

B · L O V E

HER EXCEPTION

A FAKE RELATIONSHIP ROMANCE

LAW BY DAY... LOVE BY NIGHT

HER EXCEPTION
A FAKE RELATIONSHIP ROMANCE

B. LOVE

PROLIFIC PEN PUSHER

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PROLOGUE

Three Years Ago

As frustrated as Jeremy was by what he was hearing, he wouldn't show it on his face. His father taught him the importance of two things when in professional settings – showing his expertise, knowledge, and confidence with a low tone to command attention and respect, and not showing his approval or denial of what a person was offering while they were speaking to shift the conversation in his favor.

The more people feel, the less they think—that was the Phoenix motto. Trials were like war, and Victor had trained in the art of war, giving those same lessons to his son. That was something Jeremy would forever be grateful for.

Violet had caught on by now, so she didn't bother looking over at him while she gave her spiel. In their office hierarchy, Jeremy was considered her second in command. Jeremy's best friend, Flex, was an extension of him. Quentin was usually the odd man out when it came to partner meetings, but he didn't care, because he was over the associates' training and they often voted with him.

“We're going to put this to a vote before making the other partners aware of this new change,” Violet said, rounding the long conference table and standing in front of the men.

Flex chuckled. “What's the point of us voting, Violet? Regardless of what

we say, you're going to do what you want anyway."

A soft smile subtly lifted the corners of Violet's mouth. "And as managing partner, I have that right." Her hand rubbed her slicked-back bun before her shoulders straightened and she cleared her throat.

"That's true, but there's a difference between right and wrong," Quentin said, not surprising Jeremy. "You are managing partner and will have the final say, but I think what you're doing is wrong."

"I agree," Flex said. "Removing the first three tiers of partnership leaves less room for advancement. A lot of associates came here not just because of our reputation but because of the advancement and no-ceiling financial opportunities. Going from a senior associate to freshman partner was an incentive that made them believe they had a chance of becoming a senior and named partner, eventually, maybe even managing partner. If we remove freshman to junior partner opportunities, a lot of lawyers will not have a real chance to advance. We have too many associates as it is, Violet. They're more like assistants at this point. It's simply not fair."

Violet didn't respond immediately as she considered his words. Her head bobbed as her palms rested on the table. A lot could be said about Violet, but she always did what was best for her firm. When Jeremy's grandfather retired and made her managing partner, no one disagreed with his decision. They all had total confidence that she would always do what was best for the firm, including those who worked there and those who came for representation.

Violet hardly ever let her own desires or emotions get in the way of making the right decision. Her personal life never affected her work. She was logical, driven, and had the right amount of compassion to care for others without being taken advantage of. Up until now, Jeremy was proud she was his managing partner—but he was starting to have a hard realization when it came to Violet—and that realization was that she had no plans of allowing anyone to advance higher than her.

"How do you feel, Jeremy?" she asked, and all eyes were now on him.

"Honestly, Violet, I don't care either way," he admitted. "I'm less concerned about the advancement of associates and more concerned about the ceiling we as partners have." Her shoulders slouched and she released a hard exhale as he continued. "Yes, a lot of associates came here because of the advancement opportunities. Is it fair to chop several partner positions? No. However, they aren't forced to practice law here. If this decision is made and they aren't happy with it, they can leave. Taking three tiers of partnership

away decreases the amount of money we have to pay out and that puts more money in our pockets, so I'm cool with that." Jeremy paused. "What I'm *not* cool with is the fact that, since I became a named partner two years ago, you've promised me you'd incorporate a junior and senior managing or co-managing position, and you haven't done that yet. I care about the advancement of the senior and named partners who are aimlessly devoting themselves to you and this firm with no clear and distinct plan for their future here."

It seemed a deeper hush fell over the room. As if they weren't even breathing.

Violet chuckled, piercing through the silence. "So being named or senior partner at one of the best Black law firms in the south is not good enough?"

"That's not what I'm saying, and you know that. Don't deflect."

"Are you insinuating I'm not running this firm well?"

"I don't insinuate anything; I'm very straightforward."

Flex huffed and slumped down in his seat while Quentin's head shook and hung. Jeremy continued, ignoring their theatrics.

"With help from us and the advisory partner board, you run this firm exceptionally well. But situations like this prove why we need someone else in a managing position. You hold a lot of power, and the bulk of changes implemented come from and benefit you. The fact that our votes have to combine to equal one of yours is ridiculous. It's clear you aren't going to leave or step down as managing partner any time soon, and I can respect that, but we need a co-managing or senior managing partner under you. That's what you promised you'd implement when you got this position, and it still hasn't happened yet."

"Well, you might not care about the associates here, but I do," Quentin chimed in. "We know she's not going to make any of us her co-managing partner, so there's no point in even bringing that up. What we can change is what we need to focus on, and that's the fate of the attorneys giving their lives to this firm." His finger poked the table for emphasis as he said, "Those partner positions cannot be removed."

"The fact that you keep pushing this under the rug every time it's put on the table is exactly why it's not happening," Flex spoke up. "If we can't even agree on the importance of this, what reason would Violet or the advisory board have to take it seriously enough to vote on it?"

"You're so concerned with the associates because they make you feel like

a god around here,” Jeremy added. “You need to be just as concerned about partner advancement too. Or do you not care about that because if they advance and rank out of your control, you won’t have your puppets anymore?”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Violet interrupted, lifting her hands in surrender. “We’ll put the removal of partner tiers on the discussion panel itinerary for our next meeting with the advisory board.”

“And implementing a co-managing partner or junior and senior managing partners?” Jeremy checked.

“We’ll see,” was all Violet added before leaving the room.

Quentin wasn’t too far behind.

“You should’ve known she wouldn’t go for that,” Flex said as they stood. “Nice try, though.”

“Violet is a beast and she’s a damn good managing partner, but she’s going to have to give out those positions and promotions she promised. I agreed to five years as named partner at this firm, and that was out of respect for my grandfather’s wishes. If she doesn’t implement these changes in three years...”

“What?” Flex chuckled. “You’re leaving?”

Jeremy smiled as they left the conference room. “You don’t think I will?”

“I think they’ll have to pull you out of the rubble. That’ll be the only way you leave this place.”

Sucking his teeth, Jeremy shook his head. “My pops left and did his own thing after realizing how far he would advance here. Maybe I need to as well.”

Flex didn’t respond either way, and Jeremy was grateful for that. He needed time to fully process the meeting and what it would mean for their future. HGP² meant a lot to his family and their legacy. He’d promised his grandfather that he would not only keep Phoenix on the wall as a named partner but put it first again as a managing partner as well. Regardless of how well Violet ran the place, Jeremy was determined to keep that promise.

ONE

J eremy
Present Day
Mid-December

It was becoming more difficult to spend time with my parents without confronting them to speak my truth. Ever since Amelia barged into our family dinner and spoke hers, the blinders had been taken off my eyes. I loved my parents, but I could no longer ignore how toxic my upbringing was. I could no longer ignore how shallow my connection with my father was and how dependent my relationship with my mother was. Every time I looked at them now, I had to keep myself from blurting question after question, accusation after accusation. I used to live for Fridays and Sundays—our time at the country club and family dinner—and now, I couldn't wait for this day to be over.

My eyes shifted toward the nearest window. We were seated at a table in the center of the country club café. That was Mom's doing. She loved being in the center of the room to watch everyone who came and left. I preferred being in the back. Pops preferred being in the front. As with all things, we gave in and gave Mom what she wanted. While she babbled about one of her friends hosting her daughter's engagement party here at the club, my eyes zeroed in on the golf course. The amenities here made the high ass annual membership fees worth it.

Along with golf, there was space for basketball, pickleball, and tennis.

There were several pools and saunas along with game rooms for chess, checkers, and cards. The food was decent. The best part of being a member, outside of the activities, was the networking that could be done here. A lot of my most valued connections in and out of the courtroom came from this club.

“Speaking of weddings,” Mom said, regaining my attention by placing her hand on top of mine. “When will I have the pleasure of planning yours?”

I forced a smile and flipped my hand over so our fingers could connect.

“My focus right now is work, Ma. You know I want to be managing partner before I get married.”

Her head shook in disapproval. Those hazel eyes closed and her light skin reddened. One of the quickest ways to make Mina Phoenix upset was to mess with me. And she hated when I did things she didn’t like because, to her, I was messing with myself. She’d always been protective—the kind of mother to do what she believed was best for her child even if they didn’t agree. I’d never cared for that style of parenting, and that was why I was in no rush to have children of my own.

“I don’t agree with that, Jeremy, at all.” Her eyes opened and stared into mine. “I think you should have your family established before becoming managing partner. That’s why I told your father not to retire officially and offer you the position of managing partner at his firm until you were married.”

My head jerked in the direction of my father as he casually sipped his latte. We’d been talking about me taking over his firm next year, because this year made five years of me being named partner at Hunter, Phoenix, Genesis, and Prime. I made a promise to my grandfather that I would not leave, but I also made a promise to myself that I wouldn’t stay there if Violet didn’t make me senior managing partner or co-managing partner. It was tough choosing to keep the promise I made to myself over the one I made to my grandfather, but I would.

Pops told me the position was mine if I wanted it but there was no clear timeframe, and now I knew why. Technically, he had already retired, but he was still managing partner. His responsibilities had been given to his senior managing partner temporarily. Dexter had no desire to run the firm permanently, so it worked in my favor to have him as interim managing partner. That meant when I took over, I wouldn’t have to worry about him making the transition difficult.

“Is that why you haven’t given me an official start date?” I confirmed.

The man who looked just like me stared at me with a nonchalant expression. I had my mother's cashew brown skin tone and round eye shape, but other than that, I was the replica of my father.

"That, along with the fact that you haven't even mentioned leaving to Violet."

"I was trying to give her a chance to do the right thing."

He chuckled. "She is, in her mind. So unless you offer her something better than the position she currently has, she's not going to change anything."

I knew that in my mind, but my heart wouldn't allow me to accept that. The only flaw Violet had was her immense need to be in control. If she could only surrender to the fact that she wasn't a one-woman show, I would stand by her side forever.

"Why didn't you tell me that me being married was a stipulation of being managing partner at your firm?"

With a sigh, Pops looked over at Mom, who nodded and urged him to continue.

"Because, quite frankly, I didn't agree. I knew eventually I would have to tell you, but I was hoping by then you would have gotten Violet to change her mind or met someone and fallen in love."

"How will he have time to find love as much as he works? I had to beg him for years to give us this time on Friday mornings into the afternoon, and when he has trial, we don't get this. He will never find love as long as he's working crazy hours like you used to. It'll only get worse when he becomes managing partner, and I don't want that for my son."

"What about what I want?"

Her head slowly turned in my direction. "I want you to have what you want, but I see so much of your father in you that I... I want to do whatever I can to make sure you don't make the same mistakes he made."

I didn't respond right away, giving my father space to speak up for himself. In the courtroom, Victor Phoenix was a bully. When it came to family and friends, he was known for his manipulative way of getting anyone to do what he wanted. With his kids, he gave us just enough to worship him and want more of him. But with my mother... that was the only person I'd ever seen my father submit to.

At one point, I revered their love. As I aged and matured, I realized that shit was toxic as hell. It always blew my mind to see him soften when it came

to my mother. I used to think, as a child, that she was the one who had all the power. That made me want to please her even more.

“What mistakes are you referring to?” I asked. “And why do you think it’s your responsibility to keep me from making them?” I kept my tone as soft and low as I could to ensure she understood I was asking genuinely, not trying to be smart. If I hurt her feelings, Pops would be ready to try to kick my ass.

“His cheating,” she said. “Your father prioritized his career more than our marriage, and that’s why we had so many problems. I don’t want your family life, your marriage, to suffer because of work. I want you to fall in love and realize its value and priority before taking on that position, so you won’t do anything to mess your marriage and children up.”

I could understand where she was coming from. This wasn’t the first time she suggested work was the reason they had issues in their marriage, but it was the first time she said it led to his cheating. I didn’t see the correlation, and without him giving input, I probably never would. It wasn’t like Milli’s mom was a secretary or client, so I’m not sure how work led to their separation and his affairs. That wasn’t my concern, though.

Love wasn’t my priority right now—my career was. Climbing the ladder of success was a distraction that deterred me from the pursuit of love. It felt like just yesterday I was fresh out of college, passing the bar; now, I was thirty-eight with no wife, kids, or anything going for me outside of my professional accomplishments. So, again, I could understand where she was coming from. For quite some time, I made becoming named partner and managing partner my goal to the point where nothing else mattered. Now, it seemed like I was behind in life in other areas that should have mattered most.

Still, even with me acknowledging that truth, becoming managing partner was still my highest priority. After I accomplished that, then I’d focus on my personal life. It was frustrating feeling like women who were supposed to be for me were against me making that happen the way I believed it should.

“I don’t know the details of... that... and I don’t care to know,” I explained. “What I do know is, work has never made me cheat on a woman, and I doubt that will change when I get married. I don’t think it’s fair to require marriage before I get the position that was promised to me, especially when those terms weren’t expressed from the beginning.”

“Well, you know now, so it’s on you. When it seems as if you have a

social life that's leading to love, marriage, and a family of your own, I'll make you managing partner of my firm," Pops said.

My eyes shifted as I huffed and sat back in my seat. I looked over at the bar, and at the sight of Maritza talking on her phone, something shifted inside of me.

"What if I'm already on track for that?"

The wheels were spinning in my head, and even though I knew there was a chance they wouldn't believe me, I was going for it anyway. It seemed being a damn good lawyer, partner, and leader wasn't enough to get the position that was rightfully mine.

"What do you mean?" Mom asked.

"I am dating... in a serious relationship, actually. I just... hadn't planned to propose until I was where I wanted to be professionally."

They both stared at me for a few seconds before laughing.

"You expect us to believe you're seeing someone?" he asked.

"Yeah, I am."

"Then why haven't you mentioned her before?" Mom wondered.

"Because I didn't want to mention another relationship and have you getting excited about marriage and babies like you always do. I wanted to be sure she was the one before I introduced her to you all."

"And you believe she is?" Pops asked.

"I do. So there's no reason that position shouldn't be mine next year. I'm in a committed relationship and will be proposing soon."

"I have so many questions." Mom sat up in her seat with a wide grin. "The first of which is when can I meet her? She must be truly special."

"She is. Uh..." I stood. "You can meet her now. One sec."

Mom squealed and clapped her hands as I walked away, and my heart hammered against my chest. All I could do was pray Maritza went along with this. If I took too long to find a woman, they would be even more skeptical about the relationship being real. The only way this would work is if I introduced them to someone now.

My breath came out shaky as I gently grabbed her elbow and turned her to face me. She gave me a genuine smile.

"Jeremy, hel—"

Before she could finish her greeting, I pulled her petite frame into my chest and kissed her. No tongue, but I did allow my lips to linger on hers. She stared up at me with wide, expressive eyes and an open mouth.

“Please, go along with this. I need you to convince my parents we’re in a relationship.”

Her brows wrinkled before she nodded her agreement and cleared her throat. As she ran her left hand down her throat, I took her right hand into mine to lead her over to the table.

“Smile,” I commanded.

“Oh. Uh, o-okay.”

She plastered on a smile and squeezed my hand as we neared the table. Pops stood as Mom beamed brightly.

“Pops, Mom, this is my girlfriend Maritza Amaretto. Maritza, this is Victor and Mina Phoenix, my parents.”

“That name sounds familiar. Are you an attorney?” Pops asked, extending his hand to shake hers.

“Yes, sir,” she replied.

When I realized that was all she was going to say, I laughed. She was far too humble, but most confident and secure people were. As she shook Mom’s hand, I spoke on her behalf.

“She’s not just an attorney, she and her sister have the best success rates in trial law, specifically criminal trial law, in the city, and she’s number one on that list. She recently joined us at HGP².”

“Oh, wow. That’s amazing,” Mom complimented as we took our seats.

“Thank you,” Maritza replied bashfully.

“May I ask what made you join such a large firm if you were doing so well?”

Though that was a personal question, I was glad he asked, because I’d been wondering why she and Sakura joined us as well.

“My sister and I have success with trial and criminal law, but we want bigger cases. Wider reach. HGP² offers us not just the opportunity to try more prominent and prolific criminal cases but the prestige that comes from being attached to that name has already gotten us into rooms we weren’t able to knock on the door of on our own. Individually, we were great, but with this firm, I believe we’ll be powerhouses.”

I stared at the side of her face as she spoke, impressed with her passion. It wasn’t the first time I heard a woman speak passionately about being a lawyer and advancing, but it was the first time I was genuinely impressed. Whether it was because the woman was mysterious and beautiful or highly ambitious and successful, I wasn’t sure. Either way, I liked that shit.

“With your drive for professional advancement, do you have that same eagerness when it comes to your personal life?” Mom asked. “Do you want marriage and children?”

Maritza’s shoulders slumped. Her facial expression slacked.

“Ma, please. None of that this afternoon, okay?”

She chuckled with a shake of her head. “You’re right. We don’t have to know everything today. From what you said earlier, I believe Maritza and I will have plenty of time to chat.”

Maritza gave her a small smile before looking over at me. I was grateful for her help, but I could sense Mom’s question had taken her to a dark place. We stayed for another forty-five minutes or so before heading out. After giving Pops a handshake and Mom a kiss goodbye, I walked Maritza to her car, which was parked on the opposite side of the club thankfully.

I had no time to prepare before her palm was smacking the spit out of my mouth. It caught me so off guard that my natural reaction was to grab her and push her into her car. When I realized what was happening, I quickly released her neck as she coughed. Her hand wrapped around it as she pushed me away.

“Maritza...”

“If you *ever* kiss me again, I will pull your lips off and feed them to my neighbor’s dogs.”

For some reason, her threat, though I believed she’d try, made me chuckle. “Yes, ma’am,” I agreed before licking my lips and opening the door of her white Jaguar F-Pace with black rims and trimming. The car was nice as hell. It fit her. “Thank you,” I mumbled.

With a roll of her eyes, she slammed the door, making me laugh again.

As far as fake girlfriends go, I’d say I did damn good...

Two

M aritza

My lips still tingled from Jeremy's kiss. Talk about unexpected. One second, I was getting ready to have my favorite mid-day cocktail, and the next, I was pretending to be Jeremy Phoenix's girlfriend. I suppose as far as fake boyfriends go, he wasn't so bad. Jeremy had the reputation of being a selfish asshole when I first made it to the firm. He was the partner everyone told me to stay away from. I was told he took pleasure in testing people in one breath and making them feel like nothing the next. So far, that hadn't been the version of Jeremy I experienced.

I tried to stay out until the encounter left my mind, but it had been hours and that hadn't happened yet. Even an impromptu shopping trip only granted brief relief. As I walked into the home I shared with my sister, Sakura, my heels clacked against the hardwood flooring of our kitchen. I hated flooring that wasn't carpeted in homes. If Sakura had it her way, every room in our home would have no carpeting. Our compromise was for the bathrooms and main rooms along with the kitchen to have hardwood flooring while our bedrooms, offices, and entertaining rooms upstairs had carpet.

"Ritz!" Sakura yelled from upstairs.

I smiled as I headed toward her bedroom. "Kura!"

"Come here and help me find something to wear!"

It wouldn't surprise me if she was getting ready to go on a date. Sakura

was the flirtatious, social butterfly between the two of us. I made my way up the stairs and to her room, which was just a bit smaller than mine. Since I was the oldest, she decided I deserved the master bedroom. I appreciated the gesture.

Slowly, I made my way into her pink and cream-themed bedroom. Her eyes lit up at the sight of my bags.

“Did you buy me something?”

“Don’t I always,” I teased, setting the bags on the pink velvet bench in front of her king-sized bed. “Where are you heading tonight?”

“I’m not sure, but Tim told me to look good and wear a dress.”

“Tim?” I repeated, following her into her closet.

“Timothy. The entrepreneur I told you about.”

“Ah, yes.” My eyes rolled as I smiled. That man was a drug dealer, and I was sure of that. Sakura was blind to that, though. All she saw was his looks, swag, and money. I just prayed he wouldn’t get my sister caught up. “Since we don’t know the vibe, you can never go wrong with a classic black or red number.”

“Agreed.” I leaned against the doorframe of her closet as her fingers trailed over the several black dresses in her closet. “Okay... let’s see.”

She pulled three black dresses out of the collection and we both agreed on a leather number that I was sure would make Tim feel like the luckiest man in whatever room he took my sister in.

“What happened today to have you shopping like this?” she asked, pointing toward the bags as she placed her dress selection on her bed.

“I had the strangest encounter with Jeremy at the club earlier.”

“Phoenix?”

I nodded, going through the collection of bags in search of the one that held the Sephora bag for her. I’d gotten her another bottle of the Tom Ford Lost Cherry perfume she’d been using like crazy and the new Fenty Beauty foundation to try.

“Yeah. He kissed me.”

“What!” Sakura gripped my arm tightly and turned me to face her. “What the hell are you leaving out?”

Laughing, I handed her the bag so she would release my arm. “Okay, so he randomly came up to me, and before I could even speak to him, he was kissing me.”

She gasped and clutched her chest in true dramatic fashion as her mouth

hung.

“Then, he asked me to pretend to be his girlfriend in front of his parents. It all happened so fast... I just said okay and went with it.”

“How did that go?” she asked as we sat on the bench.

“Hmm... like any awkward parent meeting would go I suppose. Jeremy kept the heat off me thankfully, so his mother wasn’t able to ask me the personal questions I could tell she was dying to ask. But when he walked me to my car, I slapped him and told him if he tried it again, I’d feed his lips to Jerry’s dogs.”

Her right hand covered her mouth as she laughed and the left gripped my thigh, but she knew I was dead serious.

“Oh, Jesus. Why did you threaten that man like that?”

“Because he had no business kissing me without my permission.”

“If he would have asked, you would have said no!”

“So?”

Her eyes rolled playfully as she stood. “So, how long are you going to pretend to be his girlfriend? And did he tell you why?”

“Just today and no. We didn’t talk.”

“Hmm... curiuser and curiuser.”

With a chuckle, I stood and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Be safe and have fun tonight. Take your gun, too. I’m telling you that man is a drug dealer.”

Her eyes rolled as she stood and walked over to her dresser. “When Jeremy asks you to be his play girlfriend again, say yes.”

“Sakura...”

“We both know it’s the only chance you’ll give a man to give you the companionship and love you deserve. Enjoy it.”

