

A woman with short dark hair, wearing a red halter-neck top, is shown from the chest up. Her arms are raised and bent at the elbows, with her hands behind her head. She is looking down and to the right. The lighting is warm and dramatic, highlighting her skin and the texture of her top. She is wearing a thin gold chain necklace and a hoop earring.

AFTERWE

burned

IN SECRETS WE TRUST BOOK 2

CHELSEA MARIA

AFTER WE BURNED

IN SECRETS WE TRUST BOOK 3

CHELSEA MARIA



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chelsea Maria is rebirthing the idea of love for the millennial generation. Armed with a desire to define the union of faith and love, Chelsea Maria writes relatable stories that challenges society's warped view of love. With a clearly defined purpose, Chelsea puts her passion and talents to use for the betterment of the generation.

Tasked with changing the narrative, Chelsea gives it her all. With no abandon, she pens fervently the stories of her heart and the hearts of her readers. Using her God-given talent, she employs wit and artistry to plant seeds of conviction and force reflection of her readers. Every addition to her growing catalog is penned with the purpose to revive the faith in love.

Now, with an arsenal of love-inspiring chronicles she is claiming her spot in the world of fiction. Bringing a new wave to the industry and reshaping the twisted perceptions.



LOVE NOTE

Dear Reader,

We've come to the end of the 'In Secrets We Trust Series'. Boy has it been a ride. A ride that I've enjoyed immensely crafting and sharing.

Are there triggers? - Yes, a lot.

If you're looking for a plushy romance, this isn't it, but I promise if you look through my catalog, you'll find something to wrap you in loves arms.

I started this series testing the waters with Dre and Coco. Who knew a whole world would be created just from their hearts connecting?

Enjoy it. Process it. Think on it.

When I say that I poured my soul, blood, and tears into this book - I'm blessed to share what I crafted during one of my most hardest birthing seasons of my life.

Xoxo,

Chelsea Maria

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Moodey Leigh,

Thank you for allowing God to use you as my guiding light through my transition. Thank you for being selfless and patient with each of my growing pains. Thank you for teaching me, correcting me, guiding me, PRAYING for me, and standing in the gap when I couldn't and was too lost to see past the haze over my eyes. Along with God's grace and mercy, I pushed through to the end with you right there with me. You stepped in and helped me when I thought all was lost.

Together we created this story.

Thank you!

WHERE WE LEFT OFF...

Cassian

“I’M NOT sure when I’ll be home. After I finish business with Honey, I have a waxing appointment and then I’ll come back to change for the dinner party.” Back and forth she walked. Her grey silk robe opened, showing off her navy blue panty set. “I can’t wait for the dinner. It’s been such a long time since we’ve all been together.” A black lace gown with black lingerie was laid across her high-back makeup chair outside of her closet. New shoes, still in the box, placed at the feet of the chair.

I knew all about the retirement dinner for Frank that Noelani planned on attending tonight. Yesterday, she and I took the kids to his retirement picnic hosted by Broward County’s Federal Bureau of Investigation. A picnic where she played the perfect wife and mother. Fixing the kid’s plates. Playing with the girls. Making the other wives jealous that she had it *all* – a thriving career and a beautiful family. Tonight’s dinner was exclusive to those who worked alongside Frank. No spouses, just the team. I had no problem with that. Amell

was going and I knew he'd keep an eye on her, but my problem was what she'd get into after the dinner was over.

“Sixx is outside waiting.” With a shimmy of her shoulders, her robe puddled around her freshly manicured toes. Lately, she traded in her short pixie cut for expensive ass bundles that flowed down to the crack of her ass. I wasn't here for it at all.

Waking up to strands of hair in my face. Scared out of my damn mind from walking in the dark bathroom and seeing mannequin heads with wigs on them. Hair on my toothbrush, bar of soap, inside my sink. I wanted them shits out of my house just like their owner.

Red bottoms, tight dress that was way too sexy for running a warehouse. A new perfume that made me lick my lips. I craved the scent more than I craved the woman wearing it. Lips glossed and makeup beat. Devil in a dress. “Tootles, husband.” A kiss on my cheek was what I got from her, and she was gone.

I stood at the foot of our bed looking at the odd picture before me. A bed that had rustled sheets and misplaced pillows. A bed that looked like two occupants had slept in it when it was just me and the girls, Tai and Ameliana. We left the picnic yesterday together but returned home separately. She ended up calling Sixx to pick her up, saying she had work to do and I went home with my kids.

It was after two in the morning when she skipped her happy ass in my house. She showered, went back downstairs to work on her computer and phone until she passed out on the couch around five. Being the asshole that I am, I got up an hour later and clanked the hell out of my pots and pans as I prepared breakfast for the kids. She hopped up in such a damn chipper mood, even kissed the girls as they ate breakfast.

“Tai and Ameliana,” I yelled, staring at the chair with her clothes for tonight.

“Yes, Papa.” Both came running still dressed in their pajamas.

“Wanna play dress up in mommy’s clothes?” Noelani wanted to play, well I was going to play right along with her.

My girl’s eyes widened, and mouths opened as they gasped. Hands clapping as they bounced on their tippy toes. “Oh, yes, Papa. Can we wear mommy’s shoes too?” Tai was already headed towards Noelani’s walk-in closet.

“You can wear whatever you want. Have a ball.”

For hours, the girls played their hearts out in Noelani’s closet. My wife had extremely expensive taste. Looking past her collection of custom gowns and outfits from Chanel, Christian Dior, Versace and ‘nem, I watched as Ameliana took a pair of scissors and cut them to her and Tai’s height. Noelani’s wall of shoes, her pride and joy, that shrine was just sold, destroyed, or played with. I had the girls pick what shoes they wanted to walk around the house and play in, the rest I sent photos to my homegirls in the hood and told them they could have them all for free. For the shoes they didn’t want I popped the left heel off each shoe and put them back on the shelf.

Now the expensive ass purses, I hit up my jeweler to see if he knew how I could sell the purses and get some of my money back. Within an hour I was on facetime with a purse appraiser giving me quotes for what I’d be able to get for each purse. Of course, I made sure to let my little ladies get first pick on the purses they wanted. You would’ve thought it was Christmas morning by the way they kept squealing, gasping, clapping, and thanking me.

Those ugly ass Birkin Bags, I sold them shits. The ones that the girls didn't want and the ones that I didn't care to sell, I put those in the pile for my homegirls. When it was time to look at her jewelry, I took the pieces I wanted the girls to have and placed the rest in a case to sell back to my jeweler. Last but certainly not fucking least, her makeup. Never knew brushes were so damn expensive. After I fed the girls lunch, they used her makeup pallets and brushes to paint pictures and play makeup on themselves.

By the time I had destroyed all Noelani's shit, the only thing she had left was her cotton pajamas she wore when her period was on, cotton granny panties, and sports bras. All her lingerie, I placed them in the pile for the homies in the hood too. Well, everything except for the panties. Ain't no telling how many niggas Noelani's hot pussy ass let run through her, so I wasn't about to give them infested shits away. Everything of hers that I didn't want to sell, give away or want the girls to have, I had it in a pile in the front of my yard. I made sure to turn the sprinklers on too.

"Papa, look at my pretty picture." Tai was having a ball with those Anastasia brushes. My baby girl was quite the artist if I say so myself.

"Ouu, Papa, this is my song. Aunty Keatyn plays it all the time." Flipping her new Brazilian wig over her little shoulder, Ameliana bobbed her head to *Not Gone Cry by Mary J. Blige*.

Yeah, I was deep in my feelings. Couldn't smoke like I wanted to cause the girls were my damn shadow. Cashton's ass took one look inside of Noelani's closet, smiled, and went to play ball with AJ, so he couldn't keep an eye on them. It was just me and my princesses.

“I love your picture, baby girl. Did you paint one for mommy too?”

Blowing strands of weave out of her face, Tai nodded with a bright smile. Red lipstick smeared all over her face. Green, blue, and gold makeup had her looking like the cutest little clown. “Yes, I did...ouuu that’s mommy. Come on, Melly. Let’s show mommy our pictures.” Hearing the garage lifting, the girls gathered their pictures and stood in their one-of-a-kind Ameliana Kalmin Designs gowns. Scuffing the bottom of their mother’s expensive shoes, they shuffled their way to the kitchen just a giggling. Wigs barely hanging on and purses on their arms.

“Cassian, why is there a pile of stuff in the middle of the lawn with the sprinklers on? Amell’s dogs are sniffing around it and if I’m not mistaken, one of them took a poop.” If only she knew.

I hated those damn dogs but at least they came in handy for something.

“Mommy. Mommy. Mommy. Look what we made you.” I couldn’t see the girls, but I heard their little giggles.

“Oh, wow. These are...um...these are pretty. Wait. Tai, what do you have on? Are those...are those my wigs?” Quiet and then more giggling. “Why are you wearing my Alexander McQueen shoes?” Noelani squeaked pissed off. “Cassian, were you not watching them?” She finally came into view, standing behind the sofa. Her eyes took in the living room, which was spotless except for the coffee table where the girls were painting. Those grey eyes of hers damn near popped out of her damn head.

I sat cool, calm, and collected in my favorite La-Z-Boy recliner. Hands in my sweats, toothpick in my mouth, ESPN

on mute listening to my girl Mary J. “Hi to you too, Noe. How was work?”

“Mommy, aren’t we pretty?” Ameliana twirled, almost breaking her butt in those too tall heels she tried to keep on, and shook her wig covered head, ankles finally giving out and falling.

Her partner in crime came shuffling in her designer wear. “Daddy said we look just like you, Mommy.”

Noelani looked at me like she wanted to jump bad, and I sat there not at all amused by her anger. “I’ll deal with you later. Amell will be here shortly, and I need to get ready.” Oh, she was going to have fun getting ready alright.

I waited.

Counted to ten in my head before her high-pitched scream rang throughout the house. The girls gasped, covering their mouths, and continued to giggle because that’s what little ass girls do, I guess. “Aye, y’all remember the special performance we’re going to do for mommy? Remember the song I taught y’all?”

Eyes wide and smiles wider, they both nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay, it’s time to show mommy your show.” Changing the song, I waited until I heard Noelani’s stomps before I hit play.

“To the left, to the left.” As if they were a part of Diana Ross and the Supremes, a new age toddler girls’ group, Tai and Ameliana sang word for word to the opening of *Irreplaceable* by *Beyonce*. Moving their little non-existent hips and pointer fingers pointing to the small Cocomelon carry-on luggage left with Noe’s things.

Blinking at the girls, Noelani huffed and marched my way. “What the hell is wrong with you? Where are all my clothes, Cassian? My shoes? My jewelry? Where are my things?”

Standing, I stood right in front of her and watched the rage take over her entire body. She was shaking. Face turning red. Eyes misting. “Everything you own is in that carryon by the door. I was nice enough to leave the clothes you want to wear tonight untouched. Shower, change and get the fuck out my house, Noelani. You wanna run around acting like you’re not married, then go ahead. I’m no longer attached to you at all. I hope you pay that nigga Sixx some good ass money cause that’s all the security you’ll have.”

Her perfectly arched brows bunched together. “Are you serious right now? You can’t be serious. This has to be a joke.”

I nodded, stepping back, feeling my hands twitch. “I thought the shit was a joke too until I saw you bent over for my enemy with my own damn eyes. Noe, I’m giving you a lot of grace right now. Go change, take what little bit of shit I had the decency to leave you, and get the fuck off the compound.”

Her mouth opened and closed three times before her shoulders slumped and eyes closed. She always thought she was slicker than me. Had more sense than me. Wiser than me. Sneakier than me. Not a chance. She was trying to pull a me on me and failed to understand that there is only one Cassian Kalmin.

She fucked up big time. This, having our girls play in her shit. Tossing her shit out on the lawn and playing heartbreak songs, this was nothing but me trying to calm the murder twitching in my hands.

“Cass, it-it...it’s not what you think. I’ve never cheated on you.” Her definition of cheating must’ve been created by the

whores of Rome.

“Take what I gave you and leave. Don’t make me toss you out, Noe. I put that on everything I love. That dress in the room will be the one you’ll be buried in.” Leaning down until my cheek brushed against hers, I whispered low enough for her to hear me. “Get. The. Fuck. Out.” Releasing a shaky breath, she wobbled before stepping back and running back up the stairs.

“Oh, man. Papa, why did mommy leave? We aren’t done.” Tai pouted looking where Noelani ran to.

“It’s okay. Let’s go to Aunty Krishna’s house so you can do your performance for the twins and Massey. Wanna do that?” I had a lot of willpower, but I wasn’t about to sit around and watch her get ready.

“Yayy. I can’t wait to show Uncle Amell my new hair and my new dress.” Tai grabbed her new purse and tried to fix her wig as she scooted out the door with her sister.

After dropping the girls off to a laughing Massey, I decided to walk back to my house instead of driving the golf cart back. I needed to clear my mind before I stepped a foot back in my house. Thankfully Amell was getting ready, and his sixth sense having ass wasn’t around to read my thoughts. Keatyn and her girls were also over his house when we got there. They fell out laughing seeing Tai and Ameliana. I left them to tell the story of what happened and dipped. I didn’t feel like explaining anything. At this point, I didn’t owe anyone an explanation and the one I wanted one from would never tell me the truth but continue to spew lies.

Sitting on the bench at the playground across from my house, I watched my front door waiting for her to come out. This wasn’t what I expected my marriage to turn into. A

marriage of failure and cheating. Lies and deceit. I gave Noelani all her heart's desires and she repaid me by going behind my back and working with my enemy. Entertaining other men on a physical level I never imagined doing with another woman.

I wore my wedding ring with pride. It was a symbol of God's grace to me. Giving me the unexpected.

I stared down at my ringing phone already knowing he was going to lecture me. "Yeah."

"You good?" Out the corner of my eye, I saw Amell's driver circle around my driveway.

Exhaling, I shook my head knowing that behind those dark tinted windows he could see me. The sun had started to go down, giving him a perfect view of my frown. "Nah. I'm not good." There wasn't a point in lying to him or myself. "I don't know what I did wrong."

"The only thing you're doing wrong is taking the blame for another grown person's actions. Hold her accountable, not you." I heard what he said but that didn't make me feel any better. "Cassian."

"Yeah."

"Don't react until I get back." He hung up right as she emerged from the house. Spotting me across the street, she stared at me, and I tried my hardest to read her. Read her eyes. Read her body language. Stayed quiet and listened. There was a time when I looked deep in her grey eyes and saw the reflections of my soul. Saw my heart in human form. Saw our future. Looking into her eyes now I saw a stranger. An enemy. The cause of my kid's pain.

Mouthing *fuck you*, she got in the truck and left taking the last bit of love I'd ever have for her.

A heavy sigh passed my lips feeling my phone vibrate in my hand again. It was Kenny, one of the many eyes I had on my payroll. "What's up, Kenny." I stood hearing my name being called. Looking across the playground Massey was running towards me.

"Aye, so I found out some information about that little nigga who pulled the gun on Massey and PJ."

"What did you find out?" The closer she jogged to me, the more I gritted my teeth. Between PJ and I, we beat that nigga's ass inside of Pacino's warehouse. There was no need to ask questions at that time. He pulled a gun on my baby girl and for that he was going to get the life beat out of him. Of course, Amell, being the rational thinker out of us all, stopped us and told us to keep him locked away. Slowly torturing him until the point he'd willingly talk. Talk about what, I don't know. I didn't question what information Amell wanted from him.

"He's friends with that Cameron dude. The one that Massey's best friend Daisey Jean is dating. Name is Justin Albert from Pahokee. He's slowly breaking and talking. Thought you'd appreciate that piece of information."

I didn't appreciate it at all.

"Preciate it." I hung up just as Massey reached me.

"Papa, why you made me run all the way over here?" My pride and joy smiled up at me barely out of breath.

Seeing her smile traded my dark clouds for sunshine. "Because you need the exercise. You don't start conditioning for another mouth."

Playfully rolling her eyes, she sat down on the bench I was sitting on. “Anyway, can I take my car and go to the store with Aunty Krishna? The twins need diapers and teething rings and I want to show her my driving skills.”

My baby girl wasn't a baby anymore and I hated that shit. Dating, driving, and outspoken like she paid bills. She made me proud to be her father. Proud to be a part of her life. “Yeah, that's fine. The keys are in the drawer in the kitchen.”

“Cool.” She hopped up. “Next time you wanna cut up Noelani's clothes, please call me.” She shook her head laughing.

“When was the last time you talked to Daisey Jean? Y'all still friends?” I tried to know everything about Massey without having to use her guards. Having a relationship with open communication meant a lot to me. I never wanted that to change. I always wanted her to feel like she could come to me about any and everything. Including Daisey Jean's mannish ass.

Popping her lips, she rolled her eyes hard. “I don't know what we are. She got a boyfriend and started acting weird. All that switching up, I don't do.”

My chest pumped with pride. “Drive safe, Massey. I'll tell Pete to stay back. I'm trusting you.”

Her eyes widened. “Thank you.” She took off running to the house. Just because I had Pete stay back didn't mean I was going to do the same with Krishna's guard. I didn't want that type of smoke with Amell.

Not too long after Krishna and Massey left for Target, Cashton came back home and locked himself in his room. That boy was becoming more introverted by the day. He rarely

came out of his room. Spoke only when spoken to. Closed himself off and I didn't know why. He didn't have a love for sports like AJ but played whenever invited. His head stayed in books, and I appreciated that.

Sitting in my quiet house gave me time to think and reflect on the last year. Straight up, I was a pussy with how I've been handling things going on in my family. The situation with Massey and Daisey Jean, I didn't like that shit at all. Hated it. Amell got on my ass about keeping tabs on every person connected to my kids and he was right. But I also felt like where I messed up, Coco should've picked up the slack.

What was the whole point in co-parenting if she couldn't do her part? I was already a married single parent, trying to be mama and daddy. The least she could do is help me out.

I was tired of being taken for a joke. Tired of my kids suffering because of their sorry ass mummies. I was only one man out here trying to raise four damn kids with no help from the wombs they came from. When Coco came by the house minutes later to pick up Massey I dug in her ass. Let her know how I felt and let it be known that I was done playing games. However, her ass wanted to be spiteful and toss my problems in my face.

Showing me pictures and videos of Noelani and Lionel out and about all booted up at a restaurant. My brothers knew that Noelani was in communication with our enemy, but I made sure that her adulterous activities weren't known. That level of embarrassment and humiliation weren't one I wanted others to know about.

Hearing Coco rub my failed marriage in my face. Hearing her speak on things that she shouldn't even know, I snapped. All my anger, shame, and hurt I released on her.

Coco's past wasn't new to me. That day I told her to tell me what was in the folder I had my PI put together I already knew and really cared nothing about her past, but since she wanted to stick her nose in places that weren't her business, I used it to cut her like I had been cut. We were going to be two cut motherfuckers by the end of the night, and I had the last word when I told her that I was taking Massey. I knew how to break her, and it was with our child.

Seeing her cry and run out, I wanted to beat my chest in pride. Only that pride dwindled after hearing her tires screech over the gravel of my driveway. Reality set in and I panicked.

"Where is Massey's car?" Pete stepped inside the house seconds after Coco left.

Coco knew where Massey was and if she got to her first it would be me who wouldn't see my baby girl ever again. "Is your truck parked out front?" Reaching on the side of my recliner, I grabbed my gun and walked out with him following.

"Yeah, why? Where is Massey?"

"Take me to Target." I lied when I told Coco that Pete was on his way to get Massey.

So caught up in my anger I said what I knew would hurt Coco without having the plan in motion. I thought about calling Krishna's guard and telling him to make sure Massey didn't leave with Coco if she beat me to her first but that would cause more problems than I wanted to deal with.

"What...why..."

"Motherfucker, I don't pay you to question me. Get me to Target fast, nigga." Pete and his narrowed eyes could kiss my ass. "Pete, I'm telling you now if you drive this bitch slow, I'm shooting you. If Coco gets ahold of Massey before I do, I'm

killing you. Think clearly, my nigga.” I didn’t know what was about to happen. Coco got a good head start and I knew I wasn’t about to let her keep my child away from me.

CHAPTER ONE

Noelani

TONIGHT WAS like a fairytale come true. I sat back at the round table with a glass of wine to my lips in an attempt to hold my growing smile. Frank's wife had dinner catered by GiGi's located in Pembroke Pines. A rare casked, single malt scotch for the man of the hour and a biodynamic selection of wine for the ladies. Rubbing shoulders with the men who I helped advance their careers. Laughing and retelling stories of past adventures. Sitting next to the most dangerous of men.

I was floating and I never wanted to leave these clouds.

"Tell us, Amell, and don't be shy about it. How is fatherhood treating you? Still can't believe that you've hung up the Batman coat and decided to become a full-time family man. I gotta say," Frank polished off his third glass of scotch. "Working for you and your brothers was always a thrill." Light laughter circled the table.

There were only ten of us here at the private dinner. Ten people who had more secrets than the Pentagon. We all worked for each other in some capacity. All worked alongside

Amell and Mitch when they rained fire and fear in the streets of Broward and Miami Dade County.

Forever the mysterious enigma of a man he was, Amell chuckled lightly. “Fatherhood is a blessing that I don’t take for granted.” His dark, rumbling timber coated my arms in chills. My physical reaction to his voice had been that way since he and Pacino sought out my services decades ago.

Releasing a shaky breath, I cleared my throat and shifted in my seat. “He’s being modest.” My lashes kissed my cheek as I tried to hide my flushed cheeks. “In his case, he epitomizes the word fatherhood. Trust me,” I looked over at the beautifully sculpted beast with his unblinking eyes, dark as the night. “I have the privilege of witnessing his talents up close and personal. Like everything he touched and had accomplished, he’s an excellent father.” I winked, ignoring his chilling glare.

Another round of light laughter, but none from him. He hated being put on the spot. Hated to be praised, though it was all well deserved.

Frank’s country laugh and heavy slap on the table sent the laughter up a notch. “Find it hard to know that you’re out here making googly eyes and kissy faces to babies and changing diapers. I’m here for it, Kalmin. You deserve all the happiness in the world, and that beautiful wife of yours is a definite prize.”

Hmph.

A prize.

Krishna is nothing even close to resembling a prize.

I never quite understood their levels of love, nor would I care enough to try. Understanding Krishna’s love for Amell came easier to understand than his for her. As any woman

would when they encountered a man of his exceptional stature, she fell face and heart first into his intoxicating web. I've never come across a woman who wasn't ready to risk it all for a lethal man who wielded an unyielding amount of fear amongst his peers.

No matter their race, women were drawn to him and he, well, he had been enthralled by a woman who had no right nor business being attached to him in any capacity. Without making it known, he has a boss mentality. His presence easily commanded the attention of every person in his sphere. Alpha of his pack and shepherd of his flock.

What value did a weak bitch like Krishna add to that?

None.

“One last toast.” Glasses were raised as Frank stood. “I thank each of you for making my life worth living. The thrills, adventures, and near-death experiences were all worth every task given. I may be retired but that doesn't mean I won't jump at the opportunity to help any of you should you ever be in need. This is the end of one chapter and the beginning of a new one. Salute”

“Salute.” We all clanked our glasses.

Hugs were given. Handshakes were exchanged. Pictures that would never grace any social media platform were taken. We said our goodbyes then Amell and I were headed back to that dreadful compound. He hadn't mentioned anything about Cassian kicking me out the house, so I figured he didn't know. Didn't matter much to me either way. Once we parted ways, I planned on heading back out and doing what I do best – building a legacy worth the approval of any man.

“Random question, but are you curious as to why I named my daughter after you?”

He sat on his side of the truck, eyes taking in the streets that we passed. Legs gapped open, one hand resting on his thigh and the other tugging on his beard. A beard that I appreciated greatly when he started growing it out. The first four buttons on his black dress shirt were unbuttoned showcasing a tantalizing view of his well-defined chest with sprinkles of hair barely visible to my eyes. Can't forget the Cuban link chain that he never went without wearing, adding to his overall sexy persona.

He smelled like the devil's greatest creation and sexiest sin you craved to commit. Mysterious. Beautiful. Dangerous. Lusty. Deadly. His scent was better than any cologne ever to stock the shelves at Neiman Marcus and I knew his scent was one-of-a-kind because that train wreck of a wife of his made sure that it was. Oils crafted by her secret connect. At this moment, being so close and able to drift into a world of dangerous fantasies, I appreciated her need to make sure that her man stood out from the rest.

Originally, I wanted to wear a burgundy silk gown but once I knew that Amell would be accompanying me, I decided to switch and go with his signature color black. I felt it was best that he and I coordinate since we were a team. A dream team. A covenant of sorts.

He hadn't answered my question and I didn't find any offense in it. Again, you had to know Amell and his ways to understand his quietness shouldn't always be taken as an offense but an honor. “Cashton, my first born, my baby boy, my heartbeat. Most boys are to their mothers. And girls, well they are the apple of their father's eye. Their father's Achilles’

heel. Their soft spot. Their pride and joy.” Like his, my eyes drifted out the window taking in the nightlife.

Twirling my crescent shaped necklace with a smile on my face, I took a trip down memory lane. As much as I tried to push the memory of conceiving Cashton to the back of my mind, the night I conceived Ameliana was like living between the pages of one of the best romance novels ever written.

I remember his face. Remembered the intense passion brewing behind his hooded, midnight-colored eyes. His voice echoing against my ear like hail beating down on a windowpane. His touch, his panting, him planting his seed deep in my womb.

“I named her after you because I wanted my daughter to be a representation of those responsible for her existence. Courageous, bold, and smart like her mama. Soft, vulnerable, and submitting to the right man but also lethal like her father, well in this case, like her uncle. Dangerous like a black widow but zealous and beautiful as any African goddess. Ameliana will be the perfect blend of you and I.” My curved smile grew as I thought of how beautiful and dangerous my baby girl was going to be.

In a few years I planned on starting the process of grooming her to be just like her mama. Ameliana had big shoes to fill, and I would personally ensure she took the Kalmin Cartel to another level. Thanks to my husband’s desire to be a domesticated stay-at-home-husband, I became the new face of the cartel. The unexpected threat that no one saw coming. The woman who got shit done. The woman who brought her own seat to any table she wanted to sit at.

Fear and doubt kept the cartel from previously expanding and merging. I had no such fears or doubts when it came to my

operations. I did what Cassian and sadly, Amell too, failed at doing – expand. However, none of that mattered. Clearly it showed value to the organization and how they needed me. I’m their secret weapon. Keatyn had her clinic and Krishna was just taking up space, but I, I got shit done. I was the rib to every Kalmin man. Their missing piece.

“Tell Krishna she waited too long to give you kids. She could’ve used the name, but this early bird got the worm, and she was stuck with traditional names.” Krishna disappointed me greatly and likely made Clover roll over in her grave. Yes, give your husband his legacy but also stand beside him while building the legacy.

My heart dropped and it felt like my spine dislodged from my body hearing Amell’s dark and leery chuckle. Suddenly, the air became thin and the space between us seemed so small. The minute he flicked his nose I wished I’d brought Sixx with me. None of the guards in the truck were assigned to me but were Amell’s and the fear now coursing through my veins told me that my compliment had been taken out of context.

“Nothing about my children is traditional nor are they stuck with what was chosen as their names.”

I opened my mouth to correct myself but closed it upon seeing the look in his eyes. It was well past ten at night and the only light illuminating the vehicle was the streetlights we passed that shone on his handsome face for a glimpse of a second. A second too long because though his eyes were dark as night, they appeared to be the only thing I could see.

“Issa’s name means strong willed. In Hebrew it means God rescues, Yahweh is salvation. Omari’s name means God the highest. God is exalted. Flourishing.” Amell never blinked. Never swallowed. I don’t even know if he breathed. “My *wife*

and I choose those names for our children because they represent our testimony. A testimony I will never explain to you because you aren't deserving of knowing those pieces of us, of me."

Well damn. Tell me how you really feel.

"You failed your daughter by assuming she'd be able to live up to the weight connected to my name. Not yours but mine. Who you are *attempting* to become and dream of being, you could never achieve. Authenticity isn't something you can buy or obtain by opening your legs to whichever man holds the amount of power you feel you deserve. Who I am and the legacy *I* created, what you're doing and have been doing is equivalent to a substitute teacher...a placeholder until the original returns for their position." His harsh words were lethal. So lethal that a tear dropped from my left eye.

He spoke calmly. Spoke clearly and heavily toned. "If I, the name holder, can barely carry the weight myself, then what makes you think a child having a bootleg version of my name, would be able to do so? She can't and what you've done is created a counterfeit hand stitched uniform you put together with the assistance of your imagination. How on earth do you expect her to fulfill a purpose not assigned to her? You and I, we are not the same. Not equal in any stance. We live in two different worlds. She has Cassian's blood and yours. Yes, we are related, as a DNA test will confirm but that's where our similarities rest." His phone rang, giving me a chance to exhale and shake off the hurt feelings breaking through my exterior.

Instead of answering it right away, he continued to tear me to pieces. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue. When you speak over your children, learn to speak life

because speaking death, will cause her to live a life she never wanted, all because of her mother's greed. My niece deserves a fair chance at a life of abundance. She's already at a disadvantage because she was born with a target on her back. After all, she's a Kalmin. Check your heart, Noelani. The wickedness rooted there will bring more harm to you before you receive blessings for attempting to perform good deeds." He answered his ringing phone and I hiccupped trying to dislodge the tears trapped in my throat that were strangling me.

I wanted to snap and curse him out. Wanted to roll my neck and pop my shit. Damn sure wanted to smack him in the face for trying me on such a lower level than I was, but I also wanted to live to see another day. I heard what Amell said. I digested it thoroughly, as I also knew the turns life could take you on. I damn sure never thought this would be my life but it was, so that meant the same could and would happen for my daughter regardless of what he said.

"I'm five minutes away." He hung up. "Meek," Amell called out to his driver.

"Yes, Boss."

"I need you to push on the gas and get me to the compound ASAP."

I wanted to ask who called and what happened but from the hard set of his jaw and clenching of his fist, I sat quietly and prayed whatever was going on didn't result in anybody I'd been involved with, dying.

CHAPTER TWO

Massey

“I THINK WE GOT EVERYTHING. These teething rings better work cause Omari thinks my nipples are his personal chew toys.” Aunty Krishna groaned, rolling her eyes. I couldn’t help but laugh. As cute as he could be, Omari sunk those three little pegs for teeth into anything within his reach. My cheeks and fingers knew exactly what she was talking about.

Just the other day Aunty Krishna tried to give him a bottle with her breast milk and the poor little baby had a whole tantrum. Even Uncle Amell tried to talk to him and tell him that he could have the breast if he treated *his* breasts with gentle kindness. I don’t know what type of baby whispering magic my uncle has but his little pep talk seemed to work for a full day. I mean, how do you give a six-month-old baby a pep talk? Those teeth came back full force this morning though.

“What movie are you and your mom going to see?” We got in line ready to head back to the compound.

“Quiet Place 2. I wanted to go see it with PJ but since my mom and I saw the first one together, I thought it would be

cool to see the second one with her.” Our movie night was nothing more than me being proactive to spend time with my mom now, so she won’t complain when my summer gets filled with dates with PJ and volleyball practice. “Speaking of…” I took my phone out my back pocket and answered her call. “Mom, we’re checking out. I…”

“Massey, listen to me. Do not leave the store. Don’t leave with Krishna. Stay on the phone with me.” Frantic, my mom yelled through the phone.

My eyes immediately shot to Aunty Krishna who wasn’t paying me any attention. My mom sounded scared, and I heard her blow her horn repeatedly.

I tried not to get worried. She was probably fearful that I was driving at night after only getting my license less than a month ago. “What’s going on? Ma, I’m checking out…”

“Massey, shut up and listen.” She screamed crying. Hearing the tremble of fear in her voice, I became scared and started to look around as if I could see her. “Stay in the… aaahhhhh.”

“Mom. Mom.” I screamed into the phone not at all concerned if I caused a scene. Aunty Krishna kept asking me what was wrong, but all I heard was my mom’s screams, an impact hit, her screams, and then nothing. The call disconnected. My heart dropped along with the phone in my hand.

“Massey. Massey. Hey, what is going on?” Aunty Krishna shook my shoulders and I finally snapped out of the static trans of horror I was in.

“I-I… I need to get to my mom.” Picking up my phone, I ran towards the exit of the store leaving her running behind

me. I kept trying to call my mom's phone, but it kept ringing and ringing.

“Massey, slow down and tell me what is going on.”

“My mom. I have to...” Patting my hoodie pockets I took out my keys and hit the alarm to find my car. My mind wasn't clear, and I couldn't think straight to find my car. Right when I reached my car Henry, Krishna's guard, was leaning against my car. “I need to get to my mom. I-I...I can pull up her location.” I tried not to cry. Tried not to give in to the pounding of my heart. My body was already shaking but I needed to get to wherever my mom was.

“Give me your keys.” Henry outstretched his hand and I quickly handed them over. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to drive at all.

“Have you spoken with my husband?” Aunty Krishna asked.

“No, ma'am.”

While they talked back and forth, I pulled up the Find My iPhone app to trace my mom's last location. “She-She...” I could barely talk from the relief I felt seeing that she was literally right down the street from us. “She's right down the street. Can we please go now?”

I tried to remain calm as Henry pulled out of the Target parking lot. Aunty Krishna kept questioning what was going on, but I had no words for her right now. It was hard for me to explain what I heard without breaking down. Once I saw that my mom was okay, then I'd be able to talk.

Maybe it was a fender bender. She always had a habit of driving right on the bumper of other people's vehicles. Maybe

it was a small accident and the cops was too busy checking her out and she couldn't answer the phone.

“What the heck happened up here?” Aunty Krishna questioned beside me.

Up the road, a dozen or more flashing red and blue lights made the queasy feeling in my stomach turn to complete fear. The closer we got the more my heart felt like it was seconds from jumping into my lap. On the opposite side of the road traffic was at a standstill from whatever was happening.

“Damn. I hope whoever was in the car...”

“Stop the car, Henry. Stop the car.” I screamed seeing my mom's car turned upside down.

From the angle of the paramedics and fire trucks I couldn't see inside or what was going on, but I knew that was her car. I jerked and jerked the door handle to open and it wouldn't. I forgot that I had put the child locks on the rear doors when my sisters were riding with me the other day.

Fed up that Henry wasn't listening to my screams or stopping, I tried to jump in the front of the car and get out through the passenger door, but Aunty Krishna grabbed me in a bear hug. “Massey, calm down. We don't know if that's your mom. Let's get to the compound and talk to your dad. She...”

“Let me go. That's my mom's car. I know my mom's car.” I screamed and cried at the top of my lungs. She and I wrestled to keep me seated until we reached the compound. By the time Henry opened my door my face was drenched with tears, my voice hoarse from screaming and crying, and the back of my shirt was wet.

“Dammit, Massey. All of this breastmilk is now waisted.” She groaned stepping out of the car with a wet shirt.

The minute Henry came into view I tried my hardest to punch him in the face with all my might. Him moving quick, I ended up shoving him and scratching his cheek. “Why would you do that? How could you do that?”

Not waiting for his reply, I ran inside Papa’s house so he could take me to go see what happened to my mom. “Papa. Papa.” I yelled for him. Sitting in his recliner with his head down, Papa looked up at me. “Papa, something bad happened to my mom. I can feel it. She was in an accident and Henry wouldn’t stop so I could see what was wrong and be with her. Please, Papa. Take me to my mom.” My heart was hurting. My body was hurting. Not from wrestling in the backseat of the car with Aunty Krishna. I was hurting because my mom was all alone hurting, and no one was with her.

I saw her turned over car. I saw all the police cars. Something happened to her, and I needed to find out what exactly happened.

I couldn’t stay still. I couldn’t focus my eyes on one thing at a time. Between the hard pounding of my heart, the headache, and the unknown status of my mom, I wanted to pull my hair out. “Papa, are you listening to me? Please take me to my mom.”

“No, Massey.” His words sounded mumbled, and I just knew he didn’t say what I thought he did.

“Take me to my mom or give me your keys or tell one of the other guards other than Henry to take me.” I patted my hoodie for my phone and didn’t feel it. It must’ve fallen out of my pocket in the car. I’m sure if I called PJ, he would take me without question.

“I’m not taking you nowhere. Go take a shower and clean yourself off.” He glared at me, and I glared right back.

Closing my eyes, I took several deep breaths. My bottom lip wouldn't stop trembling. Tears wouldn't stop pouring but my heart slowed down enough for me to breathe without my chest hurting. The fear I felt seeing my mom's car overturned had quickly turned into an indescribable amount of rage looking at him.

"Why not?" My body finally stopped moving but my hands were balled into a tight fist.

Clearing his throat, Papa stood with his hands in his pockets, not at all looking concerned for my wellbeing or my mom's. "I'm sorry that she's fucked up probably but that's not our problem." He nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders.

Was he serious?

I felt the crease lines form in my face as I stared back at him in disgust. "Excuse me? That's my mo..."

"Fuck your mama, Massey!" He yelled making me jump. I think my eyes doubled in size at his sudden outburst. "Your mama ain't nothing but a sneaky ass prostitute. Her whole damn family ain't nothing but loose pussy hoes." The more he talked the more I felt like I was standing in the middle of my worst nightmare. How could he say such vile words about my mom? "Yeah, your mama is the biggest hoe in Florida and I ain't raising no baby hoe!"

The buildup of emotions led me to burst out into body shaking sobs. Sobs that weakened my knees and had snot oozing out of my nose. My tears weren't because of his words but because of my mom's trauma and pain. While he slandered her name my mind went back to the conversation my mom and I had at the beach and the way she's been trying to tell me about her past but couldn't find the words or courage to say it.

He was taking her past and using it against her and I didn't like that at all.

“Don't worry, baby girl. I got you. You'll never have to worry about that bitch ever again. I got you...”

Hearing him call her out her name I snapped. “I hate you.” I shoved him as hard as I could, surprising him that he stumbled. My shoves turned to punches and I relentlessly took my anger out on him.

“Massey, what the fuck? Aye...ouch. Shit, Massey.” He tried to get ahold of my hands, but I was moving too fast and wild for him to control. I was so angry and all I wanted to do was shut him up.

“Aahhh...let me go.” Papa managed to grab ahold of my hands, turn me around, and put me in a headlock. “Let me go. Let me go, Cassian.”

“Massey, quit that shit...oh fuck...” He let me go but he kept cursing. I turned around and gasped. With a metal bat in his hands, Cashton swung and swung, hitting Papa wherever he could.

“Don't ever put your hands on my sister!” Cashton was giving Papa the business. Once I saw that he was focusing on Papa's legs, I jumped on Papa's back and started swinging.

“Y'all got me fucked...got dammit...Cashton, I'm gonna...shitttt.” Papa didn't know what to do except drop to his knees.

“What the hell is going on?” Aunty Krishna screeched walking inside the house with others following.

“Uncle Cass is getting beat up that's what's going on.” Ari laughed.

Uncle Atlas grabbed me and one of the guards grabbed a wild swinging Cashton. Both taking us out the house kicking and screaming. Once Uncle Atlas released me, I ran to my car to get my phone. Hearing Cashton grunting and breathing hard, but still held tightly in his hands, my heart broke more. He stared at Papa with eyes that were so chilling.

My young bull and protector.

Cashton always said he'd do any and everything to protect me since he came to stay with us from Columbia. He and I were close, though he was quiet most of the time. I admired his loyalty and love for me and would smile whenever he declared his oath of protection to me. He was so young but tall and strong for his age. Almost AJ's height and he was pushing six feet. But to see those angry dark eyes focused on his father, cut me deeply because I knew Cashton would never be the same after tonight.

Everybody was outside the house, but nobody was moving in the direction that I needed them to. All the concern was shifted to Papa who had more lumps and bumps than I initially saw him with. Looking at Aunty Keatyn, I ran to her knowing she'd want to go see about her friend. "Please take me to see my mom, Aunty Keatyn. I have to make sure that she's okay."

Her eyes bounced between mine and Uncle Atlas who thought I didn't see him shake his head. "Why don't we wait a minute, Massey. Let's just calm down and figure out what happened." She reached for my hands, but I quickly moved away. I continued to step back and look at all the faces staring back at me as if I'd seen them clearly for the first time.

No one moved because no one cared. They've all had this vendetta against my mom for years. They made her suffer for one mistake like they were squeaky clean. "Wow." My head

dropped to the middle of my chest as I tried to control additional sobs eager to surge from the pit of my gut. If the tables were turned, we wouldn't be standing here right now, but of course, this was my mom, and they didn't care whether she lived or died.

Taking out my phone I called my last bit of hope. "Uncle Amell, I need you please." Everyone's eyes, especially Papa's, widened.

"Talk to me, Massey. What's going on?" His voice, calm and soothing enough for me to swallow the cry I wanted to scream and tell him what happened.

"I don't trust anybody here, Uncle Amell. You must come and get me, please. I went with Aunty Krishna to Target to get things for the twins and my mom calls me panicking after she left Pa...Cassian's house."

"Call me that shit again, Massey, and I'm going to bust your ass." I ignored his threats. At this point, he meant nothing to me at all.

"I'm on the phone with my mom and I heard the impact of an accident. She screamed and then our call is disconnected. Henry drove me right past the accident, Uncle Amell. He wouldn't stop and your wife wouldn't let me out of the car. She held me down and Henry refused to stop the car when we passed the scene of the accident. Your wife held me down, Uncle Amell. She refused to let me out." I talked as I walked in a circle with my hand on my head. I didn't care what they thought of me or what I said, at that point.

"I thought we were going to my mom, but he kept driving." I sobbed in my hands. "I don't trust none of these people. Please, Uncle Amell. I just wanna see my mom. Everyone keeps saying to stay here and figure out what

happened, but how can we do that if we don't go to see what happened? No one is moving or making sense."

"I'm five minutes away." He said before disconnecting the call.

My stomach felt a little less queasy but still unsettled. I wasn't about to stand here with these people waiting for him. I'd meet him at the gate. Right when I turned around to start walking, Papa called my name. "That's how you feel, Massey? Huh? That's really how you feel?" He limped towards me holding his arm. Lip was busted and bleeding. "I go out of my way to help you..."

Was he out of his mind? "Help *me*?" I pointed at myself.

"Yes, help your spoiled ass!" He yelled waving his good arm. "Your mama ain't shit but at least...ouch...what the fuck." He grabbed the back of his head. Cashton and his perfect aim threw a rock at the back of his head. "Aye, little fucker, I'm going to fuck you up."

"Oh my God," I screamed. "Shut up."

"Who the fuck are you talking to?"

"Massey!"

"Aye, watch it, little girl."

I was tired of them. Tired of them all. My mom could be dead right now and not one of them cared. "No. Screw all y'all." Spit flew out my mouth and I shook with rage.

"Massey, you better..."

"My mom could be dead right now and nobody is moving. I don't trust any of you. Knowing what y'all do, somebody probably set her up. You never cared about her so why am I surprised. She's always nice to all of you but what do y'all do.

You judge.” I had to bend down and rest my hands on my knees from the wave of emotions rocking my body.

“Massey, calm down.” Keatyn tried to console me, but I wasn’t in the mood for her fake empathy.

“Don’t touch me.” I stood straight up looking her dead in the eye. “She’s your best friend or at least she’s supposed to be. I told you she was in a car accident, and I don’t know if she’s dead or not, so why aren’t you going to the hospital or trying to figure out which one she’s at? All of y’all are so concerned with him and making sure that he’s okay but not concerned about my mom.”

We all turned to the headlights coming down the road. I closed my eyes for a brief second thankful that Uncle Amell kept his word. “I hate all of you. I hate you especially.” I made sure Papa and I locked eyes.

“For real, Massey, that’s how you want to do this?” His eyes became misty and face red.

I felt not one ounce of remorse for him, nor did I regret my words. “Yes. I told you before that if you ever tried to take me from my mom that I’d make you sorry.” Uncle Amell’s truck came to a stop, and I started walking but stopped and looked at Cashton. “Cash, I love you. Thank you for defending me.”

“I love you too, Sis. I’ll always protect you.” His eyes shifted to his father who looked like he was on the verge of crying.

I kept walking towards the car and one of the guards stepped out and opened the back door letting Noelani out. She looked up at me with a look of disgust and I just didn’t care anymore. Shoving her hard, I moved to get in but stopped when Uncle Amell rounded the truck.

“Hey, little girl.” Noelani tried to catch her balance, thankfully the guard caught her before she fell.

“Don’t say nothing to me.” I gritted, ready to fight.

Seeing Uncle Amell, my shoulders dropped, and I ran to him, crying a river into his chest. “Everything is going to be okay. Your mom is going to be fine.” His words relaxed me but the unknown still had me on edge.

“I followed the traffic cameras. She was taken to Jackson Memorial.” Uncle Atlas revealed. Hearing that made my tears quickly dry up.

What was so hard for him to say that from the beginning?

“Come on. Let’s go see your mom.” He helped me in the truck, and I took one last look at the people who I once loved with all my being. I cared nothing if I didn’t see those I once called my aunts and uncles again, except Uncle Amell. I’d always love my cousins and siblings, but the rest, they were dead to me.

CHAPTER THREE

A mell

I FOUND an odd solace in Massey's sniffles. Found comfort in hearing the nurses tell us that Coco was still in surgery. Sitting calmly in the waiting room with my niece allowed me to relax my mind and welcome the peace and quiet. My phone hadn't stopped ringing and I let each call go to voicemail with no regret. Even the calls from my wife were ignored. She and I would have a conversation once I made it home but the others, they didn't deserve to hear from me or know the status of Coco.

The day I walked out of Raiford Maximum Security Prison until now, I've been waiting for all of hell to break loose. I became a free man, rebuilt my marriage, rebuilt my relationships with my brothers and family. I watered my wife's womb and became a father of fraternal twins. To anyone else they'd see those things as blessings and they were, however, in my eyes, they were the calm before the storm.

Per the old myth, death comes in threes. Mitch and Clover were two so who was going to be the third person?

Regardless of what those doctors were going to come out and report about Courtney, I knew that she wasn't going to be third. If I relied on my vivid dreams, the actions of my brothers, and the carelessness of their wives, I'd say the next person possibly being buried would have the last name Kalmin.

My entire family was waiting on edge for my order and command. The next man might find pride in that. Beat his chest and let his ego run wild. The weight of it made me nauseous. Their problems were mine. Their despairs were mine. No matter how much I taught them, groomed them, prepared them. They ran to me to fix everything and right now I wasn't so eager to leave these walls of this hospital to do so.

Knuckles knocking against the waiting room's glass broke my thoughts. "I'm going to step out and talk to Atlas. I'll be right outside, okay?" I wasn't leaving this seat until Massey felt at ease with my presence being gone for a few minutes.

Wiping her puffy red eyes, she removed her head off my shoulder and sat up. "Okay." She said one thing, but her hand hadn't released my hand. Seeing her lack of trust in me returning, I had to bite down on my molars. That family of mine was going to get a big piece of my mind the minute I had them all together. I understood I had a role as the patriarch of this family, but my brothers had the same roles as I – protect the family.

No one protected Massey's heart or feelings by pussyfooting around and showing a lack of empathy towards her mother or her own concerns. That wasn't how I moved or taught any of them to move. Quite frankly I was disgusted with them all for their actions, my wife included.

“Promise me you’ll stay.” The saddest pair of brown eyes filled with a mountain of tears peered up at me and I wanted to do any and everything to take her sadness away.

“I promise. I’m just stepping out to talk to Atlas and I’ll be right back. Watch me through the window so you’ll see that I’m not going anywhere.” It took a few seconds before she found the strength to release my hand. Then it became my turn to find the strength to leave her side.

I swear I wanted to beat Cassian’s ass.

I don’t care what was said. I don’t care what was done. As a parent you’re supposed to be there for your child regardless of who hurt who. His absence spoke volumes. The longer he allowed Massey to sit here without him. Allowed her to mourn and grieve the unknown of her mother without him, their relationship, her respect for him will dwindle to the point of no more.

“Did you pull the footage like I asked?” Atlas appeared shocked at my brisk tone, but he honestly couldn’t have expected to receive pleasantries from me. Since he and his clown of a brother wanted to act like they had no sense then I was going to treat them as such.

Breaking his remorseful gaze off a subdued Massey, Atlas handed me his tablet. “Here, I collected footage from the compound and the traffic cameras.” He scratched the back of his neck while breaking eye contact. Right there I already knew I was about to watch some bullshit. “It’s all there. I’m also trying to get the shell casings from the bullets.”

Tapping his screen to play the footage I watched Courtney enter the compound and drive to Cassian’s house. The clip showed her and him outside talking before she went into his house. The clip sped up and showed her running out of his

house and speeding off. Two minutes or so later he hopped in the truck with Pete and took off after her. I released a long sigh through my nose, looked up at the tiles on the ceiling, and rotated my neck.

This damn fool.

The clip jumped to Courtney flying through traffic. She was two traffic lights down the street from Target when a black tinted SUV rammed into the side of her, making her car flip and flip until it landed upside down. A dark hooded figure ran out of the truck and dragged her body from the car. It took everything in me not to squeeze Atlas's tablet until it broke watching her body jerk with each bullet shot in her body. The guy ran off and right when I was about to hand the tablet back to Atlas, I looked at the screen and saw the guy run back and kneel near her body before running off again.

Slamming the tablet in Atlas's chest making him grunt and stumble, I looked him dead in the eye. "Where is Cassian?"

He blinked, jaw tight and nose flaring. "Amell...you can't do that. I'll take care of it."

This is the shit I'm talking about. Placing a hand in the pockets of my slacks, I had to step back to keep from doing something harmful to the wrong person. "Yeah. Take care of him like you were supposed to take care of Jaali Kamau." I flicked my nose. My rage was starting to suffocate me and right now I wasn't in the space needed to release that rage. "That motherfucker has been in Palm Beach for two days now, Atlas."

He scoffed in disbelief, eyes blinking like he was attempting to see in the future. "What? What do you mean he's here?"

“Exactly what the fuck I said, Young.” He was pushing me. “I told you to take care of him so why is he alive and breathing? Why are he and his wife vacationing at a beach house forty-five minutes from here?” My feet started pacing because my hands were itching to hurt something or someone, so I needed to create space immediately.

Atlas and Cassian wanted me to respect them as men but moved like little kids. I could never have pulled the shit they pull with me on Mitch. He would’ve shot me square in the face for disrespecting him and having to repeat himself more than twice. I tried to be lenient with my brothers. Tried to give them space to be men and not crowd them too much. No one was to blame but me because if I didn’t let them slack in certain areas, they would’ve done what I asked the first time.

The fact that Jaali brought his ass down here said enough and I wasn’t at all phased by Atlas or his frowns. “Y’all motherfuckers are so fuckin hardheaded. Why do I have to keep cleaning up your shit?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Atlas was missing the point and the danger of what landed on our front lawn. All he saw was that he didn’t do the job I asked of him, but it was deeper than that. I take full responsibility because I asked the wrong person to take care of a job that would’ve taken me less than a day to handle. Atlas had been so out of touch with the world Cassian and I lived. Hell, I can’t include Cassian anymore because he gave his nuts along with his power over to his wife.

Whereas they decided to take a break from the family business, I never completely stepped away. When I decided to change the course of my future at the age of twelve, I assumed the heavy burden of my reality until the day I died. Protecting

them provided the false pretenses and illusion that this was a corporate job, where you could clock in and out as you pleased.

Nah.

That's not how survival worked.

Either you were in or out. No in-between.

I gave Atlas an out when he became a married man. Cassian switched roles with his wife and gave himself an out. So, these problems now threatening to harm those I loved, those were now additional burdens heaped upon my shoulders.

"I won't hold my breath." I walked off and headed back towards the waiting room. Before I opened the door, I turned back to look at my baby brother. "Make sure Cassian's clothes and gun are at my house when I get there." His head dropped to his chest, and I walked away not at all caring about his feelings.

God, forgive me for thinking such evil towards my brothers but I will end them before I must make my wife a widow.

Speaking of my wife, I answered her call before I went back to Massey. "When are you coming home?" Honey brown eyes stared at me through the camera of my phone. Krishna spoke with a frown and a million and one questions. I knew I wouldn't be home for a couple of days. My purpose now was to stay and be close to Massey. Staying away from the drama that was sure to overwhelm me once I reached its gates.

"I can't answer that. I'm not sure."

It's been a while since she and I were at odds. If memory serves me right, I'd say the last time we were in a space of not being on the same page was right when the twins were born. She refused to rest and wanted to be a superwoman around the

house. Thinking that she was my maid instead of my wife who just birthed my kids. It was one of the few times when I had to use my dominant position as her husband and respectfully tell her to sit her ass down somewhere.

Biting her top lip, she nodded looking off. I felt her aggravation before she spoke her mind. “Are you punishing me for what I did?”

Sighing heavily, I looked up to see PJ go in and sit with Massey. “Do you even know what you did, Krishna? From the constant calls and text messages, I’m starting to think that you’re *only* calling me because you’re guilty and want to hear me now instead of when I get home.” I knew Krishna was dealing with her guilt heavily.

I knew my wife and she knew that.

Dropping her head, she pinched the bridge of her nose. “I-I...I wasn’t thinking straight. The only thing on my mind was to get her home. She...”

I wasn’t in the mood to hear her excuses. Quite frankly, I was tired of hearing everyone’s excuses. “No. The only thing that was on your mind and everyone else’s was waiting until I got home to handle it, and now that I am, y’all around there scared as shit. Makes no sense to me at all. Everyone’s lack of judgment and lack of sense of urgency to take care of this family, was especially foul on your part and theirs.”

The fact that no one seemed to understand the severity of their actions blew my mind. Not just the way they treated Massey, but the actions of my brothers to protect their homes. I tried not to question where I went wrong because they were grown men who had to take responsibility for their actions. But, of course, the protector and leader in me wanted to carry the weight of it all, though it wasn’t mine to carry.

“I’m hanging up now. Unless it’s about the kids or you’re hurt, wait for my call.” I hung up before she could say anything else.

CHAPTER FOUR

A^{tlas}

WHEN I DECIDED to step back from working with my brothers and focus on my marriage, I made the decision in confidence knowing that when or if they ever needed me, I'd be right there to help them. Growing up in the cartel was all I knew. All I had been groomed to know regardless of how much Amell tried to shield me from the lifestyle. Granted, my style of handling things looked opposite to him and Cassian, but that same Kalmin blood pumped through my veins.

The only regret I had was focusing so much on my marriage and kids that I became handicapped in the dangers that always lurked. It's like I forgot the target we had on our backs existed. If it wasn't this person driven by jealousy wanting what we had it would be someone else. The threat would never go away if we continued doing what we were doing.

I fucked up.

Fucked up bad and big time.

Allowing Jaali Kamau to live was my greatest mistake. I gave him those pills thinking he'd listen to the threat on his life and leave us alone. Never have I ever in the past done such a thing. I killed men for less, yet I let him live because my focus had shifted and wasn't on what was right in front of me. When Amell asked me to handle him, my chest swelled with pride knowing my brother still had use for my skills. So focused on making him proud that I failed because I was looking at the situation through the wrong lenses.

Lens of pride and not of expectancy.

My mind was all the way fucked up. I left the hospital and drove the long way home because I didn't want to face my mistakes. Didn't want to face my wife. Didn't want to face my children. We failed one of our own because we got so used to leaning on Amell, that when the time came for us to band together, we faltered and froze like rookies. We were at our most vulnerable because we weren't on one accord. We depended on one man to handle our problems when this was family.

A unit.

A band with one sound.

"Is Ms. Knight okay?" Duncan, our guard that guarded the front gates of the compound asked as I pulled in.

"Not sure yet, Dunc." My heart grew heavy replaying Massey's hurt. I've never seen her look so helpless and be in so much pain.

"They're doing another sweep of the property. All the families are in their homes except Cassian. He left not too long ago." He stepped back into his booth and opened the entrance gate.

“Close it. I’m not going in yet. If I’m not back in an hour have the guards do another sweep but make sure they go beyond our property lines.” Backing out, I headed to the one place I knew Cassian was hiding at. Can’t even say if he was truly hiding or dealing with the shit dumped in his lap.

As funny as it was to see him getting jumped by Massey and Cashton, once we separated them and the reality of the situation set in, it was miserably disheartening. His house was way out of order and his kids saw him as the enemy. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what my brother felt. Then to go to the hospital and see Massey in such a desolate state, not even wanting to look at me, I felt a measure of his pain and it had me heartsick.

Amell said a lot when he asked me to get Cassian’s clothes and gun. Unspoken loud assumptions that I didn’t want to allow myself to imagine until we had all the facts. He damn sure said a whole lot by letting it be known that Jaali had been in Florida for two days without me knowing. For Amell to get alerted by his guys before mine, that shit fucked with me heavy because once upon a time I was the informant, the eyes and ears in the sky. Nothing used to move in Florida without me knowing.

Period.

I made a sacrifice when I chose being married to Keatyn over being Aaron. I wanted to love her to the best of my ability and with all my strength. I wanted to be there for and with my kids. At the time, stepping away for a while seemed like the logical thing to do. Amell supported my decision and I wanted to fix what I had broken between my wife and I. Only years and years passed before I’d have a reason to step back

into the dangers that made the streets, and my brothers respect me as Aaron and not Atlas the family man.

Wrong feeling to have with all the chaos erupting around us but adrenaline pumped in my heart knowing I was jumping back into the crazy world I once ate, slept, and breathed.

Parking my truck next to Cassian's, I sat back and closed my eyes. Coward and being a punk weren't anywhere in our DNA, but I knew if he wanted to disappear for a minute he'd go to his autobody shop, Rims and Heaux's. I stepped out of my truck feeling heavy. This wasn't the time my brothers needed to be at odds. This wasn't the time for pride to step between us and create division.

Walking through his dark shop I went straight to the back. Passed his office and stepped into the working bay area. Sitting in the back of a convertible Cutlass, Cassian sat smoking in the dark. If I didn't see the red and orange flames from his blunt I wouldn't think he was in here.

Turning on the lights, I grabbed one of the black disposable waste bags and held it out for him. "Give me your clothes." Not saying a word, he hopped out the car and stripped down to his boxers and socks. Taking the clothes from him I clenched my jaw, seeing specs of blood. "I need both of your guns." He and I stood staring before he pointed behind me.

I wasn't surprised by his blank and stoic demeanor. Shit had just got real; he and I both knew that. Putting both of his guns in the bag, I headed back out but stopped when he called my name.

"Is he coming for me?"

I had an advantage others would never have when it came to my brothers. Growing up with them, growing up and seeing the men they were now, I became an expert in hearing what strangers would never pick up. Cassian asked me one question and if someone else was in here with me they'd think he spoke regularly in his normal voice.

Nah.

Nothing about Cassian's voice was normal. I heard the slight tremor of fear. Hell, I had it in mine when I asked for his clothes. Collectively we were the most dangerous hurricane ever created - The calm, the eye, and the catastrophic disaster. What happens when those three levels are at war with each other? Who can survive a category seven hurricane?

No one.

Sighing, I answered honestly. "Not yet."

I left Cassian and went home to create my own storm within my home. The night was late but the hour in my world was early. Before I jumped back into the Kalmin underground world I needed to speak to Keatyn. She deserved an explanation for my late nights and early morning that were sure to come. She deserved to know why some days I wouldn't be home and some I would.

"Daddy, you're late."

I chuckled to myself walking in the house. I was worried about Keatyn's reaction when the reaction I should've been worried about was Ari's. My princess was too smart for her own good. You'd think she ran the house by her levels of sassiness used to keep everyone in check.

"Why are you up, Ariana?" Rounding the corner to the living room I came face to face with my sassy little sunflower

dressed in her bright colored pajamas. Hair wrapped in a magenta satin bonnet. Glasses on and hands on her little non-existent hips in a humorous attempt to appear intimidating. Stepping closer I smiled at the Simpson slippers she had on her feet.

“Because, Daddy, I called Uncle Amell to check on Massey and he said you had just left. That was over an hour ago.” She was too wise for her own good.

“Come on.” I bent down a little and held my arms out. Like I knew she would, she jumped in my arms and wrapped her little body around mine. When her head rested on my shoulder and she released a yawn, I exhaled too.

My little sunflower brought me sunlight in the gloominess of my days.

“I think mommy is having one of those things again.” She mumbled sleepily on my shoulder.

Walking into her bedroom, I sat on her bed smiling. “What things, Ari?”

“Those period things because she’s been crying in the closet since you left.” She rolled her eyes, moving to lay down. “I don’t want a period if it makes me cry in closets, Daddy.”

I didn’t want to even think about my girls entering that world of womanhood yet. I had two and they drove me crazy enough without the added hormones. “Good night, Ari. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I checked in on Nova and she was sound asleep. AJ was caking on the phone as always. Standing outside of my bedroom I braced myself for whatever emotional rollercoaster

Keatyn was in. Sure enough, I found her just like Ari said. Laying in the middle of her walk-in closet crying.

So damn dramatic.

“I’m such a horrible friend.” She sat up wiping her eyes. “I honestly froze when Massey told me Coco was in a car accident. I didn’t know what to do. Then you didn’t make it any better by telling me to calm Massey down and not take her anywhere.” She rolled her eyes pulling the hood of the hoodie she wore over her head.

Sitting on the floor next to her, I pulled her on my lap and let her wrap her body around me. There were so many aspects to Coco’s accident I couldn’t speak on until we knew who and why. Keatyn would ask too many questions and I didn’t have any answers now to give. “She’s going to be okay.” I kissed the top of her head.

“How is she? Is she okay?” She leaned back, staring up at me with her red eyes and red nose. She’d been crying for a while.

“She was still surgery when I left.” I kept it short. “Listen, we need to talk.” I stared into her eyes and my heart fluttered.

Keatyn would forever be the most beautiful woman to me. There were some days when I felt like our love for one another was borderline more whimsical than reality, but it was our whimsical reality. I fall deeper in love with my wife with each season that we’ve gone through. Miscarriage, lies, deceit. I don’t regret stepping away to build a strong foundation for my marriage. Though I do wish I found a way to keep both parts of my life intertwined without having to give up the other.

“What’s wrong? Is everything okay?” Crossed legged between mine, she stuffed her hands in the front pocket of her

hoodie and searched my eyes.

“I’m stepping back into my role with my brothers.” I let that sit in and marinate in her head for a while before continuing. She sat blinking, lips slightly parted. “My schedule will change a little.” More like a whole lot. “Shit popped off way before Coco and I have to do what I do best for the safety of the family.” I shrugged biting the inside of my jaw.

Her silence made me nervous. We sat staring until she finally broke her gaze and looked around at everything but me. “What do you mean stepping back in and a changed schedule?” She kept an even tone.

“Shit is fucked up right now, Keatyn, and I need to help our entire family. You can see the craziness happening around us. I’m stepping back into the cartel.” She wanted me to say it, well there it was.

The cartel was a sensitive topic we tried to never bring up because it’s what caused our marriage to be strained the day we got married. My lies caused us to go a whole year with minimal communication and intimacy. I never wanted to go back to that place of living my life walking on eggshells, not knowing if today was going to be the day she left me or not.

“So we’re boring to you now?” She reared back with bunched brows. I looked off and exhaled because I already knew she was about to lose her shit. She hopped up and scowled down at me like she wanted to slap some sense into me, but the decision had already been made. “Being a family man ain’t it no more? Is that what you’re telling me?”

Standing and giving her the same scowl back, I stepped all in her space. “Did I say that? Don’t put words in my mouth that I never said.” I gritted watching her glare back at me.

“You might as well have said it.” Her bratty and spoiled behavior was quickly becoming a turn-off. I knew she’d have some lip but not like this.

Telling Keatyn about Jaali and whatever other threats laid waiting in the dark wasn’t an option. That was my responsibility as her husband to take care of the ghost in the darkness so she could sleep at night. She needed to just trust me. Trust that if I had to step back in, then that meant I had a reason.

“Keatyn, I’m not doing this with you. You knew who I was and what I was connected to for over fifteen years. Right now isn’t the time to act like you forgot. I will always put my family first and you should know that out of everybody. If I’m stepping back in that means that I don’t have a choice and I’m doing it to keep you and my kids safe. The kids aren’t little anymore. They’re older and will understand I’m doing my best to make sure no hurt, harm or danger comes through those iron gates. I need you as my wife to support whatever decision I make and know that I’m doing this for us.”

Not being in agreement right now wasn’t what I needed. My focus had to be fixing my mess and then my family. Yes, sadly, they were coming second but first at the same time because I was protecting them. Jaali being here meant he was cocky and had some big fucking balls, testing me like this. Meaning my family wasn’t off limits since I touched his first. I needed Keatyn to hold down our fort while I went out and reintroduced myself to our guest.

“Not all of the kids are little anymore.” She mumbled looking down at her feet.

“What do you mean?” Even with Ari being our youngest, she was more than capable of taking care of herself. “AJ is in

high school. Nova starts ninth grade this upcoming year and Ari is her own person.” What was I missing?

Reaching in the pocket of her hoodie she took out a stick and threw it at my head. “That last *we* baby that we wanted, well congratulations. Such a convenient time for me to get pregnant when you wanna go back playing in the wild wild west.” She walked past me bumping my shoulder.

Picking up the pregnancy test, I stared at it hoping that the results changed. Both of us wanted one more baby before I had my vasectomy. Since she gave birth naturally to all our kids, had her body changed to bring my kids into the world, I felt it was only right that I was the one to get the procedure done. We agreed on me intentionally filling her womb one last time and did what we’re pros at and created another love child, but this was not the time. So not the time for her to be an even greater weakness for me. Your enemies always went after the ones you loved - wife and kids first. With her being pregnant, she became an even bigger target without even knowing.

“Fuck!” I yelled punching the wall.

CHAPTER FIVE

D^{re}

“COCO, baby, please call me back. I...I just need to hear your voice.” I stared at my phone for the umpteenth time wanting to call her back again. I called and called with no answer.

We’ve been living on the Kalmin compound for three days and I’ve yet to hear or see Coco. Yesterday I saw a glimpse of her daughter Massey playing on the playground with the kids. I stopped myself from going over and introducing myself knowing that her mother and I were in a weird limbo phase right now.

Today I awoke with a gut full of hope. Massey was on the compound, and I overheard Drea talking with Krishna saying that Coco was coming to pick her up so they could go to the movies. Once I heard that I went into overdrive and planning mode. I called the owner of Romance On The Go, Ta’veca Collins, to transform the backyard of my house into an Italy Under the Moonlight theme. For such short notice it cost me a pretty penny but making things right with Coco was worth it.

The sun had set thirty minutes ago, and my house was transformed to my liking. Everything was set. Food was

spread out, music playing, candles were lit. They created the perfect ambiance, only thing missing was my Coco Bean.

“This is some bullshit.” I groaned sitting on the curve of my driveway.

Yes, she asked me for space to handle her family issues but why couldn't she see that I was willing and more than capable of loving on her and helping her at the same time? Massey was clearly okay. Coco didn't talk to her mother and her father wasn't in her life, so what family issues did she have?

I jumped to my feet seeing her car speed by heading in the direction of Cassian's house. Massey had left with Krishna not too long ago which prompted me to stay outside until she came back. My feet were moving fast to reach her but not fast enough. Cassian came out his house and spoke to her. She got out of her car and followed him outside. I stayed across the street waiting and waiting. Pacing back and forth, trying not to go knocking on his door demanding she talk to me.

About thirty minutes later she came running out of his house yelling, looking disheveled. “Fuck you, Cassian. Fuck you.” Before I could get her attention or move, she was backing out and speeding out of the compound. Not even two minutes later Cassian got in his truck with one of the guards and followed out behind her.

I called her again. Texted and left voicemails. Still no answer or reply.

The food was getting cold, and I didn't want my money to go to waste so I told Andrea and Landon to have a date night on me. Drea was excited and Landon sighed with relief to be able to have a romantic night with his wife. While they enjoyed my date night plans, London and I sat on their porch lost in our own thoughts.

“Dre, can I ask you a question?” London rocked back and forth on the porch swing drinking wine.

I wasn't in the mood at all to talk but I wasn't going to be rude. “What's up?”

“When you first met Coco, did you make it known that you liked her just when y'all were together or outside of that?”

I glanced over at her laying back looking into space. Theo had yet to get in contact with her and she wasn't taking his lack of communication too well. “I made my intentions known from the second I stepped in her space.” My lips curved into a smile thinking back on how intense those three days were that Coco and I spent in New York during New Year's weekend. “Have you reached out to him?”

There was no denying London's overly coddled and entitled behavior. Her father and brother gave her everything she wanted, making it hard for the average man to have a chance with her. The only thing I've seen her work hard for is her juice bar business, FruitsNBooks. Theo had his work cut out for him. Not just because of her being spoiled, but because London wasn't one to humble herself long enough to accept a man's leading in her life. She liked control too much.

Sucking her teeth, she said, “Surprisingly I've stooped down to that level and called him. When I did call him he said that he was giving me time to think on what it is that I want and to find myself, like I don't know who I am.”

Smirking, I turned to her. “Do you know who you are, London?” Her head whipped towards me. “Before you get riled up, think on the question. Outside of the designer labels, celebrity status, and money. Who is London Nicole Carter? I know you have a good heart because you fight to make sure

that kids have proper nutrition in school. So you're not all the way shallow."

If London wasn't Landon's sister and closer to my age, would I date her? No. Have a sexual relationship with no strings attached, if I was in that mindset, yes. As beautiful and smart as the next woman, she was also shallow and stuck up. You wouldn't know her heart would beat for anything genuine if you didn't know she was the one responsible for a lot of inner-city schools receiving grants for better health food programs.

