



A COUNTRY

HOOD

*Christmas*

WITH THE HENDERSONS

MONICA WALTERS

# **A COUNTRY HOOD CHRISTMAS**

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# INTRODUCTION

Hello, readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This work of art contains explicit language, lewd sex scenes, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers.

This book is an update to an existing series of books. If you have not read them, you will not understand a thing. Character development happened in previous books of the family series. Again, this is only an update on the Hendersons.

There will be multiple points of view in this book because all the Hendersons had something to say, and it will also serve as a precursor to Jessica's anticipated book (Jenahra's daughter). It's *highly* recommended that you read the previous books of this family's series before indulging in this one, because it updates family dynamics that I don't go into great detail about.

*Blindsided by Love*

*Ignite My Soul*

*Come and Get Me*

*In Way Too Deep*

*You Belong to Me*

*Found Love in a Rider*

*Damaged Intentions: The Soul of a Thug*

*Let Me Ride*

*Better the Second Time Around*

*I Wish I Could Be the One*

*I Wish I Could Be the One 2*

*Put That on Everything: A Henderson Family Novella*

*What's It Gonna Be?*

*Someone Like You*

Also, please remember that your reality isn't everyone's reality. What may seem unrealistic or unrelatable to you could be very real and relatable to someone else. But also keep in mind that despite the previous statement, this is a fictional story.

This update was extremely fun to write, and there is minimal to no drama. I just wanted to give you something fun to read for Christmas time. Enjoy!

Monica

# Henderson Family and Friends Family Chart

Wesley and Joan Henderson (Patriarch and Matriarch)

<u>Wesley Jr. (Olivia)</u> Nesha (WJ's daughter w/ Evette) Shakayla and Chenetra (WJ's daughters w/ ex-wife, Sharon) Decaurey (Olivia's son)	<u>Jenahra (Carter)</u> Jessica and Jacob (Joseph's kids) Carter Jr. (CJ)	<u>Chrissy (LaKeith)</u> Jakari, Christian, Rylan (Avery's sons) Janessa and LaKeith Jr. (LJ) (LaKeith's kids w/ Nancy)
<u>Kenny (Keisha)</u> Kendral Jr. Karima Kendrick (Kenny's deceased son) King Kane	<u>Jasper (Chasity)</u> Ashanni Royal Crew	<u>Tiffany (Ryder)</u> Milana Ryder Jr. (Ryder J or RJ)
<u>Storm (Aspen)</u> Bali and Noni (twins) Maui Seven Jr. (SS) Remington (Remy)	<u>Marcus (Wesley's son) (Synthia)</u> Ace (Marcus's son w/ Heaven) Malia (Marcus's daughter w/Mali) Seneda (daughter w/ Syn)	<u>Malachi (Danica)</u> (cousin of the Hendersons) Malachi Jr. (MJ) Deshon Niara
<u>Kema and Philly</u> (Tiffany's friend and Ryder's brother) Philly Jr. and Philema (twins) Kiana	<u>Shylou and Cass</u> (Friends of Tiffany and Keisha) Shaydon Shymir	<u>Vida and Aston</u> Synthia (Marcus's wife) (Vida's daughter with Jerome)

# CHAPTER 1



## STORM

“Who in the hell gets married on Christmas Eve? Nesha got my kids mad as hell. They normally open gifts on Christmas Eve since we’re with their grandparents all day on Christmas day.”

“Uncle Storm, really? You don’t have to be here. You aren’t in the wedding.”

I frowned at Jessica and said, “What’chu mean I ain’t gotta be here? Girl, I might as well be the damn mayor of Nome. Ain’t shit go on in this town without me. Somebody gotta keep shit in line. You must’ve been living in Houston for too long and forgot. Secondly, I ain’t complaining about today. I’m complaining about tomorrow. Nesha better be glad I like her.”

“Don’t you mean love?” she asked.

“Naw. I meant like. Love wouldn’t have me here. I could love her from my house. But because I like her, I’m gon’ be here tomorrow.”

“Lawd have mercy.”

She sounded just like Jen when she said that. *Like mother, like daughter.*

“I don’t know why you entertaining his sour ass,” Jasper said. “Come dance with me, Jess. Jenahra got Chas busy, and my Ashanni don’t wanna dance with me.”

I shot Jasper the finger as he pulled Jess away. We were at the rehearsal dinner at the family barn for Nesha and Lennox’s wedding. It would be taking place right here in the barn

tomorrow. Olivia and WJ had been busy, trying to make sure everything was in order. Evette, Nesha's biological mother, and Sharon, WJ's ex-wife, were also here running around, pulling shit together.

I was sitting here doing what I did best: supervising. The kids had left with Mama and Pop, and I was grateful for the break. Remington was almost two, and that lil nigga was the worst out of the five of them. I guess the twins and SJ weren't bad enough. God had to really test our patience with this nigga. It was like He wanted me to end up in jail for child abuse. Maui was my stress reliever. The older she got, the calmer she seemed to get. Half the time, I forgot she was even there. She definitely inherited that from her mother.

The twins were so much like me it was scary. They were fifteen, almost sixteen years old already, and driving all over Nome. They were pissed because I only bought one car for them, but they would get over it eventually. *Spoiled asses*. As I watched Jasper dance with Jessica and Marcus dance with Syn, I felt a presence behind me. I turned to see my beautiful wife standing there with a huge smile on her face and a stack of papers.

"The Nome News is finished! Just in time to give people joy on Christmas!"

I frowned. What in the hell was going on in Nome that would give people joy? Shiiid, these days, if it wasn't run by the Hendersons, the shit wasn't ran. She handed me the paper, and on the cover was a picture of a black Santa Claus. I glanced up at her, and she said excitedly, "Storm, read it!"

I slightly rolled my eyes and began reading. It was the traditional Christmas time jargon at first until I got to the section that was subtitled *News You Can Use*. The first item underneath read: ***Unfortunately, we have to report that Jerry's vacation is over. He's gone back to his home at Liberty County Jail.***

I looked up at her and cracked a smile. Everybody knew Jerry stayed in jail. When he was on the streets of Nome, that nigga was just on vacation. He was gonna eventually do

something to land his ass back in jail. That shit had been going on for the past thirty years.

Aspen giggled as my smile got bigger. I went back to the paper and read the next item. ***Please be sure to barely tap your horn to get Sidney out of the street. Last week, a car snuck up on him, and when their horn blared, it almost gave him a heart attack.***

I cracked up laughing. Sidney was known to walk in the middle of the street. He needed to get hit. He lived on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, the main street in Nome that turned into Grayburg Road further down. Marcus flew through there all the time and almost hit his ass. I looked up at Aspen. “Baby, this is really good. You right. It will give people something to laugh about. Hopefully, I didn’t land my ass in here.”

She shrugged. “You’ll only find out if you keep reading.”

“Hmph. It better be on the up and up. You should have put Dudley’s ass in here.”

“Dudley? From the post office?”

“Hell yeah. That nigga picture need to be on the front page with the caption, *Count your muthafucking days.*”

“What did Dudley do to you? I love him! He’s so crazy! And secondly, he’s in China, not Nome. So he can’t be in Nome News.”

“He crazy alright. Crazy for fucking with me. If I wasn’t worried about catching a felony case, I would’ve snatched his ass from behind that counter.”

“Storm! Are you serious? Why didn’t you go to Nome post office and see Kathleen?”

“Me and Kathleen cool. We here,” I said, gesturing my fingers back and forth between me and her. “I forgot Nome closed at four, so I had to run to China because they don’t close until four thirty. When I got there, the nigga had the nerve to roll his eyes. First of all, I was already in a mood because I had to fly to China. So I was like, not today, man. I ain’t got time for yo’ bullshit. This nigga proceeds to take his

time. I mean like, went and sat at his desk and got on the fucking phone.”

Aspen hollered with laughter while I frowned. That shit had me hot enough to shoot his ass, and she was standing there laughing. “Storm, you know he was just playing.”

“I told him I wasn’t in the mood for his bullshit.”

“So what happened after that?”

“I told him if he didn’t get his fucking ass up, it was gonna be a misunderstanding. 1-800-ASK-USPS was gon’ get a fucking earful. If I had to jump through hoops to get to who I needed to talk to, I was gon’ be sitting outside that damn post office waiting for his ass to leave. Then I’d follow him home and beat the shit out of his ass for the same amount of time I was on the phone.”

She put her hand over her face and slowly shook her head. “Storm, just when I think you can’t get any worse, you do something like this. You owe Dudley an apology.”

I frowned. “I don’t owe Dudley shit. He owes me an apology.”

“What did he say after that, Storm?”

“Nothing. He got his ass up and did what I needed him to do. When he held out my receipt, I snatched that shit and probably gave his ass a couple of paper cuts. I hope he get salt in them.”

Aspen slowly shook her head again as she rolled her eyes. “Lawd have mercy. He gon’ be looking at me sideways next time I have to go in there.”

“Storm! Get y’all asses on this dance floor!” Jasper yelled, interrupting our conversation.

I noticed Chasity was dancing with him now, and Jessica had gone over to a table with the rest of the wedding party. She was standing next to this dude that was tall as fuck. Nigga was tall as that cell phone tower outside. He had to be every bit of six feet ten. Muthafucka could still be chopped down

though. He was one of Lennox's groomsmen, but I still had my eyes on him.

I waved Jasper off as Tiffany said, "You know that nigga can't really dance. Them damn boats that he call feet trip him up."

"That's alright though. Aspen appreciate how big these feet are."

Tiffany rolled her eyes as Aspen sat on my lap and kissed my lips. "So, since we are kid free tonight and have the entire house to ourselves, I expect the works."

I frowned. "You get the works all the time. What'chu talkin' 'bout?"

"No, I don't. I want to cum in every area of the house."

I lowered my head and gave her a devilish grin. "Girl, you tryna get that old thing back? We ain't in our twenties no more."

She giggled. "Well, let's get as close to that as physically possible. You had your vasectomy redone, and now, my tubes are tied. Nothing but space and opportunity, big daddy."

"Shit, let's fucking leave right now," I said as I gripped her ass.

She lowered her head and kissed my lips, slipping her tongue in my mouth. I was gon' get carried away in here. I pulled away from her. "Girl, the general is rising. I don't wanna make all my brothers jealous in this bitch."

She giggled again and stood from my lap, grabbing my hand and pulling me to my feet. "Let's go, daddy."

"You ain't said nothing but a word."

"Where y'all going?" Jenahra asked as she came out of the kitchen.

I frowned like something stank and stuck my tongue out of my mouth, hanging it over my lower lip. Jen frowned then fake gagged. "That's what you get for asking questions. You

got the rated G version. I could have said that I was going deep sea diving in my wife's pu—”

“Storm!” Aspen yelled then laughed. “Stop!”

Jenahra's face was red as hell. She rolled her eyes as I smacked Aspen's ass. When we got outside, she turned to me. “You have no filter at all, and you wonder why nobody wants to babysit our kids but your mama.”

“Oh, I don't wonder. I know they bad as hell. My mama dealt with me, so she can handle them. She almost fucked Noni and Bali up the other day. She fussed at them and heard them mouthing off when she was walking away.”

Aspen stopped and turned to me before we could get to the car. “What did they say?”

I bit my lip, trying to hold in my smile. “Noni said, *Her old ass gets on my last nerve*. Bali followed up and added, *She gon' need us before long. Put her ass in a nursing home.*”

Aspen's eyes widened. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I handled it. That's why they were washing cars and shit the other day. You know how much they hate manual labor. You should have seen their faces when they had to wash those tractors. Now calm down. I need your mind back in the gutter. I got some nasty shit on my mind to do to you. I hope you and that juicy ass pussy ready for me.”

Her face turned red as she gave me a slight smile. “Aren't we always?”

# CHAPTER 2

## TIFFANY

“Have y’all read the Nome News that Aspen put out this month?” I asked as I tried to hold in my laughter.

Everyone shook their heads, so I enlightened them. “Sis was in her bag with this one. She said that Vegas couldn’t buy his way out of a paper bag but was always promising these kids some Jordans. If we see him getting jumped to just look the other way.”

I burst out in laughter. That fool Vegas had been promising kids around here Jordans for the past forty years. I remembered that he promised Jasper, Storm, and me some when I was seven. Jasper knew better though. He told Vegas, *Nigga, you ain’t got no money. I already got some Jordans.* As I laughed, I noticed everyone else was laughing, too, until I looked at Marcus. He wasn’t laughing. He slid his hand down his mouth and went outside.

I frowned slightly, and I noticed Syn was somewhat confused too. She stood to go outside after him. They were expecting their first baby together. She was already seven, almost eight, months pregnant. I wanted to follow him out, but I knew it was best to let her talk to him without getting involved. I went over to WJ and sat next to him and Olivia. They’d been working their asses off to make sure Nesha had a wedding she would never forget. Baby girl deserved every bit of it too.

“WJ, did I say something to make Marcus angry?”



“It probably made him think about CiCi. I think she used to sell all the shit that Dad was buying him. Vegas bought some shit from her.”

“Oh, damn. I didn’t know that.”

“It wasn’t something you would have known. I only know because he and I used to talk a lot about shit. That hasn’t changed. So when Dad told him that he tried to be there for him when he was little but CiCi was fucking up, it triggered him. He could remember CiCi selling shit, but he didn’t know where she’d gotten it from, nor that it was his stuff.”

“That’s fucked up. I hate that he’s still dealing with that shit.”

“It’s not as bad as it used to be, but Vegas and those Jordans are triggers for him.”

I nodded then went back to my husband. “You good, lil baby?”

“Yeah. I just didn’t know about Marcus’s issues with Vegas. I’ll have to talk to him later.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine.” Ryder slid his arm around me. “You ready to go get the kids? Milana is about to have a fit at your parents’ house. She said Bali is on her last nerve.”

I chuckled. They were just like Storm and me when we were little. That negro got on my last damn nerve. “Okay. I know she can only take so much of the twins before she’s ready to get away from them. I doubt Jasper is going to get Ashanni, so we’ll just get her too.”

When I looked up and saw Marcus walking back in with his arm around Syn, I stood and walked over to him. He gave me a smile, and before I could say anything, he said, “It’s cool. You don’t owe me an apology or nothing like that. I got it under control.”

I twisted my lips to the side. “Don’t be a rude ass like your brother. Come on... Bring it in,” I said, holding my arms out to him.

He slowly shook his head and gave me the hug I wanted. Although he tried to be hard, he wasn't nearly as emotionally hard as Storm. "I know you said I don't owe you an apology, but I feel like I do. I'm sorry. I had no idea. WJ told me."