I know she didn’t mean for her words to put me in my feelings, but they did. My mouth twisted to the side as my eyes watered. Swallowing back my emotion, I nodded and abruptly left her room. She was right—I had no desire to date. Well, I desired male companionship, just not the love and loss that came with it. It was proving safer to focus on work, family, and solo experiences, and I was okay with that. Sometimes I was a little envious of my sister’s social life, but I had no one to blame for that but myself.

When I was done putting my new items up, I lit a few candles, put some music on, and took a long, hot bath. There was a new thriller out that I’d been itching to start, and I got to the fifth chapter before getting out of the tub.

After oiling myself down, I popped some popcorn, added jalapeños, and grabbed a bottle of Port. Just as I was getting comfortable in bed, Sakura was coming in to show me her outfit for the night.

“Whew! You look good as hell, sis. The body is bodying, okay?”

With a giggle, Sakura gave me a twirl. The leather mid-thigh length dress wrapped around her short, stacked frame perfectly. Her makeup was beat, and I loved the plum-colored matte lipstick she wore. It looked great against her caramel-colored skin. Her short natural hair was under a long thirty-inch sew-in with a middle part. Gaudy gold jewelry accentuated the simplicity of the leather dress. Baby Girl was going to be turning heads all night.

“Thank you, sis. I doubt if we’ll make it to too many places tonight.” She sat on the edge of my bed. “Are you really calling it a night this early? Why don’t you come out with us for drinks? That’ll keep Tim from ripping this dress off me as soon as he sees me.”

I chuckled with a shake of my head, checking the time on my phone. It was then that I noticed I had two missed calls from Jeremy. My heart dropped instantly, and I completely lost track of our conversation.

“Maritza?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you okay?”

“Uh yeah. What were you saying?”

“I said why don’t you come out with us for a few drinks?”

“Oh, no, ma’am. I’m not going to be the third wheel.”

“Then tell Jeremy to join us.” She shot me a wink and laughed as she stood, avoiding my hand swatting her.

“I hate I told you about that already.”

The doorbell rang, and I was glad Tim was here to get her ass.

“Bye, sis!”

“Have fun and be safe!” I repeated.

It took several minutes before I worked up the courage to return Jeremy’s call. This was the first time he’d ever called me, and I was pretty sure it was about what happened at the country club. A few seconds passed after he answered before the music in the background lowered and I heard his raspy, deep voice.

“Hello?”

“Hey, you called?” I shut my eyes and palmed my forehead. *Of course, he called.*

“Yeah, I was just calling to thank you for earlier since you wouldn’t let me at the club.” His sexy chuckle made me smile. “And I wanted to make sure you made it home safely. You seemed pretty upset when you left.”

“You’re welcome, and I wasn’t upset. More like flustered.”

“Was it the kiss? Did it unnerve you?”

I thought about his question carefully, not wanting him to think he had any type of physical power over me. I also didn’t want to lie and say it was just him asking me to lie to his parents and pretend to be his girlfriend.

“It was all of it,” I admitted, squeezing the back of my neck. “I wasn’t expecting that or prepared, but I’m glad it worked out for you.”

“Yeah, I do apologize for that... especially if I traumatized you or made you uncomfortable.”

With a smile, I lowered more in the bed. “I wouldn’t go that far. It caught me off guard, let’s just leave it there.”

“Okay, cool,” he agreed with a chuckle. “Well, I’ll let you go. I just wanted to thank you again.”

I wanted to ask him why he needed a fake girlfriend to pretend with but felt that wasn’t my business. If he wanted to share, he would have.

“Okay. Have a good evening.”

“You as well, Maritza.”

I disconnected the call quicker than I meant to, but the combination of his voice and how he used it to say my name, in his words, unnerved me just as much as his kiss. Twiddling my thumbs, I took in a few deep breaths and composed myself. No man had gotten a physical reaction out of me in quite some time, and twice today, Jeremy Phoenix had done just that.

THREE

Jeremy

“Damn,” I mumbled at the sight of Sakura. She was just as beautiful as her sister, but I favored Maritza’s looks over Sakura’s. They were more pronounced and natural. Sakura, however, was shorter and thicker than Maritza, who was tall and toned. She had a nice round ass, though. Tonight, Sakura was looking more like her sister, and I think that’s why I had the reaction to her that I did. I don’t know if it was a wig or tracks, but her hair was just as long as Maritza’s natural hair and the same jet-black color. She even had it curled like her older sister usually wore hers.

She slipped out of her long, thick coat, and heads all over the lounge turned in her direction. The leather dress she had on didn’t leave much to the imagination.

“Boy... if I was twenty years younger.” Pops whistled, and I looked over at him, finding his eyes were on Sakura as well.

“Chill out. That’s Sakura, Maritza’s sister.”

“Oh, wow. She’s beautiful. No wonder she looked a little familiar. Are they twins?”

“No, and I honestly didn’t realize how much they looked alike until just now. I think it’s the hair because their styles are completely different.”

“I’ll say. The slacks and silk shirt your girl had on earlier are nothing like this little number her sister has on.”

My girl.

That's right.

We were here because he wanted to talk to me about Maritza.

Clearing my throat, I took a sip of my whiskey as he finally pulled his eyes away from Sakura.

"Tell your future sister-in-law to be careful," Pops continued.

"Why is that?"

"The man she's with... that's Timothy Blane, also known as Grim."

Sitting up in my seat, I allowed my eyes to drift over to their table again.

"Lewis Blane's son?"

"The one and only."

Pops chuckled. Lewis Blane was a reverend and drug dealer with a retainer at my father's firm. Tim sold under his father, but they wouldn't admit that, though Tim was under a retainer as well. He operated under the guise of being an entrepreneur, and I assumed that's why Sakura was with him. If she knew who they truly were, I would think she wouldn't want to have anything to do with him. And maybe she liked roughnecks.

Who was I to judge?

"Damn," was all I could say. I didn't feel comfortable telling Sakura anything about Tim, or Grim, but I would test the temperature with Maritza and see how she felt about him. "Wassup, though, Pops? I know you wanted to talk to me about Maritza. Is that your doing, or Ma?"

He chuckled, setting his glass of scotch down after taking a sip. "More her than me, but I am curious about this relationship that you've never mentioned before."

"I told you I didn't want..."

"I know, I know." He gave me a dismissive wave of his hand. "Your mother wants to be sure you don't end up like me."

There was a time when I would say there was nothing wrong with turning out like him, but that wasn't the case anymore. Clapping kept me from replying immediately. I looked toward the stage where the jazz band was playing. Gracy's Lounge was, for lack of better terminology, an upscale lounge for professional hood niggas. Whether they were still in the streets or retired, this is where they came to enjoy a nice, safe evening among their own kind. If Sakura recognized anyone in this room, that would give her an idea of Tim's true source of income.

The black and gold décor, brown tables, and brown marble flooring gave

the opulent vibe Gracy was going for. His bottle girls and bartenders were covered but beautiful in different colored silk gowns. All spirits were top shelf, and the bar bites were immaculate. It was my favorite place to come and unwind after a long day at work and the only place that would keep me in a good enough mood despite how this conversation played out with Pops.

“Why did you become a father?” I asked, surprising us both based on the way his head tilted as he ran his tongue over his cheek. “You didn’t really devote yourself to being present for Milli, and our relationship is surface level. We’ve never had a close bond. All we talk about is shit you’d talk to your friends about, but we’ve never had that father-son, loving relationship. Did you not want kids?”

Pops finished the rest of his drink and sat back in his seat. “I wanted a lineage, but no, I didn’t want kids. I wanted someone to pass my name on to, someone to keep the Phoenix bloodline going.” Scratching behind his ear, he clutched his empty glass. “I don’t know how to give you the kind of relationship you’re asking for. I didn’t have that with my father. I didn’t see that in my family. He worked and provided and asked us questions to keep us on track with life and school, but we didn’t bond. We didn’t hang out. His relationship with his father didn’t even have that. Men in our family were only concerned with being providers, and I’ve done that.”

That was the most used excuse for not being present, being ignorant. But just like he learned law and sports and whatever else he wanted to know, he could have learned how to be a present father too.

“Was Mama aware of that before she gave you me?”

“She was aware of the relationship I had with my father. I think, like a lot of women, she thought things would be different.” He released a short chuckle. “She swears work is the reason we had issues, but it wasn’t. We had nothing in common. There was no excitement. No reason for me to come home. I thought giving her kids would make her content, and after you were born, that worked for a while. But eventually, she started asking me for more than I had to give. Eventually, I got tired of that and we separated, and that’s when I started seeing other women.”

“She says you cheated.”

His laugh was louder this time. “Mina calls it cheating because she didn’t want me with anyone else, but we were separated, and she knew what was going on. She also had my permission to see other men, but she didn’t. Sounds crazy, but it took about ten years of marriage before I learned to love

her. Now that I have, I'm not letting her leave... whether I've had affairs while we were separated or not."

"Regardless of how you package it, you being with other women while you were married to her, whether you were separated or not, traumatized her. I don't know why she stayed, but she's been using that against you ever since, and I'm not sure why you let her."

He shrugged. "I feel like I owe her. I hurt her. I gave another woman the daughter your mother wanted."

"Yeah, but to what end? Milli is here now. Are you going to let her hold that over your head for the rest of your life? Now I'm not going to place the blame on Ma when it comes down to you not being more in Milli's life because you could have done more regardless of how she felt, but damn. If you put forth a third of the effort into being a father that you put into making her happy, we'd all be all right."

Standing, I pulled my wallet out and placed three hundred-dollar bills on the table. I hated that I allowed my feelings to frustrate me.

"She's going to ask me about your relationship."

"At this point, Pops, I don't care *what* you tell her. You'll think of something."

I walked away, being sure to give Sakura a head nod on my way out. She grinned at me a little harder than usual, and I figured it was because her sister told her about what happened earlier.

The thought of Maritza's lips made me smile.

FOUR

M aritza
The Following Monday

“So, what’s your game plan?” I asked Sakura as she pulled our sandwiches out of the Subway bag. Two of her clients had been indicted this morning on several counts of wire fraud and money laundering. Allegedly, the married pair were responsible for starting and running a pyramid scheme that earned them twenty-five million dollars in profit over the last five years.

One thing was for sure, the FBI took years to build their case, and they didn’t make an arrest until they were confident they’d get a conviction. She’d have to be as good as John Gotti’s lawyers were to get them off.

Sakura sighed as she sat in one of the chairs across from me. Since we’d come to HGP², we tried to have lunch together daily to talk and brainstorm, but with our caseloads getting bigger, that was harder to do.

“I don’t know, sis. They are guilty. They are willing to do whatever they have to do to avoid jail time, but I don’t think that’s possible. I believe I can get their sentences reduced if they can come up with as much of the money as possible to give back to the victims.”

“Well, do what you believe you can win. If that’s a reduced sentence and paying back the money, do that. They might not want jail time, but they know they stole those people’s money.”

Sakura and I have always been honest and upfront with our clients. We never gave them false hope and we didn’t take cases to trial that we weren’t

confident we would win. That's why we had the success records that we did. A light tap on my office door gained my attention. I looked up, and at the sight of Jeremy through the glass door, I unintentionally smiled.

"Ooh, your boyfriend is here."

My eyes rolled as I motioned Jeremy in with my hand. "Lord, you make me hate I even told you that."

Sakura cackled, causing Jeremy to smile as he looked from me to her. "Sorry to interrupt."

"Oh, you're not interrupting at all," Sakura answered, patting the seat next to her for him to sit down.

As he sat, he said, "I was coming to see if you'd like to go to lunch so we can talk, but it appears I'm a little late."

Sakura tsked. "You're just in time, brother-in-law."

"Sakura, please." Massaging my temples, I released a nervous chuckle. "Thanks, but I already have lunch, Jeremy."

"Girl, please. I'm sure wherever he wants to take you will be better than these dry-ass Subway sandwiches you *insist* on us eating."

My eyes rolled as Jeremy and I chuckled. "These sandwiches are not dry, and if yours is, it's because you didn't get extra mayonnaise like I told you to."

No matter how many new cuisines I tried, nothing could ever top a BLT in my eyes. When I got it from Subway, I added red onions, mayonnaise, oil and vinegar, and salt and pepper. Perfection.

"As good as those sandwiches look, I'd love to take your sister to Sonny's Steakhouse and bring you something back," Jeremy offered, and I groaned. If he got Sakura on his side with a promise of good food, she'd force me to leave.

"Sonny's truly has the best steaks. Please go, sis, and bring my fav back." The pout she gave me had me rolling my eyes as I stood.

"Fine. Wrap my sandwich up and don't let anyone eat it before I get back."

She sniggled. "Trust me... You don't have to worry about that."

I walked over to the coat rack by the door and grabbed my pea coat. I wasn't expecting Jeremy to help me inside of it, so when he did, his touch surprised me. Looking back at him with a hesitant smile, I mumbled, "Thanks."

Looking down at my stilettos he asked, "Are you going to be able to walk

in those, or do I need to drive?”

With a chuckle, I headed out of the opened door. “I can walk.”

And we did... in silence. Sonny’s was at the end of the block, so it was maybe a two or three-minute walk. We opted for seating at the burgundy bar for quicker service. My eyes scanned the plethora of alcohol bottles lining the brick wall because that was better than looking at Jeremy. He looked and smelled exceptional today. Who am I kidding? He looked and smelled exceptional *every* day.

The bartender was quick to help us. I ordered Sakura a medium well steak with broccoli and a loaded baked potato with the toppings on the side to go, and for myself, I got a steak house salad with a side of home fries. Jeremy got a medium well steak with creamed spinach and mashed potatoes. It wasn’t until we’d gotten our lemonades that he spoke, forcing me to look over at him.

“Thanks for having lunch with me.”

“Did you ask me here for a reason?”

The left side of his mouth lifted into a smile. His thick, juicy lips were dark brown—evidence of his use of Mary Jane. Cashew-colored skin stretched across a tall, wide frame that reminded me of a football player’s stature. He had a square head, low fade, and stubble for a beard. Aside from his lips, my other favorite part of his face was his round, espresso-brown eyes. There was a small skin-colored scar between them.

“I did actually, but I was hoping we could discuss it after I got you fed.”

Smiling, I took a small sip of my lemonade. “It must be something bad?”

“No, not really. It’s something I’m not sure you’ll agree to.”

“Oh, gotcha. Well, what do we talk about until then? Or nothing at all?”

“You could tell me about yourself.”

My eyes lowered to his hand as he lifted his glass to his mouth. I loved how large and veiny they were. All I could envision was how good they would feel wrapped around my neck... again. My hand ran down my neck absently as I looked straight ahead.

“If you’re not comfortable with that, maybe I could talk to you about something,” he continued.

“Yes, that sounds better.”

He gave me a smile before nodding. “Okay. I... was at Gracy’s Lounge with my father Friday and I saw your sister there... with Tim.”

“Oh, yeah, she mentioned him taking her there for their date. How do you

know Tim?”

“He and his father are clients at my father’s firm.”

“Oh. Hmm... because he’s an entrepreneur?”

Jeremy chuckled. “You’re not buying that huh?”

I laughed myself, feeling more relaxed with the personal turn our conversation had taken. “I mean... I don’t deny he has businesses, but I think he’s a drug dealer.”

“It’s not my place to confirm or deny that. I’ll just say look out for your sister and trust your gut. Not too many niggas have the nickname Grim and they not be in the streets.”

“Wait.” Clutching his arm, I turned slightly in my seat. “Grim is Tim?”

“Y’all didn’t know that?”

With a sigh, I shook my head. “No. He doesn’t come around for me to question him like I usually question the men she dates.”

“But you’re familiar with him as Grim?”

“Not personally. That name has come up several times over the years in discoveries and depositions, but we’ve never had a real name or even description to tie to it because people are always too afraid. And you’re telling me *this* is the man my sister is so smitten over?”

“I’m telling you, I only know one man with that nickname. I could be wrong, but like I said, look out and trust your gut. And I’m always just a call away if you or your sister need me.”

I thanked him for the heads up and our conversation continued to flow as we waited for our food. When we were done, he wasted no time getting down to the reason for our lunch. Jeremy turned slightly in his seat to better face me, allowing me to get an even deeper whiff of his cologne.

He took a deep breath before saying, “I want you to marry me.”

I looked around, sure I was on some kind of prank show. Before I could stop it, a hard laugh escaped me. So hard my stomach hurt, and my eyes leaked.

“You’re joking, right?”

“No, I’m very serious.”

Wiping the corners of my eyes, I stared into his. There wasn’t a hint of amusement there, forcing me to mirror his expression.

“Jeremy...”

“You walking into the country club was fate. I needed a fake girlfriend, a fake wife, and I want you to be that.”

“Why are you lying to your parents about your relationship status, Jeremy?”

Sighing, he ran his hand over his face. “My mother wants me married before I become managing partner of my dad’s firm.”

“You want to leave HGP²?” I asked in a low tone.

His head shook. “I don’t *want* to, but I feel like I don’t have much of a choice. The advancement that was promised to me hasn’t come yet, and I don’t know if I want to wait around for it. The position at my dad’s firm is guaranteed... with the stipulation that I have a wife.”

Sighing, I shook my head as I sat back in my seat. “Jeremy...”

“I’ll make you named partner. And in three to five years, you’ll be senior managing partner if you want. Now I won’t lead you on like Violet has done me and others and say you can be co-managing partner because that position has already been promised to Flex, but on the off chance I decide to step down or am forced to for any reason, you’ll be my replacement. Same goes for him.”

I couldn’t even allow myself to consider his offer. I wanted to be named partner but not like this. Not by lying about something as sacred as marriage. Just thinking about marrying another man was triggering. My head shook as I stood.

“I’m sorry, Jeremy, but I can’t. Violet promised me she’d make me the next named partner so that offer doesn’t appeal to me enough for me to disrespect the sanctity of marriage by entering into it under false pretenses.” Covering his hand with mine, I told him, “Thank you for lunch, and I hope you find someone who can help you with this.”

I walked away, stopping when he said, “I only want you.”

My eyes closed and I licked the corner of my mouth before swallowing hard. Instead of responding, I continued out of the restaurant.

FIVE

Jeremy
Christmas

Christmas with my parents was more depressing than usual this year. They hadn't even bothered to put forth the effort to decorate the house or put up a Christmas tree. After we exchanged gifts, theirs not even being wrapped for me, I left and made my way to spend the rest of the holiday with Amelia and her tribe. I appreciated that she'd even invited me. It was clear she didn't fully trust my intentions and I could respect that. I had no problem earning the place in her life that I should have cherished from the moment she entered this world.

By the time I arrived, the adults had somehow shifted into a conversation that revolved around a woman being loved by a man who didn't know how to truly love and how toxic it was. It seemed like a random, dark topic for Christmas, but I gave my greetings and headed into the kitchen.

"You came," Amelia said with a genuine smile.

She made her way around the island and gave me a hug.

"Of course, I came. Merry Christmas, and thank you for inviting me."

"Merry Christmas. Have you eaten?"

"Yeah, but I can eat again. What you make?"

Amelia chuckled as she guided me across the kitchen, running down an extensive list of items on the menu. She offered to fix me a plate, and I told her to put a little of everything on it. By the time we made it back into the

living room, the conversation had shifted to something lighter thankfully.

“Uncle Jeremy!” At the sound of Alisia’s voice, I turned toward the hallway.

“My favorite twelve-year-old munchkin. Hey, niece.”

Lis laughed as she rushed over to me and gave me a hug. “I’m your *only* twelve-year-old munchkin.”

“Even if you weren’t, you’d still be my favorite. I got your Christmas gifts in the car. I’ll go get them when I finish eating.”

“Okay! Yours are under the tree.”

Confusion covered my face as I looked from Alisia to Amelia. “Y’all didn’t have to get me anything, Milli.”

“Nonsense. Now eat up before your food gets cold.”

I swallowed my emotion, not sure why them including me made me so emotional. I guess because things had been so off between us; I was just grateful for the invitation.

When I was done eating, I opened the gifts they’d gotten me and went out to get theirs. I’d even gotten Amaru and AJ something so they wouldn’t feel left out. Milli warned me that their mothers would be here, so I had flowers and wine for them too.

After that, Christmas songs and movies turned into line dancing and drinking. By the time the guys and I were passing around the third jar of moonshine, I knew I needed to call it a night. I was a comfortable tipsy, capable of getting home safely, and I didn’t want to overindulge.

It warmed my heart when both Amelia and Alisia were sad to see me go, but I promised them we could hang out again soon.

As I drove home, I had a strong desire to call Maritza and wish her a Merry Christmas. I expected her to let the call go to voicemail, but when I heard her sultry voice on the other line, I couldn’t stop the grin that spread my lips.

SIX

M aritza

It took me a second to answer Jeremy's call. Our Christmas festivities had run long this year, and I was okay with that. There was nothing, and I do mean nothing, that I loved more than spending time with my family and friends. Work and parenthood had separated my tribe, unfortunately, but I hung out with my closest friend, Dena, as much as I could.

Clearing my throat, I stood quickly from the large bean bag I was seated on to answer Jeremy's call.

"H-hello?" I almost whispered, stepping out of my parent's home theater.

"Maritza... hey."

I smiled as I leaned against the wall, which was new. "Hey. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas. I hope I didn't interrupt you while you were doing something important."

"No, not at all. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. I got you something for Christmas. I was going to give it to you when we all went back to the office, but I was hoping I could give it to you tonight instead. If it wouldn't be an imposition."

My body warmed and melted against the wall at the sound of his words. "Jeremy, you didn't have to get me anything, especially if it's an attempt to change my mind about what we last discussed."

His chuckle was sexy. “Not at all. I’m not manipulative in that manner.”

“Then why did you get me something?”

“Because I wanted to.”

The simplicity of his answer made me smile. I looked toward the ceiling and considered if I wanted to risk seeing him tonight. The holidays always made me a little happier than usual, and I’d been drinking. The last thing I wanted to do was say something I’d regret.

“Okay, if you insist.”

“I do.” We shared a soft laugh. “Tell me where you are, and I’ll bring it to you.”

“Uh... I’ll call you when I get home and send you my address.”

“Sounds good. I’ll talk to you soon.”

He disconnected the call, and I stood there for a while—stumped. Every time we interacted with one another, I waited for the version of Jeremy that I’d been warned about to appear. So far, that hadn’t been the case.

I hadn’t even made it back inside good before Sakura asked, “Was that your husband?”

“Husband!” our parents shouted.

Before I could stop myself, I was shoving her off her beanbag as she laughed hysterically.

