

NEW HEIGHTS

could you
RESPONSE

christina e jones

Call and Response

A NEW HEIGHTS NOVELLA

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WARM HUES CREATIVE

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CHAPTER ONE

Audra

IT WAS KINDA HARD to block out the noise sometimes.

At any given moment, my mind was a too-fast carousel, constantly circling, rising and falling with an ever-running list of things to do, places to be, people to talk to, art to create.

It was *loud*.

Not here though.

I closed my eyes, sinking back into the time-worn leather of the armchair I'd claimed in a tucked-away corner of the coffeehouse. Without the interference of sight, I could just listen to the ambient sound—the customers, the cash register, the espresso machines, the traffic passing outside...

Mmmm.

It was the best possible ASMR, not beholden to charged earbuds or a connection to the Wi-Fi.

Just enough of a hum to make everything else melt away, allowing me to focus on just this *one* thing.

Harmonies in the Heights.

There was a whole list of folks who thought it was wild that I would push everything else off my career plate to organize a concert and they had a whole list of reasons.

You've never done anything like this before.

You're not an event planner.

And the one giving me the most anxiety of all:
Performing? You?! I thought you were a writer?

Shit.

I was letting the noise creep in again.

I sat forward, grabbing my lukewarm coffee to take a sip before forcing my attention back to my laptop screen, which I had split into two windows. One was filled with tonight's lineup—an excellent list of artists. All of whom I'd either worked with before or had some personal connection to the Heights. Despite the secrecy around the list of performers, all the tickets had already sold out, making tonight a success before it even happened.

Kinda.

My eyes fell on a forty-five minute window that currently said *Vibe Check*.

If necessary, that time would be filled with a curated playlist. People could dance, get drinks, take a bathroom break, etc., before the concert hit another high with one of the big artists—Kyir.

Really though?

That slot was supposed to be a performance slot.

For me.

My other open window held my personal setlist; music that would be brand new to damn near everyone who heard it, which was risky to say the least.

A wiser approach would've been to introduce the music on social media first, give myself time to find the audience and vice versa.

The advice I would've given anybody.

And yet... I hadn't been able to bring myself to do it. At every instance, I succumbed to a level of second-guessing that had never been an issue for me. Success at my craft had made me the poster child for confidence in my abilities.

But still.

Here we were.

Here *I* was, staring at a list of songs I loved, songs I'd rehearsed with my band, songs my cousin Winnie had been begging me to let her play in one of her boxing classes.

She was at least one person who would be screaming my lyrics back at me from the audience... if I got my shit together.

Why can't you get your shit together?

I sighed.

Why, indeed.

If nothing else, the audience was going to show me love, even if it was just to be polite. I might get my ass dragged online later, but I wasn't going to be booed off the stage or anything like that, even if the music was trash.

But the music isn't trash.

I took another long drink of my tired coffee.

The music *wasn't* trash.

I wasn't even capable of that.

But I knew from experience sometimes it wasn't even about the music itself or even the talent of the artist. Sometimes the music just... didn't mesh with the artist.

And sometimes the audience didn't mesh with the artist.

Especially if they were expecting some certain thing, but what they got was wholly different.

Like with me.

I'd built a masterful career on something I was untouchably good at.

And... shit.

What if that was all people wanted from me?

"You want a top-up?"

The deep tenor posing that question snagged my attention immediately and I looked up, directly into a handsome, vaguely familiar face.

More than handsome.

Fine.

My eyes narrowed, searching my clouded mind for his name instead of answering his question.

“You’re Audra Charles,” tumbled out of his mouth, eyes wide, before he could school his reaction to something much, *much* more neutral. Like a repeat of the inquiry that matched the coffee pot in his hand.

He wasn’t wearing a nametag or any other Urban Grind paraphernalia though.

Still, his recognition of *me*, which was rare, made the answer of who *he* was fall into place for me. “You’re Noble Taylor,” I said, still not answering the question he’d posed. “You were in a group with Josiah, right? *The Cure?*”

Something flashed across his face—annoyance, shame, something like that—and he shrugged. “Yeah. Something like that. Did you want more coffee?”

“I’ll pass,” I answered, leaning in a bit. “What are you doing here?”

“Just helping out the fam,” he said, gesturing vaguely toward the front counter, where the owner, Roman, was working at the register. “Lots of call-outs. Apparently everybody needs time off to attend your event.”

My event.

Whew.

Despite how proud I’d been to plaster the graphics with “Harmonies in the Heights, curated by Audra Charles” big and bold, his mention of it now made my armpits feel hot.

“Sorry.” I grinned and he shrugged.

“No need, it happens. Besides, it’s nice to have something like this at the park. Kinda wish somebody local had dreamed it up first, but it’s cool.”

My eyes went wide. “Wow... okay. Thanks for your... permission, I guess? I hope it doesn’t disappoint.”

“I doubt that’s a possibility with somebody like you involved, but I’m surprised you’re *here* right now. Doesn’t everything kick off in like... a

couple hours?”

“My team is on it,” I countered, confused by what I was picking up as... shade?

Why?

“Hey,” I added, after a sudden thought occurred. “If I’d known you were in the Heights, I would’ve invited you to perform. I thought you and Josiah were both still in Cali?”

His free hand went to his head, restless, brushing over his fade. “Uh... yeah, I moved back a bit ago. And I’m not on that anymore anyway, so...”

I frowned. “What are you not on anymore?”

“Music.”

That answer made my head rear back in surprise. “What? I mean, I know the group isn’t a thing anymore, but you had solo music, I thought? And, wait, you were just featured on *the* song of the summer last year, with Ky,” I remembered. “What do you mean you’re *not on music* anymore?”

“I mean exactly that.” He shrugged. “But... I’m not really trying to get into this conversation, so—”

“Yeah no, I get it. I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s just... you’re so talented.” I shook my head. “Like... so talented. Voice of a generation talented, so I just... I don’t understand?”

The sadness in his eyes when he nodded almost brought tears to mine, but again, he shuttered it. “I appreciate you saying that, but... I’m supposed to be keeping the coffee pot moving, so...”

“That’s definitely cold by now,” I told him, and he looked at it, a little surprised, before he nodded again.

“Yeah, I guess it probably is. I should take care of that.”

He couldn’t get away from me fast enough.

And instead of minding my business like I knew I should, since, like he’d said, in just a few hours a first-of-its-kind neighborhood concert with my name attached was kicking off.

But like *I* said...

I didn't understand.

My carousel started up, decorated this time with what little I knew about Noble Taylor.

I knew Josiah pretty well, but I'd never kicked it with both of them and I knew little about why they'd disbanded the group, right on the cusp of genuine success. They were independent artists and doing well with the preponderance of social media on their side. If they'd lasted just another couple of years, the latest app, which had a background music feature baked into the functionality, would've exponentially blown up their success.

Josiah was capitalizing on it now, so booked and busy that he'd had to turn my invite for tonight's performance down.

But... the same hadn't been the case for Noble.

Even though he was inarguably the more talented of the two.

And finer, to be perfectly honest.

And his voice?

Whew.

Like butter.

The first time I heard him on that raunchy ass song with Kyir, something had stirred in my spirit and my panties, but when I thought about his solo music, I couldn't quite say the same.

Mostly because I couldn't actually remember any of it.

I knew it *existed*, which was confirmed by a quick search of his name on the internet. No solo album, but he had a few things out on streaming services. None of it had the plays I would expect from someone who was pretty fresh off a major feature.

Making sure my earbuds were connected, I hit play on a couple of the songs. The beats were good, Noble's voice was great, but the music itself was... *meh*.

Which was kinda the worst thing your art could be.

Just... *meh*.

Not enough of anything to garner a strong reaction.

Damn.

Curiosity about the contrast took me to the still-available music from *The Cure*, all of which was older than Noble's solo work, but was trending higher.

Much higher.

Damn.

Even though the music was older, it felt fresh—great production, great vocals, and perfectly toxic lyrics and arrangements that would be at home on the charts *today*.

The difference was stark.

Especially when a quick glance at the details showed Noble was the songwriter of note on a *lot* of the music.

I pushed out a sigh.

"*I think I know why you're 'off' music,*" I muttered to myself as I glanced around the room, trying to spot him again.

If I had to guess, that lack of solo success had probably killed his confidence. And the reception of the song with Kyir... that was a double-edged sword. Yes, it was great people loved the song, but what did it mean that people only went hard for the music when there was someone else on the track?

Shit.

I could only imagine the hell happening in his head.

And couldn't help wondering if there was anything I could do.

Not that I needed to be fixing things for somebody else when I could barely help my damn self right now.

At first I shook my head, but then... I sat straight up.

What if I could do both?

Help him *and* help myself?

When I spotted him coming from the back, I hopped up from my seat, making a beeline straight for him.

“Hey, what are you doing tonight?” I asked and his eyes went wide.

“Huh?”

“What are you doing tonight?” I repeated.

A little smirk spread over his mouth, hitting me *right* in the panties. “I’m flattered,” he said. “But I’m not really dating or anything right now.”

I sucked my teeth. “Man, I’m not trying to fuck you,” I told him. “I want you to perform with me tonight.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Perform? With *you*?”

“Yes, with me,” I countered, propping my hands on my hips. “Something was missing and I think you could be the answer.”

He shook his head. “Audra... you’re a writer. A damn talented writer. What do you mean, perform?”

“I’m not *just* a writer,” I argued. “I can sing, and I can perform, and... it’s a yes or no question. Will you do it?”

“You say it like it’s so simple.”

“Because it is,” I insisted. “People don’t know me, not like this. But they know you. They’ll be excited for you.”

“What would we even perform?” he asked.

“My songs.”

“I don’t know your songs!”

“But you’re a performer, a *real* performer,” I countered. “You know how to improvise, and ad lib, right?”

He pushed out a sigh and nodded. “Yeah, but—”

“No buts!” I shook my head. “It’ll be amazing—call and response. I know you’re familiar.”

“Yeah, b—”

“*No buts!* Remember?” I asked. “It’s a forty-five minute set. We’ll do a couple of my songs, a couple of well-known duets. ‘Nothing Even Matters’

and ‘Say So’,” I decided right then, certain he already knew both songs. When he didn’t object, I kept talking. “And we can do a couple of your—”

“Nah,” he cut me off. “I’m good.”

“Noble, we have to do something where you’re the focus.”

“It won’t be a bunch of stuff nobody was fucking with.”

I sighed. “Fair enough. *The Cure* songs then.”

“Josiah is gonna bitch about it.”

“Who gives a shit?” I laughed. “When is Josiah *not* bitching about something?”

That earned me something adjacent to a smirk.

Finally, a sign of amusement from him.

“So... we’re doing this?” I asked and he let out a little huff.

“I... I don’t know.” He shook his head. “This is pretty wild for last minute. What do I get out of this?”

“You get to be back on stage, doing what you love, and you were *way* too open to this idea for me to believe your *I’m not really doing music anymore* bullshit,” I told him. “This—music—is in your veins.”