She looked good. Smelled good. Could hold an intellectual conversation. But once all of that moved out that way there was nothing worth committing to.

Hearing sniffles and hiccups, I looked over to see her crying while refiling her glass of wine. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I'm a horrible person, Dre. I can't answer that question because I don't know who I am. I hurt people before they even get the idea to hurt me. I bury my insecurities with designer labels. I've done everything to protect my heart from being at the mercy of pain again that this person I've created, I don't know how to get rid of her." She downed her glass in two gulps, wiped her tears, only for a fresh river to flow.

London just revealed a lot of internal issues to work on and I hoped she was open to receiving help. "I know I joke a lot about marrying you, but Dre, if you're still single in five years, marry me so I won't die a lonely old hag." She looked at me and then we erupted into a fit of laughter.

"Can't make no promises but I got you." I understood London and I wanted more for her. Not having Coco in my life five years from now...that wasn't an option. I'm not sure what

I had to do to change the direction we were going in now, but us apart wasn't an option to entertain on any level for me.

“Oouuu look. I think some mess is about to pop off.” London hopped up and looked at all the trucks and cars headed towards Cassian's house. I noticed Massey's Tesla, but I didn't see Coco's car. “I'm going to be nosey. Are you coming?”

Coco wasn't trailing them, so I wasn't about to waste my time. “Nah. You got it.”

“I shall return.” She skipped off and I went inside and tried calling Coco one more time. Like all the times previously my call went to voicemail.

SOMETHING WAS GOING ON. Something had happened. I felt it. Last night I barely slept. Couldn't sleep at all really. Drea and Landon ended up staying the night over at my house and I stayed at theirs. London came skipping in the house after midnight saying she was sitting across from Cassian's listening to all the drama. Apparently, Cassian and his kids were fighting, and his brothers tried to break it up. Amell came and got Massey and Cassian went crazy.

This morning there were more guards than normal. They were checking everyone's security cameras and inspecting all the vehicles. I don't know what happened, but I knew it had to be bad. You could feel the change of air when you stepped out of your house. It smelt like tragedy, and no one was saying anything.

“I think we can pull this off and have a test run by the end of July. Once we get this thing promoted on social media and all the radio stations, I'm sure we'll have more than enough

artists willing to showcase.” Landon, Kellon and Khiver Cambridge, and I were sitting in Landon’s living room going over the new business idea to start a down south record label.

To be honest I wasn’t feeling it. Not that I thought the idea was stupid and not worth the investment, mentally I wasn’t at all desiring to giving what little bit of time I had to develop artists. Over the years I sat side by side with Landon as we hosted showcases in New York and Jersey. Back then I did so because I needed the distraction from my issues. Needed to get my mind off Dafina. Times had changed and I haven’t thought at all about the girl. I didn’t need the distraction anymore.

My love for music wasn’t as strong as Landon’s and Drea’s. She’d be the better fit, but she was months away from giving birth. Besides, I started outlining and designing my new comic book that I hoped to have released by the beginning of winter. Then on top of that, I wanted my available time to be for my lady when she decided to come around.

“Have y’all given much thought to taking the showcase on tour and going to different cities? One thing I do know is that if the artists are serious they’ll come to you. Miami can be the start but if we really wanted to see a variety, I say take it on the road.” Khiver had more than enough knowledge on the subject since he’s been managing his brother and several artists over the years.

Scratching his brow, Kellon looked at me and then at Landon. “I’m cool with traveling but I gotta run that by my lady. Delilah and I work as a unit and if my lady ain’t on board,” he shrugged. “I may have to sit the traveling part out and let you handle it, Khiver. Landon is about to have a baby. He’s damn sure not about to start traveling no time soon, and Dre doesn’t seem the least bit interested. I say we give Miami

all we got and go from there.” We all laughed cause everything he said was the truth.

“How about use the technology you have before investing money in traveling and touring?” All eyes looked at me. It was the most I’ve said since we started the meeting almost two hours ago. “Announce submissions on all your platforms but they have to submit a YouTube video.” Kellon gave me the side eye and I chuckled. “Aye don’t knock it before you try it. How do you think my platform grew before I signed with Landon? Seriously though, have the artist submit their videos of them performing, give the public a chance to rate them since they’re going to be the ones streaming and buying the music anyway. Once that picks up, depending on what region sends more and is the fan favorite, then go on tour. Those are my thoughts.”

What I got out of the meeting with these guys was that they had a brilliant idea but no time to see it through how they wanted to other than Khiver, and that was too much to put on one person. People knocked YouTube but that’s how a lot of artists nowadays were being signed and recognized. Let’s not even go back in time to when myspace was popping.

Tapping his pen on the table, Landon looked at me nodding. “I actually like that idea. Covid is still out there and that eliminates us encountering so many people and then coming home to our families. I’m for sure not trying to bring anything home to my wife and newborn son.”

The doorbell rung and London yelled that she was getting it.

“I agree. I can have my graphic designer get started on setting up the YouTube page and creating the social media

pages as well.” Khiver was already tapping away on his phone.

“Another good idea would be to have the top artists go bar for bar or vocal for vocal like a Verzuz battle. That’s something that can be added down the line though.” I had all the ideas to give just not the time or desire to be a part of it. Everything I mentioned required little to no effort.

“Look at Dre and all his smart ideas.” Kellon joked. “But nah, I’m with it all. Count me in.”

“Kellon and Khiver.” London came around the corner. “The guards said unless you’re trying to spend the night, you gotta ride out. They’re locking down the compound in thirty minutes.”

Lockdown?

What type of prison yard mess was this?

Landon was the first to stand up looking confused. “Lockdown? For what?” Like him, none of us understood.

Khiver and Kellon looked at each other before standing. “If y’all are on lockdown then it was ordered by Amell, and he rarely locks down the compound unless something has happened.” Kellon shook my hand before heading towards the door.

“Somebody is in the hospital after getting into a car accident last night. I told y’all that they were out there fighting.” London did say that, but I wasn’t at all concerned with what was going on at Cassian’s house.

“I was hoping to talk to Amell but seeing as he’s not here, can you tell him that Bishop is looking for him.” Khiver tossed over his shoulder before following his brother out the door.

“Lockdown.” Landon kept repeating with his hands on his waist and a concerned frown on his face.

“Dre.” All of us turned to a teary-eyed Andrea walking into the living. Thinking that something was wrong, Landon ran to her side. “I’m okay, Landon.” Her eyes pulled away from his and landed on me. I stopped breathing with each second that passed that she didn’t say anything. “It’s Coco.” My knees became weak. “She was in a car accident and was shot.”

“What?” I tried to take a step but ended up falling back on the chair I was sitting on.

“She’s at Jackson Memorial and in critical condition. Krishna called and told me. Amell and Massey are there with her. Until they find out who did it, we’re on lockdown.” She cried in Landon’s chest.

My body felt like it was on autopilot. I got up and ran out of the house towards my truck. One of the guards yelled something about me not being able to come back in if I left but I didn’t care. My only concern, my only focus was getting to Coco.

Luck wasn’t on my side at all. It took me forty minutes to get to the hospital with all the traffic. All the red lights I ran, stop signs I didn’t stop for, I don’t know how I made it in one piece, but I made it. Walking into the packed hospital I looked around feeling woozy. Everything felt like it was moving in slow motion. There were police officers, nurses, and staff members all over the place, but I stood in the middle of the entrance way unable to speak. The reality and severity of what Drea told me made the antiseptic smell of the hospital nauseating.

She was in a car accident.

She was shot.

Was she alive?

“Sir, how can I help you?”

I finally made it to the information desk, but my words were still lodged under my heart that had dropped to the pit of my stomach. Blinking several times, I rested my shaky hands on the counter and licked my dry lips. “I...um...I-I...I’m looking for my Coco Bean.”

The woman bunched her brows and looked over the rim of her glasses. “Excuse me, sir. Do you have a proper name?”

A proper name? That is her name.

That’s the name of the woman that I love.

My Juliette.

My Coco Bean.

My Courtney Knight.

“Uh, yes, sorry. Courtney Knight. I’m here to see Courtney Knight. Can you please tell me what floor she’s on?” I don’t know how my mouth moved or how my tongue formed the right words.

“Can I see your ID please?” I gave her my driver’s license and stood there robotically waiting. She handed me my ID and took what last breath I had away. “I’m sorry, sir, but you aren’t on the list see her.”

A list?

“What list are you talking about?” The shock of what happened to Coco was slowly turning into anger.

“The list given by her family. We have strict instructions on who is privy to anything concerning Ms. Knight, and as I

said, sir, you aren't one of them."

Why was I not on this bullshit ass list when I was her man?
Who in the hell gave the list?

"Ma'am, my heart is somewhere in this hospital, and I need to see her. I don't give a fuck about a list. Give me a badge so I can..."

"Dre." I turned and came face to face with Amell Kalmin. "Take a walk with me." Instead of fussing with the woman who was only doing her job, I followed behind Amell thinking that if there was anyone capable of getting me inside the hospital to see Coco it was him.

He and I walked outside of the ER entrance and sat down on a bench under a tree. Considering the circumstances, I was surprised to see him so dressed up. "Who oversees the family's list? I want my name added." My right leg started to bounce. I didn't follow him outside to get fresh air. My fresh air was inside that hospital.

Leaning back against the table of the bench, Amell crossed his arms across his chest and glared at me. "Are you ready for this?"

My heart dropped even more.

Had Coco's condition worsened?

"Ready for what?"

Never blinking, he continued, "Loving all parts of Courtney."

This was not the time for one of his logical bullshit talks. I needed to see her. "What does this have to do with me seeing her, Amell? Did something in her life cause this?"

“Yes, something in her life caused this.” He sat up resting his arms on his knees. “The woman you love is connected to dangers on both ends – her family and ours. This,” he pointed towards the hospital ER entrance. “The chaos of hospitals, bullet wounds, and the fear of death, I’m used to it but if you aren’t willing to try to love all aspects of her, past and present, walk away right now because things aren’t about to get better. Things are about to get worse and if your love for her is conditional, then leave now.” He stood looking down at me with his signature mug. “She’s still in surgery so you can’t see her anyway. I’ll keep you posted.” He walked away leaving me sitting there confused.

Of course, I loved Coco.

My love for her wasn’t conditional. I made that clear to her from the beginning. There was nothing she could do or have done that would change my love for her. My past wasn’t the brightest and my future up until recently wasn’t either. I had no room in my heart to judge her nor would I. However, that still didn’t stop my mind from racing and analyzing everything he just said.

Just who exactly was Coco and what was going on?

CHAPTER SIX

C^{oco}

FLASHBACK - 15 YEARS OLD

MY HOME ROOM teacher threatened to call my mother and tell her that my mind wasn't focused on my studies because I wrote my name and Jimmy's all over my binder instead of studying for my upcoming test. For the last six months my focus had indeed shifted from my books to thinking of my future with Jimmy. Thinking of what our kids would look like. Thinking of walking down the aisle and marrying him after he turned pro. Thinking of spending the rest of my life with him. My grades would never slip, I wasn't that gone over him that I'd neglect everything. But I had become a member of lost in lala land over the first guy to ever look at me as more than just a piece of meat.

Even now wearing his letterman's jacket and t-shirt I had made with his number and name on it, I couldn't help the blush that came over my face watching him run up and down the court. We were in the lead thanks to his two-pointer shots and

ability to interfere the ball. Jimmy Hawthorne was that dude on the court as he was off the court.

All the girls wanted to love him, and all the guys wanted to be him.

I wouldn't say I was the lucky one versus him. He chased me down since my freshman year when he was a junior. Out of all the girls he wanted me, and I ignored him until he wore me down. If we're being honest, none of the guys at my school interested me none. They were either too overconfident, too stupid, or just plain unattractive and did nothing to pique my interest.

Didn't help that I wasn't your typical high schooler either. I was a Pearl or at least being primmed and groomed to be. Nevertheless, I may not have had the crown, but I had the benefits of one. Probably more so than the other girls in the house because my grandmother was the Madame. Being her granddaughter came with just as many woes as there were benefits.

"Has he asked you out to prom yet?" My cousin Mya bumped my shoulder. She and I were sitting on the bleachers watching Jimmy's last game of the season.

Everyone that was everyone was here and of course, I had to make sure to be present. Not only that but his parents were sitting on the bleachers in front of us. His parents loved me, and I loved them. Jimmy's father, Dr. Hawthorne was a part of the first black pharmaceutical company that built the first pharmacy on Sistrunk.

With Jimmy coming from a wealthy prominent black family and my grandmother being a philanthropist and stellar entrepreneur within her community and amongst her peers, we were a match made in heaven...at least to some people. I met

his entire family and the only family he'd ever meet of mine was Mya. His mother often asked to meet Veronica, but I gave her excuse after excuse to nip that in the bud. That wasn't happening at all.

"Yeah, he asked me, but I don't know if I'm going to go." It wasn't that I couldn't afford to because I most definitely could. It was other circumstances that made me leery of going.

Nodding her head knowingly, Mya offered a warm smile. "Y'all would steal the show if you did decide to go. I already know you'd come dressed to shut shit down." We laughed because she knew me well.

"We'll see. I haven't given him my answer yet, but I will soon. His mom asked me what color my dress was, and I lied and said plum and rose gold." I rolled my eyes. When Mrs. Hawthorne cornered me before the game, I didn't have time to come up with a lie. She caught me off guard and I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"Plum and rose gold, huh. That can actually work." Mya and I both knew it could work. All I'd have to do is give my personal designer my colors and she'd create or find me a dress that would make every girl at prom jealous and Jimmy drool.

The half-time buzzer went off and Jimmy and his team ran out from the locker room onto the court. Getting into position to practice shots, Jimmy looked my way and winked. I loved that boy something serious. Maybe it was the way his toffee-colored skin felt like the finest silk rubbing up against mine. Or maybe it was the way his nutmeg eyes held me captive while he sang off key to Keith Sweat just to make me laugh and blush. Or perhaps it was his giant height of six-five that made me feel secure and protected whenever he towered over me.

Lanky but with the right number of muscles, Jimmy was my first of everything, well almost everything. The first boy that I ever uttered the words I love you to. The first boy to make me a girlfriend. The first boy to kiss my lips and French kiss me like we starred in the best romance movie ever made. The first boy to make my heart skip a beat and stomach fill with butterflies. The first boy, the first person, to see me outside of the vision Veronica and Stacey created for me.

“I’m going to wait out by the parking lot to look out for Nette.” Mya and I were walking out the gym. The game was over, and Jimmy was headed to the championship game. My baby was an MVP.

“Cool. I’m just going to congratulate him, and I’ll meet you there.” I never missed a game of Jimmy’s. Even the games that were at other schools, I managed to make them with my partner in crime right next to me. It’s not that we had to try hard, but we still had to be careful. Veronica had eyes and ears everywhere.

As I stood outside of the locker room, I waved to a few people who were nice to me in school. Smiled at the others who were unreasonably jealous. Jimmy’s parents came by and said goodbye. They were always nice to me, and I wondered if that same love would exist if they knew my truth.

“Damn, you look sexy as shit in my jacket.” The coolest deep voice whispered in my ear making me smile.

Turning around I came face to face with the one person I wanted to love forever. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I ran my nose along his cheek and neck. I loved the smell of his sweat and natural body odor. It wasn’t too musky or tart, just perfect for me. Mya often told me I had issues when I’d beg Jimmy to let me have the shirts that he wore after practice that

was drenched in sweat and funk. To me it was the best smelling fragrance ever.

“Good game tonight, baby. Congratulations.” Kissing Jimmy, gosh I’d never get tired of it. He may not have been the first person to peck my lips, but he was the first person I enjoyed doing it with.

He always kissed me slowly. Kissed me methodically until my body was covered in chills and my heart threatened to beat outside my chest. He took his time with me. Always a patient kisser. Sometimes, more so than not, he kissed me with his eyes open. I learned early on and way before him to kiss with my eyes closed because it gave me the ability to escape from the reality of who my lips were touching. When it came to Jimmy and him kissing me with his eyes looking at me, I asked, and he said he wanted to look at me because he wanted to make sure that I was enjoying it and to make sure that it wasn’t a dream.

Yeah, the kid had game but so what.

I was smitten to the moon and beyond the largest grouping of stars.

“Let’s go to Steak and Shake. Eat some burgers and drink some milkshakes. Celebrate with me, baby.” His hands running up my back was making me want to give in to anything he asked of me.

But, of course, I couldn’t. Not tonight anyway. I already sacrificed enough to make it through his game. “I can’t tonight. I actually have to get home and get ready for...” I stopped talking feeling him stiffen.

Not wanting to see the look of disappointment in his eyes, I carefully removed myself from his body and stepped back.

Several of his teammates walked by and spoke. He spoke to them but kept his eyes on me. I learned to never falter when looking a man in their eyes yet when Jimmy looked at me when we were discussing certain aspects of my life, I could never hold his intense gaze.

Those nutmeg eyes held so much anger for things he didn't quite understand. His passion for me surpassed the physical, it made my heart thunderclap. "How many did she schedule for tonight?" He switched his gym bag to the other shoulder, not once breaking his intense gaze.

"Jimmy, please. I don't want to talk about it." I never shared the layers of my life with anyone outside of Jimmy. Mya knew because she lived in the same house with me, but with Jimmy. Goodness, he made it easy to trust him.

Trust him with all parts of me. The parts that I knew made my beauty ugly. The parts that made girls in school envious. When I first told him of my real life I did it in hopes to run him away. At the time he was relentlessly chasing after me and I wanted to stop running and give in to the boy who sang Bobby Brown and New Edition to me every day at my locker. I was falling for him, and I knew it was forbidden, so I wanted to run him off but instead, my truth turned into a green light for him to pursue me with no barriers.

I fell in love with Jimmy Hawthorne.

I fell hopelessly in love with the boy who saw me past my flaws and ugliness.

"Come here. Come back to me." He spoke low but authoritatively. Stepping back into his space, I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on for what I knew was coming next. Him grabbing my booty cheeks and hoisting me up to wrap my legs around him.

I loved being this close to him. Loved being so close that it felt like my clothes would melt off and merge us as one.

“I’m taking you with me, Courtney. I don’t care about what anybody says. When I leave, you’re going with me. Do you understand me?” Goodness, this boy has so much passion burning behind his eyes and in his voice.

Being the star athlete in our county came with many perks and blessings like being offered a full ride athletic scholarship to Notre Dame to play ball. He immediately took the offer and signed with them on National Signing Day. I was so proud of my baby. He was getting away from the dangers of South Florida. I wanted that for him. I wanted that for us too and I couldn’t wait to run away with him.

“Yes, I understand. It’s you and me against the world.” We weren’t out here shooting up people and robbing banks, but he was my Clyde, and I was his Bonnie.

Resting his forehead against mine, he exhaled, as I inhaled. “I love you so damn much, Courtney. I hate that she...”

I hushed him with a kiss. This wasn’t the place or the time to reflect on things that were out of my control. “Have fun with your friends tonight and I’ll call you when I get home, okay?”

Calming my raging heart, he rested his lips against my forehead. “Don’t forget either.” He squeezed my butt cheeks making me moan. “And I don’t care what you say, you’re going to prom with me. You understand me, baby.” He was so bossy, but I loved it. I loved him.

Giggling, I nodded. “Yes, we’re going to prom.”

“Um, sorry to interrupt, but we gotta leave. Nette is here.” Mya tapped my shoulder.

Jimmy and I exhaled two different breaths. Mine was shaky and his was hard. Sadness and frustration. "Talk to you soon. I love you." Pecking his lips one last time, I held on tight until he placed me back on solid ground.

I reached to remove his letterman's jacket but stopped seeing his glare. "Don't try me, Coco." He squeezed my hand before I turned and walked the green mile with Mya.

Every time I walked away from him, I always felt like I was going to cry. My eyes stung with tears, but they never fell. I never allowed them to fall.

Mya and I got in the back of the car and sighed. Nette, one of the older Pearls, turn around with a smile and handed us a folder each. "Veronica already has your clothes laid out for you when you get home. Shower and get ready. Everyone is booked tonight so that should be fun." The minute she turned around and drove off, Mya and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes.

I opened my folder and winced. I hated going on 'cuddle dates' with Frederick Greene. The man had a hard time keeping his hands in the proper areas even after being warned by Veronica herself several times. It got so bad that now whenever he books my services I had to be escorted by a guard. The embarrassment just kept on growing.

Once we arrived at the estate, my entire persona had shifted. At school and with Jimmy I was Courtney Knight, the student and girlfriend. Here, I was Courtney or Coco the apple of Madame Veronica's eye. Straight posture and a catwalk that would put Naomi Campbell to shame.

"Hey, Coco. Hey, Mya." Mya and I were greeted instantly walking into the mansion.

From the outside looking in you'd think this was a fun twenty-four-seven sleepover party by the way the girls and women were dressed. The hip swaying music playing and servers offering trays of wine and champagne.

Mya and I looked at each other before separating. She went towards the kitchen, and I went upstairs to get ready. I hadn't run into Veronica, and I planned on being out of the house before she found me. Laid out on my canopy bed was everything that I needed for tonight. My grey silk spaghetti strapped dress with splits on both sides going all the way up to my hips. One glance and I knew I wouldn't be wearing a bra. There was a pair of stringy thong heels, perfume, and hairclips. When the hairclips were placed out that meant that I was requested to wear my hair up and out of my face. Next to the Chanel perfume was a tube of red lipstick.

Turning on the radio, I turned the shower on the hottest setting and stripped. Before getting in, I made sure to hide Jimmy's jacket in the back of my closet. If Veronica saw it she'd ask a million and one questions, and I wasn't in the mood to deal with her. After showering and making sure to scrub myself until I was squeaky clean, I patted myself dry and I stepped back in my room only to stop upon seeing Veronica sitting on my bed with my body butter in hand. I knew I locked my door but of course, she'd find her way into anywhere.

"Come, let me help you." She stood, her sheer robe opening showing off her black lingerie. I don't think I've ever seen her wear regular clothes around the house. She always wore next to nothing.

Releasing a shuddering breath, I slowly walked over to where she stood. I knew if I protested, she'd go from zero to one thousand. Standing naked before my grandmother wasn't

anything new. It's quite common in this house for all of us to see each other naked, borderline forced upon each of us. She said it was important that we become comfortable in our skin and to appreciate and cherish our temples.

Rubbing a palm size amount of body butter in her hands, she started moisturizing at my neck. "Tonight, is going to be a night of fun, Courtney. Frederick paid extra to spend the night with you, but I told him that was only possible if a guard was there." Like that made me feel any better.

Lying in bed with one man and having another watching over you. Yeah, that was so much better.

Her hands went down from my neck to my shoulders, my arms, and then my breasts. I learned long ago to space out when these moments happened. Learned to be present physically but not mentally. Right now, my mind was on Jimmy and us being so far away from here that Veronica would need Jesus to help her find us.

"Your body is a work of art. So perfect. Not a flaw in sight." My eyes squeezed shut with each venture of her hands across some place on my body. "When you step into the fullness of being a Pearl, you'll be ready to enjoy the feeling of being with a man sexually. The way I'm touching you is the same way he is to touch you. Nothing less but definitely more." She laughed lowly, the warmth of her breath on my neck making me wish I was I dead.

Twice, she moisturized my skin. Hands graced over my breasts, my hips, arms, hands and between each of my fingers, belly, back, butt, thighs, legs, and feet. "Open up." Dropping six drops of her special yoni oil onto her fingers, she turned and smiled creepily at me.

Stepping closer until her lips grazed my ear, her oiled hand moved to my vagina. I bit my lip and squeezed my eyes shut in pure horrified agony, praying and wishing that she hurried up. “You’re going to be my best Pearl, Coco. Men will fall at your feet. Women will be so jealous that they will try to kill you. Never allow anyone to diminish your worth or your light. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I spoke low through my pursed lips.

“Your birthday is coming up and the bidders are endless, my girl. I can’t wait to present you at the gala.” Still with her hand lodged between my thighs while her fingers moved over and around me, she moved her head back and looked me in the eye. “I’m so proud of you.”

Exhaling once she removed her hands from my body, I quickly dressed. “Madame, I told you that I want no parts of the gala.” Everyone in the house knew that is where my obedience ended. No way was I going to be a man’s sex slave for a year and a half all because he out bid another man.

Veronica paid me no mind at all. She continued helping me get ready. She curled my hair and made sure that it was pinned up to her liking. She made sure that my lipstick was applied just right and kissed my lips to ensure it didn’t smudge. Once I was completely dressed and ready, she spritzed me with enough perfume to make me sneeze, my bedroom door was opened, and I stepped out just as Mya was stepping out of hers.

From the faraway look in her eyes, I knew what had happened to me behind these closed doors was the same things she endured with her mother. She and I held locked eyes while the women gathered to praise us for our beauty. Quietly, she and I walked shoulder to shoulder down the grand staircase,

down the hall to outside where the circular driveway was filled with black town cars. She went in one direction, and I went into the other. Right before I bent to get in, I looked up and locked eyes with her. On cue she and I winked our sign of promise to the other to make sure that we did all we could to survive through the night.

“She’s coding again.” My eyes fluttered open, a bright light shining down on me. “Courtney, don’t you dare give up on me.” I felt nothing as my eyes fluttered back closed and again, the darkness welcomed me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Massey

LIVING in a nightmare day after day was the worst experience of my life. We were now on day three of my mom being in the hospital and her condition still wasn't a hundred percent known. One minute she was in surgery and the nurses were waiting for the doctor to come out and speak to us. The next she was in ICU because she coded on the table and they didn't want to keep cutting her open to remove the bullets, causing more distress on her body.

Bullets.

Multiple bullets.

This was the longest I've gone without seeing or speaking to my mom. Even when she traveled for work or went to see Mr. Dre, I still saw her beautiful face over facetime. She still called me before bed and bright and early in the morning. She still texted me throughout the day. Sent me funny and ratchet Instagram posts.

She still...but now she wasn't.

“Why does she keep coding?” I spoke barely above a whisper.

Uncle Amell and I were sitting outside of the room my mom would be wheeled into after this surgery was over. The doctors were finally going to let her body try to heal on its own. The room looked more like a bubble with a bunch of machines waiting to be hooked up to her.

Rubbing a hand over his face, he looked straight ahead at the nurses preparing the room. “She’s facing her demons. God didn’t bring her this far to take her away before she helped the next woman assigned to her obedience. Her testimony of survival will be a breakthrough for others. This is her time to rest and face her demons.”

Wow.

Okay.

He said a whole lot that made me confused and sad at the same time.

The more I sat there and replayed his words my heart sunk further into despair. My bottom lip trembled, and my eyes began watering all over again. I’ve never cried so much in my short life. Those demons that he spoke of probably had to do with her mother and grandmother. Two people who claimed they wanted to be in her life had an ugly way of showing it. I know they knew what had happened. The accident and status of my mom’s condition had been broadcasted all over the news. Police were begging the public to come forth if they knew any information about the hit and run accident.

Out the corner of my eye, I saw a group of people headed our way. Uncle Amell stood holding my hand. Looking up it was the doctors and team of nurses working on my mom. I

searched all their faces to see if I could see any signs of grief. I don't know what I would do if she didn't make it. When I first saw them yesterday, I felt at ease seeing the superhero team of black doctors and nurses assigned to my mom.

"Thank you for being patient with us." Dr. Malone nodded. "I'm truly sorry that you haven't been able to see Ms. Knight and all that is due to her condition worsening as the hours ticked on." I wobbled a little, making Uncle Amell wrap his arms around my shoulder and pulling me into the safety of his chest.

Looking at the other doctor next to him, who offered an encouraging nod, Dr. Malone continued to splinter my world. "We were able to remove most of the bullets except for a few." He looked at me with remorse. "One bullet is entirely too close to her spine for us to take it out so right now she's temporarily paralyzed. We won't know the severity until she wakes up."

"Wakes up? What do you mean wakes up?" I didn't understand that part. His words were clear, but they were starting to run together in a circle.

"She's in a coma."

I quickly sank at this news, my knees completely weakening. Before I could hit the floor, strong arms encircled me, lifting me up. "I got you." My eyes closed and tears ran down my cheek as PJ arms tightened.

"Ms. Knight suffered a serious number of injuries. Not just from the bullets but from the accident." Dr. Malone licked his lips while clearing his throat. "She suffered a severe TBI. That's a traumatic brain injury. There was so much bleeding, swelling, and bruising on her brain we had to cut her skull open to relieve the pressure. Right now, we had to leave it

open to allow it the opportunity to go down. While on the operating table, she coded twice and slipped into a coma. We ran a quick scan for brain activity, where we were assured she retained functionality, however, her body appears to have begun the process of shutting down from the overwhelming amounts of traumatic stress she's endured over these last hours. As a result, we opted to forestall the remaining surgeries until we are better able to assess the full extent of her injuries and healing abilities.

“So far, we were able to remove five of the bullets. Two remain, with one near her spine we will need to go back in at some point to remove but none of this is what we consider dire at this point. Right now, our primary focus is the brain injury. Because she is exposed, she is still on our critical floor and for now, I cannot grant you access to her. If she pulls through these next six hours, we will move her to this room. Until then, I must do what is best for my patient and keep a close eye on her. I'm truly sorry I was unable to provide you all with better news. Each hour, each minute, is a waiting game.” Dr. Malone's voice trailed off as my head dropped to the middle of my chest, scared and defeated.

I wanted to curl into a ball on the floor and cry, but PJ held me tighter as my quiet sobs became body shaking sobs. If my mom died, I'd have no one. No one at all. I couldn't lose my mom. This couldn't be our end. She and I had to go shopping for homecoming and prom dresses. She had to see me graduate high school. She had to be there to drop me off at college. She had to be there to help me pick out my wedding dress. She had to be there when I had my first child.

She had to be there.

She needed to be there.

I don't know how long I sat in PJ's lap while he held on to me like a baby. Rocking me back and forth telling me that everything was going to be okay. Whispering prayers in my ear, petitioning God and his mighty warring angels to heal my mom. Besides Uncle Atlas coming up here that one time to give Uncle Amell some information, I hadn't seen anyone else.

Now that, that hurt me even more.

They saw the news.

They knew what happened.

Their lack of presence spoke volumes. Here we were three days into being at this hospital, a whole seventy-two hours of wearing the same clothes. Where were they? You don't care for my mom, fine. But when it came to me, at least come to show some type of support that I desperately needed right now. This moment wasn't about them. I needed them to dead their pride and come for me.

"Walk with me." Uncle Amell stood in front of us with his hand out. Wiping my face clean with his shirt, PJ kissed my cheek before releasing me to my uncle. Hand in hand he and I walked down the hall to another sitting area. He guided me to a chair and pulled another to sit in front of me. "PJ and Capone are going to take you home to get a bag of clothes and some stuff for your mom. Get whatever you think that she would want and need. Massey." He commanded my full attention.

As much as I didn't want to go, I knew I had to. My chest hadn't stopped hurting since I heard my mom's screams over the phone. I needed to breathe fresh air. "Yes, sir." I rubbed my hands up and down my jeans. I felt like I was going to cry again, and I was tired of doing that.

“Eat, bathe, sleep, and come back when you’re ready. Don’t try to fight me and be hardheaded. You heard the doctor, your mom is alive, but she has a long way to recovery. It’s okay to sleep. It’s okay to not be here every day. I’m giving you the option to move how you want but if I see that you’re making yourself sick by being here twenty-four-seven, I will keep you away. You know I got you. I’m here for you. I love you, kid.” He stood holding his arms open. Like a little child, I ran into them and buried my face into his brick of a chest.

“What about you? Aren’t you going to go home too?” I’m sure he missed the twins and Aunty Krishna.

“Once you come back and we see if they move here to this room or not, that will determine when I go home.”

I’d forever be indebted to his selflessness. He sacrificed so much to be here with me, and I’d never take that for granted.

Walking back into the hall, I looked up to see PJ and his mother walking my way. It was crazy how my heart fluttered at the most inconvenient time. But him being here, being there to catch me, I loved me some Pacino Luciano Jr.

“Are you ready, sweetie?” Capone offered a warm smile that made me smile. Can’t remember the last time I did that... smile.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Taking my hand in his, PJ kissed my forehead before shaking hands with my uncle. As their driver drove to my house, I sat between PJ and his mom, both held one of my hands, and I wished that at this moment it was my aunts Keatyn and Krishna instead. I was closer to them but clearly that meant nothing. As much as I loved being cloaked in PJ’s

safety net, I wanted to be wrapped in the warmth of familiarity.

“Baby, let me see your house keys. We’re going to check the inside before y’all get out.” Regardless of his mother being an arm stretch away, PJ showed affection and I loved it. The same way he was soft and gentle with me alone, he was the same in front of others.

“Thank you,” I mumbled handing him my keys and giving the code to disarm the alarm. Watching him and the guard round the house, I sunk back in the seat and closed my eyes.

A soft hand squeezed mine. “Everything is going to be okay, Massey.” Everyone kept saying that and I wanted to believe it, but until my mom’s eyes opened, and she spoke one word to me, I wasn’t going to believe that. Instead of answering, I squeezed her hand back and gazed out the window.

It took PJ and the guard less than ten minutes to inspect the entire house. Once they finished, he came back and helped me out of the truck while the guard helped his mom. “I’ll wait here while you guys pack your stuff.” Capone stood in the middle of the living room.

I nodded my head and ran upstairs with PJ on my tail. The second I hit the top stair my lip trembled and my stomach caved in. Three days since she’s been in this house and her scent still lingered. “Breathe, Massey.” Wrapping an arm around my waist and the other around my chest, PJ pulled me back into his chest and kissed the back of my head.

It was such a weird relaxing feeling being in his arms during this tragic moment of my life. When I felt like I was breaking at my worst here he pops up and gives me a tad bit of his strength and I’m able to walk again.

“Go get your mom’s stuff and I’ll get started on yours.” Another squeeze of his limbs around me and we parted ways.

Stepping into my mom’s room I wasn’t as strong as I was seconds ago. Those tears and body shakes came back with a Thor hammer force. But I cried while packing her stuff. Taking out her favorite luggage set from Mia Ray, I packed her favorite loungewear, underwear, socks, soaps, and lip gloss. My mom would be pissed off if she woke with dry, crusty lips. Going through her closet, a place I often lived in because I had a habit of borrowing her clothes and shoes. One of the many perks of wearing the same size shoe, and clothes as your mother. Looking in the back of her closet I saw a black box peeking out under jackets she had tossed in a pile.

“Oouuu.” My eyes grew wide opening the box and seeing the crowns and jewelry. I mean the jewels sparkled and shimmered so damn bright that I had to blink to clear my vision. There were so many crowns and strings of pearls. All of it was so beautiful. Shrugging and not thinking anything of it, I placed it back where I found it and went back to packing. Looking under her bed for her slippers, I came across another box but this one was a forest green.

Sitting on the floor, I put the box between my legs and opened it. It was another crown sitting on a matching velvet pillow. Stitched on the pillow was my name with a crown. Like the crowns in the other box, the jewels sparkled. I know these were real diamonds and stones. I sat confused as to why she never gave it to me. My birthday was a week ago and this would’ve gone perfectly with the dress I wore at my party. Placing it back where it was, I made a mental note to ask her about it later.

Grabbing her favorite pillow and blanket, I stood in the doorway of her bedroom and looked around to see if I missed anything. I had her favorite books, chargers, and headphones. She may not be able to speak to me, but I hoped the doctors would allow me to play her favorite playlist that she listened to whenever she felt down.

“Hey, are you done?” PJ came up behind me and grabbed the bags out of my hands.

I bit the inside of my jaw nodding. “Yeah, I got everything.”

He placed my mom’s bags down by the stairs and walked to my room. On my bed was the matching Mia Ray luggage set to my mom’s that looked half packed. “I packed everything I thought you needed except delicates. I ain’t trying to see no skid marks or your little training bras.” His sense of humor was so needed.

Peeking in the bags he packed, I was surprised at how well he did and how well he knew me. He packed my favorite lounging clothes, books, iPad, chargers, my current favorite journal, and pictures of me and mom. “I packed those just in case you wanted to place them around her room at the hospital.”

OMG.

Could I get any more smitten with this guy?

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I rested my chin in the middle of his chest and thanked him. “You’re perfect, you know that?” His lips curved into that heart stopping smile I loved. His open-faced grill gleaming. His hands wrapped around me, pulling me deeper into his chest.

“I’m here for you, baby.” The vibrations of his deep voice caused my chest to tighten and my stomach to flutter. “Don’t ever feel like you can’t come to me about anything. I’ll always be here for you.” He placed soft kisses all over my face until finally taking me out of my misery and kissing my lips.

I swear kissing PJ always felt like a recharge of batteries.

“Thank you.” I rubbed my nose against his.

“I got you, Massey.”

“I know y’all are hungry, so I ordered some pizza and mozzarella sticks.” Capone came around the corner. I expected PJ to release me, but he kept his arms wrapped around me. “After we eat and you finish doing what you need to do, we’ll take you back up to the hospital.”

“Thank you so much, Mrs. Capone.” I really did appreciate her kindness. She’s always been kind, but this moment was different. The circumstances were different.

She smiled backing out the room. “I’ll be downstairs.”

“Go ahead and bathe. Brush your teeth for a few cycles. I think you burned my brows and beard off.” He joked, jumping out the way of my hits.

“Whatever. Get out.” I playfully rolled my eyes and headed to my ensuite bathroom after he closed the door.

Standing under the showerhead, I relaxed my shoulders and my mind, finally being able to breathe and cry the way I needed to. Cry for everything. Cry for my relationship that was more than likely over between Papa and I. Cry for placing Cashton in a position to choose to defend me against his father. Cry for the hurt and pain my mom was going through. Cry for feeling like the family I once knew as my own would no longer be.

I completed my tasks and brushed my teeth till my gums felt raw. PJ's comment lowkey was embarrassing but he kissed me so it couldn't have been that bad or he just liked me that much.

"Hello," I answered Uncle Amell's call. Once I saw how my family was moving, I made sure to give him a special ringtone instead of my normal because I wasn't answering for anyone but him.

"It's okay to cry, Massey. Be angry. Be sad. Do whatever you have to do to allow yourself to feel but don't lose faith. I love you, kid." He hung up, leaving me smiling with another batch of tears.

Uncle Amell was the best man in the entire world.

We spent another hour or so at my house, alone, eating and being entertained by PJ with his crazy self. I knew he was doing any and everything to keep me smiling and my mind off my mom. I appreciated it more than he'd ever know. Once we made it back to the hospital, many of the news trucks that had been sitting outside the hospital for days were gone. Uncle Amell gave the hospital strict instructions on who could visit the floor my mom was on. How he got that much pull, I'd never question it.

When we passed by the waiting room, I expected to see Uncle Amell, but he wasn't in there. We kept walking until we saw him standing in front of the room that was prepared for my mom. His clothes were changed, and he looked like he finally showered and ate. Standing next to him, I looked up in his face because I couldn't look straight ahead at my mom until he gave me the confirmation that she was okay.

Taking my hand in his, he looked down and kissed my forehead. "She's going to be okay."

My breathing became shaky as I prepared myself to finally look at her. “Oh my God.” My free hand went to my cover my mouth as I stared through the glass window. Laid on the hospital bed connected to endless number of wires was my mother with a partial shaved head. Her face was swollen and bruised. “She...she...” I couldn’t speak.

I don’t know what I expected when I finally saw my mom, but this wasn’t it. She looked...this wasn’t her. This wasn’t my mom who had the creamiest chocolate skin I’ve ever seen. This wasn’t my mom who had a head full of thick, wild coils. This wasn’t my mom who had a swollen face. This wasn’t her. This was just a shell of her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cassian

THE FIRST TIME I received the look of disappointment in the eyes of a loved one was when my mother still called herself being a mother to me and my brothers and married to my father. Back then I didn't know what to call her looks because I was so young, but I knew I didn't feel loved when she looked at me. Knew that I had to have done something to her. It took me a long time to realize her looks were of disappointment at having given birth to yet another version of her husband. The same husband that she loved based on the merits of his bank account's balance.

Three human reminders of how her life could've been better if she had married up and not settled for false promises.

The second time I received the look of disappointment in the eyes of a loved one came from Amell. People thought me calling him my father was a joke, but it was the God's honest truth about how high of a standard I respected him. The look started to grow after he came home from prison. A moment that was supposed to be a joyous reunion turned into him looking at me like *he* failed somewhere down the line with me.

The look continued to grow until he no longer cared who saw it. I disappointed my brother in the way I ran my household, the way I ran my marriage. The free passes I gave my wife.

The third time I received the look of disappointment in a loved one was staring me right back in the face. My kids. I swear becoming a father changed me. Gave me this new sense of pride and confidence because I created three hearts that beat for me. Then on top of that, I had a teenager that has been my heart and soul since she was in her mama's belly.

Being looked at as a disappointment in your kid's eyes, now that shit rocked the hell out of me. Them being disappointed in Noelani for standing them up or not spending time with them, I fed off that shit because I was looked at as the favorite parent.

Now the jokes were on me.

“Papa, why can't we come with you? I promise I'll be good.”

“We're sorry, Papa. We didn't mean to eat all the Oreo's.”

These two were determined to crush what little bit of pride I had left. Here they were thinking that me taking them to Atlas's house for a few days was because of something *they* did instead of the bullshit I had done.

Scooping Tai and Ameliana up in my arms, I kissed both on their cheeks until they soothed the pain in my chest with their little giggles. “Neither of you did anything wrong. Papa has to go to work and fix the mess I made, okay?” Looking at each other with bunched brows, they nodded. “I promise I'm coming back and when I do come back, we can do whatever you want.”

Ameliana's eyes widened, and smile stretched making me smile. "Can we go to Disney World to see Princess Tiana?"

Tai wasn't too far behind with her own excitement. "Oh, yes, Papa. We can wear our new dresses that we made and mommy's shoes. Oh, and our new wigs too. Go to work, Papa, and hurry and come back." Wiggling out of my arms, they hugged my legs before running off towards Keatyn who stood near the front door.

As they started rambling about all the things we were going to do at Disney to their aunt, I turned to my core, my only son. That little fucker had a mean swing. As much as I wanted to fuck his ass up for hitting me with a bat, I couldn't. It would go against everything I taught him since he was five years old. Cashton had done exactly what I taught him – protect his sisters, even if that meant protecting them from me.

Massey surprised the hell out of me when she started swinging after I said that foul shit about Coco. I blamed myself for it all. Instead of admitting my faults and taking the girl to see about her mother, I let my ego and pride step in because my selfish mind was telling me that she didn't need Coco. Noelani wasn't around and now Coco would permanently be out of the picture, leaving me to be the sole person my kids depended on.

Some heavy toxic shit that I regret.

"You need anything?" I looked Cashton in the eye, and it felt like I had a moment of Deja Vu.

His eyes, the hard set of his mouth, and his stance with his fist at his side. I saw the same rebellion. Witnessed the same bone-chilling persona make itself a home in a body that would forever go to war with anyone that hurt the people he loved.

“No.” His one-word response held so much weight that I don’t even think he understood what was happening to him.

“Cash.” I looked off trying to find the right words. “I’m sorry. I would never hurt Massey or you. I said some foul shit and did some even fouler things, but you have my word that I’m going to fix everything.” I never cared to explain myself, let alone apologize, but the way he looked at me, I felt like I had to, I needed to apologize.

He gave a single nod. “Okay.” Not another word was said as he walked back to Amell’s house. He refused to stay anywhere but there, and I could do nothing but allow it since I wasn’t going to be home.

“Give him some time, Cass. You know how he is about Massey.” Keatyn spoke behind me.

I couldn’t tear my eyes from Cashton walking down the street. Seeing his disappointment hurt more than the girls being upset. They were young and got over my absence with a promised trip to see Mickey Mouse and Princess Tiana. The same couldn’t be said for Cashton and damn sure not Massey. My two strongest heartbeats were the focus needed to fix the mess I made.

“Thank you for watching them. Call me for anything, Kea.”

“No problem.” Her hug gave me the comfort to relax my mind and shoulders just for a minute. Keatyn had always been a soft spot for all of us and the same remained today. Compared to all the darkness we had in our world; she was the light we needed to drag us out of the darkest tunnels.

I had one last place to go before I traded in my house shoes for my ‘fuck-shit-up’ boots and that was to the hospital.

Massey blocked me on everything. Had me out here feeling like those white parents who allowed their kids to get away with all types of disrespect but in this case, I deserved it and I'd let her get away with it...for now. She was hurting. The unknown of Coco living or dying was still lingering around her and I made it worse by telling her that I didn't care.

“You're pushing your luck and my patience, Noelani, and I don't think you wanna continue down this path because you will not win.” I hung up, tossing my phone in the passenger seat.

Never in my damn life have I left a voicemail, but Noelani's stupid ass had me doing things out of character. Chasing behind her, letting her get away with the foulest shit ever. My reasons for calling had nothing to do with us but with our kids. I choose to leave them with my family because I knew where my headspace was about to drift to – deadly territory.

I didn't want any dark spirits that I came in contact with to be around my children. I refused to come home with blood on me while also having Tai and Ameliana running around. I regretted nothing about kicking Noelani's trifling ass out of my house and off the compound. I regretted nothing about having the girls fuck up her shit.

Truthfully her ass deserved death and it was coming her way slowly but surely, but to *still* ignore and abandon our kids like they did something to her. The same damn kids that didn't ask to be here. That's where my problem laid when it came to her.

“You're bold for coming up here.” Amell didn't even look up from his phone when I walked into the private family waiting room. Another reason why I respected my brother was

his heart and love for family. He's been by Massey's side since that night. Sacrificing his family to be with her.

Massey looked up hearing him speak and her eyes turned to low slits, lips pinched in a frown and eyes red and puffy from crying. Next to her sat my little nigga, PJ. He tossed his head up nodding. For a young dude, I appreciated his loyalty to caring for my baby girl. I respected him even more waiting until her mother and I agreed that she could date at sixteen before he made his move.

Ignoring Amell, I spoke to Massey. "Step out and let me talk to you." This little big-headed girl had the nerve to roll her damn eyes and suck her teeth. Yeah, I might've done the unthinkable when it came to her mother but at the end of the day, she was my damn child and not the other way around. "Massey, get your ass up and step outside the room."

She opened her mouth probably to say some foul shit until Amell leaned forward and gave her a quick glare. Her ass got up quick and followed behind me. "Why are you here? Haven't you done enough?" I guess she felt like since Amell was behind the glass window and couldn't hear her that she could say anything.

I think the fuck not.

I was tired of these damn kids walking around thinking that they were adults who told me to jump when they said jump and paid my bills. Attitudes didn't mean shit to me. She blamed me and had every right to, but her mouth wasn't going to fly. Snatching her by the front of my shirt, I ignored her gasp of shock as I brought her close to my face. "Little girl, your ass ain't too damn big to get a fucking beat down and I will knock you out in the middle of this hospital my damn self." I gritted, nose flaring not at all fazed by her tight assed

little eyes. “Watch your damn mouth and if you say that I ain’t your damn daddy bullshit, I swear on your life, Massey, I will fuck you up. Do you understand me?” She tried to remain so hard, shaking and trying so hard not to let her tears fall.

Releasing her shirt, I pulled her into my chest and hugged her. “I’m sorry for everything, Massey. I never meant to hurt you.” Feeling the wetness from her tears and body shake as she sobbed in my chest, that shit had me struggling to breathe.

We stayed outside the room, me holding her while she cried. “I’m still mad at you. The things you said hurt my feelings.” She punched me in the arm. “You can’t beat me for that. It was well deserved.” The curve on her lips wasn’t a full smile but it was enough to ease the pain that had been growing since that night.

“I’ll let that one slide.” I glanced back in the waiting room. PJ and Amell were both watching us. “I know you don’t want to stay at the compound or be anywhere near me right now, so you can stay with Capone and Pacino.” Her ass smiled for real then. Snatching her ass up again by her shirt, I quickly wiped that smile off her face. “I’m only allowing you to stay with them because some shit is about to pop off and you being with them is unexpected. If your hot ass thinks you’re about to be dry hunching that Tarzan looking nigga in there I swear I will ship your ass to Africa so they can perform one of those burning rituals and you will have no more lady parts. Do you hear me?”

Trying hard not to laugh, she nodded. “Yes, crazy man.”

Kissing her forehead, I pulled her back into my chest and hugged her tight. “I love you, baby girl, and I promise with everything in me, Massey, and I’m so damn sorry.”

“I know.”

“Text me when you get settled.”

“I will.” Surprising me she kissed my cheek. “Be safe, Papa.” Hearing her call me Papa again, I needed to hear that.

She walked back in the waiting room and Amell walked out. I wasn't in the mood to deal with him. Wasn't sure who I was going to get when talking to him especially by the stoic hard look he gave me. Either he was about to start talking in parables or say some shit that would piss me off.

“Atlas showed me the traffic camera footage from the shooting. You aren't as slick as you think you are, Cassian.” He leaned against the doorframe, hands in the pockets of his sweats, and to the unknown eye he appeared to be calm. Only time I've seen Amell calm is when it came to his kids.

Scratching my nose, I nodded already turning to leave. “Thank you for looking after her.” I had nothing else to say because nothing else I said would matter. I know what I did and so does he.

“Be safe out there, Cassian.” He spoke to my back.

I shook off the chill trying to cover my arms as I walked to the elevator. Amell wasn't slick just like I knew I wasn't slick by thinking no one would find out what I did. Him telling me to be safe had an underlying meaning – watch my back from him.

CHAPTER NINE

A mell

THE TIDES HAD CHANGED, and nobody seemed to notice. Everyone was out here playing catch up to my already plans that had been set in motion before they errored on their part. An ignorant pre-celebration calmness covered the hearts of my loved ones knowing that I had finally emerged from the caves of my home to answer their spoiled cries for help. Seeing me as more than the father I'd been for seven months now was seen in their eyes as a beckon of hope and promise.

A much too heavy burden for one person to carry.

Staying away from my home especially my wife and children had been done on purpose. If I'd stayed on this compound and dealt with the same business as I've been handling, the blood pour on the city streets would be horrifying. Stepping away from the people who brought me much grief but the same amount of love, I had the time to properly plan.

Time to sit and think past my heavy weighted aggravation of emotions. Time to put together a team of people that were dark hearted in the same sense as me. Though I rarely left the

hospital, I was able to communicate with my team and dig deeper into what was going on around me.

As tragic as Courtney's accident was, it held nothing to the battles coming our way in the next few days or even weeks. I'm sure to my wife and other siblings, my actions were very relaxed compared to my previous years of raining down hail and brimstone. However, the tides had changed and the enemy I had to defeat was the ones that shared my blood.

Killing them would kill me and I couldn't do that.

My lax response to a lot of the bullshit happening or soon to happen, it would be purposeful on my part. Purposeful in the sense of I knew it would happen, didn't stop it from happening, but also made sure to be there to rescue said persons in need. It probably made no sense to a lot of people if I explained it and I guess the simplest terms would be – I'm tired.

Tired of fighting my brother's battles. Tired of taking on the burdens of others. Tired of having four A-Z plans when no one had a starter plan.

I'm tired.

So damn tired.

These were the times I was supposed to be spending with my children and using my finesse as a lover to convince my wife to have another. Instead, my days were spent the furthest from her so I could think straight. So, I could put things in motion for her and our children's future.

"I have one last question for you." I peered out over the hill of Chesapeake Hills, closing my eyes ever so often to listen to the low muddles of the lake. Indian Chief Chatterjee and I had met out here two hours ago. Walking the land,

talking about what type of money it would take for me to purchase it, and so forth. Most of the time spent, he and I said nothing but walked and breathed in nature.

Chuckling, he side-eyed me, turning back to the lake that started to awaken since we arrived before the sun. “Make sure whatever you ask is something that challenges me. So far you’ve done the opposite of what you usually do when we take these walks.” That was true.

Ever since that day he and his daughter Eta gifted me the land I built the compound on, he and I talked often. His knowledge and culture were a breath of fresh air compared to the life I lived. It wasn’t until I was released from prison did he and I start having these weekly wisdom walks. That’s what I called them. There wasn’t another Mitch in my life, so to have him around and hear his knowledge and wisdom, these walks were important for me, especially now.

Not to mention his family had welcomed me and my family with open arms. I never expected any type of reward for what I’d done to save his daughter. Not to mention they gave me my first goddaughter Amellika, who was now a young woman on her way to following in her grandfather’s footsteps in the family’s business.

“When it comes to Indian laws of the land, and being that I live on Indian soil if a heinous crime was committed on my land or any other land in the Indian reservation, will I have immunity for the crime? I know I’m not a blood Indian, but I want to know if the same clauses apply to me because of where I live.” I knew the answer before asking but I also knew that the head appointed Chief could change the laws and had the power to decide what was considered a crime or not.

A lot of people forgot or didn't know that I went to college and graduated from the University of Miami and obtained my law degree. I had esquire behind my name and had it for years. Being so heavy in the streets and doing the things I did and still do, Mitch always taught me to be smarter than my worst enemy and that enemy had always been the law. My brothers all went to school for different majors, but I made sure to teach them the same information I went to school for.

Releasing a long hum, he rested his old bones on the bench behind us. "No, you aren't Indian by blood, but you live on Indian soil, so therefore any crimes committed on our land is overseen by our government, not the Americans." He gave me a pensive stare before shaking his head with a small smirk. "Stay within our land, Amell. Whatever you do, stay within our land. Outside of that, I won't be able to help you and you already know those Americans are waiting for you to mess up again so they can toss you inside of a looney home."

Shit. How could I forget?

Still can't believe Krishna had me declared crazy.

Taking a seat and resting my arms on my knees, I brushed a hand over my face and sighed. "There are things that I have in place that will happen outside of your land but the things that I am physically involved in, I'll make sure to do them where I am protected."

What I did to avenge and protect JD, I'd do it all over in a heartbeat. I never regretted my decision. I'd always had a plan of getting out of prison, my wife just beat me to it. However, this go around, I had two little children I *needed* to see grow up. I had a wife I *needed* to continue making memories with. My planning went beyond getting a job done to eliminate threats. I had to think logically and realistically.

A welcoming silence drifted between us before he asked a question that I wasn't at all prepared to answer. "Is he still avoiding you?"

All I could do was shake my head. "He won't have much longer. His need to avoid me at all costs comes from shame and embarrassment. He's taking the blame for everything, and though a lot of it is on him, the rest of it falls on the others involved. Having your pride and ego bruised isn't a good feeling and he doesn't know how to deal with that. He thinks avoiding me is working in his favor when only it is making my anger towards him worse."

Cassian and I had entered a realm in our brotherhood that had one or two outcomes. Either we were going to fight it out as men and move on, or we were going to fight it out as men and desolate our relationship. There wasn't an in-between. Cassian went too far, and I wasn't about to sit around and turn a cheek to him and his wife's bullshit. Actions came with consequences regardless of if the action was good. He needed to face his and facing his consequences meant having to face me and that was the last thing he wanted to do, hence him hiding out from me.

"Whatever you do, whenever the time comes when you stand before him, don't soften the blow just because he's your brother. Often we become naïve and blinded by blood that we forget our greatest enemies will be those who are extensions of us." Chief Chatterjee was preaching to the choir.

I asked Atlas to bring Andrea and her family down here so I could protect them from the botched job he did with Jaali. I gave Landon my word that he'd have nothing to worry about. That he and his wife could sleep peacefully knowing that their battles had been fought. Andrea calling me a few days ago to

tell me that she and Landon were leaving and going to Naples because she didn't feel safe on my compound that had damn near a hundred men guarding it, spoke volumes.

Knife to the gut and having it twisted and turned, type of volumes. However, I had to respect her decision because she and I both knew things were about to get complicated. Courtney's accident and shooting, which wasn't shit compared to the storm about to sit over our homes. Just how Andrea's spirit was grieving death, imagine having vivid dreams of it. Imagine looking in your nieces' eyes and seeing the tears they'll shed and the hurt and pain they'll go through before it has even happened.

Things were in motion, and the wrath of what was about to set ablaze, I knew some of us wouldn't come out of it victorious, let alone alive.

Chief Chatterjee and I sat out by the lake for another hour or so talking and doing what we do best – escaping our problems. I never cared much for being driven around by the men I hired. That duty was given to them to drive the wives and children, but lately, I took advantage of the service. Sitting in the back of the truck, looking at the outside life passing by my heart grew heavy the closer we reached the compound.

Several conversations needed to be had and one of the main ones was the one I'd been avoiding out of fear. Wasn't much on this earth that placed fear in my heart. I feared leaving my children without a father and I feared the wrath of God would eventually rain down on me for my sins come judgment day. But now I had a new fear and that fear currently took up residence in my home.

I thought I'd be able to stay away for days at a time but that turned out to be false. It was nothing for me to go off the

gride back in the day to deal with whatever threats and problems we had going on. The same way I forced Massey to go home and take care of herself, I had to practice what I preached by going home to see my family.

Leaning against the kitchen wall, I stood there watching my heart in human form. Krishna sat between Omar and Issa's highchairs feeding them breakfast. Feeding them was always an Olympic sport. One wanted to play in their food and the other wanted to see how far they could throw it. I expected seven-month-old babies to still want to feed off her breast all day, not wanting oatmeal, but my babies were growing, and I loved to see it.

I waited patiently to see which of my children would feel my presence first. Sure enough, her hands stopped windmilling around and her lips parted showing her gums and residue of food. Turning her head slowly, Issa's baby doll brown eyes widened upon seeing me. It's like I could feel the race of her heart as she kicked her chubby little legs. My breathing always hiccupped looking into her eyes. She was so pure and innocent. So full of life and promise.

Many of my gifts handed down from God were a discerning spirit and the gift of foresight - a gift, and a curse. Looking into my children's eyes, there were days when I walked away from laying them down in their cribs with body aches and knots in my stomach because I saw a glimpse into the tribulations that they would experience.

They were my children. Seeds from my loins. Karmas that I wished would come to me for my actions and sins would be given to my children and that pained me greatly, especially knowing what my baby girl would endure as she got older.

Clapping her hands, she started yelling in her baby gibberish, alerting her brother of my presence. Like the cool little dude he was, Omari glanced at me with a mouth full of food and smirked. Yes, the little nigga smirked.

And last but not least, the one of who I had already peeped feeling my presence before them all, she sat rotating her shoulders and neck. A quick tremble in her hands as she fed Issa another spoonful of food. Krishna and I were mechanically inclined. Chemistry surpassing the furthest planet in the galaxy. Growing in agape love with her every day had been one of God's greatest blessings.

“Please do not come in here unless you want to finish.” Clearing her throat, she finally gazed at me over her shoulder, making the strings in my chest tighten as her eyes became brighter. “I missed you, King.” Bashfully, she blushed. Head dropping a little as her lashes kissed her cheeks.

That right there, I always wanted to make her feel that way. Make her feel like she was sixteen years old and seeing me for the first time. Make her feel like I desired her just as much as she desired me, but she and I both knew that was false. My bloodthirst for Krishna had no boundaries or limits. This woman awakened a warmth in my blood that quickened to a scorching blaze whenever she greeted me with a name that fit the superior mold I was as a man.

I loved the new color she rocked. Auburn curls right in time for summer and fall. She wore one of those long dashiki dresses she seemed to favor lately. Besides the time she wore that white bathing suit to the women's yacht party, she hadn't worn much that showed a lot of skin. Having twins stretched her body in ways I'm sure she wasn't prepared for, and I'd forever be indebted to her for the sacrifice. Along with

carrying a child, two at that, her belly was decorated with celebration strips of the lives that once lived in her womb. Her breast was full and stayed swollen with breast milk. Thighs had become thicker and juicier to my lustful liking.

And that ass...

Krishna was beautiful before but now that she added motherhood to her belt, she glowed. My adoration for my wife reached levels that only God himself could explain. The only thing I'd ever want to change is her view of herself. I wanted her to see herself as I saw her – flawlessly beautiful. But I understood her current state of mind.

Her body had changed.

“How are you feeling this morning, love?” I left right after I put the twins back to sleep after they awoke for their early morning feeding.

We have a deep freezer in the garage, and a mini fridge in the nursery and our bedroom stocked with breastmilk. It made the task of feeding them much easier. After changing their diapers, I feed them both while rocking them to sleep. Once they were milk drunk, I left out to meet with the Indian Chief. I tried to give Krishna as much room to herself as possible. Post-partum depression was real, and I never wanted her to feel like she couldn't talk to me or that she had the task of being a mother as her own.

We equally made those babies, and we were equally sharing the responsibility.

“Tired and sore. My boobs mostly. Your son here thinks that my nipples are teething rings.” She rolled her eyes, turning back to a smirking Omari like he knew what she was talking about. “Have a talk with him or I'm banning him for a

week.” She made silly faces, making them both laugh. “Are you heading up to talk to him?”

My smile slowly slipped from my face. “Yeah. Has he eaten anything?”

She shook her head. “No. I tried to bribe the kid, but he wasn’t budging. He did promise to come down and watch the new season of Stranger Things with me later. That’s progress.” A fair amount of progress since he was talking now.

“I’ll be right back.”

“When you come back down, can you look over the fitness contract for Soul Cycle? I want to start next week.” She blew me a kiss, making my cheeks warm.

“I got you mama.”

“Oh, JD said if you don’t call him back, he’s taking the first flight home.” She giggled. “I told him he doesn’t want them problems, but you know he’s grown and smelling himself.”

I had no reply for that. JD was going to make me cancel all his credit and debit cards. I told his ass to stay in California until I felt it was safe for him to be here. I already had enough people to worry about and I didn’t need to add him to it.

Since the big blow up between Cassian, Massey, and Cashton, their house hadn’t been in order. Massey was staying with Pacino and Cashton was staying with us. Tai and Ameliana were still at Atlas house, Noelani was wherever the hell she was and Cassian, I let that fool think that I didn’t know where to find him.

Knocking on his door, I opened it and wanted to backtrack. There in the corner of his room sat my nephew. When he came to stay with us, we told him he could bring whatever he

wanted from his house. He brought his clothes, a notebook, and his metal bat. There was a queen-sized bed with a dresser and nightstand. A beanbag chair in front of the tv with the latest gaming system collection thanks to Krishna.

In a room with furniture bigger than him, seeing him sit with his knees up to his chest, arms resting on his elbows, and the chain I gifted him years ago hanging from his fingers, his ominous aura made him look larger than all the furniture in the room. Medium in size for his age but hulking in his presence.

Cashton was only eleven years old, but his eyes were those of a man who had lived to see the darkest of nights. Kid looked like he's been in the chain gang serving time too. He needed a haircut and plenty of damn sun.

Closing the door behind me, I scratched my brow thinking of what angle I wanted to start. Out of all my nieces and nephews, Cashton was probably the only one I didn't have the strongest relationship with but the strongest connection to, if that made sense.

His dark eyes followed my every move. No frown. No glare. Just voided jaded brown eyes watching me pace until I settled in front of him. "Talk to me." I wasn't going to start out with small talk. He might be young, but the boy was far from stupid. Very wise and intelligent for his age.

Tilting his head, his eyes peered deep into mine, never blinking. I held his same stare, even though this tingling heat in my chest was becoming irritable. Looking into his eyes was almost like having a front row seat to me as a child. "What took you so long to come and talk to me? I know you're not disappointed in me. I know you're not angry. Are you...are you scared of me too?" Again, the kid wasn't dumb by a long shot. Hella smart and wise for his age.

Flicking my nose, I leaned back against the wall and chuckled. Troubling feelings of Deja Vue hit me hard in the chest, making my hands sweaty. "I am," I answered truthfully.

All the kids, teenagers mostly, were aware of my brother's and I childhood. The things I did and the things we all did collectively. They weren't shared to boast but shared to give them an insight into the family they had been born into. To understand us more. To value and respect the life they had been given. To not take for granted their blessings.

His eyes dropped to the chain in his hands. "Because I'm like you." His bold statement, not a question, but a bold statement, that shit knocked the fucking wind out of me, making me go into a coughing spell. Once I gathered myself, he continued. "I heard everything he said to Massey. Heard how hard she cried. Heard how sad and angry she felt." His jaw clenched; hands gripped the chain tighter. "Two days before that I heard my mother tell her friend Honey that I was her cash cow baby. That's why she named me Cashton. I was the golden ticket for her to secure a spot in the Kalmin family." When he looked up and his eyes locked with mine, I stopped breathing.

That fear I spoke of having with one other person outside of God and leaving my children with no father, I was looking at it or rather him.

Everyone loved to say that my little Ari was a mini version of me but that was the furthest thing from the truth. It was and will forever be Cashton. I saw it in his eyes the first time I met him when he was just five years old. Not even my son will be able to replicate me in the same token as my nephew will and that's part of the reason, I tried to *not* attach myself to him like I had my other nieces and nephews.

Ignorantly thinking that if I stayed away from him, that what I feared wouldn't come true. But it didn't matter if I stayed away from him or not. His story had already been written and I had to go through the fire first so he could walk.

He and I had the strongest connection because he was me. Cashton was too much like me that it scared me. Quiet, watching and learning, listening. Then to add in his characteristics. His eerie persona. His hard and dark eyes. So young to have them but his jagged edges were the same I had at his age. All Cassian and Noelani had done is give birth to another version of me. Noelani bragged about Ameliana being just like me because she shared a distinction of my name, nah.

That replica had been born and I was staring at him.

Sniffing, he stretched out his legs. "He left right after Ms. Courtney. If he didn't shoot her then I'm sure he knows who did. I don't regret defending my sister. I'll always protect Massey. I'll always protect my sisters from them."

Hmph...*them*.

It wasn't hard to see that Cashton felt abandoned by both of his parents. Cassian didn't pay him as much attention as he did the girls. And Noelani... "She doesn't love me as a mother should. Once they got married, once she became part of the family, she changed," Cashton spoke the rest of my thoughts. "I know I'm supposed to honor and obey my parents, but I can't do that anymore. You taught me that I am to give respect when it is given to me. I refuse to honor and obey people who use me as a pawn. I'll never forgive my father for what he did to my sister. I'll never respect him for the way he allowed my mother to treat us. What they are doing, my mother especially, goes against everything you taught me." His voice had started to deepen early last year, giving him a mix of a smokey rasp

and hoarseness. His voice caused my eyes to close because it was my teenage voice.

The same tone.

The same volume and authority.

The same menacing undertones.

The same vulnerability and pain.

Seeing the same form of abandonment happen that I felt as a young boy, abandonment from his mother and not respecting his father, it was like watching a film of my life. Cassian was so concerned with the betrayal Noelani had done, that he wasn't paying attention to the transformation of his son, and it was too late to change that.

“I won't tell you how to feel. I won't tell you to forgive. That decision will always be yours, but that lion you feel roaring in your chest, let it out cause if you keep trying to suppress it then yes, you will become just like me.” It's what led me to kill my father. It's what triggered me to fight men with my bare hands and beat them relentlessly until my knuckles touched bone.

He nodded; eyes transfixed on his hands. “Does it surprise you that I am like you?”

It didn't.

“No. I saw it in you the first time we meet you.” Tugging on my beard, I wondered if I had grown closer to him would he be the same way. “I thought staying away from you would magically take what was growing inside of you away.”

He looked up at me smirking. “Yeah, I kinda figured that. We don't spend as much time together like the others, but I feel closest to you. To be honest I always looked at you as my

father versus the one I have.” He shrugged. “I don’t think I have that discerning spirit you have but I always feel like I know what people are thinking and what their actions mean. Am I staying here with you?” Pleading eyes stared back at me.

Cashton was going to be a force when he got older. He indeed had my discerning spirit. Maybe even a touch of being an empath. I saw the way he gravitated to those who were feeling out of sorts without saying what was wrong with them. That combined with everything else about him...

He was going to be a thorough breed savage.

Already seeing it, my chest swelled with pride.

“Yes. You can stay however long you want.” I knew Cashton wasn’t going back home. The road to repair the relationship between him and Cassian was going to be a long one. “Are you opposed to boxing?”

His brows creased. “No. Why? Is that what you think is going to fix me?” His eyes narrowed, becoming challenging.

I swear this was the craziest shit ever to behold. “Aye, you might wanna chill out on puffing your chest out, Cashton. I’ll fuck you up and not care that I caved your chest in.” His ass had the nerve to smile like he wanted to challenge me. We had a long way to go. “Boxing won’t fix you. I’m not trying to fix you. That’s only something God can do. What I am offering is providing a safe outlet for you to release that pressure mounting on your chest. Don’t be like the uncontrollable me. Learn to tame that beast and I promise you’ll be the most dangerous man walking this earth. It isn’t how you slaughter that develops the savage in you. It’s how you channel your mind and self-control to be on the same playing field.”

“I’m down,” he shrugged. “Uncle Amell.”

I stood motioning him to stand. “What’s up.”

“Thank you for not giving up on me.” His confession unsettled me. He shouldn’t feel like I or anyone else would *ever* give up on him.

I hugged him. Hugged him tight. Feeling his body tremble a little made my eyes moist. I wanted to question when the last time was he’d been hugged but I couldn’t stomach the answer.

“I love you too much to give up on you, Kid, and I’ll never stop loving you. Now come downstairs and eat. Got my wife cooking for you and you’re not eating.” I needed to lighten the mood. I hadn’t smoked in years but after talking with him, I wanted to smoke the strongest grade of weed.

Being the patriarch was a hard job. I just hoped that my tactics to help him would save him from going down the dark road I had to go down.

CHAPTER TEN

Noelani

“WE HAD a deal and only one of us seems to be keeping their end of the bargain.” His lips brushed across my ear, fingers making small circles along my thigh. “I think it’s time for me to reach out to your husband and see if he can assist me since you seem to be incapable of managing it on your own.”