"Apologize by whupping up on those white boys at that rodeo in January."

"Oh well, shit. You might as well gone 'head and accept that apology now. Milana and Karima gon' take barrel racing and steer undecorating too. I'm so proud of them. Malia is gonna be next. She wants to barrel race so bad."

"I know. I'm gon' have to make sure she gets more practicing in with you."

"Yep. Bring my baby to me. I'ma get her right."

He chuckled as I rubbed Syn's belly. She was so beautiful. She was beautiful before she got pregnant, but my God. She was the most beautiful pregnant woman I'd ever seen. "Syn, you are glowing. Carter and Shylou missed out on their opportunity to have you model a maternity line. Baby, you are gorgeous."

She gave me a small smile. "No, they didn't. We got a shoot in last month."

"Yes! That's what's up, sis. Well, let me go so we can get our kids. Nesha ain't worried about us old folks anyway. See y'all tomorrow evening."

I kissed Marcus and Syn then made my way back to Ryder. When I got to him, he pulled me into his arms. This man had been perfect. After all these years, our love had only gotten stronger. We had our moments since I was so head strong, but he knew just how to humble me. I'd never forget how he threw me against the wall when we were dating and fucked me into submission. Sometimes I started shit just to get that kind of action.

"Ryder J wants to stay with SS and King. You know they roll together."

"Yeah. They remind me of Storm and Jasper, especially him and SS. Royal is Jasper's son, and he wants no part of

their shenanigans. He and Ashanni are so laidback.”

“Well, so is Jasper until you get him all stirred up,” Ryder added.

“True.” I slid my arm around his waist as we walked to our truck. “You think I can get some attention tonight? This wedding has the love in the air.”

“Since when you have to ask for that, lil baby? I’ll give it to you whenever you want it and when you think you don’t want it. You know that.”

I giggled then stepped in front of him and wrapped my arms around his waist again. I stared into his eyes, and he lowered his head and gave me his tongue. When he pulled away, he said, “You gon’ have to be quiet tonight. I can’t have Ashanni reporting to Jasper what we do in our house.”

“Shit, Ashanni is the last one we have to worry about. Did you see Jasper and Chas when we left?”

Ryder thought for a minute with a slight frown on his face. “Hell no. Their nasty asses will definitely get it in anywhere. They weren’t in the bathroom though, because Chrissy and Jenahra are in there.”

“There’s no telling with them. I love that for them though. I’m glad they have something that’s just for them. Now come on so I can saddle you up and ride the fuck out of you.”

“You ain’t gotta tell me but once, lil baby.”

# CHAPTER 3

## JASPER

“Oh fuck, baby! Jasper, shit!”

“Yeah. Give me that shit, Chas. Cum on this dick, girl.”

We were in the back of our Traverse getting it in. Since the kids were with my parents, I'd folded the seats down and had my way with my wife. Probably tore up all the shocks the way we had this shit rocking. Jenahra and Chrissy had fucked up our normal location by being in the kitchen, cooking and prepping for tomorrow. That was okay though. I'd slay this pussy anywhere. I'd pulled around to the other side of the barn where no one parked and had my way with her shit.

I could never get enough of her, and I was grateful that she could never get enough of me. Surely, I would need a blunt after this shit. It seemed the older we got, the better it got. It was good in the beginning, but now? Shiiid, it couldn't be fucked with.

“Jasper, I'm cumming, baby!”

“Yeah, me too. Fuck!”

Listening to our labored breathing for a minute, I let out a chuckle. “You know we getting older, Chas, and ain't gon' be able to fuck in these tight spots like this.”

“Speak for yourself, nigga. I'm getting better with age.”

She giggled as I tickled her. Once I released her, I quickly zipped up my pants and got some wipes from the side

compartment for her to clean up with. “Just take those panties off because that wet, wet done soaked them.”

She playfully swatted me on the chest as I noticed Jenahra standing outside the back door of the barn, staring at the car. Her nosy ass had made us. We always disappeared for a few minutes. I didn't know why she always wanted to come looking for us. “Your sister-in-law gon' fuss when you get back in the kitchen.”

Chas looked toward the door and rolled her eyes. “That damn Jenahra always in our business. Carter need to put some more dick in her life. They both work too much.”

“Well, let's get ready to hear it.”

I lifted the hatch and watched Jenahra's eyes squint. She slowly shook her head as I slid out. I turned to help Chas out as Jenahra yelled, “You ain't gotta park on the rough side of the building! Everybody know what y'all nasty asses be doing!”

I rolled my eyes as Chas laughed. After I helped her out and put the gate down, Jenahra yelled again. “You have a flat, Jasper!”

*Fuck!* Sure enough, the back passenger side tire was completely gone. I'd probably run over something. There used to be a bunch of junk on this side of the building. Apparently, some of the iron was left behind. As I escorted my baby to the barn, Jen said, “Serves you right for taking me and Chrissy's help out the kitchen. Aspen bailed on us a long time ago. Good luck getting Storm to open the shop.”

“I ain't worried about Storm's long-headed ass. I'ma call Aston to open it for me.”

“Mm hmm. You know he gon' know you were there, right?”

“I'll deal with him later.”

I walked inside with Chas and Jenahra and went to the bathroom to wash my hands. Chas followed me inside as Chrissy yelled, “Don't break the sink this time!”

I bit my bottom lip to keep from laughing and closed the door. When I pulled Chas in my arms, I asked, “How much longer before we leave? We still have to pick up Ashanni, Royal, and Crew from Mama and Daddy. I know their nerves are fucked up with all those kids over there.”

“Your parents love every minute of that. I think they feel like they have a do over with all those kids. I don’t know about Aspen and Storm’s bad ass kids though. Nobody wants to watch them.”

I chuckled as my hands slid to her ass. “Mm hmm.”

I brought my lips to her neck and softly kissed her. Rubbing the tip of my nose against her skin always turned her on even more. I gripped her ass as she whispered, “You don’t play fair, baby. Let me finish helping them so we can take this to the house.”

“Just one more round, baby.”

I unzipped my pants and gently pushed her over the sink. After lifting her skirt, I slid into paradise. This woman was it for me. There was no point in hiding since everybody knew what the hell we did. They could define how they operated in their love. This was how we operated in ours. “Chas, fuck. I love this pussy.”

“Mm hmm. I love your dick too.”

I was long stroking her shit until somebody started knocking on the door. They were gonna have to wait until I nudded. “Jasper,” Chas whispered.

“Naw. Fuck them.”

I began stroking her shit faster and deeper, making her moan louder than what she normally did when we were tucked off in here. Pulling her up slightly, I wrapped my arms around her and humped her like I was a fucking dog. “Oh fuck, Chas. This shit too good, baby.”

I bit her ear and closed my eyes, listening to her moans and expletives, then exploded inside of her. Holding onto her, I rested my forehead on her back for a second then released her. She was everything I needed in my life, and I refused to lose

sight of that. “I love you, Chas. I love you so damn much, baby.”

She turned to look at me then slid her arms around me. “Jasper, you are everything to me, baby. Everything.” Bringing her hands to my face, she said, “You are a blessing to me and our babies. You are everything I prayed for. It was a little rough in the beginning, but you hadn’t come out of the oven God had you in. Oh, but when you did... that gold was sparkling and shining so much, I could see His reflection when I looked at you.”

“Damn, Chas. Like that? You see God when you look at me? Bud smoking Jasper?”

“Mm hmm. This,” she said as she laid her hand on my heart, “it’s pure. He put it in the oven and burnt off every impurity it possessed, and you came out different. All the shit that was weighing you down was gone. You do what you can for everybody. Free haircuts to the kids in Nome, food drives, backpack and coat giveaways... I’m just in awe of the man He created just for me.”

She had me all sensitive and shit in this bathroom. “He blessed me with you, baby. You are definitely the prize. The way you have helped the family in the business office is amazing. You practically run it when it comes to those numbers. We are indeed a power couple, and it’s because of the strong black queen. You. All you.”

I kissed her lips as someone banged on the door. I rolled my eyes and zipped my pants then flung it open to see Syn standing there like she was about to pass out. “Syn, you good?”

“Yeah. I just feel like I need to throw up. I ate too much gumbo.”

Chas and I quickly moved out of the way and let her have the bathroom to herself. “The smell proolly gon’ make her throw up more. Nasty muthafuckas,” Kenny mouthed off.

I lifted my eyebrows as he laughed. He knew that he and Keisha were just as nasty. He was just better at hiding it.



*Sneaky ass.*

# CHAPTER 4

## MARCUS

“**B**aby, you okay?” I asked as I knocked on the door.

Tonight had been fun until Tiff brought up Vegas. Now, Syn was feeling sick. It was like it just went to hell in a handbasket. I needed to get her home and pick up the kids from Pop’s house. Malia would probably want to stay with Milana and Ashanni, but they were a bit older than her. I knew they probably got tired of her crashing their party, although they would never say so.

I could hear Syn throwing up more, so I opened the door and set the bottle of water on the countertop and rubbed her back. Everyone was concerned about her. There was practically a crowd around the doorway. “I’ll get her a cold towel,” Keisha said.

Kenny’s wife had been there for her around the clock. Syn was so sluggish during her pregnancy. The doctor had said it just came with the territory. Every woman’s body was different and handled things differently. Syn was still as beautiful as she’d always been. Her stomach was the only evidence of her pregnancy. She had still been modeling. Shylou had gotten her to model for several maternity boutiques. We’d been all over the country for photoshoots.

It was like when one saw her, they all wanted her. We’d been as far as Los Angeles and New York City. She had a shoot right after New Year’s Day in Jamaica. I couldn’t wait to see how beautiful those pictures would come out. We opted to take pictures there together as well. She was making way more money than she did as a teacher, and I wanted to believe that

she enjoyed this more as well. She sometimes missed teaching African American Literature, but again, she loved what she was doing now.

When she was able to come up for air, I helped her to the sink to rinse her mouth out. “My throat is on fire,” she whispered.

“That gumbo was spicy, baby.”

She’d had two bowls, but I wasn’t about to throw that in her face. One thing her pregnancy taught me was how to filter my tongue around her. She took everything personal and cried at the drop of a hat. She was the total opposite of her normally fiery disposition. Her sensitivity was front and center. I couldn’t wait until the baby got here. We chose to keep the baby’s gender a surprise. He or she would be the youngest Henderson grandchild unless we chose to have another one. Everyone else seemed to be done having children.

Synna was still young and could very well want another one. This pregnancy may have had her rethinking all that though. While she still looked the same, I knew her insides were going through hell. Her mental was taking a hit. She’d even gone to her counselor, Serita Gardner, a couple of times. She said she felt like she was losing it. The last thing I needed was for her to have a nervous breakdown. Synthia Coles Henderson was my baby. I wanted to always see her at her very best, and until this pregnancy, she had been. The counseling sessions seemed to help though. She was on the downside, and we could see the finish line. Just a few more weeks... six to be exact.

I believed that, at this point, she would deliver early. She’d dilated a centimeter, and most days, she took it easy. She had an appointment before we left for Jamaica, and they would let her know where she stood. I knew that if she could make it at least another two to three weeks, the baby would be fine and considered full-term.

After she finished rinsing her mouth, she looked up at me and smiled. “I’m sorry, Marcus. I didn’t mean to add this on top of what you were already feeling.”

“You don’t owe me an apology. You’re my wife, and you’re doing something that God didn’t give men the ability to do. You are bringing a life into this world. Do you know how amazing that is? The baby being an extension of me only makes it that much more amazing. I love you, girl. Let’s get home so you can rest.”

She smiled again. Seeing her smile was worth every bit of manhood I thought I lost by being sensitive and compassionate. In the beginning, I felt like a whole soft ass nigga for letting her dictate everything. That shit had almost become a way of life now. I had great brothers who were also husbands to look up to and get guidance from, especially Jasper. He was always my go to when I was having moments where I wanted to push back with Syn. He kept me in pocket and helped me to learn how to get my way without Synna even realizing it.

When we left the bathroom, everyone was standing there waiting to see if she felt okay. She smiled at all of them, assuring them that she was. Keisha gave her hand a squeeze. “I’ll be at the house to help you tomorrow since all of you are in the wedding.”

“Thank you, Keisha. You’ve been amazing. See you tomorrow,” Syn said.

As they talked, Vida pulled her in her arms and gently rubbed her belly. “I’ll be there, too, to help with Malia. That way Marcus can just focus on himself and Ace.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

After more hugs and kisses from everyone, we headed to the car to get home. Jasper was outside smoking and staring at his tire. “You called somebody, bruh?”

“Yeah. Aston left to get his truck. He on his way back to come help me.”

“A’ight. See you tomorrow.”

Once I helped Syn in the car, I turned to see Nesha running toward us. “Hey! Sorry, I was tied up. Is Syn okay?”

“Yeah. She thinks she ate too much gumbo. I’m gonna get her home so we can be ready for tomorrow evening.”

I hugged and kissed my niece then made my way to the driver’s side. When I got in, Syn turned to me. “You wanna talk about what happened earlier?”

When I’d gone outside and she followed me, I didn’t say anything to her about why I walked out. She knew how to just let me be. She only rubbed my back and let me know that she was there if I wanted to talk about it. Most times when I thought about hurtful shit in my past, I’d retreat within myself until the moment passed where I could come out of it. I’d kissed her cheek earlier, and we’d gone back inside without me saying a word.

I took a deep breath as I started the truck and turned to her. I grabbed her hand and gently caressed the top of it with my thumb, then lifted it to my mouth to kiss. “When I was little, I used to always see my mama selling shit. She would tell me that she had to get money for food and to pay the bills because my daddy wasn’t shit. I remember her selling shit to Vegas all the time for him to turn around and sell it to people for more. It wasn’t his fault, but it reminded me of that when Tiff mentioned him.”

“Was it your things?”

“I found out as a grown up that it was. He was doing shit for me. I remembered him coming over at times, then suddenly stopping after my mama and Joan got into it. He told me that he would have never stopped taking care of me because of Joan’s ultimatum, but because I wasn’t benefitting from anything he gave to CiCi, he stopped giving it to her.”

“I’m sorry, baby.”

“It’s cool. Sometimes, when it catches me off guard, it makes me stumble a bit. I’m cool about it though. You are my only concern. You wanna ride with me to get the kids, or do you want me to take you home first?”

“There’s no sense in passing them up to take me home. Stop and get the babies first.”

I smiled at her as I continued to hold her hand. “I love you, Synna,” I said, knowing it got on her nerves when I called her that.

I believed she’d lowkey started embracing it though.

“I love you too, nigga.”

