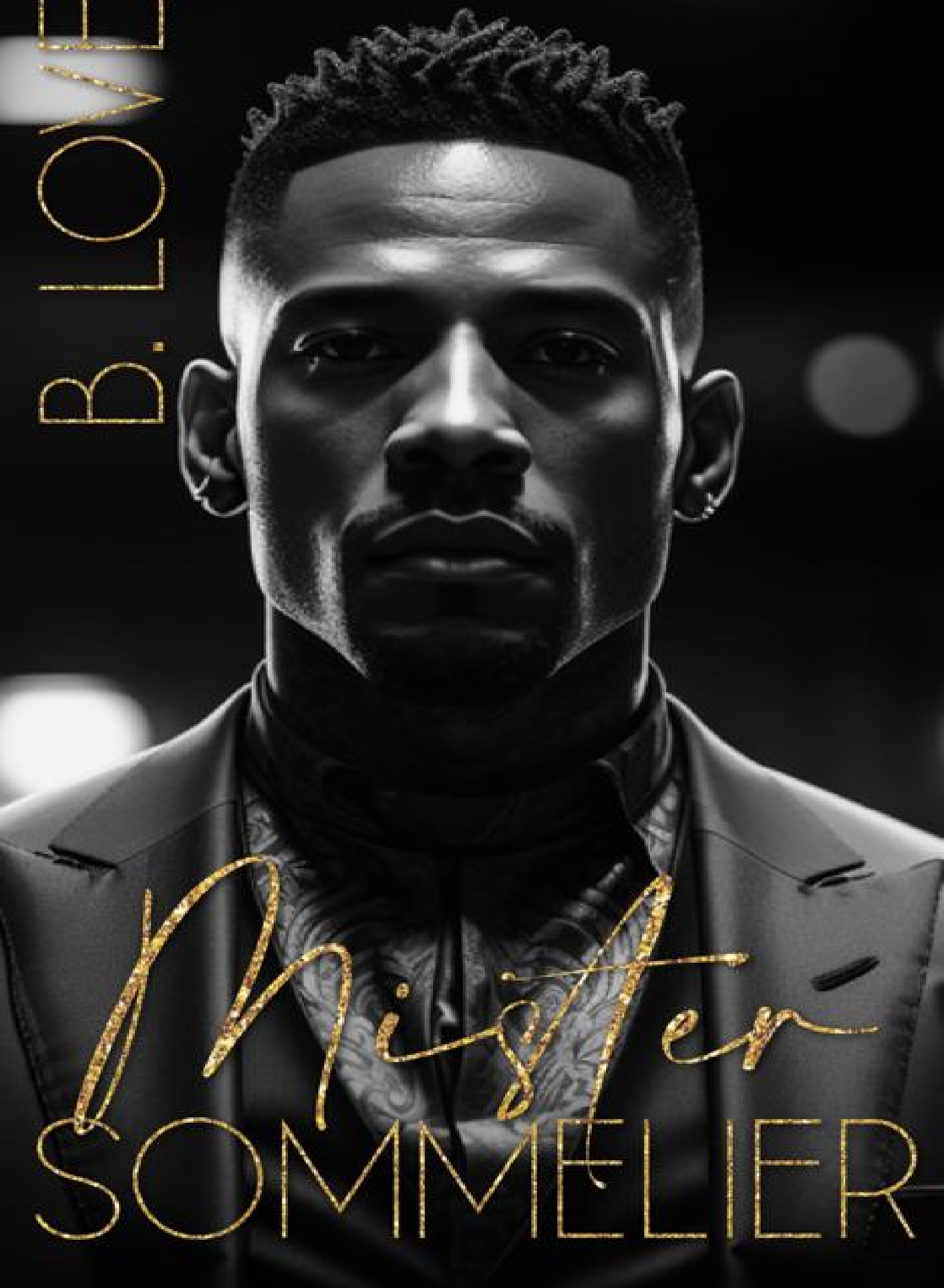


BLOW
UP



Blow Up
SOMMELIER

Mister Sommelier

B. Love

[Prolific Pen Pusher](#)

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Preface

Please note: Antonne is one of two Misters still in the streets. Because of this, his book is a bit more urban than the others. It does contain several brief descriptions of violence.

I

Antonne
December

THE INCESSANT RINGING OF HIS PHONE PULLED ANTONNE OUT of his sleep. His arm stretched across the bed as he tried to find the phone without having to get up and cut the light on. When he felt it, Antonne lifted it, squinting at the light the incoming call produced. Clearing his throat, Antonne accepted the call from his brother, Jackson, who was in prison serving a life sentence. If he was calling before the sun came up, nothing good would come from that call.

“Yeah?” Antonne greeted, allowing his heavy lids to close over his eyes.

“It’s time to get out.”

As groggy as Antonne felt, his eyes popped back open as he sat up in bed. “What’s going on?”

“Ol’ girl that you work for is about to make a hell of a lot of enemies. The partnerships that her husband had, she’s not honoring. A lot of niggas been fucking with her in his name and yours, but from what I’m hearing in here, that’s about to be over soon.”

Antonne rubbed his eyes, releasing a tired sigh. His gut had been telling him to get out the streets for the last six months and he wasn’t sure why. Though he wasn’t the type of man to run when things got hard, he also wasn’t the type of man to risk his life behind another person’s foolish mistakes.

When Crimson took over her deceased husband's illegal organization, Matt's men remained because she promised to operate just as he did. If that was no longer the case, not only would she have to face enemies, but she'd have to face her men leaving her too.

"I 'preciate you lookin' out. Any names I can pass along?"

"Nah. I want you to stay out of it. Just make plans to get out like I said."

With one bob of his head, Antonne sat on the edge of his bed. "One."

"One."

After disconnecting the call, Antonne said a quick prayer of thanks to God for allowing him to wake up to see another day before heading to the bathroom to take care of his hygiene and relieve his bladder. There was no way he'd be going back to sleep any time soon, so he decided to go ahead and start his day. Once he was showered and dressed, Antonne headed to the guest bedroom that he used for his foster pets.

That month, he was fostering a three-year-old pit bull—Iggy. Iggy had been adopted and would be going to his forever home the next month, and Antonne had thoroughly enjoyed his time with the bull. Since he had no kids or a wife, the excitement and unconditional love of his foster pets always gave him something to look forward to coming home to. He wasn't sure how he'd feel when Iggy left, though this was the routine he'd followed for the last five years. Fostering never got easier; it was always just a different experience.

Not to his surprise, Iggy was up and ready to start his day when Antonne made it to the guest bedroom. He gave him a few minutes of petting and love before taking him outside. While he waited for Iggy to handle his business, he got his breakfast together by the back door. A part of Antonne wanted to warn Crimson about the conversation he'd just had with his brother, but that wasn't something he'd be able to discuss over the phone. Even if he tried, Crimson would demand his presence so she could look in his eyes as he talked.

Once Iggy was full and taken care of, Antonne made his way back to the kitchen to make himself some coffee. Nothing smelled better than coffee in the morning. The sound of Al Green crooning in the background while Antonne read his bible and sipped his coffee was always the perfect start to his day. As stressful as his job was, Antonne made it his mission to start and end his days in peace... because there was no telling the amount of hell he'd endure while he was in the streets. There was a time Antonne lived for the drama and excitement of not knowing if he'd make it home alive. The older he got, the more he craved stability and the security and safety that came from living a normal life.

Since he had plans to have breakfast with his grandmother, Antonne allowed the coffee to be enough that morning. While he didn't usually mix business with personal affairs, he texted Crimson and asked her to meet him at the restaurant he'd be taking his grandmother to. It was technically his day off and he didn't want to handle any business, but he wouldn't be able to live with himself if something happened to Crimson and he didn't warn her.

When Crimson's husband was in control, Antonne was his protégé. After a devastating loss, he stopped providing security and temporarily switched to selling. He had a team of men under him, allowing him to never have to touch product or deal with customers. Crimson took over, wanting loyal men she could trust standing by her side. She made Antonne her right-hand man, and he was also the head of her security whenever she had meetings or trips to take.

As Antonne headed out of his home, he shot his other brother a text to check in. With Simeon living in London, there was a six-hour time difference. By that point, he should have been well into his afternoon. Antonne envied his brother's ability to leave his family behind and chase the life he truly wanted. Family had always been important to Antonne, but lately, it started to feel like a crutch—just like his loyalty to Crimson. There was so much that he wanted to do with his life, but until he got out of the business and possibly left Memphis, Antonne didn't see any of his dreams becoming a reality.

It took him about twenty minutes to make it to his grandmother's home. He knocked before using his key to let himself in.

"It's me!" he yelled, not wanting her to be alarmed by the sound of her security system going off.

"Stay down there. I'm not decent."

Antonne could only chuckle and shake his head as he entered the password to cut the alarm off. He didn't expect her to be ready because she never was.

"Aight, G," he replied, heading toward the sofa to make himself comfortable while he waited for his favorite girl—but he'd never let his mother know that.

Massie Walker had a special place in Antonne's life. It could have been because she loved him in a sweeter way than anyone else. He'd *always* clung to her. No matter how great things were between him and his family, Antonne always preferred the comfort of being at his grandparents' home. When his grandfather died, Antonne took it upon himself to move in with her when he was sixteen. What was supposed to be a temporary stay over the summer so she wouldn't feel lonely turned into him staying with her until he turned twenty-one. His parents never asked him to come back home, but they did ask him to spend weekends there.

By the time Antonne had found something to watch on TV, Massie was making her way into the living room. The eighty-year-old woman was moving slower than usual, releasing a tired breath as she sat down.

"Hey, baby," she greeted.

"You good?"

Massie's head shook. "Think I'm coming down with a cold. This weather got my body aching."

That was understandable. One day, it would be low seventies and the next high forties.

"Well, do you want me to just cook something or bring you something back to eat? If you're getting sick, you probably

don't need to go out.”

“You don't have to cook. I don't have an appetite right now anyway.”

Yeah, she was getting sick. Massie always had a hearty appetite and breakfast was her favorite meal.

“You probably still need to eat, G. Let me make you something light.”

Without waiting for her to respond, Antonne stood and prepared to head to the kitchen, but she stopped him with, “I don't want nothing solid. My throat hurts. How about a smoothie?”

“Aight, I'll get you one. What kind? Strawberry banana?”

Massie nodded her agreement as she stood. “I'm going back to bed. Just bring it to my room when you get back.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

As Antonne made his exit, he called Crimson and asked her to meet him at Panera instead. The sooner he warned her so she could prepare for what was to potentially come, the better.

CRIMSON STEPPED OUT OF THE CHAUFFEUR DRIVEN ESCALADE looking decadent as always. Her red pixie cut was styled to perfection. A brown fur coat rested over her tan pantsuit, matching her brown heels. As she walked over to him, she took her shades off and handed them to Hank—her guard for the day since Antonne was off. As she made her way in front of Antonne, she gave him a genuine smile.

“What is it, Antonne?”

“How confident are you that your partners are to be trusted?”

“None of them have my trust fully. Why?”

“A very reliable source told me that because you haven't been honoring some partnerships and deals that were started by Matt, you're about to gain some enemies.” Antonne

paused, head tilting as he closed the space between them and lowered his voice. “You know how many people gotta be talkin’ for Jackson to bring that to me?”

Her eyes rolled as he released a heavy breath and licked the corner of his mouth. “I will admit that I’m changing some things Matt had in place, but it’s to better my organization. If they don’t like it, I don’t give a fuck.”

Antonne squeezed the back of his neck. “That’s not how this works, Crimson. If Matt has had decades long partnerships in place and you disrupt that ecosystem, they’re not gonna give a damn if it’s because it’s what’s best for your organization or not. You can make a choice like that, but you have to be prepared for the consequences. And the consequence of whatever you’re doing is going to be war.”

Her head bobbed once. “What do you suggest I do?”

“Stop whatever you’re doing. Respectfully end any partnerships you feel aren’t benefiting you anymore. If they don’t want out, then you handle it your way. But give that courtesy first.”

“Okay,” she agreed, extending her hand for her shades. As Hank placed them in her palm, she added, “It’ll be a hell of a lot easier and quicker to just end things, but I’ll pacify these niggas just once.”

Antonne chuckled as he watched her walk away. For now, that would do.

2

Haley

A QUIET HUM ESCAPED HALEY'S LIPS AS HER MIDDLE FINGER curved and applied pleasure to her g-spot. Tweaking her left nipple, she sighed as her back arched and toes curled. When that familiar tingle began to fill her, Haley moaned and bit down on her bottom lip... continuing the pleasurable assault on her spot until she came.

Her mornings started the same every day—prayer and affirmations, reading and journaling, and masturbation. A smile instantly spread her lips as she pulled her finger out of her pussy. After licking her essence from her finger, Haley sat on the edge of her bed, now prepared to start her day.

She continued with the rest of her morning routine before taking care of her English bulldogs, Alpha and Princess. Once they were fed and back in their room, she dressed and headed to her grazing restaurant. Though *Just Graze* was a fully staffed establishment, Haley still loved being hands on. There were days she wouldn't allow her staff to come in to help with anything beyond deliveries because she loved creating her charcuterie boards and grazing tables herself. And since they were paid salary instead of hourly, they never seemed to mind.

Along with the standard meat and cheese boards, Haley also offered chocolate, fruit, nuts, and cheese boards along with cupcakes and additional desserts. A great deal of her profit came from individual sized boards and couples'

packages, but she had catering requests for grazing tables at least four or five times a month.

Since she only had individual sized boards to prepare for the day, she told her three person staff to come in during their delivery blocks to drive so she could make them herself. As she pulled into the parking lot of *Just Graze*, a call from her mother came through.

“Hey, Ma,” Haley answered after the call accepted through Bluetooth.

“Hey, baby. I was just calling to confirm you’ll be able to join us for dinner tonight.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m having my crew make deliveries this afternoon and evening, so I’ll be free once I’m done setting up the boards.”

“Okay, good. I can’t wait to see you.”

Haley chuckled. She’d just seen her mother three days ago at church and for Sunday dinner, but that didn’t matter. If Piper had it her way, she’d see Haley and her brother Hosea every day.

“Do you need me to bring anything, Ma?”

“Just yourself. And some of those cheeses I like. You know the ones you put with the walnuts and grapes.”

Nodding her recognition, Haley smiled as she unbuckled her seatbelt. “Yes, ma’am. I got you.”

“Thank you, baby. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

After disconnecting the call, Haley exited her orange Ford Mustang with a huge grin on her face. Her life was almost perfect. She had healthy relationships with everyone in her family, her friends circle was thriving, and her business was fun, creative, and lucrative. Socially, the serial dater had a roster of men that kept her fed, excited, and entertained. There was only one thing, one person, that could have made her life better... yet he seemed to be completely ignorant to how much she liked him.

It didn't help that Haley had never actually spoken those words to Antonne. Hell, she didn't feel as if she had to. Haley had mastered the art of initiating a man's invitation to pursue her. They flirted from time to time when they both were single, and there was no doubt in her mind that Antonne was fully aware of how she felt about him. If he didn't, it would have been because he didn't feel the same way. And if that was the case, it was better off if they never talked about how she felt for him.

Once inside, Haley did her morning walkthrough and sanitized her work area for the day before cutting her 70s playlist on and preparing to get started on her boards. She logged into her dashboard and squealed at the sight of seventy-three boards for the day. Wanting to push it up to a hundred, Haley made a quick post on social media letting her followers know she had space for twenty-seven more orders before she'd mark the individual boards as sold out.

On average, she'd make twenty-five to sixty boards per day, but a video she'd posted last night to promote her new sweet and spicy jam and sriracha board seemed to do the trick.

Only a few seconds passed before Antonne was giving her a call.

"Hey," she answered sweetly, putting him on speakerphone so she could go ahead and print the orders then glove up.

"Hey. Let me get them last twenty something boards off you."

Her heart skipped a beat, and she looked over at the phone as if she could see him through it. "What are you gonna do with all these boards, Antonne?"

"I'ma keep a couple for myself but I'm going to take the rest up to Mama's salon."

Catering to his mother was standard practice for Antonne. Though she didn't have to, she still worked at her hair salon, and his father owned a barbershop. Both could be retired living off the wealth Antonne's father acquired while he was in the streets, but they were active sixty somethings who

couldn't stand the thought of not having something consistent to fulfill their days.

Haley's parents were the same way. Her father was a judge who'd limited his trial days and her mother was a pastor and founder of a nonprofit organization for women that took up a lot of her time.

"Aw, that's sweet of you. She's going to love that and thank you for getting them. I only said that to see if I could hit a hundred orders for the day."

"Of course you can, even without me offering to get them." Since she was blushing too hard to speak, Antonne continued. "Text me and let me know when I can pick them up, aight?"

"Okay. Thanks again, Stink."

He chuckled like she knew he would. "I told you to stop callin' me that shit, especially since I can't call you that."

"Mhm. I have to get started on these boards, though. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Aight, Stink. I'll see you later."

She allowed Antonne to disconnect the call so she wouldn't have to step away from what she was doing. A quiet chuckle escaped her as she shook her head. It shouldn't have surprised her that Antonne wanted the boards she mentioned. He was typically the first one to support her outside of her brother. There was no doubt in her mind that Hosea would be calling as soon as he saw her post.

As her computer chimed, Haley clapped as three orders came in simultaneously.

Today was going to be a great day.

3

Antonne

“PLEASE,” HE BEGGED, HANDS TREMBLING AND LIFTED IN surrender. “I didn’t know you were the mark. Had I known, I *never* would’ve come after you.”

Unmoved by the man’s confession, Antonne closed the space between them, placing the barrel of his pistol against the man’s temple. “What’s your name?”

“S-S-Sammy,” he stuttered, closing his leaking eyes.

Without flinching, Antonne sent a bullet into his skull. “Rest in peace, Sammy.”

“Are you crazy!” Hank yelled. “Sammy’s people are going to make you pay for that.”

With a chuckle, Antonne put his gun back in its holder. After pulling a dollar out of his pocket, he tossed it onto Sammy’s lifeless body. “That should be enough.”

Hank groaned as they exited Waffle House. The great thing about that location was that it was owned by one of Crimson’s workers. She used the restaurant to clean her money. So Antonne wasn’t worried about cameras, police, or witnesses for that matter.

As calm as Antonne appeared, his anger was brewing internally. Sammy had been sent after him and Hank because they were Crimson’s top two security guards. Because of that,

the duo hardly ever did things together for such a time as this. If something was to happen to one, the other would be available to protect Crimson.

That evening, they hosted a meeting for their entire crew to go over the new protocols now that word had begun to spread that Crimson was more of a target. A quick bite to eat had now ended with a man losing his life, and the only regret Antonne had was not punishing him more. He'd save that for Sammy's boss, Jo.

"Well, at least now we know who is coming after Crimson," Hank said as they headed toward their cars.

"Yeah, but I don't think Jo is the only one. I'm going to call for a cleanup crew to handle this nigga before going to pay him a visit."

"Cool. I'll call a team in to accompany you. Let me know where you're going to leave from, and I'll send them your way."

Antonne nodded his agreement as he opened the door to his military green Ford Bronco. This wasn't the way he saw his evening starting, but with his lifestyle, he'd learned to *always* be prepared.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, ANTONNE MADE HIS WAY INTO Hosea's lounge. He was in desperate need of something stronger than the wine and tequila he usually enjoyed sipping. His knuckles throbbed from the beating he'd given Jo before sending two bullets into his skull for going after Crimson. Her show of gratitude for ridding them of one of her enemies? A seven-figure wire transfer into his offshore bank account.

As lucrative as being Crimson's right hand and head of security was, Antonne wasn't flashy or overly materialistic. He splurged on his home and jewelry, wine and fine dining, but more than anything, Antonne loved paying for traveling and experiences.

His eyes scanned the lounge, taking in the new décor. Hosea had the walls painted white and there was now white

tile on all floors. Blue booths and chairs with white tables gave a calming effect, which was the opposite of the all red décor for the sex club upstairs. Spotting his friends, his brothers, Antonne headed in their direction.

Saint was the first to spot him, saying, “Bout time, nigga,” as he stood to shake Antonne’s hand.

Antonne was closest to Saint, Tyreek, and Elite, but they all were his brothers. While he gravitated toward Saint and Elite for fun and familiarity, Hosea, Tyreek, and Kahlil were the friends he often talked to about real-life shit.

“I had some business to handle,” Antonne replied with a crooked grin.

“I see.” Saint released his hand as he stared at it. “You good?”

“All’s well, brother,” Antonne assured him, taking the empty seat between Aiyden and Damien. “Somebody need to move. Y’all can’t sit me between the two biggest niggas.”

Though they laughed, Antonne was dead serious. His medium sized athletic build and six-foot frame towered over most, but compared to Aiyden and Damien, they all looked tiny. The brothers weren’t just taller, they were wider and thicker too.

“That’s what happens when you’re late,” Tyreek teased before taking a sip of his brown liquor.

Sucking his teeth, Antonne picked up his menu, though he was sure he’d end up ordering what he always got. His head bobbed to the Young Dolph that was playing in the background as Elite handed him a much needed blunt.

“There go my baby,” he heard Tyreek say, and that caused him to look up.

At the sight of Janae, Harmony, and Haley walking in their direction, Antonne licked his lips. Haley was looking amazing as always. Haley was probably the most well put together woman Antonne knew. Her hair and nails were always done, and she always smelled good. Even when she dressed down in sweats, she dressed it up with jewelry or heels. Though she

often gravitated toward neutral colors, her favorite pops of color to wear were pink, red, and orange.

That night, she was dressed in loose fitting dark jeans, a black lace bustier, and chunky black heels. Her bra strap length, jet black hair was in loose flowing curls with a deep part. As soon as she stepped into his personal space, the scent of her sweet perfume had him moaning as he swallowed hard. Without his permission, his dick hardened at the sight of the cocoa brown beauty.

“Hey, y’all,” she greeted everyone, but her eyes remained on him.

It was taking everything inside of Antonne not to wrap his hand around her waist and sit her on his lap. Though he felt his relationship with Christina had reached its expiration date, he wouldn’t do anything to intentionally hurt her.

“You look beautiful,” he complimented, taking her hand into his and kissing it.

“Thank you, Stink,” she muttered softly, avoiding his eyes with a smile.

The sound of Supreme, Elite’s brother, sucking his teeth made Antonne cut his eyes at him, causing everyone to laugh. “If y’all don’t just get together already,” Supreme said as Haley gently pulled her hand out of his.

“Shut the fuck up, bruh,” Antonne replied, fighting back his smile.

Supreme was probably the most un-serious, playful thug Antonne knew. But when it came to his family and friends, especially his wife and brother, a darker side of him was unleashed that not too many lived to say they saw.

“Where you going?” Hosea asked his sister.

“I have a date.”

“With who?”

Haley’s eyes rolled as she crossed her arms over her chest. “You don’t know him.”

“I need to. He picking you up from here?”

“Yeah.”

“Aight, I’m a walk you out.”

“Have fun, but not too much fun,” Antonne said, unable to keep his eyes from lowering to her ass as she turned to walk away.

“You know I live for pleasure.”

She gave him a wink and smile before walking away, and Antonne couldn’t pull his eyes from her until she was no longer in his line of vision. When he turned back to his crew, all eyes were on him.

“What?” he asked the table innocently.

As they all broke into boisterous laughter, Antonne flipped them off and slumped down in his seat. They loved making him and Haley the butt of their jokes, but it was never truly a laughing matter to Antonne.

Though he’d never openly expressed his feelings for Haley, he was sure she knew he liked and cared about her. If she didn’t, it would have been because she didn’t feel the same way. As much as Antonne liked Haley, he hadn’t worked up the courage to go after her. He’d learned the hard way how deadly the streets could be. Because of that, he vowed to never commit to a woman he truly loved or get married until he retired.

One night of reckless sex had finessed him and Christina into a relationship. A pregnancy scare led to a commitment that he didn’t truly want to make and now desperately wanted to get out of. Their relationship had never been a true partnership, but those days, it seemed he gave far more than he received. Usually that would be okay because giving was a part of his masculine nature. The truth was, he was tired of giving to a woman he didn’t want to be with.

Antonne wished he could be with a woman like Haley, but it wouldn’t be fair to commit knowing he’d have to, in essence, hide their love. The last thing he needed was one of Crimson’s enemies to target his woman in an attempt to

weaken him to get to her. So as much as he craved her, he'd settle for their friendly flirting and support of each other if it meant keeping her safe.

4

Haley

“YOU LOOKED AMAZING LAST NIGHT, LEY. I HOPE YOU enjoyed yourself.”

Leaning against the counter, Haley beamed. She bit down on her bottom lip but that did nothing to stop her smile.

“I did. We ended up going to a comedy show.”

“That’s good,” Antonne replied. “What are your plans for the day?”

“Asylum is coming over since his wife is out of town. We’ll probably just chill. What about you?”

“I’ll be in the streets for quite a while. I just had to call you before I got too busy to tell you that. You were on my mind all night last night because you looked so beautiful.”

As much as Haley wanted to bask in his compliment, she didn’t want to set herself up for failure by thinking it would lead to more. “Thank you, Antonne. Please be careful, okay?”

“Always.”

“Bye.”

After disconnecting the call, her smile slowly faded. It was getting harder and harder to ignore how she felt about Antonne, and Haley hated feeling powerless to do anything about it. She was used to getting anything and anyone she wanted. Antonne Walker was, unfortunately, the exception to

that rule. While some would call her spoiled, Haley preferred taken care of. At thirty-three, the multi-six figure business owner didn't have to pay any of her bills because her father did.

Her upbringing positioned her to operate in a state of softness, femininity, and receiving that caused men to gravitate to her. It was easy for her to always get her way in romantic relationships but dating several men at once was starting to bore her.

Since she wasn't sure what she would do with Asylum, Haley made her way into her living room to wait for him. The moment she settled into the center of her dark green sofa, Alpha and Princess made their way to her feet. They knew not to get on the sofa, but she didn't hesitate to rub their wrinkly faces and talk to them in the baby voice they loved.

The sound of her phone ringing prompted Haley to give it her attention, causing Alpha and Princess to return to their beds. At the sight of the unfamiliar number, Haley released a quiet, "Hmm," before answering.

"This is Haley."

"Hi, Haley. This is Esme calling on behalf of Graceland Pierce."

Clutching her chest, Haley's eyes widened and heart palpitated. Graceland Pierce was the most sought after event planner in the country. She was known for the charitable galas and fundraisers she hosted that boasted seven and eight figures, but she also put together immaculate soirees that were season or holiday themed.

Clearing her throat, Haley sat up in her seat. "G-Graceland Pierce?"

Esme released a warm laugh. "The one and only. Graceland asked that I reach out for your scheduling availability. She will be in Memphis next month meeting with potential vendors for a spring event. Are you interes—"

"Yes!" Her eyes squeezed shut immediately and she palmed her head. That wasn't the time to play coy. When

Graceland Pierce called, you came running.

“Great. I have Haley at Just Graze dot com for your email address. Is that correct?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Perfect. I will send you a calendar to lock in a specific date. We will see you soon.”

“Thank you.”

Quickly disconnecting the call, Haley burst into a fireball of energy around the room. Alpha and Princess chased behind her barking and wagging their stumpy tails, unsure what the hell had gotten into her. She danced and giggled around the living room until her exhaustion had her plopping down onto the couch.

Fifteen minutes passed before Asylum was ringing her doorbell. She was genuinely excited as she went to let her best friend in. Though she was close to several women in their crew, Asylum had been her best friend since they were in middle school. He was rough around the edges but soft at heart, and it seemed that had been the type of man Haley would use as the prototype for dating.