“Hmph.” I leaned into his lips. “We both know that if you so much as show your face to my husband or his brothers that you’re a dead man. Don’t get beside yourself, Lionel.” My heavy eye roll was warranted considering the circumstances.

Like the many before him and I’m sure those coming after him, he saw me being a woman as a weakness. Saw it as a pathetic tactic to use what I had been blessed with as my greatest weapon. Such a false narrative to think that I was only as great as the flesh cupped in between my thighs. My method of being busy had never been boosted by lying on my back. I simply knew how to run an organization with the best of them. I knew how to get the job done without causing careless wars and disturbing the peace of others who preferred to remain

silent partners. I know my shit because I was one of the best to do it.

Going into business with Lionel boiled down to me wanting to expand the cartel's territory. Mitch, Amell, and whomever else had a problem with separating Lionel's personal life from his business aspects. I cared nothing about the activities he partook in after dark. That wasn't my business, nor would it ever be. I wanted to do what the men before me were too afraid to do. I wanted to sit at the tables that were frowned upon. I wanted to become the first female in charge to reign over the entire south, not just the west coast. I wanted to have my name on everything over the map and I was doing just that.

Did my actions jeopardize my marriage and place my family in danger? No, not really, at least not the dangerous parts. Lionel knew that I had an army of men behind me that would slaughter his entire bloodline if he crossed me. Amell, Atlas, Pacino, and Cassian might not like the way I've been moving, but when it boiled down to it, they'd protect me. Cassian kicking me out of the house and damaging my things was just him being in his feelings and showing once again why my heart had always favored the wrong brother.

And as far as my marriage, well my sacrifices would pay off for our kids and the generations to come.

"I need access to the ports, Noelani. My guys were able to ship a large shipment of inventory for me and I need you to keep your word." Lionel's green and brown eyes raked up my body, hands still exploring places he had no business touching.

Before I even agreed to let him have access to the ports, I needed to clear it with Amell and Cassian first but that was out of the question. "Sure. Let Sixx know when you need it, and

we'll pull security back. Is there anything else that you want before I go?"

Gripping me by the chin, Lionel licked my cheek making me smile. That right there, his nasty dominance and bullshit attitude, that's what I missed in my marriage. Cassian became a father and stopped being the ruthless killer I knew him to be. It was the same with his brother's too. The minute their children were birthed, the menacing killers in them died, deading all my fantasies too. It's like after I showed my hand and told Cassian about my deception, he became soft. More concerned with kissing my ass and I didn't like that at all.

I went from having an asshole of a husband in Dominique to a man out of control in his feelings. There was never an in-between. I had more fun chasing the reckless Cassian than trying to break him, so he'd be more logical. It backfired on me greatly. When Amell got locked up, I damn sure thought that he was going to step up and be the king I longed for.

Sike on me once again.

"You made a promise to me, Noelani, and I haven't seen you acting on it. Why do you make me question your motives?" Gripping my neck with enough force to cut off my airways, he bit my bottom lip until I gave him my moans.

Was I playing a dangerous game by getting entangled with Lionel?

Yes, and I'd do it again because, unlike the man I married, at least with him I know that I'd have the success of the future I lusted for.

Out the corner of my eye, I watched Sixx get out the car and reach for the door of Lionel's truck. "Until his heart stops beating, we have nothing to discuss. You want something big

from me and I want something bigger from you. Deliver and we'll merge. Until then," I pecked his lips, heart fluttering when he growled. "There is nothing you can do for me. Tootles."

I exited the truck just in time. Honey was calling to fill me in on the incoming shipment we had with the new weapons Amell ordered. Again, he was another that kinda faded my fantasy just a little. Putting family over the business, I wasn't a fan at all.

Honey and I had become good friends over the years. She was a young bright girl who wanted to secure her future just as much as I did. Not only that, but she also wasn't fake like those I once had to live on the compound with. I wouldn't miss the tooted-up noses from Krishna and Keatyn by a long shot.

They were jealous of me and all that I had accomplished. Jealous that I didn't allow a man to dictate my future. Keatyn was by far the most successful with her clinic and brand as a holistic nurse practitioner. Yet, she traded that in to run a clinic in the ghetto alongside her husband. Krishna wasn't shit other than a stay-at-home wife who enjoyed being pregnant entirely too much. Just like Keatyn, Krishna had become one of the most sought-after educators in California. Yet, she traded in her knowledge for shortcomings of being her husband's doormat.

They were the smartest but dumbest bunch of women, and I didn't care that I wasn't associated with them in any form. Sometimes I didn't even want my kids to play with theirs because I didn't want the dumbness they had to rub off. It was bad enough I had a lazy ass husband.

“Aunty, what are you doing here?” In a towel with her skin glistening from water, Kassidy looked up and down the hall of her floor before stepping aside to let me in.

Walking inside I became speechless taking in her high-rise luxury condo. I knew Cassian made sure that she wanted for nothing, but this was exquisite. Chef-styled kitchen, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Biscayne Bay. Even her furniture pieces looked like they cost more than the shoes on my feet. Following behind her to her bedroom, my mouth dropped again. It was the life of luxury for me. Spa-inspired bathroom with an oversized walk-in closet, and a California King sley bed that looked like it was made from the clouds.

Afraid to dirty her white bedding with my outside clothes on, I sat on her chaise lounge as she dropped her towel and started lotioning her body. I had no shame ogling her. The last time I really paid attention to Kassidy she was a teenager in her weakened little teenager body, but this grown ass naked woman in front of me was not what I expected my niece to look like. Her body was sickening in a good way. A hell of a good way.

“I, uh, I was wondering if you’d mind if I stayed with you for two nights.” She paused, glancing over at me with raised brows. “Cassian and I are separated and I’m tired of sleeping in hotels. The apartment I’m renting won’t be available until this weekend.”

“Wow. Are you okay?”

“Not really but I will be.” To get him back for kicking me out and ruining my things, I went to the most expensive hotel in Miami.

I booked a week stay but got the surprise of a lifetime when on the second night I was being called down to the front

desk because my card on file had been reported stolen. Like the little bitch he is, Cassian canceled all my credit cards and took me off our joint accounts. People always like to say *hell hath no fury like a woman scorned* but I beg to differ.

Hell hath no fury like a man in his feelings.

After marrying Dominique, I learned never to put all my eggs into one basket and that included my finances. I wasn't out here slaving every day for him to feel like he could freeze my accounts whenever he could. Cassian knew about the accounts I only wanted him to. I've never been that stupid to depend solely on him. I would always be good with or without him.

Sparkling objects on Kassidy's dresser grabbed my attention. Looking over her shrine of jewelry I had to really look at my niece. She clearly wasn't hurting at all. Doing a whole lot better than I thought. Our relationship wasn't the strongest and I take full responsibility. Part of me didn't know how to move knowing that Mason died at the hands of my husband. Part of me was so caught up and focused on the business that I figured she'd understand and clearly, she did.

Kassidy was on her boss bitch status. Looking like the finest money. Living a life of luxury and on her independent status.

"What's up with all the crowns and pearls?" From the weight of one of the crowns in my hand, I knew the diamonds were real. "All this jewelry and is that the new fall Birkin Bag?" Again, my mouth hit the floor.

What type of lifestyle was my niece living?

Putting on a sexy lingerie set, she giggled before going into her walk-in closet. "Really, Aunty? Yes, those diamonds

are real. It was given to me by one of my sorority sisters along with the pearls.”

That was news to my ears. “Wow. I didn’t know you crossed the burning sands.” Sadness settled in my stomach, making me sit back down and really take another look at her.

She was thriving and I wasn’t a part of her life because of my own selfish choices. About to graduate as an RN and having a life that didn’t involve me. I respected the fact that she didn’t allow her past to define her. Both parents and her brother were murdered, that was a hard pill to swallow. I can’t imagine what her darkest days looked like.

“And the purse is from my little boy toy.” She poked her head out of her closet winking. “You can stay as long as you like. The guest bedroom is already made up, but you’ll have to entertain yourself tonight because I have a date.” She came out of the closet taking my breath away.

A champagne silk spaghetti strapped dress that stopped right in the middle of her thighs clung to her lavish curves. Those perm rods she sported moments ago were out and her hair flowed down her back in curly waves. Tasteful jewelry and no makeup, smelling like the exotic flower she was.

Kassidy was absolutely beautiful, and I felt proud that she was my mini-me.

“Kassidy.”

She sat down at her vanity putting on two coats of YSL Peach Passion lipstick. “Yes, ma’am.”

I walked over and stood behind her. “I’m sorry for not being present in your life. You’ve been through so much and I’m so damn proud of the woman you’ve become.”

Standing, she turned towards me and took my hands in hers. “Aunty, everything is okay. You don’t have to apologize. If anything, thank you for showing me how to be strong amid adversity. Teaching me how to go after everything I want and not settle for less.” She hugged me and for the first time in a long time, I felt the need to cry.

I can’t remember the last time someone hugged me just because. I found such peace and a moment of relief of being wrapped in her arms that I laid my head on her shoulder and closed my eyes. Exhaling long and hard with tears in my eyes, feeling so vulnerable but loved at the same time. That was something I missed and longed for.

“I do have a favor to ask though.” She stepped back blinding me with her perfect smile and pearly white teeth.

“Anything for you.” I didn’t want to let her hands go. I wanted to stay in this moment and feed off her tranquil vibes.

“My sororities sisters and I are hosting a small girls’ house party.” She leaned in whispering in my ear, “A few male dancers and kinky stuff.” We giggled. “Can I use Cassian’s Palm Garden’s estate for the event? I’ll pay whatever is needed.”

“Girl, please.” I waved her off. “You don’t have to pay a damn thing. I’ll have the keys for you by tomorrow. That’s no problem at all.”

“Yayy. Thank you, Aunty.” She hugged me again and I swear I felt an unexplainable amount of joy and guilt at the same time.

Joyful that she was happy and guilty because of her happiness, I hadn’t been a part of it.

Her phone rang, breaking our moment. “That’s my driver. See, you should be proud. I already know I’m going to be drinking and I’m not driving. If you need anything call me. Good night.” She kissed my cheek and left me standing in the middle of her bedroom high off her peaceful energy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Atlas

“RISE AND SHINE, SUNSHINE,” I smirked tossing a banana at Dre, backing out of his driveway.

He held just as much responsibility for Jaali being here as I did, and since that was the case, he was going to accompany me along the journey of doing what I should’ve done from the beginning – handle it.

Groaning, Dre waved me off. “Where is it that were going that couldn’t wait until the sun rose? It’s four o’clock in the damn morning, Atlas, or did you not check the time?” Reclining all the way back, he folded his arms across his chest closing his eyes.

“I’ll let you sleep off that attitude. We’re going to Muck City, and that’s about an hour or so drive from here. Get your beauty sleep while you can.”

“Whatever, man.”

The last few days I spent regrouping my team that once worked alongside me when I was heavy in the organization. Surprisingly, all of them were pumped and ready to get their

hands dirty. I don't think nobody was more excited than me, though. There was so much on the line, and I needed to rectify my errors.

True to Amell's words, Jaali and his family were living the life out on the beach. Personally, I've been scoping out his every move. Watching and taking notes of who he was in business with, his connections and so forth. I got the surprise of a lifetime when he met up with Lionel Ortega. That shit was disastrous. I knew the perverted stuff Lionel was into.

On top of fixing my errors, I had a one-track mind of making sure that my unborn child was welcomed into a world of peace and not chaos. Keatyn had her days. Days when she made it crystal clear that she hated that I was back doing what I truly loved. Days when she was supportive as she knew how to be. Nevertheless, I loved her the same because at the end of the day, she kissed me like I was her heart's greatest desire and told me she loved me and prayed for me every chance she got.

My love for Keatyn never waned but strengthened especially amid all the bullshit going on. As a man being able to go out and fight to protect my family, that gave me a next level sense of pride.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty. It's time to get to work." It took me less time than normal to get to Muck City since the city hadn't even begun to awaken yet.

Leaving Dre to get himself together, I stood in front of my pride and joy. My first greenhouse. My first warehouse. All gifted by Amell when I graduated high school. This is where I concocted most of my vitamins and supplements.

"What type of factory is this?" Dre looked around the large building, seeing the open fields of my herbs and plants. "Is this all yours?"

“Yes. Yes, it is. This is my bread and butter. My baby. The inside is just as beautiful.” Stepping inside my warehouse my chest swelled with pride.

Richie, my leading chemist from back when he was in college, stood with his white coat, Harry Potter glasses, and gapped smile. Beside him sat my team dressed in black looking ready to work. Yeah, today was going to be a good day.

“Boss man, it’s been a long time.” Amp, one of my right hands, pulled me in for a brotherly hug. That pride that swelled my chest, it almost choked me up for a minute. They all answered my call for help. All dropped whatever they had going on to help me. I’d forever be grateful.

“I’m glad that I’m not the only one moving slow with old age.” I joked, slapping hands with the other men. “This is Dre, and Dre is going to be a big helping hand. Dre, meet my team.”

While he and the other guys introduced themselves, I went over to Brian, my lead tech guy. Like I asked, he had twelve monitors displaying Jaali Kamau’s every move. With the help of his housekeeping service, I had surveillance cameras all over his house, wired his phones, and even had two of his security details under my guide. Amell asked me to take care of him and seeing that I failed the first time, this go around was personal.

“What the hell is all of this?” Dre stood next to me taking in the view.

“Brian, give me a live feed of our guest, please.” I already knew Dre was going to bitch once he saw Dafina.

“What the fuck, Atlas?” He stepped us close to the monitor seeing her walk along the beach in a bathing suit, clear as day pregnant. Not too far behind her was Jaali and his men.

“I hope you’ve come to terms that I will not spare her life, Dre.” I stepped in his space because I needed him to see the truth in my eyes. “What happened in New York, him still being alive, that should’ve never have happened. My focus has never been off. I never slacked on a job, ever. This started because of you and now I’m going to finish it and you’re going to help because we’re best friends, Dre. The best motherfuckin friends. I’m going to give you a few seconds to digest the harsh truth that you’ll never see your child being born.”

Hanging his head, Dre looked stressed. “Atlas, come on, man. The baby is innocent.”

“Let me ask you a question. Once she gives birth and he sees that her baby is not his, do you think he’ll let it live? Regardless of how close of a resemblance y’all share, a man can feel if that child is his or not. He might even do a DNA test. That man will never show that baby mercy let alone her.” Killing children wasn’t my forte but in this case, I’d just have to pray and fast for months to come because I swore to myself that not a single person connected to Jaali would be alive once we were done.

“Well, Atlas, let ask you a question.” Dre stood with his hands on his waist like he was about to chastise me.

“I wanna hear this shit.” Amp smirked.

“Let me take out my phone to record because I have a feeling he’s about to say some off the wall shit.” Richie pulled out his phone and started recording.

We all stood there quiet waiting for Dre to ask his question. “Since the baby is innocent and you have more than enough space, why don’t you move her on the compound to keep an eye on her until she gives birth?”

Was this nigga serious?

“Oh shit. This boy done lost his damn mind.” Amp shook his head. “You got some big balls to ask that.”

This biggest balls in the world.

“Aye, Boss. I created a new pill. Can we try it out on Dre to see if it works?” Richie stopped recording and walked away. “I’m not going to be a witness to your downfall, Newbie.” He yelled over his shoulder, making everyone but me laugh.

Dre must’ve felt the death in my glare. “Wouldn’t you want to save your unborn child?” He had the nerve to ask me.

I had to scratch my head and stretch my neck before I opened my mouth. I felt like Dre tried the hell out of me. “You’re new to my world so I’m going to let that shit slide, but hear me good, Dre.” I stepped close until we were a breath away. “If you go behind my back and try to save her. If you reach out to her and give her a good Samaritan warning. If you so much as try to sabotage what I have going on, I promise that you will regret the day you ever crossed me. Take my words however you will.”

I’ll admit, he had a lot of heart especially to be thrown into the predicament he was in. I wouldn’t even say his question wasn’t warranted. He was new to this world of ours. This was deeper than counseling JD and Amell a handful of hours a week. This was seeing the vile life we lived. Getting an up close and personal look into what made our hearts cold and

black. If I was in his shoes I'd ask the same question, but I wasn't.

Exhaling, he nodded. "I get it, Atlas. I really do but you can't fault me for asking." And I didn't. I would never fault a man for *trying* to save those he loved. "So, what are we about to do? Are you going to show me how to make bombs or something?"

This fool.

"No, Dre. I'm going to show you how to skin a rabbit."

His head reared back, face frowning. Amp and all the rest of the guys started laughing. "Why in the hell do I need to know how to skin a rabbit?"

Amp clapped Dre on the shoulder. "If you can skin a rabbit, you can skin a body. Welcome to Muck City."

Like I said, today was going to be a good day.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Dafina

I LOVED SOUTH FLORIDA. I loved everything about it. The warm weather and different cultured foods. Loved the shopping centers and tropical paradise vibe. When Jaali surprised me with the trip I wasn't quite sure what to expect. He'd been distant a lot lately. Distant but also attentive if that made sense. He was attentive only for the simple fact that I was pregnant, and his heir would finally have a place on the Kamau throne.

For the past two weeks now, I woke up to the crispy sun beaming down on me. Spending most of my day walking along the private beach behind the beach house we were renting. I felt so content feeling the sand between my toes and getting a tan.

"Mrs. Kamau, your lunch is ready." Lora, our head housekeeper, called from the patio.

Every day I had a different type of cuisine. Our chef had the hands of an angel. He cooked me something new and different every day for all three meals. Caribbean, Indian, Russian. You name it and he cooked it for me.

“I’m coming, Lora. Thank you.”

Another plus was the staff’s attitude. They weren’t so stuck up and snotty like Jaali’s servants at his family’s estate in New York. The staff here were kind and welcoming. Always asking if I needed anything, making me feel like I belonged, and they were so helpful when I went shopping for the baby.

Before I headed back to the house, I called the same three phone numbers that I’ve been calling for almost a month. The first number I was sent to voicemail. The second number rang once and then sent me to voicemail. The third number my call dropped completely. Andre Joseph had completely lost his damn mind. Him and his sister. Ignoring my calls because he was in his feelings is one thing, but to block me on his personal, work, and bookstore phone.

I hated a nigga in their feelings.

“You know, Dre. I’m growing really tired of these games that you’re playing.” I gritted walking back towards the house. “These little games you’re playing are nothing compared to how nasty I can get like naming *our* daughter Jaaliyah after my husband instead of something you like since you want to act like a whole bitch. Yes, I’m having a girl, motherfucker. Call me back before I show my entire black ass.” I hung up feeling so much better because I knew that I’d get the reaction I wanted once he listened to his voicemail. Better yet once somebody at his comic bookstore listened. Yeah, I stooped that low, but I didn’t care.

You don’t get to impregnate me and then think you can go on about your life like me and your baby don’t exist. No. Not on my watch.

Walking through the double wide glass doors, Jaali and his tailor were still in the living room going over merchandise she

purchased for him at his request. All the items were beautiful and equally expensive. Handbags from foreign designers I had never heard of. The sexiest heels and sandals. Lingerie and perfume. Everything a woman would die for.

Picking up a dark magenta robe with matching lingerie, I rubbed the fabric between my fingers, sighing at the feel. This man was so amazing. Already thinking of the things he knew I'd want to wear after I had the baby. Not my style, considering the length of some of the outfits, but if my husband wanted to see me in them, then who was I to decline their man having a whole new wardrobe created for them.

“Oooh.” I let out a little yelp feeling the fabric being snatched out of my hand. Seeing Jaali standing there frowning, I explained myself. “It’s beautiful, Jaali, and feels good.” I hoped my wide smile would relax the crease lines in his forehead, but they only made them crease deeper.

“I know.” He dismissed me and turned back to his tailor.

He and his mood swings were so confusing, and I didn't feel like being around him, so I left him downstairs and went to shower the days sun off me. While the water heated to my liking, I stood in front of the floor length mirror naked. So far, I was all belly. My breasts had tripled in size, but other than that I was carrying my pregnancy well and couldn't wait to meet my bundle of joy.

Smiling and rubbing my belly, I grabbed my phone and took lots of pictures in different poses. Some, innocent and just showing my belly. Others were provocative and showing all of me. The parts of me that I knew *he* loved. Once I sent them all to Dre's email, I got in the shower and relaxed. No one needed to tell me what I was doing was wrong but Dre and

Jaali pissed me off to no return. Both thinking that it was okay to play with my emotions and that I'd be okay with it.

Hell no.

After all the years I sacrificed to be with Dre, he thinks that he can just say what he wants to me and break up with me because he got a taste of new pussy. Treating me like I'm nothing and less than worthy of tying his shoes. Hell no. That's not how this works. Since he wanted to hurt me and wanted to ride on his high horse, I was going to make him suffer until he came to his senses and came crawling and begging on his knees like I knew he would.

Then my dear husband, oh that motherfucker really had me fucked up.

I never suspected Jaali of being the committed and devoted husband he portrayed himself to be in front of the people of Kenya. I knew that to be a lie dating back to when we were dating in high school. However, what I did expect is for him to be careful and more secretive about his extra affairs outside of our marriage. Two weeks before I told him I was pregnant I caught him having sex with one of his newly hired lawyers.

In our home.

In his office.

So, since he felt that bold to fuck her in our house so I could hear, I was going to also make him suffer and make a fool out of him in the same breath.

With Dre, I planned on sending him a very graphic video of me propped up on an examination table legs wide open as the doctor vacuumed his baby out of me. But then Jaali showed his ass, literally, and I became even more vengeful.

Like my other pregnancies, I couldn't stand the smell of bananas. So, one morning at breakfast, I had one of the kitchen staff cut me up some fruit with extra bananas. As soon as she placed the bowl in front of me, I became nauseous and ran to the bathroom. Jaali came in questioning if I was okay and I smiled with puke still on my tongue, telling him that he was about to become a father.

Yes, a father to another man's baby.

I wasn't even sure if I was having a girl. I lied about that too.

It was true, Dre and Jaali favored dangerously close, but I knew if my husband didn't feel a connection with the baby or his over spiritual mother had one of her visions about the baby not being his, then I didn't know what I was going to do. Hopefully by then, I had a better plan in place to run away or run to Dre.

By then I'd have his baby and he wouldn't dare turn me away as the mother of his child. Who knows which angle I'd take? I still had time to put a foolproof plan in place. I just know that both men were going to direly regret the day they ever crossed me.

Stepping out of the shower, I grabbed my towel and walked into our bedroom, stopping seeing Jaali standing at the foot of our bed with my favorite body oil in his hands. This was Jaali being attentive. Anything that had to do with the baby he was present for.

"Come, lay down so I can rub this oil on you." His husky voice awakened my lady parts. It wasn't hard to do these days. Anything sent her off the rocket. Jaali swore he wasn't sleeping around anymore but I didn't trust his ass to have sex with him, so I settled for oral sex.

Doing as he ordered, I dropped my towel, put an extra sway in my hips and cat walked to our bed. Forever the seducer, I made sure to crawl on the bed, dip my back as much as my belly allowed. Once I heard his animalist growl, I turned around and laid on my back, spreading my legs from east to west. No matter where we were during our marriage, angry and not talking, talking but stubborn, our sexual chemistry never suffered.

He was too savage for me to deny my body the pleasures I knew he'd give me. Yes, I've been punishing him by withholding my dripping nectar, but that was his fault. He could taste me and lick me until his heart became content, but he wasn't penetrating me until I felt like he suffered long enough, and right now wasn't it.

"I love seeing you carrying my child." His locs were hanging free around his chocolate face. Eyes were dark and glowed with a savage inner fire. Dressed in a pair of khaki slacks and a white polo, he was both comfy and hard. The weight of his muscle looked painful trying to break free from his pants.

Knowing how heavy he was. How girthy he was. How it felt when he circled his hips and dug deeper into me, the memories had me moaning and biting my lip. "I love carrying your baby." Truly, I did like being pregnant.

I felt powerful and my most beautiful regardless of who the father of my child was.

Running a finger down my stomach to my freshly waxed peach, he leaned down, hovering and making me squirm feeling the coolness of his breath blow on my swollen bud. "Can I kiss you here?"

Shit. He could kiss me anywhere he wanted to if he kissed it. “Yesss. Kiss me.” I wanted more of him. I wanted to feel his depth, but I also had to stick to my guns, but denying Jaali was like denying a newborn of milk. They needed it to survive, and I needed that part of Jaali to remain sane. “Ohhh, Jaali.” His lips felt so damn good, and I wanted more. “Please don’t stop...” My eyes were crossed, and toes curled feeling his lips suction against my pearl. “Jaali, noooo.” I pouted when he removed his lips to answer whoever thought it was okay to knock on the door.

Chuckling, he gave my pearl one last kiss before leaving me. “Stay right there.” He opened the door, sticking his head out. I’m not sure what was said. Didn’t care. I was ready to wet these sheets, eat, and take a nice long nap. Closing the door, he turned back to me with solemn eyes. “Love, I’m sorry but I have to go downstairs. My suit has arrived, and I need to get fitted.”

What suit?

Propping myself up on my elbows, I looked at him like he lost his damn mind. Never has he ever left me unsatisfied to manage something not important. And even if it was, we rushed our lovemaking until the other was pleased.

“What do you need a suit for?” I asked already feeling my attitude reaching level *go off*.

He walked into the bathroom to wash his hands and brush his teeth. Wow. That was surprising. Once upon a time, he’d never wash me off his lips. He’d love for people to smell me on him. It turned me on to see him beat his chest with my fragrance on his lips. “I’ve been invited to one of the city’s charitable gala’s this weekend.”

This was news to me. I didn't even know he had political connections in the city. "I want to go." A loved the beach house but I loved getting dressed up more. There were probably going to be skanky women waiting to claw their way into his space and I wanted to rub my pregnant belly in their face.

Walking back in the room wiping his hands off on a towel, he glared down at me. "No."

Wow.

A quick and simple no.

"Seriously, Dre...Jaali." Damn, I hope he didn't catch that. "I want to go and you're going to take me. Isn't that what all the clothes you were picking out downstairs are for? For me to wear for you?" I rolled my fat ass over and got up, walking to my closet to put on my robe.

"Do not ask questions that will cause you to get upset and stress my child." His tone sounded so detached.

Walking back out, I moved quickly to block him from leaving. "Are you cheating again?" Just as he glared down at me with his locs now pulled back from his handsome face, I glared back at him.

"Considering everything you have done." He shook his head chuckling. "I would say I'm entitled to."

Was he serious right now?

Blinking, I scratched my nose and replayed his words to make sure I heard him right. "Entitled to? Really, Jaali? You think you're entitled to cheat on me?" Now that, that burned. Burned worse than the nightly heartburn I had. "Who is the bitch that has you smelling yourself?"

Leaning down until our eyes were leveled, he gritted, “Someone who knows how to honor the sacredness of a marriage.”

Was this negro serious?

He went into our marriage being unfaithful.

“But you’ve never honored the sacredness of our marriage.” I needed him to break this down for me because I wasn’t understanding where this new Jaali-the-devoted-and-committed-husband came from.

He stood up, placing his hands in his pockets. I hated how in the moments when I was supposed to be so irate with him, his smug was so damn sexy to me. “That is true, and it’s true because you aren’t worth the honor.”

I gasped so loud and hard, that I frightened myself.

Oh, but he wasn’t done. He continued to stick the knife he stabbed in my chest deeper and deeper. “All these years you thought you were the one in control but that was never the case.” He smirked, licking his lips slowly. “You’re serving your purpose as my wife because I decided that to fulfill my duty to our country. In return, I provide a lifestyle that keeps you envious amongst your peers.”

I couldn’t believe he was saying such mean things to me. Closing my eyes to give my tears the freedom to fall, I cupped my belly. “But we’re having a baby. Doesn’t that mean something?” It had to mean something.

It had to mean that I was more to him than a needed body of help for political gain.

“Yes, it means that you’re doing what is required of you. Being my wife and the mother to my children. My affairs outside of that are my business. Again...” He leaned down to

kiss my forehead, making me cry harder. “Don’t stress and get upset when I am not with you, Dafina. What I do when we are not together, that is my business. When I am with you, that is the only thing you need to focus on.”

How could he go from wanting to ravish my body to being this cold and ugly emotionless rock of a stranger?

“You almost killed my sister because you thought I was with another man,” I screamed, hissing as I felt a tightness in my lower abdomen.

Seeing me rubbing the spot that hurt, he replaced my hands with his. Kissing along my cheek and neck until I calmed down. His touch always had that effect on me – calm me down even when he was the one who caused my anxiousness.

“Our baby doesn’t like when you’re upset.” He whispered in my ear. “If you ever try me again by calling me another man’s name or seeing him again, I will kill you and have my lover raise our child as her own. Everyone in our country will fall in love with her because she selflessly stepped in and helped raise *my* baby while I was grieving the tragic death of my wife.” My sobs were uncontrollable at this point. “Learn to move smarter but until then, stay in your lane as a mother and a wife.” He kissed my cheek before gently moving me out the way and leaving.

I slide down the door feeling all types of emotions. Rage, betrayal, confusion, and heartbreak. Jaali wanted to play a game that not even he knew how to move the pieces on this chessboard. I’ll admit, he caught me off guard with this one, but I can guarantee I’d never allow him or any other man to put me in this place of sorrow ever again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

D^{re}

DARK CLOUDS and heavy drums of thunder covered all of South Florida for the last three days. Last night the rain finally dropped, and it hadn't stopped since. Everyone thought nothing of it, thinking it was regular summertime weather for the sunshine state, especially with hurricane season in full swing, but I knew better. Even Drea knew better which is why she and Landon hightailed it out of here yesterday morning.

She kept saying that her spirit wasn't at peace, and she refused to give birth in a perilous environment. With the army of men guarding the compound, I knew that wasn't the danger she spoke of. It was the danger that lay within the hearts of these people living on the compound.

Days have gone by, and I haven't been able to see Coco. The only updates I received on her condition were those that came from Amell. I was tired of being a sitting log. Tired of having to go through other people to find out what is going on.

What enemies did Coco have?

Who would intentionally hurt her?

I had questions but nobody to ask them to.

Since the rain started to pour, I hadn't been able to shake my restlessness or anxious feelings. Sleep seemed far out of my reach, and I didn't know what to do. There was this strong tugging in the middle of my chest. A tugging on my spirit led me to walk out of my house into the pouring rain at three in the morning. Walking in nothing but my sweats that were now drenched, barefoot, and shirtless. As soon as the rain touched my skin, I felt this hot covering and all these images of my childhood flashed before my eyes.

A cinema from where I started to where I am now.

My tribulations and my victories.

The harder the rain poured, the harder my heart thumped against my chest. Besides the streetlights and the moon shining down, there wasn't much light but heavy darkness that seemed to follow me as I walked aimlessly around the compound. I had nowhere in particular I wanted to go but my feet were guiding me.

My body felt foreign to be in. My mind wasn't sound. My body felt off.

I'm not sure how long I wandered around with a tight chest and lungs feeling like they were about to give out on me. Several things were happening to my body at once, but my feet never stopped moving. Nauseous, but walking. Lightheaded, pace never slowed. Burning in my throat and lungs feeling like a rubber band had been placed around them, still walking. Vision becoming disoriented, feet still walking. The rain poured and poured, cloaking my steps and becoming colder and colder.

Blurred vision and gasping for air, the temperature of my body heightened to a heat that made me sweat. How I could sweat in the middle of a rainstorm is beyond me. I didn't try to figure it out. Didn't want to figure it out because for the first time in my life my mind went blank.

No thoughts.

No thinking.

No flashbacks.

Nothing.

Just a dark void.

Blinking, hoping to gain control over my vision, a figure crouching down on the ground came into focus. Even though my legs were functioning, no other limb on my body did. No matter how much I *tried* to will my hands to wipe the rain from my face, my hands and arms were not under my control.

My steps slowed and where I was became clear. I was in the backyard of Amell's house, and he was the figure crouching down. Only he wasn't crouching down but, on his knees, dressed as I was. The closer my feet walked to him, the more my body burned but it wasn't a burn that was unbearable. A burn that increased the thunder in my chest.

"O wretched man that I am." He spoke low right before a flinching clap of thunder shook my body.

Standing beside him I took in his position. Kneeling in his grass. Hands resting on his legs. Eyes closed and mouth moving but no words that I could hear were coming out. It was hard to explain but he looked peaceful. Lost in a tranquil spiritual bliss that looked night and day from the heavy rain pour on me.

“Things won’t ever change if you don’t submit, Dre.” Amell’s voice warred against the thunder and lightning, sounding deeper and more authoritative.

I had no idea what he was referring to, so I stood there quiet. My feet no longer wanted to move, and the rain was coming down even heavier but there wasn’t a puddle around us like the rest of his yard.

“He’s been waiting on you.” He finally opened his eyes and he looked straight ahead.

“Who’s been waiting on...” Before I could finish, this big roar of thunder clapped so hard that I swear it felt like the ground shook. The lightning paired with it was something I’ve never seen before.

It was like the skies opened and this white opulent cloud glowed brightly against the darkness of the night. Chills covered my body, but it wasn’t because of fear or the coolness of the rain.

Standing, Amell rotated his neck before giving me eyes. Eyes that were flat and unreadable as stone. “God has been waiting for you. Aren’t you at all curious to what is happening to you right now?”

Andrea would brag and say that experiencing Amell when he was in his meditation element with God was something to behold, and for the first time, I agreed. His larger-than-life quiet personality made him stand out from the rest, but this Amell. This Amell that seemed like he stood shoulder to shoulder with God’s greatest and mightiest angels, Michael and Gabriel, I’d never want to wrestle with him so he could hollow my thigh.

His strength was so charging. Even now, though he stood in front of me, it's like he wasn't mentally here but deep in spiritual meditation. Feeling his spirit and vibrations, the hairs on my arms stood at attention.

“If God can call out to you amid a storm. Command your feet to move and walk to where he needs you to, then why do you *not* believe that God can change you? Teach you to be a better man? Teach you to be a better lover? Teach you to be a better artist?” His eyes weren't as dark as before. Not as menacing but charging, nevertheless. “We're told to not lean unto our own understanding but yet, you fight Him by putting on masks for others.”

Not expecting it, he pressed his knuckles in the middle of my chest, bringing me to my knees. “It's time to stop being a helping hand to everyone else and start helping yourself. Surrender, Dre.” I didn't see him use force or swing, but the strength in his hands did just that, drop me to my knees.

I tried to stand.

Tried to straighten my back but whatever my body was surrendering to had full control.

“Surrender, Dre.” The more he kept repeating that over and over, my back bowed and bowed. Not even my head had enough willpower to lift on its own.

When he finally removed his fist, I gasped for air. Coughing and shaking, holding my stomach as it twisted into knots. “It's too late,” I mumbled, frustrated that I had no control over my body.

“According to whom?” He walked around me, kneeling in front of me. “Lift your head.” Under his command my head lifted, and his onyx eyes were the blackest of marbles. “As

you're aware, silence is nonexistent in my world. However, when I am blessed to experience it, I cling to it because here in moments like this, when it's raining and quiet, I hear from God the most and clearly. He talks to me. Reminds me that despite what I have done, I was worth saving. The same is true for you, Dre."

On my own will, my head hung past the middle of my chest, damn near touching the ground. I was so weary and heavy-laden. I felt shattered and broken. Felt worthless and for the first time, it didn't come from a woman. Can't remember the last time I drunk my problems away. Can't remember the last time I sexed my problems away. I did everything in my power to keep Dafina away from me, and Coco was in the hospital, so all my usual vices of distraction were gone. Leaving me to face my mirror of self.

These demons on my back were of my own merit. Things that I hadn't tackled because I had the distraction of a woman. Things that brought an unexplainable amount of self-doubt by a simple question – Who is Andre Joseph?

Who am I without a woman, both romantic and platonic?

Who am I without the liquor?

Who am I without the childhood trauma?

Who am I?

"I can't...I can't, Amell...I don't know what to do." My soul was crushed, and I gave in. Surrendering to my emotions and breaking down. Fist digging into the wet soil, I cried from the depths of my being.

"Petition God to unblock your heart, Dre. That hurt you feel in the middle of your chest is from the pharaohs you're still allowing to rule over your life after God has set you free.

You aren't a slave to anything. There is no condemnation. Just as God freed the Children of Israel from Pharaoh, he freed you from the things that had you bound and chained. The only person blocking your way is you because the pharaohs of your past, you're still holding onto them because the hurt is familiar. It's comforting." On the same assignment from a force so much more powerful than me, Amell's voice and thunder roared on one accord.

Thunder wasn't a silent rumble. It shook homes and it paired itself with the striking force of deadly lightning. Knowing that, how is it that Amell's voice rang louder? He spoke at the same time the thunder and lightning strikes, making the air around us more pressure gripping but expanding at the same time.

"He freed you, Dre. Look where you are. A new land overflowing with milk and honey. But it comes with a sacrifice. A sacrifice of obedience. Obedience to God and self. Get used to being uncomfortable. It's part of your new norm and when you start feeling like God has forgotten about you because the tests are getting harder and your days of weariness are running parallel to one another, then offer God thanks for entrusting you with those burdens because that means he *knows* that you can overcome them. The next time you start to question and doubt your existence, place your hand over your heart and feel the beat thumping against the palms of your hand. Those thumps against your fingers, that's your purpose right there."

Everything he said was true. I got rid of one set of my demons and took on a new set. A set of demons that had me questioning my purpose, something I've never felt before and didn't know why.

I felt helpless not being able to see Coco. There was this block around my creativity, so I hadn't drawn a comic since before I left New York. My normal ear to listen to my problems, he and I were still at odds, and I didn't want to trouble Landon more than he was dealing with since Drea was due soon. Theo had been reaching out to resume our sessions, but I didn't feel like he could help me.

Though I craved to get closer to God because I needed fresh new oil and faith, my flesh made it seem impossible and unneeded. Made it seem like God was no longer in need of me or loved me. Now I was out here crying like a whole bitch in the middle of Amell's backyard.

After I shed my last tear, I straightened my posture to see the rain had slowed to skirted drops. That restlessness and weighted down feeling I've been carrying for weeks, my shoulders felt light. The elephant size pressure on my chest was gone. I felt peace. Calm and serene. Cosmic spiritual nirvana in a way. Like I had smoked the purest heavenly grade of replenishing weed.

Looking around Amell wasn't in my line of vision. It wasn't until I stood to my feet and walked deeper into his backyard that I saw him sitting on the steps of his porch. Sitting next to him, I asked, "How often does this happen to you?" The sun was starting to rise, and a rainbow dusted over the skies.

Smirking, he shook his head. "Too often. In the beginning, I was just like you. Running from God and the transformation he was trying to do on the inside of me. It didn't make sense because I was heavy in the streets at the time. Killing because it was my job. Ordering dudes around to make sure they collected my money after selling my drugs. Shit was horrible.

I kept questioning why God was trying to talk to me when I was out here killing his children. Yeah, I had faith in God. Believed in him and everything. But why me? Why choose me?" He spoke as if he was asking the question to God again instead of explaining it to me.

"The first time he brought me to my knees I didn't have no one there to guide me through it. It was just me and God." He ran a hand over his head blowing out a long breathe before smiling. A rarity from my understanding. "I don't know why God moved you down here, but I know it's bigger than dealing with your ex and her husband. My best advice is to let God use you for whatever he needs because the more you fight," he shook his head looking off. "It's not worth it. You know you have a purpose, Dre. You know you were destined for something greater than your own understanding. You're running because guilt and shame are telling you that you don't matter. Speak against that with life. You're running because little boy Dre wants you to stay in the past, sulking in misery.

"Your mother abandoned you. Your father died before he saw you become the man he prayed for you to be. You spent your childhood looking after your sister. You had your heart broken repeatedly by women. Now what, Dre?" He shrugged his shoulders, looking at me with a chastising hardness. "You can't change none of those things because they happened in your past. What you can do is accept what is and decide that you have an even brighter future to live for."

I never thought he and I would ever be in this position but I'm grateful for it. My pity party was becoming lonely. Becoming darker as the days passed on. Pride kept my lips closed. Embarrassment and shame told me that I needed to suck it up because as a man, a black man, what I'm feeling doesn't need to be shared but suppressed.

To see and hear another man who was formed to fight the tribulations of his loved ones while also being a servant to God, I knew I wasn't alone.

That made such a huge difference for me. I know I'm an artist that wears his emotions on his sleeve. In the past people who weren't understanding of who I am had categorized my expressive demeanor as childlike – pouty, whining, and borderline stubborn.

I was none of those things but a man who took communication to the next level by vocalizing my feelings in the best way I could because of my trauma, I hadn't been able to shake it. Didn't want to shake it. Expressing myself in ways that were expressions of a child, but like Amell just said, I was holding onto those old versions of me because I was afraid to let those pieces of me go. Afraid of letting them go and being faced with emptiness.

Because the truth of the matter is, I didn't know who I was outside of the trauma and pain I carried from my childhood. The adult that I am, the man that I am today, I've failed him because I haven't allowed him to expand and grow. To make his own expressions.

Amell looked out towards his crystal blue pond. That thing amazed me. It was clear with no imperfections. "Just because you've labeled yourself as broken doesn't mean that you are. It means that there are vulnerabilities that have been identified that you've looked at as a weakness. But with the right person, the person who is strong enough to be the glue needed to keep your broken pieces from shattering, they fill up your weak spaces with their strength and love. What may be seen as vulnerable to the outside world is showing the piece of the puzzle where Courtney fits. Where you are weak, she is strong

and vice versa. You don't need to be dependent on a woman or relationship to feel like you're whole. You just need to be vulnerable enough to the one God made for you.

“Abandoned but now you're surrounded by people who love you and will do anything to protect you. Father died but you're about to become an uncle to a little boy who isn't supposed to be here because doctors already ruled out the possibility because of who his mother is. Childhood and most of your adulthood were spent making sacrifices for your sister, now you're in Florida creating new sacrifices for yourself and love. Dafina broke something within you but now you know how you want to be loved. Now your heart recognizes the broken pieces in another, and she wants to love you with no barriers from your past. Do you see how I flipped that? Sounds easier said than done, but the choice to walk in the fullness of it is yours.”

This man's wisdom and knowledge were enviable but also refreshing.

Lightening the mood, I joked, “So, since we're bonding, does that mean you'll add me to Coco's visiting list?”

Those onyx marble eyes transfixed to menacing burning coals. “You wanna see her, then eliminate the threats to her life.”

He made it seem like it was just that simple. “I don't know who shot her.” I tossed my hands up. “It was probably your punk ass brother since he was the last person to see her. I saw him leave out after she left.”

His jaw clenched and hands squeezed into fists. “See that's your problem. You're only focusing on what you think you know and what you saw in the moment. Think on a larger scale. Expand your mind. When you start to see what you

can't right now because your feelings are involved, then come and talk to me. How about you just focus on surrendering your problems so he can make you whole again." He walked away, going back into his house, leaving me there to sit in my thoughts by myself.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

C^{oco}

I THINK I have magic powers, or maybe I've mastered my grandmother's ability to be a lethal manipulator. Regardless of what it was, I gave Jimmy what he wanted – a date to his senior prom. His mother took my blurted out lie of wearing plum and rose gold to heart. She had a custom plum suit designed for her son with accents of rose gold to complement my custom gown. A plum silk gown with a plunging camisole neckline, an open back, and knot detailing at my lower back. Extremely lower back that rested on the crack of my butt. The classic flattering fishtail hem complementing the dress to perfection. My accents of rose gold were the sparkling hem of the gown and my purse.

The dress, flawless makeup, and luxury Rolls Royce, I couldn't have pulled it off without my grandma. Of course, my declaration to tell her that I was accompanying one of the senior boys to prom came with so much sacrifice. This was Jimmy's senior prom and I wanted to make sure this night was everything he could imagine. Usually, it was the girls dream

come true, but I wanted the tables to be turned for the night and cater to him.

I was proud of him and all his accomplishments. I was proud to be his girlfriend, not at all worrying about other girls like many of the others had to worry about.

The biggest accomplishment was him wanting to take me with him once he left for college. To everyone else I had another two years to finish high school, but I talked with my guidance counselor to see what needed to be done so I could graduate a year early. Next year I had to work my ass off, but I was set to graduate. Set to get away from Veronica and her stupid bidding and perverted clients. Our plan was for me to finish my last year next year and then move to Indiana right after. It was perfect because freshman basketball players were required to live in the athletic dorm for their first year, after that they could move off campus. Besides, I wanted my diploma so I could get a job.

I had full rides and partial scholarship offers to different colleges, but I also wanted to have a plan just in case something happened. So far, our plans were successful, but I knew a shoe was bound to drop at one point.

“You’re so beautiful, Coco,” Jimmy mumbled against the sensitive skin of my neck.

He and I were on the dancefloor slow dancing to ‘If I Ever Fall in Love’ by Shai. About thirty minutes ago he was crowned homecoming king and danced quickly with the homecoming queen, before pulling me into his arms.

From the time I stepped out of the Rolls Royce at his parent’s house to now, he made me feel like a princess. Jimmy always showed his emotions through his eyes and touch, two things that made my young heart beat off kilter. It was the way

he held my hand, using his thumb to rub circles on my wrist or in the middle of my palm. The way he gave me forehead kisses or kisses behind my ear. The way he kept me at his side, hands squeezing me closer wanting to melt us together.

The way he looked at me as if all he saw was me.

He made me feel special.

Made me feel wanted beyond what the men I encountered at the estate.

Lightly running the tips of his fingers along my spine, he growled in my skin making my eyes roll to the back of my head. His touch felt carnal but so right. "Are you ready to get out of here?" I'd go anywhere with him.

I'd go to the moon and back just to stay in this moment with him.

"Yes," I breathed in his ear.

"One more dance." Right after he said that the song changed to Make It Last Forever by Keith Sweat.

Back-to-back all my favorite slow songs were being played and I didn't think it was a coincidence. Leaning back, I stared up into his handsome face with a smile. "What did you do, Jimmy?"

His smile grew wider, and my breathing slowed. His eyes had been low slits since he stepped out to smoke a blunt with his teammates after we took pictures. Licking his lips, he leaned down brushing his nose along mine, making my belly flutter with butterflies. "I know the DJ and I may have slipped him a few dollars to play some of your favorites." The husk of his voice combined with the low lights and 'love under the stars' theme, I was floating on the highest cloud called Jimmy Hawthorne.

“You and me forever.” I declared before pressing my lips against his.

“You and me until the end.” Eyes staring to the depths of my soul, he kissed me like it was our last.

We danced until the song ended. Afterward he collected our things, said goodbye to his friends, and were in the back of the car heading to the beach. Though I made sure the night was all about him, I had to add in one small detail for me. I loved the ocean. Loved to hear the waves crashing against the rocks. Loved the smell of the salty water. Loved the way the moon reflected off the water. I loved everything about the beach.

“Where does your grandmother think that you are right now?” Barefoot, Jimmy and I were walking along the shoreline. Instead of holding the train of my dress as I should’ve, I allowed it to get wet along with my feet. He was smart to roll up his slacks, but I didn’t care.

Blowing out a long breath, I tried not to drift into the headspace of annoyance. This was our special night and he wanted to talk about people who weren’t important. “She knows that I came to the prom, but she thinks that I left with one of my regulars. He’s a cool guy that doesn’t push his luck like the others. I told him that I wanted to go to prom with my friends, but Veronica wouldn’t let me, so he’s covering for me.”

That sounded so wrong to admit out loud, but it was the truth. He was also the one who rented the room up ahead at the W Hotel for us. Trust me, I regretted it because as sweet and mild Nick was compared to my other clients, him doing this for me resulted in promises that I’d have to uphold in the coming days. But, Jimmy Hawthorne, my first love, was worth it.

Feeling Jimmy's hand slack in mine, I knew he was upset, and I didn't dare to look up in his face. We didn't share secrets and I wanted him to understand that my love for him had no bounds. That I'd do anything within my reach to make him happy.

"I know you hate that I'm...that I'm involved in unusual situations but tonight isn't about that." I moved in front of his path, blocking him from walking. Pleading with my eyes, I reached up on my toes until I had his handsome face between my hands. "Tonight is not about us. It's about you. Please don't think about things that will change your mood. I have one last surprise and I need to see you smile. Please smile for me."

The things Veronica and the rest of my family had Mya and me doing, Jimmy wasn't unknown to them. He and I swore not to have secrets, but shame kept my lips closed to the graphic details that happened at the estate and on the dates I went on. A month ago, one of my clients grew an infatuation with my neck, leaving a jungle of hickeys in his tracks. I refused to go to school until they healed. Or the time when Nick left hickeys and other passion-induced marks from his teeth and hands between my legs and on my butt.

I kept the details and graphics from his ears because I never wanted Jimmy to question my love for him. Did I enjoy getting dressed to the nines and going out with men who paid me for my time, sadly yes. Did I enjoy it when they intimately touched me, again? Sadly yes. Veronica had groomed me for this since I was a young child. I grew up anticipating the touch of a man. It was all I knew. The older Pearls and Veronica made sure that we were prepared and when the time finally came, my young mind and body reacted in ways that were still confusing to me because I knew now that it was wrong.

Out of all my clients, I trusted Nick the most because he was the lesser of the men who was gentle and sparked a close heat in my body that Jimmy did with his kisses. The weekends were my days to do whatever Veronica asked of me and though she helped me prepare for tonight with Jimmy, she made sure that I didn't forget my job. Jimmy would have tonight but tomorrow, and Sunday were for Nick. That's the sacrifice I made.

His strong jaw finally relaxed, and his eyes drifted from the night space to my face. "I'm sorry. You know how much I hate what they make you do."

Nodding, I kissed his knuckles and placed his palm against my rapidly beating heart. "It only beats for you. No one else." Though my young mind was confused about the sensations awakening when I was with other men, my heart had only reacted wildly with Jimmy.

He claimed my heart.

He owned my heart.

Lips curving into a slow smile, he pulled me into his chest. "What's my next surprise?"

Excited, I took his hand and lead us across the street to where the W Hotel was. Nick had already given me the keys earlier in the day, so we didn't have to stop and answer anyone. Leaning against the railings of the elevator, Jimmy's brows were arched. He looked so confused but excited at the same time. I just kept on giggling because one, I was nervous as hell, and two, it was so cute to see him out of his element not in control like he liked to be.

"Wow. This is nice as hell." Letting him step in the room before me, Jimmy dropped his shoes and coat by the door to

marvel at the presidential suite.

“You deserve the best.” A thick film of nervous mucus coated my throat. It wasn’t until we stepped off the elevator did the reality of what was about to happen hit me.

I’d been okay for the whole night but things between him and I were about to change.

Turning around in circles with a wide smile, Jimmy stopped in the middle of the room to look at me. “You didn’t have to do this, Coco. I was fine with walking the beach and hanging out at the afterparty. However, this shit is sweet. I love it. Come here, baby.”

I couldn’t move my feet. The only thing that did move was my fingers fidgeting with each other. My heart was seconds from bursting through my chest and tears had puddled my eyes. Seeing my sudden change of emotions, his smile slipped and that look of concern crossed his face.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” He moved towards me, but I stepped back, making him stop. “Talk to me, Courtney. What’s going on?”

“I-I...I.” I could barely talk without wanting to cry. “I got the room because I want us to spend the night together. I want you to...I want you to make love to me, Jimmy.” My mouth became dry as the first set of tears rolled down my cheeks.

His eyes ballooned. One minute, he was smiling and the next he looked like he was ready to blow a gasket. “I told you, Co. I’d wait until you were ready.”

He didn’t understand. I barely understood myself but the powers that be had already started moving without my concern. “I know but I can’t wait any longer.” I told him how I

wanted to wait until we were married to make love. To give my body to the only person I'd ever truly love.

The same remained except the marriage part. We could catch up to that in due time.

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he leaned against the dining table staring at me like he knew there was a deeper reason. "Courtney, I love you too much to not give what you want but I know this isn't it. We can chill and..."

"Jimmy, please," I whispered, closing my eyes as more tears fell. "If you don't make love to me tonight then..." I shuddered thinking of the bidding sheet I saw on Veronica's desk. The gala was weeks away and I needed tonight to be the night. "I'll be crowned a Pearl in a few weeks and then some man other than you will take what I only want you to have." With my eyes still closed I could feel the heat of his glare. "Make love to me, Jimmy. Please. I need you to make love to me."

Circling my arms around my middle, I hung my head in defeat. I begged Veronica to not auction off my virginity but of course, it was a Louis woman's right of passage. It was a part of accepting my crown as a Pearl. A title and path in life I never wanted to be a part of. None of this made sense to me. My peers in school were always out shopping, going to parties, and having normal teenage fun while I was being groped, wined, and dined by men old enough to be my grandfather and father. Dealing with my hormones and wondering why my body was getting excited for strangers the same way it did with Jimmy.

I couldn't control much of my life, but I could control who I gave my innocence to and that was going to be him.

Rough hands cupped my face, tilting it up. "Open your eyes, Co." Doing as he said, I looked in my saving graces' eyes. "I love you and I'll do whatever you want me to do. I'll make love to you." Kissing me until my heart and mind was reassured, Jimmy saved me.

In a few weeks I'd have to face Veronica and the other Pearls and explain my actions. I'd never disobeyed her. I've done everything she'd asked of me, but the one time I ask something of her she tells me no and that money is more valuable than any of my wants. She could put a price on anything else but not this.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Massey

MY MOM'S condition wasn't getting any better. One day the doctors were telling us that this might be the day she wakes up and then the next I'm not allowed in her room because she had a fever, and they were concerned about an infection. She coded some days. Some days she was fine, and I swore I felt her hand twitch in mine. Other days, I cried so hard that I made myself sick. She didn't smell like herself or look like herself. I helped the nurses take care of her everyday.

I washed her body early in the morning when nurse Natasha was there. Changed her clothes every day so she felt comfortable and smelt good. I couldn't get her mouth to open much with the breathing tube, but I was able to place pieces of a Listerine strip on her tongue. Since they cut her hair, I had no choice but to place what little hair she did have into braids and comb it every day. Thanks to YouTube, I found a gallery of videos teaching me how to move her legs, arms, and hands so when she did wake up, she hadn't lost so much muscle mass.

Massaging her body and exercising her limbs, I had to be careful. She still hadn't healed all the way, but I was hoping she'd wake up soon.

"I got something for you." This boy and his daily surprises.

If it wasn't flowers, love notes, poems – yes, PJ wrote me poems and he's quite the poet. If it wasn't food from my favorite places, my favorite candy, or movie dates, it was something. Every day he brought me something trying to put a smile on my face.

I never needed PJ to buy me anything. Having him near me, smelling his smell, and feeling his body heat, was more than enough.

Outside of going to the hospital to sit with my mom, I made sure my mind stayed busy by going to PJ's football practices. His two-a-day training season started earlier than mine, which ended up being a blessing in disguise. He'd drop me off at the hospital on his way to his first practice in the morning and pick me up once he finished so I could watch his second in the afternoon.

Sweat glistening on his skin, running down his muscles, and the smell of it on him. Nothing ever looked or smelled so delicious. More delicious than a cold cherry iced tea from 7-eleven on a hot day. I've been in a daze all day just staring at him. Catching all his kisses he blew my way, giggling when his teammates teased him and blushing hard when he ignored them.

Who knew that prince charming was real, and I had the chance to fall in love with one?

Reaching into his gym bag near his feet, he pulled out a black shirt that looked too small for his hulky body. “I wanted to share the news with you first.”

Taking the shirt out of his hands, I held it up and started squealing. “Babe. Oh my God.” Forgetting about the food he was holding, I jumped in his lap and kissed him all over his face. *My heart belongs to an All-American* – that’s what the shirt said.

A few people started making kissy noises and taunting us, but I didn’t care. My man was an All-American football player. Something he’s been working hard for his entire high school football career. “PJ, I’m so damn proud. Like so damn proud of you. How does it feel?”

Comfortably sitting on his lap, I started eating his snack of nuts given by the team’s nutritionist waiting with excitement. Giving me all white thirty-two, I don’t think his smile could’ve gotten wider. “Baby, it feels good as hell. I got the letter this morning from coach.” His smile slipped a little and I knew why. “I hit up my homie at the flea market to make you a shirt and he dropped it off not too long ago.”

“Did you tell your parents? I know your dad is going to be excited as hell. You might get that hellcat you always wanted.”

Snorting, he shook his head. “Nah, I haven’t told anyone but you.” He looked up at me and my heart somersaulted. “I’ll tell them when I’m ready.” Seeing his jaw start to clench I changed the subject.

“The new Candyman movie is out. Do you wanna...”

“Massey.” I stiffened hearing her voice.

Kissing along my jaw, PJ’s lips reached my ear and he whispered, “Talk to her. Hear her out.” He was right but I

wasn't at all ready to talk to Daisey Jean. Every day she reached out to me, and I ignored her calls, texts, and social media DMs.

"I don't wanna talk to her," I whined leaning into the plump coolness of his lips that were smiling against my neck.

"Do it for me and I'll take you to get lemon pepper wings after we leave." He was becoming a pro at bribing me.

"Fine." I pecked his lips and stood to face my best friend.

Standing, I stretched my neck prepared to deal with whatever craziness she had to tell me. "Hey, Daisey Jean." I sounded as sincere as I could.

The last time I saw her she had a tongue ring, belly pierced, wearing the shortest clothes I had ever seen on a girl her age. I was far from a prudish, snobby girl, but I also wasn't out here changing who I was for a grown boy I had no business talking to.

"Hey, Massey. Hey, PJ." She wore a cute yellow sundress that blew with the wind. Cute sandals and her hair flowed in spiral curls. This was the version of my Daisey Jean that I remembered.

"What's up, DJ. I'm going to shower." He leaned down kissing my cheek. "Be nice." He whispered.

"It's still so weird seeing you two together." She laughed softly watching him walk away.

I waited until she turned around to see if she had hearts dancing in her eyes cause if she did, I was going sucker punch her in the boobs. Thankfully she didn't. "Here, come and sit." I remembered that I was raised with manners.

We sat on the bench quietly. Me swinging my legs, her fiddling with her hands. “I’m sorry for how I’ve been acting lately, Massey.” She blurted out turning my way with eyes full of tears. Despite her teary eyes, her skin looked so bright, and her freckles were so pretty.

“What has been going on with you lately, DJ? I’ve been ignoring your calls because I’m mad at what you did.” I have never been one to hold grudges at all but with all the mess going on in my life I never had a chance to digest the past before the present became equally messed up.

Her head dropped along with her tears. “I don’t know what happened, Massey. I got too big for my britches, at least that’s what my grandma told me.” She chuckled sniffing. “Cameron was the first boy to flirt with me and show me some attention. It felt good to be wanted like that and then my feelings became worse when we added in the sex.” She rolled her eyes wrapping her arms around herself. “Whatever you do, don’t have sex yet. Not until you know for sure that he’s who your heart loves or as your mom would say who your soul sings for.”

That made me smile.

My mom and her hopeful romantic poetry are the reasons why my heart is so big and open when it comes to PJ. He checks off everything on my dream guy’s list and others I never had listed.

“Are you...are you and Cameron still together?” I hoped not because we were not doing double dates with them.

Her smile slipped and those tears came back heavy. “No,” She whispered. “My dad wanted to meet him, and he refused. Said he wasn’t the meeting the parents type of dude. There was only so much sneaking around I could do without getting

caught. Then I, uh, I..." She rubbed her hands along her dress. "He changed when I told him I was pregnant." She cried and I gasped. "Yeah, I know. I messed up so bad, Massey." Pulling her into my arms I held her while she sobbed on my shoulder.

Pregnant.

A baby.

A tiny human.

We were juniors in high school that was supposed to be excited that college was right around the corner. She'd never be able to stay at our school. One of the sophomore girls got pregnant last year and her parents had to pull her out and put her in an alternative school until she gave birth.

Who was going to watch her baby?

Were her parents okay with everything?

I rubbed her back while she cried and cried. I couldn't imagine what she was going through. Sixteen and pregnant wasn't on her vision board the last time I checked. "Have you told your parents?" I asked once she was able to breathe without hiccupping.

"No." Her curls bounced as she shook her head. "I don't want to keep the baby." Her red eyes flew to my face, she looked so scared. "I-I-I know it's wrong, but I can't have this baby, Massey, and it's not because he and I aren't together anymore. I don't want to be a mother right now."

"I'm here for you, Daisey Jean. Whatever you need me to do, I'm here." And I meant that.

She and I continued talking and I promised to pick up when she called me. Now I felt bad for ignoring her all this time. I asked about her change back to the old Daisey Jean and

she laughed so hard she almost fell off the bench. She said her granny was the one who got her right. Told her about herself and I knew how much she loved her granny.

I walked her to the parent picking up area where her granny was waiting. “Thank you for talking to me, Massey. I took a chance by coming here and I’m glad I did.” She squeezed my hand before hugging me again. “Please don’t stop being my friend. I really need you.” Her body trembled before she released me.

“I promise I won’t. Call me later.”

“I will. See ya.” Out of all the craziness surrounding me, it felt good to resolve things with my best friend. I missed her and our craziness together.

I stood there staring into the sky imagining the sadness DJ would have to face in the next couple of weeks. Because she was a minor, she couldn’t get an abortion without a legal guardian. She surprised the heck out of me when she told me that her granny was going to take her. They had that type of relationship, and I was glad she had somebody besides her prissy mother who probably would’ve sent the girl off to boarding school.

Pulling my vibrating phone out of my pocket, I read the text smiling – *I saw u 2day. Love them shorts on U girl.*

Goodness.

This was so unfair.

Hayden finally came back after spending time in Jacksonville with his dad. Keeping his word, he called me as soon as he got back wanting to talk. At the time I didn’t know if I wanted to see Hayden or hear what he had to say but now,

especially after making up with Daisey Jean, my feelings changed.

I was dating the boy of my dreams but seeing Hayden's name pop up on my phone always gave me a slight flutter of butterflies. Butterflies that were only supposed to be for PJ, who was walking up behind me. I hadn't seen him yet, but I felt him and that said a lot. This boy could pull up outside my uncle's house and I'd be lying in bed watching tv, but my heart would do this weird twerk in my chest alerting me that he was close.

Like now, my heart had them strong Meg knees with all the twerking it was doing.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" PJ's arms circled my waist.

Quickly exiting out my text messages, I slide my phone in my pocket and leaned back in his arms. "It wasn't. She's going through a lot, and I want to be there for her. Seeing her today made me miss our friendship."

Kissing my temple, he stepped back grabbing my hand. "Look at you being an adult and shit." He smacked his lips like he was licking off the residue of his favorite chicken. "You ready to go?"

"Yes, sir."

While he drove us back to his house, I talked it out in my head a thousand times how I wanted to tell him that I planned on meeting up with Hayden...without him. I felt bad enough not telling him that Hayden and I were texting. PJ was far from insecure, but it was no secret that he had big beef with Hayden for reasons neither of them told me. Regardless of how I looked at the situation, I was screwed.

He'd be pissed that Hayden was texting me.

He'd be pissed that I didn't tell him and met up with him

This relationship was too damn stressful. Like I thought we were supposed to send cutesy texts, talk on the phone till one of us fell asleep, have our parents drop us off at the mall, and see a movie. Hold hands walking through the halls at school and post on social media.

That's it.

All the rest of this was like a full-time job and I never worked a day in my life.

CIRCLING my wrist with his fingers, PJ didn't know how subtle his movements and caresses were big moments that caused big reactions. "Wanna watch another movie?" He and I were in his theater room on the left side of his parents' house.

Since that day he showed up at the hospital with his mom, I've been staying at his house. Had the circumstances been different and I wasn't on the verge of a nervous breakdown because of my mom's condition, I might find this as a dream come true – living under the same roof with both of my Pacino Luciano crushes. I guess there's a silver lining in everything though.

I refused to go back to the compound. Refused to stay with any of those people. Uncle Amell respected that, and Mr. Pacino offered me the guest bedroom in his house. Sometimes I felt like I'd become this orphan child going from place to place. Not having a real home to go to or not having a solid family foundation who I could lean on during times like this. Those I normally would lean on were my enemies and I wasn't budging at all on how I felt.

With all the chaos going on, Mr. Pacino flew up to Yale to bring Luna home. She wasn't at all happy about it. What really took me by surprise was the relationship she had with her mother. Granted Mrs. Capone has always been nice to me, seeing her interaction with Luna was kinda sad.

She criticized the girl about everything. From the way she wore her hair, the color of her nails, the clothes she wore, and how she talked on the phone. It got so bad that Luna stays locked in her room and doesn't come out at all. Of course, her brothers make sure to bring her food and such, but she doesn't speak to her mom, and I felt bad for her.

“Yeah, what do you wanna watch?”

Today after we left his practice, he surprised me by taking me to my house to get my mom's pillow. He told me that having her scent near me would help me sleep instead of doping myself up on Benadryl to sleep at night. My love for naps was no more. Now every time I closed my eyes, I have flashbacks of hearing my mom's screams and the impact of the car crash. Seeing her car turned over. The fight with Papa. That whole day replays the minute my eyes close, and I couldn't stand it. Taking Benadryl helped me to fall into a no dreaming REM sleep.

“All-American dropped its latest season. Wanna watch it?” PJ and his dreamy brown eyes.

He's been so attentive and caring that his actions fight against the depression trying to swallow me into a dark hole. He was sitting on a pile of college offers from every D1 college in the nation. I knew he wanted to go to Alabama and represent the Crimson Tide jersey.

He deserved it all. True, he worked equally hard, but I also knew PJ. I've had the pleasure of really getting to know him

on a deeper level over the last few weeks. As much as he replicated his father's hard exterior and sometimes came across as having an emotionally void persona to those who didn't know him but with me he was this giant with a gentle spirit that kept me floating on the clouds. Just how his dreams were to go to Alabama, mine was to play for the Gators and PJ was waiting for me to make my decision before he committed.

I had a whole year to go before I made that decision and to be honest, I had no plans on making it before my mom woke up. Practice started for me during mid-July. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to play. The only love in my heart for anything was lying in a bed at Jackson Memorial.

"Sure." Wanting to erase all apprehension in his eyes, I kissed his cheek, earning a full crescent smile with those open-faced golds that made my toes tingle.

From the time he woke up to right after he tucked me in at night, yeah that was a new habit that made his mom and dad give us the birds and the bees talk. After he'd tuck me in, kiss me until I drifted into a sweet lullaby, he'd leave and go to bed. Sometimes when I couldn't sleep, he'd text me from his room to ask if I needed anything. If I needed him to sleep at the foot of the bed or in the reclining chair in the room that he first slept in when I first came.

I had a bad case of night terrors and he wanted to be close, so he'd soothe me back to a peaceful sleep. Again, this boy blew my mind as far as his selflessness to care and cater to me. The things he did were those of a grown man, but I had to remember what grown man he had as a father and it made perfect sense.

Mr. Pacino spoiled the hell out of Luna. Though she didn't come out of her room, that didn't stop him from going to her.

He'd sit in there with her all day just chilling. Didn't care if she was on the phone, painting her toes, watching ratchet shows, or whatever. Then she'd gossip with him about her friends and social media, and I swear it was the funniest thing to hear her say 'Girlll let me tell you...'

Just how Mr. Pacino catered to his only daughter, so did Mace and PJ. She was the oldest child but clearly her brother's soft spot.

"I'm going to make some more popcorn. Want anything else?" Wearing his hoodie, a pair of his joggers, his socks, and I felt so comfy and protected.

Weird, I know but his scent, I wanted it to live in my skin forever and ever.

"A Gatorade and Oreo's. Give me a kiss." Not waiting for me to move, he fisted the front of my hoodie, making sure our lips collided. He knew how uncomfortable I felt kissing him or hugging him for too long being at his parents' house. I didn't want them to think that I was there to hunch their son's bones.

Blushing beyond my control, I pulled my hot tingling self-off of him and hit my hip on the edge of the mini fridge. "Ouch...see. Messing with you is going to leave me bruised." I rubbed my hip, giggles slowing as his eyes became hooded.

"Come here." The slow lick of his lips and clench of his jaw...

Hell no.

I learned what that look meant, and I was *not* ready for that.

PJ caused all types of nuclear reactions to set off in my body. The first time it happened was last week when we were in his room listening to music while he played the game with

Mace. He started singing along to Ginuwine and I got lost in his voice. Mace excused himself to the bathroom and the next thing I knew PJ was singing *Far Away* and looking at me like I was his darkest fantasy. One minute I was singing along and the next I was under him, and things got extremely heated and *firm*.

“I’ll be back.” Scurrying away, I ran out of the theater and didn’t stop until I made it to the kitchen.

“I don’t care, Pacino. That’s my son and I don’t want him around her.”

Arguing hushed voices coming from the garage causing my nose bone to move me to walk on the balls of my feet so I could get closer without being discovered. I knew it was Mrs. Capone and Mr. Pacino. Wanting to ear hustle and go back and tell PJ some juicy piece of gossip, I stood by the counter near the garage door and listened.

“Nothing you’re saying is making sense, Capone. How is she going to bring harm to him? Huh? She’s here and safe. PJ is here and safe.”

Were they talking about me?

“As long as he is around that girl, he is not safe! Have you and your little goons found the person who damn near killed her mom?” Quiet. *“Exactly. Your silence says enough. Until the person has been caught and dealt with, she’s a target. And since you graciously opened our home without consulting with me first, makes us a target now. Makes my son a target. I don’t know where you need to take her, but it needs to be far away from here.”*

My lashes became wet with each blink of my eyes. Mrs. Capone’s concern and niceness, it was all fake. She didn’t

want me here. She didn't trust me around her son. I was a target. I put their family in danger.

But I hadn't done anything.