“Like poison,.” He snorted. “Just cause it’s in me, doesn’t mean it’s good.”

“That’s *so* dramatic.” I laughed. “And I’m not trying to hear it. If you do this for me... I’ll write you a hit song.”

He scoffed. “You can’t guarantee that.”

“The hell I can’t. Every song I write is a hit song.”

“Is that why you need somebody to hold your hand with you on stage for the first time?”

My mouth dropped open. “Okay... wow. Drag me.”

“I didn’t mean it like—”

“It’s fine,” I insisted, waving him off. “But we’re wasting time. Do we have a deal or not?”

I extended a hand, watching, waiting for him to accept it.

He thought about it, and then...

“Yeah. We have a deal.”

Whew, shit.

Okay.

Okay.

I *had* to go on stage now, because it was affecting someone’s life other than just my own.

Whew.

Okay.

Sink or swim.

Whew.

Okay.

CHAPTER TWO

Noble

YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?

That was the unspoken question in the eyes of every person I had to explain myself to when it suddenly became necessary for me to head out.

Or maybe it was projection.

It was probably projection, because... shit.

Was I sure about this?

Absolutely fucking not.

I was still going to do it, though.

“You’re really taking that hairline on stage?” Royal asked, the first actual question I’d gotten between him and Anika. They were tag-teaming manager duty today, and even though I was just volunteering, they were the obvious people to talk to about leaving.

And they were family.

Anika gave Royal the stink-eye as I ran a hand over my head. I was due for a line-up I’d planned to drop by the shop for next week, but now that my brother had brought it up...

“I bet Troy can squeeze you in for a quick cleanup,” Anika offered in a soothing tone. “And if not, this is the exact kind of situation they make hats for. Shut up, Royal.”

“Why I gotta shut up, I’m looking out.” Royal shrugged. “The blogs will say he on that shit if he pops out looking raggedy.”

She sucked her teeth. “Blogs? You’re ten years late.”

“You know what I meant, girl.”

“Do I?” Turning back to me, she smiled. “This is exciting. Are you excited? I didn’t even know Audra sang. How does she sound?”

How indeed.

Definitely not something that should be a question in my mind. At least, not if I was making good decisions.

“Uh... she sounds good,” I guessed, trying to sound more certain than I felt.

Audra was pretty major in the industry, major enough to have mega-stars in The Heights tonight for the concert she’d curated. Surely she wouldn’t get on stage and embarrass herself by not having the voice to back up her presence.

There wasn’t that much misplaced confidence in the world.

Right?

Anika and Royal exchanged a look. Clearly neither of them believed I knew what the fuck I was talking about, but they were nothing if not supportive since I’d been back in town.

“I’ll shoot Troy a text and see if he can squeeze you in. Quickly, because doesn’t the concert start soon? Like... real soon? Like... is there time for a rehearsal soon?” Anika asked, glancing at her watch.

“I’m supposed to be meeting her at the rec center in two hours, more like an hour and a half now,” I corrected myself after my own time check. “Her set is a bit later, so I think she wants to run through some things first.”

“Good.” Royal nodded. “Give you a chance to shake the cobwebs off.”

I frowned. “What cobwebs? I’ve been fine performing with Ky.”

“Eh. You’ve been a little pitchy,” he argued. “Why you think Ky ain’t ask you to perform with him for this?”

“Kiss my ass.” I chuckled, getting off that topic as I finally broke out of my semi-frozen state.

I had to get out of there.

Anika let me know Troy actually could squeeze me in for a quick lineup between appointments, so I popped by there first, then rushed my ass home for a shower.

And clothes.

What the fuck was I supposed to wear?

No time to dwell on it.

I grabbed the kind of thing I would wear any other time I was getting on stage—jeans, fresh tee, clean sneakers, a chain. As soon as I was ready, I left.

I couldn't give myself time to think about it too much.

I had to keep moving.

Before reality caught up to me.

The closer I got to the park where Harmonies in the Heights was being held, the louder the music got. The concert itself had already started, so the journey was thick with people heading there.

It was noisy and festive.

Perfect to keep me out of my head.

I got myself to the venue with no issues and headed straight for my meeting spot with Audra, which turned out to be a large conference room set up like a mini soundstage. The level of security I had to get through made much more sense to me than how solitary she'd been at the coffeehouse.

Maybe since the average person might not recognize her on the street, it was easier for her to be incognito.

Now though, she was clearly in star mode. The oversized athleisure and ponytail she'd been in before was gone, replaced by big, free hair framing her pretty ass face, fitted jeans, and a purposefully destroyed t-shirt hanging off a bare shoulder.

She was already fine dressed down at UG, but now... damn.

"Ah!" she shrieked happily when she looked up from her laptop to see me headed in her direction. "You really came!"

My eyebrows dropped. “I said I would, didn’t I?”

“Well, yeah, but you seemed a little nervous about it. So I’m glad to see you,” she said, standing up to hug me. “Ohhh, you smell good as hell,” she groaned, taking a deep inhale before she stepped back. “I appreciate how easy you’re making this for me.”

“Easy?”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “You’re fine, you smell good, your voice is like butter. You’re contributing to my vibe, you know?”

“Oh. Uh... yeah,” I agreed, not knowing what else to say.

She frowned. “But you’re awkward as fuck—which is a vibe killer, and not at all expected—what’s going on?”

Shit.

“My bad,” I told her, shaking my head as I glanced around at the improvised stage. There was a tracklist pulled up on her computer and she was talking about me adding to her vibe, when... “I don’t even know if you can sing,” I admitted. “So I’m not feeling the breeziest.”

Her head jerked back. “You don’t think I can sing?”

“That’s not what I said,” I quickly corrected. “I said I don’t know if you can sing. There’s a difference.”

“There is a difference. And you’re kind of an asshole,” she snapped. “But let me dispel your concerns.”

Eyes narrowed, but not dropping contact, she picked up a guitar from nearby. I expected her to take a seat with it, there was a stool a few feet away. Instead, she got right in my face, maintaining that eye contact as her fingers strummed an impressively complicated riff.

And then she opened her mouth.

If I wait on you to see what I see, feel what I feel

I’m looking at overgrown yards, broken wheels

Letting life pass by, missing good meals

Cause

*You feel unsure
You're insecure
"Love's" premature
But I've got the cure for you
You stay here
Immersed in your fears
While I disappear
You're made yourself clear
So I'll make it easy for you
I'll be brave enough
For the both of us
No handcuffs
I'll go with no fuss*

"Okay, I get it," I spoke up, shaking my head.

The song was too polished to be off the cuff about me offending her, but damn if her delivery didn't make it feel that way. She was looking me right in the face, with the voice of a well-seasoned angel, singing lyrics about me—I mean, some other dude—being... a bitch, basically.

A smirk spread over her lips and she stepped back, lowering the guitar. "So I've got your approval, then?" she asked.

"You never needed it, clearly." I nodded. "But thank you for easing my mind."

"You're welcome. Your turn now," she said, hefting the guitar into my hands.

I frowned, accepting the instrument to make sure it didn't fall. "You already know I can sing."

"True." She smiled. "But before we get on this stage, I need to make sure we can vibe. We can't execute my vision without chemistry."

"Chemistry isn't something you can... perform. Or practice," I said. "It's there or not. You have it or don't."

She nodded. “I agree. So... Let’s see if we’ve got it.”

I wasn’t exactly *confused* as she walked over to the keyboard nearby and sat down, but I also wasn’t... *not* confused.

I had no clue what she was expecting me to do.

Once her hands hit the keys though, playing the melody for “Nothing Even Matters”, the Lauryn Hill and D’Angelo duet she wanted us to perform, I understood.

It was time to step into it.

So... I did.

I put my fingers where they needed to be to accompany her on the guitar and I tuned myself in as she started singing the first verse. Not necessarily as her co-performer, but as her fella in the relationship we were crooning about.

It was key to getting the delivery right, if you asked me.

It wasn’t just about stepping on a stage to sing a song, it was about... expression.

Immersion.

Not a performance.

A dialogue.

In the absence of an audience... I was “talking” to Audra.

We were in conversation with each other and the words flowed easily—not just because I knew the lyrics.

This was my lane; this was where I *thrived*.

Which was why it fucked me up so badly that I couldn’t seem to find my groove.

Not on my own, at least.

It wasn’t that Kyir hadn’t asked me to perform the song that had put my name back on people’s radar musically. He *had*, actually.

I’d refused.

The feature had been an enjoyable experience to record, fun to perform, and had put money—*good* money—in my pocket, and would for the

foreseeable future, but it wasn't... *me*.

It wasn't the type of time I was trying to be on, not anymore. It was more in line with the kind of shitty relationship music I used to make with Josiah; the kind of shit he still made now. And to his credit, people ate it up.

Toxic was hot right now.

In music *and* character, apparently. It was wild to me that Josiah had bounced back from the borderline criminal scandal that gave me no choice but to separate myself from him.

Not because it was a scandal.

Because I couldn't rock with what he'd done.

But that was behind me now—was *supposed* to be behind me, at least.

Right now, I was in a moment, getting to perform the kind of music that made me feel like myself again, like I hadn't in a long ass time.

And damn if Audra's voice wasn't making me feel something *else* I hadn't felt in a long ass time, too.

Not the time for that.

Not even a little.

But it was impossible not to recognize that Audra was sexy as hell—full-bodied, sultry-voiced, pretty-faced, and just... so damn self-assured that I gravitated to her, needing to be closer.

Especially as we transitioned into songs that weren't as intense in tone—the PJ Morton song, another of hers I was supposed to do ad-libs and background for, and a *Cure* song that felt much different singing with her.

“Knock Knock” was about a dude trying to talk an ex into a bit of late night creeping, unresolved feelings be damned.

Like I said before... *toxic*.

With Audra singing Josiah's parts, though, it turned the song into another conversation. Instead of coercion, it was more like... a negotiation.

We both won and we both lost.

But it was balanced.

And it was smooth as hell—a better dynamic than the original ever was.
Particularly with Audra’s subtle lyric changes.

*Soon as I hear that knock-knock
I’m ready to get on top and ride
Whenever you want it, fuck the clock
I’m waiting for you to come inside
Looking me right in my damn face.
Right in the face.*

She had to know *exactly* what she was doing, exactly what it was doing to me.

There was nothing else the little smirk she was wearing could mean.
Still.

I knew better.

I gave her back that same energy, but kept in the back of my mind that it wouldn’t go beyond the stage.

I couldn’t afford to let any kind of personal drama fuck up this opportunity.

Once the song was done, Audra smiled at me, shifting out of performance mode as she stood from the keyboard. “So... what do you think?” she asked. “We’re good together, right?”

“Randomly as fuck... we are,” I agreed.

She grinned even wider. “I don’t know how random it is. I think it was meant to be.” She glanced up at the big clock on the side of the conference room. “In about ten minutes, there’s gonna be a bunch of people in here, making sure I’m ready to go on, putting mics on us, all that. So... last chance to escape.”