Briefly, in high school, Asylum and Haley considered taking their friendship to the next level, but the romance just wasn't there. Everyone urged them to try since they were so close, but they were proof that men and women could have truly platonic friendships.

As she opened the door, Haley smiled at the sight of the pizza boxes in his hands. Though she loved eating healthy and could eat a salad or fruit daily, pizza was her comfort food.

“Wassup?” Asylum greeted, giving her a one-armed hug.

“Where's my girl?” she asked as she hugged him, referring to his stepdaughter.

“With her damn mama. I thought she was going to spend the weekend with me, but she ended up going with her at the last minute.”

Haley chuckled at the pout that covered his face as she closed and locked the door behind him. If there was one thing no one could ever take away from Asylum, it was his fierce love, loyalty, and devotion to his stepdaughter. There were times Haley was sure her best friend stayed married for True, not his wife. She loved Asylum's ability to remove the shield his career hardened his heart with for True. She had the power to soften a man that Haley had seen perfect his strength since they were kids, and Haley would always love True for that.

“Aww, I'm sorry, Sy. I'll keep you company all weekend if you want me to.”

“You ain't got no choice. My bag in the car.”

Though she playfully rolled her eyes, Haley couldn't think of a better way to spend her weekend than with her best friend, who was just as close to her as her brother. Her dogs were too lazy to get up and see who was at the door, but the moment Asylum made it into the living room, they were all over him, whining and pining for his attention. Haley busied herself with fixing their plates of pizza and cheese sticks.

Once he was done with the dogs, Asylum returned to the kitchen and washed his hands thoroughly before sitting next to her at her white and black island. Her entire home was decorated with dark green, and the kitchen was no different. While the island, flooring, and walls were white and ash black, the cabinets, counters, stools, and hanging lights were all green and gold.

“How did it go last night?” Asylum asked, pulling his plate closer.

“It was cool. We went to a comedy club.”

“That's wassup. He didn't look like that was really his vibe.”

“I know, right? It surprised me. He said he'd had a long day at work and needed the laughs, so I don't think it was something he would have normally planned.”

“You plan to see him again?”

Haley shrugged as she bit into her cheese pizza. “I’m not sure. Bobby is cool but he’s a little too uptight for me. You know I love having fun. There’s a time to chill and be laidback but he’s a bit *too* laidback for me.”

“I feel you... especially in the beginning stages of getting to know someone. That’s usually the time you have the most fun. So if it’s kind of dry now, it’s probably because y’all don’t have that much chemistry.”

“Exactly! The whole point of dating and avoiding commitment is to experience only the good and fun with a man before things get boring or feel forced. This was our third date and it’s already kind of boring. I gave him brownie points for being smart enough to do a comedy show since he knew he wasn’t in the best mood. I even offered to reschedule but he really wanted to see me, so that was cool too.”

Their conversation shifted in Asylum’s direction, and he caught her up with what had been going on with him. She decided against sharing the news about Graceland until she was sure it would lead to a real opportunity. When they were done eating, she poured them both a glass of wine before they headed to the living room to finish watching one of her favorite comfort shows—*The Big Bang Theory*. Eventually, they made their way into her game room where they spent the rest of the evening playing pool and cards. By the time she grew tired, Asylum grabbed his bag out of his car and made his way to the guest bedroom he always occupied.

Asylum had a thing about being alone. His mind hardly ever shut off, and he rarely gave himself time alone to sit with his feelings and thoughts. Haley felt in her spirit that things were off between him and his wife, but she wouldn’t press him for information until he was ready to share.

5

Antonne

AS ANTONNE CRUISED THE STREETS OF MEMPHIS, HIS thoughts shifted from one priority to the next. Driving always calmed him, but that day, the act of being in traffic was unable to lull the thoughts racing in his mind. His grandmother was feeling better, but it seemed not being as active had a negative effect on her mobility. Her children hadn't been able to convince her to start light senior workouts or physical therapy for her mobility and flexibility, and Antonne feared if she didn't, her body would start to decline.

His mother had been having dreams, dark dreams, and worrying about his safety more than usual. Antonne assured her he was okay and there was nothing for her to worry about, but he couldn't be too sure. Until Crimson made peace with the partners and distributors she'd recently tried to do away with, there was no telling how things would play out.

Christina had been annoying him more than usual, and it was getting increasingly more difficult to ignore the fact that he was starting to like her less and less. She was a beautiful woman, but she didn't have too much else going for herself. The flaws he once ignored, bad habits he found cute, were starting to get under his skin. He lacked a desire to spend time with her. These days, their days were filled with sex, food, and him giving her money.

Antonne sighed as he ran his hand over his face. Too many things were feeling beyond his control, and a man like Antonne thrived in positions of control and power.

His ringing phone interrupted his screaming thoughts. He stared at the unknown number for a while before declining the call. When they called a second time, he answered with, “Yeah?”

“Oh. Hi. This is Esme calling on behalf of Graceland Pierce. May I speak with Mr. Walker?”

Graceland Pierce...

Antonne was very familiar with the name, but he couldn't believe she'd be reaching out to *him*.

“Speaking.”

“Hello, Antonne. Graceland has been following your moves for a while and would like to work with the man considered the best sommelier in the south. She's bringing a spring event to Memphis and speaking with potential vendors next month. Are you interested and available for a meeting?”

“Uh, yeah. No doubt. I'd be honored.”

“Great. I have mister sommelier A W at Gmail dot com for your email address. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I'll send the calendar to your email for you to book your time slot.”

“Aight, cool. Thanks.”

After disconnecting the call, Antonne smiled and sat up straighter in his seat as he accelerated his speed. That was the boost he needed. Graceland was known for her amazing parties. While some were for charity and fundraising, a lot were simply to have a damn good time. It would be a good look for Antonne to have his name attached to one of her events. His dreams of being a full-time sommelier and winery owner were on hold while he worked for Crimson—which was also a reason he was ready to retire. Now that his brother was

urging him to leave the streets, Antonne was even more adamant about leaving.

His thoughts shifted from heavy weights to positive possibilities as he continued to his destination. When he arrived at the small, two-bedroom home in the heart of Orange Mound, Antonne was a bit more at peace than when he'd first left his home in Lakeland, which was just outside Cordova. Because of his lifestyle, Antonne wanted to build his home on acres of land that gave him seclusion and silence.

Instead of pulling his black BMW M2 fully into the driveway, Antonne hung back by the mailbox. Usually, he never made runs with product or money, but Crimson was anxious to get Jue on her payroll. The postman was highly sought after because of his ability to easily make drops from one destination to the next.

He hadn't expressed interest in joining Crimson, stating that he was content with the partners he had. If buying him in didn't work, Crimson would eliminate some of the competition. Antonne was hoping it wouldn't come down to that. Starting a war by killing a dealer to gain access to Jue's routes was too risky of a move.

When Jue pulled his mail truck up to the mailbox, Antonne got out of his car and popped the trunk. He grabbed the black duffle bag and handed it to Jue.

“What is this?”

“A gift from Crimson with instructions on how to receive more.”

Jue eyed Antonne skeptically as he opened the bag. When he saw the thick stacks of cash, his head shook and he tried to hand the bag back, but Antonne wouldn't accept.

“Whether you decide to work with her or not, she wants you to keep that.”

Releasing a long breath, Jue nodded and set the bag next to his foot. “Aight, OG. Blessings.”

Antonne nodded as he stepped back and watched Jue drive away. He appreciated Jue's hustle and commitment to staying

off the radar. If he had it his way, he'd keep Jue out of such a large organization because they were most often harder to get out of. Crimson, however, was determined to replace as many of Matt's men as she could.

The biggest problem with that way of thinking was getting rid of someone who could be trusted for someone who couldn't, but that would be a lesson Crimson would have to learn the hard way. Antonne had done his best to keep things as they were while Matt was still alive. All he could do was hope Crimson listened.

Getting back in his car, Antonne headed home to chill for a while before he'd have to meet his parents for dinner. With one brother in prison for the rest of his life and the other living in another country, Antonne's parents craved his presence more than they used to. He understood and respected that, so he carved out two evenings a week that he'd devote to them. Nothing was more important to him than family and the principles his parents instilled within him, and he couldn't wait to be surrounded by the comfort and peace that came from his parents' love.

AS ANTONNE RELAXED IN THE RECLINER, HE GRINNED AT Haley's text. Any time she wanted to tell him a corny joke, she sent him a pair of eyes to see what he was doing. Shooting her a call, he relaxed further in his seat. The meal of smothered chicken, yams, and collard greens with hot water cornbread that his mother prepared was about to have him sleep soon... and his brief conversation with Haley was sure to have him drifting into that sleep with a smile on his face.

“Why was the apple sad?”

The sound of Haley's smile and happiness in her tone made Antonne chuckle already. Her grade of dad jokes were always corny and not the least bit funny, but she would be so proud and happy when she told them, it always made those around her laugh.

Her positive and joyful spirit was one of her most attractive traits.

“Why, Ley?”

“Because someone hurt his peeling.” The hoot she released was funnier than the joke. Antonne laughed with a shake of his head as his eyes fluttered. “Get it, his peeling... like his feelings?”

“Yeah, I get it.” Antonne chuckled. “That must have hurt him to his core.”

She was silent for a while before laughing and snorting so loud Antonne had to pull the phone from his ear. He smiled so hard his cheeks hurt, loving how simple and easy it was to get a smile out of her. How simple and easy it was to please her—that filled him with pride.

“Oh my God, that was good, Stink. I gotta go tell Cartier that. Hurt him to his core.” She laughed again. “Alright, baby. I gotta go. Bye!”

Just as quickly as she’d struck up a conversation, she was gone back into the night. And her calling him baby for the first time instead of Stink left a lingering smile on his face for a different reason...

6

Haley

THEY HADN'T BEEN AT THE RESTAURANT FOR MORE THAN thirty minutes, and Haley was already anxious to leave. Ian was a man who didn't understand two things: all things should be a luxury and experience, and the more he pleased her... the more she'd please him. Her plan had been to give him the best pussy of his life, but with his attitude, she was losing interest in him even eating it at that point.

Their evening was supposed to start at Tiger and Peacock, which was arguably one of the most unique restaurants in Memphis. What made it even better was the fact that it was in the Memphian hotel. After some time at the bar after dinner, they were supposed to end their night in a room, but that more than likely wouldn't be the case.

Regardless of how cold it was, a woman very rarely went to Tiger and Peacock without going to the rooftop to snap a few pictures. At night, the black and white seating and walls were a bright pink because of the lighting. Haley snapped a few pictures of herself under the pink hue before going into the pink room to take a few pictures there as well. Because the walls, furniture, and carpeting were all pink, she asked Ian if he wanted to wait at the bar for her until she was done. With a roll of his eyes, he agreed.

Now, they were seated at the bar waiting for a table to become available—because he refused to eat at the bar. Not

wanting to let his mood sour hers, Haley still planned to order at least a drink and an appetizer while they waited. As high class as Ian appeared to be, Haley could tell he wasn't really about that upper class or fine dining life. If he was, he'd know the bar was the best place to sit. That's where networking and life changing connections were made—professionally and personally. Still, Haley would let him look down on those seated there if it made him feel better about himself.

“Damn.” All music and chatter around her ceased at the sound of that voice. She wouldn't have to turn around to know who it belonged to. Haley never had a hard time hearing and distinguishing Antonne's deep, raspy timber. “You look phenomenal,” he complimented, making his way behind her fully. The warmth of his body pressed against hers as he inhaled her scent made her eyes flutter. And when he exhaled against her neck, she shivered. “You smell good too.”

“I know, but you haven't seen the whole 'fit because I'm seated.”

Antonne took her hand into his. “Stand up. Let me see all of you.”

With a wide grin, Haley stood with his help. She'd kept it simple but beautiful in a form fitting black dress that stopped mid-thigh. The long sleeves dropped under her shoulders, exposing them and her collarbone. Black, sheer stockings covered her long, toned legs, and she had on her favorite black pumps.

“Yes, Lord.” His reaction made her giggle. Haley was always confident, but when Antonne complimented her, it made her more bashful than usual. “I know you took a lot of pictures.”

“Well, I wanted to, but I didn't want to keep my date waiting,” Haley replied, pointing toward Ian, trying to keep her voice from sounding as dry as she felt about him.

Antonne's eyes shifted from Haley to Ian. “He know what and who he got in you?”

“I do,” Ian replied, sitting up straighter in his seat.

“Was I talking to you?”

“Ton, please.” Haley placed her hand to his chest, hoping the physical contact would cause him to return his attention to her. If there was one thing Antonne was known for, it was his no-nonsense attitude. People often mistook it for a quick temper, but that wasn’t the case. For the most part, Antonne was in control of his emotions—it was his reaction to the disrespect of others that he couldn’t control. “What are you doing here anyway? Is Christina here?”

His head shook. “Nah. She nagged me about meeting her here and left before I arrived. I told her I would be a few minutes late because of work.” He shrugged, not seeming the least bit fazed by Christina’s disappearing act. “Guess I wasn’t worth the wait.”

Haley found herself stepping further into his space. “You’re *always* worth the wait, Stink.”

A slow smirk lifted the corners of his mouth as his hand lowered to her waist. “In front of ya man? That’s how you comin’?”

“About you? Always.”

After licking his lips, Antonne placed a wet, tender kiss to the center of her forehead. “Get back to your date. I’ll talk to you later, Haley.”

A pout formed on her face before she could stop it. The last thing she wanted to do was entertain Ian’s boring, uptight ass. Still, she nodded with a roll of her eyes.

“Okay,” she agreed softly, making Antonne chuckle.

He helped her back onto her bar stool before walking away.

“Who was that?” Ian asked.

“A very close friend of mine and my brother.”

“How close? Because it looks like y’all are more than friends.”

“We aren’t.” *But she wished they were...*

Ian released a long huff. “Look, Haley, I like you but...”

“No, you don’t like me.” She chuckled as she turned slightly to face him. “You like the way I look, but you don’t like me. You don’t know me. And the parts of me you do know, you’ve complained about since we got together tonight.”

“That wasn’t my intention. I’m just not the kind of man that would feel comfortable in this kind of environment.”

“That’s a toxic ass lie, Ian, and you can believe it if you want to, but not me. You see all these men in here with their women? You think they care about going to the pink room? No! Because it makes their woman happy, and if she’s happy, *they* will be happy. If you had that stick out of your ass, your reward for bringing me here would have been sleeping in this pussy. But you’re so concerned about the aesthetic you missed how happy being here with you made me. So you can go.”

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand as she stood and looked around the room for Antonne.

“Pus—wait.” Ian released a low chuckle. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think about it like that. Can we start over?”

Ignoring him, Haley walked down to the opposite end of the bar and sat next to Antonne. He laughed and stopped the stopwatch on his phone.

“Less than three minutes,” Antonne said to the stranger sitting next to him. “Pay up.”

“What’s that about?” Haley asked.

“I bet him you’d send your friend away in less than five minutes now that someone you knew was here.”

Haley couldn’t help but snicker as she got comfortable in her seat. “He was boring and dry as hell, and I couldn’t even have a good time.”

Antonne accepted the twenty-dollar bill from the man but slid it toward the bartender and told him, “Put that toward whatever drinks he wants for the evening.”

The man thanked him, and Haley huffed at the sight of Ian leaving the restaurant. He didn't even have the balls to try and tell her off or make things right, making her gladder she ended their night.

"Can you take me home?" she asked Antonne sweetly. He looked just as good as he wanted to look in a crisp, short-sleeved white button up and black slacks. Anything Antonne put on looked better than the average man because he had three tailors on salary to customize all of his casual, business, and formal wear.

"Of course. Have you eaten yet?"

"Nah. I was thinking about getting that blueberry and brie grilled cheese, but I don't know what to drink with it."

Antonne grinned, knowing exactly what she was up to. Any chance she could, Haley opened a door for Antonne to shine. He loved discussing wine and tequila, naturally, as a sommelier.

"I would recommend getting a glass of their top shelf tequila to start. When I know the options, I can give you a specific brand. With your meal, cabernet sauvignon or merlot... but you like that super sweet shit, so a dessert port would be best for your palate."

"Don't chicken nuggets me like I'm a kid. I can drink the big girl stuff."

Antonne released a bark of laughter with a bob of his head. "Aight, if you say so. Go with the sauvignon then."

When the bartender came to take their order, Haley resisted the urge to request prosecco or Moscato and went with the sipping tequila and sauvignon instead. They fell into easy conversation until their food and drinks arrived, and Haley wasn't surprised by how good she enjoyed his recommendations. After they were done, they went back to the pink room where Antonne acted as her personal photographer, hyping her up with each picture he took. He even graced her by taking a couple with her, and Haley couldn't stop smiling no matter how hard she tried.

“Look at the camera, crazy,” she cooed as his grip around her waist tightened.

He always smelled so good.

“Why would I look at that when I can look at you?”

Tilting her head, Haley looked into his eyes. They were espresso brown in color, and somehow, so dark they shined. Naturally arched brows hovered over them, showcasing her favorite part of his face. Her eyes lowered to his blunt brown bowtie shaped lips, and she licked hers. She loved the way Antonne looked. From his milk chocolate brown skin to his tapered cut with about an inch of curly hair on the top. She loved his tall, athletic build and the way he dressed to cover it up. She loved everything about this man.

“Um...” she almost whispered, trying to remove herself from his embrace.

Because this was dangerous. Being so close, smelling his cologne—how delicately the Dior Sauvage mixed with his natural scent. It wasn’t the most exotic smelling cologne. But it was something about the scent that made her want to get close to inhale more. It was addictive.

“One more,” Antonne pleaded, just above a whisper.

Nodding her agreement, Haley took a deep breath and relaxed against his frame. He snapped the picture, then put space between them.

“Thanks for tonight,” she said, referring to him paying for her meal and taking her home.

“You don’t have to thank me. We’re friends. I will always have your back.”

Friends.

As if she needed the reminder.

With a sad smile and long exhale, Haley nodded. She followed him out of the restaurant, mentally kicking herself for spending the evening with him.

Antonne Christmas Eve

CRIMSON'S EXPRESSION REMAINED BLANK AS SHE PROCESSED Antonne's words. It wasn't his intention to pull up on her and quit, especially on Christmas Eve. After talking with his father, Nathan, and Jackson, Antonne couldn't wait any longer. It wasn't because he felt trouble was brewing; it was because he felt as if his life was slipping away. All the purpose he felt protecting Crimson was starting to feel less fulfilling because he wasn't able to truly live his life for himself. As much pride as he got from doing his job, he was starting to feel emptier and emptier because it wasn't the career he saw for himself.

Nathan was in the streets, and seeing as all three of his sons were too at one point, that shit was in their blood. Antonne, however, was the only one currently active in the lifestyle. Nathan retired when Dedra got pregnant with their first son, Simeon. Simeon retired when he got married and moved to London. Jackson had no choice but to sit down after picking up a life sentence. To him, it wasn't worth it trying to continue on behind bars, though he could have made more money inside than outside.

Seeing a man not yield to Haley's desires did something to Antonne. It shifted something inside of him. Their night together at Tiger and Peacock happened two weeks ago, and he hadn't been able to get it off his mind. Thanks to Ian not

being her type and Christina standing him up, it was almost like they were on a date.

The ways Antonne imagined sliding into her pussy after a few drinks to end their night had been plaguing him, and that didn't happen too often. He'd decided not to pursue Haley, but the thought of not being able to be with a woman like her as long as he was in the business was all the more reason for him to get out. At thirty-six, Antonne was ready to do what he was most passionate about with his business and settle down... no matter how loyal he was to Matt, and in turn, Crimson.

"How long can I have you?" Crimson asked.

"Thirty to sixty days. Depends on how long it takes me to feel comfortable with leaving you."

With a slow nod, Crimson stood. "Okay. Thank you for your service, and for giving me a warning."

"You're welcome," Antonne replied as he stood. "Merry Christmas, Crimson. I know this might be a fucked-up time to do this but..."

With a chuckle, she waved him off. "There's always reason and sound mind behind your actions. If you're telling me this now, I'm sure you've been thinking about it for months." Antonne nodded. "If there's anything I can do to keep you, let me know."

"Aight," was what he said as he prepared to leave, but Antonne was sure there was nothing she could offer that would be better than the life he'd always dreamed he'd have.

ANTONNE COULDN'T TAKE HIS EYES OFF HALEY AS SHE walked over to him. The crew had gathered at Kahlil and Honey's home to exchange gifts, and it looked like a white and red winter wonderland. Two white Christmas trees were on both sides of the fireplace with red decorations. White candles lined the floor, tables, and bookshelves while the fireplace roared. All the beauty around him and of the moment couldn't compare to Haley.

She was dressed in a green dress that accentuated every curve on her slim-thick frame. He loved her in anything, but when she put on dresses that highlighted the pear shape of her hips and fat ass, Antonne's dick could *never* behave. He was glad Christina decided to spend the evening with her mother. Between that cocoa brown skin, long thick hair, and those round, expressive, dark eyes... Antonne hadn't been able to keep his eyes off Haley all night.

"So this is for you," Haley said, sitting next to him and crossing her legs. She licked those heart shaped lips and his dick throbbed. There was no way this woman could know just how beautiful she was. She smiled, lifting her already high cheeks.

His eyes trailed her frame, ignoring how much he told them not to. "Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?"

"Yes." She giggled with a nod. "Like three times already."

"You should wear this color more. This green looks amazing against your skin." The gold heels and accessories made her shiny skin sparkle even more.

"I was thinking the same thing," she said absently looking down at herself. "You look handsome as always. I don't think I've ever seen you look bad, though, so that's nothing new."

"Thank you, Stink," Antonne replied, laughing when she rolled her eyes.

He opened the envelope, completely surprised by what she'd gotten him. A three-day weekend at one of the hardest resorts and spas to book in Napa Valley along with a ticket for a full day pass on the Napa Valley wine train. It didn't matter how consistently Antonne thought about booking himself a stay at Meritage Resort and Spa or the Grand Reserve at the Meritage, they were always booked the weekends he wanted to go.

"How in the hell did you get a three-day weekend stay at the Meritage in May? They're almost always booked. And it's a suite at that?"

“I have my ways,” Haley replied with a sly grin. “Merry Christmas, Antonne.”

“Haley...” Pulling her into his side, Antonne gave her a warm hug. “Thank you, beautiful. I really appreciate this. You’re coming with me, right?”

“No, the other ticket is for Christina. I figured you’d rather go with your girl.”

Damn.

He’d forgotten all about her that fast.

That did make the most sense.

“Nah. I want *you* to go.”

“Ton...” Her head shook as she gripped his thigh.

“We’re friends. Friends take trips.”

“Yeah, but...”

“No buts. I want you there with me.”

Their eyes remained locked for a few seconds before her expression softened and she surrendered. “Okay. I’ll go.”

“Good.” Antonne extended the small box in her direction. “Merry Christmas, Haley.”

Without even knowing what it was, she did a little shimmy in her seat that made him smile. When she opened it, curiosity filled her at the sight of the small piece of paper and QR code. So she wouldn’t have to get up to get her phone, Antonne allowed her to scan it on his. As the confirmed reservation for the meditation spa she mentioned in Sedona, Arizona pulled up, Haley gasped and cupped her cheeks. All it took was her to show him and mention it once for Antonne to commit it to memory. She’d mentioned wanting to go there for a staycation to lose herself in the rest that came from nature, and by her watery eyes, Haley still wanted to experience it.

“You remembered?” she asked softly, blinking back her tears.

“I remember everything about you. You’re unforgettable.”

Cupping his cheek, Haley caressed it with her thumb. She surprised him by leaning forward and placing a kiss there... very close to the corner of his mouth.

“Thank you, Stink. This is perfect.”

“You’re welc—”

“Aht aht.” Cartier lifted Haley from her seat, quickly pulling her to the makeshift dancefloor as she mumbled about Haley getting too cozy with someone else’s man.

As much as Antonne hated that she’d ruined their moment, he was grateful Cartier did. It was getting harder and harder for him to keep his hands off Haley, and if her face remained so close to his, there was no doubt in his mind he would finally go in for that kiss...

Haley New Year's Eve

HALEY LAUGHED HYSTERICALLY AS HER BULLDOGS CHASED each other around Asylum's legs. The blanket he was carrying for her wrapped around his ankles, causing him to lose his balance and fall. They took full advantage, jumping on him and licking his face and neck no matter how hard he laughed and yelled for them to stop.

"Get these crazy ass dogs, man! I don't want them licking all on me!"

"From the sound of your laughter, that's *exactly* what you need," Haley said, though she still walked over and tried to save her best friend.

"Y'all go to your room!" It took several shoves, but eventually, Alpha and Princess left them and returned to their room.

Asylum had come over to walk them with her, and as he huffed and grumbled under his breath as he stood, Haley was sure he wouldn't be doing that for a while.

"Sy..."

"T'on wanna hear that shit," he snapped after sucking his teeth, making her laugh harder.

"Asylum! I told you to pick that blanket up!"

"You need to train them wild ass dogs, Ley. For real."

“Leave my babies alone and give me the blanket.”

Haley laughed as he walked over to cut the electric fireplace on. She wrapped the dark green cover around herself and got comfortable on the couch. It was the same color as her sofa and blinds. Gold pillows, lights, and tables accented the warm, earthy space. Asylum plopped down beside her, looking at her with a lazy grin.

“You love them, don’t you?” she confirmed.

“Yeah, but don’t tell them that.”

With a giggle, she handed Asylum the remote so he could find them something to watch. Normally, she walked her dogs with Antonne, but he’d been distant since Christmas. That was no surprise. They always seemed to take two steps forward and one step back.

“They feel it, that’s why they go so hard with you. If you would stop acting like that and give them love they’ll leave you alone quicker.”

“Whatever. When is your brother getting here?”

“Maybe in an hour or so. You staying?”

“Yeah. I’m a run to the store real quick and get some meat for the grill.”

“Y’all the only niggas I know who will grill in forty-degree weather.”

“Seeing as you be the first one with a plate for them ribs, I don’t want to hear you complaining.”

All she could do was laugh as Asylum stood because that was *absolutely* true. A call came through as Asylum made his exit, and Haley smiled at the sight of Aiyden’s name.

“Hey,” she answered.

“Hey. You busy?”

“Nah, just chilling. What’s up?”

“I know it’s last minute, but I was wondering if you’d like to accompany me to me and Damien’s party tonight. It’s for all

of our businesses and employees. I've been so busy with planning I didn't realize I hadn't secured my date for the evening."

"Oh, so I'm your last resort, huh?" she teased.

"Nah, you'll always be first. I planned to ask you weeks ago, but I've been so busy."

"I'm just messing with you. I'd love to come. Is there a specific color or theme I need to follow?"

"Nah, just let me know what you're wearing so I can match your fly."

"I will. I'll text you a picture of whatever dress I decide on."

"Cool. I'll pick you up at seven. Does that work?"

"It does. See you tonight."

After disconnecting the call, Haley stood and headed to her room. She loved parties of all kinds, and Aiyden was fun, so she didn't mind the last-minute invitation. It would help her get her mind off Antonne. There had been brief moments where Haley and Aiyden flirted but it was never anything serious. She liked him as a friend but didn't see anything else happening between them. Antonne, however, was a different story. Groaning, she tried to convince herself to stop thinking about him... But that act was easier said than done.

9

Antonne
January

“THE LAST RUN IS NEVER REALLY THE LAST RUN, YOUNG blood. If your gut is telling you not to take that ride... listen.”

Antonne nodded, allowing Simeon’s words to register in his brain. He’d called his brother on his way to Crimson’s penthouse apartment.

“You’re right,” Antonne agreed. “I’m pulling up now.”

