wanted children. Ever. I never wanted to give a woman the opportunity to fuck a kid up the way Vivica did with me and Devyn. That’s how I knew Keva’s baby wasn’t mine. Until then, I never suspected I was being cheated on.”

Samara’s lids fluttered as she broke eye contact. I brought her gaze right back to mine.

“I had it reversed. Devyn went with me, and I stayed at his place until I was fully healed. It was hard as fuck not to hop in the car and ride over here. Especially just to sleep by your side. That was the most agonizing two weeks of my adult life.”

She snickered. I lightly pinched her chin, missing that smile.

“What I’m sayin’ is, the moment you’re ready, we can take it there. I want that with you I want everything with you.” I’d barely finished talking before fat tears spilled over the rim of her eyelids.

Turning points like this were the first step to climbing mountains that once seemed daunting. My legacy with Samara would never be one of sorrow as such with her pops. I refused to do lil’ baby like that. Our legacy would be perfect. That’s the only way I’d have it for her and for myself.



MOBILE, Alabama

RIDING through the neighborhood I lived in all those years ago should’ve caused me to have flashbacks. I fully expected to pull into Pine Village Estates and lose my damn mind. It wasn’t so, though. As I came upon the brick house, I parked along the curb and stepped out of my ride.

Nothing had truly changed about the community or the house I grew up in. One older model Acura occupied the driveway. It looked dead with no plants or lush greenery decorating the yard.

Opening the rickety gate, I walked up the pathway and onto the porch. Taking a very deep breath, I rang the doorbell.

“Wait, a damn minute!” Vivica shouted like I’d beat the door down. After all these years, hearing her voice was crazy. I thought it would trigger something deadly inside me.

She snatched the door open, wearing a robe and hair bonnet. Her eyes only widened for a moment before she started cackling.

“Well I’ll be damned! What the fuck led you over here?”

“Me being here doesn’t imply that I give a fuck about you. ‘Cause I don’t. However, I do give a fuck about Samara. She’s the only reason I’m here.”

Vivica leaned against the doorjamb and cackled louder. Drugs had done her bad. In her younger years, she’d been vibrant and beautiful. Now, she looked tired and dusty.

“I’m just here to say, that I forgive you.”

“Do you think I give a fuck? Boy, the day you got outta my house was the

best day of my life.”

Ignoring her comeback, I continued. “It’s not for you to give a fuck. I did this for me and my woman. Everything of you that attached itself to me, I’m leavin’ right here on this fuckin’ porch. No longer will you have control over me in any area of my life.”

I doubt she really heard me by the way she was laughing. But I kept going because I needed her to understand every boundary that I erected.

“Whenever you come to Pensacola, stay the fuck away from my woman. If you see her, pretend she’s a muhfuckin’ ghost and keep walkin’. None of ya people better not fuck with her. I swear on my life I’ll make you regret the day *you* were born if I ever think you or anyone you’re attached to is fuckin’ with her.”

“Boy, I gave birth to you.” She’d stopped laughing and was seething now. “You ain’t gon’ talk to me like that, and you damn sure ain’t gon’ threaten me.”

“I will on both accounts. Not for a second am I playin’ witchu. For years I let you fuck with my mind. But I’d be damned if I let you touch anything, or anyone attached to me. Don’t enjoy the rest of ya miserable life.”

Turning, I headed back down the pathway with her shouting at my back.

“That bitch made you soft as fuck! Can’t wait ‘til she fuck you over, too! That nigga Rajon knew you was a fuck boy! That’s why he fucked yo’ wife and got her pregnant!”

Growling under my breath, I held back the rage inside me from hearing her call Samara out her name. All the rest of the shit she said could go to hell. When I said I was leaving all the bullshit she spewed on her front porch, I meant that shit.

Vivica was a woman who deserved death but likely wouldn’t find it until she was in her old age. Bitches like her lived forever. It was the sweet, innocent women that left too soon.

Hopping back in my ride, I wasted no time cranking that bitch up and peeling off from the curb.

Back in Pensacola, I stood over Keva’s grave while her headstone was being placed. It wasn’t anything fancy. Just something to be here instead of the grave marker that had been here since she arrived.

Her broke ass, bitch ass family hadn’t even stepped up to the fucking plate and did it themselves. I felt bad for Keva in that regard.

“I thought once I found out who the nigga was, that it would be on site.

Truthfully, I don't give a fuck anymore. That nigga is a bottom feeder and y'all's fuck up brought a beautiful ass woman into my life. Besides all that, I forgive you, shawty. Hopefully, some part of you forgave me too."

Once her headstone was placed, I left all my feelings concerning her right at this plot. As I walked away, I dialed my pops.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Better."

"That's all I ever wanted for you, son. I love you."

"Love you, too, Pops."