I didn't ask for any of this to happen.

“Watch yourself, Capone. I get that you're concerned as a parent and that's your right but at the end of the day, she's a child. A child who is innocent and doesn't know anything about the target on her back. No, I did not consult with you first because I did not have to nor would I ever because if the tables were turned and our kids were in her shoes, I'd expect my brothers to step in where I couldn't. Check yourself because this attitude you have towards a child is disgusting and I don't like it. She isn't going anywhere. PJ is safe. We're all safe.”

I heard enough.

So many things ran through my mind, I ended up giving myself a headache. What target was on my back? What was he talking about? Was the person who attacked my mom now coming after me?

I didn't have the answers and the one person who I know would wasn't near me and I refused to stay where I wasn't wanted. Running out the kitchen I ran up the stairs to the room I'd been staying in. Thankfully I hadn't unpacked my things in the draws offered, all I had to do was get my toiletries and put on my shoes. But the big question remained, where would I go and who could I call?

As I scrolled through my phone a text came through from Cassidy.

Hey, just checking on you. Hope your mom is doing ok. If you need anything, I'm here girlie. Love you.

I took that as a sign from God and called her. She said if I needed anything to let her know and I was in desperate need of her.

“Hey, Massey. You didn’t have to call me. You were on my mind, and I wanted to text and see if you were okay.” This girl talked so fast.

Closing the bedroom door, I whispered my plea of help. “Kassidy, I need a favor. Can you please come and get me? I don’t want to stay here anymore. Uncle Amell will be okay with it. Please come and get me.” I was damn near begging during my sobs.

I didn’t like to feel helpless. I didn’t like to feel like I wasn’t wanted somewhere. I wanted my mom, and I couldn’t be comforted by her arms right now and there wasn’t a substitute like hers.

With no hesitation, Kassidy offered her help. “Where are you? Send me your location. I’m on my way.” Hearing her move about in the background made me feel better, feel special that she was dropping whatever she was doing to come and get me. I didn’t even ask if she was busy.

“Thank you. I just sent my location to you. I’ll be outside the gate waiting.” I hung up and wiped my eyes.

How did I go from enjoying a movie day with my boyfriend to feeling like the most unwanted child in the world?

Guess it was my fault for being nosey.

“How are you doing, Massey?”

Uncle Amell’s simple question broke the levy all over again when he answered the phone. I knew I couldn’t leave here without telling him. Plus, Pete was somewhere on the

Luciano's land. It took additional time to get my sobs under control.

"I don't want to stay here anymore. I called Cassidy and she said I can stay with her."

He was so quiet that I had to check my phone a few times before his deep voice spoke again. "That's fine. Pete is still in charge to follow you, Massey. I'd prefer to have you back on the compound, but I understand what you're going through right now. The minute you start ignoring my calls and texts, we're going to have a problem. Do you understand me? I'm trusting you to be wise and smart in your decisions and actions."

I nodded my head like he could see me. "Yes, sir. Thank you, Uncle Amell."

"I love you, kid. Call me when you get to Cassidy's house."

"Love you too. Bye."

I hung up feeling like I had a plan to getting out of this house. It took me no time to wash my face and make sure all my bags were packed. Cassidy texted me and told me that she was less than fifteen minutes away.

"Where are you going? Is Uncle Amell coming to get you?" Luna stepped in the bedroom looking down at the luggage in my hand.

Shoulders squared and head held high, I spoke with confidence. Yeah, her mother's words hurt but I wasn't about to show that I was wounded by them. I wanted them to see that I was removing myself from a place that didn't serve me purpose. Not the other people inside, the place as a whole.

Mrs. Capone is the wife and mother of the house. This was her domain.

“I’m going to my cousin Cassidy’s house. She said that I could stay with her for a while.” I walked past her with her on my heels and just my luck PJ was coming up the stairs looking confused.

“Aye, what’s going on? I’ve been looking for you.”

Did I want to tell him that his mother was fake?

“I’m going to stay with Cassidy for a while.” I tried to move around his large frame, but he blocked me in. He was in my front and Luna was behind me. “PJ, please move. It’s not that deep.”

The way he reared back; you would’ve thought I’d hit him. “Whatchu mean not that deep?” He reached to take my bag out of my hand, but I snatched it back. “Seriously, Massey. What is going on? We were just watching a movie and now you’re leaving.” He was blinking and looking me over, I guess seeing if something was wrong. Knowing the way his mind worked, he probably thought it was something he did.

“I said what was going on and I need you to please move.” Pushing past him, I made it to the stairs just as the doorbell rang.

Just great.

By the time I made it down to the last step, Mrs. Capone and Mr. Pacino were walking towards the front door. Luna and PJ were going on and on behind me, and I just stood there looking frustrated because I knew everything was about to go left. I have never been one to hold my mouth for the sake of not hurting someone’s feelings. My parents raised me to be honest regardless of how it might hurt the other person.

“You need something, Pete?” Mr. Pacino had his own share of guards that guarded his home. Pete only came out of the shadows when I was on the move and I’m sure seeing him caused his antennas to go up.

Pete looked past him to me. “Just getting Massey’s bags.” He stepped inside the house coming straight to me. “Kassidy isn’t far, but I’ll be driving you.” My hands were relieved of my bags and now it was time to answer the million and one questions written all over everyone’s face.

Scratching his brow, Mr. Pacino glanced at PJ and then at me. “Did something happen, Massey?” From the pinch of his brows and mouth scrunching into a mug, I’m sure he thought his son broke my heart.

That was the furthest thing from the truth.

It wasn’t his son but his wife.

“I apologize for being nosey, but I overheard the conversation you had with Mrs. Capone and I’m not comfortable staying somewhere where I’m not wanted.” I shrugged, looking over at Mrs. Capone who narrowed her eyes at me. “I was getting some popcorn and heard you all talking. Thank you for the hospitality but Kassidy is letting me stay with her.”

“What did y’all say?” PJ, forever my protector, stood in front of me blocking my view of his parents.

“It doesn’t matter, PJ. I’m good. Again, thank you for having me in your home.” I was steps away from the front door and wanted to leave before things got worse.

Rolling her eyes, Luna crossed her arms and popped her hip out. “It was probably mom and her judgmental ways.”

Mrs. Capone gasped, eyes big as her two-faced fakeness. “Really, Luna? I’m judgmental because I care about the wellbeing of my children? Be glad that you have parents that care about you and care about those who you surround yourself with.”

“Capone, you’re pushing it.” Mr. Pacino’s steely glare at his wife made me halt my steps. “Massey don’t take what was said as us not wanting you here. We don’t have...”

“With all due respect, Mr. Pacino, I know what I heard, and your wife made it perfectly clear that she didn’t feel comfortable with me staying here because of the target placed on me and my mom. Like I said, I’m thankful for all of your help but it’s no longer needed.” Turning to my young bull of a man, I leaned up on my tippy toes and kissed his cheek. “I’m okay. I’ll call you later.”

I don’t think I breathed until Pete had driven off and the Luciano house was far in the rearview. Cassidy and her matte grey Tesla were waiting on the side of the road outside of the subdivision. Pete blew his horn and followed behind her. I sunk back in my seat and exhaled.

Did I overact? Possibly.

Was I in my feelings? So darn deep in them.

Did I feel a certain kinda way towards Capone? Hell yes, and I wish my mom was healthy so she could fight her. I wish Aunty Keatyn hadn’t been so shiesty in her actions so she could check her.

I’m a teenager that is waiting on pins and needles to see if my mom will see another day. The man who I grew up to love as my father showed me a side of him that I don’t think I’m able to forget or forgive. The family that has loved me showed

me that their love is conditional except for one uncle and my cousins and siblings. Then on top of that, I feel misplaced with no real home to go to.

I felt like I had no one and the one person who always stayed in my corner is fighting for her life. These folks forgot that I'm still a child out here. Yes, the maturity they raised me to have has leveled the playing field, but I need someone outside of my uncle to take responsibility for my feelings and heart.

“Thank you for everything, Pete.”

Placing my luggage down inside of Cassidy's living room, Pete hugged me and kissed the top of my head. “I always got you, Massey. Even when you're mad at me.” He squeezed my cheek, making me smile.

“I appreciate you.”

“I know.” He winked walking out and closing the door.

“Give me a hug.” Cassidy and I hadn't greeted each other much since we arrived at her penthouse condo.

Resting my head on her shoulder, I took comfort in her warmth and welcoming arms. “Thank you, Kass. I appreciate everything.”

“Girl, you don't have to thank me. Come on, let me give you a tour and show you where you'll be staying. Oh, I hope you'll be up to accompany me to my sororities event this upcoming weekend.” Cassidy had always been so nice to me and seeing her smile so brightly turned my mood upside down.

Letting my eyes roam her condo, my mouth dropped wide open in awe. She was living out my penthouse Pinterest dreams. “First, yes I will go with you because I've never been to a sorority party let alone a college party. Two, can we trade

lives? Your condo is amazing.” Seriously, this girl was living a dream and I wanted to trade places. “Oh, do you mind if my friend Daisey Jean comes with us? She’s having a bummed-out summer and I think a party will brighten both of our spirits.” I nervously bit my lip, eyes scouting over her entire face.

DJ being pregnant, I know she was going crazy. The look in her eyes and tears that continued to pour when I saw her the other day. Plus, the way Cameron treated her. She and I talked about college and the parties we wanted to go to all the time, and this was perfect.

“I don’t mind at all. We can have a whole girls weekend.”

My heart fluttered with excitement hugging her. I could not wait for the party. “Yesss. Thank you. Thank you.”

Laughing, she looped her arms through mine. “No, girl, thank you for wanting to hang with me, and this apartment is a gift from your Papa. Maybe he’ll get you one when you go off to college.” Ha, I doubt it. That man is the reason I hold grudges for so long. I’m sure he wasn’t going to apologize if I didn’t apologize first. “Anyhow, tell me about you and PJ? I never saw that coming.”

Heck, neither did I.

I wanted the father but got the son and I wasn’t at all complaining.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cassian

I'VE HIT many lows in life. Many highs. Many in between and many other grey areas that I'm not quite sure what to categorize them as. A good number of my life's decisions were made on impulse with no thought of consequences or how others would be affected. Catching my first body at such a young age happened because I was determined to protect my baby brother. I thought nothing about getting caught or how my victims' families would feel burying their children.

Besides moving quick on impulse, I lacked strength in knowledge. Lacked the ability to see beyond what pleased my flesh. Had I ever thought beyond what I desired and thought about what I'd gain beyond the quickie of having my flesh licked by lies, I would've seen Noelani for who she was.

An opportunist.

A manipulator.

She's the wages of my sins.

"Papa, I miss you and if you miss me like you say you do, you'd come to get me so I can see your face, Papa," Melly

called with the same plea for me to come and get her. Next Tai would get on the phone and do her damage to what was left of my pride by crying and begging me to come home.

I was home just not home with them.

My first born and my only son, I got my ass beat by both. I'm not ashamed to admit it because I deserve all of it. My eldest kids saw me as an enemy in their eyes and I had the scariest nigga on the planet looking for me. My wife was out here living her best City Girl's life like she had no husband or kids.

Life was fucking great.

"I'll come by and see you tomorrow, okay? Papa misses you too." My heart ached for my kids. I went from having a full house with loud noise all day to absolute silence.

"If you break your promise, I'm going to shave your eyebrows off, Papa. Remember you said you'd do that to Massey if she left her bra's hanging in the bathroom?" Melly and her little innocence were breaking my heart more and more as the seconds ticked on.

Clearing my throat of the overwhelming number of emotions lodged in my throat, I rubbed my chest trying to fight away the heartburn of my fuckup. "I remember, baby girl. I'll call you tomorrow. I love you and tell Tai I love her too." Before she could say anything else I hung up and squeezed my phone in my hand.

This man, this person, whoever I had become, I despised him and everything he stood for. This man or boy rather, this wasn't me at all. Standing out on my back porch looking over at the lot next to me where I was having my alligator pond

built, I shook my head in complete disbelief of what a simple decision had cost me.

My girls loved animals and loved going to the zoo. Covid ruined that for a while, and I magically got the bright idea to build my own zoo. From monkeys, alligators, exotic birds, and fish. It was a mixture of a zoo and farm because I wasn't about to have lions or large ass giraffes on my property. In two weeks, the cows, goats, hens, and some other stank shit was supposed to get here.

Whatever my girls wanted they were going to get.

But what would all of it mean if they weren't here to enjoy it?

I appreciate my sisters-in-law more than ever in this time. They stepped in when I couldn't. I kicked Noelani off the compound and she made no effort to try and reach out. Made no effort at all to reach out and fight for our marriage. If she didn't care then why was I allowing her actions to place me in a dark space of denial, betrayal, and hurt?

Did I know for a fact that Noelani stepped out on our marriage as in have sex with another man? Yes. The question that I kept asking myself was why hadn't I killed her for it? The minute she decided to physically desire another man, decided to kiss another man, and have sex with another man. She broke our vows.

So again, why was she still alive knowing the type of man that I was? Or rather, the type of man that I used to be?

I didn't have the answer because once I started thinking about why she lived another day, I was faced with insecurities that rooted deep like the wounds given during my childhood. I gave Noelani all of me. Even pieces that I didn't know existed.

I felt like a fuckin failure. Failed to keep my wife satisfied in our marriage that she went looking elsewhere.

What was it that Lionel had that I didn't? When did I stop being enough for her? What did I do wrong to make her not want to uphold the vows we took before God?

“How can I help you, Ari?” To be so young she mastered the art of moving stealthy quiet without being detected or maybe I'd been so caught up in my head that I didn't hear her walk around the side of my house and lean against the railing of my porch.

“Uncle Cass, I have a favor to ask of you. You can't tell my parents though.” My head snapped around so fast. What in the hell had Ari gotten herself into?

Taking a seat on my deck steps and asking her to sit next to me, I looked at my niece shaking my head. She was the spitting image of her mother but a nerdier version. An attitude like her father and mind like Amell. A fierce dangerous weapon if you asked me. Then she had the nerve to be best friends with Mace Luciano. I saw the havoc she was going to wreck when she got older.

“Talk to me, Ari. You have my secrecy.” Holding my pinky out, I waited for her to take it with a smile on my face.

Ari was so adorable in her flower yellow glasses. She looked innocent until she opened her mouth. “Thank you. I appreciate your promise bound by word.” She watched too much TV. “So, I have a dilemma. Mace thinks I'm being irrational and dumb. I really want to put wax on his brows and rip it off.” She huffed rolling her eyes. “Anyway, he entered this fancy schmancy digital contest given by one of Apple's developers that branched off, and Mace got the bright idea to

clone phones without ever touching the original.” She reached in her pocket and took out an iPhone.

Damn these kids were smart as hell. She was only eleven and he was thirteen already cloning phones. “So, what’s the problem?”

“Don’t rush me, Uncle Cass.” She gave me a mean side-eye. “This is the part where I need to bind you to secrecy. No one can know what he and I did. You have to promise me scouts honor.” She held up her hand looking scared.

If Ari and Mace hacked into a banking system or something, I was not about to snitch but ask how I could be of assistance. I locked pinkies again with her. “I promise I won’t tell anyone. Whatever you tell me will stay between us.”

“Whew.” She wiped her brows all dramatic. “For a second I thought I was going to have to trade you in for Uncle Amell.”

Sucking my teeth, I mushed her head playfully. “Really, Ari?”

Giggling she shrugged. “I’m just saying. When it comes to things like this, I need options. Either we ride together or sink apart, something.” I hollered, earning a small fist in my ribs. “Anyway, so we cloned a phone, and that phone was Auntie Noelani’s phone.” She paused and my ears perked up.

“Why hers?” It was odd that out of all people on the compound that she had access to that she cloned Noe’s phone.

“To be honest we did it for Cashton. I don’t like that he’s always sad and not knowing where his mom is all the time, so I wanted him to always know. Kinda like the *Find my iPhone* app but better because you have everything she uses on her phone. All her calls, texts, and emails. You can even listen to

her in real time when she's having her conversations. Mace even put this memory component that records all of her conversations she has for longer than two minutes and stores it on the phone for up to three days." She shrugged like my mouth wasn't on the damn ground.

She was her father's child.

That's some super IT mess Atlas would do but to know little kids did it and it worked, I was amazed and wanted to pay them to clone a few phones I wanted to have access to. Then it hit me who she said she cloned – Noelani. My damn sneaky ass wife.

"I know it is considered an extreme invasion of privacy and we could go to jail, but I love my cousin more than his mama's feelings sooo..."

"Have you guys finished the full cloning process?"

She nodded all big eyed and handed me the phone. "Doesn't look like anything other than a regular iPhone, right?" I nodded. "That's how it's supposed to look. Mace bought two phones off eBay and started the replication process the last time PJ was over my house which was weeks ago. He put the main satellite phone in PJ's bookbag and right when Noelani came home, which he knew because I was sitting outside your house waiting for her to come home. Side bar, Uncle Cass, did you know that she never eats anything you cook but comes home with doggy bags of food from eating out? Super weird but Cashton told me. Anyway, once I saw she was home, I called Mace and he remotely cloned the phone. It took ten minutes and forty-two seconds. Genius that kid is."

Genius as hell and I had it in my possession. They had to have cloned it that night Noelani and Amell went to Frank's

retirement dinner. That's the longest she's been home for them to do it. I had so many questions concerning Cashton, but I knew Ari wouldn't tell me. She lived by the code of loyalty.

"Why are you mad?" My fingers were itching to power on the phone and see what type of shit Noelani was really into. It was one thing to have eyes on her and watch her but to have ears too. Yeah, I needed Ari to tell me everything.

"Because the selfish jerk didn't add my name for credit." She squeaked, lips pursed, and fists balled up at her side. "I gave him the idea to clone her phone, so I deserve my credit."

"Well, your secret is safe with me. What are you going to do with the phone? Are you still going to give it to Cashton?" I hoped she said no because I was about to use my uncle card and keep it for myself. Something told me it would become very useful to me.

"I listened to a few of her conversations, and I can't give Cashton that phone." Her head dropped, tone becoming sad. "That's why I came to you. If he heard the things said," she shook her head standing up dusting her pants off. "I won't hurt him any more than he already is so I'm giving it to you. Mace knows but outside of just the two of us and those involved in the contest, nobody knows. Please don't tell my parents or tell Aunty Noelani what we did. I was only trying to help Cashton."

"Come here, Ari." Opening my arms, I waited until she rested her head on my shoulder and hugged me. "Thank you for helping him. I promise not to say a word. I'll keep the phone safe and will even get rid of it if you want me to." After I listened and read everything of course.

"Thank you, Uncle Cass. I appreciate you. Well, I gotta go before my mom starts wondering where I am. See ya later. Oh,

if you have questions, text me a 911 code.” She skipped off humming.

I quickly powered on the phone and alerts started making the phone vibrate like crazy. Texts, voicemails, and emails – just like Ari said. In disbelief that this type of luck had been handed to me, I stared at the phone wondering if I really wanted to open Pandora’s box. They say once you go looking for stuff you find what you didn’t think you wanted to see. At this point, I wanted to see it all. I *needed* to see it all.

“How long are you going to stand there not saying shit?” This motherfucker picked the wrong time to lurk around my house like I wouldn’t know.

Dre wasn’t the smartest man and I wondered what attracted Coco to him.

Finally coming into view, Dre stood at the edge of my deck with his fists balled up, frown on his face, and shoulders squared. If I wasn’t so caught up in my head, I might’ve laughed at his gangster stance.

“What did you say to Coco that made her drive out of here like that? You were the last person to see her before the accident and then you followed her out of here. Yeah, I saw you.” He stepped closer, veins popping out of his forehead and fists squeezing tight.

I’ll give it to him; he had a lot of heart to defend the woman he loved.

Flicking my nose, I stood with my hands clasped in front of me glaring right back at him. “I think it’s time for you to get off my property and walk back to your house. My relationship with Coco will never concern you.”

“Admit that you shot her. Admit that you caused the accident.” He was so angry that he was shaking.

I stepped down until he and I were at eye level. “I get it, Dre. You love her, but don’t allow your anger to get yourself killed before you’re able to see her open her eyes. Now get the fuck on.”

Minutes ticked on and neither of us moved. I’m sure he thought of every possible way to kill me and get away with it. Trust me, I knew that look in his eyes. It lived behind my eyelids for years as a kid feeling defenseless against my father. Feeling like I couldn’t defend those I loved because I wasn’t strong enough. The thing about it, Dre was indeed strong enough, but the uncertainty of his survival made him hesitate.

Since he wasn’t going to make the decision for himself, I was going to make it for him. Before he had a chance to blink, I removed the gun from my back, cocked it, and had it in his face. “Walk away while you can, Dre. I know you’re hurting right now but this ain’t what you want. My gators haven’t eaten in days and I’m sure they’ll like the taste of you.”

This nigga had the nerve to chuckle and smile. “Is this what you do every time you feel threatened? Huh? Pull out your little gun and feel big and bad?” Now, he and I both know ain’t shit little about my Glock nineteen.

“Motherfucker, does it matter? I’m not the one at a disadvantage here, you are. Now, get your extra sensitive artistic ass off my property.” To see if he’d run, I let off a shot in the woods behind my house and this nigga stood there with that same smirk on his face.

“Isn’t it interesting how guarded we become when life decides to send dancing chaos around us?” He tilted his head, nodding to himself. “A word of advice, Cassian. Your issues

can't be killed by bullets. Sooner or later, you're going to have to face all of your insecurities and you won't be able to hide behind a gun."

"Nigga!" I wasn't in the mood for his psychological bullshit.

Holding his hands up, he smiled backing away. "Enjoy *trying* to sleep in that big house all alone. But like I said, those insecurities and demons you're wrestling with won't stop hounding you until you cut off the root. Good night."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A mell

NOW THAT MASSEY and I formed a schedule regarding sitting with Courtney, my late nights and early morning meditations were back on schedule. I needed it. On top of the craziness going around, it's been days since it last rained and that wasn't something I liked. My most vulnerable moments communicating with God happened during the darkness of the night right before the sun started to rise.

Bare in skin and cloaked in heaven's showers, I bared my soul to God. I wasn't like Samson who got his strength from his hair. I recharged in those moments where it was just me, God, the dark of the night with peeks of the sun emerging, and rain.

That's all I needed.

However, I had an alternate just as anointed as the rain – my crystal blue pond. Everyone questioned how my piranha pond was murky and you couldn't see to the bottom, but my crystal blue pond was clear as day. The purest water on my land. No dirt, debris, algae, or anything else that could make the water unpurified. It was just a natural pond of water.

The same way people blessed olive oil to bless others with, I blessed my pond in the same fashion. Just because it wasn't raining doesn't mean my time with God was void. I found peace, solace, and rebirth in my pond just the same.

After checking the house, changing the twin's diapers, and making sure everyone was straight. When I didn't see Cashton lying in his bed, I thought maybe he was sleeping in the theater room since he finally started being semi-social. What I never suspected was to find him here outside in the dark of the night standing in the middle of my pond.

I turned to walk back inside so many times but the same why God had to force Dre to meet me here is the same way He was forcing me to meet Cashton where he was. In the middle of the pond where the water came to his waist. His back was to me, and he was looking straight ahead. Usually, the temperature of my pond at this hour of the morning was cold and took a while to adjust to but this morning it was warm. Warm and extra clear.

Standing next to him I looked down to see him bare chested with his boxer briefs on and socks. His left hand kept rotating the 'K' on his necklace back and forth and his eyes. His eyes were looking straight ahead into the dark, into the unknown. If one of the guards walked by, they probably thought he was looking into nothingness, but he was staring right into the spirit I beckoned every time I needed to feel closer to the being higher than me.

"Lately I've been drawn to water." His voice came out hoarse. "This pond, your pond, specifically. I don't know why, Uncle Amell, and that scares me. While everyone in the house can lay down at night and go to sleep, I can't." My eyes dropped down to his hands. He was trembling causing small

waves to move around him. “When I try to sleep my body feels weird especially my legs and feet. They won’t stop moving. Almost like I’m walking in bed.” His head dropped to the center of his chest, tears coming out of his eyes, but it lifted back up and went to that same place of the unknown.

Sniffing and wiping his eyes, he looked at me and my chest caved in. I saw it. I saw what he wasn’t understanding. “These weird sensations cover my arms and my legs. Feels like tingles, pins, and needles. I don’t understand,” He cried. “I hate it, Uncle Amell. I hate it.”

“Cash...” The more he was breaking down the more I was on the verge of joining him.

“I googled it, what I’ve been feeling. I googled it and it said that I have restless leg syndrome. I asked Uncle Atlas about it too and he said the same thing, but it was uncommon for a kid. Nothing works but one thing. I tried propping my legs up on pillows. Tried walking around my room. I even let Ari talk me into drinking Nyquil so I wouldn’t feel it.” That damn girl. “Nothing works except this pond. When I walk in the water all those sensations and aches go away.”

Rotating the uncomfortable weight on my neck, I closed my eyes and exhaled. “What made you come out here, Cash?”

He shrugged. “Can’t really explain it. One night I was frustrated and getting angry because this was happening, and something told me to walk. You were at the hospital and Aunty Krishna had just fallen asleep. I started walking around the house, but the feeling wouldn’t go away. I kept walking until I came to the pond.”

Prior to having this moment with Cashton, there was only one other person who has witnessed my deepest rawest moment of vulnerability and I ended up giving her my last

name. While this moment was similar, sharing the gift of feeling a presence that surpasses my understanding, my duty was to pass the torch. Explain to Cashton the gift entrusted to him and guide him on how to use it.

Standing in front of him, I demanded his attention. “Remember how you said that you don’t think you have my level of discernment or the spirit at all?” He nodded. “You do. We all have it it’s just a matter of if we pay attention when it has been gifted to us. When you’re sleeping your legs are still moving, running. But when you walk out here and submerge yourself into the water, purified water, the sensations you feel go away.” He nodded again, eyes widening. “God is speaking to you, Cashton. He’s trying to get your attention. You have somewhere to go, something to do and whenever you’re done, you...” I had to stop and blow out a breath. As much as I didn’t want to acknowledge what was being asked of me or what was about to happen to him, I had to be obedient.

I needed to start from the beginning. Show those layers of myself that I tried to keep hidden from my nieces and nephews. “When I said that I purposely stayed away from you, yes it had a lot to do with not wanting to taint you but because I also knew you needed space. You needed room to think. Like me, you’re an analytical thinker and you need room, time, and space to lay out your thoughts, feelings, and whatever else. That was me giving that you because I knew the day when our lives intertwined fully, those fears I had of you being like me were no more.”

“Uncle Amell, we need to sit.” He grabbed my forearm and walked backwards before sitting down in the pond. The water came to my waist and his chest. He sat right in front with eyes as bright as the moon looking eager to learn. Like

his eyes were open to see, ears open to hear, heart open to receive, and mind open to understand.

“You’re most like me in thought and in deed.” I scratched my ear still fighting with myself on what needed to be said. “When I was twelve years old, I made a decision that changed the trajectory of my life. God gives us the freedom to make whatever decisions we make, and we must be man and woman enough to withstand the consequences of those decisions. These hands.” I held my hands up and so did he. He mimicked everything I did. “The amount of blood I have on my hands can probably fill all my ponds, my pool, and then some. That’s a lot of bodies, Cash, and I’m not saying it to brag.

“At times it was survival of the fucking fittest. Survival to make a name for myself and demand the respect that was owed to me. I never wanted to think, feel, or come across as if I was making godlike decisions of who lived and died but there comes a time in your life when you must understand the difference between godlike behavior and survival. My decision at twelve wrecked me. The same heavy burden that you feel on top of the weird sensations in your body.” I paused waiting for his young mind to catch up. Took no time at all for those bunched confused brows to straighten out and his eyes to balloon.

“How did you know...”

I stopped him before he could even finish. “That same burden that you feel, Cashton, was on me too. Felt it each time I stood in place as my brother’s protector. Each time I stood in place to take their beatings. Heavy is the head that wears the crown, and my damn crown weighs me the fuck down, but I still must find a way to level out everyone else. It took me a long time to understand that I have dual roles when it comes to

the decisions that I make with the God I serve. Those two roles can dwell within the same space, I just have to have balance.”

Part of me wanted to believe that what I saw in the spirit for Cashton’s future wasn’t real. That it was just a glimpse of my imagination from watching all those horror movies with Nova and AJ over the years. But the more we sat here almost submerged to our necks in the purest water, I knew that me passing the torch of spiritual honor and physical power wasn’t going to be given to my son first but to Cashton.

I was the rising of the sun and Cashton was the setting of the same.

Much would be required of him.

Much would be asked of him.

I just hoped that he’d grow to understand the weight connected to his name, his purpose, and not abuse it.

“It’s okay to act on what you’re feeling. I was once in your shoes. Once in your same spot, almost in the same body. As a child I had to make the best decision for the survival of myself and my brother’s. A decision that shaped them to have and live the lives that they live currently. Some look at me as a savant of sorts. I look at myself as a protector.” His head nodded and I knew it was starting to become clear to him, but I needed him to get the full scope. “I’m giving you, offering you a level of balance and reprieve that was *never* offered to me because once you act there is no turning back.”

Using the word decision in almost every sentence I spoke was necessary. Cashton had a tough decision to make that would change the trajectory of his life. That wasn’t a decision you took for granted or made lightly. This was a moment for

him to assess the level of wisdom between his ears and the levels of how high the volume of his heart spoke.

Which one would he listen to?

His heart or his mind?

“As much as I hate to admit it, and it’s not for reasons of saying I don’t want you to be like me, I *need* you to be better than me. I *want* you to be better than me. I don’t want that same level of heaviness I’ve experienced to weigh on you. At your age your mind shouldn’t be constantly racing five to ten steps ahead of everyone. You shouldn’t be woken out of your sleep because God is giving you the okay to act. I’m going to teach you, Cash. I’m going to keep you close to me because I know what you’re going to do and when you return, I’m going to teach you balance. Balance of accepting what happened and the balance of moving on.”

I said all I had to say. Said more than I wanted to.

Lord knows I appreciate Mitch and Clover for doing everything they did but there were days, like now when I was forced to stare in the eyes of a child that was about to go down my same path, I wish someone other than Mitch had stepped in the gap for me. Stepped in the gap between me and my demons. I never had a fighting chance either way I looked at it but sometimes I wondered what if.

What if somebody fought harder to help me than use my trauma and pain for their gain and turn me into a vessel of destruction?

“It’s weird that I’m more afraid of my restless legs than the thoughts in my head.” He had no idea.

Once someone lost the fear of something or someone, there was no turning back. Like a child who stopped fearing

their parent's authority meant they stopped respecting them and were now focused on doing what they wanted to do. Becoming lost souls thinking the world was going to be better parents. Cashton could lose all the fear he wanted to, but I knew that it would stop there.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Cassian

MY LAWYER THOUGHT I lost my damn mind. He thought maybe I needed to see a psychiatrist and talk about my problems. Even suggested that I go on this chakra bullshit sabbatical before I signed the papers. Nah, I haven't lost my mind...yet. What I was doing was being proactive by making sure my kids would be straight for the rest of their lives by having a last will and testament.

The day had finally come when Amell summoned me and everyone else that he had a vendetta against. I never thought my whereabouts were unknown to him, I just wasn't making myself visible. On top of that, I was pulling twenty-four-hour surveillance on my wife. Yeah, her ass had been up to some grimy shit, and instead of exposing my hand and showing that I knew all her dirty little secrets, I was sitting and waiting for the perfect moment. Ari and Mace's little phone gadget came in handy. I swear I wanted to wring her neck, but her time was coming, that I knew.

Usually when Amell held a meeting of any kind we all met at the warehouse Mitch used since he started in the drug game

way back in the stone age days. I was confused as hell driving up to Muck City and seeing this big ass barnyard in the middle of the boonies. At first, I thought this was some new shit Atlas had built.

Nah.

This was all Amell.

There was nothing but smoke grey illegally tinted SUVs all lined up on the side of the barn. I knew them bitches were bulletproof. There were dudes dressed in all black with earpieces standing out front with riffles strapped to their chest. My main question was how in the hell did this nigga pull this off?

Inside, that bitch was fucking laid. I ain't never seen a tricked out barn house like this. The length of it had to be two Olympic sized pools and the width was just wide as it was long. On the left side near the back was a high platform area with at least twelve monitors positioned together showing live footage of different people. On the right side, this fool had another piranha tank. He loved them vicious ass fish. I couldn't talk since I had an alligator farm now.

On the left side near the door was a large armored cage that was the size of the first level of my house. Any weapon you could think of was there. I'm talking grenades and bazookas. Where in the hell did this nigga get a damn bazooka? Were we about to go to war with terrorists or some shit? Were we in the middle of the zombie apocalypse? I needed to ask Massey since she watched that *Walking Dead* show. And on the front right side, one glance at the metal table and metal cabinets, I knew that was his torture space.

I hadn't seen Amell drift to that type of dark element in forever, and seeing that shit made my stomach hurt. Ain't no

point in faking it. I was close to shitting on myself because I knew how diabolical that motherfucker could get.

Walking to the back where all the other men in black were gathered, I spotted Atlas, Pacino, and Dre. I had no idea who the other men were. Never seen them a day in my life and that made me feel a certain type of way. When I became of age and showed that I wanted to be a part of the family business, I was Amell's left hand while Pacino was his right. Seeing what I was seeing, neither Pacino nor I had any involvement in it whatsoever.

"What's up, Boe," I spoke to my brother, who was drilling a hole into the guy sitting at the desk with all the flashy buttons and gadgets.

"Do you see this shit?" He mumbled, nose flaring and eyes twitching. "When did he make this shit? Huh? Who are these niggas, man? Why didn't he ask me to run surveillance like he normally does?" I guess I wasn't the only one who was bothered by the new team Amell replaced us with.

Pacino walked over with the same mug on his face that Atlas and I wore. "Do y'all know these people?"

Smacking my lips, I rolled my eyes. "Nigga, if you don't know them then what makes you think that I do? Where the hell is..." Right then, additional men walked in from the side entry behind Amell.

"Mannn." Atlas groaned. "I don't feel like dodging bullets today."

Looking at everything but what we were witnessing, Dre said, "I think this is tight. Did you check out the backyard? He has heat sensor detection. Pretty cool." This square ass nigga.

Black Timberland boots, all black mechanic overalls he had zipped up to his chin, no jewelry, and a rag whipping a red substance off his hands that I'm pretty sure is blood, Amell's presence silenced the whole barnyard. By the time he made it to the center, all eyes were on him. When I saw his eyes taking in each face, I wanted to run my ass up out of there. Atlas must've felt the same way too because he started shifting around.

Yeah, some shit was about to go down.

I don't know how good these other men knew my brother, but I hopped they weren't fooled by the calmness on his face. They needed to pay attention to his eyes because I saw nothing but death in them shits. I'm talking about a cruel and suffering death burning behind his eyes.

"TK, drop the screens." Eyes locked on me; he gave the order too calmly for my tastebuds. A humming sound sounded, making us all look up at the ceiling as four large screens lowered.

"I don't like this, Cassian. When he's mad at us, he usually does that weird staring thing, but he just glanced at us. What the hell is going on?" Atlas whispered, speaking my same thoughts.

Any other time Amell was pissed at us he stared at us to the point we'd be seconds from shitting on ourselves cause his glare was so menacing. I won't lie, back in my early days, I might've started on myself a time or two. That's why I always made sure to take a shit before meeting with him.

That nigga scared the shit out of me...literally.

Freckled faced dude that was handling all the electronics pointed a remote at each of the screens, and live footage of

Jaali, Veronica, and Lionel popped up. He pointed towards the fourth one, but Amell shook his head and glanced at me. Something told me that the live footage of that screen was probably Noelani.

“I gave specific instructions for each person you’re looking at. Crystal clear instructions that should’ve had their family’s planning closed casket funerals.” Stuffing the bloody rag in his pocket, he widened his stance with his arms crossed. “Why are they alive?” You could hear the outside crickets it was so quiet.

“Tomorrow some stuff is about to go down and since I don’t trust either of you to take care of it.” Amell made sure to look at Atlas and me. “I’ll do it myself.” He dropped his hands and started pacing. My damn nerves were so bad. I didn’t see a gun on him but that meant nothing. “Young, we’re approaching months since I asked you to manage this Jaali situation, and every day this man breathes, I’m growing tired of repeating myself.”

I heard the sigh Atlas released. Now that, I didn’t understand what Atlas problem was when it came to handling Jaali. He had the team. He had enough power and armor to slaughter his whole family. I wasn’t about to get into it or offer my help either. That was between him and Amell.

Amell stopped pacing and glared over at us. When he tilted his head and his eyes became darker and steelier, I reached behind my back and took the safety off my gun. “Y’all step out for a minute while I talk to my people.”

“Ah, shit.” Pacino sat down on one of the stools. Dre’s nerdy ass sat next to him while Atlas and I stood. He never took his eyes off me the entire time the men walked by. I don’t

think he blinked. Once it was just us, he walked over with his eyes still on me.

“I told you to lose the pride and ego.” His eyes shifted from me to Atlas. “I asked one thing of you and...” Atlas cut him off.

“And what the fuck do you think I’m doing?” Atlas yelled back.

Dre was the first one to get up and move back. Pacino and I followed behind him. Veins poking out the side of his head and fist squeezed at his side, Atlas kept running his mouth. “I’m not like your new little puppets. I said I got it and that’s what I mean. Stop questioning me about it when I told you I’d handle it. Ain’t nobody ask...” An eerie silence covered the room as Amell walked with the patience of twelve virgin nuns over to Atlas. You didn’t hear his boots make a sound when he walked. He kept his hands held behind his back. I had no idea what Atlas was looking at when Amell stood in front of him, but I knew it was lethal enough for this man to shut up.

“You didn’t ask me to help you. Is that what you were about to say, Young? Huh? Speak, Aaron.” Atlas didn’t say a peep just looked him straight in the eye. I knew my baby brother was frustrated but he knew like I knew that taking his frustrations out on the wrong person wasn’t smart at all. “Cat got your tongue now. Huh?” He turned sideways. “You know, I shouldn’t be mad at you, Young. I asked you to complete a job that wasn’t your responsibility but Cassian’s.” When those black bitches he called eyes landed on me, I damn near choked on my spit.

“What the fuck that African nigga gotta do with me?” I ain’t have nothing to do with what Amell asked of Atlas. That was their shit.

Chuckling, he tugged his beard before looking past me to Dre. “Boy, y’all motherfuckers are so damn dumb. You get the same alerts we all get, Cassian, when someone is looking into one of us. Your stupid ass got the same alerts we got when Jaali was looking into Courtney.”

Smiling, he stood in front of me. His nose flaring, breathing hard like a bull. “I dare you to lie and tell me that you didn’t get the alerts. Be man enough to say that you saw it and ignored it because you didn’t care.” I hated that his ass learned to smile. It was the calmest but also the most frightening thing ever.

A ruthless savage smiling wasn’t camera worthy cute.

Nodding, I glanced over at Dre and shrugged. “My bad. Thought it was one of her old tricks or something. Don’t take it per...what the...Amell, shit...” When the hell did this fool learn karate?

I went from looking at Dre to my arm being twisted behind my back. He snatched both of my guns, the one I had on my hip and the one behind my back. Once I realized he had both of my shits, I looked at Pacino who was trying not to laugh. I looked at Atlas who was still trying to catch his breath from being grilled, and then I looked at Amell. It was either flight or fight. I know what I just saw in that nigga’s eyes, and I wasn’t about to go out like no punk.

I took off running as fast as I could but of course bullets are faster. “Fuck.” Not only did this crazy motherfucker shoot me in the arm but my extra dumb ass ran straight into a clear plexiglass wall divider and busted my nose and lip. “Shit.” I laid out on the floor pissed at my damn self. Hearing his boots walk over to me, I closed my eyes and pretended that I was dead.

“Stupid ass. Always trying to run.”

He shot me again but this time in the damn leg. “Shit, Amell.” The burn of whatever type of bullets he used hurt like the real thing. I was rolling back and forth on the ground.

“See, I knew your stupid ass would try me. You always testing my patience, but I was ready for you today. How do my new rubber bullets feel? Be lucky I didn’t shoot you with real bullets. You got too much work to do to be bedridden ole cry baby ass. Bring your ass back over here, Cassian.” What was this fool smoking? “Cassian!” He yelled.

“Bitch, you shot me twice. I feel lightheaded.” I was dead ass serious. I had two wounds from those rubber bullets. Them shits felt like they paralyzed me and electrocuted me at the same time.

“One of y’all better help him up or he’s going to get another bullet.”

“Aye, help me up.” I hoarsely screeched.

Laughing like this shit was okay and funny, Pacino came over rolling a chair. “Get your big ass in the chair, man. Crying over some rubber bullets.”

“And?” That shit still hurt. Was I the only one who realized he actually shot my ass not once but twice? “Aye, fool. Be gentle. Ouch shit. Damn, Pacino. What the fuck, man?” His extra big ass slung in me the chair, not at all worried about my injuries.

Once we were back in Amell’s kumbaya circle, he started pacing again with his new special gun tapping at his side. “Since amnesia is going around the room, let me give a quick history lesson to those faces on the monitors because I swear if I have to speak of this again, it’s lights out and I mean that.”

Glaring at Atlas and me like we were two misbehaved kids, Amell pointed at Dre.

“Dre knows Jaali quite well since he’s been having an affair with the man’s wife for years. Around the time he finally decided to end the relationship, he meets Coco, and they start their little rendezvous. Long story short, Jaali is on some get back shit. He started looking into Coco. We all got the alert and I told Young to handle it.” He paused and glared at Atlas, who was rubbing the back of his neck.

“Young gave the man one of his slow killing cigars but in the same breath gave him pills to reverse the side effects like a dumb ass. He had the man’s brother and sister beat up but kept him alive for reasons I don’t want to know. So, now Jaali is in Palm Beach plotting to take us out.”

I can’t say that I knew about any of this because I didn’t. I had access to the same information but if it wasn’t pertaining to Noelani I didn’t care.

“Veronica is Courtney’s grandmother and if you don’t know, well that’s your fault not mine.” Crossing his arms over his chest, he turned to me, and I tried to scoot my ass away. “I won’t go into detail right now cause shit is still all over the place but Cassian, this is my promise to you, when I’m done with her, it’s you and me. No weapons either cause when I fuck you up, I want to feel your blood on my hands.”

Yo, what the fuck!

“Amell, really?” Now that shocked me because I knew how Amell fought with his hands. You didn’t walk out the ring when he fought you. “You’d...you’d kill me?” The realization of his words hurt more than those rubber bullets.

Never blinking, he nodded. “Yes, I will. The mother of your eldest child is in the hospital because of you. Your children are misplaced because of you. Your wife is slinging her pussy around to our enemy who wants our cartel and is determined to take it because of you. The common denominator in all this shit is you. I’d gain a whole lot of peace by eliminating you.”

A hushed silence settled around us.

Even Atlas looked up with a opened mouth. Pacino and Dre were both shocked. And I, my fucking heart broke.

My brother. The man I’ve looked up to my whole life. My father. He basically said I was an inconvenience to him and better off dead. Unashamed I allowed my eyes to become teary.

Bending down until we were eye level, he said, “tell me why I shouldn’t kill you, Cassian. Lionel has been after us for years. We all know that he tried everything he could to get at Mitch. He’s been silent since Dominique died. That never seemed odd to you? Did you shrug it off and think that our problem vanished in thin air? He was never silent but plotting and waiting. But guess what? It was your wife who brought him back into our lives. Brought him straight to Miami. There’s a bounty on your head. Did you know that?” His head tilted. “Yeah, he wants you out the picture. He put a bounty on your head and your wife is partnering with him. Odd coincidence, isn’t it?”

I tried opening my mouth to respond. Tried to defend his accusations but nothing came out, not understanding the wash of emotions taking me over at that moment had me scared to speak knowing that I’d breakdown.

“None of that felt good to hear right? Listening how I’d rather kill my own flesh and blood so the threats and bloodshed will stop. Regardless of how much I want to silence you for good because I’m angry, I could never do it. I will never harm you because killing you is killing myself.” Whatever point he wanted to get across, I got it loud and clear. Whatever wakeup call I needed, I answered the phone several times. That feeling I just had...I didn’t like it.

“Look,” he sighed, dropping his head back looking up at the ceiling. “This isn’t a game anymore. Our enemies are on our doorsteps and we’re all targets. Our children are targets. No one is safe. Atlas, I don’t care what your pride says, I’m helping you. Cassian,” he shrugged. “Do whatever the hell you want to do. Once I’m done with Veronica and Jaali, then I’m going to do what you’re scared to do, so you might want to handle your wife before my time is free.” Finally, motherfucking finally, he glared at Pacino.

“P, I already know where you stand but check your wife. I don’t have sympathy for those who have misplaced feelings. She stepped way out of line with what she said to Massey. To be honest, I’m really close to unleashing my wife on her, if we’re being honest. This time Krishna won’t come for her business but her life if she ever thinks it’s okay to hurt my family. I don’t care if it was her concern as a mother. There is a way to communicate your fear without hurting others. She crossed a line that makes me now have to come to you. We’re brothers all day, but Massey is my heart. I’ll do whatever it takes to protect her over your wife’s feelings, even if that means stepping to you.” I knew all about the foul shit Capone said.

Amell didn’t have to recruit Krishna to handle Capone. Oh, trust me, I have a few of my homegirls ready to tap that

ass. I loved Pacino like my blood, but his wife was going to get hers whether he liked it or not. She hurt my baby girl's feelings, so I was going to hurt hers too.

"I apologize for what my wife said. I've apologized to Massey too." Turning towards me like he heard my thoughts, Pacino said "I'm handling my wife. Trust me, she won't ever let anything else disrespectful or incorrect come out of her mouth." He could glare at me all he wanted to. It was too late. I already signed her ass-whooping report, and quite frankly I haven't cared much for Capone since she made those dry-ass vegan meatballs for Easter a few years back.

Amell looked at Dre who had a stoic look on his face. "I'm giving my condolences now because there is no saving her." Dre nodded and kept quiet.

Amell started pacing again. I looked over at Atlas and I could see the emotions on his face. Feeling my stare, he locked eyes with me, and we both felt it. An equal shared pain of disappointment. Us four alone, not including Dre, were dangerous men who had more bodies on our hands than a graveyard. However, the level of respect we shared for protecting our family. The level of respect and love we had for Mitch and Amell. To see that this is what we had come to, it hurt.

"This isn't just on you two. I take full responsibility because I'm a leader. Am I lashing out from a place of anger? Yes, and I apologize for it because it's not even the outside threats that brought me to this place of wanting to put my hands on you. Both of you brought me here. I'm so disappointed to the point that after all this shit is over and done, I want nothing to do with you, but I love y'all too damn much to live a life without you in it. When my children,

nieces, and nephews are in danger because of the lack of responsibility for our actions, I take that shit personal. This is me out of character and I'm tired." He sat down on one of the stools, resting his head in his hands.

A lone tear fell from my eye hearing him admit that. This shit shook me to my core. Being at odds with him or Atlas, I hated it more than anything. We didn't survive the things we did to get to a place where we became enemies. Too much had been sacrificed. We've been through the fucking mud, ain't no way in hell was this supposed to be our ending. Mitch was probably turning over in his grave.

"Those men y'all saw in here, I shouldn't have had to put together another team when I know what the four of us working together are capable of doing. Y'all don't think I'm tired? Don't think I want to sit at home with my wife and kids instead of coming behind you grown fools and cleaning up your messes? Cassian, I understand that you're putting together this big plan to deal with Noelani but don't forget about your kids. Atlas, yeah, I'm coming back to you. What have you done to prepare Keatyn? I can't even say you stepped back in the business because you haven't done shit, but have you prepared her to deal with managing this other version of you?" He shook his head, the waves of disappointment bounced off his shoulders in droves.

"I'm done asking. I'm done talking. If there is anybody that knows how I am, it's everyone in here. So, knowing that, why would y'all give me your ass to kiss?" He chuckled flicking his nose. When he rested the gun on his lap, we all shifted in our seats. "Because niggas are fucking selfish and don't care about nobody but themselves. You don't care about the mental strain put on me when I must clean up behind you. Let's be honest. This mess isn't mine at all. I ain't do nothing

but make twins and love on my wife, yet I'm around here dusting off my boots and guns to come save our family because you don't care. This is the last time I step in to take care of other grown men's fuck ups. Y'all don't even understand the magnitude of the consequences y'all put in motion but have the audacity to challenge me and get buck. Control this situation." He stood, placing my gun on the stool behind him, and walked out.

After he walked out, we all sat there with hung heads. If Amell wanted to light a fire under my ass, then he succeeded. I heard what he said but I also knew my brother. If he wasn't a God-fearing man I'd have no hope, but he was and that worked in my favor because Amell was a man who understood forgiveness. That really didn't mean much because he'd forgive someone and kill them in the same breath, but I couldn't lose my brother. I couldn't lose my kids.

As quickly as he left out, he came back in with a woman looking nervous. A fine thing too with the sexiest walk I have ever seen, and she was walking in sneakers. "This is Mya. She's Coco's cousin and has offered or I hope she offers to help me in getting rid of Veronica once and for all. These are my brothers." Atlas and I spoke. "That's my right-hand Pacino." He tipped his chin up to her. "And that's Dre." He waved smiling.

Now that Amell said it she looked just like Coco just a caramel short version. Amell tapped something on the keyboard and one of the monitors flashed to Coco's room inside the hospital. Of course, this man had virtual eyes on her, I wouldn't expect anything else.

Gasping with her hands to her mouth, tears quickly falling and her hand trembling, Mya finally spoke. "When you said

she was in bad shape I thought she may have a couple of broken ribs. A few scratches, but not this.” Her voice cracked as she wiped her tears.

Amell stood next to her watching the monitor that all our eyes were fixated on. I hadn’t seen Coco up until this point. Seeing her now laid out with all those tubes and wires, I had to look away. “She’s resting. Sleeping and fighting. She’ll pull through.”

“She deserves justice,” Mya whispered.

“I offered you protection. Out of everyone that I asked a favor of, the one I asked of you is probably the most dangerous. You have access to certain places and people that I don’t without causing eyes to wonder. Besides that, you have a lot to lose but also a lot to gain.” Amell was going to tell it exactly how it is.

“I know...” She covered her sob. “I’ll do it. I owe Coco that much.” I think we all sighed in relief.

“Do you know where Veronica is holding the gala this year?” What gala was he talking about?

She shook her head finally turning towards him. “No. She’s keeping that tight lipped until the day of the gala. Once it’s been given to me, I’ll send you the location.” She released a shaky breath. “I’m scared, Amell. I don’t...I know what she did to Coco’s mother and now look at her.” Her arms wrapped around herself as she hung her head and silently cried.

He nodded in understanding. “You may not find hope in my promise but understand that I will do everything in my power to make sure you head back to California and live a life that doesn’t result in you having to look over your shoulder. That, you have my word.”

“Aye, you got four of the most ruthless men in the world standing behind you, in front of you, and on the side of you. Trust me, we’re not going to let anyone do anything to you.” This woman didn’t know us from a can of paint, but I knew if Amell brought her here to help then she had to mean something to Coco. I wanted to reassure her that her actions weren’t going to be done in vain.

Raising her head and clasping her hands under her chin, she nodded with a small hopeful smile. “I’m ready.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Noelani

I WASTED my best years being married to Cassian Kalmin. Besides making me a mother, something I never wanted, he served me no purpose whatsoever. I wonder how he'd feel knowing that I settled by marrying him? Knowing that I lowered my worth and became like those dirty foot ghetto chicks he used to messed with and thought having a baby would change him, change us. When I made him a father, he put me last in line. Competing with my kids for my husband's attention never crossed my mind until he put me in the position to.

“We need to start looking for another location. We've outgrown this one and I want something closer to Miami. Can you get on it, please?” Honey and I were in my office going over our weekly schedule. “I also want to hire more women.” Overlooking the main floor of my warehouse from my office, my lady parts started to tingle seeing the bodies below working under my command. I went from being a psychiatrist to running the biggest drug and gun cartel in the South. It felt good to be unstoppable.

“Honey, are you listening?”

Lifting her head from her phone she frowned. “Did you say something?”

Out of all my staff, Honey had been the most consistent outside of Sixx. She was my most prized possession. Our time of working together started when I married Dominique. At least I got something good out of marrying him.

There was no need for me to come into the office every day. There was no need for me to not be home with those kids I birthed. Truth of the matter is I found more satisfaction being here than at the home that had my name on the deed. I found purpose in being here. I felt wanted.

Taking a seat next to her on the couch, I smiled seeing her cheeks blush from whatever she read on her phone. “Who is he, Honey?”

Her head popped up quickly. “What do you mean?” She slid her phone under her thigh laughing. “Okay. Okay.” Behind her glasses, her hazel eyes sparkled with mirth. Shifting my way and getting comfortable, she clapped her hands and started talking. “His name is Rolland, and he is everything, Noe.” She closed her eyes swooning. Gosh, I missed that feeling.

Missed the feeling of getting chills randomly during your day when a single thought of your lover crossed your mind. Missed the flowers and candy. Missed the weekly thought out planned dates. Missed the soft kisses on my neck when he passed by me in the kitchen. Missed the forehead kisses he gave before going to bed. Missed dancing to 90’s music in the middle of the day. Missed tossing my head back in laughter hearing a corny joke.

I missed my husband romancing me.

“And he loves me so much. Anyway, I have a question. How did you know that you were in love? How did you know that he was the one?” Out of all the things we could talk about, Honey really wanted to go there.

Whew...okay.

“Uh, well.” I cleared my throat trying to relax my shoulders. It took a minute for my mind to drift back eons ago but when I did and I saw his face, my heart’s reflection brought a sweet smile to my lips. “He actually chased me for months.” Her eyes widen as she began to get lost in my story. “Girl, he and Pacino would watch me at this little café I’d go to on my days off from the prison I used to counsel at.” Man, those were the good ole days. “I took it as him being shy and didn’t know how to approach me. I mean he’s this tall, beast of a man dripping in power and authority.” The chills coating my skin made me moan.

“Damn. That’s some powerful shit.” Honey fell out laughing while I stood and wrapped my arms around myself, walking around my office cloaked in the best warmth ever.

“Seriously, Honey.” I licked my lips reminiscing of the first time I heard his burly timber against my ears. God! That man is so damn powerful without trying. “When he found the courage to speak, he and Pacino asked if I’d be a part of the cartel. Now, I’m not a girl who turns down her future when it’s staring her right in the face. Working beside him for so many years, seeing him become this God, oh my goodness.” I moaned rubbing my hands up and down my neck.

“Seeing him kill, seeing him rule. How he goes above and beyond to protect me. How he felt comfortable enough to trust

me with his darkest secrets compared to those closest to him. I fell in love instantly.”

“Wait...” Honey scratched her brow. “I thought y’all met at the movies or something like that?”

Hmph, she needed to pay attention to the question *she* asked.

She asked how I knew I was in love and how did I know he was the one. *Never* did she ask *who* I’d fallen in love with.

“That’s the story we told to keep our true romance a secret.” I winked at her making her giggle. “Trust me, our love story started writing itself all those years ago but...”

Honey and I both shuffled to my large window overlooking the warehouse floor where the voices were coming from. My heart stopped. The dead butterflies that once fluttered whenever he was near, began stretching and fluttering around seeing him stand in the middle of the warehouse dressed in all black. My, how I’d love to be the fabric of his shirt stretched across his muscles. Or be the denim of his jeans. Even the steel toe boots on his feet.

I wanted to be the clothes he wore, the washcloth used to wash his long day away. The fork in his mouth when he ate. The cup he sipped from. I wanted to be whatever he needed me to be. I *never* wanted him to *stop* needing me.

“Oh, did you know that Amell and Cassian were stopping by, and who are all those men with them?” Honey asked the questions I didn’t have the words for.

Like always, Amell stole my ability to function whenever he came close to me, making it impossible to focus on anything or anyone other than him. I hadn’t even paid

attention to recognize that Cassian was with him. I had tunnel vision on one man and one man only.

“I’m not sure. Go out there and see what he needs while I use the bathroom really quick.” I need to change my panties. One glance at the man and they were drenched.

“Cool.”

After she left out, I ran to my desk in search of my compact mirror. Granted I stayed ready, but I wanted to look my best. Once I was okay with what I saw, I re-glossed my lips, spritzed on perfume, and headed to my door. “What the hell are y’all doing here?” I hissed seeing Anthony and Glen.

Pushing past Anthony and me, Glen glowered down at me. “Marlin is still missing, Noelani.” Could he be any louder?

Shoving him and his fool of a cousin in my office, I looked down the hall to make sure no one was near before closing my door. “And I’m supposed to care that he is missing because?”

That day Cassian barged in my meeting with his flour covered face, bonnet, and apron on, these were two of the three light-skinned stooges, as he called them, who boldly sat unmoved until he shot his gun. Working with them had been the biggest mistake of my life. They were all clingy and whined more than my damn children. I never met such needy men in my life.

“What do you mean are you supposed to care?” Glen jumped in my face, nose flaring, and eyes bulged. “He’s missing after you sent him on that messed up mission to clean up your problem. The problem has been taken care of but where the hell is he?”

Stepping closer until we were chest to chest and nose to nose, I lashed out right back. “If he went missing that’s his

fault because last I checked my problem was still breathing.” His Chris Brown lookalike ass shut up then. “Yeah, he failed at what I asked of him to do. You all failed because I gave you one job a piece that has yet to get done. Get the fuck out my face.” I sneered at him, stepping back and looking at Anthony. “You want to be my right hand but can’t control your men? What type of leadership is that, Anthony?”

Anthony, Glen, and Marlin were three cousins I hired about eight months ago. Honey managed to get us a trusted dealer on FAU and UM campuses. Cassian would’ve tried to scalp me if he’d known that I expanded our drug business to college campuses, but oh well. There was a demand for it, and I had the supply. My dealers weren’t rookies by far being that they’ve been the connect for their college peers for the past four years. They were three professional college students that were every bit of annoying and clingy. Cousins who acted more like my husband than my associates.

In the beginning I let Honey handle all the transactions and communication. As much as I was involved, my involvement never stepped outside of the warehouse unless I needed to. After three months of having them on my payroll, I saw how they increased my profit three times more than I expected so I took a trip to their near campus apartment to surprise them with a token of my appreciation for making me richer.

Nothing special other than a few bottles of Ace and pistols from my German supplier. By their excitement, you would’ve thought I gave them the world. They were just happy that someone saw them as more than lame drug dealers. Their insecurities, I fed off them. It became the reason fueling my blood lust because I knew they’d be very valuable to me when I needed them and sure enough, they proved me right.

“Glen, chill.” The two cousins shared an intense stare off. I couldn’t help but smile. They went from being nerds to fine, handsome men that were getting pussy by the pounds now. “Step out while I talk to, Noelani.” Glen sucked his teeth like the true bitch he was but stomped out like Anthony ordered him to.

“He has one more time to disrespect me, Anthony.”

Shaking his head, he stepped close to me until our lips kissed. “I’ll take care of him.” Silencing my next words with his tongue, Anthony kissed me like he missed me, and I suppose he did. “Where are you staying? Why didn’t you call me when he kicked you out? Did he put his hands on you?” He inspected my face and parts of my body that weren’t clothed.

“What? No, he didn’t touch me.”

Cassian was a lot of things, but an abuser isn’t one of them.

I messed up by having sex with Anthony.

All of them flirted with me but I never took any of them seriously. Though I wanted out of marriage, they were a complete downgrade and a complete insult compared to my husband. However, one late night when I was here working late. Looking over paperwork and having a pity party because the man I wanted didn’t want me and the one I did have wasn’t paying me any attention, he came by to drop off my share of his profits and the bottle of Moscato I finished by myself made him look four times as good and worth the danger of sleeping with.

Surprisingly, his young self fucked me better than I had been fucked in a long time. Cassian would forever be my best lover, but Anthony was running a close second. The next day I

blamed the alcohol and told him it was a mistake that should've never happened. He didn't believe me, constantly throwing sexual innuendos at me until he demanded that I ride his face, and the rest is history.

His clinginess reached levels that I always wanted the man I loved to have for me. His attention to my body and needs, I craved it but not from the man giving. I put his life in jeopardy every day but that was his choice. He knew I was married and to whom. Our little secret, knowing the deadly risk, made the sex ten times better. A complete high.

Remembering that Cassian and Amell was here, I quickly cut his visit short. "Listen, we'll talk later. Right now, I need you to leave. Take care of your cousin and I'll investigate what happened with Marlin. You're supposed to make my life easier remember." I pecked his lips one last time before opening my door. "I'll call you later."

Licking his lips tasting the lingering of my flavor, he winked. "I'll be waiting."

Once he was gone and out of sight, I exhaled and prepared myself to deal with my husband. Good thing Anthony and Glen came through the side of the warehouse. Last thing I needed was to have to explain why they were in my office. *Oh shit.* "Oh my God. You scared me." The minute I turned around Cassian stood right there.

Ughhh.

It's always the wrong brother popping up at the wrong time.

Cassian had me shook for many reasons. One, he moved like a silent ninja, never making his presence known until he wanted you to know he was there. Two, I wasn't sure what he

heard or saw. Third, where was Amell? Did both overhear my conversation?

His silence disturbed my soul. I mean, he really didn't have to say anything. Cassian was up to something, and I didn't like it. "How are you doing, Noelani?"

A low sigh of annoyance fluttered past my lips hearing his question. It took a few seconds for my cotton mouth to go away so I could try to formulate words. "I'm well. Working hard, missing my children, trying to remain sane through my storms." I shrugged, putting on my best boss face. "I'm doing what I do best, handling business." Unlike him.

"Good. Good." His legs gapped wide; hands clasped in front of him. Sometimes, when he wanted to be, he could channel his brother's dark enigmatic aura so easily that I started to crave the desire to explore him again, explore his mind. "I know I told you that you weren't allowed on the compound, but you can move back. A few issues are going on and I need you there to take care of the kids while I handle business. I had one of the houses on my block set up for you. Come back home, Noe."

Wait.

Did he just say come back and take care of *his* kids?

Was I Susie Homemaker to him?

"Thank you, Cassian. I appreciate it. I really miss my children so I'm excited to be back near them." I'd say whatever he needed to hear to show him that I was thankful to be near ...my children. Be back near Amell.

His words made every organ in my body dance, but his eyes were so unnerving and devilish that I felt guilt for an unknown crime I didn't know I committed. "Also, whatever

you want out of your office, take it with you, box it up, have Sixx or Honey pack it, I don't care."

My heart dropped to my toes.

"You're no longer involved in the organization in any fashion. All our associates, business partners, and so forth have been made aware and have been told to *not* affiliate themselves with you in any capacity if they still want me to be their supplier. Whatever hobbies you decide to do," he shrugged not at all caring that he had reduced my emotions to nothingness. "That's your business, not mine."

This can't be happening.

This couldn't be happening.

It damn sure wasn't going to be happening.

"I'm...I'm...I'm not...I don't understand." I rubbed my temples trying to process the hailstorm he threw my way.

"You understand everything I said, Noelani. I'm not the one you can bullshit so don't try it. You have an hour to get your stuff and leave. A little word of advice." He leaned in close to my ear. "You don't want to be here when that hour has run out." He was so cold and his tone seemed malicious.

How could he tell me that I was welcomed back on the compound but also forced out of my position in the same breath?

Who did Cassian think he was?

"I'm not sure what is going on here but *trying* to force me out of the organization that *I* built," I cackled loudly at that. This had to be the funniest joke ever. "You really think that you can remove me from something that I built?" Boldly, I stepped close until my breast pressed against his stone chest.

Curving his top lip into what I'm assuming was supposed to be a smirk, his calmness almost broke my hard facade. "What is it that you built, Noelani? Hmm? The only thing that you built is a strong back for all the times you laid down with my enemy." Wow. That was low. "You must've forgotten the conversation that took place right before Dominique died. All this shit is mine and has been mine and my brothers since before you fucked the man that killed your family. Oh, you want a prize for being our eyes and ears over the years when it came to our shipping freights? When was the last time we used you for that? Since you had your ass locked away in Columbia. We didn't need you when he sent you away and didn't need you when you came back."

Leaning down until his face was mere inches from my mine, his demeanor remained the same. "Everything that happens goes through me. Merging with territories out in Central Florida and by the Panhandle, you thought that was you, huh? Nah, *wife*. It was never you. I put those deals in motion and let you smile in people's faces thinking you called the shots. Every time you left a meeting, I got called to work out the details and negotiate rates. Don't get beside yourself. All you've done is worn out the soles of your heels prancing around *my* warehouse micromanaging *my* staff. Your role is equivalent to a call center manager – of minimal value to me. Humble yourself and leave. You're already on borrowed time." One last glare and he left me fuming wanting to pound my fist into his back.

Cassian granting me access back to the compound wasn't his brightest idea. He wanted me to sit at home and be the perfect wife and mother. He wanted me to cheer him on while he took credit for my hard work, then I hope he was prepared for having everything taken from him too.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Massey

“YOU WOULDN’T BELIEVE how *Senior Year of Grown-Ish* started.” I chuckled thinking of the shocker I got watching Aaron and Zoe get married. “Our favorite couple is married, and Doug is still king jerk. Borderline asshole now because of the way he treats Jazz.” My fingers played with the band of my Apple Watch. “I umm, I’m staying with Kassidy now.” Looking up from my lap, I smiled at my mom. Besides them removing her breathing tube, there wasn’t much change in her condition. She was still in a coma. Yesterday they closed her skull since the swelling had gone down and her brain was back to normal size.

“She’s such a sweet person and caring. The total opposite of her aunt.” I snorted rolling my eyes. This morning before Kassidy dropped me off to see my mom, I had her stop by the compound so I could see my siblings. I knew Papa wasn’t there. Ari made sure to give me daily updates. My little sisters cried when they saw me. Tai called herself trying to beat me up because I’ve been away for so long.

That made me feel like crap.

I was punishing them for something they didn't do.

After promising to come back this weekend, I went to Uncle Amell's house to see Cashton. I managed not to cry when I saw my sisters, but I broke down when I saw him. He'd changed so much in such a small amount of time and not for the good. Though his eyes widened and were bright, just a little, he had this darkness over him that gave me chills. Truth be told, the more he and I sat on the porch talking, I couldn't help but feel like I was having a conversation with a younger version of Uncle Amell.

I felt responsible for his transformation. Felt responsible that he had to resort to beating Papa with a bat because he wanted to help me. Felt responsible that he boldly looked me in my face and told me that he never wanted to speak to his parents again.

Before I left Aunty Krishna told me that he was going to be okay, and that Uncle Amell was doing everything in his power to make sure of it. That relaxed me a lot. A whole lot.

"If you were awake right now you probably wouldn't let me go but tonight Daisey Jean and I are Kassidy's dates to her sorority's gala." I looked into my mom's face to see if maybe I'd get a reaction. "Uncle Amell is aware of it. Pete is going so we'll be okay." Surprisingly I was nervous about going.

All week long I heard nothing but excitement from Kassidy and DJ. DJ was super excited to be around college people, mainly the boys. In her words, she was ready to bounce back and find a Greek or football player to make her new boo-thing. She's been stalking the UM players roster since I told her what school party we were going to. You'd think she'd learned her lesson by now from messing with older guys. Kassidy talked nonstop about it and expressed how

much fun it was going to be but now that the day had come, I was apprehensive about going.

“I’ll make sure to take plenty of pictures so when you do wake up and realize that I went to a college party, you won’t be so upset because I looked pretty and had a good time.” I laughed a little until it hit me that my mom wouldn’t be there to help me get dressed. She wouldn’t be there when I got my hair done and or helped me with my makeup. “I miss you so much, mom.” Taking her hand in mine, I kissed her healing cuts and bruises on her knuckles.

Pulling my vibrating phone out of my pocket, I sighed reading Cassidy’s text telling me that she was downstairs with Daisey Jean. We had two hours to get ready before the gala started. I really wish I told her I didn’t want to go but I felt like I had to since she’d done so much for me in such a short amount of time. I didn’t even know what my dress looked like. She took our measurements and told me that she’d take care of everything else.

Standing, I leaned over until my cheek rested against on hers. “I love you so much. I’ll be back tomorrow to tell you all about my night.” I kissed her cheek. “Please wake up for me.”

Walking out of her room, I gulped after seeing the tall, hulking figure stand from the chair outside of my mom’s room. Stretching to his full height and shaking out his shoulders, his muscles relaxing showing how his intense two-a-day training was beefing up his body, I leaned against the closed door and took him in.

His locs were freshly twisted in an up do that did nothing but make his distinctive features more handsome. His eyes were low and red from being out in the sun all day. Cocky in his true nature, his thick pink and brown lips lifted in a

knowing smirk showing off those golds that were going to be the reason I developed a heart condition.

My eyes lowered to the thickness of his neck, and I swear it felt like my hair follicles were on fire. His ripped sleeveless shirt showed off all his Luciano genes and tattoos. It still amazed me that his parents allowed him to freely ink his body whenever he wanted to. Most of his body art had meaning to his family, his favorite scriptures, and his love for football.

His joggers turned my entire mind carnal and had my heart playing double dutch in my chest. “Good to know you still like what you see.” He snorted with arrogance.

I missed my boyfriend.

I missed my PJ.

We barely talked since I left his house and all of that was on me. My feelings were still hurt by what his mom said, and I just wanted to enjoy feeling my lungs inhale and exhale without being consumed with his air.

“How long have you been here?” I removed my vibrating phone and rolled my eyes seeing it was Daisey Jean calling me.