“Call me after you leave so I’ll know you’re straight. It’s no coincidence she’s trying to make you take runs again suddenly. I know Crimson said she was okay with you leaving, but I don’t trust that too much either. You’re making her too invincible and giving her too much power for her to let you go so easy. Unless there’s something about your relationship that you haven’t told me?”

Scratching the back of his head, Antonne killed the engine.

Love.

Could that have been the reason Crimson was releasing him?

He couldn’t allow himself to even think it... especially since they could never be together. Yeah, he’d noticed the way she looked after and at him, but nah. Antonne wouldn’t allow himself to even think it. He was far too loyal to Matt to ever take it there with Crimson, now or in the future.

“I’ll call you,” was all Antonne offered, and Simeon laughed before hanging up.

After speaking to the doorman, Antonne used his keycard to get onto the elevator and head up to Crimson’s penthouse. He understood her desire to live surrounded by others in a way that allowed her to maintain her privacy and seclusion. When she first took over, guards were placed at her home and were sent with her everywhere she went.

She’d convinced the property manager to employ her security guards, so they were always on the grounds, but no one was allowed to come up to her penthouse without her permission.

At her floor, Antonne inhaled a deep breath as he made his way down the hall. He knocked twice and stepped back, waiting for her to let him in. It took a few seconds, but when she did, the sight of Crimson caused his dick to immediately get hard. She was dressed in a black sports bra and biker shorts with sweat dripping from every inch of her body.

With ragged breathing, she motioned for him to come inside with her hand.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were working out when I called?”

“I figured I’d be done by the time you arrived.” Antonne followed her over to the corner of the living room where her mat, headphones, and bottled water were. “I’m pretty much done. I just need to do my cool down routine.”

“Cool. What I wanted to talk to you about won’t take long.”

Antonne pulled his eyes away from her and looked out of the floor to ceiling windows. She had the best view in the city. He loved watching the ripples of the Mississippi River every time he came over.

“Are you here to tell me you’ve changed your mind about quitting?”

With a chuckle, Antonne pulled his hands behind his back. “Nah. I wanted to let you know I rejected that last shipment. I

want to get out while my hands are still clean and I got my freedom, you feel me?”

Nodding, Crimson inhaled a deep breath. “I understand. Does this mean this will be the last time I see you?”

His eyes trailed back over to her as she leaned forward and touched her toes. Antonne’s eyes focused on her round ass briefly before shaking his head. Christina would kill him just for looking, no matter how much he told her it would never lead to anything.

“More than likely. I’m going to try and keep my distance from anything that could bring negative attention to my legal endeavors.”

Crimson nodded and grabbed her water bottle. Her eyes remained locked with his as she guzzled it down. All Antonne could think about was his dick sliding down her throat. Jaw clenching, he hung his head and inhaled a deep breath.

“I can respect that, but I must admit, I will miss you, Antonne.”

Slowly, she made her way over to him. Her hands lifted, but before she could place them on his chest, Crimson took a step back.

“What you doin’?” he asked quietly, unsure why he didn’t feel the urge to put space between them.

“I want to kiss you,” she confessed. “Ask you to wash me in the shower and make love to me. But you wouldn’t agree to that... would you?”

Their eyes remained locked for a few seconds before Antonne’s head shook. He took a small step back to put some extra space between them, hoping that would keep his nostrils from being filled with the scent of her need.

“I wouldn’t. I’m loyal. You know that.”

She chuckled quietly with a nod. “All too well. That’s why I trust you so much.” Crimson extended her hand for his, palm up so he’d know she wanted it kissed.

He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm, allowing it to linger against his lips far longer than he probably should. It didn't matter how many problems he was having with Christina; he'd never fold. Nah. Antonne would leave her before he ever mistreated her. So as much as he wanted to allow his lips to take the trail up her arm and neck to her lips, Antonne released it.

Clearing his throat, he put more space between them. "I'm out the game, but if you ever need anything, I got you."

"Goodbye, Antonne," she whispered.

Finding it too difficult to return those words, Antonne walked away. He kept reminding himself this was for the best, whether his dick and heart agreed or not. Ending things professionally brought personal feelings to the surface they'd *both* been ignoring.

No matter how attracted to Crimson he was, Antonne wouldn't cheat on Christina, nor would he sleep with a dead man's wife. Now wasn't the time to go back on the integrity and morals his father had raised him with... no matter how hard it was to leave that penthouse.

10

Christina

AS CHRISTINA PACED, SHE WASN'T SURE HOW ANTONNE would take the news. Things weren't horrible between them, but they hadn't been great for a while. Seemed as if they'd been arguing a lot lately, and Christina hoped tonight would fix that. Antonne had never had a romantic bone in his body, so she hadn't bothered setting up candles and flowers and all that shit. She did, however, start his Xbox up, set his blunt and beer out, and throw his boxers and socks in the towel warmer for when he arrived.

Dinner was already keeping warm in the oven, and she could only hope her efforts would keep them from arguing tonight... especially when he found out she'd spent ten thousand dollars on a Hermes backpack for their trip at the end of the month. The amount wouldn't be a problem if he wouldn't have recently given her a monthly budget to go with her allowance. Now... she was broke... and she had three weeks left in the month. Even if he did trip about it, once she fed him and gave him some head, Christina was sure he'd throw her a few more stacks.

At the sound of the door unlocking, Christina jumped slightly before scurrying over to the couch. She sat down and tried to settle into a casual position as Antonne made his way into her apartment. As much as she asked him to let her move in with him, he wouldn't. He demanded his own space, and Christina had learned to accept that.

“Hey,” she greeted sweetly.

“Wassup?”

Antonne pulled her hair back, tilting her head for a kiss as he lowered himself to her. Instead of sitting down next to her, he went straight for the bathroom to shower. Instead of going in to join him, Christina waited and hoped the warm water would relax and soothe him enough to give in to her request.

After his shower, Antonne made his way out in the boxers and socks she'd put in the warmer for him.

“How was your day?” he asked, finally making his way next to her.

“Good. Boring.”

He smiled. “It wouldn't be if you actually did something with your time. I'm paying your bills, but you can still work or start a business. Get a hobby or some shit.” Christina's head shook and eyes rolled as he opened the beer and dropped a lime wedge in it. “You're out of the wine I left here?”

She muttered a quick yes, wanting to go back to his previous statement. “Speaking of which, I need some more money for the rest of the month.”

Confusion covered his face as Antonne looked over at her. “I just gave you ten thousand at the start of the month.”

“I know... but... I bought a backpack.”

He chuckled. “And?”

“It was ten thousand dollars.”

Nostrils flaring, Antonne's head shook. “I don't know what to tell you other than you need to return that shit. I'm not giving you no more money.”

“Antonne!” Ignoring her, he took a swig of his beer. “I can't return it, so you have to give me more money so I can pay my bills.”

“I'm not giving you shit. You should have thought about your bills before you made such an unnecessary purchase. The

fuck you spending that much money on a damn backpack for anyway? What I tell you?”

With a pout, she rolled her eyes again and crossed her arms over her chest. “Antonne,” she whined.

“What did I tell you?”

Christina huffed. “If I can’t afford to buy it three times, I don’t need to spend the money on it.”

“Exactly. So if you want that shit, get a refund and wait until you got that money saved. I’m not going to reward you for being so irresponsible.”

“You act like you ain’t got it to give.”

Setting the beer down, he turned slightly to face her. “Whether I have it to give or not is beside the point. It’s *my* money. I’m not obligated to give you *shit*.”

He stood, and Christina didn’t have to follow him to know he was going to dress and leave. Following behind him, she said, “I’m not trying to argue with you tonight, Ant. That’s the opposite of what I wanted.”

“It don’t seem like it. I can’t even get comfortable before you got your hand out. You don’t even ask about a nigga day or nothin’. Just straight to the money.”

“I’m sorry, okay?” Taking his hands into hers, Christina kept Antonne from grabbing his jeans. “I’ve just been really anxious about it all day and wanted to get that conversation out the way so I wouldn’t have to worry about it for the rest of the night.” She kissed his hands then his lips. “Of course I want to hear about your day.”

Sighing, Antonne gently pulled his hands from hers. “It’s cool,” was what he said, but she could tell by the stiffness of his frame that he wasn’t over it fully yet.

The last thing Christina wanted was to make him feel as if she only cared about his money, but she also couldn’t make it seem like money wasn’t important to her. She’d spent her entire childhood watching her mother struggle because she fell in love with a man who couldn’t provide. Christina refused to

spread her legs for a man who would end up putting her on the same wave.

“Um... I fixed your favorite for dinner. It’s keeping warm in the oven. We can eat and talk. Is that okay?”

With a nod, Antonne walked out of her bedroom. She followed him to the kitchen, where she fixed them both a plate of beef roast, mashed potatoes, and green beans. Before she could walk away and sit on the opposite side of the table, Antonne gripped her ass and set her on his lap.

“I’m on my period,” she informed him, though he’d already felt the pad.

“It’s cool.” He placed a kiss on her neck. “I apologize for coming down on you so hard. I just got a lot on my mind.”

“Like what?” she asked, pulling her plate to her so she could eat while remaining seated on his lap.

“I quit the business,” he blurted casually. “I’m finally going to open my winery.”

Her eyes blinked rapidly before she chuckled. She found it difficult to process his words.

“You *what?*”

“I quit. I’m not working for Crimson anymore. So you spending ten thousand on a backpack really set me off. I don’t mind taking care of you, but I won’t be getting random million-dollar deposits on a Tuesday anymore.”

She watched as he put a forkful of roast and potatoes in his mouth.

“How could you make a decision like that without me, Antonne?”

“We’re not married. We’re not even living together. I don’t have to tell you about what I’m doing with my life.”

She released a long exhale, hoping it would keep her calm as she stood. “But you know I rely on you financially. Are you sure you’re going to be able to take care of me? You make a lot of money working for Crimson...”

“Is that all I have to offer to you? Damn. I’m telling you I’m finally going after my dream, and all you give a fuck about is money.” He stood. “Never mind the fact that a nigga finally legit and you won’t have to worry about me going back to jail or getting killed over this shit. I’m trying to set something up for myself permanently, and you somehow manage to make it all about you. Again.”

“You know what...” Her hands lifted in surrender as she chuckled. “I can’t even do this with you, Antonne.”

“Yeah, I bet. You find out I ain’t in the streets no more, now you ready to dip.”

“That’s not it,” she said, but hell... Christina didn’t believe herself. How did she expect him to? “I’m just tired of you making me feel bad for wanting a man that makes me feel financially secure.”

“That’s not the point,” he stressed. “When have I ever not supported you financially? Not that it’s my job. I’m not your daddy, and I’m not your husband. Still, I’ve been taking care of your ass since you quit your job without even talking to me about it. Yet you expect me to talk to you about the moves I’m making? You’re a fucking hypocrite.”

“Just forget it, Ant,” she grumbled, heading out of the kitchen.

He followed behind, but instead of joining her in bed, he grabbed his jeans and put them on.

“Where are you going?” Christina asked, cutting the TV on.

“Home. I can’t do this shit with you anymore either.”

“I may have overexaggerated, but I don’t want us to be over, Antonne. I just... got a little anxious. You know how important money is to me, but you’re important to me too.”

“That’s your right,” he mumbled, avoiding her eyes. “Your value. But I’m done, Chris.”

“So you don’t want to be with me anymore?”

Finally giving her his eyes, Antonne shook his head. “No, I don’t. Not like this. I’m doing what’s best for me, and I suggest you do the same.”

He sat on the edge of the bed to put on his shoes. This wasn’t the first time their argument had led to them saying they weren’t going to be together, and Christina wanted to believe it wouldn’t be the last. But this one was different. This time, his tone was different. His energy was different. *He* was different.

“If that’s what you want,” Christina said, not wanting him to think she was desperate. Because she was sure they’d both wake up in the morning regretting the things they’d said. Right? That was always the way it worked. When he was fully dressed, Antonne leaned forward in the bed and kissed her forehead. “We can talk in the morning, okay?”

Without agreeing, Antonne left her room... her apartment. But Christina prayed her reaction to his decision wasn’t the final straw that made him leave her heart...

11

Antonne

AS SOON AS ANTONNE STEPPED INTO CHRISTINA'S APARTMENT, the smell of cigarettes and stale beer hit his nostrils. They'd been broken up for a week and he was glad he'd made that decision. For the last seven days, she'd spent her time smoking and drinking with her mother while she made seafood boils for the hood. With a shake of his head, Antonne followed Louann into the kitchen where Christina was mixing her own blend of seasonings. That was one thing he wouldn't take away from her—she was a damn good cook.

“Hey,” she greeted warmly with a smile.

“Hey. Can we talk real quick?”

“Of course.”

After washing her hands, Christina followed him out of the kitchen. They went into her bedroom, where he handed her a golden envelope that had enough money to pay her bills and leave her a little room to splurge for the entire year. When she opened it and saw what it was, she dropped it and covered her face, sobbing immediately.

“That's enough to cover your bills and desires for the next year if you spend it wisely.” Antonne pulled her hands down and wiped away her tears. “You have so much potential, Christina. Just because this is the life your mama wanted to live, it doesn't have to be your path. You have a luxurious

mind and palate, get some money behind that desire so you can take care of yourself. I don't want to hear about you being with a nigga that's doing you wrong because he's taking care of you financially."

Her chin trembled and head lowered as her tears continued to pour.

"The right man is going to come along and take care of you," Antonne continued. "He'll give you your heart's desires, but until then, I want you to promise me that you'll invest in yourself. Get some hobbies, find something you're passionate about. Maybe rent out a commercial kitchen for your food and start your own seasoning line. You have so much potential, Christina, don't waste it."

With a nod, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. There was a time Antonne was content with what they had. As he aged, he wanted a relationship with more substance. A woman that was ambitious, intelligent, and layered. He and Christina had nothing in common or nothing to talk about, and he was tired of sex and food being their foundation.

"Thank you," she muttered into his chest, sniffing. "I promise I'm going to make you proud."

Antonne smiled and kissed the top of her head. "Don't do it for me; do it for yourself. That's what will make me proud."

After releasing her, Antonne looked her over once more before leaving her room and her apartment. He prayed she listened and took his words seriously. If she did, the sky wouldn't even be the limit for her.

12

Haley

THE NAVY-BLUE SUIT ANTONNE WORE MADE HALEY'S MOUTH water. He paired it with chocolate-colored accessories that complemented his skin tone. Licking her lips, Haley screamed mentally to stop staring at him as he walked in her direction, but she couldn't pull her eyes away from him.

While one hand held a bouquet of flowers for her, the other had a drink holder with two to-go cups in it. His lips moved, signaling he was on a call.

"I'll stay on until I can vet the new options, but not a moment later, Crimson."

After handing her the flowers, Antonne removed the earbud from his right ear and disconnected the call.

"Good morning, Stink."

At the sound of his greeting, she smiled. Somehow, them teasing each other with that nickname didn't make her like him less. There was nothing cute about the word unless it was him saying it.

"Good morning, Stink," she replied, lifting the flowers to her nose. "These are beautiful. Thank you." Not wanting to get too caught up in him getting her a dozen red roses, Haley made her way around the checkout counter of *Just Graze*. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your presence this morning?"

“I wanted to ask you something.” Antonne handed her one of the to-go cups as she leaned against the counter. “Black coffee with cinnamon and ginger, right?”

Her shoulders hiked as she grinned. “Right. My fav. Thank you.” Haley took a sip and did the same little dance she did after tasting good food. “Mm, so good.”

“Good.” He licked his lips, eyes lowering to hers. Squeezing the back of his neck, Antonne cleared his throat and looked away. “So I’m leaving Crimson soon. Well, I’ve already left, but I’m staying on until she has a good replacement for me. When I’m completely detached, I want to open my winery and wine bar. I was wondering if you’d like to go and look at some land with me tomorrow.”

“Antonne!” Setting her coffee down, Haley hugged him tightly. “I’m so, so proud of you! Congratulations!”

The hug was tighter and lingered longer than she’d planned for it to, but Haley couldn’t pull away. She cupped the back of his neck, pulling back to look into his eyes as his arms rested comfortably around her waist.

“Sorry, I know you got a girl.”

Haley tried to remove herself from his embrace, but he held her tighter. “I ended that too.”

“Oh.” Her grin made him laugh, causing her to cover her mouth. “I didn’t mean to smile that hard.”

“You didn’t like Christina for me?” he asked, finally releasing her.

“Honestly, no. She was a cool girl but not the kind of woman I could see you with long term. That’s why I was so surprised you committed to her.”

“I committed and was going to marry her to be there for my kid, but it turned out to be an ectopic pregnancy.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Ton.” For some reason, hearing him mention marriage to another woman caused Haley’s heart to ache. Even if it was for the sake of a child with no mention

of love, the thought of him tied to another woman for life was a visual Haley couldn't take.

"It's cool. So... tomorrow?"

"I would love to look at land with you. This is so exciting! I know this is something you've been wanting for a while."

"Hell yeah. I love working as a freelance sommelier for restaurants in the city and hosting my classes and tastings, but I want my winery and bar. It's finally time for me to put my desires first—in all areas of life."

There was something about the dip in his tone and lowering of his eyes as he said the last part of his statement that made Haley hum quietly.

"Can I get something for lunch?" he added.

"Yeah, of course." Laughing nervously, Haley walked around him and went behind the counter. She loved the space she'd created with *Just Graze*. Leaning into the sacral chakra and free flowing creativity that came from it, Haley had designed the restaurant to have orange walls, booths, and chairs with brown and gray tables and flooring. Though most people had their boards delivered or took them with them, she had enough space for patrons to sit and enjoy their boards inside. "What would you like?"

"Hmm... that depends on if you can join me for lunch or not."

Unwillingly, she smiled. "I can. What did you have in mind?"

"How about you make one of the picnic baskets. We can eat on the patio at my place. I'll cut the firepit on and we can watch a movie out there if you have time. If it's too cold for you, we can eat in my wine cellar."

"Ooh, I love that! I'll make time."

Antonne gave her a sexy chuckle as he pulled his wallet out. "Aight. Just come to my place when you're ready then."

She declined the two hundred-dollar bills he tried to give her, but he insisted. "Well at least wait for your change," she

said as he made his exit.

“Just keep it,” he mumbled, opening the door to leave.

All she could do was sigh as excitement filled her. She couldn't wait to spend the afternoon with him.

The Next Day

HALEY HAD BEEN HOLDING HER TONGUE. ANTONNE MISSED HIS appointment with his realtor because he was working with Crimson. It was clear to her that Crimson was trying to keep Antonne as close as she could, though Haley wasn't sure the reason. Whether it was truly on a professional level or personal, Crimson conveniently needing him to do a security sweep at the same time as his showing was no coincidence.

Antonne was such a protector and so loyal that he couldn't risk it being a setup. Regardless of if the danger was real or not, he would always show up for his people. They were now on their way to the pet shelter Antonne often got his foster dogs from. While Haley was grateful to be spending time with him, she hated that he hadn't been able to do what he originally planned to do that day.

When she couldn't take it anymore, she blurted, “Promise me that no matter what happens with Crimson, you'll do what's best for you.” Antonne looked over at her briefly before returning his attention to the road. “For the last five years that I've known you, you've dedicated yourself to the protection and priority of others. You told me that Crimson knew exactly when your showing started today, and I don't think it's a coincidence that she made that call. She's going to do whatever she can to keep you on, Stink. Promise me that you'll finally go after what you desire and deserve.”

Antonne didn't respond right away, but when he did, it was a simple, “I promise.”

Pleased with his answer, Haley allowed silence to find them again.

When they arrived at the shelter, she was overcome with excitement at all the dogs and puppies. To resist the desire to take one home herself, she opted out of engaging with any of them—until a one-year-old pit bull became smitten with her. He kept leaving Antonne to play with her, and to Antonne, that made him the perfect dog to take home. When she asked him why, Antonne told her if he got a dog she was attached to, maybe it would make her come over more.

All she could do was smile.

Antonne

ANTONNE DIDN'T HAVE MANY EXPECTATIONS WHEN HE WALKED into the meeting with Graceland Pierce, but what he wasn't expecting was to see Haley. She looked beautiful in a pink pantsuit and silk pink shirt underneath. Gold diamond studs in her ears, a bracelet, and Rolex accented the gold buttons on her suit jacket. The chunky pink heels had him envisioning them on his shoulders as he dug in her pussy. Clearing his throat, Antonne ran his hand down his neck.

Suddenly, Graceland wasn't the most important woman in the room.

Haley smiled at the sight of him. She stood and pulled him into a friendly embrace. He knew her well—in professional settings, she wore floral, fruity scents, for dates, she wore sweet like candy scents, and when they were just hanging out with the crew, her scents were fresh and clean. That day, the floral, fruity scent wafted into his nose and had him wanting to hold her a little while longer.

“Hi, Stink,” she whispered for only him to hear, causing Antonne to chuckle as he looked into her eyes. With her five-inch heels, they were almost the same height. He loved how tall she was, whether she was wearing heels or not.

“Hey, Stink.”

Her bright smile softened him even more toward her.

“Well, it seems I had the right idea by meeting with you two together,” Graceland said, gaining his attention.

Releasing Haley, Antonne stepped closer to the desk. Graceland stood and shook his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Pierce.”

“Please, call me Graceland.”

She motioned with her hand for them to have a seat on the opposite side of the desk. She’d rented office space downtown for the meeting. The large glass windows behind her desk gave a view of the city skyline since it was twenty stories up.

“Thank you both for setting aside time in your busy schedules to meet with me. I didn’t know you two knew each other until my assistant did deeper research and unintentionally stumbled across pictures of you two together on social media.” Graceland paused, crossing her long, slender legs. “Friends, right?”

They both looked over at each other before Antonne replied with, “Yes. Haley is one of my closest friends.”

“Then you two wouldn’t have a problem working together?”

“On what exactly?” Haley asked.

“I’m doing an all-white weekend affair the week before Valentine’s Day. I’d like for you to handle the grazing tables and Antonne to not only create the drink menu but be at the event as our sommelier for any guests who will have questions about pairings.” Graceland slid them both folders that held details about her upcoming event. “For the tables, I want hot and cold options. I want things never done before. I want brunch and soul food in grazing form. You can do that for me right, Haley?”

“Oh... uh...”

“She can,” Antonne answered, not bothering to look up from the venue dimensions she’d included.

“Great! You’ll have about a month to come up with menus for both. I’ll cover expenses for everything including food and

drinks, any fees for your teams, and of course you'll be lucratively compensated."

When Antonne made it to the end of the packet and saw she was offering ten percent of what would more than likely be a million-dollar event, he bobbed his head.

"Is there a bottom line or base fee?" Haley checked. "We know your events do well, but this is Memphis. I want to make sure we'll be compensated well regardless of the turnout."

"That's fair. We've already opened pre-registration. So far, we have five thousand people waiting in line, online, to secure their tickets, which range from one to five thousand dollars each. The venue holds ten thousand people, and seeing as we just opened pre-registration yesterday, we're confident we'll fill every slot. On the off chance we don't, there is a guaranteed one hundred thousand dollars for the both of you." Graceland stood. "I'll leave you two to discuss this, because I have another meeting in the office next door. If you're interested, just let Esme know out front. I look forward to working with both of you."

Both stood and shook her hand. Antonne waited until she left to ask, "You in?"

"Hell yeah! That's Graceland fucking Pierce. Having my name attached to hers will do wonders for my brand."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"All the more reason for you to open your wine bar. People are gonna want to know more about the sexy sommelier working the room."

With a chuckle, Antonne nodded his agreement.

"How about we grab dinner this weekend and start researching what's expected at her events. We can plan the menus from there."

"Sounds good. I'm so excited!"

Antonne was too, but the idea of having dinner with Haley sounded better than a six-figure payday.

Haley

EVERY MONTH, HALEY PUT TOGETHER CARE PACKAGES FOR homeless and women's shelters. For the women's shelters packages, she added extras like feminine products, but they all had the same things—food and snacks, books and cards with prayers, and coupons for free food deliveries from restaurants that had partnered with her over the years. Earlier in the day, the guys had come over to help her make the deliveries. It felt a little weird being around Aiyden and Antonne for the first time. Things were shifting between her and Antonne, and even though they hadn't vocally expressed their feelings for each other, they were there.

Now, she was getting ready for dinner with Antonne to discuss the event, and as much as she reminded herself it wasn't a date, she wanted to look her absolute best. Her hair was pinned while she did her makeup, sipping wine and talking to her girls. Cartier and Harmony had come over to help steel her nerves, though there was nothing she could do to prepare for her evening with Antonne.

"I just don't understand why you're so nervous," Cartier said.

"Yeah, I mean, it's not like y'all don't spend alone time together," Harmony added.

"This is different."

“How so?” Cartier asked.

“This positions us to be partners, and partnership means a lot to us. This is also the first time we’ll be going to such a nice restaurant alone. Like, I’ve never gotten dolled up for Antonne, and I’m not even sure why I’m doing it now. Usually when we end up alone at restaurants it’s by accident. But this is very intentional. And I guess I’m nervous and also a little sad because I wish this was a real date but it’s not.”

“What’s the deal with that anyway?” Harmony asked. “Saint tells me all the time how much you two like each other. Why haven’t you ever gotten together?”

“Because they won’t tell each other the truth,” Cartier answered, making Haley roll her eyes. “I asked Hosea the same thing when I first started coming around. They won’t tell each other how they feel, she dates like crazy, and he works like crazy. It’s weird.”

Snickering, Haley applied her blush. “I can’t deny that. I haven’t told Antonne how much I like him, and he hasn’t told me either. He always mentions us being friends, so I’m not sure he even likes me. I know he enjoys my company and he’s attracted to me, but I don’t think he wants to actually be with me.”

“The way that man acts when you’re in the same room says otherwise,” Cartier replied.

“I don’t know... maybe it’s different perspectives for us because y’all are on the outside looking in. I know he makes me feel good, but nothing about the way he handles me makes me feel like he wants to be with me. I think he’d fuck me if I let him and he’ll probably flirt with me for the rest of his life, but he’s had five years to make something happen between us. If he hasn’t by now, he probably never will.”

“If he doesn’t, will you be okay with that?” Harmony asked.

Haley thought her question over carefully before answering, because that was a question she often asked herself.

“Yes, I would. I like him a lot, but I can’t wait on him forever. But, I’m also not waiting on him at the same time.” With a soft laugh, she turned to face both of them. “I love dating different men and I haven’t wanted to settle down. I’ve been in serious relationships and even fallen in love. What I’ve learned is, I prefer the honeymoon stage... when things are passionate, fun, and exciting. When you’re in a committed relationship, you have to actively put in the work and effort to keep that going, and a lot of men aren’t worth that. They start to get lazy or switch up on you, or worse, cheat and give that energy to someone else. Dating can get a little boring at times, and I do wish I had that one person to do life with, but I’m content with the way I’m living. Antonne would change that. I know if I dated him, I’d fall in love with him. And right now, I just don’t want that. Well, I don’t want the risks that come with that.”

“The risks that come with love?” Cartier clarified.

“Yeah.” Haley shrugged. “I know I’ll love him more than I’ve loved anyone else, and that also means there’s a chance loving him will hurt more than it’s hurt with anyone else. I don’t care about what he does, but there’s a greater risk of losing him. I couldn’t stomach that. So as much as I want him, I’m at peace not having him. But if I were to get him, there’s not a doubt in my mind that I’d keep him—forever.”

As if she’d thought him up, Antonne called her.

“Hey,” she answered, turning back toward the mirror of her vanity.

“I’ll be at you in like five minutes, Ley.”

“Five minutes!” she shrieked, making him laugh.