"Hug Samara for us, will you?"

"I will."

Hanging up, I took a cleansing breath and smiled. My world waited at home for me.

SAMARA WISE

Days after my dad's funeral, I was still processing that he'd died. I didn't plan on handling any business concerning his possessions until my mind was clear to think.

Ace had bounced back quickly. He was already in the studio working on another album with Saadiq and Devyn. Honestly, I felt like that was his way of staying busy so that he didn't think about it.

His mother didn't come to Ennis' funeral, which was to be expected. Their relationship was toxic as hell, and she wanted no parts in anything that had to do with her ex-husband. When she left, she didn't look back.

The little people he knew or the scattered family we had straggled in and out. Service was quick and over with before I really had a chance to cry.

In death, he left me everything, while in life he gave me nothing. Deciding it was best, I sold his car, put his belongings in storage, and put the house up for sale. There was no way I could ever go back there. I'd use the money to invest in something for my future children.

Speaking of children, I was no longer taking my birth control. Watching my dad be put in the ground caused me to think about what I wanted my own life to be like. I didn't want to leave this earth not having lived to my full potential. I had the house, money, and career. What I didn't have was my own family to share any of it with.

Since Saadiq revealed that his vasectomy had been reversed, we were now working off my time. He said when I was ready, that we could make it happen. I thought long and hard before discontinuing the medicine. It ultimately came to me that if Saadiq could take a leap of faith in us, then so could I.

I stood at the kitchen island, preparing my notes for the Superbowl game, which was in a few days. I started not to go and let Marnie take my place. But I wouldn't give that smug wench the opportunity to one up me no matter how petty it was. Besides, this would give me something to do other than holing myself up in Saadiq's house.

The sound of the garage opening had a smile gracing my face and tingles shooting down my spine. My man was home. Minutes later he walked in, talking on the phone. My smiling eyes drew him to me.

Saadiq came up behind me and wrapped me in his arms. Next I felt his lips on my neck as he squeezed me closer. Saying he loved me had never left his lips. However, in the last couple of weeks, I could swear I felt his love at every turn.

"Aye, bruh, I just made it home. I'ma call you back after I bless my shawty."

I scoffed then giggled at Saadiq volunteering too much information to Devyn on the other end. His hard dick against my ass said that he wasn't kidding, though.

He placed his phone on the island, then turned me to face him before lifting me and positioning me on the island top. He stepped between my parted thighs and snuggled me once again. This sort of affection was never taken for granted.

"Before I bless my shawty, I wanna tell you something."

Draping my arms over his shoulders I said, "Okay. What you got for me?"

"A visit to Vivica. And a headstone for Keva."

Surprised, emotions welled up inside me. I tamped them down, though, until he gave me the outcome.

"How do you feel?"

"I feel like..." He kissed my lips, then smiled. "I feel like I'm in love. Yeah, love definitely got a nigga doing some shit I don't normally do. I'm makin' plans that include you. And it's fuck the world, just gimme you..."

A basket case I was at hearing those words pass his lips. In the next

second, I attacked him, bringing his face to mine, so that I could suck his tongue out of his mouth for sounding so sexy when he professed his love for me.

“I need you right now,” I whispered between kisses and fumbling with his light wash jeans at the same time. Finally, I got them open and reached inside for the dick that knew how to fuck me every which way I wanted. He snatched his white tee over his head, sending his chains tangling amongst each other.

My man was so fucking fine. One minute he could pass for a model, the next a warrior. I had no panties under his tee shirt. So when I lay back on the counter, I spread my legs wide for him to enter me. His face contorted into one of pleasure the minute my pussy wrapped around him. She understood how meaningful this moment was and literally melted from the slightest contact.

He stuffed me, groaning in time with me.

“You love me, Samara?” Slowly pulling back, he entered me again, torturing me.

“Yes, baby.”

“Say that shit!” he demanded.

“I love you, Saadiq!” Gasping for breath was hard when he was taking the very breath from my body.

My legs were still spread eagle and the sound of us was a song I would listen to on repeat.

“Saadiq... Take this journey with me, baby.” Just in reach was the end of the cliff. Once I jumped off, I knew the flight would be beautiful.

“Say less, Samara. I’ll take every journey witchu, love.” Both his hands wrapped around my neck as he swirled his hips and delivered powerful thrusts that seemed to touch my chest.

He was so deep, my mouth sagged open. But there was the cliff. In an instant, I was over it, flying.

“I love you, Samara!” His response was choppy due to the grip my pussy had on him. When he erupted, he chanted my name and didn’t stop until he was fully empty.



THE SKY BOX was packed with employees and their families. Although Pops didn't like the Hurricanes, he and Nesha were here enjoying the game with me, Saadiq, Devyn, and his sadity ass girlfriend. She clearly wanted to be somewhere else. Whenever I was around her, I paid her no attention, since that was what the hell she craved.