I shook my head. “Nah, I don’t need that,” I assured her.

“So you’re good then?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

CHAPTER THREE

Audra

DEBUTING new music in front of a crowd was... a tough sell.

It wasn't something I'd recommend to even the biggest superstars I'd written music for. Of course there were people who wouldn't hear the song until it was performed live, but there was lots and lots to be said for the people who would have already heard it, learned the lyrics, and taught themselves complementary choreography to go alongside it all.

That signaled to others they were listening to a hit.

Whatever grievances one might have with “groupthink”, it often worked out favorably for artists. Lots of people—maybe the majority—needed people to tell them they were listening to a good song.

Otherwise they wouldn't know.

Less insidiously, seeing someone else enjoy something influenced you to give it a chance.

Not leveraging any of that was... a choice.

It was the level of risk I'd decided on for myself.

For some reason.

Not for *some* reason, actually.

It was because I was a coward.

I never could make myself just post the damn music.

But now that I was on this stage... Now that I'd invited *Noble* onto this stage, now that there were thousands of excited faces staring back at us, ready

for us to put on a show *on this stage*... there was no turning back.

“*Mahogany Heights, make some noooooise!*”

Ah, hell.

Why *that* came out as soon as I opened my mouth to address the crowd, I had no clue. It was so corny and overdone, enough to cringe over, but it didn't matter.

The Heights made the noise.

Excitement pierced through the nervousness pricking at my chest and I smiled at the crowd, placing my fingers in the appropriate places on my guitar. I looked at the band, looked at Noble, and then... It was time to perform.

Suddenly it wasn't a decision to worry about anymore, it was simply an imperative to follow through on. I started singing my brand-new song that no one knew and maybe only ten or so people had ever heard before.

By the time I made it to the second round of the chorus, everybody was singing along.

I mean, obviously not *everybody*, but definitely a lot of people, which was... *shit*.

It was one thing when it was music I'd written for someone else, but *this*?

This was different.

This was affirming in a way I hadn't expected, giving me a booster pack of confidence I used to charge into the next song, and the next, and the one after that.

And Noble...

Noble was a damn good decision.

Half my smiles on stage I could directly attribute to him. He didn't just *sound* good, the man knew music. Not just how to use his voice, but *music*—lyrics to other songs in other genres, easily slipping in on-the-fly ad-libs that engaged the crowd *and* sounded amazing.

We didn't just have complementary voices, we had actual performance

chemistry, which I would *easily* credit for the long ass applause we got when we finished the set.

Which came out of *nowhere*.

We were vibing, so the time just *flew* by. One moment I was giving that cringey introduction, the next we were waving goodbye, and one more blink and we were at my cousin Winnie's gym for an after-hours celebratory wind-down—the open space was perfect for a last-minute thing.

With all the major planning out of the way—and the team I'd hired doing the actual coordination and running of the show—I'd been able to kinda... compartmentalize. I was never concerned about the *rest* of the event going well.

Just the performance I was directly responsible for.

But if the buzz from the crowd was the primary metric to look for, it was clear the entire event had been a success, not just my performance.

Hence, the little after-party. We had rules about the time to leave the venue, but I felt like free drinks and food were the least—besides their paychecks, obviously—I could do.

My team, the band, my friends, some artists, Noble, some of his people too—at least thirty people ended up packed in for what I'd really intended to be a small thing.

Way too many.

But it was okay.

The energy from the successful performance had me damn near floating, so I wasn't even bothered like I might normally be. I was, however, tired.

Which Winnie must've picked up on.

“Aiight, it's late, y'all. You ain't gotta go home, but... y'all know the rest,” she playfully announced. All that was needed to get people moving on to their next things—sleep, other parties, booty calls, whatever.

“Thank you for that,” I told her between goodbyes, as people started filtering out.

“No problem, cuzzo. I can see the *over it* all in your face.” She laughed, making my eyes go wide. “Chill,” she said, holding up her hands. “Your eyes are just getting low.”

“*Oh*,” I breathed, relieved. “Everybody did such a good job. I don’t want anyone thinking I’m bothered by something. All I really need is some quiet. Maybe a bit of sleep.”

“Bye,” Winnie huffed. “What you need is some *dick*.”

“Do *not* start that,” I groaned, stepping away from her in an attempt to stave off that line of conversation.

She wasn’t having it though. She followed right behind me, and then stepped in front, wearing a mischievous grin that instantly spiked fear.

“Winnie...”

“Hey Noble, you think you can walk Audra home please?” she called over to where he was standing a few feet away.

His eyebrows lifted in surprise before he walked over and I couldn’t even scold Winnie for the clear—to me, at least—implication she’d laid, for no damn reason.

“That’s unnecessary,” I told him, shaking my head. “I’m sure you’re exhausted and probably ready to get home. I’m going to hang out a bit longer to help clean—”

“Uh, no, you’re not,” Winnie interrupted, still wearing that damn smirk. “I already talked to the cleaning crew about an extra day this week—paying them double time for the mess. *Go home*. Thanks Noble, you were *brilliant* tonight, by the way. Did I say that already?”

“A few times.” He nodded, chuckling as he accepted a quick hug from her. “But I’ma eat it up every time, so say it as much as you feel.”

“I know that’s right.” She laughed. “Good night. And good night, *cousin*,” she said, and my eyebrows shot up, confused by the emphasis, but... this was Winnie. “Noble, please make sure she gets in bed.”

“Huh?”

“Ignore her. Come on,” I insisted, looping an arm through his to get away from her before her innuendo turned into explicit instructions.

Again—this was Winnie.

“I’m not playing,” she called after us. “You know my nigga beat people up, don’t make me—”

“Hold up, *what?*”

Relief breezed over me as Jonathan—the nigga in question—intervened, sufficiently distracting her so we could get away.

“Sorry about that,” I offered, shaking my head, but Noble laughed.

“I’ve been around Winnie enough to know she can get a little wild at the mouth.” He shrugged. “She’s cool.”

I raised an eyebrow as we stepped out into the night, thankfully much cooler than it had been all day. “Really? You’ve been kinda giving uptight vibes, so I’m surpri—”

“*Uptight?*” he cut in, clearly taken aback. “Me?”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “*You*. You were lowkey rude to me at the coffeehouse.”

He opened his mouth, probably to refute that claim, then... realized he couldn’t. “My bad,” he chose instead, looking ahead of us on the sidewalk to avoid looking at me.

“The music is a tough topic for you...”

There was no use in framing it as a question when it was so abundantly clear.

He nodded. First at my question, then to a small group walking past who recognized us and spoke, but otherwise kept it pushing—magic of a neighborhood like the Heights.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” he said, after we’d walked in silence for a bit. “Honestly... I’d been thinking about hanging it all up, and I still might, but... this was... I won’t forget this.”

He finally looked at me, holding my gaze for so long that the smile my

mouth curved into was more reflexive than anything else, prompted by the feeling of butterflies in my chest.

“I should thank *you*,” I told him. “I don’t think I would’ve been nearly as well-received without the hometown hero at my side. Not to mention, that brain of yours, some of those lyrical references you ad-libbed? *Genius*.”

He shrugged. “That’s what you said we were doing, right? Call and response.”

“I mean yeah, but *damn*. You’re... gifted,” I said, and this time, I was the one holding the gaze, wanting him to understand I really meant that shit.

That talent-attractiveness-intellect trifecta was nothing to sneeze at.

“I appreciate that.” He nodded, breaking the eye contact to look up the street again.

“But do you *believe* it?” I asked.

His gaze shot back to mine.

Eyes narrowed.

“What?”

“I asked if you believed what I said. If you believe you’re gifted,” I repeated, though I was confident he’d heard me perfectly well the first time.

“What makes you think I don’t?”

“The way you keep brushing it off,” I countered, stopping to wait for the crossing signal. “And also the fact that you haven’t actually answered the question.”

His hand went to the back of his neck, squeezing like he was trying to soothe a sudden rush of tension as he shook his head. “I... honestly?”

“Please.”

He shrugged. “I don’t... I don’t know anymore.”

“Because you haven’t been able to get anything to pop off on your own... you’re taking it personal?”

He let out a bark of laughter as we crossed the street. “How do you *not* take it personal?”

“Well... I mean, the music that isn’t working... is it personal to you?”

“I wrote it.”

“That’s not what I asked though. I asked if it was personal to you. Like... meaningful. You poured your heart, your soul, everything into it and it flopped?”

“Uh... nah,” he answered, after giving it a moment of thought. “It’s not like *that*. Hasn’t been. But it was good stuff.”

“Maybe for someone else.”

“What?”

“Maybe it was good stuff for someone else—not you. The music has to fit the person, the audience has to believe it, and they don’t believe... *you*.”

He stopped this time, arms crossed over his chest. “What does that mean?”

“It means I listened to your solo stuff, and you’re right, it’s not *bad*, it’s just not *you*.”

“You don’t know me.”

“But musically, I *should*,” I countered. “You went from that good toxic shit with Josiah to... music our grannies would approve of,” I explained. “And I don’t think that’s what you’re about. I think *The Cure* is you. I think the song with Ky is you. But you want so badly to not be associated with Josiah and his bullshit that you’re not doing what actually works.”

“So toxic is the only thing that works now?” he scoffed. “I can’t accept that. I need to grow.”

“Then *grow*... and take us with you. Show it. You can’t go straight from sneaky link tunes to twenty-fifth anniversary music.” I laughed, and after a moment, he did too. Then, I continued. “The transition period is important, and if I had to guess... I think that’s what you’re missing—that shift. Like... I know for a fact Josiah was on the exact kinda bullshit y’all were singing about in his real life. What about you?”

He sighed, shaking his head before he admitted, “I was writing from

experience.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “But you’re not in a relationship now, you’re not in love, you’re not married... Why is the music about that then?”

“How do *you* know I’m not those things?”

I sucked my teeth. “*Please*, you’re way too surly for that.”

“Surly?”

I giggled. “That’s what I said. So... you figure out what space you’re in. Figure out how to articulate it. And *that’s* where the music should be. Not ahead of it or behind it. And that’s where we’ll write from. Okay?”

His eyes narrowed a little, confused. “Uh... okay. I think.”

“I *know*.” I laughed. “My building is just right there,” I told him, pointing down the sidewalk from where we’d stopped. “You go home, get some rest... do some thinking. And in two days... we write. Cool?”

“Yeah, but... I need to walk you the rest of the way. I think I promised Winnie I’d make sure you went to bed.”

I sighed. “Noble... Winnie was insinuating you were gonna fuck me to sleep, so unless that was in your plans for tonight, I think I’ve got it from here.”

“Oh!” He chuckled; eyes wide. “I did not pick up on that,” he said, gesturing for me to move, so I did. “I can’t say that was in my plans though.”

“Not *tonight* or not at all?” I asked as I started up the steps to the door.

“I... uh—”

“Relax.” I laughed. “Two days, okay?”