She was calling and Hayden was texting me. After everything went down with PJ and his family, I wasn’t in the mood to talk to anybody. And as far as Hayden goes, I decided to *not* entertain whatever he wanted to talk about. He had to accept that he let me go and I was with PJ now.

“Long enough.” His voice lulled me into a relaxed mood. The silkiest baritone with touches of the ocean’s depths. “I don’t appreciate you being in your feelings this long, Massey.” He snarled. A coy smile feathered my lips seeing him frown and his mouth dip into an even deeper snarl.

Licking my lips, I nodded breaking eye contact for a second. "I'm sorry." That's all I had to offer that was PG-rated. Lately my thoughts concerning PJ were all carnal and way too advanced for my teenaged mind. I wanted to ask him if I could kiss him until his bruised feelings felt better but I knew not to poke the beast.

"When I asked you to be my girl, I didn't ask you to be *our* girl, Massey. It's me and you, love." He waved a hand between him and I. I swear this door was the best kept secret right now. I heard exactly what he said and so did every other part of my body making my knees knock and legs turn to jelly. "I love my mom but she doesn't run shit over here."

Oh, damn. He cussed. He was big mad.

"You need time to get out your feelings, that's cool, but don't ignore me. I don't like being ignored by *you*." Snarl on his face, bunched brows, yet his voice was unexplainably gentle and soothing. "Now, come and give me a kiss." He didn't have to tell me twice. I practically threw myself into his arms and kissed him with almost a weeks' worth of passion.

Gripping my chin, he pulled back making me pout. "I'm for real, Massey. Don't ignore me like you did. I understand you were upset but that ain't have nothing to do with us. Making me suffer for other people's mistakes ain't cool at all." He pecked my lips.

Wrapping my arms tighter around his neck, I rested my forehead against his. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again. Do you forgive me...ewww PJ." I pushed his head back when he started licking my cheek. I hated when he did that. He said I tasted like caramel and his tongue felt way too good to sound so nasty.

Placing me back on my feet, he tapped my nose. “Yeah, I forgive you. Where do you wanna go eat? I know you’re hungry.”

“I actually have plans tonight.” I sighed. “Kassidy is downstairs to pick me up. DJ and I are going to her sorority’s gala tonight.” I really didn’t want to go. Something about it unsettled my stomach and I’d much rather spend the rest of my day with him.

“A gala huh?” There goes his tongue licking his juicy lips again. “What does your dress look like? You better send me some pictures. I even want a video of you.” Taking my hand in his, he gave me one last peck before leading us to the elevator. “What time is it over? Hit me up so I can come check you out.”

Now that got me excited.

To be all dressed up. Looking and smelling good. Okay, he was getting me excited. I couldn’t wait for him to see me all dolled up.

“I’d like that. Maybe you can pick me up after I’ve spun around the dancefloor and took enough pictures to satisfy Kassidy.” I chuckled to myself thinking of how overly excited she’s been all week long. She even took me to the nail shop, got my legs and underarms waxed for the first time. Though I always looked at Luna as the big sister I never had, Kassidy was coming in second.

“Hurry up and kiss your man. We’re having a hot girl night tonight.” Kassidy yelled as soon as we walked through the hospital’s sliding glass doors. She kept beeping the horn, turned up her music, and started dancing along with Daisey Jean.

While I was laughing at their craziness, my boyfriend, on the other hand, kept looking between them and Pete, who was parked right behind her. “Your uncle is having him go to the party with you, right?” The way he flicked his nose and sniffed, mean mugging the hell out of Cassidy, had me perplexed and made that weird feeling that I’ve been having all day come back full force.

Scratching my brow, I nodded. “Yeah. That’s the only way I can go. Is...is something not okay?” I searched his eyes hoping that if he felt the same weird bad vibe I’ve been feeling that he’d tell me.

“As long as Pete is there then I’m fine. I’ll pick you and DJ up when it’s over so make sure you call me.” Though he kissed me and even squeezed my little booty, his eyes weren’t on me but mugging Cassidy.

“Keep your phone close.” I kissed him and took the short but long walk to her car.

“Are you ready to party?” Cassidy all but screamed in my face. “Girl, I can’t wait for tonight. We’re going to have so much fun.” She pulled off, yapping her gums, and my eyes were trained on PJ in the side view mirror as he stood there watching us until we were out of view.

“Thank you so much for getting me out the house. I was becoming so depressed sitting on the couch watching Hallmark movies with my granny.” DJ looked so happy compared to the last time I saw her. She was scheduled to have an abortion in two weeks. Her granny was taking her, and she asked me to go for support. I quickly said yes.

“Here, pop this bottle. Let’s turn up.”

I jumped at the heaviness tossed in my lap. Holding it up in my hands I frowned reading the label. It was a bottle of Belaire. Granted my mom would let me have a glass of wine with her every blue moon as well as my aunts. Papa even let me and AJ smoke with him a few times. His motto was that he'd prefer we did it with him and not with fake friends who might've laced the blunt.

But this...

It felt wrong and weird for her to offer me a whole bottle of liquor. Did she forget that DJ and I were minors? What if we got pulled over?

She had no cups and apparently, I was moving too slow. When we pulled up to a red light, she popped the top and took it to the head. "Damn, that tastes so good." She burped, handing the bottle to me. "Go ahead. I won't tell your Papa." She winked turning up the music. Pursing my lips together, I made it seem like I was turning the hell up when I really wasn't drinking at all.

"I want a swig." DJ snatched the bottle out of my hands. When she saw me looking at her like she done lost her mind, she shrugged and kept drinking. "Ain't like I'm keeping it. It's going to be killed in a week or so anyway."

Wow.

Just wow.

We got on the Turnpike, and I slouched down in my seat wanting to cry. I felt so anxious, so overwhelmed and I didn't know why. Pete was following right behind us, but something kept telling me to text Uncle Amell and tell him that I didn't want to go anymore. As much as I was happy about the change of scenery, I just didn't feel good about it.

“Why...why are we at Papa’s event property?” I sat up in my seat taking in all the people moving about as we pulled around the circular driveway.

“My aunt said I could use it for the event tonight. Come on. I can’t wait to show you all the décor and your dresses.” Kassidy barely put the car in park before she hopped out.

Knowing that we were at Papa’s Palm Beach Garden’s mansion kinda made me breathe easier...kinda.

Flowing behind her, we stepped inside, and my eyes ballooned in awe of the transformation. I’ve only been here a handful of times and it has never looked this grand. I guess the colors of the night were emerald and a cream pearl. Elegant, classy, but sexy. There were balloon arches, silk drapes, single candle posts, the whole shebang. I felt like I was walking into a royal ball for the royal queen and king. I’ve seen red lights and many other LED fluorescent colors but never a soft easter green. It made the atmosphere feel so grown-ish.

There were servants dressed in the same colors of the gala. A whole staff of melanin. We walked up the grand spiral staircase and my mouth had yet to shut. DJ was just as in awe as I was. There were three levels, and the second level was just as jaw dropping as the first. Once we reached the third level my heart started to race, and my palms became sweaty.

I felt so out of place taking in all the beautiful women walking around in emerald sheer robes and matching fur mules. They were nice, waving and smiling. The few that Kassidy did introduce me to were extra friendly and kissed me on my cheek. All the women were different in their shades and body types. All confident in their skin.

I loved it.

I began to wonder if all sororities were like this.

“Will there be any frat guys here?” DJ practically bounced in the makeup chair. We were in one of the many bedrooms getting our makeup and hair done. Even the shower I took felt like I was getting bathed by diamond crystal hot water pellets.

Giggling and more than tipsy, Kassidy kept taking selfies. “Not frat brothers per se. The crowd tonight is mixed. Our Madame is also hosting a welcoming cocktail hour for a few new city officials. Either way, we’ll have a ball.”

Our hair was professionally styled in a topknot bun with pearl hair pins. Subtle makeup highlighting our features. Lips enhanced with a mauve gloss. By the time my face had been beat and hair laid, I was once again a nervous wreck. Then I made the feeling worse when I looked out the window and saw all the cars pulling up and man after man got out. Unlike all the melanin staff, the men varied in nationality like the women I passed in the hallways.

“Let’s get you dressed.” Walking up behind me, topless and comfortable, Kassidy laid the ivory satin gown on the bed. “You’ll notice that everyone is wearing the same thing. Tonight, you’re one of us.”

The gown DJ and I wore was a Galvan London’s Whiteley silk-satin gown. Fabric from lustrous ivory silk-satin that skimmed over my body, creating a timeless and flattering silhouette to my young curves. A cowl neck supported by delicate straps that crossed over at the lowest part of my back. High splits up to my curved hips. Bedazzled stone stiletto heels on my freshly pedicured feet that I wasn’t sure I’d be able to walk in all night.

It’s one thing to play around in my mom’s shoes but these heels were the real deal. MIKIMOTO Akoya cultured pearl

bracelets, necklace, and earrings. Walked into a scent cloud of Maison Francis Kurkdjian Baccarat Rouge 540 Extrait De Parfum.

The whole experience freaked me all the way out. Kassidy and DJ kept having to calm me down, telling me that this was normal, but it didn't feel normal. Why was all this needed for a sorority party? Who were we trying to impress? PJ wasn't here and I damn sure wasn't about to entertain those grown men I saw pulling up.

Speaking of PJ, I texted him with my location and begged him to come and get me in an hour. I also sent Uncle Amell the same text and asked him if it was okay for PJ to come and get me. He'd yet to respond.

"Come on. We're late and I don't feel like hearing Madame's mouth." Grabbing DJ and me by the wrist, Kassidy practically dragged us out the room and down the stairs to the first floor.

I guess it was a blessing that part of playing volleyball since I was six is that I mastered the footwork and had strong ankles because these damn heels had me wobbling and sliding but I hadn't fallen on my face yet. DJ was another story. Already tipsy, probably drunk from finishing the bottle of Belaire, she laughed her heart out slipping and sliding on the marble floors.

We fell in line with the other girls who were walking into one of the large meeting spaces. Stepping inside, my lips parted questioningly as I took in the mauve tufted high back chairs that were strategically placed in a crescent moon shaped circle. Kassidy led us to the last set of chairs on the right side, beckoning me to sit while she stood behind me. I kept blinking and taking deep breaths.

I wanted my mom.

I didn't want to be here.

Unable to shake this strong urge to cry, my legs kept shaking under my gown. I looked around at the other women's faces, my mind froze. A lot of the women weren't women but girls. Young girls that looked to be my age or younger. The women that I had seen when we came in weren't sitting in the chairs like me. They were standing beside the girls like Cassidy.

Squeezing my hand, DJ leaned in whispering, "This is so amazing, Massey. For the first time in my life I understand what it means and feels like to be a bad bitch."

"Relax," Cassidy whispered in her ear. I almost jumped out of my skin when she touched my shoulder.

A bell rung and silence covered the room. The doors opened and several older women dressed as elegant as we were stepped inside. "Oh my God," I whispered, heart pounding. Veronica, my mother's grandmother, was the last one to walk in.

"I wonder who she is. She's so beautiful." If only DJ knew.

I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be here.

This was when I was supposed to call Pete and tell him to get me the hell out of here. This is when Papa or Uncle Amell got my 911 alert and came to my rescue but of course I left my phone upstairs in the bathroom. Cassidy had dragged me out before I could grab it and I know from DJ's empty hands that she didn't have hers.

Veronica had yet to spot me, and I wanted it to stay that way. Dressed in a black version of the dresses we wore; she circled the room taking in each face. I really wanted to leave

but my body and mind were still in shock. Finally, her eyes and mine met. I never knew a person could smile so wide. I was terrified and she didn't seem the least bit of surprised.

Raising her hands, she ordered, "Pearls, please stand." Seemingly all at once each of the girls stood, DJ included, with their shoulders squared. Kassidy nudged me to stand but I didn't want to. I wasn't a Pearl or whatever this was.

"Stand up." She gritted angrily in my ear, gripping my arm hard pulling me up.

Wobbling to my feet, I snatched my arm out of her grip. "I want to leave."

Right before my eyes she transformed into a completely different person. Her genuine and warm smile morphed into this conniving smirk. "Shut up and listen. Stop being a damn brat."

Yeah, it was time for us to leave. I needed to either get outside and find Pete or get to my phone. Thankfully I knew all the emergency numbers by heart. DJ was so fascinated by everything that she wasn't paying attention to what was happening. She probably thought they were about to induct her into their sisterhood when I doubt that was the furthest thing from the truth.

Turning back to Veronica, I listened to her speech, "I congratulate each of you for standing boldly in your truth. For wanting to be powerhouse women and doing what is necessary to have a life of elegance. A life of plentiful provision. These crowns not only represent you becoming a Pearl, but they represent your power as a woman. No one can or will ever be able to walk in your shoes. You are unlike any other woman on this earth. Envied by the lowest peasant and imitated by

those who can't strap the buckle to your heels. Remember that. Rise in that. Congratulations.”

The older Pearls, who I learned were referred to as Lady Pearls, came in the room with silver trays. In the middle of the trays sat a single diamond and pearl crown. My mouth became dry, and I started shaking. The crown was identical to the one I saw in my mom's closet and under her bed.

“I so wanna be a Pearl. Don't you, Massey?” DJ squealed lowly while I stood there frightened.

“Pearls, place your crowns on your head.” All the girls did as they were told, even DJ got a crown. I thought for a moment she was going to cry or faint. “I'll do the honor, Kassidy.” Politely taking the crown from her, Veronica stood before me looking like she was on the verge of crying.

The corner of her eyes crinkled with pride. My eyes passed beyond her shoulders, and I took in the faces of all the girls. Some of them smiled so bright that I had to blink from its brightness. Others remained stoic and stone faced.

The heaviness of the crown made me stumble a bit. “You are absolutely beautiful, Massey. Such a rare beauty.” The way she held my chin and turned it from side to side, analyzing me, I felt a little woozy. Eyes trained on me, she stepped back speaking, “Pearls, Lady Jessica will guide you to the backyard where all of the fun is happening. Have a glass of wine. Eat a few hors d'oeuvres.”

After the last group of girls walked out, she looped her arm through mine, guiding me out the room and through the doors leading to the equally extravagantly decorated backyard. “I'm truly sorry for what happened to your mother. I've sent flowers daily.” She patted my shoulder as if that would soothe the horror screaming inside of my chest.

“Wait...” I turned to look for DJ. “My friend. I need to wait for my friend.”

“Here I am.” DJ and her fit of drunk giggles finally popped up. She took one look at Veronica, which turned into a double look and a gaped open mouth. “Oh my goodness. You are such a...I don’t know what to call it but I’m happy that I get to be a Pearl for the night. Oh, I’m Daisey Jean by the way.” I wish she would stop talking and pay attention to what was going on around her.

DJ’s parents needed a good talking to like the one my parents gave me. Talks and daily reminders revolved around building her self-esteem so she wouldn’t get fooled by crooks like Veronica.

Hearing DJ’s compliments made Veronica’s eyes glow. “You’re more than welcomed.” Taking her by the hand, she sized DJ up like she was a new outfit on the display rack. “Daisey Jean, you are uniquely gorgeous. I absolutely love your freckles. Come, both of you. I want to show you around and introduce you to some of my friends.”

Walking around the open yard with Veronica smiling and waving to all...all the men that couldn’t stop looking at us as if we were rare fresh meat in a meat market. “There are so many people I want to introduce you to.” She kept talking and I couldn’t find the will to ask questions, to scream for help, to do anything. I felt like I was drugged and under her command. I stopped paying attention to DJ. She was so ditzy in the head.

“Ah, yes. Massey, I want you to meet a very special guest of mine.” Veronica stopped and tapped the broad shoulders of a man with long locs with blonde tips. He was super tall and when he turned around smiling, well sheesh. He was fine as hell compared to these other old farts walking around. Kissing

Veronica's cheek, the handsome chocolate man winked at me, and instantly he became ugly. Again, that weird fear bubbling in my gut hit me so hard that I stumbled.

“Jaali, this is my granddaughter Massey and her lovely friend Daisey Jean. Ladies, this Jaali Kamau from Kenya.” If I didn't know any better, I'd say that she was crushing on the man. Not that I blame her because he's handsome. So handsome that if the circumstances were different, I might've vetted him for my mom.

Yeah, she had Mr. Dre, but his future wasn't bright considering he'd yet to see about her.

“Wow. She's even more beautiful than the pictures, Veronica.” What pictures was he talking about? “It's such an honor to meet both of you. Massey, your grandmother tells me that you're quit the athlete.” I became stiff as a board when he leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Your beauty is something I'll forever cherish, that I promise.” I squeezed my thighs and knees together, silently praying that God wouldn't let me pee on myself in front of all these people.

That's how grossed out and uncomfortable he made me feel. Then when he pulled back, winked, and licked his lips slow and seductive, it made my skin crawl. This time I didn't hide my teary eyes because I wanted them all to see and know that I wasn't at all okay with whatever was going on here. Feeling trembling in my hand, I looked down at mine and DJ's clasped hands realizing it was her. She mirrored my same fear but worst.

“Hey, DJ, are you okay?” I whispered.

Never taking her eyes off Jaali, she whispered back, “We have to get out of here.”

Duh.

Finally, her drunkenness wore off and she was thinking straight.

“No shit sherlock.” I gritted harshly.

“No, Massey.” Her voice quivered as her eyes became watery. “*You* have to get out of here like right now.”

I was confused as hell. “What? I’m not leaving you. We’re going to leave together.”

Pulling my eyes from his to Veronica’s I silently pleaded for her to get us away from him. Trying to understand what was happening, I felt like I was losing my mind. What pictures and why was she bragging to these people about me? What did he mean by he’ll cherish my beauty forever?

Sensing my uneasiness, Veronica patted my hand and pinched my cheek. That’s all she had to offer? Did she not see this grown ass man staking a claim to me? “She is such the outstanding young lady that’s going places. Speaking of going places, Massey, Jaali would like to speak to you privately. He wants to offer you a scholarship.”

Scholarship my ass.

I wasn’t going to speak with this perverted man who boldly and disgustingly undressed me with his eyes. I recognized the look because I saw all the men in my family have it towards their wives when they were being fresh and nasty. PJ had a similar look when he transformed into this Vedo mixed with a New Edition singer. Yeah, we listened to a lot of 90’s R&B.

Regardless, the look was disgusting, and he shouldn’t be looking at me that way.

Pushing me to stand closer to the man, damn near chest to chest, Veronica kept urging us to be alone. “Jaali knows where the private study is. Why don’t you...”

“She’ll meet you in the study after we powder our noses in the lady’s room.” DJ gripped my hand tight. “I promise to bring her to you myself. My early celebration has run through me.” She giggled, making sure to look both Jaali and Veronica in the eye. Maybe she wasn’t as ditzy as I thought.

Jaali must’ve loved what she said. “Perfect. I’ll grab us something to drink and meet you there. Veronica, come and walk with me.” Unlike Jaali who believed whatever DJ said, Veronica, on the other hand, her eyes were so piercing. I held my breath waiting for her to interject but she didn’t.

As soon as they were out of sight, DJ and I rushed back inside the house until we found a bathroom. The minute she closed the door, I felt myself starting to hyperventilate. DJ kept pacing and my mind was trying to form a plan to get upstairs unseen so we could get our phones. Pete...yes, Pete was here. I needed to get to Pete.

“DJ, we have to get...”

“I know him, Massey. I know that Jaali man.” Like a rushing river, tears rushed out of her eyes. “He doesn’t know me, but I know him. Cameron and Justin work for him and...oh my god, Massey, please don’t hate me.” She started sobbing freaking me out.

“Daisey Jean, you have to calm down. Please calm down.” I tried to console her, but she only sobbed harder. Hoping the sound of water running would tune out her cries, I turned on the faucet full force.

“I-I...Part of the reason I stopped talking to Cameron is because of you.” Wait...what? “He was hired by Jaali to kidnap you and bring you to him and so was Hayden.”

Talk about a complete mind fuck!

I couldn't focus on people I thought were my friends had been plotting on me. At this point, the knowledge was nothing but a distraction.

“DJ, focus! You said he came for me. Clearly, my grandmother is in on this as well. Yes, Veronica is my grandmother. That's a story for another day. If I disappear, they will come looking for me but not you.” I closed my eyes shaking off the fear I felt radiating throughout my body. “Sneak upstairs and get my phone.”

“No, Massey. He's a dangerous man.”

“And so is my Papa.” I wanted to cry so bad. So damn bad. My lips were trembling. My heart felt like it was seconds from bursting. My adrenaline surged, making my heart pump so fast, I felt almost lightheaded.

“Go find my phone and send alerts to the *family love* group chat pinned at the top of my messages. My passcode is 14315.” It stood for I love you (PJ) and his jersey number. “First, hit the power button on the side five times. It's a silent panic emergency alert that will go to all my emergency contacts, my entire family, and Pete. After you do that, send my location to that group chat. Do you understand me?”

Sobbing, she nodded. “Please come with me.”

Lord knows I wanted to, but we had to think smart. Papa and my uncles prepared me for horrors like this, though I never imagined I'd ever be in this type of situation. *I* was prepared but DJ wasn't, so she had to go. “I will meet up with

you, I promise. Please, DJ. Do you remember everything I told you?" She hugged me crying harder. "Hey, now. Everything is going to be okay."

"Don't trust him. Don't trust anything he says."

Wiping her face clean, I tried to give my best impression of a reassuring smile. "I won't, now let's go." Though her eyes were red and puffy, I finally got her moving while I took the long walk to the study where Veronica waited impatiently by the door.

"He's been waiting long enough." She never needed to make that pissed off face again in her life. Pinched brows and a pinched mouth weren't a good look on her. She reached for me, grabbing on my arm as if she needed to restrain me.

"Ouch." I hissed snatching out of her grasp.

"If you ruin this for me, I will make you sorry you were ever born. Go in there and give my guest whatever he wants!"

Narrowing my eyes, I tilted my head. At this point, there was no use in holding my tongue. "What is it that he wants from me and how does he know who I am? Who are you really?"

Touching the string of pearls laying against her chest, she licked her lips while tossing her curls over her shoulder. "I guess that's an error on my part. I forgot to explain what it means, what happens when one of my crowns is placed on your head."

Stepping close to me, she fixed my hair, smoothed out my dress, and adjusted the crown on my head. "The blood flowing through your veins is the blood of all the great Louis women who came before you. You're royalty, Massey. A coveted and

rare jewel. Jaali is amongst the finest of men who will show you just how valuable your beauty and brains are.

“It may seem frightening at first. May seem confusing, but always remember the strength that comes from having men falling at your feet. He’s worth millions and has specifically requested you. Now that, my sweet girl, is priceless and for this reason you will go in there and represent me well. I haven’t had the opportunity to formally train you *yet* but after tonight, oh trust me. We’re going to become close. Very close.” She wetly kissed my cheek, her lips lingering way too long for my comfort.

Pushing open the door revealing a waiting Jaali, she ran her nail along my arm. “Get to know him. He won’t bit unless you ask him to.” She winked closing the door.

Swallowing all my fears and nerves, I stepped further into the study trying to remain calm. Good Lord I was failing, and DJ needed to hurry up. I never knew what it was like to feel like I was outside of my body, but in this moment, I was. Inside I was screaming for help and on the outside, I was a shell moving so I wouldn’t get killed or something even worse.

“Have a seat.” He pointed to the plush, olive-green couch. Unbuttoning his coat, he stretched out with his arm draped behind me. “It’s good to finally be seeing you in person.” His eyes tracked up and down my body. I jolted a little feeling my spine shift. “Your beauty, it bewitches me.” His thick accent and the glide of his fingers across my cheek, I tried to mask the small cry I released as a whimper. “This originally started out as my wanting some form of payback, but now that I’ve seen you...” I jumped when he squeezed my knee, quickly wiping a lone tear that managed to escape from my eye.

Dear God, why was this happening to me?

“Why-why...” My stuttering was a clear warning that I was seconds away from breaking down and I couldn’t do that. I had to hold on.

“Give me one second to take this.” With his phone continuing to ring, he leaned in close to sniff me, making me squeeze my eyes shut to minimize how much his closeness was affecting me. “You even smell heavenly. Mmmm.” He moaned running his nose against my cheek. My fingers were cramping and hurting so bad from how hard I am squeezing them to keep my mind off wanting to release the strangled scream in the back of my throat. “Yeah, I’m going to keep you exclusively for my personal enjoyment.”

The second he hopped up and went to talk in the corner, I exhaled and started blinking rapidly. Chest heaving up and down, I tried hard to shake off the terror chilling my body. I needed to leave, and this was the perfect time to run for it. Standing on wobbly legs, I inched back towards the door with my eyes on him. He was so consumed with whispering in the corner that he never saw me turn the knob. The entire time I turned it, I was desperately praying it wouldn’t creak. Once I got it open enough for me to push through, I took off running.

Bunching up my gown, I ignored the pain from these damn heels and pumped my feet. *Think, Massey, think.* The front door was too obvious. Probably had security guarding them. The backyard wasn’t an option. Wherever I went, I had to find DJ first.

“Massey.” She came running my way with our bags slung over her shoulder. “Come on, we can leave out through the kitchen.” Grabbing my hand, we pushed past all the serving staff and ran until we reached the back side of the house.

Crouching down behind a large bush, she looked around the lit-up area wheezing and panting.

“I did everything you told me to do and called your dad. Your uncle Amell is on the way. I called Pete but he’s not answering.” Thank goodness she listened.

“We can’t wait here DJ.” I tossed those heels and ripped my dress open enough for me to run. DJ had changed back into her original clothes and sneakers. “If you listen closely, you can hear cars on the other side of those trees behind the pool house. We have to make a run for it.” Lord I prayed this worked. We had no other choice.

“No, Massey. We need to wait on them. Your uncle said to wait.” This wasn’t the time for DJ to freak out on me again. Literally, we were in a moment of fight or flight.

“What if they don’t make it in time?” Papa needed to hop in his hellcat and drive with speed. “We’re way in Palm Beach. That’s forty-five minutes from the compound on a good day without traffic.” The tips of my fingers were tingling as I felt my body starting to hyperventilate again. “We have to try.” It felt like I was about to have a heart attack.

“I’m so scared, Massey.” Hell, so was I.

Distant voices made us cower lower on the ground. “See, we have to go. We have to go now!” Holding her hand, I looked in her teary eyes mirroring my own. “We’re almost there. On the count of three run, DJ. Don’t stop, just keep running, no matter what happens.” I broke. I sobbed in my hands because I couldn’t hold it in anymore.

I couldn’t breathe.

My vision became blurry, and my ears were ringing. Heaviness sat on my chest as I tried to scream and cry but

nothing came out.

Why was this happening to me, to us?

“The voices are getting closer.” DJ wiped my face hugging me. “Together we’re going to do this, okay?” I nodded sniffing. “Okay, one...two...” We took off.

I kept the pool house in my line of vision. All we needed to do was make it there and then into the woods. We were almost there when a strong hand grabbed my arm. “You’re not going anywhere.”

She once had the face of an innocent angel. Eyes that were sad but would brighten whenever you made her laugh. A smile that reached her ears and made you feel like you were special to receive it. Her heart made you envious of how such a person could still be so caring and nice after all she had been through.

That was the old Cassidy.

This Cassidy, probably the real Cassidy, looked deranged and evil. “Don’t try me, Massey. I will...oh, fuck.” Her face and my knuckles somehow collided shutting her up. Shaking her off me, I continued running and running. DJ was almost to the pool house. “They’re over here.” I should’ve hit her harder and knocked her out.

“We don’t have much to go.” Panting hard with my hands on my knees, we finally made it to the pool house that was much farther away than it looked.

“Okay.” Poor DJ looked like she was about to pass out. “Come on, we got this.” We took off again, but something felt different. Felt off. Turning to my left, where DJ should’ve been running alongside me, she wasn’t there. “Run, Massey, run.”

My feet slowed hearing his voice. “I wouldn’t try that if I were you.” His accent made me come to a complete stop.

We were so close to making it. So close. Shoulders slumped, head drooped, and tears running down my face, I turned gasping seeing a man in all black restraining DJ while Jaali stood next to them with his sleeves rolled.

“Please don’t hurt her.” I covered my mouth trying not to cry. DJ kept shaking her head mouthing for me to run but I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.

“The choice is yours. Either you come to me, or she dies.” He held his hand out and the man holding DJ wrapped his hands around her neck.

“No, Massey.” Her voice sounded so strained like she couldn’t breathe.

If I ran, they’d kill her and come after me. If I stayed and went to him like he said, he’d take me and her. There was no winning this situation. It had to be over forty minutes by now. Where was Papa? Where was Uncle Amell?

“Come to me, beautiful.” Taking two steps my way, Jaali beckoned me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to DJ walking to Jaali.

Cupping my face in his hands, he placed kisses all over my face until he reached my mouth. My whimpers and trembling went ignored. “You listen, I like that. However, you’re going to pay for the very unwise attempt to leave me. Trust me, I’ll chase you. I’ll follow you wherever you go but if you ever disrespect me again...” He harshly spat, while taking a fist full of my hair yanking my head back making me hiss in pain.

Seeing his hand lift out of my peripheral, I shuttered closing my eyes. I just knew he was about to slap me. “I’d

never physically hurt my investment. You're far too precious and valuable to me." I hated how he looked at me. Like he wanted to devour me. "Say goodbye to your friend." He pecked my lips releasing my hair.

"What-what...what do you mean?" My eyes shot over to DJ. "You said..."

The snap of her neck.

The thud of her body hitting the ground.

My legs gave out and he caught me right as my lungs finally worked and I released the scream that's been wanting to be let free since we got here. "Daisey Jean!"

"Shhh," he kissed my cheek. "Everything will be fine. I've got you now."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

C^{oco}

COURTNEY 'COCO' Hawthorne.

I like the sound of that.

It's been a year since I gifted Jimmy my virginity and he's blown my mind with the new ways he loves me. He already loved me to the point my heart would skip a beat prior to us making love, but it seemed like his display now reached a place with no bounds. The best part about it was that even though we were long-distance, I felt like he was nearby.

Jimmy graduated high school and went on to Notre Dame. I cried my eyes out for days, wanting him to stay while also knowing I couldn't hold him back. I quickly got to work so I could graduate at the end of the year. What never stopped, but only seemed to increase, was our communication. I never would've thought Jimmy would be the perfect pen pal. At his urging, I got a PO Box and at his urging again, I checked it every day because my handsome guy wrote me a letter every day and I wrote him back just as much.

His poetic words and the thoughtfulness behind his letters made time fly by. I had a secret box in the back of my closet full of them. Then, once a month he snuck down to Florida without his parents knowing and we'd spend the weekend together. Of course, I lied and told Veronica I was with a client, so she never questioned my whereabouts. I also had Mya who covered for me just in case.

Our love wasn't one sided. Just how he sacrificed and came down to be with me, I took just as many trips on the train to see him. I loved Jimmy so much that I'd do any and everything to make sure that he was happy. That we were happy. He was the only dosage of happiness in my life. I royally pissed off Veronica by giving him my virginity. Of course, she clowned me to my face when I told her that I didn't sell it but gave it away to the boy who loved me.

Regardless of her spiteful words, I felt no regret at all. She, of course, made me suffer more than humanly possible because I embarrassed her at the gala. I left that night with a crown that wasn't virtuously earned, and a schedule booked every weekend with old clients and new. Most wanted to continue our flirtatious relationships and the others saw my crown as a rite of passage leading directly to sex. Though that's exactly what it meant, I still wasn't on board, but I knew I had to be.

Veronica was going to get what she wanted either willingly or by force.

"Nette said you canceled your dinner date tonight with Senator Royce." I knew it wouldn't be long before Veronica sought me out.

The day had finally come.

I graduated from high school early, with honors and it was just my luck I got accepted into the University of Notre Dame too. Jimmy and I were so excited to finally be with each other without thousands of miles between us. His player development coach helped him secure an apartment off-campus. It was a nice one-bedroom that wasn't far from campus and luckily, with his scholarships and grants, all the expenses were paid for. Only thing we needed to do was get me there and that's what we were doing today.

Moving with much haste back and forth from my closet to my overflowing suitcase on my bed, I wasn't going to lie. Jimmy was on his way to get me and this place, clients, and everything including Veronica would be a thing of the past. "I had her take me off the books. I'm leaving." I looked up to see her standing near my dresser toying with her necklace and watching my every move.

Like any other day she was dressed comfortably in one of her sheer silk robes, lingerie that showed all her goodies, and her fur mules. One of the older Pearls had permed and curled her hair yesterday, giving her shoulder length hair a nice bounce and sheen.

"Oh, okay. Where are you going?" Her tone wasn't one I expected to hear.

I put the last of my clothes in the suitcase and looked around to make sure I grabbed all my necessities. Clothes, shoes, jewelry, and my journals. That's all I was taking. Oh, and my vinyl collection that Jimmy started when we first began dating.

Facing her with the confidence and boldness she raised me to have, I flipped my hair over my shoulder and answered, "Away, Veronica. Jimmy and I are leaving. He's a guy I've

been seeing for years now and the one I gave my virginity to. I won't tell you that I'll call once I get settled because I know you won't care to hear from me but thank you...for everything." Despite my distaste for the life she had me live for the last seventeen years, I earned quite a large amount of money and had one hell of a nice savings account thanks to her teachings.

Yeah, it was escort money, but money, nonetheless.

Managing to grab all my bags with both hands, I moved out of my room but stopped once I made it out my door. Mya still wasn't home, and I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye. She's my best friend. I truly thank God that we had each other because without her I don't know how I would've survived and remained sane all these years.

Veronica wasn't nice regardless of how beautiful and glamorous she looked.

The things she did to me and made me do...I no longer wanted to live the life of a Pearl.

Making a promise in my head to call her later, I started for the stairs with Veronica behind me. "Before you leave can I show you something?" Hell no. I was not about to get caught up in one of her little games. Knowing her she probably wanted to get me alone so she could drug or trap me.

"I have to go. Jimmy is on his way." Huffing and damn near out of breath, I made it to the bottom stops.

"I promise I won't take longer than a minute. I just want to show you something quickly and you can be on your journey to Indiana."

Fine.

Jimmy hadn't called me, and the security guard hadn't called the house yet either, so I guess I had a few minutes to spare. Placing my bags down, I followed her down the hall to her office. But wait...how did she know where I was going?

"How do you know that I'm moving to Indiana?"

Closing the door behind us, she gave me a small smile before winking. "Granddaughter, I know everything about you. Did you actually think I would know nothing about the boy you've been dating and sneaking around with for the last two years?" Her witchy giggles made my stomach drop. "If you're wondering if I'm upset, well, I'm not because I taught you well. I was a little disappointed to know that you didn't feel like you could share your little boyfriend with me, but I digress." She shrugged her arms turning on the television.

"Look, Veronica, I really don't have time to watch an episode of your soap operas." Knowing she knew all about Jimmy and me for this long didn't sit well at all. My underarms started to sweat, and my heart raced so fast that I could barely catch my breath.

Nodding her head to the television, she smirked. "Trust me, this isn't one of my little soap operas. Though the drama in it would be just as good, this isn't my particular forte."

Arms crossed and shifting from side to side, I was ready to continue arguing with her until I heard the voices coming from speakers near the screen.

"I'm glad you came to see me. It's been so long since I felt your touch. Did you miss me?"

"Hell yeah, I missed you. Come on over here and show me how you missed me because you know you did."

I felt the hot stare of Veronica's eyes boring into the side of my face. She wanted to see my reaction. She wanted to see me crumbling in hurt. She wanted to see me break so she could say I told you so. But see, that's the thing, no matter how much I was hurting. No matter how painful it felt to feel my heart breaking in my chest. No matter the level of self-control and willpower it took to keep my eyes from watering and lips from trembling, I held on.

I watched a good thirty minutes of the sex tape between my mother and Jimmy. Oh, trust me, it wasn't just one scene. It was multiple encounters compiled into one tape. Time and date stamps made my mouth fill with salt as the urge to puke threatened to break my resolve. The same time Jimmy came into town on the weekends to see me, he was also seeing my mother. How he managed to do it, I don't know but he did.

At first, I didn't want to believe it was him. Not my sweet, loyal, and trustworthy boyfriend of two years who I gave my virginity to. Not my Jimmy who wrote me letters every day and promised me a lifetime of forever. Had it not been for the distinctive birthmark on his lower back and the shade and color of his dick, I would call the video bullshit.

But indeed, Jimmy and my mother were having sex.

I watched the passion and love faces on both of their faces. Listened to their moans, groans, and screams. Compared how he made love to me to how he fucked her.

"I'm not living on the estate any longer. Until I leave for school, I want a condo in Miami, and you'll keep her away from me. When it comes to my clients, I pick and choose who I am going out with and when. My money comes straight to me, not you, and if anyone asks, I am nothing to her like I am nothing to you. Those are my only conditions, Veronica." Not

giving her a second to reply, I stormed out of her office, out the front door until I made it to the security gate.

Jimmy and the guard had been calling my phone for the last twenty minutes. Having my mind blown, left in shock, and just hurt, I couldn't answer the phone. I had no one to blame but myself. Veronica always said a man would only be as loyal as long as his dick stayed soft when in the presence of pussy.

She was right.

He really fucked my mom.

The woman who gave birth to me!

Why not fuck one of the girls from his college? Why not fuck someone else? But my mom? Out of all the pussy in the world, my damn mama?

"Baby, where is your stuff?" Stepping away from his parked car near the security booth, Jimmy looked so handsome in an Adidas sweatsuit. So damn handsome that I almost forgot that he fucked my mother in the ass.

"Take care, Jimmy. I wish you all the best in life. It's been nice but we're done." That's all I could manage because anything outside of that would show my emotions and there were cameras around that I'm sure Veronica was watching. Probably even Stacey's sick ass too.

Confused, he stumbled back before trying to touch me. "What do you mean you wish me the best in life, and we're done? What is going on?" He kept trying to touch me and I kept moving back.

"What's going on is that you thought it was wise to fuck me and my mother and think that I would never find out. Did you think that you'd be able to have us both on the Holidays

and Christmas morning? Huh?” I raised my voice far too loud for my comfort.

When his shoulders slumped and head hung, he confirmed every sick detail I saw on that video. “It-It...It isn’t what you think, Courtney. I didn’t know she was your mother until recently. She pursued me and I thought she was some older groupie pussy. Just some random bitch I was fucking whenever I came into town. She means nothing to me. I love you, baby. I want to get you far from this sick place. Don’t listen to anything she told you.” Suddenly, he became angry with his thick brows bunched and chest heaving.

See, that’s the thing.

He missed the whole point of his betrayal.

“At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter what I don’t understand about what happened between the two of you or if she pursued you or not. You still stuck your dick in her middle-aged pussy.” Those emotions I was desperately holding at bay, I needed to leave because all I wanted to do was cry and take a hot bath.

Tapping on the guard booth, I asked them to make Jimmy leave. “He isn’t allowed on the property. Please make him leave or call the police.”

“Courtney, are you fucking serious? Look, baby, I’m sorry, but please hear me out. Courtney? Courtney? Come back, Courtney!” Jimmy yelled after me making my feet move faster back towards the house.

I said what I had to say. It was more than he deserved.

When I made it back to the house my steps slowed as I shook my head laughing. Boy, today was straight bullshit.

She's been missing all day but suddenly, she pops up when my life just got snatched from under me.

Fiddling with her fingers, Mya stood on the steps looking scared. "Hey." I stood before her saying nothing. She kept blinking. Looking at her feet and then looking at me. "I-I...I'm sorry, Coco. I didn't mean to tell her ev..."

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up." I gritted through my clenched teeth. I need to get out of this house. I felt like I was going to kill somebody, and these people weren't worth the risk of my future. "Out of everything, I'm more disappointed in your disloyal ass. What have I ever done for you to betray me like this, Mya? Huh?"

I put two and two together when I was watching the video. Veronica knowing everything had to come from one person who knew all my shit and that was Mya. Did I not believe Veronica had eyes like she claimed, no I didn't because I knew she didn't. My routine never stopped. I made sure I did whatever she asked of me to keep her eyes off me. And Veronica has never been one to keep her mouth closed about anything especially after I embarrassed her at the gala last year.

She's been plotting to get me back and the one person to help her succeed was the one person who had become my human diary since we were kids.

"Listen to me good." I stepped so close that my heavy breathing blew her bangs. "Whenever I see you from this day forward, I'm beating your ass. I put that on my hoe ass mama. You ain't shit to me." Her crocodile tears didn't move a damn thing in me.

"Coco, please, let me explain." She reached out to touch me and my reflexes led me to punch her in the mouth. "Oh my

God.” She moaned holding her bloody mouth.

“Next time it will be worse.” I stepped around her to get my things. I wasn’t staying another night in this house. I was so damn tired of hearing let me explain from the people who shouldn’t have a reason to explain shit in the first place.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Dafina

THIS BABY WAS MAKING me regret not swallowing it. The heartburn, constant bathroom trips, nipples feeling like they were seconds from falling off, and night sweats. The list never ended, and I was second guessing if this was worth the taunting I was doing to the two men in my life. Well, one man because Dre was on his high horse ignoring me like I wasn't going to make him eventually feel my wrath. And then my dear husband, he'd lost his damn mind since he came home last night, he and his flock of steroid injected guards.

I'm not sure the hour when he exactly came home but it was well past four in the morning. Around eight it sounded like aliens had invaded our house and were tearing it apart. I screamed for them to quiet it down but that did nothing but make the noise louder. Finally realizing that going back to sleep was out of the question, I got up and went downstairs for breakfast.

I got another surprise of a lifetime when I saw the staff packing up the place and Jaali shouting orders in Kiswahili, his native tongue. One glance at me turned into a double take

and he went off even more. He wanted me gone days ago but since he wasn't going with me and didn't have a better reason other than '*I don't want you around*', I was staying until I felt like leaving.

Ignoring him and his flock of fools, I went to the kitchen and fixed myself a nice big bowl of fruit and opened a fresh new container of Cool Whip, forgot the spoon on purpose, and pigged out by my damn self in the middle of the dining room. Jaali came in yelling and whatnot, but I acted like he wasn't there. Giving him a hefty dosage of the same treatment he'd been giving me for the last few days was especially easy when I decided to stop caring as he appeared to have.

I was pregnant with his possible baby, and he had the nerve to treat me like shit?

Not happening.

"I distinctly recall asking you to leave, Dafina. I told you not to be here. Why in the hell are you still here?" Taking his frustrations out on the chair next to me, he dragged the chair out harshly and plopped down, snatching the bowl of fruit out of my hand, and started eating.

Blinking away his audacity, I shifted in my seat until me and my forever growing belly were comfortable. "Have you given me a reason as to why I should leave other than not wanting my company? No, you have not, so guess what?" I rubbed my belly. "We're staying, husband."

One of the housekeepers handed him a stack of mail and of course displaying the lack manners his snooty mother raised him to showcase, he snatched it out of the poor lady's hand without regard. "I'm growing really tired of your disrespect and blatant disobedience."

Scoffing at his nerve, I snatched back my bowl of fruit and finished what was left. “The feeling is mutual. Actually, you’ve become such a jacka...” My words were cut off watching a young girl nervously enter the dining room.

Hands fidgeting and eyes pooled with large drops of tears, she glanced at Jaali and then at me. My mouth opened and closed almost every second that passed. Her cocoa skin. Bright Hersey brown eyes shaped like the perfect almond. Lips with the perfect bow-tie arch. Hair in wild matted curls.

She was young but beautiful, even with fear dressed all over her. Speaking of dressed, the apples I was chewing on fell out my mouth since I couldn’t keep it closed because my brain was shell-shocked to see her wearing one of the outfits Jaali and his stylist had laid out that day.

Those clothes were never for me, they were for her. The her who looked like an identical younger version of that whore of a woman Dre called himself trying to replace me with. It had been six months since I last saw her face but all it took was one run in and I memorized it.

Engraved it in my brain. Branded it in my skull. I never wanted to forget her face. Never wanted to forget the woman Dre was *trying* to replace me with. However, to see a younger version of this same said woman in my house, wearing clothes my husband picked out just for her, I was stunned speechless.

Worst of all, she appeared so young.

“Um. Can...Can...” Her voice trembled and she could barely talk without shaking.

“Glad you’re awake, beautiful.” I looked on in open astonishment at Jaali’s obvious flirtation with the juvenile like I wasn’t even sitting here.

“Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my house?” I cared nothing about Jaali’s steely glare or her ballooned frightened eyes.

“My-my name is Massey, ma’am.” Aww isn’t she sweet and respectful.

Tearing into one of the envelopes, Jaali side-eyed me before his eyes softened at the young damsel. “Have a seat, Massey. Forgive my wife’s manners. The pregnancy has her acting unlike herself.” Listening to his orders, she sat down finally granting her tears the freedom to fall.

The grey lounge set clung to her young curves, the low dip of the tank top showing her newly developed cleavage. It was all so disgustingly perverted. It was all so very wrong. She was obviously underaged.

Why is she here? Why would he be looking at her as a man who desires an adult woman? Why have a whole wardrobe done for a minor?

“Have you ever traveled to Africa, Massey?” Jaali’s tone was giving me a serious case of the creeps and I didn’t like the look he had in his eyes for her.

He wanted to send me back home so he could freak off with a damn child!

Who in the hell was this man? Why is she sitting here in tears? What happened to her?

Who in the hell did I marry? I knew he messed with other women but young girls too?

Is this what he’s been doing when he claims to be working late at night and coming in when the crows started crocking?

I felt like I was about to puke up everything I recently consumed.

“I’m going to step out and answer this.” Taking my ringing phone in hand, I moved to stand but he grabbed my wrist tightly and forced me to sit back down.

“Whoever is on that phone and whatever conversation you need to have can be done sitting right there.” He shoved my hand back in my lap and turned back to Massey smiling. Poor girl looked like she wanted to run. I really wanted to ask if he forced himself on her.

Looking at my phone, I was surprised to see Elinah calling. “Elinah. Hey, how are you?” I didn’t care that my eagerness could be heard miles away. I hadn’t talked to any of my family since she took Durah away and started the process of moving our parents to an unknown location. I had no idea where any of them were and right now I wanted to be wherever they were.

“I hope you’re enjoying your morning, Dafina.”

I gasped hearing her voice. “Durah.” Instantly my eyes closed as fresh warm tears rolled down my cheeks. I missed her so much. Daily I prayed for God to restore our relationship somehow. For him to soften her heart so she’d forgive me. For her to find a little love for me in her heart through her niece that was going to be born soon.

“Jaali is the one who cut my hair. Do you know how important hair is to a woman?” Her voice stayed neutral. Not at all raised, snotty, or demeaning. She sounded like she was relaxed on a chill Sunday. “Do you know what that does to a woman? To have her hair forcibly cut off and left in patches.”

“Durah, I-I’m so sorry.” I ignored Jaali and Massey staring at me. He kept looking through the mail and she sat across from me afraid.

“Every day I live in my own hell hole. A form of mental torture. Do you know what that is like, Dafina? Do you live in torture every day?” She snorted as I silently sobbed. I never understood why Jaali had her head shaved so cruelly. Why he left patches like she was a rabies infected animal.

“Yes, my hair can grow back but what am I supposed to do between that time, huh? I live in a personal hell because whenever I get the courage to look in the mirror or touch my head, all I see, all I feel is what’s not there. Not wondering if I’d still be considered pretty or even beautiful, but the epitome of ugliness. Your husband deliberately made it virtually impossible for me to feel a single trace of attractiveness because of you. I can wear wigs, but once I must take them off, guess what I’m left with? Triggers, Dafina. I now live with triggers!”

No one at the table was paying attention to me. Jaali’s head was buried in a piece of paper and the scared captive girl had her head buried in her hands, audibly crying. As for me, I wanted the ground to open and swallow me alive. Hearing her pain and trauma. Hearing how she felt, I didn’t know how to fix this.

“What can I do, Durah? Please tell me.” At this point I’d give up the life Jaali had afforded me just to be with my sisters and parents. My husband had a perverted fetish for young girls. He didn’t need me anymore. I no longer belonged here. I wanted to go back to my old life. I wanted my family back.

“What you can do is choose to end the shambles your life has been reduced to.” My heart slammed against my chest. “If

you no longer walk amongst the living, the remaining members of your family will be allowed to live, Dafina. Elinah has had to hide us out all because of you. Father has had to restart his chemo treatments at a brand-new center because of you. Your selfishness put all our lives in jeopardy. Your selfishness for continuing to engage in an adulterous relationship with Dre, cost me everything. Not you, but me! I am unable to ever have children now, thanks to your husband's barbaric torture. No man will want me. My family has become a disgrace because of your lust for being a common whore. You could never fathom the true depth of horrors those men caused me.

“My life ended the second Jaali chose to use me as punishment for your sins. I cry myself to sleep every night because I must contend with enduring another day filled with anguish and unyielding despair. Then, two nights ago, it occurred to me for me to heal and move on, I would need to confront the one thing I hate most in this miserable life and that is you. And it's not because I'm jealous of you. It's because you represent the full scope of my suffering. Your level of selfishness has no boundaries. You are only sorry because you were caught. Nothing is stopping Jaali from continuing to come after us yet you are the common denominator. So, if you're dead, you and Dre's child, us living in fear stops because you would no longer exist. There will be no reason for us to constantly look over our shoulders. If you go away permanently, then so do our problems.”

Her words shattered what was left in me into a thousand pieces. I understood she wanted me to suffer as she had. I understood how it was my selfishness that put her in the predicament that she was in. I understood it all, but nothing stopped the electric charge of fear snaking through my body.

My precious baby girl was going nuts in my belly. My heart was racing at a rate I had never experienced before.

“What did you do, Durah?”

My mind was in a state of utter confusion. Stomach warming in delight to hear her laughter. It reminded me of the times when she and I would watch reruns of *Martin*, just laughing and eating bowls of popcorn with extra butter. Then, my heart felt as it were being faced with the greatest danger of giving out from the stress behind the unknown.

“I sent your husband a nice letter from his favorite sister-in-love. A nice letter telling him the truth about the child you’re carrying. The child that he *thinks* is his. You’re welcome, Dafina. The truth has set each one of us free.” She hung up leaving me scared as shit to open my eyes. I knew the paper Jaali had been reading since I answered the phone had to be the letter she sent him. His breathing had turned raging, hands squeezed into fists on the table.

I don’t know what she wrote in that letter. At this point it didn’t matter. Placing reasonable doubt in Jaali’s mind about the paternity of my baby was deadly enough.

“You bitch.” Jaali roared, hand smacking with full force down the side of my face.

“Agghhh,” I screamed, falling out of my chair onto my knees. Screams retching from my gut so hard that my stomach knotted with cramps. This sick bastard stabbed a knife in the middle of my right hand.

“Oh my God.” Massey jumped from the table hitting the wall behind her.

“Jaali, please...Agghhh.” Sharp pain in the middle of my back damn near knocked the wind out of me. Everything was

hurting. I felt dizzy and lightheaded. The sharp pain in my stomach made me try to stand.

“How much of a whore can you be?” He spoke low in my ear gripping my hair damn near ripping it from my scalp. I thought the doorbell ringing would loosen his hold, but he kept tightening his hand.

“Jaali, please...” I wanted to fight back. I wanted to yell and scream but the pain in my lower abdomen took all the willpower out of me.

“You were going to have me raise a baby that wasn’t mine.” Relentlessly his fist punched and punched my stomach. We had a house full of thirty or more people, yet my cries went unanswered. No one came to help me.

His long locs swayed with each shake of his head. The minute his eyes turned dark and eerie; I knew the same fate Durah endured was going to be my own. “Bren.” He yelled, pushing down on the knife in my hand making me scream. Each time my body weakened and on the verge of collapsing, he held me up tighter by my hair.

“Yes, Boss.” His personal assistant came in not at all startled by what Jaali was doing to me.

“Record this pivotal moment for me. I want to make sure that I send the soon-to-be father a nice sonogram of his baby.” Sinister wasn’t even the word to describe the level of diabolical and devilish burning behind his eyes. I’d never seen so many veins pop out near his temples. Never seen him sweat without much exertion. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

“I’m sorr...” He continued to backhand me filling my mouth with blood.

“Bitch, I haven’t begun to show you how sorry you’re going to be. Massey, take note, beautiful. I don’t like disloyalty of any kind. Do you understand?” Like me, she was too shell-shocked to say anything other than stand in horror of what was happening.

“Video is recording, Boss.”

Pulling my face close to his, Jaali tapped my nose with the edge of the steak knife I had used to cut my fruit. “All of this is your fault. You were supposed to be my wife and mother my children. Mine, Dafina. No one else’s. That wasn’t good enough for you, so you decided to lay with a peasant.” He turned to face the camera.

“Mr. Joseph, you see this. My wife’s gut is full of your baby.” Each rub of his hands on my belly made me cry harder. I tried not to focus on the pain and wetness running down my legs. I wanted this nightmare to be over.

“Her gut...” He shoved the knife in my stomach. “This is your baby in her gut.” I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t move. My mind had yet to break away from the shock and adrenaline of the trauma to process that he was gutting me and my unborn child. Over and over, he taunted with his teasing words and doing what he kept repeating...gutting me.

“Good thing I found your replacement just in time.” My body had long ago lost mobility to stand and he no longer cared to hold me up. I felt nothing. My limbs were numb. Each time I blinked my vision became blurrier and blurrier. My heart was slowing down. “I’ll train her to be what you couldn’t – a submissive wife. I told you,” his bloody hands moved my hair out my face as he rubbed my head. “I told you, Dafina, that you’d regret ever betraying me. I hope he was worth your life.”

The last thing I remembered was him kissing my lips before I felt what little life I had left slip away. “I’m sorry, Dre.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Massey

I PASSED out for the first time in my life upon seeing Daisey Jean's body dropped to the ground like a bag of manure. Her eyes were still wide and pleading for me to run when that man, without care that her grandmother might die at her old age from a broken heart, snapped her neck like she meant nothing to the people who loved her.

Growing up and hearing the stories of what my Papa and uncles did for a living were just that – stories. But to see with my own two eyes a person being murdered right in front of me, I never wanted to close them again.

I'm not sure where I was but I knew we were by the beach. That's what woke me up, hearing the waves crashing against the rocks and the seagulls singing. Waking up in a foreign bed, though comfortable beyond belief, flashbacks of last night crippled me. I tried not to panic and think that no one knew where I was. Tried not to think so negatively and have faith that one of my uncles or Papa had got the alerts Daisey Jean sent and would somehow find me.

After I found the strength to get out the bed and use the bathroom, I came back in the bedroom and screamed seeing an older woman dressed in a modest maid's outfit standing there with an armful of clothes. She said nothing to me other than placing the clothes on the bed and leaving out. Lord knows I wanted out of this dress. Wanted to wash away the dirt and filth of yesterday's nightmare. After locking the door and placing one of the corner chairs under the lock, I made sure the windows were locked and the blinds were closed.

Between crying uncontrollably and scrubbing my skin until it was raw, I showered not even caring when the water turned freezing cold. Being a Kalmin child, we were raised knowing how to defend ourselves. I could shoot any gun and free myself from the strongest man, but none of that mattered after what happened. I felt so helpless, alone, and afraid.

The clothes brought to me were surprisingly nice and my style, which turned my already queasy stomach upside down. I had no idea who this Jaali Kamau man was or what he really wanted with me, but the fact that he knew my sizes and style made me wish I never stopped running. Either way, they were going to kill Daisey Jean, and I still had a slight chance of freedom.

Somehow my feet guided me outside of the room, which I was surprised to discover wasn't locked. Uncle Amell always taught us that if we were ever kidnapped or held against our will to try the nearest window. I had several windows with no bars. The two-story home didn't seem like a far jump but I went in the opposite direction of what I'd been told.

When I made it to the dining hall and stumbled upon Jaali and a pregnant woman I assumed was his wife, I immediately wished I had tried to escape out of any of those windows.

Maybe I wouldn't have been a witness of this sick lunatic of a man gutting his pregnant wife until she laid dead on the floor in a large puddle of her own blood.

I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to think. My whole body, especially my brain, we were in complete shut-down mode. Like this man literally went from stabbing a knife in the middle of her hand to gutting her like a pig. Then he recorded the whole thing for whoever Mr. Joseph was.

I wanted to run. Lord knows with the type of fear pumping in my heart I could've gone far but I stood cemented with a paralyzing fear he would gut me next.

"Send me the clip, Bren," Jaali ordered standing over Dafina's body with a smile as if he just recorded a reel to post on Instagram. When he crouched down and started analyzing his work, I knew I was in the company of the devil himself.

What type of mess had Kassidy gotten me into?

"Massey." He spoke my name low but loud enough for my ears to prick.

"Ye-yes?" I tried to remain unaffected by everything going on. Tried to remain tough and not scared but that false persona flew out the window the minute he had my best friend killed right in front of me.

He looked up at me and winked. "I'm going to make you so happy, beautiful."

No. no. no.

Hell no.

This was not going to be my future.

My heart was seconds away from exploding from the rapid pace it had been beating since I walked into this room. The

entry to the dining hall was empty. No guards or other men besides the one occupied with his phone. I'm not sure what awaited me once I crossed the threshold, but it was better than being whatever his sick mind fantasized about.

Right when I finished sending up a big prayer to God to cover me when I made a run for it, four guards rushed in yelling in a foreign language. I had no idea what they were saying but it made Jaali start breathing like a wild bull. Biting the inside of my cheek, I held my breath as I started to back pedal at the slowest snail pace possible. No one's attention was on me, and I prayed it stayed that way until I was long gone.

"How did they get past the gate?" Jaali yelled making me flinch. His eyes landed on me, and I swear my life flashed before my eyes. A short life that ended here. "Make sure you..." Gunfire rang out through the house. Off instinct I ducked with my arms covering my head.

In my crouched position I waited until the shots stopped. Jaali stayed in the dining room while all his men ran out. From the angle I was on the wall I could see whoever entered stood outside the entryway and when I saw those black steel toe boots, I wanted to scream and clap for joy. He hadn't even made his presence known yet but knowing that he was here and had come for me, gave me the courage to stand to my feet.

"Don't be scared, Massey. I won't let anything happen to you." If only Jaali knew that my sudden change of attitude wasn't because he remained in the room with me.

Seeing another pair of boots stand next to the first pair, I welcomed the calmness of protection wrapped around me. "It seems I misjudged you, Mr. Kamau, because I know a man of the clergy wouldn't treat his wife the way you just disgracefully did to yours." Stepping in the room dressed in all

black, Uncle Atlas came in smiling like this was his favorite day of the week. Not too far behind him came Uncle Amell who beckoned me to come his way with a single nod of his head.

The entire time I took the short but mentally endless walk over to him, Jaali watched never blinking. Shrugging off his glare, I jumped in Uncle Amell's arms and tried to speak. "Thank...you." I don't know how I managed to get the words out with so many different emotions fighting against my ability to breathe sufficiently.

"What I always tell you?" He lifted me up and held me close to his chest like I was a newborn baby, and he was rocking me to sleep. "I'll always protect you, Massey."

"How cute," Jaali smirked.

Uncle Atlas moved closer to the table, not at all in a rush. Jaali stood there unmoved, and I was ready to go home. Go home to my family. "Mr. Kamau, I thought I made myself clear when we last saw each other. Not only did you come to my city, but you committed the ultimate violation in taking my niece." He picked up a knife, twirling it around in his hands.

Shrugging, Jaali glanced at me and blew a kiss. Knowing whose arms I was being held in, I felt brave enough to stick up my middle finger. "Feisty. I like that. Blame yourself, Kalmin. Shouldn't have given me the reverse pills."

"You're absolutely right and that's my fault to correct." I paid close attention to the way Uncle Atlas kept toying with the knife and I just knew he wasn't about to start a knife fight when he had a gun behind his back. "Trust me it won't happen again."

"I know it won't. I'll...Agghhh."

“Ewww.” I flinched seeing the knife Uncle Atlas tossed lodged in Jaali’s right eye.

Completely disarmed, Jaali screamed and fell to his knees. Before I could blink twice, Uncle Atlas shot him twice. Once in the shoulder and the other in the hand that was trying to pull the knife out of his eye. “Baby girl, you ready to go home?”

“Yes, sir.” I didn’t know what else to say but I knew where I didn’t want to be.

“Aye, we gotta go. The neighbors called the cops, and it won’t be no time at all before they swarm the place.” My eyes ballooned seeing Pete rush in. “What’s up troublemaker.”

“Hey, Pete.” I tried not to get emotional but seeing him, especially after I thought they killed him like they did my Daisey Jean. The reality of what had happened in the last twenty-four hours finally hit me and I couldn’t breathe. “I wanna go home.” I sobbed into Uncle Amell’s neck. “Please, Uncle Amell. I want my mom and Papa.”

“Shh. We’re going to take you home. Pete, set the house on fire, and let’s go,” Uncle Amell ordered. I became even more emotional and overwhelmed seeing all my Papa’s and uncle’s men when we stepped outside the house. They all came for me. “He sent his best for you, Massey. It would’ve been him here, but I was closer. You’re his world and he’ll go above and beyond to protect you.” I cried even harder.

It didn’t matter my Papa wasn’t here. Him sending his strongest battle tested soldiers said more than enough. The fact that Uncle Amell and Uncle Atlas came to rescue me, was all I needed. I tried not to focus on the what-if of them not getting here in time. Tried not to focus on what Jaali might have done to me. I was safe now and that’s all that mattered.

“They...they killed her. They killed my Daisey Jean. Please find her body. Her grandmother deserves a proper burial.” The reality of what I had done to bring her to her death shocked me straight in the gut and I ended up leaping out of his arms just in time to puke in the grass near his feet.

“Take deep breaths, baby girl.” Uncle Atlas squatted down in front of me holding my hair back. “Breathe, Massey. We’re going to give DJ the farewell she deserves, okay?”

I nodded feeling lightheaded. “It’s all my fault...” Everything went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kassidy

MASSEY IS A DEAD LITTLE BITCH.

I had one job. One job and she royally fucked it up or rather I did.

Sunny days were far from my reality when my father died. Life seemed to have stopped, leaving me feeling like I was just a body existing through the day-in and day-out mundaneness. When my mom and brother were killed in the house fire, I experienced depression for the first time in my life. Not just a lie in my bed and not eating depression. But a deep and dark depression that had me researching ways to end my life painlessly. My father wasn't much to talk to since he had his own grief to deal with and my Aunt Noelani was away doing whatever she does.

Then, years later, I'm once again experiencing the horrific pain of having my heart cut out of my chest when my father was killed.

Yes, killed.

I didn't buy for a second that he committed suicide like Aunty Noelani and Cassian told me in such a colorful but fabricated story. Hell no. I was far from stupid. Not to mention how my dad played the audio of the video Dominique left her over the phone when he called me irate and hurt after watching it in her home office.

Knowing my aunt, a woman who's supposed to be my family, laid next to the killer who ruined my life, I wanted her dead. I wanted her to pay for all the hurt my father had to endure.

It was her fault he was so consumed with grief he could barely focus on me. It was her fault I had cabinets full of anti-depressant medications enough to open my own pharmacy. She took my life from me. She killed my entire family for her selfish ass gain. She had everything and I had nothing. She took it all from me, so I was going to take it all from her.

One of my teachers in high school recommended that I try a grief group for young girls. At first, I didn't want anything to do with a group of crying ass teenagers. I was a senior in high school getting ready to start at the University of Miami in the fall. During this time the only woman in my life was my aunt but at the same time, she wasn't there. I had no family but her and all I wanted was for her to acknowledge me. Acknowledge and admit her wrong.

I've always known that Cassian killed my dad. The way he spoiled me with luxuries to make up for the wrong he'd done, it made me sick. Somedays I wanted to forgive, forget, and move on. Wanted to continue living life to the best of my ability and honor my father, mother, and brother. But Noelani made it so damn impossible to move on with her shitty attitude

towards me. Like I was a fuckin burden she had no time to deal with.

Then this bitch had the nerve to come to my house a few weeks ago and ask to stay for two days. I swear I wanted to slam the door in her damn face. I wanted to laugh and ask her how having a wet ass felt? She thought she was God's gift to men. Thought she was the best thing smoking. Cassian kicking her out was the best gift he ever gave me. I wanted to call him up my damn self and thank him for finally getting a backbone. He let that woman get away with murder.

Joining the grief group had been the best decision of my life. I got so much more than I could ever ask for. Veronica Louis was one of the main leaders and counselors in the organization. After hearing my story, she quickly took me under her wing. I clung to her maternal spirit.

She was so kind, nurturing, and just all around amazing. She became the motherly figure I desperately wanted and needed after everything I've been through. She gave me love, support, encouragement, and everything that was needed for me to bounce back as a new woman. She showed me how to turn my anger, pain, and grief into channeling my inner feminine prowess.

Right before their eyes, I transformed into this confident, vibrant person filled with ambition, boldness, intelligence, and I was sexy as hell.

Two years after meeting Veronica, I became a Pearl. Along with helping me become this new being, she took me under her wing again and taught me how to make a man crawl and kneel at my feet. How to use my body and make a man beg by using minimal words and smizing with my eyes.

My alter ego had awakened – Kehlani Raye.

That's the woman I became when I stepped into my world as one of the best Pearls Veronica ever created. When I became Kehlani, I became the woman I never dreamed of being. I dressed in designer labels, heels that would make the entire Kardashian clan jealous, men who wanted to blow their fortunes on me, and so much more.

I knew all about Coco and I admired her so much for who she had become. The way Veronica bragged about her and Mya, I wanted to be up there with them. I heard the rumors about Coco leaving and wanting better, but none of that mattered. Not to me.

Most would categorize what Veronica was doing as modern-day prostitution or sex trafficking, but I called it being a part of an empowering movement. Men wanted sex, women wanted wealth and power. I got all the above by being Kehlani. I was able to live a luxurious life while catching a nut.

Sounds like I was living my best life if you ask me.

"Are you mad at me?" Tears rimmed my eyelids looking over at Veronica.

Shame kept me locked away and fear kept me up at night.

Two days had passed since I failed to complete the one job she asked of me. The deed had been trusted to Lionel, but he was moving too slow for her. By doing what Lionel had failed to do, I wanted to show Veronica I was all she needed. That she didn't need to rely on anyone but me. I was the daughter she dreamed of having, unlike Stacey's no-good ass. Only thing she was good for was sucking up air and scamming people. She was about as useless as they came.

Leaning against my car, she massaged her temples and chuckled. “No, sweetie, I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at myself. I should’ve had better security measures in place to keep unwanted guests out.” She and I were standing outside the estate looking over her beautiful garden lost in our thoughts.

“Hmm.” I hissed in pain from the throbbing in my eye. Thanks to Massey and her heavy-handed hands, I was sporting a black eye and busted lip. That little bitch hits hard.

One minute I was laughing with Massey and Daisey Jean, happy I was bringing Veronica two gifts for the price of one. All of us getting our makeup done and the next I was pinching Massey’s arm to stand up when in the presence of royalty.

She’s such a spoiled brat. She had the world at her feet and acted like people should bow down and worship her. I was happy to help Veronica once it became known that she wanted to connect with her granddaughter.

A few months ago, I was lounging around the estate. Lollygagging, kicking the shit, or whatever and I overheard her talking to Lionel about the Kalmin’s. How she wanted to bring Massey into the legacy that was rightfully hers to stand in. I can’t even explain the amount of joy I felt knowing Massey was a legacy Pearl.

Besides the bratty attitude, she was young, vibrant, and full of life. She’d make the perfect Pearl. And since I wanted to do anything to prove to Veronica that she could trust me, I interrupted their conversation and told her that I’d bring Massey to the gala.

At that time, I didn’t have a plan. I didn’t have any idea how this was going to work since Veronica told me that Coco had been leery of it all. Then boom...Coco gets in an accident

and is almost shot to death. The compound went on lockdown, and I knew for sure that I wouldn't be able to get to her like I would. Sending that text placed Massey right in the center of my lap. I got Veronica what she wanted plus a bonus only I failed and ended up with a headache and other injuries.

“Change your mindset. Don't look at the minor setback as a failure but as a motivation to work harder.” Stern eyes glared at me before softening. “Minus the mishap, the gala turned out fantastic. Jaali got what he wanted,” she smirked, shaking her head.

I loved this woman so damn much.

She didn't allow things to upset her or get her riled up. She always stayed optimistic and graceful no matter what. Not to mention, one of her most valuable lessons is that you dress how you want to feel. Veronica always dressed classy and super sexy. Inside the house she wore nothing but a silk robe, Katie Billoft aurum mules, and lingerie. Outside of the house wasn't much of a change.

Grabbing her hands in mine, I squeezed them and bore my soul through my eyes. “I promise I'm going to make you proud of me. You won't regret trusting me with any tasks. You have my word, Veronica. I'll do anything for you.” Those tears I tried to keep at bay had fallen but I didn't care that they stung the cuts near my eye. I rarely cried these days but knowing that I failed her, I felt crushed inside. Almost like dying a slow death.

After Jaali left with Massey and left a dead Daisey Jean in the yard, Veronica's head of security started ordering us to leave. Said that an army of men was headed our way and we needed to go. I knew that army was probably Cassian and I refused to stay around and get caught up in his web. Without

much persuading, we all got into the awaiting vehicles and went out through the back roads. We escaped by a fraction of a hair, but I knew we'd have to stay on the run because those Kalmin's was coming for us.

I touched one of the protected Kalmin Princesses and that was a violation of the highest order.

Cupping my face in her hands, she leaned down until our foreheads rested against one another. "I trust you, Kassidy. You're a powerful woman. Make me proud." She kissed my lips making me exhale. "You're going to do...oh my lord. What the hell is that?" She screeched, jumping around until she was damn near on the hood of my car.