How their movie room was set up, they had standard reclining theater seats on one side and beanbags on the other. A thin aisle separated both. Off to the right was the concessions area. It was probably my favorite room in their home. Even when I wasn’t watching a movie, I often came inside and took a nap on the beanbags.

“He is *not* my husband!” I yelled, feeling like a kid all over again. One who hated having an annoying little sister.

“Well, he wants to be!”

“Not for real!”

“Okay, someone start making some sense,” Mama said.

Sakura and I have always had an open relationship with our parents, so I didn’t hold back. I told them about everything—the club, the lunch, the proposition, and him having a gift for me—I gave it all. By the time I was done, Mama had an amused grin on her face while Daddy looked perplexed. Sakura busted into a fit of giggles, and I was *sick* of her ass at this point!

“You need to call Tim and tell him to come get you,” I ordered, pulling away from her as she held on to my arm. As much as I didn’t want to, I

laughed at her silly ass. She could drive me up a wall and make me laugh instantaneously.

“Whatever. You know you love me.”

“Mhm.” With a smile and roll of my eyes, I gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I do, but you’re annoying as hell.”

We shared a laugh before giving our parents our attention as they continued to stare at us.

“Tell him to bring the gift here,” Mama said. “I want to see him.”

“Ma, no.”

“Why not?” Daddy asked.

“I don’t want you guys to make this weird like your daughter does.”

“We just want to meet the man who thought highly enough of you to make such an offer,” Daddy said to my surprise.

“Wait. You guys aren’t offended that he wanted to be in a fake relationship with me?”

Mama laughed. “Chile, these days, you have to get it how you live. The both of you know how cutthroat the courtroom *and* these law firms are. That’s why I stopped practicing the moment your father became a judge. If he needs to have a fake marriage for a certain length of time to get what he wants and help you, or someone else, in the process... hey. So be it.”

I hadn’t thought about it like that. She was right; it was hard to move up in the ranks at prestigious law firms, especially one like Hunter, Phoenix, Genesis, and Prime. Before talking to Jeremy, I placed a high level of confidence in Violet’s word. Now, I wasn’t so sure. I would give her a chance, though. Maybe there was a reason she hadn’t kept her word to Jeremy for a reason that wouldn’t affect me.

“Well, I’ll tell him to stop by, but please, guys, don’t make it weird.”

While Daddy grunted, Mama gave me a syrupy smile.

“Oh, hell,” I grumbled under my breath, making them all laugh.

I texted Jeremy and warned him that it was my parents’ home, and when he texted back, he let me know he was seventeen minutes away.

That seventeen minutes was the longest seventeen minutes of my life.

The entire time I waited, I wondered if I was playing with fire.

Not just because I knew he wanted my help but because I was genuinely attracted to him, and I hadn’t been attracted to a man, like this, since my husband. The sound of the doorbell ringing caused me to jump. Sakura wasted no time jumping up and scurrying to the door, and I know she did that

because I told her I would talk to him outside. By the time I made it to the door, she was inviting Jeremy inside. I had to admit, he looked good as hell in his green Grinch sweater and jeans. I couldn't help but smile as I walked over to him.

"Dressed for the occasion, aren't we?"

"Milli made me."

I laughed and gave him a soft hug. One that I wish would have lasted longer than it did. At the sound of my mother clearing her throat behind me, I rolled my eyes and sighed.

"Jeremy, this is my mother and father, Anna and Leonard. They wanted to meet you before returning to the movie room."

They all shook hands, but the moment Daddy tried to strike up a conversation, I pleaded with Mama for them to go away. She led him away, being sure to tell Jeremy he was welcome to stay and watch the next movie with us. I was glad the rest of our family had come and gone before he arrived, otherwise, it wouldn't have been so easy to have him to myself.

"Sorry about that."

He gave me that sexy smile as he took a small step in my direction. "It's cool." Jeremy extended the gift bag that I hadn't paid much attention to in my direction. "Merry Christmas, Maritza."

Every time he said my name...

"Why are you doing this?" I asked softly.

"I already told you."

My head shook adamantly. "I need more than... because you wanted to. There has to be a reason. There's always a reason."

His body radiated a calm that was the complete opposite of me. "That is the reason." Jeremy stepped closer, closing the space between us, forcing me to hold my breath to create more. "I thought about you and wanted to get you something, so I did. That's it."

Hesitantly, I took the bag from him. The first gift was a coffee mug that had *Allegedly* written in a cursive font, and I couldn't wait to use it. It was the kind of cute gift that I would cherish forever. The second gift was the exact Vincent Van Gogh Montblanc pen that I wanted for my collection. It was twenty-five thousand dollars, and the fact that he'd gotten it for me... just because... was rattling me.

"I asked your sister for suggestions on gift ideas, and she told me about your pen collection."

“Did she tell you that I wanted this one specifically?”

His head shook as I continued to stare at the pen. “No.”

Blinking my watery eyes, I looked up at him. I closed the space between us completely and stood on the tips of my toes to hug him. The warmth of his body as he wrapped his arms around me caused my eyes to close as I sighed in relief.

I missed this.

The warmth of a body.

The embrace of a man’s arms.

The caress of his hands.

Before I got too deep, I pulled away and quickly wiped my eyes with a snuffle.

“Thank you,” I muttered. “I wanted this pen for my collection. I don’t know what led you to get it but thank you so much.”

He wiped away my tears before tilting my head and looking into my eyes. “You’re welcome. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Maritza.”

My eyes closed at the sound of him saying my name. They didn’t open until I heard him opening the door.

“Um... would you... if you... they want you to stay.”

Jeremy chuckled as he turned, but he kept the door open. “Do *you* want me to stay?”

As lawyers, we often trained clients not to volunteer anything and keep answers short. That had become a practice of mine. One that he was trying to break.

I thought about it for a while before answering with a soft, “Yes.”

“Then I’ll stay.”

He closed and locked the door, then followed me into the movie room. As if Sakura knew he would be joining us, she made her way over to the reclining seats. I offered those to him, but he assured me he didn’t mind sitting on the beanbag next to me. After offering him snacks and drinks, both of which he declined, I got comfortable on the beanbag next to him.

I’m not sure when it happened, but somehow, I fell asleep on him. And he fell asleep on me. And Sakura had a picture of it. A picture that I made her send to me. I walked him to his car and made him promise to let me know when he made it home since I decided to stay there for the night. After I showered and got in bed, I went back to sleep with a smile on my face.

SEVEN

Jeremy

I decided to try and talk to Violet one last time before making the decision to leave. As I told Pops, I didn't want to leave HGP². Not just because of Grandfather, but because this was the firm I loved. I was fully aware of the reputation I had and that a lot of people didn't like me personally, but everyone I challenged, grew. I was the partner they could always depend on to make the best decisions—whether they liked it or not. There was no part of me that allowed my emotions to rule when it came to our firm or practicing law. To some, that made me heartless, to others, it made me a damn good leader and attorney.

As I made my way into Violet's office, she gave me a warm smile. All the staff were out of the office until after New Year's Eve, unless they needed files or equipment and were just stopping by. Violet was dressed to perfection in a gold pantsuit that made her glow. Ever since Mecca mentioned her looking like the singer Mya, I couldn't unsee it. Violet's youth was unmatched. Proof that, somehow, even with all the hours and work she put in here, she still took care of herself.

I admired that.

"My favorite partner. How was your Christmas?" she asked, standing to give me a hug.

Just the thought of ending my Christmas with Maritza had a smile

spreading on my lips. It wasn't my intention to fall asleep, but between the acceptance of her family, the warmth of the room, and the closeness of her body... that moonshine put me right to sleep. Sakura sent me a picture of us that she'd taken, and I couldn't deny how good we looked together—even with our eyes closed. Even with Maritza not wanting to be my fake wife, I still liked and respected her and wanted her in my personal life in some capacity.

“It was great. How about you?”

“Same. But I know you aren't here during your break for pleasantries.”

Rubbing my hands together, I took a deep breath. I didn't usually let my nerves, thoughts, or emotions show, but I was truly passionate about my advancement here and felt like it was beyond my control.

“This year was my five-year-named-partner anniversary.” Her eyes shifted and mouth opened slightly, as if she knew exactly where I was going with this. “What are your plans concerning the advancement of named partners at the firm? Last time we talked about this was three years ago. Since, none of the changes we requested have been made. If I've reached the cap of my success under you, let me know so I can begin to plan accordingly.”

“I will remain managing partner, the *only* managing partner, until I can't serve this firm and the justice system anymore.”

My head bobbed once. “Understood. No co-managing partner for Hunter, Phoenix, Genesis, and Prime. What about a senior managing partner?”

Violet sighed and sat back in her seat, pressing her palms against one another. “As of now, the highest position will remain named partner. I don't want you to leave, but I understand if you're not satisfied with that. In the past, I have alluded to further advancement...”

“Why is that no longer an option?”

“I don't want to risk things changing.” She gave me a soft smile. “Things are great as they are. If I put another man or woman in the position to make changes or decisions on my level, I'm jeopardizing what I've built since becoming managing partner. There's absolutely nothing wrong with how things are going around here, and I simply don't want another chef in my kitchen. You understand that, right?”

I couldn't stop myself from chuckling as I stood. “Perfectly.”

As I turned, she called my name. “If there's anything I can do to satisfy you more here and keep you, outside of adding additional management

positions, please let me know.”

All I did was nod as I exited. There were other positions, but if she had an issue with releasing power, she wouldn't consider those either. I could no longer ignore the fact that my time here would soon come to an end.

When I made it to my car, I checked my phone as I often did. The sight of Milli sending me a set of eyes made me chuckle. We talked this morning and I let her know what was on my agenda today. Once I was in traffic, I called to give her an update, grateful she was finally more open to letting me earn my place in her life.

“How'd it go?” was her greeting.

“As we suspected. Violet isn't giving anyone else power unless some crazy scandal emerges, or she dies.”

“I just don't understand that.” She sighed. “I mean, I get why she wants the most control, but I would think she also wants relief. There's absolutely nothing wrong with having a senior manager who can handle certain things and give her a break.”

“Well, she doesn't want a break. We can't force that on her. If she spends the next twenty years as managing partner the way she has up until now, there's nothing wrong with that.”

“True, but new minds can come up with ways to make HGP² even better. I really hate this.” She paused, but I didn't even know what to say to that. “So, what are you going to do? Are you really going to leave?”

I deflected briefly by asking, “Do you think I'm overreacting?” Up until now, I didn't give a damn about how anyone felt about my actions. My sister felt like the first person in a long time that I could trust to not have ill intentions or ulterior motives when it came to the advice they gave me.

She thought it over for a while, which I appreciated.

“I don't think you're overreacting. I think you were told something that you took as truth and that isn't being honored. You have every right to leave because of that. However, if you're truly satisfied with what you're doing at the firm, even if you don't advance further, no one would blame you if you stayed. My only concern would be the trust factor between you and Violet going forward.”

“Agreed. I've never had any issues with her keeping her word except for on this.”

“No matter what you decide and where you go to practice law or manage the firm, you'll be great at it. I can admit I hated the way you manage and

guide, but it works. You equip us to be quick on our feet, logical instead of emotional, and independent—capable of taking care of everything we need to for our clients without relying on anyone else.” She paused before exclaiming, “Hey!” I chuckled, gripping the steering wheel tighter in preparation for whatever revelation she just had. “*That’s* why Violet doesn’t want another managing partner. You’re the perfect example. Your styles are completely different. Violet has a true partner mentality. She’s more involved and hands-on with the associates. You set us up for independence. Maybe that’s why she doesn’t want anyone else in control. It could destroy the ecosystem she’s built. There’s nothing wrong with either style, it just takes time to adapt to, if it’s not what you’re used to. I see it from both sides now. If you want to step into a managing role more permanently and go to trial less, leave, Jeremy. If you want to continue to guide associates into independence and practice law full time, I think you should stay.”

I thanked her for the advice, and we continued to talk until I made it home. She’d given me a hell of a lot to think about, and even allowed me to see things from Violet’s perspective. When I first left, I was sure I was going to quit. Now, I didn’t know what I was going to do.

EIGHT

M aritza
January 1st

There was a solemn mood when we arrived at the firm today. Though none of the associates knew what was going on, the partners all seemed to be on one accord. We were in the large ballroom of the firm, which was usually where company parties were held, I was told. I was surprised they didn't have a Christmas party, but this was the first year they gave their associates time off, and we all appreciated that more.

Violet paced in front of us all. She held the microphone but continuously hesitated to speak. Jeremy stepped in front of her, gripping her shoulders and speaking to her softly. After the quick pep talk, Violet nodded adamantly and wiped a quick tear before turning in our direction.

“Good morning, everyone. Thank you all for coming in a few minutes early for this emergency meeting. This is not something any of us wanted to discuss repeatedly, so we're glad you honored our requests and came in early.” Violet paused and looked back at Jeremy and Flex, and that's when I noticed Quentin wasn't with them.

Had he left the firm?

“When security came in last night to do a sweep of the building in preparation for our return this morning, they noticed Quentin's login information had been active since the day after Christmas.” My heart dropped. “He had a heart attack at his desk and transitioned, and no one knew

until last night.” Her eyes squeezed shut as she pulled in a shaky breath. “Quentin was so committed to this firm, his associates, his clients, that he’d completely destroyed his social life. He no longer had a personal relationship with family or friends, and that’s why no one found it odd that they hadn’t heard from him since Christmas. There was no reason a forty-three-year-old man should have died so young and so alone.”

When her tears started to fall, Jeremy gently took the microphone and guided her into Flex’s arms.

“Let’s please have a moment of silence for Quentin Prime,” he directed. We all bowed our heads in silence. “His funeral information will be sent out via the company email. His family is requesting a closed viewing for them only, but we are all invited to the funeral. Effective immediately...” Jeremy paused and scanned the room, as if he was looking for someone. When his eyes landed on me, his expression saddened. “It is the managing partner’s decision to make Mecca Smith the next named partner.” While some people gasped, cursed, and expressed their confusion, others cheered and clapped.

Mecca was a senior associate. He and Amelia had been doing phenomenal work along the lines of class action lawsuits and civil cases. They were bringing in millions over the last few months with the cases they’d been taking on. Mecca was a titan now that he’d niched down to what he was truly passionate about, and I was genuinely happy for him.

I couldn’t deny that I was upset over a senior associate beating out senior partners for a named partner position—especially when that was promised to me when my sister and I arrived. Why did I expect Violet to keep her word to me when she hadn’t kept it to Jeremy? I was sure she had a reason for the change, but at this moment, I didn’t give a damn about her reasoning.

“You okay?” Sakura checked.

I didn’t realize the meeting was over and people had started to trickle out until she took my hand into hers. Jeremy stood in the distance—watching me.

“I’m fine,” I lied, trying to walk away, but she held my hand tighter.

“Hey... I know how important advancement is to you, and she told us she would make you the next named partner because of our experience. It was a downgrade for us to come here as senior partners, but we accepted that because of the pay and promised billable hours and opportunities.” I nodded, gritting my teeth, and avoiding Jeremy’s eyes. “There’s no point in going to her about it, especially right now. She didn’t honor her word to Jeremy, and she won’t honor it to you.” My head hung and nodded. “Now’s the time to

reconsider his offer. You both can leave and have the positions you deserve.”

She gave me a quick hug before leaving me there in my thoughts. Jeremy took a step in my direction, but Mecca and Shalom cut him off. It seemed they were just as confused about the announcement as we all were. I was confident, if they believed he could handle the position, he deserved it. Still, I was pissed off. Violet made me a promise, and now I couldn't help but wonder if it was one she *ever* intended to keep.

NINE

Jeremy
One Week Later

Death had a way of reminding you how important it was to live, not just exist. Flex and I stood in the back of Quentin's longtime ex-girlfriend's home. She insisted the repast be held at her place, and Quentin's parents agreed. Apparently, the couple had broken up after Thanksgiving because Quentin was working like crazy. Heather was taking his death hard, filled with regret over not fighting for them and his time more. I wished she understood there was nothing she could have said or done to change fate. If it was his time, it was his time. I do understand, though, how thoughts of spending the holidays with him instead of him working like crazy may have made this easier for her.

We tried to wait until everyone was gone before we left to make sure Heather wasn't overwhelmed. Quentin's family was absorbed in their grief, which was understandable, so we wanted to help in any way we could. Something good over the past week had been Violet asking for help more. She allowed me to partner with her on more things because she was taking Quentin's death harder than anyone at the firm. Being there with her, helping her, further confirmed what Milli said to be true about how different our styles were.

I wanted to take over and handle everything while Violet took time to grieve. She wanted to be involved and allow me to be her mouthpiece and

logic when she felt too overwhelmed. The partnership that she wanted, I felt, could be a permanent thing if she enlisted the help of a co-managing or senior partner, but until she realized that herself, it would never happen.

“Mecca finally accepted,” Flex mentioned out of nowhere before taking a sip of his drink.

When we first made the announcement, Mecca was just as surprised as I was when Violet said she wanted him to take Quentin’s place. I knew, eventually, that he would become a named partner, but for her to bypass him becoming a first-year partner first... that wasn’t like Violet.

We all had a meeting and she explained why she made that decision. She wanted someone in that position that was established in other areas of their life. Mecca was engaged with a baby on the way, and from what I heard, he was considering adopting his unborn cousin as well. There was no way he’d let anything at the firm keep him from being committed to his family. I think that was the point Violet was trying to make.

He said he needed time to think about the timing of it, but he wanted the position from the day he joined the firm, so I wasn’t surprised he accepted.

“Good,” was all I said. Mecca deserved the position no doubt, but I hated that Violet had offered it to Maritza as well. Maritza was an exceptional lawyer, however, there was no way in hell she’d be able to come in and take a position away from an associate who had been there for years—I don’t care how great she was. There was an order, a hierarchy, in the way we did things, and I couldn’t believe Violet had even offered the position.

I questioned Violet about that, and she told me that she promised a named partner position to Maritza with the hopes of adding her name to the wall without having to give her anyone else’s position. She also wasn’t planning to do so until after the sisters had been there for a year. Sakura had no desire to become partner. The courtroom was truly her happy place, and she wanted nothing to stand in the way of her trials.

To make sure Maritza didn’t consider leaving, Violet had tried to set up a meeting with her to explain what was happening, but so far, Maritza hadn’t confirmed the day and time. I planned to talk to her and see where her head was at once everything slightly returned to normal, but as she made her way over to us, I figured I’d have that chance today.

Maritza looked regal.

Her long hair was pulled up and into a high bun. Dark black sunglasses covered her eyes. The black pantsuit she had on seemed to be made just to

curve against her body. I was jealous of the black silk shirt clutching her breasts. That should have been my hands.

The black lipstick she wore drew my attention to her plump, bowtie-shaped lips. She pulled her shades off as she neared us, allowing me to see her beautiful honey-brown eyes. Maritza gave us both a polite smile before taking my hand into hers and caressing it with her thumb. The contact, the gesture, made my heart skip a beat. I wanted to lick her peanut butter brown skin and see if it tasted as good as it looked.

This woman was no good for me.

“Can we meet for drinks later and talk?”

I had to keep myself from grinning as I rocked on my heels. It would be unwise to assume this conversation was going to lead to her agreeing to my offer, but I assumed it would.

“Tell me when and where and I’ll be there.”

She gave me that beautiful smile that caused her slanted eyes to tighten and I couldn’t help but smile myself.

“I’ll text you.”

Maritza gave Flex a soft wave before grabbing her sister’s hand and leaving.

“What was that about?” he asked.

I couldn’t pull my eyes away from her round ass until it was out of the door. All I could envision was how the soft mound would jiggle as I smacked it and fucked her from behind. She wasn’t hippy, and her thin, toned frame didn’t allude to the fat ass she was working with. I couldn’t stop myself from eyeing every inch of her frame when she came to me... and especially when she left.

“Huh?”

Flex chuckled and ran his fingers down the corners of his mouth. “I asked what was that about? You like her for real... don’t you?”

With a shrug, I decided to ignore his question by asking, “Have you heard about Parker leaving with Amaru?”

He chuckled again as he nodded his head. “Yeah, I’m not surprised Amaru plans to open his own firm. He wants to do more contract law.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t make sense to me. Contract law is extremely time-consuming. He could bring in crazy billable hours. Why is he trying to go to a fee-based system instead?”

“I don’t know. That’ll be your brother-in-law soon. Maybe that’s

something you need to talk to him about.”

I considered it but didn't want to overstep. It would have been different if it was my sister. Even if she didn't want my advice, I would offer it. Still, if Amaru planned to marry her and care for her and my niece, I would need to make sure he'd be able to provide for them. If I could keep him from making a career mistake, I would talk to him. He could take my advice or leave it. Maybe he had good reasoning behind his decision. I couldn't focus on that right now. All I could think about was Maritza and what she wanted to talk to me about. Maybe after we talked, I could go and see what Amaru was thinking about doing after his departure.

TEN

M aritza

I asked Jeremy to meet me at Gracy's since that was a lounge we both frequented already. I was curious about how he and his father were allowed membership but that was a conversation for another day. My understanding was that you had to be from the hood or in the streets to gain a membership. Our father was why Sakura and I were able to go. He used to be heavy in the streets before a ten-year stint in prison changed the course of his life. Mama held him down, then they both went to college and became lawyers. He advanced and now serves as a judge, but Mama retired early to enjoy life as a stay-at-home wife.

My leg shook under the table, but my expression remained calm. The last week had been a lot for me to process. Violet expressed her desire to meet with me so we could talk one on one after the announcement about the next named partner was made. She gave me time and space to talk when I was ready. I decided to finally meet with her after the funeral before meeting with Jeremy. That conversation still replayed in my mind.

We'd met at her monstrous mansion of a home. She gave me a tour, allowing me to bask in the potential of what could be my future. Once I toured her seven thousand square feet home, we settled in her cognac room, which housed lines of books along the wall. In the center of the room was a royal oak, round four-person table. Violet poured me two fingers of cognac,

and we sipped slowly, as she opened up to me in a way I didn't expect a woman in her position to do.

"At the first law firm I worked at, I was harassed by male counterparts in every way you could think of. Physically, sexually, mentally, emotionally... I struggled financially. I endured it all." Her chuckle was soft and sad as she took a sip of her drink. "Women during that time weren't an ally; they were either competition or an enemy because they were just as horrible as the men. I suffered for ten years before finally finding a firm that was a safe space for women, for Black women. Not just a safe space, but a safe space that offered security and advancement. That firm was Phoenix and Prime. At that time, it was managed by Jeremy and Quentin's grandfathers. They protected me and took me under their wings, helping me become the woman I am today."