He grinned from where he was still standing on the sidewalk and nodded. “Two days.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Noble

FIGURE OUT *what space you're in and that's where we'll write from.*

As with most things these days...

Easier said than done.

That whole *figure out what space you're in* thing?

Man...

“Damn, are we already through those orchids?”

August's question pulled me out of my head and I looked up to give him an answering cringe. “I put the last couple out a few minutes ago. Did we get all we could from the greenhouse?”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “It's this damn heat.”

Shaking his head, he went back out to the front of the shop, leaving me where I was, in the back of *Posh Petals* on another helping hand task with the family. The flower shop *was* short-staffed today, but we all knew Simone was doing me a favor just as much as I was doing one for her.

I didn't have a damn job.

Roman had been an active enough influence that I'd done well with my earnings from the group, so I didn't need money—yet.

What I needed was something to freaking *do*.

Since what I loved seemed less and less like an option.

So... it was the flower shop today—helping keep things stocked, helping customers, etc. I'd been offered the job of handling deliveries, but turned it

down. I wasn't trying to be part of the lovey-dovey romantic shit.

Oh.

Damn.

That was kind of the answer to my question right there, wasn't it?

If I was thinking with my songwriter brain, especially considering my preferred genre, putting myself right in the middle of romantic gestures and seeing those reactions, the emotions, should've been like catnip to me.

Instead... it was about the last fucking thing I wanted to do.

I wasn't on any anti-love tangent. I enjoyed seeing the people I cared about find their fit in relationships that worked for them. I just... could never seem to find my own approach.

And that shit was never more vexing than it was now.

Here in the Heights, I was surrounded by what many people would call the best examples of relationships and love. Perfect in their imperfections, real and raw, aspirational for damn sure, but not out of reach.

Maybe out of reach.

Maybe... out of reach for *me*.

But if you asked why I thought that, I didn't have an *actual* fucking clue.

Just one more way I was in that damn state of limbo, with no idea how to move forward.

It was supposed to be *up* from here.

Finding my groove, settling into purpose—I was watching from the sidelines while everybody around me did exactly that. They were carving out their lanes, enveloped in love and support while I... tried to keep busy.

It was fucked up.

“Uh-oh. I know *that* look,” Simone mused as she came breezing through the door, gathering a bundle of the waxed paper we used to wrap certain orders. “You’re coming to the house for dinner tonight. Do *not* argue with me,” she warned.

“And what if I had plans already?” I asked, taking a seat on a stack of

empty pallets.

She sucked her teeth. “*Do you have plans?*”

“You know I don’t.” I laughed. “I’m just saying. I *could*.”

“You could, but you don’t, so... Come on by, see the kids. Zahra asked about you. You’re hot on social media right now and she needs to prove she actually knows you or something,” Simone argued. “So if not for me, come solely so you don’t let your little cousin down.”

Damn.

She knew *that* was the angle I couldn’t argue. Even when we were all on each other’s nerves, family was everything to me. Simone wasn’t blood, she was my older cousin Roman’s wife, but she’d been so for nearly a decade now.

And honestly... she’d been one of my biggest allies.

When I came home, Roman and Royal both came at me heavy with their ideas for my path, insistent that keeping myself too busy to think too hard was the healthy path.

And maybe it was for them.

They had musical talent too, and even a passion for it, but they *also* both had business acumen they’d elected for their primary paths.

That wasn’t me.

Helping here and there was fine, but I wasn’t trying to go through management training, or open a franchise, even though I recognized and appreciated I was being offered a great opportunity.

For a little... I just wanted to fuckin’ *breathe*.

Somehow, Simone had seen it.

“What’s on the menu?” I asked and she rolled her eyes.

“Does it matter?”

“Maybe.”

“Stop playing with me.” She laughed. “Summer got some steaks in from Gilded Ridge.”

My eyebrows went up. “Okay, big money. I’ll *definitely* be on time for dinner if that’s how you’re coming.”

“I knew that would get your attention, but you’re bringing dessert.”

“No problem,” I agreed, already looking forward to the pan of banana pudding from *Pot Liquor* that immediately came to mind. I spent the rest of my shift in a better mood than I’d started, and by the time the night was over, I was glad I’d been invited.

It was a good time.

Royal and Anika came over too, as well as Leah and August, both representing half-couples that kept me from feeling like a spare. Lots of laughs, and chaos from all the kids, and just... great energy.

A good balance to spending the next day by myself.

After burning a whole day keeping myself too busy to let my mind run free, I really needed to think.

I turned down any social offers, and turned off my social media notifications, and made sure my fridge was stocked with anything I might need. I didn’t need any distractions while I locked in, putting all my mental energy into the pressing question of *where I was*.

So I could write from there.

Theoretically.

In reality?

The blinking cursor on my laptop screen taunted me.

The blank pages in my fresh notebook taunted me.

None of the instrumentals or beats I blasted in my headphones were moving me.

I needed GPS directions to figure out where I was on my behalf or something, *damn*.

That was the only way I was puzzling through this, clearly.

I pushed myself up from the couch, glancing at my watch as I made my way to the fridge. The day was nearly gone, without a shred of progress or

clarity.

It felt like the universe was trying to tell me something.

I let the fridge door swing closed without taking anything. I didn't actually have an appetite; I was just looking for a distraction.

Which made the knock at the door very, very exciting.

I wasn't expecting anyone, but had every intention of welcoming the company. I didn't even bother checking the peephole, just unlocked the door and snatched it open.

I was *not* anticipating Audra at the threshold.

A little smirk played at her full lips, clearly amused by whatever expression had registered on my face.

"I thought you said two days?" I blurted, and she shrugged, pushing past me into the door.

"This is day two, isn't it?"

"That's—"

"Not the same thing, I know," she said, stopping in the foyer to face me. "But I was restless, so..." She gestured at the laptop bag strung across her chest. "Here I am. Let's write. Unless... Do you have company already? Or... *expecting* company?" She glanced at her watch and smirked. "I guess it is *that* time of night, huh?"

"What? *No*," I insisted and immediately regretted when she laughed at my response.

"Relax," she said, taking off her bag as she continued into my apartment, looking around. "I'm teasing you, trying to get comfortable. We have to be comfortable with each other for this process to work, you know?"

"Yeah... for sure."

I watched as she dropped her bag on my kitchen counter, then moved to my fridge. "What do you have to drink? Any sparkling... Ooh, you've got Topo Chico, may I?"

"Help yourself." I chuckled, since the bottle was already in her hand.

Before I could tell her, she spotted the bottle opener magnetized to the side of the fridge and had popped it open. “While you’re hydrating... you wanna tell me how you know where I live?”

She shrugged. “I just asked Royal,” she explained. “I got zero pushback. Good thing I’m not here to kill you.”

“No kidding.”

“To be clear, though, you might *feel like* you’re dying for a bit at first,” she teased, keeping eye contact with me while she took a long swig from the bottle. “In a good way though... if you’re into that kinda thing.”

She winked at me.

Playfully.

I think.

It was kinda hard to tell with Audra. Everything out of her mouth felt like flirting, honestly. I wasn’t sure if it was actually flirting, or just her personality, or maybe a mixture of both.

With a heavy splash of my attraction to her stirred in.

Audra was fucking *fine*.

Unambiguously.

Pretty deep brown skin, pretty full lips, pretty big brown eyes, a full figure she didn’t camouflage with baggy clothes. Right now, she was in these little shorts that had her thighs on full display, and yes, a matching oversized tee, but it was cut to expose her shoulder and sports bra underneath.

Frankly... it was giving sneaky link energy.

Which I was about to ignore like my life depended on it and not make assumptions that her outfit had anything to do with me.

I needed her help professionally and couldn’t let thinking with my dick get in the way.

“I don’t *believe* I’m into feeling like I’m dying, so I’m need you to explain,” I told her, taking a seat at the counter. “I need fine detail on what that means.”

She laughed. “It’s my dramatic way of letting you know... I like to dig deep in writing sessions like this. If you weren’t a writer too, it would be different, but since you’ve got chops too, there’s no reason for shallow music. If we can get beyond the surface, we can make magic, but... it’s not always comfortable.”

I nodded. “Okay. I get you. But... I haven’t been able to pinpoint what you asked. I was supposed to be figuring out where I was, so we could use it as a jumping-off point.”

“I wasn’t expecting that anyway,” she said. “I would’ve been shocked if you had something to spout off to me.”

I frowned. “So then why...”

“To get you thinking.” She shrugged. “Even the fact that you couldn’t get a good footing... It’s a starting place. Like... okay, let’s do this... I’ll sing a line; you sing a line. Whatever comes to mind. We’re freestyling, okay?”

I shook my head. “Nah, I don’t know if—”

“Don’t knock it till you try it,” she insisted. “And I don’t want to hear you can’t, ’cause I’ve performed with you now. I know how fast your brain works and what you come up with on the fly.”

“Yeah, lyrics I’ve already heard.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. Just... roll with me please, damn.” She giggled and I shook my head.

“I... okay. Why the hell not?”

“Exactly.” She nodded. “Why not?”

A moment later, she had her laptop out, open to her production program of choice. She started up an instrumental track, letting me know it was set to loop before she cracked the spine of her own fresh notebook and clicked her pen into a ready state.

“Remember,” she said. “First thing that comes to mind.”

I nodded.

I wasn’t ready at all, but again... *why the hell not?*

“*I can’t figure out what the fuck I’m doing,*” she sang, then looked at me expectantly.

Shit.

“Uh... *everybody around me is moving?*”

“Are you asking me?”

“Kind of.”

She laughed. “No, tell me. If that’s your line, commit to it.”

I sighed. “Uh... yeah. That’s my line. *I can’t figure out what the fuck I’m doing. Everybody around me is moving,*” I sang both lines together.

“*I can’t seem to find my place,*” she added, then gestured to me.

“*Squandered my lead now I’m losing the race...*”

“*Disqualified, damn near ’shamed to show my face...*”

“*Can’t keep pretending the shit ain’t confusing...*”

“*Holding it together, but the pressure’s all-consuming...*”

“*I’m giving everything I have one last time...*”

“*One last effort, one last climb...*”

“*This is it; this is all, this is me... If that’s not enough, I gotta let it be...*”

“Whew,” Audra breathed, shaking her head in response to me taking the last two lines myself, instead of waiting for her to fill in the next thing. She tapped the notebook with her pen, pointing out her hurried scribbles of the lyrics we’d just pulled together. “Boom... a verse. That beautifully exemplifies what you’re feeling about the music. Raw.”

I scoffed as I skimmed over the lyrics. “*Very raw.*”

“So what if it’s not perfect?” She shrugged. “It’s *real*. And it’s *you*. It just needs polishing.”

“Me, or the song?”

“Probably both,” she said with a giggle. “But... that’s true of all of us, so don’t take it personally.”

“I’ll try.” I chuckled, then watched as she wrote the lyrics out again on a fresh sheet of paper, with better handwriting this time. She tore the page out

and handed it to me.