# CHAPTER 5



## NESHA

“I ’m so tired, baby. Y’all be careful, okay?”

Lennox frowned at me. “I thought you, Danica, Jessica, and your sisters were going out tonight?”

“We were, but I just want to go home and rest. My day starts early tomorrow morning.”

He brought his hand to my cheek and leaned over and kissed me. “A’ight, baby. Me, Nate, and Decklan going out. Marcus can’t hang since Syn isn’t feeling well. Jakari and Malachi are coming with us too.”

“I’m surprised that’s all that’s going.”

“Well, more are coming, but I didn’t see a need to run down the rest of the list.”

I smiled up at him. Lennox had been a dream come true. After being engaged for a year and a half, we were finally tying the knot. I wanted everything to be perfect. The family barn had been transformed into a winter wonderland, and I couldn’t wait to officially commit myself to Lennox Guilman. I wrapped my arm around him and said, “Y’all be careful. Make sure you make it back to me in one piece.”

“Absolutely. I love you, Nesha Henderson Guilman. I can’t wait to see you tomorrow at five, baby.”

“I can’t wait either,” I said as I lay on his chest.

I almost didn’t want to let go of him. We’d been living together for a while, and I just wanted to lay in his arms tonight. Who said we had to follow tradition and be apart the

night before the wedding? I took a deep breath and released him. He kissed my lips and made his way to his friend Nate. That guy was every bit of six feet ten inches. He was taller than Lennox, and he was six eight like Uncle Storm.

I'd noticed that Nate had been paying quite a bit of attention to Jessica. The problem with that was that she was supposed to be with Decklan. She hadn't told me of any issues, but I noticed they had barely said two words to each other tonight. I just hoped they hadn't brought their issues to our wedding. Jessica would never do anything to ruin my day, but Decklan was a different story.

He was quiet, for the most part, but I also noticed he was sneaky as hell. One time I'd seen a text he sent Lennox about some woman. It had shown up on Lennox's lock screen. I wanted to tell Jessica, but I didn't want to get involved in their drama. Jessica was a very smart woman. However, I told Lennox I saw it and that he'd better tell his brother to get his shit together before I told Jess. He said he relayed the message.

I looked around the barn to see my mama, Sharon, and Olivia, sitting at a table talking. I loved their relationship. It was beautiful and something I never thought I would see. My family was perfect. My dad should have been dead. He shouldn't have even been here to walk me down the aisle. *Thank God for sparing him.* An arm slid around my shoulders, and I knew it was Dad. I could smell his cologne.

"You ready for tomorrow, baby?"

I stared up at him and let a tear fall. "It just seems like a beautiful dream that I don't want to wake up from."

"I'm so happy for you. Lennox is a good man."

I hugged him and lay against him as he continued talking. "Jen, Chrissy, Keisha, and Chas got all that chicken stuffed and ready to fry tomorrow. Your mothers will get all the real flowers out tomorrow, and J. Paul will be here to play for the reception. I'm not saying I will, but if I cry tomorrow, just turn the other way."

I chuckled. “Daddy, when no one else was there for me growing up, you stepped up to the plate and did what a father was supposed to do. With all the bullshit you went through, seeing you take your rightful place has been rewarding and overwhelming at the same time. You deserve all the good things that come your way. You taught me so much, and I hope to teach my kids everything you taught me, if I have any.”

He kissed my forehead. “I see you tryna make me cry tonight instead.”

“Wesley Henderson Junior is a hell of a man, and I don’t mind telling anyone that. I’m not trying to make you cry, Daddy. Just stating the facts.”

He hugged me tighter as I felt him take a deep breath. Tomorrow would be extremely difficult. I already knew I would cry all my makeup off. When he released me from his arms, Jessica looped her arm through mine. Daddy smiled at her. “Take my baby home or somewhere to relax. Don’t worry about a thing, Nesha. We have everything. All you have to do is show up to marry your groom.”

I smiled at my daddy then kissed his cheek. “Bye, Daddy.”

“See you later, Uncle WJ,” Jessica said.

We left out of the barn, and I could see her stealing glances toward Lennox and the guys. As soon as we got to her car, I turned to her. “Now what’s up with you and Decklan?”

She rolled her eyes, but I could see that she was hurt. “He wants to entertain too many people... women in particular. He can kiss my ass. Every time I’m out of town, I’m wondering about who he could possibly be with. That shouldn’t be a worry if he’s my man. He can go fuck whoever he’s entertaining because he ain’t getting no more of my cookies until he proves that he’s serious about us.”

I lowered my head, knowing that it had to be hard for her to have to walk with him at the wedding. “I’m sorry, Jess. When did this start?”

“I noticed a change in him a couple months ago. He would go a couple of days without talking to me and blame it on his

job or my job, and a woman called him while we were out to dinner one night. I'd never even heard him mention anyone named Stacy. I'm not an insecure bitch, but I go with my gut. My gut telling me that he fucking around, and I ain't got time for it, especially when that fucking tall drink of water in there likes what he sees."

She was talking about Nate. I didn't know him that well, but I could see where this could possibly end up. The ending didn't look pretty. "Jess, just be careful. You need to have a conversation with Decklan or break up with him. Don't go into something with Nate before ending things with Decklan."

She frowned as she drove to her mom's house. "What the fuck you talking about, Nesh? I broke up with his ass before coming here. That's why we aren't talking. That's why we didn't drive here together. Fuck him. I like him a lot... maybe even love him, but he fucking with my got damn feelings like he don't feel the same way. He already doesn't communicate like he should, and it has only gotten worse the past couple of months. We aren't married. I don't have to be patient and wait for him to get his shit together."

I slowly shook my head. "Have you tried asking him what was going on?"

"On several occasions. We ain't built shit together. We haven't even said I love you. If he doesn't want to talk, then what the fuck I need to hang around for?"

Jessica's mouth was typical of the Hendersons. She cursed a lot, especially when she was angry or hurt. Like every other word was a curse word it seemed. According to my dad, Aunt Jenahra was the same way as a young woman, until Uncle Joseph broke her. She turned to the Lord and got saved, then submerged herself in the church when she was really covering up something bigger. I believed that was why Jessica was so adamant about not taking shit off nobody. Her dad nearly killed her mom.

Although Jessica and I never really talked about him, I knew that she'd suffered some verbal abuse from him. She didn't come out of that household unscathed. While Aunt Jen

did her best to protect her and help her boost her self-esteem as a beautiful, voluptuous woman, it didn't stop some of the hurtful things said to her from penetrating. She was carrying hurt, and she guarded herself from anything that slightly resembled that.

We remained quiet until we got to Aunt Jen's house. Before we could get out, I turned to her. "Jess, I love you. I'm sorry that he doesn't realize what a beautiful, loving, and sweet woman looks like."

"Yeah, but I bet he knows what an angry, broken, mean woman looks like. That's all he's seen this past week. When I got back from the Bahamas, he forgot to pick me up from the airport. He's definitely fucking somebody else, and I refuse to continue to be cheated on. I don't think I would ever trust him after this."

We got out of the car as Decaurey, my stepbrother, turned in the driveway. When he got out of the car, he said, "Hell naw! We finna turn up! Y'all can rest when you die."

I stared at him and scanned him from his cowboy hat down to his boots. "And where do you suggest we go?" Jessica asked then laughed.

"The party in Cheek. Y'all go change, 'cause I'm not accepting no for an answer. Everybody gon' be out there. If y'all ain't feeling it once we get there, we can find something else to get into, but y'all ain't finna stay home. Even Danica coming with us. She's taking the kids to her parents' house."

I smiled at him and took a deep breath. I supposed I'd better get dressed.

# CHAPTER 6

## JESSICA

*What's up, beautiful? I had to reach out to make sure you gave me the right number.*

I stared at the text message from Lennox's friend, Nate, and a slight smile made its way to my lips. We were on our way to Cheek, and I was in the back seat of Decaurey's car with Danica. I wasn't in the partying mood at all, but I could fake it until I made it. Eventually, I'd start feeling it if I pumped myself up enough. I couldn't be all depressed and shit on the happiest time of Nesha's life.

My cousin and best friend had found a lasting love that was beyond anything she'd ever felt. How could I not celebrate that? What I had going on with her forever's brother would have to go on the back burner. I was in love with him and had never told him, because I felt like something wasn't right. Decklan was so sweet in the beginning... until the last few months. It was like he checked out on me. I couldn't hang around and endure if he wouldn't talk to me about what was going on with him.

I'd told Nesha it had only been a couple of months. I'd been sensing something for the past four actually. I didn't want her to know I'd put up with him for any longer than I had. When I realized that I was tolerating toxic behavior, I ended it. I refused to be like my mother and endure bullshit that could lead to something much worse. I loved Jenahra Henderson Carter with all my heart, but she didn't provide a great example for her young, impressionable daughter. Her words to

me were always encouraging and filled with strength, self-love, and motivation, but her actions spoke louder.

She was telling me to be a strong, independent woman while she was feeling weak, defeated, and definitely dependent on my father for her happiness. Seeing her so miserable all the time, thankfully, had an adverse effect on me. It made me want to do everything in my power to not succumb to abuse the way she did. There wasn't a person alive that I would allow to demean me and make me feel bad about myself the way Joseph did her. *No-fucking-body.*

I stared at the text for a while, and when I felt the car slowing down, I looked up to see the party in full swing. The music was blaring, and I could see people everywhere. Going back to the text, I replied, *You've reached the right one. I don't play games like that. What'chu see is what you get.*

Before I could slide my phone in my crossbody, he responded. *That's good to know. I hope I can spend some time with you tomorrow, gorgeous.*

I twisted my lips to the side and slightly rolled my eyes. Niggas played games, and I just hoped he wasn't playing any. Calling me beautiful and gorgeous was played out. I believed I was those things, but I was tired of men saying that to me, only to say it to the next woman. It was like they only said it to butter my fucking biscuit... like I needed their validation. *Fuck them.*

I was a curvy, beautiful black queen. I knew who the fuck I was. Compliments were nice, but I was more concerned about their actions. I'd just met Nate today at the rehearsal. I didn't know him. All I knew was that his name was Nate, he was tall as hell, and that he didn't live here. He played basketball. I wasn't sure if he was in the NBA or if he played overseas. Him living somewhere else only made me more skeptical of his intentions.

As Decaurey parked, he turned to me and Danica and said, "Y'all stay close to me until we scope this shit out. I ain't tryna be fighting nobody."



Danica laughed as I rolled my eyes. “Decaurey, first of all, you know I ain’t straying too far anyway. Secondly, you ain’t gon’ do shit,” I said.

“Girl, I been working out. I ain’t just a fat boy no more.”

“I see you done lost a few pounds, but you see all these people? Tell me you can handle a few niggas at once,” I replied.

“I prolly can’t, but I’ll go down trying. Y’all my people. You feel me?”

I smiled at him. “I feel you, bruh. Let’s go turn up.”

I stepped out of the car prepared to have a good time. My phone chimed and vibrated, so I took it from my bag to see what else Nate had to say. When I saw a message from Decklan, I rolled my eyes. Curious about what he could possibly have to say, I opened the message. *Damn. So you break things off with me and flirt with the next nigga right in my face, huh? That’s cold, Jess.*

After taking a deep breath to calm down, I responded. *Not as cold as how you’ve treated me for the past four months. Boy, fuck you.*

I looked up to see the three of them staring at me. “You good, boo?” Nesha asked me.

“Yeah. Let’s go have fun.”

I swiped the tear that had somehow fallen down my cheek and strutted toward that party like I was a fucking stallion on the runway. I didn’t have time to give a fuck about people that didn’t give a fuck about me. I could see Decaurey glancing at me. I was always the strong one, never allowing my true feelings to show. I supposed that was one thing I *did* inherit from my mother. She was a damn professional at hiding shit.

When we got to the party, I was in awe at just how much fun everybody was having. That shit looked like a cross between the parties on *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and *Son In Law*. People were in boots and Stetsons all over the place, but they looked to be damn near fucking on the floor. I loved this shit. It wasn’t often that I got to embrace my

country roots, but when I did, I took full advantage. I pulled at the waistband of my leggings, then glanced at Decaurey.

“I’m going to fuck this dance floor up. Either y’all can join me or watch me.”

I didn’t hang around to hear or see their responses. I went right to the middle of the dance floor and started dancing by my-damn-self. That shit didn’t last long though. I could feel the heat against me. I turned to see a nice-looking man dancing behind me. He winked at me as he bit his bottom lip. I flashed him a smile as his diamond studs sparkled under the lights. Country hood niggas did it best. His dimples pulled me in as he tipped his Stetson up. Leaning into me, he asked, “What’s up, baby?”

I winked at him and began rolling my hips into him. He slid his hand to my hip and matched my movements. I was feeling that shit. “Damn, girl. Where you come from with all this body?”

“Big City Nome, baby boy. Now what’chu gon’ do wit’ it?”

“Shit, whatever you want a nigga to do.”

I smiled as I dropped it low in front of him and slid my ass up his erection. He pulled me closer to him, and we fit right in with the vibe of the crowd, practically fucking on the dance floor. His hands stayed on my hips, making sure I didn’t veer too far away from him. Damn, he smelled good. Nesha appeared in front of me with a drink and began dancing with us. I took a sip of her drink as she made her way behind our cowboy.

Decaurey and Danica made their way to us as well. When Decaurey got in front of me, he slowly shook his head but danced in front of us with Danica. When I felt Cowboy’s lips on my neck, I turned to him, and he stole a kiss from my lips. I could feel it already. Tonight was gonna be fun as hell, and I was all for it.

# CHAPTER 7

## NATE

Jessica had gone MIA on me, but that was okay. I was having a good time with my boy and his friends. I couldn't believe Lennox was getting married. We'd gone to Lamar together and tried to keep in touch when I began playing overseas. Now that I was back, it was a lot easier. I started playing for Dallas a couple of years ago. It had been a long and hard journey to the NBA, but I'd made it.

While I could have made it easier for myself, I didn't. I wanted to make it based on my skill and talent, not on a name I was connected to. Although the connection was extremely close, I didn't know him. He died when I was thirteen, and I had never met him. It wasn't because he was a deadbeat or anything. My mom thought it best if he didn't know. I didn't find all that out until after he died, of course. Had I known while he was alive, I would have definitely found a way to reach out.

David Guillory played for the Los Angeles Lakers for years, and he'd even taken in a famous rapper, Noah, as his son. He was his stepdad for years before he became a rapper. It seemed to me like he would have loved to have a son, but my mama stole that from me, and I still didn't have a logical explanation why.

