

B . L O V E

HER EXCEPTION

A FRIENDS TO LOVERS ROMANCE
LAW BY DAY... LOVE BY NIGHT

HER EXCEPTION 2
A FRIENDS TO LOVERS ROMANCE

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PROLIFIC PEN PUSHER

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ONE

A melia
October

Darron was my lesson that money and status weren't the most important things when it came to choosing a mate. It didn't matter how much money he made or who he was in the city, there were more important things that made our relationship subpar. At the top of that list was our struggling sex life, conflicting schedules, and his wandering eye. Darron swore he was only looking, never cheating, and the sad part was, I didn't care enough to find out if that was true. In his defense, I relied heavily on my intuition, and it didn't make me feel as if he couldn't be trusted. More than anything, watching him appreciate the female body and even flirt in a friendly manner was an annoyance as opposed to an unforgivable betrayal.

We were in a beautiful, unnecessarily expensive restaurant that you had to make reservations for a month in advance. Darron, however, was able to get us in on the spot because the owner was his cousin's ex-wife. I sat in amusement, poking at the so small it was frustrating serving of food, thinking about how women were on social media writing lists of places they refused to go on for dates. The only great part about going to a fine dining restaurant was getting dressed up, other than that, the food was never worth the money or the experience to me. I'd take a buffet or casual restaurant over this *any* day.

But this was what Darron liked—the experience and ability to brag about going to one of the hottest places in the city with his lady. If only he was in tune enough with his lady to realize how unhappy I was. With a sigh, I placed my fork on the edge of my plate and looked around the dimly lit restaurant. My guys were having the time of their lives at a bar and grill, and I was stuck in this boring ass restaurant with Darron. We'd been together for almost a year at this point, and there were still places he refused to go because he felt they were beneath him.

As a compromise, we stopped going to restaurants and certain entertainment venues for dates, but the list of things we couldn't do together was becoming so long, I gave up the fight and went along with whatever he said. I could admit the difference in our tastes and values was a clear indication of our incompatibility, but I was comfortable with Darron, and my daughter loved him.

Resisting the urge to take my phone out of my clutch to see if Mecca and Parker would be at the bar and grill after we left here, I asked Darron about his day. He loved talking about himself but very rarely cared to hear me do the same. I didn't mind. It was more out of habit than him being uncaring. For quite some time, all I talked about while we were together was my daughter. To break myself of that habit, I began to listen more and talk less. Now, he left little room for me to insert my thoughts into his.

As Darron told me about the multi-million-dollar merger he was working on with his company, the waitress came over to refill our wine glasses. Darron didn't bother to not look at her pushed-up cleavage as she leaned over, and I chuckled to avoid releasing my frustration. Clearing his throat, Darron gave me his gaze as he asked her for the dessert menu. I told him that wouldn't be necessary since I was ready to leave and get some real damn food. Eighty dollars for one lamb chop with shaved vegetables on top was a big enough crime for me to call the police!

Darron waited until the waitress left to ask me, "Is everything all right, darling?"

I chuckled and ran my tongue over my cheek. This wasn't a new disagreement. If I told Darron I was dissatisfied with the food or that I felt uncomfortable with the way he was ogling the waitress, he'd have excuses for both. Deciding not to waste my time or ruin my mood further, I wouldn't address it. I'd been doing that with men all my life it seemed—not addressing things that made me uncomfortable in hopes of keeping the peace. Having a father who loved you unconditionally made you do that.

“It's fine,” was what I said, but my face must have said the opposite because he chuckled and rolled his tongue across his cheek as his head tilted.

“Are you sure?” I nodded. “Then why are you frowning?”

I relaxed my facial expression and chuckled. “It's fine, Darron, really.”

“If there's something that I've done to upset you, you can tell me, Amelia.”

Sighing, I accepted the fact that he wasn't going to let this go. “I don't mind you looking at a woman and appreciating her attractiveness. I'm not insecure. But the way you do it is disrespectful, and it makes me uncomfortable.”

He stared at me for seconds on end before chuckling and lifting his hands in an innocent, dismissive way. “Milli, I was just looking.”

“Repeatedly, for seconds on end, especially at her breasts. Every time you did it, she shifted uncomfortably and released a nervous chuckle. I don't understand why you can't comprehend how creepy that is.”

His eyes rolled toward the ceiling as he shook his head and motioned for the waitress with two fingers. “You're overreacting.”

“No, I'm not actually. If you don't agree with me, say that, but don't downplay my feelings and observations.”

“Fine,” he grumbled as the waitress approached us. He let her know we needed the check, and I was more than ready to leave. I planned to hang with my guys for the night, but when

he said, “I want you to come home with me tonight,” I considered changing my plans.

If I said no, it would probably lead to an even bigger disagreement. I’d been mentioning how little time we were spending together lately, so I couldn’t get out of whatever he had planned for the evening.

“What did you have planned?” I asked, though I already knew what his answer would be.

“Making love to you, holding you, and giving you the attention and affection you deserve for the rest of the night.”

The charming smile he gave me caused me to mirror it, though I really didn’t want to. I would bet money our night wouldn’t end with us spending quality time together. Maybe tonight would be the night he proved me wrong and showed me different. I hoped so, because with my mom having my daughter for the evening, I wanted to take full advantage of my adult time.

“Okay, baby. That sounds nice.”

He paid the check, and we headed out to the town car that was waiting for us. As always, he went into his phone, and I went into mine. After sending Mecca and Parker a text in our group chat, I texted my mom to make sure she and Alisia were good, then, I texted my closest best friend Amaru.

If I had to describe my relationships with Amaru, Mecca, and Parker... I would say, Parker was like family, Mecca was my work bestie and favorite confidant afterhours, and Amaru was my best friend and life partner.

I noticed I had several missed calls from my brother, Jeremy, and I started not to return them. Jeremy and I had a strange and sometimes toxic relationship. Since I was already halfway in a mood, talking to him would only make it worse. However, if it concerned one of my clients, I didn’t want to risk it. I decided to call him back while Darron spoke to his assistant about his upcoming travel plans that he hadn’t even mentioned to me.

“Amelia,” was the greeting Jeremy gave me.

“Yes?”

“We have a situation. When can you come into the office?”

I looked over at Darron briefly. Being a senior associate at Hunter, Phoenix, Genesis, and Prime was what I was most proud of outside of being a mom. Most people thought my brother being a named partner gave me favoritism at the firm, but it was actually the opposite. Things were harder for me at work because of him. If he was calling me, he was either about to give me a case I didn't want or complain about something I did that he didn't like.

“I can have Darron's driver to bring me now if it's really important. It's date night for us.”

He exhaled a hard breath into the receiver. “That won't be necessary. You can come in the morning, but I'll give you details now.” I nodded as if he could see me. “I just bailed one of my clients out on an embezzlement charge. He wants me to work out a deal to ensure his freedom or a lighter sentence in exchange for information on someone else.”

“Okay. What does that have to do with me?”

“The person he wants to give information on is one of your clients.”

My eyes closed, and I inhaled a deep breath. “How are we going to handle this, Jeremy?”

“I have to do what's best for my client, but I can't throw yours under the bus in the process.”

“What are you thinking? They can't do a joint deal if he's going to snitch on my client.”

“If your client comes forward with information that's just as useful, he can avoid charges or at least get a lesser sentence.”

“What is he going to accuse my client of?”

“Chase is claiming your client is also involved in embezzlement and extortion.”

Massaging my temples, I shook my head. “I can’t ask you not to work the deal, but you know like I know the chances of my client getting no time or a lesser sentence are slim to none unless they snitch. It will not be a good look for us if one of our clients is the reason another is in prison.”

“Everyone has a price. I need you to work your client and get them to give up someone, something, that can get them as good of a deal as I’m going to get my client.”

“I’ll try, but I can’t make any guarantees. This is Chase Rogers, right?”

“Right, and the client he plans to inform on is Gideon Samuels.”

“Shit,” I muttered.

Gideon had been a client for over ten years. This was my first year representing him. He was first a client of my grandfather, who originally started the firm. When my grandfather left, he wanted me or Jeremy to represent him. He went with Jeremy because Jeremy had more experience, but Jeremy had so many clients Gideon felt as if he wasn’t getting the attention and treatment he deserved. There was no way in hell he’d snitch, even if it meant saving his own ass. Gideon was an old-school hustler, and he abided by certain rules. Remaining loyal and not snitching was at the top of that list.

“Come on, Jeremy, you know Gideon is not going to snitch. And Granddaddy will have a fit if he finds out your client is the reason one of our most loyal clients will be sent to prison. I don’t know how you’re going to work a deal for Chase, but you need to do it without involving Gideon.”

After disconnecting the call, I emailed Gideon’s assistant and asked if we could meet in the morning to prepare him. I also planned to call my grandfather so he could talk some sense into Jeremy. Grandpa didn’t care to talk law these days. He was spending his retirement in Miami living his best life. I hated to involve him, but if I had to, I would. Though I hoped Jeremy would do the right thing and not involve my client, I really couldn’t say.

On the off-chance Jeremy did work the deal and put a target on Gideon's back, I'd have to do whatever I could to keep Gideon out of prison. Even without me looking at the evidence and potential charges, there was no doubt in my mind Gideon was involved. This was the part of being a criminal defense attorney that I hated, but it was my job. There were worse things going on in the world was what I told myself in situations like this, but situations like this often made me glad I was shifting my focus from criminal to civil law.

I remained silent for the rest of the ride. By the time we arrived, Gideon's assistant had responded and let me know they could come into the office in the morning. Though I hated working on the weekend, this was worth it. I had an idea as we walked into Darron's home, so I quickly called my brother back. Jeremy probably had the perfect solution for this, but he was the kind of partner who hardly ever gave associates guidance and tips. Everything was a test or game to him.

"Yeah?"

"I have an idea."

"Which is?"

"Since Gideon was previously your client, you can create a deal for both of them as if he's your client now. They can be tried together. Even with the information Chase gives, if they are co-conspirators, they'll receive the same sentence if you make that a requirement of the deal."

He was quiet for a while, but I heard the smile in his voice when he said, "I'll see what I can do," before disconnecting the call.

That lifted a weight off my shoulders as I headed toward Darron's bedroom. I was sure Chase had other people he could give information on. It didn't have to be Gideon, but if he did implicate him, the deal Jeremy worked out would keep Gideon safe.

"Did you get everything taken care of?" Darron asked.

"I did. How about you?"

"Yeah."

“What’s this about a trip you’re taking?” I asked as he loosened his tie.

“Oh yes, I wanted to talk to you about that. I’m leaving for New York in the morning. I’ll be there for a week.”

I didn’t respond right away as I took off my shoes. Darron was arguably one of the best attorneys handling mergers and acquisitions for big corporations. When we first met a little over a year ago, I wanted to study under him. I learned quickly that, though I was great at negotiations, I didn’t want to do it for that niche. Learning from him turned into dating him after three weeks, and we’d been together ever since.

“I thought you were going to come with me to have dinner with Daddy?” I confirmed softly.

My father had this thing where he wouldn’t meet a man I was dating unless we were together for a year, and it was leading to marriage. He especially didn’t want to meet Darron because he was fifteen years my senior and my dad swore Darron was using me for sex and arm candy. At thirty-five and fifty, I was sure we looked like daughter and son because of Darron’s salt and pepper hair, but he was so attractive I didn’t care.

Darron’s head shook as he walked over to me, unbuttoning his shirt. “Can we reschedule?”

“Darron, it was planned specifically so he could meet you.”

“And I understand that, but I can’t miss this opportunity, darling.” He gave me a quick kiss before heading to his closet to finish undressing.

I undressed, though I really didn’t want to spend the evening at his place. There was no doubt in my mind this quality time he mentioned would consist of him working while I rested in his bed. Still, I undressed and went to his closet to hang up my dress like I always did. His arms were wrapping around me immediately, but I was too frustrated to be aroused.

Dinner with Daddy meant a lot to me. We didn’t have the best relationship. It wasn’t the close bond my friends had with

their fathers when I was growing up. Up until eighteen, he provided for me, took me to his home two weekends out of the month, and took holiday photos with me. Once I became a legal adult, he gave me access to a trust fund that I was still receiving money from and looked out for me professionally, but that was really the extent of our relationship. Maybe once a month we'd do family dinners together, but that was it.

He agreed to dinner this Sunday solely for the purpose of meeting Darron. If I let him know Darron wouldn't be there, he'd cancel. Or, at least, tell me not to come and have dinner with his wife and Jeremy.

His hands slid up to my black lace bra and he squeezed. "I've been thinking about getting you in my bed since I picked you up. You looked delectable in that dress, letting it cling to every one of your curves. All I could think about was ripping it off you."

I turned in his arms, looking into the eyes of a man who mirrored Idris Elba. If we could get our schedules more aligned and work on our sex game, Darron would be perfect for me. It wasn't that he was small or quick; he just... ran from good pussy by switching positions far too quickly for me to cum. The journey felt nice, but I never reached the destination of climax with him.

"Darron," I cooed as his lips went to my neck. "Baby, is it possible for you to take your trip after dinner? This really means a lot to me."

I lowered to my knees, pulling his long, straight dick out of his boxers. It was hard already, oozing pre-cum. Our eyes locked as I swirled my tongue around his head, but instead of taking him into my mouth, I waited for his response.

"Darling..."

"Can you take a later flight?" I took him into my mouth, smiling when his head popped out. "Please?"

"Amelia," he groaned, cupping the back of my head. "Anything for you."

Pleased with his answer, I took him into my mouth and gave him the fast, wet, loud head that he liked. When his body began to jerk and his mouth hung open, he pulled out. We made our way to his bed, where he stroked me a few times missionary before turning me over onto my stomach. By the time I was moaning my pleasure and allowing my wetness to coat him, he was pulling out and exploding on my ass. My eyes closed as I pulled in a shaky breath. I'd get myself off in the shower... just like I always did.

Two

A maru

I loved the sight of my best friend's face. Looking at Amelia *always* made me happy. We had the kind of bond that didn't require conversation between us. Just sitting with her in silence was often enough for me.

I was surprised she even Facetimed me. Usually, when she was with her man for the evening, she was hard to reach unless it was for an emergency. I could respect that. Since I had a son the same age as her daughter, twelve, we were doing this parenting thing together. We met our first year of law school. She was pregnant and so was my girlfriend at the time. We bonded over the experience since I couldn't be as active in Veronica's pregnancy as I would have liked.

She had gone out of state for nursing school. I had to beg her to even keep the baby. Veronica had a plan for her life, a particular purpose that she wanted to fulfill, and she believed a baby would get in the way of that. I convinced her to have my son and give me full custody. Now, she saw Amaru Junior for holidays and his birthday, and he was loved enough to where he was okay with that. I'd explained to him, once he was old enough to comprehend, that he was my son. That I wanted him. That I was grateful to God for his mother giving him to me. Because that's what my son was—he was my gift. Regardless of what his mother did or didn't do, he'd been my

responsibility and greatest accomplishment, and that would never change.

Amelia and I ended up doing life together after school, even starting at the same law firm. I left earlier than her to start working at HGP² and she ended up following me there. Now, we both were senior associates, waiting for our next chance for advancement. Unlike most associates, I didn't care if I never became partner. That was a lot of responsibility and less time actually practicing law in my opinion.

As I looked her pretty face over, I thought about how we had each other's backs over the last close to thirteen years. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for this woman, and there was no doubt in my mind that she felt the same way.

"I'm jealous." The pout on her face was adorable.

"Why are you jealous, Milli?"

"Because Alisia gets to hang with my two favorite guys, and I don't."

I couldn't stop the smile that spread my lips at the sound of her confession. AJ and Alisia were close, just like Amelia and I were. He wanted to spend the evening playing games with her, so I reached out to see if Alisia could play. Milli's mom didn't mind me picking her up, which I was grateful for.

"I'm sure you'd rather be under your man than play games with us."

Amelia's eyes rolled and I laughed. "Darron is in his office working, like I thought he would be, so I'm just chilling in his room until I fall asleep."

"Well, I wish you were here." Before she could respond, I was getting a call from Parker. "Hey, I'll text you, okay? Parker's on the other line."

"Okay, Ru. Take care of my baby."

"Don't I always?"

She shot me a wink and smile as she nodded before ending the Facetime. As I answered Parker's call, I headed toward the kitchen to see what kind of snacks I could make for the kids in

about an hour or so. We'd already stopped to get rolled ice cream and I didn't want to give them too much too soon.

"Hello?" I answered, hoping everything was okay with him and Mecca since they'd gone out together for the evening.

"You busy?"

"Nah, what's up?"

"Do you have any plans Sunday after next? Around seven that evening?"

"Nothing is coming to mind. What's going on?"

"I'm putting together a surprise wedding for Carina." My feet stopped moving as a surge of happiness and shock filled me. They'd been dating for a little over two months now, so it was extremely fast for a wedding. Parker had never been in love with a woman or even attached to a woman in all the years I've known him. As soon as he met Carina, he let us know she was the one, and since I believed it didn't take long to come to that conclusion, I shouldn't have been surprised that he wanted to marry her this fast.

"Wow, man. Congratulations. I'm happy for you, and I wouldn't miss the wedding for anything in the world."

"Thank you. That's what I wanted to hear. Wear black. I'll shoot you an official invitation tomorrow. And don't tell anyone except your date because this is a secret."

"I got you."

We said our goodbyes, then I texted Taylor, my on-again-off-again ex. Well, I'm not sure I can call her an ex since we never officially committed. Between work and my son, I didn't have much time to try and meet new women. Honestly, I had no desire to either. Milli gave me the companionship I needed, and when I wanted sex or romantic evenings, I got that from Taylor. It didn't take her long to text me back, letting me know she was available and would love to be my date for the evening.

I went to check on the kids, and my heart expanded in size when my son hugged me and thanked me for going to get his

favorite girl. The fact that he even called her that made me willing to go and get her whenever I possibly could. There wasn't much my son lacked in this world besides a consistent relationship with his mother. He didn't ask to be here, and it was my desire to make sure he lived a life that made him happy to be in this world and my son.

Once I had their games set up in the game room, I settled in the living room and put it on what was the best season of *Martin*—season two. I was about three episodes in when there was a knock on the door. Since I wasn't expecting anyone, I checked the camera before going to open it, smiling at the sight of Amelia. For several seconds, I was frozen as I stared at her. I couldn't believe she was here. When she rang the doorbell again, I stood to let her in.

When I opened the door, my eyes scanned her frame. She was dressed in sweats and an oversized t-shirt. Slides were on her feet, and two ankle bracelets were wrapped around her ankles. Her hair was pulled back and off her face, giving me a full view of its beauty.

“Milli...”

“Hi,” she spoke sweetly.

“What're you doing here?”

“You said you wished I was here.”

“Well yeah, but I wasn't expecting you to actually come.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

Before she could turn fully, I was grabbing her hand and pulling her into my home... into my chest. “You *know* I want you here.”

The seconds that passed of our eyes being locked together felt like eternities. She released a shaky breath and pressed her hand into my chest, pushing me back gently.

“Where are my babies?” she asked, stepping further into my home.

“In the game room, as always.”

After locking up, I followed her into the game room. When AJ and Alisia laid eyes on her, they both shot up from their seats to hug her. Alisia expressed her excitement for her being here so we could play games together. Her presence had officially made this the perfect night.

THREE

A melia

Alisia and I ended up sleeping at Ru's house. We spent the night playing all kinds of board games. AJ wanted cookies and Alisia wanted nachos, so we made both and pigged out. They crashed just after midnight, and Amaru carried her into the guest bedroom for me. I tried to stay up with him a little longer, but I was drained and fell asleep not too long after.

I woke up to Darron blowing my phone up. He was upset because I left after he promised to make me breakfast in bed. I told him I'd stop by after dropping Alisia off, but he said it was okay for me to bring her. They had a cute relationship, which I was grateful for. He almost always gave her some kind of gift, making her have a high level of expectancy when he came around. I appreciated him taking the time to not just date me but create a bond with my daughter as well since her father wasn't around. Amaru had been a constant in her life since birth, though, and I was eternally grateful to God for that.

When we pulled into the driveway and Alisia realized where we were, she gasped and beamed. "I didn't know we were coming to Mr. Darron's house."

"Yes, he's making us breakfast. After that, we're gonna head home so you can get ready for school tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am."

I texted Amaru to let him know our plans since we left before he and AJ woke up. They both were deep sleepers, which was good because I would have hated for our early departure to disturb their sleep. Alisia and I walked to the front door, where Darron waited to greet us. He was soft and all smiles toward my daughter, but I felt his irritation when he spoke to me and gave me a kiss on the side of my mouth.

“Morning, baby,” I replied, taking in how handsome he looked in his black, silk sleep set.

“Can we talk once we get Alisia set up?”

“Sure.”

We went to the dining room, where several trays and dishes of food rested on the table. Though Alisia could fix her own plate, I still often did it for her to make sure she didn’t get too much or too little. She was in that stage where, though she wasn’t gaining weight or inches, her metabolism was crazy high, and she could eat more than me. Once I had her juice poured, I searched for Darron and found him in his bedroom.

He was pacing with a perplexed expression on his face, which concerned me.

“Is everything okay?”

“I didn’t want to address this last night while I was working, but I’m not comfortable with you leaving me to go be with another man.”

It took me a second to respond as I processed his words. My routines with Amaru and AJ were so second nature, I thought back to a time I left him to be with another man because I refused to believe he was talking about last night.

“What are you talking about, Darron?”

His fingers slid down the corners of his mouth before he placed his hands on his hips.

“Last night. You left me to be with Amaru. I don’t like that.”

With a chuckle, I took a few steps back. “I didn’t leave you to be with Amaru. I left you because you were working and I

was bored, so I went to spend the evening with my people. It wasn't just Amaru; our children were there too. I'm not sure why I'm even explaining this to you, because we do game nights all the time."

"It's not the game night that's the problem." He closed the space between us, hovering over me because of our height difference. "It's the fact that you left me to be with another man." My eyes rolled as I crossed my arms over my chest, but he lowered them. "You know I hate when you do that while I'm speaking to you."

"Darron, I want to take your feelings seriously because they are valid, but I'm also confused about why you're making this a big deal. You've never had a problem with me spending time with Amaru. He's my best friend."

"And that's all he is to you?"

"Yes! If we were going to be more, it would have happened long before now."

With a long sigh, Darron took my hands into his. "I just want to make sure I'm not investing my time and effort where it isn't appreciated."

"If I didn't appreciate your time and effort, you wouldn't be meeting my father tonight. I'm not sure where this is coming from, but I don't like it."

This wasn't the first time a man questioned my friendship with Amaru, but it was the first time Darron had done so. The fact that it was happening the day he was supposed to meet my father didn't sit well with me. This could have been a sign that I needed to cancel and let Daddy know we wouldn't be able to come. I needed time alone to process it and meditate.

"I'm just going to grab Alisia and leave," I continued, pulling my hands from his.

"Don't do that. She was excited to be here."

Chuckling, I admitted, "I was too... until you started up with this."

“Look, I’m not trying to ruin your mood. I was upset over that and wanted to let you know so it won’t happen again.”

“I can respect that, I’m just trying to figure out where this is coming from because you’re not the kind of man who insecurely gets upset over something that’s been going on literally since you met me.”

Our eyes locked as he remained silent for seconds on end. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to decide whether he wanted to be completely honest or not. When I was over the conversation, I tried to leave, but he gripped my arm. Usually, I tried to avoid disagreements with Darron at all costs. Even if it meant I suffered from dis-ease within myself, I held back to keep the peace. If it came down to my daughter, my mother, or my best friend and his son, the meek Amelia went away.

“All right,” he surrendered, pulling me back in front of him. “My brother’s wife left him last night. For her business partner at that. A man she was with daily, had in their home... all of that. She swore there was nothing going on between them, but obviously, that was a lie. Last night was the first time in a decade since our mother died that I heard my brother cry and it fucked with me. That’s why I spent the evening working. I needed the distraction.”

I wrapped my arms around him, softening against him. “Why didn’t you tell me, baby?”

“I didn’t want to unload that on you.”

“I’m your woman. That’s what I’m here for.”

His head tilted as he released a shaky breath. “I know, but last night, I was having a weak moment and needed to be to myself. So when you told me you were leaving to go to his house, it was a trigger I guess. I spent the rest of the night convincing myself you were cheating on me with him.”

The laugh I released was one of disbelief, not amusement. Standing on the tips of my toes, I gave him a sweet kiss.

“Baby, I really wish you would have said something. All of this could have been avoided. I promise there is nothing sexual going on between me and Ru, and there never has been.

We value our friendship far too much for that. Plus, our kids are like sister and brother. Nothing is worth messing our little family up, especially sex.”

He nodded, pulling me closer. “I believe you, darling. I apologize for projecting their situation onto us and doubting you.”

“Promise me that if you ever have a moment like that, you’ll communicate with me. Even if you want to be by yourself, don’t shut me out, okay?”

“Okay,” he agreed, before reconnecting his lips with mine.

We kissed and held each other close for a while before I left so he could get dressed. When he joined Alisia and me, we finished our breakfast and made plans for the day. To further apologize, though I told him it wasn’t necessary, he set up a day of fun for the three of us. It was appreciated, because I honestly didn’t know how dinner with Daddy was going to go...

FOUR

A melia

“You’ve been quieter than usual,” Darron noticed as we pulled up to the estate Daddy shared with his wife Mina.

“Are you really surprised?”

With a low chuckle, Darron took my hand into his. “If you don’t want to do this, we don’t have to, darling.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to. I’m just nervous.”

He didn’t have to ask why. I’d shared my tattered family history with Darron during our get-to-know-you stage.

“Are you going to be brave and do it anyway, or shall I have Winston drive us away?”

I looked at the iron doors for a beat before telling him, “Let’s get this over with.”