“You ready to start?”

I looked at it for a moment, then nodded as I took the page from her.

“As much as I’ll ever be.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Audra

IT WAS ONLY SUPPOSED to be one song.

That was our deal.

Except, when our effortless flow with each other produced that song way sooner than expected, my brain kicked into overdrive, figuring out a reason for the night to continue.

I hadn't promised a *song*.

I promised a *hit*.

"Let it Be" wasn't a hit.

It would be well-received, and get streams, but it wasn't a *play in the club* kinda song. It was a play in your headphones at the gym, blast in your car so you don't quit your job kinda song.

It was personal, and affirming, and those things were great, but in the time we were in, we needed something that would go viral, get stuck in people's heads and really just *saturate*.

That was how you got people excited about what was coming next.

"How did your last relationship end?" I asked, pulling Noble's attention. He had an extremely rough cut of the song playing in his headphones, recorded on his phone. The sound quality was absolute trash, but it was enough to catch the vibe, and I could practically feel the happiness radiating off him, even though he was playing it cool.

This was easily his tenth listen with a notebook in front of him, and he

was tweaking lyrics and arrangements as he went along.

My question made his eyebrows shoot up.

“Huh?” he answered, pulling one side of his headphones off so he could hear better. “What did you say?”

“I asked how your last relationship ended,” I told him. “Wondering if it’s something else we can pull from. It needs to be more relatable, and damn near everybody can relate to relationship bullshit.”

“Yeah, but...”

The discomfort on his face made me lean in closer from my place beside him on the couch, *really* curious now. “But what? You must’ve really fucked it up if you don’t even want to say.”

“Yes and no,” he admitted, fully removing the headphones now. “Honestly... it’s so damn stereotypical it’s embarrassing.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Stereotypical? So... you’re a cheater then.”

“Not technically.”

“Boy.”

“We weren’t official!”

“Oh *God*, you really weren’t lying in the music, were you?” I laughed, shaking my head. “That’s why that shit hit so hard, because you really are toxic, wow.”

“*Damn*, it’s like that?!”

“It sure is,” I countered. “But it makes sense—looking like you do, sounding like you do—everybody kinda expects you to be a fuckboy, so...”

“Which is *fucked* up,” he said. “Like, think about that shit—*everybody expects you to be a fuckboy*. That creates a certain pressure, damn near a *standard* to live up to, and if you don’t, everybody looks at you like there’s something wrong with you. And if you *are* faithful, well...no you’re not. You couldn’t be. Why would you be? You’re not actually capable of that.”

“Well shit,” I mused. “I... I’ve never really thought about that. But *still*, are you saying you were trash because you were expected to be?”

“I’m saying I wasn’t, but everybody—including her—thought I was anyway. So what was the purpose?” he responded with a shrug.

“I get that, but can you blame her for having doubts, considering the way dating culture has been for the last five or ten years? Especially with social media and everything. It wreaks havoc on your confidence in literally every facet of your life if you’re not careful. Dealing with someone like you, of course she had insecurities.”

“Which I tried to be understanding of,” he argued. “Like, she was fine as fuck too, and I knew folks were trying to get at her. But I trusted her. I could never get that same trust back though. And even when I would try to reassure her, sending gifts, always commenting on her pics, not being overly friendly with other women, all the shit you’re supposed to do, I would get accused of doing those things as cover. Can you imagine? I’m in her comments saying *‘bring your fine ass to me’* and somehow it gets spun into, *you’re just saying that so nobody is suspicious*. It got to a point where I gave up and just started doing the shit if I was going to be accused of it anyway.”

I sighed. “Yeah... that’s messed up,” I agreed. “I get both sides though. There’s so much lying and faking and betrayal it’s hard to know what’s real anymore.”

He nodded his agreement, then met my gaze. “So, is this what you had in mind?” he asked, leaning back into the couch with his arms draped across the cushions. “Listening to me whine like a bitch about nobody thinking I should be taken seriously in a relationship?”

“I wouldn’t frame it that way exactly,” I replied with a chuckle. “But yes. Your vulnerability around your desire for real romantic connection being limited by these kinds of... misogynistic cultural touch points is refreshing. And I actually think you should put it over a beat. It’ll only work if there’s also acknowledgment of why those stereotypes are what they are, and why it’s so hard to take a lot of your brethren at face value with the things that they say,” I added, reaching across to give him a playful shove.

“I can swallow that,” Noble agreed. “But y’all—”

“I already know—maybe we don't have to hold another man's mistakes against someone who's trying to pursue us,” I said. “There's a balance we can find, while absolutely paying attention to the red flags so you motherfuckers don't play in our face.”

“Of course,” he conceded. “But can a green flag just be that? And not evidence of something else?”

“Sometimes it *is* evidence of something else though.”

“See?” He chuckled. “Y'all are hell!”

“Wow,” I exclaimed, bouncing to my feet, hands propped on my hips. “That's *mean*. Take it back.”

He scoffed. “I ain't taking back shit—*especially* not the truth. Or you telling me you've *never* had a nigga blowing up your line on the *why you being weird to me* tip?”

“*Never*,” I declared. “I'm a wholesome young woman who would *never* do anything to invite that kind of dynamic around me.”

Noble smirked, his gaze raking over me in clear appreciation of what he saw before he shook his head. “Bullshit.”

“It's not. And don't look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

I bit down on my lip, studying him for a moment. “Like the energy just shifted, and you're... about to fuck me.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Is that what you think?”

“Am I wrong?” I challenged; eyes narrowed. “I'm not, usually.”

“I don't think it's only up to me,” he said, moving so he was at the edge of his seat on the couch.

Closer to me.

Eyes in line with my pussy.

“What?” I asked, distracted by the warmth of him, not even touching me, just... *there*.

And fine as hell.

“Whether or not we’re about to do that, it’s kind of a joint decision, right?”

“You’re stalling.”

“I’m *waiting*,” he corrected.

“For?”

“An invitation.”

“That kinda makes me wanna say no.”

Noble’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head as he shuffled forward the last little bit that allowed him to touch me with ease, grabbing me at the thighs to urge me between his legs. “I’m the toxic one though?”

“Game recognize game,” was my rebuttal as I took the initiative to climb into his lap—once again, he was... *right there*.

Long, hard, and *right there*.

“This shit is messy,” Noble muttered against my mouth as soon as I brought my face in line with his. “With a very high chance of regret.”

“True, but it’s sexy,” I countered, briefly pulling his bottom lip between my teeth before I grinned. “The kinda shit you don’t ever forget.”

“That’s compelling, but are you sure?” He grabbed me at the hips, pulling me tighter against him. “Once we do this... it’s done.”

“Too much talking, not enough touching,” I groaned. “Don’t overthink it... let’s just have fun.”

He was nervous.

I could feel it.

If I had to guess though, it wasn’t about the act itself, but the possible aftermath.

Honestly... I kinda was too. It was against my personal code to even be too too friendly with a client—which he technically was—let alone *sleeping with one*.

But this felt... different.

There was just something undeniable about the chemistry between us that made this step feel like the next logical conclusion.

It wasn't... smooth.

The transition wasn't neat.

And yet, it felt like an imperative that I welcomed his tongue into my mouth and his hands into the waistband of my shorts, my panties.

And so incredibly important to grind against his dick.

Vital, to slip my fingers into his boxers, gripping him, squeezing as he teased my clit.

Like he said, no turning back.

Only forward, stripping off clothes, finding a condom, riding him right there on the couch, with his hands gripping my ass, my palms anchored on his shoulders, and the sounds of our pleasure playing in the background.

The moans.

The whimpers.

The grunts.

The soft curses.

That wet sound of friction between us.

It was a gift and a curse for me that I found the music in everything, and this was no different, the realization of the erotic melody actively turning me on even more, making me ride him harder, faster.

“*Do you hear it too?*” I couldn't help myself from asking, even at risk of sounding crazy.

Instead of asking me *do I hear what*, Noble tipped his chin, his head relaxed back against the couch as I moved.

And he grinned.

No nod, no verbal answer, just that damn grin, and I knew.

His hand went to the back of my head, tangling in the hair at the nape of my neck to grab and drag me forward, bringing my mouth to his.

“You feel good as fuck,” he hummed against my lips, that buttery tenor of

his sending a shiver up my spine. “This was a terrible plan.”

“Worst idea ever,” I agreed with a grin, slowing the roll of my hips to less of a breakneck cadence. “We’re definitely gonna have to do this again.”

“And agai—*shit*,” he groaned, fingertips digging into my thighs.

I could feel the tension in his hips, his shoulders, knew what was coming.

So I *really* went in.

Bouncing like my life depended on it, building the tension higher and higher until I’d lost control. He took over easily, without missing a step, fucking me back until we were harmonizing our way through a mutual orgasm that had me seeing stars.

And when I’d finally come down from the high, with my forehead still pressed to his, our gazes met.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “We need pens.”

CHAPTER SIX

Noble

IT WAS HARD TO SLEEP.

Wait, scratch that.

Post-sex exhaustion made *falling* asleep incredibly easy.

But once something changed in the middle of the night, throwing me off enough to pull me awake, I couldn't get back.

It only took a moment for me to recognize what the change was.

Audra.

She was no longer in my bed.

Taking the parts of her personality I'd been introduced to so far into account, it wasn't far-fetched to think she'd simply left in the middle of the night, effectively treating me like a sneaky link.

But...nah.

She was still in my apartment.

Somehow I just... knew.

And since I knew, was I supposed to investigate?

Or did I assume she wanted to be alone?

Surely after the level of intimacy we'd shared, it wouldn't be ill conceived for me to find and check on her, right?

Intimacy.

Was that what we were calling casual casually fucking a near stranger now?

Casual fucking.

Near stranger.

If only either of those things struck me as particularly accurate.

Shit.

That, right there, was the exact reason I hadn't been dealing with anybody lately.

I didn't know the rules anymore, and if I didn't want to wind up in an accidentally toxic situation, it was best to just completely leave it all alone.

Too late for that now.

“*Fuuuuck*,” I groaned, rolling out of bed to cover my naked ass in a pair of boxers before I went searching.

Not that we hadn't seen everything at this point, but coming to find her with my dick swinging just didn't seem like the right vibe.

It was a small apartment, so there were only a few places she could be. She wasn't in the bathroom, so I took the opportunity to procrastinate a bit, relieving myself and washing my hands.

I hated awkward moments.

But *why* was this so potentially awkward?

Once I'd dried every possible molecule of water from my hands and disposed of the paper towel, I put myself back in motion. With just a few steps into the main area, I solved my mystery—*there she was*.

Fine all over again, damn.

She was seated at the kitchen counter with her notebook and pen, her laptop, and her headphones on.

Eyes closed, but not asleep, clearly in a zone—head bobbing, lips moving.

I hated to interrupt.

And I'd already decided I wasn't going to, taking a step backward to leave without a word, but her eyes popped open, and her gaze immediately found mine.