I was almost twenty-nine, but I was playing even better than I was at twenty-two. Unlike my dad, I was ready to settle down. My mama said that he was playing the field, and that was why his marriage to Noah's mother didn't last. Sack chasers and being with multiple women wasn't my thing. I

wanted a hard-working woman that could match my energy. Jessica Monroe... she seemed to be who I was looking for.

“Nigga, what’s up wit’chu? You been looking all depressed and shit all day,” Lennox said to his brother.

We were sitting in a strip club, waiting for the show to begin. They were just opening the doors when we got here. I wasn’t all that fond of strip clubs, but whatever floated their boats. “Jessica broke up with me,” he said as he glanced at me.

*Oh shit.* Jessica was his woman. I’d unknowingly put myself in the middle of a situation and practically put Lennox in the middle too. I guess she didn’t feel she owed him anything at this point. It wasn’t like she was flirting with me to get back at him. Her flirt was subtle though. She was just staring and smiling. I was glad I didn’t ask Lennox about her. I hadn’t really had time to ask him about her. He was busy, constantly moving or in conversation with other people.

“Damn. Why?”

“I been outta pocket for the past few months. I don’t know what’s up with me. She picked up on it and been asking questions that I really don’t have answers to. It’s not her fault. She chose not to deal with me anymore. We broke up earlier this week.”

“Honestly, bruh, you know what’s up with you. Just say you don’t wanna say. A woman that has her own shit and loves herself ain’t gon’ deal with a nigga that ain’t got his shit together. Have you cheated on her?” Lennox probed.

He looked over at Jakari and Malachi, who both had frowns on their faces, and said, “Yeah.”

They both stood from where we were and walked off. I knew that they were related to Jessica, but I didn’t know how. Lennox slid his hand down his face and sat back in his seat. “You know, this supposed to be a joyous occasion. I’ll have to talk to you later. My baby deserves the best parts of me, especially this weekend.” He glanced at me then back to his brother and said, “You better not start no shit on our day.”

Decklan sat back in his seat as I stared at them. I decided to speak up. “I didn’t know. You want her back?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. She got her shit together, and I don’t. I thought I did, but apparently, I was wrong. If she feeling you, then whatever.”

He was salty. I didn’t owe him shit though. I didn’t meet him until today. Lennox had mentioned him a few times, so I knew he existed, but we had never hung out or anything like that. Lennox was a couple of years ahead of me in school, so we were only around one another for a year or so. He was like a mentor to me, helping me stay focused. We became close during that time, and no matter how long we went without talking, we’d always be close... unless his brother came between that. I didn’t think Lennox would allow that though.

I glanced back at my phone to see Jessica still hadn’t responded to me. I texted her once more for the night. *Hit me up when you settle down for the night.*

I slid my phone back in my pocket as I thought about my plans for next week. I wanted to reach out to Noah to get to know more about my father. My mama seemed to be fuzzy on the details, and I knew Noah would keep it real with me. He knew what it was like to grow up not knowing who his father was. The only difference was that he grew up with him and still had him. Mine was dead, and I would never get the opportunity to get acquainted.

I tried not to let that bother me to the point where I stayed angry with my mother. For whatever reason, she’d done what she thought was best. I had a decent life growing up in Houston, and I was grateful for that. I didn’t want for anything. My grandparents made sure of that. My mama supplied everything I needed. I didn’t have any siblings, but I had a lot of friends growing up.

My phone vibrated, so I looked at it to see a message from Jessica. *Okay.*

That was all she said, but I figured they were trying to turn up just like we were. Tomorrow would be a beautiful moment in time, and I could only hope that one day I would experience

the same type of love that Lennox and Nesha shared. I could clearly see how much they loved one another. Her family had accepted him in their lives and claimed him as their own. It was just cool to have so much love in a family. Knowing that Jessica was related to her in some way only made me want to be in the family too.

# CHAPTER 8



## JENAHRA

“O h yes, Carter. Yeeeessss.”

“You worked hard today, baby. I always gotchu,” he said as he rubbed the stress out of my feet.

It felt like that was where all my tension went. I was nervous about the food being good, then I worried about Syn. I prayed she didn't go into labor early. She didn't look good when they left. My nerves were always bad with events this size. I shouldn't have been nervous since this was my niece's wedding, but that fact only made it worse. I knew my family didn't bite their tongues. If it wasn't good, I would hear about it immediately.

Storm and his demon seeds would be the first to speak up and say the food wasn't shit. Those twins worked my last nerve at times. However, my biggest concern was my daughter. CJ was bad as ever, probably terrorizing Mama and Daddy's house with Remington. Jacob was his normally joyous self, and Jessica was usually the same way. She enjoyed life to the fullest, and I was happy she learned to do that despite the turmoil I raised her in. She didn't look so good today though. I noticed that she and Decklan didn't arrive together.

I couldn't really observe her because I was prepping food and cooking some of it for tomorrow, but I knew my daughter. She was more like me than she cared to admit. She was hiding something beneath her smile and laugh. I could see it in her eyes. She looked like she was so far away from here. Her mind was on something else, although that basketball player was

giving her the attention she wasn't getting or refused from Decklan.

As Carter kissed my toes, I stared at him and asked, "Have you noticed anything weird about Jessica? I mean, like a change in her personality?"

"Like she seems depressed or sad about something?"

"Yes."

"I have. She hasn't said anything, but I saw it Tuesday when she left for the Bahamas. I asked if she was okay, and she said she was. I didn't want to push, especially after she called me dad. You know I get all soft and shit when she does that."

I smiled slightly. Jessica had bonded with Carter immediately, and I knew it was because of what I told her he and I had shared when she was a kid. He wanted to take us away from Joseph back then, but I was crazy. *Stupid*. I felt like my complaints with Joseph weren't serious enough to leave him, but I was cheating. My thought process was ass backwards back then, and they caused way more harm than good to not only me but my children, especially Jessica.

"Yeah. I need to talk to her before she leaves. I think she's heading out either Sunday night or Monday morning for the airport. You and Shylou working my baby to death."

"Naw. *She* working herself to death. She can turn down anything she wants. She accepts it all. Either she loves it, or she's trying to keep herself busy to avoid something else."

I looked away, thinking about what he said. Although she was a grown woman, she would always be my baby. I was concerned about her well-being: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. I worried about her more than I did Jacob because she endured Joseph's verbal abuse as well. Although I would go behind him and try to do damage control, I knew that she could have very well taken some of the things he said to heart and carried with her into adulthood.

"I'll try to talk to her after the wedding."

“Okay. Until then, I need you to calm down. You have a long day tomorrow. Jessica is thirty years old. She’s very capable of handling herself. I know, as her mother, you’re going to worry, but try to relax. I’ve gotten to know Jess well. If she needs help or someone to talk to, she’ll say so.”

I gave Carter a slight smile, but to hell with that logic. That was my baby. We would be talking ASAP, even if I had to text her tonight. He continued to massage my feet then took a deep breath. Setting my foot on the bed, he went to the dresser and grabbed my phone. When he handed it to me, I immediately awakened my screen and sent her a text.

*Hey, baby. I can see that something or someone is bothering you. I can also see that Decklan is that someone. I’m always here if you want to talk. I know Nesha is usually your sounding board, but I can imagine that you don’t want to ‘bother’ her tonight. If you need to talk, it’s never too late. Text or call me whenever.*

I set my phone on the bed and looked at Carter as he stared at me with a smirk on his face. “What? She will always be my baby.”

He lifted both hands in surrender. “I didn’t say a word. I know you. That’s why I got your phone for you.”

I rolled my eyes slightly, then said, “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said as he went back to massaging my foot.

I slid it from his grasp and went to my knees in the bed, making my way to him. I went behind him and began massaging his shoulders. He’d been dealing with CJ all day, until he left with my parents, and for us, that was a lot. Carter and I were in our fifties, raising a four-year-old. God definitely showed off his sense of humor when he allowed me to get pregnant.

Carter groaned under my touch and dropped his head back for a second. This man was so sexy, and there were times where I still couldn’t believe he was all mine... again. I truly believed he was all mine when I was cheating on Joseph with

him. All I had to do was say the word. Somehow, I'd managed to hold onto his soul for years before we finally saw one another again.

It worked out how it was supposed to. I tried not to question why God allowed me to go through certain things. One day, my silent inquiries would be answered. I knew that most of what I went through was on me. I had plenty of opportunities to change things, but I didn't. I couldn't blame anyone but myself.

I leaned over and softly kissed Carter's ear then wrapped my arms around his neck. He kissed my arm. "Let's get some rest, baby. I'm gonna let you make it tonight. Tomorrow though, we will do this all over again, and I will fuck that beautiful pussy up."

"I can't wait until tomorrow, Carter. I need you now."

He pulled away from me and turned to face me, immediately putting his hand at the back of my neck, pulling me to him. I landed in his lap, and his mouth landed on mine. As we kissed passionately, he slid his hand up my night shirt, gripping my ass, causing me to release a moan into his mouth. When he separated our kiss, I straddled him, subtly rolling my hips.

"Nahra, why you ain't got on underwear?"

"Because I was hoping to convince you to fuck my beautiful pussy up tonight instead of tomorrow."

"Mm. Well, wait no longer."

He lifted me slightly and pulled his dick from his boxers, allowing me to slide right down it. My eyes fluttered closed as he slid his fingers through my hair. "Mm, Carter. Yeeeesss, baby."

"Ride yo' dick, baby. Let me feel everything this pussy has to give me."

As I began bouncing on him, my orgasm snuck up on me, and I nearly bit the shit out of his shoulder. He gripped my ass and began sliding me up and down his dick. My body was trembling as it enjoyed everything he did to me. Carter always

made me feel like I was the sexiest woman in the world. I loved the way he loved my kids and me. He took them in as his own, although they were grown.

He gave Jessica her dream job and was teaching Jacob the business side of things for the boutiques. Jacob was also working for Henderson Ranch and Farms in his down time and teaching Carter what he knew. He fit perfectly. Sexually, we were beyond explosive together, and I didn't know how I let him go all those years ago. As he released within my depths, my phone rang. After remaining still for a moment, I slid from him and went to it, knowing that it could be one of the kids.

When I saw Storm's number, I rolled my eyes. To fuck with him, I answered breathlessly. "What, Storm?"

"Jenahra," he said as if he was about to scold me.

I could imagine the frown on his face, and I nearly laughed. "What? I thought you were going deep sea diving," I said, barely able to control myself.

"We got the quickie out of the way, and now Aspen is taking a shower for the main event. You worried about the wrong thing. If you was getting your back blown out, you shouldn't have answered the damn phone. I don't wanna hear my oldest sister sounding like she got COPD."

I couldn't hold my laughter any longer. I hollered as I fell to the bed. "Shut up, Storm! What do you want?"

"Shit, I done forgot now. You done made me fucking sick to my stomach. Oh! Bali called and said Remington and CJ was fighting. Remington beat his ass, but don't worry. I'm gon' beat Remington's lil ass tomorrow."

"What were they fighting for?"

"It was Remy's fault. CJ had a popsicle, and Remy snatched it from him. CJ got mad and popped him in his head. Remy got mad back and dove on him. They're probably friends again by now, but I'm gonna handle him in the morning."

"Thanks for letting me know, Storm. Tell your little imps to keep their hands off my baby though."

“Imps? Angels can’t produce imps, Jen. Study yo’ Bible. Gabriel is a messenger of God, girl.”

“Clearly, you’re delusional just like Mama Monroe was when she called you Gabriel that day.”

“Storm?” I heard Aspen call out.

“Bye, Jen. I gotta go serve Aspen this demon di—”

I ended the call in his face. Storm was the most disrespectful nigga I knew. No wonder his kids didn’t have any damn sense.

# CHAPTER 9

## KENNY

“This time of year is always the hardest.”

“I know, baby,” I said as she and I pushed Kendrick’s fire truck back and forth between us.

We only did this around the holidays and his birthday, but it was more to remember him than anything else now. There was some sorrow, because even after all these years, I missed him. I still wore my hair loose on his birthday and Christmas day every year. He loved playing in it. When I slid it back to Keisha, she held it in her hands then looked up at me and smiled.

She slid it back under the bed, then I pulled her to me. I wrapped my arms around her as she sat between my legs and leaned back against me. “Baby, you have a lot of work to do tomorrow to help Jen and Chrissy. Why don’t we just go to bed?”

“Mm. Okay,” she said, not making a move.

I lightly kissed her neck as she slid her hand up the back of my head. “Are we still going to let Kingston and Kane open presents tomorrow since it’s the wedding?”

“Yeah. It’ll just be later. Is Shylou and Cass coming tomorrow? I haven’t had a chance to talk to him today.”

“Yeah, they are.”

“Kingston and Kane will be glad to hear that.”

“Yeah. SS, too, since he’s gotten just as close to Shaydon and Shykim.”



Shaydon and Shykim were Cass and Shylou's boys. They were barely a year apart in age. Shykim and Kingston were the same age. Shaydon was a year older, and Kane was a year younger. I couldn't wait until they got here. Since Shylou and I were no longer in business together, we didn't get to see each other nearly as often as we used to. We were both busy as hell with our own businesses.

Shit, I had the truck stop and the ambulance service to worry about. He had several stores and his own successful clothing line. He'd gotten his first celebrity endorsement a couple of years ago, not counting that of his cousin who was a rapper and had always looked out for him. I was beyond proud of him. He'd always had a business mind. That was why we instantly gelled in school. We were a lot alike in that aspect.

I patted Keisha's hips so she would stand. Once she did, she extended her hand to help me from the floor. I smiled and accepted her help then pulled her in my arms. She wrapped her arms around me, and before she could lay her head on my chest, there was a crash in the room the boys were in. I dropped my head back. That was what we got for letting SS and RJ come over. My boys were rough enough on their own. They didn't need help. "Help, Holy Ghost," Keisha voiced as I left the room to see what was up.

When I got to the room, Karima was standing in the doorway fussing. "Kane, you know better, bruh. Daddy gon' whip yo' high yellow butt."

"What happened?" I asked, scaring the hell out of her.

"Come on na, Daddy. You can't be sneaking up on me like that."

I chuckled. Karima was a senior in high school already. I didn't know where the time had gone, but I sure in the hell wished it would come back. Kendrall was a grown ass man and was doing well for himself. He'd started rodeoing professionally a couple of years ago, and I was extremely proud of him.

As I watched Karima hold her hand to her chest and take deep breaths, I said, "You are so damn dramatic. What

happened?”

“Kane jumped off the bunk bed and landed against the wall. He knocked everything hanging on the wall down, and there’s a small hole in it.”