His smile was soft as he nodded and unbuckled his seatbelt. This was always the case when I visited Daddy. I’d be happy about the chance to spend time with him before it was actually time to see him. When it was, I would dread the visit. Almost always, he said something to remind me I was far more desperate for a relationship with him, his love, and his approval than he was to be in my life fully. Tonight was even more anxiety-inducing because Darron was with me. There was no telling what Daddy would say about the man I was comfortably involved with.

Daddy was married when he wined, dined, and wooed my mother. Technically, they were separated, but he always planned to get her back—and that was a fact he didn't share with my mother. From their whirlwind affair, they got the forever gift of me. Mina hated the fact that Daddy's separation affair resulted in a child.

It was twice as bad because I was a girl, and that's what he wanted from her next. Unfortunately, extremely heavy bleeding led to an emergency hysterectomy that resulted in her not being able to carry any more children, and my father winning them a ten-million-dollar lawsuit against the hospital who did the procedure without their consent. One would think that would have made Daddy cherish having me even more, but that wasn't the case.

Jeremy was three when I was born. I wish I could say he was the best big brother a girl could ask for but nope, not even close. Since childhood, our relationship had been strained. There are times I feel as if he merely tolerates me and others he acts like he can't stand me. Very rarely does he treat me like a loving big brother should, but when he does, I cherish those moments.

Even without a close relationship with my father and brother, Daddy made sure I didn't want for anything financially. He took care of me and Mama as best as he could. A caveat to getting back with Mina was that she never felt as if she was splitting him between two homes. Mama cut her heart off toward him the moment she found out he was married, so they never had a physical relationship again. She tolerated him because of me until I was eighteen, and after that, she never spoke to him again unless it was for emergencies.

Every time I stepped foot inside this monstrosity of a home, I prayed it was the day my father expressed his love for me and apologized for not being in my life like he should have been. I prayed it was the day he validated me and spoke life into me. I prayed it was the day he took my intelligence and career just as seriously as he did my brother. And every time I stepped foot inside, I was disappointed.

Darron held my hand as I walked toward the front door. I held my breath as I rang the doorbell and plastered on a smile when Pamela, the housekeeper, opened the door. She greeted us with a warm smile and led us toward the dining room, where Daddy, Mina, and Jeremy were already seated. I spoke to them all and gave Daddy a hug before introducing them to Darron. Daddy sized him up silently for quite some time before motioning with his hand for us to have a seat.

With Daddy and Mina at the heads of the table, Darron and I sat next to each other, across from Jeremy. He was staring at me with his usual smug grin, and I was sure he found this whole thing amusing. When it came to the women he dated, he *never* had to get Daddy's approval. I, on the other hand, had been given the warning if he didn't like the man I chose to marry, he wouldn't be at the wedding or in my life beyond that day.

As Harriet, their personal chef, began to place dishes of food on the table, Daddy immediately began his interrogation.

"Amelia tells me you're one of the best attorneys for mergers and acquisitions," he said.

"He should be, for as long as he's been alive doing it," Jeremy replied.

I wished I could have kicked him under the table, but he was too far away from me.

"Jeremy, behave," Mina said as Darron gave a confident smile.

"I assume that's the elephant in the room. The age difference between Amelia and I."

"It is a concern," Daddy replied.

"And why is that?"

One thing I could say about Darron was that he always maintained his cool and confidence. That's why I was so thrown off by him questioning me about Amaru earlier.

"What could you possibly want from my daughter outside of her pussy and good looks?"

I think Mina was just as surprised by my father's question as I was because she choked on the water she was drinking.

"Daddy!" I yelled, slamming my fist on the table. We hadn't even started fixing our plates yet and he was already showing his ass!

"It's okay," Darron assured me, taking my hand into his under the table.

While Mina coughed, she looked from me to Daddy. For the first time, there was sympathy in her eyes. She'd never been nurturing toward me, or even talkative... always detached and guarded. I could get that to a certain extent. I was the physical representation of her husband's affair. Though he swore they were free to see other people because they were separated, to Mina, he had cheated.

"I'm going to assume your father's crass questioning comes from a place of love and concern. He wants to know what I see in you, and I can respect that." Darron gave my father his attention as he continued. "I think your daughter was first attracted to me because of you. She needed guidance and mentorship that should have come from you or your son, and since she couldn't get that, she came to me." I squeezed his hand because he was right. "When she realized what she needed on a professional level, we opened ourselves up for something personal. Regardless of the age difference, I've fallen in love with your daughter's mind, personality, and yes, even her beauty."

My heart thumped rapidly against my chest. This was the first time Darron had ever mentioned love. Was he being sincere, or was he putting on a show for my father?

"I know it's important to Milli that the man she marries has your approval, and I hope that will be me. If not, I'm still going to marry her and make sure she never feels the effects of your absence in her life should you decide to leave."

My eyes blinked rapidly as I fought my tears. Twisting my mouth to the side, I looked over at my brother and swallowed hard. He gave me a nod of approval with a small smile, which I wasn't expecting.

Darron and Daddy stared at each other until Daddy cut through the tension by asking Darron, “You into sports?”

As if the previous conversation hadn’t happened, we all began to pile food onto our plates. Conversations shifted from sports to music, religion, and politics. By the time we were ready to have dessert, Daddy was gushing over how Jeremy had gotten one of his clients off Friday for murder. Because two women had confessed to the same crime—killing the man who had abused them—neither of them could be tried. A win was a win to Jeremy, but I would have preferred to truly prove my client’s innocence. Either way, a violently abusive man had been stopped permanently and two of his victims were able to now live in peace.

After dessert, Daddy surprised me by offering Darron a cigar and two knuckles of his favorite cognac. While they continued their quality time, I went into the living room to call and check on Mama and Alisia. I felt someone walking behind me, and I was surprised when Jeremy came and stood next to me at the large floor-to-ceiling window.

“You did good with him, Milli.”

Something about his approval made my heart squeeze. I knew Darron was a good man. Even with our small issues, he was a damn good catch. Mama told me with a man, you’d have to settle for something to deal with. If what I had to deal with was long sex without my walls pulsing as I came, I would just have to invest in a lifetime supply of batteries for my vibrator and deal with it.

“I think so too.”

“You know what’s crazy?” I turned slightly to face him. “All this time, I thought you’d end up with Mecca or Amaru.”

“Those are my two best friends.”

“I know you’ve always said that but still. I expected something more to happen with one of them, especially Amaru.”

Not wanting to have this conversation again, I remained silent. This was one of the few times Jeremy wasn’t being a

total asshole, and I wanted to take full advantage of our moment of peace.

FIVE

A maru
One Week Later

Taylor was one of the finest women I'd ever been with. She was stacked like Ashanti and had the beauty to match. The all-black sequin dress she had on clung to her curves and had quite a few men in the room stealing glances. On any other night, that would have filled me with pride and boosted my confidence. This night, I didn't give a damn how men reacted to Taylor, because I couldn't take my eyes off Amelia.

Amelia looked absolutely *stunning*.

Her cocoa-brown skin was covered in a black dress that was classy and sexy at the same time—just like Amelia. It had a deep v-cut in the front, teasing the tops of her B-cup breasts. A high split gave just enough thigh to leave me wanting more. She was tall, slim, and toned... not my usual body type, but tonight... tonight her body was looking just right.

Her black and brown hair was usually parted in the middle and hanging down to the middle of her back. Tonight, she had it up in some kind of curly updo with two curls framing her face. The makeup she wore complimented her beauty with shades of gold and brown to match her syrup-brown eyes. I couldn't stop staring at her pouty lips.

What the fuck was going on with me?

She was my best friend... had been for years... and tonight I was envisioning her in a wedding dress like Carina's with me as her groom.

Clearing my throat, I tried to tear my eyes away from her and Darron, but I couldn't. I felt strangely possessive of her, which was a first.

Darron placed a kiss to her neck before making his exit, and I wondered if he was gone for the night.

"I'll be back," I whispered against Taylor's ear as her head bobbed to the music that was playing.

Carina and Parker's ceremony was short and sweet before it turned into a party. They looked beautiful as they danced in the middle of the ballroom. What they had made love feel real—feel possible. I was honored to witness it and hoped one day I'd be honored enough to experience it.

Sitting next to Amelia, I held back my smile as she grinned at me.

"Taylor finally let you up for air?"

Chuckling, I sat further in my seat and wrapped my arm around her chair. "She wants me close because she doesn't know anyone else here."

"She knows me, but I can understand that. If you were my date, I wouldn't let you get away either. You look damn good in this suit, Ru."

Before I could relish in her compliment, Mecca was pulling her out of her seat. Apparently, Shalom had a surprise for Carina and she needed Amelia's assistance. I couldn't pull my eyes off her as she walked away, and it took everything in me not to tell her to quickly make her way back to me.

I made my way back to Taylor, trying my hardest not to show my disappointment of not having my favorite girl.

"How much longer are we staying?" Taylor asked, scrolling on Facebook.

"I'll be here a while. These are my people."

Her eyes rolled as she huffed. “I’m bored.”

“You wouldn’t be if you mingled or danced. You’ve been sitting here for the last hour doing nothing.”

I’d asked her to dance twice and both times she declined. If we were in a club, I wouldn’t have been able to get her to stop shaking her ass. I don’t know what was up with her tonight, but she’d been shyer and more reserved than usual. At first, I thought it was because she didn’t know too many people, but she’d even been giving Amelia a cold shoulder.

“This isn’t really my scene, Amaru. All these stuffy ass lawyers. I’m just not comfortable.”

I chuckled as I looked around the room. While some people were sitting and vibing to the music, mostly everyone was on the dancefloor having a good time. I felt like she was using that as an excuse, but if she didn’t want to discuss the real reason she was so stale-faced, I wouldn’t make her.

“How about I Uber you home then?”

She looked up from her phone briefly before nodding her agreement. That was cool with me. Without me having to be tied to the chair next to her, I could enjoy myself for the rest of the night.

It took about five minutes for the Uber to pull up. I walked her out and told her to text me when she made it home. As I re-entered the ballroom, I was just in time for Shalom’s surprise for Carina. It was a hologram projector that presented a 4D image of her deceased father so they could share a dance. I don’t think there was one dry eye in the room as Carina danced along with the 4D image of her father. Shalom was the one for that move. Only the most considerate of people would think to do something like this for a friend’s wedding.

After they loved on each other and Carina repeatedly expressed her gratitude, she requested something that would get everyone back in a turnt-up mood. The DJ played “Wipe Me Down” by Boosie, which had everyone, including me, on our feet dancing and rapping along.

With both of our dates gone, Amelia and I made our way to each other. A series of line dancing songs played, and we danced to every one. When “All My Life” started to fill the room, Amelia hesitantly looked at me as she cupped her hands in the center of her.

“Would you like to dance?” I asked, taking her hand and pulling her into me.

With a wide smile and a nod, she wrapped her arms around my neck while I wrapped mine around her waist.

“You look beautiful tonight, Milli. I hope Darron took every chance he could to tell you that.”

“He might’ve told me once or twice, but it always sounds better coming from you.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, and my voice had unintentionally dropped an octave.

She bit down on her bottom lip and searched the room, avoiding my eyes briefly.

“You’re my person. Everything, every word, every compliment... it’s always better coming from you.”

I felt the strongest urge to kiss her, and I wasn’t sure why. Pulling away from her, I decided it was best to put some space between us. At no point in our friendship had I ever looked at Amelia romantically or sexually, and it wasn’t because she wasn’t beautiful. What I felt tonight was confusing the hell out of me, and I needed to get it together before I said or did something to make things weird between us.

“Let’s grab a drink,” I suggested.

We walked over to the bar area, and my hand instinctively went to the small of her back. She looked up at me curiously with a smile.

“What?” I asked, smiling down at her.

“Nothing. You okay?”

“Why do you ask?”

Milli shrugged. “I don’t know. You seem... different.”

“Good different or bad different?”

Licking her lips, she looked straight ahead before saying, “Good different.”

I didn't want to question what it was that made me different. That was a conversation I didn't think either of us wanted to have. For now, I was glad to finally be able to enjoy some time with my girl without any distractions.

SIX

A melia

As I got ready for the spa night I'd planned for me, Alisia, and Mama, I hoped Darron would honor his word and come to see me before he went to the airport. Things had been even more distant between us since dinner a little over a week ago. That night, he left for New York and didn't come back until the following Sunday. I appreciated him taking the time to attend the surprise wedding with me, but the next morning, he was on his way back to New York. If we had still been talking, I wouldn't have minded the distance between us, but days would pass before I'd hear his voice, and I wasn't sure how much more of this I could take.

I hadn't been able to ask him if he was serious about what he'd said to my father about being in love with me and marrying me—that's how short our conversations had been. All I could do was hope he'd be in town long enough for us to spend some quality time together.

Trying to get him off my mind, I put my phone on the charger and headed to the living room. I loved living with my mother. Though I made more than enough money to have my own home for me and Alisia, Mama wanted me here until I was married. Not just to continue to be close to me and provide the comfort and security I've had since birth, but also because she loved being close to her granddaughter. She and Alisia were the best of friends. Between her and her sisters, I

never had to worry about not being able to have a social life because Alisia's father wasn't in the picture. Mama had been there with me from the beginning, including being in the delivery room.

She did marry after Daddy, but my stepfather died of a heart attack when I was eight years old. I don't have too many memories of him, but from the pictures of us, it looked like we used to have a great time together. I wished Mama would get out there again and date, but she was content with the love she had with my stepfather and had no desire to put her heart on the line again.

I looked over what I had set up in pride. We all had foot spas and massagers in our chairs. There was a spread of finger sandwiches, fruit, vegetables, and tea that Alisia would love. I had aromatherapy going with soft jazz music playing in the background. This would be the perfect distraction to get my mind off things with Darron and at work.

Jeremy had done what I suggested to keep both our clients out of prison, but he neglected to tell Gideon it was my idea. Gideon was so impressed he decided he wanted Jeremy to be his attorney, and because I had too much integrity to tell him Jeremy took credit for my idea, I took the loss. He would have to pay a new retainer, so I was okay with that since I would still get paid.

After checking to see if Darron had reached out one last time, I told my girls to come inside. They both were excited, but Alisia could barely contain herself. She was at an age where the simplest things pleased her, and that made me want to give her the world.

As we soaked our feet, we talked about our plans for the upcoming week. I gave them pedicures and manicures before Mama did the same for me. We were so relaxed by the time it was over, we all wanted to take a nap. Just when I was about to settle into bed, Darron called and told me he was outside. By the time I made it to the front door, he was making his way in front of it. I jumped into his arms and saturated his face with kisses.

He laughed as he held me close. “I missed you too, darling.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were on your way?”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“You definitely did. How long do we have? Are you taking me to your place?”

Darron placed me on my feet. He ran his hand over his face, and it was the first time I took notice of how tired he looked. I respected his hustle, but I worried about him overdoing it. His crazy work schedule was why he hadn’t gotten married and had children, and I didn’t want it to be the reason we broke up too. More than that, I didn’t want it to be the reason he died too soon. When we weren’t together, I couldn’t ensure he was eating and resting like he needed to. My nerves were always bad when he went away for business. That was always a reminder of how much I cared about him.

“I could but I’m not sure how much time we’d have to spend together. We’ll have tonight and tomorrow morning, but I can’t guarantee more. I’m waiting on a call that the sellers have made a decision about the deal my client offered. When I get that call, I have to take a flight.”

“I’ll take what I can get. I just want to spend some time with my man.”

His lips curved into a smile as he lowered them to mine. “Then pack a bag and spend the night with me.”

“Okay. Let me make sure Mama is okay with me leaving Alisia. I know she doesn’t mind but I still like to check.”

“Of course. And if she isn’t, I’ll stay here until you fall asleep.”

Excitement coursed through me at the sound of his words. I almost skipped to my mother’s room to confirm what I already knew—that she didn’t mind me leaving for the night. Alisia was taken care of for the evening and probably wouldn’t leave her room until morning. I stopped by her room and gave her a hug and kiss and let her know I’d see her in the morning.

On the off-chance I was running late, I'd Facetime her at the least.

It didn't take me long to pack a bag, and since I didn't suspect I'd be there beyond morning, I kept it light. We walked out to the town car hand in hand, and I couldn't have been more excited to finally have Darron back in my personal space.

"So what's new?" he asked once we were comfortable in the back of the car.

"Well, there's something I've been anxious to talk to you about face to face."

"And what's that?"

"Did you mean what you said at dinner about being in love with me and wanting to marry me?"

Darron chuckled as he took my hand into his and kissed it. "Of course, I meant it. Why would I lie?"

With a shrug, I looked out of the window to avoid his eyes. "I don't know. Maybe you were trying to make Daddy feel bad."

His finger went under my chin, and he pulled my attention back to him. The softness in his eyes made my heart skip a beat.

"I love you, Amelia Jane Phoenix. I'm in love with you. I love your daughter like she was my own. And I hope one day to give her a little brother or sister. I want to make her mother my wife soon. The sooner, the better."

"I would straddle you and ride your dick if we were in this car alone."

"Mm... we'll be home soon enough."

His hand went to the back of my neck, and he used it to pull me closer. After kissing his lips a few times, I pulled away to say, "I love you, and I'm down for the baby and the marriage too."

Darron released a hearty laugh. “Well, I was going to do both anyway, but I’m happy to know we’re on the same page.”

All I could do was stare at him in awe. It could only get better from here.

SEVEN

A maru

“Whew. Taylor wasn’t playing around branding you.”

The feel of Amelia’s finger on my neck made me shiver.

That was a first.

I couldn’t deny what she was referring to. Last night, Taylor and I had rough, *nasty* sex. We were gone off Hennessy and Patron and I only remember half of what we did. Hickies and scratch marks were the physical reminders I had of our night when we woke up... along with her cum on the condom and my thighs. I never passed out without cleaning myself up, but last night was the exception. I don’t know what had gotten into her to make her go so hard, but just thinking about it had my dick getting hard too.

“Man, say. Last night was wild.”

“Clearly. I wish I was getting sex that had me doing all that.”

Her comment caught me off guard. For a second, I watched her make her way across the breakroom on our floor. I wasn’t even supposed to be at work today, which was why I was dressed down in a V-neck and slacks. Seeing her this early in the day made me glad I’d come to grab a few files.

As close as Amelia and I were, there were some things we never discussed, and sex was at the top of that list. I had

always been a curious man, and I felt like talking to her about sex would make me want to experience it. That had been a boundary we'd kept in our friendship until now, but as I considered her confession, I couldn't help but want to cross that line.

Amelia leaned against the counter and took a sip of her coffee. She looked beautiful in an off-white pantsuit that hugged her slim frame perfectly. Her hair was back in its signature style... middle part, resting on her back. Her eyes were playful as she stared at me like she was baiting me to say exactly what was on my mind.

Sitting at the small round table directly across from her, I asked, "What does that mean? You've never had sex good enough to make you scratch a man's back up? You've never had a man deep in that pussy missionary style long enough for you to give him a hickey?"

She crossed her ankles and cleared her throat, running her hand down her neck. "Um... no. No to both."

"Don't tell me Darron is a minute man."

"No, no it's..." She squeezed the back of her neck. "It's not that. He can last."

"Then what's the problem?"

Cupping her coffee with both hands, she came and sat at the table across from me. "My pussy is so good he can't stay in one position for too long."

I don't know what I was expecting her to say, but that certainly wasn't it. She broke our stare down with a laugh. I smiled, but I really was stuck on what she said.

"You're joking, right?"

"No, not at all."

"Running from the pussy by switching positions means he has no self-control. Does he make you cum?"

Her smile fell. She licked her lips. "No, but it still feels good, and I enjoy it. But no. He doesn't make me cum."

The thought of him having access to her pussy and not satisfying her pissed me off.

“Having sex and not cumming is the equivalent of climbing a mountain and stopping just before you get to the top. You don’t get the pride and euphoria of reaching your destination. The pleasure.”

“Amaru...”

“If he’s not satisfying you, he doesn’t deserve to have your body, Milli.”

“Not every man can make a woman cum, Amaru. It’s more common for a woman not to cum from penetration than to cum.”

“Wait.” Lifting my hands, I chuckled and sat up in my seat. “Are you saying you’ve never cum at all?”

“I have just not from penetration alone. The only time a man has ever made me cum with his dick was while he was using a toy too. I’ve had men eat my pussy or finger me until I came, but just straight-up penetration sex with no clitoral stimulation... that’s... no.”

I wanted to change that.

But I couldn’t.

We were best friends.

We raised our kids together.

I could have sex with literally any woman.

I couldn’t risk our friendship for a night of pleasure.

But damn if I didn’t believe she deserved it.

Lidia walked inside the break room, keeping me from saying what I wanted to say but didn’t need to. Amelia must have been grateful for the distraction because she quickly hopped up from her seat and told me she’d talk to me later.

A part of me was grateful for the distraction too. This was a dangerous path for us to take. For me to take, at least. She didn’t seem to be bothered physically by our conversation at

all. I, on the other hand, had a hard dick that I *wished* she could have taken care of.

As I gave my body time to calm down from thoughts of pleasuring Milli, I checked my email on my phone. Because my hours could run long depending on what I was working on, I opted to work from home as much as I possibly could in between trials. When I needed to account for billable hours, I worked at the office. Otherwise, I took care of business at home to ensure I'd be there if and when my son needed me.

When I first started working at HGP² there were times I'd get so caught up in my work I wouldn't make it home until nine or ten o'clock in the evening. By then, AJ would be asleep. I never wanted a job to come between us and keep me from being a present father, no matter how well it paid. I felt like I had a pretty good handle on balancing work and being a father. My romantic life was the only part of my life that seemed to suffer, which was why what Taylor and I shared worked so well.

She didn't give me a hard time about being consistent, taking her on dates weekly, or anything like that. We spent time together when we wanted and had sex when we needed.

I continued to check emails for a few minutes longer before Gloria made her way into the breakroom in search of me. Relief washed over her face as she rushed in my direction.

"I'm so glad you're still here. Mrs. Ingram is here, and she says it's urgent. I can tell she's been crying."

Standing, I told her to lead the way. Stacy Ingram was the wife of Eric Ingram, a billion-dollar fast fashion mogul that I'd locked in as a client in the most unexpected way. Amelia had tickets to a fashion show, and we went. There was a situation with one of his vendors and he was having trouble getting around the contract they'd signed. Without knowing who he was, I offered to take a look, and it took me hardly any time to resolve the issue. As thanks, he had a Rolex delivered to my office.

That caused me to look up his name, and that's when I realized who he was. He'd told me he was simply the man

over the event for the evening, not the founder of the brand, and I could understand his desire to conceal his identity. With the money he made, Eric kept a low profile, keeping his face off his brand and using a fake name to handle business. I invited him to dinner, and that ended with me bringing him on as a client.

Over the last three years of him having me on retainer, the bulk of his issues had been small lawsuits from people accusing him of stealing their designs, him trying to sue people for stealing his designs, or looking over contracts for brand deals and sponsorships.

Contract law was my favorite part of working with clients like Eric. Ideally, I'd practice contract or entertainment law full-time. Contract law was tedious, but it didn't require me to be chained to my office here all the time. I could work from literally anywhere and have more freedom. Contract law, here at least, meant big billable hours. If I worked for myself, I'd work for a fee instead to allow myself more flexibility. That was one of the downsides of working with a large firm. There was opportunity to make great money, but you often had to sacrifice your time to get it.

When I made it to my office, Stacy was there, pacing. She sniffled and wiped her nose with a shake of her head.

"Mrs. Ingram," I called, gaining her attention.

"Attorney Williams. I'm so sorry to just drop by like this but I need your help."

"Of course." I closed the door to give us some privacy and motioned for her to have a seat on the burgundy leather couch on the back wall of my office. "How can I help?"

"Eric was arrested last night. Well, around three this morning. I've been making calls like crazy to get him out myself but I'm not making any progress."

"I'm glad you came to me since this is what I'm here for. Do you have an idea of what he was arrested for?"

Chin trembling, her eyes shifted. "Rape."

I kept my expression blank as I nodded. I would get Eric out, but if he was guilty of what he was accused of, I would not be defending him. While I believed everyone deserved a fair trial and day in court, there were some offenses no amount of money would make me defend.

I shared with Stacy that I would do all I could to get him out as quickly as possible, making sure my assistant kept her in the loop, and that calmed her down before she left. I asked my floor assistant, Finola, to search for Eric's affidavit and bond information. All I could do was hope Eric was innocent. Until I spoke with him, I'd defend him as if he was.

EIGHT

A melia
The Next Day

My eyes were almost crossed as I looked over the deposition transcript for an upcoming case. With Mecca and I paving the way into class-action lawsuits and civil law, we were getting more opportunities to represent groups of people. I'd given him a young lady's information a couple of months ago that I believed would lead to a class-action suit. She'd lost her baby and believed it could have been avoided if her OB/GYN had been more present and concerned. For several visits, and even with calls in between, Katie complained about pain and discomfort that her doctor downplayed.

Mecca accepted the case, but as I suspected, Katie wasn't the only one who was a victim of this doctor's negligence. So far, there were twenty-eight women on the lawsuit. Because I didn't want to overwhelm Mecca, I offered to be his second chair. If things kept progressing like this for us, not only would he be partner soon, but I'd be his right-hand woman and we'd need our own team of associates.

He made his way back into my office and placed our food on top of my desk. As much as I hated missing dinner with my family, I had a good pace and didn't want to stop just yet. I was on part two of the deposition, which was two hundred and twenty pages.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, opening the to-go box. I requested something light and easy to eat so it wouldn’t tire me out. He’d done good with the sushi, dumplings, and fried shrimp with a creamy, spicy sauce.

“Why don’t you call it a night, Milli? I know Lis wants you home.”