Violet paused and sighed. "I keep the power because I need the control. I will not suggest that's healthy, but it's the truth. My truth. And anyone who doesn't like that can leave."

I didn't respond right away. I appreciated her sharing her truth with me and I understood where she was coming from. I could only imagine the things she endured decades ago, and no one denied her deserving her place as managing partner. Upon hearing her story, it seemed she correlated help with losing power and control. If that was the case, I could understand why that was triggering for her. If her safe space was as the boss, of course, she wouldn't want to share that power and position with anyone else.

"Thank you for sharing that with me. If I'm hearing you correctly, because of what you've experienced in the past, you feel safest in positions of power. You don't want anyone in the managing position with you, but you are open to partnership."

"That's correct."

"Then why lead people on and make them think they have a chance at management positions when you knew that wouldn't happen?"

"I wanted it to happen," she rushed out. "But it's been easier said than done. I understand what I've suffered through is personal and should not affect the firm but that's not easy." Her chin trembled and I gritted my teeth as my eyes watered. "I wanted to make Jeremy, at minimum, senior managing partner to put him directly under me. I do trust him, but I don't trust any man enough to feel as if he has power over me. And if I make a man my partner in this, there's no guarantee he will maintain that role and try not

to exert his power over me. A conversation about the budget that we don't agree on will be too triggering and have me thinking about being sexually harassed while trying to fight for equal pay."

She released a bitter chuckle and quickly wiped a tear. "I'm still working through the traumas I've endured over the years. My heart and mind are not often on the same page. When I made those offers, I meant them in those moments, but I simply am not in a healthy enough place to make them happen now. No matter what, it's my responsibility to protect myself. If I have to do that by being the only managing partner, you'd better damn well believe that's what I'm going to do."

All I wanted to do was pull her into my arms and let her know that she was safe, protected, and loved, but I still needed to ask, "And Mecca?"

"I did have every intention of making you named partner, not in place of someone who left, but in addition to who I already have." She slid a manila folder over to me. "Mecca is taking Quentin's place, not yours. If you agree to stay, you will be named partner after one year at the firm. It's there in writing and signed because I'm sure my word means less to you at this point."

I didn't bother opening the folder or responding either way. She'd given me a lot to think about. Above all, I was sure Violet would do what was best for her no matter what, and I wanted to take her example with that. Standing, I walked over to her and gently lifted her for a hug. As I assured her that she was safe, protected, valued, and seen, her tears poured. With a woman of her status, I wasn't sure she had people she could have these kinds of moments with, so I was happy to be that for her. Once she was composed, we continued to sip our drinks and talk until my alarm alerted me that it was time to head out to go and meet Jeremy...

When I left Violet's home, I had more clarity on the situation but still wasn't sure how I would proceed. At the sight of Jeremy walking over to me, my mind seemed to make itself up without my permission. Waiting a year to become named partner at HGP² was realistic, but Jeremy was offering me exactly what I wanted right now. Plus, I got the chance to be his fake wife. I felt like I needed to be honest with him about my past, though, and let him decide if he still wanted to partake in this scheme with me.

He looked so good, sauntering over to my table as if he knew he was the finest damn thing in the room. Jeremy had changed out of his all-black suit into an ash-gray suit with a burgundy button-down shirt that beautifully

complemented his skin. My eyes lowered to his wide chest as he unbuttoned his suit jacket. Jeremy placed a kiss to my temple that made me smile as my nipples hardened.

As he sat across from me, smelling just as good as he looked, he asked, “Have you been waiting long?”

“Not at all. I got here a little early because I came from Violet’s home instead of my own.”

“Oh.” His head jerked slightly at my words, but his expression remained its normal blank and unreadable stare. “You wanna talk about what that was about?”

Our waiter placed his drink on the table. I’d already ordered on his behalf. In the small bar area of his office, there were several kinds of brown liquor. I played it safe by getting him an Old Fashioned while I opted for a Whiskey Sour. Sakura and I shared our first alcoholic drinks with our father. He was a brown liquor man. That trait had been passed down to us.

“Good choice,” he said after taking a sip of his drink.

“Thank you, and I don’t mind discussing that with you. I wanted to talk to her before meeting you.” I paused before going into detail about my meeting with Violet without sharing her personal story. I made it clear that she explained why she did what she did and how, and gave me a contract that she had already signed promising me a promotion after one year at the firm.

“Do you have the contract with you?”

I pulled the folder out of my tote bag and handed it to him. While he read it over, I took small sips of my drink. He gave me an impressed nod as he handed the folder back.

“She’s given you a promissory note that did not require your signature or any promises or agreement on your behalf. Which means, regardless of how you perform over the next year, she’s going to remain a woman of her word and offer you that promotion. Violet has never done that for anyone before. She really values you.”

“That’s what I got from it after I read it.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Well... that’s why I wanted to talk to you. Before meeting with Violet and having her explain things, I was ready to consider your offer.”

A slow smile spread his lips and that made me chuckle. “What do I have to offer you to make you come with me instead of staying with her?”

“First, I want you to explain why you said you only wanted me when we

had lunch at Sonny's. Then, I want to share a little of my history with you. It may make you reconsider."

Sitting up in his seat, Jeremy's head tilted as he licked his lips. "I'm not sure how you want me to explain wanting you."

"Are you saying that you want me or that you want me to be your fake wife?"

"Yeah."

I laughed and he smiled. "You're so simple it makes you complex. I have no earthly idea how to read you."

"You know how, you're just not listening. I'm not one to hold back. Yes, I want you. Yes, I want you to be my fake wife."

Our eyes remained locked as I processed what he'd said. Jeremy wasn't the first man to express his desire for me over the last decade, but he was the first person whose desire scared me. I'd had sex a few times since my husband, however, I didn't allow myself to date or get attached to any man. Jeremy was challenging my ability to keep my heart preserved for a man who would never be able to access it again, and I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

Clearing my throat, I lifted my glass and took a bigger gulp before wiping my mouth. My breath came out shaky as I twiddled my thumbs, prepared to share with him my truth.

"Ten years ago, my son, my husband, and I were leaving church, headed to his parents' home for an early dinner. We hadn't gotten on the expressway yet. A man tried to jump in front of us, but Matt wouldn't let him because we were about to miss the light." I swallowed repeatedly as my eyes watered. When I was sure my tears wouldn't erupt, I continued. "The guy was so upset that by the time the light turned green again, he sped to catch up with us." I smiled and wiped a tear. "My husband wasn't one to back down, so when the guy got on the side of us talking shit, I had to talk my husband down by reminding him Jacob, our son, was in the car. For that reason only, Matt decided to walk away... well drive away."

I paused as images of that day flashed in my mind. "The guy got behind us and hopped back on the side, swerving in traffic. When Matt couldn't take it anymore, he abruptly pulled over. He yelled about how our son was in the car and if the man didn't stop, he was going to beat his ass. The man got out, they fought, and Matt won. I hated that he'd done that, but I understood why. Jacob was only two and he wasn't paying attention, anyway. I was just glad it seemed to be over."

I didn't realize I'd paused until Jeremy scooted his chair over to mine and took my hand into his, wiping tears that were falling.

"About a mile down, before we could merge onto the expressway, he came back. He started shooting." My head shook as I stared at the remnants in my glass. "Both Matt and I... our first thought was to protect Jacob. We both tried to dive into the back seat. Matt was hit in the back of the head. I was hit in my arm and side. My baby... he shot him in his chest. They both didn't make it, and I hate I survived." I chuckled before it turned into a clipped sob. "They were my world. I wanted to die with them too. A week after their funeral, I tried to commit suicide. I digested an entire bottle of pain pills and overdosed, yet somehow survived. That seemed like a sign that God had a plan for my life."

"Is that why the bulk of your cases have to do with gun violence and homicides?"

I nodded, wiping the last of my tears. "Yeah. It's triggering to a degree, but it also makes me feel like I'm getting justice for families that suffered a loss like me."

"What happened to the shooter? Was he charged?"

"We were able to find him, but um... let's just say death found him before jail time could."

He smiled. "Your pops? I hope he handled that shit for you personally. I damn sure would."

Though I trusted Jeremy, I wouldn't confirm or deny. My father, had, in fact, killed him.

"Either way..." I smiled... "He was handled, and a large part of my practice now goes toward victims of gun violence and their families. About 80 percent of my cases in fact. I said all of that to say, I've been married and had my son, and Matt loved me so softly and deeply that I will never settle for a love that doesn't feel as good as his did. So I would be willing to do the fake marriage as long as we can agree on the terms, but a real relationship wouldn't work. That's why I asked if you wanted me."

When Jeremy took my hand into his, I had to resist the urge to pull it out. My love language was quality time and physical touch. That's why I didn't have sex often or date over the years.

"First, thank you for trusting me enough to share that with me, and I'm so sorry you had to experience that. I know there's nothing I could say or do to make you feel better, and I would never try to replace your husband. But I do

want to confirm something.” I nodded for him to continue. “You’re not saying that you’re closed off to love completely, just that you’re not willing to settle for a love that doesn’t feel as good as the one you loss?”

That felt like a trick question, and I wasn’t sure how to respond. “Yes?” I said, but it came out more like a question than an answer.

His laughter was light and like music to my ears. “Are you sure, Maritza?”

“Yes,” I repeated more confidently.

“Then you’re saying I can love you and you won’t try to stop me.”

“I-I guess I can’t. No. But why would you want to?”

Jeremy lifted my hand and kissed it. “Because I know, if I do it correctly, you’ll be smart enough to realize what you have in me and one day return it. Even if you can’t... it’s just... something about you that makes me want to handle you in a way I’ve never wanted to handle a woman before. Maybe God wants to love on you a little harder through me. Whatever the reason, that’s on a personal level and we can let that happen organically. Right now, we need to discuss if we’re going forward with our fake marriage or not.”

I agreed, so we shifted our focus to that.

“Last time we talked about this, you mentioned being co-managing partner with Flex at your father’s firm. Can you give me more details about that?”

I listened intently to what Jeremy said. His father’s firm was half the size of HGP² but they brought in about the same amount of billable hours. They had fewer associates and their partners brought in more profit because they handled the negotiations, closings, and went to trial more than the partners at our current firm.

His father’s firm already had senior and junior managing partners, but they only had two named parents, and only two senior partners. There were no tiers when it came to their associates, so the competition for advancement wasn’t as fierce there. I liked that.

“For you personally, with your experience and record, I’m willing to offer just about anything to have you on my team,” Jeremy continued. “Named partner immediately, and after you’ve trained under Flex and me, if you want to become senior managing partner, that will be yours too. Things at my father’s firm aren’t as cutthroat. No one wants those positions currently, and the people who are occupying those roles now have plans to start their own firms by 2025. Everyone will have smooth transitions, I’m very firm on that.”

“Are you considering anyone else?”

“I want Amaru and Parker. They want to start their own firm, but I want to get in their heads about it. I believe if I talk to them one on one, they will be on board to join. From what Milli has told me, Amaru wants freedom and flexibility with his schedule, and he’s willing to go into business for himself to get that. I believe if I offer him the chance to practice the kind of law he wants without having to be chained to the office, he’ll come.”

“That’ll be a damn good team to take with you. Parker’s great with mergers and acquisitions, Amaru is great with entertainment and contracts, me and Sakura handle criminal and trial... what about civil and class action? Family law?”

“I want your sister on civil and class action. She’s a fucking beast.”

“Agreed. She might go for it. Kura doesn’t care what she practices as long as she’s in that courtroom. I think that’ll be a fun challenge for her.”

“That’s what I was thinking. Carina handles a lot of personal injury and malpractice suits. I do still need someone for family law. The attorney who handles that at the firm currently has a large caseload. I don’t want her to experience burnout so I’ll see who I can pull, but they won’t be from HGP². We’ll have a mighty team... but at the top of that list, for me, is you. Are you in?”

“I do like the idea of joining and working this with you from the ground up. It feels like I’m helping build something instead of coming into something that’s already established.”

“Sooo,” he almost sang softly, taking my hands into his as I laughed quietly. “Will you be my fake wife so we can make this happen, Maritza?”

“I will, but I’m deserving of a better proposal than this.”

His hearty laughter... the crinkles on the sides of his eyes... God. I was playing with *fire*.

“You are, and I need you to leave that up to me. Right now, all I need is a yes, and I will handle the rest.”

I thought about it again before finally agreeing with, “Yes.”

I wasn’t sure what it was about this man, or his plan, but I felt led to stand by his side. All I could do was pray I didn’t regret it.

ELEVEN

Jeremy
That Weekend

I started not to answer Maritza's call because I knew what she wanted. My weekend had been filled with one meeting after another. It was imperative that when I shifted from HGP² to my father's firm that my team be in place and ready to go. One thing my father didn't do half-ass was business and law. Just because he was making me managing partner didn't mean he wouldn't do everything in his power to strip me of that title if he felt I wasn't handling business properly.

Before I went inside Amaru's home to talk to him and Parker, I decided to answer Maritza's call so she wouldn't be anxious. The email I sent her outlined our next steps and what her salary would be as a named partner at my firm.

"Yes?" I answered, pacing on the porch instead of ringing the doorbell.

"I wanted to make sure you sent that email to the right person."

Smiling, I squeezed the bridge of my nose. "You're the only woman I'm pursuing to be my fake wife, so yeah, that was for you. I took the liberty of crafting a contract for us to go over together to make sure you know you'll be taken care of."

"And I appreciate that." She paused. "I'm referring to the salary that you are offering."

"Was it not enough?"

Maritza chuckled. “Uh, yeah. It’s enough. It’s two hundred thousand dollars more than what Violet offered me.”

“Oh. Well, the offer still stands.”

“Jeremy, are you sure? I know I’m a damn good lawyer and I will be a phenomenal named partner, but I don’t want you to spend more of your budget on payroll than you should. Five hundred and twenty-four thousand a year for a first-year named partner is a lot. Plus, you’re offering a six-figure signing bonus.”

“And you’ll also be receiving quarterly bonuses for billable hours instead of yearly like at HGP². I’m going to make you doing this worth it, Maritza. Let me.”

She sighed into the receiver. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m about to meet with Ru and Parker. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay.”

After disconnecting the call, I rang the doorbell. People would be surprised to know what the partners at my father’s firm made after payroll. They may not have had as many clients on retainer as HGP² did, but paying my team wasn’t even the least of my concerns. On top of the large profit margin, they did a lot of pro bono work, which made them the first choice with a lot of political and religious organizations.

AJ answered, giving me a handshake before letting me know the men were in the dining room. I made my way inside and we all shook hands. I wasted no time thanking them for theirs and getting down to business. It was risky letting them know I planned to leave before telling Violet, but I knew I could trust them, if just off the strength of Amelia. Besides, I had something to offer them to make their transition smoother.

“How did the two of you intend to get out of the non-compete clause?” I asked.

They looked at each other, and Amaru spoke up first. “The only option we have is to pay, right? From my understanding of the bylaws, we can’t practice law in Tennessee for two years after leaving unless a partner releases us from that clause voluntarily, or we pay two million dollars.”

“I’m not trying to count your pockets, but do either of you have that type of liquid cash to put up for this?”

“Honestly, no,” Parker answered. “But we were able to work out loans with [Tate Banking](#) to make that happen.”

My head shook as I sat up in my seat and crossed my arms on top of the table. “I can get you out of the clause without having to take out such a large loan. Both of you are transitioning into new phases of life. Parker, with your new wife. And you plan to propose to my sister soon, Ru.” They both nodded their agreement. “You both plan to leave at the end of February, right?”

“Right,” Amaru agreed.

“I leave early March. I can sign off on the redaction of the clause before I leave, and you’ll be free to practice without having to pay to do so.”

“Will that require us to work with you?” Parker checked.

“No. I know you two may have a certain perception of me. This is my way of showing you both I’m not the monster the firm has made me out to be.” Standing, I continued. “I get why you want to go in business for yourselves. I’m offering you the freedom and flexibility you want with twice the salary. You won’t have to kill yourselves trying to hit billable hours goals. That will always be a bonus, as it was intended to be. You won’t have to build your firm from the ground up. The only incentive I’m offering is the pay and signing bonus. Getting y’all out of the clause has nothing to do with this.”

“How long do we have to decide?” Amaru asked.

“Until the end of this month.”

“Cool,” he agreed.

“Sounds good,” Parker added.

I left his home feeling lighter. There was no point in me asking Amelia because she had already made it clear she was staying with Mecca. She was a great negotiator, and he was a great litigator. I wished I could take them with me, but their place was at HGP² and I would honor that. For now, I was more than confident with the team I was building, and it would only get better from here.

TWELVE

Maritza
Jeremy was winning my sister over just as easily as he was winning me over. Earlier in the week, we went over the contract he'd had drawn up and a few pertinent details. It was his idea that we start hanging out to have a more authentic bond and get to know the facts about each other. I was cool with that when we agreed, but now, I was nervous about being alone with him. Lunch with Sakura was a better option.

While we were there, he shared some great news with Sakura. His father helped him land a billion-dollar client that Victor used to go to school with. He was in town for the holidays and let them know about the business ventures he had in mind for the city. Victor and Jeremy convinced him to utilize an attorney for his land development deals so he wouldn't have to travel from Denver to Memphis frequently. Victor expected Jeremy to take him on, but Jeremy recommended my sister instead. It wasn't her usual style, but for the retainer amount and small amount of legwork she'd have to do for him, she didn't turn it down.

Jeremy was going to originally offer it to me, but I'd just accepted a crime of passion case that would be my priority. We were having lunch and Sakura was asking Jeremy about his habits and routines when I got the call that I could finally go and see my new client. I excused myself and left, because I was curious about this woman and if the rumors I'd been hearing were true. She'd been arrested for murder but hadn't been processed yet. That meant one of two things: they had no evidence, or she had friends or family in high places.

It took me about ten minutes to make it downtown to speak with her.

After being led to the interrogation room where she was being held, I made sure the cameras and microphones were off before going inside. The room was cold because discomfort often made people confess quicker just to get out. The black chairs were thin and hard as I sat across from her at the square table.

She was beautiful. Her skin was cocoa brown and flawless. Striking, sculpted features gave her a modelesque vibe. Wide, expressive eyes stared back at me as she rocked in her seat.

“Rem Thompson?” I confirmed. She nodded. “My name is Maritza Amaretto. I received a call requesting my presence as your representation. Do you have an idea who would have done that?” She nodded again, eyes shifting around the room. “This conversation is confidential. No prying eyes or ears here.”

Rem relaxed a bit in her seat. “My brother, Grim.” There weren’t too many people in the city named Grim, but I refused to believe she was referring to Tim Blane, Sakura’s current fling. If she was, why hadn’t he called her? Conflict of interest?

“Tim?” I confirmed.

“Yes.”

“You’re Reverend Blane’s daughter?”

She smiled. “Yes. I’m not originally from here. He and my mother were never in a relationship. I actually didn’t find out they were related to me until...” Her mouth snapped shut. “If someone called you on my behalf, it was him. But I can’t pay you...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Whoever it was had payment delivered to my office earlier. The deposit for the retainer, at least. Tell me what happened.”

Her hands slid up and down her arms as she swallowed. I saw the detachment in her eyes as she stared into the distance. I knew that stare all too well.

“I snapped. Peter was perfect when we met five years ago. We got married and he turned into a monster. He cheated repeatedly and abused me mentally and emotionally. He was a fucking narcissist.” The bark of laughter she released was like a knife to my heart. “I tried to leave him over and over again but never could fully. He would beg me to stay, love bomb me, then start up with his bullshit all over again. This last time, he cheated and gave me something. I caught him in bed with another woman when I went to

confront him and I just... snapped. At that moment, I felt like he would never do right by me. Never let me leave. Never leave me alone.” Her tears started to release. “I genuinely felt like I had no way out.” Her eyes found mine. “I’ve tried to leave him, I swear I have. But he loved me in this sick way of his and never planned to let me go.” Rem’s head dipped. “I accepted what he gave, so he had no reason to. I just... I couldn’t take it anymore. I was tired of him hurting me. I needed it to be over.”

“Do you have proof of the cheating and abuse?”

She nodded, wiping her tears. “Yes. I have pictures and videos of the women he’s cheated with. Apparently, he has someone pregnant but he was denying it. I also have text and videos of him abusing me... bringing me down to the point I believed him when he said I wasn’t shit without him and no one else would want me. He took care of me financially and I’d moved away from my family, so I didn’t have anyone else. I felt trapped. I know that’s no excuse to kill anyone but...” Her head shook as she sobbed. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

Every time I heard about a woman being treated horribly in the name of love, it made me all the more grateful for the safe, healthy love I experienced with Matt. Even if I never experienced it again, I would cherish the way he loved me for the rest of my life.

I promised Rem that I would work her case as best as I could before going to speak with the lead detective to figure out what evidence they had, if any, and why she hadn’t been processed yet. He told me that her father had called in a favor with the mayor to allow his daughter to not be taken downtown and processed just yet. Because she was facing a murder charge, there was a really good chance she wouldn’t have a bond, or it would be high. The woman her ex was with was their witness and the reason she’d been taken into custody. She knew all about Rem and fucked with her man any-damn-way. I’m surprised Rem didn’t put a bullet in her scandalous ass too.

Lewis may not have wanted her processed, but there was no point in trying to avoid the inevitable. The quicker she was processed, the quicker we could get her in front of a judge and out on bond. I was hoping because she had no criminal record that we could get the bond amount as low as possible. Regardless, Rem was going home soon, and I was going to do everything in my power to make sure that happened.

She would be the first person on the opposite end of the gun that I represented. Her being a victim of abuse was the only reason her story

resonated with me. I'd seen the effects of abuse and cheating on women and how those situations could turn deadly. As much as I hated when a person pulled the trigger and ended someone else's life, I hated a man abusing a woman just as much.

THIRTEEN

Jeremy

Maritza and I covered the facts about each other on a surface level yesterday in preparation for dinner with my parents today and I was glad we did. Every question they asked about her, they directed to me. Her age, her birthday, her parents' names and occupations. It felt more like an interview than them trying to genuinely get to know her. I was cool with that. When my father asked to speak with me after dinner was over in his study, that's when I started to get irritated.

I knew he was about to be on some bullshit because he massaged the hair on his chin with one hand on his belt as he paced. Standing in front of the door with my hands cupped in the center of me, I waited for what I was sure would be a quick conversation. Knowing Maritza's past, I didn't want her alone with Mom for too long. She couldn't wait to have grandkids, and I didn't want her saying or doing anything to trigger Maritza.