I tried not to laugh. Damn sure didn't want to do it in her face but who in the hell gets scared over a small garden mouse running over their feet? It probably thought her fur mules were its cousin or something.

"Garden mice are harmless, Veronica." I lowly snickered. "It wasn't going to harm you."

Seeing her breathing hard and on the verge of tears, I instantly felt like shit for laughing. "I don't care what kind of mouse it is. Does it look like I run a rat and roach infested brothel in the ghetto? It's still a rodent." That quickly we switched dispositions. A few minutes ago, I was crying over hurting her and now she was on the verge of stroking out crying and shaking.

"I-I-I...Are you okay?" I didn't know what else to do or say.

Backing away with her hand still on her chest and eyes locked on the garden, she sent me on my way. "Go and do whatever errands you need to run. I'll make sure your

bedroom is ready for you to move into.” With that, she turned around and ran into the house.

Wow.

That was...interesting.

Those errands I had to run consisted of me packing up my stuff from my penthouse condo Cassian gifted me. I wasn't a fool to think that those Kalmin's weren't after me, Amell especially. Thankfully I was in good with my doorman and when I called to see if anyone had been by to see me, he said no. I took that as my cue to get my things before they caught me slipping.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A^{tlas}

AN UNEXPLAINABLE AMOUNT of guilt rested in the middle of my chest right behind my rib cage. At sixteen years old Daisey Jean Edwards was dead and my niece was currently going through her bout of shock and trauma, all because I fucked up when it came to taking care of Jaali Kamau.

Had I never given him those pills to reverse the poison I had put in his cigar Daisey Jean's grandmother and parents wouldn't be mourning and Massey wouldn't be screaming in the middle of the night from night terrors.

“Our enemies, men period, they don't respect you or fear you because they see you as nothing but a hood pharmacist trying to play gangsta. A wannabe Cliff Huxtable, pretending to be hard by holding a gun. They play on the fact that you chose to step back and focus on your family. When I asked you if you were sure about leaving this world behind, I needed you to be one-thousand percent sure because everything that came along with being in your position became nonexistent the minute you walked away. You don't have the same respect or

credibility when you were Aaron Kalmin running the streets alongside Cassian and me. An exchange happened and it ended with you giving up everything that came with being Aaron to becoming Atlas, the devoted husband, and family man.

“There is nothing wrong at all with the decision you made. But understand that nobody is afraid of the hood healer with his own apothecary you’ve chosen to become. Why would you think Jaali would listen to you? Who are you for him to warrant that level of attention? What part of you pumped a grain of fear in his heart? If he ain’t listening to you then what do you think the niggas who’s been envious since day one think? You’re wide open, soft to them. And yes, I have a constant guard on you for that reason alone. Face the facts, Young. You couldn’t withstand the weight connected to your name while also being a husband and a father.”

Daily I replayed Amell’s words in my head over and over until it clicked. I never considered how my reputation would diminish the minute I said, ‘I Do’ and wanted to be present at all my kid’s school events. Nothing about people viewing me as weak settled right within my spirit. I hated it with a strong passion.

Probably why I took it personal and killed this man myself. It took a lot to convince Cassian to let me go after Jaali when he took Massey. If a man snatched up one of my daughters it would be hard for me to let someone else step in and do what I knew I was more than capable of doing. However, this was personal and I’m glad Cassian stepped back.

Standing under the full weight connected to my name was never the problem. The problem came with feeling like the man I had grown up to be with my brothers couldn’t live under

the same roof with my wife. The version of me I presented to Keatyn when she and I met was the same image I wanted her to always have of me.

At the end of the day, I was always Atlas Aaron Kalmin but the same way we switched personas when the environment changed, I wanted to make sure the persona she always saw was the one that she fell in love with.

The small glimpse of Aaron she saw on our wedding day almost ruined our entire relationship. Her ignoring me for a whole damn year kinda left me with a small case of PTSD and a trigger. I never expected to suffer the way I did emotionally over my actions when I lied to her. The thought of never going back to that place where she took her love away from me scared me enough to give up that part of me.

“All that screaming you’re doing ain’t going to do nothing but make you weaker.” Ignoring his screams, I inhaled letting my lungs fill with my new grade of weed. “Hmm, that’s some good shit.” I was more than pleased with my latest creation.

Since my son and PJ had a habit of smoking and thinking that no one knew, I decided to create a marijuana plant that was just as natural and potent as Jamaica’s finest. Tweaking it to be just as concentrated but not show up as high usage when tested for drug levels of consumption.

CBD was now legal for athletes, but they couldn’t consume more than 150 nanograms per milliliter for THC. My strand was ten times that but only shown in testing as below 120 nanograms. Giving them the freedom to smoke and not show up on drug tests.

How I did it, I am still figuring it out.

I just knew it worked and the few athletes who tried it had passed tests with flying colors.

“If you want him to stop screaming like a little bitch tell little Langston Hughes over there to stop spraying him with the water hose.” Shaking his head, Cassian puffed, inhaling the smoke deeply, blowing it out through his nose. “Told you that it wouldn’t take nothing to corrupt his poetic justice ass.”

Amused by his new nickname, Dre looked over at my brother, “Do you need a hug, Cassian? I told you there is nothing wrong with a man saying he needs a hug.” Dre taunting Cassian had been the funniest thing ever. Those two bickered back and forth like two little ass kids. When I thought that they wouldn’t get along, it turned into Cassian lowkey seeing Dre as an annoying cousin who didn’t want to admit that he enjoyed his company.

“And for your information, there isn’t any water coming out of the hose. All ninety-nine percent alcohol. Told you my idea was pretty sweet.” I bet Dre wouldn’t be saying it was sweet when he started having reoccurring nightmares of Jaali’s screams and torture.

I’ve been plotting on what I was going to do to Jaali for a long time. Shooting him wasn’t enough and neither was stabbing him. Whatever I did had to inflict the same traumatizing pain he caused my niece and Daisey Jean. Cassian didn’t care what I did if the result ended with him being dead, and Dre had become unusually fascinated by it all. After watching Jaali gut Dafina and kill his unborn child with no remorse, the perfect torture popped up in my head.

Out of the three of us Cassian and Amell were known for loving to physically torture their enemies, especially Amell. I used to have the decency to give my enemies a pill or some

form of poison and go on about my day, but with Jaali, I felt like I had a point to prove so the first thing I did after setting his house on fire and bringing him to Amell's new state of the art warehouse, I stripped him naked and placed him in a metal tub of warm water. He probably thought his ass was at a spa and about to receive the ultimate care for his eye that still had the knife in it and bullets in his shoulder and hand.

He soaked in warm water with coconut oil for two hours until his skin was raw, slick, and pruney. I had limits to my stomach queasiness, and I gave him a paralyzing drink so he couldn't feel anything for at least four hours. Cassian said I was being too nice, but if I learned anything from watching him and Amell over the years, was that too much pain would cause the victim to blackout or die.

So, between the blood thinners and paralyzing drink, Jaali was in a state of being in-and-out of consciousness while I had one of Amell's crazy ass soldiers skin seventy-five percent of his body. I created this large machete sized potato peeler with extra sharp blades to make it easier to skin him like butter, thanks to his raw and pruney skin, and that's exactly what happened to him.

It took exactly three hours and fifty minutes for him to get cut up just the way I wanted. Dre got the bright idea to fill a twelve-gallon bucket with pure alcohol and hose him down since pouring acid on him would bring a quick death, rather than the slow and painful death we wanted. The first spray Dre sprayed on Jaali had him raising up screaming. There wasn't enough blowing on his skin he could do to dry up the alcohol.

That level of pain he was enduring was only the beginning of a very long night.

“Joc, escort our guest in. Dre, you can take a break now, homie.” At first, I didn’t think it would be a good idea to have him sit in on this part but after seeing what Jaali did to Dafina, I felt like he deserved some type of release knowing his unborn child was dead.

“Whew, that was interesting.” He dropped the water hose, nodded for a guard to close Jaali’s cage, and made his way over by us, stopping right in front of Cassian with his arms wide open. “Sure you don’t want that hug? It won’t emasculate you, Cassian.” Me and a few of the other dudes in the warehouse failed trying not to laugh.

“Dre, I’m four seconds away from putting my foot up your ass. Gon’ some damn where with your bothersome ass.” Cassian tried his hardest not to laugh but did so anyway.

All our attention turned to the five men wheeling in seven-foot plexiglass cages each. I wasn’t surprised when Dre became uncomfortable with this part and went and sat down. I never sugarcoated my plan. I made it all known to him because he needed to understand why it had to happen. You can’t fuck with my family and expect me not to fuck with yours. The first time I roughed up Jaali’s siblings was a warning he completely ignored. So, like I had to correct my wrongs by killing Jaali, the additional correction of said wrongs included them too.

“What is this?” Jaali yelled in a strained voice. Like those in the five plexiglass cages before him, he too was in a cage naked, skinned, and in his last hour of living. “Mother, are you okay?” Unable to move from the pain, all he could do was yell and cry. Kinda like the same thing my niece and Daisey Jean were only able to do.

Smirking, Cassian circled around the cages inspecting my work. “This is dope, Young. Probably one of your best ideas in a long time.” I made no attempt to hide the proud smile on my face. After all the negative shit I’ve been hearing for weeks, it was nice to finally hear a compliment. He stopped in front of the cage with Jaali’s sister and licked his lips. “Had the circumstances been different I might’ve entertained your pretty ass.” Indeed Jaali’s sister was fine as hell but that ain’t mean a damn thing.

“Preciate you.”

“They have nothing to do with this!” Jaali cried before speaking in his native tongue. Dre, forever surprising the hell out of us, spoke back to Jaali. I don’t know what the hell he said but it sucked Jaali’s tears right up and had him glaring his way. “Oh, you speak Kiswahili? How nice for you.” Skinned half to death he still found the strength to talk shit.

“Thought it would do me some good to know what your wife was moaning in my ear when I fucked her in your bed.” Nonchalantly shrugging, Dre pulled out his phone completely dismissing Jaali.

“He’s been hanging around you too much, Cassian. You’ve corrupted him.” I inhaled the last of my blunt, feeling the calming tingles of lavender flow through my body. I made that good shit. “Alright, let’s get this show on the road. Jaali, I thought it would be nice for you to see your family one last time before they left this earth, but they have something to tell you.”

Every time he tried to move he’d cry out in pain and fall. Between the alcohol and the way he was skinned, almost like a skin graft, there wasn’t much blood coming out but he one hundred percent felt the pain. I made sure that once the

plexiglass closed that it couldn't be reopened without extreme force like a chainsaw. On top of Jaali's cage was a basketball sized opening. On the other five cages, there were two openings in the rear that were the same size. Wasn't no escaping or trying to fight your way out.

"Please let them go. They have nothing to do with what I did." His one good eye looked from his mother, father, sister, brother and sister-in-law.

Standing in front of his mother, I looked her dead in the eyes. "Tell him why you have to die. Don't speak in your native tongue. Speak English."

Knowing how humiliated those young girls felt being placed on display in front of Jaali and the other perverted men at the gala, I had them all stripped naked to endure the same form of humiliation. I'm sure he never wanted to see his family so exposed and vice versa, but I know damn well those girls, my niece especially, didn't like being exposed.

His mother trembled with fear, tears pouring down her eyes. She looked at her husband and children before looking at him. "Jaali, I have to die because you touched his niece. You violated her."

Nodding my head to the man behind her cage, I stepped back so everyone had a clear view of him placing his arms through the rear holes and snapping her neck. Her body dropped to the floor of the cage and the warehouse filled with screams and cries. What had been done to Daisey Jean would be done to them all.

Next was his sister. For a second I thought I had a default in Jaali's cage. He found whatever strength he could muster and tried to break free, making it fall flat on the ground, but it didn't break or open. Like their mother, she had to explain

why she was dying because of his actions. One by one each of his family members told their reason and had their necks broken right in front of him, starting with his mother and ending with his father.

They died because their son had a wicked perverted heart and liked underage girls. Died because he thought it was okay to come after my family and think that there would be no repercussions for his actions. Died because he killed Daisey Jean. Died because he used the covering of being a man of clergy to operate an underground human trafficking ring.

Crouching before his cage, I tilted my head before knocking on the glass. “How are you feeling? Need some water?” I cared nothing about how he felt nor was I going to offer him water. His immediate family had all been killed in front of him and he was now sobbing a hard broken cry.

“How could you?” He cried with a hung head. “You’re evil.”

Ain’t that some shit?

I’m evil for doing what he does.

“Nah.” I chuckled standing. “That didn’t make me evil.” I turned to one of the guards. “Bring them all out to meet Big Keisha.”

“Ah shit.” Cassian sucked his teeth. “That big bitch don’t like me, that’s why I brought her ass out here for Amell to try and tame. She got one more time to hiss at me before I shoot her in between her eyes.”

“What do you expect? You don’t even feed her.” The way Dre confusingly stared at Cassian made me chuckle.

“Lil Langston, what I told you about questioning me?”

All of my plexiglass cages were wheeled out to the back of the barnyard. Earlier in the week I had a medium size portion of the left side of the backyard fenced off with a plexiglass fence secured around it in a circle. About the size of one of those above ground pools but a little bigger, and in the middle of it was Cassian's new fixation. His twenty-foot, one-thousand-pound pregnant American alligator named Keisha.

I don't know who told my brother he could train a damn alligator, but he got the bright idea thinking if he fed her every two to three days, she'd listen to his demands like she was some circus animal. All it did was make her aggressive as hell especially being pregnant. And to think this fool wanted her to be at the alligator farm he had built next to his house. That wasn't smart at all with all the little kids we had and I'm glad he decided to have her moved out here.

Knowing it had been a good three to four days since she last ate, I had another plexiglass fence built in the middle of the circle to separate her from us when we fed her. I've seen enough movies to know how fast these damn creatures moved. The minute we came into view she started hissing. Big Keish was hungry and smelt her next meal.

"Drop the bodies," I ordered turning to Jaali who looked like he was in a daze but snapped out of it when he saw his mother's body falling out of the cage onto the dirt ground. "I've been a horrible uncle to my brother's new pet."

I crouched down watching his eyes balloon once he saw the massive alligator on the other side of the separation glass. "Yeah, she's big bitch ain't she, and guess what? I've been purposely starving her for days for this moment."

"Please..." He cried.

Looking him dead in the eye I ordered, "Open her gate."

“No.” He lowly cried dropping his head.

“Aye,” I knocked on the cage. “Head up, motherfucker. I tried to warn you, but you wanted to play so we’re playing. Watch the finale of my show.”

Once all five of Jaali’s family members were laid out on the other side of the glass and the middle partition fence was pulled back, Keisha wasted no time at all crawling her big ass over to her large meal and started feasting.

“I’m going to take a...yeah, I’m going for a walk.” First chomp and Dre was gone.

“Slow your greedy ass down, Keisha, damn.” Cassian kicked the glass.

“You lost your whole family because you made the conscious decision to come after mine when I specifically warned you to stay away. These are the consequences of your actions. Watching them die because of you and watching them get eaten like they’re nothing but food for a greedy reptile. Shit happens, right?” Even when I was heavy in the streets before getting married, I never ventured off the dark handle like this. My preference was milder for a reason because the more I stared in his sorry eyes, the more I heard the crunch of his family’s bones, I didn’t like the overwhelming sense of darkness taking hold of me.

I had this urge to level up and try something more sinister. Test the levels of my willingness to be even more diabolical.

“You know how you season some nice ribs and let them marinate overnight. Once you grill them they’re nice and tender. Damn near falling off the bone. Well, guess what you lucky, African Bitch?” I chuckled darkly, standing to grab the bucket handed to me. “I’m going to let you marinate in this

nice thick sauce I specially made for Keisha.” Making sure I had it positioned over the top hole of his cage, I poured in the marinade.

It was a mixture of raccoon and squirrel blood, pig guts, and a bunch of other foul-smelling shit. Bucket after bucket I poured until about three feet of the cage was filled with it. He sat there weakly banging on the cage, gagging, and coughing. It smelled horrible and would get worse as the days passed on.

“Cassian named her Keisha because she’s like that chick in the hood that all the niggas want and is evil as fuck. Your lucky ass won’t even have to finesse her to like you. Because after you marinate right here, right in front of her for the next few days, she’s going to want to eat your ass up. Every day for however long I decide, she’ll look at you smelling like a warm Krispy Kreme donut. Have fun getting acquainted with your new friend.” Leaving him there crying and begging, I looked over to see that she was halfway through with her meal.

I walked around the barnyard to the front feeling weird. Kinda confused that I enjoyed immensely what I just did and heavy in the sense that I didn’t want to go home. I never had a problem with killing someone and going home after, but this was the first time I’d have to do so with a wife and kids waiting on me. I now understood why my brothers went ghost after they stepped into this part of the dark world.

“Ride out with me, Young.” As if he knew what was already going through my head, Cassian took my keys out of my hand and tossed them to Dre, who was leaning against my car.

“You straight?” The way Dre looked at me made me feel exposed and he could see everything that I didn’t want to admit.

“I’m good.” Honestly, I was good. I had no remorse for what I had just done. It was the feelings associated with having itching hands wanting to do more and more, but then also feeling like this was the exact reason I had stepped away in the first place.

When you step into the underground world of any type of illegal dealings, at one point and time you’ll have to get your hands dirty. I never had to get my hands this dirty though. My brothers gave me the safe assignments and took on the heavy stuff. Sheltering me in a sense. Amell used to always say that he never wanted me to get a taste of what it was like to take a trip on the other side of sanity. Having done that just now, I kinda wish I listened because what I just got a taste of was building something in me I wasn’t sure if I wanted to take root.

CASSIAN AND I rode around smoking for hours until we headed back to the compound to chill out in the back of his house. The weed mellowed my mood but that adrenaline to keep inflicting pain stayed a consistent steady flow. Words weren’t spoken between us. They weren’t needed.

By the time I made it home the sun had already risen, and my kids were off to school. I purposely stayed out that long to avoid running into them. Afraid of what they might see when they looked at me. I’d long ago changed my clothes and showered but they’d ask questions. Keatyn would ask questions. While they all deserved answers, I wasn’t in the right headspace to answer them.

Standing in the foyer of my home I felt torn and conflicted.

I stepped away for a reason. I choose my wife and kids for a reason. On the surface, being in the business wasn't hard. Not hard at all. But once you broke through that level and entered that dungeon of constantly living in survival mode, it turned you dark and it wasn't for the weakhearted. I respected my brothers, Amell especially, so much more because he lived that life every day, twenty-four seven.

He functioned off it. He breathed it, ate the carbs of his enemies. Cassian, well he wasn't too far from him, but he had his hobby's to keep his mind afloat. It amazed me when I was dating Michelle all those years, none of the things I was concerned about played a factor. I had no problem being in the streets running alongside my brothers. That's all I knew. All I wanted to know.

Then I met my Sparkle.

My love in human form.

I met my baby and suddenly I developed these new priorities and boundaries when it came to what I would expose her to. Knowing we as people carried unwanted spirits, I refused to bring any evil spirits of the underground world I lived in around my woman, around my children. I wanted to shower her with my love not taint her with the parasites of others.

So I made a choice, and that choice was my family.

“Hey.” There she was, my Sparkle.

I for sure thought she had left for the clinic after dropping the kids off. But here she was still dressed in her favorite peach silk nightie with the matching rob and furry sleepers on her feet. Hair wrapped in a scarf, belly poking out looking as fine as she could be.

“I-I...” She cleared her throat fidgeting with her fingers. My silence was making her nervous. But that’s what she did to me, make me speechless. “I sent the kids off to school and Krishna is going to pick them up for me. They’ll stay with your brother for a couple of days so I can focus on you.”

We’ve been married for over sixteen years, and she still entices me as she did the first time we met at the library.

Hips swaying, bottom lip between her lips, and her favorite body oil engulfing me. Turning me on in ways I haven’t been turned on in a long time. Everything about Keatyn heightened all my senses. Once she got within arms reached, I looped my arms around her waist and pulled her as close to me as her belly allowed. My shoulders dropped and my mind became clear the second I planted my face in her neck.

Sighing in relief, I held onto her as her presence submerged me in peace. “I need you.” I don’t know how else to say what I needed other than that.

“I’m here, baby. Whatever you need me to be in this moment, whatever you need me to do to get your mind back focused, just tell me and I’ll do it. Teach me, show me what you need from me. Teach me how to handle this side of you.” A savory shudder heated my body feeling the coolness of her breath on my neck.

“Atlas,” she purred, mouth latching onto my shoulder at the feel of my manhood poking her.

The touch of my heaviness always turned her into a purring kitten. “Hold onto me.” Before she could question me, I hoisted her up in my arms and carried her upstairs to our bedroom. “Damn, Kea.” Lights were dimmed low. Music playing, my favorite Palo Santo candles burning. She created the perfect relaxing vibe.

Her eyebrow raised as her lips curved into a smile. “It’s been a while since I catered to my man. You’ve been working hard, and I want to show you that I’m so appreciative of all your sacrifices. I can run you a bath or shower. Breakfast is in the warmer, I cooked all your favorites. Tell me how I can cater to you.” She asked while lifting my shirt over my head.

“I showered at Cassian’s before coming here. I refuse to bring that type of energy into our space. But there is something that *I* need to take care of.” I stripped down to my briefs not once breaking eye contact.

“You?” She giggled. “No, sir. This isn’t about me. It’s all about you. We can even watch those ‘*How it’s Made*’ shows.” Her warm hands roamed all over my chest. I almost came undone when she placed kisses over my stomach down to the waistband of my briefs.

Grabbing a chunk of her hair, I pulled her head back. Leaning down until our lips touched I spoke against hers, “I said I had things to take care of didn’t I?” Each time she opened her mouth to speak, I licked her lips teasing her to moan. “Part of you catering to me is letting me do whatever I want to *you*.”

Those brown doe eyes peered up at me with hunger and need. “You kept your promise to me and came home in one piece. You can do whatever you want to me.” I watched as her eyes filled with tears and her breathing picked up. “I’m always so scared when you walk out that door, Atlas. That side of you is oddly new to me but I’m going to hold it down because I love you too much not to.” The rawness and vulnerability gripped me tight around my heart.

What else needed to be said?

Nothing.

I needed to feel my wife without any hindrances. Several times I had to pause and take deep breaths removing her clothes. Keatyn had a way of giving me power but also making me nervous. All she'd done was look up at me with those brown eyes and pouty lips and I wanted to give her the world. Taking in her nakedness, rubbing my hands on the growing creation we made of love. I'd give up anything to make sure this, her, is what I had to come home to every day.

Rubbing soft, comforting circles on her stomach until she calmed down, it felt like every nerve in my body was on high alert, drowning me in my anxiety. One hand slid across her silken belly, the other gripped her waist. Her nipples pebbled at the intimacy of my touch, begging me to love on them.

The pain in my groin grew with each chorus of my name she released. "Atlas, please," she whimpered when I traced my fingertip across her bottom lip.

"Thank you for carrying my babies." Placing kisses on her belly my hands glided over to her chocolate mounds that were erect begging me for attention.

The first taste of her chocolate pebbles grew my possessiveness. Ravenously, I sucked, nibbled, and made love to her nipples until they became sensitive and swollen. Her cries and heavy breathing fell on deaf ears. Knowing that I made her come undone by feasting on her breasts drove me wild and made my erection twice as hard. Giving each breast and nipple one last kiss, I let my tongue lead the way down south.

"At-Atlas." She gasped as I dipped my tongue into her navel. Her body squirmed beneath me, chest arching towards the ceiling.

Stretching out on the bed, I placed her thighs on my shoulders and locked her in with my arms securing her from moving. Opening her petals with my tongue, I blew on her engorged bud of pleasure. Since my first taste of her flower, I developed an insatiable craving. It turned me into an untamed beast. There were days, sometimes weeks, when all I wanted was to feast on her and want nothing in return. That's how good she tasted.

"Mmm, open up, Sparkle." I popped her pussy causing her to cream on my beard. "Yeah, that's it." She tasted like the finest chocolate and sweetest forbidden fruit.

"Ohhhhhh, you so nastyyyy." She pushed on my head, but I wasn't letting up. Keatyn knew what time it was. When I got started, there wasn't any stopping until I became overstuffed.

"Son of a gunnnn." She whimpered exploding on my tongue.

"Don't even try it," I chuckled pushing down my briefs watching her try to curl up.

A moan slipped past her lips as she watched me stroke myself. Running her tongue from one corner of her mouth to the other she tried to sit up, but I placed my free hand on her stomach to keep her down. "Not tonight, baby. If I allow you to do that I'll be done. I need to be inside you. Spread those legs for me." Neither of us moved. Her eyes were locked in watching my hand stroke my aching shaft.

I moved my body to cover hers as best as I could. Taking her hands into mine, I raised them over her head. "You still my nasty girl?" She opened her mouth to speak, and I took her tongue hostage. Lifting my hips, I lined my hardened tip at her entrance.

Her eyes squeezed shut as I teased her. “Stop teasing me. Put it in.” She wrapped those mocha thighs around me.

“Tell me you’re my nasty girl first.” Taking her tongue back hostage, I sucked and dove in until I touched the base of her cave. Covering her lips, I welcomed her scream into my mouth only to release a tormented groan. “Shit, Kea. Damn, release me.” Her walls were ridiculously tight, suctioning me. Each time I tried to withdraw they sucked me deeper.

“Atlas.” She cried out. Her hands flexed in mine.

Raising my head, I nuzzled her neck. Alternated between biting and sucking. Letting my beard tingle her sensitive skin. “That’s it, baby. Damn. I love the way you feel around me.”

Carefully, I maneuvered us further on the bed until her back relaxed on the sheets and before she had a chance to part her pretty lips to speak, I sunk into her warmth making us both cry out, “Shit.” Her wetness was drowning and suffocating. She squeezed and I enjoyed the sight of my width and girth covered in her glaze.

“You’re my everything.” My tongue spelled out my name along the length of her neck. Her hands tightened against me, legs keeping me in place.

“Thank you for loving me.” She mewed, eyes rolling into the back of her head as my pace stayed slow and long. We never had a reason to rush. This was us moving how we loved to move together. “Thank you for protecting our family.” Tears began to puddle in her ear.

Keatyn loved to affirm me when we were in the middle of making love. She said that was when my heart, mind, and soul were opened the most and she could empower me. I loved it

too. Hearing her silken voice caused a passionate fluttering to arise from the back of my neck to my toes.

“We appreciate all of your...oh my...Atlassss.” She sung, back curving up into me. “We appreciate your loyalty and sacrifices.” Her breathing became chopped as my mouth trailed from her neck down to her aching breasts. With my lips, I performed a series of slow, shivery kisses traced around her left nipple. Her head tossed left and right. Hands gripping the sheets as she tried to survive my torture.

Not once did I break my rhythm. Continued to stroke her deeper and deeper and when that next wave hit, I made sure to lick her clean. “Atlas!” she cried out as she gave in, exploding in a downpour of fiery sensations. Her screams were my favorite melody. “Damn, Kea.” Drinking from her never-ending well of pure honey drove my state of euphoria over the edge. Looking up, I smiled at my hard work. My Sparkle lay panting, her chest heaving.

A house with no kids or rushing around to get them, I can guarantee by the time I finished with Keatyn both of us were going to be well recharged and in our right state of mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Cassian

CONTRARY TO WHAT everyone assumed and mumbled under their breaths, I didn't sideswipe Coco nor am I the one who shot her. Was I there when it happened? Yes, I was three cars behind her. Did I see who shot her? Yes, I did. Why haven't I cleared my name and told the truth? Because Noelani would be dead sooner than I wanted.

Pete drove like a bat out of hell when we left the compound to chase after Coco. At the time my only concern was beating her to talk to Massey first. My extra dumb ass didn't have a plan in motion when it came to taking her from her mom. I only said it because at the time I was pissed and frustrated, taking out my issues on the wrong person.

Hurt people hurt people.

One minute I was fussing at Pete to drive faster and not let a damn Prius pass us, then the next thing I see is a black SUV sideswiping the hell out of Coco's car. The car kept hitting her until she finally flipped over and over. Pete finally did something right and that was pull over on the side of the road not too far behind the truck that hit her.

I've never experienced anything like that in my life and I've seen some scary shit. Each flip her car took it was like the fist of Goliath slamming into my chest. Then these weird still shots from when Coco and I first met kept flashing before my eyes. Still shots of us meeting at the Flea Market, our first time hanging out at the Grand Prix in Boca Raton, and her beating my ass in a go-cart race so I beat her back in when we got to my place. Still shots of the first time we got high together, late-night riding around the city and listening to music. Still shots of her smiling and laughing at my foolishness.

Still shots of us doing some daredevil shit I thought of in the middle of the day. Still shots of her telling me that she was pregnant. Of her crying and telling me that the father of her child didn't want her anymore. Still shots of me asking to be the father of her baby and her agreeing.

Every still shot that I had was of the happiest of times Coco and I had. Nothing of us when we said words that we didn't mean or were at war with each other. Sitting there with my mouth opened, eyes wide, gun clenched tight in my hand, and eyes moist, I spoke to God with the most sincerity I've ever had in my life.

Besides praying over my children, my relationship with God wasn't superb. A lot of it had to do with pride and thinking that I was smart enough, wise enough, and more than capable to handle life on my own. It seemed like I only communicated with God when I needed him, and in that moment after watching Coco flip in the air, I used one of those safety net prayers for her protection.

This prayer I sent up to God for Coco was different. Something I never experienced before. I begged God to save her. Save her from whomever these enemies were that were

trying to kill her. Save her for Massey and save her for me so I could apologize and correct my wrongs.

“What the fuck?” My body jolted at the same time Coco’s did when the first bullet entered her body. By the second bullet I was out of the car with Pete. Whoever this nigga was he was stupid as hell or didn’t care. There were too many witnesses, and the traffic cameras were still recording. He had to be a rookie.

As much as I hated to stand by and not do anything, Pete and I waited until he finished emptying his clip and ran back. The level of rage coursing through my veins had my body hot and sweating. Not paying attention to his surroundings, dude ran back to his truck with his head down, oblivious to me standing there.

“Stupid motherfucker.” I gritted, lifting my gun, bashing it against his head. Once I saw he was knocked out, I ran over to Coco to see if she was alive. “Nah, Coco. You can’t go out like this man.” The urge to cry and bleed the city red never felt so strong in my life. I sighed when I touched her bloody neck and felt a weak pulse. “You gotta fight, mama. Fight for Massey.”

Reluctantly leaving her there, I ran back to Pete who had just finished tossing dude in his own truck. “I’ll take him to your warehouse. Go back to the compound. Massey should be back soon.” Pete didn’t wait for me to respond. He hopped in the truck and drove off in one direction and I got in my truck and drove back home.

That was weeks ago, and I still had that nigga tied up in my warehouse. Imagine my surprise when I finally went to see who he was, probably some random dude her grandmother hired to take her out. My ass got the scam surprise of a

lifetime. It was one of them new light-skinned niggas that worked for Noelani.

Surprised the royal fuck out of me.

When Atlas came and asked for my clothes that night I knew it was because Amell had seen the traffic cameras. If you weren't familiar with my build or knew that I *never* backtracked after I shot somebody because I made sure when I shot my first bullet that it was intended to kill, then you knew the dude running back to Coco's body in the video was me. There were too many people around for me to do anything reckless, so I left her there knowing that she'd be taken to the hospital quicker, and I didn't want to be questioned or blamed for something I didn't do, though that ended up happening anyway since I was the last person to see her before the accident.

"Turn up the volume," I spoke out to no one in particular.

"I love my son most of all because he served his purpose. Cashton, my precious baby boy, was my ticket into getting back into the family." Noelani giggled and Honey gasped. "Girl don't act so surprised. I knew my husband. I knew what Dominique was going to do once he figured out that I had developed feelings for Cassian. He was going to ship my ass straight to Columbia to teach me a lesson and to rub it in Cassian's face that he had me. So, I got pregnant."

Wiping the sweat from my brow, I rotated my neck. "One more round." Nate, one of my soldiers and homies from the hood, was an underground boxer that often spared with me whenever I wanted to let off some steam. Today was one of those days. Usually I spared with Amell, but I wasn't in the frame of mind needed to deal with him.

“What I didn’t expect was for Dominique to keep my ass hostage for six damn years, but it worked out in my favor.” Her laugh pumped the heavy force behind my fist with each punch I landed. *“Being separated from him for that long only grew my love even deeper. I thought loving him from afar played on the strength of my heartstrings, but not seeing him and then to come back and find out that she’s still in the picture. Now, that shit almost broke me.”*

“Wait, so I’m confused. You loved him this whole time but never said anything? Why not? You had more access to him and could’ve put that thang on him while she was living in California. Made him forget about her with one clap of your ass cheeks, Noelani.”

Them laughing and kee-keeing over the foul shit she just admitted to, I had to stop. “Give me a second.” Walking to the edge of the boxing ring, I hopped down and sat on the steps.

“At the time I wasn’t thinking straight. I was so captivated by his unforgettable presence and being a part of the team. I told myself that if I stay close to him, show him that I’m loyal and his true ride or die, then he would forget all about her and choose me.” Noelani’s heavy sigh, sounding like she was reminiscing back on her days of longing after her true love made my blood boil.

“If you learn anything from me make sure that you learn not to settle for less. I settled and had far too many kids than I should’ve because my plan backfired time and time again. Now, I must resort to extreme measures to get what I want, and trust me, I’m to the point that I’m not backing down. I want what I want and that’s the alpha.”

“Turn it off.” I didn’t think I spoke loudly enough, but someone heard me.

“Yo, Cass. Who’s the broad on the tapes? She sounds foul as hell.”

If only Nate heard the previous recordings. The one I just played was child’s play compared to what I heard the first time. I thought Ari and Mace’s little gadget was broken or a regular toy until the records of Noelani’s phone conversations started to come in.

“A dead bitch walking. I’m done for the day. Preciate you for coming through.” Leaving out the side door, I went down the hall to where I had Marlin chained up and starved.

Up until today I never said a word to him. My form of torturing ranged from starving him for days, hosing him down with ice cold water, whipping his ass like a runaway slave, to using him as my punching bag. Whenever I felt like bleeding the city red over some fuck shit happening, I came here to beat his ass. However, today was his lucky day. I finally felt like talking.

Seeing me enter the room I had him shackled in, he curled into a ball. He was stripped down to nothing but his draws and socks. No part of me felt bad for torturing a kid. Had Amell not talked some sense into me, Hayden’s ass would’ve been his bunkmate instead of moving to Jacksonville to live with his daddy. After we found out Hayden was a part of Jaali’s plan to kidnap Massey, PJ beat that nigga like a runaway slave.

Positioning a chair in front of him, I sat back admiring my work. Both of his eyes were swollen shut. Lips busted. Bruised all over. “When I ask a question, you answer. If I must repeat myself or you take too long, I’m going to chop your fingers off one by one and send them to your mother. You understand me?” He nodded. “Have you ever had sex with my wife?” I wasn’t sure if he could see me, but he knew who I was. He

recognized me the first day Pete brought him here, so he knew exactly who I was talking about.

“No.” He answered too quickly for my liking. “She and my cousin Anthony have been messing around. I swear I never touched her.”

I wanted to bash his head against the wall so damn bad. “Who told you to kill Coco?” For weeks I’ve been trying to figure that out without having to beat it out of him. Instead of seeing if he would lie or not, I tried to solve the puzzle myself but each time I put the pieces together, they never fit.

Coco’s grandmother was the first person on everybody’s list that we suspected but after much digging, she was not involved. Outside of her family, Coco didn’t have any enemies. I even investigated Massey’s sperm donor to see if maybe his wife was on some years later get back type of shit. Their asses came back clean. So, now I had to see the man who shot the gun.

“I don’t know nothing about a Coco. All I was told was to take out the woman coming out of the compound. The first woman to leave, well it was a girl with another woman and a man in the car. I called Noelani to confirm because the description of the car and those inside didn’t match. She said that that was her stepdaughter and her mother. I had to wait until the next person left and that if it would be a woman by herself going to Target, that was my mark.”

Thank God I was already sitting down. I think I would’ve fallen on my ass if I was standing. Before I completely lost my shit I asked one last question. “What did you whisper to Coco before you emptied the clip?”

Shifting uncomfortably, he started shaking his head. “I-I... I don’t remember.”

Right now wasn't the time for him to try and protect whomever. "Marlin, what did I tell you about answering me in truth?"

A few seconds passed before he finally spoke up. "Noelani told me to whisper in her ear *"In death do you part. His heart now belongs to me"*. I swear I don't know what it means. All I know is that she's been plotting on taking that woman out for some time."

"You'll live to see another day." The minute I walked out the room my head hung between my hunched shoulders. Without out saying anything to anyone I left and drove home.

Heavy is the head that wears the crown.

I wanted a refund.

I wanted to give the responsibility of overseeing the cartel back but there was no one to give it to. My brothers were adamant about not wanting to be in charge, but me, forever thinking that I have something to prove, I offered myself as tribute on plenty of occasions. The burden of my title within the cartel wasn't so much the heaviness that weighed me down rather than the woman who was the neck of my family.

My wife.

This feeling, being uncomfortable, I hated it. Wanted it gone. I couldn't sleep. Barely could eat. I was restless, fucking itchy, and just all around miserable. These feelings weren't new. A lot of them had been reoccurring for a while and I tried to ignore them if I could, but God wanted my attention and He had it now.

Until I dealt with the eminent threat attacking my family, I would be uncomfortable. Until I dealt with what was being asked of me, I was living in a season of uncomfortableness.

Amell should be proud right now that I'm digging deep within myself to figure this all out on my own, and maybe that's the whole point of him stepping back and not getting involved like he normally would.

Starting back with him telling me to spring clean my house and closet. Cleaning out my house and closet meant searching and looking for something. When you clean you find all types of dirty shit. Find the hidden clothes that needed to be washed or thrown away.

Keyword in all of that – clean and thrown away.

Then tending to my grass.

Other than my house, everyone else's grass was growing and flourishing. I had dead roots. Dead soil. You can't plant where it is dead. You can't grow where it is dead. In order to plant and have healthy grass, you must dig up the old grass and soil. Dig up all the old shit and throw it away. Once you have all the old tossed out, then you lay down new fertilizer and seeds.

You start the process of rewatering and replanting.

I had to start the process of rewatering and replanting my children.

I wanted them to love me so bad. Wanted them to be solely dependent on me, well now God was *demanding* I stood on that.

“Hey, Cass.” Keatyn waved from the couch.

“What's up. How are you feeling?” My hands itched to rub her belly, but I stopped myself from doing so.

All the dark things clouding me and the way I've been feeling lately, I didn't want to rub that off on her. It saddened

me a little to not be able to rub her stomach. It was my way of bonding with my niece or nephew before they were born. My way of bonding with my sister.

That was another push to get me to stop pussyfooting around and handle my business.

Smiling tiredly, she yawned. “Sleepy and hungry. Same ole same ole. I had to come over here to get some peace and quiet.” We laughed because I already knew my girls were giving her a run for her money.

Another push for to stop procrastinating. My responsibilities were tiring other people out. I know she and Atlas would always watch my kids, but they had their own plus another on the way to look after.

“Thank you for everything, Kea. I really appreciate it.” It took a lot for me to swallow my pride in asking for help and I’m thankful that no one made me feel bad about it.

“Always. You never have to thank us. That’s what family is for.”

I was also learning a new meaning to family. One that I hadn’t quite figured out yet but knew it was deeper than the one I’ve been living by. “I’ll be back.” Leaving her to dose off, I went upstairs to check on my firstborn.

People wanted to say that Covid-19 brought us close to the end of perilous times. I beg to differ. The curse and voodoo that was hovering over each Kalmin was perilous times. First Coco, though she wasn’t a Kalmin by blood she was one by association. Then Massey getting kidnapped, having her virginity bid on, and her own grandmother selling her to a damn Kenyan priest.

What in the hell was going on?

Rubbing baby girl's head, watching her finally sleep, my heart ached for her. I never felt so useless as a man for not being able to take my child's pain away. I felt even more useless when I got her emergency code and was two hours away, not knowing if I'd be able to save my own child or not. Again, my ass was stuck chasing behind Noelani rather than being available to the ones who needed me the most.

Thankfully my brothers called and said they were closer and would bring my baby back for me. Pacino calling me seconds after, ready to ride out to get the motherfucker that took her, my definition of family was taking on a whole new meaning. I'm kinda glad they handled her rescue than me because I wasn't thinking straight. Amell was a logical thinker when it came to the hard stuff.

What I saw as kill and take back what was mine, he looked deeper into planning the perfect rescue, so we all left alive.

Seeing her passed out in his arms, my baby girl couldn't catch a break. Then on top of that, finding out that Kassidy preyed on her all this time threw us all for a loop, but I know it really crushed Massey. It took my brothers and sisters-in-law to talk some sense into me about not going after her just yet. Amell promised that he was taking care of it, but I wanted that bitch's head on a plastic plate.

And when did she become a high-end escort?

I had so many questions, but they all had to wait as Massey became the center of mine and everyone's attention.

Transferring her from Amell's arms to mine, she woke up and my chest damn near exploded when she saw it was me holding her and she sobbed in my arms. Thanking me over and over for saving her. Now that shit gutted me, and I wasn't ashamed at all to cry with my child because Lord knows so

much foul and evil shit could've happened to her the same as it did with little Daisey Jean. Knowing that that man killed that little girl for no reason, man...

Finally getting her to calm down, I ran her a bath and left her alone thinking that she needed a minute to herself. I was wrong. Krishna and I both ran into the bathroom after hearing these spine-chilling screams. Imagine walking into the bathroom and seeing your child cutting the clothes she had on hysterically crying. So focused on getting the terrifying memory off her, she's wildly cutting and nicking her skin. She almost cut her damn hair trying to get the twigs out of her hair.

It took us almost two hours to get her bathed, dressed, and knocked out, thanks to Krishna giving her a Xanax. We thought the pills would keep her sleep for hours. It seemed like every two hours she was up having panic attacks and night terrors. Atlas and his holistic skills were at his warehouse concocting a natural pill to help. The last thing we wanted was for her to get addicted to narcotics.

"Hey," Krishna whispered from the threshold of the guestroom Massey was sleeping in.

I sighed running a hand over Massey's head. Even in her sleep, she looked so sad and distraught. "How long has she been asleep?"

Was it possible for your heart to cry? Bleed and cry at the same time?

My mind, body, soul, and spirit were in a state of distress. I ached. I was lowkey traumatized by the traumatization Massey endured.

I heard the shake in Krishna's voice. "We have another hour or so before she wakes up. Your brother asked to speak

with you whenever you're ready.”

“I'll watch her.” Cashton sat so quiet in the chair in the corner that I forgot he was here.

I don't think my poor kid slept a wink. Once we got Massey settled he made sure to find himself a seat and watch over her. It warmed my heart that my kids still loved their siblings unconditionally despite their fucked-up parents, at least Noelani anyway. I was going to do everything in my power to rectify my wrongs.

Kissing her forehead, I whispered, “Papa loves you, baby girl.” Leaving Krishna and Cashton to watch over her, I headed out back to the backyard where Amell was watching the twins play on a blanket.

My steps became less heavy, and my breathing relaxed to normal seeing them. If they were around then he wasn't about to physically challenge me, though his mouth wasn't any less gritty. For years he's been chastising me about Cassidy. Telling me to get ahold of her before she became something that would end up hurting those closest to her. My guilt behind killing her father never let me see through a different set of eyes and that's where I failed at.

“Start wherever you feel comfortable, Cassian.” Omari and Issa sat on the blanket before him. He was dressed down in a white v-neck, sweats, and house slippers. Comfy Amell was a reasonable Amell to talk to.

Not even trying to fight the talk he and I needed to have, I took my shoes off and sat on the opposite end of the blanket. Issa's chunky tail wasted no time crawling in my lap and started playing in my face.

“I blame myself for Kassidy. Had I listened to you years ago none of that would’ve happened and Daisey Jean wouldn’t be dead.” It was one thing to know what Jaali had planned for my child and knowing that I couldn’t bring the same torment and pain to DJ’s parents on top of them already having to bury their child.

Hayden came in handy when it came to finding Cameron. I may not have killed Hayden like I wanted to, but Cameron was a different story. Not only did he abuse DJ, get her pregnant, and abandon the damn girl but he was also the ringleader plotting against my child. He had to suffer and at my hands, he did.

By the time I finished with him and after Pacino took DJ’s body from my Palm Beach house, we set up a scene to make it look like both died from a crime of passion. Between Pacino having his brother Lucas plant text messages in DJ and Cameron’s phone like they were meeting to talk about the baby and him killing her because he didn’t want it, we made sure her death pointed to him.

I refused for her parents to grieve harder than they already had to. Krishna reached out to her grandmother and offered to take care of all funeral expenses. The women were making sure DJ had a nice farewell. Getting Massey involved was out of the question. She couldn’t stop crying when she asked to go to the funeral home to see DJ one last time.

“We don’t realize how simple but powerful *‘I’m sorry’* can rectify a serious situation.” He looked over at me. “That’s all you and Noelani had to do – apologize. Intentionally include the girl in your lives and not out of pity instead of buying her condos and Tesla’s but actually build a relationship with her.”

As much as I wanted to place all the blame on Noelani since Cassidy was her niece, I couldn't do that because I played an equal part in this fucked up equation. Like he said, I was trying to buy her love rather than correct my wrong. Whereas my wife blatantly ignored the girl. We were both wrong and now we had to horribly suffer the consequences. I just hated that those consequences skipped me and went to my child.

“I could've put a stop to Cassidy's existence when she was introduced to Veronica at the support group she started going to. I could've ended her when she became a Pearl or when she started coming around more. I could've done a lot of shit, but I decided not to because it wasn't my battle to fight. Though shit hit the fan, I regretted nothing about letting the chips fall where they were currently lying.” He challenged me in his glare and for the first time in a long time, I had no rebuttal to give because this error wasn't on Amell but on me.

Yeah, he was the patriarch of the family, but I was the head of mine and had I done what I knew to do, then Cassidy would've never gotten the chance to sneak attack us.

Back then he said that the day we told her that her father committed suicide he stared in her teenage eyes and saw what wouldn't start brewing for years to come but would be detrimental to us all when it did. He saw different types of emotion that was planting unknown to her.

Revenge.

Anger.

“Hate me for it but I knew Cassidy was going after Massey, I knew it was just a matter of when. Veronica was keeping her location of the gala a secret up until the last minute and when Massey called and said that she was going to

stay with her, I knew I'd kill three birds with one stone – Veronica's location, finding out Jaali's plan, and showing Kassidy's true colors. Sadly, my niece had to be used as bait and suffer because of it but I made sure to be in place to rescue her." Amell was a cold son-of-a-bitch.

A cold son-of-a-bitch.

Issa must've felt the anger building in me. Her tiny hands rubbed against my cheek, and she gave me baby kisses. "Your child is saving you from an ass whooping." The more I wanted to be angry at my brother and fuck him up, the more she loved on me and made those feelings go away. I see why kids were gifts from God. Had I not been holding her and had Omari not been sitting in the middle of us, we probably would've come to blows right now.

I don't think me knowing that he knew Kassidy was involved was the problem. Massey laid in one of his guest bedrooms frightened and traumatized out of her mind, which was my problem. Daisey Jean dying, that was my problem.

"You may not understand my reasoning especially since there were casualties, but you know I don't move unless I've thought out everything through. Daisey Jean was never included in my plans. Jaali was never supposed to leave with Massey. I fault myself just as you do for her state of mind, but I'd rather put her back together than continue going after a man and a vile woman who was making it their business to get your child. We can heal Massey's mental state, but we can't heal the dead." His eyes lowered to his son who was now crawling in his lap.

I tilted my head and narrowed my eyes as I took in the twins. I wonder if they were empath children. Issa made sure to comfort me when she felt me getting angry and Omari was

doing the same to his father, resting his head on his shoulder while rubbing his tiny hand on his face. Amell's eyes were filled with regret and gloom. I knew how much he loved Massey and he'd never do anything intentionally to hurt her.

I shook my head needing to change the subject. What was done, was done. It was time to move on and deal with the other mess I had to deal with. "I didn't shoot Coco."

His dark eyes lightened in the sadness department. Only a little when he smirked. "You don't think I know that? I watched the traffic camera footage remember. I know you still have a man caged up at your warehouse. Is he the one who did it?"

What didn't this nigga know?

"Yeah." I swallowed the hurt behind the painful truth. "I purposely didn't speak to him, so I pistol whipped him instead. More so afraid of what he'd tell me than anything else." Suddenly my ears filled with the words spoken on the recordings I've been listening to and remembering what Marlin told me.

"Speak truthfully with me, Cassian. I can see the despair written all over you."

I couldn't look at him.

Every time I did all I saw was the savage uncontrollable beast within unleashing and that scared me. He's been home from prison for less than five years and I couldn't bear to have him go back. I barely survived the first time. Looking up at my brother, it felt like my spine was being pushed into my stomach. That heavy uncomfortableness wrapped all around me. Even Issa felt it because she started to whine and wiggle out of my hold.

Effortlessly I let her go and watched her crawl over to her father. Wrapped in the safety of his arms she laid her head on his chest looking at me with big tears in her eyes.

Amell always taught me that selective obedience is just another form of disobedience. My disobedience to handle the pertinent threat against my family was now starting to affect them. The responsibility had been given to me and I had to uphold it. I needed to take responsibility for what had been entrusted to me and stop giving excuses.

Mouth dry and hands trembling, I told him the truth. “It was mistaken identity.” I swallowed watching my brother close his eyes, nose flaring and breathing hard. “Marlin, the dude that shot Coco, she was never his target. It was Krishna.”

“Who gave him the order?” The arctic chill of his dark voice coated my arms in chills, and it was ninety degrees outside today.

Shifting uncomfortably, I uttered lowly, “Noelani.”

When his eyelids flew open, I stopped breathing. “It would behoove you to start praying for God to equip you with the stones to face the Goliaths in your life.”

I had no response to give but I understood what he said. My brother was coming after my ass and Noelani’s.

“Are my babies ready to eat?” I exhaled hearing Krishna.

Sitting here having this eerie stare off with Amell was wreaking havoc on my nerves. Standing with both twins in his arms, Amell handed her Issa. Grabbing Krishna by her throat, making her release a combination of a gasp and a moan, Amell savagely, with so much damn passion, kissed her until her knees buckled and walked away. By the time she caught her breath and balance, he was long gone.

“Damn, what was that about?” She fanned herself all flustered.

That was him kissing from his source of sanity because he was two seconds from killing me. “I fucked up.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Noelani

LIKE A CHILD, Cassian put me away in one of the furthest houses out on the compound. The closest house was a mile away, leaving me with nothing but darkness at night and a bunch of guards walking around like I was going to escape. He thought he was doing something by making a fool out of himself when he decided to finally step up and take charge.

In that moment I was pissed more than anything. Pissed that right when things were finally taking the turn I needed them to, here he comes trying to be the boss I thought he was when I married him.

My love for Cassian sometimes felt more complicated than trivial.

Since meeting him I've worked overtime, tirelessly trying to mold him to be the savage boss I needed him to be to take over Dominique's cartel. My cartel. I don't care what arraignments my late husband made. I don't care what Mitch and Amell had going on and the ownership they had.

All of this was mine.

It survived this long because of me.

Our borders expanded because of me.

They all received three times as much money each month than when things were boring and safe because of me.

My only contact was Honey. I'm not sure what happened to Sixx, nor do I care. He's probably somewhere dead if I knew Cassian like I thought I did. My dear husband was in his feelings and I'm sure it all stemmed from his ego being bruised. I wasn't a fool to *not* believe that Coco hadn't run her mouth, and what happens when snitches run their mouths?

From my understanding, she has a lot of stitches so...

Tying my silk robe, I took my time walking down the stairs. Somebody was having the time of their lives playing with my doorbell and banging on the door. If they didn't have a key, then oh well. I wasn't rushing for anybody.

"Mommy, what took you so long?" Tai, my sassy little princess, had her little nonexistent hip popped out. Face frowned up, hands on her hip, and taping her left foot in my Giuseppe heels. I still can't believe Cassian was so petty to let the girls destroy my belongings.

Excited to see faces that I liked, I swooped her up in my arms and kissed all over her sticky cheeks. I knew it had to be grape jelly from the sugary smell. She loved peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

"Hello," Ameliana rolled her eyes, tossing up her hands. "I want a hug too. Put her down right now, Mommy, and hug me." Geesh. Talk about attitude and much sass.

Complying, I kissed Tai on the cheek one last time before swapping my girls. "How are you, Melly? Mommy missed

you.” The more I kissed on them the more this burning sensation spread from my chest to my gut.

“I missed you too, Mommy. Okay, put me down. It’s Cashy’s turn. Hug him.” She wiggled her way out of my arms.

Covering my shaky breath I turned to my firstborn and felt needle pricks make a painful home over my body. Standing next to his father, both wearing the same menacing glare with squared shoulders, I wasn’t too quick to embrace him as his sisters. He didn’t look like he wanted me to touch him, and that fault was mine alone.

“Hey, Cash. How are you, sweetie?” Between me working so hard and being gone a lot, I haven’t spent much time sitting down with my kids. The girls would flock me as soon as I came through the door, but my son stayed wherever he was.

Looking at Cashton now, the boy standing before me felt unfamiliar. A younger stranger and not the boy I gave birth to. He used to favor me in his brown sugar complexion, my button nose, and grey eyes. His complexion, probably from the hot, scorching South Florida summer heat had him now a rich caramel complexion like his father. Same nose but those eyes...they weren’t as tantalizing grey like they used to be. Now they were a dark grey with no emotion in them.

This sudden chill moved like a fierce wave over my back making me cough from the knot in my throat I tried to swallow. It hit me hard and quick. Those eyes, his eyes. Its darkness though specs of grey shimmered. I’ve seen a pair just like his and that revelation terrified me.

Nudging his son to speak, Cassian’s eyes roamed over me but not in the fashion that they used to. “Speak to your mother.”

“Hi.” Two letters. One word. That’s all I got and to be honest I didn’t want anything more.

“Go in the house with your sisters while I talk to your mother.”

I moved to the side to let the kids in. The girls happily skipped past me in my dresses they had cut up, heels they click-clacked in, and singing how they couldn’t wait for us to play dress up. My son, when did he get so tall? I stood at five-foot-five and Cashton was almost taller than me. He made eye contact with me the entire time he walked by.

Never blinking.

No emotions showing that he missed me.

“What do we need to talk about, Cassian?” Finally breaking that intense eye contact with Cashton, I took a deep breath, relaxing my lungs from holding my breath.

Just like his son he stood there looking at me but looking through me. Like he saw nothing in me. Saw everything but the love that used to beam from his eyes. Can’t say that that felt good seeing the love and admiration he used to carry for me no longer there.

Tilting his head a little, I watched him lick his lips and got a little excited. One thing I’ll never take from him is his lovemaking. He mastered that like a true scholar. “A guard will be by at eight this evening to take them back home. If there’s an emergency, have Cash call me.”

“So now my children can’t spend the night with me? I’m on a time frame ordered by you?” I folded my arms across my chest stepping in his space. “Does this turn you on? Belittling me? Taking my job away, turning my kids against me, and having me live way out here. Why are you doing all of this?”

What are you gaining? Were you tired of being the stay-at-home father that you so desperately wanted to be? Or is this your way of dealing with your pride because I've done what you could never do when it comes to the cartel and now you're jealous?"

Cassian could fool everyone but me.

I knew he decided to focus on the kids more when I started making moves that he could never do. Probably thinking that since he failed at being the leader of the cartel he'd be the perfect parent. Wanting to still be perfect in some compacity in everybody else's eyes. That's where he and I were different. I cared nothing about making these people on this compound proud. They were shit to me. Well, I take that back. Only one person and he was coming close to being sorry like his brother.

"Take care of my kids." Ignoring my questions, he walked away not saying another word.

Over him and his childish antics, I walked in to see the kids in my living room playing and watching tv. The girls had set up their makeup table, the same table I used for my wine and propping my feet up. Cashton sat behind them on the couch flipping through the channels. Leaving them to entertain themselves, I went in my bedroom to use my phone in private. I wasn't sure where Cassian had cameras in the house, but I know Amell forbid them from being in the bedrooms.

"Hey, baby. I texted you."

Closing my door, I lashed out in a hushed voice. "Don't hey baby me. Anthony, I'm having a hard time understanding why you can never do what I ask you to do?"

"What are you talking about, babe? What have I not done now?" I swear Anthony was as slow as slow could get. The

kid's mouth was the best golden seat but besides that, he was dumb and useless.

"I don't know, Anthony? How about you think and think hard?" By now I didn't care about whispering or keeping my voice down.

As much as I enjoyed seeing my kids, that was it. I enjoyed seeing them. The girls had their stuff to keep them busy, Cashton clearly wasn't fucking with me, and I had everything I needed in my room. I'd go out in an hour to see if they were hungry and eat with them. Maybe even watch a movie. But I had no other plans besides those.

"Look, I'm trying here." I hated when he started whining, sounding like a soft little bitch. And to think he thought I was going to make him my right hand.

"Trying? You said you're trying? Trying how because he's still very much alive."

"I'm handling it, Noelani." He had the nerve to shout back.

I remember back in the day when Cassian would shout at me, and it felt like my spine had melted in my body. Making me feel all mushy to be as submissive as he wanted me to be. With Anthony, it only pissed me off.

"Handle it now, like in the next few days or I promise I will handle you." I hung up more frustrated than I cared to be.

All these men in my life weren't shit and making my life a complete hell because they were all incompetent. Needing me to hold their hands just to pull their pants up and I wasn't in the business of raising grown men to be what I needed them to be.

I gave Anthony, Glen, and Marlin two jobs and so far they botched one and failed to do the other. Could I have done the

work myself, absolutely but why when I had hired help and didn't need to get my hands dirty? More importantly, why get involved and it backfires?

Last thing I need is to have fingers pointed my way.

“I need some wine.” Tossing my phone on the bed, I opened my bedroom door and froze. “Uh, hey-hey, Cash. Do you need something?” How long had he been standing there?

Hands in his pockets and that same unreadable look, he made no effort to move to let me by. “My sisters are hungry.” He continued to stare into the depths of my soul, making my heart slam against his chest before walking away.

“What the fuck?” I gasped finally able to breathe when he wasn't in sight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

P^J

MY POPS never sugarcoated his lifestyle. Never lied about the things he's done and currently did. He kept it honest, and I respected him for it. GP, my grandpa, would joke and say that it was time for me to step into the family business. As much as I loved the thrill of hanging with my Pops when he rode through the hood, handled business at his warehouse and went shooting out in the woods, I had no interest at all in continuing the Luciano legacy.

My focus was making it to the NFL. Anything outside of that didn't have my interest except Massey.

I've loved Massey for a long time.

Not crushed on her but loved her.

Along with teaching me street knowledge and whatever wisdom he felt I needed to grow into a man, my Pops also taught me how to respect and adore a woman, well girl in my case.

Many dudes that I knew talked about liking a girl and loving a girl, but Pops taught me how to adore my future girl.

He always said that it was easy to like someone. Even easier to fall in love with one, but to adore, that was special and meant to be cherished. Meant to be held sacred and whenever I experienced it, I'd understand why he went above and beyond to cater and love on my mom.

I'll never forget when my moment of adoring a girl happened. At first, I thought I had a contact high or some mess because Pops smoked around us often and he didn't smoke any weak weed. He smoked the stuff that had you laid out in the grass not sure of your name.

Anyhow, the first time I knew my like for Massey changed to adoration happened when I was ten years old, and she was nine. Our families often had get togethers, so this day wasn't out of the ordinary. Having the biggest pool most of the gatherings were in the backyard of Uncle Atlas's house. All the kids were playing in the pool but Massey. She was in the house upstairs in the media room watching a movie. Going to bother her, but lowkey wanting to see her, I got out of the pool and went searching for her.

Even though she never went swimming, she had on her favorite sky-blue bathing suit, her hair was braided into two braids, and she was eating her favorite candy, cherry jolly ranchers. On the big tv was some romance movie that she loved to watch. As much as I hated watching those movies, I'd sit with her until my feelings changed and I started teasing her because at the time I didn't know what was happening to me.

Her almond shaped nutmeg brown eyes moved from the tv to me and the same smile she had watching two people on tv kiss grew when she saw me. "PJ, come and sit with me. This is my favorite part." She patted the seat next to her and I almost tripped over my feet trying to speed walk over to her.

Even back then she was the prettiest girl to me. Always smiling. Always happy. That day wasn't any different. She recited the whole scene holding my hand and making sure that I paid attention. I was paying attention, but it wasn't on the tv. Her telling me how she loved that part because the guy made the girl happy and how she dreamed of that growing up, that's when my adoration for Massey began without me knowing because I told myself that I was going to make her happier than the girl in the movie.

Over the years I did what any stupid teenage boy did when they liked a girl – picked on her. Became a never forgetting thorn in her ass. My Pops peeped my interest in Massey from the beginning and sat me down to explain that whatever I had in mind I needed to dead it until we both were old enough to date and I knew for sure that I wanted to get involved with her because of the dynamics of our families. No, we weren't related, and our fathers were best friends, but if I hurt her, they'd hurt me.

Hurting Massey never crossed my mind, and she was worth the wait until her sixteenth birthday. I refused to try and date her before that time period when we'd have to be under the watchful eye of our parents. Not saying that I had some foul motives, but I wanted to wait so I could do everything I always intended which was to sweep her off her feet. Massey is a Disney movie romantic. She wanted the perfect fairytale love and I wanted to be the one to give it to her.

My ass got blindsided when Hayden swooped in and tried to make a move. I ain't never been jealous of another dude a day in my life but when he started showing interest in Massey and her big head tail started to reciprocate it, that mess knocked me off my pivot a little. My bothersome ways only made her dislike me and pushed her more in Hayden's way.

Once I saw what was happening, I stopped and decided to let everything play out.

For one, I didn't trust Hayden once his cousin started coming around. How in the hell are you a legal adult but in high school?

A stupid dumb motherfucker.

Yeah, that didn't sit well with me nor did Hayden's punk ass ways to not defend himself against his cousin. When my Pops told me that Massey had been kidnapped, I swear the first thing out my mouth was Hayden did it. Either Hayden or Kassidy.

Something about Kassidy rubbed me the wrong way. She gave me snake vibes and usually when it came to me reading people I was right but at the time I didn't want to tell Massey that her people were flaw as hell. I ended up texting Uncle Cassian about it and he said he would handle it.

Some handling he did cause now my girl was gone with some Kenyan nigga and DJ was dead. On everything I love I swear I'll never listen to their orders when it came to Massey again. Had I acted how I wanted to she'd be home and safe, not missing.

"Pops, I'm really not understanding why are we just sitting at the park like some ducks. You got a whole army of niggas built for shit like this. Call them up so we can roll out." If he didn't want me involved then he shouldn't have told me what happened.

When he picked me from playing basketball, ran down everything, I thought we were about to go fuck shit up and get my girl. We ended up at a warehouse just sitting getting bit up

by mosquitos. I had Massey's last location. She texted it to me hours ago. I wasn't understanding what the holdup was.

Tying his locs up on the top of his head, Pops mugged the hell out of me. "Aight, little nigga, don't get your ass fucked up, PJ. We can't just go out and shoot shit up. That's not how this works. We're not moving until her family moves."

He could've kept that answer because I didn't like it at all. This was the second time we were sitting ducks waiting on her family to give the first order. "Pops, that ain't gone fly with me. That's my girl, man. She's out there somewhere and I'm supposed to sit and twiddle my thumbs?" If I paced any more the soles of my sneakers were going to be gone. Behind me was a fenced-in cage with every gun you could think of. I could shoot with the best. My father made sure of it.

When Justin pulled his gun out on me and Massey, I got excited cause his ass royally fucked up and I wanted all the smoke. With men like my father and grandfather, it was normal to have a gun drawn in my face since they liked to punk me and Mace with these sporadic survival tests. I may not want to reign on the Luciano throne, but I had their blood pumping through me.

"I get it, son, but what can you do? Do you even know where to start looking for her? Do you know what the people who took her look like? Do you have your own army of shooters behind you ready to take that bitch ass nigga out? Nah, you don't. My shooters ain't running blind behind you either." Leaning against his Chevy, he tapped his temple. "Open your eyes to see what's not normally there. Think about the players involved that you do know and start moving those chess pieces. Think, plan, and then execute. We don't do blind

missions off emotions. That's the easiest way to get killed and your mama would kill me if I had to bury you."

Pops ain't never lead me to a dry well so I knew he was right. I was acting off emotions and that was a recipe for disaster. I started thinking and rereading our text conversation leading up to her last message. She sent me a picture of her getting her makeup and hair done. Sent me a picture in her dress, my baby was so damn beautiful. She sent me a picture of all three of them together – her, Daisey Jean, and Cassidy. She sent me...

Pops said to think about the players involved that weren't normally there. Massey and Daisey Jean recently started back talking and Cassidy had always been around so the only person that wasn't a norm was DJ. And if DJ was there, she was connected to Cameron who was cousins with Hayden.

"Aye." I snapped my fingers in excitement. "That nigga Justin, didn't he say he was working for some African dude and that he was doing what he was paid to do?" After Pops let me beat Justin's ass that night at the warehouse he started rambling about a whole bunch of shit that I didn't pay attention to because at that point it didn't matter.

Thirty-two gold teeth smiled back at me. "See what happens when you stop and think? I think it's time to pull up on your little friend Hayden, don't you?"

"Shit."

Between practice and regular day use, my knuckles were taking forever to heal. After we snatched Hayden's bitch ass up and he spilled everything, my Pops gave me the okay to do what I've been wanting to do – beat his ass and beat his ass I did.

None of that *'I was forced to do it'* mattered to me. The men in my life always told me that we had the freedom to make choices and I had to be man enough to accept whatever consequences came from those choices. In my eyes, Hayden got off easy having to deal with me instead of Uncle Cassian. He had a bullet with his name on it, not at all caring that he was a teenager.

“Look at you. Got blood all on my counters. What are you some gang banging thug now?” Huffing in annoyance, I didn’t say a word. I had too much love and respect for my mom to stoop down to the level of disrespect she was taking me to. “Who did you beat up this time, PJ? Huh? Was it some other boy that liked Massey? I told you to leave her alone. I told you...”

I stopped listening and focused on my hand. My mother was a straight con artist. She lied in my face, lied to Massey. Never in a million years did I think my mother would have a hate towards her.

In Massey’s face she acted like she cared for my girl. Acted like she liked her and all, but only to talk cash shit behind her back. After Massey left because of what she heard, I haven’t said much to my mom. I knew that whatever I said wouldn’t be nice and I didn’t feel like dealing with my father behind her.

“Your son is ignoring me again, Pacino, and he’s still running behind that *girl*.” I gritted my teeth hearing the way she said *that girl* like Massey was some hoe or skank chasing behind me when we all know that was the furthest thing from the truth.

Turning off the water, I grabbed a handful of paper towels and wrapped my knuckles. “Still sore?” Pops nodded towards

my hand. Of course he wasn't bothered by it because he was there when I bruised them, but his wife was acting like I was this soft porcelain doll that she didn't want to get broken.

"We switched to pads today in practice, so I banged them up a bit. Uncle Atlas gave me some ointment to help." As soon as I said that I wish I could take it back. Pops pinched his nose already knowing what was about to come out of his wife's mouth.

"You were on that compound after I specifically told you not to go, PJ?" She shrieked getting in my face. "Not only are you being hardheaded and out there fighting behind that girl, but you're blatantly disobeying me too."

I didn't like how she labeled Massey as *that girl* like she was some random person.

"I didn't go to the compound." Not to get the ointment anyway. "I went to his clinic so he could make sure I was good." I know these were my parents, but I didn't feel like I had to explain myself when I did nothing wrong. My mother was making a big deal out of nothing.

So frustrated and disappointed, her hair slipped from her ponytail from all the head shaking she was doing. At five-foot-four, she barely came to the middle of my chest but had the anger of any mother lion. "Why is it so hard for you to obey what we tell you to do?" More so hard for me to obey the foolishness she asked of me.

First, whether they realized it or not, I wasn't going to stop seeing Massey. She'd been back for a few days now and I made sure I saw her every day. My visits weren't always long because she was still doped up on the pills Uncle Atlas gave her because she was either having anxiety attacks, night terrors, or panic attacks.

My baby was going through it, and I was going to be there with her. My parents raised me. They knew I wasn't out here getting into trouble. I had too much going for myself and goals I wanted to achieve. They needed to trust that I was going to be okay wherever I went.

“Give me your keys.” Fed up with me ignoring her, she put her open palm in my face.

I know she was playing. I looked at Pops and he was looking just as frustrated as I was. “Are y'all serious right now?” I've been driving myself around since I was fourteen and not once have they ever tried to take my keys from me. Even when my Pops knew that I was going over girls houses to have sex, he never once took my keys.

Surprising the hell out of me, Pops agreed with mom. “Only until everything is sorted out. Not saying Massey is a threat to you but they got some things going on.”

What other things weren't sorted out?

This is the shit I didn't like.

This man physically placed a gun in my hand and told me to handle Justin. This same man gave me the verbal okay to do whatever I felt was deserved to Hayden, but now he wanted to play bad cop because his wife was on one of her strict order moments.

“But that's your best friend's house. You really think Uncle Amell would let something happen to me?” None of this made sense to me.

“Do you think he wanted anything to happen to Massey?” He fired off back. “Son, listen. Until it cools off over there chill out. Sit your hormonal ass on some ice for a minute.”

“This ain’t got nothing to do with me getting my dick wet and you know it.” Father or not, he wasn’t about to punk me.