All I could do was sigh as I popped a shrimp into my mouth. That was true. Bigger cases meant less time at home. Though my baby was understanding, she was also expressive. Even when her words didn’t say how she felt, her face did. Every time I told her I had to work late and saw the sadness that covered her face, I considered saying to hell with my career goals. Working a standard nine-to-five job so I could spend more time with her sounded better and better with each day that went by. The only thing that kept me from making that decision was knowing I was doing some good in this world—this city.

“I really want to, but if I don’t go through this tonight, I won’t be able to go home to her early tomorrow.”

“I feel you. I know this sounds crazy, but I can’t wait for the day I’m sad about working because I miss my kids.”

I chuckled. “Listen, I got a feeling that’ll happen sooner than you think. There’s no doubt in my mind you’ll hit your partner goal by forty.”

“I don’t deny that. It’s managing partner that I’m concerned about. Happening here at least. If it was up to just Violet, I would be more confident that it would happen, but I’m not sure about the others.”

“I wish I could say you had nothing to worry about, but with Jeremy and Flex, I honestly can’t say. With the way you’re tackling these cases, you can open your own firm and have the same success. Your name has always been synonymous with success. Your clients will follow you anywhere.”

“Will you? Because I’m not leaving without you.”

“With no hesitation. You and Parker keep me sane here. If y’all leave, I’m gone too.”

He laughed, though I was dead serious. I would have included Amaru in that number, but we didn’t have a professional relationship as weird as that may sound. We talked to each other in passing, but our relationship was personal. I can count the amount of cases we’ve worked on together on one hand over the last several years. When we did partner up, we were great together, though. Mecca and Parker were the associates I worked with most, and I liked it that way. I never had to worry about things at work making things weird between me and Amaru while we were with the kids at home.

At the sound of light tapping on my door, we both looked to see who it was. I smiled with a mouth full of sushi at the sight of Darron. Motioning for him to come in with my hand, I wiped my face in case there was something on it.

“Hey, I’m sorry to interrupt, but this can’t wait.”

Mecca stood to excuse himself and give us some privacy.

“What’s up, baby?” I asked, making my way around my desk.

We hugged, but his grip around me was loose. Concern filled me as I looked into his eyes.

“I have... bittersweet news.”

“What is it?” I asked as his arms finally tightened around me.

“Since I did so well with the merger in New York, one of the top mergers and acquisitions firms wants to hire me as their in-house attorney. To start, they want me to take on a merger that’ll be just as big as Google and Android.”

“That’s great, Darron! Congratulations! We have to celebrate.”

He shifted on his feet as he smiled and nodded. “Here’s the thing... I have to move to New York immediately. Like today. We have to break up, Amelia.”

“Why?” I asked softly. I’d never been a woman to beg a man to stay with me, and that wouldn’t change now, but I needed to know how we got to this point. The last time we saw each other he was talking about marrying me and giving Alisia a sibling. “We can’t do long distance?”

“I don’t think so, sweet girl. We were straining with my schedule being as it was. I’ll only be busier, and I won’t have as much time for you. You don’t deserve that.” My head hung. It was my attempt to keep him from seeing the tears in my eyes. “Hey, don’t do that.” He lifted my view. “I’m doing this because I love you.”

Scoffing, I removed myself from his embrace. “Yeah, you love me so much you’re not willing to try.”

As much as I didn’t want them to, the tears began to fall. I turned my back to him as I wiped my face. He squeezed my shoulders and kissed my neck.

“Milli...” he stressed, and the sadness in his tone only made me want to cry more. “I had accepted the fact that I would never have the gift of a wife and children. Being with you made me believe that was possible. But the truth is... I’m just not built for that kind of life, and it’s better we accept that now than later.”

With a nod, I wiped my face. “Do you have time to say goodbye to Alisia?”

“Not tonight, but I’ll be back this weekend, and I’ll say goodbye to her then. I promise.”

My eyes rolled to the ceiling as I gritted my teeth.

Yet another man in and out of her life because of me.

With a nod, I put space between us.

I no longer wanted him touching me.

“Amelia...”

“Can you please go, Darron? Please?”

“I really do love you. Please tell me you believe that.”

Walking forward, I placed my hands on the edge of my desk as I pulled in a deep breath.

“Yeah, I do,” was what I said, but my tone didn’t match the declaration. “And I love you too. Goodbye, Darron.”

I was able to maintain my composure until I heard the door close behind him. Then, the tears started to pour more. Up until dinner, I didn’t allow myself to believe I loved Darron. Hearing him speak up for me and make plans for our future shifted the comfort I felt for him into something deeper. Now, it was over.

“Milli, I...”

Sniffing, I tried to get myself together so Mecca wouldn’t see me like this, but it was too late. Cursing under his breath, he made his way over to me and pulled me in for a hug that I desperately needed.

NINE

A maru

My heart ached for Milli when she called and told me what happened. The first thing I did was make sure AJ had his homework done before deciding to go and get my girls. When I knocked on her bedroom door, she told me to come in. The sight of her lying down with Alisia on her chest as she rubbed her hair made me smile. Gasping, Alisia sat up in the bed.

“Ru!” she yelled, hopping out of bed to hug me. “Is AJ here?”

“Nah, he’s at home. Go pack a bag.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Pack a sweater for tomorrow, sunshine, and put on your black coat.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Sitting up, Amelia stretched her arms out for me. I made my way over to her, even more concerned. She hated when anyone got in the bed with their outside clothes on, so if she wanted me close without me getting undressed, she was desperate for the affection. I climbed into her bed and pulled her onto my chest, stroking her hair the way she was doing Alisia’s.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to really talk about. He got an amazing opportunity and he’s moving, so we’re over.”

“How does that make you feel?”

She took deep breaths as she considered my question. “I feel... disappointed and angry more than anything. I was sad when it first happened, but now, I think anger is consuming me most.”

“Because he left?”

Milli’s head shook as she laced her fingers with mine. “No, more so because I feel like I wasted a year with him. I wasn’t completely satisfied with him, but out of comfort, I stayed. Plus, he was good with Lis and that meant a lot to me. She’s hurting over him leaving too. I feel like I failed her all over again. Darron is just another man who came into her life and left because of me. It makes me not even want to date anymore.”

I considered her words and feelings before responding. There was a time I felt the same way about dating after Veronica. I didn’t want my son to get attached to women and hurt after they left our lives. What I’d learned over the years was, though children attached easily and sometimes quickly, it was a necessary part of life. While I didn’t bring every woman I dated around AJ, if it was someone I felt had good qualities and could help me teach him about healthy relationships, I did.

Oftentimes, people kept the romantic love between them and their spouse away from their children, not realizing they needed that picture as an example. I wanted my son to not just see me as a father and as a man, but as a lover and gentleman when it came to women too.

I shared that sentiment with Milli, and it caused her to give me a smile.

“Thank you, and thank you for being a constant in me and my baby girl’s life. No matter how inconsistent my dating life is, or how distant my father and brother are with her, you’ve always been the one man I could count on to be there for her. I’ll forever be grateful for that.”

“And that will never change. Y’all are my girls. Well, our girls. AJ would kill me if he heard me say that.”

With a soft giggle, Amelia sat up and looked down at me. “True, you know he don’t play about us. Especially Lis.” She cupped my cheek and stroked it with her thumb. “Thank you, Ru. Seriously. You two are the best thing that has ever happened to us.”

I pushed her messy hair out of her face. My hand rested on her neck and chin. I lowered her to my lips, and instead of kissing hers like I wanted to, I kissed her forehead. She wrapped her arm around me and rested on my chest until Alisia came back. I’d accepted the fact that my feelings for my best friend were turning into something deeper. No matter how deep they got, I’d never express that to her—especially now that she’d reminded me of how important I was to her and Alisia.

Regardless of the romantic desires bubbling within me, I would never awaken that kind of love between us and risk losing the most important woman to me, outside of my mother, in this world.

I stopped to get Amelia and me food for a late dinner. I’d already fed AJ since I didn’t like him eating after eight, and Milli was the same way with Alisia. Food fueled them at this age, and if they ate too late, they’d be up all night. She hadn’t eaten all day except for a few bites of sushi earlier before the breakup, so I wanted to get something on her stomach before the day was over. Though she assured me she had no appetite, she agreed to eat a few wings and fries from our favorite wing joint.

When we made it back to my home, AJ and Lis wasted no time going up to the game room. Under normal circumstances, I’d tell them to go ahead and get ready for bed, but I think Alisia needed a distraction to uplift her spirits before bed just as much as her mother did.

“Can we eat in bed?” Amelia asked me quietly, wrapping her arms around me.

“Whatever you want.”

“Your bed?”

“Yes, Milli.”

“And I can sleep with you?”

That was new. I liked it, too. Most times when we slept together it was unplanned or while we were on vacation.

“You never have to ask.”

She gave me a small smile before grabbing her to-go container and taking small steps out of the kitchen. I stopped by the game room and told the kids they could watch TV for an hour before going to their respective beds. Though both Amelia and Alisia had their own guest rooms, they sometimes slept in the same one. I let Alisia know she'd be in her own room tonight so she wouldn't be expecting her mother.

When I made it to my room, I had to take a pause at the sight of Amelia taking her sweats off. It wasn't the first time I'd seen her in her underwear, but like a lot of things between us, this felt different. She looked different. Well, she looked like she always looked—my reaction to her was different.

Lowering my eyes, I set my food on the bed and discarded my clothes as well. With just my boxers on, I got in bed and made myself comfortable in the middle of it next to her. Her head rested on my shoulder as I tried to quickly find us something to watch on Hulu. The best thing for right now was a comfort show, so I selected *My Wife and Kids*. It didn't matter how much she watched this, she laughed at each episode like it was the first time.

We ate in silence except for our laughter from the TV. When we were done, we brushed our teeth and got comfortable in bed. She thanked me again, though it wasn't needed, before drifting off to sleep. I ended up laying there awake for quite some time before getting out of bed to make sure the kids had gone to sleep. Once I made sure all the doors

were locked and the lights were off, I made my way back into bed.

As if she was aware of my absence, Amelia quickly made her way back onto my chest. She tossed her leg over me, and I couldn't stop myself from gripping the back of her thigh. Amelia released a quiet moan as she held me closer. My breathing relaxed as I settled under the weightlessness of having her on top of me. And before I knew it, I was asleep.

TEN

A melia

Three days had passed since Darron and I broke up. I'd been trying to give Alisia as much attention as I could to get inside her mind and heart. Her attitude had changed since I told her he was moving to New York. All she did was tell me she was sad he was leaving, but she didn't want to talk about it on a deeper level than that.

The first day after, I let her stay home. I took off work, and we spent the day alternating between Disney movies and rom-coms. We ate unhealthy comfort food and enjoyed each other's company. The next day, she came home and was quieter than usual, but I gave her space to process her feelings and prayed she'd come to me when she was ready to discuss them. I didn't think it was solely because of Darron because she didn't spend time with him daily. I asked her if it was something going on at school, and she hesitated before saying no.

This morning, I reached out to her teachers to see if they could provide any insight on a change in her character, friendships, or anything that could contribute to her detachment. Before I could even go through their responses in the parent portal, I was bombarded by several missed calls from the school and Mama. Because she knew I had court this morning, she went to get Alisia when they called and let her know they couldn't get in touch with me. I didn't even bother

listening to the voicemails they left as I rushed home to see what was going on with my baby girl.

As soon as I made it home, I rushed inside, tossing my purse and briefcase onto the wall table. I kicked my heels off before scurrying down the hall in search of Lis. She was in her room, at her small desk, doing her homework. Closing the door behind me, I took my suit jacket off as we greeted each other.

“What happened at school today, sunshine?”

Setting her pencil down, she released a dramatic breath that made me smile.

“Nothing.”

“Well, obviously it was something.”

I sat on the window bench in front of her desk.

“I was just feeling a lot and accidentally exploded in my STEM class.”

Nodding, I reminded myself to go slow and be soft. She was finally opening up, and I didn’t want to say anything to cause her to shut down. Plus, Alisia read people based on their expressions. If I scrunched my face up in thought over what she was saying or looked angry, she wouldn’t want to talk anymore.

“What were you feeling?”

“I was still a little sad over Mr. Darron leaving. I thought he’d be my new dad. He asked me and Grandma what kind of ring we thought you’d like, so I was excited. And he told me you and him were going to give me a little brother or sister soon. So I was really confused about him leaving.”

Clenching my jaw, I swallowed hard repeatedly. My eyes blurred and blinking rapidly didn’t dry my tears. I’m not exactly sure what I thought she was going to say, but that wasn’t it. Darron hadn’t told me about that conversation with them, but I know exactly when he could have had it. The last time he’d come to get me before his last trip, I wasn’t ready.

He waited while I took a shower, and I'm positive that's when he showed them rings.

I rubbed my ring finger absently, looking down at its emptiness.

“Were you feeling anything else?” I asked quietly.

“I was also upset because we learned something new in math and I didn't understand. My teacher showed me once, but I still didn't get it. I asked for more help, and she told me I'd have to figure it out at home or sign up for the morning tutoring before school started.”

Now that pissed me off. Her math teacher had been acting like she had a stick up her ass all year. I'd sat in on one of her classes after Alisia got her report card and had a C in math. My baby was a straight-A student. If she was struggling in a subject, I always helped or got her a tutor. I wanted to see if it was a problem with Alisia's comprehension or the way she was being taught. I considered getting her put in another teacher's class but decided that would teach her it was okay to give up when things didn't come easy to her. Now, I regretted not following my first mind and having her transferred.

She and AJ went to a private school, and even though I believed the experience was worth it, there were times when the students and teachers made me question that decision. Ironically, her math teacher was Black, and I was expecting her to be an ally.

“Anything else, sunshine?”

She scratched her nose and considered my question. “Some girls were bullying me. They said I was being dramatic because I asked for more help, and then they said I was stupid. Everyone laughed and the teacher didn't even tell them not to say that. I was embarrassed and hurt. I told them to leave me alone, but on the way to STEM class, they kept calling me stupid. So by the time I got into my next class, I just... exploded. You know Mr. Brady has that rule about having your notebook and pencil out and ready when the bell sounds, but I was so upset and thinking I forgot. He tried to give me a mark for not having my stuff out and I yelled at him.”

Not needing to hear anymore, I stood and pulled her into my arms. Alisia wasn't a big crier, so when I heard her sniffing and felt her shuddering against me, that infuriated me even more. I didn't know who I was more upset with—those ignorant ass children or the adult who condoned their behavior. Either way, I was going to handle all of their asses first thing in the morning.

“First, you are not stupid. I'm sure you're smarter than every one of them combined. When people envy you and have no real reason to, they say untrue things to make themselves feel better about not liking and envying you. Second, I'll take care of your math teacher. If I can, I'll have you transferred to another class. If I can't, I'm going to make sure she understands just who your mother is in the morning. I can promise you, you won't have any more issues out of her or those kids. And third, it was rude to take your feelings out on your STEM teacher. Your feelings were valid, but you should have processed them a little better. Exploding when you have big feelings is something we can work on, and I'm not upset with you. We just have to find a way to settle them before that happens. But you're going to have to apologize to him tomorrow.”

She nodded her agreement and held me tighter. I didn't even know what to say about Darron, so I didn't touch that subject. Besides, what was going on with her at school was more important to me anyway. Once she was empty of her tears, I wiped her face and asked her how she wanted to spend the day. She told me it didn't matter as long as she got to spend it with me.

I hate preparing for and going to trial because it makes my workdays longer. Since court was over for the day, I made up in my mind to do whatever she wanted to lift her spirit.

We ended up dressing more comfortably and going to her favorite restaurant for an early dinner. After that, we went to Paint a Piece and painted two plates before doing a little shopping. By the time we made it back home, she had a smile on her face, and keeping that smile on her face was what mattered most to me.

ELEVEN

A maru

It was taking everything inside of me not to show how I was feeling on my face. Eric, the fast fashion mogul, had been released and asked for a little time to smooth things over with his wife before he came in to talk to me. That was okay because his first court date was sixty days away. It was hell getting him a bond because of the amount of money he made. Though this was his first time being arrested, because of his status, the prosecution argued he could flee the city to avoid his charge. It took some convincing, but eventually, the judge agreed that his business was too profitable for him to up and leave.

He was sitting in the conference room telling me about his encounter with the victim, Mia. Or, at least, the version of their encounter that he wanted me to believe. I was confused by all the different paths his story was taking, and that only meant one thing—he was lying.

“Eric.” Tossing my pen down, I bobbed my head silently, asking my floor assistant to leave. She was transcribing the interview, but I needed to be one hundred with Eric, and that required us to be alone.

“Is something wrong?” he asked as Finola closed the door behind herself.

“Yeah, you’re not telling me the truth. How do you expect me to defend you with a lie? The prosecution will be able to easily poke holes in your story. On top of that, if you’re telling me all these different stories, if Mia gets up there and tells the truth, I will be ill-prepared to defend you against it.” He sighed and ran his hands down his face. “Now I need you to tell me how you know this girl and what the hell happened that night.”

Girl.

As in sixteen years old. Just four years older than Alisia. All night, I tossed and turned thinking about what I’d learned about the victim. Had a man even had an *accusation* against him of rape when it came to Alisia, he’d be dead from a bullet between his eyes. Yet here I was, sitting across from Eric, trying to make sense of what I’d learned over the last couple of days.

“And what I say stays between us, right? Client confidentiality?” I nodded. “Okay. I was having an affair with her mom. No one can know about that. I don’t need it getting to my wife.” I remained quiet, unsure how he thought Mia’s mom wouldn’t find out about this when the trial started if she didn’t know already.

I started shuffling through the papers to find out who Mia made her first outcry with. It wasn’t her mother. It was her sister, and that’s who took her to the police station. Apparently, Mia made her sister promise not to tell their mother out of fear of what might happen if she knew the truth. I continued to read and listen to Eric’s version of the truth.

“I’d stopped by there to take Cheryl out. Because the date wasn’t expected, she told me her youngest daughter would let me in so I could wait for her.” He shifted in his seat. “We had sex.”

“You had sex?” I repeated. “Consensual sex? Though no sex with a minor is technically consensual. Even if Mia said yes, that’s still statutory rape. Are you telling me she said yes?”

“I’m telling you she didn’t say no.”

My head tilted.

This nigga fucking raped her.

There was no way in hell I'd defend him in court. It was hard enough not lunging across this table at him. My legs shook as I dropped my arms, gripping the edge of my seat.

“So Mia did not consent?” I confirmed.

“She didn't say no,” he repeated, letting me know that would be his defense—no no, meant yes.

“So what happened after you raped her?” His head jerked at the sound of my question. “You went out with her mother and had sex with her too?”

Our eyes remained locked as he processed my words. “I didn't rape her.”

“Just answer the question, Eric.”

“Yes.”

“Did you threaten Mia in any way? Or bribe her to keep her from telling her mother what happened?”

His head shook. “I just told her I made her mom really happy and took care of their bills. That if she told her we had sex, there was a chance she'd break up with me, and they would be homeless again.” With a scoff, I scratched behind my ear. “I need to know how you're going to play this in court. I can't... outright say I didn't have sex with her. Not unless she gets an abortion first. I've been trying to reach out to her to offer to pay for it and compensate her for the loss, but she's blocking every number I try and call—”

“Hold up.” My hands lifted as I sat up in my seat. “You got her *pregnant*?”

Eric shrugged. “Apparently so, unless she was having sex with someone else at the same time.”

“How do you know she's pregnant?”

“I've still been talking to Cheryl. She's upset that Mia is pregnant and won't tell her who the baby is by. If I can get her to have an abortion before trial, there will be no evidence of

our night together. But if she has that baby, regardless of how good your defense is, I'm going to do time. Cheryl is pushing for an abortion, so I think it's going to happen. I just need to apply a little more pressure. Convince her that she only has two years left of being a full-time mom before she can truly live for herself again. But if Mia keeps this baby, they both will be her responsibility for several more years."

Standing, I buttoned my suit jacket. "I'm going to speak with the managing partner about getting another attorney to represent you."

"What?" He stood, laughing as I rounded the table. "Why?"

"Because I don't represent rapists."

"I didn't ra—"

"You did!" I roared, wrapping my hand around his neck and using it to slam him into the wall. "You fucking did! No matter how much you try to pretty it up in your head, you did. And worse, you're manipulating her mother into destroying evidence of what you did to her child. Now I'm going to let you go, and if you have any sense, you'll shut your fucking mouth and let me leave. Otherwise, I'm going to beat your ass and take you down to 201 myself."

After banging his head against the wall, I left. Violet was in a meeting with a client, but I didn't even give a damn. I felt like I was going to explode.

"We need to talk," I told her as she stood.

"Can this wait, Attorney Williams? I'm meeting with a client."

"If it could, I wouldn't be in here."

Without waiting for her to agree, I left her office to head to mine. Only a few seconds passed before I heard her heels clicking.

"Amaru!" she whisper-yelled, grabbing my elbow. "What the hell was that? Do you know who that was?"

“He did it,” I said through gritted teeth. “Eric did it, and I’m not representing him. You need to get someone else to handle this case, and you need to keep him away from me. I’m liable to kill that nigga, Violet. For real.”

“Okay, Amaru. I need you to take a deep breath for me.”

My eyes rolled slightly as I shook my head, but she grabbed my hands and forced me to look at her and do as she said. Usually when we had these moments, it took about five deep breaths to calm me down. This time, I lost count after ten. Eventually, my shoulders relaxed along with the muscles in my face.

“Now, tell me what happened with your client.”

I ran down the details of our conversation with her, ending it with, “He’s in the conference room now. We need to get rid of him as a client.”

“He brings in a hell of a lot of money, Amaru. We’re going to bleed him and make sure he not only goes to prison but that he pays for what he did to her—literally.”

Before we could finish our conversation, Jeremy came charging down the hall like a madman.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” He pointed a finger in my direction as he neared us. “Do you know how hard it was for me to convince Eric to not fire you as his attorney?”

“He can’t fire me because I quit.”

“Listen, you need to put your feelings aside and grow up. This man pays you to do a job. Whether you like what he did or not, it’s your legal obligation as his attorney to give him the best defense possible.”

“And it’s also my legal obligation to recuse myself from any case I believe I can’t handle or won’t be able to represent my client fairly on. I don’t care what you say, I’m dropping him as a client. And if you had any sense, you’d want him away from this firm before other people find out and start questioning us for being connected to him.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Violet stepped between us, gently pushing us both back. “I agree that we need to keep Eric around because he’s a billion-dollar client.” I shook my head in disagreement. All money wasn’t good money. Just seconds ago, I thought Violet and I were on the same page about that. “But I also agree that if we keep this case and represent Eric, that can potentially cause us to lose more clients—especially women. So we need to decide what’s going to cause the least amount of loss, keeping him or cutting him.”

“Regardless of what you decide, I want nothing to do with him,” I told her.

“And I respect that. But you need to be prepared to bring in a client to replace those billable hours immediately. More than one client actually.”

I agreed but really didn’t give a damn about that shit. That was all they cared about here—billable hours and bonuses. I could respect it because that’s what big partner firms like this one thrived off. And as managing partner, Violet had to do what was best for all parties involved. I’d do my job and get a couple of new clients in to make up for what I was about to lose, and even if I couldn’t, I’d leave HGP² without a second thought if it meant maintaining my values, integrity, and self-respect.

My feet were on autopilot as I charged toward Amelia’s office only to find it empty. I pulled my phone out to call her. She answered after the third ring with, “Hello?” Her voice was already low and raspy, but it sounded even raspier like she was asleep.

“Were you sleep? Are you sick?”

Now, she was my main concern as I headed down the hall back to my office in case I needed to shut everything down for the day to go and see about my girl.

“Yes and no.” She giggled, and that calmed me down some. “I came home after court this morning and me and Lis fell asleep.”

“Is she okay?”

“She’s better.” Amelia sighed. “It’s a long story.”

“I got time.”

I listened as she told me about what happened with Alisia at school yesterday and how she went up to the school this morning before court to set her teacher and every child in that math class straight. I didn’t have to know what she said to believe she’d put the fear of God in them. Amelia was soft-spoken and sweet as pie, but when she went into Mama Bear mode, no one was safe. After court, she checked Alisia out of school early so they could spend some more time together. Apparently, they ate lunch together before falling asleep.

“Why didn’t you tell me about what happened yesterday?”

“I didn’t want to burden you. I knew you were busy getting ready for this big case.”

“Anything that has to do with you and Alisia is never a burden, and I’m not worried about that case anymore. I’m firing Eric as a client.”

She gasped. “Oh no. So he did it?”

“He did.”

“Damn. Well... you’re doing the right thing.”

“I know that in my heart. I just hate that your brother has Violet questioning if he should leave the firm altogether.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not surprised. Jeremy cares about cash more than character. I believe Violet will make the right decision, though.”

We talked for a few minutes more as I gathered my things to leave for the day. Mentally, I was drained. I told her to call me if they needed anything before heading out. It was probably best if I went home and locked myself inside for the day. Otherwise, I’d end up at Cheryl’s front door, letting her know what Eric had been up to. She’d find out soon enough. All I could do was hope Mia was able to heal from this and not be traumatized by it for the rest of her life.

TWELVE

A melia
That Weekend
Early November

I was glad Amaru offered to be here for me when Darron said goodbye to Alisia. She expressed her sadness over him no longer being in her life, but that she was happy about the fun life she was sure he'd have in New York. When she told him she thought he was going to be her new dad, he got misty-eyed. I could see the remorse as he apologized and hugged her, and that made me soften toward him. In my mind, I knew Darron wasn't intentionally trying to hurt me and my child, but my heart didn't want to listen to reason. Guilt had been consuming me about this moment.

Even with Amaru's words of wisdom, I still felt really bad about bringing Darron into my daughter's life and having him leave like this. It probably wouldn't have felt so bad if there weren't other things going on with Alisia at school. When he was done talking to her, she gave him one last hug before leaving the adults in the room. Mama was already waiting to help her decompress in her bedroom. I didn't want to put my feelings on her, so I was grateful for Mama holding space until I was composed and could speak with her.