"Your mother is open to this. She's warm. I'm suspicious."

"About?"

"You and her. It's suspicious to me that when you find out about your mother wanting you married before you become managing partner, you mysteriously are in a relationship."

"Pops..."

"If the relationship is fake, I'm okay with that. My only concern is what she will do when this is over."

"You haven't known her long enough or been around us long enough to have an opinion on if my feelings for her are real."

"Look, if they are, I'm happy for you. But if they aren't, just let me in on

it so I can help you. The last thing I need is for the truth to come out and for your mom to get hurt in the process.”

I chuckled, lifting my foot and placing it against the door. “Because that’s all you care about, right?”

Pops didn’t hesitate when he said, “Yeah, it is. My main concern is keeping her happy.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“I find it amusing that you’re willing to do whatever it takes to keep her happy when it comes down to hurting or denying others, not when it comes down to actually loving her and giving her what she needs from you.”

His pacing stopped and he frowned as he looked at me. “The fuck you just say to me?”

“You heard me, Pops. Mama was unhappy with you working like crazy so y’all separated. You gave her space, which is the opposite of what she wanted, just so you could continue to work. Then you fucked around and got another woman pregnant, which made it worse. Instead of you making changes or divorcing her, you made your child suffer and go without you. It’s been this way my whole fucking life. You make demands of everyone else for the sake of making her happy when all she’s ever wanted and needed to be happy was a healthy marriage with you.” I opened the door to leave. “You can talk all the shit you want about me, but don’t ever mention my relationship and its authenticity again.”

I stormed down the hall, frowning so hard the shit made my head hurt.

“Let’s go,” I grumbled, lifting Maritza out of her seat across from Mom.

“Is everything okay?” she checked as I used her elbow to lead her out of the dining room.

“Yeah.”

“You’re leaving so soon, son?”

“Yeah,” I tossed over my shoulder to Mom. I didn’t even want to look at her right now out of fear that I’d take my frustration out on her. It was her fault I had to even do this shit to begin with. If she would have left his ass years ago, she wouldn’t have felt she had to force something so serious as marriage onto me.

“It was nice seeing you again, Mrs. Phoenix,” Maritza said as I gently shoved her out of the front door.

“You too!”

As I closed the door, I heard her asking my father what he'd said to make me mad.

Maritza waited until we were in my Aston Martin DB11 and driving out of the driveway to ask, "Do you want to talk about it?"

I didn't, but I didn't want to ruin her mood either. As I drove with no real destination in mind, I told her about my fucked-up childhood, why Milli and I weren't raised together, and the real reason my mom wanted me married before I took over Pops' firm. She took my hand into hers, which I wasn't expecting because she made it clear what her love languages were and that there would be no affection between us unless it was for show.

The rest of the ride was done in silence until we pulled up downtown. A food tour was going on, so we decided to end the night doing that. After our third food truck, my mood was lighter. And she was still holding my hand.

We talked about how she'd gotten Rem bonded out for a quarter of a million. The prosecution wanted a million-dollar bond. Grim had the right idea calling Maritza. I'm sure he didn't know how triggering the case could have been for her, and I was honestly surprised she took it—but when I heard the facts, I was glad she did.

The more we talked, the more time got away from us. It wasn't until she yawned that I checked the time on my phone, seeing that it was well after midnight. Though I was enjoying her company, I decided to take her home since we both had long days ahead of us. When I dropped her off, Sakura was just getting in from a date with a man who wasn't Grim. Apparently, she was tired of him keeping secrets from her ever since she found out about his sister and was teaching him a lesson by putting space between them. I didn't know how long that would last, but I hoped when he finally resurfaced, that he would be honest with her about who he truly was.

Sakura was a smart woman. I was sure she had her suspicions. But love was a motherfucker. It made you blind to things that were right in your face. For her sake, I prayed that wouldn't be the case.

FOURTEEN

M aritza
End of January

The month went by in a blur. We were spending more time with my family and less with his... well, his parents. We were hanging out with Amelia, Amaru, and the rest of the crew a lot. After Sunday dinner with my family, we went out with the crew. Shalom's little belly seemed to grow overnight. She was so cute with her glow. I asked if they had decided on adopting Mecca's unborn cousin yet and they hadn't. They wanted to but feared getting excited and Symphony decide to keep the baby. Seems she was all over the place with what she wanted to do, but they were patient with her.

Somehow, the topic of them potentially raising two babies just a few months apart led to them asking me if I wanted children since Sakura and I were the new girls in the group. I answered truthfully, letting them know I'd love to have another baby one day, and I think *another* is what confused them. I didn't bother to go into detail, and they didn't ask. A baby had always been my desire—it was love from a man that I was avoiding.

Jeremy must have sensed a change in my mood after that because he used having an early morning as an excuse for us to leave. When we arrived at my home, he asked if I wanted him to come inside. I appreciated how gentle he was with me during times like these. He never made me feel bad about my hurt... my grief. Instead, he made space for it. For me.

When we made it to my room, I wasted no time undressing and taking a

shower. Showers were always my sacred time with God. To shed my tears. Recharge. By the time I was done, Jeremy was half-asleep. He looked good in my bed. Like he belonged. My silver sheets were halfway up his chest. His left arm was tossed over his head. Lazy eyes flitted over to me, and he gave me a sexy smile.

“Ain’t no flaw in you, Lovie. You’re beautiful.”

I looked down at myself absently and smiled. If the sight of me in an oversized sleep shirt warranted that compliment, so be it.

And Lovie... that was new.

After climbing into bed, I snuggled up against him. He always smelled so good—intoxicating and sensual. I needed skin to skin, so after using the remote to cut my lights off, I took my shirt off. Jeremy was ever the gentleman... holding me close, caressing my back, kissing my forehead. My frame melted against his as I sighed, allowing myself to surrender to how good it felt to be held by him.

I hated to bring it up, especially now, but I still asked, “Are we still set with the plan? It seems like you aren’t interested in convincing your parents this is real. March will be here before we know it.”

“We are. They’ll believe it’s real. It might not be for you, but it is for me.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I remained silent. I did like him and cared for him, but not to the point where I was willing to confess those feelings and be in a relationship with him. At the most, I was willing to enjoy whatever this was between us until one year after our marriage. Then, we’d divorce, and return to a strictly professional relationship.

FIFTEEN

Jeremy

“You’re the best, thank you.” Maritza ended the call and squealed.

“Good news?” I asked, though it was obvious it was.

“Yes. That was Marilyn. She was able to get the prosecution to drop the request for a gag order. I want everyone to know Rem’s story before the trial starts in six months. Now, they will be able to.”

Marilyn was like a real-life Olivia Pope. When Maritza started getting heat from the prosecution about the interviews she and Rem had been doing, she called Marilyn and her firm for assistance.

“And you’re sure a bench trial is the way to go? I’d think you’d want to sway her peers.”

“I heavily considered that, but it’ll be too risky convincing them she believed ending his life was the only way to save hers. If I argue crime of passion to a jury, even if they believe that was the case, they would still find her guilty of second-degree murder or manslaughter and give her the least amount of time possible. With a judge, I can argue the very definition of both against crimes of passion for a non-guilty verdict.”

I was impressed... thoroughly... but I shouldn’t have been surprised. “That’s smart, Lovie. Damn, I’m impressed.”

She gave me a soft giggle that made my heart squeeze. It did that a lot with her. I looked over at her, temporarily being blinded by her beauty.

Maritza had this jar filled with things for us to do to continue to build our bond that went beyond the traditional dinner and a movie. Tonight, we were supposed to go blind shopping for snacks and clothes to wear for our evening together. I was a little concerned about the clothes we'd end up picking for each other, but I was down for it.

“Are you sure we gotta get the clothes from here?” I asked as we pulled up to Ross in Collierville.

Maritza laughed as she nodded. “You have something against Ross?”

“Nah, it's not that. I'm just concerned about how this shit is about to look.”

Her cackle as she unbuckled her seatbelt made me chuckle, though I was serious. “It's not going to be your usual suit and tie, but that's the point. It's gonna be fun!”

I didn't want to give her a hard time about it, so I got out of the SUV and headed to her side. We crossed the street hand in hand. For her to not want us to be affectionate, she'd been initiating it a lot lately. I never said anything about it because if it was instinctual and not intentional, her being mindful of it would cause her to stop doing it. It showed me that, even if she didn't want to admit it, she liked being with me and was comfortable with me.

When we made it into the store, she immediately got so high off happiness, I was sure she'd float to the ceiling. It was nice seeing her like this. We recorded each other picking the outfits. As we walked the aisle, we had to touch the items, and when we said stop, whatever the other person's hand was on was what we had to wear.

She ended up getting red leggings, a green and tan plaid shirt, silver rain boots, and a hot pink bubble coat.

I was stuck with a purple and black sweater, orange cargo pants, camouflage boots, and a navy-blue raincoat.

As much as I was unsure about this, it was fun and hilarious. We died laughing at our outfits since we changed into them in the dressing rooms. After taking several pictures, we headed out of the store. I was cool with us grabbing dinner and going skating afterward. I figured our attire would put smiles on other people's faces. Plus, it was nice not having to be so put together for a change.

Over dinner, we got a few laughs and stares, but that was cool. We talked about typical date topics—goals, fears, dreams, motivations. It was nice getting to know her on a more intimate level mentally. The more I knew her,

the more I liked her. The more I wanted her. I was okay sharing my desire for her with her, but I had no expectations of Maritza. She had made it clear she wasn't interested in being half-loved. Though I believed I could love her wholly, sweetly, just as soft and deep as she needed me to, I also understood and accepted I couldn't compete with how things were with her husband and her memory of him.

All I could do was try my best, give her my all, and hope that would be enough. If it wasn't, we'd part ways after being married for a year, and I'd be able to say I tried. That was too far in the future for me to worry about. For now, I was thoroughly enjoying her company, and by the shining in her eyes and the huge smile on her face, it was clear just how much she was enjoying mine too.

SIXTEEN

M aritza

Our date night turned into a date day. We went to my place and Jeremy spent the night after we sipped whiskey and gazed at the stars. He woke up before me and went home to freshen up before coming back so we could have breakfast together. Breakfast turned into happy hour and dinner with unlimited cocktails. Now, we were grinding against each other on the makeshift dancefloor in the middle of the restaurant without a care in the fucking world.

I kept telling my heart it was dangerous to continue to spend so much time with this man, but it didn't care. It liked the way it felt with him.

He looked down at me with telltale signs of his slight inebriation—glossy eyes, goofy smile—I'd never seen him so happy, relaxed, and beautiful.

I loved the way he looked at me. I wanted to ask him what he was thinking, how he felt when he looked at me in that way. A way that showed something it was too soon for him to say. To feel. Something I was too scared to hear.

My eyes drifted to his lips. Those juicy, thick, brown lips.

“Kiss me,” I commanded, tightening my grip around his neck.

His brows wrinkled in confusion before he smirked.

“You told me if I kissed you again, you'd rip my lips off and feed them to your neighbor's dog.”

My eyes lowered to his lips again as we shared a laugh.

“I lied,” I confessed before lowering him to me by his neck.

The more we kissed, the wetter my pussy became. Each time he rubbed or squeezed my ass I released sighs of contentment against his lips.

“Where else can I kiss you?” His hand slipped forward, settling between my thighs. “Hmm?”

“Jeremy,” fell from my lips in a whisper as the pads of his fingers brushed against my clit.

“Can I kiss you here too?”

“Yes.”

He lifted himself, looking into my eyes for further confirmation. When he found it, he used my hand and led me back over to the table, where he placed enough bills to cover the ticket and leave behind a hefty tip.

We made it out to his Lexus, and I was glad he’d driven this instead of his two-seater. Jeremy opened the back door and helped me inside. My low-cut blue jean mini dress didn’t stand a chance against him. He lifted it to my waist, pushing my panties to the side and over my ass cheek.

The moan he released as his eyes trailed over me just before the lights went out made my eyes flutter. His fingers grazed my thighs and I shuddered. The second his tongue slid against my thigh they locked against him. Jeremy’s hands took hold of my waist as he brushed his nose against my soaked opening.

“We don’t have to do this, Lovie,” he assured me. “This is more than enough for me.”

“I want to.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I moaned, spreading my thighs.

Each time his fingers gripped them, it felt hot—like he was branding me. By the time I finally felt his breath and tongue on my clit, my chest heaved as I struggled to breathe. I wanted to tell myself my reaction to him was so intense because it had been so long since I’d been with a man. That wasn’t true. This was him. And I wouldn’t deny him of that.

Jeremy held onto me, caressing and squeezing my ass as he slowly feasted on my pussy. It felt so good I fed myself to him, holding his head in place as his hands went up to my waist. He took his time... as if he was getting just as much pleasure out of this as I was. His hands slipped up to my nipples, tweaking them and squeezing my breasts as he moaned against me. I

held on for quite a while, but when his hand wrapped around my neck, that was my undoing.

Back arching, mouth opening, I moaned a warning that I was about to cum. He stayed there, giving my clit short, fat licks that had me crumbling underneath him as I came. Jeremy covered my pussy with my panties as he made his way up my frame. Locking his eyes with mine in the darkness, he palmed my pussy, stroking my clit through the fabric, preparing me for another release.

I clung to him, nails digging into his arms as my chin trembled through my deep breathing.

“You look so pretty when you cum,” he whispered against my lips, shooting my orgasm through me a hell of a lot quicker than I’d intended to release it.

My hand went to his jeans, but he lifted it over my head. “Not like this. You deserve better when I give you this dick.” He squeezed my hand and kissed my smile away.

This was new. And exciting. And I liked it. I liked him. And I think... I think I’m okay with that.

SEVENTEEN

Jeremy

Maritza surprised me when she watched the football game with me and her father. She mentioned being into sports, but I didn't believe she would actually know much about it. Hearing her not only talk about players but plays made my dick hard. By the end of the game, I was full of beer and party food, ready to nap and get ready for my week. Since I was preparing to leave the firm, I was careful about not taking on any new clients and avoiding trial. It wasn't always my preference to prioritize litigation over trial, but that's what I'd be doing for the next month.

I was surprised by the sight of my father's missed calls when I checked the time on my phone. This was the third Sunday in a row that I wouldn't be there for dinner, and I was more than okay with that. It seemed I'd taken a page out of my sister's book and desired to cater to my father's ego less. She and I had been getting along better. It wasn't just on me to call her and make plans; she was putting forth the effort too. That made my heart smile.

After saying goodbye to Maritza's people, I confirmed if she wanted me to take her home or not. She did, so I told her I'd be waiting in the car for her so I could return my father's phone call. I had no idea what he wanted to talk about, so I figured it was wise to speak with him privately.

Once I had the car cut on and heating, I called him back. It took him a while to answer, but eventually, he did.

“Took you long enough to call back,” he grumbled, making me smile. He’d never say he was wrong. He would never say he missed me. This was as good as it would get with him.

“You and Mom good?”

“If I say we are, you’re going to end the call?”

“Unless you’re ready to apologize, yeah.”

“Apologize for what, Jeremy?”

“For how you treated me and my sister. How you still treat my mama. I’m done downplaying and accepting that. If you’re not going to apologize and change, I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“Your pride is worth losing the job of your dreams?”

That made me chuckle. My anger was about to brew, but at the sight of Maritza heading out to the car, she calmed me. I didn’t even bother taking the call off Bluetooth. I didn’t care about her hearing how fucked up my relationship with my father could be at times. People swore we had the best bond because we laughed and joked a lot, but they had no idea.

“If you’re willing to cancel our agreement because I’m holding you accountable that’s cool, Pops. What I said stands.”

“I will not apologize for not being a better father. I did the best I fucking could.”

“Aight, Pops.”

My finger hovered over the button to end the call, but the tired sigh he released stopped me. “Did you ever consider you and your sister didn’t *deserve* more of me?” He chuckled. “I gave you both more money than you could spend. I taught you all I know about law, sports, and politics. What more did your selfish, greedy ass *want*?”

“Maybe a father who gave him unconditional love and acceptance. Support. A bond that went beyond superficial things he could talk to a stranger about,” Maritza answered.

“Who the fuck is that?” Pops asked.

“My woman,” slipped out so effortlessly it felt real.

“Do better, Attorney Phoenix. All the good you do for your firm and our community won’t mean shit when you die if your own kids don’t care enough to mourn you and show up at your funeral.”

She disconnected the call from the dashboard before casually buckling her seatbelt. For a while, all I could do was stare at her. What she’d said was true. Our father hadn’t given us unconditional *anything*. Everything he gave

came with conditions or needed to be earned—even with the management position he was offering.

Throughout my entire life, I couldn't think of anyone who chose, intentionally, to unconditionally love, support, or accept me. No one ever took up for me. Protected me. Made me feel safe—secure. Wanted for who I was, not for what I had to offer or the family I came from. It felt dangerous for Maritza to be the woman to change that.

I couldn't pull myself to believe she'd done that organically, so as I reversed, I told her, “Thanks for playing your part, but you didn't have to. I can handle him.”

Maritza gave me a half smile. “I wasn't playing, and I know you can. But you got me now... so you don't always have to.”

“You understand you're playing a dangerous game, right?”

She chuckled, taking my hand into hers as we cruised out of her parents' neighborhood.

“And how is that?”

“If you give me things no other woman has, this fake relationship will become real.”

“Jeremy, I—”

“I always get what I want, and if you keep that up, that's going to be you.”

Her mouth opened and snapped shut without releasing a response. That was cool. There wasn't anything she could say that would change my mind.

When we made it to her home, she couldn't get out of the car fast enough. I was amused by the fact that she didn't even wait for me to let her out before she scurried up to her front door and unlocked it as quickly as she could with trembling fingers. My steps were casual as I made my way to the front door. Even if she didn't let me in, my sister would. The bond Sakura and I were developing had become separate from Maritza and me. She was cool as hell and reminded me of how I wished things would have been between me and Amelia from the beginning. Having them both seemed like a blessing.

To my surprise, Maritza hadn't locked the door behind herself. I don't think it was intentional, because I heard her telling her sister, “That man's going to make me love him, Kura, and I-I really don't want to.”

“Huh? Sissy...” Sakura sucked her teeth before pulling Maritza into her arms as she sniffled. “Why not? You don't think you'd be safe with him?”

“It's not that it's just... I can't do that to Matt. He's my husband.”

“No, he’s not,” Sakura replied quickly, firmly. “Not anymore. I loved my brother-in-law, but he’s *gone*, Ritz. There’s nothing he can do for you from the grave. No one will shame you for holding on to your memories with him, but Jeremy’s here... now... and he’s trying to give you things Matt’s memory can’t. You’d be wise not to push him away.”

I took quiet steps backward, feeling like I’d intruded on a moment that didn’t have anything to do with me. There was nothing I could say to make Maritza feel better. Maybe her sister’s words could. Regardless, I’d fall back. I wanted Maritza to be open to me, not hurting because of how she felt about me. If she felt guilty over what was happening between us personally, I’d try to stick to our plan professionally.

EIGHTEEN

M aritza
Just a Few Days Before Valentine's Day

Things had been off between Jeremy and me. He wasn't calling or texting me anymore or stopping by my office throughout the day. For the past week, he and Sakura had been having lunch without me. I'm not sure what made him start to detach from me on a personal level or why it hurt me that he did. I should have been grateful. This was what I needed, even if it wasn't what I wanted. I was scared to feel anything deep for another man outside of my husband and that was happening with Jeremy.

Now that he'd hit the brakes, I felt like I was losing someone I cared about and was starting to love all over again. This time, it was worse. With my husband, I didn't have to see him again. Seeing Jeremy daily and not experiencing him in the same way as I once was, was beginning to feel like torture.

I leaned against his opened doorframe, admiring him for a few seconds before gently tapping it to gain his attention. He looked up at me, and the smile in his eyes didn't lower to his mouth.

That stung.

"Hey," I spoke before gritting my teeth.

He looked so damn good in his olive-green suit. The fresh haircut he sported was begging me to scratch his scalp, but I couldn't.

Those were the days.

“Hey.”

“Um... my daddy wanted me to invite you over to watch the Super Bowl game Sunday if you don't have any plans.”

“Are you going to be there?”

Yikes.

“Yes.”

Jeremy sighed with a shake of his head. “Then I'll pass, but tell him I said thank you for the invitation.”

It felt like his words were like little needles piercing my heart. My eyes watered, but I wouldn't dare cry over his rejection. More than anything, I was hurt that I was angry because of it. Chuckling, I pushed myself off his doorframe.

“I was wondering when this would happen. When the you that everyone warned me about would show up.”

“You don't get to do that,” he said firmly, standing and tossing his pen onto his desk.

“Do *what?*”

“Make me feel like shit for doing what's best for you.”

“How is switching up on me what's best for me?” I asked, voice slightly raised.

He released a hard breath, palms flat on his desk. “I don't want to hurt you,” he muttered, and for a second, I was genuinely confused.

Closing his office door behind me, I walked over to his desk. “How could you hurt me?”

Jeremy's head shook as he turned and looked out of the window, avoiding my eyes. “This that we're doing... it needs to just be about the arrangement. All the extra time we've been spending together, that needs to stop.”

I agreed, but I still couldn't stop myself from asking, “Why?”

“Because you don't want me the way I want you.” My shoulders slouched as I massaged my chest. It hurt. “And I don't want to hurt you by treating you in a way that would make you.”

“Jeremy...”

“You made it clear you didn't want a real relationship. I'm going to honor that.”

I wanted to tell him that wasn't what I wanted. That was the *opposite* of what I needed. But I couldn't do that to him or to myself. Instead, as I wiped away a fallen tear I whispered, “Thank you.”

He nodded but didn't say anything else. He stayed there, gazing out the window until I left. My feet felt like cement was drying around them as I walked. The further away from him I got, the harder it was to walk. But this was for the best, so why did it hurt so damn bad?

I was jealous. My family was having the time of their lives with Jeremy, and he was barely acknowledging me. After I told Daddy he declined the invitation, he got his number from Sakura and called him personally. He had the nerve to tell Jeremy what we had going on didn't have shit to do with them and to bring his ass to the party. So here he was—drinking and smoking with my people without me as if he belonged here.

He looked like he did.

Since the game was over, I decided to make my exit. Slowly, I walked in their direction in the basement my dad had turned into his man cave. The only time he allowed women inside was for family parties like this one.

“All right, y'all, I'm heading out.”

“Jeremy, walk my daughter to her car.”

Jeremy's smile faded as he briefly stared at my father, causing Sakura and Mama to chuckle, but he nodded his agreement and stood.

