

B · L O V E

HER EXCEPTION

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE
LAW BY DAY... LOVE BY NIGHT

HER EXCEPTION
AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS
ROMANCE

B. LOVE

PROLIFIC PEN PUSHER

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PREFACE

Please note: A previous abortion is mentioned throughout the book. If that will make it difficult for you to enjoy this book, please skip this read.

mecca

Early August

I took great pleasure in pleasing a woman.

Satisfying a woman, putting a smile on her face, had the ability to make my dick painfully hard.

When a woman gave her body to me, I never took that honor lightly.

Every time one was in my bed, I vowed to make her ascend to new heights.

Hosanna was no different.

As I stroked her in missionary position, she gave me a visual that would haunt me long after we were over. I loved the sight of my dick pressing its way into her core... Her titties bouncing with each stroke... The slight tremble of her lips... Her cum coating my dick and her thighs. There may not have been any love between us, but lust ensured we'd always have a good time.

I was familiar enough with Hosanna's body to know she was soon about to cum. Her walls were holding me tighter, making it increasingly difficult for me to pull out of her without tight resistance. She groaned as her pretty face

contorted. Long, artificial eyelashes fluttered before her eyes shut completely.

Hosanna's small hands wrapped around my wrists as she hissed.

She was pretty when she came. Her light brown eyes opened and stared into mine. Between the heat of the room and the heat of her body, her sandy brown cheeks had reddened. Trembling lips whispered, "I'm cumming," as she wrapped her legs around me tighter.

I kept my same pace, wanting her cum to cascade against my dick in waves. She grunted, legs shaking as her eyes rolled into the back of her head. When she tugged her bottom lip between her teeth, I wrapped my hand around her neck and applied pressure. Her moans and ragged breathing sent me over the edge. I waited until she was relaxed against me to pull out and shoot my load in the condom she'd drenched with three orgasms.

When I was done stroking my seeds out, I sat on the edge of the bed. She made her way over to me, wrapping her arms around me from behind and placing a kiss on my neck. I didn't want to pull away and seem cold, but now that I'd cum, I was ready to go. My brother and cousins were waiting for me, and I was already an hour late because of her random pop-up. Not that I minded. If the choice was being between the thighs of a beautiful woman versus being surrounded by testosterone and sometimes toxic masculinity, I would *always* choose a woman.

"That was amazing," she almost purred before placing another kiss to my neck. "You make me cum quicker and harder than any man I've ever been with."

"Trust me, it's my pleasure." Hosanna chuckled as I casually removed myself from her embrace. "What are your plans for the rest of the night?"

"I was hoping I could stay here."

My head was shaking before I could stop it as I picked up pieces of our clothing from the carpeted floor of one of my guest rooms. Regardless of how long Hosanna and I had been

doing this, I never allowed her or any other woman in my master bedroom. That bed was reserved for my wife... whenever I got one.

I wasn't sure why Hosanna thought tonight would be the night things changed between us. All we ever did was have sex. She was a true girl's girl. Our conversations were always flat or one-sided because we weren't interested in the same things. I didn't mind that because her femininity was what originally attracted me to her a little over a year ago. We tried dating in the beginning, and when we realized the chemistry was only in the bedroom, we agreed to keep it there.

"I have to meet up with my family," I reminded her, placing her clothing on the bed. "I told you that."

"Can I wait here for you?"

"For what exactly?"

Hosanna shrugged as she grabbed her panties. "I don't know, Mecca. Maybe we can watch a movie and have a late dinner or something when you get done."

Releasing a long exhale, I ran my hand over my face as my shoulders caved. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt Hosanna's feelings, but I valued honesty.

"You know that's not really our thing, Hosanna."

"I know..." Licking her lips, Hosanna climbed out of bed and slowly strutted toward me. Her body was a distraction I couldn't fall victim to again. "But I was hoping tonight could be the night I changed your mind." Her arms wrapped around me, and mine automatically wrapped around her waist. On the tips of her toes, Hosanna connected her lips with mine. I allowed a few pecks to land before I gently pulled away and took her hands into mine.

"I enjoy what we have. Let's not mess it up, okay?" Without waiting for her to agree, I headed toward the connected guest bathroom to cut the shower on. She slowly followed behind me and we showered together before she dressed fully and headed out without further reservations.

It took me around forty-five minutes to get ready to go. By the time I was heading into my garage, my brother was calling me again. I could only chuckle as I opened the door to my Maserati. He acted like he couldn't hang with our cousins without me. I waited until I was inside to return his call. Instantly, loud music filled the line as he answered.

“Where you at, brother?” Promise questioned.

“Headed that way now.”

“You finally out that pussy and ready to spend time with your people huh?”

Amusement filled me as I opened the garage. I shared a lot with my brother, but when it came down to women, I never disclosed those details with him or anyone else in my family for that matter. Whatever details they knew, they learned by happenstance or accident. Though I trusted them, I'd learned over a decade ago how important it was to keep people out of my relationship. Not because they didn't want what was best for me, but because too many opinions and perspectives could taint a pure love unintentionally. I didn't have love for Hosanna, but a boundary was a boundary, and that would not change.

“Get off my phone, boy. I'll be there in about thirty minutes.”

“A'ight, bet.”

As I reversed out of my garage and driveway, I increased the volume on the Maxwell song that began to play when my Bluetooth connected to the car. On the drive, I took the time to think about everything I'd have to do at work during the upcoming week. My weekends were getting shorter and shorter. Now that I'd shifted from criminal law to civil, corporate, and class action lawsuits, my spirit wasn't as heavy, but my days were even longer. My true passion was class action lawsuits, but the firm I worked at—Hunter, Phoenix, Genesis, and Prime—didn't have enough history with them for me to have several cases and clients like I did when I did criminal law.

I ended up having to release 80 percent of the clients I had on retainer, keeping only those with businesses or assets they wanted my help to protect. The financial loss wasn't a big deal to me for two reasons—I would make more with class action suits and civil law, and I had enough money saved and rolling in from my salon suites to not have to ever worry about money. Unlike the typical salon suites, mine wasn't just for hairstylists. I had small suites set up for barbers, estheticians, nail technicians, and masseuses.

My goal was to open three more locations here in Memphis before branching out into other cities. Because I had a commercial property manager and accountant, all I had to do was check in monthly, do a walkthrough of the suites bimonthly, and collect my funds.

The ease of owning the salon suites building gave me more time to do what I was truly passionate about, and now that I'd unburdened myself with criminal law, I could spend that time feeling as if I was making a difference in a more positive, purposeful, and impactful way.

By the time I pulled into the parking lot of L.O.V.E my mind was free and clear of thoughts of work. L.O.V.E wasn't really my type of vibe, but my cousins loved it, so Promise and I often met them here on Mondays or Thursdays. Since it was later in the evening when I arrived, there wasn't a long line to get inside. I scanned the dimly lit lounge for my people, head bobbing to the song the live band was playing and singing. Tony's arms lifted as he grinned at me, and though I mirrored the gesture, I was filled with dread as I headed in their direction.

The multicolored lights blinked as I walked across the white and black tile floor. Bodies were huddled around the stage as bottle girls made their way through the crowd, holding bottles that sparkled and caused the waiting table of women to cheer.

“Aye, cuz, what took you so long to get here?” Tony asked as I stood in front of their black booth. The table was covered with shot glasses and half-empty plates of food. His breath

reeked of vodka, and I could assume most of the empty glasses were because of him.

All four of them stood, giving me handshakes as I tried to gauge Tony's level of inebriation. I loved my cousin, but I hated going out with him. If Promise would have told me he was here, I probably wouldn't have come. I was under the impression Tony had to work tonight, but it was just like him to give an excuse so he could come out to party.

I enjoyed partying and having a good time with my people, but I preferred to do it within the comfort and safety of our own homes. Because I was who I was and the prestigious firm that I worked for, I couldn't afford any negative press. Tony was a wild card. Depending on how much he had to drink, the alcohol would either have him ready to fight or extremely loving and affectionate toward his woman. And seeing as Shanice wasn't here, I could only hope he'd be leaving soon to go find her.

"I had some business to handle," I answered finally. "You good?"

"Of course, baby. We gotta take shots, though, now that you're here."

I had to keep my eyes from rolling toward the ceiling as I groaned.

"Aye, man, you don' had enough," Steve said, and I was grateful he was trying to keep Tony in check. Matt wouldn't because he found Tony's drinking to be amusing, and Promise had always been the kind of person to go with the flow.

Sucking his teeth, Tony gave Steve a dismissive wave of his hand. "Mane, fuck all'at. My cousin here, so we 'bout to take a shot."

Tony stepped out of the booth, stumbling over his own feet in the process. With a shake of my head, I pulled my phone out of my pocket to check the time. Already, I wanted to go home.

"Why y'all let that mane get drunk this early into the night?" I asked, looking at them one by one.

“You know he don’t listen when it comes to this liquor,” Promise replied.

That was true.

We made small talk until Tony returned to the table, holding two shots. A smiling waitress stood behind him with two more. I took them from her and handed one to Promise. After a quick toast, we all took the shots back, and only a few seconds passed before the warmth of the brown liquor caused my nerves to relax. It was Jack Daniels, which wasn’t my liquor of choice, but I would stick to it for the evening to avoid messing my stomach up. I was concerned about Tony switching from clear to brown, but I didn’t voice my concerns to avoid hearing his mouth.

There wasn’t too much space in the booth, and I started to ask them how they even ended up in one. Instead, I let them know I would be at the bar to start my own tab. Promise followed behind, which didn’t surprise me. As we settled at the bar, he asked me about my day and if I’d talked to either of our parents. I hadn’t, which was unusual. I usually called one or both of them on my way home from work, but I was so ready to get home and chill that it slipped my mind.

Conversation fell silent as we indulged in drinks and the band. I ordered wings with greens and mac and cheese, asking the bartender to make my order to go. Something in my spirit told me I wouldn’t be here for long. When the sound of shouting drowned out the band, I didn’t have to turn around to look and see who it was.

My body hardened as I sighed and turned to find Tony hovering over a man in a heated discussion. The man was clutching a woman’s arm tightly, and I could only assume Tony had tried to step to her.

“Here he go,” Promise grumbled, standing to his feet.

“Let Steve and Matt handle it.”

Promise’s head shook as he headed in their direction, forcing me to do the same. Before we could make it over there fully, the man had swung on Tony, and all hell broke loose.

My cousins were on him in half a second, and Promise wasn't too far behind. His friends must have been watching the encounter because four other men came out of nowhere. It didn't matter. My cousins were thoroughbreds. As much as I didn't want to get involved, I had to. There was no way in hell they'd let me live it down if I didn't.

I pulled a man out of the brawl and landed two punches before lifting Tony off someone else by the back of his shirt. As I yelled for them to leave, security headed in our direction. I couldn't afford to get arrested or even be on video displaying this kind of behavior. As frustrated as I was, I remained silent as I charged out of the lounge. It wouldn't have done me any good to express my anger toward Tony, but I couldn't stop myself from gripping his collar and using it to slam him into his car.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, cuz? Do you not realize we grown ass men now with families and jobs we can't afford to lose? Your ass needs to tighten the fuck up before I stop dealing with you altogether.” As I released him, I turned toward Steve and told him, “Drive his car. I will take him home in mine.” I made sure to look into Tony's eyes when I told him, “I swear to God if you throw up in my shit, not only are you going to clean it with your toothbrush, but I'm going to beat your ass in it.”

Promise and Matt tried to hold back their laughs as Steve took Tony's keys from him. I didn't realize how much I was frowning until Promise tapped the center of my forehead three times like he'd been doing since we were kids. No matter how upset I was, when my older brother did that, my entire body would relax.

“Ease up, Mecca. You know he means no harm,” Promise said quietly as Tony slurred under his breath and walked sideways toward the passenger side of my car.

“I don't want to hear that shit. That man is thirty-eight years old. There's no reason for him to be acting like this.”

“I'm not saying you're wrong; I'm just saying now's not the time.”

“If not now, then when? Y’all don’t talk to him about this when he’s sober. We got too much to lose to be fighting in public. And I know better than anyone how quick people are to pull a gun these days and shoot. It’s not worth it, Promise, and he needs to learn that from us before he learns it an even harder way.”

“I can agree with that. Just take it easy on him until he sobers up. You know he’s like a little child when he gets drunk. He’s not going to receive what you have to say anyway.”

There was no denying that, so I nodded and shook his offered hand before getting into my car. I looked over at Tony, whose head was bobbing as he fought his sleep. The punch the man landed had a small knot on the side of his temple, but that was the only hit he’d gotten in before Tony did damage. Now, there was no doubt in my mind he’d sleep like a baby before his bubbling stomach woke him up.



shalom

My grip around my champagne flute tightened when Heather announced her pregnancy. She was an old friend from high school that I was surprised reached out for my address to send me an invitation to her engagement party and wedding. I wouldn't say we were best friends, but we had several classes together and had a genuine bond. More than anything, her wedding was looking like it would be a fifteen-year reunion for our graduating class. So many familiar faces were in the room. While a lot of them were happy about seeing one another, the unexpected reunion took me back to the worst time of my life.

Heather announcing her pregnancy only made it worse. Knowing there was a baby in her womb triggered me. Pregnancy... *always* triggered me. I had the emotional intelligence and wisdom to feel my sadness and not let it consume the happiness I felt for others being blessed with a baby. Tonight, that was a little bit harder to do. The mix of so many old friends along with the reminder of the man I'd been trying to forget had me heading in Heather's direction as soon as she was done with her announcement and taking pictures with her fiancé—Gary. I told her I would see her at the wedding, where I was sure she'd make a beautiful bride, but that I needed to depart early. She gave me a disappointed pout and hug before thanking me for coming.

I made it to my car briskly with no destination in mind. The last thing I needed to do was go home and drown in my depression. It didn't help that it was August and the anniversary of my breakup with him and the abortion was last month. My energy had been so low. Even fifteen years later, I found myself still crying, hurt, and angry over what could have been—over how foolish I was to think I had a real shot at forever with him. No matter how much I told myself I was only eighteen and had all the time in the world for love and children, experiencing what I thought would be my forever so young and not having further relational success made me more bitter than I'd like to admit.

Driving aimlessly led me to a bar that would give me double shots for the price of one, allowing me to get tipsy sooner, so I could forget about the happiness I'd witnessed that reminded me so much of my sadness. As soon as I stepped inside, peace consumed me, and that's when I realized I probably needed to slow it down with my drinking. Just the thought of using alcohol to numb me gave me relief, and it was the only solace I'd had lately. That truth didn't stop me from heading to the left toward the cherry oak bar.

I went to the side of the bar that was near the pool tables and arcade games since fewer people were over there. Only a few seconds passed after I was seated before the tall, thin, and pale bartender made his way over to me. He gave me a lazy smile and bob of his head as he placed a white, square napkin in front of me.

“What's up, hun? What can I get'chu?”

Though I had an idea of what I would get, I still grabbed the small menu from the box that held the condiments to look at the featured drinks of the week. Getting mixed drinks would fill me up quicker without consuming as much alcohol. As much as I wanted to ask for shots of unending tequila, I told him, “I'll take the lemon ginger mule.”

“Cool. I'll get you a shot of tequila on the side.”

I bit down on my lip to keep from declining his offer. “Thanks,” I muttered, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

“Did you want to get food too?”

“Um... I’ll take a fried chicken tenders salad with ranch. Extra tomatoes please.”

“Put hers on my tab.”

At the sound of a deep, husky voice behind me, I turned slightly to see who was offering to pay for my things. He was cute, that I could admit. Though he wasn’t my type physically, I had always been a woman to appreciate the beauty of Black men. This chocolate king with locs that hung just past his shoulders had a dazzling smile as he stared at me. I had to resist sticking my finger in one of his dimples. I loved straight white teeth on a chocolate man. And he smelled good too.

“Thank you...” I extended my hand for him to shake as I waited for him to supply me with his name.

“Vontae.”

My smile spread as he placed his hand in mine. “Thank you, Vontae.”

“You’re welcome, beautiful.” As he pulled his hand out of mine, Vontae sat on the empty stool next to me. “What’s your name?”

“Shalom.”

His brows raised as his head dipped. “I’ve never met anyone with Shalom as a name before. Do you provide the peace your name suggests?”

“If a man gives a safe environment for me to do so... yes.”

Vontae’s tongue rolled across his cheek before he smiled. “I like that.”

Silence found us as I looked ahead. Though I’d come here for a distraction, I wasn’t exactly sure if I wanted it from a stranger. Sex, like alcohol, could give me a brief distraction from reality, but being with someone new was too much of a risk.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Vontae asked as the bartender put my drink and shot in front of me.

I told him thank you before giving Vontae my attention. “Talk about what?”

“Whatever has you here instead of the party you appear to be dressed for.”

I looked down at my attire and cackled. In my haste to leave, I’d completely forgotten about my dress. Overdressed and out of place were both understatements. The early August weather was still fairly warm, so I’d chosen a cream-colored bodycon dress with a ruffled bottom. My five-inch heels were gold, matching my clutch and accessories. Because I knew lots of pictures would be taken, I did a full beat on my face, and my bra strap length sew-in was in 70s curls with a deep bang that framed my face.

“Not really. I would like to forget about it.”

“I feel you. I’d love to give you something else to think about.”

Between his playful tone and serious expression, I couldn’t tell if he meant sexually or not. My eyes scanned his seated frame without my permission. He was dressed simply but nicely in a red and black graphic t-shirt, black jeans, and red, white, and black Nikes.

“What did you have in mind?”

He looked around, leaning forward. With a whisper, he asked, “Can you play pool?”

I giggled, pulling my drink forward. “I can, but I thought you were referring to something else, honestly.”

“Sex?” I nodded. “I was, but I figured I’d work my way up to that.”

My head shook as I chuckled. Figures. I couldn’t blame him. At least he was honest. I wouldn’t suggest I’d never had a one-night stand before, but they often ended in disappointment. Either they were too quick, or the man left me unsatisfied. Instead of replying, I took a sip of my drink. His attitude would determine if I took a chance on him.

As the night progressed, Vontae and I continued to drink, play pool, and talk. We kept the topics light, but we did share a few facts about one another. He was an entrepreneur, and I thought it was pretty cool that he had mobile gaming trucks. There weren't any sparks or anything to make me want to go home with him, so by the time I'd started to feel relaxed from my drinks, I decided to call it a night. I never drove tipsy or drunk, but I was teetering on tipsy. If I had a bottle of wine when I got home, that would leave me just right.

As I prepared to leave, I made sure Vontae was okay with paying for my salad and drinks. He assured me that he was as he walked me to my car. Our steps were slow, and I prayed he didn't approach the subject of sex again. Though I wanted it, I didn't want it from him. While I unlocked the door of my Honda Civic, Vontae leaned against it. Not wanting to show my irritation, I inhaled a deep, calming breath.

"You heading home already?" he checked.

"Yeah, these heels are killing me."

His eyes lowered to my feet. "How about I trail you home and give you a foot massage?"

"I appreciate that, but you don't have to. I'll be good once I take these shoes off."

Pulling himself off my car, Vontae closed the space between us and wrapped his arms around me. "You sure I can't trail you home? Make sure you get home safely..."

"I'm a big girl, Vontae." I kept my tone light as I gently pushed his arms down and stepped around him.

"That you are."

I saw him eye the back of my frame out of the corner of my eye. "Have a good night, okay? And thanks for the distraction."

"No problem at all. It doesn't have to end here. You know that, right?"

"If I change my mind, I'll look you up."

I hoped my gentleness would keep him from getting angry. Too many reports of men attacking women because they were rejected swirled around these days. As I opened the door, Vontae put space between us, and I silently thanked God for that.

“Do that,” was what he said, but when I got into my car and pulled out of the parking lot, I noticed he was heading out and following me.

It could have been my paranoia, so I didn’t freak out immediately. When seven minutes of driving passed and he was still behind me, I began to get worried. I’d specifically taken the street way home, and Vontae made every turn I did. Sometimes he’d keep a car between us, others, just distance. My gut told me he wasn’t going to take my no as easily as he wanted me to believe, so I called Carter, my ex. It was nearing midnight and I figured my dad was asleep. If Carter was busy or didn’t answer, I’d drive to the nearest police station to make sure Vontae didn’t know where I lived.

“Hello?” Carter answered, causing me to release a sigh of relief.

“Carter, are you busy?”

“Nah, I’m just at home chilling. What’s wrong?”

“I just left the bar a few minutes ago and this guy that bought me drinks is following me. He made it clear that he wanted to have sex. I told him I didn’t want to, and he said okay, but I know he’s following me.”

“A’ight. Pull up. I’ll handle that.”

There was no doubt in my mind that he would, that’s why I called. Carter and I broke up almost six months ago, but we had the kind of bond that allowed me to still feel like I could depend on him for almost anything. He told me to call him when I was about to pull up, and I thanked him before ending the call.

About five minutes later, I was pulling into Carter’s neighborhood. I texted him to let him know I’d be pulling up soon. When I arrived, he already had the garage pulled up. I

parked and closed it, and sure enough, Vontae parked on the street a minute later. Even though I knew I was safe with Carter, my nerves were still bad as I entered his home through the garage door. He took my trembling hands into his and looked my face over.

“Did he violate you?”

My head shook rapidly. “No, he was cool. He didn’t start getting creepy until he walked me to my car.”

The doorbell rang, causing Carter to release my hands. I watched as he grabbed his gun from the kitchen counter and made his way to the front door. He looked good as hell—almost just like Lance Gross. The gray sweatpants he had on hung loosely against his frame, and he was shirtless. I followed behind, twiddling my thumbs as my heart raced.

At the door, Carter pulled me behind him before unlocking it. When Vontae saw him, his eyes widened. His hands immediately lifted in surrender when Carter placed his gun in his face.

“Can I help you?” Carter asked, head tilting.

“Uh n-nah. I was just trying to make sure miss lady got home safely.”

“I got her, but if you don’t get off my property, you won’t be going home at all.”

Vontae lowered his eyes to me before taking a few steps back and walking away. I didn’t realize I was holding my breath until Carter closed the door and I exhaled.

“You good? You might need to stay here for a few minutes to give him time to leave.”

Carter turned to face me as I nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. Thank you, Carter.” I chuckled nervously and ran my fingers through my hair. “I can’t believe he really followed me and knocked on this door.”

“He probably would’ve tried to force his way inside if you were alone.”

My eyes squeezed shut and head shook. I didn't even want to *think* about that. Before I could cover my face with my hands, Carter was pulling me into his chest for a much-needed hug.

"Thank you," I whispered, voice breaking as the weight of the situation fully settled within me.

"Always, bae. Why don't you stay here tonight?"

As tempting as the offer sounded, I'd never been the type to let fear rule me. I was careful, which was why I called Carter, but I wouldn't stay here hiding.

"I think I'm okay to go home, but I will stay for a few minutes longer if that's really okay with you."

"Of course, Shalom." He lifted my hands to his mouth and kissed both before leading me to his living room.

Truthfully, Carter was a great catch. I only broke up with him because we weren't on the same page about certain things when it came to marriage and children. When we first started dating, I was sure we'd get married. That changed when I started hanging around his family and saw how his father treated his mother... how his brothers treated their women. For a while, I convinced myself Carter was different. I convinced myself that I'd be able to live a soft life, raise my children the way I was raised but with a better view of individuality and healthy marriage, and not lose myself in my man like my mom did. After talks of a future with Carter, I realized that wouldn't be the case.

He wanted a housewife who would spend her days cooking, cleaning, and catering to him and their kids. That was the life my mother lived—a life I swore wasn't for me. She lost herself in that role and had no identity beyond being a wife and mother. When my sister Heaven and I left for college, she didn't just suffer from empty nest syndrome; she was extremely depressed and had a midlife crisis from her lack of an identity.

With no work experience or passions outside of us, she completely lost herself. It took a few years before she found

herself through part-time work, book clubs, and women's groups. She and my father ended up divorcing, and I still wasn't sure how I felt about that. I was glad to have both of them in our home, though my father left mostly everything to my mother. He was the parent who gave us money and who we had fun with.

Now, my sister and I looked out for him since he no longer had my mother. After their divorce, he realized he didn't want a wife—he wanted a mother and caregiver. Someone to see to his needs, not be a true partner. His eating habits were horrible, to the point now where he suffered from high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and borderline diabetes. Apparently, he was eating eggs and bacon for breakfast and pork chops for dinner for years along with sweets since that was all he'd ever learned to cook.

He was on a low sodium, low to no sugar diet, and my sister and I took turns doing meal prep for him to make sure he stayed on the right track.

So as much as I enjoyed being with Carter, the thought of that becoming my future forced me to break up with him. He hated things ending but understood it was solely because we wanted different things. Carter was a great man, and he'd make the right woman truly happy. I loved my career and independence too much for that type of traditional marriage, but I was grateful to still have him in my life to some capacity.

When we sat on his dark brown reclining sofa, Carter wasted no time lifting my legs and tossing them over his lap. He took my shoes off and began to massage my feet in a way that made me instantly relax.

“How did you know?” I almost slurred from the pleasure of his pressure on my feet.

“You always needed a foot rub after going out in high heels. I don't think you would have changed that much in six months for that to no longer be true.”

I opened my eyes and they locked with his. “How have you been?”

“Good. Business is good. Family is good.”

“You dating?”

He gave me a soft chuckle and a shake of his head. “Yeah, but it’s nothing serious. You’re a tough act to follow, bae.”

His words made me melt. That was nothing new. Our chemistry, in and out of the bedroom, had never been a problem.

“I miss you,” I confessed. “I hate what happened with him tonight, but I’m glad it gave me an excuse to see you.”

“You never need an excuse. Whenever you want to see me, just call. I’ll always come running.” A few seconds of silence passed before he added, “I miss you too, by the way.”

My body was on the same page as my heart, both going against my mind. I found myself straddling him instead of getting up to leave like my mind told me to. Carter and I hadn’t gotten to the stage of our relationship where we expressed love, but we were damn near close. So close it ached for quite some time to be away from him. His arms wrapped around me as he looked me over, placing a soft kiss to my chest and collar bone.

“You look beautiful tonight.”

“Thank you. I had an engagement party to go to.”

I opted out of telling him about the pregnancy announcement and how that led to me going to the bar. He knew about me and Mecca and my abortion at eighteen.

His hands slid up and down my back. “I’m sure you gave the bride-to-be a run for her money. This dress is gorgeous—the kind a man wants to see you immediately take off.”

With a chuckle, I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Clearly Vontae felt the same way.”

Carter’s laugh was soft as he pushed my hair off my shoulders. “We’re making light of it, but are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

The feel of his fingers caressing my thighs calmed me even more. My forehead rested against his. “Yeah, I will. I’ve been through worse. He was creepy but... I’m good.”