"Can you walk me to the door, darling?" Darron asked, looking from me to Amaru.

With a nod, I stood. Amaru gripped my hand, keeping me from walking away immediately. “I’m here,” he reminded me, making me smile.

I bobbed my head as he released my hand and slowly walked behind Darron to the front door.

“I didn’t think about how this would affect her,” Darron said when we made it to the door. “I’m sorry for that.”

I wanted to tell him he didn’t think about how it would affect me either, but I didn’t want to make him feel worse than he already did. I wouldn’t have been so hurt by the breakup if it could have been a conversation between us instead of him bursting through my office to tell me we were over. Still, I understood Darron was doing what he believed was best for us, even if I didn’t like the way he did it.

“She’ll be fine. Thank you for coming to say goodbye.”

He nodded and released a heavy sigh. “Maybe for Christmas you two can visit me in New York. Give her a real white Christmas for a change.”

We shared a smile as our bodies gravitated toward one another. “As beautiful as that sounds, I think a clean break is best. I don’t want her thinking there’s a chance we’ll be this... happy family after all.”

Sadness covered his face, but he nodded his agreement. “I can respect that. If you change your mind, don’t hesitate to call me.”

Tilting my head, Darron placed a kiss to the center of my forehead before leaving. I stood there for a minute or so before making my way back into the living room. At the sight of me, Amaru stood and shoved his hands into the pockets of his sweats.

“You good?” he checked.

Nodding, I made my way toward him. He extended his arms and gave me the hug I needed—like always.

“I know it hurts now, but I believe this is God setting you up for the relationship that will give you everything you desire

and deserve. And Alisia is going to be okay, too. She'll never have to worry about me leaving her. If I have to step up a little more to remind her that she's loved and that she has a man in her life that she can always count on, I will."

"You're right," I muttered into his chest. "I know there were things about my relationship with Darron that made us incompatible. It's just... when he got Daddy's approval, said the L word, and mentioned marriage... my heart expanded in size for him. And knowing Lis was looking forward to so much..."

Huffing, I pulled away from him. I didn't want to talk about this anymore. That would only keep me in a state of feeling bad when I really just needed to get over it. Truth was, Darron was too busy for me, I hated his wandering eye, and the sex wasn't as good as I wanted. If we got married, I don't believe I would have been truly happy. I would have loved and appreciated the way he cared for us and gave us time when he could, but he was right—his life wasn't set up for those things. He could have strung me along and married me, forcing me to be in a miserable situation, but he didn't, and I would always respect him for that.

"We'll be fine," I assured him, and myself. "We will be."

"I know." Between the confidence in his tone and his smile, I couldn't help but smile. "On the off-chance Lis does feel down, AJ has already told me he wants me to come get him from his GiGi's house if she needs him. He swears she's his responsibility."

We shared a laugh as we sat back down. "You know he's her protector. He does not play about that girl, and I'm so happy they have been able to grow up together. I'll call, but I think she'll be okay. We've been trying exercises that help her process her feelings, and it's been going well."

"And what about you? What are you doing with your feelings?"

Running my fingers through my hair, I allowed, "I just need a night of drinking and hard dick, and I'll be good," to slip out before I remembered who I was talking to. Covering

my mouth, I laughed. Sex had been a topic that was off-limits for us in the past, though we'd kind of broken that rule at the office a while ago. "Sorry."

"It's cool." His eyes took a slow trail down my seated frame. "I would love to help you with that."

"Huh?"

He waited until he looked into my eyes to ask, "What?"

"You said you'd love to help me with that. Help me with what?"

Amaru stared at me, as if he hadn't meant to say that. It was too late now, and I wanted to hear what else he had to say.

"Mommy!" Alisia yelled. "Grandma said she'll take me to get a seafood bag if it's okay with you. Can we have that for lunch?"

"Um, sure, Lis. Whatever you want."

"I'm gonna head out," Amaru announced, placing a kiss to my temple. "Call me if you need me."

"Bu—I... ugh."

Rolling my eyes, I palmed my face. That was the quickest Amaru had *ever* gotten out of here. Maybe he was talking about taking me out for drinks, because he for damn sure couldn't have been talking about sex. Things had never been sexual between us, and nothing had changed for that to be the case now. I wouldn't lie and say I hadn't been thinking about sex with Amaru after our conversation in the breakroom, but that's all it was—just a thought. He was far too important to me and my daughter to risk losing his friendship over sex or anything else for that matter.

THIRTEEN

A maru

My brother was making me regret stopping by my mom's house. When I dropped AJ off earlier, she asked me to stay. I told her I couldn't because I had to stop by Milli's place, and she asked me to come back when I was done. Something told me to take my ass home, but I wanted to honor my word to her. We hadn't been spending a lot of time together. When she wanted AJ for the weekend, I usually would either drop him off or take her to lunch so we could spend time together outside the house. I was cool with her coming to my house whenever she wanted but going to the home she raised me and my brothers in with my father, knowing he would no longer be there, fucked with me.

Dad died almost a year ago, and me and my two brothers handled it differently, to say the least. My oldest brother overworked himself to avoid how he was feeling, my middle brother drank until he was blackout drunk, and me... I tried not to think about it at all. Avoidance had been working. I told myself he was on a much-needed vacation and that I'd see him again soon.

I could tell by Amir's eyes that he was already heavy on his liquor for the day, and it was just after two p.m. To avoid arguing with him, I'd been sitting at the table talking to Mama. She was having a moment and reminiscing about Dad was making her feel better, even though hearing her talk about him

in the past tense was making me feel worse. For her, I would endure.

She wiped a few tears as she told me for what felt like the millionth time how they met. I listened, providing as much excitement as I could. Because I was still in denial about Dad's death, moments like this left me paralyzed. They made her feel better, but they forced me to accept a reality I wasn't ready to accept yet.

"That's enough of that," she said with a laugh, wiping an escaped tear. "What's up with you?"

I was glad she was shifting the conversation from Dad. Maybe I was biased, but I believed I had the best parents in the world. Even their flaws were correct. From a young age, they made sure my brothers and I understood they were parents, but they weren't perfect. They were learning about life and love too, and I always respected them for that. Dad was the reason I valued showing my son how to be a father and husband, while Mama was the one who taught me how to be a lover and gentleman. With them, I had the best of both worlds.

As I contemplated what I wanted to share, I figured that would be a good space for me to talk to Mama about my changing feelings for Amelia. She was still my best friend, but the romantic thoughts and desires I'd been having lately were extremely intrusive, and I'm not exactly sure where they came from. Before I could confess my feelings, Amir was shuffling into the dining room.

"Let me get the keys to the truck, Ma. I'm about to meet up with Tony," he said, referring to Mecca's cousin.

They both, in my opinion, were alcoholics who needed to go to rehab. Mecca and I were the only people who tried to get them to see how dangerous their lifestyle was, but they didn't care to listen. My worst fear was getting a call in the middle of the night that my brother had gotten into an accident and killed someone else or himself. Mama was stern yet loving, but she had a soft spot when it came to Amir. Maybe it was because he didn't handle his emotions well and she felt she needed to

coddle him. Whatever the case, I hated that she wasn't as honest with him about his choices as she should have been.

With a sigh, Mama shook her head and crossed her hands on top of the table. It was clear she didn't want to give him the keys to Daddy's truck, but the chances of her actually saying that were slim to none.

"I don't know, Mir," she said hesitantly.

Sucking his teeth, Amir plopped down in the seat next to her. "I'ma be back before you go to sleep. I promise." That was a lie. Mama had taken his house key two weeks ago to try and force him to come home at a decent hour. That didn't stop his late-night alcoholic binges. It only forced Amir to sleep in the car or at someone else's house.

That's right. My thirty-eight-year-old brother was living at home with our mother. For the past two years, he'd been back. Dad gave him a year here to get back on his feet after he lost his job, but since he passed and Mama was a bit lonely in the house, she hadn't put him out. Amir had long since gotten a job, but he blew all his money on alcohol and traveling. He had a BMW parked on the street that needed a new transmission that he refused to pay to get fixed, so Mama let him drive Dad's truck for work. Somehow, that led to him driving it when he was off, and both me and Adam told her not to do that.

Amir was the kind of person who was hard on cars and had a lot of accidents—sober and drunk. I still had no clue how he hadn't been arrested with a DUI charge yet. God truly had to have a guardian angel with him, because the way my brother lived, I don't see how he survived most of his nights out.

"I can smell the alcohol on your breath," I commented. "You don't need to be driving nowhere." I took the keys from the center of the table, and though it was subtle, I saw Mama's body relax. Even if she didn't want to be the one to say it, she knew Amir didn't need to be driving anywhere, in anything, especially not in my daddy's truck. That truck was his pride and joy, and I refused to let Amir wreck it.

“Nigga, you ain’t my daddy,” he almost yelled with his chest poked out, pounding his fist.

He did that a lot—quick temper tantrums that hardly ever got him his way.

“Still, you ain’t driving the truck. I can drop you off, or you can have someone pick you up, but the truck is off-limits.”

Sucking his teeth, Amir jumped from his seat, knocking his chair back in the process. “You gon’ come up off them keys, bro.”

At the sound of the commotion, Adam made his way from the bedroom that was closest to the living room. With its open concept, the living room and dining room were connected, and to the left was the kitchen and a smaller breakfast nook that we used for kids when we had holiday dinners here.

“Y’all good?” Adam confirmed, standing by Mama and placing his hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah. Your brother is trying to drive Daddy’s truck,” I informed him.

Adam’s head immediately shook. Though he was the oldest brother, he was the most laidback. Amir was the one who tried to run shit, and that was why we often butted heads. We were either the best of friends or the worst of enemies—there was no in-between.

“Nah, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Adam said. “You’ve had a lot to drink already, Mir.”

Amir released a low chuckle before running his tongue over his cheek. “Just like I told him, you ain’t my daddy. I’m going to do whatever the fuc—”

“Hey!” Mama yelled, standing to her feet. “Watch your mouth. That’s enough.”

“Just give me the keys,” Amir said, trying to walk around the table, but he couldn’t even do that without bumping into it.

Chuckling, I shook my head and put them in my pocket. “Take ’em,” I challenged, knowing damn well I’d beat his ass. It wouldn’t be the first time. He always started talking the

most shit when he was drunk, and he couldn't fight for shit with that alcohol in his system. When he was sober, he was a solid contender for someone, but drunk? Amir was always getting laid out. That's why Adam and I hated going out with him these days... especially if he was with Tony. It always led to us having to de-escalate a situation or fight because he'd stepped to the wrong person.

"Amir," Mama called, grabbing his hand when he made it toward me. "Can't you just call someone to pick you up, baby? Please?"

He stared at me for a few seconds before jerking his hand away from her and storming off. I watched as he paced outside on the porch, talking on his phone. Mama and Adam's conversation was going in one ear and out of the other. I hoped he would leave, because I didn't want him ruining my mood to cut my visit with Mama short. And if he stayed, there was a chance I'd end up popping him in his mouth because he loved to talk shit.

When he came back inside, he was talking about how I was being a bitch as he walked through the living room toward the hallway. Chuckling, I stood and gave Mama a kiss on the cheek. "I'm going to head out before I end up beating this mane ass," I told her, handing her the key. "Do not let him drive, Mama. He's already inebriated and it's only going to get worse."

With a nod, she thanked me for leaving and not putting my hands on him. Adam promised to stay until Amir was gone, which I appreciated.

When I made it to my car, I sat in it for a while with no clear destination in mind. I realized I was so upset with my brother that I didn't even tell AJ I was leaving. I went back inside to say goodbye, and it took everything inside of me to remain silent as Amir continued to talk his shit. I asked AJ if he wanted to come home with me, but he was enjoying spending time with his GiGi. So as irritated as I was with my brother, I wouldn't let him ruin that.

With no clear destination in mind, I pulled out of the driveway. I decided to send Mecca and Parker a text to see what they were up to along with Amelia. Amelia was the first to respond, letting me know she was heading to one of our favorite chill spots since Alisia was spending the rest of the day with her grandma. Deciding to pull up on her, I made my way onto the expressway to head out to Cordova. If nothing else could make me feel better, spending time with my best friend always could.

FOURTEEN

A maru

Milli and I were kid-free with no solid plans in mind. Her mom had stolen Alisia after lunch and told Amelia not to bother making plans with her for the rest of the day. More than anything, I think Caroline wanted Amelia to enjoy herself and get her mind off things. My girl had a tendency to stress when things changed, and she had a lot of things changing in her life right now. I made it my mission for the night to make sure she enjoyed herself. Somehow, all the plans I had in mind went out the window, and we ended up grabbing a couple of bottles of wine, a pizza, and talking for hours down by the river.

We were sitting on the blanket with another wrapped around us. Her arm was wrapped around mine as she rested her head on my shoulder. It was a beautiful evening, the kind I thought I'd be sharing with my life partner. I was just as honored to be sharing the moment with Amelia, though.

She released a soft sigh as she rubbed her free hand up and down my arm. "Ru?"

"Hmm?"

"You love me?"

I was stunned by her question. It came out of nowhere.

"Of course, I love you. You're my best friend."

“In all these years of our friendship, we’ve never said those words to each other.”

I could only chuckle in astonishment because she was right. We said it to each other’s kids, but I don’t think we ever said it to each other. That was odd, because I loved Amelia more than anyone else in this world outside of family. Hell, I loved her more than I loved the mother of my child. We showed each other our love and I couldn’t help but wonder why we’d never actually said it.

“Do you know why, because I don’t?”

She sniffled, snuggling up closer to me. “I’m not sure. Maybe because we’ve always shown it and didn’t think the words were necessary. I’ve always felt loved by you, but never hearing those words was always odd to me.”

“What made you finally say something about this now?”

“Truth?”

“Like always.”

“I was sitting here thinking about how perfect this night has been. How I feel so comfortable with you. How blessed we are to be in each other’s lives. How much I love you. And I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t want to get all weird if you had a thing about that.”

I was smiling so hard I couldn’t respond immediately. Taking a deep breath, I placed a kiss to the top of her head.

“I’m not weird about it, Milli. Loving you comes so naturally the words didn’t seem necessary. But you can tell me. I’ll say it back.”

Silence passed between us. I’m not sure how much time passed, but in the thick of the silence, her low, raspy voice almost whispered, “I love you, Ru.”

She lifted her head from my shoulder, and I looked into her eyes. They were softer than usual. My denial made me want to believe it was because of the wine; my heart told me it was because of love.

Love for me.

“I love *you*, Milli.”

The left side of her mouth lifted into a smile as she held my gaze. I’m not sure why, but the eye contact was sexy as fuck. Everything about Milli these days was sexy as fuck.

Our foreheads rested against each other. “I know,” she whispered, “But it was nice to finally hear you say it.”

“Then I’ll tell you every day.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, slowly pulling her forehead from mine. But I moved closer. And she didn’t pull away. So our lips connected. I felt a literal spark. Before I could question if she felt it too, Amelia gasped and jumped slightly.

“Ru,” she whispered against my lips. Not allowing me to respond, Amelia reconnected her lips with mine. Our lips stroked the gently growing fire within me. She gripped my arms like she ached for this closeness and couldn’t chance me pulling away. I wouldn’t. Not even to breathe.

The soft hum she fed me made my hardened dick throb. I was seconds away from allowing my hands to familiarize themselves with her body in a more intimate way. The only thing that stopped me was the hesitance of moving too fast.

When we finally pulled away, I expected her to say it could never happen again, or to question what we were doing. Neither of those was the case. She put her head back on my shoulder, leaving me with racing thoughts about what the hell would happen next.

FIFTEEN

A melia

I should have gone home, but I didn't. I'd been quiet since the kiss. The unexpected, absolutely amazing kiss. It was the best kiss I'd ever had. It made my pussy throb and heart race. And it was from my best friend. I didn't even think Ru was into me like that. Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he was just caught up in the moment of us expressing our love for the first time.

But that didn't make sense. We didn't say we were in love with each other. So how did that happen?

Nibbling my bottom lip, I opened the car door and followed him inside of his home. He was supposed to be trailing me home, but I ended up coming to his place. I told myself it was because I needed to talk to him and make sure we were on the same page, but the truth was, I didn't want to talk at all. I wanted to be in his arms, on his lips.

Shaking those thoughts from my head, I ran my fingers through my hair and released a shaky breath. I'd been stressing for years now how important it was that nothing ruined our friendship—and I kissed him. Worse, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

And I mean... there were definitely worse things that I could have been doing. Not only were his lips soft and juicy, but my best friend was fine as hell. Physically, Amaru favored Ovie Soko. They had the same cocoa-brown skin, tall, athletic

build, and chiseled jaw with balsamic brown eyes. I could stare at him, talk to him, sit in silence... for hours.

For someone else, Amaru Williams was a damn good catch. The thirty-six-year-old senior associate was an intellectual beast. He was secure and financially stable. Outside of his father's unexpected passing, Amaru was a healed, calm spirit. Not too much could rattle him outside of bullying and injustices, or someone messing with those he loved and cared about. He was fun and spontaneous, yet a planner and intentional. And he was an amazing father, provider, and protector. He was damn near perfect, and I was so blessed to have him in the capacity I did.

If I could have met a man like him on a romantic level, I wouldn't ask for anything more.

A part of me wanted to explore whatever Amaru had to offer for the night. But the sensible part of me was pushing the brakes on that the further we walked into his home. Clutching his hand, I stopped his movement.

He turned to face me with a knowing smile.

“What are we doing, Amaru?”

His tone was low as he pulled me close and pressed my body against his. “Whatever you want us to do.”

“I came here with the intent that we finish what we started at the river, but...” My head shook as my eyes watered. “I promised myself I would never make things sexual with a friend, and I can't make you the exception to that.” His head bobbed once before it hung. “You mean too much to me and Alisia. I can't do this life shit without you, Amaru. And romance... it's too fickle of a thing to risk our friendship. So... I think I should leave.”

Licking his lips, Amaru caressed my cheek. He swallowed hard as he looked at my lips.

“I will always do what's best for you. I will always give you what you want.”

“And what about you want?”

He chuckled quietly with a shake of his head. “It doesn’t matter what I want.”

“It always matters to me.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, he released a hard breath as his head tilted. “What I want will make you not want to leave my home. Trust me, it’s better if I leave those words unsaid.”

My eyes fluttered as I processed his words. Once they settled within me, I muttered a quiet okay before turning to leave. He made me promise to let him know when I got home, and I said I would. My mind raced a mile a minute as I drove. Did that mean he wanted to be with me, or that he wanted sex? Was I wrong for not pressing him for his truth? Would it have mattered if it went against mine? How were things going to play out between us now that we’d kissed? Every question made room for another, and by the time I got home, I had a headache.

I made my way to my mother’s room, grateful she was still awake. She greeted me with a bright smile as she pressed pause on whatever she was watching, more than likely a Lifetime Movie Network movie. She watched them so much, she had my baby hooked on them too.

“Hey, lil lady. How was your evening?”

“Weird,” I admitted, sitting down on the bench that was in front of her bed.

“How so? Didn’t you spend it with Amaru?”

“Yes. Tonight was different. I guess with the weight of all the changes that have been happening lately, I realized how much I loved him and how grateful we are to have each other. We said we loved each other, and we kissed. And I mean really kissed.” Absently, I brushed my lips with the pads of my fingers. “It was the best one I ever had,” I admitted softly. “Then I got back to his place and... realized how stupid kissing him was. I can’t risk losing him for love. Lis has lost enough. He’s the only consistent man in her life. If she loses

him, she loses AJ too.” Sucking my teeth, I hung my head and twiddled my thumbs. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Seems like you already did what you believe you should do. What you’re struggling with is accepting it.”

“True.”

“Why is that?” she asked, scooting closer to me. “Is it because you don’t want to accept it?”

“No, I don’t think I do.”

“Then you want to be with Amaru?” Her grin made me chuckle.

“What is that look for?”

“I would love to have him as my son-in-law. He practically already is.”

“Ma, we’ve only kissed. It’s a little premature to be thinking about marriage.”

“Not for me. I’m on the outside looking in, so I’m not blinded by fear and negativity like you. I see the possibility of this in a beautiful way, but I can also see your hesitation.” She cupped my chin and wiped a tear I hadn’t even realized had fallen. “Your fear is warranted, but it also gives way to your value of him and his place in you and your daughter’s life.”

“I can’t lose him, Ma,” I said through my sniffles. “I can’t even wrap my mind around the concept of not having Amaru in my life.”

“Why do you think it won’t work? You two practically co-parent each other’s kids. You’re great partners at work when you have to work together. You’re best friends. Why do you think a romantic relationship wouldn’t work?”

My eyes rolled to the ceiling as my head shook. “Ru hasn’t been in a serious relationship in years. His priorities are AJ and work, and us of course. He doesn’t desire a romantic relationship. If he wanted that from me, he would have told me long before now. Tonight would have been just about sex, and I don’t know how that would have affected us going forward.

What if it made me possessive of him? What if he started avoiding me? The thought of it is just too much.”

“I don’t blame your way of thinking. Your father isn’t the best foundation, and men you’ve been with often have traits like him. Or lack the traits you need like he does. But I want you to promise me something.” She took my hand into hers as I nodded my agreement. “Promise me that if Amaru decides to pursue you and he shows you that you and Lis are safe with him, you won’t run away from the unknown.”

I wanted to tell her that wasn’t possible, but I agreed. Amaru would never pursue me romantically, so that was a promise I wouldn’t have to worry about keeping.

SIXTEEN

A maru

The call I'd gotten completely destroyed my schedule for the day. The truth had finally gotten to Cheryl about Eric. Mia came clean and finally made an outcry to her mother. She confessed that she thought keeping the baby would cause her mom to give her more attention. Eric had been taking all of her free time. When Cheryl heard about what Eric had done to her daughter, she had a medical episode, and her family rushed her to the hospital because they thought she was having a heart attack.

Thankfully, it was just a severe panic attack. She'd already made calls to the men in her family, forcing Eric to flee the city for his safety. Because the judge told him he couldn't travel as one of the conditions of his bail, there was now a warrant out for his arrest. To my surprise, his wife was working with the police to get him back to Memphis to face his charges, and I was grateful for that. I was grateful that Mia had been honest with her mother, and Cheryl was now in a position to give her daughter the attention, help, and care she deserved. From the sound of it, it was Mia's wish to give the baby up for adoption, however, Eric's wife had requested custody.

I didn't know how they were going to handle that, but I told Jeremy to keep me posted since he was still representing Eric.

As I headed back home, I called Veronica. The holiday season was upon us, and I wanted to make sure she was going to come back home to spend time with AJ. She had an apartment here that she allowed her sister to stay in and keep up during her absence. When she was back in Memphis, AJ spent time with her there. Not having him until the actual holiday was difficult, but I made the sacrifice to honor that time with his mom. He was at an age where he was comfortable with the process, though he had his moments where he missed her and wished he could see her more.

When they first started, I used to try and send him to her for the weekend, but she often spent that time working and was unable to give him the time he needed. So to avoid tainting his perception of her and keep him from thinking he wasn't a priority to her, I tried to make him feel as loved as possible for the both of us when she wasn't around. My family, and Milli, helped out with the void of a motherly presence in his life.

Veronica didn't answer, not to my surprise. I went to my text thread with Milli as I sat in my office. She'd sent me the daily picture of her and Alisia I requested when I was working from home and wouldn't see her. Lis was looking like a mini Milli with a wide smile and comfortable sweatsuit, making me assume today was one of her P.E. days. Amelia was dressed in an olive-green suit that beautifully complemented her cocoa-brown skin. I replied and wished both beauties a good day before focusing on my work for the day.

Since I was mostly going over contracts and paperwork, today was the perfect day to work from home. Just as I was about to order Starbucks for both me and Milli, Veronica returned my call.

“Hello?” I answered, sitting back in my seat.

“Hey, you called?”

“Yeah, you on the clock?”

“Not yet, but I'm heading in for a twelve-hour shift.” She released a long breath. “Is everything okay with baby boy?”

“Yeah, I was just calling to make sure you’ll be here for Thanksgiving. If so, when are you flying in?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there, just not as long. I’m going to come in the day before Thanksgiving and leave out the following Saturday.”

My jaw clenched as I closed my eyes. Shaking my head, I pulled in a deep breath. I hated making Veronica feel bad about her schedule, but it seemed like she was giving AJ less and less of her time. Truthfully, she wasn’t obligated to come at all because I had full custody, so I tried to work with what she gave. From the moment we met, I understood her desire and passion for becoming a traveling nurse. I don’t regret my son, but I do wish I would have had him with a woman who had a more stable career. Veronica was doing what she loved and making damn good money at it, so there was nothing I could say or do to make her slow down to spend time with our son. All I could do was make the most of the situation we were in.

“He was looking forward to spending the whole week with you since he will be out of school. Is there a particular reason you can’t take that time for him?”

“Honestly, Amaru, I’m tired. I’m taking a vacation with my girls. We’re all over the place with our schedules and decided that week would be a good one to take a trip. I’ll still be there for three and a half days, and that will give AJ and me more than enough time to create some memories.”

“All right, V. I guess I’ll see you when you get here and I drop AJ off.”

“Okay. Also... I was wondering if we could maybe have lunch or dinner or something as a family? There’s something I need to talk to the both of you about.”

Oh shit. My heart squeezed. If it was concerning the both of us, either she wouldn’t be coming back home for Christmas, or this was about a man.

“Just tell me now so I’ll be prepared to help him process whatever it is.”

She sighed heavily into the phone. “Okay, Amaru, um... gosh.” Veronica chuckled nervously. “So next year I won’t be able to come back home. I’ll be settling in Washington for a while and taking a break from work.”

“Why not here?”

“I’m pregnant, and the father of my child is in Washington. He’s a surgeon that I worked with during my last assignment. We’re getting married. I’m still in my first trimester, so I’m not telling a lot of people. But I did want to talk to you and AJ about it when I got home.”