“Yeah, Stink. See you soon.”

The second he disconnected the call she released a strained, “Ah!”

Cartier and Harmony laughed as they stood. “We’re gonna go so you can focus on getting ready. You know that man is going to wait for you,” Harmony said.

“Have fun and try not to be nervous. This is your friend, and I know you hate to hear that, but that’s what he is,” Cartier reminded.

“You’re right, both of you. Bye, y’all. Keep the door open so he can come right in.”

Haley put the finishing touches on her makeup before scurrying into the closet and grabbing the black blazer she intended to wear as a dress. Since she’d already put her body butter on, she sprayed her perfume and put on her black lace bra and panty set along with her black sheer stockings. At the sound of the front door opening and closing, she cursed under her breath.

“It’s me,” Antonne announced.

“Be right down!”

Haley removed the pins from her hair and put the blazer on, then grabbed her pumps and purse for the evening. Silver jewelry and nude lipstick were her final touches before she made her way out of her room. At the sight of her, Antonne stood, dressed impeccably in an all-black suit and black T-shirt combo that had her moaning quietly under her breath.

“Yes, Lord,” he mumbled, making his way over to her. Every time he said that at the sight of her, she smiled. Slowly, he circled her, like a lion and its prey. “Absolutely stunning. I can never get enough of you, Haley.”

“Thank you, handsome. You look great as always.”

“Is this long enough?” he asked, tugging the bottom of her blazer. “I ain’t tryna have to kill a nigga tonight for getting fresh wit’chu.”

With a soft giggle, Haley turned to face him. Slowly, his eyes lifted from her ass to her eyes.

“I can bend over and let you see for yourself.”

Antonne rolled his tongue over his cheek, putting space between them. “You do that and we ain’t leaving this fuckin’ house.”

Her hand slid down his chest. “I don’t think I would have a problem with that.”

“Haley,” he warned softly, and the tremble in his voice suggested he was losing his control.

“Yes, Antonne?”

“You’re playing a very dangerous game.”

“Well... whether I win or lose... I’ll get a night with you and still come out on top.”

Tilting her head, Antonne’s eyes lowered to her lips, and her heart skipped a beat. He allowed his to graze hers softly—gently. Lifting slightly, he stared into her eyes... almost as if for permission to continue. Her response? Cupping the back of his neck and lowering his lips back to hers. Sweet kisses turned into a deep tongue down that had them both moaning as he squeezed her ass and smacked it.

“Ton,” she whispered against his lips.

He bit down on his bottom lip before sucking hers into his mouth. When his hand pulled her hair as his tongue re-entered her mouth, she whimpered, and he abruptly pulled away.

“Let’s go.” Without waiting for her to agree, Antonne grabbed her hand and led her out of her living room.

If sex with Antonne was as magical as that kiss, he was right—she was playing a *very* dangerous game.

15

Antonne

IT WASN'T UNTIL THEY WERE LEAVING THE RESTAURANT THAT Antonne realized they hadn't spent any time at all talking about the event. He had thoroughly enjoyed having dinner with Haley—and her kiss. Her lips were as soft and luscious as he thought they would be. It took every ounce of strength he had to leave her home after they kissed. He thought he'd spend the evening visualizing having her in his bed but that hadn't been the case. They held constant conversations that didn't revolve around sex, and Antonne loved every second of it.

“Do you want to come in so we can actually talk about the event?” she asked as Antonne pulled into her driveway.

With a chuckle, he nodded his agreement. “Yeah, that'll probably be best. One month isn't really a long time to come up with extensive menus for that amount of people, unless she only wants two or three options.”

“I did a little research in preparation for tonight, and Graceland does everything big. Her menus are like books. That's probably why she wants you there.”

“And that in itself is a damn good move. Not too many people can say they had a hired sommelier at their event. Sure, they sometimes have wine waiters that can answer questions from the catering company, but what she's trying to offer with me is going to be game changing.”

And it was all the more reason for Antonne to find his replacement with Crimson. He'd accompanied her that morning for a meeting. While Hank was good at what he did, he was older and more likely to retire in a couple of years. Antonne wanted someone young without a family and not too much to lose.

Once they were inside, Haley slipped into something more comfortable while Antonne removed his suit jacket and shoes. She came back into the living room with her hair pulled up into a loose bun and a sleep shirt that barely covered the bottom of her fat ass. Haley had been teasing him to no end that day, and quite frankly, he was losing the will to not give in.

She sat next to him smelling so good he couldn't resist running his nose against her neck like he often did. Haley pushed him away gently with a smile as she told him, "None of that. We really need to get started on this, Stink."

"Aight, aight. So let's cover the basics. What are you thinking for meat? Everything else will revolve around that."

"I agree." She sat on her leg and put her notebook on both their thighs. Looking up at him, she gave him a soft smile. She was so cute he had to stop himself from kissing her nose. "So I'm thinking to offer something for everyone, I can do chicken, beef, pork, and two forms of seafood."

"And you're going to cook the food not just outsource it and set it?"

"Might as well. What do you think?"

"It's up to you, bae. That'll be a lot, but you can do it with your team. You can also outsource it to save yourself some time. I love your cooking, but that's a large amount of people to satisfy."

"That's true. I'll make up my mind about that later. What are you thinking as far as wine and spirits are concerned? Are you offering a lot of options or keeping it simple?"

"Well, I can keep it simple because I know she'll want everything to be top shelf. So I'll only need one type of each

liquor but I want a wine pairing for every meat and dessert you come up with.”

“That sounds good. Will you do signature cocktails?”

“I was thinking about it. It’ll really depend on the menu.”

They continued to talk and plan for several hours before her yawns gave way to how tired she was. Antonne decided to leave, and she slowly walked him to the door. It was cute how she didn’t want him to leave.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow, aight?” he assured her.

“Okay,” she muttered with a pout.

“Haley.” Antonne chuckled as he hugged her. “Don’t do that.”

“I had a really good time with you. I don’t want you to go yet.”

“You’re tired.”

“So?”

“So I want you to get some rest. I’ll come back over for breakfast.”

“Promise?”

“I promise, Stink.”

“Okay. Let me know when you get home.”

“I will.” After dropping a kiss to her forehead, Antonne left while he still had the strength.

16

Haley
February

THE MOMENT WAS BITTERSWEET. AS HAPPY AS HALEY WAS that they'd put together a magical menu, she was sad the weekend was officially over. Since the night they kissed, the only time Haley saw Antonne was when they were planning for the event. All they talked about was the event. It was as if the kiss pushed them further apart instead of bringing them together like magnets.

The event had been a huge success and being there had already started to open doors for both Haley and Antonne. They'd gotten thousands of new followers, and she'd received hundreds of new orders and requests for her catering services. Antonne had been pulled left and right by partygoers who wanted him to serve as the sommelier at their gatherings. He made sure to let them know about the classes, tours, and tastings he hosted as well.

Only one thing would have made the weekend better, and that was if she and Antonne had dived into a deeper romantic level over the past month. Instead, she was even more confused and not willing to play the cat and mouse game anymore. As much as she loved dating and non-serious relationships, what was happening with Antonne was different. His ability to rile her up then become inconsistent hurt, and she was tired of downplaying and denying that.

After saying the last of her goodbyes to her team, Haley headed out to her car. Her feet were aching and in desperate need of a soak and massage. She thought about the men on her roster and wondered who she could choose to spend the evening and Valentine's Day with. Aiyden briefly popped into her mind, but she was horny and didn't want to tease herself with another one of her friends.

At the sight of Antonne standing in front of her car, Haley's steps halted. When he realized she was frozen, Antonne chuckled silently as he walked over to her. She couldn't deny how impeccable he looked in his white tuxedo. Swallowing hard, Haley gritted her teeth and told her pussy and heart not to react to this man.

"I wanted to tell you that you look amazing tonight, and you held it down. I'm proud of you, Stink. Your tables were absolutely incredible. I've never seen anything like what you put together."

She gave him a soft smile as she pulled a loose curl behind her ear. "Thanks, Antonne. You killed tonight too."

"How about we go somewhere and celebrate?"

Her head shook as she slowly walked around him and approached her brown Maserati Grecale. "I don't think that's a good idea, Ton."

"Why not?"

Before she could open the door, he was placing his hand against it, forcing her to turn and face him.

"Because spending the night with you is going to have me on a cloud. Then, I'm going to wake up and you're going to switch up on me. Either I won't hear from you, or you'll act like nothing between us happened, and I can't keep doing that." His shoulders sagged and head tilted as he released a long sigh. "You won't lead me one way or another." She scoffed. "Friends or lovers. And I-I'm tired of that. So *I'm* making the call." Haley released a shaky breath. Her eyes watered and heart pained just at the thought of what she was

about to say. “We’re friends, and I think we should only hang out with the crew.”

The weight of her words hovered over them. In the silence, she held her breath and waited for his response.

A part of her hoped he’d take that moment to confess his feelings for her for the first time, but instead, he nodded and said, “If that’s what you want.”

Antonne opened the door behind her. After placing a kiss to her temple, he told her, “Get home safely, Haley.”

With a chuckle, she got inside. Haley wasn’t sure why she thought, for once, he’d finally own up to how he felt. It didn’t matter anymore. Whatever they could have had was over before it began, and like she’d told her friends a month ago, Haley had no choice but to be okay with that.

Valentine’s Day

HALEY’S SMILE WAS WIDE AS SHE OPENED THE DOOR FOR HER father and brother. Like every year, they prioritized seeing her and gifting her with something before devoting the rest of the day to the women they loved. Though Haley insisted that wasn’t necessary, she appreciated the gesture. Thanks to them, she had been trained to never accept the bare minimum when it came to love.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, baby girl,” Hezekiah spoke, extending a large bear with several balloons wrapped around it.

“Thank you, Daddy.” Haley gushed as she hugged the bear tightly.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, sis.”

Hosea waited until their father released her to hug her as well.

“Thank you, Zay.”

“How’s your day starting?” Hezekiah asked as she led them to the living room.

She wanted to tell him it was good, because it was, but her heart hurt a little. Antonne had been on her mind heavily. As much as she wanted to reach out to him and tell him she regretted what she said the last time they spoke, she had to stand her ground. Keeping her distance from him was the only way she could think of to not overly invest her emotions and break her own heart. He was the only man that made her truly feel in years. Since he couldn't be consistent, for whatever reason, she had to stand firm.

“Good. You?”

“Real good.”

The syrupy grin her father gave her made her gag as Hosea laughed. The last thing she wanted was a visual of her parents having morning sex.

“Yuck.”

Hezekiah chuckled as they got comfortable in the living room. “Haley, sex is a natu—”

“My parents having sex will never be natural, Daddy. Please stop.”

“Agreed,” Hosea said, making them laugh, though Haley was serious.

Both men placed jewelry boxes, flowers, and candy on the coffee table. She thanked them before offering to cook them breakfast, which they accepted. Hanging with her two favorite guys for a couple of hours was the perfect start to her day. Even though she planned to go out later that evening, it didn't feel right celebrating the day of love with a man she could take or leave. Still, she'd go out and commit to enjoying herself, even if just to get her mind off Antonne.

THE EVENING HAD GONE SURPRISINGLY WELL. HALEY HAD MET her date for the night, Dedrick, at an event she catered for his sister. He expressed how he was honored to spend Valentine's Day together and wanted to put together an evening that

articulated that. He'd taken her to dinner at Ruth's Chris, then they went salsa dancing.

Though he wasn't familiar with the style, he took her because she mentioned how much she loved it. Detric was a quick learner, and the two step he did was cute and funny to watch. Haley was surprised by the amount of fun she had and the fact that Antone hadn't crossed her mind—until she made it back to her home and saw gift bags and flowers at her front door.

After closing her garage, Haley went through the kitchen and grabbed the bags and flowers. She checked on Alpha and Princess and let them out in the backyard before returning to the gifts.

She lifted the roses to her nose, eyes fluttering as she inhaled their scent. Haley couldn't wait for them to dry out a bit so she could make rose water for a bath. Removing the card, a slow smile lifted the corners of her mouth as she read it.

Forever on my mind. Always in my heart. Happy Valentine's Day, Stink.

Clutching the card to her chest, she inhaled a deep, shaky breath. Opening the bags one by one, she aww'd and cooed with each one. Ever the intentional giver, Antone got her things she'd mentioned with time.

A silk dress, because she said she loved the way the fabric felt on her skin. Six-inch pumps, because she said walking in them made her feel powerful and confident. Fine jewelry, because she said it made her feel luxurious. And a stack of hundred-dollar bills, totaling ten thousand dollars, because she said that was the amount she wanted her man to give her as chump change on a random day. It was a joke in conversation with their friends, but as always, Antone was tucking her words into his memory.

Grabbing her phone, Haley texted Detric and let him know she'd made it home as he'd asked. Then, she called Antone. When he didn't answer, she figured that was for the best. So, she left him a voicemail.

“Hey. Sorry for calling so late. I’m sure you’re out with someone enjoying Valentine’s Day.” Leaning against the table, Haley sighed as she twirled a curl around her finger. “I wanted to thank you for the gifts. You’re probably the most thoughtful and intentional man I’ve ever known.” Chuckling softly, Haley shook her head as she stared at the ceiling. “Have a good night, Ton. Thanks again.”

After ending the call, she let the dogs back in and showered before going into her playroom, where she planned to dance and indulge in self-pleasure until she fell asleep.

Antonne

“HEY. SORRY FOR CALLING SO LATE. I’M SURE YOU’RE OUT WITH someone enjoying Valentine’s Day. I wanted to thank you for the gifts. You’re probably the most thoughtful and intentional man I’ve ever known. Have a good night, Ton. Thanks again.”

After listening to the voicemail Haley left, Antonne pocketed his phone and made himself comfortable next to Dahlia’s tombstone after refreshing the flowers he took there weekly. Even in her death, Dahlia left an imprint on Antonne’s life. She was his first love and the woman he swore he would spend the rest of his life with. Unfortunately, Arthur’s enemy had other plans.

That was before Antonne started working for Matt. He was Arthur’s head of security, just as he was now for Crimson. During that time, he was younger and not taken as seriously, so a lot of competitors tested Arthur and Antonne’s methods. It didn’t take long before they realized Antonne was *nothing* to fuck with. A shootout left Arthur’s son dead, and instead of going after Antonne, he went after his fiancée. Arthur made it clear he wanted Antonne to suffer for the rest of his life, and though he’d never admit it, he was.

Between his father getting out of the streets when his mother got pregnant and losing the love of his life, Antonne made up in his mind to never give the streets access to his family or a woman he loved. No matter how lonely it got, it

meant more to him to protect those closest to him than start a relationship that could potentially have a premature end.

While Antonne wished he could have told Haley that, he didn't want to burden her with his truth. It wouldn't change the fact that he couldn't pursue her. All it would do was make her look at him with pity and feel anger about something beyond their control keeping them apart.

Eventually, Antonne was able to avenge Dahlia by sprinkling Arthur's ashes on her grave after he'd literally burned him alive, but nothing made the pain of no longer having her better.

“AW, SHIT. TELL ME HOW YOU REALLY FEEL.”

At the sound of Hosea's words, Antonne chuckled. He hadn't meant to, but he'd gotten caught staring at the pictures he'd taken with Haley at Tiger and Peacock a while back. He was missing her like crazy. After visiting Dahlia's grave, there was nothing he wanted to do more than go to Haley and get a refill of her warmth and kindness, but that was impossible. She'd put a boundary in place, which he respected, and would honor whether he wanted to or not. That boundary had him going to sleep and waking up the next morning wishing he was a toxic nigga who didn't give a damn about them.

Even without Haley saying the words, it was clear she liked him and wanted to be with him. Antonne wanted to be with her too. If he allowed himself to surrender to what was happening between them, he'd fall in love with her. But until he was out of the business and living a normal, safe life... he couldn't risk it. The commitment he had with Christina was a reflex more than love, and if he was to be honest with himself, he felt stronger feelings for Haley than every other woman he'd dealt with over the years after Dahlia.

It didn't help that her brother was one of his closest friends. If something happened to Haley because of him, hurting Hosea in the process, Antonne would *never* be able to forgive himself.

“What’s going on, mane?” Hosea asked as Antonne shoved his phone back into his pocket.

Since he couldn’t see Haley, he’d gone to her brother’s lounge instead. That led to them going up to his suite for a few beers and to watch the game, but all he could do was think about Haley and stare at pictures of her in his phone.

“Your sister ain’t tryna fuck with a nigga no more.”

“What you do?”

“It’s what I didn’t do,” Antonne admitted, squeezing the back of his head. “She doesn’t know about Dahlia.”

“Damn.” Sitting back in his seat, Hosea released a low whistle. “Is Dahlia the reason you don’t want to be with her?”

“In a way.” Antonne paused. “I want to be with your sister, let me make that clear. I can’t risk what happened with Dahlia happening with her. I can’t be the reason another woman loses her life, you feel me?”

“I do, and I respect that too. It’s easier to be selfish and go after what we want, regardless of who that hurts in the process. It takes a real man to be able to sacrifice their desires to protect someone they care about.”

“I know that in my head, but my heart ain’t really tryna hear all’at.”

They chuckled as Antonne finally opened the beer that Hosea gave him when they first made it up.

“Which one are you going to cater to?”

“I gotta listen to my mind. Logic is what’s going to keep her safe—emotionally and physically.”

“I’ma let you make that decision yourself, but I’ma tell you something that changed my perspective and allowed me to open up to Cartier after the devastating betrayal of my last love crippled me.” Antonne gave Hosea his full attention. “We think our thoughts guide our actions but it’s really our hearts. We think softness and being expressive is a weakness, but it’s really how we equip ourselves to love our women the way they need. That love is also strength because it gives you the

priority to do whatever it takes to keep that person safe and in your life. If you feel like being in the streets will keep you from presenting a version of yourself that is safe, expressive, and open for my sister... keep your distance. I'll support you when the time comes for you to take that next step, when you're ready, and decide to move."

Antonne nodded, allowing Hosea's words to enter both his mind and heart. He'd given him a lot to think about, and Antonne wouldn't make a move until he was sure it was best for him and Haley if he did so.

Haley
June

FOUR MONTHS HAD PASSED SINCE THE VALENTINE'S DAY event, and a lot had changed for Haley. All of it had been for the better. Her business was flourishing to the point where she had to hire more staff. The rest of her year was booked for catering events and private parties. While she still dated weekly, she'd started to grow bored with jumping from man to man.

Things with Antonne weren't awkward. They'd seemingly settled into a normal friendship. They didn't walk their dogs together anymore or spend time together one on one, but when they were with the crew, the vibe was positive and peaceful.

Aiyden had been more flirtatious lately, and since she had a deeper connection with him than the men she'd been dating, Haley was hanging with him more. Even though she was a champion of women and a girl's girl, Haley loved the companionship of a man. She and Aiyden were on the same page, and that page was, a relationship would never happen between them, but any and everything else was on the table.

They were in New York looking at dresses and tuxedos for Hosea and Cartier's wedding. Haley was honored when Hosea asked her to be his best woman. Cartier was her closest female friend, and there wasn't a better woman for her brother in Haley's mind. As they waited for Cartier to finish getting dressed so they could leave the boutique, Haley and Aiyden

were in their own little bubble talking and enjoying each other's company.

While she felt Antonne's eyes on her, she didn't let it faze her. As far as Haley was concerned, he had his chance to take things to the next level with her and chose otherwise. If she spent her free time with Aiyden or anyone else for that matter, it had nothing to do with him.

"What'chu getting into later?" Aiyden asked, gripping her thigh gently.

"I'm not sure. You know Saint has that surprise lined up for Harmony. After that, I might just tour the city."

"You want some company?"

"Of course! Do you have anything specific you want to do in mind?"

"Nah, you know I'm a go with the flow kind of man when I'm traveling. Wherever the wind blows us, we can head that way."

"That's what I love about hanging with you. It's never serious or any pressure. We just vibe and have a good time."

Aiyden licked his lips and gave her a sexy smile. "Life is too short for anything otherwise."

For a brief moment, she got lost in his stare... until she saw her brother headed in their direction.

"Let me holla at you for a minute," Hosea said, gently lifting Haley out of her seat by her arm.

"Is everything okay?" Her smile was comfortable as she looked around the waiting room of the boutique. "Where's my girl?"

"Still putting on her clothes." Hosea led her to a quiet corner with ottomans that had several pieces of fabric draped across them. "You need to decide if you want to be with Antonne or Aiyden and leave the other one alone."

Haley's expression turned serious as she considered her brother's words. "I have no earthly idea what you're talking

about.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Haley.”

“I’m not.” She shrugged innocently with a chuckle. “I’m not dating either one of them.”

“And sex?”

Her eyes rolled toward the ceiling as she crossed her arms over her chest. “I haven’t had sex with either of them... yet.”

“Haley...”

“Aiyden and I are just friendly. Flirtatious but friendly. I like him but I would never take him seriously.”

“Does he know that?”

With a nod, Haley looked back at Aiyden, whose attention was in his phone. “Yeah. It’s his brother for me. We all know Damien ain’t shit when it comes down to relationships. I refuse to believe Aiyden is the opposite of his brother. He might not be as bad or as public with his whoring and ain’t shit-ery, but I know he can’t be trusted just like his brother.”

As serious as Hosea wanted to appear, he couldn’t help but laugh. “Ain’t shit-ery?” he repeated with a shake of his head.

“Yes,” Haley replied in a matter-of-fact tone before laughing herself. “I really do like Aiyden, and I won’t lie, things may get physical between us one day, but that’s all it will ever be. I would never be able to trust him because of Damien, and it wouldn’t be fair to take that out on him if he truly was faithful.”

Hosea nodded. “That’s fair. And what about Antonne?”

Sadness flashed across Haley’s face as she hugged herself. “I like Antonne... a lot.” She released a bitter chuckle and circled her tongue across her cheek. “I’ve invited him to initiate something between us, but for whatever reason, he hasn’t. I’m tired of waiting for him to act on how he feels about me.”

“He’s never told you why he won’t pursue you?” Hosea confirmed in disbelief.

“No... You know?”

“Yeah. It’s because he’s in the streets. He doesn’t want to be with anyone he truly cares about while he’s living that life. It’s a deeper explanation, but that’s his truth to tell.”

Her shoulders slouched as she massaged her temples. “Well, I can respect that, but still. Everyone around us is finding love, and I deserve that too. If he doesn’t want to give it to me, for whatever reason, I’m not going to deny myself.”

“I can respect that. I just want to make sure you ain’t fucking with both of them at the same time.”

Haley’s head shook as she released a long sigh. “I wouldn’t do that. I know they both are like your brothers. I promised you I wouldn’t do anything with either of them to jeopardize your friendship with them. Aiyden and I talk shit and flirt, but it will never lead to anything serious. And Antonne... I guess that won’t lead to anything serious either.”

Hosea couldn’t ignore the sadness on his sister’s face, and it broke his heart. “I’m sorry, sis. I know you really like him, but he’s doing what he thinks is best for you.”

Her head bobbed slowly as she pouted. When it hung, Hosea pulled her into his arms. At the sound of her sniffles, Hosea closed his eyes and held her tighter. He hadn’t realized just how much Haley liked Antonne until now.

“He’s never going to make something happen between us... is he?”

Kissing the top of her head, Hosea sighed. “That’s not for me to answer, Haley. But I can honestly say, you’re good either way. If something were to happen to you because of him that would destroy him—and me. I trust him with you, but I’m not naïve. Even if Antonne leaves the game, he’s going to be associated with that life forever unless he leaves the city. I want you safe, even if that means you can’t be in a romantic relationship with him. With that being said, if he was to leave the city and start fresh and he wanted to take you with him... who knows? I guess you just have to wait and see.”

“No.” Wiping her eyes, Haley’s head shook. “I’m done waiting. Antonne knows how I feel about him, even if we’ve never said those words. If he hasn’t done it by now, he never will.”

“Are you going to be okay with that?”

“I don’t really have much of a choice... do I?”

As her tears poured, Hosea held Haley tighter in his arms. Her public display of emotion surprised Haley. She never cried, though if she did, it was with her brother. Not even her parents had the luxury of seeing her tears. For them to be falling because of Antonne, that was proof to her that she liked him more than she wanted to admit. And the mention of love? That was something she was sure she didn’t want six months ago. Not anytime soon, at least. Antonne had her saying and doing things that were beyond her control. Was that how it felt to be in love with someone?

HALEY HAD PUSHED THE OTTOMAN TOWARD THE WINDOW IN her suite to enjoy the beautiful, bright city views. After Saint proposed to Harmony, Haley hightailed it to her room. She felt like she did that week before Valentine’s Day all over again. Convinced she was over Antonne and had accepted their nonexistent romantic future, Haley was caught off guard by her public display of emotion earlier. It had always been a possibility that they would never be together, and even she said they would be just friends in February, but hearing her brother share a little bit of Antonne’s reasoning made that truth all too real.

Sniffing, Haley lifted her glass of tequila to her lips and took a sip. Antonne had given her a list of sipping tequilas and whiskeys to try, elevating her palate in a way that would make her think about him for the rest of her life. The alcohol she had before him for shots and margaritas had been God awful and a horrible burn on her throat with its rubbing alcohol taste, but the selections he’d given her were impeccable. He’d taught her how to sip and savor the spirit instead of taking it straight to the head and knocking it back. Now, when she drank and

reflected, even if she didn't want them to, her thoughts took her back to Antonne.

Releasing a sigh, Haley looked down into the glass of Tears of Llorona. She thought back to the night he introduced her to it.

It was the Wednesday before Graceland's event. They'd had dinner in his wine cellar, and he opened a bottle of fifteen-hundred-dollar wine for her enjoyment. It wasn't something she'd drink regularly, but she finally understood a bit of his love for it. That moment, with him, was one to be treasured and celebrated... and that wine was like the icing on the cake.

When they made it back upstairs to his sitting room, Antonne lit the fireplace and poured himself a glass of Tears of Llorona. He'd added a few sweeter wines and syrups to make mixed drinks for her, but Haley was curious about the three-hundred-dollar tequila that had raving reviews. It was the only brand her mother ever drank, and she only had it on her birthday.

"I want to try it, but I want to do it right," Haley said, standing from the couch and making her way over to him. "Teach me."

Amusement danced in his espresso brown eyes. "You sure? I know this kind of thing can be boring if you're not a true connoisseur..."

"No, I want to learn," she assured, aware of how uninterested Christina had been in his passion for wine and tequila. Of all the tastings and paint and sips and tours that Antonne did, Christina never attended any of them. Haley couldn't imagine how hard of a hit that was to their relationship.

"Okay." He gave her a soft smile. "Tears of Llorona is a mixed barrel extra anejo tequila that is aged for five years. A lot of people who don't usually like tequila enjoy this one because it's mixed in scotch, sherry, and brandy barrels." Instead of pouring hers in a tequila glass like his, he handed her a smaller tasting crystal glass. "Smell it."

She did and was pleasantly surprised. “Hmm, so it’s not a strong alcohol smell like I’m used to. In fact, it smells more like agave than alcohol, which is a promising start.”

He grinned. “Good. Germán González believes tequila should taste like agave, so that’s good. Smell it again. See if you get any other notes.”

Closing her eyes, Haley took a deeper whiff. “Caramel?” she asked more than said, and they shared a soft laugh.

“Yes, caramel. This tequila has notes of caramel custard, dried fruit, and dark chocolate.” His hand covered hers, and he tilted it slightly. “Give it a gentle roll to see the oil, or teardrops, it leaves behind on the glass.” She stared at it in awe. He had her take in the dark golden color as well before having her take a small sip.

Her eyes widened as she mumbled, “Wow.”