“Good.” The feel of his breath... the mint on his tongue. Carter cleared his throat. “I’m gonna... go back to my room. Stay as long as you need to, okay?”

“Thanks again, Bug.”

That made him smile like it always did. On our first date, Carter almost flipped his seat over when a flying bug jumped on him. It was the icebreaker we needed to relax and get to know each other, and I’d been calling him Bug ever since.

“You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?” The sight of him licking his lips as he smiled wider made me smile.

“Never.”

As rough and tough as he was, knowing such a small bug could get a reaction out of him always made me chuckle. He swore it was because the bug surprised him, and that would only make me laugh harder. Sliding off him and back onto the couch, I decided to head home. The longer I stayed, the more of a chance there was for us to end the night having sex.

“I’m gonna go ahead and go,” I announced as we both stood.

“You sure?” Carter took my hand into his again. This time, I stroked his with my thumb.

“Yeah. But tha—”

“Stop thanking me,” he stressed with a low voice, using his free hand to cup my cheek. “You know I’ll do...” His head shook slowly. “Everything for you.”

I’m not sure which one of us moved first, but my hands went to his chest while his went to my waist. Our lips connected, and I savored the reunion. When he whispered my name against my lips, my pussy throbbed.

“We shouldn’t do this,” I muttered, running my hand down his neck.

“You’re right. We shouldn’t.”

I counted five Mississippis of us staring at each other’s lips before they were connecting again. A short walk down the hall led to Carter putting me in the middle of his bed. He made quick work of grabbing a condom while I pushed my dress down my body. Yanking me to the edge of the bed by my ankle, he turned me over and slipped into me from behind.

Each slow, long, deep stroke made it harder for me to breathe as I gripped his comforter. My toes curled as I rocked against him and relaxed more into his bed. This was the distraction I needed to forget about Mecca, our angel baby, and everything else that was wrong in my world... and there was no one better to give it to me than Carter Leigh.



There was no better way to celebrate getting my first solo class action lawsuit as a senior associate than going to an underground poker tournament with two of my closest friends at the firm—Amelia and Parker. So far, the other three lawsuits I'd done were under the mentorship of our managing partner, Violet Hunter. The fact that she trusted me with this case gave me confirmation that named partner would soon be in my future, but I didn't want to jinx it just yet. Hunter, Phoenix, Genesis, and Prime, or HGP² as we called it, was like a revolving door when it came to partners.

At the moment, there was Violet Hunter, Jeremy Phoenix, who was Amelia's older brother, Flex Genesis, and Quentin Prime. We were the largest and highest-grossing Black law firm in the mid-south. My desire to become named partner one day didn't outweigh my pride in working at such a prestigious law firm. I didn't mind being a senior associate for no more than five more years. By thirty-eight, I wanted to be a named partner and managing partner by forty-five, even if I had to start my own firm to do so.

As a senior associate, I had attorneys and paralegals working under me, so I'd have enough experience to confidently make that transition if necessary. The only thing that had me unsure about my ability to excel at HGP² was how close Jeremy and Flex were. The best friends always voted

together, ensuring their positions of power regardless of who else came and left as name partners. Because of Amelia's issues with her brother, I didn't see either of us getting a promotion if he had anything to say about it, no matter how much we deserved it.

"I'm so excited for you, Mecca, and proud!" Amelia boasted, gripping my shoulder. We'd played a few hands and were now lingering at the bar before deciding to call it a night. "Do you not realize what this can mean for the firm? For you?"

"For us," I reminded. "This is a win for you, just as much as it is for me."

Parker sucked his teeth. "Will you two just have sex already?"

Though Amelia and I laughed, I planned to quickly correct him. Amelia was beautiful but she was my closest female friend and more like a sister to me. I was physically attracted to her when we first met, but now, it turned my stomach to even think about her in a sexual way. We were truly platonic friends, and I was grateful God had blessed me with both her and Parker—even when he said dumb shit like that.

"You know it's not like that between her and I," I reminded him as he took a sip of his French Connection. "But I meant what I said," I told Amelia, giving her back my attention. "You are undisputedly the best negotiator at HGP². I know you hate criminal law just as much as I do. If I can make this take off for the firm, I'm handing you as many cases as I can."

"There's no if, only when. If I'm the best negotiator, you're the best litigator. This is literally just the beginning for you, bro. Congratulations, again."

All three of us toasted before taking sips of our drinks. I wasn't happy about the situation that led to the case, but I was glad to be the lead attorney on it. A middle-aged mother sought representation after her young son got sick. She swore it was because of her apartment complex but no one believed her. The living conditions were horrible—rats and roaches, and as a result, poison that was being improperly used, loose

flooring and ceilings, broken HVACs, and Sheila suspected the landlord was allowing drugs and prostitution in some of the apartments as well.

My goal was to get as many tenants as possible to join the lawsuit. Sheila said quite a few complained but were afraid to speak up. The last time we talked, she had two other single moms who were willing to go against the landlord and his organization. That was a start, but I wanted at least half of the tenants to be on board before we served him.

Conversation continued to flow between us, and both Amelia and I were caught off guard when Parker announced, “Well, I think I found the woman I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.”

Amelia and I looked at each other before bursting into laughter. I laughed so hard my eyes watered as I held my tightening stomach. Amelia gripped my arm as she struggled to catch her breath, wiping tears from her eyes. Parker’s pride had his chest poked out as he frowned, looking from me to her. I don’t think it was either of our intentions to make him feel bad, but in the five years that we’d known Parker, he’d never been in a serious relationship or even expressed his desire to be in one.

“Okay, wait, let’s be fair,” Amelia said, pulling her laugh in. “Let’s hear him out.”

“Oh, I’m listening,” I replied, amused.

Parker stared at us before sucking his teeth and giving us a dismissive wave, making us laugh all over again. When he tried to walk away, I quickly stood and grabbed his arm.

“A’ight, a’ight, we’re done. Tell us about the future Mrs. Parker Graham,” I said as he sat back down on the opposite side of Amelia.

“I’m not going to share the sacredness of my new bond if you’re not going to take it seriously.”

“We are going to take it serious, Parker, promise,” Amelia assured him with a sweet smile.

This time, when he looked at us, Parker nodded and began to speak. “Okay, so I met her a week ago at that rooftop party I told the both of you about. She was flirting back but also playing hard to get, so we didn’t link up until yesterday.” He paused and clutched his chest as his expression softened. “We spent literally all night together. After dinner and drinks, we went to the river and walked and talked for hours. Then, when I took her home, we sat in my car for hours and talked more. For twelve hours straight, we got to know each other. The only reason we parted ways was because we needed to get ready for work.”

“Wow,” Amelia almost whispered, covering his hand with hers on top of the bar. “That sounds so beautiful, Parker. I’m happy for you. It truly sounds like you guys connected in a magical way.”

“I feel like we did. I’ve never had that kind of instant connection with someone or the desire to be around them so long. And it wasn’t even physical. We held hands as we walked and hugged before we parted ways, but we didn’t even kiss. I’m in love with this woman and I don’t even know what her pussy feels like yet.”

Amelia rolled her eyes as I chuckled and took a sip of my drink. I was waiting for his ass to say something slick.

“I’m happy for you, man,” I said as I set my drink down. “Love doesn’t come around often. If you think she’s the one, treat her right and make sure she never questions how you feel.”

“Do you have a picture of her?”

“Yeah.” Parker pulled his phone out, opened his photos, and handed it to Amelia after a few swipes.

With a gasp, Amelia shoved Parker playfully. “Oh my God, Park. She’s absolutely *beautiful!*” Amelia extended the phone in my direction. “Here, look at this. I see why he spent twelve hours with her.”

I laughed as I grabbed the phone, but I almost dropped it when my eyes landed on Carina. No matter how much time

had passed, in this case, fifteen years, I'd never forget her face or her beauty. Carina had very distinct features that made her unforgettable. What made her most unforgettable was the fact that she was my first love's best friend when we were in high school.

My nostrils flared as I tightened my grip on the phone.

"Hey," Amelia called quietly, placing her hand on my back. "You okay?"

I tried to speak but no words would come out. Instead, I handed her back the phone as I stood and pulled enough bills to take care of all our drinks.

"Don't tell me she's an ex," Parker said as he retrieved his phone from Amelia.

"Nah." I gave him a forced smile. "I gotta go, y'all. Thanks for coming out and helping me celebrate."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Amelia asked.

I didn't want to go into detail, but I also didn't want them to worry. "Yeah, that's... Carina, right?" Parker nodded. "She was Shalom's best friend when we were in school."

Nothing else needed to be said. Their expressions grew solemn, giving me even more of a reason to leave. I didn't want to ruin their night just because the sight of her had ruined mine. It had never been my intention to share that part of my past with them, but every time summer rolled around for the past five years, anger and depression took over me, and they did an intervention for me and called me out on it.

I told them about Shalom. How we fell quick, hard, and fast. So fast we got pregnant our senior year on prom night. I planned to marry her and be there for her every step of the way, even if it meant not becoming a lawyer. My parents convinced me to take some time to myself before making such a major decision, so I spent two weeks of the summer in Florida with family. Though I enjoyed myself, my time away further solidified Shalom was the one for me. Even if I became a lawyer later in life or never at all, I wanted her and our baby.

Imagine my surprise and disappointment when I came home to a letter from her saying her love for me wasn't real, she just wanted an experience before graduating from high school. She said she was going to have an abortion and go to Atlanta for school, and to never reach out to her again. When I called her, her number had been changed. When I went to her home, she'd already left. I was crushed. Angry. Hurt. Gutted. The girl I loved more than anything had taken not just my heart but my baby too.

Even all these years later, I still wasn't over that shit.

The years hadn't made it easier for me to move on. My love for her had been buried deep under hate. I hadn't spent years healing; I'd spent years fuming over her betrayal. I prayed I never saw her again because I honestly didn't know how I'd react.

As happy as I was for Parker, I had to leave before I said some shit that further ruined their night. This beef was between me and Shalom, and it was best if we stayed on our own ends of the world so it would never be cooked.



The next morning, I met with the partners who all congratulated me on bringing the lawsuit in. Even Jeremy offered kind words, which was a surprise. After the congratulations, Violet pulled me into her office to speak with me privately. As she sat behind her glass desk, I closed the door.

“I wanted to run this by you before I made the executive decision to outsource.”

“What's up?” I asked, heading toward one of the chairs that was on the opposite side of her desk. I couldn't help but look at her spacious office. It was the size of my master bedroom. She had it decorated simply with only awards and diplomas lining the walls along with shelves of books. There was a small bar area and two chair tables to the left, but other than that, the space was bare.

“I really want you to win this lawsuit without it having to go to trial. Based on what the lead plaintiff has shared, there’s a chance you can have at least fifty people on this suit if just half of the tenants want to join.” I nodded as I sat down. “I have faith in our researchers and paralegals, but I think you need someone of a higher caliber to handle this. Of course, we want to settle this outside of court, but if it does go to trial, you’d better damn well believe the defendant’s attorney will dig up any and everything they can find on your clients to try and prove whatever they experienced while living there was their fault. This can quickly become a character case, and you will need to know these people better than they know themselves in order to be prepared.”

“What do you have in mind?”

Violet sat back in her seat and put her palms together in prayer position. “I want to bring in a freelance researcher. One or two that will be extensively for your use on this case.”

“I’m okay with that. The more help, the better.”

“Good.” Violet gave me a warm smile. “This won’t come out of your fees. I’ll take care of it.”

She was always doing little things that showed me she believed in me, and I appreciated her more than she would ever know for that. Violet was a hard ass, but she was soft and compassionate when she needed to be. The fifty-something single woman didn’t look a day over thirty-eight, and I could honestly say, if we didn’t work together, I would have tried to get her in my bed the day we met. Violet favored the singer Mya to me. I loved her long wavy hair, though she often wore it pulled back into a low bun.

“Thank you, Violet. Not just for that, but for allowing me to take on this case and for believing in me. I know criminal law was my money maker, and you had every right to make me stick with that.”

Violet chuckled as she rocked in her seat. “You’re... right about that, Mecca. Your retainers for criminal law have been increasing at an impeccable rate over the last two years. Just last quarter alone, you bringing in that mafia family...”

“Alleged,” I interrupted to add.

“Alleged,” she corrected with a chuckle. “Added a three-million-dollar retainer for each of them. I hate that you are no longer doing criminal law, but I would never force you to practice something that causes dis-ease within your spirit. I’m confident that you will do just as well with these class action suits and civil law. If you feel as if you need a little more time to get your billable hours where they need to be...”

“I won’t,” I assured her as I stood.

Failing at this wouldn’t be an option. I was finally feeling more peace and able to sleep better now that I was done with criminal law. Defending people I knew in my heart were guilty had been causing it to ache. No amount of money was worth my peace. I understood, though, that at the end of the day, I needed to keep my billable hours up. So if I needed to take on smaller cases in between lawsuits until I became known for them, I would.

As I headed out of her office, I wondered who she had in mind to bring in as my researcher. I didn’t care either way. All I needed was someone competent and able to get the information I needed without me having to hold their hand. And because of the standard of excellence that Violet operated with, there was no doubt in my mind that she would deliver the perfect person for the job.



“Girl, I don’t see how you still have the energy to cook after what you just did for Daddy,” Heaven said.

We were on FaceTime while I waited for Carina to arrive. She said she needed to talk to her friends about the amazing guy she met. Our other two friends couldn’t get away tonight, but they wanted us to FaceTime them when she got here.

“I mean... I still have to eat,” I replied, chopping some spinach to make spinach dip with. I was out of artichokes and didn’t have time to go and get any before Carina arrived. On the menu for our random girls’ night in was spinach dip, lemon pepper hot wings I’d put in the air fryer, and her favorite cheese and onion enchiladas with my homemade beefy enchilada spread on top. I’m sure it sounded like a lot to Heaven, but each meal took about twenty minutes on its own once they were prepped and ready to go.

“Still. I would have ordered in. You prepped him breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Not to mention those no-sugar brownies. When are you going to take a break?”

It felt like I had this conversation with her and my mother at least once a week. If they weren’t complaining about me cooking for Dad and a few other elders, they were complaining about how much I worked as a freelance researcher. I was so used to having the conversation I didn’t

bother answering her. Instead, I asked, “What are your plans for the rest of the weekend?”

Heaven rolled her eyes, making me smile as I put the enchiladas in the oven. The wings were already in the air fryer and the dip was in my air fryer toaster oven. All that was left was our drinks. Since it would be just the two of us, I’d probably make spiked lemonade. It was crazy how adamant I was about not being a domestic woman who cooked and cleaned daily, and now, I got so much relief out of doing both. Baking calmed me and was one of my favorite hobbies. I think the difference was, what I did now, I did for myself alone. It would be different if I was doing it for a man and kids.

“I’m not sure. Danny wants to go out but I’m not sure. I think I just want to chill and watch a few series or something. What about you?”

“Same. I told you and Ma I wouldn’t work on the weekends, so I don’t know. If I step out, it’ll more than likely be with Carina unless she’s boo’d up.”

“Well, let me know. Maybe we can have a sleepover and watch that new series on Netflix that everyone’s been talking about.”

“I will. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Okay, sissy. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I allowed Heaven to disconnect the call so I wouldn’t have to stop what I was doing. The ’90s R&B playlist I was listening to before she called started back up through my Bluetooth speaker. For a while, I lost myself in my kitchen while I waited for one of my best friends to arrive. By the time I was pulling everything out and setting it up in the living room, Carina was ringing my doorbell. I yelled for her to let herself in since I’d already unlocked the door.

She almost floated into the living room wearing the widest smile I’d seen on her in a while, and I couldn’t help but mirror it.

“I’m in love, I’m in love, and I don’t care who knows it!” she sang, twirling, like on *Elf*.

I laughed as we hugged. “Okay, I need all the details because you haven’t been this giddy over a man in a while. If ever.”

“Okay, but I’m hungry. Let me get a plate first.”

“Oh! We need to call Draya and Stephanie too.”

Carina nodded her agreement as she headed into the kitchen to wash her hands. She looked really pretty in a red peplum shirt, leggings, and pumps. While she washed her hands, I called our girls. Not to my surprise, Stephanie didn’t answer. She was probably doing something with her son, Sun, who was eight years old. Draya answered, but her husband was kissing all on her neck and begging us to update her later since he finally had a night off. As much as she giggled and insisted he leave her be, I hung up so she could give her hardworking man some attention.

“Well, babe, it looks like it’s just going to be us,” I told Carina as I washed my hands.

“You’re all I need,” she replied with a wink.

We made our way back into the living room, and while I fixed our plates, she poured our drinks. As soon as we got comfortable, she started to tell me about who she was sure would be her new man—Parker Graham. I immediately wanted to go into researcher mode and look up everything about him that I could find. She asked me not to, so I’d hold off for now. As happy as she was, I wouldn’t want to rain on her parade anyway.

I listened intently as she told me about them spending half a day together. Seeing her like this was cute. Carina wasn’t the kind of woman to gush over men. In fact, she swore she wouldn’t get married or have kids. From the sound of it, Parker would soon have her reconsidering that. I stressed to her how happy I was for her, and she ended up staying for a couple of hours before heading out to go see Parker.

After cleaning up, I surrendered to my desire to check my emails since I wasn't supposed to do any work at all. Curiosity got the best of me when I saw an email from Violet Hunter. Her name was vaguely familiar, but I wasn't sure why just yet. Instead of immediately opening the email, I showered, got into my pajamas, and climbed into bed first. Once I had the TV on an episode of *The Golden Palace* that I'd probably seen a million times, I finally opened the email from Violet.

Ms. Daniels,

I hope this email finds you well. Though we have not spoken personally, I am very familiar with your work as a researcher. One of my senior associates has taken on a class-action lawsuit that could use your expertise. If you have the availability to speak with me in person, I'd love to share more details. To honor your time, I'll have payment available for the short consultation.

Best,

Violet Hunter

Managing Partner

Hunter, Phoenix, Genesis, and Prime

I reread the email three times before doing a quick Google search on the law firm. The website had a very basic setup, offering information on their specialties, partners, and several reviews. There was no harm in going to hear her out, so I replied to her email to see when she'd like to meet. After that, I snuggled deeper into my bed to watch the one and only season of one of my favorite TV shows until sleep found me.

I wasn't sure why I was nervous as I headed toward Violet's office. This wouldn't be the first time I worked with a lawyer if I accepted her offer. For some reason, though, this felt different. The receptionist, who introduced herself as Gloria, extended her arm toward the open door on the left. She'd already called to let Violet know I was there, so when I walked in, she was standing and waiting with a smile.

"Ms. Daniels, thank you so much for meeting me," Violet said as she walked around her desk.

"Please, call me Shalom."

We shook hands before she motioned for me to have a seat near the small bar area to the left of her office.

"Shalom it is," she agreed. Though we'd just met, I could tell she had a warm vibe. Violet slid a white envelope in my direction. "That's for you, and I promise to not keep you long."

"I have time, and I'm curious about the case. You didn't give me any details about it via email."

"Intentionally. I didn't want you to look into the case on your own. I want you to speak with the lead attorney first, however, he's in Chicago. What I can share with you, is that it is a class action lawsuit against a landlord and his property management company. He has just over a hundred tenants, and the living conditions are horrendous. Quite a few of them have been dealing with health issues that were never an issue before they moved into his building. Outside of that, the building has become a community nuisance because he allegedly allows drug dealing and use and prostitution. Now I believe the lead attorney has a very good case just with the proof and testimony of the tenants, but I am concerned about the defense turning this into a character circus. That's where you come in."

"What would you need?"

"I would need you to be his lead researcher and go through as much information as you possibly can pertaining to the landlord, his company, and everyone who works with him along with all the tenants within the building. I'd need you to

look for specific things that the attorney will make you aware of so you won't bombard him with files and files of paperwork to go through. It is my understanding that you also took classes in reading expressions and body language?" I nodded. "Then I would also like for you to sit in on meetings with him and the plaintiffs and with the defendant when they initially meet for mediation."

"Is this an immediate thing?"

"If possible. I understand you may have a current caseload and I'm sure the attorney will be willing to work around it. I am also willing to pay for your priority."

She motioned toward the envelope, and I opened it. There was a five-thousand-dollar check for this consultation and a small piece of paper with a number that I had to keep my eyes from bulging out at the sight of. I averaged one hundred and fifty to one hundred and eighty thousand a year as a researcher. Violet was offering double that.

"Is this... what you're willing to pay for my services for the entire year, or the length of the case?" I clarified.

"We're hoping this won't go to trial, so that's for the next three months. If it does go to trial, or we need you longer, I'll have a contract drawn up with further pay information after you meet with the lead attorney and agree to work with him."

As far as I was concerned, I would have accepted the case now. Money wasn't everything, but I wanted to help the tenants as much as I could, and it appeared I would be paid handsomely for it. To avoid seeming too anxious, I agreed to wait until after I met with the lead attorney before giving her my decision. We stood and shook hands, and I tried to return the check. I hadn't been here for more than five minutes, and I honestly felt like I was cheating her by taking the five thousand dollars. She insisted and implored me to honor my time and my expertise, so I kept the check. As I made my way out of the office, I couldn't help but smile.

This was a new opportunity that I wasn't expecting at all, but it would allow me to keep my mind off how shitty my personal life was right now.

mecca

Hosanna huffed into the phone, and I couldn't care less. She was acting clingier than usual lately and I wasn't sure why. Every Sunday I went to church with my family and had an early dinner with them. For whatever reason, Hosanna expected that to be different. She'd called me twice while I was at church, and when I returned her call, she asked me to accompany her to brunch. I was sitting in my car talking to her while the rest of my family went inside.

"I'm confused," I admitted. "You sound upset about me not going to brunch like you don't know I do the same thing every Sunday."

"I just don't understand why you can't make this exception for me just once."

I had to keep myself from asking her who she thought she was for me to make that exception for her. Sundays with family have been a tradition since I was a kid. Hosanna was a woman I had sex with. There was no reason for me to renege on my plans for her. Still, my mother had raised me to be a gentleman, so I was trying my hardest to spare Hosanna's feelings. I also was double thinking about my responses because the weekend had been hard for me. Since seeing that picture of Carina, Shalom had been heavy on my mind. Even

with the random one-day trip to Chicago yesterday, my soul was still struggling to release her.

“Hosanna...” I released a frustrated chuckle. “If you want to go to brunch, we can go on a Saturday neither of us has plans. Sunday has always been and will always be the day I spend with my family.”

She huffed again, and the sound was starting to piss me off. “Fine, Mecca,” she grumbled before disconnecting the call.

I didn’t care about the conversation ending, but I didn’t tolerate disrespect. I shot her a text reminding her of that before getting out of my car and heading to the door of my parents’ home. It didn’t matter how much my brother and I offered to cook or barbecue to give her a break, she insisted on doing our Sunday dinners at their home. I was cool with that because it allowed me to eat and take a nap before heading home to further rest. As I headed inside, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I started not to look at what Hosanna had said in case it pissed me off, but I wanted to get the conversation over with. All she’d said was, *I know and I’m sorry. I’m just frustrated.*

Me: Why?

“Where y’all at?” I called out, finding the living room and sitting room empty.

Mom let me know she was in the kitchen and that my dad and brother were outside. I wouldn’t be surprised if Pops got a new tool or piece of equipment for the house or lawn that he wanted to show off. As I headed toward the kitchen to see what Mom had prepared, I read Hosanna’s reply.

Sanna: I can admit that the sex is making me get more attached to you. We’ve been at this for a long time and I’m starting to want more. Not a relationship but more than just sex. We don’t hang out at all, and I want us to try again.

Me: We can try.

I figured this was a time when showing her would be better than telling her. There hadn’t been any changes within our

character, so I was sure our time outside of the bedroom would be just as dry as it had always been. If she wanted us to chill, we could chill, and I hoped that would help her remember why we stopped.

“Hey, baby.” Mom greeted me, like she hadn’t seen me at church.

“What you cooking?”

“I’m just about to do some cornbread real quick, but everything else is ready.” She walked over to the counter. “I’ve got ham, meatloaf, baked chicken, candied yams, greens, green beans, mac and cheese, and banana pudding for dessert.”

My stomach immediately began to growl. Hosanna was out of her damn mind if she thought I was missing out on this. After giving Mom a kiss on her cheek, I headed outside to see what my Pops was showing my brother. Sure enough, he’d gotten a new riding lawn mower that he wanted to show off.

I hadn’t even made it over to them good before Pops was saying, “What’s been going on with you?”

“What you mean?”

“You’ve been off this weekend.”

I squeezed the back of my neck and laughed as Promise lifted his pointer finger to excuse himself like we were in church. If Pops was about to grill me, he’d be up next. I didn’t blame him for getting out of the way.

“I’m good,” I lied, but his head shook as he prepared to call me out on it.

He got off the riding lawn mower telling me not to tell Mom he’d gotten on it in his church clothes. I laughed as we headed toward the patio to sit down.

“Now you don’t have to lie to my face, son. You can just tell me you don’t want to talk about it.”

That was true. I didn’t want to talk to my parents about Shalom. They made it clear back in the day that they believed we were moving too fast and needed to break up. When I told them we were pregnant, Mom fainted, and Pops wanted to

whup my ass. I thought they would be proud of me for stepping up and wanting to do things the right way, but all they cared about was me ruining my future. I resented them so much after I lost Shalom. I felt like the last year of our relationship was so stressful because our parents didn't want us to be together. When she broke up with me through a letter and killed our baby, Mom tried to heal my broken heart, but it was no use. I took my anger out on those closest to me because that was easier than telling them how much I was hurting.

A part of me wished I could talk to Pops about this and other women in my life, but after Shalom, I never felt safe being vulnerable with them in that way again. I didn't want them telling me the woman I loved and cared about wasn't good for me and making me question our relationship, that's why I kept my dealings with women private now.

Still, I considered opening up to him. It had been fifteen years, and last month was just as hard for me as it was when she first left. Clearly, I needed help to get over this.

"Shalom," I said for the second time this weekend, and it was just as hard getting it out now as it was then. "Just... been thinking about her a lot lately. The anniversary was last month, and Parker is seeing one of her friends. Well, old friends. I don't know if they still talk." My head shook as I sighed and ran my hands across my waves. The more I talked, the more anxious I felt. My left leg began to shake as my heart palpitated. There was no reason for this girl to still have such an effect on me.

"It's been fifteen years, Mecca, and you're still holding on to that?"

My head whipped in his direction. "Holding on to what?"

"The abortion."

"That was supposed to be my firstborn child. She was supposed to be my wife. That's not something I can just... get over."

“Have you tried?” He chuckled softly, turning slightly in my direction. “I promise you, you only feel as strongly as you do because of how things ended between the two of you. If you would have had that conversation with her face to face and gotten your closure, you’d be okay.”

“You think I like having this affect me? I wish I could forget about her, about them, but they’re engrained into my heart. Whether Shalom and I talked face to face or not, I was in love with her, and that doesn’t just go away.”