Pride filled me first. I wanted to question why this baby and man was worth taking a break, but AJ and I weren’t. Once I released that, I was able to be honest with myself and admit that Veronica and I were never in love. I didn’t mind not being the man worth slowing down for. AJ, however, should have been. If she wanted to give that honor to the man she loved and the baby that came from that union, I would accept it, mainly because I had no choice.

“That’s... congratulations, V. I’m uh...” Chuckling, I couldn’t get the words out. “I wish I could say I’m happy for you. I am, but I’m sad for my son. I know he’s going to be hurt by this. He’s going to want to come and see you, Veronica. Will that ever be an option? I know you’ll need time in the beginning to adjust to having a newborn but... will you at some point have time for him? And will your fiancé be okay with that?”

“He can come eventually. But you’re right, I will need time to adjust. You had AJ while he was a newborn, so I don’t have the experience you do. I think maybe by the time the baby is four or five, I’ll be settled enough into mom life to handle two children.”

My ears started to ring. I refused to believe what I’d just heard. *Did this woman say she planned to wait at least five years to see our fucking son?*

“And just so we’re on the same page, during those five years, technically almost six including the length of your pregnancy, you don’t plan to travel here to see him?”

“No, I don’t,” she said after a brief pause.

My tongue rolled over my teeth. “All right. Don’t put that on my son on your next visit. Let him enjoy having you around, not being upset because you’re replacing him with a baby with a man you actually want to be with. One that’s worthy of your time and attention.”

“Amaru, that’s not what I’m doin—”

“That’s *exactly* what the fuck you’re doing. It might not look like that to you, but it is. And I’m not going to let you subject him to that kind of pain and rejection.”

“I’m just trying to live my life! *You’re* the one always saying there’s more to life than work.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t saying that so you would stop seeing my son altogether to start fresh with another fucking man!”

She huffed, and I laughed, realizing it was pointless having this conversation with her. Veronica had proven the priority she would give our son when she signed her rights to him over. I shouldn’t have been surprised by this, but I was. I guess because she’d been coming around for holidays, I thought maybe there was a chance she’d realize how special she was to him and try to do more.

“I have to go, Veronica. But remember what the fuck I said. Don’t say shit about this to my son when you get here.”

“Amaru, I...”

Ending the call, I chucked my phone onto my desk. With a roar, I used my arm to swipe everything off my desk, not caring about how it would take double the work to separate the files. I loved my son with everything in me, and it broke my heart into pieces knowing his mother didn’t feel the same way. Six years would turn into forever, and there was nothing I could do to spare my son from that.

“Fuck!” I yelled, punching the wall repeatedly.

The only thing that made me stop was the ringing of my phone. My adrenaline was so high, I didn’t realize the damage

I was doing to my hand until I tried to use it to grab my phone. Already, it was cut open and bruised.

“What!” I answered, not bothering to look and see who was on the other end.

“Baby.” At the sound of my mother’s sniffing, my anger immediately began to dissipate.

“What’s wrong, Ma?”

“It’s Adam. He was in an accident. I’m here at the hospital with him now.”

“A car accident?” I confirmed, rushing out of my office. “Is he okay?”

“He’s... stable. He was wearing his seatbelt thankfully. He does have a concussion, and that’s what they are most concerned about. Other than that, it’s just some cuts and bruises here and there.”

“No broken bones? Was anyone else involved? Please don’t tell me he fell asleep behind the wheel again?”

“No broken bones. He did hit someone this time.”

“Shit,” I grumbled. The first time my brother fell asleep behind the wheel, he hit a light pole and was ticketed for reckless driving. “Are the police there yet?”

“No, and I’m hoping they won’t get here until after you do.”

“I’m on my way, Ma. If they get there before I do and he’s awake, do *not* let him talk to them.”

“Okay, I won’t.”

Ending the call, I jogged out of the house. Checking the time, I wondered if I would still be gone by the time AJ got out of school. On the off-chance I was, I didn’t want him home alone unaware of what was going on, so I shot Amelia a text and asked her if she’d be able to pick him up about an hour after he got home and settled if necessary. This day was getting worse and worse, and I prayed to God nothing topped this.

SEVENTEEN

A melia

After the kids got out of school, I picked AJ up and brought them back to the office with me. They loved running around like little professionals and thoroughly enjoyed their time here until I was done for the day. Then, I took them to grab some food before going to Amaru's place. As they did their homework, I made baked chicken, mac and cheese, and green beans to last the boys for the rest of the week so Amaru wouldn't have to worry about it.

The last time he gave me an update, it was to let me know the police had arrived and planned to arrest Adam for reckless driving since this wasn't his first offense. Adam signed off on the arrest so he wouldn't have to be processed immediately. Once he was released, he'd have to go and be processed. By that time, he will have had his first court date set. Thankfully, he wouldn't have to wait in jail until then, thanks to his brother.

When Amaru told me he was on his way home, AJ was already sleep. I took Alisia home so she could have a bath and spent a little time with her before she went to sleep too. After checking on Mama and making sure she was okay, I headed back to Amaru's place to be there for him.

It wasn't lost on me that Adam's sleeping behind the wheel was a result of his overworking. The brothers all had different

ways of dealing with their father's death and overextending himself was Adam's. I wanted to be there for my friend, because I knew he would be tired after spending the bulk of the day in the hospital.

As I let myself inside of their home, I prayed for Amaru's peace. With their father gone, all of the brothers were having a hard time adjusting to being their mother's son and the man in her life too. I understood their desire to be for her what their father was, as much as they could, but trying to carry that weight seemed to be draining. Take today, for instance, Amaru catered to her emotional wellbeing and prioritized being there for her while she worried about his brother. The only reason he left her at the hospital with Adam was because he wanted to check in on AJ and rest.

I found Amaru sitting on the edge of his bed in nothing but boxers. His hands were palming his face. I made my way over, kneeling in front of him.

"Have you eaten?" I checked, lowering his hands from his face.

"Nah." He cleared his throat, looking at me with tired eyes.

"I'll fix you a plate."

Before leaving his room, I started to play *Gold* by Cleo Sol to try and help ease his nerves. I fixed him a plate of the food I'd fixed earlier, and after warming it, took it to him. While he ate, we sat on the couch on the side of his room. With no conversation between us, the music filled the silent void.

When he was done eating, I stood to take his plate back to the kitchen, but he grabbed my wrist before I could do so. He stood and pulled me into his arms. I set the plate on the dresser so I could hug him fully, then took him back into my arms. I'm not sure how long we stood there hugging, but we eventually moved to the bed when our legs got tired.

There, he told me about the horrible day he had, including Veronica's announcement. It broke my heart to hear that she planned to let years go by before seeing AJ so she could focus on her new family. I could understand where Amaru was

coming from, thinking those years would lead to forever. With AJ being twelve, he'd be legal in six years. At that point, Amaru wouldn't be able to control whether he spent time with his mother or not. And honestly, I wasn't sure if he'd want to.

The older I got, the more I wanted my father because he felt like a prize. Truthfully, I was the prize. Not having a relationship with me was his loss. I was finally learning that, even though it took me thirty-five years to do so. Regardless of whether AJ wanted to see his mother when he was eighteen or not, I'd be there for both him and Amaru.

"I'm sorry, Ru," I told him as I ran my hand up and down his back as he laid on my chest. "She might not see what she has in you and AJ, but I do. I would have loved to be his mother and the woman who gave him to you."

I immediately snapped my mouth shut. Though I wanted to make him feel better, it wasn't my intention to say something so personal. To suggest that suggested I wanted to have sex with Amaru, and though that was the truth, I never wanted to admit that. What I could admit was how great Ru and I were when it came to our kids, and I hoped he knew that's what I was trying to say.

"Now that I've calmed down some, I'm not as angry. More than anything, I'm hurt that she could care so little about being in his life. I know she proved that by giving up her rights to him but damn. I didn't think she could do any less than seeing him for the holidays. How in the fuck am I supposed to tell him there's a chance he won't be seeing her until after his eighteenth birthday?"

"With love and grace. And I'll be there with you every step of the way."

"You always are." He took my hand into his and kissed it. "You've been there for us from the beginning. You've been more of a mother to AJ than she has. I probably don't say it enough, but I'm grateful to have you in our lives, Milli. You don't have to do nearly half the things you do for him, whether you're my best friend or not, and I appreciate you for it all."

“I love the little guy like he is my son. It’s easy to be there for him. Plus, you’re the same way with my daughter.”

“That night we kissed, I hated that you pulled away,” he confessed. “I wanted more.” He kissed my hand again. “I wanted *everything*. But you were right. What we have is far too important to risk it for a night of pleasure.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page,” was what I said, but hearing him finally admit to wanting to take things to the next level had my pussy leaking.

I had to remind myself the next level didn’t mean a loving, forever relationship. It meant sex with my best friend. And though that sounded amazing, it wasn’t worth risking the stable family unit we’d built for our children.

Especially now that Veronica and Darron wouldn’t be in their lives. So as much as I wanted to spread my legs and pull him closer, I gave him a kiss on the top of his head and caressed him until he finally went to sleep.

EIGHTEEN

A maru

Adam was released three days later, and like I promised I would, I took him downtown so he could be processed. He was looking at a suspended license, six months in prison, and a five hundred dollar fine. The only thing I was concerned about was six months in prison. Typically they didn't give that until the third offense, so I wanted to know why the D.A. had that on the table. He may have been trying to make an example out of my brother, because lately, there has been a lot of sleeping behind the wheel. Because there was technically no law against it, people weren't taking it seriously.

"You wanna talk about what's going on with you?" I asked Adam as I drove on the interstate.

"Whachu mean?"

Scoffing, I looked over at him briefly. "You could've killed yourself or someone else. Now is not the time to play games, Adam."

His head hung as it shook. When he didn't reply immediately, I figured he was going to ignore me, as usual. The second I heard sobs erupting from deep within him, I pulled over as quickly, yet safely, as I possibly could. Getting out of the car, I rushed over to his side and pulled him into my arms.

“He wasn’t supposed to die that young, man,” he sobbed, forcing me to close my eyes so I wouldn’t shed my own tears. “A fucking heart attack? And he’s just gone. No warning, no time to prepare. Nothing. My daddy is fucking gone, and I’m supposed to just live like a huge part of me ain’t missing.”

I didn’t know what the hell to say, so I just held him. I figured that was better than saying the wrong thing. When he was composed, we got back in the car, and I figured it was best to take him to Mama instead of back home.

“I don’t know what to say, but I know you can’t keep doing what you’re doing. Working yourself to death won’t change the fact that he’s...”

When I couldn’t finish, he laughed. “You still can’t say that shit, huh? He’s *dead*, Amaru. You not acknowledging it won’t change the fact that he’s gone.”

Swallowing hard, I blinked back tears. “You overworking yourself doesn’t change that. All it does is put you in a position to hurt yourself or someone else. Now I’m not going to be able to console Mama if she loses you because you got into a fatal accident or because you killed someone and went to prison for vehicular homicide. I don’t know what it will take to get your mind at peace enough to not feel the need to avoid your thoughts and feelings with work. I’m glad you haven’t turned to drugs or alcohol, but this is clearly just as dangerous. If you can tell me what to do to help you, I swear to God I will.”

He thought over my question for a while before saying, “Honestly, bruh, I don’t know. But when I figure it out, I’ll tell you.”

“Can you at least promise me that you’ll stop working as much and get some rest?”

“Yeah.” His head bobbed. “I can do that.”

At this point, his agreement was good enough for me.

Mecca and Parker were deep in conversation, and I was half listening. Because of AJ, I didn't go out with them often. Tonight, I needed the distraction. I was horny as hell, and I didn't want to call Taylor to chase my nut. I wanted it to be Milli. We'd talked and agreed that, even though we wanted each other, it was best if we didn't take it there. It was getting harder and harder to keep that pact.

We were having drinks at a downtown hotel, and my leg shook violently under the table as I tried to force myself not to get a room and have Amelia meet me there. After chugging my beer and wiping my mouth, I blurted, "I want Milli."

Their laughter died down, and they both stared at me.

"How?" Mecca asked.

With a shrug, I massaged my temple. "I don't know."

"Where is this coming from?" Parker asked.

"I don't know. Just seems like last month, out of nowhere, I started looking at her differently. It was just before your wedding."

"Damn," Mecca muttered. "Is this sexual, or do you want more and you're too afraid to admit it?"

I thought about his question, sincerely. Up until Amelia became the topic of conversation, I had always been a logical man. A man of communication and truth. With her invading my thoughts, I was afraid to be honest about how I felt. Afraid that admission would lead to action that would change everything.

"I don't know."

"Nah, that's bullshit," Parker said.

"You know damn well that you know, even if you don't want to say it," Mecca added.

"I don't know," I stressed. "I'm not allowing myself to think about that. To explore it. We got too much to lose."

Sucking his teeth, Parker's head shook as he sat up in his seat. "You can't be scared when it comes to love. You gotta go

all in. You think I wasn't scared shitless to ask Carina to marry me after a little over two months?" He chuckled. "I figured... all she could do was say no, and I would wait, because she was the one. You've known Milli long enough to know if she's worth taking a chance on. You just have to be brave enough to admit it and do it."

"I think the two of you should have sex," Mecca said, completely catching me off guard. As protective as he was of Milli, I'm surprised those words even came from his mouth.

"Nah, that'll blur the lines even more," Parker said.

"Not for him," Mecca continued. "Sex and relationships up until now have been things he can control. When a woman is the one, both are beyond your control. You find yourself surrendering to her for her service and doing whatever you can to please her. To keep her happy. To keep her as yours. If you're in denial about wanting to be with her, take things to the next level. Once you make love to her, *nothing* is going to stop you from wanting to make her yours permanently. You won't want anyone else to experience her in that way again."

"I have to agree," Parker said. "On the off-chance y'all aren't meant to be, the sex can get the desire out of your system and make you stop questioning what if. If y'all are meant to be, like he said, you're going to do whatever it takes to make her yours."

I believed the Bible when it said God would never put a temptation on us that we couldn't overcome. My desire for Amelia was growing, and I wasn't sure if it was because I wanted someone I couldn't have, or if she was the one and my eyes were finally being opened to that. There was only one way for me to find out. Excusing myself from the table, I pulled my phone out and dialed Milli's number. She answered, and that low, raspy voice had me biting down on my lip.

"Hey, Ru."

"Hey. So listen... I'm going to get a room at the Peabody, and I want you to join me for the night. Can you do that?"

I waited as she remained silent. So silent I had to look at the phone to make sure she was still there. “Milli?”

Clearing her throat, she stuttered, “U-uh y-yeah. I’m here.”

“Good. I need you here. Will you come to me, so you can cum for me?”

“This is just sex?”

“I don’t know. We’ll talk about that in the morning. What do you say?”

NINETEEN

A melia

“I’m falling in love with my best friend,” I blurted, causing Shalom and Carina to stare at me with gaped mouths. They fell into a fit of laughter that made me cross my arms over my chest. “Hey! This is serious,” I whined.

“Okay, okay. We’re sorry,” Shalom said, grabbing Carina’s wrist as their laughter died down.

“What is going on, sis?” Carina asked. “I thought you had a thing about never having sex with or dating your male friends?”

“I did, and I’ve kept that rule in place since I graduated from college. Amaru has me wanting to change that.”

“Since when?” Shalom asked.

“Since I started paying attention to how good of a man he really is.” My shoulders slouched as my eyes watered. “How consistent and loyal he is. How stable and secure he is. How safe he is. And after the wedding, I started... being more dissatisfied with Darron. I plunged headfirst when he mentioned marriage, but the truth is, the sex wasn’t good enough and he never made me feel secure with him. I fucked around and mentioned that to Ru and his response, though short, made me think some nasty things about him that I haven’t been able to put to rest.”

Carina fanned herself as she grinned. “Chile, the only thing that puts those kinds of thoughts to rest is sex. You need to get it out of your system. Otherwise, you’re going to forever wonder what if.”

Shalom’s head shook. “I don’t know if I agree. What if things get messy and it ruins their friendship?”

“That’s been my concern,” I admitted. “I don’t want to do anything to ruin what we have going on. Not just for us, but the kids.”

“That makes it tricky, but I don’t know. I see it differently,” Carina said. “If your friendship is as solid as you say it is, nothing will be able to destroy that.”

“That’s true,” Shalom said. “When something is fated, you can’t stand in the way of it. Look at me and Mecca. We hated each other for fifteen years and it took less than three months for us to surrender to the love that was always within our hearts.”

“Instead of thinking about it in a negative way, think about how great things would be for all of you if this led to love and marriage. Your kids would get the family unit you both want them to have,” Carina continued.

“Both of you are right. I guess I haven’t allowed myself to think about being in a relationship with Ru because he’s not the relationship type. Not right now at least. What if we start a sexual relationship and then he finds the woman of his dreams and wants to marry her in a few months like Parker did? Then what? I’m supposed to just go back to being his friend?”

“And what if *you’re* the woman of his dreams but you two have been so stuck in the reality of your friendship and co-parenting that you have been too blind to see it?”

They’d given me a lot to think about, and I honestly didn’t know what I was going to do. Would sex with Ru be something I could just... get out of my system? What if they were right? What if there was more between us and this was the path to get to it? Could I have the courage to risk how great things were now to find out?

Before I could fret over it for too long, I was getting a call from Amaru.

“Hey, Ru.”

“Hey. So listen... I’m going to get a room at the Peabody, and I want you to join me for the night. Can you do that?”

I didn’t realize I was silently holding the phone with my mouth open until Shalom leaned across the table and closed it.

“Milli?”

Clearing my throat, I stuttered, “U-uh y-yeah. I’m here.”

“Good. I need you here. Will you come to me, so you can cum for me?”

“This is just sex?”

“I don’t know. We’ll talk about that in the morning. What do you say?”

My heart raced as I rocked in my seat. How ironic that he called me with this now? Was this a sign that this was supposed to happen? If it was, I wouldn’t ignore it.

“I say I’m on my way. Text me when you have the room number.”

“Changing your mind?” The sound of Amaru’s voice behind me made me shiver. Feeling the warmth of his body pressed into mine had my eyes fluttering. I was all for exploring the unknown when I arrived, but now that I was in his room, my nerves were starting to set in.

He had champagne and flowers waiting for me, which made my eyes water. His patience only made me feel worse. I don’t know how long I’d been standing by the window looking out at the moon, but my legs had started to slightly ache.

“I’m not changing my mind, but I am nervous,” I confessed.

“We don’t have to do this, Milli.” He released a low chuckle. “I don’t know what I was thinking calling you and telling you to come here. I’m sorry.”

Turning, I took his hands into mine and looked into his balsamic-colored eyes. “You do know what you were thinking. I was thinking the same thing. But doing what we’re thinking... that’s the hard part.”

“Nah. This...” He gave me a sexy smile, lowering my hand to his dick. “This is the hard part.”

I couldn’t stop the moan that escaped my lips as I massaged and gripped his shaft. There were times I’d felt it pressed against me when we were cuddling or playing. Intentionally touching it allowed me to see how long, curved, and thick he was. Unable to resist, I lowered myself to my knees. I didn’t grant the honor to all the men I dated, but I loved giving head.

The better a man treated me, the more pleasure I took in pleasing him. Plus, there was something empowering and erotic about bringing a strong man to his knees by making him cum. As I pulled his basketball shorts down, we locked eyes. His had lowered, making him even sexier as he looked down at me while biting his bottom lip.

Before I could take him into my mouth, Amaru was lifting me from my knees. “As much as I’d love to see your mouth wrapped around my dick, tonight is about you counting all the ways I can make you cum.”

A gasp escaped me as he picked me up and carried me over to the bed, bridal style. He took his time undressing me. There was a slight tremble in his hands when he got to my bra and panties. I took them into my palms and kissed both. As we stared into each other’s eyes, he gave me a small smile before releasing a slow breath. His hands stilled, pulling my bra and panties off. He released a low moan before kissing me from my ankles to my neck. By the time Amaru laid me in the middle of the bed, I was panting and aching for more.

Amaru took his time... worshipping my body. There wasn’t a place he didn’t kiss, lick, or touch. The moment he

placed a closed-mouth kiss to my clit, my walls were already tightening. He held my legs open, tongue kissing my clit with the adoration she deserved. I should have been ashamed of how quickly I came, but I wasn't. He began to suck my clit and lick my opening before pressing inside of me with his tongue. He moaned while he feasted on me, running his nose between my folds and staring into my eyes as he slipped two fingers inside of me.

My back arched as my walls locked around his fingers. I was cumming again.

One of his arms pressed my legs into the bed as he continued to feast, turning his head sideways and flicking his tongue from my clit to my opening. I held his head in place and rocked my hips against him, but I tried to push him away when a third orgasm was about to erupt. He kept his place and pace, chuckling as I trembled underneath him.

"This pussy tastes as sweet as you are," he complimented, making his way up my body.

"Ru," I called quietly, tugging him up. I was spent and needed him close.

He wrapped my legs around him, kissing me tenderly. "I love you, sweetheart. I've cherished your spirit since we met. Thank you for giving me access to your soul."

I wasn't sure it was his intention, but his words and the pressure of him pressing his way inside of me had me cumming the moment he was fully inside.

"Mm," he moaned, giving me a sexy chuckle. "It feels that good?"

"Hell yes, baby."

"Show me. Show me how much you love finally having me inside of this pussy."

Steady strokes filled me as the command left his lips. They were long, hard, and deep. My lips and chin trembled as I dug my nails into his back. Eyes fluttering, I fought to keep them locked with his. When they closed, he kissed me, and that made me even wetter.

“You’re taking your time in this pussy.” I released a sizzling breath as I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I knew you deserved it.”

He moaned and wrapped his hand around my neck, hardening his strokes. As that familiar warmth began to spread through me, wetness poured out of me and onto him. My whimpers and heavy breathing mixed with his moans. Amaru waited until I was at the edge to say, “What are you about to do, Milli?”

My eyes squeezed tight and back arched. “Ah…” I tried to push him out of me, but he grabbed my hands and lifted them over my head. “I’m about to cum.”

“What number is that?”

Honestly, I didn’t know. My walls pulsed as I cried out, trembling underneath him.

“What number is that, sweetheart?”

“F-four?”

“No, bae. This is five.” Lifting himself, he pressed my knees into the bed. “Let me give you number six.”

And after that, came seven. He flipped me over on my stomach for eight. By nine, I was begging for mercy. Amaru pulled out and slurped on my clit and pussy until I was cumming again. He came back inside for ten, kissing and licking my toes and staring into my eyes, talking all sweet until I was cumming so hard it put me straight to sleep.

The feel of him cleaning me off woke me up, but I was too drained to try and stay awake. A smile covered my face as he climbed into bed and pulled me onto his chest. I wasn’t sure how things were going to progress, but I knew one thing for sure—there was no way in *hell* I would be satisfied with just one night of his good love.

I couldn't wipe the smile from my face as Ru placed my tray of breakfast on my lap. The sun had just risen, and we had about two hours before we needed to get to work, but neither of us was in a rush. We'd spent more than half the night making love, yet it fueled us and gave us energy. I thought I'd be too tired to go in to work, but I was refreshed and excited to tackle my day.

After placing a kiss on my forehead, Amaru climbed into bed beside me. While he had steak and eggs with fruit, I chose sausage and eggs with fruit. My stomach began to grumble as soon as it took in the scent. I didn't dig in right away, opting instead to look out of the window that was directly across from the bed toward the sky and say a silent prayer to God.

"Do you think we should talk before we part ways?" Amaru asked as he cut into his steak.

"I think that'll be for the best, so we'll be on the same page."

"Okay," he agreed before placing a piece of steak into his mouth.

"Is this just sex?"

"What do you want it to be?"

"Ru, I don't want to say first," I admitted bashfully.

"I need you to. I'm going to lead us, but I need to know where."

I loved that about him. Even with Amaru being a leader, he didn't mind being influenced when necessary.

"I would love for us to see where this goes, but I do have some concerns."

"Which are?"

"The biggest one is ruining our friendship and the stable environment it has provided for our children."

He waited until he was done chewing to respond. "I think the best way for us to avoid that is to make sure we're on the same page when it comes down to dating, marriage, and

children. If we are, we shouldn't assume being together will ruin things. It'll only make things better. Now, with time, if we decide to part ways, we should have a plan in place to make sure the kids don't suffer because of it."

"That sounds fair."

"And what are your other concerns?"

"If I'm moving too fast after Darron and the fact that you haven't been in a relationship since we met."

Wiping the corners of his mouth, Amaru smiled. I loved how calm he was. It always had the ability to keep me steady. Because the truth was, I was just as nervous having this conversation as I was to make love to him. But last night, he guided and led me into something beautiful, and there was no doubt in my mind he'd do the same thing with this conversation.

"You can never move on to something better too fast. I know people say if you aren't prepared for something you might not treat it well or appreciate it, but you're prepared to be loved by me, and I don't want your time with Darron to make you question that." Unable to resist, I leaned forward and kissed his lips before he continued. "And you're right, I haven't been in a serious relationship. I didn't realize it had been that long. I've dated seriously and almost got to that point, but no woman was worth me taking away time from my son or career to invest in them."

"But I am?"

"You are. I want to prioritize you and put you first. Make plans to spoil you and give you the dick and dates you deserve. Take you on trips and buy you nice things. And eventually... give you a wedding ring." He chuckled and rolled his tongue over his cheek. "It's crazy because when I was talking to the guys last night, they told me if we were meant to be, all it would take was one night with you and I would be willing to do whatever it took to make sure you were mine." Amaru paused and kissed me. With his lips just an inch from mine, he added, "They were right."

He kissed my smile away, and not long after, I was straddling him and pulling his shaft out of his boxers as he kissed and licked my neck and collarbone. Grateful I had no panties on under his t-shirt, I lifted it slightly and lined his head up with my opening. As I sat on him, he hummed and squeezed my waist.