“Wow. He’s even talking disrespectfully like you too.” My mom shook her head, hand still out waiting for me to give her my keys.

“Ima let your comment slide cause you’re in your feelings but don’t push it. Once all this cools down then we can discuss you two seeing each other.”

Looking between the two, I wanted to say so much but held my tongue. “So now I can’t see her at all?” I looked at my father whose words weren’t matching his facial expressions. He looked unbothered and probably didn’t care but was doing all this for my mom who had a whole attitude with her hip popped out and arms crossed.

Sighing, Pops shook his head and held his hand out. “Not right now. Either I’ll take you to practice, your mom, or one of the guards.” Looking at my mom I handed him my keys. If I didn’t want my chest caved in I would’ve said what was really on the tip of my tongue, but I held off.

Dropping her arms and softening her frown, she tried to butter me up but nothing she said would work. “When you become a parent you’ll understand, PJ. I just want what’s best for you.” She reached out to touch me, but I moved back not at all caring that she looked hurt.

“With all due respect, Ma, don’t. Since we’re being so honest right now, it’s actually your fault that Massey was taken.” I stood straight up, ready for the impact my father would punch my way.

Gasping, she grabbed her chest. “PJ, how can you say that?” She looked to my father who was scratching his beard

and eyeing her like he knew what I said was the truth.

“I can say that because it is the truth. Had you not felt like she was some terrorist living under your roof that you despised, she wouldn’t have left and went and stayed with Kassidy. She wouldn’t have been lied to and manipulated into going to an auction to be bid on. Yeah, Ma, her kidnapping is on you because you felt threatened by a teenager.” I’d been holding that in for days.

As fierce as my chest pounded from the repercussions of speaking what we all knew but didn’t want to say, I stood tall on my words even if that meant having to deal with my dad. “You pick and choose when you want to be team Luciano or teal Elliott.”

My gaze went over to my father who had the same look of fire as mine. “Everything you taught me, everything I am, this ain’t it and you know it. Never pick sides. Always stay true to who you are and what you stand for. Valor, honor, respect, strength, honesty, and loyalty. Isn’t that what you preach about being a Luciano man? You taught me that so why is it okay that she gets to pick and choose to wear a different mask? One minute you wanna wear the Luciano mask because it opens doors and provides protection but then when it goes against your perfect image of family, you switch the code, and suddenly you’re team Elliott.” I was talking to my mother but looking at my father because I knew he’s the one I’d have to deal with.

This time I made sure I looked her dead in the eye. I hated with a passion how she wanted to play this game of wanting the perks of being married when it benefited her but also wanted the perks related with her side of the family when it didn’t.

“You say when I’ll become a parent that I’ll understand. Nah, Ma, I won’t ever understand your reasoning to pick and choose when to like a part of who I am. Haven’t you learned that already with Luna?” I knew I was overstepping my lane big time, but my mother has been pushing and pushing me to this point.

They always told us to speak how we felt. That this was an open communication house. Well, now I was testing the theory.

“Your pride won’t let you rebuild the relationship you have with your daughter because the Luciano blood runs thick in her veins, and you don’t like that. She’s exactly who Pops raised us to be and so is Mace. At thirteen he’s already showing you that behind those thick bifocals, he’s the spitting image of Pops and Uncle Lucas in everything that he does, and you don’t like it so you try to control us as much as you can. Luna’s already out of the house and I’m next. Massey isn’t good enough for me because she’s attached to everything you hate about Pops. Admit it.” The second I exhaled after getting all that off my chest, her small hand came down hard on my cheek.

I expected it.

Prepared for it.

I honestly thought Pops would’ve been hauled off and punched the shit out of me, but he stood there glaring at his wife. Mom was angrily trembling and shaking. Not even bothering to wipe the blood from my lip I walked out the kitchen and went up to my room.

I was months away from turning eighteen and about to be grounded for the first time in my life and I didn’t regret a thing I said. I’d always defend Massey. I’d always defend what I felt

was the truth. My strong personality wasn't some fake jock social media filter. I came out of the womb with the same heavy nuts as the man before me. Nothing about me was going to change.

“Hey.” Luna stepped in my room. “I heard what happened downstairs. Thank you for defending me and taking up for Massey.” She sat down on the edge of my bed, taking the ointment out of my hand to bandage it for me.

Not even a full day after Ms. Coco had been shot and hit, Papa was on the private jet going to Yale to bring Luna home to keep her safe until whatever drama ended. Luna hated coming home and I didn't blame her.

Over the years mom had become terrible to deal with. She and Luna fell out over her friends and the dude she was dating. Pops ran a thorough background check and had two guards on Luna but because the people she associated herself with had some rough edges, they weren't good enough in Mom's eyes.

It's like it was okay for her to marry Pops but we couldn't be in one-hundred feet of anyone close to his ways.

“You know I got you. She needs to get off her high horse and come back down to earth. We ain't changing... sshhhiiiiittt, Luna.” I hissed when she sprayed the alcohol on my knuckles.

“My bad.” She giggled. “Whatever you do, don't let her stop you from loving Massey. Yeah, y'all are young but I can see that you two will be together forever.” She looked up at me winking.

I knew Massey was my forever. I didn't see no other girl but her. I loved and adored her too much. “Letting mom get in my head almost cost me the greatest love outside of family

that I've ever known. Take the pain and heartache she causes by going after everything that you want. All done." She kissed my bandaged knuckles. "I'm proud of you, PJ. You're growing into an amazing young man."

My sister was my heart.

I loved Luna and would do anything for her. The first time I got flip with mom was over the way she was treating Luna. Had Luna done something to deserve being ridiculed, then maybe I would've kept my mouth shut, but knowing that the only thing she had done was fall in love with a man with more similarities to Pops, nah.

I'd stand in front of my sister ready to go to war with anyone behind her and Mace.

"Why am I the last one to always get invited to the party?" Pushing up his new Ray-Ban glasses, wearing his favorite anime t-shirt, and Christmas themed sweats, Mace came in dragging his feet with his iPad in hand.

If there was ever a person to make me smile regardless of how I was feeling it was Mace. He was the coolest nerdy, geeky, genius little dude ever. The secret thing about Mace is he was more like Pops than I was. I may have been named after him, but Mace, that little nigga lowkey was going to be the one to continue the Luciano legacy.

"I didn't get a hug today, Macey-Pooh." Luna held her arms open and Mace rolled his eyes but skipped his behind over to her. "You're just the cutest little dude ever, Macey-Pooh."

"Watch it, Luna. You're ruining my reputation." He mushed her face, handing me the iPad. "I tweaked your iPad a little bit. Added a secret network exchange so you can keep

track of Massey's whereabouts without the parentals finding out. It works pretty well. Ari and I tested it out all day yesterday and today."

Luna and I looked at each other and laughed. Those two fussed more than anybody but were best frenemies. Talked all day and night about their latest projects and experiments.

"It's been a long time since I've seen all three of you together like this." Pops leaned against my door.

"Hmph," Luna snorted. "Ain't our fault."

Just like Luna was my soft spot, she was an even softer spot for Pops. As his only daughter, she had a special place in his heart that Mace and I weren't even the least bit envious of.

"She only wants the best for you guys." He spoke but looked at Luna.

"I can't do this." She stood shaking her head. "I refuse to continue doing this. Pops, I love you more than anything, you know that, but I don't agree with anything mom says or does. Contradicts y'all entire marriage, if you ask me, but again you didn't. I'm gone once you release us back into the free world. Night y'all." She kissed each of us on the cheek, hugging Pops before leaving.

"I'm Switzerland and stuck here until I'm eighteen." Mace shrugged.

Mom wasn't as hard on him as she was with Luna and me. Her placing him in all these accelerated programs to keep him separate only made him happy because he liked having his brain challenged. "Unless you or mom wants to grant my request for emancipation so I can backpack in Europe, *we're happy and we're singing, and we're colored. Give me a high-five!*" Pops and I hollered. "Night folks."

After Mace walked out, Pops stepped in my room and closed the door. “I know you’re thinking that I’m about to go off but I’m not. What you said to your mom needed to be said because when I speak on those things it doesn’t hit as hard as it did when you said it. However, at the end of the day, she’s your mother.” He lost me at that point.

Mother or not, she was foul and wrong.

The same accountability we had to stand on so did she.

“How long do you plan on chauffeuring me around?” I heard everything said to me, but I was going to see Massey. Either they were going to take me, or I was going to find a way to her.

He smirked, leaning against my dresser. His smirked slipped when his eyes landed on the envelope on my dresser. “What is this? Did you get accepted?” It was my letter being congratulated in playing in the All-American game. I still hadn’t told my parents.

“Yeah. I’m playing in the game.” I expected this moment to go so differently.

He and I have been talking about this game since I was a kid. Planned how we were going to bring out the whole works in San Antonio. Bring Florida to Texas. This was a moment we planned on celebrating together and the only person I felt like sharing the moment with was Massey. My mother took away my thrill of wanting to tell them the news because I just knew she was going to say something to change my whole mood.

“Wow. Congratulations, son. Give me hug, boy.” That pride I always loved coming from my father, I missed that. “I’m so damn proud of you.”

I hated that he was the last to find out, Mace and Luna knew, but he had his wife to blame, and I didn't regret how I went about celebrating my moment. No, the way she felt wasn't his fault, but Pops was just guilty by association.

"Thanks, Pop," I mumbled in his chest, thankful that he and I still had our bond over what my mother was trying to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Veronica

NOT ANOTHER WOMAN walking this earth could walk in my shoes. There'd never be another shoe in my size or style to be mocked or imitated as the real thing. I knew there were jealous people out there that wanted what I had but never did I think those close to me would be among those.

For the last forty-five years I've held a Pearl gala in honor of the new girls stepping into womanhood, and not once has my security been compromised. Not once has a Pearl slipped through my fingers during or after the crowning ceremony.

"What do you think about having the younger Pearls merge into the main house? I think it would be such a good learning experience for them to be around older women." Cassidy and her not so brilliant thoughts were on the verge of making me turn in early for my afternoon nap.

"Hmm, I don't think so. I like having them separate. At the end of the day, the younger Pearls are teenagers trying to find themselves and dealing with their emotional hormones. I've never had a cat fight in my house, and I don't plan on having one by listening to your mediocre plans." Interesting how the

same person who failed at one task felt like they could offer advice on how I ran my business.

Somebody was getting too big for their britches...

Maybe if she grew up how I did she'd have more of an appreciation for the measures I had implemented. Granted the Louis women have been around for generations and our beauty has always exceeded expectations but the leveling up as far as class and luxury were because of me. We went from crack house brothels in the middle of the ugliest ghetto to mansions and designer labels.

I broke the generational curses.

I broke the curse of being beautiful and poor in the same token.

My mother and aunts growing up confused me on many occasions. How is it that you lay on your back for these men that came in like revolving doors and still barely had a pot to piss in? That's because they lacked knowledge and wisdom. All they cared about was having enough for the moment. Having enough to supply their tacky drug habits.

No, if I was going to allow a man to have access to my body then he was going to pay what I was worth and that was more than a pack of cigarettes or the weave it cost to get extensions. I took the life they introduced me to and created a goldmine. An empire that withstood all the others.

“How about we have a pool party? Or rent out a skating hall to bring some cheer to their faces? The rest of the girls remaining need some motivation, something cheerful to brighten their spirits.” What did Cassidy think I was running, a summer camp?

“Why don’t you worry about yourself, Kassidy. What I do with my Pearls is just that, what I do with them.” Chancing the creases of frown lines, I rolled my eyes.

“I-I-I only want to help you, Veronica.” Oh, Lord. Here she goes with the pouting. My driver needed to hurry and get me home. Sitting so close to her for this long was growing on my nerves and I needed a drink or two. “They look up to me and I...”

I tried to hold it in, but she was pushing it. Cackling at her false narrative, I finally turned and gave her the attention that she’s been seeking since we left brunch. “Dear girl, where on earth did you get that notion? They do not look up to you nor do they want to be you. What have you done that makes you so special for that type of grace?”

Outside of Kassidy’s innocent girl-next-door looks, long legs, and curves, she was about as ditzy as they came. Probably the reason I wasn’t too angry with her when she failed to keep Massey at the mansion. The girl had way too many air pockets in her brain. Besides finessing a man until his pockets were bone dry, I don’t know how she managed to get into nursing school. Taking her under my wing hadn’t been a regret at all. Trust me, I received tenfold off my investment. She made me good money. Men liked her innocence and confidence.

Twirling a lock of hair around her finger, she blinked trying not to cry. Here she goes with the emotional front. “I’m special because you said I’m special. You never tell the other Pearls that they’re special. You never treat them the way you treat me. Am I wrong for thinking that I am one of your best?”

Oh, my.

She had it all wrong.

“Dear,” grabbing her hands, I spoke clearly so she understood me. “I treat you differently than the others because you need it, Cassidy. You’ve never heard me reassure the others because they don’t need my validation. They are who they are with or without me, you on the other hand need me, they don’t. And as far as being one of my best, continue to dream.”

Taking her hands out of mine, she looked like one of my younger Pearls ready to start the blame game instead of a grown woman holding her head up high and learning. “Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, I am your best. At least your best since Coco and Mya, and well, we see how that turned out. One has left you and the other wants to leave but doesn’t have the confidence to. Yeah, I’m your...” She never got to finish her words but had a stinging cheek instead.

“Watch your mouth. Disrespect of any kind isn’t welcomed, you know this. Wipe your eyes and fix your face. We’re almost home.” Adjusting my clothes, I straightened my posture and turned back to the window.

Kassidy lost her mind for a split second, but I helped her find it.

Her unspoken problem is jealousy. She’s jealous of Mya and Coco. Jealous that none of my Pearls, not even the legacy Pearls during my time have amounted to the fierce threat those two were when they were in their prime, especially my Coco. I groomed her to be the greatest weapon any man ever encountered. The greatest weapon walking in heels and purring in the bedroom. From the time she was such a small girl to when she started smelling herself, I made sure to single handedly oversee and manage all her training.

Coco is and will forever be the epitome of a Louis Pearl - savage classy, bougie, ratchet – those were skills she learned on her own. Sassy, moody, nasty, smart, and unexpected – I created that.

A weapon of destruction unlike any other.

My heart still performed summersaults, and my eyes got misty when I think of the memories of when I had the privilege of seeing her in action. Seeing the looks on the men and women's faces when she walked into a room. How they drooled and dropped to their knees wanting to be whatever she needed them to be.

Yet now that same weapon had done the unthinkable and turned on me like her selfish mother. Like Connie, Coco knew that I never had a taste of being made a fool of let alone embarrassed by my own flesh and blood.

Just like Connie when she came to me with the news that she was with child and had fallen in love, wanting to step away. I had no problem with that. Clearly I didn't since I managed to have two girls of my own. My problem came when they both decided I wasn't *worth* the value of being in their children's lives. Connie decided her own mother wasn't good enough to be in her child's life, I showed her and that Darren Peters that I would always be worthy and smarter.

Fine, you don't want me in your child's life, then neither will you enjoy the luxury.

I gave her riches and brought her into a lifestyle that had been given to me. I never had a choice in the matter, I simply accepted what is and made the best out of it, the same as I needed from all my Pearls. I never folded. I simply did what needed to be done and continued building the legacy of strong women.

So, like Connie, I needed to show Coco, my sweet and beautiful granddaughter, that before she became *that* bitch, I had always been *that* bitch.

Waiting sixteen years was the perfect plan because Coco thought life was sweet and I forgot all about her betrayal and the embarrassment she caused me. She decided to give a peasant boy who loved having sex with her mother her virginity. She learned a valuable lesson that day – Men could never be trusted outside of the money they paid you.

I expected the push and pull. I expected her to be angry, she is a younger version of me after all. However, I never expected to hit a brick wall by that family she associated herself with. Then on top of that, someone was trying to kill my legacy and I couldn't have that. If Coco was going to die it would be by my doing. Whoever thought it was wise to come after mine, well they'd regret it. Regret it dearly.

Merging my business with Lionel Ortega had been a blessing in disguise. He wanted young girls to add to his harem and I needed protection. So far we aided in each other's needs. The monkey wrench came in the form of his handsome Kenyan business associate Jaali Kamau. Him wanting Massey took me by surprise and I only agreed hoping that he'd awaken the savage in Coco so she would want to take my place, but she was in a coma, and I had to be a woman of my word by giving her to him.

However, those Kalmins were a different matter altogether. I wanted to spit in their faces for ruining my decades of hard work. Why is it that people find it pleasing to butt in others' business? I hated them all. I hated Coco and Massey for feeling like they were invincible because those thugs gave an oath of protection. I don't know who, I don't know which one

but whoever took my girls, took my Pearls – they're going to pay.

When my security team rushed us out of the house to avoid getting caught in the middle of a war zone, I gave firm detailed orders for them to make sure they got my young Pearls out of there. Make sure they were in the vehicles that brought them over and taken back to my home. Black and white instructions but somehow they failed. My young Pearls have yet to be accounted for and several on my security team were dead.

Those Kalmins thought they were gods, well I was about to show them that God indeed was a woman, and I am her, I am she.

“Are they supposed to be doing that? They're messing up your garden.” Cassidy squeaked from her side of the town car looking out the window seeing my gardeners digging up my exotic flowers.

“Yes, they are supposed to be doing that because I asked them to.” Thinking of that rodent running across my feet, I closed my eyes and shook off the skin-crawling feeling.

“But why? The garden blooms so beautifully this time of the year.”

“Because I wanted to that's why.” I snapped growing tired of her constant whining. “I don't care anything about it blooming. The fact of the matter is that there are rodents in my garden.”

“Garden mice are harmless.”

“Then you go live with them then.” That shut her up. She had nowhere to go except here. “Sometimes I wish that I had the nerve to take you and the rest of those bratty Pearls to where I grew up and let you see the conditions I had to endure.

Could you be a Pearl living in a slump, next door to crackheads, and pissy smelling hookers?" I cackled at her upturned sour face.

"You lived like that?" She turned in her seat with her legs under her, head tilted and eyes sizing me up. "I honestly can't see it, Madame."

Finding comfort in the locket hanging around my neck, I looked out the window and took a quick trip down memory lane. "That's because I don't find value in sharing any parts of my life since I've shed the skin of my past. Every morning when I wake up I make sure to dedicate my all to my businesses, so I won't ever have to experience the disgust of having a man on top of me while a rat nibbles on my toes or a roach crawling in my ear." I closed my eyes releasing a shuddering breath.

Decades have passed and I can still smell the pungent piss aroma. Feel the fine hairs of the rats crawling across my skin. Feel the creepiness fighting off roaches.

"Being showered by darkness but also living amongst creatures of the night." My body shivered. "Humble yourself, Kassidy. I'd take you by there if I hadn't had the house demolished years ago. I refuse to sell the vacant land. As long as I live no other house is going to break ground on that place. I refuse."

"Wow. I'm so..."

I didn't need her sympathy or pity. I was Madame Veronica Louis. I survived. I broke the curse and changed the standard. I became victorious. I lived.

Not waiting for my driver to open my door, I needed to get far from Kassidy. Barely making it to my front steps, the

second over dramatic woman I know rushed out the house looking scared.

“We need to leave. I don’t know where, but we have to leave before the cops get here.” Stacey didn’t give me a chance to question what she was rambling about.

The allegations I was arrested for previously were all tossed out the window. My lawyer made certain of it. I’m not sure how information on some of my high-profile clients got released but my hands weren’t involved whatsoever.

“What is going on, Stacey?” All my Pearls were running frantically around the house. A few had bags in their hands. Some were crying. Even the metal steel door keeping the younger Pearls separate was open and that should never be.

Ignoring me, Stacey kept dragging me along until we reached my office. Clicking on the tv, I watched a breaking story on CNN. “This is what’s going on, *Mother*. Someone released a video of the entire gala. They have a video of the inside of the house. They know, Veronica. Everything is out there now, and we need to leave.”

My body had become paralyzed. I couldn’t move. Right before my eyes I listened to the altered voice explain what was being shown in the video. They had clips from the gala. Clips of my bidding binder. Clips of the younger Pearls quarters. Clips of me ‘preparing’ a Pearl for her night out. They blurred her body but made sure they upped the volume on my words and zoomed in to where my hands touched.

The news anchors were downright mean and full of shit. Calling my hard work a sex trafficking ring like the sweat shops in Mexico. Saying all types of outlandish things and that a warrant had been issued for my arrest as well as all the older Pearls.

Scratching my neck, I blinked the tears away. “We-we...” I couldn’t stop shaking long enough to talk properly. “Li-Lionel, we have to...”

“I tried calling him but he’s not answering.” Grabbing my shoulders, Stacey looked deep in my eyes. “We have to go. We can’t be here when they come, okay? I already backed up all the external hard drives and wiped all the computers and security cameras clean. Listen, this is not the time to freak out. We need to go.”

Nodding, I closed my dry mouth and tried to collect myself. “Okay.” She left me alone and I tried to call Lionel myself. The longer the phone rang, the more my heart raced. If he was behind this I swear on my dead daughter that he’d regret ever crossing me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

C^{oco}

AFTER GRADUATING COLLEGE, I got a job working at Norman and Grant International Development Firm as a Commercial Development Liaison. In short, my job was to oversee the construction sites of all new commercial buildings, make sure they were up to code with permits, approve or deny blueprint changes, audit local and surrounding area traffic, and a whole bunch of other stuff that explained my hefty salary.

I loved my job. I loved that I got to travel all over the world on my boss's dime and order men around. It was fun and worth those long years I spent in Tallahassee at FAMU.

"Ms. Knight, thank you for coming out on such short notice to approve all of the new building changes. I hope you accept our offer to have a nice dinner on us." Nicolas Klein, owner of Spear Construction, didn't have to tell me twice about accepting the reservation he booked at my favorite restaurant since I had to come out to New York within two days after he submitted the permit changes to the new high-rise development breaking ground in a month.

“I most definitely will. Have a good day gentlemen.” Knowing that their eyes were going to follow the sway of my hips in my new knee-length leather skirt that enhanced all my womanly endowment, I cat walked out of the board room with a growling stomach.

“Your driver is downstairs and ready to take to you Posh, Ms. Knight. He’ll also be on standby to take you back to your hotel once you’ve finished your dinner.” Jessica, Mr. Klein’s assistant met me at the elevator with a bottle of water and a gift bag of goodies they had on hand from all their sponsors.

“Thank you, Jessica. It was lovely seeing you again. Take care.”

Thinking about the apple pucker drink and curry spiced egg rolls that were about to make love to my mouth made me shimmy my shoulders. Food, good food at that, always put me in a good mood. I loved everything about trying new food. It wasn’t until I got to college that I learned to cook. Veronica refused for any of us to cook when there was a twenty-four-hour staff on hand to cook whatever we wanted.

Speaking of Veronica, she’s been relentlessly calling me several times a day. I thought all communication between she and I would be cut off when I turned in my Pearl phone a year ago. Clearly that meant nothing because she still called me as if I cared about whatever emergencies they had going on and I damn sure didn’t care if one of them died and I wasn’t there to say farewell.

Being a Pearl was a part of my life I kept hidden from my only friend Keatyn. It took for me to sit in my psychology class at nineteen to learn and understand that everything I had been taught all my life was abuse. Sexual and manipulative abuse. Some acts can even be labeled borderline incest.

After what happened last year between my mother and me on a double date, my time as a Pearl was no longer. I walked away without a care in the world to Veronica's sick rules and pledge. Walked away from the clients who loved stuffing my designer handbags with money. Walked away from those women who I thought were family.

I walked away for me and not them.

I walked away for my own survival and sanity.

"Welcome to Posh, my name is Brittany. How many will be dining with you this evening?" Stepping inside of Posh always felt like a high-end luxury experience.

There were glass chandeliers, black and white décor, plush leather seating, and the staff was dressed to the nines. Never a hair out of place or lacking in the customer service department.

"Hi, Brittany. I have a reservation under Courtney Knight."

Looking down at her computer, she tapped away before nodding. "Yes, I have you here, Ms. Knight. You'll be dining in the Desperado room."

Mr. Klein really pulled out all the stops for little ole me. Any of the movie-inspired rooms outside of the main dining floor cost an additional two hundred dollars to dine in in addition to your meal. Was the price worth it to have a whole experience, it was when it was on someone else's dime.

"Is it possible to sit at the bar? It's just me and I don't want to sit at a table by myself."

"Sure. Follow me."

Thankfully the restaurant wasn't at all overly crowded for a Tuesday evening. A few couples were dining. After-work crew sipping martinis, and the regular folks like me that just wanted peace, good food, and good drinks. I appreciated the bartender's sense of urgency to take my order and make my apple pucker martini.

I was giving myself a full hour to enjoy dinner and then head back to my hotel to sleep. Unfortunately, my travels to New York were just the beginning of my long week. In two days I had to be in Austin, Texas to fire an old managing crew and welcome in the new crew.

Praise the good Lord that Texas wasn't as hot in September as it was during the summer. I planned to hit all my favorite food spots, maybe shop a little, and then head home to rest and start my travels all over again come Monday. Again, I loved my job. It kept me busy. Kept my mind off the woes in my life. It made me happy, and at this point, that's all I wanted.

"Here you go. If you need anything let me know." Brooke, my bartender, placed both of my plates in front of me. Drooling in hungry I thanked her, said my grace, and unapologetically stuffed my face. These curry egg rolls were heaven in a roll. Then the avocado ranch dipping sauce. My goodness.

"Good evening sir, how can I help you?" So consumed with my food, I didn't take notice of the man who sat next to me until he commented on what I was eating.

"Yes, I'll have whatever she's having. If it's making her moan like that then it must be good." His silky voice and the added flavors of seasoning swimming around in my mouth, oh my stars I was going to burst into tiny, pleasant stars.

Giggling with a napkin over my mouth, I glanced over at my bar mate and started choking. Ain't no way in the world my eyes were seeing what they were seeing. Couldn't be.

When Jimmy Hawthorne, my high school love, reached out to me on Instagram six months ago, I left his message on read and went on about my life. Can't think of the last time he and I spoke, but he found me on social media about two years ago, and on some petty mess of showing him what he missed out on, I accepted his request but never interacted.

For the last six months he sent me daily messages. Asking about my morning, my day at work. Sending me flowers after reading my bio and knowing where I worked. He made me drift down memory lane when he started sending me pictures of us that we took in high school. The nostalgia I felt looking at those pictures brought an enormity of emotions. Some I thought died when he betrayed me. Then he started talking about the love we once shared. Stupidly, or maybe even conveniently, I forgot about his wife and kids and began interacting with him again.

What can I say, the temptation was a bit of peer pressure?

Jimmy messaged me again this afternoon after I foolishly posted that I was happy to be back in my favorite city and said that he wanted to connect. Again, I stupidly posted a picture of Posh's sign when I arrived writing my excitement of eating at my favorite restaurant, never thought he'd come.

It had been years. Far too many years. More like decades since I last looked into those brown eyes. Time drifting between us didn't matter. I'd recognize those eyes anywhere. A hard truth, I knew those eyes because I looked up the owner every blue moon when I felt like taking a trip down memory lane.

“Are you okay?” Gently he patted my back, handing me a glass of water. “Can you make sure that my order doesn’t have all the spice like hers?”

“Sure. I’ll be back.”

My coughs were controlled, and I was ready to ask for my bill before he had the opportunity to bewitch me with his suave persona and poetic lip service. “Thank you.” With my head still down and turned to my left, I spoke low.

Those egg rolls weren’t spicy at all or at least not to me. It was the spice in his eyes, the utter shock of him being right next to me that sent me into a coughing frenzy. With the turned upside of my fist, I pounded my chest lightly until I felt like I could breathe again. My damn reflexes to shock were horrible.

How is it possible that memories that happened when you were a teenager could replay in your mind like it was yesterday?

I could taste the hot dog he and I shared on our first date. Remember the fizz from the strawberry Fanta soda I had flowing down my throat. Remembered the feel of his hands holding mine as we walked and talked.

“Nice to see you again, Coco.” A smooth toffee hand extended my way and I wanted to run for the hills.

Instead, I flipped my hair out of my face and smiled. He wanted to play this game then game on. “I know it is, Jimmy.”

If there was ever a time I needed to run in the opposite direction of a man this was it. Jimmy and I ended years ago after he broke me. After he hurt me to the point that it took years for me to feel an ounce of trust to date another man again.

Time had done the head coach of Syracuse men's basketball team some good. Still forever tall with the New York signature precise Caesar haircut, waves swimming from here to Jersey. Grown Jimmy was a fine handsome man. Those brown and pink lips I used to love kissing on were still pleasantly plump, if not more. His casual attire of khaki slacks, school embroidered navy blue polo, with beige Sperry's. A single Diesel watch and...wedding band.

Of course a man like Jimmy would be married.

Besides cheating on me with my mother, he was a good guy back then so I can only imagine that with maturity and life teachings that he had grown to be a dream come true for his wife.

"Wow." He looked down at our hands before glancing back up at me. "Your pictures don't do you any justice at all. Still the sexiest thing in the room."

My whole body started to awaken hearing him call me that. A warmth and sliver of chills coated me from head to toe. Jimmy and I were supposed to be married with kids. He was supposed to be playing in the league for the Miami Heat. We'd have a house out in Southwest Ranches. A marriage that had withstood the test of times. All these things plus more were supposed to be our future because back when I felt invisible living in a house with over thirty bodies, he made me feel seen.

Made me feel like I mattered. That I was more than the body men loved to pay for.

There was a time when he wanted to kidnap me and help me escape. A time when he never cared about me being a Pearl. Damn, Jimmy. I shook my head looking him over. Why did he have to sleep with Stacey? I know I would've forgiven him had it been any other woman or girl. He knew how I felt

about Stacey and how I hated that she was my mother, so for him to betray me like that, as much as I loved him. Like legit loved him, he ruined my fairytale of love.

Because had he not betrayed me I wouldn't have been subjected to the scars and bruises of men coming after him trying to fit a mold of my past.

"I know. Experiencing me up close and personal is always better than an illusion of pixel images." I wasn't sure what cruel game the universe was playing but I wasn't happy to be a participant.

Yeah, I might've looked him up occasionally, but to sit here and smell his intoxicating cologne. To have my ears kissed with his deep silky baritone. To be reminded of my heart's first time skipping a beat and my first real kiss, this was cruel.

"Wait." He stood up when I did, his towering height and the muscled thickness he acquired over the years made me lick my lips. "Can...can we talk and catch up? It's been forever, Co." Those married eyes of his took in everything I presented with much appreciation.

"I-I don't think that's a good idea. Time has done us good, and we should leave it as it is." Leaving had everything to do with me and not him.

My heart was awakening in excitement, and I didn't like how I was feeling in this moment. I've swooned over plenty of men. Pinned over them and even gotten weak in the knees, but with Jimmy, he made things extraterrestrial. He made things seem so unreal but real at the same time. I felt like I was back in high school all over again and that wasn't a good feeling to have.

"One hour. Please, just give me one hour."

A lot could happen in sixty minutes. Trust me, I knew what all could be done and said in that time frame. I went from being head over heels in love with him to betrayed in less than thirty minutes back in high school. Time together wasn't a good idea, I felt that with each pitter patter of my heart, but I sat down anyway.

Quiet and lost in our thoughts, I bit the hell out of my cheek debating if I should leave. He was a married man, and my thoughts weren't respectful to his union because all I wanted to know in this moment was if his love for me ever waned.

Did he think about me over the years?

Did he regret hurting me?

I never forgot Jimmy. Tried for years but stopped and let my mind place him in a secret box. I still loved those pieces of him that had the capability to make my reality less real back then. I thought about him over the years, and as much as he hurt me, I never once regretted giving him the best parts of me.

"Before I say anything else, I need to apologize for hurting you, Courtney. I never ever intended to hurt you. That's why I came here. Why I've been stalking you lately." He chuckled nervously, running a hand over the back of his neck. "I was young and dumb. Got excited about older pussy being thrown my way and took the bait. Didn't matter who it came from." How could I ever forget that he had such a brass tongue and spoke whatever he felt?

Clearing my throat, I scratched my ear and shifted in my seat. "Thank you for the apology but it isn't necessary." I thought about going to the hostess stand and asking if the Desperado room was still available but then us in an intimate setting alone wasn't a good idea at all.

“You’re so damn beautiful.” His knuckle caressed my cheek and like a fool, I leaned into him. The coolness of his ring felt like a sting to my skin.

“I can’t do this,” I mumbled to myself, stumbling out of my seat. Reaching into my purse, I took out my credit card and handed it to the bartender. “Can you please have my food boxed up?”

“Sure. Give me one second.”

I didn’t have an extra second to give. I was standing here nibbling on my lip, chest heaving, and fingertips tingling because my heart and body were confused about the man standing too dangerously close. To us, Jimmy was the same but better. A remix of the oldie and a better blend. He had changed and so had I.

“Courtney, please...” Why did he have to keep touching me?

“Jimmy, please.” I damn near whimpered closing my eyes when he leaned down and his breath skirted against my cheek. “You’re married. There is no us that needs to be talked about. We once were and we aren’t anymore. This is all too confusing because I never ever expected to see you again, especially not outside of TV and the internet. Let’s just...”

I failed the mission.

I failed the test I never asked to be quizzed on.

Grabbing me by the back of my neck, his thumb and middle finger pushed down on those sensitive pressure points behind my ear, weakening me like a fat heifer. He remembered how to subdue me in the most intimate way and that wasn’t okay.

“Why did you post your locations if you didn’t want to see me?”

Because I’m a damn fool and wanted to sex you past dumber than dumb and send you home to your wife with my pussy on your breath.

I always posted pictures from my trips. I loved giving the youth something to aspire to work hard for, but I always posted them once I got back home and was safe. I knew how dangerous it was to post in-live motion footage and pictures. Stalkers are real and so are murders. Jimmy showing interest in wanting to meet up awakened that flutter in my belly that hadn’t fluttered since him. I wanted to see him again. See if he still had any feelings towards me after all these years and then do what I had been trained to do since birth – bleed him emotionally and physically dry.

Now, I wasn’t so sure because instead of my body being the one excited, it was my heart Harlem shaking in my chest, thinking that love had returned home.

“Because I wanted to show you what you’re missing.” Looking up at him with lust drunk eyes, I leaned into him until our noses were damn near glued together. His hand tightened around my neck, and I released a shaky moan that turned into a low growl. “I wanted to hurt you how you hurt me. I wanted revenge.” I nipped the shell of his ear earning a hiss that melted the seat of my panties.

Moving his hand around from the back of my neck to the front, he pulled me closer until our lips touched. “Use me, Coco. Get the revenge you want. Give me a taste of you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

D^{re}

“SHATTERED, but you’re not broken. Wounded, but time will heal. Heavy the load, the cross you bear.” Pausing, I looked down to see if the small jolt I felt was my imagination. I shook my head with a smile knowing that it was probably a reflex to me stretching out her legs and oiling her down. *“Shaken, but here you stand. Weary, still you press on.”*

“Goodness. It makes no sense that you can sing that damn good while also giving our good sis here the ultimate intimacy while she peacefully sleeps.” Natasha and a few other nurses stood in the doorway of Coco’s room gushing over what I thought any man would do when the woman they loved was fighting for her life in a coma.

Thankful for the compliment, I didn’t let their words deter me from continuing with the same routine I’ve done since I got clearance to visit my Cocoa Bean. “Even while she slumbers my baby deserves to be affirmed.” I knew God’s word through and through. Read the good book cover to cover every year. Memorized my fair share of scripture so I knew that there was power and life in the tongue.

I could sit here, hold her hand, and tell her how much I wanted her to wake up or I could use my voice, let God inhabit my praise while I spoke life into, onto, and over my woman. I'm sure if I asked the nurses what was on the top of their dream man list they would tell me that they wanted a *God-fearing man*. That was cool and all, but I was more than a man who feared God.

Since the day I came into Coco's room and saw her laid in the hospital bed, I started praying *over* her. Covering her in prayer. Fasting and putting a demand on heaven to remember the promises of God's word. That He has a plan for her life. That He will never leave nor forsake her. That He is a healer and way maker. That she is one of God's favorites.

After having that encounter with Amell God renewed my mind in a way that I am forever grateful for and that change came in the form of me stepping into the gap between Coco and her enemies. Standing in the gap and praying unceasing that the spiritual warfare trying to take her out would trample under her feet.

Every day or every other day she was coding and having to be resuscitated. Still temporarily paralyzed. The enemy was working overtime trying to take her out because God clearly had great plans for her and knew that the day she woke up, she was going to step into her calling, her purpose with a confident anointing that would make every devil tremble when she opened her eyes.

I had to protect that, protect her purpose. I wasn't sure what God was having her face while slumbering, but she had work to do when those brown eyes opened. I had to protect her and if I had to alter the lyrics to some of my favorite gospel

songs to speak living life and triumph over her, then I was going to do it.

“You’re a good man, Dre. I hope you know that.” Natasha stood on the other side of Coco’s bed checking her vitals. “I’ve been a nurse going on fifteen years and I’ve seen my share of devoted spouses but none like you. I hope she knows that your devotion and love for her isn’t in vain.”

A smile touched my lips thinking of the first day I met Coco. My instant connection and pull to her at the time went deeper than her rich chocolate beauty. Her fragmented pieces fit mine and we created the perfect canvas of mosaic renewed art.

“She deserves the world and even in a coma I’m going to give it to her.” That I promised.

If I wasn’t out with Atlas or Cassian, my time was spent here taking care of her. Reading her new releases from her favorite authors. Playing her favorite artists and singing to her. Using the techniques the physical therapist showed me to make sure her legs never lost all their muscle mass.

She slept but my intimacy and love to cater and court her never stopped.

“I love it. Let me know if you need anything. I’ll be at the nursing station.” Leaving me to finish my daily care, Natasha closed the door and I continued serenading my lady.

I appreciated these moments a little more than I did the last time she and I spent time together. Lately I’ve been growing and unlearning a lot of my old ways. Not drinking, not burying my issues with sex and other devices. Praying for God to teach me things rather than me constantly complaining. Coco once

told me it was dangerous placing her on such a high pedestal as the bandage to cover up my issues.

For a long time I thought she'd be the only remedy to my healing. In truth that healing could have never taken place if I didn't surrender it all to God, and I'm pissed at myself for waiting so long to do so.

Days turned to weeks and now weeks were turning to months since the last time I made love to her. Since I last felt her soft touch, heard her illicit moans and groans that were made specifically for me, but in times like right now with me combing her hair, massaging oil into her scalp, brushing her teeth, and scraping her tongue. Washing her down, oiling her skin in her favorite body oil, and placing fresh new clothes on her. It was in these moments that I felt closest to her.

No, it wasn't better than being inside of her nest of warmth and petals of rebirth. What I was experiencing with her now slaughtered those negative seeds of doubt that once lived within me making me feel like love could only be illustrated through the thrust of my pelvis. Seeing her fight every day, knowing that she came back after each time she coded, I fell in love with her all over again and the feeling surpassed the first.

“After everything you've endured. After every scar. After each heartbreak, guess what, baby? You never gave up. You're still standing. You're still rising.”

Feeding my greed to feel the softness of her lips, I kissed her until my heart became content. Who knew I'd have a deeper love for pecking her softly and tenderly? I just prayed that even though she slept, she felt through my words, the low tenor of me singing, my firm but gentle pecks to her lips, and a touch of me rubbing life into her body, that she knew how much I loved her.

Knew that I *still* loved her regardless of the beginnings of her memoir. Those traumas and tribulations were a part of her story that made her, her. The her that I loved beyond my understanding because she never portrayed to be anyone other than herself – a woman who didn't take a new day of fresh air for granted and lived her life to the fullest because she had to grow up in a world that dressed up love as an exchange of selfish pleasure.

Feeling my phone vibrate I knew it was time to go. Though I had more than enough occasions to introduce myself to Massey, I didn't feel comfortable without Coco's blessing. Cassian was fine with me introducing myself, but I wasn't in a relationship with him. Coco had the final say at the end of the day and until she okayed it I stuck with writing her letters and leaving them on the bedside table near her mom's bed.

Massey sat with her mother during the day, and I came in during the evening. I made sure that our paths didn't cross but she knew I was here and taking care of her mother. Each day I wrote her a letter listing everything I had done that day. Natasha told me that she was also caring for Coco in the same fashion as I was and I wanted to lighten her load, especially with everything she had going on.

The last thing she needed to worry about was if her mother had been bathed and turned for the day. I wanted her to focus on the moment while I took care of everything else.

"I'll see you tomorrow." Rubbing my nose along hers, I kissed along her cheek until I reached her forehead. "You're my world, Coco. When you're ready wake up for me." Adding in a few more encouraging words and a prayer, I left the note for Massey and left out the room.

“Are you coming to sing for us now, Mr. Joseph?” Brenda, one of the nurses who boldly declared herself as my second wife, winked at me as I passed the nursing station.

“That talent is only reserved for my baby. You ladies have a good night.”

“Bye, Dre.” They sung making me chuckle.

As much as I enjoyed coming up here to Jackson Memorial, I couldn't wait for the day when I could take her home and cater to her without all the watchful eyes. Not even to have sex but to breathe her air and suffocate myself in her scent without intruders lurking in on our moment.

“Still giving all the nurses the blues?” London greeted me as I got in her car. She and I were going to some new soul food restaurant in Hollywood that she wanted to try.

“Can't help it that they find me irresistible.” I shrugged, poking my finger in her dimple.

Swatting my hand away, she rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Mr. Lover man.”

Riding in a comfortable silence I sat back thinking about Drea. Drea and Landon. She was at the end of her last trimester and excited for the baby. Two days after Atlas finally took Jaali out of his misery and fed him to that big ass alligator Keisha, London and I drove to Naples to tell them that it was safe to go back to New York.

In such a short time frame, Drea fell in love with being in Naples and Landon liked the distance it gave him from being in Miami when he went to work with Kellon at the headquarters for their new record label.

I was still asked to get on board with the production of it all, but I didn't have an interest in it. Any free time I had I

wanted it to go to Coco and being available to whatever she needed of me. Whether that meant her waking up or covering her. Most evenings after I finished my care of her, I'd sketch a new comic piece. If I stayed on the path I've been on, I'd be done by the end of fall. Being still allowed God to speak through me and create what He wanted me to create.

Seeing my sister again after being separated for weeks, it felt good to be in her presence and have her charging spirit engulf me. She looked like a different person with a glow of no-drama.

With Andrea due any day now, I assumed London would want to stay in Naples with them, but she didn't. If she wasn't consuming her days with the Kalmin children or spending time with the wives, she was locked in her house, and for someone like London that was odd, which is why I asked her to dinner.

"Theo is in town. Did he tell you?" She and I were at Sister Sarah's in a back booth that had a good view of the stage that housed a live jazz band. It was a nice little hole in the wall spot with a small crowd.

For a glimpse of a second her eyes became sad until she realized I was staring. "No." She cleared her throat. "We don't talk anymore. In short, I'm not the woman he wants."

Being on the go since we touched down in Florida, I hadn't paid much attention to her or what she had going on. Normally, outside of the cute and fun flirting she did, London and I were close. We talked about everything, and I knew when she met Theo she fell for him hard, and I thought the feelings were mutual.

My head tilted and my eyes narrowed looking her over. The more I analyzed the version of London sitting before me the more this weariness grew in my chest. Almost as if I could

feel the sorrow bleeding from her heart. Usually her gold and brown eyes would be sparkling with so much life and excitement. Now, she had low lids of melancholy. Even her attire wasn't as couture and fashionably eye-catching as she normally wore.

She looked plain and London never looked plain.

“Talk to me. What’s going on, London?” The last time she and I had a conversation she was drunk from wine and crying that she was a horrible person who didn’t know who she was. I kinda felt bad because I’ve been so consumed with my stuff that I neglected to see what was going on with her.

Dressed in a t-shirt dress, fancy flip flops, and her hair in a raggedy ponytail, she gulped half of her peach Cîroc drink. “It doesn’t matter. How I feel will never matter because no one sees me. I don’t even see my damn self.” She snorted finishing the drink. “Life is so fucking hard, Dre.” She chuckled with a shaky breath, quickly wiping away the loose tear that fell.

My eyes had to be playing tricks on me as I stared at her because I know I wasn’t seeing what I’m thinking I saw. Grabbing her wrist, I turned it over until my thumb rubbed over the freshly scabbed cut she tried to hide with her bangles. “Are you serious right now, London?” I hissed, making sure my voice was firm but low. “When did you start doing dumb shit like cutting yourself?” Caught up in my emotions, I shoved her arm away from me.

Both stubborn, we glared at each other from across the table. Our food had been brought out and placed before us, but we were too busy warring with each other to eat. Knowing that she was stupidly cutting herself ruined my whole appetite.

“Wow.” She chuckled blinking. “How can you judge me when your aid to kill yourself was hardcore liquor in a bottle?”

Same purpose but different device. That's like the teapot calling the kettle black don't you think, Dre?" She sassed but I didn't find it funny at all.

Yeah, there was a dark moment in my life when I wanted the poison of the liquor I drank to send me to an early grave. I didn't know how to handle my pain and trauma back then. I didn't know how to ask for help but deal with my issues the best way I could and that was drinking and sex. Messing with a married woman who kept nursing my brokenness.

"Out of all people I thought you'd be more understanding than anyone but again, I'm a wishful thinker." Her eyes drifted down to her untouched food before looking back up at me with tears sitting on the rim waiting to fall. What stared back at me frightened me to the point I became scared for her. "I'm not supposed to feel because I have money, a family that loves me, a closet that has granted me to have the blue check mark on all of my social media accounts. I'm the 'it girl' so nothing could possibly be going on with me. I have everything so I should be grateful." She sniffed.

"For the first time in my life, I've had the taste of what it feels like to be me and invisible at the same time. In New York I am London Nicole Carter, Landon Carter's sister, and fashion's favorite girl. Down here I am nobody and guess what? I like being a nobody because there are no expectations placed on me. Here I can do and be whoever I want to be, but you know what I wasn't expecting? I wasn't expecting the silence of being on my own to be so painful. To sit and look in a mirror and face my true self. Face the things I swore to never ever talk about. You've dealt with trauma from your parents and love, well guess what, Dre. I have the same traumas just different sources."

I...I was speechless.

I didn't know what to say because I wasn't expecting her to say any of that.

“London, I...”

“No. It's too late, Dre. I don't want or need your sympathy. I don't need you to counsel me or send your sister my way either. These are my issues and I'm handling them the best way for *me*. Eat your food before it gets cold.” Picking up her fork, she started eating completely shutting down.

Right now I'd give her the space she asked for, but it wouldn't be for long. Like she said, I knew what it felt like to be at your lowest and it wasn't a good feeling at all. Feeling like death was easier because life was hard. My mind instantly went back to her college days. London had always been needy but after her sophomore year, she changed, and I remember speaking to Landon about it.

Confidence wasn't something she ever lacked but it's like she traded in her Tory Burch flats for a Naomi Campbell catwalk overnight. She became the spicey, sultry young PYT, a vixen with a snobby stuck-up attitude to boot. To everyone else, it looked like she had her college glow up phase, but I saw it in the spirit of her masking a trauma and trying to be someone she wasn't to protect the real woman she was.

Something happened and if I had to bet my fortune, those buried demons were now making her face them and she didn't know how.

“I'll give you this time to yourself but if you think I'm going to sit back and let you destroy yourself, London, baby girl, I will lock you in a closet myself and not let you out until you talk to me. Whatever you're going through, don't let it

make you feel like you don't matter because you do." I had so much more to say but I knew it wouldn't be received how I wanted it to because her mind wasn't open.

"Okay." Her weak response said enough.

Grabbing her hand and stopping her from eating, I pleaded, "Promise me that the next time you feel like giving up that you will call me. If you don't want to call me, you will call someone. Promise me, London. It hurts me that you hurt yourself so painfully to shut out the voices. All jokes aside you know that I love you and when you need me I'm there. Nothing has changed. So promise me that you will call me when you need me. Better yet, when you feel like you don't need me, that's when I want you to call me, okay?"

Swallowing the large cry I saw building and wanting to escape, she nodded squeezing my hand. "I promise."

I've been in her shoes. I knew what she was going through without having to know the details. Her scars said enough. As much as I wanted to pull her from her seat and hug her until my strength rubbed off on her, I did what I had been doing lately for another, praying over her.

London was crying out for help, and I wasn't going to let her call go unanswered or be ignored.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Massey

“I GOT you some chocolate pudding and a mango-peach smoothie.” PJ sat next to me on the blanket.

Smiling for the first time today, I nudged him with my shoulder. “What a combination.” Resting my head against his arm, I closed my eyes and enjoyed the sun beaming down on us. “Thank you for everything, PJ.”

“What I told you about thanking me?” He kissed my forehead.

Regardless of what he said I was thankful for him getting me through one of the hardest days of my life. Daisey Jean had been laid to rest today and I wasn’t sure if I was coming or going. Like I thanked him a million times, I thanked my family for sparing no expense and making sure that my best friend went out in true Daisey Jean fashion. – a bright day with country love.

I missed her so much and I regretted that she and I had stopped talking over foolishness. Everyone kept telling me that it wasn’t my fault that she was killed but I felt like it was

because had I never invited her to go along with me, she'd still be leaving me the corniest voicemails in her thick Mississippi accent. Texting me the weirdest news she found on The Shade Room. Gushing hopelessly over AJ.

My Daisey Jean had so much life left to live.

She deserved to be here living amongst us. She deserved to go to LSU like she always dreamed. She deserved so much, and it had all been taken away from her.

My stomach had been in knots all week leading up to today. I wasn't sure if her grandmother and parents wanted me there, though according to the police report, I wasn't involved, and Cameron had killed her out of anger for being pregnant. That part I wanted to stay secret, but I knew once the autopsy had been performed, her parents would find out. My uncles paid some high people to set the crime scene the way they did. Making it seem like Cameron flipped and it turned into an episode from *Fatal Attraction*.

We sat in the back of the packed church during her funeral. Every Kalmin was in the building along with PJ and his family. To have everyone I loved there to support me, I regretted the mean things I said to them the night of my mom's accident. They've been there for me in so many ways since and I was an ungrateful brat.

I remained strong during the service, even managed to give a recap of our friendship in front of the whole church since I was her only friend. PJ walked up with me, stood to the side, and walked me back to my seat. I'd like to think I made it through my moment of reflection because of the strength that he exuded so openly.

However, once we made it to the burial site, I was no good. Switching places with PJ, Papa held my hands, wiped

my tears, and carried me back to the car when her casket was lowered into the ground. Her lilac casket with gold trimmings, it was beautiful. Since lilac was her favorite color, her grandmother asked that everyone attending incorporate the color in their attire.

All the men and boys in my family, plus the Luciano men, all wore white with lilac ties, bow ties, and shoes. Between Luna and Aunty Krishna knowing all the fashion spots in town, all the women and girls had pretty lilac dresses.

PJ knew I couldn't sit through the repass. My family catered the event, but we didn't attend, well PJ and I didn't. The more I watched her parents cry uncontrollably. The more her grandmother rocked crying and singing Daisey Jean's favorite song, guilt ate me alive. We ended up going to the beach and have been sitting out here since.

Besides laying DJ to rest, I've been dealing with the aftermath of what happened. Between Kassidy setting me up to getting kidnapped by a man my father's age who wanted to turn me into his new young bride, nightmares of DJ's neck being snapped in front of me, watching Jaali gut his wife to death, I lived in a state of shock most days.

Out of everyone I surprisingly found comfort in talking to Cashton. Lord knows I didn't want to burden his young mind with my thoughts and feelings, but he was the easiest to talk to. I felt the safest with him and I know that's weird considering the amount of muscle walking around the house, but Cash helped me feel normal, feel safer.

We equally shared our deepest secrets. Who would've known such young souls had deep feelings and deep thoughts, but we did. Doing the one thing everyone asked me not to do, I tried to bury my feelings and fears. Besides talking to Cash, I

didn't want to talk about what happened or how I felt. Then when I heard Noelani was back on the compound, that triggered the hell out of me because she's Cassidy's aunt and guilty by association. Granted she was way on the other side in the other houses, she was too close for comfort so I was eager to get off the compound whenever I could.

I had this full circle revelation, and it made my sadness and depression worse. That day at the beach when my mom told me about her mom and grandmother. Seeing the crowns in her closet. Then for Uncle Amell to really go into detail and explain her childhood, I puked and cried because I was about to experience the same thing she did if he hadn't come for me. I cried knowing that she had to endure that type of abuse.

“Are you ready to start practice next week?”

School started in a few weeks and thankfully our sports schedule was back to normal putting our first game in September. I have never been so happy to get out of the house and go to practice ever in my life.

“I am. Coach told me I could miss the first week or two if I needed to, but I'm going. How are you feeling about this season? It's your last year playing and as captain. All-American player and Alabama's top recruit. My boo is just all around the shit.” I giggled loving the way his golds shined when he smiled. I don't think I'd ever get used to the intense summersaults my heart did in my chest.

Popping his collar and dusting off his shoulders, he bit his lip grinning. “Feels A-fucking-mazing. All my dreams are coming true. Going to wear that crimson tide jersey on my back. Playing in the game I've been waiting for all my life, and I got the girl of my dreams.” He placed those juicy lips on mine pecking me. “I got everything I want.”

I was so happy for PJ. I truly was. Him going to college in Alabama and me more than likely committing to the University of Florida, I wasn't sure how we were going to make it work but I was ready to give my all to keep him in my life.

“Are you ready to drop me off?” Before it got too late I wanted to stop by and see my mom. Lately she hadn't coded or had any problems, so the doctors were hopeful that she'd wake up soon.

“Let's roll.” Tossing me over his shoulder, he ran to his car with me laughing so hard I was drooling. “I know your grown behind is not drooling, Massey.”

I couldn't stop laughing. “I...I'm sorry.”

His funny nature and my goofy side paired together was a moment to behold. I don't know how we made it to the hospital in one piece. My stomach was cramping, and I had tears running down my face from laughing so hard. I loved this boy so much. He made my days so light without even trying. He was himself and that was more than enough for me.

“Call me when you get home.” He tried to hide it, but I know he was pissed off that his mom called tripping and demanding that he come home.

Another comfort I found was in my PJ. I don't think he's been home for a complete twenty-four hours since that awful night regardless of his parents threatening to lock him in his room. Mr. Pacino gave him back his keys to drive me to the funeral but other than that he went against his parents to see me. As much as I appreciated him wanting to be with me, I didn't like that I was causing division between him and his parents, his mom especially.

Since he was over so much, Papa had a talk with us about respecting his house and our temples, and we've been inseparable ever since. I kinda felt bad that he ignored most of his mom's calls. He answered calls from his dad, Luna, and Mace, but when it came to his mom, they still weren't talking. Or rather he wasn't talking to her much these days.

I felt responsible for that too.

I felt responsible for a lot of things.

Had I not been so caught up in my feelings, irate, and scared, I wouldn't have jumped on Papa and Cashton wouldn't have hit him with a bat. He still would've had some relationship with his parents.

Had I not been nosey and stuck in my feelings, I wouldn't have eavesdropped on Mrs. Capone and Mr. Pacino's conversation.

Had I not been so out of my head and thinking clearly, I wouldn't have asked Kassidy to pick me up.

And had I not ignored my gut feeling, I wouldn't have gone with her to the gala but left the hospital with Pete or PJ.

"Get out your head, Massey." His forehead kisses always felt like a soothing balm of peace. My body naturally relaxed into him.

Leaning against his car, I wrapped my arms around his neck and rested my forehead against his. "You're my sunshine in the rain when it's pouring."

Leaning his head back with his arms wrapped tightly around my waist, his eyes were low but the intensity of them were so riveting that my breathing became skittish. "You're my best part. The best part of me."

These were the times when I wished my mom was awake so I could talk to her. Talk in a million different circles until she told me to calm down and talk slow. Tell her that I was only talking at the same rapid speed of my heart. Tell her how I felt calm, content, and protected whenever I was around PJ. Tell her that in his arms is where I felt like I was right where I needed to be. Tell her that even though we're so young and had so much to learn, he intentionally chooses me and my feelings every day.

Then after I rambled all those reasons, I needed her to put all that together, so it all made sense. Confirm what I had known all along and that I wasn't out of my mind but had fallen hopelessly, deeply, in love with Pacino Luciano Jr.

“PJ, I...”

Shushing me with his lips, he mumbled, “I love you, Massey.” Sweet baby Jesus. I done died and went to heaven. Each time I tried to speak and say it back he kept kissing me and kissing me. “Don't say anything. Let me have this moment. Tonight when you're in bed and it's quiet, and the events of today finally hit you, hold onto that. Carry that with you. Remember that I'm in love with you.”

I...I didn't know what to say and apparently, it didn't matter.

He kissed me again, increasing my brain fog, and shooed me on my way. I glided on clouds inside the hospital. Smiling and waving at everyone that I passed. Humming the tunes to our favorite song in my head. I went from mourning my heart's pain to feeling like God's favorite angels had blown me a kiss.

What's up, Massey. Just checking on you. Remember to say your affirmations before you see your mom – on my

momma, on my hood, I look fly, I look good

“Oh my God.” I laughed loudly, forgetting where I was for a split second.

Mr. Dre texted me the same affirmations when it was time for me to see my mom. He came to the funeral today too. I didn't get a chance to see him, but Papa told me that he was there. I liked Mr. Dre a lot. He was nice, funny, and we liked the same music and shows. More than anything I loved his love towards my mom. He worshiped the ground she walked on and that made me extremely happy.

I giggled thinking back to how nurse Natasha and a few of the other nurses were excited to tell me all about Dre and his care for my mom. Said the way he sung to her sounded like a chorus of angels. I always wondered who was doing the extra care along with me. He shampooed her hair. Bathed her in the evenings. Prayed over her and even left me notes telling me everything that he did.

At first I was kinda thrown by their daily reports and telling me that my dad was a good man, and my mom was lucky to have him. Last I knew Papa hadn't come up to see my mom, so I got a little offended thinking somebody was impersonating him until I read Dre's first note and realized who he was.

“Hey, Massey.” Several of the hospital staff spoke to me as I walked down the hall to my mom's room. In such a short but long time they became like family to me. Not only looking after my mom but making sure that I was okay too.

Stepping up to my mom's window, I frowned seeing an unfamiliar man sitting in my usual seat near her bed. I couldn't see much of his profile, but he stood tall with his medium

build in his all-black sweat suit compared to the other hulks in my life. He had a head full of dark curly waves.

“Hey, pretty girl.” Nurse Natasha stepped next to me.

“Hey. Who is that man?” I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

He felt so familiar but foreign at the same time. Whoever he was knew my mom because he kept wiping his eyes and kissing the back of her hands.

“I don’t remember. He said that he’s an old friend of your mom. Your uncle gave the green light for him to come up.” Her pager went off right as he stood.” I’ll be back.”

Dang, he’s tall.

My heart tugged a little seeing him bend his tall frame down to kiss my mom on her forehead. I wonder if this is Mr. Dre. I know my mom said he had locs but maybe he cut them since the last time she saw him. A smile curved my lips getting excited to finally meet the man that had stolen my mom’s heart. I couldn’t wait to speak to him.

“Oh my God,” I whispered in a strangled voice.

The man had turned around for the door and I froze. His head raised and our eyes locked. Like me, he stood frozen. I wasn’t breathing and I don’t think he was either. There were many nights I cried in thanks that I looked nothing like him but favored my mom identically. One thing I could never change about myself that I got from him was my nutmeg brown eyes and toffee complexion.

He finally moved his feet, and I followed his every move until he stood right in front of me. I should’ve had rage in my heart. I should’ve wanted to scream and yell demanding that he leave. I should’ve called PJ so he could beat his ass. There were a lot of things I always said I’d do in this moment if I

ever saw him again. There were a lot of emotions I should've been feeling except those that had my heart pumping with relief.

“Massey.” Hearing him say my name I swear my body swayed and my head dropped to my chest as this rush of tears burst from my eyes. Lifting my chin, he looked at me with tears of his own. “Hey, pretty girl.” That knowing feeling I always had when I saw my mom looking at me whenever she saw me for the first time each day, I felt that times a million looking into his eyes.

That familiarity of a parent's love, I felt that.

My heart knew him.

I knew him.

It felt like angels had stepped in and took over because I was too weak. My eyes lifted and my upper body leaped into his chest. Catching me, he lifted me up until I was wrapped around him and crying my heart out in his neck. His scent, cinnamon and wood, the memories flashed through my mind like it was just yesterday.

“Daddy.” I cried.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Atlas

OUR FAMILY DESERVED A VACATION. A long vacation on somebody's island being pampered and catered to. Most importantly our family needed to practice a moment of gratitude and give thanks for God's grace for covering us. That even with all the trials and tribulations, we all managed to walk away unscathed. That included Coco.

Not only was she doing better but Drea was days away from giving birth to her first child and Keatyn and I found out last week that we were having another boy. Started with a boy and ending with a boy. That gave me a warm sense of pride that my girls, my wife, all my nieces, and sisters-in-law had another young king to protect them.

Baby girl herself, our Massey, endured a lot of traumas this summer. I'd never expected her to forget or move on quickly, but we had a lot to be thankful for regarding her as well because the situation she was placed in with Jaali could've turned out deadly. Somedays she cried until she became sick. Somedays she smiled and laughed until her stomach cramped.

Regardless of where her emotions took her during the day, we were all present to help her get through.

“Daddy, the puzzle pieces aren’t matching.” My one child to test all levels of my knowledge and my patience stood next to me clapping her hands.

She and these millennial phrases weren’t growing on me, but she loved them. I blamed Tiktok for whatever wasn’t matching. “You said that lavender and eucalyptus mixed with drops of mint and lemon essential oil help with allergies. Sorry to say it but your little experiment didn’t work. I told Mace what you said, and he said that it’s not working.”

My sunflower child and little Einstein, Ari had to be God’s way of humbling me but at the same time paying me back for the mess I put Amell and Clover through growing up. I loved her inquisitive mind. Loved that she had an interest in the same herbalist practices that I grew to love. However, what I didn’t love or rather have the patience for was her questioning me about every vitamin, herbal tea, and whatever else I’ve made.

“Have you asked Mace what exactly he’s allergic to? Those oils work, you should know that yourself because your mother places them in your diffuser every night before you go to bed. How about you ask Mace more questions about his allergies. Get the full scope so you can determine how to treat him better because what works for you might not work for him.” Watching her brows bunch behind her yellow glasses, those dimples in the corners of her mouth deepen, my child went into deep thought.

“Cash, come on. Let me do an allergy test on you.”

My attention turned to Cashton to see if he was going to let his cousin bully him. “No, Ariana. Go ask Mace to let you use

him. I'm good."

Her little almond shaped eyes squinted and once she raised her hand and started pointing, I knew she was about to have one of her little diva moments. "You know, Cashton, I'm starting to notice a similarity in your tone." Similarities in tone? Lawd, this child of mine. "First it's Massey and usually I ignore it because she has times during the month when she menstruates and the same thing happens with my mom, but you, young man, are sounding too much like her, and I don't like it." She stepped closer to him, pushing up her glasses, finger still in his face. "You don't want me as an enemy, Cashy. I fight other people's kids." She walked off, making sure to bump his shoulder.

I don't know what I was going to do with her. She was too smart for her own good and a true doppelganger of her mother. All I could do was laugh because she was an even mixture of my blood and Keatyn's.

"Don't fill her pillow with peanut butter again, Cash." I tried to keep a straight face, but I failed. It wasn't often that Cash stooped down to his cousin's level of petty but when he did he went straight for the jugular, kinda like his father when he played his annoying pranks and jokes.

Shrugging, he twirled on the stool facing me. "Can't make any promises." My nephew had changed right before our eyes, and I still had a hard time processing his change.

"How are you liking boxing with Bishop?" I thought with him having a love for swinging metal bats that he'd want to join a softball league or something. Never thought it would be boxing but Amell said it was best.

"I love it actually. When I'm at practice I don't think about anything other than who is in front of me. Watching their

movements. Paying attention to their breathing and swing of their arms. Gauging which is their dominant hand versus their weak side. Bishop is teaching me to not have a weak side but to be skilled using both of my hands.” He spoke full complete sentences. The most he’s said to me and around me in a long time.

Cashton reminded me so much of Amell when he was his age. Quiet but watching. Deep in thought but alert enough to answer questions when asked. I was surprised when I asked him if he wanted to come with me to my greenhouse out in Belle Glades and he said yes. Maybe he was tired of being cooped up in the house, hell I don’t know. Didn’t care really. I had two young people interested in what I did so nothing else mattered.

“I’m proud of you, kid. Can’t wait to see your first fight.”

“Preciate it.” Even sounded like his father. “Why do you have that area sectioned off?” He pointed to where I had Ricky drop down the mesh dividers.

“Whenever I bring kids here I have my guys separate my lethal and non-lethal chemicals. All my pills, plants, and elixirs that are deadly are over there. It took one time when AJ was about six years old running around touching something that he shouldn’t have for me to learn my lesson. Thank God nothing happened to him, but it could’ve.” I had several greenhouses all over the city and at my house, but my kids knew not to enter any of them without me.

“I know what my father does. I know what uncle Amell does. What do you do? I mean they let their weapons speak for them. I’ve heard the stories about you but what exactly do you do?” Cashton looked me square me in the eye. Couldn’t tell

where his interest came from, but I got it especially with my place in the cartel being questioned once I stepped back in.

“Walk with me.” Making sure that Ari was good, and she was, on her iPad fusing with Mace about his allergies. Like him having them was his fault.

“Do I need a hazmat suit and helmet to go in here?” Cashton stood outside of the blocked off area looking at me like I was crazy. Face all frowned up like his damn daddy.

“Boy,” I chuckled shaking my head. “I wouldn’t bring you in here if it was dangerous. You wanna know what I bring to the table we’ll I’m trying to show you and I can’t do that with you standing on the outside.”

It took a good minute for him to trust my word and step behind the mesh netting. Once he did and saw all the glass containers I had placed over certain plants, pills, and liquids his eyes lit up.

“You made all this?” Hearing his disbelief made my chest puff out a little bit.

“I did. Alright so pay attention. These are my latest creation. When you get older you’ll see that a lot of men like smoking cigars and drinking a top shelf brown liquor. So far I’ve created the perfect cigar that starts killing a person once it’s inhaled.” It took me fucking up with Jaali to learn my lesson. I’ll always have a reverse pill, but I wouldn’t give them to known threats and enemies.

“Oh, so like the cyanide part of a cherry seed?” He snapped his fingers as his eyes grew big.

I swear I felt proud right now. He knew his shit. “Exactly but more potent and deadlier.”

Cashton and I spent an hour with no interruptions of me showing him every section of my warehouse with me explaining all my proudest joys. He asked questions, asked if we could make some together, and even helped Ari come up with a better essential oil mix for Mace's allergies. I was surprised he wanted another oil blend, but I realized Ari was in charge.

Once we finished in the warehouse I took them to get something to eat and we headed back to the compound. I never felt prouder as an uncle besides rescuing Massey than spending time with Cashton. He rarely ever showed interest or spoke to me much but today I got to know a lot about the kid. Heard him laugh, argue, and couldn't stop smiling when he shared his knowledge and interests in certain things.

Compared to his silence most of the summer, it felt good knowing that I had a hand in getting him to step outside of his norm.

"Thank you for taking me with you today. I liked it and had fun." He and I were standing outside of Amell's house. Regardless of his mom being back on the compound, he refused to stay with her. Cassian was still handling his business, so I chalked it up to him waiting for his dad.

Pulling him into my chest, I hugged him tight. "Whenever you wanna escape these compound gates, talk, or do whatever, I'm here, Cash." I meant that and more. Regardless of him having a good time today, being engaged and everything, his smile had yet to reach his eyes. When we got that light back, then I'd feel worthy of his thanks.

I waited till he got in the house before getting in my truck and driving home. Ari hopped in the front seat and looked at me with her chin resting on her palm. "Daddy?"

I smirked because I knew she was about to say something off the wall. “What’s up, Ari.”

“I don’t think it was a good idea to show Cashton all of your secrets.” She caught me off guard with that one.

Scratching my brow, I looked over at her and sure enough, she was still looking at me. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, I think it’s awfully interesting that he suddenly has an interest in what you do. Odd, right?” She kept tapping her fingers on the middle console.

I got what she said but I didn’t think it was odd. If anybody needed to be questioned about his sudden interest it would be me since I’m the one who invited him. Cash never came to me, texted me, or anything. Knowing that Ari wanted to hang with me today I stopped by Amell’s house on a whim to see if he wanted to go.

That’s it.

That’s all.

“It can be looked at that way, but I think you’re overthinking it, Princess. Cashton stays in the house all day and I wanted him to join us. He’ll be straight.” No doubt in my mind that that was all it was. No doubt at all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

D^{re}

I MADE peace with the death of Dafina and my unborn child. I made peace with those ending chapters of my life. The minute I stepped foot on the compound I started to internally grieve. Wasn't sure of what I was grieving but the process had begun. The process of feeling like my insides were being ripped to shreds and burned. In the beginning I wasn't sure what I was feeling but I knew it was grief because the taste of it reminded me of what I dealt with when losing my father.

When Coco got into her accident and slipped into a coma, I thought it was because of that but the feeling only intensified. Andrea leaving made me think that that was the source. Just like before, it intensified, and then the revelation of it all hit me when my face was to the muddy ground, cold rain beating on my back, and God forcing down my submission.

It was like God had given me an early screening into the moment when I'd have to deal with the loss of someone I never met.