“You were eighteen, son. What did you know about love?” To avoid disrespecting him, I stood to leave. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry. Maybe I’m being harsher than I should. It’s just difficult for me to hear that you’re suffering because of something that happened so long ago.” When I continued to head out, he stood and grabbed my neck. It was hard enough to even gain the courage to talk to him about this. I wasn’t expecting him to be soft and to coddle me, but he was making me feel worse. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, turning me and giving me an unexpected hug. “I’ve never lost a child or the woman I was in love with, so I don’t know what you’re going through. I’m not going to deny how you felt about her. If you’re still struggling, whatever it was, it was real.”

“Thank you,” was all I could think of to say.

Though I appreciated his apology, his response was exactly why I hadn’t bothered to try and talk to him or anyone else about this. They didn’t understand what I was going through, and if they didn’t understand, there was no insight they could offer me. I appreciated him trying, but this was something I’d have to figure out on my own—if I even figured it out at all. Even after I got married and had kids, I felt like the one we lost would haunt me. They couldn’t be forgotten or replaced. Regardless, I would have to find a way to not be so triggered and affected by Carina or thoughts of Shalom. If things got as serious with her as Parker suspected, I’d have to be around her eventually, and I refused to make my friend feel bad about his relationship just because of how bad I felt about mine with Shalom.

“Have you considered grief counseling?” he asked as we headed back inside.

“No, I haven’t,” I admitted with a shake of my head.

“Maybe you should. From the sound of it, you haven’t released them or the pain of losing them. No matter how I feel about the abortion, she was pregnant with your baby and he or she never made it into the world. I think if you talked to someone about the pain of that loss, it’ll help.”

My pride wouldn’t allow me to seek professional help over my loss of a child I’d never held in my arms, but maybe Pops was right. Whether I held my child or not, I fell in love with them the moment I learned they were in her womb. And when we went to her first appointment and heard their heartbeat, I was determined to do whatever I had to, to be as good of a father to them as my father had been to me. My plans for the future died along with our baby, and maybe I needed to talk to someone about that to truly get closure.

“I’ll do that, Pops. Thank you.”

“Anytime. I’m here for you, even if I don’t always say the right things immediately.”

That was true, but I loved him anyway. He was a man who could acknowledge his strengths and weaknesses, and I would always respect him for that. I know in my mind my parents wanted Shalom and me to break up because they thought that was best for both of us, but still. I wasn’t sure I’d ever get over how hard they made things for us. It didn’t matter though. As far as I was concerned, she died right along with our baby.



shalom

Violet informed me that she'd been held up in court and would be late, but I could expect her and the written offer by the time I was done meeting with the lead attorney. I was okay with that. Today, I wanted nothing more than to speak with the attorney over the case so I could get a better understanding of what was going on and how I could help. Research, to me, was my purpose, and a way to help improve society, life, and the law by working with people who had the power to make change instead of being the face of that change myself. Like Pac, I didn't care about being the one to make change; but I did want to be the one who helped or inspired someone to do it.

Gloria ushered me into the room where the attorney I'd be working with was waiting, and my heart, for some reason, began to rapidly beat as I made my way over to him. He was immersed in his phone conversation, which was fine because it gave me time to compose myself. I ran my sweaty palms down my pale yellow slacks that I'd paired with a blue silk shirt and heels. When I was first meeting a client, I always wanted to make a good first impression and make sure my energy felt like energy they could trust. Wearing blue helped with that.

I cleared my throat, not to get his attention, but because it was getting dryer the closer I got to him. At the sound of it, he hurried off his call and turned to face me. As soon as he did,

the world started to spin. *My* world started to spin. It didn't matter how many years had passed; I would never forget Mecca Smith's face. Time had aged him well, but I didn't give a damn about that.

The longer I looked into his eyes, the more anger, shame, and hurt filled me—just like it did fifteen years ago. He looked at me as if he was looking at a ghost, and I could understand why. I neared him, and he frowned, like he was the one who had a reason to be upset. Before I could stop myself, I was slapping him with my palm and roaring as I tried to backhand him with the same hand, but he gripped my wrist before I could connect with his face a second time.

“I hate you!” I yelled as my eyes blurred with tears.

I was never the type to draw attention to myself with public displays of emotion, but I had years' worth of anger reserved for Mecca. Gone was the thirty-three-year-old established woman with emotional intelligence. I felt like that eighteen-year-old girl, lost in the world, lacking control of herself and everything else, all over again. His hand wrapped around my neck and Mecca pushed me into the nearest wall. As he squeezed, I wondered for a brief second if he would actually kill me.

“You hate me?” he gritted. “I hate *you!*”

The commotion caused a few people to rush into the room. As I kicked him, they pulled him off me.

“You bastard!” I yelled as a man I didn't know carried me out of the room. “You're a piece of shit, Mecca! I regret the day I ever met you!”

“Fuck you, Lom! You the one! You ruined *every-fucking-thing!*”

Scoffing, I gripped the frame of the door. “*I* ruined everything? You lied to me! I hate you! I hate you! I fucking hate you!”

All I could do was yell that I hated him as I was carried out because I did. I really, truly did. Nothing consumed me more in that moment than my hate for him. And that was crazy,

seeing as I was in love with him—had been since I was fourteen. Even after all these years, no man evoked emotions within me the way Mecca did—good or bad. I would always tell myself our love was so strong because we were young, and young love was always more intense. There are fewer guards and boundaries, less pride and ego. The love is expressed easier and it's often purer. But telling myself that hadn't stopped me from being disappointed with adult relationships because the love never felt the same.

Carter was the only other man I considered marrying, and because of our differences, we were not as compatible as me and Mecca.

Me and Mecca.

There was no me and Mecca. Not after the way he betrayed me.

Pulling myself out of the man's arms, I rushed down the hall and repeatedly stabbed the down button on the elevator. My entire body shuddered as I fought back tears and a guttural groan that was begging to be released. A trembling hand covered my mouth as I swallowed it down like vomit. I rushed into the elevator, sinking onto the floor as I waited for it to take me to the ground level of the building. The calming music did nothing to soothe my rattled nerves and shattered soul.

I always wondered how it would feel if I ran into Mecca when I returned to Memphis.

Nothing could have prepared me for this moment.

Nothing.

The elevator chimed, and I made a quick dash for my car. I dropped my keys and purse as I opened the door, but I didn't even give a damn. Slamming the door behind me, I gripped the steering wheel as I released every moan, wail, and tear that demanded to be released.

I'm not sure how long I sat in my car sobbing before the door was opened, and a man who was vaguely familiar lifted his hands in surrender.

“I don’t mean you any harm,” he rushed out. “I saw you crying and couldn’t stop myself from coming to check on you.” He seemed genuine, and even if he wasn’t, I was in such a bad state that I’d take comfort from anyone. As I cried harder, he told me, “C’mere, angel.”

He pulled me out of my car and into his arms with care. I allowed him to hold me, to rock me gently, until my cries turned into whimpers. When he pulled me from his chest to wipe my face, I looked into his eyes.

My head tilted as I tried to place where I knew him from. He looked at me inquisitively as well, but I don’t think for the same reason. That’s when it hit me.

“What’s your name?” I asked, but before he could answer, I added, “Parker?”

His head jerked slightly in confusion. “Yeah, how do you know me? Are you a client?”

My chuckle was low as I wiped the rest of my tears. “Carina is my best friend. She showed me a picture of you.”

As recollection filled him, he gave me a smile that I was sure made Carina pine. “That’s my darling. You’re one of the friends she raves about?”

“I am,” I answered proudly as he put some space between us now that I was composed. “I’m Shalom.”

His countenance dropped at the same time as his shoulders. “Shalom?”

“Yeah. Don’t tell me she’s been talking shit about me.”

“Oh, no. Not at all.” Parker chuckled nervously as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. “It’s just... I have a friend who had an ex named Shalom that’s all.”

I didn’t know too many women named Shalom in Memphis, so I wouldn’t be surprised if that ex was me. I put two and two together, knowing if he was here and a lawyer, there was a good chance that friend was Mecca.

“I have to go,” I blurted, hopping into my car. “But thank you, Parker. You have my approval with Carina, for what it’s

worth.”

He gave me a comfortable smile and patted his chest.

“Thank you, Shalom. Please let Carina know when you’ve made it home and tell her to let me know too.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

He gave me a bob of his head before turning and heading toward the revolving doors of the place I’d just left. My eyes shifted in that direction only for a brief moment. The thought of Mecca being inside had me cutting my car on and swerving out of the parking lot as quickly as I possibly could. Everything inside of me wanted to go to Carter, but I couldn’t. I didn’t want my negative feelings for Mecca to make Carter shine in a more positive light. We’d been doing good keeping our distance for the last six months. Men wouldn’t change that.

I drove home aimlessly, thinking about me and Mecca the entire time.

How we met my freshman year of high school. It was a slow build I suppose. We first saw each other walking the halls. Our eyes locked so long we’d have to turn to keep sight of each other. He smiled at me, beamed at me, like just the sight of me made him happy. A couple of weeks of that led to him working up the courage to sit with me at lunch. Silently. A month of that led to him walking me home. Finally, a week of that led to him uttering his first words to me.

After that, we were inseparable.

I gave him my virginity, we were homecoming queen and king our sophomore and junior years, and at prom our senior year... I got pregnant. Well, Mecca would say *we* were pregnant. Even back then, he had a partner mentality that made me feel safe with him. Though we were young and still kids ourselves, he made me feel secure taking things to the next level.

One minute we were planning our forever, and the next, he was leaving a letter with my parents saying he only used me for my virginity and that he didn’t want to be with me

anymore. He told me he was leaving early for school and to use the money he'd put in the envelope to get an abortion. The letter also said if I didn't he would tell the world I was a whore who trapped him and tried to ruin his future. He told me he was changing his number and never wanted to hear from me again.

I was so distraught I agreed with my parents' idea to terminate the pregnancy. They'd been nagging me about me and Mecca moving too fast anyway. I didn't think I would be able to raise a baby on my own, so as much as I hated doing it, I got the abortion Mecca wanted me to have. As soon as the procedure was done, it felt like my parents shipped me to Atlanta so I could get settled in my dorm early.

College was horrible. I cried daily over the baby I no longer had. It wasn't until my junior year that I started to come out of my depression, but even still, it always plagued me during certain parts of the year—like the anniversary of the abortion, Mecca's birthday, and what would have been our anniversary.

By the time I got home, I was even more hurt. Mecca seemed so angry with me. How could I have been so foolish to think he was as kind and loving as he was? How could he be so angry at me for getting pregnant? Then he tricked me into thinking he was happy about it and going to be by my side, just to crush our future and my heart with a lousy letter.

Weakly, I made my way inside my home. I usually never got into bed with my clothes on, but I didn't have the strength to care. I climbed in, covered myself in the warmth of my sheets and comforter, and cried.



All it took was me texting my heart hurts in our group chat, and my parents and sister showed up at my front door. They'd been here for hours. My parents were in the living room and Heaven was in bed with me. Though I wanted my parents' advice and comfort, I was upset with them all over again. They

made the last year of my relationship with Mecca hell because of their reservations. On top of that, I felt pressured into the abortion because they made it clear they weren't going to raise my child if I gave up my future to have it.

So many emotions from fifteen years ago were consuming me, and I felt so overwhelmed by them. I was all cried out as I lay my head in Heaven's lap. She was taking my sew-in down so she could grease my scalp. The gesture was an act of love and service that our grandmother drilled into us years ago—greasing scalps and washing feet while singing gospel hymns for those who were hurting somehow made all things better.

A quiet knock sounded on the door before my mother poked her head in.

“Baby, you keep getting a call from a woman named Violet.”

My eyes rolled as I reached for the phone. To maintain professionalism, I'd answer her call, though it was fuck Mecca and everyone attached to him... except for Parker. Parker was cool.

Just as Mama handed me the phone, Violet was calling again.

I answered with, “Hi, Violet,” as I sat up from Heaven's lap.

Her sigh of relief was the first thing I heard before she said, “Thank goodness you answered. One second. I'm going to put you on speaker for a conference.” A beat of silence filled the line before she said, “Okay, Shalom, Mecca is in the office with me and...”

He sucked his teeth. “If I would have known you were calling her, I would have left.”

“And if I would have known he was there, I wouldn't have answered,” I replied.

“Guys, please, can we ju—”

“I have nothing to say to her. She's a lying, selfish, thot and I want nothing to do with her.”

Gasping, I hopped out of bed. With a growl, I paced. “And he’s a narcissistic, lying, user! He can’t be trusted, and I will *never* work with that... that... whore!”

“Fuck you, Lom!” he yelled from a distance.

“And fuck you, Mec! It’s on sight whenever I see you.”

“Shit, pull up right now!”

“Say less!”

I disconnected the call and charged toward the closet, but before I could put on my boots and put my hair up in a ponytail, my father was coming in and enveloping me in a bear hug. I told him to release me, though that wasn’t really what I wanted or needed. He held me until my anger turned into sadness and I cried as I weakly surrendered to his embrace.

I wanted to go to Mecca and pound his face in the way he’d shattered my heart. But the truth was, he’d probably fold me in half like a pretzel, and not in a good way. Knowing that he harbored such hate for me only hurt me more. I was truly at a loss. I gave him the abortion he wanted and never reached out to him.

What more did he want from me?

mecca

“I am so disappointed in you,” Violet seethed.

I couldn't blame her. My actions were completely out of character. What could I say? Seeing Shalom took me back to that eighteen-year-old boy all over again. The one whose heart was broken into so many pieces he had no choice but to chuck them at everyone within reach through anger. Because anger was easier to feel and express than betrayal and pain. It was easier to lash out than admit just how much Shalom's actions hurt me. And she had the nerve to act as if I was to blame. Like she had a reason to hate me. Like she wasn't the one who broke up with me with a pathetic ass letter and killed my firstborn. Just thinking about it had me getting pissed all over again.

“How could you behave that way in this office, Mecca? You plan to be named partner one day, yet you don't even have control over your emotions.”

“I have control over my emotions. It's just... her.” I felt silly even saying that. “She brings me out of myself.”

“Well, you need to get your shit together. Whether you want to accept it or not, Shalom is the best researcher available. If you want to win this case and avoid it going to trial, you need her.”

“Violet...”

She lifted her hand to silence me. “Whatever happened between the two of you, fix it. And don’t *ever* let me hear about you putting your hands on a woman again, or I will personally go to the D.A. and have them file charges against you myself.”

“She slapped me! And tried to do it again!”

“So?” With a huff, I stood and prepared to leave her office, but she called my name. “It’s clear you both are hurt over whatever it is. Heal, Mecca. I’ve never seen this side of you, and though it’s human, I don’t want to see it again. You’re better than this.”

I was frustrated with myself as it was but knowing that I’d let Violet down didn’t make me feel any better. After leaving her office, I told my floor assistant to take messages for all my calls for the rest of the day so they would not be forwarded to my cell. I needed a break. Being here made me feel like I was suffocating.

When I got into my car, I didn’t have a clear destination in mind. I ended up at Hosanna’s office. She was a paralegal, which was how we met in the first place. The lawyer she worked for needed our help with a case that he didn’t have the manpower or resources to win. I prayed she was in her office as I ignored the greeting of the receptionist. It wasn’t intentional. I looked at her and tried to speak but the words wouldn’t come out.

Hosanna’s smile was wide as I closed and locked her office door.

“Hi, Mecca. To what do I owe the pleasure of this impromptu visit?”

As I unzipped my pants, she got the message. Standing, she hiked her dress up before lifting one of her knees and placing it on her desk. Regardless of how desperate I was for relief, I took the time to strap up. Pinning her chest against the desk, I pushed her panties to the side and slipped inside. She moaned as I filled her with deep, hard strokes. Strokes that came so swift and precise she couldn’t moan and struggled to breathe.

It didn't take long before she was drenching me with her cum, but I didn't let up. I lost count of how many times she came. The only thing that made me pull out was her clawing at my wrist and telling me to stop before she got too loud. I looked down at the mess we'd made and quickly pulled out, but that didn't stop her walls from pulsing as she gushed and squirted.

"Shit," I grumbled, falling back into her seat. She had soaked my pants and would leave me with a wet stain.

Hosanna fell back onto me as she struggled to regulate her breathing. With a moan, she wrapped my arms around her as the last of her tremors subsided.

"Damn, baby. You've *never* fucked me like that."

She dropped to her knees and pulled the condom off, sucking my shit until my seeds seeped down her throat. Afterward, she tossed the condom into a piece of paper that I offered to discard. I didn't think Hosanna was scandalous enough to try and get my semen out, but because she'd been acting a little weird lately, I didn't want to take any chances.

"You wanna talk about whatever made you fuck me like that?" she asked as I stood and took off my suit jacket. I would need to carry it in a way that covered her wetness on the front of my pants.

I wanted to talk, but not to her, and definitely not right now. I was already more emotional than usual, and sex compounded what I was feeling because of Shalom. If I confided in Hosanna right now, it would make me feel closer to her, and I didn't need or want that.

"Nah, I'll be all right now. Thank you for not turning me away."

She gave me a smile before kissing me, and I greedily gave it back. I helped her readjust her dress well enough to be presentable on her way to the bathroom before we parted ways. She told me to call her tonight, but I probably wouldn't. Sex twice in one day hadn't been our thing, and things were too complicated right now for me to risk it.

I checked my phone before heading out, seeing that I had missed calls from both Parker and Amelia. I shot them a text letting them know I was heading home to shower before going for a run, and they let me know they'd meet me at the park in an hour.

We ran for an hour, and it helped clear my mind tremendously. I finally felt grounded again and like myself, but I wasn't sure how long that would last after we talked. We ended up going to the café in the gym for smoothies, and Amelia barely let us get seated before she asked, "What the hell happened back at the office, Mecca?"

I scratched my head and shrugged. One minute I was turning to see who the researcher was and the next I was being slapped by the ghost of my past. Then, my hand was around her neck, and for a split second, I couldn't control myself. That was a scary feeling. I didn't think I would actually hurt her, but knowing I wasn't entirely sure I could stop was the worst feeling of all. I was frozen as I stared into her wide eyes. I wasn't trying to kill her; I just couldn't believe she was actually there.

"Shalom," was all that would come out.

"What?" she almost whispered, leaning forward into the table. "That was her? Dammit! I wish I would have seen her."

I chuckled and scratched my ear, thinking about how beautiful she was. My head shook as I released those thoughts. Regardless of how beautiful she was, she was not to be trusted.

"I saw her in the parking lot before I came up," Parker said. "She was hysterical. I went to her and comforted her, but I didn't know who she was at the time. She was pretty messed up, man."

Knowing that she was hurt didn't make me feel better or worse. "It's her fault we're in this position, so I don't care if she's hurt or not," I said, feeling like that was the stance I needed to have in this situation.

His head shook as he crossed his arms on top of the table. “I don’t know, Mecca. The way she was crying, Shalom is hurt. I think there’s more to it than what you think.”

“Do you plan on talking to her?” Amelia asked.

A bitter chuckle escaped me as my eyes watered, forcing me to stare at the table. “Nothing good would come from us talking and we can’t be in the same room. Besides, there’s nothing that needs to be said. She broke up with me and killed my baby, then changed her number so I couldn’t talk to her about it. As far as I’m concerned, there’s nothing for us to talk about ever again.”

Neither of them said anything, and I was grateful for that. I was tired of people trying to make me get over this or talk to her to work things out. Shalom and I were doing just fine until today. The quicker we forgot about this encounter and returned to our normal lives, the better.



shalom

“As far as I’m concerned, there is nothing for us to talk about ever again,” I said to Carina.

Parker had been checking on me through her, which I appreciated, and they both wanted me to talk to Mecca. We didn’t have anything to talk about. He’d made how he felt perfectly clear in that letter. It was his choice to break up with me after leading me on. It was his choice to leave Memphis when I needed him most. It was his choice to tell me to get an abortion or prepare for his lies and hate about us, about me. So no, I had no more words for him. He wasn’t even worth my hate.

“Look, I appreciate you guys checking on me and being concerned, but trust me, it’s for the best if Mecca and I never see each other or speak again.”

“Shalom.” The sadness in her tone made my eyes water and nostrils flare. “Even if you don’t work with him, what about if Parker and I have the future I think we’re going to have? What about our wedding and holidays? How are we going to work if our best friends despise each other?”

With a smile, I put the tops on the last of the meal prep containers. “No matter what happens between Mecca and I, it will never affect you and Parker. If I have to ignore him and act as if he doesn’t exist to keep the peace, I’m sure I’ll be able to do that now that the initial shock has worn off.” Grabbing my phone, I lifted it so she could see my face. “You both have

to understand that we hadn't seen each other in over a decade. It's safe to say we both had a lot of unexpressed feelings. I don't behave that way on a regular basis, and I'm sure I'll be fine now."

Her head shook, but she didn't give me a hard time about it anymore. We talked for a few seconds longer before ending the call, then I packed up the meals I'd created to do my deliveries. Three days had passed since I'd seen Mecca, and I was grateful to feel like I was getting slightly back to normal. Today was my off day from work and the day I did my deliveries of food to my dad and a few other elders.

Family and community were very important to me. I loved talking to older women to get their life lessons and experiences on love and womanhood. After the way things had been going lately, I needed a talk filled with wisdom today more than ever. Once I had all the bags of food packed in my car, I changed into a two-piece linen set and headed out. It would be hours before I headed home, and I was actually looking forward to getting out of my home and out of my head for a while.

Sister Thomas made me feel worse. It wasn't intentional. When I dropped off her food for the rest of the week, she could immediately sense that something was wrong with me. I told her a shortened version, that I saw a man who hurt me deeply and reacted badly. She told me my physical reaction was proof of unresolved issues and lingering love and urged me to close that door of my life because it clearly had been open for years. I wasn't ready to accept that just yet.

Carter called to check on me, which led to us meeting at a bar downtown for drinks. I enjoyed the familiarity and safety of being with him after feeling so exposed by Mecca. He followed me back home, and though I knew it was because we'd fucked around and had sex the last time we saw each other, I let him come in anyway. I wanted to spend the night swimming a few laps, but drinking with him had canceled

that... at least for the next several hours. My mom wouldn't mind me coming over late so there was still a chance I'd be able to.

"Did you want to watch a movie or something?" I asked as I stepped out of my shoes at the front door.

"Yeah, that's cool. I really just didn't want my time with you to be over yet."

"What are we doing, Carter?" I asked, turning to face him. "We know this is dangerous."

"What makes it dangerous?" His arms wrapped around me, and he pulled me close.

"We don't want the same things. Risking developing deeper feelings for each other knowing this won't lead to marriage..."

"Why can't we just have fun?"

I didn't answer right away, trying to carefully figure out how to respond. "There's nothing fun about falling in love with someone that you will eventually have to say goodbye to."

"But shouldn't love be an experience, regardless of the length of time it lasts?" I couldn't argue with that as he cupped my cheek and caressed it with his thumb. "I want to love you, Shalom, even if I can't have you forever."

His forehead rested against mine as I tugged my bottom lip between my teeth. "Carter," I whispered, fighting back tears. This was the last thing I needed right now. My cracked heart was already exposed more than usual. Outside of not wanting to develop deeper feelings for him, I also had a thing about not dating exes once we were over.

"I want to experience how good it will feel." His lips hovered over mine. "To love you and be loved by you."

My hands wrapped around his neck as I lost what little will I had to deny him. Lord knows I was in no emotional state to try and make a relationship work with him or anyone else, but at least with Carter, the foundation had already been laid. A

foundation that didn't match my own. My eyes closed and head shook as I tried to accept our differences, but that was easier said than done.

“Bae,” he called, pleaded.

“Hmm?”

“Let me love you.”

Those four words opened my heart even more. Our lips connected and we devoured each other's mouths right there at my door. When we were ready for more, he slid down the wall and sat on the floor, bringing me with him. I lifted the sweater dress I had on, and he smiled when he realized I didn't have on any panties. Our eyes were locked as he retrieved a condom out of his wallet. Once he was sheathed, I slid down on him, riding him with my feet flat against the tile.

We lost ourselves in the ride. The act, and getting to it, was fervent... like always. Things were always deep and intense with Carter, and that's what reminded me of Mecca.

Mecca.

The thought of him had my body locking against Carter.

Closing my eyes, I tried to stay in this moment. My nectar trickled down, making a crackling noise against Carter as he moaned. He felt so good inside of me as he gripped my waist, but all I could think about was Mecca.

Before I could stop them, tears were streaming down my cheeks as I rested on my knees.

“Hey,” he whispered, stopping my movements. “Talk to me.”

“I'm sorry. I'm really not in the headspace for this.”

“Why didn't you say something, Shalom?”

“I wanted this, wanted you. I'm just... not ready.” I wiped my face as Carter held me close. “This is all Mecca's fault.”

“Mecca?” he repeated. “The fuck does *he* have to do with this?”

I tried to stand, but Carter tightened his grip around me. I told him about everything and when I was done, the compassion in his eyes as he stared at me forced me to look away.

“You can’t keep living like this, Shalom,” he almost whispered, cupping my chin and forcing me to look at him. “It’s clear you still have...” His head shook as he struggled to find the words. “A lot of feelings for and over this man and what you shared with him. What you lost with him. You need closure, bae. Whether you get it with or without him, you’re going to continue to be triggered and in pain until you deal with what happened years ago.”

Though he didn’t use the exact same words Sister Catherine did, they came with the same message, and I couldn’t help but feel like it was from God. I could admit I held a lot in from the most traumatic time in my life, and maybe I did need to get it out—I just didn’t know how.

“You’re right,” I agreed quietly. “I’m sorry for shoveling my issues on you, especially like this.”

Carter chuckled as he pushed my hair off my shoulders and kissed my neck. “This is what love is about, right?” He wiped the remnants of my tears. “I want to sit here and hold you until you find your strength. Because I want to love you and I want you to know you can trust me to do that.”

His declaration made my eyes water all over again, but I didn’t cry. I buried my face in his neck and allowed him to hold me and give me the care my aching heart so desperately needed.

mecca

Violet tapped her pen on my desk. She and Jeremy had come to make sure I wanted to do what I'd planned to do. I didn't want to do it at all, but I felt like it was the right thing to do. Since seeing Shalom, my head and heart were all over the place. It was crazy how differently things could look and feel in one week's time.

"Are you sure, Mecca?" Violet repeated for a second time.

"Let him do what he thinks is best, Vi. I told you he wasn't ready for this anyway."

"You will not speak about me like I'm not sitting right here."

Jeremy chuckled as he looked at me. "I don't give a damn if you're sitting there or not. You're not ready for such a large case and you're nowhere near ready to be a named partner. If you can't even control your emotions and put your personal bullshit to the side for the sake of your clients and this firm, you'll never get your name on that wall."