“You wet as fuck, Milli. Damn.”

A confident smile lifted the corners of my mouth as I started a slow ride. “You’re the best I’ve ever had, Ru. Not just sexually, though that’s true too. I’m glad we’re giving this a chance because I wouldn’t have been able to walk away from this... from you.”

“Me either, so it’s a good thing we won’t have to.”

His hands were all over me as my pace increased slightly. Between his intense gaze, passionate kisses, and wandering hands, I’d be cumming soon. Amaru lifted his shirt over my head, licking and nibbling on my nipples and causing my moans to grow louder as I tilted my head. Holding him close, I pulled in deep breaths as my toes curled. I was glad my first time experiencing orgasms from penetration came from Amaru. It felt fitting. We might not have taken each other’s virginities, but this experience was like nothing we’d ever had with anyone else before.

TWENTY

A melia

I floated through the day on a cloud. When I got home, that cloud filled with rain. Alisia had been distant with Mama and apparently had a bad day. She hadn't eaten the lunch that was prepared and was already in bed as if she was ready to go to sleep. Closing the door behind me, I slipped out of my clothes and climbed into bed with her.

"Hi," I spoke quietly.

"Hi, Mommy."

"Did you have a bad day?"

She nodded as her eyes watered. "Yes."

"What happened, sunshine?"

Releasing a shaky breath, Alisia pushed her thick hair out of her face. I loved how small and innocent she still was, even though she was almost a teenager. Maybe my mom and I shielded her too much, but I didn't care. She would always be my little baby, and I would never apologize for that.

"They announced it would be Grandfather's Day Friday. They are supposed to come to lunch with us. But I don't have one. I don't have a daddy either."

For a while, all I could do was blink back my tears and swallow my emotions. I wouldn't dare vomit mine onto her,

no matter how her truth made me feel. Every time she expressed her sadness over any type of lack in her life it made me sick. I knew I couldn't provide everything she wanted, but I should have been able to provide those two things. Getting things wrong with Daddy led to me being attracted to an unemotionally available man just like him. Now, I was forcing my daughter to not have a father either.

At least mine was there at times and financially. Alisia's dad wasn't doing anything at all.

"You have both, sunshine. They just... aren't active parts of your life. I'm sure if you call Grandpa Victor he'd love to come and have lunch with you."

Her eyes rolled and her head shook. "He'll say he's too busy."

As much as I wanted to tell her that wouldn't be the case, I couldn't. Daddy was *always* busy. And even when he wasn't, that was his excuse to stay away.

"I'm sorry, Lis. I wish things were different for you with both of them. But at least you have Ru."

That caused a smile to spread her lips. "I do, but he's not my real dad. I wish he was, then me and AJ could be real brother and sister."

Knowing that she wanted that made dating Amaru feel like a safer bet. We hadn't made things official, but he told me to be looking forward to a very special date. I was excited to see what he would come up with, seeing as he knew me better than anyone.

"Do you think you can find my daddy for me?" Alisia continued.

"Uh..." Sitting up on my elbow, I shook my head as I peered down at her. "I don't know about that, sunshine."

Even if I could find him, there was no guarantee Trent would want to see her. Twelve years had passed, and he hadn't done so yet. He saw her once, right after I had her, and hadn't tried to since. Last I heard, he wasn't even in Memphis. I had

no contact with his family. His parents didn't give a damn that they had a whole grandchild they had no relationship with.

“Please, Ma. I'm tired of not having a daddy. Can you please find him for me?”

Licking the corner of my mouth as my eyes watered, I nodded slowly. “I'll do my very best. I love you, sunshine.”

She hugged my neck, and I squeezed my eyes shut to keep from crying as she told me, “I love you too.”

I wasn't sure what would hurt her worse—me not being able to find him, or bringing him into her life and he not be what she was expecting. All I could do was pray I could find him and he wanted to be in her life now that he was older and hopefully more mature. If not, I'd try and heal her heart just like my mother tried to heal mine.



That Friday

Since both Lis and AJ didn't have grandfathers present for today, Ru and I decided to let them stay home from school. We made a day out of it, watching movies, playing games, and eating comfort food. Once they were ready to go their separate ways and chill, Lis went to the guest room she always occupied here, and Ru and I went to his office to try and get some work done.

We talked about our cases and a few networking events he had lined up to replace Eric. Losing him would be a big hit for the firm as a whole, but I didn't blame Amaru for standing his ground and releasing him as a client. When Cheryl found out, she started raising hell for her daughter, and I would have done the same thing. Eventually, the partners decided it was best to have Eric find new representation. He wasn't the only wealthy and prolific client we had, and we couldn't let being associated with him destroy our relationship with others.

His phone vibrating on top of the desk gained my attention, but I didn't bother looking up to see if he would leave to take the call. My interest was piqued when I heard him say, "Taylor... hi." My pen stopped moving temporarily, but I forced myself to focus on my current task. "I'm getting some work done, so I am a little busy, but I'm glad you called." Hmm, is that right? I was wondering if he'd cut her off yet. We weren't in a committed relationship, so I couldn't make him. I wouldn't share him, though. "Yeah, I'm actively pursuing someone, so I can't continue with our arrangement." He remained silent as he listened to her response, and I had to keep myself from grinning. "I appreciate your understanding. Yeah, it's Milli actually. We're going to finally see what's up between us." Ru chuckled with a bob of his head. "Thank you for that, I appreciate it. And thank you for being so gracious about this. You be well. Bye."

A few seconds passed after he disconnected the call before he told me, "You can stop acting like you weren't listening now."

My smile finally spread as I set my pen down and looked at him. "You noticed?"

He chuckled. "I did."

"So... that's really over?"

"It is. She wished us well."

"That was nice of her. I was wondering if you planned to end things with her."

"No doubt. I'm not a cheater. Plus, I have no use for her or anyone else now that I have you."

Standing, I made my way over to his desk and straddled him. "I love you, Ru, and I'm glad we're doing this. A little scared, but glad."

"And I love you. I finally have enough courage for both of us. You're not going to regret giving your heart to me, sweetheart. I promise."

He'd never broken a promise to me before, and I trusted Amaru more than any other man in my past. Cupping his

cheek, I connected my lips with his, and peace immediately washed over me. I was becoming more and more obsessed with this man by the day, and finally... I was okay with that.

TWENTY-ONE

A maru

Mecca and I were searching the streets of Memphis in search of my brother. Amir was out drinking with Tony and Tony lost my damn brother. Apparently, Tony had passed out in the parking lot of the club and Amir had left by the time he woke up. That was hours ago, and Tony hadn't heard from him since. Mama, Adam, and I had been blowing his phone up, and he wasn't answering for anyone. I'd called in a favor to see if any DUIs had been called in and there wasn't, so that gave me a little peace, but I was still concerned because he could have been in a ditch somewhere out of view.

I was even more upset because I'd just fallen into a good sleep with Amelia when my phone started vibrating. A call that late was never good, so when I saw Mama's name, I already knew something was up. Because Adam was finally sleeping on a more regular schedule, I urged him to stay home and try to go back to sleep, but the chances of that were slim.

Mecca called me, pulling me out of my thoughts. I answered the call, letting his voice permeate my Challenger through the Bluetooth.

"Have you heard from him yet?" Mecca asked.

"Nah. He's still not answering."

"Shit."

“Why don’t you go home, Mec? I’ll call you as soon as I hear something.”

“Nah. I probably shouldn’t, but I feel responsible for Tony in a way. He’s not sober enough to help you look, so I’m going to.”

“I appreciate that. What part of town are you in now?”

“I’m back by his house. I was hoping the liquor wouldn’t have kicked in immediately and he would have made it closer to home.”

“That’s a good idea. I’m about to head back toward the club. I got a feeling if he didn’t make it close to home, he’s still out that way.”

“A’ight. Keep me posted.”

I agreed, then disconnected the call. I prayed and tried not to think the worst. It was frustrating because I was the youngest brother, yet somehow, I was always the one taking care of them and Mama. The only person who ever saw to my needs was Milli. That truth made me want to get back home to her even more.

It took me about fifteen minutes to make it back out that way. I checked the club parking lot again and he wasn’t there. After checking all the gas stations on that block, something told me to stop by the abandoned Backyard Burger parking lot. Relief filled me at the sight of his girlfriend’s car parked by the drive-thru menu. He wasn’t moving, and I thought the worst.

I threw my car in park and rushed over to his girl’s. The doors were locked and he wasn’t moving no matter how hard I knocked. I grabbed a nearby brick and smashed the back window. Once I had the backdoor unlocked, I leaned forward to check for his pulse and unlocked the driver’s side door.

“Amir!” I yelled, shaking him. “Mir!” Slapping his face, I shook him again. “Amir!”

His face scrunched up as he groaned. “Wha—” His eyes slowly opened, and they were bloodshot red. “What’s going on?” Amir asked as I released him.

“What the fuck are you doing, man? We’ve been worried sick about you.”

He looked around, discombobulated. “I stopped here to get some food before going home.”

“Amir, this Backyard Burger has been closed for months.”

Amir chuckled. “Damn. I guess that’s why it took them so long to take my order. I must have fallen asleep waiting for them to say something.”

I just stared at his dumb ass to keep from hitting him in his mouth. This shit was serious as hell and his nonchalant attitude was irritating the fuck out of me.

“Get the fuck out of the car, mane,” I told him, tugging on his arm in the process. “And get the key.”

He grabbed the key and handed it to me as he got out of the car. “I’m not finna leave my shit here.”

“You got Uriah sitting at home worried sick about you because you’re not answering the phone. Mama thinking the worst. And we out here searching the city for you while you sleeping. It’s best if you don’t say shit to me right now, bruh. For real.”

Once we were in my car, I texted everyone to let them know I had him. I was going to drop him off and bring Uriah here to get her car, but she said she didn’t mind Ubering. While we waited for her to get here, Amir fell back asleep. Mama was still on edge and wanted him to come home, but he opted to go to Uriah’s place instead. When she saw the window she was pissed, but she was more grateful that Amir was okay. I offered to pay for it, but she insisted on making him pay since this was his fault, and I agreed with that.

I followed them out of the lot and headed in the opposite direction to go home. It seemed like now that I’d finally gotten through to Adam, Amir was on an even darker path. I loved my brothers, and I would do all I could for them, but enough was enough. I couldn’t watch Amir destroy his life because of his drinking. Something was going to have to change.

The Next Night

I couldn't take my eyes off Amelia. She looked beautiful as hell. Even though I knew her pretty well, I was wise enough to accept the girlfriend and wife version of her would be different from my best friend. Before I planned our date, I wanted to talk to her and see what she liked when it came down to romance. She loved plays, movies, shopping, traveling, and restaurant hopping on our friendly level. I wanted to be sure those things would be a good idea to incorporate into our special evening.

To talk, I took her to a wine bar, and she looked so stunning I wanted to take her right back home the moment we arrived. Watching her get dressed only made it worse. Underneath her pencil skirt were black sheer high-waisted stockings that I wanted desperately to rip off. She had on a black lace bustier under her blazer, and my eyes kept going down to her breasts almost every time she breathed. And she smelled so damn good—like vanilla and brown sugar.

When I finally looked up and into her eyes, she was looking at me with a smile. “You like what you see?”

“Damn right. It's taking everything inside of me not to take you to my car and have my way with you.”

She pulled her hair behind her ears as she blushed. “Babe,” Milli cooed. “I'm still getting used to this side of you.”

“I need you to, because there's a lot that outfit makes me want to say to you.”

“Like what?” she asked, licking her lips.

“Like... I need your body more than I need to breathe right now. I can't stop thinking about how good you feel. It's truly wild how damn sexy you look. Ripping those clothes off you

tonight and making love to your body until morning will be my highest honor and pleasure.”

The sight of her gulping her glass of wine made me chuckle. “Is there anything else we need to discuss, baby?”

I considered saying yes just to draw this out, but as much as I wanted her, I wouldn’t tease her and play that game.

“Nah. I think I have enough information to plan the perfect first date.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

I put enough money on the table to cover our wine and small bites before helping her out of her seat, grateful it was a Saturday and AJ was with his GiGi, so we’d have my home to ourselves.

TWENTY-TWO

A melia

I loved Amaru. With each day that passed, that love turned into something... deeper. It was the weekend before Thanksgiving and Ru chose that for our first date. He flew me to New York, where I was able to experience Broadway for the first time. Tonight, we saw *Chicago* live. Tomorrow, it would be *Wicked*, and Sunday, *Aladdin*. As much as I loved plays and musicals, I'd never come to New York to see one, so Ru doing this for me was something I'd always remember.

We were finishing up cocktails and dinner at Raoul's, which was recommended as one of the most romantic restaurants in the city. The small, two-person tables were cozy and intimate, which I could appreciate. The French cuisine was pretty good. I played it a little safe with Maine lobster risotto while Amaru opted for Steak Naturel au Poivre with hand-cut fries. We had to laugh at our selections because neither of us was very adventurous with our food while we were traveling. We liked to stick to what we knew, or at least a version of it.

He gained extra points for bringing me here, though, and allowing us to try something new together. We'd finished dinner and were trying our hardest not to talk about or check on the kids for the millionth time. It felt like we were a married couple trying to enjoy date night, and we were failing horribly.

“I have an idea,” he said.

“What is it?”

“We should go to a bar or grab a bottle, and whoever mentions the kids first has to take a shot.”

“Ooh, that’s dangerous. I’m with it.”

Amaru laughed as he gained our waiter’s attention. After paying, we left and headed back to the hotel. We had an Empire State presidential suite at the Langham Hotel. When we first arrived, there were pink flowers and a bottle of champagne waiting for us, which was a nice touch. I was most excited about the Saks Fifth Avenue shopping spree Ru was going to take me on tomorrow afternoon before we had dinner back at the hotel. We ended up going to the bar at the hotel until they closed at ten, then we took a bottle of Hennessy up to the suite.

My favorite parts of the suite were the Hermes accents and art pieces along with the floor-to-ceiling windows that provided the perfect views of the Empire State Building and city skyline. We showered and crawled into bed, cuddling up and enjoying the closeness of one another.

“What would your ideal relationship look like?” he asked me.

I took some time to think about it before responding. “A true partnership. One that’s a small taste of the goodness that’s to come in marriage. It should be a safe space filled with love and peace. Fun and spontaneity. Commitment and understanding. Honor and nasty sex.” I giggled. “That sounded really cliché.”

“Not really, sweetheart. Cliché would have been listing rules and demands on a shallow level. You showed more of your heart with that.”

“Yeah, I mean, I haven’t had a lot of expectations and conversations like this when it comes down to relationships of my past. Most men didn’t ask what I wanted; they just assumed they were it. And if they weren’t, they didn’t really care.”

“Well, I want to make sure I can give you what you need before we take this journey. My ego tells me I can, but logically and emotionally I need to be able to confirm that.”

“And I appreciate that. It’s one of the things that makes me feel safe with you. That’s one of the biggest things to me. Feeling safe and secure in all ways—physically, mentally, emotionally, financially, spiritually—all that. It doesn’t matter how great the sex is, how much money a man has, how fun he is, or how good he looks... not even how much I love him... if I don’t feel safe and secure with him, we won’t work. Not for the long run.”

“To me, providing safety and security, provision and protection, those are acts of service in marriage. Because of my parents, I was raised to view marriage as a partnership for service and the betterment of two individuals. Two individuals who, in their oneness, make each other the best versions of themselves through the love of God. Happiness, good sex, fun... all that shit’s a plus.”

Looking up at him, I smiled. “That was probably the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Though he laughed and held me closer, I was serious. I couldn’t count the amount of times a man thought sex or his wallet would make him a great catch. What Amaru provided and believed in, that’s what made him the *best* catch. I truly hoped I’d be the woman blessed enough to be loved by him in marriage.

“You’re laughing but I’m serious,” I told him, lowering his hand between my thighs. He moaned and bit down on his bottom lip, expression turning quite serious. “Every time we talk about the future, this is what your words do to me.”

As he made his way between my legs, Ru told me, “I hope you know they aren’t just words. You can trust my actions to align with every declaration I make to you.”

“I know, baby. I trust you... even more now.”

Our lips connected, and he wasted no time pulling his shaft out and running his head between my slick folds. In no mood

for long bouts of foreplay, I took him into my hand and guided him inside. We fed each other moans as he filled me with medium-paced, methodical strokes. Gripping his biceps, I released low moans as I relaxed against the bed.

I loved making love to Amaru. His eyes, his words, his movements... they were always my undoing. Even when we were fucking and being straight-up nasty, he still handled me in a way that made me feel respected and classy. There wasn't anything about this man that I didn't love and trust, and I was so glad we finally gave love a chance.

TWENTY-THREE

A maru
That Monday

Milli and I came home to bullshit. By lunchtime, I was getting a call that AJ had gotten into a fight at school. While most Memphis city schools were out all this week for Thanksgiving break, the private school AJ and Lis went to wouldn't be out until Wednesday, but they'd still have a full week out. I didn't think I needed to call Amelia, but when I made it to the principal's office and AJ told me what happened, I decided to fill her in when we left.

They were trying to suspend my son for the fight and expulsion was even on the table, and until I heard the details, I was all for it. From what AJ was saying, the fight happened because he was sticking up for Alisia.

"So you're saying they were bullying her?" I confirmed.

One of the good things about this school was their no-bullying policy. Because so many children were taking their lives because of bullying, the school reserved the right to expel students who were caught bullying. I'd raised my son to not only defend himself but anyone else in trouble, so it didn't surprise me to hear him say he was taking up for Lis.

"They were. And this wasn't the first time."

"When was?" Principal Spencer asked.

“I don’t know but the last time was last month. Milli came up here and handled that,” he said, forcing me to hide my smile.

“Milli is Alisia’s mother,” I clarified. “I remember her mentioning some kids in her math class bullying Alisia. She came up here to speak with the teacher and the students and we thought it was over, but obviously that wasn’t the case.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that Alisia was being bullied, but because we have no proof of that, it’s your word against theirs, and everyone that was in the bathroom is saying you started the fight for no reason.”

“My son is not a liar. If he says Alisia was being bullied and he was taking up for her, that’s exactly what happened.”

Cutting the principal off, AJ said, “One of my friends was recording it. He has a video.”

Spencer called for the boy to come to the office. Sure enough, Ray had a recording of the altercation. It started with an argument in the girl’s bathroom that centered around Alisia. The girls in there were doing typical mean girl stuff, hating because Lis was smart and pretty and she dressed well. When the boys went in to see what happened, the one AJ got into a fight with joined in on the bullying. AJ told him not to, and the boy went as far as to shove him and Lis, so AJ did what he was taught to do and taught him a lesson that had his nose and mouth bleeding by the time teachers came in to break up the fight.

“As you can see, all three of those girls and that boy were bullying Alisia. And the boy put his hands on her and my son first. So I need you to make sure all four of them are expelled. Now I’ll agree to Amaru being suspended for two or three days because he did fight, but it was for a good reason.”

Spencer sat back in his seat. He rocked from side to side as he massaged his chin. “I’ll make it happen. Amaru, you can go back to class. I’m not going to suspend you for doing the right thing. Next time, use your words or get a teacher even if someone does put their hands on you.”

“I’m checking him out early,” I said before AJ could even respond.

This school was predominately white and Indian, and a lot of the parents did things differently than Milli and I did. Our kids weren’t raised to be bullied or attacked and not do something about it. As we walked out of the school I told AJ, “I’m proud of you, son. You did the right thing.” I gave him a side hug. “You know I don’t condone violence, but I also don’t condone bullying. Always stand up for yourself and Lis. And if anyone ever puts their hands on her, you break them hos off.”

He laughed but nodded his agreement. “I’m always going to look out for Lis. That’s my sister. She’s always going to be safe with me.”

Pride continued to fill my heart as I pulled him into my side. “Let’s go to the mall and get you some new shoes.”

“Aye, thank you, Dad!”

“You’re welcome, but remember, I’m not rewarding fighting or bad behavior; I’m rewarding you doing the right thing.”

“Yes, sir. I know. I tried to get them to leave without getting physical, but he was trying to show out because he liked one of those girls.”

“Figures.” I waited until we were in the car to ask, “How would you feel about Milli and I dating?”

He gasped and sat up in his seat. “Finally! Milli so fine... I wish I could make her mine. If you didn’t, I was going to shoot my shot when I turned eighteen.”

“Boy, shutcho crazy ass up!”

We laughed as I pulled out of the parking lot.

“For real, Dad! She might’ve said no but I was going to at least try.”

“I thought you said she was like a second mom to you?”

He sucked his teeth and grabbed my phone to find whatever music he wanted to listen to.

“She is, but she fine. I’m glad you’re going to date her. Maybe we can finally be a real family.”

“So you’re saying you’d rather have her as a stepmom and Lis as a sister than Milli as your woman?”

“I mean... I guess I can let you have that. I got enough girls my age trying to get at me anyway.”

All I could do was laugh and shake my head. This child was too much like his uncles for me. I loved and hated that at the same time. It felt good to hear him say he approved of Milli and me dating, though a part of me was sure that would be the case. I didn’t want to get his hopes up too soon, but I also wanted him to have something positive to think about and look forward to because after his mom came and left, I was going to share with him her truth.

Milli and Lis came over for dinner so we could talk about what happened today. When I told Amelia I wasn’t sure I wanted to keep AJ at that school she agreed. We’d originally enrolled them there because it was one of the best schools academically, but realistically, there was more to their youth than excelling with their grades. We were concerned about them not being active with sports or extracurricular groups and activities because they didn’t like a lot of the kids in their grade.

AJ had two boys he considered friends, and the only person at the school Alisia considered her friend was him. She talked to other girls there and would go to the mall with them every once in a while, but they didn’t really connect with other kids there the way I liked.

When we decided to talk to them and see if they wanted to consider going to another school, I told her I would go and get them from the game room, and the sound of their conversation halted my steps immediately.

“What you mean, Lis?” AJ asked as I leaned against the wall.

Alisia sniffled. “I’m just really sad.”

“Why?”

“Those girls are always talking about me. I hate going to school now. And the last time I fought them, I was the one that got in trouble.”

“Well, Dad and Milli said we can defend ourselves when people bully or attack us, so if you need to beat them up, they won’t get mad at you. And even if you don’t want to, I’m always going to protect you. Just like I did today. The first time your mom was mad because you didn’t even let the girl finish talking before you started tagging her.”

I covered my mouth to avoid my laugh escaping because that was true. I couldn’t believe girls were even trying to bully Lis at this point because she’d tagged a girl for it last year. Maybe because Milli stressed nonviolence and had Lis trying to resolve things with words over her fists. She too believed sometimes it took popping someone in their mouth to silence them, though, and AJ had obviously mastered learning how to bait someone enough to let his reaction be acceptable.

“Thank you. I love you, AJ. I’m glad you’re my friend. I wish I had a daddy like yours.”

“I wish I had a mama like yours.”

They laughed softly. “I love my mama, but she works so much. It sucks because I don’t have my daddy either. My grandma is always there for me.”

“Yeah, but, it’s cool. My dad works a lot too because they have to, but they love us.”

“Yeah.” Lis sniffled again. “I just wish she was at home more when I got home from school or that I had my daddy. I love yours, but he’s not mine, though I wish he was.”

“That’s why you’re sad?”

“Mhm. School sucks, my daddy doesn’t want me, and my mama always works. She tries to spend time with me as much

as she can, so I don't complain. I just wish she could be with me a little more."

"Well, why don't you talk to her about it, so she won't work so much?"

"I don't want to make her feel bad. She gives me anything I want... just not more of her. I know she has to work so I just deal with it."

Silence found them, and I took that time to go back into the dining room with Amelia. Sitting next to her, I took her hand into mine.

"Uh oh." She smiled nervously. "What's wrong?"

"Promise me you won't say anything about this. I wasn't supposed to hear this, and if she knows I did, she might stop talking to AJ about it."

Her brows wrinkled as she nodded. "Promise. What's going on?"

I kept my voice low as I told her, "Lis thinks you work too much. She's sad because of the bullying and not having her dad. She knows you love her and want to give her whatever you can, but she wishes you didn't work as much so she could spend more time with you."

Her eyes watered as she tried to pull her hand out of mine and stand, but I held it and kept her seated.

"Why hasn't she said any of this to me?"

"I don't think she wants to hurt your feelings and make you feel bad. In my words, not hers, she knows you have a lot on your plate and you're doing the best you can. I believe she is craving you more now because she's missing her father more than usual. But she doesn't want to make you feel bad about that, so she's talking to him about it instead."

Amelia licked the corner of her mouth and nodded. "Okay. Well, I guess it's a good thing that we've already started talking about enrolling them into a new school."

"Right. These are supposed to be the best years of their lives. No stress and real responsibilities. They need to be in a

school where they feel they belong.”

She didn't respond right away, and I held the space so she could process her thoughts and feelings.

“She has been asking for her dad a lot lately, so I can understand why that would make her want more of my time. I wish she would have said these things to me so I could talk to her about it.”

“You don't have to, sweetheart. Just find a way to give her what she needs. Can you possibly work from home more?”

Nodding, Amelia wiped a free-falling tear. “Yeah, I can, but I might take some time off. At least until we have them settled in a new school and I can get her emotional state to a healthier place. I have more than enough money saved to not have to work. Plus, Mama's house is paid off anyway.”

“Money will never be an issue, you know that. I'll always take care of y'all. Just do what you have to do for her and for you.”

“Thank you, babe,” she whispered, opening her arms for an embrace.

I wasted no time pulling her into my arms and consoling her. I couldn't imagine how this made her feel. Amelia was a damn good mother. Even with her hectic schedule, she was a present mom. Alisia was going through a lot, though, and she may not have been able to actively voice it to Milli, but her mother was all she needed to make things better.