“Tell me how it feels,” he instructed softly, taking a small step in her direction... getting so close her nipples hardened and chill bumps covered her arms.

“Smooth. Very, very smooth. I feel that heat, though, but it’s not as peppery as other tequilas. It’s a pleasurable warmth. Like a hug for my throat.”

She giggled as he smiled.

“Sip a little more. Tell me how it tastes.”

She took a bigger sip, closing her eyes to savor it. “Mm. This is good, Stink. I get that agave, but also vanilla and citrus.” Another sip. “Leather maybe. I don’t know. I taste that smell in my mouth. And oak?”

“That’s good, bae.”

“It’s a little spicy but still really smooth.”

Haley opened her eyes. “This is definitely my new favorite.”

“We have to do this right.” Between the smoothness of his tone, and the sexy smirk he gave her, Haley found herself

hanging on to his every word. “Put it in your right hand, and as we toast, we lock eyes in celebration of our friendship.”

Their glasses gently clinked as they said, “Salud.”

He poured her a larger glass, and they went into the kitchen, where they made chocolate cake to go along with their tequila and cigars...

Wiping a single tear, Haley smiled at the memory. She chuckled, shaking her head in disbelief.

“I think I love that nigga.” Just as the revelation eased from her tongue, there was a knock on the door.

Taking a deep breath, Haley stood. At the sight of Aiyden, she smiled. He looked good in his black shorts and matching T-shirt. Black and white Jordan 1s matched the hat on his head.

“I was just checking on you. You left quick as hell after the proposal.”

Chuckling, Haley opened the door wider so he could step in. “Yeah, the moment, as beautiful as it was, put me in my feelings.”

“That’s usually what proposals and weddings do, right?” he confirmed, closing the door behind him.

“Yeah, but not for me. I haven’t wanted love and babies. I love my independence and freedom.”

“That’s changing?”

“I think so.”

They sat on the gray sofa in the center of the living room area. “I won’t stay long. Like I said, I just wanted to check on you.”

Nodding, Haley gritted her teeth and swallowed hard. Aiyden took her hand into his, as if he felt her battling her emotions.

“You know you can talk to me, right? It don’t always have to be jokes and small talk between us,” Aiyden assured.

She rolled her tongue over her teeth again and swallowed hard. “To make a long story short, I think I was triggered earlier while talking to my brother. Being reminded of the fact that nothing will ever happen between me and Antonne was a hard pill to come up and have to swallow again.”

Aiyden nodded, giving her a knowing smile. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah. I accepted it months ago, and I know it’s for the best. So I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way...”

“Oh God.”

Aiyden chuckled, gently squeezing her fingers. “It’s nothing bad. I... I started flirting with you to get him to step up.”

“Huh?” Her head jerked forward, eyebrows wrinkled.

“I always thought you were beautiful and cool as hell, but I knew Antonne liked you. I’m not a grimy ass nigga, so I would have never pursued you seriously out of respect for him. But I did start flirting and shit to make him stand on bidness about you. Throughout the process, I started to like you too. I’m genuinely sorry to hear things aren’t going to pop off between y’all, but I hope that leaves space for me to get through.”

“That was sweet of you, and I appreciate your effort, but yeah... I’ve given up on that. As far as we go, you know how I feel about your brother, and I don’t trust you aren’t as much of a playboy as him. But we can date and stuff... if that’s cool.”

“Yeah, with all the businesses I’m running, I don’t have time for anything serious. I just want to be able to continue to spend that one-on-one time with you.”

“You can. Hearing you say that makes me like and respect you even more. I’m glad you did that, if only because it allowed us to get to know each other better. You’re really cool, Aiyden, and I always enjoy myself with you.”

“Good.” He kissed her palm. “I’mma get outta here, though.”

Aiyden stood but Haley tugged him back down gently. “Stay,” she requested softly.

There was something about the vulnerability of his effort and sacrifice that turned her on. He sat closer, grazing her leg with his.

“What you wanna do?” he asked, lowering his eyes to her lips.

“You.”

He released a low, throaty moan, using the back of her neck to pull her close for a kiss. Haley swirled her tongue around his, and her nipples hardened immediately. It was thick and warm, and she hoped she had the pleasure of feeling it on her pussy.

Kisses and groping turned into Aiyden laying her flat on the couch. With slow urgency, he removed her panties and the shirt that covered her body. He made his way between her legs, wrapping them around his neck. His eyes were on hers as he slurped her clit into his mouth. She released a moan and gripped the back of the couch.

His tongue trailed down, caressing her opening and her asshole. Aiyden was an calculated lover—giving more of what made her squirm. He swirled his tongue around her asshole, smiling as her back arched and eyes closed.

“Mhm... You like this shit, huh?”

“Yes,” she chanted, surprised by how good it felt. He stayed there, massaging her clit and fingering her pussy as he licked and kissed her asshole until she came.

Aiyden stood and removed his clothing, showing her his dick was just as big as the rest of his body. He flipped her over, making sure she’d get the ultimate pleasure from the under turned curve of his dick. After feasting on her pussy from behind until she came again, Aiyden sheathed himself and slowly stretched her walls to fit him.

Haley gripped the couch as his pace picked up. He filled her with long, hard strokes that had her moaning as she bounced against him.

“This pussy keeps getting wetter and wetter,” he moaned.

Haley chuckled, but it turned into a whimper when he smacked her ass. He lowered and licked then kissed the same spot. Her body trembled as she hissed. “That’s because fucking you keeps getting better and better.”

“Tell me you love this dick,” Aiyden commanded, tightening his grip on her waist and using it to further arch her back.

“Ah!” she cried out, toes curling as her body numbed. “I love it,” Haley slurred. “Mm...” The sound of her wetness coating him filled the room as she came.

Aiyden continued to pound her pussy until her walls stopped pulsing. He pulled out and repositioned her so that her back was against the couch. Spreading her legs wide, he slowly slipped back inside.

“Shit, Aiyden.” She bit down on her bottom lip and gripped his arms as he stroked her. “Thank you.”

He chuckled, but her appreciation of the way he was fucking her didn’t make him miss a stroke.

“You wanna thank me? Cum on this dick.”

“Make me. Make me cum on it.”

“Mhm... I’m a make you squirt on it too.”

His deep strokes had her eyes rolling into the back of her head and mouth hanging open as she took every one. Aiyden did just as he said. He made her cum and squirt until she begged for mercy.

The Next Morning

THOUGHTS OF HER NIGHT WITH AIYDEN HAD HALEY IN A trance. Her breakfast grew cold as she thought about all the

ways he fucked her over her suite. By the time he left at three in the morning, her body was sore... and satisfied.

“Um, hello,” Cartier said. “Earth to Haley.”

“Sorry.” Sitting up in her seat, Haley squeezed her legs together as she chuckled.

They were having breakfast as a group before heading to Vegas for Cartier and Hosea’s impromptu wedding.

“What the hell you over there thinking about?” Harmony asked, making Haley chuckle.

She hadn’t planned to share details about her night with Aiyden, but she couldn’t help herself. Dick that good had to be bragged on. At her table, it was Harmony, Cartier, Denali, and her sister-in-law, Nicole. Honey, Janae, and the men were two tables over since they had too large of a party to sit together. No one had heard from Aiyden, and Haley was sure it was because he was asleep in his room.

“Chile, my night with Aiyden.”

“Aiyden!” Cartier yelled before slapping her hand over her mouth.

Immediately, Antonne’s eyes shifted in her direction, but Haley ignored them.

“*Jesus*, Cartier. Could you be any louder?” Haley said with a laugh.

“I’m sorry. I just wasn’t expecting that. Y’all had sex?”

“Yes, and it was amazing!” As the women clapped and squealed, Haley covered her face.

“Don’t get shy now,” Nicole said. “You busted it open for that nigga, now we need details.”

Haley lowered her hands as they all laughed. “Listen, all I’ll say is, his dick matches his height and shoe size. That man made me cum for *hours*.” Haley paused. “I’m ashamed to admit this, but I thanked him mid-stroke.”

As they cackled, Antonne’s head tilted as he frowned.

“So are y’all going to be a thing?” Harmony asked once their laughter died down.

“Honestly, no. He’s busy and I’m busy and...” Her eyes shifted in Antonne’s direction. “No. Plus, as great as the sex was, and I do mean it was great, something was missing.” With a sigh, Haley squeezed the back of her neck. “I think I’m finally getting tired of dating all these random niggas. I want sex with emotional attachment, not just a pleasurable relief. I want...”

“To make love?” Denali asked sweetly, causing Haley to blush.

“Yeah,” she admitted softly. “That.”

“Aww.” Cartier wrapped her arm around her for a side hug and kissed her cheek.

Aiyden walked in, and after giving the men handshakes, he headed straight for Haley.

“Oh shit,” she muttered.

“Oop. I think it’s time for another round,” Nicole said, causing a fit of laughter to erupt from their table.

Aiyden chuckled as he approached, already knowing what was up. “Wassup, ladies?”

“Hey, Aiyden,” they all sang like children.

He lowered himself, giving Haley a quick kiss that she willingly returned. Gasps left the table as Aiyden took her hand and helped her stand.

“I need to talk to you real quick,” he said, leading her out of the dining room.

“Uh, y-yeah, sure.”

Avoiding Antonne’s stare, Haley exited the dining room. She rested against the wall as Aiyden took a deep breath.

“There’s an issue with one of our businesses, so Damien and I are heading back home early. I hate to miss the wedding, but this can’t wait.”

“Of course. I’m sure Zay understands.”

“Yeah, I wanted to ask you...”

Aiyden’s words went in one ear and out of the other as Antonne approached them. He took her hand into his, stepping to the side of her so they both could see Antonne.

“Are you happy?” Antonne asked quietly, calmly.

Haley’s eyes prepared to shift from Antonne to Aiyden, whose grip on her hand tightened. Before they could, Antonne stepped closer, demanding her attention. With a soft nod, Haley swallowed hard. Her eyes watered. A soft whimper escaped her when Antonne’s large, veiny hand wrapped around her neck and tilted her head. He placed a kiss to the center of her forehead that made her eyes flutter and heart skip a beat.

Still holding onto her neck, Antonne extended his hand for Aiyden to shake. The gesture, his surrender of her and conceding to Aiyden, had Haley’s jaw clenching as her nostrils flared. She rapidly blinked back her tears as Antonne walked away. This was what she wanted—to be completely free of one to focus on the other—so why did Antonne’s surrender feel so much like rejection?

Blinking back her tears, Haley released a shaky breath.

“You okay?” Aiyden checked.

Nodding adamantly, Haley whispered, “Yes.”

She cupped her cheek, hiding the tear that fell.

“No, you’re not, Ley.” Aiyden took her into his arms. “Fuck what I was about to ask you. It’s clear you want that mane.”

“Aiyden...”

“If we keep this up, you’ll be settling. And I don’t want to get attached to you knowing you want someone else. It would be different if y’all were detached from each other.” Aiyden chuckled. “Love is there. I think you should talk to him about how you feel.”

Haley held him tighter as she swallowed her words. She couldn't force herself to go to Antonne. He had his reasons to not want her, and whether something happened with her and Aiyden or not, Haley would honor that.

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Antonne
Two Weeks Later

ANTONNE STARED INTO THE DISTANCE. NO MATTER HOW present he tried to be, he'd been operating on autopilot since they got back from New York. He knew there was a possibility that Haley would move on rather quickly, but he didn't expect her moving on to hurt as much as it did. It wasn't even the fact that it was with one of his friends. At least with Aiyden, he knew Haley would be safe, treasured, and taken care of.

Losing Haley felt like the ultimate sacrifice for the streets other than his life. She was the second woman he'd lost because of his lifestyle, just under different circumstances. It didn't matter how much Antonne told himself she was better off without him, he craved her.

It wasn't until Aiyden came and sat next to him that Antonne forced himself to return to the present. The guys were at Elite's home and the sound of music and laughter had dulled down because of his thoughts.

"You good?" Antonne checked out of habit, gripping the neck of his beer.

"Nah, the question is, are you good? The fuck are you doing, Ant?" Releasing a heavy sigh, Antonne hung his head as it shook. "I stepped out of the way. That girl shed tears over you. She don't want me; she want *you*."

"It don't matter. I can't risk losing her."

“You already lost her, and what’s worse is you ain’t lose her to a grave. You have to see her all the time. Tell me you good with how things are, and I’ll let it go. Nah, tell me you good with how things are, and I’ll go after her myself.”

Even though Antonne had made peace with the thought of them being together, he couldn’t stop himself from saying, “You go after my woman again and I’ma put a few bullets in yo’ big ass, nigga.”

The pair shared a chuckle and shook hands. “That’s what the fuck I’m talkin’ ’bout. Go after what’s yours. I’ve been a gentleman about this shit out of my respect for you. But I’m serious, brother. Haley is a damn good woman. Take her, or I will.”

Ayden stood, leaving Antonne alone with his thoughts.

Before he could settle in them fully, Tyreek and Kahlil headed over, sitting on opposite ends of him.

“Y’all good?” Tyreek confirmed.

“Always. You know ain’t shit comin’ between us.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Kahlil replied.

“How do y’all find the courage to love y’all women knowing your pasts can put them in harm’s way?”

Neither of the brothers answered immediately, but eventually, Kahlil spoke up first. “Honey faced danger because of me when we first got together, and the thought of losing her filled me with a fear and guilt that was unimaginable. But I had to remind myself that fear is just an emotion. And even though it’s a real emotion, I can’t live my life based off it. Instead of allowing it to riddle me anxious or force me away from the woman I knew would be my wife, it forced me to get my life together so that it would be a safe space for her. I’d give my life for hers in a motherfucking heartbeat. And if I die tomorrow, knowing all the time we’ve had is all the time we’ll have, I’d die a grateful man for just having experienced her love.”

“None of us can say for sure what will happen in the future,” Tyreek picked up. “All we have is today. Janae and I

have our issues, and we vowed to take this shit day by day. That's what keeps us free from the pain of our past or the anxiety of our future. If all you had was today, would you want to spend it here with us missing her, or with her? If you live every day like it's your last one, you'll start making decisions and acting as if living and love are your true priority. If you live in the present, all that other shit really won't matter."

"I 'preciate y'all, brothers. Both of you gave me a lot to think on. For real."

"Nah, you've done enough thinking," Kahlil said before chuckling. "You live in your head, and *that's* the problem. Be intentional with your love and pursuit, but for once, just go off how you feel." He poked Antonne's chest. "What's in your heart? What is your heart telling you to do?"

His heart was telling him to go and get his woman before someone else did.

His heart was telling him what happened with Dahlia wouldn't happen with Haley.

His heart was telling him Haley deserved the truth.

After taking a long sip of his beer, Antonne stood. "My heart is tellin' me I need to go get my woman."

ANTONNE WATCHED HALEY FROM AFAR. HE'D GOTTEN HER location from Hosea. She was at a steakhouse on a date, and she looked beautiful. Something was different about her that night, though. Her smile wasn't lifting to her eyes. The normally happy woman seemed like a shell of herself. Antonne couldn't help but wonder if he had anything to do with that. He quickly humbled himself, refusing to believe he had that big of a space in her heart and life.

Instead of intruding on her date's time like he wanted to, he went over to the bar instead. He scanned their selection, deciding on a bottle of Moët. After waving the bartender down, he asked for paper and a pen and to have the note

delivered with the bottle of champagne. Antonne hung back, watching Haley's face as she read the note.

A toast, for this joyous occasion in which love finally gets its turn. Enjoy your date, Stink. It'll be the last one you ever have with a man that isn't me.

Her fingers trembled as she set the note down. Blinking rapidly, she grinned and nodded for the bartender to pour her a glass. Antonne laughed when she outstretched her arm to keep him from pouring her date one, taking the bottle herself instead.

I think I love this girl, he thought, shaking his head and patting his chest gently.

Haley looked around the dining room for him, catching only the back of his frame as he walked away...

Haley

A SMILED SPREAD HALEY'S LIPS FROM THE MOMENT THE champagne and note were delivered until her date dropped her off back home. Quite frankly, going on a date was the last thing she wanted to do, but she refused to wallow in sadness over not having the man she truly wanted. As great as sex was with Aiyden, she accepted what they had was a one-time thing when she made it back to Memphis after the wedding and found herself on his doorstep.

Aiyden stood at his doorstep, shirtless.

Squeezing her fingers, Haley avoided his eyes. "Me being here... would be like me using you. You should turn me away, Aiyden, but I really don't want you to."

A crooked smile lifted the corner of his mouth as he took her hand into his and pulled her into his home. "I ain't got no problem with you using me, Haley. Use me until you've released every tear or drop of cum in that pussy. Whichever release you need that comes first."

"You're such a good friend. Always so kind."

"Is that what you need tonight? A friend?"

She thought she needed to get her back blown out. But maybe that was what she needed—a friend, and a hug.

"I think so."

“Good, because I meant what I said before we left New York. I’m not standing in the middle of you and Ant. You want him, whether you want to tell him or not, and I’m not getting in the way of that.”

“Yeah, I do, but you’re right... I’m not going to tell him.”

With a sigh, Aiyden shook his head. “How about I invite a few people over and we can have a little set? Will that take your mind off things?”

Her head nodded as she looked up at him with a sweet smile. “That sounds perfect.”

Since that night, she and Aiyden were on the same page about their friendship. That night in New York would be a core memory for her. Not just because it was some of the best sex she’d ever had, but because it was also the weekend she forced herself to finally accept how she truly felt about Antonne. Haley often told herself one day she’d have the courage to tell him, but that wasn’t the way she was raised. Her pastor of a mother and judge of a father provided an atmosphere for her to thrive in her femininity, and a big part of that was receiving and inviting but never taking the lead when it came to men... except in the bedroom.

Her father and brother taught her men would have sex with literally anyone they could, and they’d often go along with what a woman allowed. If she wanted a man to stand on his actions and have true intentions, she needed to let him take the lead... Even if that meant leading them in separate directions.

By the time Haley had gotten out of her heels and dress, there was a knock at her door. Her heart dropped immediately at the thought of something being wrong. She grabbed the first gown she touched from her drawer, which turned out to be a yellow silk one. After checking the security app on her phone and seeing Antonne, she smiled. As excited as she was to go to him, her feet wouldn’t move right away. He looked directly into the camera, giving her a wink and that smile she’d fallen in love with.

“Come let me in, bae,” he commanded, his raspy voice lower than usual.

A short moan escaped her as she bit down on her bottom lip and tossed her phone onto her bed. Trying not to squeal, she hurried down the stairs to the front door. Haley took a deep breath to compose herself before opening the door.

“Hey, Stink,” he greeted before licking his lips and eyeing her frame.

Her lips parted slightly as she took him in. Very rarely did Antonne dress down, but when he did, he looked just as good as he did in a suit. Gray sweats molded against his frame, not trying to hide his long dick print. A form fitting white T-shirt stretched around his wide chest. Black, white, and gray Jordan 1s matched the black hat on his head.

Antonne gave her a quick, soft kiss... barely allowing her to register having his lips on hers before he was pulling away.

“Can I come in so we can talk?”

Clearing her throat and hoping that would help words come out, Haley nodded and opened the door wider. “Y-yeah, come in.”

The chuckle he released was quiet as he stepped inside. Antonne led the way to her kitchen, where he placed a bag on top of the island. Haley crossed her arms over her chest and watched as he pulled out item after item. Vodka, caviar, and what appeared to be a homemade indulge box.

“I’m glad you brought the champagne,” he said.

“When most men show up uninvited, they bring flowers... not eight-hundred-dollar caviar,” Haley teased.

“I think we’ve already established I’m not like most men, Ley.”

That was most *certainly* true.

Licking the corner of her mouth, Haley shook her head. “Antonne, if this isn’t going to lead to things changing between us...”

“Do you still trust me?”

With no hesitation, Haley answered with, “Yes.”

“Then let me do my thang.”

Lifting her hands in surrender, she agreed. “Fine.”

“Go get in bed. And before any anxiety sets in, we’re not having sex.”

A calm washed over her at the sound of his words. As much as she wanted to have him inside of her, Haley knew they had a lot to discuss. Haley made her way back into her room, looking around to make sure nothing was out of place before Antonne joined her. Like the rest of her home, it had a green color scheme with hints of pink. Large plants took up every corner of the room. Nothing was out of place since she cleaned up well behind herself, but her vanity was a little messier than usual since she rushed doing her makeup before her date.

Antonne made his way inside, and the presentation of the tray he’d put together had her melting and gushing as he walked over to her. He set a large tray in the middle of her bed. To drink, he poured vodka and champagne. Along with the caviar, he had diced pickles, plain chips, crème fraiche, and blackberry jam.

Haley hated to admit it, but Antonne was the kind of man who paid attention to all things, even if he didn’t use the information immediately. Everything on that tray were things she’d mentioned loving during conversation. No one else in their group liked caviar, so they talked about their favorite pairings for it years ago. Haley never thought that one conversation would lead to her eating caviar in bed with him.

Her eyes stayed on Antonne as he dressed down to his boxers. Her pussy instantly began to drip at the sight of his tattooed chest, six pack, and thick dick pressed against his boxers. He slipped into bed with her, pulling the tray close. Haley’s nose immediately went to his arm and inhaled his scent.

“You always smell so good,” she complimented before taking in a deep whiff to make up for lost time.

“As do you. You always look good too. It took everything in me not to approach you at the restaurant earlier.”

“I was so scared you would.” She chuckled. “I didn’t want you coming to blows with that man if he said the wrong thing, so I’m glad you kept your distance.”

“Yeah, I didn’t mind you finishing that date. Like I said, it’s the last one you’ll have with a man that’s not me.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

“I’m sure of that because I’m sure of me.” As he spread the crème fraiche on a thick, salty chip, he told her, “We have a lot to talk about. Things that I’m not too quick to discuss with anyone. I believe before we can move forward, you have to know about my past.”

There were things about her—secrets, and loyalties, and obligations—that no one, not even her brother, was aware of. Things that, if they came to the surface, would change the course of every relationship in Haley’s life. She respected Antonne’s desire to keep certain things to himself, but if he wanted to share, she’d listen with honor.

After topping the crème with jam and caviar, he fed it to her. She moaned, savoring the layered taste of fish eggs combined with the salty, sweet, and crunchy pairing of additional ingredients.

“Mm,” she moaned, smiling and biting down on her bottom lip. “Lord knows my daddy raised me with expensive taste. I love this.”

“Good thing I can oblige you.”

Antonne fed her a few more, placing the caviar and diced pickles on his purlicue for her to suck off with a caviar bump before taking a shot of vodka. Between kisses and bites, Haley felt herself relaxing more and more. By the time Antonne started to open up, it felt like old times and like no time apart had passed between them.

“Pops was heavy in the game when he met Ma Dukes. She accepted him unconditionally and didn’t ask him to leave the streets when they got married. She did, however, ask him to

leave when they had their children. To her, it was her choice to get with a nigga in the streets. If she lost him because of it, she'd accept that. But a child had no choice what family they were born into, and she didn't want his lifestyle to take him away from their family prematurely. When she got pregnant with Simeon, he retired like he said he would. It was a costly transition, and it took a couple of years, but his dealer respected why my father was leaving and didn't give him a hard time about it."

Antonne paused. "Simeon retired when he got married, but it wasn't as easy for him to leave. He left the country to ensure his wife and unborn child's safety." He squeezed the back of his neck, releasing a shaky breath. "Jackson wasn't... He couldn't..." As he struggled to find the words, his head shook. Haley covered his hands with hers. "He chose to stay in the game, and for a while it was cool. It wasn't until some young niggas moved in on his territory that shit started getting crazy. They had no honor, no integrity. They hit 'em up while he had his fuckin' baby in his arms."

He wiped a quickly fallen tear and pulled in a deep breath. Haley covered her mouth as tears threatened to pour.

"Don't shit scar you and stay engrained in your brain like the sight of a small casket. I still see that shit in my dreams to this day." The chuckle he released wasn't humorous at all. "Yvonne, his baby mama, left him after that. Jackson went on a rampage. He caught them bodies in broad daylight for my nephew and didn't give a damn about getting that life sentence behind it."

Scooting closer, Haley wrapped her arm around his. "And for me... I lost Dahlia."

Dahlia?

Haley had never heard that name before.

"It was right before I met Zay. An enemy of my boss wanted to put me out of commission so he could get to him. She was so green to the lifestyle that she walked right into a trap. They killed her to get to me, and from that point forward, I swore I would never let a woman be my weakness again. I'd

never let a woman be a target because of me again. Her blood was literally on my hands because I tried to have a romantic relationship, knowing how deadly this street shit is.

“I’ve been okay with not committing, not loving... until you. That shit with Christina was lightwork compared to what I feel for you. I’m an exceptional lover, whether I commit to a woman or not. I intended to make a woman feel every ounce of my desire, respect, and admiration for her. A title was just a word... Then came you.

“I’ve never forgiven myself for what happened with Dahlia, and I probably never will, that’s why I haven’t tried to pursue you, Haley. It’s never been because I don’t want you. I just... didn’t want anything to happen to you because of me. If a nigga came after you tryna get to me, I’d paint this whole city red and be in that cell with my fuckin’ brotha.”

Unable to witness him unravel any further, Haley moved the tray and pulled him into her arms. He held on for as long as he could before releasing the most heartbreaking, guttural sobs she’d ever heard. Not just for Dahlia, but for his brother and nephew too. Haley released her own tears, finally understanding his hesitance. After seeing what happened with Simeon and Jackson, then losing Dahlia, Haley understood why Antonne hesitated to open up and commit to her. If that never happened, she’d be okay with it now that he’d shared his truth, but she hoped this would still be the start of something new.

The Next Morning

FOR HALEY, COOKING WAS AN ACT OF NURTURE AND LOVE. She always put extra care and effort into the meals she produced for others, and breakfast for Antonne was no different. They’d spent the evening cuddled up in silence after his confession until they fell asleep.

When they woke up, Antonne left to go home and freshen up while she cooked breakfast. By the time he made it back, Haley had created a feast of fried catfish, French toast, eggs, spinach, and grits.

“Damn. If this how you comin’ I’ma have to swing by for breakfast every day,” Antonne said, wrapping his arm around her waist as she cut his French toast.

She couldn’t help herself. Every part of her wanted to love and serve this man.

“I definitely won’t turn you away,” she replied, feeding him a piece of French toast.

“Mm.” His eyes closed and body relaxed as he savored the morsel. “That’s the best French toast I’ve ever had. It doesn’t even need syrup.”

“I know, right?”

“How did you think to pair fried fish and French toast?”

“Well, it was kind of an accident,” she admitted, sitting next to him with her own plate. “I had fried fish for dinner one night and wanted a roll with my spaghetti. I didn’t have any, but I had a few pieces of French toast left over from breakfast, so I had that. That shit was bomb as hell. You’ll have to try it like that too.”

“If you want to live with me, just say that, Stink.”

Haley laughed. “You know what? I’m all about my freedom and independence but I can’t lie and say I didn’t enjoy going to sleep and waking up next to you.”

“Good. Let’s do it more.” They shared a brief kiss before he asked, “Did you get an email from Graceland this morning?”

“I got mine yesterday morning actually. My first thought was, it seems fate keeps trying to pull us together, and you want to keep us apart.”

Graceland had emailed them both asking if they’d be interested in partnering for future events with her. Though she made it clear she’d work with only one, she stressed wanting them both.

“Yeah, that experience made me realize how great we are together. How good of a partnership we have. Even if I hadn’t come after you last night, after getting her email and reflecting

on everything, I would've still come here to tell you my truth. I felt like, even if nothing came from us on a romantic level, you deserved the full story."