He stood and stormed out, and I wondered how he and Amelia were even related. As much as I didn't care for Jeremy, he was right. Violet stood and pressed her palms into my desk.

"Don't make me have to agree with him, Mecca."

“I’m trying to do what’s right, Violet. Maybe I took on too much too soon. No one in this firm has taken on a case of this caliber. We don’t have the team to devote to this. I’m man enough to admit I need help to win this case and we don’t have that.”

“I know, but I also know it’s your desire to change that. This is how you start.” She stood upright. “If you want to change things, you have to change your actions. You start by keeping this case and fixing things with Shalom. You don’t need a full team of researchers, Mecca. All you need is her.”

“Mr. Smith, your one o’clock is here,” Gloria said over the intercom.

Violet knocked on my desk with her knuckle before saying, “Think about this, Mecca. I believe in you.”

Sitting back in my seat, I released a shaky breath as she walked away. Times like this, I wished my grandmother was still alive. I loved my parents and appreciated their wisdom, but like most good parents, their main concern was what they thought was best for me—whether it was what I wanted or what made me happy or not. My grandmother was different.

No matter what, she always took my heart and happiness into consideration when she gave me advice. She was the only person outside of my parents who knew Shalom was pregnant. Though she expressed her disappointment over us starting a family so young, she was happy about being a great-grandmother and offered to help me in whatever way she could to make sure I could be there for my family, go to school, and still work. She was the only person in my corner like that, and until I told my parents, with her and Shalom, I felt invincible.

“Hi, Attorney Smith.”

The sound of Sheila’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts. I stood and gave her a handshake before motioning for her to have a seat.

“Thank you for meeting me, Sheila.”

“Of course. I wasn’t expecting to hear any news about the case so soon.”

“How’s Anthony?” I asked, referring to her son.

“He’s better now that he’s with my parents. I miss him but I know it’s better if he stays with them.”

“And you’ve been keeping track of his improvement like I advised?”

“Yes, sir. I have a written log and my parents have been taking him to their family physician, so he has one as well.”

“Good, good.” Nibbling my bottom lip, I loosened my tie. I hated handing her case off, especially hearing that her son was doing better now that he was no longer living in the apartment. That alone was proof that his sickness came from his environment. Still, I felt inclined to say, “I wanted to speak with you and see about how you’d feel about another attorney taking the lead on your case.”

Her mouth opened and closed. She blinked for a few seconds as her head tilted. “I don’t understand.”

“We have a partner firm in Chicago. Attorney Harris is licensed to practice here and there, and that firm is just as qualified, if not more, to handle this case.”

Sheila’s head shook as she crossed her hands over her purse in her lap and sat up. “I just don’t understand why it can’t be you.” When I didn’t respond, she continued. “Attorney Smith, I agreed to this lawsuit because of you. You gave me the courage and confidence needed to do what was right and stand up for the tenants who can’t or won’t stand up for themselves. I don’t want to work with anyone else. So if you can’t do this, I’ll just have to tell everyone it won’t be done.”

When she stood, my heart plummeted. “Sheila, wait.” Standing, I ran my hands over my face as my head shook. She was *not* making this easy for me. “Don’t do that.”

“Then you’ll stay on as our attorney?”

As much as I wanted to say no, I needed to say yes. This was what I felt purposed to do, and I couldn't let Shalom ruin that for me and everyone I was positioned to help.

“Yes, I'll stay on.”

“Great!” She clapped and did a quick shimmy that made me smile.

“I'll, uh... I'll check back in when we prepare for the next phase, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hey, Sheila,” I called out as she headed out of my office. “Thanks for not allowing me to give up on you... or myself.”

“You believed me when no one else did. I'll *never* forget that.”

She gave me a soft wave before leaving, and I briefly thought over my next move before buzzing Gloria and asking her to have Amelia and Parker meet me in conference room A.

When they arrived, I wasted no time telling them, “I'm going to put my pride and personal feelings aside and continue on with this case.” They both smiled and Amelia cheered as Parker and I shook hands. “But I'm going to need your help.”

“Whatever you need,” Parker said.

“Hold off before you say that, because I need you to handle my upcoming civil case so I can focus all of my attention on this. And, Milli, if this goes to trial, I'll need you to be my second chair. I'm hoping we can settle before it comes to that, though.”

“We got you,” Amelia said, pulling me into a hug. “I knew you'd make the right decision.”

“Carina and I are going out with her girls and their men. She told me Shalom was going to be there with her sister in case you wanted to stop by and try to convince her to work with you.”

I clenched my jaw and avoided blurting not wanting to have anything to do with her. Violet seemed to believe she was

key to me not being overwhelmed with this case, and because I trusted Violet, I would agree. As much as I hated the idea of being in the same room as Shalom, I'd put my feelings to the side for the sake of this case.

“I'll stop by for a while. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Of course.”

As we headed our separate ways, I prayed that Shalom and I could talk as sensible adults without things getting out of hand. If we couldn't, at least I'd be able to tell Violet I tried, and she'd have to get the second-best researcher for this case.



“Hey,” Parker spoke, gaining my attention.

I was scrolling through my emails looking for one from an old client. Toya had called and said she wanted to confirm that I’d gotten her email about freelancing for her history department. She was one of the department chairs for a prestigious private college here and she wanted to convince the board to allow her to take her history class on a trip that the President of their school disapproved of. I hadn’t gotten the email and wondered if it ended up in my spam folder somehow. Even though I was a little unsure of what she thought I could find to help change his mind, I was willing to help in any way I could.

“Hey,” I replied, putting my phone face down on the table. Everyone was having a great time, and I was too, but it would bother me if I couldn’t find that email. It made me wonder what else I had been missing out on.

“I just wanted to give you a heads up. Mecca is about to walk in.”

Gritting my teeth as my thighs clenched, I nodded. “Why?”

“It’s not to cause trouble. He wants to apologize. Do you think you can handle that?”

I ran my tongue across my teeth and swallowed hard. Even though I didn't want to be in the same room as Mecca, this was inevitable. Parker and Carina really liked each other, so I wouldn't be able to avoid him forever.

"I'll be fine. Thanks for the heads up."

Parker smiled with the left corner of his mouth before returning to his seat next to Carina. Suddenly, emails became the furthest thing from my mind. My armpits and palms immediately began to sweat. Rubbing the pads of my fingers together, I took in deep breaths. My heart palpitated, but it plunged at the sight of him.

He made his way over to our table, and I had to admit, the sight of him made my mouth water. Mecca was impeccably dressed in a suit that looked like it was made for him. The burgundy color looked amazing against his peanut butter brown skin. A crisp white button-up complemented my favorite shade of brown on a man. Silver jewelry adorned his neck, ears, and wrist as he held a bouquet of sunflowers.

Standing in front of me, he extended them in my direction. My mind immediately went back to when we were kids. He'd taken sunflowers out of his grandmother's garden to give to me and she tried to skin him alive for it. I laughed until I cried as I watched her chase after him while he barely exerted energy and effort.

I bit down on my bottom lip to try and camouflage my smile, but I was sure it didn't work when he gave me a smile of his own.

"You didn't get these out of Grandma Rose's garden, did you?"

Taking the empty seat next to me, Mecca shook his head. "Nah, she passed three years ago."

My heart plummeted as a whimper escaped me. With watery eyes, I reached for his hand before immediately pulling mine away.

"I'm so sorry, Mecca. I know she was your favorite girl."

He gave me a smirk as his eyes glossed over, but they dried quickly as he swallowed.

“She was my second favorite girl. You were the first.” Before I could fully process what he’d said, Mecca pointed to the flowers as he continued. “Those came from my garden. I started it to feel connected to her.”

“They’re beautiful... just like she was.”

It felt like all eyes were on us, and if I were to count only the ones at our table, they were. Everyone looked on quietly as we engaged. Their attention made me nervous, and I wasn’t sure if they feared we would start yelling at each other or worse.

“I just wanted to apologize, Shalom.” My eyes fluttered until they closed at the sound of his words. “I shouldn’t have put my hands on you...”

“No, that was a reaction to me. I slapped you, and I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry too.”

I opened my eyes, and his were still on me. They were just as beautiful as I remember. Coffee brown in color with the ability to make nothing else in the world matter. There was a small scar on the side of his left eye, and I’d accidentally put it there.

We were playing around as he tickled me. When I pushed him away, the cheap ring I had on cut him. He didn’t get upset. All he said was he’d buy me one that was of better quality. And he did. I threw the ring away after he broke up with me, and I regretted it ever since.

I wanted something good to remember him by, and I’d gotten rid of everything except one picture of us and the stuffed teddy bear he’d won me at the fair one year.

He drew my attention to his wide, pink lips when he licked them. Aged Mecca favored that actor on *How to Get Away with Murder*. Gabriel, I think was his name. They even had the same wavy hair and shaped head. He was so beautiful I couldn’t stop staring at him. My fingers lifted to trace the scar. Mecca allowed me to for a few seconds. If I was crazy, I’d

swear he stopped breathing because his chest stopped moving. A few seconds passed before he took my hand into his and looked down at it.

“Where’s your ring?”

His finger grazed my ring finger and chills covered my arms. Pulling out of his grasp, I crossed my arms over my chest to hide my pebbling nipples.

“I, um... threw it away after everything happened.”

Sadness covered his face as he nodded. “All I kept was a picture and that bear you gave me for Valentine’s Day.”

We shared a soft laugh after I told him I had the same amount of items. “I should replace it,” he said more to himself than me.

“Huh?” I asked, unsure I heard him correctly.

His head shook as he licked the corner of his mouth and swallowed. “Nothing. I was hoping you would hear me out about the case. I really want us to put our past behind us and work on this together, but if we can’t I understand. If you have a look at what I’ve compiled so far, you’d understand why I’m here. This is bigger than us, Lom, and these people really need our help.”

Squeezing the back of my neck, I nodded. “I’ll stop by the office and have a look, then let you know.”

“Okay. That works for me. Thank you.” He stood, and even though I wouldn’t dare say it, I hated that he was leaving. “I’ll have Gloria call and set up a time for you to come in.”

Nodding, I turned forward and whispered a soft okay. He stared at me for a few seconds before walking away. Conversation picked back up at the table while Heaven squeezed my hand and asked me if I was okay. Blinking rapidly, I nodded and forced a smile. If this would be my new normal, at least temporarily, I’d have to get used to being back in Mecca’s presence... no matter how uncomfortable that may be.



I'd done my first virtual therapy session for the day and though it drained me, it gave me a sense of peace too.

After sharing with Tandra the full story of what happened years ago, she gave me an analogy that perfectly described what I had been feeling. Divorce, or the ending of a relationship a person thought would last forever, can often feel like death. And when we don't take the time needed to properly grieve that loss, it consumes us. Sometimes we never fully get over the loss; sometimes we only learn how to live with it.

I hadn't given myself the grace needed to grieve losing Shalom and our child. Worse, seeing her in my office literally felt like I was seeing a ghost. A person who was dead to me had come back to my life, and I didn't know how to handle that. Tandra challenged me to continue to work through the grief of our baby like Pops suggested, and she also asked me to be honest about my feelings for Shalom. I wasn't ready to deal with that just yet, but I knew I would need to eventually.

I wanted to share what I'd learned with Shalom but decided against it. She was the cause of the death of us, so I didn't think she had as hard of a time as I did processing it. It was easier hating her than being at peace with her. Seeing her in the restaurant over the weekend made my heart soft. All I wanted to do was hold her and kiss her and make up for lost

time. I wanted to give her a ring to replace the one she'd thrown away. That truth made me feel like a fool.

My mind was in overdrive trying to process these new feelings, but I was determined to put them aside and remain professional when we were in each other's presence again.

The vibrating of my phone pulled me out of my thoughts. At the sight of my little cousin's number, joy filled my heart. Symphony was sixteen and one of the smartest kids I knew. Often, she reminded me of my unborn child because they would have been almost the same age.

"Hey, Sym," I answered, lowering the volume on the TV.

"Hey, cuz." She sniffled, and at the sound of her crying, I sat up in my seat.

"What's wrong?"

"Mama put me out and my dad isn't answering. Can I come and stay with you?"

"What?" I leaped from my seat and headed to my bedroom. "Why did she put you out?"

"Because I'm pregnant!" She cried harder. "She told me I was being fast and she's not going to take care of me and a baby. I don't have any of my clothes or my stuff for school tomorrow."

Cursing under my breath, I grabbed my wallet and keys. "Where are you now, Symphony?"

"I'm outside on the porch."

"Okay. I'm on my way. Keep trying your dad, but of course, you can stay here with me."

She sniffled again before saying, "Okay. Thanks, Mecca."

After disconnecting the call, I slipped into a pair of house shoes and rushed out of the house. I didn't give a damn about how I looked. I just wanted to get to my baby. Uncle George was my favorite uncle, and I couldn't believe his ex-wife had put their child out. It shouldn't have surprised me. Aunt

Rachel was old school and traditional, and so was her side of the family my father's brother had married into.

The entire time I drove, I thought about Symphony's situation. I hated that she'd gotten pregnant so young, but I was no one to judge. As smart as she was, she was taking honors classes and would be able to graduate a year early. Next year, she would only have to take one class, then she would be done. All I could think about was how my parents said a baby would ruin my life, and I imagined Aunt Rachel was saying the same thing to Symphony. The only difference was, my parents didn't put me out, and even if they did, I was old enough to work and try to provide for myself.

Symphony was only sixteen and her focus was on school as it should have been. What the fuck was Aunt Rachel thinking? My speed accelerated as my anger grew. It took me about fifteen minutes before I pulled up in front of their house, and sure enough, Symphony was sitting outside with nothing but her phone in her hand, tears on her face, and the clothes on her back.

I kept the car running and got out. The first thing I did was give her a hug. She cried on my chest for a while before thanking me for coming. I told her that we would get a few of her things before we left. Aunt Rachel had the right to want her out, but she wasn't going to leave her with nothing. I knocked and waited for her to answer, and when she did, I told her to let us in so Symphony could get whatever she needed. Aunt Rachel didn't give me any argument, which I was glad about.

I'd learned, it was easier to show your ass when there wasn't an audience around that you didn't want to see the real you.

It took everything inside of me not to question her, only because I felt like it wasn't my place. I would let Uncle George handle her. He'd moved to Rose Valley Hills after their divorce. Custody was split between them, and Symphony spent weekends and holidays with him since she went to school here.

When Symphony walked into the hallway with three bags and puffy eyes, I grabbed all of them as I shook my head. She avoided her mother's eyes as she walked out, and I couldn't imagine how hard this was for her. After putting her things in the trunk, I got in the car and asked her if she needed to stop anywhere before we went back to my house. Her head shook as she stared out of the window.

"Are you hungry?"

"I'm good, cuz. I am a little thirsty."

"Okay. I'll stop you by Sonic." That made her smile. She loved their Ocean Water.

"Thanks. Daddy called me back. He wants you to call him."

"Cool." As I headed down the street, I called Unc.

He answered almost immediately with, "Mecca, nephew, thank you for going to get my girl."

"Of course. You know she's my girl too."

"I can't believe Rachel put her out. I'm doing one-twenty on my way there and she better hope I don't stop by her place before I get to yours."

I chuckled as I lowered the volume on my phone, grateful I hadn't put the call on Bluetooth. "Come straight to us, please, and slow down. I don't want to have to bail you out or handle your case before we get this taken care of."

He laughed, but it trembled, and it was because he was trying to maintain his composure.

"You right, nephew. I'll be there in three hours."

"There's no rush, Unc. She can stay with me tonight if necessary and you can too if you'll be too tired to drive home."

He released a hard breath. "I was nine hours into my twelve-hour shift, that's why I couldn't answer her calls. I know she doesn't want to miss school, but I'ma have to bring her back with me."

“Well, she can stay here throughout the week, Unc, it’s really no trouble at all.”

“Are you sure? Because that would help me out a lot.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. I’m still going to come and see her tonight and I’ll leave when she goes to school in the morning. I’ll pick her up from your place Friday.”

“Sounds good.”

“A’ight. I’ll see y’all soon.”

“A’ight, Unc.”

After disconnecting the call, I asked Symphony if she wanted to talk about it yet and she said no. I agreed, but wanted to confirm the sex was consensual before Uncle George got here and she said it was. If she’d been violated, I wouldn’t be able to stop him or myself and the rest of the men in our family from going after whoever had done it. I grabbed her drink from Sonic before going back home.

Once I had her settled in the guest room, I went to my room and tried to process my thoughts. She was triggering me and taking me back to Shalom and I would need to separate the two while she was here. I couldn’t let my anger toward how Shalom handled our situation influence the way I talked to and treated Sym... especially since I didn’t know if she was going to keep her baby or not. Regardless of what she chose, I would support Symphony all the way.

Unc had arrived and talked to Symphony. She told him that she didn’t want to talk much like she’d told me, and he understood. This was a lot for both of them. She did make it clear that she wasn’t sure if she wanted to keep the baby and that the father was a boy she was in a relationship with. Unc wanted to meet him this weekend, which I offered to be there for.

When Sym said she wanted to keep the baby, I reached out to Amelia for OB/GYN recommendations. She hadn't gone to the doctor yet because she was in denial, but she had been having symptoms. Her stomach was hard and she looked a little bloated but not pregnant, so she couldn't have been too far along.

They ended up crashing in separate guest rooms and Symphony expressed her gratitude for me letting her stay throughout the week. School was important to her, and I wanted to honor that. She reminded me of myself—a curious child with big dreams who simply wanted to experience life and love and have fun. I was going to be there for her as much as she would allow.

Hell, there were pictures of me feeding her as a baby up until us at her latest birthday party in our family photo album. Whether I clung to her because she was my favorite uncle's child or she reminded me of mine, we had a bond that urged me to be there for her the way I wish my parents were there for me. The way Grandma Rose was. I wouldn't condone the young pregnancy, but I for damn sure wouldn't make her feel bad about it. Her mother and life would do that enough.



Mecca was right. As he informed me about the case and showed me everything he had so far, I wanted to help in any way I could. The first thing I planned to do was find out everything I could about the landlord, his company, and his employees. Mecca's biggest concern was the defense turning this into a character case to prove the tenants were responsible for their own issues. That meant I would have to find out all there was to know about the lead plaintiff and everyone else involved in the suit to ensure Mecca would be prepared with a rebuttal or reason behind anything they might find.

Violet made her way inside, and when she noticed Mecca and I hadn't ripped each other's heads off, she smiled. She sat across from me at the long, rectangular table next to Mecca and slid the offer in my direction. I looked it over, still in disbelief at how much money she was offering me. It was simple in its layout, and I didn't feel like I needed an attorney to look over it. Still, I wanted someone to do so just to be safe. After expressing that, Mecca called in a cocoa-colored, bright-eyed woman with a beautiful smile.

"Do you have a dollar?" she asked me, sitting next to me.

"Hmm... I think so." I went into my purse and fished around for my wallet, then pulled a dollar out and gave it to

her.

“Amelia Phoenix, at your service.” We shook hands before she looked the contract over. I expected her to immediately agree to the terms, but she surprised me when she said, “This is a really great deal, but based on the number of plaintiffs in the case, I think you should ask for two hundred thousand more. That would be half a million total, which is the bare minimum of what some of the tenants will receive when we win. Some will be awarded three. Mecca himself will be making quite a bit more for his counsel. I don’t think Violet is intentionally trying to cheat you, but I also don’t think she understands how rigorous and demanding the task they want to hire you for will be.”

She was right about that. It would take hours of research daily for God only knew how long for me to find all the information I needed. Then I would have to go through it all to find what was important. Finally, I’d have to compile it into easily accessible files for Mecca and whoever was working with him. On top of that, he wanted me to sit in with him on meetings too. Even with that being said, half a million dollars was a lot. I guess, to them, that was nothing. They probably made that amount of money in their sleep. My eyes shifted to Mecca, who gave me a comfortable smile and bobbed his head in agreement.

Nibbling my cheek, I nodded. “Okay, I trust you.”

Amelia gave me a smile before looking at Violet. “Do I need to repeat all that?”

Violet chuckled as her head shook. “Not at all. I can do five.”

“For the same length of time, three months. If this goes to trial or she works longer, the same increase will be expected.”

Violet inhaled a slow, deep breath. “Agreed.” They shook hands before Violet and I did the same. She stood and let me know she would be updating the offer based on the new terms. I thanked Amelia, and he did too, making her blush as he called her his favorite negotiator, before she left Mecca and I alone.

“Congratulations,” he said. “And thank you for agreeing to work with us. With me.”

“Thank you. This is a really great cause. I’m honored to help.”

We remained silent until Violet returned. When she did, I signed the offer and thanked her again when she gave me a copy. As I prepared to leave Mecca said, “Would you... like to grab lunch or something?”

Yes.

Hell yes.

“No.” My head shook quickly when I realized how hard the word had come out. Softening my voice I added, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Mec.”

“Yeah, no, you’re probably right.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds more before I turned to leave. Working with Mecca was one thing, but I didn’t feel comfortable being around him on a personal level. Even if we put the past behind us, the fact remained—he used me for my virginity and left me when I needed him most. Mecca was the reason I vowed to never be with a man who hurt me or lied to me even once. He was the reason my boundaries were as strong as they were. Though I appreciated the lesson, I still hated that he was the teacher. I would never allow a man who claimed to love me make me feel that way again.

I couldn’t allow him to be an exception to that rule.

mecca

This was bullshit. Shalom and I had a bond deeper than anything else I'd experienced, yet as we sat across from each other, it was awkward and silent. We weren't talking about anything but the damn case, and even that was a little weird.

Shalom wanted to meet with all the plaintiffs, and though she insisted on doing it alone, I did it with her. I was glad I did because it ended up taking about twelve hours. After the last client left, I had takeout delivered from a soul food restaurant a couple of blocks up. She swore she wasn't hungry, but her grumbling stomach said otherwise.

Now, we were sitting at this long-ass conference table, feeling like we were a million miles away. I wanted to say it was good that we weren't at each other's necks, but I wanted more than that.

I left to go to the bathroom when we were done, and when I came back, I saw Olivia drop a stack of papers outside of the conference room. Before I could make it down to help her, Shalom was coming out.

"Thank you," Olivia mumbled, frantically picking up the pieces of paper.

"Are you... okay?" Shalom asked a visibly shaken Olivia.

“No. My life is over.” Wiping my fingers down the corners of my mouth, I tried to keep myself from chuckling. Olivia was a first-year associate who was easily rattled. She ended up working under Jeremy and no first-year associate deserved that fate. The good thing about that was, if she could handle him, she could handle *anything*. “Jeremy asked me to find the smoking gun before his case starts in the morning and I’m coming up short. If I don’t find what will convince the jury that his client is innocent, I’ll never advance. He’ll probably fire me.”

“Why is he putting the weight of this on you if it’s his client?”

Olivia’s eyes rolled. “He already knows the answer. It’s a test for me.”

“Oh.” Shalom chuckled as she handed Olivia the papers. “If you want me to... maybe I could help.”

“I should say no but I really need the help.”

“I got you. Let’s go inside.”

“Thanks... uh...”

“Shalom.”

Shalom placed her arm around Olivia’s shoulders and led her back into the conference room, and I hated it, but her being so kind and warm and helpful made my dick hard—and my heart soft. She didn’t sound like the woman who would talk to me as cruelly as she did in that letter... even if it was years ago. Not wanting to get too deep, I went to the breakroom to give them space. I didn’t need anything making me look at Shalom in a different light.

My plan was to rest my mind before heading home so I could decompress before bed, but all I ended up doing was staring at the wall until Shalom came in.

“Hey, I was looking for you.”

“Were you able to help Olivia?” I asked as I stood.

It took her a second to process my question before her body relaxed and she smiled. “You saw that?”

“Yeah, but I wanted to give you two some space.”

“I was able to help. She’s good now.”

With a nod, I slowly walked over to her. Closing the distance between us, I put my hands in my pockets to avoid touching her. Looking down at her made me envision looking down at her while she was in my bed. She smelled good—clean and fresh, pure soap—like she’d just gotten out of the shower, but we’d been here for half a day.

For a few seconds, she avoided my eyes. When Shalom finally looked up at me, I told her, “That was a really nice thing you did for her.”

“It was nothing. I knew it would take me no time to go through those papers.”

“Still.”

She swallowed hard and looked away. “Well... I just wanted to find you and let you know I was about to go.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary, Mecca.”

Ignoring her, I opened the revolving door and waited for her to walk out. We walked and took the elevator in silence. There were a million things I wanted to say, to ask, but I kept quiet. It made me feel fluttery things in my stomach when she unlocked her door but leaned against it.

She wasn’t in a rush to get away from me.

“Today was good,” she rambled. “We got a lot done. I’ll go through my notes and put together some files for you.”

“Cool, thanks.”

She nodded, looking everywhere but at me. The sight amused me. Stepping closer, I reached behind her to open the door. Shalom pulled in a deep breath and braced herself with one hand on my chest.

“I was just opening the door for you, Lom.”

“Oh.” Her laugh was nervous as she pulled her armpit-length hair behind her ear. “Thanks.”

My free arm went to the other side of her, locking her in, and I’m not exactly sure why. I wanted her to leave. I *needed* her to leave. But those fluttery things in my stomach wanted her to stay.

“I-I can’t get in with you in the way.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

I stepped back and allowed her to move so I could open the door, and she got inside quickly. Lowering myself, I put on her seatbelt, just like I used to do when we were in school. She was a horrible driver, and I would tease her about risking our lives every time I let her drive. With my face just inches away from hers, I looked at her lips. They looked just as juicy and soft as always. She licked them, and I had to force myself to get out of the car.

“Be safe, Shalom.”

Nodding, she avoided my eyes as she squeezed her thighs together. “You too.”

Closing her door, I took a step back and watched her leave. She was so fucking *beautiful*. Her slim-thick frame highlighted the weight she’d gained over the years in the best way. That honey-brown skin had been begging to be kissed by me all fucking day. I loved when she blessed me with her slanted, dark eyes for more than a second.

This was too much.

What the fuck was I thinking, agreeing to work with her?

If I wasn’t careful, the woman I once loved, then hated, would be the woman I loved all over again.

Symphony was sixteen weeks pregnant. She cried when we heard the baby’s heartbeat. Now that she felt more settled with everything, she was ready to talk, and our conversation had me

wanting to meet with Shalom so we could talk. Symphony shared with me how nervous she was when she thought she was pregnant. Her biggest fear was the father not wanting to be there for her. She understood regardless of his place in her life, that baby was a forever thing, and that was a big choice to make.

She also shared with me how her mother's rejection made her feel. For a while, she considered adoption. Abortion was never an option. I asked her what made her decide to keep the baby, and she said it was the thought of having a human being that was half of her in this world and not in her life. Symphony wasn't 100 percent sold on keeping the baby. If she felt like she wouldn't be able to give him or her the life they deserved, adoption would always be on the table, but the longer she waited, the harder it would probably be.