I hated that for Devyn because he was a really good dude. If home girl wasn't careful, she was going to lose him.

Ace was here along with a few of his homeboys. I rolled my eyes the minute they landed on Rajon coming through the door. His ass couldn't do shit but hang off my brother's dick. Ace would find out how grimy that nigga was in due time. Many rappers had flawed circles and Ace wasn't immune to it. He just had to see it for himself.

Lady was here, watching her man own the field. Her aura was just beautiful. It was one basking in love and contentment.

My gaze passed hers and landed on Marnie who was cliqued up with the other women whom I guessed had slept with my man. I paid them absolutely no attention just like Saadiq didn't. After all, I was the love of his life. He'd never give another woman what he gave me. Ever.

"I heard that dude right there is the one Saadiq's wife was cheating with."

For whatever reason, Marnie's voice carried, making it to my ears. Ears perked up, I discreetly scanned the room to find my man. He'd gone off to the bar a few minutes ago. Glancing that way, he was still at the bar, talking to Rajon and Ace.

"Which guy?"

Shoot I wanted to know too. If the enemy was in here, he needed to be aired out.

"Not Ace Heat. The other dude. I think his name is Rajon."

Taken aback, I debated whether or not the other chick's information was valid. If Rajon was the one who'd fucked Saadiq's wife, then I needed to go bust up their little conversation. Rajon wasn't about to play in my man's face!

"Girl, how you know? Rajon is nowhere on Saadiq's level. Why the hell would Saadiq's wife fuck with the help when she can have the boss?"

"Cause Rock told me. You know he and Rajon are blood related. Rock got an issue with Saadiq, 'cause Saadiq don't really fuck with neither of them like that. Then after Saadiq beat his ass on the show a while back, Rock been

on Saadiq since.”

“Not after Saadiq fucked him up at the club. That shit was so funny.”

The four women laughed while I stood to go join my man. As I approached Saadiq, his eyes lit up. I would’ve smiled back, but my gaze locked in on Rajon, who was staring at me per usual.

I walked into Saadiq’s open arms and let him snuggle my neck like I knew he would.

“You good, lil’ baby?” he asked.

“I’m perfect.” I pecked his lips then turned to mug Rajon. Normally, I wanted Saadiq to avoid confrontation. However, tonight I’d give him a pass.

“What are we talking about?” I asked the three men. Ace looked confused and sipped his drink while dividing his orbs between me, Saadiq, and Rajon.

“Nothin’. Just tryna get on this new beat with Ace.” Rajon was smiling too hard for a man about to get his teeth knocked out.

“Oh. So when did you start fucking Keva?”

Ace’s liquid went down the wrong pipe, sending him coughing. Rajon’s eyes widened and bounced to Saadiq. Saadiq’s hand resting on my abdomen never moved. His low chuckle had me glancing at him over my shoulder.

“That is a good question,” was Saadiq’s response.

“Wait,” Ace interrupted and glared at Rajon. “You was fuckin’ my nigga’s wife?”

“He was,” Saadiq confirmed. “But I really wanna tell you thank you, for real. If this was a few months ago, I would’ve gladly put a knife in ya throat and watched the blood drain outta you. However, I’m a healed nigga now, so you got that.”

Saadiq being so calm about this really had me conflicted. I wanted him to kick Rajon’s ass!

“Nah, you too cool, bruh,” Ace said agreeing with my internal thoughts. He stepped in Rajon’s face only for Saadiq to push him back.

“Nah, we ain’t gon’ spoil my woman’s night. Her colleagues an’ shit in here, and a nigga legit tryna do better.”

He left me, and Ace stumped. Rajon looked somewhere between scared and embarrassed.

“What I will do is this. You’re banned from anything owned by Montclair Savage. If my fuckin’ name is on it, you ain’t welcome there. *That’s* fair warning.”

Rajon attempted to explain himself, but Ace wasn’t going for that. He

jumped at Rajon, who bucked back, then decided it was best for him to get the fuck out of dodge. Ace called his security and went behind Rajon to make sure he was gone.”

Upset, I turned in Saadiq’s arms and glared at him.

“You knew? And why didn’t you fuck him up? How you just gon’ let him walk outta here without you choking his ass? And did you know he’s related to Rock’s jug-head ass, and he knew the whole time it was Rajon?”

His chuckle along with the way his head tilted caused the creases in my forehead to loosen.

“You got me on him being related to Rock. That’s news.”

“How’d you find out?”

“Vivica. And you?”

Nodding in the direction of Marnie and her crew, I said, “Those birds over there were talking about it. I had to come over here and check him for that foul shit.”

Saadiq put his arms around me and smirked.

“You came to check him?”