I peeked in and rolled my eyes. “Kane! For real? You gon’ work to fix this. I have an entire shop worth of tools that need organizing Sunday. I expect you to get to it.”

“Aww. Yes, sir.”

“Ain’t none of y’all can fly. Quit jumping off shit.”

When I closed the door, I heard SS say, “My daddy would have whupped my ass had that been me.”

I reopened the door, and the four of them stared at me. “Seven, you about to get your ass whupped *here*. Let me hear you curse one more time, and I’m gon’ beat all the evilness Storm passed down to you right out *of* you. You hear me?”

“Yes, sir.”

I closed the door and waited to hear if any of them would say anything else. When they didn’t, I headed back to my wife. The running shower got my attention and had my dick rising. Going to Karima’s room, I said, “Listen for them. I’m about to get in the shower.”

“Okay.”

I closed her door and made my way to the shower, finding Keisha in the bathroom, taking off her clothes. Keisha was still so damn fine. Her hips had gotten wider since having the boys, and I loved every minute of that shit. Stepping behind her, I wrapped my arms around her waist. “You are so beautiful, Keisha.”

“And you’re a handsome man, baby. What happened in there?”

“Your son Kane jumped off the bed and put a hole in the wall when he crashed into it, realizing that he couldn’t fly.”

“Lord, have mercy. Well, let’s get this fuck session in before Karima gets sick of them.”

“Hell yeah. You have no complaints from me, Mrs. Henderson.”

# CHAPTER 10

## CHRISSEY

“I just came here to get starter for the bread I’m gonna make tomorrow. If I wanted to be attacked by children, I would have gone to your houses,” I said to Storm’s bad ass kids.

For some reason, they all liked me and gave me the hardest time as well. They were all bullies, like their father, except Maui. Why did I have to be the chosen one? “Aunt Chrissy, quit playing. You know you love us.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said to Bali.

CJ came running toward me with his arms outstretched. His lil ass was bad too. He didn’t steal it though. Jenahra was a badass when we were little. She could cuss like a sailor. I picked him up and frowned as I stared at his face. “CJ, what happened to your eye?”

He had a scratch above it and a slight bruise on the side of it like he was fighting for his damn life. “Remy did that.”

My eyebrows lifted. My mama had to be tired. These kids were in here fighting and shit. “Noni and Bali, how did this happen?”

“They were playing fine, and the next thing we knew, Remy was on top of him, swinging.”

“Lord, have mercy,” I said, holding CJ tightly.

He was eating the attention up too. I felt sorry for him until I saw his bad ass stick his tongue out at Remy. I rolled my eyes and set him on his feet. Making my way to the kitchen, I saw my mama leaned over the sink. She was in her eighties

now, and those years weren't slowing down. "Hey, Mama. You okay?"

"Yeah, child. Just taking a rest. These kids gon' drive me to an early grave."

"I'm gonna call Storm. He has nothing to do for the wedding tomorrow. He can keep his kids at his house. I know Jenahra has a lot to do in the morning, so I see why CJ is here. If everybody else can get their kids, then he can get his."

"I'm just feeling extra tired tonight. We worked hard decorating earlier. I'm not a spring chicken anymore."

"I know, Mama," I said while placing the phone call.

Of course, he didn't answer. *Jackass*. "He didn't answer. I'm gonna send these kids other places."

After calling Jasper, he said he would come and get Remy and CJ since Ashanni was with Tiff. I guessed the twins would have to come with me. Storm was gonna pay for this shit. I made my way back to the front to see them sitting on my mama's living room furniture with their legs crossed. "Go pack your stuff. Y'all are coming with me. Pack the boys' things too. Jasper is coming to get them."

"Thank God. It smell like old people in here," Noni said.

I rolled my eyes, a common occurrence anytime I was around Storm or his children. "Y'all know y'all ain't supposed to be in here anyway on Mama's good furniture."

"This room smells the best because nobody is ever in it. I bet you would sit in here, too, if you had to spend the night," Bali said as they walked off.

I went back to the kitchen. LaKeith was gonna be pissed when I got back home with the twins in tow. He'd promised to glaze every roll on my body when I got back, and now he would have to keep his glaze to himself. Those twins were way too nosy. The older they got, the worse they got... just like their nosy ass father. Their asses stayed in grown folks' business.

"Mama, I got all the kids situated. Get you some rest."

“Thank you, Chrissy. Normally, I can handle it, but today wore me out. I had to be a part of making my first grandchild’s wedding a grand affair. The barn looks beautiful.”

“It really does. So elegant. You, Aspen, Vida, and Tiffany did a beautiful job.”

“Thank you, baby.”

“Where’s Maui?”

“When Tiff came to get Milana and Ashanni, she took off with them. You know all this shit gets on her nerves.” She chuckled. “She is *not* Seven’s child.”

I laughed then went to her and hugged her. Seeing her and Daddy get old made me just want to cherish the time we were blessed to have left with them. I would always make the load lighter when I could. When I released her, I grabbed the starter for the bread.

“Aunt Kissy, we ready!” Remington yelled.

“Good. Y’all are going with Uncle Jasper. Maybe you can play with Crew and Royal.”

I knew that was a long shot. Royal was way older than them, and Crew was unbothered when it came to the two of them. He would ignore them, even if they had gotten on top of the roof. He did his dirt, but CJ and Remy were on totally different levels. Crew was older than them as well. He had to be at least six.

“Yay!” CJ yelled.

When Satan’s imps appeared in the doorway, I turned to Mama. “See you tomorrow.”

“Okay, baby.”

When we got to the front door, Jasper was walking in. He didn’t speak. He looked slightly annoyed. “Get y’all asses in the car. I’m not Grandma. I’ll beat y’all lil asses, then take you to yo’ parents and let them handle you.”

The boys lowered their heads, and Remy looked like he wanted to cry. When they walked off, Jasper let a smile grace

his face. “You gotta be tough with them. I’ma give them some liquid marijuana and knock them out. Mama okay?”

I chuckled. “She’s just tired. She worked hard today.”

“Yeah, I get it. You know I got a key to Storm’s house.”

My eyebrows hiked up. “For real?”

“Mm hmm,” he said with an evil grin.

“Let’s go over there then. We can drop CJ’s ass there too, since they are missing SS and Maui.”

Jasper chuckled and rubbed his hands together. He was always down with the foolishness, especially when it involved irritating Storm.



# CHAPTER 11

“**Y**ou need anything else, Jen, before I leave?”

“No. I think I got it. I just have to fry this chicken. Tell Reverend White don’t be all day with this ceremony so I won’t have to rewarm food. I don’t know where Chrissy is. We have too much to do this morning.”

I looked around the kitchen to see food everywhere. Somehow, they would pull all this together. Chrissy’s stepdaughter Janessa would be helping them, along with Keisha, Cass, Sharon, Vida, and Kema. Kema and Philly didn’t make it out to party last night, but I was sure they would be more than ready for the turnup today.

“I’m here! Sorry I’m late, Jen. Good news though. I’ve already done the bread. I was up all night,” Chrissy said as she rushed inside with her garment bag.

I took it from her and brought it to the dressing room where Jen’s things were. Well, it wasn’t really a dressing room, but that was the purpose it would be serving today. My baby was getting married, and I couldn’t be prouder of her. She and Jakari had taken the lead on the family business, and I knew it would be in good hands whenever I chose to retire. Christian and Jacob were learning fast, and before long, they wouldn’t need me at all.

Tiffany and Chas had been teaching Milana, Ashanni, and the twins how to handle the books and business side of things as well. We wanted to keep it in the family as much as possible. Although Philly wasn’t technically related, he was

just as much family as all of us. Liv had been learning the business as well. She'd retired from nursing and just wanted to be with me all the time. Honestly, I loved the hell out of that. She'd said if learning the business would assure that she spent enough time with me, then so be it.

Olivia was everything I needed at this time in my life. I realized that I had been blessed with good women. I just wasn't who I was supposed to be yet. Had I been, Evette and I would still have been together. If not her, then Sharon and I would have made it for sure. I abused her and took her for granted for nearly our entire marriage, taking what I was dealing with out on her. She didn't deserve that.

As I left the kitchen area, I heard the Christmas music crank up, and I could only smile. Christmas was Jenahra's favorite time of year. She always decorated everything and played Christmas music. She was beyond excited when Nesha chose to decorate like a winter wonderland. All the crystals and flowers were gorgeous. You couldn't help but be in the Christmas spirit when you walked in here.

It didn't help that we had a real-life nativity scene to the side of the family barn. The only thing fake were the people. All the animals were definitely real. I made my way to where Nesha was getting her hair done. My other daughters, Shakayla and Chenetra, were in there getting their hair done as well. When I walked in, Nesha was on the phone and laughing hard. I smiled as I stared at her. She became a beautiful, intelligent, kind woman, despite the turmoil I'd put her through. When I thought about that shit for too long, it still bothered the hell out of me.

"Girl, you ain't never seen a barndominium? It looks like a barn on the outside, but it's elegant on the inside! Lawd, I know you ain't from Texas, but you finna find out. So wear whatever you were gonna wear. Ain't no cow gon' be moo-ing next to you," Nesha said to whomever it was on the other end of the phone call.

She died laughing as I slowly shook my head. People had that misconception all the time. When you said barn, they immediately thought of hay and animals because, typically,

that's what barns were for. However, barndominiums were becoming more and more popular. I had plans drawn up for this one twenty years ago so we could have all our big family gatherings here instead of us renting facilities or piling up at somebody's house.

When Nesha noticed me, she hopped up from her seat. She had huge rollers in her hair, and her skin was glowing. She gave me a big smile as she finished up her call. Once she ended it, she ran to me. I closed my eyes as I hugged her tightly. My heart was full. When she looked up at me, tears streaming down her face, I kissed her forehead. "Even with these big ass rollers in your hair, you are so beautiful."

She giggled. "Daddy, I can't believe this day is finally here. I just hope I can always be everything Lennox needs."

"Listen. If there ever came a time that you *weren't* everything he needed you to be, then that would be on him. Nesha... I've told you before. You are a reflection of everything good in me and your mother. It seems not one flaw was passed down to you."

Before I could stop it, a tear fell down my cheek. I quickly wiped it as she broke down. "Daddy, I love you so much."

"I love you more. These aren't tears of sadness but of joy. Lennox is a blessed man. For me to give him one of my most precious gifts speaks to how great of a man I think he is. He didn't try to change anything about you. He fell in love with just who you are. If neither of you lose sight of that, you'll be just fine."

"Thank you, Daddy. I know you don't think you did right by me, but everything I know, I learned from you and Aunt Jen. Mostly you though. Lennox knows how to change the oil in a tractor now."

I chuckled. Lennox was so far from being country, but he was willing to adjust to her world instead of trying to pull her out of it. That was kingly as hell. "I just wanted to dip in before y'all really get to running and say how much I love you and how proud of you I am."

Nesha hugged me tightly, then went back to sit under the dryer. I hugged Chenetra and Shakayla, then waved at Danica. As I walked out, I nearly ran into Jessica. She had serious bags under her eyes. My eyebrows lifted slightly. “Late night?”

She gave me a slight smile. “Hey, Uncle WJ.”

She didn’t answer my question, just walked past me like I hadn’t said a word. I shrugged and made my way to the front to see Storm walk in. “What you doing here so early?”

“I needed to make sure everything was going according to plan. I turn my back for one minute and all hell breaks loose. Jasper had his ass in my shop last night and stole a tire. I ought to call the police on his ass. Then him and Chrissy came in my house while I had Aspen screaming at the top of her lungs and dropped Noni, Bali, Remington, *and* CJ off. They were supposed to be at Mama and Daddy house. Remington fucking walked in on us. He thought I was fighting his mama. Nigga, I almost punched my baby in the throat.”

I laughed so hard I could barely breathe. He only frowned harder. When I could finally calm down, I asked, “Nah what nah?”

That only made me laugh harder. “Fuck you, man.”

“That’s what y’all get for that newsletter Aspen put out. Did you see what she said about Tony?”

“Naw.”

“She said that nigga was perpetuating failure with that Dallas Cowboys flag stretched across the outside of his house. That’s enough to have all of Nome knocking on y’all’s door.”

“She said what? Oh, she tripping now. She know better than to bash the Cowboys.”

“I’m just saying. Karma.”

“Whatever, nigga. I’m finna run for mayor. Abney gon’ have to get the hell on and let a real one run this shit.”

“Storm, just because you know everybody’s business don’t mean you capable of running a town.”

“Hater,” he mumbled. “Who playing Christmas music? Let me go delegate shit.”

He walked toward the kitchen, knowing that Jenahra and Chrissy were in there. I swore, the older he got, the worse he got. And he wondered why his kids were so bad. When I walked out the barn, I saw Lennox’s brother sitting on the ground, staring at the animals. I frowned slightly because I didn’t know what could have had him looking the way he was with all the happiness and love in the air.

When I got close to him, I asked, “You good?”

He looked away and mumbled, “I lost her. I lost Jess.”

Maybe that was why she looked the way she did when she’d come inside. All I knew was that they had better not start no shit at my baby’s wedding. We’d worked hard to pull this event together. “Well, think about what you did to lose her and figure out if it can be rectified. Can you possibly prove to her that what the two of you have is bigger than whatever it was that caused you to lose her? If you can’t, then you have to let go. However, today is about Nesha and Lennox. Please don’t bring that into their moment.”

“I won’t. It’s just hard to see her and Nate flirting with each other. I think they may have seen each other late last night or rather early this morning.”

“If they did, what can you do about it?”

“Nothing. It’s in the past, no matter how recent.”

I nodded then patted his shoulder. “You gon’ figure it out. In the meantime, go meet the fellas and chill out.”

He nodded then stood and went to his car. I didn’t know how he would chill out with Nate being there too, but it was far better than him being here.

# CHAPTER 12

## NESHA

I looped my arm around my dad's as "He Loves Me" by Jill Scott began. The barn doors slid open, and I stood still, letting everyone take me in. This mermaid, off-the-shoulder, lace gown had blown me away when I saw it, so I knew that they could barely handle the sight of it. When my daddy laid eyes on me, the tears cascaded down his cheeks, no matter how hard he tried to hold them in. I was doing my best not to cry, but one look at Lennox's sexy ass had my emotions on overload.

That six feet eight inches of chocolate perfection had me thirsty, and I couldn't wait until the honeymoon to quench it. Since tomorrow was Christmas, we chose to leave tomorrow night. We also decided we would try to wait until we reached our destination to consummate our marriage. I could see now, as I stared at him in his black suit and wine-colored shirt, that would be hard to do.