Before I could stop myself, I told her I would adopt the baby if she needed me to. At least that way, she'd still be in their life and able to have them back when she felt she was ready. That made her cry, which made me cry, and Unc made it worse when he called me crying after she called and told him what I'd offered.

We were going to sit down with the father and his family and see how they felt. Even though Symphony was young, I didn't think it would come to that. With the father, her father, and me, I felt like she'd be able to not only finish school and not have to worry about work but be able to give her baby all it needed and still live her life.

It was no secret to anyone that I wanted marriage and a family, but I was particular about who I wanted those things with. I didn't want just anyone mixing half of her bloodline with mine. Adopting my little cousin was different. I didn't have a fear of being too attached to the child to want to give them back to Sym when she was ready. They would grow up knowing she was their mother, and I was their cousin. I chuckled as I drove, thinking about how different my life would have been if someone in my family offered me that same grace. The truth was, they didn't know.

My parents were adamant about keeping the baby a secret. They were all I had, and knowing my grandmother was my only source of help was daunting. I kept trying not to go back to that time, but looking back on it now as an adult, especially after talking to Sym, I see things in a slightly different way. That's why I was glad Shalom agreed to see me. Even though I was still hurt over her getting the abortion, I can understand now that it was more her decision and her choice than mine.

When I pulled into the parking lot of the pavilion, I was glad it wasn't too crowded. The walking trail around the small body of water was the perfect place for us to walk and talk. By the time I arrived, Shalom was already there. We got out of our cars at the same time. Even dressed simply in a two-piece crop top and leggings set with her hair in a bun, Shalom looked damn good. I had to avoid looking at her to keep my dick from getting hard.

"Hey," I spoke when we were just a few inches apart.

"Hi."

"Thanks for agreeing to meet me."

"It's cool. You sounded like it was important."

As we started to walk the trail, I tried to think about how I wanted to broach this topic. She looked up at me, but I avoided her eyes. Gently, Shalom nudged my shoulder, causing me to look down at her.

"What?" I asked with a smile.

"You're making me nervous."

Chuckling, I resisted the urge to wrap my arm around her shoulders. "I just wanted to apologize."

"For what exactly?"

"I need to start from the beginning." I paused, and she silently held the space. "I have a cousin who just turned sixteen. You remember Uncle George?"

"Oh yeah, I loved him. He was fun."

“Yeah, well, Symphony is his daughter. We have a tight bond. I’m starting to think I had her so much as a baby because...” I paused and swallowed the lump in my throat. “She would have been two years younger than our baby.” Her feet stopped moving, but she picked back up her pace. “I envisioned how differently things would have been if they would have been able to grow up together like me and my cousins.” Clearing my throat, I blinked back my tears. “Anyway, she’s pregnant and she’s staying with me because her mom kicked her out.”

“Oh my God.” Shalom stopped walking and turned sideways, so I did the same.

“Uncle George moved to Rose Valley Hills after they divorced three years ago. She spends holidays and weekends with him. Until she’s done with school, she’s going to be staying with me. Symphony is really smart and has a bright future ahead of her. She’ll be graduating next year and will only have one class to take.”

“Wow, that’s amazing, Mecca. You sound really proud.”

“I am. I hated that this happened to her, but she’s handling it with grace, and Unc and I are going to do all we can to make sure this doesn’t deter her from the path of life that she wants to take.”

“I’m not understanding why this made you feel like you need to apologize to me.”

“After talking to her, she gave me a new perspective. Your perspective.” Her eyes closed and she smiled softly. “Even with me saying I would be there for you, it still would have been more difficult for you than it was for me. That was a large weight to put on you, and I wanted to apologize for not handling that situation better. We were really young and had our lives ahead of us. I don’t regret our love or the baby we made...” I quickly wiped away the single tear that slipped down her cheek. “I just... wanted to say that I was sorry for putting us in that position. I never wanted us to have to face something so big, so young. I’m truly sorry.”

Her eyes opened as she swallowed her emotions.

“Thank you,” she almost whispered. “I’m sorry too. I hate how things ended between us. We’d been partners up until that point, and we should have been partners for that and after. But... it seems like you’re on the path you always wanted to be on. So that’s good, right?”

With a shrug, I shoved my hands in my pockets as we started to walk again. “I guess. I’m able to help Sym and a hell of a lot of other people. I don’t know how my life would have turned out if we stayed together. Can you say the same?”

“Yeah, I can. I can also say that I’ve spent a lot of time hating you and wishing we would have stuck to our plan to be together forever, but you’re right, we were really young. We had our entire lives ahead of us. I do regret not having our baby, and nothing will ever take that guilt from my heart but...” Her breath came out shaky, and when I looked down at her and saw her licking the corner of her mouth as she blinked back her tears, I couldn’t stop myself from taking her into my arms.

“I regret it too, Lom. There’s nothing I’ve wanted more on this earth than you and our child.”

She clung to me... wrapped her arms around me and held me desperately. Closing my eyes, I held her just as tightly. We needed this. We needed each other. If only we’d been able to do this fifteen years ago. I released a few tears of my own as we stood there. People walked around us, and I didn’t give a damn at all. Nothing mattered to me in that moment beyond Shalom.

After wiping her face, she looked up at me and gave me the smile I fell in love with when we were kids. When she placed her chin on my chest, I groaned. The same thing that always happened with her happened—my dick hardened, and my heart softened.

“Hi,” she whispered before giggling softly.

“Hi.”

“It feels like I’m seeing you for the first time all over again. I prefer this meeting more.”

Unable to resist, I placed a kiss to the center of her forehead. "Me too."

Hand in hand, we walked the trail twice before agreeing to grab dinner at a steakhouse that was up the block, which led to us going to the bar across the street when we were done for drinks. We talked about our lives for the last several years, and it felt good. It felt like I was catching up with an old friend. I didn't think Shalom would ever be my lover again, but if we could remain friends once the case was over, I would be at peace with that.



shalom

As I prepared to get ready to spend the evening with Carina, I sang along to almost every song that played on my playlist. Mecca and I had come to some sort of truce, I suppose, and my spirit had been lighter ever since. I couldn't make the exception of giving him a second chance as my lover, but I was hopeful and excited about us being friends again. We'd take things slow. Even with the talk we had, I wasn't expecting things to magically feel normal between us.

When an incoming call came through, Siri told me it was Carter. I grabbed the phone off my bed and answered, taking the call off my Bluetooth speaker in the process.

“Hello?”

“Hey, you busy?”

“Not really. Getting ready to go out with Carina. What's up?”

“Not too much. I was thinking about you and wanted to hear your voice.”

Carter was worth me taking a break, so I sat on the edge of my queen-sized bed so we could talk. He had a big part in me even talking to Mecca again. If it wasn't for him and Sister Thomas, I don't think I would have been as willing to hear him out, and I was glad I did.

“How have you been?”

“Good. Crazy with work. You?”

“Same. I went ahead and took the case with Mecca.”

A few seconds passed before he asked, “How’s that going?”

“Good actually. You were right. I needed closure, and I think I finally got it. We had a really good talk and apologized to each other.”

“That’s good.” He paused. “You... thinking about getting back with him?”

Chuckling nervously, I looked down at my light pink colored Russian manicure. “No, why?”

“Just wondering. I can’t compete with that.”

That made me laugh a little louder. “There’s nothing to compete with, but why do you say that?”

“As much hate as you’ve carried for that man in your heart, you’ve carried just as much love. Even if you don’t want to admit that, you still love him.”

I *didn’t* want to admit that, but it was the truth.

“Whether I love him or not, Mecca and I will never be in a relationship again. And I don’t think you and I will be either.” He sighed but I continued. “I heard what you said the last time we were together, and I wish I could agree, but I just can’t risk breaking my own heart, Carter. I know I’m going to love you deeply, and after what I’ve endured because of Mecca, I can’t go through heartbreak like that again. I *do* want to be loved, but I want to be loved by a man I feel safe having a future with.”

“I didn’t think about it like that,” he admitted. “I know you got your rules and reasons, and I know our visions for marriage are not the same.”

“I think it’s best if we go back to no contact. It’s extremely hard to resist you, Carter Leigh. You’re truly a good man.”

“And you are an exceptional woman. Should you decide one day to embrace being taken care of in marriage and only having to focus on your man and kids, come to me, Shalom.”

With a smile, I stood and headed back to my vanity. “I will, Carter. Take care.”

After disconnecting the call, I continued to get ready. For a brief moment, I considered if I was making the right decision. Then, my mother came to mind, and I knew I was. I refused to let my life mirror hers, even if it meant not being with Carter. He was a great man, but he wasn't a great man for me. I trusted that there was someone out there who could love me better without me having to sacrifice my job, freedom, and identity to receive it.

Carina set me up, but I didn't mind. What was supposed to be a girls' night out turned into Parker and Mecca joining us, and Mecca didn't know what they were up to either. It took a little time for us to loosen up, but eventually we did. When we did, we started to enjoy ourselves. The evening started with us renting a top golf suite, then we went bowling, which was my all-time favorite thing to do.

It was fun seeing how good Mecca had gotten at bowling over the years. My last memory of bowling with him was of him falling down the lane and me falling when I went to help him. We almost died laughing as we lay there without a care in the world. Somehow, bowling led to us going to a hotel rooftop for small bites and drinks where we reminisced about the old days. We got on the subject of hobbies and how he never taught me how to skate. I'd never learned either.

We both still loved sports, but the rest of my hobbies were me-centered while his involved other people. I hadn't planned for us to spend hours on that roof talking, but we did. As Mecca drove me to my car, I thought back to my conversation with Carter. Was I capable of being a real friend to this man, knowing our past and the love I had for him? I wasn't sure if

that was possible or if I even wanted to. There would come a day when he'd get married and start a family. Would I be able to witness that and not feel some type of way?

Why in the hell was I worried about something like that now?

I chuckled as I looked out of the window into the night sky.

I was thinking about it because I needed to be in control in order to feel safe and happy.

I was thinking about it because if I couldn't plan it for my future, I didn't want to have anything to do with it.

I was thinking about it because I'd been disappointed by this man once before and I couldn't let that happen again—even if it *was* unintentionally.

How would I explain that one day? *Hey, Mecca, even though we've come a long way and become friends, that can't be the case anymore because I don't want to see you love a woman and have the family with her we were supposed to have.*

“Ugh,” I groaned vocally.

“You good over there?” he checked, turning the radio down.

“Yeah.” There was no point in bringing him down with my overthinking.

“You know we suffer more in our minds than reality, right?” I looked over at him, and our eyes met briefly. “You'll feel better if you talk about it.”

“Do you plan on getting married and starting a family?”

He massaged his chin. “Most definitely. You?”

“Yes.”

“Why does the thought of that have you upset?”

“I'm not upset, and it's not the thought of *me* getting married and having kids that's making me feel... weird. It's

you.”

His stare lingered on me a little longer this time. “Why’s that?”

I rubbed the pads of my fingers together as I considered how honest I wanted to be. “I don’t want to see that, Mecca. All I’d think about is how that was supposed to be me. Us. So I don’t know how this friendship thing will work.”

“Why can’t it be you?”

My brows wrinkled as I looked over at him. “I don’t give men that broke my heart access to it again.”

“Men that broke your heart?” He chuckled. “If anyone’s heart was broken, it was mine.”

“How could I have broken your heart, Mecca?”

“Are you serious right now?”

With flaring nostrils, I crossed my arms over my chest and looked away. “Yeah, I don’t think this is going to work.”

“I think you’re right.”

My eyes rolled and leg began to shake as I tried to keep my cool. He was the reason we broke up, and he had the nerve to suggest I broke his heart? Another chuckle escaped me as my eyes watered. The rest of the ride was done in silence, and I barely let him get the car in park before I hopped out of it.

“You not gon’ let me open the door for you?” he asked as I quickly unlocked my car and got inside.

Ignoring him, I slammed the door and locked it. I was glad we had this conversation before we invested too much into our friendship. Work was all there could be between us, and as soon as this case was over, we’d need to go our separate ways.

mecca

I stared at the tickets, unsure if I wanted to offer them to Shalom. She was in the conference room waiting for me.

When she called and told me that she wanted to meet and go over what she had so far, I had my assistant pick up coffee, tea, and pastries. Now that we were wrapping up, I wanted to offer her the tickets to try and fix how weirdly things ended between us last weekend.

One minute, we were having fun like old times. The next, she was mad about a future wife and kids that wasn't even on the radar yet. Then, she had the nerve to suggest she was the one heartbroken after breaking up with me and aborting our baby. I was confused as hell by the whole encounter, but I didn't have the energy to unravel it. We'd had a good time together, and I hated how it ended.

Releasing a long sigh, I headed out of my office to the fifth floor where the conference rooms were. One of my clients was happy that I was able to get him three times his asking price without having to go to trial. It was honestly an open-and-shut case that we knocked out over the course of one week. The mechanic he'd gone to lied about the work done on his car, and it was fairly easy to prove that.

Unfortunately, because the mechanic had crossed wires to avoid the check engine light coming back on, the car caught

on fire while he was in it. The lower part of his body was burned, which was how we ended up getting as much money out of him as we were able to. The money wouldn't take away the physical impairment, but it would make his life easier.

I assured him that he didn't have to give me anything extra beyond my fee, but he insisted on getting me season passes to the Grizzlies and Titans games. I knew there was a chance Shalom would say no to accompanying me, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to ask. When I walked into the conference room, she was placing the last of her papers into their respective folders. She gave me a soft smile before lowering her eyes back to them.

"A client of mine gave me season tickets for the Titans this year and Grizzlies next year." Her eyes lit up as she grinned. "I was uh... wondering if you wanted to join me for a game or two."

Her smile wavered as she plopped down in her seat. "Mecca, I'm not sure if that's a good idea. We agreed we wouldn't try and be friends."

"Yeah, because you spazzed on me and I'm still not sure why."

"Well, you told me I would feel better if I talked about it." Her tone raised. She was getting upset. That made me upset.

"Yeah, but that was before I knew it was about me."

She chuckled, and I couldn't help but join her. I hated even asking her if she was okay because it ruined the progress we'd been making. If I felt like I could put aside the hurt of her betrayal to have her in my life again, I couldn't understand why she couldn't meet me halfway. That was her choice, though, and I wouldn't force my way into her life, no matter how much I wanted to be in it.

"Mecca..."

"You're going with me to some of these games, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

I held my breath, waiting for her to give me a hard time about it. Instead, she lowered her head as she smiled and

almost whispered, “Whatever you say, Mecca.”

Not expecting it to be that easy, I turned to leave before she changed her mind. My own grin spread my lips as I headed back to my office with a bit more pep in my step. It reminded me of Norbit after his makeover when he was going to meet Kate for his date on Tuesday. I covered my mouth and chuckled with a shake of my head. This woman was going to be the death of reason within me, and for today, I was okay with that.

Symphony was having a rough day. I felt like she needed to talk to a woman, but she didn't want anyone in our family there because she felt like they would judge her. It was a toss-up between me calling Amelia or Shalom, and I chose Shalom because of our history. Not long after Shalom arrived, I realized I made the right decision. They hit it off instantly, and Symphony was able to release a weight she'd been carrying by being able to talk to a woman.

It hurt me all over again that Aunt Rachel was acting the way she was. She wasn't even answering Symphony's calls. She did talk to Uncle George, and her excuse was Symphony being pregnant hurt her feelings. Apparently, she had a vision of Sym's future that she believed a baby would ruin. I could respect that, but I also felt like she would regret not being in her daughter and grandchild's life sooner than later.

Shalom stayed for dinner, and they watched a movie together in the living room before Symphony decided to call it a night. She could barely keep anything down and was tired a lot. I was glad she was able to stomach the butter and parmesan noodles I'd made her. I was worried the garlic would be too hard on her nose and make her sick, but she devoured them, so we agreed to put them in rotation so she would stop losing weight.

I didn't want Shalom to leave, so I offered her a tour and a round of bowling, which she excitedly accepted. It wasn't until

we got to the game room that she said, “You have a big, beautiful home, but there’s hardly anything in here.”

I chuckled as I cut the light on. “That’s on purpose. I want my wife to decorate it when she moves in.”

“Oh.” She rubbed the pads of her fingers together like she always did when she was nervous.

“Me saying that doesn’t make you want to leave, does it?”

“Nah. I need to beat you at least once in bowling before I go.”

“Yeah, right. I only let you win when we were with Carina and Parker to be nice. I’m not showing you any mercy here.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll see.”

Her head nodded in approval as she looked around. It was the most put-together room in my home. Along with two bowling lanes, I also had an area for pool and arcade games, a bar, and a theater setup. Because I’d gotten my home built, I devoted an entire level to this. It was important to me that I had a place to escape in my home because of how much I worked, and this was perfect.

“This is really nice, Mec. If I had something like this in my apartment, I’d never leave.”

“You can come over whenever you’d like.”

“Maybe I’ll take you up on that.”

The couple of feet between us felt like thousands of miles. I needed her closer. She rubbed the pads of her fingers as I closed the space between us. When I stepped into her personal space, her hands immediately went to my chest.

“Mecca,” she whispered, looking up at me with lazy eyes.

“Yes?” I tilted her head slightly with my forehead and brushed her nose with mine. “You always smell so fucking good.” My nose lowered to her neck, and I inhaled her scent, holding her waist when she shivered.

“Mecca.” Her voice trembled as she squeezed my arms.

“Hmm?” My lips hovered over hers... so closely that if she licked hers, her tongue would graze mine. Her eyes were damn near closed as her breathing grew ragged. “Tell me what you want, Lom.”

Fisting my shirt, she tilted her head more and swept her lips against mine. As much as I wanted to connect them, I put an inch of space between us. I needed to hear her say it. Needed to hear her say she wanted me just as much as I wanted her.

“Shalom...”

“I...” With a hiss, she stepped back and covered her face with her hands. She was about to retreat. I would let her. Shit... I had no choice. Pulling my hands behind my back, I took a step back to put some space between us. When her hands lowered, her eyes were watery. “I didn’t come here for this,” she muttered.

“I know, but it can be an unexpected treat.”

She smiled as her shoulders relaxed. When she removed the distance between us, I held my breath as I stared at her, waiting for her to make the first move. On the tips of her toes, she wrapped her arms around my neck and lowered me to her.

“Are you sure?” I checked, palming her waist.

“No, but I want it anyway.”

That was good enough for me. After over a decade, our lips returned to one another. Content sighs and low hums escaped us both as we surrendered. Shalom’s kisses were more intimate than anything I’d ever experienced before. I missed them... missed her.

My hands lowered to her ass, and she moaned as I pressed her body into mine. Her phone began to vibrate in her pocket, causing her to jump and quickly pull away from me. She wiped her mouth with a trembling hand while the other pulled out her phone. Turning her back to me, she answered with, “Hello?” A few seconds passed before she said, “Shit. Okay. I’m on my way.”

As she disconnected the call, I asked, “Is everything okay?”

Her head shook and eyes watered as she jogged toward the door. “No, that was my sister. My dad is having trouble breathing and is lethargic. They are taking him to the hospital now.”

“Let me drive you.”

“Mecca, you don’t...”

“I’m driving you,” I insisted at the sight of tears streaming down her cheeks. If anything would have happened to her because she was too upset to drive, I’d feel like shit.

“Thank you,” she mumbled with a snuffle, taking my hand into hers.

We quickly made our way upstairs. I texted Sym and told her I was heading out in case she woke up and needed me for anything. Deciding to Uber home, I drove Shalom’s car. While we drove, she held on to my hand. I prayed for her, and the sight of her tears broke my heart. When we arrived, she thanked me for the ride and praying for her, as if I was going to leave. I told her I’d stay with her until she heard word about her father, and that got me another hug.

It didn’t matter how things were between us—pleasing and serving women made me most feel like a man. There was no way I could leave her to handle this alone. When we went inside, Heaven was the first person we saw. They rushed into each other’s arms for an embrace. She informed us that their mom, Lydia, was back in the emergency room with Roger, but he could only have one person back there with him at a time.

We all sat down, and I faded to black, allowing Shalom to connect with her sister. Her hand gripped my thigh, and I guess that was her way of staying grounded. About two hours passed before Lydia came out. When she saw me, her body rocked. I could understand the reaction. Heaven and Shalom pressed her for answers, and that was the only reason she pulled her eyes away from me.

“He has fluid on his lungs, and they want to run more tests on his heart, so they will be keeping him and putting him in his own room. That’s all they’ve told me so far.”

“But there’s obviously something wrong with his heart for them to be saying that,” Heaven said, and I realized both she and her sister were overthinkers.

“Maybe, or maybe they just want to be safe,” Lydia said.

“I’m going to Google it,” Shalom said.

“Don’t do that, Lom,” I urged. “Google will diagnose him with the worst thing possible. He’s here and in good hands. For now, let that be enough until his doctor gives you answers.”

Blinking back her tears, she nodded and made her way into my arms, burying her face in my chest. I ignored her mother and sister staring at me. I wasn’t sure what she’d told them about us, if anything. I didn’t really care about that, though. I’d stay here for as long as Shalom needed me to—and beyond.



shalom

I didn't want to leave my parents at the hospital, but they insisted Heaven and I go home. Honestly, I was surprised my mother was even there. With the divorce, I didn't think she'd be there for times like this. The fact that she was showed me that even though she made the choice to live life without him, her love still tied her to him. I loved that for them. Heaven and I agreed, but promised her we'd be there tomorrow to relieve her. Heaven would be there in the morning, and I'd go that evening.

Mecca drove me home and said he would Uber from there, but I asked him to come inside. It wasn't just because I didn't want to be alone... I didn't want to be away from him. Before Heaven called, I was ready to see how far things would go between us. At that moment, I didn't care about how things ended between us. I only cared about our present and how much I wanted him inside of me.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'm about to take a shower," I told him after showing him around. It didn't take as long to give him a tour of my three-bedroom apartment as it took him to show me his five-bedroom home. When he told me he was waiting for his wife to decorate it, I could have melted in his arms. I knew I wouldn't be that woman, but for a brief second, I allowed myself to pretend I would be.

“You need help with that?”

Turning, I caught him staring at my ass. His eyes heightened slowly, and when they connected with mine, he smiled.

“With... taking a shower?” I confirmed.

“Yeah.”

Twiddling my thumbs, I thought about his offer for a while. My mind was screaming for me to say no, but the pieces of my heart that had always belonged to him were screaming yes.

“Yeah.”

His head tilted and brows wrinkled, as if he wasn't expecting that to be my answer. “Yeah?”

Chuckling, I lifted my shirt over my head and tossed it into the hallway before saying, “Yes, Mecca. I want you to help me in the shower.”

A few seconds passed before he followed me down the hall toward my bedroom. When we made it to the bathroom, the weight of the moment began to settle within me. I thought fear would consume me or even unsurety, but that wasn't the case. My heart wasn't racing anxiously; I was calm. He waited until I cut the shower on before he pulled me into his arms. I forgot how much I loved being there. How safe I once felt there. Our lips connected, and I released a content sigh, just like the first time we kissed earlier.

I loved this man—still.

Insecurity crept in and told me I was a fool, opening myself up to a man who once hurt me, but I'd deal with that later. Right now, I needed grown man Mecca to make love to me. He seemed to be on the exact same wave because he stopped kissing me and frowned, breathing raggedly, before connecting his lips with mine again.

We discarded of each other's clothes before he lifted me and placed me on the counter. He was the only man, in my life, that I'd *ever* had sex with without a condom. Tonight, we

became one with no boundaries again. I shivered as he stretched me with his long, perfectly curved dick. It was bigger than before... so meaty and pretty with a large vein from the shaft to his head.

I was mesmerized by the sight of him hiding himself inside of me.

“You still love watching this pussy hug my dick?” he asked breathlessly.

All I could do was nod as I bit my trembling lip. I was afraid moans would pour if I opened my mouth. That curve started to hit my spot instantly. Flinging my head back, I tried to keep my legs open, but they started to tremble.

Moans started to pour from him, and they were the sweetest melody. I alternated between panting and moaning his name as my trembling legs locked against him. He commanded I look at him, and as soon as our eyes locked, things took a deeper turn. My left leg extended, and he placed my ankle on his shoulder. With me slightly slanted and hanging off the counter, he pulled my chest to his. Sweet affirmations left his lips as he stroked me slow and deep.

I came quicker than I ever had before.

My orgasm urged his.

He pulled out rapidly, allowing his seeds to fall onto the floor. I rubbed his back slowly as I came down from my high. His hands pushed my arms from around him, and confusion filled me.

“That was too close. That pussy felt so good I almost couldn’t pull out.”

“It’s okay, Mec. I’m on birth control.”

“Good, because I don’t trust you with my seeds. The last time I gave them to you, you played me.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I asked, jumping off the counter as he casually headed toward the shower.

“You acted like you wanted to have my baby, then you got an abortion. I’m not trying to go through that with you again.”

Scoffing, I gripped his arm and kept him from walking inside. “No, we’re going to settle this right damn now.” As sticky as my thighs were, I refused to let either of us get cleaned up until we had this conversation once and for all. “I’m tired of you acting like this was my fault. *You’re* the one that broke up with *me*. You told me to get the abortion. So I’m not understanding how you can stand there and act like you’re upset that I gave you exactly what you asked for.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Shalom? I never told you to get a fucking abortion. Why would I tell you to get an abortion after promising you that I would find a way to take care of you both?”

“I don’t know! But you did! And you did it in a fucking letter!” The tears began to fall before I could stop them. “After everything we’d gone through...” Chuckling, I took a step back as my chin trembled. “You didn’t even have the decency to break up with me to my face.”

“Baby...” Mecca grabbed my hands as he chuckled with watery eyes. “I didn’t break up with you, and I for damn sure didn’t write you a letter. You wrote me a letter breaking up with me. You told me you were going to get an abortion and wanted nothing to do with me. I even went to your house, and you were gone.”

“Well, yes, I left early, but that was because you left first. I called you but my calls didn’t go through, so I figured you blocked me or changed your number.”

Silence found us as we processed what the other had said.

“I didn’t block you. My parents suggested I leave my phone at home while I was gone. I didn’t change my number until I came back, got the letter from you, and called you to learn you’d changed your number. So you’re saying you never wrote me a letter?”

“Yes, Mecca. And you’re saying you didn’t write me one?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I didn’t want you to have the abortion.”

“You didn’t?” I asked quietly.

“No, baby. That’s why I was so upset with you. I wanted you and our baby, but you left me.”

“Only because you left me first and said all those mean things in that letter. You even left money for the abortion.” Groaning, I ran my fingers through my hair. “Well, obviously not you, but someone.”

“This is crazy.”

“So someone wrote us both letters to break us up.”

“From the sound of it, yeah.”