“Hey,” I spoke, since now I was in the spotlight. I didn’t want to paint a picture that I’d been standing there for some extended time, watching her like a fucking creep. “You good?”

She startled a bit, almost like she hadn’t *actually* even registered my presence until I spoke. A sly, sexy grin spread over her lips as she pushed the headphones back on her head, freeing her ears.

“What did you just say?”

“I asked if you were good.”

Her eyebrows pulled together. “I let you give me Twinkie treatment, and you feel like you need to ask if I’m good? Interesting,” she mused, dropping her elbows on the counter, chin resting on her hands.

Staring a damn hole into me until I broke eye contact, chuckling.

“You are *hell*, you know that?” I asked, traveling the rest of the distance to get to the counter.

“Because I’m reminding you of last night’s irresponsible decisions?”

I shook my head. “Because you’re using it as bait.”

“Bait? For what?”

“To keep me from noticing that your eyes are red, face puffy, you’re up late as fuck with a pen... you’re writing your way through something.”

Her eyes went wide, lips parted in surprise for a moment before she blew out a sigh. “Fine,” she huffed. “You’re right. Now what?”

“Now... what’s up?” I responded, taking the empty stool next to her. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, we’re doing *this*?”

I shrugged. “Like you said, I gave you Twinkie treatment. Surely we can talk to each other.”

“Surely,” she agreed with a soft giggle before she looked away. “I just... have you really processed what we did a few nights ago? Performing on the fly like that, in front of all those people, barely any rehearsal...”

“You know that’s probably what saved us, right?” I asked. “Or maybe

that was just me. Not having time to think too hard about it, no time to back out... we *had* to make the shit happen.”

“Absolutely.” She nodded. “And we were so well received. People in person have been great, and all the comments online are overwhelmingly great, but it’s... it’s so different. I didn’t know how different it would feel.”

“Different from... solely being the writer? Actually performing for yourself?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ve snuck and sung background with people before, and I sing demos all the time, so it’s not like it was completely foreign, but that night was so... *major*. And now... here I am, sneaky-linking and writing and not getting enough sleep like... normal. This huge thing happened, and it’s like nothing changed.”

“But you just said—”

“I know, it feels hella different. That’s the point,” she explained. “I feel so discombobulated, and I’m not even sure why. So I don’t know where I could start to try fixing it.”

I nodded. “And layering in my bullshit probably isn’t helpful, huh?”

“Are you kidding me?” She sucked her teeth. “*Please*. These last few hours have been the most peace I’ve had since we went on stage.”

“Oh damn, I’m your peace? I don’t think a woman has ever said that to me.”

“*Shocking*.” She laughed. “And I definitely don’t think that’s what I said. Is that what you got from it?”

“Sure the fuck is, don’t backtrack now,” I teased. “Give me a page out of your book, I’m about to write about this shit.”

“Oh, whatever.”

“You think I’m playing?”

I held out a hand and her eyes narrowed in challenge as she ripped out a blank page to give me, then slid me her pen.

I snatched it up with a flourish, immediately putting it to this page.

“*She’s saying dick can’t fix her problems, but I think we should try,*” I sang, struggling to keep a straight face as I mimicked a talkbox sound from the 90s. “*A good distraction never hurt nobody, so come on drop by—*”

“Boy if you don’t get the fuck outta my face.” She giggled, shaking her head.

“You don’t like my song?”

“It’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“Daaaaamn.” I chuckled. “You’re a *big-time* hater, I see.”

“I’m a woman of many talents,” she mused, taking her headphones fully off now, and dropping them on the counter. She didn’t say anything for a moment as a little smile curled her lips, and then, “Thank you for trying to make me feel better.”

I squinted. “Damn, just *trying*, huh?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” She cringed. “You know how I said the comments online were *overwhelmingly positive*?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “But that’s not all of them. You’ve seen some mean shit too, I’m guessing?”

“The *meanest*, oh my God!” she mused. “When it would happen to people I wrote for, I would always breeze right past up, and encourage them to focus on the positive comments, ignore the others, but—”

“That shit is about a million times easier to say than do?” I scoffed. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

“It’s wild,” she said. “Like, of course I didn’t think everyone was going to instantly love me or anything, but *stick to writing? I hate her voice, it’s like nails on a chalkboard? Everybody ain’t meant for this side of the curtain?* And that’s not even the *really* nasty ones. These though...”

“They hurt,” I finished for her. “There’s no way around it. You put yourself out there, give it your best, and here comes someone who has probably never done a hard, new, or interesting thing in their lives, trying to tear down your efforts. It fucking sucks.”

She sighed. “Yeah. It does. I’m trying to tell myself not to let it get to me like that, but... *damn*.”

“*Damn* isn’t wrong, but I don’t think you’re giving yourself enough credit,” I said. “That night wasn’t just about your performance. You put together an entire event—”

“I had a team.”

“A team who created *your* vision,” I countered. “That’s not... *nothing*. And you shouldn’t treat it like it is. You should celebrate.”

“We already celebrated.” She shrugged. “The afterparty, remember?”

“That was the public celebration. What about your private one?”

She shook her head. “There... wasn’t one.”

“Oh nah, we gotta fix that. I’m taking you to dinner.”

“Wow.” She laughed, then sucked her teeth. “If you wanted to take me on a date, you could just say that. Though... I’m a little surprised, coming from you.”

“It’s not a date—a celebration,” I corrected. “And why is it surprising coming from me?”

“Because you were kinda mean the day we met.”

“I was mean?”

“Uh, *yeah*.” She laughed. “Well... mean might be a stretch. Rude?”

“That’s not better!”

“What do you want me to say?!”

I shrugged. “Hell if I know.” I chuckled. “In seriousness though... you know I wasn’t being an asshole on purpose, right?”

“I do,” she agreed. “I know the music thing is... complicated for you. And seeing me may have brought some shit up, blah blah blah.”

“So you get it then.”

“I do,” she agreed. “It’s hard to navigate it all—clearly my ass is confused too—so it would be pretty wild if I couldn’t see where you were coming from. But I hope it was a net positive experience for you. And not just the

concert, you know?”

My eyebrow shot up. “Are you trying to get me to rate your pussy?”

“No!” She laughed. “I’m talking about the writing experience, fool!”

“Oh. You mean how you *I can write a song for you’d* your way into some dick?”

“That is *not* what I came over here for!”

“And yet... here we are. You wrote me right out of my draws.”

“*Stoop.*” She giggled, hiding her face in her hands. “I swear, this is not remotely typical for me.” Her head popped up and she met my gaze. “You’ve got me acting all the way out of character.”

“So it’s my fault now. Daaaamn.”

“If we’re assigning blame, you’re damn right,” she teased. “This is on you, for being so...”

“Handsome? Smart? Talented?”

“Raw.”

Oh.

Wasn’t expecting that.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” I asked, returning her eye contact even though it felt like something had shifted, making the act much more intense than it had been thirty seconds before.

She smiled.

“The best thing, actually.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Audra

“OOOH. YOU BEEN FUCKING.”

My eyes bugged wide at Winnie’s *instant* clocking, the moment I walked into her cardio boxing class at the gym.

She wasn’t *asking*, either, just said the shit so matter-of-factly, then moved on about her business of setting up stations with resistance bands, mats, and anything else we might use for today’s circuit.

Nobody else was here yet; I’d come in early to help with what she was doing now. Instead though, I rushed to get in her face.

“How the hell do you know that?”

She smirked. “You’ve still got a lil—” She wiped at the side of her lips to clue me in to what she saw and my mouth dropped open.

“What?!” I asked, panicking as I wiped my mouth while Winnie’s eyes went wide.

“*You were sucking dick this morning?!*”

“What?! No!” I insisted, flustered.

“Bitch, you just wiped non-existent cum off your face!”

“*Why would you tell me there was cum on my face if there wasn’t?!*”

“Why would you believe there was cum on your face if you weren’t sucking dick?”

“Well damn, what happened to hello, how are you?” Brooke said from the door.

Both our heads whipped around to where she was standing, smirking over what she'd heard.

"Winnie," I groaned.

Brooke was cool, hella cool.

But we weren't besties like that for her to be in on *this* conversation.

Especially when I didn't really know what this conversation was.

Because I didn't know what the fuck was going on with me and Noble.

"Brookie, tell her she looks like she's been hunching," Winnie said, giving me a wink as she went on setting up class.

When I looked back at Brooke, she was *actually* studying me before she nodded. "Yeah, actually. I'm not sure what it is though."

"It's the afterglow. which is a real thing," Winnie called from across the room. "It's science!"

"Then why would you pretend I had fluids on my face, why not just say that?!"

"Because my way was much funnier, duh." She laughed. "Let's talk about you sucking stranger danger dick though."

"Noble isn't a stra—oh, *fuck you*," I groaned, covering my face with my hands. I didn't have to actually see either woman to guess their expressions.

Surprise!

"I have so many questions!" Winnie shrieked. "Starting with how he bagged you. Because I could swear you were on your celibacy shit."

"I wasn't celibate, I just wasn't interested. You can't call it celibacy if it's no sacrifice."

"Should I step out for the family convo?" Brooke asked; eyes wide, and I shook my head.

"It's fine," I told her. "Winnie's big mouth already spilled the beans now."

Winnie scoffed. "Don't blame me cause you *let's write a song-ed* your way into some dick and you look like it. Was I supposed to ignore it?!"

I let out a gasp; eyes wide. “Bitch! Did you talk to him?!”

“Huh?” Winnie asked.

“Noble made the same damn j—you know what, never mind. I did *not* go over there intending to have sex with that man. It just happened! I mean, we've all had an experience like that, right? Brookie!” I said, turning to her. “You and Ky—I'm sure you didn't mean to end up fucking him when y'all shot together, right? It was just work.”

“Hm?” Brooke dropped her gaze, lips pressed together.

“Brookie!”

“Fine, damn!” She laughed. “So... yes, there was a point where it was just work, at the first photo shoot I did with him. But then... I knew for sure I wanted to, and I fucked him after work. Like... on purpose.”

“Well, yes, but you didn't show up for that purpose.”

“Hm?”

“Oh my God!”

“*What?!*” She giggled. “He was fine as hell! And so is Noble!” she added. “You know you don't have to be embarrassed about this, right? Not to mention, he seems like a good dude, and y'all's chemistry was damn near about to burn the place down the other night. Nobody is judging you for taking him down.”

“Nobody in *this* room, at least.” Winnie grinned. “You know all about how I had to wear Jonathan's ass down. I had to chase that dick with purpose, so I'm the last person to give you any static. I'm just going to tease you to hell and back about it.”

“Well, your teasing would be a lot easier to take if this shit didn't have me all confused and discombobulated. I was already stressed enough about the music; the last thing I needed to add to it was a situation like this.”

Winnie stopped distributing resistance bands to stand straight up and look me in the face. “Situations like what? What's wrong?” she asked, switching straight into family protective mode .