Once she was composed, we called the kids in to talk to them about transferring to a school in Collierville, and they both excitedly agreed. Amelia also mentioned taking the rest of the year off from work and only working during the hours Alisia was at school when she went back, and Alisia lit up like a Christmas tree. She gave her a hug and thanked her, and the sight brought tears to my eyes. But the sadness that covered my son's face as he watched them embrace crushed me. Veronica would be here in two days, and knowing she would probably only see him one more time before letting years go

by before she saw him again, had my eyes watering for a different reason.

TWENTY-FOUR

A melia

It was the day before Thanksgiving, and I'd spent it with Amaru's mom, my mom, and Lis. Amanda didn't want to do anything for Thanksgiving. Holidays were big for his family, but now that her husband was gone, she wasn't in the holiday spirit. She was so excited about spending the day with us, and that made me happy. We did a little shopping, got mani-pedis, and had a nice dinner. By the time I was dropping her off, she was ready to shower and go to sleep.

"Baby..." Her head shook as she chuckled softly. "Today has been perfect. Thank you so much for getting me out of the house."

"Any time, Mama Amanda. You can always call me, and I'll come. And I know you said you didn't want to do anything tomorrow, but you're more than welcome to join us for dinner tomorrow."

"Absolutely," Mama agreed. "We'd love to have you, Amanda."

Her smile wavered slightly and her eyes watered. "I wouldn't be good company but thank you for the invitation."

I would accept that for now, but I planned on bringing her a plate and sitting with her for a while anyway. Now that Veronica was in town, AJ was with her and her family, so Ru

was going to be with us. He expressed his appreciation for me including his mom in our plans for the day, though I told him he didn't have to. Even before we started dating, his mom was like a second mom to me. Now, she held an even more special place in my life because I believed she'd one day be my mother-in-law.

After watching her safely go inside her home, I headed out. Alisia was fighting her sleep in the backseat while Mama hummed an unknown tune in the front.

By the time I made it onto the interstate, I was getting a call from Amaru. Since I wasn't sure what he wanted to talk about, I popped an AirPods in my ear instead of letting the call transfer to my Bluetooth. I ended up having to call him back because he hung up, but the second I heard his voice on the other line, I smiled.

“Hey, sweetheart. What y'all up to?”

“Hey, baby. I just dropped your mom off. We're headed home now.”

“Thank you again for spending time with her. That made me love you even more.”

“I enjoyed every minute with her. She said she didn't want to come over tomorrow, so I'm just going to make her a plate and bring it over after dinner.”

“I'm sure she would love that. That's what I planned to do anyway. Maybe we can make a night of it and help her put her Christmas decorations up.”

“Ooh, I love the sound of that. I wish AJ was with us. He and Lis could help us too.”

“I like that. I think I'll see about getting him for an hour or two so we can start a new tradition with Ma.”

We talked for a little while more before ending the call. After what he told me Lis shared with AJ, I was more mindful of not necessarily spending all day, every day with her, but doing more sentimental things with her. Alisia had always been fairly independent. I knew her sadness and desire for her father was why she was a bit clingier than usual. So trying new

things and creating memories with her was working wonders. She was so satisfied with what we'd done today that she sounded like her old self and sang songs when she wasn't talking to anyone like she used to do.

That was progress, but I was still going to get her father for her like she wanted. Regardless of how that turned out, I wanted her to see for herself what kind of man would stay away from his child for twelve years. My prayer was that she realized she was better off without him at a young age... unlike me. I hadn't seen my father since dinner with Darron. He hadn't answered any of my calls, and eventually, I stopped calling. If we never had the relationship I desired, I would be okay with that. I was just grateful to have the mother I had.

From my research, I learned that Trent was married and living in Atlanta. I'd called and left him a voicemail, letting him know his daughter was requesting his presence. At this point, it was up to him. Even if he didn't show up for my baby, I was going to make sure she was more than okay with just me.

The Monday After Thanksgiving

Amaru and I decided to transfer the kids after Christmas break so they could start fresh during the new semester. I decided to take Lis to school in the morning instead of having her ride the bus, so we could have breakfast together. Though I could tell she was pleased with this new change, it made me happy to hear her say, "I really like having breakfast with you in the morning, Mommy. It's a great start to my day."

"That makes me happy, sunshine. Thank you for being patient with Mama. I know I've been busier than normal this year."

Her smile dropped slightly, and as I took a sip of my coffee, I hoped she was going to come clean about how she

was feeling.

“Yeah, that made me a little sad, but I know you have to work.”

“I do, but not as much as I have been. That’s why I’m going to talk to Violet today about taking the rest of the year off.”

“Having breakfast and dinner with you like we talked about helps a lot. I don’t want you to be mad at me because you can’t work as much as you want to.”

“Oh, baby,” I cooed, standing from my seat and walking over to her. “I would never be upset with you for wanting to spend time with me. I love my job, but never more than I love you. Having breakfast and dinner together throughout the week is the bare minimum of what I can give to you. When the new year comes and I decide to go back to work, I promise you we’re going to stick to that same schedule we’ve created.”

We decided on Fridays, we’d have girl time with each other. Saturdays would be my time away and the day she’d be with Mama. Sundays were in the air. If she wanted, we’d do something together. If not, she’d spend those with AJ or chilling by herself. I had a feeling she’d want to spend time on the weekend with AJ and his grandma though.

Lis has always liked Amanda, but now that Ru and I have been dating, we’d been more intentional about the time the kids spend with our mothers. She thoroughly enjoyed herself with Amanda during our girls’ day and for Thanksgiving. Amanda cried tears of joy when we showed up with food to help her decorate for Christmas. She was grateful we started a new tradition that would keep her mind off her husband and the issues going on with her children because of the loss. Amanda had given Lis her number and told her she could come over anytime she wanted.

“Thanks, Ma.” She gave me a kiss on the cheek. When I tried to return it, she put her hand over my mouth. “Ew. You know I hate coffee breath.”

Holding her tight, I tried to smother her with kisses as she yelled and giggled. “You better be quiet before you wake your grandma up!”

“Ew, Ma! Get off me! Your breath stinks!”

“My breath does *not* stink!”

“Yes, it does! That coffee smells and tastes horrible.”

Sucking my teeth, I released her. “Whatever, little girl. One day you’re going to have a newfound love for coffee and boys.”

She pretended to stick her finger in her mouth and gag, making me laugh as I went back to my seat.

“Speaking of boys, what’s going on with you and Ru? AJ told me the two of you are dating.”

Twisting my mouth to the side, I nodded as I picked up a piece of toast. “We are. I was waiting for the right time to tell you, but so much has been going on. How do you feel about that?”

“I like it. I love Amaru. I think it’ll be cool if we could be a real family. You know I’ve always wanted a brother or sister, and if you marry Ru, I’ll finally have one.”

“I’m really happy to hear you say that, sunshine. Now I don’t want you to get your hopes up too fast because we just started dating, but we have been talking about marriage. Regardless of what happens between us romantically, Ru and AJ will always be in your life. Amaru may not be your real father, but he’s held that space in your life since you were born.”

“That’s true. I know we’re lucky to have them, and they’re lucky to have us. It would be great if Ru was my dad, but I’m hoping you can find mine so I can be with him.”

I was still waiting for Trent to call me back, so I didn’t respond either way. I’d call him again on my way to work, though I said I wouldn’t reach out to him again. In the meantime, I was just grateful Lis seemed to be in better spirits

and that she was okay with Amaru and me taking things to the next level.

Not to my surprise, Violet was okay with me taking the rest of the year off. My guys were more than willing to take the rest of my open cases for the year so I could devote more time to my daughter. While she was still going to school until Christmas break, I'd use that time to spend time with myself, Mama, and Ru. And during that month-long break, Lis would be my highest priority. My prayer was that when she started back up with school and I returned to work, after the time we spent together, she'd be in a better space mentally, regardless of what happened with her father.

As if my consistent thoughts had conjured him, Trent called me. I dropped the files I was holding to take to Mecca and Parker and answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Hey, you called?”

Hearing his voice after all this time didn't affect me the way I thought it would. More than anything, I was upset over how casually he spoke... like we hadn't last talked to each other in twelve damn years.

“Yeah.” Clearing my throat, I leaned against my desk. “Like I said in my voicemail, Alisia has been asking about you a lot. Is it possible for you to come and spend some time getting to know her?”

“I was going to say no but my wife heard the voicemail, and you disrupted the peace in my home. She's upset with me because I didn't tell her about our child.”

I was so caught off guard by his statement I couldn't help but laugh.

“Wait, I don't think I heard you correctly. You're saying you didn't tell your wife you had a daughter, and the only

reason you're coming to see her is because she's making you?"

"Yeah. She basically said if I don't be in Alisia's life, she's going to divorce me because she didn't marry a deadbeat." He released a frustrated breath. "I never wanted to have kids. I told you that... And I told her that. But she swears I'm going to change my mind. I'ma do what I can to keep her, even if that means coming back to Memphis to see my child."

It took everything inside of me not to say fuck him *and* his wife. I couldn't believe he had the audacity to speak so callously about the beauty of having a child. There were people out here who prayed and wished they were able to have kids and he didn't even want or appreciate the one he had.

"The only reason I'm not hanging this phone up in your face is because my daughter really wants to meet you, though I'm sure if she knew how you truly felt about her, she wouldn't give two fucks about you. You're going to come to Memphis and spend time with her because it's the right fucking thing to do, not because of your damn wife. If she had any sense, she'd *still* leave your trifling ass. Text me and let me know when you're coming home."

Without giving him time to respond, I disconnected the call. Hearing from him had ruined my entire mood. Lord knows I didn't regret my daughter, but I for damn sure regret who I accidentally made her father.

TWENTY-FIVE

A maru That Weekend

“I shouldn’t have told her he said he was going to come,” Amelia muttered.

Trent had sent her his flight confirmation for the weekend, and she told Lis he was going to come and see her. He ended up sending Milli a long text this morning talking about how he wanted nothing to do with them. To avoid Alisia idealizing the thought of her father, Amelia decided to tell her the truth about him—he didn’t want to be in her life and that would never change. It did sadden Alisia, but she had a strong enough self-worth thanks to her mom and grandmom to where she immediately said with fierceness it was his loss and she’d never ask to see him again.

I was proud of her, but I was also going to try and be more present. I was hurting for Milli because she was hurting. As always, AJ was with Lis while I took care of Amelia.

“You’re raising a strong young lady, Milli. She’s going to be good. At least she knows the truth now.”

“I just hate that it had to come to this. She deserves better.”

“I don’t deny that, but she has better. She has you.” I lifted her chin. “And me. And AJ. And our moms. And my crazy ass brothers. We might not be the healthiest family right now, but you know they will always show up for the two of you.”

As tears slid down her cheeks, she nodded with a smile. “That’s the crazy part. Your brothers do more for me than my own. Hell, Mecca and Parker do too.” Sucking her teeth, she shot up from her seat. “Fuck Jeremy and his father. It’s time I told them how I felt once and for all.”

“Uh... sweetheart?” I called, following her out of the bedroom. “Where are you going?”

“To confront those selfish, cold-hearted bastards. I’ve spent my entire life craving things from them that should have been given to me unconditionally. I’ve had e-fucking-nough. If I’m going to raise my daughter to be a better version of myself, maybe it’s time I took a page out of her book and detached from the men that have made it clear they don’t give a fuck if they have anything to do with me on a personal level.”

When she was determined like this, there was no point in trying to talk her down. I stopped by the game room and told the kids we’d be stepping out for a while and hoped this confrontation didn’t end with me laying her father or brother out because they said the wrong thing to my woman.



Amelia was as wild and free as the wind, charging through Victor and Mina’s home. They were seated in the dining room, laughing and looking like the perfect family with their son. Seeing Jeremy with his father always confused me. There were times the duo had a toxic relationship like Victor and Amelia, but the main difference was, they still had a powerful father-son alliance, and I think that’s what hurt Milli the most. After all this time, they still treated her like an outsider.

At the sight of us, their laughter ceased, and all eyes were on Milli. With my arms crossed, I made my way behind her. I’d let her get what she needed to off her chest, but if at any point it seemed like this conversation was going to do more harm than good, I would literally carry her out of there if I needed to.

“Milli...” Jeremy called, but she lifted her hand and silenced him.

“You don’t get to call me that. Only my close friends and family can.” Confusion covered his face as she continued. “All my life, or at least, for as long as I have been able to notice how differently you treat Jeremy and me, I’ve always wondered why I wasn’t good enough to be your daughter,” she directed toward her father. “Why we could never have a loving, close bond.” Victor sat back in his seat with a roll of his eyes that made me want to jump across the table to get at him. “For years, you dangled this... half-ass relationship in my face, like I was supposed to be grateful for the money you gave to take care of me, but nothing else came with it. Even when you would have me here for holidays and some weekends as a child, you put forth no effort to get to know me and love me and that rejection has carried me into my adult life.”

She wiped a tear before continuing, looking at her brother. “I expected better from you. I expected you to be my brother. My protector. My friend. Instead, you treated me like I was a disgusting outcast that you hated the sight of.” Milli chuckled. “Even now as adults, you seem to make it your mission to irritate me and get under my skin when we talk, and that’s if we even talk. Outside of work, I never hear from either of you. You have weekly family dinners and I’m never invited.” Her hands began to shake along with her head as she took a step forward. “You probably haven’t even noticed that I stopped calling, did you?” Victor’s head tilted. “That I stopped chasing you. Stopped trying to earn your conditional love and acceptance. You have a whole granddaughter that you don’t even have a relationship with. You don’t even know how sad she was that she had no one to invite to her school lunch for Grandfather’s Day.”

At that admission, Milli’s tears began to fall as she pointed at her father. “I could have destroyed my daughter because of you. I entertained men who were just as trash and unemotionally available as you. I fucked around and had a baby by a no-good ass nigga just like you. One who rejected his daughter just like you. But you know what the difference is

between her father and mine? At least he had the decency to completely get out of Alisia's life instead of dangling his love and affection in front of her knowing it was something she could never receive."

Her eyes went toward Mina. "And you! What kind of woman are you to be okay with a man treating his daughter that way? Are you so blinded by his money, power, and status that you can ignore how neglectful he is? My mother had no idea he was a married man, yet you demanded he do the bare minimum when it came to me. How can you sleep at night, you evil, insecure, selfish ass bitch? I hate all of you! And I pray to God I never have to step foot in this house again!" She gave Jeremy her attention as she said, "As far as work is concerned, there are three other partners. If you ever have anything to say to me, please relay the message through someone else, because as far as I'm concerned, Parker and Mecca are my *only* brothers."

She stormed out, bumping into me in the process. I made my way out behind her, grinning like a Cheshire cat. Lord knows I was glad she finally told them off—it was a long time coming. Once we made our way to the car, I asked her, "Are you good?"

I expected Amelia to burst into tears now that we were alone, but she didn't. She released a shaky breath as she nodded and buckled her seatbelt.

"Yeah, baby. I'm good."

"Good, because that shit was sexy as hell, and I'm proud of you for finally standing up to them. We always get that saying wrong: blood is thicker than water. That's not the full saying. The full saying is: The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb. Meaning, chosen bonds with friends or strangers are often closer and more significant than family bonds. We often spend so much time trying to right wrongs with family because they're family, and we can destroy ourselves and our understanding of what true love, acceptance, and relationship should be in the process. I'm glad you've finally accepted the fact that they ain't shit and you

have people in your life, men in your life, who truly love, value, and care about you.”

That caused her tears to fall. “That was beautiful, Ru, and you’re right. It’s taken a long time but I’m finally at that point. I have to be better for my daughter, and that starts right now, this evening.”

Pulling her across the center console, I gave her a tender kiss that turned deeper than I planned for it to. That kiss led to her climbing into the back seat asking for deep, hard strokes from the back that I didn’t mind giving until she came repeatedly. This was one time I was truly grateful the tint was so dark on my car.

TWENTY-SIX

A melia

I was surprised when Mama called and told me Jeremy was at the house waiting for me. Quite frankly, I didn't believe her. She took a picture of him sitting in the living room with his head buried in his phone, and that was what made me leave Ru's place. We needed to leave anyway, because we were going to spend the evening at an entertainment center, and Lis wanted more comfortable clothes that she could run around in.

Mama and Amanda had been talking more and spending more time together, which I liked. They were making plans for their grandkids for Christmas break, and I loved that for Lis and AJ. It seemed the grandmothers were weaving together a deeper bond that we all would be able to benefit from, and I was grateful to God for that. When we made it inside and Alisia's eyes landed on my brother, she stopped and stared at him for a while.

"H-hey, Alisia," he spoke as he stood.

Lis looked back at me briefly. "Um... hey, Uncle Jeremy."

"How have you been?"

She shrugged and looked back at me again. "Fine."

"It's good seeing you. You look like you've gotten taller since the last time I saw you."

“That’s what happens when a year passes,” I replied. “Children grow.” Gently pushing Alisia toward the hall, I told her, “Go freshen up and get dressed, sunshine.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rubbing my palms together, I waited until she was out of sight to ask Jeremy, “What is this about?”

“Can you sit down so we can talk?”

“I thought I made it clear last night that I have nothing to say to you?”

His head bobbed as he took slow steps in my direction. “Then may I please talk to you?”

Between his closeness and the softness of his voice, I barely recognized my brother. He didn’t handle me in this way, even when delivering bad news at work. I wasn’t sure if this was some kind of trap or not, but I was curious about what he had to say, so I nodded for him to continue.

“I wanted to apologize. Last night, everything you said was true. I’ve been so blinded by how I felt and what my parents wanted that I wasn’t a good big brother to you. I am so very sorry for that.” My mouth opened, but I was speechless. Deciding to go ahead and sit down, we made ourselves comfortable on the couch as Jeremy continued. “It might look like Dad and I have a better relationship than the two of you have, but we really don’t. We can laugh and joke about certain things as men, but we don’t have a close bond either. He’s simply not built for that. When we were kids, I was upset with you because I thought you being born would mean I got to spend even less time with Dad and get less of his attention. As we aged, I realized that wouldn’t be the case, and I was happy about it. Unintentionally, I started treating you the way he treated us.

“Then, I started hanging around you and Caroline, seeing how a parent was supposed to treat a child, and... it made me jealous.” Woah. I wasn’t expecting that. “I resented you because you had a loving parent, and I didn’t. I wished either of my parents would have treated me the way she treated you,

but they never did, so that made me hate you.” His eyes watered as he smiled bitterly. “It didn’t matter how much money we had or how many opportunities Dad created for me, without that love and nurture, I felt just as neglected as you. The only difference was, I masked it because I was a man and it’s been coming out as…” His head shook and hands lifted as he tried to find the right words.

“Bitter, angry, entitlement,” I supplied, making him chuckle.

“Yeah, that. So I just want to apologize. Seeing you break down like that last night did something to me. It opened my eyes to my own issues and how wrong I’ve been. I should’ve treated you better and been there for my niece.” He paused, shifting slightly in his seat. “I know you said you want nothing to do with me, but I was wondering if we could try and have our own relationship that didn’t include our father?”

It was quite typical that he came to this conclusion after I gave up hope. That was what men often did. I couldn’t lie and say it wasn’t nice to hear Jeremy finally speak his truth, but so much damage had been done. Was one apology enough to fix that?

“Thank you for apologizing and sharing your truth along with acknowledging mine.” My eyes watered as I admitted, “I’ve waited a really long time for that.”

“I’m sorry it took so long. And I know an apology doesn’t magically fix things, but I want to work to change things for us and my niece. Let me show you with action that I’m serious about this, and if you feel you can’t trust me or that I’m not being consistent enough, I’ll walk away.”

That seemed fair. I told him I would consider it and talk to Lis about it. Regardless of what happened between us, I would let her decide if she wanted to be around him herself. We said our goodbyes, and surprisingly at the door, he gave me a hug.

That was the first time my brother hugged me since we were teenagers. The longer he held me, the more emotional I got. Before I knew it, we both were crying, and I realized just how fucked up having Victor as our father made us. But we

were adults now, and it was our responsibility to heal. Whether my brother was being serious or not, I meant it when I said I was done with them. If he wanted that to change, he would have to show and prove.

“I think we should do something nice for Ru,” Alisia said, seemingly out of the blue.

Since her father canceled on her, he’d been extra present. We hadn’t really been spending a lot of time together alone because our focus had been the kids, and I was okay with that. He decided to go ahead and tell AJ about Veronica being pregnant and not seeing him for a while. AJ was frustrated and defeated, but since he was so used to not having her around, he assured Amaru that he would be okay.

For the past week or so, all of our free time had been going to them. I’d been more loving and nurturing with him, and Ru was more loving and present with Lis. He’d just left the house after stopping by to help her with some math homework that was beyond me. To celebrate her getting every question on her homework right, he got her a seafood boil from her favorite place. It was little stuff like that that made her happiest.

So I guess her saying that wasn’t out of the blue. Amaru had shown up for her, and she wanted to do something nice for him in response. I still wanted to get inside her head a little, so I asked, “What do you mean?”

Alisia wiped her hands as she finished up her food. Mama was having dinner with Amanda this evening, so I decided to make boiled chicken and rice for myself. Instead of eating in the dining room, Lis ate at the island to keep me company while I cooked.

“Amaru has been here since I was a baby and I’ve never really thanked him for it. I know you do, but I haven’t.”

“Why haven’t you?”

She scratched her nose, briefly avoiding my eyes. “I felt like if I did, that would make my daddy mad if he ever found out.” Alisia shrugged. “I don’t know. It just felt like if I admitted how much I loved Amaru and appreciated him I would be going against my daddy.”

Leaning against the island, I resisted the urge to comfort her immediately. I wanted to give her space to get out exactly how she was feeling.

“Has that feeling changed?”

Alisia nodded. “Yes. I know now that my daddy doesn’t want to be in my life and that makes me appreciate Amaru even more. He didn’t have to be here, and he didn’t have to do all the things that he does, but he chooses to, and that makes it even more special. Even if I never see my daddy, I got Amaru and that’s all I need. I’m lucky to have him and I want him to know I appreciate him.”

Blinking back my tears, I finally made my way across the island and sat next to her. “I love the idea of that, sunshine. How would you like to show him your appreciation?”

“Well, AJ and I were talking and...”

“Oh, God.” I couldn’t stop myself from groaning, making her laugh. When those two put their heads together, it would either be really good or really bad.

“Hear me out!”

“Okay, okay, I’m listening.”

“So, he doesn’t have a mom and I don’t have a dad. Well, we have them, but they aren’t in our lives. You two are. So, I want to ask him to be my God-daddy. That way he’ll be more like my daddy, not just your best friend. And I know you two are dating but you told me not to get my hopes up about marriage. So even if you let him go, I’ll still have him.” She pulled a card out that she’d made for Amaru, and I could barely read it as my eyes watered. “What do you think? Maybe you can help me cook him dinner and get him a gift since that’s what he always does for us. And give him this card and ask him. Do you think he’ll say yes?”

My head nodded rapidly as I wiped my eyes and stared at the card. With a smile, I pulled her into my arms and gave her a side hug.

“I know he’s going to say yes. He’ll probably cry a little too.” We shared a soft laugh as I gave her a kiss on the temple. “This is beautiful, sunshine. He’s going to absolutely love it. And I know the perfect gift you can get him. I’ll take you to the mall when I’m done eating.”

“Yay! Let me go call AJ and tell him. I’m so excited! He’ll be even more like my brother now.”

I was able to maintain my composure until she left the kitchen, but as soon as she was gone, heavy sobs escaped me. For the first time in a long time, this was a soul-cleansing happy cry. It felt like I’d finally done something right in the men’s department for me and my child—and that something, or someone, was Amaru. Alisia was wrong about one thing though... I didn’t plan on letting him go any time soon—if ever.

TWENTY-SEVEN

A maru
Early December

December was always draining. In preparation for the new year, we worked even harder to secure new clients. More was expected of me because Eric was gone. I didn't see him as a loss, but the partners did, and they wanted me to bring on one to five new clients to replace him.

This seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to shift gears and start doing what I was truly passionate about—contract and entertainment law. With contracts, there was usually less trial time unless someone tried to renege on terms. I was also able to connect with managers, agents, and publicists to work with them on behalf of their clients, which meant I would have to do less work finding clients on my own.

Tonight, I had a networking event that ended with me setting up a meeting with a Memphis Grizzlies player who was fresh on the roster and seeking permanent representation. We were going to meet first thing Monday morning, and if I made a good enough impression, there was no doubt in my mind that he would be able to connect me to the rest of the players who needed new or extra representation. Having them on retainer would be a damn good start to me niching down to contract and entertainment law.

I knew Violet wouldn't care about me giving up criminal law because she'd been in negotiations with two badass

criminal lawyers who had their own firm. They had a 99 percent success rate collectively. The sisters had been practicing law together for years now, and the oldest one hadn't lost a case in eight years. I'd been doing research on the youngest sister, and the only reason she'd lost a case recently was because her investigator ended up working with the prosecution and setting her up for failure. If we could get those two in at the firm, they would be the trial lawyers we needed to take over the courtroom by storm.

As tired as I was by the time I made it home, I was hoping AJ was still up so we could at least watch a movie together or something. I wanted to tie up all my loose ends before he was out for Christmas break.

I made my way to my bedroom and took a quick shower before texting Amelia to see if she was still up. When I stopped by AJ's room, he was half-asleep but groggily told me he'd been waiting for me.

"Everything okay?" I asked, sitting on the edge of his bed as he sat up.

He had the lights off and the TV going, which was a bad habit he'd inherited from me. I couldn't sleep without the TV being on unless Milli was in bed with me.

"You don't have anything to do this weekend right?"

"Right."

"Can you take me to GiGi's house on Saturday instead of Friday?"

"Sure, but what's up?"

"I want us to do something nice for Milli."