"I'm glad you shared that with me. It made everything make sense. I knew I wasn't alone in how I was feeling for you but since you weren't saying anything I felt stupid for liking you."

Antonne waited until he finished taking a sip of the mimosa she poured him to respond. "I thought if I told you I liked you and wanted you but never made it happen you would think I was on some bullshit or lying to have sex with you. It felt like I was in a lose-lose situation."

"How do you feel now? I mean, you're still working for Crimson, right?"

Antonne wiped the corners of his mouth as his head bobbed. "Yeah, but not full time. I only accompany her to meetings now. I found a team that I'm comfortable leaving her with, but they aren't as fluently trained as I'd like. So I'm training them for the next three months, then I'll be gone completely."

"And what about after you leave? Will you have peace in knowing things will be safe for us?"

"The difference between my position now and my family's in the past is that I'm her protector. I don't have enemies because of what I do for her. If she has a problem with someone, death is the solution. And if I feel like someone will try to avenge their loss and come after her, I'll kill off their entire bloodline before I let them touch her." Between the serious expression on his face and ice lacing his tone, a shiver shot down her spine. "I'm not concerned about our safety when I retire, it's just while I'm working that's a concern for me. However, if I'm willing to go to war for her because of a check and loyalty, you can rest assured I'm coming ten times as hard behind the woman I love."

Heat radiated from her core at the sound of his words. "You love me?" she almost whispered, causing him to smile.

“I’ve been in love with you since the moment I met you. I apologize for taking five years to admit that truth, but if you’re willing... I want to spend the rest of our lives making it up to you.”

Her chin almost touched her chest from blushing so hard. “I’m in love with you too.”

His alarm going off cut off his reply. “Shit. I forgot she has a meeting today.” Antonne stood, lifting her from her bar stool as well. “I gotta go, but I’ll see you later, okay?”

Haley couldn’t help the anxiety that filled her. A hug turned into him picking her up and wrapping her legs around him. The deep, tender kiss he gave her eased her nerves a bit, but she still found it difficult to let him go.

“We make progress, and you leave and come back acting like nothing happened, Ton.”

He gave her a soft smile and a sweet kiss. “That won’t be the case anymore. I promise.”

Cupping his cheeks, Haley searched for the truth in his eyes. When she found it, she wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him another hug before she released him.

“I’ll call you after I leave, aight?”

“Okay, be careful.”

“Always,” he guaranteed, rushing toward the door.

Running her fingers through her hair, Haley repeatedly told herself he would be okay. That *they* would be okay. That he would be able to leave Crimson and live a normal life with her. That nothing would stop them from finally getting their happily ever after.

Antonne That Weekend

“WELL, IT LOOKS LIKE YOU OFFICIALLY NEED AN ASSISTANT,” Dedra said, chuckling at her son’s expense. He had so many requests for his services and for him to host events that he’d stopped trying to keep up with them all. For a while, his mother answered the emails and kept up with his calendar, but it appeared she was overwhelmed as well.

“You quittin’ on me?” he asked through his chuckle.

“I’m sorry, son, but your mama ain’t worked a secretarial job since before I got married. This kind of work is above me now.”

He released a bark of laughter as she pushed the calendar toward him and threw her hands in the air.

“That’s cool. I ’preciate all that you’ve done so far.”

“Of course, baby. I’m just glad you’ve finally started to take your passions and business seriously.”

That had been the running theme lately. Everyone in his life congratulated him for that. He couldn’t wait for the day he’d be able to completely detach himself from Crimson and devote himself to being a sommelier. His loyalty wouldn’t allow Antonne to leave her until he had the same confidence in her team that he had in himself.

“You and me both. What you and Pops got planned for the weekend?”

“He wants to take a quick trip to Tunica and do a little gambling.”

“Sounds good.” He took a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and gave it to her. “Tell ’em to use that at one of them tables and cut me in on his profit.”

With a chuckle, Debra stood and put the bill in her bosom. “I will. Let me get on out of here so I can rest before we hit the road. You taking Pretty Girl out tonight, you said?”

“Yes, ma’am. I wanna stop by her folks’ house and get her pops permission first. He’s been cool and accepting of me as their friend. I only hope he extends the same approval of me as her man.”

“Well... you know who he is and what he does. If he doesn’t, you have to respect that, but don’t let it keep you from getting your girl.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he agreed before giving her a hug and walking her out.

Earlier, he had breakfast with his grandmother, and seeing Massie was *always* a great start to his day. After seeing to his current foster dog, Lulu, Antonne headed out to run his afternoon errands. He decided to stop by Dauterive’s staffing agency to see about getting an assistant. The last thing he wanted to do was lose potential business because he couldn’t keep up with correspondence.

As he walked into her office, he shot the woman at the front desk a nod.

“Hi. Welcome to Dauterive Staffing. Do you have an interview?”

Antonne chuckled with a shake of his head. “Nah. I’m here to see Doe. Is she here?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll grab her for you.” She stood. “May I have your name and what this is in reference to?”

“Tell ’er it’s Ant.”

Giving him a tight-lipped smile, the older woman bobbed her head and rounded the corner. It didn't take long before she was returning with Dauterive.

“Antonne Pierre Walker!”

At the sound of Dauterive calling him by his full government name, Antonne couldn't help but laugh. She was the only one who got away with doing that while they were in high school, and that was only because they were study partners and she helped him maintain his A average.

“Boy, getcho ass over here and give me a hug!”

Antonne lifted her in his arms and spun her around. About three years had passed since they'd seen each other, and he hadn't realized it had been that long until he pulled into the parking lot of her business.

“It's so fuckin' good to see you, girl. I missed you.”

“Nah, don't give me that. If you missed me, you wouldn't have let so much time pass by,” she fussed as Antonne placed her back on her feet.

“The phone works both ways, Doe. I haven't heard from you either.”

“That's true. Life has been life-ing and time did not slow down at all. Are you okay? I know it has to be something major if you randomly stopped by.”

“I'm good. Great, actually. I need an assistant, though. You think you can help me out?”

“Of course! Regina,” she said, looking behind her at the woman behind the front desk. “Please hold my calls and next appointment until Mr. Walker leaves.”

“You've got it,” she agreed.

As Dauterive led Antonne back to her office, he checked the time on his phone. He was making great timing and didn't see himself being late to pick Haley up later that evening for their first official date.

ANTONNE HADN'T PLANNED TO SIT OUTSIDE IN HEZEKIAH AND Piper's driveway as long as he did, but his conversation with Dauterive was heavy on his mind and heart. Once she had three interviews set up for potential assistants for him, they caught up on their lives. Hers was flourishing in every area except her marriage. Just at the mention of her husband, she broke down. Those tears had to have been at the brim to release so suddenly, and they caught her off guard.

Though she promised him she would be okay, Antonne told her he was there if she needed him or simply needed to talk. He was tempted to pay her husband a visit. Those kinds of tears had a hell of a lot of pain in them. She was far too beautiful and free spirited of a woman to be weighed down by such pain, and Antonne hoped that she would soon come out of whatever she was going through.

Finally pulling himself out of his BMW, Antonne headed toward the front door and said a silent prayer for the best. It didn't take long before Piper was opening and giving him a warm hug. She led him to the living room, where Hezekiah was propped up watching an old western. As a criminal judge, Hezekiah treasured his weekends and very rarely used that time for work. Antonne had always respected his work-play balance and hoped one day to achieve it for himself.

Hezekiah stood and shook his hand, offering him a beer as he sat back down. Antonne declined as he took a seat on the dark brown sofa next to his recliner.

"Is everything okay, Antonne?" Piper asked. "You sounded very serious when you asked to speak with us. Do you need prayer?"

Antonne didn't mean for his laugh to spill out, but he couldn't help himself. Hezekiah chuckled himself with a shake of his head.

"My grandma says its unwise to turn down prayer from someone you trust; however, that's not the reason for this visit."

"Then what is?" Hezekiah asked.

“I’m taking Haley out tonight, and I’m asking her to be my woman. I wanted your permission to ask her to be my wife.”

While Piper gasped and clutched her chest, Hezekiah sat up in his seat.

“You’re saying you’re asking to commit tonight not make her your wife, correct?” Hezekiah confirmed.

“Correct.”

“Then why are you asking for permission now?”

“I’ve been in love with your daughter since I met her five years ago. I don’t intend to take long to make her my wife. Six months from today at the most.”

“What’s the rush, not that I don’t honor your desire,” Piper said.

“We’ve wasted enough time apart. I *know* she’s my wife. Why wait years dating when we can be enjoying life, doing what we love together, and starting our family?”

Piper nodded, smiling, with tears in her eyes.

“I appreciate you coming to us for permission,” Hezekiah said, “But I won’t lie and say your profession is not a huge concern. You’re good at what you do because you’ve never ended up in my courtroom, but all those rumors have to have a bit of truth to them.”

Antonne thought over his answer to be careful with his words.

“If your concern is your daughter’s safety, I can assure you that any alliances I have that might jeopardize that or shine an unfavorable light on you will be dissolved before I give her my last name.”

Hezekiah and Piper locked eyes, speaking a language only they understood from years of being tied at the soul. It wasn’t until Piper bobbed her head and relaxed further in her seat that Hezekiah spoke.

“If you can promise me that you will not be into any illegal things, you have our permission to propose.”

Antonne's heart dropped in relief and he smiled as he stood. They did the same, pulling him in for an embrace. When Piper told him, "Welcome to the family, son," Antonne couldn't help but smile.

Haley

“YES, LORD.”

That two-word statement always had a way of melting Haley. She loved his appreciation of her body and her beauty. This time, he was able to physically show her how much he loved her look for the evening. When she dressed in the white bodycon dress that came mid-thigh, she did so with him in mind. Red lipstick matched her nails, clutch, and heels. Unfortunately, Haley hadn't taken into consideration how good it would feel to have his hands and lips on her and what that would lead to.

“Baby,” she cooed as he lifted her and wrapped her legs around him.

“You smell good as fuck.” His breath against her neck made her shiver. “And you look so sexy... so gorgeous...”

“We're gonna be late for our reservation, Stink,” she warned.

“Fuck that reservation. We'll eat somewhere else.”

Haley had no desire to convince him of otherwise as he laid her in the center of her bed. For years, she wondered what that dick could do and was glad she was about to find out.

Antonne took his time with her, kissing, licking, and nibbling his way up her body. He removed her dress and

underwear, leaving her heels on her feet. After giving her a passionate kiss that left her breathless, Antonne made his way between her legs. For a while, he stared at her pussy with her legs spread. She knew there was a puddle waiting for him at her opening.

“Damn,” he muttered with a shake of his head before licking up every drop of her anticipation.

Her body immediately relaxed against the bed. Lifting her arms, she grabbed her pillow and pulled in deep breaths as he licked between her slick folds. He kissed her thighs and made his way back up her stomach as his pointer and middle fingers pressed their way inside her. As he fingered her, he nibbled and sucked her nipples and neck. Antonne returned his lips to hers, kissing her until she was on the verge of climax.

He waited until her walls began to pulse before he pulled his fingers out and made his way back to her pussy.

With his eyes locked on hers, he licked up every drop of her cum that spilled as her walls pulsed, and it was the most erotic thing a man had ever done. He feasted on her pussy as if he hadn't eaten in *days*. Between his moans, slurps, and nose sliding between her slippery folds, it wasn't long before Haley was cumming again.

In desperate need to have him inside of her, Haley tugged him up her frame.

“Baby, please, I need you,” she whined, trying to remove his clothing quickly.

Standing, Antonne removed his clothing, causing her mouth to water at the sight of his length and upward curve. A quiet moan escaped her as he made his way between her legs.

Each inch of himself that Antonne filled her with had Haley clawing at his back as she gasped. Once he was all the way inside, he wrapped his arms around her back vertically and slightly lifted her off the bed. Holding her chest to his, he rocked her against him slowly, filling her deeply.

Quiet moans and whimpers escaped her as he made love to her. She'd never been so vocal... or so wet... in her life. There

were times she forgot how to breathe. All she could focus on was how good having him inside of her felt.

When she whimpered, “Oh God,” as her toes curled and body tingled, he told her...

“Moan my name,” and she did. “Louder.”

“Ah... oh my... Antonne,” she slurred, jerking against him as she came.

“You got it, bae. Cum all *over* my dick.”

With his encouragement, she pulsed against him, tightening her frame against him as she came. Lifting himself up, Antonne kept her legs in the crook of his arms and bounced her up and down on his dick.

Haley released a sizzling breath as she held him tightly. In that position, he was filling her to the hilt and brushing her clit against him in the process. It was the most intense thing she'd ever felt, and it was almost overwhelming. While a part of her wanted to run, the other part wanted to feel it forever. The more she squirmed against him, the tighter Antonne maintained his grip around her.

“Look at me,” he commanded. And she did, for just a second. His strokes were so drugging, so dizzying, her eyes fluttered as she moaned and hummed. “Look at me, or I'll stop.” Her eyes locked with his, and he gave her that sexy smile. “That's it, bae. Look at me while you take this dick.”

That was her undoing. As she gushed and squirted, he held her close, calming her frazzled state with, “I'm right here, Haley. I got you, bae,” which only made her cum longer.

Antonne laid her flat on her back, filling her with long... deep strokes. She reached between them and massaged his balls as she rocked against him, though she wasn't sure how much strength she'd have to fuck him back for long. With her ankles on his shoulders, she became mesmerized by the sight of his gold chain dangling in her face as his dick hid inside her. Her head shook and frustration grew over how long he'd kept this good dick from her. Tears came to her eyes.

“I want this dick *forever*,” she begged, unlocking his orgasm.

“Mm... you look so fuckin’ pretty when you beg,” he moaned before releasing a growl. His body jerked and seeds released deep inside of her pussy.

THE PAIR HAD, IN FACT, MISSED THEIR RESERVATION. INSTEAD of going and waiting for a table, they changed into sweats and T-shirts and changed their plans for the evening. What was supposed to be a romantic evening of fine dining turned into shooting dice and playing Spades in the hood. Haley shocked Antonne, Saint, and Elite by ending the night twenty-five thousand dollars richer thanks to her ability to shoot dice.

Afterward, they got high as hell and ate greasy cheeseburgers from Dixie Queen before alternating between fucking and smoking until four in the morning. By the time her alarm started to go off, it felt like Haley had just gotten to sleep. She cut it off quickly, grateful she didn’t have to go to work that day. Even if she had, the long day would have been worth it after the amazing night she had with her man.

ALL THEY COULD DO WAS STARE AT EACH OTHER. ANTONNE insisted on a redo for the night before, so he took her to Flight where they had great food, wine, and whiskey. They talked in deeper detail about her love for dating, marriage, and children. They also talked about their goals, desires, and motivations. Even after being his friend for five years, Haley felt proud to see this new layer exposed.

“Before we go, there’s something I want to give you and ask you,” Antonne announced. “I know you like dating because of the excitement and honeymoon stage. I can’t promise you that we won’t have issues, but I can promise you that I’ll be dedicated to solving any problem we might have and keeping us as partners against it, not enemies against one another. And I also can’t promise we won’t have boring moments, but I’ve learned as I mature that sometimes boring

moments give you slow periods to realize how calm and at peace your life or relationship is. I can promise to always put forth the effort to keep the spark between us.”

Antonne motioned toward someone with his head. The waiter came over, holding a bag and a plate. He set the plate in front of her, and Haley smiled at the question written underneath the bread pudding in caramel sauce.

Will you date me for the rest of our lives?

Covering her mouth, she giggled sweetly.

“I’m your man, but will you be my woman? If it makes you feel better, we can call it an endless amount of dates for the rest of our days.”

The waiter set the bag on the table next to her, giving them privacy. Instead of answering vocally, Haley stood and walked over to Antonne’s side of the table. He wasted no time helping her get comfortable on his lap. Cupping his cheek, Haley gave him a slow, passionate kiss that made him moan as he kissed her.

“I would love to date you for the rest of our lives,” she answered. “Of course, I’ll be your woman.”

“I already knew, but your brother said you’d think I was more romantic if I asked instead of just telling you.”

Haley rolled her eyes playfully as she stood and walked back over to her chair. “You and Elite got that shit bad.”

“Nah, we got it good with knowing who and what belongs to us.”

“Mhm.” Haley grinned as she opened the box, but her smile fell when she realized what was inside. Looking up at him, her smile returned. “I know you didn’t!”

Antonne chuckled, watching with pride as she opened the Van Cleef jewelry. He’d gotten her a three-piece set. The Vintage Alhambra Mother of Pearl earrings, bracelet, and necklace were absolutely stunning. If she got a twenty-two-thousand-dollar jewelry set when he asked her to be his

girlfriend, she couldn't wait to see what she'd get when she became his wife and the mother of his children.

“These are so beautiful, baby. Especially this bracelet. I love the five motifs.”

“I'm glad.”

After putting everything securely in the bag, she told him, “I think we should leave, so I can properly show you how much I love everything you've done tonight...”

Antonne

AT THE FEEL OF HALEY'S HANDS ON HIS SHOULDERS, Antonne immediately relaxed. He'd given her a few stacks of cash to shop with while he finished up a few notes and flavor profiles for his upcoming wine tasting. It was the first time he'd be showcasing the black owned wine brand and wanted to do it justice. As much as he wanted to spend the day with Haley since she didn't go in for work, he had to prioritize his profiles so she could create a menu to go along with it.

"I've let you work all day," she whispered against his ear before kissing it and sticking her tongue inside, eliciting a guttural moan from him. "I want you... now."

Instantly, his dick began to harden, and work became the last thing on his mind.

"Oh, but wait!" Haley walked around the chair and sat on his lap. "I got a new joke."

Antonne chuckled as he wrapped his arms around her waist. "Aight, Stink. Lay it on me."

"What do you call an angry carrot?"

"What is it with you and food jokes? They're just about as corny as your dad jokes."

"Just answer!" She softly punched his chest with a pout.

"Aight, what?"

“A steamed veggie.”

As she cackled, Antonne stood and began to carry her toward her bedroom while laughing at her silliness, stopping in front of her playroom. The room was orange everything—orange walls, flooring, table, and chairs. It even had orange lighting and an orange ceiling. She told him it was because it helped her keep her sacral chakra balanced, maintaining a constant flow of creative, sexual, and expressive energy.

“Dance for me,” he requested, realizing he’d never had the pleasure of seeing her work her pole before.

“Okay,” she agreed with a sexy smile and no hesitation.

After they entered the room, she cut the spotlights on, which shined on the pole. Haley set a chair just a few feet in front of it. Briefly, she left the room, returning in a burnt orange colored lingerie set that he couldn’t *wait* to take off her toned, thick body. Antonne moaned under his breath and bit down on his bottom lip as he spread his legs. His dick was getting uncomfortably hard.

A Jhene Aiko playlist crooned as she danced. “P*SSY Fairy (OTW)” and the remix shifted into “Living Room Flow” as she worked the pole and did floorwork that had him opening and closing his legs and gripping the edge of the seat to keep from getting up and touching her. Every time she spread her legs, exposing that wet spot in the seat of her panties, or twerked and allowed her juicy cheeks to clap, a quiet curse escaped his lips. By the fifth song, Antonne couldn’t take it anymore.

He stood and made his way over to her. She was in the middle of hanging upside down on the pole with her legs spread wide, slowly clapping her cheeks.

“Hold on,” he commanded before ripping her panties, cupping her ass cheeks, and burying his face in her pussy. She cried out instantly, wrapping her legs around his neck. “Open them legs so I can eat.”

Haley gripped the pole tightly as he feasted on her pussy. He left not one inch or crevice of her dry. As he dipped his

tongue in and out of her pussy, she slowly rocked her hips until she came. Antonne wrapped her legs around him and walked over to the chair. He sat down, and she wasted no time pulling his hard dick out of his sweats and boxers.

As she slid down onto him, she released a satisfied hum. Her eyes lowered as they stared into his. His hands gripped her waist tightly as she alternated between rocking and bouncing atop him. It wasn't long before she was cumming and drawing his out too.

Standing, Antonne pressed her against the wall and stroked her deeply. Her walls tightened around him, forcing him to tell her, "Hold it until I say cum."

Distress covered her face as she whimpered. She released a shaky breath, chin trembling as she nodded her agreement. If she came again, in that position, he'd be done for.

"You're so deep, baby. I can't hold it."

"You wanna cum on my dick?"

"This *my* dick," she corrected, arching her back slightly and taking him in deeper.

"Fuck, Ley."

His pace increased as she kissed him, and while he appreciated the distraction, Antonne knew they both would be cumming again soon...

Haley That Weekend

“YOUR MAN DID AMAZING, SIS. YOU HAVE EVERY REASON TO feel as proud as you look,” Honey said, giving Haley a side hug.

She was indeed proud. With every side of Antonne that she experienced, Haley was convinced seeing him in his element as a sommelier was her favorite. He naturally oozed confidence, but it was on another level when he was in his element. The knowledge and happiness he possessed when he talked about wine or other spirits made him ten times more attractive.

And because the brand owner mentioned using only grapes harvested from one of his favorite vineyards in Italy, Antonne shifted between English and Italian. By the time the night was over, her pussy was soaking wet, and she couldn't wait to have him deep inside while he spoke to her in a different language.

“I really, truly am. I'm so glad he's getting to do what he loves more consistently. There's nothing like living out your passion and purpose.”

Antonne scanned the room, and when his eyes landed on her, he gave her a wide smile. After gaining everyone's attention, he began to speak.

“Thank you all so much for coming out to tonight's tasting. Now that you've tasted all four of the offerings, I invite you to

feast on the grazing table prepared especially for this evening by the love of my life, Haley Thompson, the owner of *Just Graze*. Come up here and explain what you've selected for the evening and why, bae."

As Haley slowly made her way to his side, her nerves rattled. All of their friends and her brother were in the room, cheering her on. She settled her gaze on them to find comfort, and it helped that Antonne stood next to her, hand on the small of her back, thumb gently caressing it. Once she was done, people immediately flocked to the ten-foot grazing table she'd designed.

"You put together an amazing evening, Stink," she complimented, taking his hands into hers.

"Thanks to you. You created the perfect menu for Isha's wine."

"Can I have my own personal lesson now?" she asked sweetly, tugging him toward the wine bar he'd elegantly set up.

"Of course. You don't even have to ask."

She looked over the four bottles of wine, already knowing she'd like the Moscato most. Her eyes lit up at the sight of it, causing Antonne to laugh.

"Go ahead, Ley. Try the Moscato."

"I mean... I can try the dryer, less sweet wines first."

He walked her through the first three—a pinot noir, merlot, and chardonnay, before the Moscato. After going over the flavor notes, smells, and tastes, he brought out the best for last—a port. Gasping, Haley clapped. She loved a sweet dessert wine.

"This isn't on the market yet. She gave it to me to try, and I want you to have it."

Her eyes watered at the sight of her name written on the bottle with thanks from Isha. "Aw, babe. This is so sweet. Thank you!"

Haley pulled him into her arms for a warm hug. It blew her mind how he included her in everything. The consideration he showered her with made the wait of them finally getting together worth it.

Antonne
August

FOR THE LAST TWO MONTHS, LIFE WAS ON FAST FORWARD. Antonne was grateful he'd gotten an assistant because business took off for the summer. Every weekend, he had three to six different events, and if Haley wasn't catering herself, she was at every one. They alternated showing up for each other in a true partnership, and Antonne had never experienced anything like it before.

Just last week, he showed up at the party she was hosting with flowers and an extra set of hands to help out. Today, she'd done the same for him. For the month of August, the highlight of his weekend events was a different kind of tasting. Though he was a sommelier, he wanted to make it clear that he didn't know just wine but all spirits. The first week he had a wine tasting and the second week a champagne tasting. Next up would be whiskey and he'd finish the month with tequila.

The champagne tasting was a bit fancier and required more work. He hired Haley to prepare the food. Of course their crew showed up and switched between being guests and helping out anywhere they could. By the time he and Haley made it back to his home, he was so tired he didn't think he would be able to make it to his bedroom.

With a yawn, he set his alarm, hoping Haley didn't expect him to be good company that night. As he stumbled out of his shoes, she wrapped her arms around him and told him, "Let

me take care of you tonight, baby. You've been going nonstop for the last six weeks.”

Since she'd taken off her shoes at the door, Haley had to stand on the tips of her toes to give him a kiss. Antonne wrapped his arms around her, lowering his hands to her ass and squeezing as her tongue slipped into his mouth. When she pulled away, he decided he wanted more. Tilting his head in her direction, Antonne gritted his teeth as his nostrils flared. His desire for her was waking him up, but his energy was still low.

Haley closed the distance between them, reconnecting her lips with his as she unbuckled his pants. As they kissed, she removed his clothing piece by piece. He did the same to her. They left them there, and she led him to his bedroom—giving him the perfect view of her pear-shaped bottom. Antonne couldn't get enough of gripping her waist and hips and squeezing her juicy ass.

Heeding her instruction, Antonne sat on the edge of his bed. He heard the water for the shower and garden tub being cut on and he smiled. His bathroom was tied with the wine cellar for his favorite room in his home. Because of its walk-in design, drains were in the floor, allowing the tub to overflow and connect with the rain showerheads. It was the most relaxing experience he ever had. Any time he was stressed or tired, a glass of wine and thirty minutes in the tub as it overflowed and allowed water to cover every inch of his body always soothed him.

Once the water from the tub and shower was at the temperature she knew he liked, Haley called for him to come. He joined her, feeling instant relief when he stepped down into the water before walking over to the tub. As four rain showerheads poured and steamed up the room, she looked like a goddess waiting in the overflowing tub for him. Antonne made his way inside, resting against her. She placed kisses over his head and neck, filling him with affirmations about how great the evening was and how proud she was of all his hard work.

After their long and much needed soak, they got out of the tub and showered. She had him to lay on his stomach in bed, where she massaged him from head to toe. Antonne flipped over onto his back, dick hard, curved, and standing at attention.

Haley took him into her mouth, giving him the sloppy, slow, deep head that made him cum within a few minutes. She moaned as saliva and cum dripped down her chin. Wiping it with the pad of her finger, Haley put it in her mouth and sucked it clean.

“You taste so good, baby.”

Between her declaration and the sexiness of her tone, Antonne was more turned on than he was before. His hand wrapped around her neck and he pulled her down to him, giving her a deep, nasty kiss as she straddled him and took him inside.

Usually, they took things at a slow or medium pace. That time, she rode him hard and fast. He guided her movements with his hands on her waist and hips when he wasn't fingering her clit, tweaking her nipples, or squeezing and smacking her ass.

“Shit, I'm 'bout to cum,” she warned, pressing her hands into his chest.

Between the sound of her wetness and her ass cheeks smacking against him, Antonne felt like he was losing his shit. His toes curled and body jerked as he came with her, pulling her down as she jerked against him. It was so hard and intense he didn't have the energy to go another round. Haley didn't seem to mind because within seconds, she was lightly snoring while she lay against him. Antonne chuckled as he grabbed the comforter and wrapped it around them, not bothering to pull out of her. Not long after, he'd fallen asleep too.

ANTONNE REALIZED JUST HOW TIRED HE WAS WHEN HE DIDN'T wake up the next day until three in the afternoon. After handling his hygiene, he searched his home for his lady. He

found Haley in the living room with the fireplace roaring like it wasn't seventy degrees outside. She had a few candles burning while she hummed under her breath and read her bible. That didn't surprise him, because they'd started to read it together at three in the morning and three in the afternoon.

He made his way next to her and kissed her shoulder and lips before saying a quick prayer and picking up where she left off. When they were done, she asked, "How you feelin', Stink?"

"Very well rested thanks to you. I needed everything that happened last night. Thank you, bae."