Lightning fast, Mecca turned and punched the shower door before I could even prepare for it. He grabbed his clothes and stormed out of the bathroom, almost running me over in the process. I quickly jumped out of his way before following behind.

“What are you doing, Mecca?” I asked calmly, watching as he tried to put on his clothes.

“Someone set up our breakup and the abortion. It was one or all of our parents, and I’m going to find out who.”

“I-I agree, but now’s not the time.” Dropping his pants, he looked at me.

“The fuck you mean it’s not the time?” He released a humorless chuckle. “They broke us up and ruined every-fucking-thing we were building and you’re talking about it’s not the time?”

“No, Mecca, it’s not.” I walked over to him and took his hands into mine. “It’s after midnight and my dad is in the hospital possibly with heart issues. I do agree that we need to get to the bottom of this, but not right now. Right now, I just want to settle in the fact that you didn’t write that letter and break my heart the way I thought you’d done for all these years.”

His body softened, and I was grateful for that.

“It’s been fifteen years, love,” I continued. “Fifteen years of us hating one another for something we didn’t even do.”

His head flung back, and he pulled me into his chest. “Fifteen years of us grieving a child we both wanted to have.”

“Fifteen years of us trying to find love in others when it’s been right here all along.”

Tilting my head, Mecca covered my lips with his. He picked me up and wrapped my legs around him as we deepened the kiss. I could no longer deny my love for Mecca and desire for him. Even before we put the pieces together, he was going to be my exception. The man I gave a second chance to and prayed he wouldn’t make me regret it. To know that he didn’t have to be an exception made my heart expand in size.

I knew I was safe with him.

I knew I could trust him.

I knew I wasn’t stupid to love him.

I knew what we had was real.

Tears poured from my eyes as I accepted those truths. This man hadn’t lied to me, used me, and abandoned me. This was why he was hurting and acting as if this was my fault. He was just as hurt and confused over how we ended as I was. I didn’t know which of our parents was behind this, but we were going to get to the bottom of it, and I prayed we could stomach the truth.

In the meantime, I didn’t give a damn about anything but the man holding me.

We kissed until we needed to come up for air, then we kissed some more.

Mecca carried me to the shower, where we washed our bodies and connected them all over again.

The water had run cold by the time we were getting out and drying off. We moisturized before climbing into my bed naked and into each other’s arms. A smile spread my lips as he held me close, allowing me to listen to his heartbeat. In his arms, I got the best sleep I’d gotten in over fifteen years.

mecca

The next day, Shalom and I couldn't part ways. Our bodies couldn't either. Very quickly, I learned the difference between her pussy and every other woman's I'd had over the years. With others, I was *always* in control. I could provide them pleasure and still get my own. The high they gave me came from my stamina and ability to hold out until they were completely spent. With Shalom, every time she came, my ass was cumming too. Though I was able to please her like all the others, her body and energy overwhelmed me. *She* was in control. I was truly under her spell, her service, and I didn't care about that at all.

We made breakfast together, and as she sat on my lap, we fed each other. After we ran a couple of miles, she wanted to go swimming, so we went to the YMCA and did a few laps. I took her shopping before we went back to my place. I expected her to leave when evening came to see about her father, but because there was a chance one or all of our parents were responsible for our breakup, she wasn't comfortable being around her parents just yet. She did call to check on him, and her mother told her that they were still running tests.

Shalom wanted to make dinner, so while I waited, I chilled in the game room. Her phone started to ring, and I grabbed it to take it to her. The call would have gone to voicemail by the time I made it upstairs, so I checked who the caller was in case

it was her sister or mom with an update on her dad. It was someone named Carter, and the picture used for his ID was of them together. He was placing a kiss on her cheek as she smiled brightly. The sight of it caused my feet to stop moving. I wasn't expecting her to be single, but we also hadn't talked about people we were dating.

By the time I made it to the kitchen, I was unsure if I wanted to question her about who he was or not. She looked so good floating around my kitchen in one of my shirts. And she was happy, too. The smile on her face as she hummed under her breath was proof of that. When I extended the phone in her direction and told her someone had called, it was difficult for me to release it when she grabbed it.

“Who was it?”

“Someone named Carter.”

She looked at me, gently tugging for me to let it go. “Oh, okay.”

“Is that your man?” I checked, finally releasing the phone.

“He's my ex.”

My head bobbed as she headed back over to the stove, placing her phone on the counter in the process. “An ex that you are friends with?”

Shalom pulled her hair behind her ears and leaned against the stove to look at me.

“I wouldn't say Carter and I are friends.”

“Then what are you?”

With a shrug, she twiddled her thumbs. “We aren't really anything, Mecca.”

“Then why is he calling you?”

Scoffing, she shook her head and picked up her phone. “I don't know. I haven't called him back to see.”

“Well, you should do that.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds, and when I realized she wasn't going to call, I chuckled and left the kitchen. I trusted Shalom, so if she told me he wasn't her man, I believed that. My concern was her having an emotional attachment to a man that could come between us restoring what we once had. Damn us restoring what we once had; I wanted us to work toward something even better. I was wise enough to know we weren't the same teenagers who fell in love and that this new bond, new level, would take awareness and effort.

Now, I wondered if I'd moved too fast mentally by thinking something was going to happen between us. We'd had sex but a talk about a relationship had not happened. As possessive of Shalom as I felt, she owed me nothing at this point.

At the sound of ringing, I looked back. She was following me and had her phone on speaker.

“What are you doing?”

“Obviously you want to know what's going on between me and Carter, so I'm about to let you see.”

“That's your business, Lom. You don't have to prove anything to me.”

She remained silent, still following behind me as I headed to my room. The fact that I even allowed her in my room was proof of how invested I was in us getting back together. Since I'd moved in, not one woman had stepped foot into my bedroom. Shalom had not only been inside, but we'd made love too. I tainted a sacred space for an intimate moment with her that I don't regret, but I do regret letting her inside without talking about where things were going with us first.

“Hello?” Carter answered.

“Hey, you called?”

“Yeah, you busy?”

I reached for the door. She reached for my hand.

“I’m not necessarily busy. I’m about to fix dinner for me and Mecca.”

I turned to face her while he remained silent on the line.

“You and Mecca?” he repeated.

“Yes.”

“That’s... a thing now?”

Shalom smiled softly. “It’s still too early to say.”

He chuckled. “You ended things with me and wouldn’t give us a second chance because of some bullshit rules after he broke your heart, but you’re giving him a second chance?”

There was a lot to unpack there, but the main thing that stood out to me was him mentioning rules. I tucked it into my memory to ask her about that.

“Well, Mecca and I have realized we were pitted against each other. He didn’t write that letter to break up with me and make me have an abortion.”

“Then who did?”

“We’re still trying to figure that out.”

He laughed again, and the shit was starting to piss me off. “So he tells you he didn’t do it and you just believe him?”

Her voice was firmer when she said, “I know he didn’t do it because someone gave him a similar letter from me that I didn’t write.” She massaged her temple and turned her back to me. “Did you want something specific, Carter?”

“I don’t think it matters anymore, Shalom. Be well.”

“Wha—”

He disconnected the call, and for a while, she just stared at the phone. I felt like I’d invaded their privacy and become privy to a conversation I shouldn’t have been. It was clear he still wanted her and based on her response to him ending the call, I wasn’t sure she didn’t want him either.

I went into my room to get my charger, which is why I’d headed that way, to begin with. It wasn’t until I brushed

against her as I headed back toward the game room that she snapped out of her trance.

“If you need to call him back to handle that, you can go in one of the guest rooms for privacy,” I offered.

“There’s nothing to handle. We aren’t together like I told you.”

“Yeah, but from the sound of it, that’s what he wants. Do you?”

I turned to face her, and the sight of her nibbling her bottom lip told me all I needed to know. Chuckling, I continued down the hall.

“Mecca, wait.” She took me by the hand again, but this time, I pulled away. “It’s not like that. Carter and I considered getting back together, but like he said, I don’t give exes second chances.”

“That’s not what I asked you. I asked you if you wanted to be with him.”

“No, I don’t. We aren’t compatible.”

Semi-satisfied with her answer, I headed to the game room, and she returned to the kitchen. If she didn’t give exes second chances, that included me, too. Even if I wasn’t the man she thought I was because of that letter, I was still an ex. I was disappointed, but I wouldn’t take that out on her. She was entitled to her boundaries and preferences. I wouldn’t go against that.

I lost myself in my thoughts downstairs while she made dinner. When she came down to let me know it was done, I avoided telling her that I didn’t have an appetite. I followed her to the dining room, and my stomach growled as my eyes took in the feast she’d prepared. Fried chicken, Brussels sprouts, herb rice, and candied yams quickly made my appetite return. Then she had the nerve to fix sweet potato cornbread to go with it.

We sat across from each other at the six-person wooden table. I said grace and we began to silently eat. Not too much time passed before she was huffing her frustration.

“You want to talk about what shifted your mood?” she asked, staring at me.

“It’s not important.”

“How you feel is important to me.”

I shoved a fork full of rice into my mouth as I considered her words. When I swallowed, I admitted, “I know we haven’t talked about us and where this is going, but hearing that you don’t give exes a second chance is disappointing. Now that we know the truth, or at least the truth that concerns us, I was hoping we could start dating and get married.”

She almost choked on the wine she was drinking. I stood to pat her back, but she motioned for me to sit down as she grabbed her throat and coughed.

“I’m fine,” she choked out. She took another small sip and a deep breath. “You just caught me off guard going straight to marriage without a relationship first.”

“Fifteen years have been wasted, baby. You were *always* supposed to be my wife. That hasn’t changed.”

“That’s true, but *we’ve* changed. We don’t even know how compatible we’d be.”

“That’s what the dating is for.”

Her expression was unreadable for a while before it softened and she gave me a smile. “I would like for you to be the exception to my rule, Mec. Now that I know the letter wasn’t from you, I feel safer trying with you again. There are some things we would need to discuss first before we even start dating to make sure we’re on the same page. It’s important to me that I don’t have a marriage and life like my mom.”

“Okay, so we can discuss that tonight after dinner. And if we’re on the same page, I’ll start planning our first date.”

“I like the sound of that,” she cooed with a blush.

With that weight resolved, we finished our dinner without issue. When it was over, we decided to walk to the coffee shop up the street. I liked how she indulged in comfort food but

took whole, healthy eating seriously too. I liked how active she was. We both prioritized exercise, which was important to me. Knowing how much she loved swimming had me making the mental note to start the process of finding someone who could put a pool in the backyard. I wanted my wife to be able to have her every desire.

As we walked, she shared more about her childhood with me, and it gave me a different perspective on traditional marriage. Hearing about her mother basically having no identity outside of a wife and mother helped me understand why that wasn't the role she wanted for herself. I didn't mind my wife working at all as long as she knew she didn't have to. I planned to pay all the bills regardless of how much money she made.

For me, the better I treated her and made her feel, the better she would treat me. The more peaceful her life was, the more peace she'd bring to me. What problem a lot of men had was wanting their woman to operate a certain way but they didn't provide the environment for her to flourish in it. Shalom wouldn't have to worry about that with me. Women in my past flourished when I took the role of leader and provider. That wouldn't change when I got married.

I told her that she could work as much as she wanted just as long as our family didn't feel neglected, and she would be able to hold me to the same standard. We would always make time for ourselves, each other, and our kids. That was her biggest issue, and I could literally see relief fill her when I told her I would never try to strip away her identity and career. Apparently, Carter wanted her to stop working if they got married, which was why they broke up.

We also talked about things like how we'd raise our kids, debt and credit, more gender roles and expectations, and work and retirement plans. Travel desires, holiday traditions, and even how we expressed sadness and anger came up too. It was the first time I'd ever talked about things like this with a woman, and it immediately made me feel closer to her and more prepared to have a healthy marriage.

By the time we finished our coffee, a wide smile was on her face as she wrapped her arm around mine and rested her head on my shoulder. I was glad talking like this had brought her such happiness and peace.

“Talking like this with you has helped me realize I don’t want to be a housewife or stay-at-home mom, based on society’s definition of those terms, but I do want a husband and children and to care for and nurture them. I feel like the way I’ve explained it in the past has made me sound selfish, but you’ve helped me normalize what I want.”

“Yeah, I mean... What good is having a man pay all the bills if you don’t have the time and money to enjoy life? If you’re too tired because you spend your days cooking, cleaning, and seeing after the kids while he does his own thing? I completely get you wanting to work to maintain your independence, but I’m also going to make sure you have help with household things, so you’ll never be overwhelmed by them.” Her chin rested on my shoulder, and she gave me those innocent eyes I’d fallen in love with. “Nannies, personal chef, housekeeper, and a house manager to take care of the bills... that’s what you have to look forward to. When you want to cook, you can, but I’m not hiring you to be my mom or my worker. I’m marrying you to be my life partner.”

She giggled before giving me a soft kiss. “But if we have help for all of those things, what are you going to expect me to do?”

“I think that’s a good place for us to talk about what we want, need, offer, and what induces our happiness.”

And we did. She wanted love, security, and true companionship. She needed fun and freedom. Outside of her love and presence, she offered her softness, submission, and influence along with true partnership.

I told her that was all I’d really need from her—being my partner... my lover... my friend.

I was a very sensual man of service. There was no doubt in my mind Shalom would enjoy life with me. I only hoped when

we got the truth from our parents that their actions wouldn't cause a new rift between our families.



shalom

The last eight days had been emotionally taxing. I loved my time with Mecca. Even when we had the slight issue because of Carter calling... I was glad it happened because it opened the door for a necessary conversation that made me feel even closer to him. Things with my family, well, my parents, had been strained. I had a feeling my parents were in on the ruse with Mecca's parents. We considered just one of them being behind it, but the more we talked about it, the more it made sense for them all to be in on it.

Both sets of parents felt like we were moving too fast. Both sets of parents wanted us to break up. Both sets of parents wanted me to have an abortion. Both sets of parents gave us the letter. Both sets of parents timed our departures from Memphis to make sure we wouldn't be able to talk when we received the letters. Now those would have been a hell of a lot of coincidences.

I hadn't seen my parents in person all week, but I did FaceTime Mama and Heaven when they were at the hospital with Daddy. He was home now. He'd stopped taking his water pills, which was why he had fluid on his lungs, feet, and hands. The fluid was making it hard for him to breathe and making him lethargic, but they were right about him having something going on with his heart. He needed a new prescription because the one he had was no longer effective.

As long as he took the new prescription and his water pills, he'd be okay.

I could understand his frustration with not wanting to take so many pills, but unfortunately, that's where he was with his life. Poor dieting and a lack of exercise had done a number on him. He was more willing to exercise and eat even better to start the process of limiting his pills, and I was proud of him for that. It showed his desire to not just live but have a good quality of life.

Our plan was for Mecca to bring his parents to my dad's home since that's where I was with my mother. We wanted to talk to them all together. I wanted to keep things peaceful since my dad was fresh out of the hospital, but I also couldn't wait any longer to have this conversation. When Mecca pulled up, he let me know they were outside. I didn't want his parents to see me and know something was going on, so I unlocked the door and waited behind it instead of opening it.

At the sight of me, Martin's mouth dropped, and Karen's steps faltered. Had Mecca not been prepared to catch her, she would have tripped over the step in front of her. I smiled and pulled my mouth to the side to keep from laughing. Their reaction to me was worse than my parents' reaction to Mecca. Mama stared at him, and Daddy laughed hysterically before giving him a handshake, but he wouldn't tell me why that was his reaction to a man I knew he wanted me to have nothing to do with.

"What's going on, Mecca?" Karen asked, straightening upright.

"We'll talk about that once you're comfortably inside."

Hesitantly, she stepped inside behind her son and husband. Mecca and I shared a quick, tender kiss before I led them all to the living room. Though we insisted Daddy rest, he wasn't ready to get back in bed, so he was sitting up on the recliner watching TV. I paid close attention to how our parents responded to each other. They were cordial, addressing each other by name.

When his parents made themselves comfortable on the opposite end of the sofa as mine, Mecca and I stood in the center of the living room.

“We’re going to keep this short,” Mecca started. “Clearly Shalom and I reconnected and are back in each other’s lives. We’ve talked and learned someone close to us was practicing deception and betrayal fifteen years ago, leading to the ending of our relationship.”

Karen shifted in her seat slightly, closing her suede blazer.

“I received a letter that was supposed to be from Mecca telling me he used me for my virginity, no longer wanted to be with me, and wanted me to get an abortion with payment to do so included.”

“And I received a letter that was supposed to be from Shalom telling me she didn’t want to be with me and was going to get the abortion to make sure nothing tied us together for life.”

“We didn’t write each other those letters... so we want to know who did.”

No one spoke up immediately, causing Mecca to add, “It was one or all of you. You’re the only ones who knew about the baby besides Grandma Rose and we know she wouldn’t have done something so unscrupulous. So who was it?”

As calm as he was trying to be, his voice raised and fists balled. I took his hand into mine, trying to keep him calm and grounded. Mecca used to have a temper out of this world, and it was quick too. I didn’t need him getting so upset that he said or did something he would regret.

My father sat up slightly with a slow shake of his head. “It was all of us,” he admitted, causing everyone else to speak up at once. “Now I don’t want to hear none of y’all’s bullshit. I know we agreed we’d never tell them, but I just got out of the hospital and nearly lost my life. I want to do better with the rest of the time I have left, and they deserve to know the truth.”

“You’re right,” Martin agreed. “It was all of us. We agreed that it was best for both of you if you parted ways, so we came up with the idea to break you up with letters. We sent Shalom’s while Mecca was away and gave him hers when he came back and she had left for school.”

“Whose idea was it to write the letters?”

“Now we won’t share that,” Karen said, making me think it was her.

“Yes, you won’t be more upset with one of us than the others,” Mama added. “Hold us all accountable in the same way.”

Mecca chuckled as he ran his fingers down the corners of his mouth. “What gave y’all the right to make such a monumental decision for us?”

“Being your parents,” Martin answered.

“We were eighteen and fully capable of taking care of our baby and each other.”

“No, you weren’t,” Mama replied. “You both had great, sheltered childhoods. You may have worked a couple of hours in the library to make some extra money, but you were nowhere near ready to be an independent adult with a newborn baby while still going to college and learning yourself as a man. And I for damn sure wasn’t going to allow you to take my baby from the comfort of her parents’ covering to make her struggle and suffer with you.”

“But that’s what I wanted,” I said. “I wanted to be with him. I wanted my baby. I didn’t care about money. We would have made it work. But you robbed us of that, and from the sound of it, none of you feel guilty about it... do you?”

They looked at each other and remained silent.

“Wow,” Mecca said, rubbing my hand with his thumb.

“I regret the hurt this has caused the both of you, but I don’t regret our decision to do what was best for our children,” Karen said. “When you have children of your own, you’ll have

the same innate urge to do what's best for them, even if it hurts them or makes them unhappy.”

“No, you don't get to do that,” he said, pointing a finger in her direction. “You don't get to absolve yourselves of what you did wrong by saying it was for our good. You can do what's best for your children and not lie to them or rip their hearts out with secrets in the process. You saw how losing her affected me. You let me cry on your fucking chest. I felt weak as hell in that moment, yet you happily comforted me, and it was all your fault!”

“You know what?” Chuckling, I tugged him backward by his hand. “It doesn't matter, love. We have the truth now and they are not going to see the error of their ways. They think they did the right thing, no matter how much it hurt us.”

“You're damn right we did the right thing,” Daddy said. “Look at you, the both of you. Look at what you've accomplished. We did the right thing, and if you hate us for it, at least we'll know that choice led to who you are today.”

“And at least...” Mama paused and looked at Daddy. “At least you have a second chance to love.”

The small smile he gave her wasn't lost on me, but I was too hurt over their betrayal to care about what they had going on.

“Let's just get out of here,” I said, turning and heading toward the door.

Karen told Mecca to call her, and all he did was shake his head. I didn't think either of us would want to talk to our parents any time soon. At least we'd finally gotten the truth and would take it from here. Mecca walked me to my car, and we agreed to take some space tonight to process what had just happened without one person's feelings affecting the other. We needed to decide how we would handle our parents going forward. I was secure in us and that we'd have the future we always desired and deserved but our parents being included in that future was certainly up for debate.

I was absolutely smitten with Mecca Smith. He was a man of action and intentionality, and I loved that about him most. When we were with Carina and Parker, I mentioned never learning how to skate since he never got the chance to teach me. This evening, he taught me how to skate. It was a fun yet painful at times lesson, and I loved every minute of it.

After the skating lesson, we went downtown where skaters of all races and ages met up and skated with drinks, food, and live music. It was truly nothing like I'd ever experienced before, and I loved the community aspect of it. I even made a new friend, Angela, who was dating and kid-less like me. I loved my crew, but Carina and I hardly ever spent time with Draya and Stephanie, so it was nice to meet someone new.

When we left there, we grabbed a quick bite to eat before heading back to his place. Symphony was gone for the weekend, so he had an intimate night for the two of us planned. Though I didn't know all the details when we arrived, my excitement grew as I waited for him in the car.

It had been three days since we confronted our parents, and I hadn't talked to mine since. Both had called and texted and I told Heaven to let them know I needed time and space. I didn't care about them trying to force their way back into my life. In fact, that would make me take longer to talk to them. They made the choice to do something that hurt me, and they didn't get to decide how I responded and how much time I took away from them. Mecca hadn't been speaking to his parents either, which didn't surprise me.

Mecca opened the garage door and beckoned for me to come inside. I hurriedly made my way out of the car to see what he had in store for me. We'd discussed our love languages, what aroused us, and what turned us off. His love language was physical touch and mine was quality time. Mecca was a very sensual man. He loved things that looked, smelled, and tasted good—and that included me. I was visual, and him in his military green sweater with tan slacks was an

amazing color combo that complemented his peanut butter-colored skin.

At the sight of the rose petal trail, I gasped and covered my mouth. “Love,” I almost sang, looking up at him. He gave me a confident smile. “What is this?”

“Follow the trail and find out.”

And so I did. The petals led to one of his guestrooms. A massage table waited for us with oil on top. More rose petals covered the floor along with candles. A love song that I was unfamiliar with played in the background.

“Mecca, this is beautiful. Thank you.”

“There’s more. This is only the beginning.”

He gave me a sweet kiss before walking me over to the massage table, where he undressed me and gave me the best massage of my life. I dozed off quite a few times before he was done, and I was completely relaxed as I got off the table. I offered to give him a massage as well, but he insisted the night was about me.

“I want to spoil you too,” I told him as he led me out of the room.

“You spoil me with your love and gratitude. That’s all I need tonight.”

I believed him, but I could see in his eyes there was more to it than that. Stopping, I took his free hand into mine. “If something is on your mind, you know you can talk to me about it, right?”

He sighed and gave me a soft smile. “You still know me very well.”

“It’s my job. So what’s wrong?”

“I just... feel a little guilt over not fighting harder for you back then. If I had put my pride aside and tried to find you, we could have still been together.”

“It wasn’t just on you. I could have tried harder too. We were kids, hurting, and unsure what to do with our feelings.

Our time apart is on our parents, love, not us.”

As he nodded, I lifted on the tips of my toes and gave him a kiss. It lasted longer than I think either of us meant for it to. When he moaned into my mouth and pulled away, my eyes lowered to his dick. I wanted it.

“I have more in store for you, so cool it with all that.”

“All what?” I asked innocently with a chuckle as we continued down the hall.

“Kissing me like you want this dick.”

“I do.”

“And I’ll give it to you... later.”

“Mhm,” I agreed, as if I really had a choice.

When he opened the second guest bedroom, a woman and older gentleman were inside. They made quick introductions, and I found out the man was a jeweler. The young lady was his assistant. My eyes watered when Mecca told me he wanted me to pick out my engagement and wedding rings for the future. I knew he was serious about us getting married but making plans like this made it even more real. We hadn’t confessed our love for each other yet and I wasn’t sure when those words would come, but Mecca was showing me his love every day in ways that made me thank God he used Violet and this case to bring us back together.

With blurry eyes, I looked over the rings. I had to shed a few tears to see clearly. When I could, I selected my choices—a ten-carat pear-shaped engagement ring that I’d give to my son for his wife or the young man who asked for my daughter’s hand in marriage when the time came, and a ten-and-a-half-carat radiant cut platinum diamond band for my wedding and forever ring. The young lady removed my choices and wrote him a receipt for both. I tried not to clock him for the price, but I was too curious not to peek. My eyes widened at the sight of two hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars for both.

Wetness immediately pooled in my center. It wasn’t lost on me that Mecca had wealth but watching him drop such a large

amount of money so casually turned me on. It also deepened my trust in his ability to provide for our family.

“That’s it, right?” I asked as we watched the pair walk to a black Tesla.

Mecca chuckled as he squeezed my ass. “Why?”

“I’m ready to show you how much I appreciate you.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

I kicked the door closed and pressed his body into the wall. He released a cocky chuckle as I pulled his dick out of his boxers and pants. I went to work giving him the slow, sloppy head I learned quickly that he loved. Spitting on his head, I locked eyes with him as he groaned and palmed the back of my head. He moved his hips, fucking my mouth as I took every inch of him that I could down my throat. Gagging with watery eyes and all, I didn’t stop until his cum was shooting down my throat.

“Fuck!” he roared, trying to push me away, but I held him by the back of his thighs and didn’t let up until he was done cumming. I could listen to his moans and hums for hours. “Get up, bae,” he urged, voice just above a whisper as he helped me stand. He wasted no time picking me up and carrying me to his bedroom. After undressing me, Mecca placed me in the center of his bed.

He made his way between my legs, running his nose between my folds as he moaned. The gesture alone had me on the verge of cumming. When he started to feast on my pussy, I thought I was literally about to die. Mecca’s mouth was dizzying—his dick... paralyzing. He made me cum effortlessly with his tongue and lips alone before sliding two fingers inside of me, pleasuring me until I came again.

“If you don’t stop, I’m not going to be able to take that dick,” I warned. When he continued to lick and suck my clit and I felt that warmth pool up at my core, I released sizzling breaths as I tried to push him away. “Mecca!” I cried, squeezing my eyes shut. “Ohmygod,” I slurred as my back arched before I came a third time.

This time, he released me.

I could barely breathe as he made his way inside of me while he said, “I love to watch you cum. I love the taste of you, pleasing you, having your pussy on my tongue.”

Between his declaration and the feel of him stretching my walls, I was about to cum all over again. His strokes were long and medium-paced as he pushed my knees into the bed. My nails clawed into his arms as I watched him fuck me. He was the sexiest man alive to me, and I let him know that. Sweet sentiments slipped from his lips, but the compliment about me having the best pussy he’d ever had was the one that sent me over the edge. Every time I came, he did, and to me... that was power.

mecca

Game nights would be interesting for Shalom and me to say the least. She loved the Eagles, which I could respect. My favorite team was the 49ers. I took her to our first Titans game yesterday and seeing her in that element was a turn-on. Today, we had lunch and got cross-faded at Buds and Brews after spending the morning at the farmers' market. I could admit I didn't come to Nashville often because I didn't think it would be fun, but experiencing it with her gave me a different perspective on the city.