“I sure the fuck did. Trust me, I was not about to let that shit slide.”

He took my chin and lifted my face more, so that he could kiss me.

“I do trust you, baby. With my life.”

Speechless, I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. For Saadiq to finally admit to trusting me, healed something in me I didn’t know was there.

“You did help me save it, so it’s only right that I trust you with it.”

“Saadiq...”

I placed my arms around my man and clung to him like he was my lifeline. Having patience with him paid off in the most beautiful way.

Hours later, the celebration for the Hurricanes’ victory commenced inside the skybox. Lady was escorted down to the field to share the win with her boo. We watched on the big screen as the players, coaching staff, and media swarm the field.

One camera cut to Jermaine whose gaze was in search of someone. The minute he saw Lady, he went straight for her. He never gave her a chance to hug him, going on one knee instead.

Stunned, I screamed from the skybox like Lady could hear me. Tears ran down my face seeing the shock on hers. Jermaine’s teammates huddled around him as Lady gave him an emphatic nod. Her tears and smile were surely to grace several platforms come tomorrow, maybe even tonight.

“You’re worried ‘bout the wrong thing.” Saadiq grabbed my attention by stepping in front of me, blocking my view of the big screen.

I pushed his big ass. “Boy, if you don’t—” The words got lodged in my throat when he dropped to one knee.

Eyes wide and mouth touching the floor, I beamed down at Saadiq like he was for real crazy. My hands started shaking. Hell, my whole body started shaking! He produced a small velvet box from his pocket and popped it open. By now all the *oohs* and *ahs* had started. I didn’t care ‘bout nan one of ‘em. My man was proposing!

“Samara—”

“Yes!” I screeched.

Everyone except the haters burst into laughter along with Saadiq.

“Can I finish?” he asked.

I sniffled and nodded but held my hand out for him to place that rock on it. It was too perfect.

“Out of everyone’s voice, yours got through to me. I appreciate everything you have been to me. More importantly, I love you with everything that’s in me. Will you marry me?”

“Yessss!” I shouted it this time while jumping up in down. He slid the rock on my finger, then stood and lifted me into his arms. I cupped his face and brought him to me for a kiss that sealed everything about us.

EPILOGUE

S AADIQ MONTCLAIR

IN THE WEEKS following the Superbowl and my proposal to Samara, I acquired a shit load of businesses. While I was cool enough to let Rajon and Rock keep their lives, I wasn't above being petty as fuck. One such business I acquired was the production company funding, promoting, and running Rock's podcast. Once I found out that nigga was making a killing talking on that fucking microphone every day, it was official I was going for his pockets. One thing a nigga loved more than a bitch, was his money.

I'd heard around the way that Rock was still looking for work. None of the major networks were trying to fuck with him, and he damn sure couldn't make it on anyone else's show due to the reputation he'd built for himself. Where he was once that nigga for interviewing rappers at the top of their game, he was now just a fuck nigga who didn't know how to stay in his fucking lane.

Rajon wasn't too well off either. He was out here trying to infiltrate another crew since Ace had it on his head if he ever came back around him. Dick riding never produced a sustainable role. Once a nigga found out that grinding for his own shit was much better than dick riding another for his shit, then niggas would stop all this fucking undercover hostility shit.

Until then, as long as niggas stayed away from me and mine, I was cool.

Vivica was somewhere on her death bed, having destroyed her liver. I

wouldn't know that shit had Devyn not told me. It was in me not to give a fuck. However, the healed me wanted to at least send her a card.

Besides all that, I was officially a married man again. Only this union was built off trust, loyalty, and love.

I held Samara and swayed with her to our song. Her arms weren't around me. Instead, she had her back to my chest, with me holding her, and us clenching each other's hands. We were locked in like that. Our hands rested above her slightly swollen belly which carried our little girl.

She was slowly healing from losing her dad. On days when she seemed more down than others, I did whatever I could to cheer her up. Seeing her down was a no-go for me. Her smile meant more to me than anything.

"You once told me I was the only one who could dress my wounds. I beg to differ. Not only did you help me dress my wounds, but you continued to nurse them until they healed over. I'll never stop loving you for that, Samara."

Every wound I had, Samara's love quietly, yet boldly bound them up. They were no longer wounds but scars. Scars meant I survived that shit.

"The wounded me loved you. The healed me loves you more than my next breath. I'm gon' treat you like you are my next breath—I don't take it for granted, and I'll do anything to have it. I'll do anything to have it because I wanna spend every breath loving you. I wanna spend as much time on this side of the dirt showing you that I love you."

Samara's head lay on my chest as I professed my feelings for her. This was something I'd never stop doing. Each time it occurred to me to do so, I would reaffirm my love and appreciation for her. She was the reason a widow's wounds were turned into scars.

Forever wouldn't be long enough for me to love her.