Once we began walking and we got closer for me to see the emotion on his face, it only made my eyes water. Ms. Cheryl had beat my face like I'd never seen, and I was doing my best not to mess it up, but Lennox was making it extremely hard. My bridesmaids were all crying and messing up their makeup. Most of the women in my family were crying as well, especially my mama and Mama Sharon.

When we got to the altar, my daddy kissed my head as Lennox stared at me. Decklan had to pat his shoulder to propel him forward. It was like he was in a trance. He shook my dad's hand, and my dad pulled Lennox in for a half hug, then



nodded his acceptance. I wrapped my arm around Lennox's as we made our way back to the preacher. "You look so beautiful, Nee-Nee."

"You look amazing yourself, Lennox."

I smiled at him as he stared at me, still in a trance-like state. The preacher was talking, but I hadn't heard a word he said. All I saw was Lennox Guilman until the rudest person in attendance interrupted the calmness and love. "I wish y'all snap out of it so we can get this over with," Uncle Storm mumbled.

I rolled my eyes before they fell closed. Nobody but Uncle Storm would even be bold enough to say that. I could hear some guests seated up close gasp and relatives doing their best to stifle their laughter. My dad gave him a pointed look, daring him to say another word. Clearly, he'd voiced the sentiments of his bad ass children, because all of them wore frowns on their faces. I wished they would have just stayed home.

Aspen had nudged him, and I was grateful the kids hadn't blurted anything, but when I glanced at her hand, I knew why. She had a damn switch. She was gonna beat some ass had they said a word. She should have used that thing on Uncle Storm. Making the moment light so my guests that weren't familiar with his ass could relax, I said, "Aunt Aspen, are you gonna spank your oldest child? He's being disruptive."

My dad smiled and winked at me as Uncle Storm frowned hard. Uncle Jasper couldn't control the chuckle that left from him, and it only caused Uncle Marcus, Uncle Kenny, and Daddy to do the same.

I brought my attention back to the ceremony, and once the preacher reiterated what I needed to say, I did just that, totally ignoring everyone and focusing on Lennox. He was the only person that mattered in the room at this moment, and I couldn't wait to live the rest of my life as Nesha Guilman.

Once we'd completed the requirements for this wedding and had managed to give flowers to our mothers, a Stetson to my dad, and a gold chain to Lennox's dad, it was time to kiss my handsome groom. He was just as excited as I was to

partake. Lennox lowered his mouth to mine and kissed me like we were the only ones in the room. Had it lasted any longer than it did, he would have been taking me to one of the private rooms to take the edge off.

“It’s about time!” SS said aloud.

“Daddy, we go home? We open pwesents!” Remington added.

“We aren’t leaving yet. Blame Nesha for wanting to get married on Christmas Eve.”

“Seven Senior and Seven Junior, enough,” Aunt Aspen said through clenched teeth.

I slowly shook my head as Lennox smiled. “They just can’t act civilized for an hour. One hour.”

He chuckled as he pulled me to him and kissed me again as everyone applauded. We had plenty of pictures to take and people to speak to. However, my first item of business immediately after the wedding would be to confront Uncle Storm and his goons.

# CHAPTER 13

## JESSICA

Walking out to the front of the barn with my arm looped around Decklan's and smiling like I was happy was the hardest shit I'd had to pull off in a while. Too many people had already noticed something was up with me, and I hated the attention. My mama had sent a text last night, but I was too busy slobbering down Nate to text her back. I was embarrassed at my drunken behavior last night. We didn't have sex, but we were awfully close.

I didn't know that man, but he was fine as hell and hard to resist. He'd met us at the trail ride because he had never been to one. He thoroughly enjoyed himself, although he was somewhat bombarded by people wanting to speak and get autographs. When he made his way to me, bitches were mad as hell. Even the nigga I was dancing with for most of the night before he got there was a lil salty. I'd totally forgotten about him when Nate showed up with Malachi and Jakari. Nate danced with me a bit, then we left together in Jakari's car, despite Nesha's glare.

We talked quite a bit about our families and how he was denied the privilege of knowing his father, who was also a professional basketball player at one time. He'd died fifteen years ago from cancer. For some reason, his mother had kept him away from his father and didn't tell him who he was until after he'd died. That was pretty sad, and he was still suffering from the grief of not being able to know and love him like a son should.

Before I knew it, we were in his hotel room in the bed, kissing and touching on one another like we'd known each other for at least months. I'd jacked him off, and he'd eaten my pussy. That nigga didn't leave a crumb on the plate either. When it came time to go all the way, I backed out. He didn't seem angry about it, just a little disappointed. My mind had somehow sobered up and told me that I was out of my rabid ass mind if I would have fucked that man.

As we stood in the front, Decklan stared at me like he had something to say. I was doing my best not to create a scene at Nesha's wedding. She deserved to have a peaceful day, but I couldn't contain my reaction to him any longer. "What, Decklan?"

He shook his head. "You just look beautiful, Jess." He walked closer to me as I rolled my eyes. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"About what? I'm not really feeling a conversation with you right now. You've already apologized me up a wall early this morning, but I don't feel like it was genuine, especially after that fucked up text you sent me last night. So what else could you possibly have to say?"

He grabbed my hand and caressed it, causing me to remember the first time we met two years ago. While I wanted to snatch my hand away, I didn't want people all in our business. Plus, my emotions were surfacing. Decklan was so sweet in the beginning. Like the song Nesha walked in to by Jill Scott said, Decklan had wooed me. He catered to me like I had never been catered to. That was why it took me so long to tell him to go fuck himself.

I closed my eyes as he said, "I'm not giving up on us. I plan to show you that I'm going to be the man I was when we first met and the man I was up until six months ago. I don't know who this man is that I've somehow morphed into. Just like he's foreign to you, his ass is foreign to me too. I can't even explain why I've done some of the things I've done, let alone make excuses for them."

“So what things have you done exactly, Decklan? Because I’m not even sure I know. You haven’t admitted a damn thing. All I know is that I’ve felt a shift in you. We don’t spend time together... Wait a damn minute. Why am I saying all this shit? We’ve already been through this. I told you I was done. Na leave me the fuck alone.”

I snatched my hand back, then looked around to be sure no one saw me. This pretending was getting harder by the minute. Decklan stared at me for a second, then said, “I meant what I said. I’m not giving up. Period.”

I rolled my eyes and walked over toward Danica to get away from his ass. Before I could make it to her, I caught Nate’s eyes on me. He’d seen the exchange between me and Decklan. I’d told him about our now defunct relationship. When he told me he didn’t know Decklan, I was happy. The last thing I would want was to mess around with Decklan’s friend. I wasn’t that type of petty. But I would flaunt another nigga in his face without hesitancy.

“You have a mess going, boo,” Danica said.

“Naw. You got that shit wrong. Decklan fucked up, and a new nigga wanna do right by me. What’s messy about that? I broke up with his ass before we even got here. He wasn’t trying to make shit right until he saw me getting attention from someone else. He can go fuck himself with a broomstick.”

“Girl, must you always be so damn vulgar?” Danica asked then laughed.

I rolled my eyes. She wasn’t my crowd. She was Nesha’s friend. We were cool, but we weren’t really friends. My people knew that I didn’t give a fuck. I was a Henderson through and through. I’d inherited Uncle Storm’s temper, Aunt Tiffany’s feistiness, and my mama’s strength. Sometimes, I could be sweet like Aunt Chrissy, laidback like Uncle Jasper, or ratchet like Uncle Marcus. It was rare that I was quiet like Uncle Kenny, but it happened occasionally. I truly believed my petty side came from Uncle WJ.

I walked away from her without a word and went to the bathroom to calm my nerves. There were a couple of other

women in there, but I didn't know them. They smiled at me and continued talking to each other. I stood in the mirror and took deep breaths as one of them said, "That man has to be family the way he said that. You only tolerate that type of behavior from people you love."

They laughed as the other lady said, "Family or not, I would have cursed his ass out. I almost want to do it on GP."

I stopped what I was doing and stared at her with a smirk on my lips. "I dare you," I said.

"You don't think I'll do it?"

I slowly shook my head as my lips turned down. It wasn't that I didn't think she would do it. She just wasn't gon' be prepared for the shit storm afterward. Was I being messy? Hell yeah. I actually liked to see the shock register on people's faces when Storm didn't bite his tongue. She smiled at me and said, "Okay! Come on. I'll show you."

I followed behind her, trying to contain my smile. If nothing else made me feel better about the bullshit I was going through, this would definitely pull a laugh from the depths of my soul. Decaurey looked at me and frowned, like he knew I was up to no good. Storm was seated at a table with his family.

I didn't know this lady, but she was gon' learn today. She didn't know Storm. You couldn't walk up to people and just say what the fuck you wanted to say, especially somebody you didn't even know. When we got to their table, she tapped Storm on his shoulder. She spoke to the table as they all frowned at her, including Aunt Aspen. No one spoke back. This shit was finna be film worthy.

"Can I speak to you for a moment?" she asked him.

He glanced at me and stood from his seat, the frown never leaving his face. She should have been hella intimidated, but she was determined to prove to me that she had the audacity. I pulled my phone from my bra and walked over to where she led Uncle Storm. I hit record as I stood off to the side, pretending to fix my hair.

“What you did during Nesha and Lennox’s wedding was extremely disrespectful. Had it been my wedding, I would have cursed your ass out. That was totally uncalled for.”

Storm frowned harder. “Who in the fuck are you, and why should I give a fuck about what you have to say? Secondly, the nigga that marry you gon’ have to be a blind muthafucka, ’cause ain’t no twenty/twenty vision nigga gon’ settle for this shit in front of me. You can curse me out if you want to, but I’m gon’ do it better. Your best bet is to get the fuck outta my face before you ignite World War Three on yo’ tales-from-the-crypt looking ass.”

Her eyebrows lifted, and she looked like she wanted to cry. She hurriedly walked away as Uncle Storm pointed at me. “Yo’ messy ass wrong for that.”

His frown disappeared, and he pulled me to him and hugged me. “Still my G. She must’ve been talking shit.”

“You already know she was. She deserved to get her pitiful feelings hurt. The Hendersons don’t roll like that. I bet she won’t approach nobody else like that.”

He chuckled and so did I as we headed back to his table. Before I could greet everyone, I was called for pictures. I glanced at the ladies as they stared at me. When I stopped walking and fully turned to them, they looked away. *Bourgeois bitches*. When I turned to walk away, Nate was standing there. “I just wanted to tell you how beautiful you looked.”

“Thank you, handsome. Come on,” I said as I looped my arm around his.

When I got back to Houston, I could truly begin healing from this shit. I just wanted to be done with Decklan’s foolishness and move on to see exactly what Nate had to offer.



# CHAPTER 14

## STORM

“If she would have been a man, I would have fucked her up. She lucky. Jessica would have caused a whole shit storm at Neshia’s wedding.”

“I’m more than sure had it been a man, Jessica wouldn’t have done that. She showed me the video. Nigga, you didn’t have to drag that woman like that,” Jasper said.

I frowned at him. If anybody knew me, his ass did. He chuckled as I frowned at him. Before I could say another word, I heard music start, then the famous words, *In my mind, I want you to be free*. I rolled my eyes. Nobody but Jenahra had started that shit. She loved Christmas music. “Here we go with this shit.”

I was at Jasper’s house having a smoke. The kids had opened their gifts, and they were happy with what they got, which was mostly electronics and those damn squishmallows for the girls. By the time they were done and had gone to bed, I came to Jasper’s. I knew the family was all still awake, because I’d left the reception early before I had to kill one of them kids. “Jenahra!” I yelled.

Jasper chuckled and took a pull from his joint. She joined us on the deck with a smile on her face. “I can’t be thinking about Jesus in the manger right now. That’s messing up my high.”

“Well, glory to God. He can still get through to you. I thought you were a lost cause, nigga,” she responded.

I stared at her muthafuckerly as she laughed. Jasper laughed so hard he nearly died from choking. I didn't even have a comeback for her ass. Tiff joined us as my phone rang. I frowned harder, wondering who was calling me at two in the morning. When I saw Bali's phone number, I rolled my eyes. A nigga couldn't get no fucking peace. "Hello?"

"Where you went this time of morning?"

"Last time I checked, I was a grown muthafucka."

"Daddy! Really?"

"I'm at Jasper's. Y'all need something?"

"No, but you need to bring it in. If you ain't wit' yo wife this time of night, then you need to be home. Only triflin' shi... I mean stuff go on at this hour."

"Bali, you gon' get fucked up in a hot ass minute. I'll be there in a minute to confiscate all that shit I just bought."

I ended the call, only for it to ring again. "What!" I yelled as Jasper chuckled.

"Daddy, you know I was just playing. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. You know you my nigga."

"Man, get the fuck off my line and go to bed."

I ended the call and said to Jasper, "Two more years and they'll be grown and gone."

"Man, you know those girls ain't going far. You got all of them spoiled rotten. They only giving you what you gave Mama and Daddy growing up."

"And me!" Jenahra yelled. "It's good for yo' ass! I'm going home. I'm tired as hell. See y'all at Mama and Daddy's tomorrow."

She kissed our cheeks and left, leaving all that damn Christmas music on. For some reason, I wasn't really fond of Christmas music, especially not the traditional songs. I turned to Tiff and asked, "Y'all still entertaining us tomorrow?"

"Yep, after we eat. Kema coming over too. Mal didn't want to do it at first, but he's gonna do it for the family. So

we'll have a bull rider, steer wrestling, steer undecorating, relay, barrel racing, and roping. Oh, and KJ gon' be cutting. Legend, Red, and Zay may even roll through. We aren't gonna start until tomorrow evening so we can turn on the arena lights."

"Aww shit. All them Nome niggas gon' be trying to come through. Make sure this don't turn into no public event. KJ be done had all his boys come through, and ain't no telling who they gon' tell," Jasper added.

"What time Nesha leaving tomorrow?" I asked.

WJ walked through the door just as I asked the question. "They will be there to see us before they leave. They are going to eat with Lennox's family, then they'll stop on their way to Houston. I think their flight leaves out at seven, so we'll probably still be inside when they come through."

I nodded. "I owe her ass a chewing about her guest thinking she can check me. She was totally misinformed. She was prolly ready to commit suicide when I finished with her ass. Bet she won't try another nigga though."

WJ slowly shook his head. "I need you to just act like a human sometimes, man."

I knew he was referencing a scene from the movie *Clifford*. We used to watch that shit all the time as kids. "What the fuck that's supposed to mean? She shouldn't have walked up on me like she knew me. I bet she know my ass now. You wouldn't be able to pay her ass to say shit else to me."