Now that we'd taken a nap and sobered up, we were going to grab dinner before attending a music festival that was being held at our hotel.

"This is nice," Shalom said as we walked hand in hand out of the hotel to my BMW x1.

"What's that?" I asked, checking the time on my phone and ignoring the notifications that were waiting for me.

"This. Us."

"Yeah, I like this new normal. I know you want us to date and take our time, but I'm locked in, and I hope you believe that."

Before I could open the door for her, she stepped in front of it. I loved when she did that—showed me what she wanted

without shame. Pressing her body against the car, I kissed her as she smiled.

“I do believe that, and I want us to have our happily ever after this time. But you’re right, I do want us to take this slow. I mean... you haven’t even told me you love me. And I’m not saying you have to; I just want us to really get to know the adult versions of ourselves.”

Amusement kept me from responding immediately as I stared into her dark, slanted eyes. Licking my lips, I pressed my body into hers. I took hold of her neck and tilted her head to ensure she looked into my eyes.

“Baby, I’ve loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you.” She tried to lower her head, which I expected, so I tightened my grip around her neck. Fluttering eyes stared at me as she moaned and bit down on her bottom lip. “I loved the teenage version of you, and I love the adult version of you too. We’ve changed, but your heart and character are still the same. We have the rest of our lives to shed our skin and change together... over and over again. But the one thing that will always remain the same is my love for you. So, I love you, Shalom. I’m in love with you. I always have been, and I always will be.”

“I’m in love with you too, Mecca. I love who you are, not what you do or what you have, that’s why there has never been a replacement for you. God...” Her eyes watered as she laughed quietly, looking toward the sky. “I hate that we spent so much time thinking a lie, but I’m so happy our paths led us back to one another. I love you so much, love. Thank you for having the courage to try again.”

Cupping her cheeks, I lowered my lips to hers. We stood there, kissing and inhaling each other’s exhales, until the sun went down. Our laughs were in sync as I opened the door for her to get in. It was easy to get lost in Shalom. I could say it was because time had passed and we needed to get used to being with each other again, but I knew in my heart things would always be like this between us. That’s the kind of love we had—one that was calm and peaceful yet exciting and deep

and passionate and intense. I wouldn't change it or her for anything in this world.

Early September

“Sometimes we think a person is our soul mate or forever partner and they are really just a lesson for our character development. A teacher to show us who we are or what we want or don't want out of love. The most important thing is to learn your lessons, so you never have to repeat them,” Shalom said to Symphony.

We were having dinner and Sym randomly blurted that the father of her child broke up with her and was already onto someone new. He still planned to be in the baby's life, he said, but he felt he was too young for a serious relationship.

Sym started crying because he didn't go to the doctor with her today, and she found out she was having a boy. It took everything inside of me not to go find the little nigga and hem him up.

“I thought Derrick was going to be my forever now that I am pregnant with his baby, but obviously I was wrong. I don't know the lesson from this yet, but I plan to learn before I date anyone else again. This sucks.”

Her pout frustrated me even more, and I was glad Shalom was here to be the voice of reason.

“You're still so young, Sym, but you're so smart and wise. You're gonna be okay. And it's truly his loss. Who wouldn't want a beautiful, ambitious young lady with her head on straight? You're such a sweetheart, and I hope you know your worth. Don't let any boy or man make you question it by settling for less than you deserve.”

“I wish my mom was like you.” Sym wiped a few tears that fell.

“She still isn’t talking to you?”

Her head shook. “She said she will talk to me if I get rid of the baby because she refuses to watch me ruin my life.”

“How do you feel about that?” I asked.

“If she doesn’t want to be in my life, I’m not going to make her. This would be easier with her, and I do miss her, but I’m grateful for you two and Daddy and his girlfriend. She’s been really nice and helpful. She texts me to check in every day too. I like her a lot.” Sym looked between me and Shalom. “I actually wanted to talk to you about something, cuz.”

“What’s on your mind?”

She took a sip of her Kool-Aid and cleared her throat before sitting up straighter in her seat. “Well... since Amanda and I get along so well, Daddy and I have been talking, and we think it’s a good idea for me to move there.” My head shook but I continued to hear her out. “I know you don’t care about me being here, and I really appreciate you letting me stay here, but I’m not your responsibility. Amanda works from home, so she’ll be there for me while Daddy is resting or at work. He looked into it, and the high school there will allow me to stay on track to graduate early. In fact, I can take my last class in summer school and not even have to go next year. So it’s best for me if I go there.”

“I can’t argue with that, Sym. It sounds like that’s genuinely the best move for you, so I’m all for it. But I don’t want to hear you say it’s not my responsibility to do anything for you again. We’re family and we do for each other. That’s what families do.”

She stood with a smile and gave me a hug before thanking us both and retiring to her room.

“You look sad,” Shalom noticed, taking my hand into hers under the table. “You don’t want her to go... do you?”

“I want what’s best for her and it sounds like that’s living with them. But... I can also admit it’s been nice having her around. Like I said, Sym was like my child, so I’ve gotten a lot of practice over the years with her.”

Shalom smiled and gave me a nod. “She told me that. She said having you was like having a big brother and second dad all in one. She really does love and appreciate you, Mec. And she told me you even offered to adopt the baby if she needed you to.”

“Yeah. I know that’s something you and I will have to discuss now that we’re back together.”

“Back together?” she repeated, leaning forward and giving me a quick peck.

“Yeah. You can say we’re dating if you want, but you’re my woman and I’m your man. And if I find out you giving that pussy to someone else, just know I know how to get away with murder.”

Her eyes rolled playfully as she giggled and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“I only want you, love. I promise.”

“Then tell me what I want to hear.”

Brushing her nose against mine, she released a content sigh. “I’m your woman, and you’re my man.”

“Mm,” I moaned, resisting the urge to pick her up and put her on my lap. “Say that shit again.”

“I’m your woman and you’re my man.”

Shalom kissed me deeply, and if there were any reservations about rushing her into this, her kiss solidified this was what she wanted... and more.



Earlier, we went and met with Sheila and three other plaintiffs in the case, who would spread the word to everyone else. We had a date scheduled to meet with the landlord, Finn, and his attorney. Our hope was that our negotiations would end with a mutual agreement that didn't end with going to trial. If that didn't happen, Mecca was prepared to go to trial. I'd given him all of my findings and was confident he would be prepared for anything the defense threw his way.

The biggest issue for the plaintiffs was Finn throwing them out once he learned who all was involved in the lawsuit, but Mecca assured them he couldn't do that. And even if he did, Mecca had already offered to put them up in temporary housing. I didn't think it would come to that, though. It would have been illegal for Finn to put them out because of the lawsuit, and I doubt if he would have wanted to make things worse for himself.

As we headed to Fleming's for dinner, we witnessed a four-car pileup that nearly gave me a heart attack. Mecca had just said the black car would end up in an accident because of how fast they passed us, and sure enough, he hit a car that slammed into another, and a fourth car hit him. It seemed like Mecca sprang into action before I could even process what was going on.

He parked and hopped out while I grabbed my phone to call 911. Four young-looking people hopped out of the black car, running in different directions. Mecca tried to grab the driver, but he yanked away and hopped into the car with me. Another lifted a gun, keeping witnesses from going after him as he ran.

“Hey!” I yelled startling him, but that didn’t stop him from putting the car in drive and trying to get away.

Mecca’s foot pressed the brake, and he wrapped his arm around his neck, yelling for me to put the car in park. I did, and Mecca dragged him out of the car. Once he had him on his chest, the young man said, “Please, big brotha. Let me up. I’m done.”

“Fuck that!” Mecca yelled. “You just tried to steal my car while my lady was inside. You’re lucky I didn’t break your fucking neck.”

I fumbled through my words to the 911 dispatcher while onlookers came and tried to help those who were involved in the accident. Mecca stayed on the teenager until the police arrived. One was in such a rush to get away that he jumped off the overpass. Witnesses said he limped away as if his leg was broken while he held his arm. Mecca told the officers that he would more than likely go to a hospital outside of city limits, and sure enough, by the time we had given our statements and left the scene, there was a report of him at a Mississippi hospital.

Turns out the teenagers, two of whom were seventeen and eighteen, were all runaways who had been stealing and selling cars. They had guns and drugs in the one they crashed, and my heart broke over how lost so many of our youths were.

By the time we left, going to a restaurant was the last thing on my mind. I just wanted to get my man home and in a nice bath before giving him a massage and putting him to bed. As he drove, his expression was calm. I couldn’t stop staring at him. When he couldn’t take it anymore, he looked over at me with a smile.

“Something on your mind?”

“You’re a hero.”

Mecca chuckled with a shake of his head. “Nah.”

“Yes, you are. You saved me, and you kept anyone else from getting hurt.”

“I just wanted to do the right thing.”

“Well, thanks to your quick thinking, two of them were caught and will get the help they need—with or without their families depending on their situations. You acted so quickly, it’s like you didn’t care about the risks or consequences.”

He looked over at me briefly as he considered my words. “Honestly... I didn’t. I was angry because one of those cars had an older man in it and the other had kids. But when I saw those teenagers in the car, I was angry for a different reason. They need structure and better outlets before they do some serious damage, and I pray they get it.”

Leaning across the center console, I placed kisses all over his cheek and neck. Unable to resist, I lowered myself to his lap and sucked his dick until we made it to his home. I ran him a warm bath and massaged his entire body with oil before putting him to bed in my pussy.



The Next Evening

Since we missed our reservation last night, Mecca and I decided to have dinner there tonight. He seemed to have a lot on his mind. As we headed to the restaurant, he told me that he checked on the teenagers from the night before. The one who jumped off the overpass had a broken leg, arm, and cracked ribs. He was so desperate to get away because he had a warrant for grand theft auto. The one Mecca detained was in custody. He had a warrant for the same thing along with illegal possession of a firearm. Both of them were so young and headed down a very dark path.

Videos of the accident began to circulate, and the other two kids were still in the wind. Their parents had come forth and begged the public to give information if they saw them. One of them even reached out to Mecca and thanked him for trying to keep them on the scene. I imagined they preferred their kids, who were sixteen and eighteen, be in custody where they could be found and taken back home than God only knows where in the city.

The teens had been heavy on Mecca's mind, and he wanted to help them in any way that he could. It wasn't lost on either of us how blessed we were to not only have our parents but to have grown up in a healthy two-parent household, even if we weren't speaking to our parents now.

He offered to represent the young boys to make sure they got the help, resources, and structure they needed—not just jail time that would put them in an even worse situation when they were released. That nobility made me love and respect Mecca even more. From our talks, watching him with Sym, and now this, I was confident he would be a great father because he had a great heart. Mecca wasn't perfect, but he was perfect for me, and I am so glad we were back in each other's lives.

Mecca and I sat next to each other instead of across from each other at the round table. My eyes bounced from the dark red wall that was directly across from our table to his face. How we were seated, it felt like no one else was in the restaurant but us. Of course, the chatter from other tables reminded me that we weren't alone, but all I could focus on was him.

As the waiter placed my blueberry lemon drop and Mecca's old fashioned on the table, I thanked him. After the last couple of days we had, I wanted to tell him to keep them coming. Between all the paperwork for the case, then what happened last night, I felt like my spirit still hadn't calmed down fully. Even with my slightly sensitive state, Mecca was still my anchor, keeping me steady.

He was such a planner, he wanted to plan out the rest of our date nights for the month. I thought it was cute how serious he was taking this. Being with a man of intention took

a lot of the guesswork and pressure out of dating. I never had to question if he wanted me, found me attractive, or loved me—because he consistently made those things clear.

“What do you think about going to Disney World? We can do the Epcot around the world drinking thing,” I suggested.

“Yeah, that’ll be cool. I can book us a Sonder and we can make a week out of it after the negotiation. Regardless of how it ends, we’ll either want to get away or celebrate.”

“Oh, you mean now? I was saying, in general.”

He sucked his teeth and relaxed further in his seat. “What reason would we have to wait?”

“Work?” came out more like a question than an answer.

“It’ll be there when we get back. You’re my priority. We can go tomorrow if you want.”

“Oh, so this is why you blocked me.” At the sound of a woman’s voice, I looked up to see who was standing over our table.

My head tilted in confusion as I looked from her to Mecca. After the hard time he gave me about Carter, I refused to believe he had a girlfriend out here that he forgot to mention.

“I blocked you because I told you we couldn’t talk anymore, and you blew my phone up.”

“Yeah, because I deserved an explanation, Mecca.” Her voice raised, and the more upset she got, the calmer he appeared.

“I’m not going to argue with you, Hosanna, especially in public.”

She huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “You owe me an explanation. We were together for a year!”

Mecca chuckled as he sat up in his seat. “We were not in a relationship; we had sex. Please don’t try and make it seem like there was more between us than that.”

Her eyes scanned my frame before she rolled her tongue over her cheek. “Is she the reason you broke up with me?”

“I’m not going to do this with you, Hosanna.” Mecca stood, taking her by the elbow and turning her in the opposite direction. I’m not sure what he whispered into her ear, but her eyes bulged before she grunted and stormed off. When he sat back down, Mecca took a sip of his drink and clenched his jaw. “I apologize for her behavior.”

I remained silent for a while, wanting to see if that was all he would say.

“Were you... in a relationship with her?”

“Not at all. It was strictly sex.”

“Then why did she try and make it seem like there was more to it than that?”

“Because she wanted it to be more.”

For some reason, his calm demeanor irritated me. I was sure he was telling the truth because he had never been a liar, but something about another woman staking her claim on him was pissing me off. Even with the wisdom of that frustration needing to be toward her and not him, I still rolled my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest.

“I know you better not sit up there and get an attitude.” He pushed my arms down and kissed me until the pout left. “She’s nothing to worry about. I blocked her after I questioned you about Carter.”

“You promise?”

“I promise, baby. I’m not doing *anything* to jeopardize us getting to our happily ever after.”

Our lips reconnected, and I felt a sense of peace. Hosanna was determined to sow discord between us, and I didn’t blame her for that. She was bitter and probably upset that nothing more happened between them. I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of thinking she came between us and made me paranoid about my man. All I could do was hope whatever he said to her was enough to make her fall back. As much as I loved Mecca and wanted to be with him, I didn’t want being with him to bring drama into my life.

mecca

This was one Monday that made me dread the weekend ending. We'd gone to Rose Valley Hills to help Sym get set up at Uncle George's home. I was sad to see her go but she promised to come and visit me and Shalom as often as she could. She still wasn't sure if she was going to keep the baby or not. I felt like she would. Once she held her baby in her arms, Sym was going to be dedicated to doing whatever she could to make it work. If she didn't want to keep the baby, Shalom and I talked about it over the weekend and agreed that we would adopt.

The reason I wasn't looking forward to today was because we had the negotiation with the landlord and his attorney. I felt in my spirit that he wouldn't make this easy, and sure enough, we were unable to agree on any terms. We were officially going to trial. I hated that, but this cause was worth it. Amelia had already agreed to be my second chair, and there was no doubt in my mind that we would win. Finn's ego was going to cost him more since we were going to trial, and that gave my clients the bright side of being able to expect more money even if it took more time.

To top off the shitty day I was having, my parents had started blowing me up again. I told them I would reach out when I was ready to talk but they weren't trying to hear that. It was driving me crazy not going to church with them and doing

our Sunday dinners, but I didn't want them to think I was okay with what they did. I'd been going to church with Shalom, and though I enjoyed it, it just didn't feel the same. Sundays were my day for family and family meant everything to me. That was the only reason I was considering going to speak with my parents, but I wanted to talk to Shalom about it first.

In the meantime, I was going to have a guys' night with Promise and a few of my cousins. I could only hope and pray Tony had to work. If he didn't, there would be no guarantee he'd be on his best behavior.

I waited until Shalom and I were at her car to say, "I think I'm gonna go and talk to my parents this evening."

She stared into the distance for a few seconds before giving me one bob of her head. "Okay, love. If you're ready..."

"You aren't?"

She cupped her hands in the center of her and shook her head. "No. I think it's harder for me because of the baby. I know that affected you too, but..."

"You don't have to explain, baby, I get it. You were the one who physically had to go through that." With a nod, she sniffled as she avoided my eyes. "If this will make you uncomfortable, we don't have to talk about it."

"I want to be there for you, even if I'm not ready to talk to my parents."

"I don't even know how this is going to play out, honestly. I do miss them, but I'm still upset with them. A part of me feels like I wish I could get over it because what they did happened so long ago, but seeing as we just found out, it's still really fresh."

"That's where I'm at with it too. I want to forgive them but that's a hell of a lot easier said than done. I'm just... feeling a lot of resentment, you know? I can tell myself we have good lives and made it back to each other, so all's well that ends well, but still. I don't want them to think that was okay."

“I feel the same way. Even if they are remorseful now that some time has passed, I’m not sure that will be enough. I won’t know until I talk to them.”

“Well... I’m proud of you for taking that step. Who knows, maybe what happens will inspire me to do the same.”

She gave me a quick kiss before hopping into her car and telling me to have a good day. Even though she tried to make it seem like she was okay with this, she wasn’t. So if things did start to slowly transition into a sense of normalcy between my parents and me, I wouldn’t put that in Shalom’s face until she was in a better place with her own parents.

One Week Later

I couldn’t take my eyes off Shalom. She’d stopped by the office, bringing coffee and pastries. We hadn’t been spending as much time together since we were no longer working on the lawsuit together. Personally, we still spent our evenings together when we could, but she was working with a new client already, and that took up a lot of her time. I was focusing on clients who were on retainer, seeing to their needs before the trial started. We were in a more realistic place with our relationship, and though we were spending less time together, we felt closer—because it forced us to cherish the time we did have with one another.

She’d invited everyone on the floor to have some of the pastries, so Parker and I moved everything to the conference room. Amelia was talking to me, and I was trying to focus, but I couldn’t stop looking at my woman. She looked good as hell in a form-fitting black dress. The blazer she had on had been tossed over the back of a chair. Her feet were covered in heels, drawing my attention to the ankle bracelets I’d purchased her. I couldn’t wait to get home and have her ankles dangling while I dug deep inside of her...

“Mecca!” Amelia shoved me softly. “Are you listening to me?”

“Yeah, what did you say, Milli?”

Her eyes and neck rolled as she leaned against the table. “I said I want you to take the case for the client I met today. It’s a Black woman who’s concerned her doctor’s ignoring her complaints and requests led to her losing her baby. If there’s something to this, I know she’s not the only one. This has the potential to be another class action lawsuit. If this will trigger you, I’ll take it, but I think this will be a good look for you.”

“All right. Send me everything you have on it so far and I’ll meet with her to see.”

Amelia squealed and gave me a side hug before thanking me and walking away. I headed in Shalom’s direction, stopping at the sound of Amelia calling my name. Violet had made her way inside, so I figured she wanted to tell her about the case. Groaning, I headed their way. Quite frankly, I didn’t give a fuck about anything right now other than having my lady in my arms. After this, Parker and I needed to head to court. He asked me to be his second chair on an insurance fraud case and I agreed. It was going to be time-consuming, and I wanted to steal every chance I could to be with Shalom.

“Hey, so I wanted to clue Violet in to what we were just discussing,” Amelia said as I suspected.

I half-listened as she told Violet what she’d just told me. Violet agreed with the switch and called Shalom over. She asked Shalom if she’d be willing to do research for the case if I took it, and she said yes. I was surprised when Violet said...

“Is there anything I can offer you to bring you in permanently, or are you fully committed to freelancing?”

Shalom looked over at me before answering. “I would need to talk to Mecca first. If he was comfortable with me working here, you could make me an offer, and I would consider it.”

“I would love to have you here full-time, Lom. Absolutely yes,” I answered, not needing to give it a second thought.

“Good,” Violet answered, turning on her heels. “I’ll speak with the other partners and give you a call when we’re ready to make an offer.”

Amelia and Shalom gushed over the idea of working together for a few seconds before I was finally left alone with my heart. I wasted no time taking her by the hand and leading her back to my office. Once I had the door closed, I pressed her against it and devoured her lips. She moaned into my mouth, cupping the back of my head.

“Damn, I miss you,” I admitted before kissing her again.

“I miss you too. I didn’t realize how much until I laid eyes on you.”

I pulled her into a hug, which led to me picking her up and carrying her over to my desk. I sat down, keeping her in my lap. We were taking things slow, but I really wanted to discuss her moving in with me. That way, whether we worked together or not, at least we’d be able to start and end our days together.

“This shit ain’t working, baby,” I blurted. “I need to go to sleep and wake up next to you. We need some kind of schedule of where we’re going to sleep... my place or yours.”

She chuckled. “You know you don’t like being in my apartment. It’s a closet compared to your home.”

“It’s smaller but it’s cozy. It feels more like home.”

“Your home would feel more like home if you decorated.”

“I told you, I’m waiting on you to do that.”

Her head tilted as she smiled before giving me another lingering kiss. “That is my responsibility as your future wife, huh?”

“It is, so you need to get on that.”

“I will. I’ll start researching designers on my next day off. Speaking of which, did you mean what you said earlier about me working here? I don’t want to impose or crowd your space.”

“I never say anything I don’t mean. I want you here, in my home, on my dick... all that.”

“Mm... I can handle that last thing right now,” she said, straddling me.

Unfortunately, being in her walls would have to wait. Parker knocked, letting me know he was ready to go over the case. As much as I didn’t want to, I gave her several kisses and smacked her ass before sending her away.

Evening couldn’t come quick enough...



shalom

I wanted to do something sweet for Mecca. Not only had he been seeing to literally every one of my desires and needs, but he'd been working like crazy. Plus, things didn't go so well with his parents, and I could tell he missed them. When he tried to talk to them, his anger consumed him, so the conversation didn't go far. Their pride and his temper were not a good combination, so out of respect, he decided to wait before trying to talk to them again. I hadn't talked to my parents in person, but I was still in our family group chat. Once I knew everyone was okay, I turned off the notifications for the day.

I asked Mecca to text me and let me know when he was on his way home. Like I said I would, I'd been looking into interior designers to make his house feel homier. Even with the few ideas I had in mind, I wanted help from an expert to truly do his home justice. He offered me a room to do whatever I'd like with plus space for an office, and I was excited to dedicate space to myself.

My apartment was cozy like he'd said, but I could put five or six of them in his home. I hadn't touched the money I got from working with him and had no idea what I'd do with it. Mecca was giving me money to pay my bills though I told him that wasn't necessary. It was important to him that he show me

what was in store when I became his wife, and I appreciated him for that.

As I put the finishing touches on what I'd done, I beamed with pride. Mecca's love offering to his grandmother, his garden, was beautiful. It was starting to get to a temperature where he wouldn't be able to plant and harvest her favorite flowers. I decided to get him a year-round greenhouse. Inside, I had several seeds and holders to get him started. On the floor, I made a pallet full of thick blankets and topped it with everything we'd need for a picnic.

At the sound of the garage letting up, I headed back inside to greet my man. My smile spread immediately at the sight of him, and even though he looked tired, he smiled at me as well.

"Baby," he called, closing the space between us.

"Hi," I spoke against his lips before he kissed me so deeply, I almost forgot about the surprise outside.

His hands squeezed my ass as he held me close, and I swear I could stay like this forever.

"How was your day?" I checked, keeping my arms around his neck.

"It was okay. I got a call that the third teen was caught. He hopped in a car while an older lady was putting mail in the mailbox."

"Oh no. At least they caught him."

"Yeah, because he crashed." Mecca's hand slid down his face as he sighed. "I don't know what I'm going to do to help these kids, but I have to do something."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out, and if anything comes to mind, I'll share. Just taking on their cases and talking to them will do wonders, I'm sure."

"You're right about that. Kids, like men, soften when they are listened to. I just hope I'm not wasting my time trying to get through to them."

"Even if you help only one out of the four, it won't be time wasted. You have a heart for kids and it's going to work in

your favor with them. I'm really proud of you, love."

My declaration led to more kisses and touching, and I got so deep I almost forgot about the surprise.

"Oh!" Wiping my mouth, I tugged him toward the back patio. "I have a surprise for you. Do you want to change before you see it?"

He looked down at his black-on-black suit and shirt. "If it's outside, yes."

"Okay. I'll need to cover your eyes, so you won't see it through the windows as you walk then."

"Bae..."

Not taking no for an answer, I took a dish towel and covered his eyes with it, then led him to his bedroom. After changing quickly into sweats and a form-fitting t-shirt, he allowed me to lead him outside. I waited until we were standing directly in front of the greenhouse to remove the towel.

His mouth dropped and eyes watered as he stared at the greenhouse. Mecca released the cutest, quietest laugh of delight as he looked down at me.

"This for me?"

"Mhm. Go inside."

He took careful steps toward the greenhouse, laughing more when he saw the picnic setup.

"Baby," he whispered. "This is thoughtful and beautiful. Thank you so much."

His arms wrapped around me, and for a few seconds, he physically showed me his gratitude. We sat down to eat while we talked about our days. I had Port for me and Merlot for him. Once we finished the sandwiches and chips, we nibbled on the fruit and vegetable tray for a while longer before the sun started to set.

"We should probably head inside," I suggested, though I didn't want our impromptu date to be over. Between him

going to trial with Parker and the research I was doing for a scientist, our quality time had been suffering lately. Me staying over helped. We were able to work out and have breakfast together before starting our days. In the evening, we had a late dinner and tried to watch a movie or something in bed before one of us fell asleep, but that often didn't work. Unless we went to his theater, we would hardly make it through half the movie.

“Yeah, I need to go over my notes from court today.”

I giggled as he pulled me onto his lap. “This is the opposite of going inside, sir.”

“We will... in a moment.”

I had no complaints, especially when we started to kiss, and he held me close. When we couldn't take it anymore, he had me to stand and undress. I watched as he laid back, and my pussy throbbed when he told me to sit on his face.

I did.

I rocked against him slowly, watching as he licked and sucked my pussy. His hands were around my waist, holding me down as his tongue fucked my pussy. Back arching, I trembled as I rode the wave of unbridled ecstasy.

I made my way down his body, pushing his pants down and pulling my favorite friend out of his boxers. Though he allowed me to ride, Mecca quickly showed me who was in control. He tilted me slightly, making sure his curved head hit my spot with every slow, long stroke.

Ten bounces in, and I was cumming already. I began to palm his shaft while riding, causing him to jerk underneath me as he came. He sat up and stood, pressing me against the wall. My eyes rolled into the back of my head as I held him close. The coolness of the wall, combined with the heat of our connected bodies was a feeling I'd never experienced before. Each time he moaned into my ear I held him tighter.