“Nothing like that.” I shook my head. “It’s just...okay... we should have been like, a casual hookup between artists who just happened to have this crazy chemistry that needed to be worked through, right? Which, that’s the cliché normal thing. But instead...it didn't feel like that.”

“It wasn't good?” Brooke asked.

“No, it was great, that's not the problem.”

“Oooh. It didn't feel casual?” Winnie guessed, coming to stand closer to me. “You like him.”

“I don't know him to like him.”

“If only that was something that actually mattered.” She laughed and I shook my head.

“Stuff like that matters to me, though,” I argued, which made her shrug.

“Fair enough,” she conceded. “But you still feel like you feel, so you have to explore that in order to figure this out. And it sounds like this is something beyond ‘knowing’ him well enough to like him.”

“Oh God, please don't go implying any weird shit,” I begged.

“Tossing it out there that you guys may have a base level connection that doesn't rely on some arbitrary length of time that you've known each other isn't weird shit,” Brooke said. “It just is what it is. And I could swear you've written songs about that very thing...”

“Yeah, for other people, not me!”

“So you think it works like that for everybody except you?” Brooke questioned.

“It's *been* working like that for everybody except me.”

“Wow, so you're out here writing songs about shit you don't even believe it?” Winnie droned.

I sucked my teeth. “Yeah, the same way niggas rap about bitches they’ll never fuck and checks they won't receive.”

“Oop!” Brooke said.

Winnie laughed. “Okay, you ate the *tiniest* little bit with that. But *still*—”

Before she could get that statement out, the door opened and other people started filtering in, and this was definitely not a conversation for the public.

“I’m not done with you,” Winnie warned and I sighed as I moved to take my place for class.

“I didn’t expect you were.”

AS MUCH AS I PROBABLY *NEEDED* TO BE ALONE WITH MY THOUGHTS, IT WAS about the last thing I wanted, which was how I found myself tucked into a corner at Urban Grind with my laptop.

Planning the next *Harmonies in the Heights*.

Sick behavior.

With the amount of emotional turmoil the first had taken me through, it would at *least* be wise to take a few months—weeks, even—to let it marinate before putting all that stress in motion again.

But apparently, I thrived in chaos.

My little silent timer buzzed, reminding me to make sure I was still mentally connected to my task; I wasn’t, of course.

Ostensibly, I was planning an event, but the fourteen open tabs on my screen told another story.

There were three different notepad windows open—two of them holding unfinished lyrics for a client and one of my own. Another tab had a list of venue search results, and yet another had the neighborhood calendar open.

At least *those* were actually getting me where I was supposedly going.

Three more tabs were email inboxes—personal, general business, and then the one that was very specific to clients.

The next set of three were writing specific—a tab for looking things up to make sure any metaphors or other literary devices made sense, a thesaurus one for when I couldn’t pull the word I *wanted* to mind and had to use

synonyms to find my way, and a dictionary one, to make sure the words I used meant what I thought they meant.

The last set of three was—embarrassingly—holding my attention the most.

An internet search about *Noble Taylor*.

The most recent news item.

His Instagram, which I hadn't allowed myself to actually look at yet.

Shameful, I know.

Looking—like, *really looking*—into a man *after* you fucked him was definitely hustling backwards, but whatever.

I needed to understand what was happening.

Why the *hell* could I not stop thinking about this man?

That wasn't... *me*.

The boy crazy thing had never been my vibe.

I joked about being for the streets, but like... *for real*. As much as I enjoyed writing the lovey-dovey shit, seeing people I cared about enmeshed in it, as much as I loved the idea of it...

It had never been for me.

Just freaking... elusive.

Every boy—or girl—I'd tried to commit to in that way, I really did give the relationship my energy, my attention, did all the things you were supposed to do.

I was *great* at making my partner happy, had even exchanged the requisite words.

Until I realized how unfair it was to do that when I wasn't *really* feeling it.

Not on that level.

I liked them, very much, and the only variety of sex I was willing to have was good, so that was never an issue either. But people always wanted the progression, *normal* people wanted the progression.

Progression I couldn't truthfully give.

Ugh.

It was so much easier on the sidelines of it all.

At least until Noble Taylor and his goddamn butterflies came along.

I switched tabs, pulling his social page up on my screen.

Still fine as hell.

If I scrolled back a bit, you could kinda see the shift from when he and Josiah were still *The Cure*—lots of thirst traps and shit—to now, where it was more family, studio shots, an occasional fresh haircut pic, all with long stretches between.

His most recent post was interesting.

It was a shot of... *us*.

Well, mainly him, from the stage at *Harmonies in the Heights*, but I was in the background of the shot, looking pretty as fuck. I didn't know what he was singing in the picture, but he was very emphatic about it, and from my smile, whatever he was doing... he was doing it well.

He could've chosen *any* of Brooke's shots she'd sent us.

Even the slightest shift in angle, a few images later, he wouldn't have even needed to crop. I just wouldn't have been in the frame.

So why this one?

Mug in hand, I clicked on the picture so I could see the caption.

Still reeling from this night, still processing how it came about, how it felt being on stage, the reception of it all. Most of all, I'm grateful. To y'all, and to @audballpointpen. It's up from here.

Shit.

I didn't even know someone had tagged me. I'd purposely shut off my notifications because I was overwhelmed with it. Against my better judgment, I took a quick dip down into *his* comment section.

There wasn't any weird shit though.

People wanted to fuck him, obviously, but mostly they sandwiched it in

compliments on the performance, excitement that he was out in public, and questions about new music.

He definitely still had fans, and if we did this right, they were going to love this new era.

Which I loved for him.

“You want a top up?”

Oh shit.

I flipped the lid on my laptop closed before I looked up to where Noble was standing, waiting expectantly for my answer.

“Uh...what are you doing here?” I asked. “I mean—shit, no, I don't need a top up. It's like eleven at night. I shouldn't,” I rambled, heart racing from the shock of his sudden appearance.

Instead of saying anything, a slow smirk spread over Noble's face, and it took me a few seconds to realize why.

Not only was he not dressed for working at the shop today, he didn't even actually have a coffee pot or anything in his hands.

“I was just fucking with you,” he told me, pushing his hands into the pockets of his sweats in a way that for just a moment, stretched the fabric across his dick.

Not that I was *trying* to look.

But less than twenty-four hours ago he'd been balls deep inside me, so it was hard not to.

“You're right though,” he continued. “It is late. Royal actually asked me to come let you know the coffeehouse is closed.”

“Huh?!”

It was *that* late?

Damn.

I looked around and quickly deduced that he wasn't playing now. I was the only person in here except for the employees cleaning and straightening up for the night.

“Shit. Sorry y’all!” I called out, already moving to my feet, and knocking all my stuff over in the process. “Oh *hell*,” I groaned.

“Chill.” Noble chuckled, bending to help me out. “Everything is cool.”

“Is it though?” I quipped back, letting him slide my bag onto my shoulder for me. “This got real awkward, real fast.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it did. Why though? I make you uncomfortable?”

“No,” I admitted. “It’s... the level of comfort I feel, that makes me uncomfortable.”

“Damn, one night and you’re already falling in love.” He sighed. “This is why I keep my dick to myself, too powerful.”

“Oh *please*.” I laughed, moving away from him. “I see I’m a little too good for your ego, so let me give you some space.”

“Nah, don’t do that, get closer,” he teased, following right behind me. “In seriousness though... let me walk you home?”

I thought about it for a moment—thought better of it, actually—and nodded anyway. “Yeah. Sure.”

Minutes later, we were outside, strolling down the sidewalk toward my place.

“So... I booked studio time with Dean,” he told me, bringing a smile to my lips.

“You’re feeling good about what we did with the songs?”

“Yuppp.” He nodded. “I wanted to ask you... you think you’d maybe want to be there? For the rewrites and all that... maybe a background vocal here and there? Since there was no traditional demo, you know?”

I smirked. “The real question is, do you *want* me there?”

“I do,” he answered, zero hesitation. “Before any of this, I was absolutely a fan of your work. So it would be an honor, actually. And of course we can work out the publishing splits and all that.”

“I know you’ll make sure it’s legit,” I told him. “But I’m willing to come vibe with you for free, just so you know.”

“Yet you scoffed when I was talking about how powerf—”

“You get on my damn nerves.”

“I’m okay with that,” he smirked, stopping at the front door to my building, which it felt like we’d gotten to in record time.

Or maybe I just wasn’t ready to part.

The thing was though... he didn’t seem ready either.

We went back and forth a few minutes, with the cliché parting words and all that, but he still hadn’t made a single move toward actually leaving.

“Are you waiting for me to ask you to come inside?” I finally asked, leaning back against the door.

He shrugged. “I wasn’t necessarily *expecting* that, but... I will not pretend I would turn it down.”

“Great. So you wanna help me hang my new drapes then?”

He laughed. “I *will*, but it’s not quite what I had in mind.”

“Oh.” I raised my eyebrows. “What did you have in mind?”

“Real talk?”

“Always, please.”

He licked his lips, hesitating for a bit before he answered. “I... just want to be around you. I’m okay with how corny that sounds.”

“It *definitely* sounds corny,” I teased him. “The sentiment isn’t, though. But... does it mean you *don’t* want to try for round four?”

“I don’t think it counts if it’s been twelve hours; I think you have to start over.”

“I think you’re missing the point.”

“You’re right.” He laughed. “But no... I’m not saying that.”

“Cool.”

“Cool.”

We just stood there, looking at each other.

Smirking at each other.

And then...

“Do you want to come inside?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Noble

OPENING THE DOOR TO GROWN FOLKS' *Music* to head down to the basement studio had my stomach twisted in knots. This always happened at the end of a bout with self-sabotage through procrastination, the weight of inaction was heavy and hard to shake. Mentally, physically, emotionally, it had to be peeled off and trudged through, and... *shit*.

Sometimes it caught hold again, with a firmer grasp.

I refused to get stuck again this time though.

“Uh-oh, do you need to go to the bathroom or something?”

At the sound of Audra's voice, my gut instantly unclenched, and I looked up to find her standing a few feet in front of me in the record store. I tossed up a wave at the person working at the front counter, then hurried to where she was standing, stifling a laugh.

“Huh?” I asked, confused by both the question and the amusement on her face.

“Your expression,” she explained. “It's giving ‘anxiety ass’, coined by Winnie, of course.”

I shook my head. “Of course. *Anxiety ass* though?”

“Very much so—all your stress, straight out the backend. A very unsexy conversation starter.”

“Incredibly.”

She giggled. “Seriously though, are you good? Your face definitely

looked like your stomach hurt.”

“Oh, nah. I’m good,” I assured her, and it was actually true—strangely.

None of the trepidation I’d felt just moments before plagued me as I followed her to the back, gesturing to the elevator that would take us down to where the studio space was.

On this level, *GFM* was mostly a typical record store, then there was the traditional radio station above. Down in the basement, though, that was where the magic that got sold, streamed, and sent out over the radio airwaves was made.