Jasper shook his head and took another puff. That nigga was high as giraffe pussy. I wasn't afforded the same courtesy of just being able to enjoy my high. Bali fucked that all up. I gave him the rest of my J and stood from my seat. "I'm going home and get into my wife. That'll drain a nigga dry so I can go to sleep."

I slapped his and WJ's hands, then hugged Tiff and took the three-minute drive home. When I got there, I saw the light in the front room on. You couldn't leave these niggas, even while they were sleeping. I checked before I left, and they

were all asleep. I sat in my driveway and just stared at the house, slowly shaking my head, getting geared up to fuss and hand out spankings if necessary.

The minute I opened the door, I saw Noni in the kitchen eating peanut butter from the jar. She was the only one who did that shit and had been doing it since she was a toddler. She glanced over at me as she screwed the lid, then took off running, screaming, “The grinch is home!”

I closed my eyes momentarily as a slight smile played on my lips. These kids were something else. They were screaming as they ran up the stairs. When I locked up and made my way to the stairs, Remy was having a hard time getting up them. He turned to see me and screamed then tried to move faster. When he saw he wasn't gonna get away from me, that lil nigga turned around and said, “I guess I'm gon' take one for the team!”

He jumped against me and started swinging, so I grabbed him by his ankles and held him upside down until I got to his room. I dropped him in his bed. “Carry yo' ass to sleep before I really steal Christmas.”

# CHAPTER 15

## TIFFANY

“Mama, are we gonna be first or second?” Milana asked.

“Barrel racing will be first, baby.”

We had just gotten done eating, and the girls and I were preparing for our miniature family rodeo. Thank God it wasn't freezing or raining. The arena was perfect. I had some guys to come out the other day and get it ready. My daughter Milana, Karima, Maui, and Ashanni were all planning to show what they'd been learning. Milana and Karima were professionals, but Maui and Ashanni had decided later that they wanted to ride, so they were still learning. I'd only been working with them for a little over a year. Marcus's daughter would be starting soon, along with Malachi's daughter, Niara. She was only two years old.

As we got the stalls and horses ready, I heard someone say, “The coldest woman to ever bareback and relay extraordinaire!”

I turned to see my boys, Legend, Red, and Zay, making their way to me. I took off running and hopped in Legend's arms. He was my husband's cousin and had been the one to introduce me to him, but he was instrumental in making sure I would make history for not only women of color, but all women. I'd been the only woman to win a national finals rodeo title in barebacking. His input and Red's prayers played an important role in my success.

He spun me around one time as he laughed. It had been a while since I'd seen him. It seemed like ever since he'd retired

from bull riding, we hardly ever crossed paths. Red had stopped steer wrestling as well. Red and Zay still team roped sometimes, but I believed it was more for fun than anything else. They would be showing off their skills tonight.

I hugged each one of them. When I saw Red's wife, Shana, I gave her a huge hug too. She was going to relay with us today. Kema and Philly arrived as well, along with their three children. The twins would also be participating this evening. We just had an entire lineup of family and friends that covered nearly every rodeo event, coming out to show everyone a good time, and I couldn't wait to get things cranked up.

"Where's Harper, Kortlynn, and the kids?"

"They're still inside. Harper made a huge cake for everyone to enjoy. We gon' have to start coming around more. You know three of mine are rodeoing now too. My oldest is bull riding. I can't help but say that he's a chip off the old block," Legend said as his chest puffed up with pride.

I smiled and headed toward the house just as my man was headed out. I smiled even bigger at him. When I got close, he grabbed me by the arm and yanked me to the other side of the house and led me to my daddy's storage where he kept his tractors. I didn't know what the fuck his problem was, but he had better voice that shit before I hollered loud enough for the Hendersons to know what time it was. He opened the door and slightly pushed me inside then closed the door behind him.

When he turned to me, I was about to go the fuck off until he dropped his pants and said, "It's been a long ass weekend. I know it's Christmas and you got a lot of shit going on, Tiff, but I need to fuck you. I mean like really fuck you. No 'nice and easy' or 'do me slow' but fuck the shit out of you."

I quickly unbuckled my chaps and pants and pulled them down, then bent over the seat of one of the mowers. Before I could count to three, Ryder was balls deep in my shit, making promises to have me screaming for help. My eyes had rolled to the back of my head, and I realized I needed this just as much as he did. Slow and easy was cool, but there were times that I needed my back beat in.



“Tiff, shit! I needed this, lil baby.”

“Me too, baby. Fuck!”

The sweat was accumulating under my breasts, and my head had hit the gearshift at least a couple of times already. Ryder had me wanting to cancel the entire rodeo. I was ready to put on a private rodeo where I rode him bareback for the championship buckle. My pants and chaps were at my knees, so I had no choice but to take it just how Ryder was giving it, and he was fucking me like it would be his last time.

“Lil baby, I’m ’bout to nut in this beautiful pussy.”

“Give it to me then,” I said as I panted.

I didn’t know how I would get on that horse feeling all gushy and shit. Everything would be starting in less than an hour. Before Ryder could finish, I released on his dick. “Oh my God, baby. Your dick is amazing.”

“Mm hmm. It’s about to fill you with its go-go juice. I hope you ready.”

He began a heavyweight round on my pussy and beat the shit out of her until he released all over my cervix. Resting his forehead on my back for a second, he said, “Got damn, that was good.”

He slid out of me and pulled his pants up, and I pulled mine up and quickly buttoned them. The minute I took a step toward the door, I could feel the intense moisture. “If any of those horses out there catch on to my scent and fuck up my ride, that’s gon be yo’ ass, Mr. Semien.”

He chuckled. “Ain’t nobody told you to have sweet potato pie year ’round.”

I giggled and made my way back to the family to put on the best show they’d ever seen.

# CHAPTER 16

## CHRISSEY

The rodeo was going so well. To see all my nieces, nephews, cousins, and my sister putting on a show like no other made me proud. Not only did we have the family business along with all the businesses we ran individually, the Hendersons were dominating on the dirt. Having Legend, Red, and Zayson here added a little razzle dazzle for us to see.

LaKeith put his arm around me and kissed my cheek. The last few years had been amazing with this man by my side. Each day was sweeter than the day before. I grabbed my blanket from my lap and flapped it open so we could wrap it around us. It was getting cold, and I was just about ready to call it a night, although they had plenty of events to go. I hated being cold.

LaKeith wrapped us up tight as he pulled me closer in his arms. Kendrall AKA KJ was doing his thang on his horse, showing us what cutting was all about. I was excited for him. Kenny had taught him well. I never understood why Kenny never pursued the sport. He was so good at it. I was more than sure watching his son make a living from doing it was good enough for him.

“Bye, Aunt Chrissy! We’re heading out. Thank you so much for all your hard work to make our day beautiful,” Nesha said as she leaned over and kissed my cheek.

“You’re welcome, baby. You were a gorgeous bride. Lennox, take care of our baby.”

“You know I will.”

“Wait a damn minute,” Storm interrupted.

When I looked up and saw Jasper with him, my eyes immediately went down to the lighter he was holding. The flame had pulled my attention to it. I thought he was lighting a blunt, because that was typical Jasper, but that nigga was holding a rib, heating it up with a cigarette lighter. *Who does that?*

“Jasper! The house is right there. Take your country ass in there and use the microwave!” I yelled then laughed.

He chuckled too, then said, “That’s too far. This rib is the shit. You know Daddy can barbeque the hell out of some ribs. Running my mouth with everybody, it got cold on me.”

We were all laughing as Storm stood there with a slight frown on his face. “I’m sorry, baby boy. Jasper distracted me. What’s wrong?”

“Nesha gon’ have to check her people. I meant to tell her earlier, but I was busy.”

“Uncle Storm, why you talking about me like I’m not standing right here?” Nesha asked.

He turned to her. “Because I was answering Chrissy’s question. Yo’ friend got her feelings hurt yesterday, and it’s your fault for inviting strangers into our territory without warning them. You should have had an insert in the invite with my damn picture on it with a circle around my face and a line through it. The caption should have read, *avoid at all costs.*”

I was about to die from laughter, because Storm was serious as hell. LaKeith was shaking his head slowly. “Your brother is something else. He did one thing right though. He led me to you.”

“Yep. And for that, he will always get a pass from me... him and his bad kids.”

“I’on know about them. Storm is enough by himself,” he said as we glanced at him going back and forth with Nesha.

“Come on, Uncle Storm. You really hurt her feelings. And she was right! You could have ruined my day.”

“Girl, first of all, you a Henderson. You grew up knowing how we all get down. If your day was ruined, that’s yo’ fault. You should have been prepared for the bullshit.”

She laughed loudly as I shook my head. “Secondly, your friend need to watch how she talk to people. One day she gon’ really fuck with the right one, and she gon’ get punched in the mouth or worse. She better be glad I respect women to a certain extent, or she would have gotten worse.”

“To a certain extent? What the fuck that mean, nigga?” Jasper asked as he laughed and continued heating his rib.

“If she hit me, she might get hit back. That means she done crossed the damn line.”

“Help, Holy Ghost,” I mumbled.

Nesha rolled her eyes and grabbed Lennox’s hand. “You gon’ make us late for our flight. Bye, niggas!”

Jasper slid his lighter in his pocket and hugged her, then slapped Lennox’s hand. When they walked away, Storm followed behind them, finally laughing about what happened yesterday. I swore, he could be so worrisome at times. “And we’re at peace again,” LaKeith said with a slight smile.

I chuckled and snuggled in his arms to fight the weather a little longer, to show all my babies some love.

# CHAPTER 17

## JENAHRA

I watched Jessica almost the entire day. However, I knew that now was the time to talk to her, or she would never talk. She was sitting by herself and looked to be in deep thought. I turned to Carter, and he was staring at me. Before I could say a word, he said, “Go talk to her.”

I smiled and kissed his lips. That man knew me just as well as I knew myself. I often thought about how I left him to endure a life of heartache and pain with Joseph. All for the sake of what? Teaching my sisters and daughter to be fake? My daughter knew more about what went on in that house than I probably even knew. I was so happy when she chose to leave. I was happy that she wouldn't be a woman like me.

Jessica was strong, opinionated, aggressive, and a boss. She was everything I was before suffering through abuse from Joseph. I allowed him to tear me down in front of my children. The blessing in that was that she knew what she *didn't* want in a man and what she wouldn't put up with from one. We rarely talked about her relationships, and I knew it was because she possibly didn't think I would give her good advice.

When I got close, she looked up at me and smiled. “Hey, Ma.”

“Hey, baby. Did you get my text the other night?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

She didn't say anything else. I sat next to her and grabbed her hand. “Jess, I love you so much. I can tell when things aren't great in your life. I also know that you probably feel like

you can't talk to me about relationship matters because of my past with Joseph, but I promise, I'm here to listen and help you sort through things if you need me to."

"Mama, you are doing great in your relationship. I never thought you were accepting of the way things were because you thought they were right. I knew there was another reason much deeper than that. While I questioned why you were putting up with his bullshit on a few occasions, I knew that you weren't a fool." She paused for a moment, then turned to me and said, "I love you too."

I took a deep breath as I nodded. Pushing her to talk would be the wrong thing to do, because she would shut down on me. I wanted her to know that she could come to me though. We were close, but I felt like our relationship was lacking. "I'm sorry for what my decisions put you through. It wasn't right, and it's something I have to live with for the rest of my life. I know you don't trust me to give you good advice. That's not what I'm here for right now. I just wanna be here. That's all."

Her eyes watered as she stared at me. After leaning against me, she said, "I realized that I'm a lot like you. I internalize quite a bit. In my mind, I promised myself that I would never put up with a man that couldn't get his shit together... or at least one that *refused* to get his shit together. I thought that if I stayed with Decklan, I would be following in your footsteps. I'm sorry for that. You are the strongest woman I know. While you endured something you shouldn't have had to, the point is that you made it through."

I gave her a slight smile and lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it. She continued. "Decklan and I broke up last week. We'd only been apart for a couple of days when I got here. He wasn't begging for my attention until he saw me talking to Nate. He was just fine with me walking away until he felt like I would be walking to the arms of another man. I just didn't want to stick around to find out he isn't right for me."

I slowly shook my head. "Trust your gut. You aren't me, Jess. Thank God. You are your own woman, making your own decisions. You love him. I can feel it."



She huffed. “He said he refuses to let go. I wonder if he would feel that way if he found out that I didn’t think I wanted to be with Nate. I mean, Nate’s a really nice guy, but I’m not up for a long-distance relationship. He lives in Dallas for most of the year. I have way too many needs to be dealing with loneliness while I’m in a whole ass relationship. Plus, I’m honestly not ready to be in another relationship. I need to properly get over Decklan.”

“I understand, baby. You’ll figure it out. It’s not something you have to decide right now. You have all the time in the world.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I inherited your genes on that one. It feels like my internal clock is ticking. Every woman ain’t blessed to where they can have a child at almost fifty.”

I shoulder bumped her. “And believe me, there are plenty of women that are thankful for that very thing.”

She nodded and watched Tiff, Shana, Kema, and Willina get ready for their relay. When their theme song began playing, I tabled our discussion for another time. However, I knew Jess had gotten the point when she sat up and kissed my cheek and said, “Thank you, Mama.”

# CHAPTER 18

## MARCUS

“Mal always talking shit,” I said to Philly.

He chuckled and said, “Aye, that’s my nigga though. Just watching him with Danica made me wanna step my game up with Kema. The way I was still in the streets, deceiving her, was foul. It took a lot to get here. Nobody knows all the threats on my life I endured for snitching but him. So Mal can talk all the shit he want.”

I slowly shook my head and chuckled. I used to run for Philly at one point. It felt good to be able to link up with him. He knew and understood my past life because he was there for a lot of it. As Malachi got situated on the bull, I could see Philly’s cousin Legend talking to him. Malachi continued to nod, agreeing with whatever he was saying to him. These niggas were acting like this was a real rodeo. It felt like one though. They could probably put one on. Tiffany, Malachi, Legend, Red, Shana, and Zayson had the popularity to make it a huge event.

Syn shifted to her right side as she sat next to me, then let out a sigh of relief. “Baby, you okay?”

“Yeah. This baby is trying to start some shit.”

“Don’t be talking about my lil baby girl in there.”

She frowned and turned her head to face me. “How do you know it’s a girl?”

I bit my bottom lip and slid my arm behind her. Bringing my hand to her belly, I rubbed circles on it, trying to ease her discomfort. “The way I made sweet love to that pussy, it has to

be a girl. I loved on that thang like I ain't never loved before. I miss that shit too."