She chuckled and gave him a quick kiss. "You're welcome. Are you hungry?"

"I am. Have you eaten yet?" She shook her head. "I'll take you out after I check my missed calls and shit. Think of what you want to eat."

"Okay," she agreed, closing the bible as she stood.

Antonne made his way back to his room, and at the sight of several missed calls from Crimson and Christina, he wasn't sure which one made his stomach turn worse. Calling Crimson first, he headed to his closet just in case he needed to get to her quickly.

"Hello?" she answered calmly.

"You good?"

"Yeah, are you? You missed the meeting this morning."

"My fault, Crim. I had a long ass night. You're good with the new team, though, right?"

Crimson sighed. "They're good, but they're not you, Antonne. I know I told you I would be okay with you leaving, but I have to be honest... I don't trust myself with anyone else *but* you."

"I can respect that, and it means more to me than you'll ever know. I take my ability and calling to protect people seriously, but my time in this business has come to an end. I

got my own shit goin' now, Crimson. I hope you can respect that, but even if you can't, you have to accept it."

"I'll let you go then," was all she said before disconnecting the call.

Antonne sat in the gray chair next to the floor to ceiling windows in his bedroom. He returned Christina's call, hoping she was okay. They hadn't spoken since he'd dropped off that care package and he wanted to keep it that way. It took her a while to answer, but when she did, it was with, "Hey, Ant."

"Wassup, Chris? You good?"

"I am. I uh... I saw your live last night at your event. Everything looked great. You looked great."

Ignoring her last comment, Antonne bobbed his head and smiled. "Thank you. It was a success."

"Yeah, I could tell. The place was packed, and you had like eight thousand people watching the live."

"What was crazy was we weren't even supposed to be at that venue. I had a smaller space rented but we outsold the event and I had to hit Cooper up at the last minute to secure another spot." Pride filled him as he thought back on how each weekend the turnout was better and better. "It was a good vibe, for sure."

"You um..." She paused and released a heavy breath. "You looked really good, Antonne. Not just physically. I can't explain it. Like... your aura. You were radiating. You seemed... happier and lighter."

"I... I guess I am. Being with the right woman and living out your passion does that for you."

Christina was quiet for a while. "You've moved on?"

"Yeah, I have."

"Oh." She paused. "Well, I just... wanted to call and let you know that I was sorry if I made it seem like I didn't believe in your dream. It's clearly your reality now and it's a really good look for you. I'm proud of you."

“Thank you so much, Christina. I truly appreciate that.”

“Goodbye, Antonne.”

“Goo—damn.”

Antonne could only chuckle by how quickly she disconnected the call. He could only assume she was hoping for a way back into his life, but that shit was dead. Now that he finally had Haley, no one was coming in between them.

Antonne returned to his closet and retrieved the gift he'd gotten for Haley. He was supposed to give it to her last night, but he was too tired to remember. Plus, after she put him to sleep with that pussy, there was no way in hell he'd wake up for anything. After setting everything on his king-sized bed, he called out for her. Haley slept with him when she stayed over, but she used the closet in the guest bedroom next to his master suite. It took her no time at all to enter, and when she did and saw the gifts waiting for her, she scurried over with a gasp and squeal.

Physical touch and gifts were her love languages while physical touch and quality time were his. Antonne tried to gift her with something at least three times a week, whether it was big or small. He had flowers scheduled to be delivered weekly and his jewelers knew to make purchases for her on his behalf every two weeks. Those, along with food, were her favorite things to receive—so Antonne planned to always have them on rotation.

“Ooh, this is niiice,” she stretched, sounding like that viral Tiffany Haddish sound on TikTok. Antonne laughed as he watched her run her hands over the silk, cream-colored two-piece set he'd gotten her. She did the same to the plum linen dress that he was sure would have her ass jiggling with every step she took. “I love these, baby. I can't wait to wear them.”

“There's something else.”

She stepped closer to the bed, and her eyes widened when she noticed the 18K rose gold domino diamond crossover necklace and earrings from Roberto Coin.

“You can’t go to Italy and not look the part, right?” Antonne asked.

When he mentioned wanting to go to Italy for a wine festival, she said she didn’t have any fine Italian jewelry in her collection. As a problem solver, Antonne immediately knew he had to buy her some... and give her the opportunity to go and shop for her own.

“We’re going to Italy?” she asked softly.

“We are. We’ve been working like crazy, and we deserve a break.” Her head shook and eyes watered rapidly as she picked up the jewelry. “Everything is already planned and paid for. I told Emily and she assured me things will run smoothly at *Just Graze* for the next week while we’re gone. Zay has informed your parents, and I’m not doing anything for Crimson. We leave this evening.”

When her tears started to fall, Antonne closed the space between them.

“Stink...”

“It’s beautiful,” she said through her sob.

Antonne chuckled as he pulled her into his arms. “Then why are you crying, Haley?”

She waited until she was composed and wiped her face to look up at him. “I don’t have to think with you. I don’t have to plan. I’m able to rest my mind and relax in a state of submission... trust and lack of control... that I’ve never experienced before. You make me feel more like a woman than I ever have in my life, and I may be selfish for saying this, but I never want this feeling to end, Antonne.”

“You can be selfish with me. It’s what you deserve. And I promise you, this will never end...”

She buried her head in his chest.

“I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“You can tell me you love me.”

Haley lifted her head as she smiled. “I love you so much, Ton.”

“I love you too.”

They shared a quick, tender kiss before she pulled away to ask, “Our babies?”

“You know Tyreek is the one who loves babies and dogs. He’s already agreed to keep Lulu for me and Alpha and Princess for you.”

“So you just thought of everything, huh?”

“I tried to. As happy as you make me, I want to make like easy for you.”

“Babe,” she cooed, kissing him again. As it deepened, Antonne accepted the fact that he’d be eating her before they left to get any food.

His phone ringing briefly distracted him, but at that moment, nothing was more important than Haley. Still, she urged him to get it, which was a first. Her intuition was telling her that was a call that shouldn’t be ignored, so he heeded the warning. At the sight of Elite’s name, Antonne answered quickly.

“You good, bro?”

The sound of Elite sniffing had Antonne on high alert. His dick immediately grew flaccid as his mind prepared to kill anyone that had wronged his best friend or someone attached to him. Elite and Supreme had always had a special place in Antonne’s heart because of their upbringing. He’d step behind them on *any* occasion.

“Gooder than a mothafucka. Denali just had the baby, bruh. My son is here.”

“Word? Bet. Send me the hospital and room information. We’ll head that way. Congratulations!”

“Denali had the baby?” Haley whispered, gripping his arm.

“She did. It’s a boy.”

As Haley cheered, he and Elite laughed. They said their goodbyes and the pair prepared to go to the hospital to meet their newest bundle of joy.

“YOU WANNA KNOW HIS NAME?” DENALI ASKED SWEETLY AS Supreme held his nephew... who would be treated like his child. Supreme had taken Denali’s kids as if they were Elite’s, because he was that kind of stand-up guy. Even with his traumas and issues, Supreme didn’t play about kids. He gave them a love that was almost just as strong as Elite did. Kinsley and Amir were crazy about their uncle Supreme, and he was just as crazy about them.

Supreme’s head nodded as he stared at the baby in his arms. “Yeah, what is it?”

Elite answered with, “Supreme.”

Supreme’s head shot up, eyes locked with his brother’s. Their circle knew how Supreme felt about having children because of their parents. Their past. Antonne couldn’t imagine the honor Supreme felt having a nephew that was named after him... knowing there was a chance he’d never have his own child.

His body weakened and eyes watered as he looked from Elite to Denali, then down to Baby Supreme.

“For real?” he asked softly before his tears started to pour. “Y’all named my baby after me?”

“You were my brother *and* my father,” Elite answered. “No one deserves this honor more than you.”

As Supreme’s shoulders shook from his tears, Elite shed his own. Nicole gently took Baby Supreme so the brothers could embrace, and it was a sight that had tears in everyone’s eyes.

Nine Days Later

AFTER A WEEKLONG STAY IN ITALY WITH HALEY, ANTONNE was glad he planned to cut ties with Crimson—until she sent him a 911 text. He was at a meeting being headed by Tyreek to receive information on potential clients in the future. Though Crimson was set to be his last client in the streets, that didn't mean Antonne couldn't offer his protection as a bodyguard for a legal clientele. That was something that would happen after he had his winery and wine bar established.

He didn't want to stretch himself too thin and not be able to show up for Haley and give his all for his passions.

After leaving the meeting, he called Crimson repeatedly and got no answer. He called the head of her security, Evan, and got devastating news... Crimson had gone to a meeting and been hit. Antonne didn't understand how that was even possible until Hank told him the full story. Evan hadn't gone to the meeting space early and set up a team like Antonne instructed them to do. Because of that, there were men waiting for the ambush. The moment Crimson rejected Hector's new pricing terms without negotiating, bullets rang out.

Crimson was unconscious, so there was no need for him to immediately make his way to the hospital. Instead, he stopped by her home, where her security team was waiting for him. As soon as Evan opened the door, Antonne put him in a chokehold and shoved a knife into his neck from behind. Though he usually hated risking getting blood on him, that was personal. That was for Crimson. Had he done his job properly, she wouldn't be lying in a bed fighting for her life.

All eyes were on Evan's lifeless body as he bled out. Casually, Antonne stepped over him. He pulled in a deep breath, trying to maintain control of his emotions.

"I'm only going to say this once," he warned. "Every last one of you need to value Crimson's life just as much as you value yours. If anything happens to her, whether I'm working for her or not, I will kill you. I gave y'all a very specific blueprint on how to keep her safe." His fist punched a deep hole into the wall as he roared, "Follow the fucking rules!"

As mumbled agreement spread throughout the room, Antonne's eyes landed on Hank.

"Make sure they clean this shit up properly since they can't seem to do any-fucking-thing else."

"On it," Hank agreed before shouting clear directives to the men in the room.

Antonne made his way out and headed to the hospital to see Crimson. He was on autopilot as he made the drive. Guilt consumed him. All he could think about was how Crimson would have been safe if he was with her. He only had three weeks left before his official retirement. He could have easily done that time without taking so many days off. Antonne thought it would be best if he stepped back and showed her she could survive without him.

Now... it appeared he was wrong.

When he made it to the hospital and saw her beautiful face with dried tears on it, tears came to his eyes. He didn't allow them to fall as he walked over to her bed. Taking her hand into his, Antonne kissed her palm and told her, "I promise I'm going to find the people who did this and make them suffer. And I'm going to put some real hittas on you to make sure you *never* be left in the open like this again."

As he left, he made a call to Hassan Black, hoping he could spare a few men for Crimson's new security team. He was going to make Hector pay, and he'd need men with him that he could trust.

Haley

AMONG THE HUSHED VOICES, ANTONNE WAS LOUDEST OF THEM all. Even with his whispered tone, Haley was so familiar with it that she'd be able to make out his voice no matter the room. Her eyes closed and she inhaled a deep breath.

"You ready?" Justin asked.

No, but she had no choice but to get ready. In just a few seconds, her world would be turned upside down.

"Yes, I am."

Justin opened the door, and at the sound of her heels clacking against the tile floor as she walked behind him, all conversation ceased. It didn't matter how many sets of eyes were on Haley, only one felt like a burning stare. She quickly locked eyes with Antonne, and the surprise on his face at the sight of her made her heart race. He probably had a million questions as to why she was at a meeting being held by Crimson's advisory board, but he would soon find out.

In the middle of the floor, eight men sat at the round table. Antonne and a few of Crimson's head lieutenants stood behind them. Justin, Crimson's lawyer, made his way to the head of the table.

"Thank you all for meeting with me on such short notice. As you all know, there was an attempt on Crimson's life. She is still in a medically induced coma. I am here to relay her

requests for the business in the event of her inability to lead.” Justin opened the manila folder he was holding and pulled a piece of paper out for every man at the table plus Antonne and Hank.

“Crimson has requested that Antonne take her place as the head of the Simpson organization. Haley will be taking Antonne’s place as head of security. These changes will remain in effect until Crimson is awake and able to resume control, or until a year’s time has passed. At that point, as head of the organization, Antonne will be able to decide next steps.”

Justin left the room just as quickly as he’d entered. All eyes were on Haley. None of them swayed her—except Antonne’s. He walked over to her with a scowl, and though she was sure he had a million questions, her mind immediately began to draw a blank. How was she going to explain any of this to him? She realized she’d need to come up with words soon when he grabbed her arm and all but dragged her out of the room.

“Stink,” she called softly, voice shaking.

“What the *fuck* is going on?” he asked through gritted teeth, pressing her against the wall.

“I can explain.”

“Then explain.” He chuckled but it ended quickly. “*Now.*”

“Can we go somewhere a bit more private and talk... Please?”

Antonne stared at her for seconds on end before grabbing her hand and leading her out of the warehouse. He shoved her into the passenger seat of his BMW before making his way to the driver’s side. The entire ride to his home, her nerves rattled. He remained silent, and though Haley thought that was what she wanted, it drove her crazy.

When they made it inside, he went straight to his bar and poured himself a double shot of tequila.

So much for sipping it and savoring the flavor.

After taking another double shot, he wiped his mouth and began to pace.

“Explain,” he commanded.

Her mouth opened and closed as she twiddled her thumbs before words started to come out.

“I’m a hitwoman. Sniping is my specialty. Any type of gunplay is my specialty, actually.”

Plopping down in his seat, Antonne stared at her. “You’re a *what?*”

“Sti—”

He lifted his hand to silence her. “Start from the beginning, Haley, and don’t leave anything out.”

Haley sat in the chair next to his. “I was the typical good girl who loves bad boys,” she started softly. “My mother being a pastor... she shielded me a lot. I was grateful for the protection, but it was also boring. I craved excitement. When I met Rico, he was a corner boy. As he moved up in the ranks, we got closer. He intensified my self-defense knowledge by adding to it martial arts and gunplay. It started simple with a .22 in a field, then he took me to a gun range. I got really good at it, and when we were on a date one night, I had to shoot to save his life.”

Haley chuckled at the memory. “We’d gone to the drive-in and one of the guys he’d had beef with had his whole little crew there. He was so oblivious he didn’t even notice he was being followed until it was too late. I grabbed the gun from under his seat and knocked off three before he even had the chance to pull his.”

Haley released a sigh and pulled hair behind her ears. “His boss found out about it and the rest is history. I’ve never worked for one person or organization permanently. I only come in for special jobs. Crimson has me on her payroll for such a time as this.” She tilted his head by his chin, forcing him to look into her eyes. “For when the man who protects her has to take over and needs protection.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” Antonne seethed, pushing her hand away. “That’s not how this shit works, bae. I do the dirt to keep you clean. I can’t even wrap my mind around you even knowing how to shoot a gun. I haven’t pursued you for the last five years to keep you away from it and you’re a part of it.” Her head hung briefly, but not out of shame of what she did. Haley hated how her truth was seemingly creating a wedge between them. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“No one knows. Not even my brother. My contracts require confidentiality to keep me safe and make sure I can live a normal life.”

Chuckling, Antonne stood with a shake of his head. “I need some time to think.”

“Okay,” she agreed, standing. “But... you can’t take too long, Ton. You’re in charge now, and there’s an entire multi-million-dollar business in your hands.”

“All this time I’ve talked about Crimson, and not once did you say anything to allude to who you are.” He ran his fingers down the corners of his mouth. “I sat in your bed and cried on your shoulder about all that this life has taken from me and you just sat there and didn’t say shit.”

“Antonne, please...”

She tried to grab his hand, but he pulled it away. “I need some space, Haley. I’ll call you when I’m ready to talk about the business.”

“And what about us?”

“That has to wait for now.”

As much as she wanted to go against his wishes, she nodded her agreement. “Okay. I... I love you, baby. I’m sorry for keeping this from you, but I thought it was for the best. No one knows and I don’t want them to. I-I don’t want it to change how I’m viewed. I want you to still see me as a soft woman who needs your protection because I do.” She took his hand into hers and placed it on her heart. “Here. So please, don’t let this be the end of us.”

“Just go, Haley,” he pleaded softly, pulling his hand from hers.

She took slow steps away from him, wishing he'd tell her to stay—but he didn't. The entire time she drove home she wondered if things were over between them already. If they were, at least she'd be able to say they tried.

Antonne

“I’M SORRY, SON, BUT I DON’T SEE WHAT THE PROBLEM IS.”

Antonne looked at the side of his father’s face as if Nathan had spoken a foreign language. He’d shared with him what happened at the meeting yesterday with Haley. Outside of laughing and cursing in shock, Nathan’s response was neutral.

“The problem is she kept something extremely important from me. How am I supposed to trust her after this? Plus, she knows how conflicted I was about taking things to the next level with her because of this and she’s about this life herself. Haley should’ve *been* told me what it was. That would have changed everything.”

Nathan’s head shook as he sat back in his seat. “That’s not fair to her, Ant. You didn’t tell her that your lifestyle was the reason you weren’t pursuing her until recently.”

“That’s true, but when I did, she should have told me then.”

“And what would that have changed? You would have reacted then just as you are now.”

Antonne frowned and remained silent because that was true.

“You know what I think the *real* problem is?” Nathan continued. “I think the real problem is that you’ve based your

whole identity on being a protector, and now, you think the woman you want to spend the rest of your life with doesn't need you in that capacity." Swallowing hard, Antonne sat back in his seat as he accepted that humbling truth. "Haley's a shooter. So what? That's not a bad thing; it's a good thing. It means she's perfect for you. It means she's your partner. It means she will understand you better than any other woman will." Nathan tapped his son's shoulder, forcing Antonne to look into his eyes. "For once, you have a woman in your life who can match your energy and be all to you that you are to her. That's a blessing, son. Don't let your pride push her away."

Antonne's stubbornness wouldn't allow him to vocally admit that his father was right. Instead, he shook his hand and thanked him before leaving.

AFTER LETTING HIMSELF INSIDE OF HALEY'S GARAGE, HE smiled at the sight of her car. Since he pulled up without calling, he didn't know if she'd be there. While he wasn't sure what he would say exactly, Antonne knew he wanted to talk to his woman. Not even a full twenty-four hours had passed, yet he couldn't let another second go by without some kind of resolve.

His father had poked his buttons enough for Antonne's thoughts to jumble enough for him to sort them out. Now, he felt at peace enough to have a full conversation with her. But the truth of the matter was, regardless of what happened between them, Crimson's business was now temporarily in their hands.

It had never been his desire to run a drug organization, even when his father wanted him to take over. His specialty had always been the protection of others. Now, he was forced into a position with a weight that was far too heavy to carry. Antonne was just getting into a position that allowed him to flourish with his own business, and he was getting sucked right back into the streets.

“Stink!” he called out from the kitchen, deciding to allow her to come to him.

He didn’t know what she was doing and figured that was the best way to honor her privacy.

“Ah!” she yelled quietly, and as much as Antonne didn’t want to, he laughed.

Alpha and Princess greeted him before Haley did. He didn’t mind showering them with love until she arrived.

It wasn’t long before she met him in the kitchen. Hesitantly, she walked over and sat next to him on the island. She looked beautiful even without trying. The two-piece sports bra and high waisted leggings set she had on didn’t leave much to his imagination. Antonne had gotten so used to sleeping next to her that her body felt like foreign land for him to discover all over again.

“Hey,” she spoke, breaking the silence.

“Hey.”

“Antonne, baby, I…” She paused and nibbled her bottom lip. “I know you’re upset with me, but you have to know I wasn’t maliciously keeping this from you. Not only is it in my contracts that neither I nor my clients can speak on what I do, but I meant it when I said I didn’t want this to change the way I’m viewed by anyone—especially you.”

“And you have that right,” Antonne replied calmly. “But it doesn’t change the fact that learning you held such a large secret from me made me question if I can trust you.”

“You can,” she assured him, grabbing his hands. “I know me saying that might not mean much, but I promise I’m not keeping anything else from you.”

Antonne released a loaded sigh. “Do you plan to do this for a while?”

She shrugged. “I said I’d stop once I got married. I don’t do it a lot. I get calls maybe three or four times a year.”

“My pops said something earlier that I haven’t been able to get off my mind. He said I was so upset because I’m used to

being the protector and needed and that isn't the case with you. I was hurt over the fact that you don't need me, but I thought about it and... maybe that's good. Not only do I feel more at peace knowing if something were to happen to you and I was unable to get to you that you can protect yourself, but I also like the idea of you being with me because you want me and not because you need me."

"I do want you, and I do need you. I need you to continue to give me the soft, intentional, sweet love you've been giving me. Please don't switch up on me because of this, Stink."

Antonne pulled her off the stool and between his legs. Cupping her cheeks, he gave her a reverent kiss. A kiss that showed her, even if his words couldn't tell her, that he would continue to love her and treat her like the spoiled princess her parents had raised her to be. The princess he one day planned to make his queen.

"I love you, my lil hitta," he teased, making her laugh as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Don't call me that!"

"You told me not to call you Stink either, now look at ya."

Her eyes rolled playfully. "Antonne, I'm serious. Don't call me—Mm..."

He reconnected his lips with hers, pulling away briefly to say, "Shut up and tell me you love me too."

Haley smiled against his lips as she kissed him again. "I love you too."

"As much as I would love to make love to you all day, we have a lot of business to handle unfortunately. Well, I do. I know Crimson asked you to protect me, but I'm good, bae. I'm not doubting your skills or no shit like that, but I got me."

"I don't deny that," Haley said as he stood. "But you don't have eyes in the back of your head. You need someone you can trust at your side. Let me be for you what you are for everyone else."

He wasn't completely comfortable with the idea, but he didn't have much of a choice. Letting Haley be with him while he handled business felt like he was putting her in the line of danger he swore he wanted to keep her out of. As his head shook, Haley held him close.

"Take me to the gun range. Hell, give me moving targets. I don't mind proving I can hold my own. You won't have to worry about me, baby. I promise I'll be good."

That wasn't a bad idea, so Antonne agreed. But if at any point he felt as if he couldn't handle business because he was too worried about her, he would call off the whole damn thing.

Haley
One Month Later

“OH MY GOD, BABY,” HALEY SLURRED, LIFTING HER HIPS TO feed Antonne more of her pussy.

When they woke up, he asked her what the perfect day for her would consist of. She told him creating, dancing, and making love. Upon her admission, he wasted no time making his way between her legs.

His head was tilted to the side as he licked, sucked, and tongued her clit. His fingers caressed her opening and asshole as her nectar dripped down. Antonne alternated between caressing her holes and fingering her pussy... sucking her clit and using short licks to make her tremble.

“Mm... shit. You know *just* what I like.”

Spreading her trembling legs and cupping her ass cheeks, Antonne continued his pleasurable assault, rocking her up and down on his tongue. From her clit to her bottom hole, he licked and sucked until she came.

“I love how you cum for me.”

His mouth wrapped around her sensitive bud, causing Haley to scoot up in the bed. Antonne released a sexy chuckle as he firmly gripped her thighs and pulled her back to him.

“Where you think you goin’?” He wrapped her legs around his neck and told her, “Don’t do that shit again.”

The moment his mouth latched around her clit and tongue swirled around it, Haley's back arched off the bed. Her mouth hung open and eyes lifted toward the ceiling as her chest heaved.

"Eyes on me," he commanded, slipping two fingers inside of her soaking pussy. She looked down at him, massaging her breasts and tweaking her nipples. "That's it, bae. Do as you're told."

She unraveled again, holding her legs open as she came. Antonne moaned against her as he licked her clit and opening as he fingered her—not stopping until she came down from her climax.

He made his way up her body, kissing her caved in stomach. Each time he tapped her clit with the head of his dick she trembled.

"Ton!" she cried, reaching between them.

"Say please."

"*Please, baby.*"

Slowly, Antonne stretched her to fit him. As if a part of her that had been missing had finally been returned, Haley's frame relaxed against the bed. He molded against her, filling her with long, slow, deep strokes. Her lips trembled as she hissed, clawing at his back. Each methodical stroke made it harder and harder for her to breathe.

"You got it, bae," he coached, causing her eyes to roll into the back of her head. "*Breathe.*"

She pulled in a deep breath, and the moment she released, she began to convulse underneath him. Her wetness crackled as it coated him.

Their lips connected as he increased his pace. She fucked him back, keeping her eyes locked with his as her pussy grew wetter and wetter.

His mouth went to her ear... hand to her neck. As he squeezed, he moaned before releasing the sexiest, "*Fuck,*" she'd ever heard. The shaky breath that escaped him as he

tightened his grip around her neck had her whimpering as his dick throbbed inside of her. Even if she didn't want to cum again, she had no choice...

The Next Morning

WHEN CRIMSON WOKE UP, HALEY WAS THE SECOND PERSON she called. She made her promise not to tell Antonne what she wanted with her, and as much as she didn't want to keep another secret from her man, she agreed. As soon as she made it to the hospital, Haley asked the guards from the Black Mayhem Mafia to give them privacy. Crimson smiled as Haley walked over to her bed.

"It's good to see those pretty eyes," Haley said, taking Crimson's hand into hers.

"I can't believe I was out for so long."

"That was your body's way of telling you that you needed to rest."

Crimson had been shot through the side. Damage had been done to her heart, lung, and spleen.

Crimson released a long sigh as she nodded. "Maybe. Listen, I need you to do me a favor. They aren't letting me go for at least another two weeks. I need you to go to my house and get the pictures, phone, and bank statements off my kitchen table. No one has been inside of my home yet, right?"

"Right."

"Good. No one, and I do mean no one, can see that shit, Haley. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah, I got you. I'll go get it right now."

Relief covered Crimson's face. "Thank you." After she rattled off the code to unlock her penthouse apartment, she asked Haley to bring the items directly to her, and Haley agreed. She had no idea what was so important, but if it was the first thing on Crimson's mind when she woke up, Haley decided not to waste any time.

Once she was out of the hospital and headed there, she called Antonne. It was nagging her to keep a secret from him after the progress they'd made with getting over her secret. The last month had been fun and adventurous in ways Haley hadn't expected. Once she'd proven she was capable of holding her own, Antonne relaxed enough to let her accompany him to handle business. Running things for Crimson drew them even closer to each other. If she had any doubts about whether Antonne was the man for her, the last month had removed them all. The only thing she hated was how both of their legal businesses had taken a backseat to Crimson's affairs, but neither of them minded taking care of things until she was able to herself.

As soon as Antonne answered, a smile spread across Haley's face.

"Hey, Stink."

"Hey, baby. What are you doing?"

"A little math." Haley nodded her understanding. That meant he was counting money. "You good?"

"Yeah. Crimson asked me to stop by her place and get some stuff for her."

"She's trying to start working already? When I talked to her earlier, she promised me she'd take it easy. That's the only reason I didn't stop what I was doing to go up there."

"Well... I'm not exactly sure. She made me promise not to even say anything, but she asked me to go get some pictures and bank statements for her. I think she mentioned a phone too."

"Hmm... that's odd."

"I know, right? You think it has something to do with the shooting?"

"If it is, you'll find out soon enough. Let me know when you get there and when you're headed back to the hospital."

"Okay, I will."

After saying their I Love Yous, she disconnected the call and increased the volume on her favorite 70s playlist. It took her about a thirty-minute drive to get to Crimson's place. When she did, she gave the guard on her floor the QR code to scan, confirming she had permission to be there. Haley loved the security Antonne had brought in from the [Black Mayhem Mafia](#). They were damn near impenetrable.

Haley put the code into the keypad and made her way inside. She made a quick beeline for the kitchen, where she found the items scattered on the table. She was about to shove everything into the folder on the table, but a picture caught her eye. It was of Crimson holding the wrist of a man who had a gun to her stomach. A familiar man. She had a bulletproof vest on. It looked as if she was showing him where to shoot.