I hadn't been here for myself in... damn.

Too long.

Which was wild, considering the way I’d practically lived down here back when I was still making music with Josiah. The shit had been effortless back then, and *confidence*?

Man, that hadn’t even been a consideration.

We had fans that would rock with us no matter what, as long as the passion was behind it; the kind of support that meant the most, as hard as it was sometimes to actually *see* it.

Back before the negativity, the insecurity, got too loud.

Even though I hadn’t recorded for *myself* in a while, I’d been here recently for the song with Kyir. It had been a good time, a good experience that should have put a battery in my back for making music again.

It had an unfortunate adverse effect.

The way it had been so effortless to jump on a feature while recording my own shit was so damn hard...it had fucked with my head.

A lot.

And it was hard not to have that shit in the back of my mind as Audra and I headed for our designated space where we were meeting up with Dean to actually make this music happen.

“Hey,” she spoke up as we stepped off the elevator downstairs. “So...

there's this show later. I want you to come with me.”

“Oh?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Are you asking me on a date?”

“*Date?* That's a big word for Elmo,” she said; eyes wide.

“And yet the question remains...”

She sighed. “It’s lowkey a work thing. Songbird Dani and Logan Lewis. Since the show is just right in Blackwood, I figured I’d do a little customer service follow-up—hear what I wrote for them live, see the crowd feedback, all that.”

“Okay... that doesn’t sound like work.”

“That’s why I said *lowkey*.”

“*No keys.*”

“Fine.” She laughed. “Do you want to come with me or not?”

“Well, they both stay in heavy rotation on my personal playlists, so I will happily be your plus-one for the show,” I agreed.

“Nice.” She smiled, then bit down on her lip. “Now... You know what the internet narrative is going to become if we’re seen out in public together like that. First we perform together, with all the obvious chemistry, now we’re booed up at a romantic concert...”

I leaned in, dipping my head a little toward her. “Now hold on, you said nothing about being booed up.”

“Oh, you don't want to be booed up with me?” she challenged.

“I didn't say *that*, I’m just saying you didn't *lead* with *booed up*.”

She propped a hand on her hip. “So going back to my original question—*do you want to be booed up with me?*”

“Woman, do you *want* me to want to be booed up with you?”

“Only if you *want me* to want you to want to be booed up with me,” she countered, laughing. “We can do this all day.”

“Yeah. We could. Or we can just speak plainly. That's an option too.”

“Sure.” She nodded, glancing back to make sure we were alone in the studio foyer before she continued. “Speaking plainly...I'm not trying to get

into anything serious right now. I love the energy of the last week, but I don't want to give the impression I want something I don't. Or that this is something it's not. At least not until it's time for it to be whatever it's going to be.”

When she stopped speaking, I raised an eyebrow. “That feels plain to you?”

She shrugged. “I'm a songwriter.”

“That you are, through and through.” I chuckled. “Nah though... I get what you're saying, and we're on the same page, really. I can't offer much more than vibes until I get this music figured out.”

“Oh, you're *real* serious about it, huh?” she teased. “I should probably stop holding you up then, let you get in there and work it out?”

My eyebrows went up. “Wait, you're still joining me, right?”

“Of course,” she agreed, already pushing the door open. “*Somebody* has to bless you with some background vocals worth a damn, right?”

“Oh, is that what it is?” I laughed, following her inside.

Dean tossed up a wave from his perch at the mixing board then went right back to what he was doing—tweaking the music I'd already put in his hands to customize to what we needed.

It already felt better.

And from the smile on Audra's face, I could tell she agreed, bobbing her head to the beat as she took off her bag and everything and found a seat.

It was time to get into it.

More than once over the next couple of hours, it struck me how—honestly—*blessed* I was to be working with these two people. Audra was so lowkey it was easy to not keep at the forefront of your mind that she was a *decorated* songwriter. Same for Dean, with production. I'd avoided coming to him with my solo stuff, not wanting to lean on his talent or overstep as a friend.

Another thing that struck me was how silly *that* shit was.

Bringing talented people into your creative process didn't make it any less of a process, or any less creative. It relieved the frustration of what you couldn't do—or couldn't do quite as well—and allowed you to focus on whatever area you really shined.

Vocal arrangements.

Melodies.

Key changes.

I could write, I could produce, yes, but my *strongest* talent was in performance, so that was what I focused on the most. By the time Audra had to head out—after laying down beautiful background vocals that delivered fully on her claim from earlier—we had *three* strong tracks I would end up having to choose from to release to the world.

After I'd seen her out to the elevator—resisting the *mighty* urge to taste the mouth those golden vocals had been spilling from for the last few hours—I went back into the studio to talk to Dean about the way things had gone.

“Hey, I'm thinking about one more layer in the background, to make sure the harmonies are fully—what's up?” I asked, stopping when he started shaking his head at me. “You think it's too much?”

“Not that—you're a damn trip.” He chuckled, leaning back in his chair. “You're really gonna pop back in here and pretend I didn't see what I just saw?”

I frowned. “Dean... I have no idea what you're talking about,” I told him.

Epecially since I kept my hands to myself specifically because you were here.

“So you and Audra *aren't* fucking around?”

“What would even make you think that?!”

“Where should I start?” he said, laughing. “You motherfuckers been grinning in each other's face all day, ad-libbing like you're fucking and shit. I started to ask if y'all needed me to step out!”

I shrugged. “You got all that from us enjoying working together?”

“I *enjoy working* with plenty of folks I never gave *let’s fuck* eyes to.”

“What about Holly?” I asked, with a pointed stare, and Dean sucked his teeth.

“Dude, that’s a *terrible* example. You should use something else.”

“How is it a terrible example?”

“Because *hell yeah*, me and Holly be fucking.” He cackled. “*Duh*. That’s the love of my life.”

Shit.

I guess he had a point there.

Holly was another artist out of the Heights—another one who worked with Audra, actually—and she and Dean had been making music together—and *been together*—for years.

So yeah.

Poor example.

“Well, I don’t need an example. I just don’t think we were giving off those vibes. We *weren’t* giving off those vibes,” I insisted. “How about that?”

“What you niggas in here lying about today?” Royal called as he came through the door, not bothering to knock. “I don’t hear any music being made. I passed Audra coming out, did I miss all the magic?” he asked.

“Not completely,” I told him, getting up to give him a quick greeting. “I’ve still got to put down a few more background vocals, but after that, we’re outta here.”

“My bad, I couldn’t get away from the coffeehouse as soon as I thought.”

“Ain’t a problem,” I told him.

“You ain’t missed nothing,” Dean said as he moved to greet Royal, too. “Just Audra and Noble in here caking undercover.”

Royal’s eyes went wide. “Word? I *thought* something was up with that. Y’all was on stage last week looking like you wanted to fuck, and you’ve been *real* different lately.”

“Okay, y’all are dragging it.” I shook my head.

“Nah, you’re just transparent.” Royal laughed. “You ain't even been surly this week. I *knew* something was up. Pussy got your mood right together, huh? I'm happy for you!”

“Man, get the fuck off me with that,” I demanded, shrugging off the shoulder pat he was trying to give me, even though I couldn't help chuckling over his antics. “Why does everybody keep accusing me of being a grouch, damn.”

“Because you’ve been a grouch,” Dean answered. “But damn... you and Audra in that booth... straight fire. Never seen your moody ass happier.”

“Oh, so you’re out here finding your soulmate and shit?” Royal asked, and my eyes got wide as *fuck* about that.

“What?! Who said all that?”

“I’m asking.” He shrugged.

“Okay, well, I’m telling you—it ain’t that.”

“Based on what?”

“Based on, I’ve literally known her a week,” I argued, even though it felt disingenuous coming out of my mouth.

Did I think Audra was my “soulmate” after a week of fucking and writing songs?

Nah.

But the argument against it felt... hollow.

It might not be *that*, no... but it was *something*.

Something I didn’t have the bandwidth to figure out.

And fortunately, she was on the same page, something that made the ribbing Royal and Dean continued with much easier to swallow.

I didn’t *have* to try to understand, or try to get *her* to understand.

We just... *got it*.

AUDRA

It was kinda hard to block out the noise sometimes, but sitting in an audience for artists that really *did* this music thing?

Whew.

It was gonna do it for me every time.

Royal and I were right up front for the concert—stage level seating that made it all feel like an intimate experience, even with the room being full of fellow attendees.

At first, I could feel the eyes on us, feel the pictures being taken, but again, it was easy to block it out, and just... *focus*.

Not only on the music, but on Noble, who was looking good, smelling good, *sounding* good when he occasionally started feeling the vibes enough to sing along.

Very much worth the later annoyance of what the internet would have to say.

Fuck it though.

More than once I caught him staring at me, like he couldn't wait to take me back to the hotel room I was staying in tonight, and hell, I couldn't wait for that either.

Especially knowing he and I were on the same page.

It took all the stress off.

“Everybody, I want y’all to know we have a very special guest in the audience tonight!” Dani spoke into the mic, just after she and Logan had sung the last notes of the previous song. Instant heat rushed to my face. I’d explicitly asked if they were doing this shit to me and they’d— *Shit*.

They hadn’t actually answered, now that I thought about it.

They’d kinda avoided the question, and now I knew why.

“Ms. Audra Charles, the phenomenal pen—and sometimes *voice*—behind a lot of your favorite songs from your favorite artists, stand up and wave baby!”

Noble laughed as I dragged myself up from my chair, following the instruction... Stand, wave, smile for a few moments, then sit—

“Come on up here!” Logan called and my eyes went wide. “Come show these people what you can do!”

At first, I shook my head, but then Dani joined in.

“You know she wrote for me? And for Logan? Like I said, some of your favorites!”

From there, the crowd joined in too, urging me to get up on the stage.

And not just the crowd.

Noble too.

He was laughing, clapping, encouraging the shit a little too hard.

“I’m coming!” I yelled up to Dani, who started clapping.

But before I went... I grabbed Noble’s hand.

“Hold up!” he argued, but I shook my head.

“Nope, you come on too,” I insisted, and it took a bit of urging, but... he stood.

Followed me on stage.

Accepted a mic right after I’d accepted mine.

I smirked at him before looking out into the crowd.

“*Blackwood, make some noooooise!*”

THE END

keep it going...

Audra & Noble's story is a part of the New Heights series, looking at the younger generation of Mahogany Heights residents with a bit of the history of The Heights thrown in. You may see some familiar faces and places mentioned and learn even more about their stories.

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Christina C. Jones is a best-selling romance novelist and digital media creator. A timeless storyteller, she is lauded by readers for her ability to seamlessly weave the complexities of modern life into captivating tales of Black characters in nearly every romance subgenre. In addition to her full-time writing career, she co-founded Girl, Have You Read – a popular digital platform that amplifies Black romance authors and their stories. Christina has a passion for making beautiful things, and be found crafting, cooking, and designing and building a (literal) home with her husband in her spare time.