“It's fine. I know ho—”

“Just let the man walk you to your car, Ritz,” Mama said, standing and giving me a hug.

After hugging the rest of my immediate family and telling everyone else goodbye, Jeremy and I headed upstairs out of the basement. His hands were stuffed into his pockets, head hung and eyes avoiding me. It was awkwardly silent until we neared the front door when he finally spoke.

“I hope you're not leaving early because of me.”

“Oh no, it's not that,” I lied, happy he was finally sending some energy my way.

“It's just... I really like your people. Y'all have the kind of connection I wish I had with my parents and sister. But if me being around makes you uncomfortable...”

“It's fine. Really.”

This was one time I hated he was a man of honor—one who was willing

to give me what I needed even if it wasn't what either of us wanted. Silence found us again until we made it to my car. He reached to open the door, but I shifted in front of the handle so he couldn't.

"Maritza..."

"Lovie," I corrected. "I like it better when you call me that."

He pressed me into my car, palm lifting from my chest to my neck. My eyes lowered and mouth parted instantly.

I loved when he did that.

"Okay, Lovie."

My eyes squeezed shut and nipples hardened.

"What should I call you?"

Jeremy's hand lifted to my cheek, causing me to pry my eyes open. "Yours." He placed a feather-light kiss to my lips that made me weak at the knees. "Even if you're never mine..." He kissed me again, this time a little harder. "I'll always be yours." Wrapping my arms around his neck, I sighed against his lips. "I'll share you with him. If that's what you need."

His declaration touched a place in my soul that had been abandoned for the last ten years. My eyes immediately blurred until tears fell. I wasn't aware there was a password to unlock my heart, but that was it.

God... *that was it.*

Lowering him to my lips, I rested firmly against the car. Because, quite frankly, I wasn't sure I had the strength to stand. "I'm sorry," I muttered against his lips.

"Shh." He kissed me again. "I got you now."

Jeremy's arms wrapped around me tighter as my legs bent. Silent cries turned into sobs that had me sliding down the car. He didn't judge me... or leave me. He sat next to me—holding me as I cried over the best love I'd ever known—wondering if Jeremy would be the next love I'd get to experience. If I was going to grant us the honor of giving this a real chance, it wouldn't be fair to compare him to Matt. That would take some time to process, but if he was willing to wait, I'd make sure I would be worth it.

NINETEEN

Jeremy

Starting my day with news from Amaru and Parker that they were on board to join me at the firm was the perfect start to my day. Knowing I would see Maritza soon made it better. I had breakfast delivered for her and Sakura. Since we were going to see my parents, she would need her strength. We had two weeks before I planned to leave HGP², which meant, even though I didn't want to talk to my father, I needed to know if the management position was still on the table.

Even if it wasn't, I was going to leave. I had more than enough money saved to take some time off from work. But now, it wasn't just about me. Several people were looking forward to the transition and the benefits that came from it. So if I had to humble myself and try to make this work for their sake, I would.

Today would also be the first time Maritza would visit my home, but since we were pressed for time, I would have to show her when we got back from my parents' place. She called me and let me know she was pulling up. Instead of letting her in, I had her park in the only available space in my four-car garage so we could head out.

She was leaning against my white Camaro looking good enough to eat—again. I still hadn't gotten over how good she tasted. How creamy her pussy was. How pretty she looked when she came. How melodious each moan she

released sounded. Shaking my head, I tried to get those thoughts out of it as I walked over to her.

Maritza's hair was in its signature style—loose curls that hung past her breasts with a middle part. I was thoroughly enjoying seeing her outside of her silk shirts, slacks, and pantsuits. Today, she was dressed in light-wash jeans, black boots that came just over her knees, and a loose-fitting sweater.

“You look beautiful.” I opened the door for her, resisting the urge to kiss her. It felt like we'd made progress last night, but I wasn't entirely sure, so I'd follow her lead.

“Thank you. You look very handsome. And you smell good, as always.” Her arms wrapping around me surprised me. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too. You should stay here tonight.”

With her arms still wrapped around me, she looked up at me with those slanted, honey-brown eyes. “You sure?”

“Positive.”

Her voice was light as she said, “Okay.”

I didn't want her to change her mind, so I quickly opened the door and helped her inside. We made small talk on the drive. I purposely avoided heavy topics. The less she stayed in her head, the better.

When we pulled up to my parents' home, I thanked her for taking the day to do this with me. I wasn't sure what state I would be in mentally, so I opted out of going to the office. I wasn't expecting her to do the same. I wasn't sure if it was her intention, but Maritza was showing me how great of a partner she was... yet another thing to make me feel as if I was falling in love with her.

After knocking, I made my way inside with my key. I found my parents in the sunroom. He was sipping coffee; she had tea. They looked peaceful and content, almost like a normal, happy couple. I'm sure moments like this made my mother believe this was possible forever, seeing as it was all she wanted from him.

She stood, giving us both hugs and asking Maritza if she wanted to spend some time with her that weekend. Maritza agreed, which I appreciated. My mother, though she was the reason for this, sincerely wanted what was best for me, so I believed she genuinely wanted to get to know Maritza. A part of me was grateful for how things had transpired now because if they hadn't, I wouldn't have taken steps toward getting to know Maritza on a personal level. I'd always believed she was beautiful and intriguing, but no woman

had been worth shifting my priority.

Pops looked from Maritza to me, offering no words. He waited until we were seated to start with, “Young lady, if you ever get in my family business and disrespect me again...”

“You can stop right there,” I interrupted him to say. “Whatever the fuck you think is about to happen right now with her, ain’t.”

“Jeremy, don’t disrespect your father,” Mom said.

“Then tell him not to even *think* about disrespecting my wife.”

I’m not sure what made me call her that. I hadn’t even proposed to her for their benefit yet. It felt natural. Her reaction to it seemed natural as well. She looked over at me with glossy eyes and smiled softly. I couldn’t look over at her. If I did and she cried, I’d want to leave and have my way with her.

Pops laughed as Mom looked from him to me. “Your wife? You don’t mention her until it’s time for you to take my place and you expect me to believe this is real?”

“Have you stopped to ask yourself why I wouldn’t want to bring a woman I care about around you?”

That seemed to leave him stumped, causing Mom to speak up.

“If you tell us this relationship is real, we’ll believe you.”

I looked over at Maritza and took her hand into mine. She lifted it and kissed it, giving me a reassuring smile.

“It’s real,” she answered for me... and if I was crazy, I’d think that wasn’t for their benefit; it was for mine.

“Well, that’s that.” Mom looked directly at Pops as she said, “And I don’t *ever* want to have this conversation again.”

The sad part was, now that she’d said that, I knew I wouldn’t have to worry about him bringing it up again...

TWENTY

M aritza
Valentine's Day

When Jeremy invited me to spend the night, it hadn't registered to me the next day would be Valentine's Day. As soon as I woke up, the thought of spending my first Valentine's Day with a man since my husband died had me wanting to run for the hills. I searched Jeremy's massive home, and he wasn't here—neither were my keys. Though the gesture of him taking them with him made me laugh, it didn't ease my rattled nerves. I was seconds away from reserving an Uber, so I called my sister instead.

“Happy Valentine's Day, sissy. Good morning!”

The sound of her chipper voice made me smile as I plopped back down on Jeremy's massive bed, which was two king-sized beds put together. His master suite was the size of me and my sister's rooms combined. I thought Violet's home would be the fanciest mansion I'd see in a while, but Jeremy had her damn near beat.

The only difference was, his wasn't as well put together. A lot of the rooms were still empty, leading me to believe it was fairly new. As far as size went, though, his home was just as large and spacious as hers. If they were making the kind of money, or had the kind of credit, to live like this... it had me questioning why Jeremy wanted to leave. However, he was offering me a hell of a lot more money than Violet was, so maybe something like this was in my future.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, beautiful. Who will get the esteemed honor and grace of your presence today?”

She sucked her teeth. “Grim, I suppose. He’s been trying to get back in my good graces.”

The fact that she called him Grim suggested she’d finally accepted what I’d told her Jeremy shared with me.

“You know what he has up his sleeve for you?”

“I’m not sure but it includes a private jet that he’s on his way to pick me up for.”

“Are you going to ask him if he’s in the streets?”

Sakura sighed. “I don’t want to.”

“Because you already know the answer.”

“I don’t want to accept it.”

“I understand, and trust me, I’m in no place to judge.”

“What are you doing on my phone anyway? Jeremy should be making a meal out of you.”

I chuckled as I pulled my knees up to my chest and rested against the headboard. “He’s gone, and he took my keys with him so I wouldn’t leave.”

“Good! You need to stay and enjoy yourself, Ritz.”

“I want to. It’s just... this will be the first Valentine’s Day I’ve shared with a man since Matt. I don’t want to be all sad and depressed and ruin it for him.”

“Then don’t. Enjoy yourself. If you feel yourself getting sad, take a moment. But enjoy whatever he plans for you. You deserve it.”

Nodding, I decided not to run. “Okay. I guess I’ll see you when you get back home.”

“Okay. I love you, and please, try to have a good time.”

“I will. I love you too.”

After disconnecting the call, I texted Jeremy, *You think you’re so cute, huh?*

I headed to his bathroom and cut the shower on, allowing the water to heat. He called me, and I couldn’t help but smile as I answered.

“Where are my keys?”

“With me.”

“And where are you?”

“On my way back home.”

“Is there a particular reason you decided to take them with you?”

“I wanted to make sure you wouldn’t try to leave before I got back.”

I chuckled. “You think you know me so well.”

“Not as well as I want to know you, but I know enough. I know today will probably be a little difficult for you, but if you let me lead, I promise it’ll be worth it.”

At this point, I didn’t have anything to lose, only more to gain. As scary as it was to let him in, I was committed to trying. So I agreed, and we ended the call. I freshened up and got back in bed since I didn’t know what he had planned for the day, praying God would allow me to accept whatever Jeremy had to offer and get out of my own way.



I’d cried happy tears literally all day. When Jeremy first made it back home, he wasn’t alone. There was a florist van behind him. They brought in twenty-three bouquets of white, pink, and red roses with a dozen in each one. We made breakfast together, then he took me shopping... in Atlanta. Sakura’s man wasn’t the only one with access to private flying. After hours in Christian Louboutin, Dior, Hermes, and Yves Saint Laurent, I piled up a bill that Jeremy didn’t even blink at. There was something sexy about him not only getting the things I wanted but adding things he wanted me to have too.

We had lunch there before flying back home, where a private spa afternoon waited for me. After that, I didn’t have energy for much else, so I was glad he only had one more thing in store—a horse and carriage ride downtown and dinner. By the time we made it back to his home, I was tired and happier than I’d been in a while. My mind was racing with things I could do to make him feel as good as he’d made me feel today, but my mind went completely blank when I walked into the bathroom and saw what he’d done for me.

My eyes watered all over again as I gritted my teeth, trying to keep the tears at bay. His large garden tub, in the center of the bathroom, was filled with bubbles and faux rose petals. Candles lined the tub and floor around it along with more petals. A tray was on the side of the tub with a glass, wine bottle, and individual-sized charcuterie tray. Al Green played softly in the background.

Jeremy placed a kiss to my neck. “Thank you for letting me serve you

today. I'm going to shower in the guest bathroom. If you're ready to leave after you soak, your keys will be on the dresser."

Before he could walk away too far, I grabbed his hand and turned him back in my direction.

"Shower with me," I requested. "Soak with me."

"Lovie..."

"Please."

Without waiting for a response, I began to undress. I was tired of being at war with myself against him. I was tired of my bed being cold. I was tired of my heart feeling so lonely. His expression hardened as he watched me. Licking his lips, Jeremy took a step back. He swallowed hard, expression softening once I stood in front of him with nothing on.

I walked over to the shower and cut the water on. Usually, I'd wait until it was piping hot, but that bath was calling my name. When I stepped inside, Jeremy began to undress to join me. I'd been blessed with the sight of him in boxers only. Tonight would be the first time I saw him completely nude. His chiseled muscles and wide frame were worth the wait. Not a blemish or tattoo was in sight. Jeremy's long, curved dick bounced as he walked toward the shower. It had me in a trance.

My eyes didn't lift until his hand was wrapping around my neck and chin. "I know your mama taught you it was impolite to stare."

"I'm tryna do more than that."

When he laughed and reached past me for the soap, I knew he wasn't taking me seriously. That was cool. I would show him better than any of my words could tell him. We showered quickly before heading over to the tub, where we caressed and fed each other while drinking out of the bottle of wine. Each song that played, we knew and sang word for word. The water grew cold three times and we refilled before finally getting out.

In his bedroom, we dried and oiled each other down. I had him get into bed, and as I massaged him, I said, "I've been thinking of what I could buy you to show you my gratitude for all that you've done for me today. Not just today but... since you kissed me." He mirrored my smile. "Your patience, and gentleness... your kindness."

"Lovie..." He turned, and I placed my finger over his lips as I continued to straddle him.

"I realized, there's nothing I can buy to return the goodness that is you for me. I have to give you me. That's... I'm the only way I can repay you for

this.”

“Maritza, I...” He looked away briefly, palming my waist. “I don’t want to make love to you if I can’t have all of you.”

“Then have all of me.”

He sat up and brushed his nose against mine. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure, baby. I want you... for real.”

Cupping my cheeks, Jeremy kissed me deeply. Each time his tongue swirled around mine I rocked my hips against him. Switching our positions, Jeremy laid me flat on the bed. His lips and tongue were all over me, to the point where, by the time he finally showed my pussy some attention, I was shivering. Gripping the bottom of the headboard, I took deep breaths as he feasted on my pussy. Our eyes were locked, but the better it felt, the harder it was for me not to close them. Eventually, I surrendered, and the pleasure intensified more.

“Eyes on me.”

At his command, my eyes fluttered open. When he latched onto my clit, my back arched. I gripped his head, keeping him there as he alternated between sucking, licking, and kissing until I came. Two fingers slipped inside of me, and his other arm wrapped around me and pressed my knees into the bed. His slow movements were the opposite of the fast, hard licks against my clit and opening.

“Oh my God,” I chanted, repeatedly digging my nails into the sheets until I came again. “Baby, please,” I begged, trying to pull him up my body.

“Did I say I was done?”

“Jeremy,” I whined, tugging him up. “I need you inside.”

“I’m going to give you this dick, but next time, don’t *ever* pull me away from my pussy.”

“Yes, Daddy,” came out organically. I’d never said that shit before in my life and hadn’t planned to now.

Jeremy chuckled as he placed his head at my opening. He slipped inside, filling me with just the head. The attention he paid to my g-spot had it swelling as I leaked against him. I held my trembling legs open, steadying the pace of my breathing as I prepared for another quick release. No man had ever made me cum with just his head before, and I didn’t know how intense it was going to be. My thighs started to close without my permission as my walls tightened.

“Baby,” I moaned.

“That’s it, princess. Give it to me.”

And I did. He wasted no time sliding all of his length inside of me as I came, causing me to cry out and moan his name. His strokes were slow and deep, so deep I could barely breathe. When he wrapped his hand around my neck, I decided I was okay dying just like this. My eyes squeezed shut as he moaned.

“I love how you open up for me.”

Whimpering, I wrapped my hands around his wrist as his grip gently tightened around my neck. Sizzling breaths escaped me as my eyes rolled into the back of my head. Gasping for air, I covered his hands with mine as they rested on my waist. A chorus of moans and curses was shared between us as he continued to fill me with slow, steady strokes.

We came together before he lowered himself to me and wrapped my legs around him. His strokes sped up as we kissed. I didn’t think it was possible, but I grew wetter as he pleurably pummeled my pussy. My nails dug into his back as I cursed and moaned into his ear. When his strokes began to grow sporadic, I knew his second orgasm would be the one to take him out. Ever the gentleman, he made me cum again before shooting his seeds inside of me.

Once our breathing was regulated, we showered before climbing back into bed. I made my way onto his chest, and it wasn’t long at all before sleep took us both captive.

TWENTY-ONE

Jeremy

For a while, I thought I'd dreamed how the day ended last night until Maritza woke me up with my dick in her mouth. After she delivered the best head I'd ever gotten in my fucking life, she rode my dick until she stole every drop of my cum. Even though we both needed to get to the firm today, it still seemed like she was leaving earlier than she should have.

"Lunch?" she confirmed, breezing past me and grabbing a cup of the coffee that automatically brewed every morning at five a.m.

"Always. Tell my sister to come too. I need to see where her head is concerning Grim."

She sighed and leaned against the counter, looking sexy as fuck in a cream-colored silk shirt with matching slacks. Her hair was slicked back into a low bun for a change, giving me an unobstructed view of her pretty face.

"Maybe you can get through to her about him because I can't. I'm not saying she should stop dating him because I don't know him; I just want her to be aware of what she's dealing with."

"That's fair."

"What's on your agenda for the day?"

"I have a manslaughter client. He's being accused of intentionally killing his best friend with a poisonous snake."

"Damn. Any proof that it was intentional?"

With a sigh, I ran my hand over my waves. “Other than the fact that he works at a pet store, brought it home after they had a fight, and allegedly accidentally left the aquarium open? Nah.”

“Sheesh.” She took another sip of her coffee before giving me a quick kiss. “I need to go. I have to go to my gynecologist for an emergency appointment before going to the office.”

“Hold up. You can’t rush out after saying something like that,” I told her, setting my coffee cup down so I could wrap my arms around her. “Did I hurt you last night?”

Maritza chuckled softly with a shake of her head. “Not at all. I’m not on birth control and you came in me, so I need to go and get some emergency contraception.”

“Oh.” My head tilted as I fully processed her words and how I wanted to respond. She was patient with me, smiling in amusement as she picked her coffee up and took another sip since I was holding her hostage. “Is that necessary?”

“Unless you want me to have your baby, yeah.”

Her chuckle stopped when she tried to walk away, and I held her tighter. Wrinkled brows hovered over those beautiful honey-brown eyes I loved looking into more and more.

“Jeremy,” she almost whispered.

“What if I do? I mean... it doesn’t have to be at this very moment, because I still want to enjoy and get to know you, but what if I do?”

Her hands rested on my chest, but before she could answer, my doorbell was ringing. I wasn’t expecting anyone, so I had no idea who that could be. Instead of checking my door camera, I released her and went to go get it. At the sight of Pops, I asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Hello to you too, son.”

He made his way into my home, movements slowing down at the sound of Maritza’s heels against the tile.

“Oh. Hi,” she spoke, heading in our direction.

Pops looked back at me with a pleased smile. “Hello, Maritza. It’s good to see you.”

“You almost said that like you meant it,” she teased, making us both laugh.

“Is this what I have to look forward to for the rest of my life? You giving me hell?” he asked, smiling widely. It appeared he liked having someone to

challenge him and not take his shit. That was new.

“I will only give you what you deserve.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek before telling him, “Have a good day, Attorney Phoenix.”

“Call me Victor,” he offered, and my mouth hung open in shock. That was new, too.

“Will do,” Maritza agreed, making her way in front of me.

“We need to finish that conversation.”

“We will, but I have to go.”

“Not to the doctor. Promise me we’ll talk first.”

“Are you sure, baby?”

I gave her a quick, tender kiss, lowering my hand to her ass. I didn’t give a damn about my father being around. This moment meant far too much to me.

“I’ve never been surer of anything in my life... other than the fact that I wanted you.”

Maritza smiled and gave me another kiss. “Okay. I’ll cancel it.”

“Good.” I opened the door. “Let me walk you to your car.”

“No, stay and talk to your dad. I’ll be fine.”

I watched until she made it to her car before closing the door. When I turned to face my father, he was standing there with his hands in his pockets. Curiosity covered his face before he chuckled.

“Well, any doubts I had about the two of you are completely gone now.”

“Good,” was all I offered, not wanting to go through that again. “Is everything okay?” I continued, leading him toward the kitchen so I could pour him a cup and finish my coffee.

“I wanted to speak with you about our transition if you have time.”

“Yeah, I’m not leaving out for another hour or so.”

After I poured him a cup of coffee, we went to the dining nook that was in the kitchen.

“You plan to leave in March, right?”

My head bobbed once. “Right.”

“And when do you intend to tell Violet?”

“March.”

He chuckled but it quickly faded. “Aren’t you required to give her more notice than that?”

“Under normal circumstances, yes, but because of what I’m trying to do and who I’m trying to bring... the later she knows, the better.”

“And that’s not going to bite you in the ass, is it?”

“Not at all. As long as she doesn’t find out before March first, I’m good.”

“Good. Do you have a team you intend to bring over with you?”

I ran over the list, and our conversation continued for another forty minutes or so. As I walked him to the door, he reminded me, “You’ll be interim managing partner the moment you step foot in those doors, but you know you won’t be officially named as my replacement until you’re married.”

I wanted to tell him that I didn’t want to rush into marriage now that things were real between me and Maritza, but I couldn’t. Even if I wanted to wait, I couldn’t. For the sake of business, things had to stay on schedule. Our relationship may have been genuine, but we’d still need to get married as soon as possible.

“I know,” was what I settled on as I opened the door for him.

After he left, I started preparing for the day with more on my mind than when I woke up. Things were moving fast in all ways. And in all ways, I was being led to a future with Maritza. Maybe a quick marriage was the only way to convince her to let me keep her forever. She agreed to us talking before she went to the doctor, but I didn’t really believe that. Maritza may have meant it when she said it, but she’d start overthinking when she got alone. All I could pray was that she didn’t shut down on me or run.

TWENTY-TWO

M aritza

As I had my meeting with a client Amaru recommended, Jeremy had flowers and breakfast delivered with a sweet note. My first instinct was to go and personally thank him. Instead, I found myself on autopilot, heading to the cemetery. Sitting between my son's and husband's graves, I allowed guilt to consume me.

Their lives were over, and I was truly happy in all areas of mine. Happy to the point where I meant it when I agreed to talk to Jeremy about us having a baby. The chances of us having a baby now were slim because I wasn't ovulating, but I really couldn't say how things would play out in the future. Deciding not to get on birth control and risk pregnancy with a man that I'd agreed to remain married to for a year in exchange for a better career was fucking *insane*.

I had the perfect life, the perfect husband, the perfect son... all taken away. It felt weird trying to have marriage and a baby in this way. Then again, what were the chances of either happening organically? Honestly, getting to know Jeremy personally was starting to feel like fate. I'd always been curious about him and found him attractive but had no plans of ever trying to make things personal between us. Now, it's hard to remember a time before him and I—and that's what makes this so scary.