“You always feel so good,” I moaned, toes curling as the familiar heat puddled at my core. My spine tingled, and the sound of my wetness filled the room. That crackling smack

announced the gush of squirting liquid that flowed out of me and onto him and the floor.

He held me steady as his dick throbbed inside of me, tongue-kissing me in that nasty, slow way that I loved. If this was how I was thanked for doing sweet things for him, I'd have to do it more often.

Finn, the landlord, decided to settle. His reputation was on the line, and his friends, colleagues, and family distanced themselves from him because he was being called a slumlord all over news outlets and social media. In just one week, he was already losing club memberships and some of his power, influence, and status in the city. Finn agreed to our terms—demolition of the current building, sixty-day temporary housing for all tenants, covering all hospital fees for sicknesses derived from the building, and one to three million per tenant on the lease. With the legal fees attached to the case, Mecca was going to be one point five million dollars richer.

I wasn't surprised Finn decided to settle, but I am glad he didn't wait too long. That kind of reputation wasn't good for a pastor claiming to provide housing under the guidance of God. More than anything, I believe Finn didn't want talks of the brothel on the top floor and drug dealing on the bottom to get out. We had pictures as proof that he was not only aware but receiving a cut as well. I was just glad the tenants would soon be in a healthier environment and have the money to take care of the expenses associated with Finn's neglect.

“We can go anywhere you want to go,” Mecca said with a grin.

We'd gone to have drinks to celebrate, which turned into Promise buying out the bar. Mecca had gotten quite tipsy, and I was happy to be his designated driver because he deserved to celebrate. On the way home, I stopped by my favorite ice cream place to get him a greasy burger that would sober him

up along with cheese fries. Now that we were back home, he was a bit more sober.

Tonight was the first time I'd seen his brother and cousins in years, and they treated me as if no time had passed, which I appreciated. Of course, I called my girls to join us, but only Carina could get away. Amelia was there, and she and I were getting closer, which I liked.

"Hmm... What about Aruba?" I asked as we headed toward the garage door.

"Cool. We can leave tomorrow."

I chuckled as he opened the door. "What about court, love?"

"Shit. I forgot about that. Well, as soon as this case is over, we can go."

"Sounds good."

"I still want us to do something this weekend. How about we find the first flight out somewhere and stay there until Sunday evening?"

"Ooh, that sounds fun! I love the sound of that, bae."

His arms wrapped around me as we stepped into the kitchen. I felt his hard dick pressed against me, and I wanted nothing more than to drain him of his cum. Sober Mecca could make love to my body and make me cum in seconds; tipsy or drunk Mecca would stretch that shit out for *hours*. He'd have me so weak and dizzy yet satisfied by the time it was over I could hardly move.

The sound of his doorbell ringing caught us both by surprise.

"Are you expecting someone?" I asked as he released me.

"Not at all."

His frame straightened as he headed toward the door. I wanted to give him space in case it was something personal, so I decided to head to the bedroom and shower.

“Hosanna?” he called, surprise dripping from his voice. “What the hell are you doing here?”

I hung back, leaning against the wall to hear what this woman had to say.

“I don’t know how to say this without just saying it... I’m pregnant, Mecca.”

My heart stopped beating at the sound of her words. Covering my ears, I laughed quietly as my head shook. I pulled in deep breaths before swaying softly in anticipation of his words.

“What? How? I strapped up every time.”

“I’m not sure, but I am pregnant.”

“And you’re sure it’s my baby?”

She sucked her teeth. “Of course, Mecca. Whose else would it be?”

“Well, we were not in a relationship, so I’m not sure who else you were sleeping with.”

“You might not have wanted to be with me, but I wanted to be with you. So no, I was not sleeping with anyone else, Mecca.”

At the sound of that, I decided to give them space so they could talk. I rounded the corner, gently tapping him on the back. He looked back at me with remorseful eyes and a defeated spirit.

“I’m gonna go so you two can talk, love.”

“Yeah, do that,” was what Hosanna said.

“No, I want you to stay,” was Mecca’s reply.

“Mecca, I...”

He grabbed my hand but turned to Hosanna. “I’ll need a DNA test to confirm this is my child as soon as it’s possible.”

“Fine.” Hosanna shrugged.

“You can go. I’ll be in touch.”

She looked at me, then back at him. “You’re not going to invite me in so we can talk?”

“No. I’m about to spend the evening with my woman. I’ll call you in the morning to discuss setting up an appointment for the DNA test.”

Scoffing, Hosanna crossed her arms over her chest and rested the bulk of her weight on her left side. “Let me get this straight... I just told you I’m pregnant with your baby, and you’re *still* going to spend the evening with her?”

“Yeah, what else would I do, Hosanna?”

“Be with me!” she shrieked, flailing her arms.

The low, menacing laugh Mecca released told me all I needed to know. “You having my baby doesn’t change the fact that I don’t want to be with you. If that’s what you came over here thinking, let’s rectify that right now.”

“But, Mecca, I...”

“If you are pregnant, and this baby is in fact mine, I will be there for you while you are pregnant and there for my child once they are born. In no scenario or circumstance will this baby lead to us being together.” He used my hand to pull me closer to his side. “Now will you please leave? I’ll call you in the morning.”

Her brows wrinkled and nostrils flared as she frowned. With a huff, she turned and stormed away. Mecca closed the door behind her, and we stood there for a while, avoiding each other’s eyes.

Mentally, I was able to tell myself his time with Hosanna happened before me.

Emotionally, I was hurt. I wanted to still be the first woman to give him the children he desired.

“I think we should probably take a break until you get this sorted out,” I told him.

He chuckled, crossing his arms over his chest as he stepped directly in front of me, but I couldn’t face him.

“What?”

“I-I can’t watch you start a family with her, Mecca.”

“We don’t even know if she’s pregnant and the baby is mine, and you’re already about to run?”

“I don’t want to say or do something in the waiting hour that damages the progress we’ve made. I’m telling you right now that I don’t like her and feel like she’s going to try and start drama between us.”

“She can try all she wants but she won’t succeed. I know how to handle Hosanna.”

“Obviously,” I grumbled, trying to move away from him, but he gently pushed me into the wall and kept me from walking away.

“That wasn’t fair, baby.”

Sighing, I covered my face as my eyes watered. He lowered my hands and cupped my cheek, forcing me to look into his eyes.

“I just... think we need space so we both can process this. I think we need a break, bae.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Yes. No.”

“Mecca, I’m not asking you a multiple-choice question.”

“And you’re not breaking up with me either.”

“I didn’t say we should break up. I said we need a break.”

“It’s the same fucking thing, and you know it.”

I didn’t want our tempers to rise further, so I paused and squeezed away from him and the wall

“We need to take a break, Mecca. Until you know if this baby is yours or not.”

“What’s the point of a break? If you don’t want to be with me if the baby is mine, a break is just prolonging the

inevitable.”

“Well... when you put it that way...”

“You’re not going to break up with me, Shalom. Now I understand needing space to process this, but that’s all you’re getting—space to process this. Go home, and I’ll call you in a couple of days.”

Done with the conversation, Mecca walked away. I dragged my feet to the garage. They didn’t want to leave as much as my heart didn’t, but I had to do what I felt was best. If Hosanna was pregnant with his baby, she was going to be on some bullshit, and I wasn’t one for the drama. It hurt to think we’d come back into each other’s lives just for things to end this quickly, this way, but this was beyond my control. I wouldn’t allow Hosanna to drive a wedge between us with this baby, nor would I put Mecca in a position to feel as if he had to choose. It was no secret he wanted a baby, a family, and I refused to ruin this for him.

My Man: She is pregnant.

I’d been staring at Mecca’s text on and off all morning, not sure how I wanted to respond. He’d stopped by her home before court this morning and she took a pregnancy test that was positive. I wasn’t surprised. Usually, things happened in this way—finding the perfect man and having to choose what you were willing to accept to be with him. I wasn’t sure if I was willing to accept a baby by another woman, even if the baby came before me.

I think I was most upset over the fact that I was pregnant with Mecca’s baby and the pregnancy wasn’t full term. All night I thought about how different things would have been if I didn’t get that abortion. We probably would have suffered a lot and broken up, forced to co-parent for the rest of our days. Or maybe, we would have strengthened our bond and been married with three more children by now. Every time I thought about how our future was taken from us, I got upset with our

parents. We were finally at a place where it seemed like we were in control of our destiny, and here came Hosanna with her baby.

“Ugh.”

Gripping my phone, I forced myself to text Mecca congratulations before tossing it onto my desk. I wanted to call Heaven, but she was at work. Carina was too. I took a chance and called Stephanie, knowing there was a chance she wouldn't answer. To my surprise, she did.

“Hey, friend,” was her greeting.

“Hey, friend. You busy?”

“Nah. I was doing a little computer work for one of my virtual clients, but I can take a pause. Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to spill my guts, but none of the words came out. Had I reacted too hastily? Was I silly for giving him up so easily? Now I was confused.

“Yes, I'm fine. I just... wanted to check on you and my nephew. I feel like I haven't seen the two of you in forever.”

“I know, right? Being a single mom sucks at times but I wouldn't trade my son in for anything in the world. We should do something when he goes on fall break since he'll be with my parents. Maybe we can take a girls' trip.”

“That sounds good, Stephanie. I'll um... I'll talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay. Are you sure you're okay?”

Nodding as if she could see me, I muttered, “Yes, I'm okay.”

“Okay. You're lying. Call me when you're ready to talk about what's really on your mind.”

We both laughed but I agreed before disconnecting the call. I loved that about Stephanie. It didn't matter if we talked once a month or once a week, we knew each other, and our bond was genuine.

I stood and decided to go for a swim to try and clear my mind, and that only made me question myself more. After I got Mecca the greenhouse, he mentioned being glad I had them put it off to the side because he'd already started getting estimates for having a pool placed underground for me. He was always so intentional with me. I felt like a fool to let him go. But I had to be honest with myself and admit I wasn't sure I could watch him be a father to a child that wasn't mine... knowing what we'd lost and what we wanted to gain.

Sym's baby would have been different. We would have been adopting him or her together.

This was a baby with a woman who would very much be present in their life, sharing a bond with Mecca that would never include me the way I would need to be included to feel comfortable. I hadn't really given him a chance to work out how to make this work for us. Maybe I needed to. In the meantime, I'd keep my distance, because I meant it when I said I didn't want to say or do anything to ruin the progress we'd been making.

mecca

Late September

I'd been burying myself in work to avoid thinking about the fucked-up situation I was in. It was just my luck that, after finally getting back the woman of my dreams, the woman I wanted nothing to do with fucked up my reality. Hosanna was a lesson, a reminder, of why it was so important not to deal with people you didn't truly like and see a future with. Carter may have given Shalom a hard time about her boundaries, but she had the right idea. If I had been the same way with Hosanna, I wouldn't have carried on with her for the last year and gotten her pregnant.

As much as we had sex, even with a condom, there was a chance she was pregnant with my baby. I could also believe she wasn't sleeping with anyone else. I didn't know what the fuck I was going to do if she was really pregnant with my baby. This was supposed to be Shalom—not Hosanna.

Hosanna's appointment was this morning. We were going to confirm how far along she was so we could see about getting the DNA test done. I'd done a little research and learned we could get it done once she was at least eight weeks. Since I had no idea when we conceived this child, I didn't know how soon we'd be able to get those results. I needed the

results to make this real. When it was, I'd be able to start making plans.

In the meantime, I wanted Shalom to understand we weren't breaking up because of this. No matter how selfish it was of me, I wasn't going to let her go. I'd been thinking about it, and I could understand how frustrating it was for her to think about me having a baby with someone else while our reunion was so new, but I didn't want the woman attached to the baby, and that's what she wasn't seeming to understand. All I could do was pray I could continue to treat her in a way that proved to her she was the only woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with—whether she had my baby or not.

Since I wanted to go to the doctor with Hosanna, I let Parker know I wouldn't be in court with him today. We were wrapping up the case anyway. He had two more witnesses to call before we rested and started up with closing arguments, and he really didn't need me for that.

I drove mindlessly, arriving at Shalom's apartment. It seemed like fate because that genuinely wasn't the place I planned to be. I wanted to go home, but I guess I *was* home. Shalom was my home. Getting out of the car, I took a deep breath and prayed we could have this conversation in peace, though I wasn't sure what I would even say to her.

When she answered, I couldn't help but smile. It felt like forever had passed since I'd seen her. Her hair was pulled up into a messy ponytail, and her reading glasses looked so cute on her beautiful, honey-brown face. She was dressed in one of my shirts and a pair of tube socks, smelling like pure soap as always.

“Mecca... hi.”

“Can I come in?”

“Um yeah, sure.”

After she closed the door, I told her, “I need you to get dressed.”

Confusion covered her pretty face. “For what?”

“Hosanna’s first appointment is today, and I want you there with me.”

She smiled as her eyes watered and head shook. “Bae...”

“As much as I wanted to have all my babies with you, if that won’t be the case, it doesn’t change the fact that I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you.” I took her hands into mine. “I want to do this with my person. My Shalom. My peace. I’m not going to let this rob you of yours, but you are mine. We are going to be together, and you will be just as much a part of this as I am. So I need you to get dressed so you can come to this appointment with me.”

“Okay,” she agreed softly before burying her face in my chest. “Thank you for not giving up on me.”

“I will never give up on you, Lom. I love you.”

“And I love you.”

She rested her chin on my chest and looked up at me with those eyes that made time stop. As much as I wanted to get lost in them, we had to go so we wouldn’t be late.

Hosanna’s demeanor changed the moment she saw Shalom with me. Her eyes rolled as she stood and walked over to us. We hadn’t even made it into the waiting room good and she was about to be on some good shit. It amused me a little, but I kept my expression blank. I felt like she really thought this baby would lead to us being in a relationship, but she was in for a disappointing surprise.

“What is she doing here, Mecca?”

“She’s my woman and I wanted her to be here with me.”

“But this is our baby.”

“You’re right, but she’s my wife, so she will be in our baby’s life as well. It’s best if you accept that now so the two of you can get along.”

Shalom looked up at me with wide, expressive eyes. We'd been talking about marriage, but this was the first time I'd actually called her my wife. I looked down at her as she smiled up at me. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do to keep that smile on her face. I was truly a man whose relational validation hinged upon the acceptance and approval of his woman, and I was okay with that. Being her man made me feel like a man, and having a child with Hosanna would not change that.

"Love," she whispered, lowering me down to her for a kiss.

"Okay, no. You know what? You're not even worth all this." At the sound of Hosanna's words, I pulled away from Shalom. "I'm not pregnant." Sucking her teeth, she put her hands on her waist. "My cousin works here, and she was going to falsify the results of the pregnancy and DNA tests for me. I was hoping we would get together, have unprotected sex, and I'd get pregnant for real. But it's clear you're nose deep in this bitch's pussy and..."

Shalom's fist connected with her nose, causing Hosanna to fly back.

"Oh shit!" I whisper-yelled, trying to grab Shalom, but she was slippery, kicking Hosanna in her chest and causing her body to fly across the room before I had her lifted into the air. "Shalom!"

As I speed-walked out of the clinic holding her, I didn't know if I wanted to be aroused, amused, or aggravated.

"The fuck was that?"

"She had you *and* me fucked up and I don't tolerate disrespect."

Her calm expression and tone made me laugh.

"I can't with you, man. I don't want you fighting anyone, do you hear me?"

She sucked her teeth just as Hosanna had done and crossed her arms over her chest. "She had it coming."

“I don’t care. I want you soft with me always. No fighting.” Shalom rolled her eyes as I put her on her feet by my car. “Do you hear me?”

“I hear you,” she grumbled.

“Good. Now thank you for having my back, just like I will always have yours.” I gave her a quick, sloppy kiss before adding, “I love you, and I’m glad you decided to stick by me with this.”

“Yeah, well, she’d better be the only woman who can try and pin a baby on you for the rest of our damn lives.”

“She’s the last and only I swear.” I wrapped my arms around her. “You’re going to be my only wife and the only mother of my children. Fate brought us back together, and I meant it when I said nothing would stand in the way of our happily ever after this time.”

After getting her into the car, I took my time walking over to my side. I hadn’t even processed what Hosanna admitted to before Shalom rocked her. A part of me wanted to be frustrated that she planned to pin a baby on me, but I was glad she came to her senses. I couldn’t even be disappointed about not being a father because no part of me wanted that child to come from Hosanna. Shalom was a different story, though. I was enjoying us reconnecting, but I couldn’t wait to start my family with her. In God’s timing. I wanted everything between us to be done right.



shalom

As excited as I was about meeting with Violet to discuss the offer she and the other partners had come up with for me, I couldn't help but think about what happened yesterday. It was Sunday, and after Mecca and I left church, we went out for brunch before going back to my place. We were completely surprised by our parents bombarding us just like we'd done them. I invited them inside, and they all admitted to seeing the error of their ways. Time away from us had humbled them and gotten them to accept the fact that, even with the best intentions, what they did was wrong. They apologized and promised to give us continued space, but also made it clear they wouldn't let us be away from them for long.

I appreciated the gesture and had been thinking about them a lot. A part of me wanted to host some kind of dinner for our parents and siblings at Mecca's home. It was clear we were going to be together forever this time around, and we'd need to not only get along with our own parents but each other's as well. My struggle was making that move too soon. On the other hand, after fifteen years without Mecca, I didn't want to make the mistake of wasting more time—especially with my father's health being as it is.

“Hey,” Mecca called softly, gaining my attention. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just thinking about last night.”

“Me too. What are you thinking?”

“I’m not sure, love. I want to reconcile, especially since they’ve finally humbled themselves and admitted they were wrong, but I’m still hurt by what they did.”

“I am too, but at least we found our way back to each other. I would be at peace slowly making our way back into their lives if you would be too. It doesn’t have to be quick or even all at once. Maybe just Sunday dinners for now and that’s it. That way, we’ll be able to stay updated on what’s going on with them, and they’ll know what’s going on with us, but we’ll still have space.”

“I think that’ll work. We can talk about it more when we get home.”

“Home, huh?” He grinned as he wrapped his arms around me and pressed me into the elevator. “I love the sound of that. What’s it going to take for you to move in with me?”

“A ring on my finger.”

“I already got it. I’m just waiting for the right time. If you’re telling me you’ll say yes, I’ll make the right time happen.”

My hand ran down his cheek as he brushed his nose against mine. “Of course, I’ll say yes.”

“Good to know.”

He gave me a slow, tender kiss until the elevator dinged. We said goodbyes and he wished me luck as he got off on his floor. I was going to the conference rooms on the fifth floor. Even though I knew regardless of what the partners offered, I’d be straight, I was still nervous. I’d been freelancing for the last decade and it was exciting thinking about working with a company permanently. Not just because of the insurance and benefits I missed out on being self-employed, but also because of the community. I adored Amelia and Parker, Violet was cool, and then there was my man. He made *all* things better.

I made my way into the conference room where Violet was seated. She looked stylish, as always, in a violet-colored dress that clung to her curves. Her hair was pulled back into a low, sleek bun. Her attention shifted from her iPad to me. With a smile, she stood. We shook hands as she greeted me, then we sat down and immediately got down to business.

“My partners and I were able to come up with what I think will be a good offer for you. I’ve made Amelia aware of this meeting in case you’d like to have her look over it.”

“Okay, sounds good,” I agreed as she slid the folder over to me.

Opening it, I listened as she told me in condensed terms what was written.

“So, we’re offering half a million per year, plus bonuses for cases you consult on and win. The bonus will be the same amount of billable hours earned per client or case. There’s a 15 percent raise yearly for ten years as long as you agree to head and train our research department along with recruiting three additional researchers. After the ten-year mark, if you’re still here and want to continue, we can work up a new offer.”

I had to contain myself. This offer was a hell of a lot better than I expected. Though I didn’t think it could get any better, I did excuse myself to go to Amelia’s office so she could look it over. She agreed with me and approved of me accepting the terms.

So, I did.

Violet congratulated me and let me know she’d email me a signed copy for my records. She also set up a meeting for me and the other partners before my official start date. I wanted to honor my obligations to current clients, so I’d probably be starting in one to three months. Between Mecca, Parker, and Amelia, I had an idea already of how the partners would act and be.

I couldn’t wait to go to Mecca’s office to tell him I signed the offer, and he congratulated me and told me we would have to celebrate this evening. As I left the office, I was so happy

with the direction my life had taken. I genuinely didn't think anything could make life better than this.

Mecca was a trickster. I thought he and I would be celebrating alone this evening, but he'd gotten all of my friends together, including Stephanie and Draya, to celebrate me. My parents and sister were there too, along with Mecca's people and friends.

We danced, ate, and drank the night away until a little after midnight. Before everyone started to trickle out of the restaurant he'd reserved for the evening, Mecca said he wanted to make a toast. He took me by the hand and led me to the center of our family and friends, who had circled around us.

"What can I do to make you halfway as happy as you've made me?" I asked as one of the waitresses for the evening filled our champagne flutes.

"Have my baby and be my wife."

"I'll stop taking my birth control pills now. The other part is up to you."

Mecca gave me a warm smile and licked his lips before lifting his glass for the toast.

"Thank you all for coming out to help me celebrate my baby. This moment has been a long time coming, and I'm honored not just to work with her but to be her life partner for the rest of our lives." He directed his attention to me. "In order for me to do that, I think it's time we make this official."

He dropped my hand and went into his pocket. When he pulled out the pear-shaped ring I selected, I had to tighten my grip on my champagne flute to keep from dropping it. Though I knew this moment was coming, I wasn't expecting it to happen so fast. Still, there was literally nothing I wanted more in my life than to enter this next phase with Mecca.

After chugging his champagne, he handed the glass to Promise and knelt before me.

“You are my past, my now, and my forever. Time couldn’t keep us apart, and now, I want us to spend all that we have left together. I love you more than anything else in this world, Shalom Daniels. Will you give me the esteemed honor of being my wife?”

My eyes blurred before tears released. All I could do was nod rapidly as my heart raced and my body warmed.

“We can’t hear you!” Tony yelled, making us all laugh.

“Yes!” I yelled, tugging Mecca up. “Yes, love, yes!”

Mecca laughed as he picked me up and kissed me deeply. I felt someone taking the champagne from my hand and was grateful for the assist so I could hold my man fully. We pulled away long enough for him to slide the ring onto my finger before we embraced again. My tears continued to pour as I released a giddy giggle. If I had known my time working the apartment case would have led to this, fear would have kept me from agreeing. I was sure Mecca had played me in the worst way and gave me life lessons that I’d take to my grave. Having my confidence restored in him led to the happiest moment of my life. And even though I never wanted to give an ex a chance, I was more than happy to make him my exception...

EPILOGUE



One Month Later

Our time in Aruba had been magical. We ate well and had an amazing time exploring and being on the beach. We spent a week there after the trial wrapped up, and by the way we slept when we first arrived, we needed the vacation and the rest.

When we made it back to Memphis, Sym came to visit us. Her stomach seemed to have ballooned overnight. I couldn't wait to meet my little cousin. Sym and her baby daddy were still apart, but he'd been present, going to appointments and buying things here and there. I hoped he honored his role as a father, but even if he didn't, they would be good. Sym was adjusting well to being in Rose Valley Hills. She'd even made

a few friends. I was truly happy for her, and glad Uncle George was giving her the support she needed.

Since the appointment that went awry, I hadn't heard from Hosanna. Well, she was still blocked, but she hadn't popped up. After the two-piece combo Shalom gave her, I didn't expect her to show her face.

Today was Shalom's first day at the office, and it was also her birthday. Now that we both were off, I planned to take her out to celebrate. She didn't want anything big or fancy, which I appreciated. She specifically asked for a nice dinner with just the two of us since Promise and my dad wanted to barbecue for her this weekend. I would give her the simple dinner since I had several gifts for her waiting in one of the guest bedrooms.

While I waited for her to finish getting dressed, I looked over the locations the wedding planner had sent us. We didn't plan to get married until next Spring, but for the options she selected, we'd need to book the venue several months in advance. Shalom had sent me her top three and she wanted me to make the final decision. I didn't care where we got married; I just wanted her to be my wife.

“Um... love?”

At the sound of Shalom's voice, I turned to find her completely naked. Her hair was in a bone-straight sew-in and the makeup she had on accentuated her natural beauty.

“Damn, Lom. You are absolutely stunning.”

“Thank you,” she replied, blushing. “I think my birthday might give us both a gift.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, trying to keep my eyes on her face and not her body as she walked in my direction.

“I'm ovulating.”

“You're ovu—oh. Wow. Okay. So we should make love before we go.”

The giggle she released sounded like music to my ears as I took her into my arms. “Yes, I think so. If a baby is still what

you want.”

“There’s nothing I want more. Come here...”

Lifting her into my arms, I carried her over to our bed.

I took great pleasure in pleasing a woman.

Satisfying a woman, putting a smile on her face, had the ability to make my dick painfully hard.

When a woman gave her body to me, I never took that honor lightly.

Every time one was in my bed, I vowed to make her ascend to new heights.

Shalom was different.

I didn’t just want to please her sexually; I wanted to please her in every way possible. I truly believe God made us for each other. We were chosen to give each other His love and a taste of heaven on earth. Maybe we got too early of a start while we were in high school and awakened love before its time, but this... this was our time. This was our love. And soon, we would have our child.

THE END

Maybe you’ll get a wedding novella for these two. Maybe not.

Either way, I hope you enjoyed their return to love.

Amelia is up next.

There will not be a follow up for Mecca and Shalom in her book. It is a true spinoff standalone.

To be notified of Amelia’s book, make sure you are following me on social media or signed up for my mailing list. Those links will be on the next page.

Until love returns,

Love, B.

LET'S CONNECT!

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*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

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The Streets Will Never Love Me Like You Do

A Memphis Gangsta's Pain

In the Heart of Memphis

Rose Valley Hills

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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

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Promise to Keep it Trill

Her Heart, His Hood Armor

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Urban Series

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Loved by a Memphis Hoodlum 3

It Was Always You 2

The Bad Boy I Love 2

No Love in His Heart 3

My Savage and His Side Chick 2

So Deep In Love

Faded Mirrors

Holiday Novella Set Box

Bloody Fairy #1

A Thug in Need of Love

Holly's Jolly Christmas

Beginning Career Titles

(Series are separated. Characters are overlapped. These titles do not have to be read together, but if you'd prefer to know what stories everyone is from, you can

*read them in this order. **Power and Elle and Rule and Camryn can be read alone without reading anything else.**)*

Kailani and Bishop: A Case of the Exes 1-3

Alayziah: When Loving him is Complicated 1-2

Teach Me how to Love Again 1-2

—

Power and Elle: A Memphis Love Story

Rule and Camryn 1-4: A Memphis Love Story

Femi (Spinoff for Rule and Camryn)

—

Young Love in Memphis 1-3

But You Deserve Better