Figuring she was training him, Haley continued to scan the pictures as her curiosity grew. By the time she made it to the last one, she felt compelled to go through the phone. It was password protected, but she was able to bypass the lock by using a large picture of Crimson. Haley went through the call log and text messages, and her heart dropped at a text from Crimson to an unsaved number that read, *I recorded our conversation on my burner. No one should see the footage of you shooting me. If they do, they'll know I told you to. Remember to hit the vest only. I don't want no lasting wounds. You and Haley make sure he never hears it. If things go left, this is your insurance.*

Haley went to the voice memo section. Her thumb shook as it hovered over the play button. After taking a deep breath, she hit it, listening in to a conversation between Crimson and one other man.

"Are you sure you wanna do this, boss?"

"I don't have a choice."

"Nah, we always have a choice."

"If Antonne doesn't think I'm in danger he's going to leave me."

“Yeah, but... having someone shoot you... that seems a bit extreme.”

“Not if you do it exactly as I say, where I say.”

“And you’re sure this new team can’t be trusted?”

“I’m positive. Don’t get me wrong, they’re good, but they’re not him. I have never been safer, not even with my husband, as I am with Antonne. These men don’t fear me; they fear him. If he leaves, I’m dead.”

The man released a hard breath. “Okay. Let me hear it.”

“Evan is lazy. He’s not going to do the pre-meeting sweep. That will give you a chance to get into position before we arrive. When I reject Hector’s offer, you come out and shoot. Make sure you hit where the pendant on my necklace is. I’ll have on my vest, so it won’t do any major damage. After this, Antonne won’t feel comfortable leaving me, and I’ll...”

Unable to listen to anymore, Haley cut the recording off. Scoffing, she snatched everything up and stormed out of the apartment, refusing to believe what she’d just heard.

Antonne

“YOU CAN LEAVE. WE WILL NO LONGER BE NEEDING YOUR services,” Antonne told Stretch, the guard at Crimson’s door.

“Aight, bet.”

The men shook hands before Stretch headed down the hall. Antonne took what he thought would be a calming breath, but not too much of anything would calm the raging bull inside of him. The only thing that kept him from storming into Crimson’s room was the fact that he was officially free of her. His anger, though warranted, came from a place of hurt. He couldn’t believe the lengths she’d gone to, to manipulate him into staying with her. It almost would have been flattering, but she’d risked her own life and the lives of others for a scheme that had failed.

At the sight of him, Crimson’s eyes ballooned. “Antonne, hello. I thought I told you that you didn’t have to rush up here to see me?”

“How could you?” he asked, voice thick with emotion.

“How could I what?” she asked nervously with a light laugh.

“You wanna play stupid, or you want me to get at that nigga for crossing you?”

Her shoulders slouched and eyes squeezed shut. “He was supposed to shoot in the vest. I positioned him across from me, but he was on my side. He shot through my side, trying to hit my heart. I can’t believe Hank betrayed me.”

“You can’t believe Hank betrayed you!” Antonne roared, causing her to jump. “You both betrayed me! I thought it was Hector who tried to take your life because Evan and the team were being careless, but it was you and Hank all along!”

“This was your doing!” she yelled as her heart monitor began to race. “If you would have just agreed to stay, I wouldn’t have been forced to go to such extremes!”

“Oh, so this is my fault?” Antonne chuckled. “You set your own self up for a hit and it’s my fault?”

Her head shook as her eyes began to leak. Swallowing hard, Crimson confessed, “Hank tried to kill me, Antonne. He joined forces with Hector and betrayed me in the worst way. Can you *please* not yell at me right now?”

Running his hand down his face, Antonne sat down. “I knew something was off with Hank when he stepped down after I was named your replacement. He didn’t make it clear he was with Hector until the official announcement. Now, he’s running for Hector, but I can’t find him. I guess he wanted the position and figured getting rid of you was the perfect way to get it.”

“That’s exactly what it was. Before you, Hank was set to be my replacement. He’d been mentioning wanting a different position because he was getting older. I told him I would see what I could do. He kept stressing me about being my second in command, but I told him I had you.

“I’m sure hearing that you were my replacement was like a slap to his face, though I’m not exactly sure why. You’ve been my right-hand man since Matt died. I guess he thought since he’s been around longer, I’d automatically give the position to him. Seeing him switch sides to be with Hector hurt me to my core. Every man that was in that room on my payroll chose him over me.” She paused. “How did you figure it out?”

Antonne chuckled as his head tilted while he slumped down in his seat. “Haley is my fuckin’ wife. As soon as she saw that shit, she brought it to me. You’d know that if you showed the least bit of interest in what’s been going on in my personal life.”

“Christ.”

As she stewed on his confession, Antonne continued, “I immediately recognized the voice on the recording, then she showed me the pictures. Even with the mask, I could tell it was Hank. I had a friend trace the bank account number just to confirm. I’ve got a team tracking down everyone else that was there and agreed to his plot to turn on you. They’ll be handled.”

“If you haven’t gotten to him yet, there’s a really good chance he’s left the city. I told Hank I had insurance for him, but he knows it will also point the finger at him now that I’m awake. I checked with Tate, and he said Hank has been calling to make sure no one has gone into my penthouse daily. Now that he knows Haley has been there and I’m awake, I can promise you he’s left town.”

“If he has, he’ll be dealt with if he ever comes back.”

As Antonne stood, Crimson asked, “What about us?”

He laughed but it quickly turned into a frown. “There is no us. Do you think I would continue to work with you after all this? I don’t trust you and I never will. I will never work with you again.”

“You’re out of your damn mind if you think I’m going to let you leave me like my husband did.”

Lowering himself until he was just inches away from her face, he told her, “You don’t have a choice.”

As he exited her room, Crimson laughed. “I’ll kill you before I let you leave me!”

“Is that what you did with Matt?” Antonne didn’t want to believe Crimson was capable of something so diabolical, but now, he wasn’t sure.

“I helped him build his dynasty and he wanted to divorce me. I’m the one who held Matt down when he first got out of prison. It was my ten thousand dollars that he took to his supplier for product. And he thought he could just... divorce me and move on to someone else.” She scoffed.

“How could you?” Antonne asked, releasing a chuckle at the naivety of his question.

“He didn’t get to leave me, and neither will you.”

Her words went in one ear and out of the other. Antonne had already been prepared for that to be her stance. He knew if Crimson had gone this far, there was only one way to stop her—and that was permanently.

Antonne looked down the hall, locking eyes with the nurse that charged him six figures to make sure that when Crimson left the hospital, it would be in a body bag. Her death would be quick and painless, appearing as if her heart simply got tired of fighting to keep her alive. While he hated for their friendship and business relationship to end on these terms, Antonne took his role as a protector seriously—and any enemy who gave him a problem learned the solution would *always* be death...

Fourteen Days Later

Early September

HE SIMPLY NEEDED A MOMENT.

Crimson’s betrayal made it easy for Antonne to do what needed to be done, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. Having her killed was a call Antonne didn’t think he would ever have to make, but he refused to allow anyone to put his and Haley’s life and future in jeopardy.

After her funeral, Antonne was supposed to immediately meet with her board of advisors and lieutenants, but he couldn’t pull himself to do it. Before he stepped in front of her men, he needed the last thoughts he had of her to be while they were on good terms, not her betrayal. He still hadn’t been able to wrap his mind around the fact that someone he loved and

cared about, and thought held the same feelings for him, could do something so dangerous and manipulative.

Soft taps on his bedroom door were followed by Haley stepping into his room. She walked over to him, wearing black and looking radiant in a way that not many people could. Haley sat on the edge of the bed between his legs and ran her fingers through his beard. The usual stubble had grown longer over the last two weeks.

“It’s time.”

She took the glass of whiskey that dangled from his hand and set it on his nightstand. Before finding out about Haley moonlighting as a hitwoman, Antonne wasn’t sure he’d be able to get through a moment, a transition, like this one with a woman by his side. She wouldn’t understand. But Haley did, and it was that understanding and support that gave him the courage to not only run Crimson’s business but bury her as well.

Standing, Antonne loosened his black tie. She grabbed it and took it to his closet as he stepped into his black dress shoes. Opting out of putting his suit jacket back on, Antonne smiled down at her sadly as she unbuttoned the first two buttons on his long-sleeved shirt.

They walked out of his home and room hand in hand, getting comfortable in the black town car that awaited them. The ride to the warehouse was silent, between them at least. Haley busied herself with phone call after phone call, making sure every possible safety precaution that could be taken was taken.

While Antonne didn’t believe his news would cause a riot, Haley’s intuition told her something was going to happen. She insisted he wear a bulletproof vest but that had never been his style. His head was always open, a vest was proof of fear. For a man like him, Antonne needed to feel untouchable. That was what often gave him the courage to do things the average man feared.

When they pulled up to the warehouse, Antonne gripped her arm before Haley could get out.

“I need to do a sweep with the team, Antonne.”

His head shook as he positioned her back against the seat.

“They don’t need you for that. Stay here.”

Haley rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest but did as he said. He got out of the car and looked around, filled with peace over knowing this would be the last time he had to take that ride. The last time he’d have to face these people for a meeting of this nature. After ten long years, he was finally done with the streets—though that mentality, hustle, and lifestyle would probably always remain in him.

Once Tate jogged over and confirmed they were good to go, Antonne opened Haley’s door. As irritated as she was, a smile graced her face when he gave her a kiss.

“You need to let me do my job,” she scolded him softly.

“And you need to let me be your man.”

A kiss to her palm softened her more, and she finally relaxed. Her grip on his hand tightened as they entered the room. It wasn’t a show of nerves, that Antonne was aware of. She was reminding him that she was there. All men around the table stood at the sight of them. Heads bobbed and hushed tones offered condolences.

Antonne took a deep breath, palms pressed against the table. He looked every man in the eyes before closing them and shaking his head. This wasn’t a decision he’d made lightly, but he knew in his heart it was the right call. This was Crimson’s life and passion; not his. And quite frankly, he didn’t trust that there weren’t more leaks in her team outside of Hank and the small crew he’d recruited. If he could cross her and try to kill her to take her position, there was no telling what someone else could do.

“I have made the decision to shut down the Simpson organization.” Grumbles of disapproval immediately began to ring out, but Antonne lifted his hand to silence them. “Crimson gave me this position because she trusted me. I’m not just some hardbody who can knock a nigga out with ease. I was in the streets under her husband learning the game from

him before I became her right hand. Trust me when I say this is what Matt Simpson would want.”

He paused, giving them time to process what he'd said. “The Simpson organization is being dismantled; however, I have come to an agreement with the [Westwood Mafia](#). They are a five-family organization that has room for more men. Based on your expertise, they will find a place for you.” Antonne motioned his head to Tate, who was waiting for his signal at the door. He opened it, and six men walked inside—every head of the five families of the Westwood Mafia plus their consigliere, Crypt. “Y’all can handle this business among yourselves. Work with them and continue to work and eat or come up with your own plan. Either way, a duffle bag is outside waiting for each of you as thanks for your service.”

The closer they got to the exit, the louder the voices behind them grew. Instead of allowing him to exit first, Haley stepped in front of him.

“Wait,” she ordered.

Tate opened the door, and she stepped outside. After doing a quick check of the perimeter between the warehouse and the town car, she motioned for Antonne with her head. With effortless ease, she shifted him so that Antonne's back was to hers. Just as he was about to tell her there were no lingering threats to stress over, Hank rounded the corner with two men beside him.

Haley pushed him into the car, taking the bullets meant for him into the chest.

She groaned as her body was pushed back by the force of the bullets, but that didn't stop her from releasing her clip and dropping two of the men while Hank limped away from a shot to the leg.

Gritting her teeth, she squeezed her eyes together tightly and released a shaky breath.

“He shot you,” Antonne said, almost in disbelief.

“I'm fine. The vest took most of—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Antonne was lifting her into the air and tossing her into the car. He slammed the door quickly and rushed over to the driver's side. After yanking the driver out, Antonne swerved around the building in search of Hank. Since the truth came out, Hank had been a ghost. When he didn't show up at Crimson's will reading or the funeral, Antonne was sure he would stay hidden until he thought his betrayal would be forgotten.

The fact that he came there and attempted to shoot Antonne made it clear just how jealous Hank was of the position he had in Crimson's life.

And he shot Haley.

All Antonne could think about was what would have happened if she didn't have on that vest.

He looked back at her with a scowl, pissed that she'd put herself in the line of fire to protect him.

Her intuition was right, though. The threat may not have come from a man in that room, but there was a threat... a threat Antonne would permanently take care of.

He swerved behind Hank in traffic, not caring if he was trying to lead him to an ambush. Before Hank could get on the expressway, Antonne accelerated his speed.

"Put your seatbelt on and prepare for impact," he told Haley before ramming Hank's car into a wooden pole. Before the airbag could deflate, Antonne shifted in his seat. He hopped out of the car and sprinted over to Hank's. Pulling a disoriented Hank out of the car, Antonne's fist connected with his face until he stopped moving. In his mind, Hank didn't deserve to die a quick death by a bullet—he needed to feel the force behind every one of his punches.

Haley yelling his name didn't register in Antonne's head until she softly called, "Stink, *please*," while gently shaking his shoulder. "We have to go."

He blinked repeatedly and stared down at Hank's unrecognizable face. Haley tugged him up from the ground, holding her stomach. They hopped back in the town car, and

Antonne was heavy on the gas, ignoring the smoke that came from under the hood. He took the expressway, not wanting to risk stopping and the car cutting off completely. Instead of going straight to his home, he went to the woody, secluded area just before the city limits. After lighting the car on fire, Antonne led her through the woods to his home, hand in hand.

THEIR EYES WERE LOCKED THROUGH THE MIRROR. ANTONNE watched Haley slowly peel the shirt from her body as he leaned against the doorframe. His knuckles were red, cut, and swollen, and there were purplish-black bruises on her stomach and chest. When she smiled at him, Antonne shot her a wink that made her giggle, but she grimaced from the soreness.

Pushing himself off the doorframe, Antonne walked over to her.

“You saved my life,” he muttered, turning her toward him.

“And you killed to honor mine.” She chuckled and licked her lips. “So much for my fairytale happily ever after.”

Antonne laughed as he cupped her cheeks. “I’ve never claimed to be prince charming, but I’ll always be your knight in hood armor.”

Her arms wrapped around his neck. “That’s actually perfect for me.”

Their lips connected, and he lifted her and placed her on top of the counter. As much as he wanted to taste her, Antonne wanted to be inside of her more. She was on the same wave, because Haley was pulling him out of his slacks and boxers just as quickly as he pushed her pants and panties down. Putting her on the edge of the counter, Antonne lined himself up at her opening and filled her with a long, swift stroke.

Her back arched as she cried out, cumming against him instantly.

“Damn, bae.” His voice was shaky as he remained still to keep himself from cumming too. “It’s like that?”

“For you... it’s *always* like that.”

At the sound of her declaration, he began to move inside of her. That time, there was no dirty talking. Only whimpers, moans, curses, and heavy breathing. She took every stroke he had to give and gave him her fat, gushy pussy in return.

Haley spread her trembling legs wide before grabbing his ass cheeks and pulling him in deeper. With his left hand pressed against the mirror behind her, his right hand pulled her hair and tilted her head as he licked and kissed her neck. When he hit that spot, her legs clamped around him as she groaned and came. He came not long after before carrying her to the shower, where they went at it again.

Epilogue

Haley
Late October

AS ADAMANT AS HALEY AND ANTONNE WERE ABOUT THEIR passions and working, after what happened with Crimson and Hank, they decided to take the rest of September and October to rest, travel, and indulge in the pleasures of life. They traveled from country to country, and state to state, week by week. In between their fun, exploring, and new experiences, they began to learn the languages of their favorite places they'd traveled to—Korea and Italy. She was teaching him Korean, while he taught her Italian. The pair still had a lot to learn, but they were able to say short phrases and basic words at that point.

The last leg of their trip was Napa Valley. It seemed fitting that would be the last place they visited. Antonne couldn't stomach going without her while they weren't on better terms in May, so he rebooked the suite she'd gotten him for Christmas. The timing felt divine, seeing as back then, he had no idea they'd be traveling after such a huge betrayal in October.

Haley walked back to their suite with a huge grin. She'd thoroughly enjoyed their three-day stay at the resort and spa. They took a hot air balloon ride earlier, and since they had a seven a.m. flight, she decided the last thing she wanted to do was get a massage and facial. Antonne opted to stay at the

suite and rest, but they were going to have dinner together once she changed clothes.

Antonne was everything she'd been missing in a man and her life. She was whole without him, but he was the completion she'd been seeking. He was a gentle gansta, romantic and sweet, but rough around the edges. And the heights he could take her body to had her pussy leaking in anticipation of his strokes. They balanced each other's differences yet had a lot in common. Most importantly, their passions aligned and equipped them to be life partners in all areas. There was no one else she'd rather spend the rest of her life with.

When she opened the door to their suite and saw the romantic set up with him on one knee, she gasped and quickly closed the door. The sound of Antonne's chuckle made her whimper as she palmed her face. Her trembling limbs almost gave out on her as he opened the door. Pulling her hands from her face, Antonne asked, "What'chu waitin' for?"

"Baby..."

"Come in."

She took slow steps as Antonne led her into the suite. Her eyes watered, causing her to blink at the sight before her. Red and white rose petals were all over the floor along with white candles. Heart shaped balloons hung from the ceiling. An old school slow jam crooned in the background. Wine waited with a small grazing tray for them to celebrate her answer to his question that had yet been asked.

With Haley finally in the suite, Antonne returned to his position on one knee.

"I ain't know I was gon' have to chase you down," he teased, easing her nerves.

Haley laughed softly. "You surprised me."

"Maybe the timing did, but not the intention. You know there's nothing I want more than to have you as my wife." Gritting her teeth, Haley tried to keep her tears from falling, but they released anyway. "Haley Marie Thompson, the last

ten months with you have been amazing. Even those moments where we didn't speak, our hearts did, and I was forced to begin the healing process to make room in my heart for your love. You are..." Antonne chuckled with a shake of his head. "The perfect partner for me." His thumb caressed her hand. "The best woman and lover I've ever had. You're my best friend. I want to spend the rest of my life giving you everything you desire and deserve. Will you marry me, Stink?"

A soft chuckle escaped her as she nodded rapidly. "Yes," she whimpered. "Yes, Stink!"

Antonne laughed heartily as he slipped the ring onto her finger, stood, and pulled her into his arms. She joined in, unable to help herself. A smile on her man's face and laughter erupting from his belly was one of her greatest joys. As their lips connected, Haley couldn't drop her smile. Antonne didn't seem to mind... because he couldn't stop smiling either.

THE WORLD HADN'T EXISTED FOR ALMOST TWO MONTHS, BUT as soon as they made it back to Memphis, obligations had to be prioritized. Antonne needed to meet with his assistant to discuss opening his calendar back up and plan a meeting with Cooper to finally go check out land for his winery. Haley had to schedule appointments to meet with clients who wanted her specifically for their catered events.

They both needed to set up a time to work with Graceland, who already wanted to pay them in advance for four events for the upcoming year. All of that would have to wait another day, though, because they decided to take a vacation from their vacation and do absolutely nothing the first day they made it home... outside of invite their family and friends over to celebrate their engagement.

Since Haley planned to stay with Antonne, they stopped by her house so she could grab more clothes. At the sight of Asylum on her doorstep with his head in his palms, Haley's heart ached. "Oh no," she muttered, quickly unbuckling her seat belt. Antonne hadn't gotten the car in park good before

she was hopping out and running to her best friend. Kneeling before him, Haley gently grasped his wrists.

“Tell me what’s wrong so I can fix it,” she pleaded, lowering his hands to expose his thinner face and baggy eyes. Whatever it was, it had been going on for a while. *Why hadn’t he said anything?*

“It’s Sierra,” he said, referring to his wife. His head shook as he struggled to find the words. “She’s gone.”

“Gone?” Haley repeated. “What do you mean gone?”

Asylum chuckled and ran his tongue over his cheek before swallowing hard. “I mean she left. She left me a fucking note, talking about don’t try to find her, divorce papers she’d already signed, along with her ring, and she left.”

“What about True? Did she take True with her?”

His head shook, eyes watered. “No, and she has to know I’m not letting her deadbeat ass daddy get her back. Now I gotta deal with his bullshit on top of hers.”

“Okay, something isn’t right. There’s no way Sierra would just leave you and leave True behind. When did this happen? Have you called the police? Are you trying to find her?”

“You good, brotha?” Antonne asked.

Both men were protectors by nature. While Antonne did his in the streets, Asylum had his start as a police officer. Unfortunately, watching the shady innerworkings of law enforcement made it difficult for him to remain dedicated to the city. He watched his partner be gunned down, by a rogue cop no less, because he spoke up against police brutality. Worse, the cop was only sentenced to five years. After that, Asylum quit and vowed to never work with law enforcement again.

He protected and served his community in other ways, offering asylum to those in need. His safehouses were talked about all over the world. If anyone was in danger, they came to Asylum.

“I will be,” Asylum grumbled, squeezing Haley’s hands gently as he looked into her eyes.

“Good.” She saw the relief physically wash over Antonne’s frame at the sound of Asylum’s words. “I gotta go, bae,” Antonne told her. “Doe has been blowing my phone up and the last text said if anything happened to her it was because of her husband. She’s never done some shit like this.”

Upon hearing his words, Asylum stood. “You need me to go with you?”

That didn’t surprise Haley. Even without knowing her or the situation, Asylum was down to ride.

Antonne’s head shook. “Not if yo’ head won’t be in it.”

“My head is always in it when it comes to this shit.”

“Aight, let’s go.”

“Y’all be careful,” Haley said as both men headed to Antonne’s Bronco.

Her heart raced as she prayed for Dauterive’s safety and Asylum’s peace of mind. And... Sierra’s safe return. Because there was no way in hell a woman would leave a man like Asylum unless she was absolutely forced to.

The End for Antonne & Haley

Asylum is *not* a Mister, but his spinoff with Dauterive is up next.

[You can preorder it here.](#)

The next Mister (Supreme) drops next month... and his story will be heart wrenchingly beautiful and sweet—just like his brother Elite.

For details, please make sure you are following me on social media or subscribed to my mailing list!

Thank you for reading, and if you enjoyed, please leave a five-star rating/review, mark it as READ on Goodreads, and recommend it to a friend!

Mailing list - <https://bit.ly/MLBLove22>

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We hate errors, but we are human! If the B. Love team leaves any grammatical errors behind, do us a kindness and send them to us directly in an email to emailblove@gmail.com with ERRORS as the subject line.

[Behind Every Great Gangsta](#)



The Johnson and Careem families are two of the five organizations that make up the Westwood Mafia. For drugs, guns, or ways to get money, the entire South coast goes to one of these families. Love and protection are easy to receive, too, if everyone involved follows the rules.

For Bella Johnson and Mason Careem, the forbidden is too good to resist. Their fathers are enemies, promising war for the smallest betrayal. Imagine how the elders feel when they learn their adult children have fallen in love.

Hard falls create even harder breaks, and Bella experiences the hardest break of all. When her father forces Bella's hand and demands her loyalty, Bella must choose between blood and the man she's grown to love.

Behind every great gangster, there's a woman with the power to make or break him. Read book one of the Westwood Mafia series to see which is the case for Mason and Bella—and their fathers, too.

Also by B. Love

Standalone Romance

Love Me Until I Love Myself (Christian Romance)

Give Me Something I Can Feel

Saving All My Love for You

To Take: A Novella

In Haven

Weak: An Irresistible Love

The Ashes: The Medina Sisters' Story

Just Say You Love Me

If You Ever Change Your Mind #1

Coffee with a Side of You #1

If He Loves Me #1

In Due Time #1

Will You Still Want Me? #1

If You'll Let Me

Til Morning #1

I'll Be Bad For You #1

Just Love Me (Shenaé Hailey)

Due for Love (Shenaé Hailey)

Til I Overflow

Flesh, Flaws, and All (Christian romance)

Make it Last

Straddling His Soul #1

Fingers on his Soul

My Love Wasn't Meant for You

The Preying Pastor

Everything I Desire

Someone She Loved #1

Give Me Love

Love Me for Christmas

Trapped Wishes #1

Yours to Have #1

Unequivocally, Blindly, Yours

Brief Intermission

But Without Haste #1

Last Chance to Love #1

Strumming My Pain #1
With His Song #1
Held Captive by a Criminals Heart #1
Fans Only
To Protect & Swerve
Now Playing: Reel Love
Faded Love
Just Like I Want You
Lie in It
April's Showers
The Mourning Doves
Finding a Wife for My Husband
In The Lonely Hour
Ours for Hours
Loving the Lonely
A Valentine for Christmas
The Love Dealer
The Love List
Santa's Cummin' to Town #1
Holly's Jolly Christmas
Bloody Fairy
Who Do You Love? - website exclusive.
His Sleeping Beauty #1
The Boss Babe Series
Tampering with Temptation
Hungry for Her
Seducing a Savage
The Office Series
Her Exception 1: An Enemies to Lovers Romance
Her Exception 2: A Friends to Lovers Romance
Her Exception 3: A Fake Relationship Romance
The Hibiscus Hills Standalone Series
A Picture Perfect Love
The Mister Series
Mister Librarian #1
Mister: The Mister Series Prelude
Mister Jeweler #1
Mister Concierge #1

Mister Musician #1

Mister Teacher #1

Mister Sommelier***

Banking on Love Series

60 Days to Love

The Business of Lust

Majority Rules #1

Romance Series

Love Me Right Now (1-2) #1

To Take: Crimson Trails series (1-5)

Send me (part 1) I'll go (part 2) #1

*The Love Series – The Love We Seek, The Love We Find, The Love We Share

Harts Fall Series – With All My Heart, With All My Trust, With All My Love
(Shenaé Hailey)

Her Unfaithful Husband, His Loyal Wife, Their Impenetrable Bond (Shenaé
Hailey)

Love is the Byline

Love's battleground

Love's garden #1

Ode to Memphis

Love Letters from Memphis

The Streets Will Never Love Me Like You Do

A Memphis Gangsta's Pain

In the Heart of Memphis

Rose Valley Hills (Standalones)

Sweet

Chapel

Standalone Urban

To Be Loved by You

His Piece of Peace #1

Her Piece of Peace

Her piece of peace: The Wedding

Hunter and Onyx: An Unconventional Love Story - website exclusive.

Thief #1

A Hustler's Heaven in Hiding

His thug love got me weak

If I Was Ya Man

A Gangsta's Paradise #1

LoveShed

Kisses for my Side Mistress

Set Up for Love

Promise to Keep it Trill

Her Heart, His Hood Armor

Her Gangster, The Gentleman

Her Only Choyce

Let it H*E (Constance)

Yours to Keep

A Thug in Need of Love

Black Mayhem Mafia Family Saga

In His Possession

Her Deep Reverence

A Heart's Rejection

Under His Protection #1

A Father's Objection

In His Possession 2

A Heart's Connection

Indiscretion #1

Succession #1

Resurrection #1

Interception - website exclusive.

Gucci Gang Saga

I Need A Gangsta

One Love

Urban Series

She Makes the Dopeboys go Crazy (1-2) - website exclusive.

Caged Love: A Story of Love and Loyalty (1-5)

If You Give Me Yours (part 1) I'll Give You Mine (part 2) #1

Loved by a Memphis Hoodlum 3

It Was Always You 2

The Bad Boy I Love 2

No Love in His Heart 3

My Savage and His Side Chick 2

So Deep In Love

Faded Mirrors

Behind Every Great Gangsta - website exclusive.

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