It's like the last ten years led to this moment, and I was stuck between my

past and the future I could potentially have with Jeremy.

I know Matt would want me to move on, but between my love for him, guilt, and loyalty, that's a hell of a lot easier said than done. It's easier when I'm with Jeremy, but when I get alone and have time to think about what I'm doing, I feel like shit.

My phone vibrating caused me to dry my eyes. At the sight of Jeremy's number, I cried harder. I wanted to ignore him but that wouldn't be fair.

"Hello?" I sniffled.

"Where are you?"

"At their graves."

"Maritza..." He sighed. "Lovie, I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for."

"I shouldn't have even suggested you cancel that appointment. I wanted fate to guide us but it's too soon to put that kind of pressure on you."

"No, I..." I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "I wanted to let fate decide too. It's just... the reality of that... it hit me and... I feel guilty about how happy I am with you. Moving on with you. They're dead and I'm here and I should suffer until I die."

I cried so hard I didn't realize he'd hung up the phone, and that only made me cry harder... until I felt his arms wrap around me.

"Jeremy?" I asked in disbelief as he got comfortable next to me. "How'd you know where I was?"

"Sakura." I nodded, wiping my face. I didn't know how long I'd been sitting here, shedding tears, but my eyes felt puffy and my throat hurt. "I think you should talk to a counselor. You have survivor's guilt. It's less about us and more about you feeling guilty about being alive and they aren't." I couldn't deny that, so I remained silent. "You said it yourself, God had more work for you to do. If He wants me to love you while you're here, that's what I'm going to do. You can go to the doctor and don't worry about that or how it'll make me feel." His hand cupped my chin, and he turned my head in his direction. "We can take this as slow as you need us to, but I need you to understand, I'm never giving up on you."

Twisting my mouth to the side, I nibbled my bottom lip as I nodded. "Thank you for not giving up on me."

His smile spread slowly as he placed a kiss to my forehead. "I meant it when I told you I was yours. I will always be here for you. You just have to let me be."

Resting my head on his shoulder, I relaxed against him. We sat there until the sun began to go down in silence. I was so drained, all I wanted to do was sleep. He followed me home and made sure I ate before giving me time to myself, which I appreciated. As much as I wanted to go to sleep in his arms, I understood we needed space. I meant it when I told him I was glad he hadn't given up on me. Now that I was more out of my emotions, I didn't want anything to stop what Jeremy and I were building—not even me. After showering and getting in bed, I began to look for therapists who specialized in survivor's guilt. I'd dealt with this enough, and I couldn't go on allowing it to rule me.

TWENTY-THREE

Jeremy
That Weekend

I hadn't seen my baby in two days, but what she did today made up for it. Along with the snake case, I had mediation between an artist and producer that had taken priority. Thankfully, we were able to get things wrapped up yesterday. The defendant settled and I was able to get my client three times what they'd originally asked for.

All I wanted to do was rest, and Maritza amplified that. She set me up to have a massage, the main areas in my home that I utilized were cleaned, and she had a private chef make my breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Ironically, by the time the sun set, I gained energy. We ended up having some of our favorite snacks delivered and decided to have a movie night, and there was no other way I'd rather spend my night.

I was curious about if she'd gone to the doctor, but I hadn't felt led to ask. If she wanted me to know, she'd tell me in due time. With a yawn, Maritza wrapped her arm tighter around me.

"Babe," she called sweetly.

"Huh?"

"What are you thinking about?"

I wasn't sure where she was going with this, so I didn't know how to answer. "Why do you ask?"

"Because your heart randomly started beating really fast."

Chuckling, I kissed the top of her head. “Something I don’t want to worry you with.”

“It’s worrying you, so I want to know.”

I thought about it for a few seconds before confessing, “I was wondering if you ended up going to the doctor.”

Maritza sat up, and so did I. She made her way between my legs and wrapped my arms around her.

“I didn’t.” Holding back my smile, I kissed her neck. “I realized I haven’t actively made a choice to heal and move on beyond a certain point over the last decade. I can admit that, without the fake marriage, I wouldn’t have given you or any other man a real chance because of my guilt. And I probably won’t actively try to have a baby again, no matter how much I want one, because of that same guilt. So... I’m letting fate decide. I prayed and asked God not to let me conceive if my trauma would be a detriment to me having a healthy relationship with the father or my child.”

“And marriage?”

She smiled, resting further into my chest. “I haven’t wanted to marry anyone, real or fake, until you. So I’m still on board for us doing the fake marriage for a year. If over the course of that time, I’m healed enough for the real thing...” Maritza tilted her head and looked up at me. “I want to stay with you.”

That was all I needed to hear. I used her neck to tilt her head back further. She bit down on her bottom lip and moaned before allowing me to slide my tongue into her mouth for a kiss. My hand made its way between her legs, and I was grateful she slept naked. I continued tonguing her down as my fingers circled her clit and played in her pussy. That shit was so wet the sound of her juices smacking against my fingers filled the room. When she started to get antsy and rock against me, I pulled away and leaned her forward until she was on her knees.

Getting behind her, I pressed my way inside of what was starting to feel more and more like heaven on earth.

“Damn,” I moaned, filling her to the hilt. I started slow, hypnotized by how good it looked watching my dick hide inside of her. “You take me so well.”

Maritza whimpered. The clear slickness that coated me quickly turned creamy and white. I learned quickly she was into praise kink, and I was more than willing to give that to my princess.

My strokes grew harder and picked up a medium pace. She gripped the comforter and melted into the bed as her toes curled. Her lips trembled as she looked back at me seductively.

I held her by her waist, trying not to lose myself in how good her ass cheeks looked rippling against me. If I did, this would turn into a quickie.

“Show Daddy how much you love this dick,” I coached, causing her to hum and rock against me. Her moans grew louder as her walls tightened. “You’re almost there.”

“Jeremy,” she moaned, looking back at me with pleading eyes.

“Hmm?” Her mouth hung open, but no words came out. “Talk to me, Lovie. Does it feel good?”

“Yesss,” she slurred as her walls began to pulse. “So good.”

“Mm, that’s my good girl.”

“I’m your good girl,” she moaned, jerking against me.

“Mhm,” I moaned, hardening my strokes against her as I came. “Fuck, bae.”

Pressing back onto me, Maritza forced me to lean back onto the heels of my feet. She bounced up and down as I throbbed inside of her, not stopping until she milked me for the rest of my cum.



Monday

My feet stopped moving the moment I saw Maritza seated behind my desk. She had balloons, a cake, and a large teddy bear waiting for me. All I could do was chuckle and shake my head as I stepped inside. I told her I never made a big deal out of my birthday and didn’t plan to start this year, but I should have known she wouldn’t listen.

She stood and walked over to me in a red dress that accentuated every one of her curves. “Happy birthday, baby.”

“Thank you, but I told you I didn’t want anything for my birthday.”

“And I told you that was bullshit.” Her arms wrapped around my neck. “I’m happy you’re alive and in my life, so I’m going to celebrate you.”

I lowered myself to her lips and gave her a kiss, but the sound of a knuckle knocking on my door forced me to pull away. At the sight of Violet, I loosened my hold around her. We didn’t have anything in the bylaws

against romantic fraternizing, but there were stiff penalties if a personal relationship affected the firm in a negative way.

“How did you get him to let you do something for his birthday?” Violet asked with a small smile.

“I didn’t wait for him to let me; I just did it.”

As she walked away, I couldn’t stop myself from looking down at her round ass. My mind immediately went back to last night and how it looked jiggling against me. Needing to settle my thoughts before my dick got hard, I walked around my desk as I asked Violet, “What can I do for you?”

She sat in the chair on the left side of my desk and cupped her hands in her lap. “Can I trust you, Jeremy?”

“Instead of playing this game where you ask me questions you already know the answer to, why don’t you just tell me what’s going on?”

“I received several emails from Amaru and Parker’s clients saying they wanted to go with them when they left at the end of this month. And the ones who didn’t ask to be released from the firm have requested to be represented by either Maritza or Sakura.”

I stared at her for a few seconds waiting for her to continue. When she didn’t I asked, “And?”

“And how in the *fuck* did they know to have their clients do that in order to maintain their representation?” she seethed. “What are they up to, giving their clients to the sisters?”

That was another piece of free game I offered. Since Maritza and Sakura were coming with me, they’d be able to bring their clients, and the guys, without any blockage from Violet. Once they were gone, they would return the clients to Amaru and Parker.

“It’s not that scandalous of a thing, Violet. You were there the day Amaru met them, correct? He offered them his clients that were on retainer for criminal charges. Is it that much of a stretch that they suggested or recommended the sisters as attorneys to work with in their stead?”

“You expect me to believe you had nothing to do with this?”

“I don’t give a damn *what* you believe.”

She scoffed and shook her head. “I thought I could trust you.”

“And I thought I could trust you,” I repeated louder than I wanted to, causing those who were walking by to look in my office. “But you lied to me for the last five years. So I don’t really give a fuck if you trust me or not, Violet.”

“So, this is what we’ve come to?” I shrugged, refusing to offer her anything she could take and run with. “After everything I’ve done for you, this is how you repay me?”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Violet?”

“I know you’re planning on leaving! Your father is so proud that his son is taking over that he’s been talking about it all over town. You think I haven’t heard the rumors?”

“If you haven’t heard that from me, it’s irrelevant.”

Violet chuckled as she stood. “Should I be expecting your resignation soon?”

I couldn’t say yes. If I told her I planned to leave and she chose to fire me to avoid me being able to amend some clauses in my contract and help everyone else do the same, we would all be screwed. This would only work if I operated as the partner who released them. That way, I could keep the non-compete clause from being an issue. I’d never been a liar, especially when it came to Violet, and I didn’t want to start now. But at this moment, I had to do what was best for the people that were counting on me, and even myself.

“You know what my goals are. If I can’t achieve them here, I will go somewhere I can.” Standing, I walked over to her. “With that being said, if and when I decide to leave, you will be the first person I make that announcement to.”

She licked her lips and gritted her teeth before storming out of my office. Cursing under my breath, I headed down to Maritza’s office. We needed to come up with a backup plan.

TWENTY-FOUR

M aritza

I loved seeing a happy Black man, and my man had been just that all day. He thought what I did for him at the office was all I had planned but that wasn't the case. After we got off work, I paid for him to have his hair cut and his beard shaped up, then I took him to the mall to get a few new pairs of shoes and outfits.

What Jeremy thought was a simple dinner for the two of us turned out to be a surprise party in his honor. He only wore one form of jewelry, black watches, so I got him a black alligator leather Santos de Cartier watch. It set me back a cool thirty stacks but his happiness and excitement when I gave it to him made it worth it. The way he spoiled me, I didn't give a damn about the price tag of anything I knew he would like.

I'd invited Violet to the party before they talked earlier, so I didn't expect her to show up. She did, and she was on her best behavior. A part of me felt like keeping this from her was wrong. I understood why we had to and that her not standing on her word was the reason this was even happening, but still... after the time I spent with her at her home, I felt closer to her. All I could do was hope she didn't take our departure personally.

With a chuckle, I recorded Jeremy as he staggered into his bedroom. He talked all this shit about the things he was going to do to me when we got home, but he was so drunk, the only thing he was about to do was sleep.

“Bae?” he called, sitting on the edge of the bed after almost missing it.

“Yes?”

He burst into a fit of laughter that made me laugh as I kneeled to take off his shoes.

“I love you.”

My smile dropped as I looked up at him. His red glossy eyes were already peering down at me.

“You’re drunk,” I reasoned, pulling off his shoes.

“I’m not that drunk, and even if I was, a drunk mouth speaks sober thoughts.”

That was true. “Jeremy...”

“Shut up,” he commanded gently. “This isn’t about you; it’s about me. I don’t even want you to say anything back. I don’t care if you love me or not; I do love you.” His hand gripped my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “You’ve given me more unconditional love, acceptance, and support in two months than any other person has in my entire life. You make me feel wanted for who I am, not where I come from or what I have. I feel safe with you, like I can be myself with you. And for a man like me, that means more to me than you will ever know.” His thumb caressed my cheek. “I love you, Lovie.”

As if he hadn’t said anything, Jeremy began to remove his sweater. I helped him out of his jeans, hanging back as he got comfortable in bed. After I undressed, I crawled into bed next to him. Instead of laying on his chest, I placed him on mine.

“Thank you for making this the best birthday I’ve ever had.”

I kissed his forehead and nose, then his lips. “It was truly my pleasure.”

In seconds, he was asleep, and I had to hold back my laugh. Humming, I kissed and caressed him until sleep found me as well.

“What a beautiful sight to wake up to.”

My head lifted at the sight of Jeremy. He’d woken up earlier than me and used the bathroom in the hallway to freshen up. I wasn’t sure if he was doing that because I didn’t tell him I loved him back, even though he told me not to. The smile on his face made me feel easier about it. Only a towel was wrapped around his chest as he walked over to the bed with a tray with two mugs and

toast on it.

“Good morning, Mr. Sunshine. I wasn’t expecting you to be up so early.”

“Yeah, well, a night of drinking won’t turn off my internal alarm clock.”

I held the tray while he got in bed, glad I’d gotten up and freshened up when I heard him moving around.

Lifting the mug to my nose, I inhaled and moaned. “Mm, my favorite.”

While he had regular black coffee with ginger, he’d made me a chai tea latte with ginger. As he bit into the toast, I found myself staring at him. Chuckling, he wiped his mouth.

“Do I have something on my mouth?”

“No.” My chin was slightly tucked as I smiled bashfully.

“What’s on your mind?”

Nibbling my bottom lip, I shook my head, not ready to ask him if he remembered his declaration of love. We continued to sip our drinks and allowed the toast to settle our hungover stomachs. Then, we laid back down. With about two hours before we needed to get ready for work, I planned to take full advantage of his bed.

“About last night...”

His fingers slipped through my hair, lips hovering over mine. “I meant every word.” Jeremy kissed me. “I also meant it when I told you I wasn’t expecting anything in return.”

The more he stroked my hair and stared lovingly into my eyes, the fewer reservations I had about accepting what he’d said as truth.

“You love me?” I asked quietly, making him smile.

“I love you.”

“I-I think...”

Jeremy’s head shook as he lowered me from the headboard. “Not until you’re sure.”

Our lips connected. My mind raced. In my heart, I was sure. I knew I loved him. My mind and mouth wouldn’t allow me to say the words. Jeremy had been exactly what I’d needed. From the way he coddled the romantic in me with sentimental gestures, to the way he gave me my love languages, protected me, and handled me with gentleness and grace. He wasn’t intimidated by my drive, intelligence, and ambition—he fed them with his own. I didn’t just feel safe and secure with him but seen and heard... even the parts of me and my past that I wanted to hide.

The moment he began to kiss my bullet wounds reverently, tears fell from

my eyes. He kissed those away too before returning his lips to mine.

The gasps and moans we released as he pressed his way inside of me broke our kiss. Our eyes were locked. As he slowly rocked against me, I met him stroke for stroke. It was the most intense thing I'd ever felt. I may not have been able to say those words, but he felt them.

He felt them.

TWENTY-FIVE

Jeremy

Wife: I'm sure.

I'd been staring at Maritza's text for so long my eyes dried. I didn't want her to tell me she loved me last night or this morning because I feared it would trigger her guilt. It was better if she kept her feelings to herself. I wanted her to know how I felt because, regardless of her feelings, mine wouldn't change.

I knew in my heart she loved me, and I was at peace with that. It would have been nice to hear the words, but I was content with the ways she showed me. If this text was an indication that she was ready for them to flow out of her mouth, that would be the best thing I'd ever heard.

Not wanting to give her time to change her mind, I stood and made my way to her office. I found her there, laughing at whatever Violet was saying. At the sight of me, her laugh turned into a comfortable smile.

"Hi, baby," she greeted, causing Violet to look back at me.

"I'll... give you two some privacy," Violet said, attempting to stand.

"Stay. I have an appointment soon and won't be here long." Maritza stood and walked around her desk in my direction. We stepped outside of her office, closing the door behind us. "You're sure?" I repeated.

Her smile was small as she nodded. "I'm sure."

"Of?"

“The way I feel about you.” Maritza took my hands into hers. “Jeremy Dante Phoenix, I love you.”

“Mr. Phoenix, your eleven a.m. appointment is here.”

I nodded at Gloria’s statement but couldn’t take my eyes off Maritza as she smiled sweetly at me. Cupping her cheeks, I tilted her head and kissed her tenderly.

“I love you too,” I replied. “I have to go.”

Maritza giggled, gently removing my hands from her face. “Go, babe. We have the rest of our lives.”

With that admission, I took backward steps from her before returning to my office. Paris was already waiting for me. She stood and extended her hand to shake mine. I took in her demeanor... the swollen eyes, red lips, and nose. I didn’t know much about her case, just that it involved her family. Family law wasn’t my specialty, so I wasn’t sure why she wanted to retain me, but since one of my clients recommended me to her, I agreed to hear Paris out.

“Good morning,” I greeted, releasing her hand. “Paris?” I confirmed, motioning for her to have a seat.

“Yes, sir. Thank you for meeting me. My godfather told me you don’t usually handle cases like this, so I’m glad you decided to hear me out.”

As I sat down, I asked her, “How can I help you?”

“I need full custody of my newborn niece.” She took in a deep breath. Her eyes had already started to water. “My sister, Asia, promised me that she was going to get an abortion. Instead, she disappeared and popped back up with a baby two weeks ago.”

“What makes you believe she wouldn’t be able to properly care for your niece?”

“Asia and I... we were abused. Literally out of the womb. We were born into a very strict, religious family who took not sparing the rod literally. Abuse was used to break a person’s will in our family to gain control. Asia and I fought like hell to be emancipated from our parents when we were sixteen, and that’s when we went to stay with our godparents.” Her tears began to fall, so I grabbed the box of tissue from behind my desk on the bookshelf and handed it to her. “Our parents... they had too much of a hold on Asia, and she went back. Now, she’s basically under their control. I know she’s going to raise my niece the same way she was raised, and no child deserves that.”

“Was an outcry ever made about your parents’ abuse? Is there public

record of it?”

Her head shook rapidly. “No, no record. The only people I felt safe telling was our godparents, and that was after they left the church and detached from my parents. A part of the emancipation was that I could never speak of their abuse publicly in a way that would taint the image of them or their religious organization.”

Nodding, I released a hard breath and sat back in my seat. I was starting to understand why her godfather, Phillip, wanted her to meet with me. I may not have handled custody cases, but I had a very successful record of going against and beating large corporations and organizations. If this went beyond her sister and affected their parents, they would need more than just a small-time family law firm.

“And do you have any proof that your sister is abusing or plans to abuse your niece?”

“When she came back, I asked her why she didn’t have the abortion. She said it was too late. I offered adoption as a suggestion, and she declined. I asked her how she planned to raise her baby while she still lived with our parents and had nothing really going for herself, and she said she was going to raise her just like we were raised.”

“Do you know who the father is? Is there a possibility of him seeking full custody?”

Paris shook her head. “She won’t tell me who it is. I think it’s someone my father knows. Someone in the church.”

“Okay.”

Rubbing the pads of my fingers together, I thought over all she’d shared with me so far. This certainly wasn’t a case I wanted to take on so close to leaving HGP², but I couldn’t not help her out. I understood what it felt like to feel as if you were so under your parents’ control you had no other options. While my parents were never physically abusive, I could honestly say the choices I made with my life came from their guidance or desire for me.

Even the decision to become a lawyer was made for me. My parents wanted me to walk in my father’s footsteps. When I began my career as a lawyer, I quickly realized I preferred being in a managerial position. That’s why becoming managing partner was so high on my goal list. Eventually, I began to love and grow passionate about what I did, but if I had it my way, I would have gone to school for engineering.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if I was setting myself

up to have even less freedom when it came to my parents. Though my father said he planned to let me run the firm on my own, would that really be the case?

Needing to get out of my head, I told Paris I would have my assistant get a few more facts about her and her family before making my decision. If I didn't handle the case personally, I promised someone from the firm would. I needed some fresh air, so I had my assistant reschedule all my appointments for later in the day. This meeting with Paris had given me a lot to think about.

TWENTY-SIX

M aritza

I was concerned.

Jeremy spent a lot of time inside of himself for the last couple of days, to the point his sister called to speak with me about it because she was worried. I told her that I believed the weight Jeremy was carrying was starting to get to him, but that it was also more than that. He hadn't opened up to either one of us about what happened during his meeting with Paris, but that was when he began to shut down.

Amelia asked me to meet her at his place, and I agreed. I admired her desire to make sure he was okay because from what I'd heard they hadn't had the best relationship in the past.

"Are you sure he's going to go for this?" I asked as I rang his doorbell. "You know him better than me."

Amelia chuckled and shook her head. "I don't believe I do. I don't think anyone knows my brother better than you do."

I appreciated that and could admit, in a short amount of time, Jeremy and I had gotten to know each other in more intimate ways than we'd allowed others in. At the sound of the door unlocking, I held my breath. I felt like I hadn't seen my man in an eternity. Just seeing him at work had been torture for the last two days. He was dressed in a V-neck t-shirt and sweats, which wasn't his usual at all. Even if he didn't want to admit something was going

on with him, it was clear that it was.

“Two of my favorite ladies. What’s going on?” The smile he gave us was genuine, and that made me feel good.

Jeremy stepped to the side, allowing us space to enter.

“We need to talk,” Amelia said, leading the way toward the living room.

Jeremy took hold of my hand, giving me a quick yet tender kiss before we followed behind.

“Wassup?” he asked again, once we were all seated comfortably.

Amelia looked at me to take the lead. I took his hand into mine and shifted slightly so we were face to face. “We’re concerned about you. You haven’t been yourself for the last couple of days. Ever since that meeting with Paris, you’ve been... detached. What’s wrong, babe?”

“Is it Violet?” Amelia checked, to which he shook his head.

“I am a little concerned about Violet, but that’s not what’s been weighing heavily on me. She’s not going to fire me until she has proof I plan to leave. Everyone else is unsafe. But that’s not the biggest issue.”

“Then what’s the biggest issue?” I asked.

“My father,” he admitted. “Talking with Paris made me realize how much of my life has been spent doing what he and my mother wanted.” His eyes shifted toward his sister. “How much the both of us have fought to have things he should have given organically—love, acceptance, respect, support.”

Amelia chuckled softly, nodding her head in agreement. “Yeah, you don’t realize how much of your days, your life, are spent obsessing over him until you start to slowly not need that validation anymore.”

“Was that abuse?” he asked. “Or just control?”