I bit her earlobe as a slight moan left her lips. "Marcus... don't do that shit. You know we can't have sex. It's too soon. I can't be dilating early."

"I know, baby. I just miss that fat pussy gripping my dick."

"I miss it too. Maybe we can do other things tonight."

My eyebrows lifted. Syn was a freak for sure. It was just that since she's been pregnant, sucking dick made her gag too much. She literally almost threw up on me one time. She had to run to the bathroom. So we hadn't been engaging in anything. I'd jacked off more times than I could even remember. Seeing her sexy body laying next to me and not being able to slide up in it was driving me insane. However, the blessing was that I knew I was a changed man.

Loving Synthia Coles Henderson was therapeutic for my soul. She made me a better man. Had that happened four or five years ago, I would've found another pussy to dive into. Our beginning was rocky, but where we were now couldn't be fucked with. I kissed her cheek and said, "Other things like what? Ace is with his mom, and Malia will be happy to go to Tiffany's or Jasper's. What's up?"

She turned to me once again and kissed my lips slowly, then pulled my bottom one with her teeth. She was about to make me snatch her ass up. "You haven't cum in the back door in a while. Maybe we can try that."

I swore my dick doubled in size. Closing my eyes, I slid my tongue up her neck as I cupped her stomach, lifting it slightly. Her eyes closed, and a moan left her lips once again. "That's how y'all got the one in there baking. Y'all gon' make her come early, and she gon' raise hell when she get here," my mother-in-law, Vida, said, interrupting our journey to ecstasy.

I rolled my eyes and pulled away from Syn slightly. "We want this baby, so we're glad our sexy asses could produce a little Henderson. And why are you saying 'she', Mama? You think it's a girl too?" Syn asked.

“Yes. You’re carrying high, so it gotta be a girl.”

Syn side-eyed her then rolled her eyes. “Mama, you’re a nurse. Quit tripping. You know that’s just something old people used to say.”

“First of all, don’t knock old people. Most times, they knew what the hell they were talking about. Ain’t that right, Mama Henderson,” Vida said, pulling my step mama into the conversation.

“You right about that, baby. Syn is having a girl. Her belly is kind of wide too. You can see that thang from the back.”

I tuned back in to the rodeo to see Malia getting on a horse. I stood to my feet and started yelling. “That’s my baby! Go, Malia!”

She laughed as she waited for Tiffany’s instruction. Tiffany ended up getting on the horse with her, sliding on behind her. She said some things in her ear, and Malia nodded as she smiled big. My baby would be nine years old in a couple of months. She’d grown so much. Although she was still little for her age, she wasn’t that little pint sized five-year-old either.

Suddenly, they took off, riding around barrels. I knew Tiff was taking her at a slower pace to teach her, but it was still fast enough to have Malia’s eyes wide and a huge smile on her face. I cheered like my baby was at the National Finals Rodeo. Syn had stood and was cheering as loud as I was. I hated that Ace had to miss this. His mother had picked him up an hour ago to spend some time with her and her family for Christmas. He would have been rooting hard for Malia too.

When she made it around her last barrel, everybody cheered loudly as she blasted through the home stretch. She hopped off that horse so excited. She started dancing to the zydeco music playing, causing everybody to laugh. That was my baby. We continued to enjoy the rest of the rodeo and talk and laugh with family. My life had come full circle, and I was happy. My children were happy, and so was my wife. I couldn’t ask for a better life.

Mali had even called to talk to Malia this morning. I was taking her for a visit with her tomorrow. Although Syn had been a mother to Malia, I tried to keep her in contact with Mali. I wanted her to know her biological mother, no matter how trifling she had been. She still didn't spend time with her unsupervised, but she still got to see her.

I would never keep Mali from Malia, but I still couldn't stand her ass though. Mali made my ass itch. She'd had another baby from some deadbeat ass nigga. It was like she hadn't learned anything from the bullshit we went through and me getting full custody of my daughter. That moment also influenced the change in me. Being everything for my daughter, I knew I couldn't let her see me being a ho. She needed stability and a positive male role model. I needed her to see how a man should treat a woman by being the type of man I wouldn't mind her being with.

Once the rodeo was ending, it was after eight o'clock. Tiffany stood in the middle of the arena and thanked everybody for helping her put this on and thanked the ones who participated. She was going to crown a few people that participated and present everyone with some type of token of appreciation. Of course, Mal had gotten one, along with KJ. That was to be expected. They were professionals. Her daughter, Milana, and Kema were awarded as well.

As we all thought we were about to leave, Tiffany said, "I have one more person to crown. This little lady has been so helpful tonight. She's been all over, doing whatever I needed her to do, and helping tonight's participants. Next year, she will be a participant too. Malia, come on out here, baby."

I stood to my feet, cheering for my baby as she walked out on the dirt with her hands in her face. "Oh fuck!"

I frowned and glanced over at Syn to see she was doubled over. I quickly sat, trying to steal glances at what was going on with my baby. "What's wrong, Syn? You okay?"

She quickly shook her head. "We gotta go, but wait until after baby girl has her glory."

"Syn, if we gotta go, we should go now."

“No. I refuse to dim her shine.”

I closed my eyes briefly as Vida helped Syn breathe. She didn't want attention brought to her while Malia was having one of the happiest moments of her life. I almost wanted to cry. My wife was a remarkable woman, and I didn't know what I did to deserve her. I watched Tiffany place a crown and a sash on my baby, crowning her rodeo queen of Henderson Ranch and Farms. Malia was crying tears of joy as we all applauded.

“Marcus, go congratulate her. Then we have to go.”

I nodded then quickly took off. When I got to Malia, I lifted her in the air and swung her around. “I'm so proud of you, baby. You did so good.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

She hugged me tight around my neck, then I put her down. “I have to get Mama Syn to the hospital, baby girl. She's having the baby. So you'll most likely be with Aunt Tiff. Okay?”

“Can I go with you? I want to be there for Mama. She's always there for me.”

I smiled slightly and said, “Okay. Let's go.”

I stared up at Tiff and said, “Thank you, sis, but we have to go. I believe Syn is in labor.”

“Shit, she's early. Okay, we're coming too. What hospital?”

“St. Elizabeth.”

I took off before she could acknowledge she'd heard me. When I made it back to Syn, she was laying against Vida. “Let me get you to the hospital, baby.”

I scooped her up from the bench and felt the wetness of her clothes. “My water broke, Marcus. These contractions are hell.”

“I gotchu, baby.”

I ran with her to my truck, with Vida and her husband, Aston, right behind me. By the time I slid her inside, everyone had made it to where we were. “We right behind you, bruh,” Storm said.

I nodded with a slight smile on my face. They all made their way to their vehicles as I peeled out. Syn screamed out in pain, nearly scaring my ass right off the road. I grabbed her hand and let her squeeze the life out of it. “Marcus, I feel like the baby is coming now!” Syn said.

“Pull over, Marcus!” Vida yelled. “Let me check her!”

I ended up in the parking lot of Kenny’s truck stop. Vida pushed Syn’s seat back as far as it would go, then helped Syn out of her pants as I did my best to block the view from passersby. “Oh my God! The baby’s head is right there! Syn, you’ve crowned! Shit! Call Kenny, Marcus.”

I was stuck. I didn’t even realize Malia was standing next to me. She took my phone and called Kenny. The parking lot was filling with cars. I turned my attention back to Syn and grabbed her hand as Vida said, “Baby, you’re having this baby right now. You’re doing so good, Syn. As soon as you push the baby out, Kenny will transport you in the ambulance. The baby is a couple of weeks early, so its lungs may not be fully developed. Kenny can provide medical assistance and get you there quicker.”

Syn nodded as tears fell from her eyes. I kissed every one of them. “You got this, baby. You hear me? You got this.”

She nodded as she squeezed my hand. “I’m so scared, Marcus. It’s too soon. It’s too soon. It’s too soon,” she said, repeating it constantly.

“Shhh. Look at me. The baby is gonna be fine. She’s a product of me and you. She ain’t gon’ have a choice but be strong.”

“Syn, when you have another contraction, push,” Vida said.

Kenny hopped in my truck, through the driver’s side, with towels and shit for Vida. Syn began squeezing my hand and



screamed, saying, “The baby’s comiiiiing!”

“Push, baby!”

She had a death grip on my hand as she pushed. I slid my other arm behind her, assisting her as much as I could. “She’s here! It’s a girl, Syn!”

The baby wasn’t crying though. Kenny used a plunge looking thing and put it in her throat. When I heard a whimper then a cry escape her, I released the breath I was unknowingly holding. “Here, bruh. Cut the cord.”

I kissed Syn then my beautiful daughter and cut the cord. Vida wrapped the baby in a towel as tears fell from her eyes and gave her to Syn. Kenny hopped out of my truck and said, “We need to move quickly.”

He went got a gurney and came back in a hurry. I backed away because I didn’t know if there was a certain way he needed to grab her. Staring at my beautiful wife, I couldn’t get past how she sacrificed herself for Malia’s happiness. Kenny quickly scooped her as Vida held on to other shit... like the umbilical cord that was still hanging from her.

They whisked her to the ambulance, and Malia and I ran behind them. “I’m gonna be right behind you, baby!” I said to Syn.

“There’s room for you to get in the ambulance, Marcus,” Kenny said.

I glanced at Tiffany, and she gently pulled Malia with her. I nodded and tossed my keys to Jasper and headed to the hospital with my wife and new baby.

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SHE COULDN’T BE MORE PERFECT. SENEDA JOELLE HENDERSON was five pounds and ten ounces and eighteen inches long. She was having some breathing issues when we got here. I was grateful that we had medical professionals in the family. Vida was a quick thinker, and I trusted her mainly because Syn was her baby. She wouldn’t do anything to risk Syn’s well-being.

They immediately whisked the baby off to the NICU and brought Syn to the other side of the third floor to get her cleaned up and situated.

As I stared at Seneda, my baby Senna, I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming amount of emotion. "She's so beautiful, Marcus," Vida said as she stood next to me.

"She really is. She looks like you and her mother with my complexion."

Vida chuckled. "She does for now. We'll see if that changes. She can very well grow up to be the spitting image of her father."

She nudged me with her shoulder as I smiled. Jasper handed me a cigar as he patted my back. "Congratulations."

"Thanks, bruh."

As I looked closer, I realized that it wasn't a cigar at all. This nigga had handed me the fattest blunt I'd ever seen. I glanced at him, and he winked at me. I slowly shook my head and slid it in my shirt pocket. "Look at your Christmas miracle. She's beautiful, Marcus," Tiffany said. "Don't worry about Malia. We got her."

"Thanks, Tiff."

I gave her a hug as Storm approached. "I guess a wedding wasn't good enough. Now we'll be having birthday parties on Christmas day."

He rolled his eyes, and I literally wanted to throw him through the glass of the NICU's windows. It was a good thing we didn't grow up together. We would have stayed into it. "Nigga, chill out," I said, giving him a warning.

He lifted his hand and dismissed me. "She's a pretty lil thing though, even if she looks like Aston's pet cougar."

I slowly shook my head as he and Vida started with their bullshit, going back and forth. "Uncle Marcus, she's a gorgeous baby," one of the twins said to me.

"Thank you, niece."

“Noni. One day y’all gon’ realize that Bali is bigger. That’s how you can tell us apart.”

“I can’t tell who’s the bigger one unless y’all are together, smart ass.”

She rolled her eyes, looking like her rude ass father. “Whatever. Yo’ baby cute. She got a big head like you though.”

I bucked at her, and she jumped. I swore I could take those lil girls and wring their necks like some chickens sometimes. I gave my lil munchkin a last look then headed back to Syn. When I got to her room, it was full of family. WJ got everyone’s attention and said, “Congratulations, Syn and Marcus, on your new addition. She’s beautiful, and she won’t be able to help but be a boss. As with every Henderson, she will inherit a piece of the company. I wanted to present your documentation.”

My chest swelled with pride with how WJ ran the company. He always included us with decision making and kept us in the loop whenever there was an issue. The way the man had the company growing and progressing was something I always knew he would do if it were in his hands. He handed me the documents, then he also handed me an envelope with more paperwork.

“That is the account information for her savings. I just have to go and add her name on there. Send me the correct spelling so I can make sure I have it right. This is also something we’ve started. Each school-aged kid has a savings account that will be released to them when they graduate from high school. Her account was started with two thousand five hundred dollars.”

Everyone clapped as I smiled at Syn. After nodding and shaking WJ’s hand, I went back to her and got in bed with her. Before I could say a word, they brought Seneda in the room with us. She was on oxygen, but they would allow her time with Syn before they took her back to the NICU. I got out of bed and quickly sanitized and put a gown on over my clothes. Taking her from the nurse, I was stuck for a moment. I was

mesmerized by her beautiful hair, slanted eyes, and damn near white complexion. I glanced at her ears, noticing they were a darker brown. She would be a perfect mix between Syn and me.

I walked to the bed and handed her to Syn as everyone looked on. Syn's eyes watered as she held our Christmas miracle in her arms. I slid back into bed next to her and kissed her cheek. She turned to me and kissed my lips. "Merry Christmas, Synna and Lil Senna."

Syn yawned then cut her eyes at me. "Merry Christmas, light bright nigga."

**Merry Christmas from the Hendersons!**

**The End**

If you did not read the author's note at the beginning, please go back and do so before leaving a review. 😊

## FROM THE AUTHOR...

I hope you enjoyed this surprise release as much as I enjoyed writing it. I wanted it to be funny and light to bring joy during this season. Storm always has to show out and do too much. It wouldn't have been a country hood Christmas without his foolishness.

Hopefully, you could keep up with all the points of view. I tried to include a family diagram at the beginning so you could know who was who. I am more than sure the children's names probably had you feeling lost. So if you missed it, please go back to the beginning and check it out.

Also, the information in the Nome News by Aspen was real information. LOL! Those people really live in Nome and do the things talked about in the article. Dudley is really the postmaster and works in the China post office. He gives me a hard time every time I'm in there to ship paperbacks. I told him I would put him in a book and have Storm tell him everything I'm too nice to tell him. LOL!

As you can see, the last chapter was longer than the rest, because I didn't want to rush Syn's moment. I wasn't sure how I would get to it at first, but it worked out. Malia being crowned came to me at the last minute, so I went with it.

As always, I gave it my all. Whether you liked it or not, please take the time to leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book, under the same title that includes some

great R&B and Christmas tracks to tickle your fancy.

Please keep up with me on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (@authormonicawalters), Twitter (@monlwalters), and Clubhouse (@monicawalters). You can also visit my Amazon author page at [www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters](http://www.amazon.com/author/monica.walters) to view my releases.

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