His statement, though it warmed my heart, caught me off guard. "Oh. Okay. What did you have in mind?"

"Well..." He reached and grabbed his phone off the nightstand. "When we did karaoke at that restaurant, she saw the flyer about the monologue series or whatever it's called and said she wanted to go but didn't have time." I smiled as he handed me his phone. "Lis and I looked it up, and it's in town

while we're on Christmas break. Lis thinks she said she won't have time to go because she wants to spend the break with her. But Alisia wants Milli to go because she feels like all she's been doing lately is being at home and spending time with all of us since she hasn't been working. So I used some of my savings to register Milli for the series. I want to give it to her and ask her to be my God-mama."

My head shook in awe as I stared at what he'd gotten. It was the perfect most thoughtful gift for Milli. Honestly, I was surprised I hadn't thought about getting it for her. Usually, I was in tune enough to make note of things she mentioned wanting or needing to take care of her, but that night, I was too happy about us spending time together as a family to really focus on anything else.

She was going to love the gift. It wasn't just a monologue show, it also included classes to help women learn to express their emotions and thoughts through monologue.

"Milli is going to cry when you give her this," I told him as I handed him back his phone. "You said you want to ask her to be your God-mom?" I confirmed, and he nodded.

"Yeah, Lis and I were talking about it and, she doesn't have a dad and I don't have a mom, and you two have always been what we didn't have. So I want to thank Amelia for being like a mom to me and let her know I appreciate all that she's done."

"Well technically you do have a mom, but I get what you're saying. Milli has been there for you more than your mom. If this is what you want to do, I support you 100 percent."

"You think she's going to say yes?"

"Of course. She says all the time you're like a son to her. This will just make it official."

He grinned as he laid back down. "Good. So don't make any plans on Friday. I need you to help me make her dinner or something nice so she can know I think she's special."

Chuckling, I stood and headed for the door. “I’ll give you instructions, but you’re gonna do this yourself so you can take all the credit for this. I’m really proud of you, son, and I’m glad Milli has such a special place in your life and heart. I love you.”

“Thanks, Dad. I love you too.”

As I closed the door, I inhaled a deep breath to dry my eyes. Those damn kids. It filled my heart with pride to know that, regardless of what was going on with Amelia and me romantically, AJ wanted to make her place in his life clear. I needed to follow his lead and officially ask her to be my woman. Because there was no doubt in my mind that she was going to be my wife.

TWENTY-EIGHT

A melia

With the help of their grandmothers, Lis and AJ surprised both me and Ru. When she mentioned wanting to ask him to be her godfather, it never crossed my mind that AJ would plan on asking me to be his godmother, but that was exactly the case.

Instead of them fixing us dinners, it was their grandmother's idea to go to a restaurant. That way, we would all be together at the same time. When I arrived to drop Lis off, she asked me to come inside, and that was the same thing AJ did with Amaru. We both were sitting there with goofy grins recording what turned out to be a surprise for us as well.

AJ went first, giving me the registration for the monologue series I'd mentioned wanting to go to and asking me to be his godmother. Of course, I cried and said yes. Amaru thought it was so funny watching me be in my feelings... until Lis put him in his. She gave him the new cufflinks and leather shoes he'd mentioned wanting the last time we were at the mall and asked him to be her godfather, and just like me, he shed a few tears and said yes.

We had dinner together, and the night ended beautifully. I felt like there was nothing else that could make my life any better at this moment.

The Next Morning

“Ah!” I yelled at the sight of Amaru, dropping the towel that was wrapped around my body in the process.

“Damn, sweetheart. If you don’t want this distraction to lead to sex, I need you to quickly cover yourself back up.”

“Amaru, what are you doing here?” I asked, picking the towel up and wrapping it back around my body.

“Get dressed. We’re spending today and tomorrow together. Just us.”

Without waiting for my response, he stood and began to head out. “Wait, what? What about Lis?”

“She’ll be good with Mama Caroline. Pack a bag. You’re mine for the next two days.”

He shot me a sexy wink that made me want to surrender to just about anything he asked of me. Since I didn’t know what he had in store, I dressed casually and packed several different outfits before making sure Mama and Lis were okay with me leaving for the weekend. They both were and insisted I have fun, which I planned to do. It felt like forever since Ru and I had time alone, and I couldn’t wait to see what he had in store.

I finally understood the term being drunk in love. Being with Amaru was a dizzying euphoria that nothing else could top. We spent the day together, and it was absolutely perfect. The day started with me being pampered, which I loved, then we made lunch together and chilled at his home. After that, we checked out a Black art exhibit at one of his favorite museums before ending the night with dinner and dancing.

I could have stayed on that dancefloor for hours being in his arms, but I was ready to do the horizontal dance too. I didn't realize how much time we'd dedicated to the kids and not each other over the last several weeks, and my pussy was in dire need of being filled with his cum. Outside of the physical pleasure that came from making love to Amaru, I needed the closeness of becoming one with him.

As we made it back to his home, I said, "I'm tripping off our kids saying, regardless of what happens between us, it's up and stuck with them."

Amaru laughed as he cut the car off. "I still can't get over that. We're raising some great kids, sweetheart."

"I couldn't agree more. AJ is handling Veronica's news so well, and Lis has her smile back." My eyes watered as I smiled. "I love them so much, and I'm glad they're handling life's transitions so well."

"Same. I want us to be just as dedicated to ourselves as we are to them." Ru took my hand into his. "We've always been friends, but you're my lover now. You're my heart. I want us to be intentional with our love."

"Ru," I cooed, lifting his hand and kissing it. "I agree. I think we've been operating like best friends still, but we haven't been adding in the romance."

"That changes starting today. I love that friendship is our foundation, that makes this a safe, authentic relationship. But I want you to know I crave you on a more intimate level and never question your place as my life partner."

"What did you have in mind?"

"First, I need you to commit to being my woman."

My smile slowly spread as I nodded. "I can do that."

Our eyes remained locked for a few seconds before he licked his lips. "Good. Second, I want us to commit to taking time on a weekly basis for just us. Not as parents, but as lovers and life partners."

“I can agree to that too. This love is truly a gift that I want us to make sure we cherish and handle it with the care and priority it deserves.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page about this. I’m going to be more intentional about being your man, not just your friend. If our kids had the sense to speak up for what they wanted, there’s no reason why we shouldn’t either.”

Though we shared a soft laugh as we got out of the car, that was absolutely true. Times like that were true indicators of how good we were doing with our little munchkins. Silence found us as we walked hand in hand through his home. When we made it to his bedroom, it looked like something straight out of Pinterest. I gasped and covered my mouth at the sight of what Amaru had done for me.

“Babe,” I almost whispered, taking small steps inside.

Balloons covered the ceiling, his couch was covered with gift bags, there were rose petals all over the floor and bed, and candles littered his dresser and nightstands. Amaru busied himself with getting some music going, then he walked me over to the small bench in front of his bed, where champagne and chocolate-covered fruit waited for us.

“So you just knew I was going to say yes to being your woman, huh?” I teased.

“I mean, yeah. How else are you going to be my wife?”

His arms wrapped around me from behind, and he gave me a sweet kiss on the neck. Melting in his embrace, I turned to face him for a kiss. We undressed and got comfortable in bed, feeding each other fruit and singing to one another as one song changed to another. By the time the champagne bottle was empty, I was full of Amaru, and there was no better way to end the day than having him deeply inside of me.

TWENTY-NINE

A maru
Two Weeks Later

Amelia released the cutest huff. For the past three or four weeks, Jeremy had been actively trying to spend time with her. She'd been curving him which didn't surprise me, but it was getting harder and harder for her to do so.

"Why don't you just answer, sweetheart?" I asked.

"Because he's going to be weird about it."

Chuckling, I leaned against her bedroom door frame.
"Weird how, Milli?"

"Being all... nice to me."

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I wanted a kind, loving brother. Nice is fake and forced."

"Well, how will you know if he's being nice or kind if you don't answer? Jeremy has been calling you for weeks. I don't think he's going through all that just to waste your time." Her shoulders softened as she considered my words. "I'm not saying be his best friend. I'm just saying, if you want to try and see if the two of you can have a healthy relationship, let him show you like he's trying to do."

"Okay. I guess I'll call him back and see what he wants."

"All right, bae. Call me if you need me."

I gave her a hug and kiss goodbye before saying farewell to Lis and Caroline. We'd just gotten back from our cabin in the mountains and AJ and I needed to rest. It was our first time going and I loved every second of it.

Our first day there, we made chili and s'mores and chilled before making snow angels and drinking hot cocoa. The second day there, Amelia and I took the kids to the town winter parade. We spent the last day there watching Christmas movies by the fireplace. Before we left, we carved all our initials in the tree right behind the cabin and promised to come back next year.

I was glad we planned the impromptu trip because Veronica decided not to come back home for the Christmas holiday since AJ knew about her pregnancy. I'm not sure if it was guilt or what that kept her away, but Thanksgiving would be my son's last memories with his birth mother for quite some time. I was glad I made the decision not to have her tell him while she was here visiting.

That Monday

My meeting with Brandon, the Memphis Grizzlies player, went exceptionally well. He'd rescheduled twice and I feared he was being led into a different direction but that wasn't the case. As I suspected, he had already started making calls to his teammates on his way out to tell them about the engagement letter. I was excited to work with him. He was a young boss who had a lot of deals being thrown his way already.

I went to Violet's office to tell her the good news and smiled at the sight of the Amaretto sisters. They were beautiful, soft-looking women whose looks often suckered opposing attorneys into thinking they weren't as lethal as they were.

“My apologies for interrupting,” I told Violet as she stood with a warm smile. “I just wanted to let you know I signed Brandon. I’m sure I’ll have more players on the way.”

“That’s great, Amaru. I’ll have to buy you a bottle of champagne to celebrate. You’ve met the Amaretto sisters, right?”

“I haven’t no, but I’ve certainly heard about them.”

They stood and we shook hands. The older sister, Maritza, was the first to speak. Sakura held my hand a little longer than I felt was necessary, and I couldn’t help but smile. She had no idea. As beautiful as she was, there was nothing she could say, do, or offer to draw my attention from Milli. That woman had been my whole heart before things turned romantic, and now that they had, I was stuck so far up her pussy, I was surprised other women couldn’t smell her on me.

“It’s nice to meet you both,” I said, pulling my hand from hers. “Is it too premature to welcome you to the firm?”

“Not at all,” Sakura replied, while Maritza said...

“We’re still negotiating, but so far, things seem promising.”

“I’m happy to hear that. You two have impeccable records. With me shifting into contract and entertainment law permanently, I’d love to send a few of my criminal cases your way.”

“For the right amount of billable hours, that would definitely be an incentive to sign on,” Sakura said, and I was impressed with how quickly her soft, flirtatious features turned professional.

“If I would have known all it would take to seal the deal was to bring Attorney Williams in here, I would have done so three hours ago,” Violet joked, causing the sisters to laugh.

“I’m willing to help however I need,” I told her. “But I have to go. The family is waiting on me.”

“Tell Amelia I said hello and that we miss her.”

“Is that your daughter?” Sakura checked, eyeing my frame.

“That’s my wife. We do have two children, though. A boy and a girl.”

Her eyes immediately lifted to mine as she clenched her jaw. “Oh. Well, it was nice to meet you.”

Me and Violet locked eyes as I smiled. “You as well.”

As I made my way out of Violet’s office, I considered stopping by Mecca and Parker’s offices to talk shit with them about the sisters but decided against it. I was being honest when I said my family was waiting for me. We were taking Caroline and my mom to lunch and blessing them with a pre-Christmas gift, which was a cruise, to show how grateful we were to have them. They were the best tribe Amelia and I could ask for.

Not once did my mother ever shame me for getting the wrong woman pregnant. She’d been in my son’s life, actively, since the day he was born. Even when I wanted to have him on the weekends, I had to ask her permission, because that was pretty much her time with him from the jump. With her help, I was able to have a taste of freedom, though I hadn’t really been doing much with it until Amelia and I got together.

Milli and I had been honoring our commitment to not just co-parent together and be best friends but to be lovers too. I was enjoying getting to know her in these intimate new ways, and I was excited about what the future held in store for us all.

Christmas Eve

So far, things were going good with the family. None of us really wanted to get together for Christmas Eve since Dad was gone, but AJ insisted. Mom was a little wine-tipsy, dozing on and off in her favorite recliner chair. Amir was here, and sober, with his girl... which was a welcomed surprise. Whatever she’d said and done the night we found him asleep in that abandoned parking lot seemed to have worked wonders on

him. He still drunk, but only wine throughout the week. And when he did drink harder liquor on the weekend, he promised to be home as soon as the sun went down. I'm not sure if he was still drinking heavily when he got home or to Uriah's place, but at least if he was, he was doing it somewhere safe.

With my representation, Adam pleaded guilty but was able to avoid jail time. He had to pay the fine and do community service along with grief counseling. That last part was my doing, but Adam thought it was solely on the judge. He wasn't working as much, and his resting habits were better. It seemed like Christmas made him fall back into his old ways a little bit because he was working from home instead of taking the holiday off, but progress was progress, and I would accept that.

All in all, my family was seemingly doing okay. I wasn't naïve. We had a long way to go, but I was grateful for us being able to get together and not allow our grief to lead us down different spiraling paths.

EPILOGUE

A melia
Later that Evening

I made my way over to Amaru and sat on his lap. He wasted no time wrapping his arms around me. We were at Mecca's house to exchange gifts with our friends, though to be honest, I didn't think there was anything that could fit under a tree to compare to what I had with my family and friends.

My daughter was in a healthier state emotionally and mentally. My mother was well. I had the man of my dreams and a bonus son whose eyes were as bright as the sun. I finally had the strength to release my father, and Jeremy was trying his hardest to have a relationship with me and Lis. Throw in the healthy relationships Mecca and Parker had with two beautiful women, I was oozing with happiness this holiday season.

"I wonder what the kids are doing," I mumbled as Amaru littered my neck with kisses and squeezed my ass. "You think they've tried to open any of their gifts?"

"I'm sure AJ has convinced Mama to let him open at least one."

Giggling, I held his cheek as his lips moved upward. "Alisia is sneaky like I was. She doesn't ask; she just opens the bottom of wrapped gifts and thinks we can't tell that she retaped them."

“What gives it away?”

“Mama had a particular style of wrapping that she taught me and I’m going to teach Lis eventually. But she can never do it exactly as it was. I always get tickled when I notice the difference, but I let her be great.”

He cupped my cheek and gave me a tender kiss. “I want a new baby with you. Maybe two.” He kissed me again. “How does that sound?”

“It sounds lovely, baby. I can’t wait to expand our family.”

“Then when are you getting off your birth control?”

“Hmm... maybe a year or so after we get married. I want us all to be able to adjust to our new dynamics once we get married and move in together. The kids are excited about the direction things are going in, but they both are only children, so I’m curious to see how they will get along once they start living together permanently.”

“I’ve been thinking about that too. It won’t be anything we can’t handle though. I’m glad you want to wait at least a year.”

“Why’s that?” I asked as our fingers interlocked and he kissed my hand.

“I’m enjoying us doing us as a couple. When we get pregnant and have a baby, we’ll be even busier. There’s still so much that I have in store for you.”

Brushing my nose against his, I smiled and wrapped my arms around his neck. “I can’t wait to see what all you have in store. Sometimes I still can’t believe my best friend has become my best man. Loving you in this way is so easy. And now that we’re putting forth the effort to intentionally work on our romance, there’s nothing about us that I would change.”

“You always say the right things, Milli.”

“That’s the truth. I love you.”

“And I love you.”

Our lips connected just as Carina said, “Oop. There’s one last gift under the tree.” We’d already exchanged gifts, so I’m

not sure how we missed that one. Giving her our attention, we watched as she read the small tag on the bag. “This is for... Mecca. From Shalom.”

Shalom clapped happily as Mecca smiled and accepted the bag with a shake of his head.

“I told you, you didn’t have to get me anything else, bae.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not going to be saying that when you see what’s inside.”

Sitting up in Ru’s lap, I waited patiently to see what she’d gotten Mecca. I was so glad they were able to make their way back to each other. For as long as Mecca and I have been friends, I saw the lack of her love in his life. Even if he didn’t want to admit how deep that love went under his hate for their situation, it exploded like a volcano when they made their way back to one another.

“Nothing can top you agreeing to be my wife,” was what Mecca said as he pulled the tissue paper out of the bag. His smile dropped, then spread when he looked at what was inside.

“What is it?” me and Carina asked at the same time.

“Are you serious?” Mecca asked, standing and allowing the bag to drop from his lap.

“Yes,” Shalom said, voice trembling.

“Lom...” The hearty laughter that he released as he picked her up made me even more curious. “She’s having my baby!”

We all cheered and congratulated them as they celebrated. I decided that was a good time for us to leave so they could really bask in Shalom’s announcement, but I was honored they shared it with us.

“What y’all about to get into?” Parker asked, as we all left.

“Probably just head to the crib and chill since the kids’ grandmamas took them from us,” Ru replied.

“Yeah, there isn’t too much open this late anyway,” Carina said.

“Well, why don’t y’all come to the house?” Parker offered.
“We can keep the party going.”

“What do you think, sweetheart?” Amaru asked, looking down at me.

“I’m cool with that if you are. I’m not tired yet.”

“Cool, let’s do it.”

We made it to his Challenger and followed them to their home, ready to see what else we could get into for the night.

By the time Ru and I made it to his home, we both were good and tipsy. It was almost three in the morning, and we had an unusual amount of energy. Maybe it was because we were used to being up with the kids anticipating Christmas morning. Whatever the case, we were singing Christmas carols and laughing our asses off as we made our way inside.

I was horny and hungry, so we went to the kitchen for an early breakfast. With Whitney Houston’s Christmas album permeating the room, we made a quick feast of pancakes, sausage, eggs, and hashbrowns. I sat on his lap as we ate, humming and looking at each other with goofy grins. We both were missing the kids, but I was glad they were gone because that meant we could have loud, nasty sex, and that was my favorite when I had a little liquor in my system.

As I carried our plates over to the sink Ru said, “You and Lis should just move in. Y’all be here all the time anyway.”

“I mean... we do. But I promised Mama I’d stay with her until I was married.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot about that.”

“She’s hardly at home these days anyway. She finally started dating some guy from church who was always asking her out. And if she’s not with him, she’s with your mama.”

I chuckled, but it turned into a squeal when he picked me up and placed me on the edge of the table. “I’on really give a

fuck about all that shit at the moment. I just want you to tell me you'll stay the week with me and give me this pussy right now."

A yelp escaped me as he ripped my fish neck stockings. "Babe!"

"I'll buy you another pair," he grumbled, pushing my sweater dress up.

Leaning back, I shimmied slightly to offer him some help. His brows were wrinkled, and determination covered his face as he pushed my panties to the side. I was trying not to laugh at how serious he was about getting inside of me because I wanted it just as much too. He fumbled around with his jeans for several seconds before pulling out my favorite part of his body and connecting it with mine.

"Ah," I moaned in relief as he filled me. My head flung back and my toes curled as I sucked him in fully.

"I've been waiting for this all day," he confessed with a slight tremble in his voice before connecting his lips with mine.

I fed him my moans and used his butt to pull him in deeper. My wetness was slick against him, coating him loudly as he filled me with medium-paced strokes. Keeping my legs wide, I looked down at the connection of us in awe of how well my pussy hid him.

"Yesss, Ru." Whimpering, I gripped the edge of the table as he placed my ankles on his shoulders. He'd gotten me a custom gold pair of ankle bracelets that had his name engraved—I never took them off.

Each moan that left his lips further drove me over the edge. Before I could cum, he was pulling out and leaning me against the table to have me from behind. Lifting my left leg onto the table, I spread my ass cheeks so he could watch each stroke. The guttural groans he released as he smacked and squeezed my ass stroked my confidence just as precisely as he stroked my pussy. The ridges of my G-spot began to swell as he tapped against my spot repeatedly.

“Right there, right there,” I chanted repeatedly. I looked back at him, and the sight of him winking as he tugged his bottom lip into his mouth with lazy eyes was all it took to make me cum. He held me up, keeping his same steady pace as I came. When I was done, he pulled out and placed me back on the table. Amaru wrapped my legs around him and filled me with deep, slow strokes that took my breath away.

“Are you going to spend the week with us, Milli?”

“Mhm.”

“Lis too?”

“Yes. Whatever you want.”

“I just want you. Always you.”

Our lips connected as I wrapped my arms around his neck. It felt so good I had to break away from the kiss, causing Amaru to lower his lips to my neck and chest. He continued at the same slow, steady pace, making me cum twice more before he filled me with his seeds. After that, we showered and finally went to sleep.

Christmas Day

This had been the best Christmas ever. Starting the day making love to my love still had my body sore and tingling in the best way. We watched the kids open their presents, and I was a proud mama watching as I sipped my coffee. After that, Mama and Mama Amanda came over and I fixed them breakfast before they started on dinner. I didn't mind letting them take over Ru's kitchen to handle it at all. More than anything, I was just grateful Mama Amanda was in good spirits and came to spend time with us.

Our friends, Amaru's brothers, and Jeremy would be coming over for dinner. I decided to finally give him a chance to show me he was sincere. If I felt even the smallest amount

of unsurety over letting him back into my life, I'd cut off contact immediately.

While our mothers cooked with Christmas carols playing, the kids were watching Christmas movies. They'd just finished *The Polar Express* and were on *Elf* now. *The Preacher's Wife* would be next, which was me and Amaru's favorite. He made his way over to me, looking comfortable and sexy as hell in his red and green pajamas. After sitting next to me, Amaru handed me a small gift bag.

"Ru, we've already exchanged our gifts."

"This is the last one."

My eyes rolled playfully as I opened the bag. "You said that when you brought the last bag in here a few minutes ago."

"I mean it this time."

Between his sexy smile and innocent eyes, I couldn't help but chuckle. I loved being spoiled by a man with good intentions. I loved Amaru period. He was the best Christmas gift for me. Anything he did or gave was extra. It didn't matter how many times I told him that, he still kept coming with gifts. When I saw the black velvet box at the bottom of the bag, I looked up at him.

"Ru?" I whispered.

"It's not an engagement ring yet," he clarified quickly, pulling the box out of the bag. "It's a promise ring." Amaru opened the box, and I gasped at the sight of the beautiful gold diamond band. "With this ring, I promise to be the best father I can be to our children, your best friend as I've always been, an attentive and intentional lover, and your fiancé within six months. Merry Christmas, Milli. I love you."

Tears flowed as I giggled while he slid the ring on my finger. Our mothers released awws and oohs as the kids cheesed and looked on with bright faces.

"I love you, Ru. I never wanted to risk our friendship, but the love that we share makes me so happy I made an exception to that rule. Merry Christmas, baby."

Cupping his cheeks, I pulled him closer for a kiss. Every time I thought God couldn't outdo what He'd already done for me this year, He showed me He wasn't quite done yet.

The End

Up next is Jeremy. Let's see if we can turn a villain into a hero

□

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Mister: The Mister Series Prelude
Mister Jeweler #1
Mister Concierge #1

Mister Musician #1

Mister Teacher #1

Banking on Love Series

60 Days to Love

The Business of Lust

Majority Rules #1

Romance Series

Love Me Right Now (1-2) #1

To Take: Crimson Trails series (1-5)

Send me (part 1) I'll go (part 2) #1

*The Love Series – The Love We Seek, The Love We Find, The Love We Share

Harts Fall Series – With All My Heart, With All My Trust, With All My Love
(Shenaé Hailey)

Her Unfaithful Husband, His Loyal Wife, Their Impenetrable Bond (Shenaé
Hailey)

Love is the Byline

Love's battleground

Love's garden #1

Ode to Memphis

Love Letters from Memphis

The Streets Will Never Love Me Like You Do

A Memphis Gangsta's Pain

In the Heart of Memphis

Rose Valley Hills

Sweet

Chapel

Standalone Urban

To Be Loved by You

His Piece of Peace #1

Her Piece of Peace

Her piece of peace: The Wedding

Hunter and Onyx: An Unconventional Love Story

Thief #1

A Hustler's Heaven in Hiding

His thug love got me weak

If I Was Ya Man

A Gangsta's Paradise #1

LoveShed

Kisses for my Side Mistress

Set Up for Love

Promise to Keep it Trill

Her Heart, His Hood Armor

Her Gangster, The Gentleman

Her Only Choyce

Let it H*E (Constance)

Yours to Keep

Black Mayhem Mafia Family Saga

In His Possession

Her Deep Reverence

A Heart's Rejection

Under His Protection #1

A Father's Objection

In His Possession 2

A Heart's Connection

Indiscretion #1

Succession #1

Resurrection #1

Interception — exclusive paperback only.

Gucci Gang Saga

I Need A Gangsta

One Love

Urban Series

She Makes the Dopeboys go Crazy (1-2)

Caged Love: A Story of Love and Loyalty (1-5)

If You Give Me Yours (part 1) I'll Give You Mine (part 2) #1

Loved by a Memphis Hoodlum 3

It Was Always You 2

The Bad Boy I Love 2

No Love in His Heart 3

My Savage and His Side Chick 2

So Deep In Love

Faded Mirrors

Holiday Novella Set Box

Bloody Fairy #1

A Thug in Need of Love

Holly's Jolly Christmas

Beginning Career Titles

*(Series are separated. Characters are overlapped. These titles do not have to be read together, but if you'd prefer to know what stories everyone is from, you can read them in this order. **Power and Elle and Rule and Camryn can be read alone without reading anything else.**)*

Kailani and Bishop: A Case of the Exes 1-3

Alayziah: When Loving him is Complicated 1-2

Teach Me how to Love Again 1-2

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Power and Elle: A Memphis Love Story

Rule and Camryn 1-4: A Memphis Love Story

Femi (Spinoff for Rule and Camryn)

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Young Love in Memphis 1-3

But You Deserve Better