She thought it over for a while before saying, “I was abused, emotionally and mentally, but I don’t think you were. You were controlled. Nothing I ever did was good enough for him or worth his time and attention. Even me going to law school. He always told me I would fail at being a lawyer because I was weak. Eventually, I stopped telling him about my successes because he used his and yours to show me how it was supposed to be done.” The scoff she released as her eyes watered made my heart hurt. I wanted to hug both of them and never let them go. “But you... you were definitely controlled. You’ve always been, for lack of a better phrase, his puppet. Daddy did a lot of dirty work through you.”

“I’m starting to realize that now,” he muttered. “I don’t want that to continue at the new firm. I don’t want him to think he can use me to do his

bidding the entire time I'm managing partner. I don't want this to be a setup. A way for him to continue to run things after he officially retires."

"This is what you've been worrying about?" I asked.

"Yeah, and it's been fucking with my mind. My confidence. I've been thinking about if he truly believes I deserve this and can run things, or if he's just positioning me for his use. Even with how I get the job, I'm under their thumb." He chuckled and hung his head, and I wanted to go and fight both of his parents for making him feel like this.

"Hey," I called softly, lifting his head by his chin. "You more than deserve this position, and I don't give a fuck what Violet, your father, or anyone else says about it. You are one of the most lethal litigators I've seen behind a table *and* in a courtroom, but your abilities when it comes to the day-to-day operations and policies of a law firm are unmatched. I know I haven't been at HGP² long, but even before I came, you were used as an example of what to do and not to do at my previous firms. The profitability and business plan you gave Violet to present to Sakura and me was the biggest reason we agreed to join. You might not have wanted to do this from the beginning, but you were made for this."

"I agree," Amelia said. "I hated the way you operated for the longest time because it wasn't the soft partnership I was used to with Violet. I can honestly say, though, I always grow more and come up with solutions on my own when I'm working with you. Daddy may have turned you into a beast, but he turned you into a beast of a businessman that I would follow anywhere if I hadn't already promised my loyalty to Mecca."

We continued to pour into Jeremy for a few minutes more before he started to look and sound more like himself. Amelia stayed for another hour or so before she gave us both hugs and left.

Once we were alone, I asked Jeremy, "Are you sure about this, baby?" as we chopped veggies for chicken and steak fajitas.

"You got a taste for something else?"

Chuckling, I shook my head and took a sip of my wine. "I mean taking over at your father's firm."

His head shook as he set his knife down and washed his hands. "I can't think about me right now. Too many people are relying on this move. You, Kura, Ru, Parker, Carina. I finally found my family law attorney. I can't let y'all down."

"I don't want you to accept this position because you think it'll finally

gain you your father's approval and acceptance." He looked at me. "And I don't want you to do it because you're so used to being under his control." I took a step in his direction. "I don't even want you to do it for me or any of the other people you named." I closed the space between us. "If you do it, I want you to do it because it's what *you* want to do. No other reason means more than that."

With a nod, Jeremy gave me a soft kiss before returning his attention to the food.

Now that I'd had a bit more insight into his and Amelia's upbringing, something was telling me Jeremy was going to sacrifice himself for us all.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Jeremy
End of February

If women couldn't bond over anything else, they could bond over being pampered and shopping. Maritza and Mom had been doing that a lot lately. When I went to pick her up from their home, Pops asked me to come to his study for a while. I was surprised Maritza even asked me to drop her off, but I shouldn't have been, because she could handle herself and my father.

The closer it got to time for me to leave HGP² the less sure I was about taking over for my father. I was going to do it regardless, but the time I stayed at his firm was up in the air. Amelia and Maritza had given me a lot to think about, and in the process, they confirmed what I'd been thinking. I still hadn't worked up the courage to ask my father straight up. It wasn't because I was scared; it was because I already knew the answer and hearing those words would destroy the illusion I was currently getting high from.

Instead of sitting, I hung back by the door like I always did when he requested my presence in there. Because usually, he wanted to discuss something he wanted no one else to hear. And that usually meant he was about to say or ask for something that was going to piss me off.

"When are you getting married, son?" he asked, sitting at his desk.

"I don't know. I plan to propose next month. Is there a reason to rush the wedding?"

He chuckled as he sat back in his seat. "You claimed to want this position

more than anything. You've barely mentioned the transition lately. I'm just making sure you're committed."

"Committed to what exactly?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Working for me."

"When I become managing partner, I won't work for anyone."

His head shook as he laughed. "As long as your last name is Phoenix, you will *always* work for me. You will always represent me. You running the firm won't change that."

"Let's just have this conversation now," I decided, walking toward the desk to sit across from him. "What are you expecting of me, Pops? Because if you're giving me this position to still run things, I don't want this shit."

Pops ran his fingers down the corners of his mouth. "I don't want to run things; I just need your commitment to handle anything I might need you to do. And, of course, there's your career elevation that I have planned."

"I need an example."

Rolling his tongue over his cheek, Pops considered my request. "Well, eventually law will need to turn into politics. Once you've had your fun as managing partner, had a few kids, and gotten settled into married life. You'll run for attorney general, governor, then senate. After that, president."

My laughter was hearty as I shook my head. I couldn't even get upset. I knew he was up to something, wanting something, but I wasn't expecting this.

"Have I ever said or done anything to make you believe I was interested in any of that? I don't want to be the goddamn *president!*"

"It doesn't matter what you want." His nonchalant tone and expression had my anger rising. "I made you for a reason, and that reason was to be better than me. To do everything I couldn't do. So whether you want it or not, you're going to spend the rest of your life trying to be the best damn version of me possible." Slamming his hand on his desk, he stood. "So you need to tell Violet you're leaving soon and get ready to take over. We got a lot of work to do before I leave, son, and not a second to waste."

He squeezed my shoulder and left, and I just... sat there. Amelia didn't realize how good she had it not growing up with him. She may have thought not being the center of his attention was the worst thing in the world, but having his attention was far worse.

Standing, I headed out, giving Mom a quick kiss on the cheek before taking Maritza by the hand and leading her out. Trusting my father had put

me in a fucked-up position, but I shouldn't have been surprised. This series of events had been what my life has been made up of, for as long as I could fucking remember. Nothing good from him ever came without a price. And the price of me finally getting the position I wanted was even more of my freedom and future.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Maritza
The Next Morning

“I don’t know, sis. First Lady Maritza Phoenix does have a nice ring to it.”

My head shook at the sound of my sister’s words replaying in my head. Last night, Jeremy told me about the conversation he had with his father and how he still planned to take over his firm. He said he planned to stay long enough to get everyone settled before leaving so he could be free of his father, but I didn’t believe that. If I knew anything about trauma and toxic bonds, it was that you could suffer for years, take years to unlearn and relearn, then take decades trying to build anew. Regardless of how much Jeremy said he wanted to be free of his father, if he took that position, he never would be.

This morning, I talked to Sakura about what I should do. I wanted to fight for Jeremy, but I didn’t want to overstep. The last thing I wanted to do was make him believe I didn’t have faith in him because that wasn’t the case. I commended him for doing what he believed was best for everyone involved; I just hated that, for him to do that, he had to sacrifice himself. No one had ever done what was best for him, and that’s what I’d decided to do.

I asked Gloria about Violet’s schedule for the day, and when she had a window of free time, I went to her office.

“Maritza, is everythi—”

“Sign this,” I demanded, pulling the top piece of paper out of my folder.

“What is this?” she asked as she looked it over.

“Something like an NDA that keeps you from using anything I’m about to say against any of the people it’s about. You won’t be able to fire them, suspend them, or punish them in any way, including but not limited to blackballing, changing clauses in their employment contracts, or refusing recommendations if and when needed based on this conversation.”

Once she’d read it over carefully, Violet signed it and handed it back to me. I took a seat in front of her.

“You’re about to lose your current named partners, four of your hardest-working lawyers, and literally every one of our clients. We’re talking *billions* in retainers and billable hours all because you don’t want to share. Now I like you, Violet, and after the time we spent together in your home, I began to respect you, so I’ve come up with two solutions to that problem that will not just benefit you and allow you to keep the power you so desperately desire but all parties involved.”

Violet sat back in her seat and crossed her legs. She released a hard exhale before chuckling. “I’m listening.”

“You can honor your word and add the additional partner positions you promised Jeremy and several others to keep everyone here.”

Her head tilted. She didn’t bother thinking about what I said for a second before she said, “The second?”

Smiling, I slid the folder across the desk for her review. “You can create boutique firms under this one. Jeremy will receive the first. He will be managing partner and have complete control to manage the firm as he pleases. His name will be taken off this wall and placed on his own. You will maintain full control here. In exchange for the boutique firm, you will receive 10 percent of all billable hours annually, but you will not have any say concerning how things are run. In this regard, the lawyers and clients remain a part of this ecosystem, but they will be under Jeremy’s management and leadership.”

Violet took some time to look over the quickest proposal I’d ever drawn up in my life. “Does Jeremy know you’re doing this?”

“No. I didn’t want to tell him until you agreed. And you have two days to do so. After that, Jeremy will propose to me. I will say yes. He will become the interim managing partner at his father’s firm. Once we are married, that position will be permanent, and this deal will no longer be on the table.”

“I can’t agree to an unlimited amount of boutique firms under mine.”

“Then come up with a number you’re comfortable with. Just as long as Jeremy has the first.”

With a nod, she continued to look it over as I stood. “I’ll uh... I’ll give you a call, okay?”

Satisfied with her at least agreeing to look it over and think it through, I left her office with a smile.

When I pulled into Jeremy’s garage, I was completely caught off guard by the sight of Violet’s car in the driveway. I quickly made my way inside his home, curious about what she’d come to say. Was she impressed with my offer and ready to make it official? Did she find the proposal disrespectful? Was she upset or hurt about the information I shared? My mind raced a mile a minute as I headed in the direction of their voices.

If I was in her position, I honestly didn’t know how I would feel. We had positioned ourselves for success starting from the moment we left her. Sakura and I would be bringing not just our clients with us but Amaru and Parker’s as well. Everything that I’d told her was the truth, and it was all because she didn’t want to honor her word. If Violet was upset with anyone, it needed to be herself.

I found them in the sitting room by the patio. The fireplace was roaring, and they were sitting there like the best of friends sipping champagne. Standing, Jeremy filled a glass with champagne and sauntered in my direction with the sexy swag I’d helplessly fallen in love with. He licked his lips, then whispered in my ear, “Thank you.” The kiss he placed there made me shiver as my nipples hardened. “I love you.” He kissed my lips and looked into my eyes before leaning against my ear again to whisper, “When she leaves, I’m going to reward you for being such a good girl, princess.”

Between his words and the feel of his breath on my ear, my breathing was ragged when he finally turned away from me. I gulped the champagne as Violet stood and walked over to us.

“Don’t ever let her go,” she told him, shooting me a wink before leaving.

Jeremy didn’t wait for her to leave his home before he was lifting me into the air, tossing the champagne flute onto the floor, and pressing me into the nearest wall.

“You’re not upset that I went to her on your behalf, are you?”

Jeremy placed me on my feet and lowered to his knees. “No one’s ever did anything like what you did for me today. Thank you, Maritza. You’re one of the most brilliant minds of our generation, and I’m honored to have you by my side.”

“I-ah-mm...” Him ripping my panties off was almost enough to make me cum on its own. Lifting my dress, Jeremy looked up at me with a smile that made my pussy even wetter. “So you two came to an agreement?”

“Yeah. I’m doing the boutique firm under her instead of taking over for my father.”

Relief immediately filled me. I was so glad he wouldn’t have to rely on his father to do what he wanted, how he wanted. Plus, I knew he didn’t really want to leave HGP².

“This is perfect!” I cheered, as he wrapped my leg around his shoulder.

“No, you’re perfect. Perfect for me.”

“Jeremy, I—” My back arched and words failed when he licked my opening and between my slippery folds to slurp my clit into his mouth. Gripping his shoulders, I rolled my hips as he licked and sucked my pussy. “Yesss, baby, that feels so fucking *good*.”

I loved the way Jeremy ate my pussy. He feasted on me like I was his favorite meal. My hand lifted to the back of his head as my toes curled in my heels.

“Shit,” I slurred as he took two handfuls of my ass and moaned against me. My clit throbbed in his mouth, warning me that I’d be cumming soon. Jeremy draped my other leg around him, lifting me higher into the air as he stood. His tongue slid from my clit to my ass hole until my orgasm had me quivering against him. “Shit!” I almost yelled when he lowered me onto his dick.

“Breathe,” he instructed as I whimpered.

My nails clawed into the back of his head as he bounced me up and down on his shaft. Gasping, I held him close, pulling his face into my neck. He took full advantage, licking and sucking as his long strokes reached places in my pussy I didn’t know existed.

“Breathe, princess.” As I took deep breaths, our eyes locked, and that only intensified how I was feeling. His name slipped from my lips repeatedly as my pussy tightened against him. “Just let it go. I’m right here. Let me make you cum like you deserve.”

“Fuck!” I cried as I convulsed against him.

“Good girl.” His timbre shook as he enunciated, “Goood fucking girl.”

Jeremy moaned as his throbbing dick leaked inside of me. He waited until he was done cumming to carry me over to the light brown leather couch in front of the fireplace. Spreading my legs wide, he filled me with long, slow strokes. When I tried to fuck him back, he gripped my waist.

“Be still. Let Daddy take care of you and do all the work.”

That was almost my undoing.

But I let him.

I let him have his way with my body until we were both drained and weak. We showered, then crashed into his bed. His voice was thick with sleep when he said, “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to keep thanking me, baby. I’d do anything for you—again and again. I love you.”

I chuckled as my eyes watered. There was a time I thought I’d *never* utter those words to a man again. I was glad Jeremy had become the exception to that.

He tilted my head. “And I love you.” Jeremy kissed me... slow and deep. And nasty. And long. So long, my center stirred, and I gained energy that I’d felt depleted of just minutes earlier. Taking his dick into my hand, I stroked it until it began to ooze with pre-cum, then I straddled him and rode him until we both fell asleep.

EPILOGUE

J eremy
March Seventh

Today was supposed to be the day I proposed.

It was supposed to be the day I entered an agreement that pleased my parents and continued to push me down a path of using my life for their glory and benefit. My incentive, becoming managing partner, along with helping my people made that sacrifice seem worth it. But with Maritza's help, that was no longer the case.

Earlier today, Violet had a meeting with the advisory board and partners. She let them know that, effective immediately, HGP² would have four boutique firms here, and over the course of the next decade, several partner firms in various states that our partners would be able to manage and run. As discussed, I would receive the first. Depending on how well it did, Flex and Mecca would be up next to receive their own. Since Flex was leaving for my benefit, he was cool with staying until it was time for him to have his own firm.

Now, Maritza and I were at my parents' home so I could let them know about the change. Amelia asked if I wanted her to come but I told her no. I appreciated the offer, but she made it clear that she never wanted to step foot in this home again, and I could respect that.

"Does seven work for you, baby?" Maritza asked, head buried in her phone as I cut the car off.

“Yeah, that’s cool. The earlier we go the earlier we can leave.”

She chuckled as she unbuckled her seatbelt.

“You don’t want to celebrate with our people? What’s about to happen is a big fucking deal.”

“I do, and it is, but I want to spend my night celebrating with you. Showing you how much I love and appreciate you.”

With a smile, Maritza leaned across the center console, cupped my cheek, and gave me a kiss. “I love the sound of that too. I’ve rented the private room from seven to nine. After nine, I’ll be all yours.”

Hearing that gave me a deeper urgency to get this over with. I got out of the Aston Martin and walked over to her side. As excited as she was about doing this for me, Maritza had no idea what I had in store for her later. Hand in hand, we went toward the front door. I lifted my keyring, considering if I wanted to take my key to their home off. The only thing that made me decide to keep it was if I ever needed to get in for an emergency.

I rang the doorbell, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. As always, they were in the dining room for dinner. I kissed Mom and gave Pops a handshake.

“Sit down,” Mom said. “Fix yourselves a plate.”

“We won’t be staying long enough to eat,” I told her.

Maritza’s hand on my back gave me the extra confidence I needed for this conversation. I never had a problem telling anyone exactly what I was thinking or feeling, but when it came to my parents, that had always been a struggle.

“What’s this about, son?” Pops asked.

“I’m not taking the managing partner position at your firm. You’ll have to find someone else as your replacement.”

Pops chuckled with a shake of his head. “And why is that?”

“Because I don’t want to be president.” I laughed, though there was nothing funny about our fucked-up relationship. “Or governor. Or attorney general. I want to be managing partner of my own law firm for the next twelve years. Then...” I took Maritza’s hand into mine. “I want to retire early and live the rest of my days experiencing new ways of life with my wife. I’ve worked three times as hard as the average person for the last sixteen years trying to please both of you and I’m done with that shit. If I haven’t received your approval yet, I’ll never have it, and I’m okay with knowing I never will.”

“Where is this coming from, baby? We approve of you. We always have and always will,” Mom said.

“Maybe you have, but he hasn’t.”

“Tell him that’s not true.”

My father’s eyes rolled toward the ceiling. When he remained silent, I chuckled with a shake of my head.

“I don’t know what it is with you and your ungrateful sister using my dinner hour for your therapy. I’m not doing this with you. If you want to talk about the million and one ways you think I ruined your life, we can talk later. Right now, I’m giving my attention to this steak.”

“You don’t have to worry about having this conversation with me later or ever, Pops. I’m done.”

I turned to leave, stopping only as he stood from his seat and said, “The fuck do you mean you’re done?”

“I mean exactly what I said. I’m done. I’m done trying to live for and please you. If you want to have a normal relationship with me one day, you’ll have to own up to all the fucked-up shit you’ve done in the past and we can consider moving forward. If not, I don’t want to have anything else to do with you. My sister was right about you, and I’m glad I finally see the real you for myself.”

“Jeremy, wait,” Mom said, following us down the hall.

“I used to always think you deserved better,” I told her, not bothering to turn around. “But you deserve exactly what he gives you because you refuse to leave. That man has wrecked lives, broken hearts, and destroyed his own daughter trying to make you happy... and for what? Love?” I chuckled as I opened the front door. “That’s not love. You’ve been using him and punishing him because of what he did to you. Instead of leaving him, you crippled him. Confined him to this house and that office. Kept him from his daughter and forced me to be him. You’re just as bad as him, and I don’t want anything to do with you either.”

Her smug grin quickly morphed into a scowl as she closed the space between us. “Wait until the love of your life cheats and embarrasses you with an outside baby, *then* you come to me about what love is.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Phoenix, your son will *never* have to worry about anything like that happening.”

Mom’s eyes shifted in Maritza’s direction as she gently tugged me out onto the porch, and I was glad. I’d never spoken to my mother like that

before and hadn't planned to start now. But I was tired of the innocent act and way she portrayed herself as a woman scorned who stood behind her man despite it all. If Pops was controlling me, she was the thumbs on his switches.

When we made it to the car, Maritza said, "I'm proud of you. I know that was hard."

All I could do was nod. That was probably the hardest thing I'd ever have to do in my life, but peace began to fill me the further I got from their home, and that was my confirmation that it would be well worth it.

"Anything you want to say before everyone starts leaving, baby?" Maritza asked.

It was almost nine and we'd soon be emptying the private room of Sonny's Steakhouse that she rented for this gathering. All those closest to us, including Violet, were in attendance. I appreciated the outpour of support for the new phase we were about to enter. There was a time, just months ago, when accomplishing something like this would have left me with no one to celebrate with.

My reputation had been tainted because I'd chosen to follow in my father's footsteps, rationalizing being unnecessarily detached and cruel by saying not being emotional was the best way to navigate law and business. The more I stepped into myself, and love, the more I realized that was an excuse to be a version of myself that I no longer had a desire to exhibit.

"Yeah, I do, actually," I replied before giving her a quick kiss and standing.

Clearing my throat, I lifted my glass of champagne into the air. My eyes landed on her father, who knew what I'd already had planned, and gave me a nod of approval.

"Thank you all for coming out to celebrate me and the associates of what will soon be Phoenix Law. This moment would not have been possible without this beautiful woman by my side. Stand up, bae." I took Maritza by the hand and helped her stand. "It's crazy how one kiss and a desperate plea led to all this." She chuckled bashfully and gently squeezed my hand. "I ran things with an iron fist and independent spirit because I never had a true partner in my life... until you. You've shown me the relief that comes from

having someone in your corner and by your side. I have a gift for you outside to show you how much I appreciate having you in my life.”

“Aww, babe, you didn’t have to get me anything... but what is it?”

We all laughed. “Come on. Let’s go see.”

They all followed behind as I led Maritza outside, where a silver 2023 Ferrari Roma was waiting for her... big red bow and all.

“Is that for me?”

“It is. Go have a look inside.”

“Ah! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” She gave me a hug and kiss before rushing over to the car as quickly as her heels would allow. Maritza opened the driver’s side door as I casually made my way behind her and got on one knee. As those around us gathered and recorded, she pulled the black box from the driver’s seat. “Um... baby... What’s this?”

When she turned and saw me on one knee, she gasped and dropped the box to cover her mouth with her hands. I caught it, chuckling as I opened it and pulled out the pear-shaped engagement ring Sakura swore her sister would love.

“Jeremy,” she whispered.

“Today was supposed to be the day I proposed,” I told her. “And I’ve been trying to think of a million reasons I shouldn’t.” I swallowed hard at the sight of her tears. “Us being fake was the main one. But even if this started as a fake relationship, the way I feel for you is very real.” After handing Flex the empty box, I took her left hand into mine. “Maritza Amaretto, you came into my life and brought with you everything I’ve been missing. Will you make me the happiest man in life, for the rest of my life, by becoming my wife?”

“For real?” she asked sweetly.

I licked my lips and smiled. “For real.”

With a giggle, Maritza nodded. “Yes... A thousand times yes!”

After slipping the ring onto her finger, I stood and pulled her into my arms. Everyone clapped and cheered, but Sakura’s, “Yaaasssss,” could be heard above them all.

We both ended our kiss to laugh at her silly ass, but I quickly returned my lips to hers. A brief desire to thank my parents entered my heart. Without their meddling and controlling ways, I wouldn’t be engaged to the woman of my dreams. The desire left just as quickly as it came. Maybe one day I’d thank them. But for now, I was determined to carve my own path in life, and

all I could do was thank God I had Maritza by my side to do just that.

The End

*Up next: A proposal/wedding/baby finale special for all couples in one book.
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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 (Standalones)

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
A Thug in Need of Love

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

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