The night Atlas and Amell came back from rescuing Massey I knew Dafina had suffered whatever fate awaited her, whether it was by their hands or another. Atlas wasn't sparing in the graphic details of her final moments. He even brought me the letter that had been mailed to Jaali that set off his reasoning of attack. Can't say that I'm either surprised or blame Durah for what she had done. Only God knows what Jaali, and his men did to her while they kept her captive.

Regardless, when the news of her death reached my ears I internally had a moment of relief that her treacherous ways were over, and there is no telling what type of mistreatment our child would've suffered had it lived and been during our chaos. Her fate had been sealed and I had an opportunity to move on in life. A complete clean slate to cleanse and heal my heart and soul from all past transgressions, inflictions, traumas, and pain.

On the other side of my healing came a sweet plundering taste of grace and humility. For a long time I feared the sacrifice attached to my obedience of wanting to heal. Feared what I'd have to go through in order to make it to the other side. Probably the biggest reason why I wallowed in my sorrows for so long was that the unknown of what it would take to release and let go haunted me.

Being bitter, angry, depressed, and just all around a toxic broken person was easy. Feeling those things came easy because that's what the enemy wanted. Wanted me to walk around broken and not whole. Wanted me angry at the world and using substances to cope. Wanted me hunched over, weary, and my crown of royalty tilting. Wanted me existing, just coasting through life and not living. Those were nothing but distractions altering my path from walking in my God given authority, power, and embodying my purpose.

Where much is given much is required.

If I wanted to love Coco in the realm of agape oblivion. To live out the rest of the days of my life hearing joy and having gladness in my heart, then I needed to shed all the dead weight.

The dead weight of my past – abandoned by my mother, grieving my father, having to grow up too early. Shed the emotional dead weight. All the dead weights connected to my past starting with yesterdays. Physical dead weight – drinking and meaningless sex. Mental dead weight – forgiving, healing, and letting go.

These last few weeks my walk was different. I talked differently. Even my sketching was more crisp and different ideas that I never thought of before for my comic books were revealed to me. I felt confident and powerful. I felt like I was becoming the strong man I've always wanted to be.

“Hey, Dre.” It never failed. When the nurses on Coco’s floor sung my name my ass turned into a blushing fool.

“Good evening, ladies.” I waved keeping my stride.

“Can’t wait to hear you sing for us today.”

“How much do you charge for a hug?”

“I can retwist your locs if you like.”

It took me one time to learn my lesson about stopping when they started bombarding me with questions. Now I spoke when I came in, waved to whoever was on duty, and stayed in Coco’s room. Some of the nurses were respectful and kept it playful with the flirting, but there were a few others that were bold as hell.

Seeing my usual chair I sat in sometimes outside of Coco's room occupied, I sighed pulling out my vibrating phone.

Hey, Mr. Dre. I 4 got 2 change out my mom's pillow freshener. Do u mind doing it 4 me pls? Also, thk u 4 the flowers n box of goodies. They're all my favs. I'm finally on season 2. R u watching it 2nite?

Though she and I had yet to meet officially, Massey and I had become texting buddies. After learning what Jaali did to her and her best friend, I had to reach out, so I left my number for her to call or text me whenever she needed to talk to somebody. Told her that I was here for her and surprisingly she texted me that night thanking me for all the notecards I've been leaving her.

It took a while for me to get used to the text messaging lingo these teenagers were using but I managed. She randomly texted me two days ago asking if I had any show recommendations that she could binge on. I think I smiled all day that she was trying to get to know me. Though I watched the entire show's season, I recommended Game of Thrones and we've been sharing our thoughts daily.

Bypassing the man sitting outside of Coco's room, I stepped inside smiling. She always looked so peaceful like she was in the deepest tranquil sleep. Her hair was freshly braided into cornrows. A new set of pajamas and she smelled like lavender and honey. My favorite body butter to use on her.

"Hey, baby." I kissed her lips. "You'd be proud of me. I got Massey into liking Game of Thrones." Running my nose along hers, I closed my eyes and basked in the feel of the air coming out of her nose brushing against mine.

Doing as Massey asked, I changed out the pillow freshener bags we started leaving under her pillows. Since we couldn't

light Coco's favorite candles or bring in her diffuser, Atlas helped me create my own relaxing aroma. In two small mesh drawstring bags we placed lavender, eucalyptus leaves, and lemon peelings all in the bags under her pillow.

The scent relaxed me instantly, so I know it gave her a soothing comfort.

"I'm still waiting for you to come back to me, Coco. I'm not leaving. Not giving up on you or us. When you wake up I'm making you my wife." I know how much she loved when I rubbed my cheek against hers and whispered sweet lullabies in her ear.

Instead of lullabies, I whispered my heart's promises. *"Until I take my last breath, I promise I'm going to give you the life that you deserve. All your dark days are behind you. Everything in your future, our future, is all bright. I miss you so damn much, baby."* There was nothing I wouldn't do for her. Nothing I wouldn't do for us. Nothing I wouldn't do for our family.

"I'll be right back." I pecked her lips a few times before walking out and sitting next to the man. "It's been weeks and you've yet to go inside. You sit here every night with all the words you want to say floating around in your eyes. That isn't going to get you anywhere."

What's up, Massey. I changed out the fresheners. I'll be watching when I leave here. Keep a look out for the mail. I sent you a few t-shirts that you might like.

Putting my phone in my pocket, I looked over at Coco's father who hadn't taken his eyes off her. Right around the time Amell cleared me to be able to see Coco an older man with her face started coming to visit her. When I asked Amell who he was he gave me the run down on her father and how they

recently connected but didn't get a chance to talk much before she got in her accident.

His time frame for coming to visit varied. Sometimes I saw him when I was here and others he came in the early mornings before Massey. Nurse Natasha told everything.

“I saw my granddaughter yesterday. She was talking to a man that I haven't seen around here before.” Darren stretched out his legs giving me the side-eye. “Is he her father? Her real father?”

Along with Massey and I talking about our favorite shows, she confided in me about what to do when it came to her real father popping up. I didn't know much about their history outside of what Coco told me. She hasn't been too keen on wanting to talk to him, which I one hundred percent understood, but at the end of the day, if her father came to check on her mother, that had to mean something.

I knew firsthand what it felt like to feel abandoned by a parent and I also knew how long I prayed as a child going into adulthood for my mother to come back. Coming from a place of experience I kept it real with her and told her that if she really wanted a relationship with her father to give him a chance and to ask the questions that kept her heart hardened. Her uncle was the one who gave him clearance to see Coco, so he must've had a talk with him about stepping back into Massey's life.

“Yes, that's her biological father.” In my eyes, Cassian was her real father, but I digress. “I trust that he loves his life too much to hurt her more than she's already been hurt. She needs her parents now. She needs a certain type of love and affection that all of us can give but hits different coming from those sharing her blood. She needs her father, her real father.

Whether she wants to admit it or not, she's dealing with abandonment issues. She doesn't feel like she belongs anywhere since her mom has been here."

From our text conversations I knew Massey wanted a relationship with her real father. Him being here voluntarily might not seem okay to some people but to those who understood it was welcomed.

"Once you stop being scared you can meet your granddaughter, Darren. She'll be more than excited to meet you." Massey wanted a family that had her blood. She wanted to feel like she belonged. I can't imagine the excitement and joy she'd feel knowing that she had a grandfather on her mother's side.

He rubbed his hands over his face, leaning on his knees sighing. "I hope you never have to endure the type of pain that comes with mourning the loss of your child, not once but twice. She's alive now but when I first started coming here, she had coded and I thought...that type of pain, I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

I swallowed my own share of pain. Not pain from my unborn child dying but from remembering what it felt like to be in arms reach away and Coco starts coding and there is nothing that you can do.

Having sharp blades stabbing you in the chest each time the doctors screamed 'clear' and pressed the defibrillator into her chest. Feeling weaker than weak not being able to carry her burdens. For Darren, I sympathized with him greatly. I couldn't imagine what he felt to think that his only child was dead, find out she's alive, and then to lose her again. That's a level of going insane I never wanted to experience.

"How did you meet her mother?"

His jaded eyes brightened for the first time since I met him. He smiled and when he did it was like getting small glimpses of Coco. “Connie was my heart, is my heart still after all these years.” His eyes drifted to the floor, a smile never leaving his face. “She and I met during my early years when I became Fire Chief. Working long hours and not really having free moments to go out and date, an old friend of mine told me about this escorting service.” He side-eyed me. “Don’t judge me.”

I chuckled because I had no room to judge. “Aye, no judgment zone.” Must he forget that I was madly, deeply, and forever in love with his daughter.

“Expensive way of getting the intimacy I desired from a woman, but it came with much privacy and fulfillment. I had no idea what to expect when I showed up at J. Alexanders to meet her.” His smile grew wider as he looked off, probably reminiscing. “Though our meeting was under unconventional circumstances, I became intensely intrigued by her. She was beautiful and easy to talk to. Goofy but funny. Openly affectionate but not trying too hard.”

If I didn’t know any better I’d say it sounded like he described me and Coco’s first-time meeting. Only I was the overly affectionate one and didn’t care how I was perceived as trying too hard.

“My intentions starting out before I got there were to have sex but that night we never did. Instead we went back to my house and talked some more. Played dominos and talked hot garbage to each other. I enjoyed her company. We enjoyed each other’s company. We became friends before the lovers.” He became quiet as several nurses walked by. “Over time, I didn’t have to book her services. She came to me and only me.

I fell in love with her as a woman not at all caring about what she did.

“She found solace in me. I gave her the safety to freely express herself and share with me the demoralizing childhood she endured. Shared with me the history of the Louis women and how her own mother prostituted her out. Still, Dre, I loved her. Even though our love had to be kept secret, I loved her boldly and we created the perfect love child.”

Both of us released a shuttered breath. I could feel this was where his story took a turn for the worst and my chest began to tighten.

“I proposed and she said yes but she needed to get away from Veronica. Connie cried for weeks when we found out we were having a girl. She feared that her mother would try to take our daughter. I swore to Connie that I’d protect her and our daughter. I swore on my life.” He closed his eyes taking deep breaths. When he opened them they were red and teary.

“We just had Courtney and were months away from our wedding day. Veronica hadn’t bothered Connie since she told her that she didn’t want to be a Pearl anymore. We thought that chapter of her life had closed for good.” Damn. Just like Coco. “One day I’m at work when we got a call at the station about a car being badly wrecked. Police officers couldn’t get the mother and baby out, so they called us. They were afraid the car would catch on fire, so I sent my best guys out.”

When he started sniffing I stopped breathing. “By the time they got there the car was in flames. There was nothing none of them could do. It wasn’t until they were finally able to put the fire out and make out what was left of the tag that my guys realized the car was registered to me. That the baby and the

woman in the car was my family.” I had to lean forward and close my own eyes to collect myself.

“Listening to what my guys told me. Looking at the pictures. I didn’t ask questions when two silver urns were given to me at the morgue.” Wiping his face the hem of his shirt, Darren continued. “I grieved my fiancé and daughter for twenty-five years until Veronica popped up at my station splattering pictures of this young vibrant woman who looked identical to my Connie. Arrogantly boasted how she had the scene of the accident altered.

“The same old friend that connected me with Veronica’s business is the same one who concocted the lie and falsified the incident report. Connie was in an accident. She died on impact, but my daughter didn’t. They swapped her out with a dead baby at the morgue. I have an urn sitting in my home office of a baby that’s not even mine.” His hands were squeezed into a tight fist as he shook his head.

“Boasting how she prostituted my daughter the same way she did her mother, throwing explicit pictures of Coco in my face and telling me how she didn’t need me. I sunk into the deepest and darkest depression of my life. I ended up being forced to retire a few years ago. Neighbors have seen my naked ass laid out on their lawn passed out. Almost went to jail for beating that ole friend of mine near to an inch of his life.

“It took me a long time to face the truth of her being alive. I had relived her death in a sense, and then here comes her cousin Mya reaching out to me months ago, and I knew I couldn’t leave this earth without at least letting her know who I was. So, yeah, that’s how I met her mother. I’m not a

deadbeat guy, Dre. I never would've abandoned my child and left her to be raised by a damn devil.”

He and I sat in a welcomed silence after he bore his soul. My dealings with the Kalmin's, riding alongside them on their G-46 classified missions were over. There was one last chapter needing to be closed and I'd never felt so eager to offer my assistance than now. Granted a lot of my moral codes of persecution had changed and I was just as much involved with Jaali's demise by being a bystander as Atlas was to feed him to Cassian's alligator, I felt I had no choice but to do the same when it came to Veronica.

Out of all the people the Kalmin's had on their hit list, Amell only asked to handle one and that was Veronica. He made a promise to Coco to take care of her and he never broke a promise. However, I'm not sure how my offered help and assistance would be delegated, but my love for Coco knew no bounds when it came to protecting everyone connected to her.

Massey wasn't my child, but I've grown to care about her dearly and knowing what Veronica *tried* to do to her, at the end of the day my actions weren't done because I developed a new taste for senseless persecution. Everything behind what I involved myself in had reasoning and a feeling of peace behind it.

“I'm sorry for all the hurt and pain you've endured, Darren. I really am. I can't imagine how you feel, nor would I ever want to walk in your shoes. However, you got a second chance with her. We're all in the dark on her mental state when she wakes up, but I can promise you on good faith, that your being here will mean more to her than you know. Don't lose hope. God didn't bring y'all this far to leave the weaving of your relationship undone.”

Darren held his hand out for me to shake. “You’re a good man, Dre. The nurses rave about your devotion to my daughter and I’m grateful that she has you in her life.” His fatherly approval meant a lot. They may not have officially sat down and talked for the first time, but after hearing his story and already knowing how Coco felt about her past, I respected him so much more.

I LOVED the city of Miami. I loved the diversity. Loved the different variety of foods. Loved the arts and sports. Loved the beautiful women. Loved the hotels even more.

Things had slowed down in terms of drama on the compound, so we were able to come and go without the heavy artillery and army of guards. Since I got my freedom back I booked a solo weekend stay at the Miami Marriott Biscayne Bay Hotel. All I wanted to do was finish the sketches for my next comic book, moderately indulge in top shelf bourbon, and chill.

No plans.

No intentions.

London joked and said I was taking myself on a weekend date. Knowing that she’s been in a dark headspace lately, I invited her to come along with me, but she declined. Instead of pushing her, I let it go since her time would be occupied with the Kalmin kids. Never thought I’d see the day when London would find a certain level of peace by being around children. History shows that prior to us coming down here to Florida she was selfish and all about London.

Whatever changed in her I was here for it to a certain extent because while she shed her selfish skin, a heavy cloud of depression and anxiety took its place.

“Welcome, handsome. What can I get you?” Leaning halfway across the bar revealing a lustful sip of her cleavage, the bartender winked, openly flirting.

“Your best top shelf bourdon please.”

“Hmm, a man with good taste. Coming right up.”

Taking a seat at the bar, I chuckled at her boldness. There were four other people scattered around the circle bar enjoying drinks and their own company. When Atlas recommend the hotel to me I didn't know what to expect. It was ducked off in the deepest part of Miami behind a million-dollar subdivision with port access in the rear. Two different restaurants were on the ground levels, a cigar bar, and a poker lounge. I had no reason to leave at all.

“These new generation of women aren't polished and classy like they used to be.” My bar mate two stools down commented. Looking her way, she nodded her head to our bartender who was at the other end flirting with another customer.

“Capitalizing on her assets to secure her end of the night earnings.” I shrugged, not at all phased by the flirty waitress. She wasn't the first nor would she be the last. “I think she's polished for the job.”

“Is that what you men call it nowadays? Capitalizing?” She scoffed, flipping her shiny salt and pepper curls over her shoulder. “Whatever happened to the chase? The mystery?”

Intrigued, I turned her way and looked her over. Older women used to be my thing before Dafina. I loved me a wild

cat in the bedroom. Their minds were just as golden as the lining between their water aerobics tightened thighs. Though she had small crow's feet at the edge of her eyes and flaunted her grey hair, the woman next to me was a brick house and knew it.

Black high heeled mules that looked higher than six inches with fur on the strap across her white pedicured toes. Black skintight leather pants that showed the curve of her wide hips even with her sitting down. A sheer black button up with an olive-green laced bra underneath. Diamonds on her fingers, neck, ears, and wrist. She smelled expensive and rare.

“Admire what you see slowly, honey.” She crossed her legs. “Don't rush. Savor it. I promise it goes down smoothly.” Winking, she sipped her drink, making sure to flash me her tongue several times.

Clearing my throat and tugging on my ear, I moved over to the stool between her and I. “Dre. Andre Joseph.”

Taking her time to savor the flavor of wine in her mouth, she shook my hand, moaning when I squeezed it. “Veronica. Veronica Louis. What brings you to Miami, Dre?”

“What makes you think that I'm not from here?”

She squeezed my knee making me flinch. “I know an up north accent when I hear one.”

I don't know what made me so jumpy. My ear kept aggravating me. There was this uncomfortable mucus that kept finding its way into my throat. She probably thought I was nervous but that was the furthest thing from the truth. She made me feel odd...

“You got me. I'm here for business. First time in the sunshine state. What about you?”

“Can I have another please?” Her hand never left my thigh.

Her aggressiveness, I liked it.

“Born and raised. I come here when I want to escape the toddler threats trying to demolish my legacy.” She looked off snickering. “Tell me, Andre, what are your plans for the night?” Her free hand adjusted her shirt so I could have a clear eye view of the metal bars and hardened nipples.

I knew Miami women were different, but I didn’t think they were like this.

Chatting with Veronica felt good. She was a very smart woman who managed to flow effortlessly with each topic of conversation I threw at her. We talked about sports, politics, she gave me some damn good advice about stocks and bonds. I was amazed at her dedication to the community and giving back by helping young girls who were either runaways or dealing with trauma and needed counseling.

That firm hand of hers stayed on my thigh unless she was eating. Both of us ordered a medium rare steak, baked potato, and a side of garlic green beans. I lost count of how many glasses of wine she had after the fourth. She and I were so caught up in each other that we didn’t pay attention that we were the only two left inside of the restaurant until the bill was placed before me.

“You’re such fine, sexy gentlemen, Dre.” She purred in my ear. “With deep pockets too.” This woman had to be dripping in at least forty thousand dollars in diamonds. With the latest Tourbillion Openworked watch by Audemars Piguet on her wrist, I know damn well my Amex black card wasn’t making her purr like the cougar she was.

“Whoa. Hey.” Her wandering hands made me jump back in shock.

“Mmhm. Well, well, well. I do believe you are extremely well endowed, sir. I hope we have the elevator cart to ourselves...oops.” She laughed, tripping over her feet. “I’ve never been this loose before. I’m usually able to handle myself. It must be you and your sexiness.” Smelling her garlic breath while feeling her slimy tongue licking up the side of my cheek, I wanted to kick my own self in the ass.

All night long she gave out invites to come up to her room so we could get better acquainted. I mean she was one hell of a fine woman and truth be told I was kinda lonely and was well overdue for some form of a physical release. I should’ve suggested something other than garlic green beans though. Her breath was kicking and not in a good way.

“Oh, Dre, I’m going to have so much fun with you.” Veronica could barely stand on her feet.

“This is some bullshit.” I gritted tugging on my ear. “You owe big time for this.”

Fumbling with the buckle of my pants, she tried to stuff her hand inside, but I grabbed her wrists. “I plan on making it worth your while, you deliciously chocolate man.”

“What the...” She smacked the hell out of me, cupping my face, garlic lips pressing against mine.

I don’t know if I was in shock or what, but I stood there until the elevator opened on her floor.

“Oh, shit. I’m telling Coco that you around here kissing old bitches.” Cassian joked.

“In my defense, Dre, I thought the elixir was going to work quicker.” Atlas tried not to laugh but failed.

Face bunched up in confusion, Veronica let my face go and turned around. “Oh, my.” She stumbled trying to fix her hair. “My days of this type of fun has sure passed me but, fellas, you sure make an old fox tingle.”

Cassian dry heaved. “I’ll suck a fart out of Lizzo’s ass before I left your dusty wolf pussy touch my dick. Can you hurry up and knock the bitch out so we can leave?”

Before Veronica could blink, Atlas stuck a needle in her neck knocking her out instantly. Good thing I was near and had the decency to catch her. Those two just stood there. Snatching out the earpiece that kept irritating me, I handed her over to Atlas.

“Next time find someone else to help you. Between her groping me all night and y’all cracking jokes in my ear, this was the worst mission I’ve agreed to help with.”

I deserved an Oscar award for my performance. They needed to pay me what I was worth because it was hard as hell to pretend with Veronica. How I managed to keep a smile on my face, engage in conversation, and flirt back after knowing the grim details of what she did to my Coco growing up. Knowing that she was the reason Massey ended up in the grasps of Jaali. Knowing all those horrible facts and still do what was asked of me.

I’d do it again if it meant catching her.

Veronica thought Lionel was helping her out by hiding her way in the deepest parts of Biscayne Bay. He did nothing but put her right in the line of Amell. I’m not sure what history the brothers had with the hotel, but Amell gets alerts of all checked-in guests along with copies of photo ID’s. Once he confirmed by hacking into the hotel’s security footage that it was indeed Veronica who was staying under the alias Jackie

Brown, a plan was formed to weed her out. That plan included me going to the hotel, flirting, and doping her up. The bartender was in on the plan as well.

“I got some disinfecting wipes in the truck so you can wipe your face off.” Cassian really thought this was funny.

“All I want is to go home so I can bleach my face and take a hot shower. Y’all weren’t violated by a predator.” I could still smell the lingering garlic from her saliva on my cheek and lips.

Turning around after helping Atlas toss Veronica in the back of a van, he opened his arms. “Aye, Dre. You want a hug? Ain’t you the one that said hugs don’t emasculate a man. Come on and hug big papa.”

I shot him the bird. “Fuck you.” Pulling out my phone I read the incoming text. “Actually, what both of you can do is drive me to Naples. Andrea is in labor.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Veronica

“VEE, did you shower and get yourself ready like I asked?”

Tapping the ends of her cigarette against the ash tray sitting on the edge of the coffee table, Mama sat in her favorite black dress and heels. Her hair had been styled in the prettiest pin wheel curls. Nails painted in her favorite color of engine red. As much as my mom was beautiful, she was also ugly.

Ugly on the inside.

My hands shook and my chest hurt making it hard to breathe. Whenever she asked me that question, I felt stupid. Felt like I wasn't understanding because no matter how ready I thought I was, it was never enough.

Answering quickly to avoid being punished for taking too long, I nodded. “Yes, ma'am. Do you want me to wear the red dress or green dress?” Every time I swallowed it hurt, kinda burned.

Ever since Aunty Jenny taught me what it meant to please my customers with my mouth, I wished that was one lesson she forgot to teach me. Weeks of me practicing on cucumbers and

bananas did nothing to prepare me for the real thing. Sliced bananas pieces with cinnamon sprinkled on top used to be my favorite snack before bedtime. Cut up cucumbers in a bowl of salt and pepper, vinegar, and Ole Bay were another favorite thing I used to love to eat.

Now I could never look at those two things the same.

All my favorites were taken from me just like my choice to do the things they've had me do since I was young. I don't know how young but young enough to know that it shouldn't have happened.

Stuck under her gaze, I kept nibbling on my bottom lip and scratching my wrist. It was a nervous habit that started about a year ago. No matter how hard I tried to stop it, I couldn't. We had about fifteen minutes before our house became a full house of people coming in and out. Knowing that mama didn't care who was around when started her inspection of my body, I bathed early hoping to be dressed or at least halfway by the time the first knock sounded.

"Come here, Vee." She took one last pull of her cigarette before putting it out.

Holding in a cry with the same amount of pain and force as it was to hold in a sneeze, I knew what she was about to do, and I hated it. Wrapped in my bath towel with my favorite pink fur slippers on my feet, a gift from my grandma, I walked on shaky legs. My knees were knocking, and my heart was seconds away from falling out of my chest.

"Turn and bend over."

Nodding, I turned around, but the second my back was to her, I closed my eyes and let the warm tears fall. I hated this part. I hated it all. I took deep breaths in and out as I bent

down. No matter how many times she does this it doesn't get less degrading. When she first started doing it when I was younger, I thought it was her way of checking to make sure I had cleaned myself good while showering.

Now that I was sixteen and had endured this same exam for what seemed like all my life, it went from being 'look mommy I'm a big girl and I can clean myself' to 'I made sure to shave, exfoliate, and oil my body to entice my customers.'

Out of reflex, my body lurched forward when she spread my butt cheeks and sniffed. In the position I was in it made it difficult to breathe, trying not to puke, and remain perfectly still.

"What did you have to eat today?"

Clearing my throat so she wouldn't know I was crying, I answered, "Oatmeal with fruit for breakfast. A chicken salad with pineapple vinaigrette dressing, and a bowl of watermelon an hour ago."

"And how much water have you drunken...stay still, Veronica, damn." She pinched my thigh when I almost fell over feeling her fingers invade my sacred place.

I doubt I could ever call it a sacred place anymore since men and sometimes women violated me in the worst way possible.

"Sorry, mama. I drunk a gallon." My voice sounded strained and weak, probably because I felt my weakest in this moment.

Once she was done inspecting me to her liking, she always placed her signature stamp of approval on my left butt cheek, a gentle kiss. The gentlest thing I ever felt from her. If my cleanliness wasn't to her approval I would've been smacked

and had cigarette burns to the inside of my wrist. Her beatings were painful, but she made sure not to hit me too hard that it left visible marks outside of the burns.

The men I laid with didn't care about my wrists or what I had on them. They never paid attention to that area but everything else they did, and she made sure to do her worst in those hidden places.

“Go ahead and finish getting ready and put on the red dress. Tonight, you'll be with that rapper from Pompano. He's spending big money on you to have fun with him and his friends. When he gets here I'll come in the back to get you.”

Giving my best smile, I nodded. “Yes, ma'am.”

My walk to my room was slow and chilling. I knew what rapper she was talking about, and I couldn't bear having to spend a night with him and his friends. They were disgusting and had no respect for women regardless of her profession. Last week I ran into them while in the mall with my cousins. We were shopping for new shoes and so were they. My cousins liked that they caught the eye of Pompano's hottest rapper, Big Gill, but I didn't.

Big Gill didn't like that I wasn't giving him any attention. He thought I was stuck-up, which I wasn't. Then my cousin decides to inform him that my mouth doesn't open unless his money talks first. That got him interested in me immediately. I went from being the quiet girl to now the gold digger who only talked when bought.

So far from the truth but I made no effort to correct her.

A few of my cousins had been talking to a couple of his friends and I thought he forgot all about me but clearly that was false. He never forgot about me. He had come paying.

Somedays I wish I could run away and other days I wished I was never born.

“Mmhhh,” I moaned in discomfort, but it came out muffled. My head was pounding, and limbs felt like they were weighed down by a thousand bricks. Eyes were sore and eye lids felt even heavier.

I don't remember much about last night. Lionel had me hiding out at the Miami Marriott Biscayne Bay Hotel way in the hidden parts of the city until heat surrounding my name and businesses simmered. I lived in South Florida all my life and I never knew the hotel existed. Because of its hidden location, I thought it was some rat-infested motel with pimps and hookers walking the streets. Like the W Hotel sitting on the sandy beaches of Miami Beach with its exquisite luxury reputation, so was the Miami Marriott.

The FBI raided my home after the news story broke. I knew it was only a matter of time before my face was plastered all over tv as America's Most Wanted but I haven't seen it yet. The story broke, three days of national attention and then nothing. That right there told me that someone with a lot of power was behind my empire crumbling. At first I thought it was Lionel, but he wasn't that smart or had that much pull. His reach in Florida only went so far and he had just as much to lose as me, if not more.

Whoever it was had finally done what many have tried to do since I reconstructed the Louis family tradition – ruin me. Dissolve my destiny. Portray me out to be this evil woman who had a wicked lust for trafficking young girls, my blood included.

I wasn't any of those things but a woman who had turned the ghetto trash of a rat-infested whore house into a million-

dollar lucrative business that created the world's strongest powerhouse women. The strongest, most beautiful women to ever walk this earth.

Trying to cough to rid the itch in my throat, my heavy eyelids finally cracked open in a panic. I couldn't open my mouth. Couldn't talk and barely could breathe. My breathing became hard and labored from whatever was strapped around my mouth. It was dark. Really dark. Pitch black dark that I couldn't see anything in front of me. Couldn't see what was binding my mouth. Couldn't see what was binding my hands, arms, feet, my whole damn body. Couldn't see what I was laying on that felt cold and hard. This wasn't the plush bed I had been sleeping on days prior.

All I can do is feel the darkness that surrounded me.

Despite the cold platform that I was lying on the temperature around me was warm. I'd been stripped naked with nothing on except the restraints. I could wiggle my toes and fingers but nothing else. My head was able to move from side to side, but I couldn't lift it. I couldn't see a thing.

"A foolish woman is clamorous. She is simple and knoweth nothing. Hmm, I think you're more than a clamorous woman, Veronica." I searched and searched for the bone chilling voice. It was unlike anything I ever heard before. Husky and thick with the right amount of smokey marinade.

"I want to give you some words of advice. Don't stop breathing. That's it, that's all. Just breathe." The more he told me to breathe the more my breathing grew heavier and heavier. Being unable to move while also having a panic attack felt like I was drowning with no water. Drowning in darkness and the unknown.

I tried to search everywhere in the blacked-out space for the source, but I found nothing. Not even a blink of a light to show a camera or microphone. This voice, this man, he sounded so close to the point my whole body was covered in double layers of chills. My bladder felt full, and I was afraid that the more he talked that I'd make a mess on myself.

Closing my teary eyes, I thought back to last night. Weaving through the fog of what I could remember and what I couldn't. I remember dinner at the restaurant inside of the hotel. Remember sitting at the bar, something I've never done. Far too classless and unsanitary. A large lump of fear lodged itself in my throat and my eyes opened remembering the handsome dread loc man who had taken away all my inability of self-control.

"Please." I tried to speak but the mouth guard made my words inaudible.

"Do not prostitute thy daughter, to cause her to be a whore; lest the land fall to whoredom, and the land become full of wickedness. Do you know what that means, Veronica? Of course you do because you turned your family, the lost and troubled souls who were only looking for guidance and love into bitter honey on the lips of men."

Was this God speaking?

Was it the devil?

Had I died and gone to hell?

"Sweet Vee." His chuckle made the bones in my body shake. "Isn't that what they called you? Sweet Vee? Wife to the late rapper Gill Jackson. Mother to Stacey and Connie Louis. Also mother to Gill Jr and Gavin Jackson. Not many

people know that you have two sons, do they? Breathe, Veronica.”

What type of nightmare had I awakened to?

Who was he and how did he know about those...those...men?

“Did you know that Gill Jr. is running for governor next election? He’s a very bright man and has a beautiful family. Your other son Gavin is currently in Tokyo. He’s been hired as one of the main creative directors for this year’s Olympics. Isn’t it ironic that the boys you gave up and left to be raised by other family members persevered without you? All you know is selling the human body, selling girls. Nothing about nurturing men outside of the bedroom.”

My breathing turned into strangled wheezing gasps. I had many buried secrets. Many of them that I kept buried for my own selfish reasons. Big Gill and my sons were memories that I never wanted to remember. Never wanted to talk about because if I ever had to be put on trial and be persecuted for my sins, I’d be guilty of the way I treated my children.

I tried to be a mother to my boys. Tried to love them in ways that were so unfamiliar to me. Tried to even love my husband but I failed each time until I got pregnant with Stacey. That, being her mother, I knew how to do that. Knew how to raise her because I knew how my mother and aunts raised me.

Falling in love with Big Gill never happened. I fell in love with the protection he gave me to expand my business across the state since he was one of those rappers who lived the life he rapped about.

The first time Big Gill paid for my services he became sucked in my prowess as a woman. A grown man falling in

love with a teenage girl that knew nothing about life was dangerous. He became consumed with me. Infatuated. Obsessed. He wanted me for himself, and I was given to him for a price.

My mother stopped my birth control and made him my only customer. I became pregnant in no time. Big Gill was happy, my mother saw the meal ticket, and I was depressed that once again my choices had been taken from me. By the time I turned twenty-three I was a forced mother of four kids and married to a man I had no real feelings for.

Gill Jr, Gavin, Stacey, and Connie.

Those were my children.

My only children.

When my girls reached five years old my mother thought it was time to start prepping them to step into their role of a Louis woman. I didn't care what she did with them. I never wanted kids. Didn't have a connection with any of them. She took care of them most of the time anyway. Big Gill was always on the road so it's not like he was around to stop what she was doing. By then my mother had retired and left me in charge of running the business.

Using the money accessible to me thanks to Big Gill's lucrative rap career, I transformed the whoredom into an empire of glitz and glamour. After my husband upgraded my life to diamonds and furs, I took notice of how my clientele also changed and the different levels of respect the men gave me. The deeper in their pockets they dug to pay me.

Big Gill was the hottest rapper in the south and I was the go-to girl for all his friend's needs. They dropped big bands on the girls I provided. I took the most hood chick and turned her

into a woman of standards, how I always wanted to be perceived. My teachers in school probably thought I never paid attention to the lessons they taught, but I was. Paying close attention to how they carried themselves and the response given by men. Paid attention when I went out and saw how women were treated when they wore certain things.

I took all I had learned and created my first class of Pearls.

I became a widow soon after my first gala. Men that Big Gill had beef with gunned him and his friends down when he was at a block party in his old hood. His funeral brought out the whole city and I never shed a tear. I cared for him but not enough to drop my tears for. Those moments were reserved only for me when I felt like I had nothing else to give and that wasn't often.

Kendric, Big Gill's brother, asked me if I wanted him to take the boys and raise them. He wasn't oblivious to the life I lived, how me and his brother became acquainted, or that I never wanted children. My sons were five and six when I last saw them. They tried to reach out to me, tried to build a relationship but they had nothing to give me. Nothing to offer that would make up for the time I wasted trying to love them.

What would having a relationship with them serve?

What could they do for me?

Absolutely nothing.

I had no use for them.

As far as my girls, I had much use for them, and they made me a lot of money. The same prepping I had to endure, the same cleanliness checks, and so forth, they endured it all plus more. Stacey and Connie were my proteges and had made their mama proud. Especially my sweet Connie. She loved me

dearly. She inherited her father's nurturing and loving spirit. It was a character flaw in my eyes but one that made her my most treasured Pearl.

"Ah," I tried to scream feeling the quick brush of soft fur run across my legs, arms, and chest. A long brush of fur running past my ear. Fighting against the restraints and mouthpiece, the tiny claws and chorus of squeaking sent me into a panic.

Having my cries choked, body unable to fight off the small creatures that felt like small rats running over my body, I jerked and jerked. Screamed even though you couldn't hear them. I made the horrible mistake of opening my eyes. That sent my body into a terrifying seizure. Small red eyes were looking back at me. Up until this point I hadn't been able to see anything but darkness. The air smelled stale but not pungent.

Body fluids escaped my body as I jerked and withered trying to free myself from the torture. Then everything stopped. All the small little feet and fur I felt running over my body were gone. Those small red eyes were no more. I know my mind wasn't playing tricks on me. I know what I felt was real. Now the only thing I could hear was my whimpers and thump of my rapid beating heart in my ear.

"Everything that you're experiencing is because of you. The consequences of your sins. Stripping you naked and placing you on display for unknown eyes is equivalent to how you stripped the innocence of so many young girls and women. Stripped them of their dignity and forced them into a life of slavery. Binding them with promises of love and acceptance. Tsk." His voice terrified the shit out of me... literally.

I never felt so hopeless and humiliated in my life and that says a lot. This man had me mortified and I couldn't do a thing about it.

“I took away your freedom of speech. Bound you unable to talk just how you took those girl's power. Took away their voices and gave them closed mouths of fear. Doesn't feel too good that your willpower has been snatched away from you does it? How does it feel laying down in a dark room, bound down against your will as a young girl? Brings back old memories, doesn't it?

“Old memories of pissy floors and rodents crawling all over you while you service different Johns. See, one of the things I love about God's severity is that he gives us the freedom of choice. We can make whatever choices we want whether good or bad. You had the freedom to change the course of your life, but you didn't so now you must pay for that. I want you to think about that. Think about how your life would've been different had you made better decisions, had you broken the generational curses. Think about what type of punishment you feel you deserve.”

Silence.

Silence and darkness.

All I could do was lay in my piss and shit and cry. How could he ask me to think of what punishment I deserved when I did nothing wrong? I did what I had been taught. Used the knowledge and ability passed down to me and created a new generation of strong women.

How was that wrong of me? How was uplifting and encouraging women to put a price on their worth and value wrong? Were we supposed to let men walk all over us and give us their ass to kiss? Be nothing but incubators for their

ungrateful ass kids? Clean, wash their funky ass draws and cook their meals. Is that all I'm worth? Why do I have to aspire to be boxed in but not limitless?

Ch 33 – Cassian

“BOSS MAN, what you got planned for tonight?”

Noonie, one of my cashiers came twisting her thick ass in my office. A stacked stallion with the prettiest dark skin I've seen in a while. Body built like a true Ms. Parker brick house, long weave that stopped at the crack of her ass, and the plumpest set of lips that annoyingly smacked the hell out of some bubblicious bubble gum.

My autobody shop sat right in the middle of the hood and besides word of mouth, good customer service, and mechanics that knew what they were doing, I had a full crew of females that appealed to the hood niggas my business appealed to.

Last year Massey gave me the bright idea to add a coffee shop to bring in more customers. I didn't think it would take off, but my baby girl knew more than I did. I ain't never seen so many damn women post up in a café shop with their computers, tablets, and order coffee.

One of my mechanic's sons worked at Starbucks, and after putting some nice piece of change in his pockets every week, he spilled all the information I needed to create my own menu of drinks. Then I hired one of my homegirls that could bake her ass off a job to turn her home business into the real thing if she worked for me.

Rims and Heaux's was unlike any other autobody shop in the south. Not only did dudes come for that custom candy

paint, them gold rims that had their box Chevy's sitting high and riding nice. Them twelve's in the back that was clear and not like those muffled jacked up speakers that had more rattle than bass. On top of that we detailed cars and fed your ass all in the same trip.

My Yelp reviews were all five-star for a reason.

Smirking at the venture of her eyes and slow lick of her lips, I stood from my desk and walked towards my office door. I'll admit, there was a time when I busted down most of the girls that worked for me. Busted them down right on my desk with the door cracked, not giving a shit about who walked in and caught me mid-stroke.

Things had changed.

It was nothing for my girls to come with me to work and run around like they ain't got no home training.

Fuck being married, I didn't want my girls to see me like that.

"Nah, Noonie. I'm heading home." Before her thick ass could block my door, I moved quicker and out of my office.

Laughing behind me, she ran her hand down my back. "You ain't gotta run, Cassian. I won't bite unless you want me to." Tempting but I didn't have time to entertain crazy pussy.

I knew what type of snapper she had between her legs. A few of my homies were around here traumatized and suffering from life-altering shock from her ass. Trust me, I'd give it back just as good, but I didn't have time to deal with that type of crazy.

"Get your stuff so I can lock up." I made my rounds to make sure all my workers had left, and the bay areas were clean. A few of the food trucks that came through on the

weekends were still outside packing up from the rush we had about two hours ago.

“Here. JT texted me and said that she forgot to give it to you before she left. I double counted the money, and her register is good.” She handed me the Brinks bag of money and coins. “You want me to lock it up or you got it?”

She knows damn well I wasn't about to let her anywhere near my safe. No one knew where it was and she wasn't about to be the first because the minute she walked in here with some platinum Peruvian weave versus her horse tail nappy bundles, I was going to tie her ass to the back of my truck by them expensive shits and drag her through the Everglades.

“I got it. Come on, I'll walk you out.”

Smiling big like I said I'd pay for her BBL, she skipped her thickness in front of me. “Aren't you such a gentleman.” Ignoring her, I looked around the parking lot. “Thank you, Cassian. I'll see you tomorrow.” She leaned up to hug me and I gave her exactly what she wanted. Let her arms wrap around my neck, her chest against my chest, and my hands full of nothing but booty meat.

“Get on, Noonie. This ain't what you want.” I smirked, watching the lust in her eyes grow.

“Oh, it is definitely what I want.” Boldly, she grabbed my dick, and her eyes widen. “Well, shit. I guess the rumors are true. I don't think it's fair that all the other girls got to experience all this goodness and I can't.” She pouted, fingers still holding me.

I ain't even going to lie. It's been months since I last had some pussy. My nuts were beyond full, but my mental state was too fucked up for me to tap into anything remotely close

to having sex. Yes, I was attracted to her. Any dude would be. Yes, I was turned on, but I wasn't hard at all, and the more she tried to stroke me to life, the more her smile slipped from her thick glossed lips.

“Whenever you're ready for a night of fun, you better call me, Cassian. Not these other bald-headed bitches with no edges.” She had some nerve.

I've caught her on more than one occasion thinking nobody was watching when she lifted her wig to scratch her scalp. She surpassed what it meant to have no edges. She deserved a Guinness World Record for being the first woman to extend their forehead without surgery.

“I got you.” The second her door closed, I was walking back inside to count the money and leave.

Since I was counting JT's bag, I decided to count all my worker's cash bags instead of waiting till the morning. For the most part I had some loyal employees. In the beginning I had to deal with a few people that thought stealing from me was smart, but it took one time for me to show my natural black ass and the consequences of what happened when you played with my money for no one else to try me again.

“Yes, Melly?” This little girl was learning how to tell time and she's been calling me on the hour every hour all week. I loved it though.

“Papa, are you on your way home? Tai is boring and Cashy won't let me put makeup on him.” Her pouting voice always did something to me. Made me feel soft and wanting to give her anything she wanted.

Placing my phone on speaker, I pushed my seat back and removed the wood board to get to my floor safe. “I'll be home

in a minute.” I caught a glimpse of a shadow from where I was under my desk but kept locking up my money. “What do you wanna do? I’m not letting you put no makeup on me.” The last time I sat down in her beauty chair and let her turn me into her practice dummy, I broke out and had rashes for days.

Her giggles put a smile on my face. “But it’s so much fun, Papa. Can we watch Frozen and eat pizza? I want some pizza and wings.” I passed down my horrible eating habits to my girls. Luckily, they had a fast metabolism, but I had to put them into some sports cause if not they were going to be two little Rasputias wobbling around talking about let’s play makeup.

Not my baby’s.

“I’ll bring home pizza, wings, and fries. Go ahead and shower and put on your Elsa dress, okay?” I eyed the shadow near my door slowly unclipping my gun from under my desk.

“Okay. See you soon, Papa.” She never waited for me to say bye back when she was excited about something.

I was not in the mood to deal with bullshit tonight. All I wanted to do was wash my ass, eat greasy food, and spend time with my kids. That’s it, that’s all. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I calmed down before locking the safe and placing the wooden board back in place. Rising to my feet, I stood up just as he took the safety off his gun.

Rookie assed move.

All the guns I kept in my office were ready to shoot.

“It’s a good thing you spoke to your daughter one last time since you won’t make it home to watch Frozen.” He stepped further in my office.

Chuckling with annoyance, I kept my hands where they were. “She finally sent you my way, huh?” Marlin told me all about him and his cousin’s business.

Explained everything Noelani had planned. Explained her plan to have either Glen or Anthony come after me. Was I surprised? Not anymore. Nothing she did surprised me. One thing her ass failed at was hiring rookies to try and take me out.

Glen sat in a burgundy Honda Accord all day outside of my shop. I guess he thought he was invisible, or I wouldn’t notice the eyesore disguised as a car out of place. I had one of my girls walk around the building to grab the license plate so I could run it.

Atlas texted me a few hours ago with all the information I needed. Again, Glen and Noelani watched too much damn tv because who in the hell would do a stakeout in their own vehicle?

Noelani and her stupid ass puppets.

I made sure to study the cousins like I was back in college getting ready for finals. I knew what they looked like, parents looked like, places they loved to eat at, and who they were fucking. I made it my business to know everything about them because I knew a time would come when I’d face them on my account or theirs.

Honestly, I’ve been sitting like a damn duck waiting to see what Noelani was going to do. See how far she was going to go. I could’ve killed all three, but I found great pleasure in watching her botched plan try to unfold.

I needed to see how far gone she went so I wouldn’t feel an ounce of remorse when I finally killed her because her day

was coming. Keeping her close on that compound was for that reason alone.

“Does it fucking mat...” Two nine-millimeter bullets shot through Glen’s forehead, breezing past my ear, leaving behind smoke swirling the bullet holes.

“Whew baby.” Admiring the gun in his hand, Amell sniffed his gun before pecking it like the crazy ass nigga he was. “I had to test my new baby. Krishna got it for me for Father’s Day, but I haven’t had the chance to use it yet. Good thing you were taking forever.”

After Atlas sent me the text, Amell pulled up and made himself ghost watching Glen. Along with his eyes, I had my own and my security cameras that were hanging on the walls of my office. You couldn’t see them when you stepped inside because they were on the wall behind you. They were for my eyes to see my entire building and neighboring shops.

I knew the minute Glen saw me alone or thought I was alone, he’d show his face. When I made it back in my office from walking Noonie out, I watched his entire move while I counted my money. Watched him get out of his car and start walking around the building until he made it inside. I kept the front door unlocked just to make it easier on him. I ain’t have time to replace windows because he wanted to bust my shit out.

When I saw Amell appear from the shadows, that’s when I put my money up. I wasn’t scared at all seeing Glen standing there when I stood up. Either I was going to kill him or Amell was.

“You almost shot my ear off.” I pulled out my phone to call our cleanup crew.

“Not like I missed on accident.” He shrugged walking out.

Making sure my money was locked up and everything outside of Glen’s body lying on the floor was to my liking, I met up with Amell who was sitting on the benches outside of the building. While I appreciate him being here, I knew he only came by to talk to me. He and I haven’t had a real conversation since I told him that Coco’s accident had been intended for Krishna.

“You know what, you need your own bible verse and it finally hit me what it is.” I sat down trying to lighten the mood before he turned it serious. “Instead of Psalms 23:4. It should be Amell 23:4. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for I am evil. I am the shadow of death, and my wrath they will feel.* Sounds good, doesn’t it? I read and comprehend the scriptures you send me.”

Lately I went back to a lot of his old text messages to read the things he sent me. I might’ve had too much pride to face him personally, but I wasn’t stubborn to not go back to his wise words.

“I like that.” Him laughing never got old.

A comfortable silence settled around us as we looked off into the night. “I know you want to ask me why I have allowed her to get this far.” My head dropped a little as that cramp like feeling started to awaken in my chest. I don’t know when I became this stiff-necked man, but I don’t like it. I scratched my nose sniffing. “My wife, I turned her into my personal molten image. Idolized her because I thought having her in my world would make me perfect. Sounds crazy as hell doesn’t it?” I laughed knowing damn well nothing about it felt funny. Probably a nervous tick since I was baring my soul to my brother.

“Ain’t shit about me insecure except my heart wanting that bitch to be full, whole, and pumping with love for somebody else outside of you, Atlas and my kids. I mean look at this crazy shit, man. This bitch is sending toddlers to kill me.” My hands squeezed into fists. “I blame you and Atlas for awakening those desires of wanting love. Fucking these hoes and doing whatever the hell I wanted to do, I had no problem with that. I was content with that. Then here comes Atlas bringing Keatyn around and this softness for a woman is awakened.” I rubbed my chest shaking my head.

“Clover was the closest thing to a woman in our lives consistently but when Keatyn came around, she gave us this peace and comfort that we never experienced before. Then your gigantic ugly ass had to fall in love Krishna.” He chuckled, smiling wide as hell. “I wanted what y’all wanted. I wanted a little AJ running around. I wanted to experience love too.”

My reason lagging when it came to handling Noelani finally clicked.

Yeah, in the beginning, it was because my ass was in complete utter shock that my wife betrayed me. It turned into a pride thing wanting to take out Lionel, thinking that if he was out of the picture, then I’d have my wife back. Then, it turned into anger. I’m talking about a type of anger I haven’t felt since I kicked my mama in a pond of piranha’s for playing on my baby brother’s emotions.

Was I a perfect husband?

No, but every day I tried to be better than the day before. I made sure Noelani never had to ask me for anything. Made sure my kids had the world at their fingertips. Then, it turned into shame and embarrassment. Shame because my real

reasons for loving her as hard as I did came to light. I loved her but the passion fueled from pushing my unresolved childhood issues onto her, wanting her to fix what was broken. Embarrassment because my marriage failed. Half my kids were talking to me, and the other half weren't.

“We have to be careful what we pray for, and I think you've come to realize that.” Amell nodded to our cleaning crew that passed by to get inside the building. “You prayed for the wife you wanted *then*. The wife to give you kids and to love you enough to where you desired marriage.” He looked over at me and I knew from the slight smirk he was about to say some shit I didn't like. “You can't fault God or Noelani to a certain extent because she's what you prayed for. You wanted a woman to give you kids. A woman to marry you and love you. That's what you got.” His matter-of-fact tone had me sucking my teeth.

“I'm out here with all these mosquitos having a moment of trying to share my growth and you wanna talk about she's who I prayed for. Man, you ain't right. Ain't right at all.” I'm trying to be great, and he wants to be a comedian.

“I'm serious.” His chuckle died down. “Did you pray for anything else?” I said nothing because I honestly couldn't remember what I prayed for or if I ever really did ask for specifics. “I prayed for a wife to love me in each season of my life and our life together. Krishna isn't the same woman I fell in love with almost two decades ago. She won't be the same woman a year from now. I want to be able to love all my wife's facets and all her changing seasons.

“You prayed for a 'right now' wife and that's exactly what you got. Not once did you pray for details that mattered. There's a difference between praying for God to give you a

wife to raise and nurture your children than saying you want a woman to give you kids. Noelani gave you kids and helped nurture them to a point and then left them to you to raise. Did you pray for a wife to have a servant's heart? A wife who is selfless and will turn the house you bought into a home? A wife who is safe and trustworthy. In the same ways women want their men to provide them with security, we want the same from them in return. To feel safe to be vulnerable because we can't be that way outside of our home. Men like us can't afford that risk of being vulnerable to anyone outside of our spouses because people will play on our weaknesses. That's just the minor stuff."

Listening to my brother's wisdom and knowledge was like calcium to my bones. It fed me in ways that most people could never touch me mentally. Amell and I were equally flawed as they came but his spiritual intellect always left me fascinated and wanting to be like him. My copycat method of wanting to have a love that was true and real, I should've sat down with him when those desires started awakening.

Ego and pride told me I didn't need to sit down and get counseling from anyone because I knew what I wanted back *then*.

Hard head makes a soft ass.

Had I asked for guidance I'm sure I wouldn't be in this position.

"I never came to God with a long list, but I knew I wanted a wife who loved God more than me and who would love all the layers of me. Who would not fear or judge me but take those layers and push me to be a better man. Everything else, whatever superficial wants and desires I had, I laid them down at God's feet. You wanted a woman that always looked good.

Noelani is that. A woman who took pride in how she looked and wanting the latest everything, and that's not a bad thing but at the same time you balance it out with praying that she isn't vain but confident. A woman who has a heart of charity and gives as much as she receives. All those superficial things will change and pass away but I want to love my wife with my whole heart as I do today years from now." And that's exactly what I've always wanted.

Everything he said, I wanted that with Noelani. We can take it back further and say that I wanted it with Coco. I for sure thought that she and I would be our own Martin and Gina with some extra ghetto sprinkled all through it. Coco and I were homies. I fucked with her tough the long way. That same bond and friendship I had with her I wanted that with Noelani.

I got a lover out of Noelani and a homie out of Coco.

I guess I should've prayed for those characteristics and wants to be in one woman.

"Don't take this as you failed at life because you didn't. God gave you everything you wanted but it came with a sacrifice. You got the wife, but she loved you with stipulations for self-gain purposes. You got the children who love you wholeheartedly. Why is it attached to suffering? Only you can answer that because from where I stand and like I told you, God is a jealous God and you looked at her as the one to help save you, heal you, love you, and whatever else when that starts and ends with God first. Not only that but you shifted the power when it came to your household. When you're ready to open your heart again make sure one of the things you pray and ask God for is a love that is willing to make the adjustments as you grow. Let me ask you this, what did you

pray for before shit hit the fan?” He looked over at me with a raised brow.

I sat quiet, thinking. “Mannn.” I drug my hand down my face while the memory of my solo car venting sessions echoed loud and clear in my head. “I prayed for God to show me Noelani’s heart so I could learn how to love her better. Can’t say it was a prayer because I was venting,” I shrugged. “But this was early on when I felt her starting to distance herself from me. When I felt like her love for me was forced. I wanted to know what I had to do to keep her in love with me and then all this shit started happening. Ask and you shall receive, right? Guess I got my answer just not how I expected to receive it.”

Now that I think about it, right after I had that moment in my car venting, trying to figure out what I had done, what was wrong with me. Asking God to show me my errors and teach me how to love Noelani better, her treacherous ways became known and them bitches been flashing bright since.

He stood up holding his hand out to me. I stood but pushed his hand away and hugged him. Amell will forever be my guiding source. “A very wise person always reminds me that *life is simple, humans make it hard*. Reflect on everything you said tonight and celebrate that you’re seeing with wisdom’s eyes. When pride comes, then so does shame. Then comes correcting and growth in wisdom. You’re finally learning. You needed me to be present but not to talk, and I feel like my work is done.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Kassidy

Making love in the shower is a life pleasure that most don't partake in for fear of messing up their hair or thinking that it's pointless. A heightened level of skin sensitivity from the scorching hot water raining down on you and your lover. Slippery bodies rubbing back and forth on each other. The acoustics from the bathroom space making your moans, screams, and groans bounce off the walls sounding like the perfect soundtrack to the new Fifty Shades of Grey movie. On top of all of that, the vulnerability of being so free with your lover.

Besides perfecting the arch in my back to level straight savage, I was the making love in the shower type of girl.

"You're so deep," I moaned circling my hips.

Pushing me up further against the shower wall, Lionel twisted my body up in the perfect pretzel that had him hitting the bottom of my pussy. "Apologize and I'll be gentle." I knew from the smirk on his plump pink lips and the mischief in his hazel eyes that he just wanted me to beg.

For dick that made my legs cramp up in a Charlie horse and made it feel like my spine was dislodging itself from my

body, all he needed to tell me was how high he wanted me to scream.

However, today wasn't one of those sessions when I wanted to be his begging little bitch. "Shut up and fuck me." Squeezing my walls, I increased the movement of my hips, loving the sex faces morphing on his handsome face.

"Shit, Kehlani. I'm about to cum and I'm not pulling out."

I swear he was making me take Plan-B pills like they were a pack of tic tacs. Yeah, I had an IUD but the way this man faithfully sprayed my uterus with his seeds on a daily, I wasn't taking any chances. "Come for me, Daddy."

"Fuck." His hand slapped against the tile near my head. "Shit."

"Let me down so I can wash off and you get ready to pick up my birthday gift."

I made sure to pour my all into slobbering him down. Men like Lionel moved off having their egos stroked. Not only did I make sure to keep his balls empty for the last week, but I stroked that big fucking ego of his too. Stroked his ego and put him in a sex coma, then sloppy kissed his ass making him think that I was dickmatized.

Sure, he was superb in bed for a man his age and could make me orgasm with his tongue alone, but if Veronica ever taught me anything it is that as much as I give him access to my temple, the more he needs to pay me. Unlike the previous times when we slept together before shit hit the fan, he paid quite well. Very generously. This time around I didn't want the money.

I wanted a life.

There was no need for me to play like I'm boo-boo-the-fool. Those Kalmins were after me for endangering the life of their precious Massey. So far my life had been spared thanks to Lionel. Stacey and I have been with him since the news story broke across America and the FBI had a warrant out for Veronica's arrest. He placed her at some lowkey hotel deep in Miami and we were in Doral ducked off at one of his partner's condos. Lord knows I missed Veronica like crazy and hoped she was okay.

Point blank period the Kalmins had a bounty on my head and before I left this earth all I wanted was for the head of the one person I despised more than anything in the world.

He and I were drying off when the bathroom door swung open revealing a pissed off Stacey. It's like the girl had one facial expression and that was her normal constipated glare of love. I never cared to know what her problem was with me. She didn't pay me nor was she the one getting me off, so she was a nonfactor in my life. How she managed to keep a full schedule of men, I didn't want to know. She must have strong knees or no gag reflex.

Chuckling at her over dramatic ass, Lionel waved her over to him. "What can I do for you, baby?" I wanted to gag at the way he babied a grown ass woman.

I swear she looked like Alfre Woodard high off cock trying to flirt. "Heather and her team are here plus lunch was dropped off." Her wrinkly hands rubbed up and down his bare chest. "Thank you for planning a day of relaxation for me."

This time I didn't cover up my gag. Prior to Lionel helping us you couldn't pay Stacey two pennies to entertain him. Now suddenly he was the sun to her moon. Bitch please. She was just as two-faced and a snake like everyone said she was.

Knowing how she set up Coco back in the day to get raped and covered the guy's tracks, that's the type of bitch you don't want even breathing your air let alone do business with.

"I'm going to head out and get my massage." Dropping my towel and flaunting all my glory in front of her geriatric ass, I blew him a kiss and seductively switched my hips out the room.

Stacey had better play it safe. Sweet and innocent Kassidy versus Kehlani Raye were two different people. Regardless of which persona I adapted, I still and would forever be that bitch.

"Hey, Heather."

Not at all uncomfortable by my nakedness, she hugged me and pointed to her masseuse table. "Hey, beautiful. Always ready for me and I love it. Lay down for me."

"Isn't she beautiful?" Lionel slapped me on the ass making his puppet suck her teeth and stomp off like a child. One thing Lionel loved about me was my confidence and I equally loved his deep pockets and the sense of security he provided. An equal exchange in my book.

"What are you getting today?" Before even knowing what I wanted, Heather's hands were already rubbing her signature hot oil over my calves.

"She'll have the works." Leaning down until his lips rested on mine, he kissed me, squeezing my booty and slipping a finger along my slit.

"Don't tease me, Daddy." I moaned, not at all concerned that we had a suit full of people.

Sucking on my tongue until I moaned, he slapped my ass one last time. "I should be back with your birthday gift in a

few hours. A few gifts will be dropped off for you in the meantime. Call me if you need me.”

“I always need you, Daddy.” I got wetter by the second thinking of my gift. He could keep the dinner reservations and designer clothes being dropped off. All I wanted was her head.

“Trust me, I need you more.” He gave me one last peck and left out with his guards.

Finally able to fully relax, I channeled everything out of my head and enjoyed the hard pressure of Heather’s fingers massaging my body. “I’m going to place acupuncture needles in your shoulders and along your back. You’re super tensed. Is that okay with you?”

“Girl, I don’t care what you do as long as it feels good. You can even use those hot ass stones if you want to.” She giggled but I was dead serious. My body was hers to do with.

It took her no time at all to cover my upper and lower back with needles. I felt no pain and had even dosed off until the hag with the dirty ass wig opened her mouth. “You know he’ll never wife you.” Stacey must’ve been holding that in since Lionel left.

Not even bothering to lift my head, I gave her the answer she was looking for. “Love, don’t ruin the good energy with your jealousy. All I want is his generous pockets and his...” My words turned to slobbery gibberish.

Stacey started back talking but I couldn’t form words to respond. It’s like my mind wouldn’t allow me to speak. My body felt weighed down and I couldn’t lift my head. Like I had been given the largest dosage of Novocain. One minute my eyes burned to blink and then the next they wouldn’t open.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Cassian

MY GUILT CALLED out to me louder than a whore calling the block for her tricks. Can't remember the last time I slept through the night without waking up, without tossing and turning. Instead of lying there I got up and went down to Jackson Memorial Hospital. It was well past visiting hours, and the hallways of the hospital were damn near empty. This sudden pull in my chest wouldn't release itself from me and I knew it would only get worse until I confronted the person responsible for making me feel this way.

"The doctors won't be around until seven. I'll be back in an hour or two to change her bandages." She paused before looking over her shoulder. "He comes in around five, so make this quick." Natasha squeezed my shoulder before walking away.

Look down at Coco, my damn knees buckled. It felt like someone was squeezing my lungs making it hard to breathe as I took in her appearance. She kinda looked like my Coco but not really. Pulling up a chair, I sat as close to her bed as I could. "This wasn't supposed to happen like this, Co." My

voice mirrored what my heart was going through – breaking. “I took my hurt out on you. I’m insecure as hell man.”

Resting my arms on my legs, I rested my head in the palms of my hands and took a deep breath. To be here, to be sitting here and seeing her like this. It’s like this wave of emotions punched me in the middle of my chest, knocking the wind out of me. Knocking the feeling out of my legs and other limbs. Making me weak and immobile.

“I wanted to hurt you how my...my...Noelani...she hurt me, and I wanted to project that hurt onto someone else. I’m sorry.” Sadly, I was taking advantage of her current state. If she was awake I’m sure I’d be the last person on earth she wanted to talk to and there was so much I needed to apologize for.

Funny how you want to bare your soul to someone when they aren’t able to respond. We wait until the last minute to bear our truths and that’s exactly what I was doing. Speaking on things I never would’ve ever admitted. Confessing to truths I swore I’d take to my grave.

“The toxic nigga in me wants to blame you for all the shit happening.” I flinched at my own admittance. “Blame you for not choosing me. Blame you for not taking a chance on us. Taking a chance on me to show you that I could learn to love you. You were...you’re perfect, man. Smart, independent as hell. You never asked anything of me but to never break Massey’s heart and I did that, and I’m so damn sorry. You’re sexy than a motherfucker with your chocolate ass.” I laughed sniffling.

“Can cook good as hell. Never gave me problems at all. Wanna know some toxic shit?” I grabbed her hand, heart damn near going off rhythm feeling her warmth.

She was still alive.

She was still able to hear me.

“I gave you shit about your parenting. Lashing out and whatnot because I was jealous and hurt that you choose another nigga that doesn’t care about you over me. That shit fucking hurt.” That’s a pain that never went away. A constant reminder of feeling like I lacked something besides good dick and personality.

“Courtney, man, I would’ve done anything for you, still would go beyond my ability to give you the world. Then to add in Massey, my baby girl, the world is yours. The pussy is immaculate. Best I ever had since we’re being honest. I don’t care anything about you slanging your coochie for a bag. I know hoes who do the same thing, and their shit is stretched down to their knees.”

Glancing down at my left hand, the worn tan line of where my wedding ring used to sit made my somberness turn bitter. “I intentionally rubbed Noe in your face. Rubbed our marriage too because I wanted you to suffer and see that just how you found better than me, well so did I. When you showed me the video and pictures of her with another man, I lashed out in shame and embarrassment because you weren’t supposed to see that. You weren’t supposed to expose my flaws.”

Who wants to admit that they failed?

Who wants to tell the world that they were used and cheated on?

I damn sure didn’t and tried to keep my marital woes a secret for as long as I could.

“Can you believe she had her little goons try and kill me? Then the saddest part of it all is that you were never the

intended target. As much as you and I argued and disagreed, not once have I ever questioned your loyalty to me. I know you'd never do anything to hurt me because you genuinely care for me. All I keep thinking about is how I wish I made you my wife instead. How I wish I fought harder for us to make it work. I didn't know how to express my feelings and tell you how I felt back then. How I wanted you to choose me. Tell you that you were always my first choice. Pride kept me from asking more of you, more of us."

Standing, I leaned over until my face hovered over hers. She looked so peaceful. I ran my nose along her cheeks, heart skipping a beat. "I need you to fight this so you can beat my ass. I can't lose you." Clearing my throat of the heavy mountain of emotions, I kissed her forehead. Knowing this would be the last time I'd ever get this close, I softly kissed her lips over and over until I felt my body shake. "Please forgive me."

I walked out of her room just as Natasha was walking down the hall. I tossed my head up goodbye and left like I had never been there. The things I admitted to, the things I said. I was toxic as shit for waiting until now but if I didn't apologize to anyone else, I was going to apologize to her. It took for Noelani to royally fuck up for me to speak those things out loud because while I was thinking my life was sweet and I had better than Coco, I ain't have shit but conniving community pussy masked as a fraud.

Compared to Noelani, Coco's minor outburst that time wasn't shit. But I was toxic and a fucked up individual with nuts full of pride and an ego twice as full. Around here chasing a fantasy. Chasing an empty heart. The empty heart was never mine; it was always Noelani's.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Noelani

I WOKE up this morning expecting dark grey clouds, thunderstorms, and my heart-pumping fast as lightning. There was none of that. Only bright skies and not a single dark cloud in sight. The air smelled cleaner, more refreshing. Close to the tranquility of a spa. All the Kalmin children, mine included, were playing at the park while Atlas barbequed.

Summer was almost over, and the kids would be back to their normally scheduled programs, so I suppose the random celebration wasn't so random. However, knowing the series of events I put into play last night, it was only going to be a matter of time before their smiles turned into sobbing tears.

Wanting to catch the moment when their worlds tilted, I sat by the front window anxiously waiting. Waiting for the precious family to get the word that one of their beloved had passed on...tragically.

The games had to stop.

Cassian thought he was going to walk around carefree and take credit for all my work?

I think not.

I wasn't the type of woman you placed in a corner with expectations of shutting up like she was some disobedient child needing to be taught a lesson. Quite frankly it was his fault if blame needed to be placed. He caused me to step outside of myself and do the unthinkable. He's the one who forced my hand. Had he stayed in his place as the doting househusband, well, Glen wouldn't have been given the order to end his life.

Marlin had yet to show up and at this point I accepted his death. Not sure who killed him, but he was likely dead. If he wasn't dead then maybe he ran. I really didn't care. Being confined to this house and not being able to leave made me crazy. Cassian's plan to torture me was really the last strike. Having to sit in with my own company sent my mind traveling to extremely dark places.

Honey had blocked me. Cassidy wasn't picking up my calls and I for damn sure wasn't going to spend my time venting to Anthony.

Then there was Lionel. The man who seemed to not keep his word. "What can I do for you, Mr. Ortega?" Speak of the devil and he shall appear. At first I wasn't going to answer his call, but I had nothing better to do.

"Time is up, Noelani. I'm on my way to your precious warehouse to take what is mine and you had better be there. Thought it would be nice to give you a heads up and warn your guards to stand down because if they shoot first, we will shoot back." At this point he could do whatever he wanted to do with that stupid warehouse.

"Have at it. Do what you have to do but I won't be a part of it."

Glen was supposed to kill Cassian last night while he was at his autobody shop. Not sure if he succeeded or not, but if he didn't then Cassian was probably at the warehouse, so if Glen failed to do his job then Lionel was second best.

“I don't like your attitude, Noelani. We made a deal. Have you forgotten all the dirt I have on your ass?” He gritted.

My goodness, he had some nerve.

Not at all caring that he heard me laugh, I continued, “Fuck you, Lionel. You're the last person to talk about making deals or issuing threats, asshole. Yes, we did have a deal and that was for you to clean up my dead weight and we'd merge our businesses. You'd get all the Kalmin territories, running it alongside me of course, and I'd be a widow fake crying over the loss of my husband. Oh, but wait, let me back track because you were supposed to kill Krishna, Amell's kryptonite. But you haven't moved on that either. Just like you have dirt on me, I have dirt on you. So yeah, fuck you.”

Love made you weak.

Obsession made you fatal.

Possessiveness made you delirious.

I was all those things for Amell Kalmin.

“Oh, that's right. I forgot your unrealistic fantasy having ass thinks that while he's mourning his dead wife and you're mourning your dead husband, somehow your two mourning hearts will merge as one. Get the fuck out of here with the whimsical fantasy bullshit, Noelani! I never followed through with your plans because they weren't plans at all but you thinking with your emotions instead of your head. Do you understand now why women aren't welcomed into this world? Despite the bitch attitude you're a weak link that will cause an

empire to fall because your vision is completely clouded by greed and love. Do you know how many times I could've killed you? Did you honestly think I believed anything that you said?" His taunting bark of laughter made me shake in anger.

"Fuck..."

"No, fuck you, Noelani. Let me guess, you're about to hang up and cry because you've just realized you're not as smart as you think, and you failed." He laughed and I wiped the lone tear that rolled down my cheek. "My purpose in seeking you out and getting close was to further weaken your husband because what man wouldn't fight for the woman he loved? I guess not yours, huh? Besides that one-time Cassian came to me to warn me off he hasn't popped up since and I've been wondering why but then it clicked. He knows that I tasted the lining of his wife's pussy so now you're less than scum to him. A fucking cunt in a skirt.

"While you thought I was sitting and waiting on you, I've been studying my enemies. You're not a weak spot for them like I thought because your betrayal was discovered early and we all know Amell doesn't like anyone who betrays his precious family. I hope you all enjoy the nice weather, and the burgers Atlas is flipping on the grill. Pay close attention to what's about to happen, Noelani. I'm going to show you what it means to take without mercy and I'm starting with the warehouse, and I swear to God, if you're not there I'm going to make you sorry for ever thinking you could play me. By the time I make it on that compound and burn it and everyone to the ground, I might spare your life, if I'm feeling generous."

I stared at my phone shaking with rage. Squeezing hard, hoping that it would break into a thousand little pieces. Lionel

played me. He really played me.

My mind started running faster than a windmill. Going back to our first conversation he and I had when I went to California last year hoping to merge with the west coast. Cassian and Amell refused to expand but I was in charge, and I refused to hinder the growth of my business just because they didn't know how to finesse a man.

Since I sought Lionel out he questioned me intensely. Even held a gun to my head and knife to my throat. Threatened to do my body bodily harm and all the above but I never cracked. Amell taught me to never falter under any man's hand including him. Once he realized that I was serious, Lionel and I sat down and worked out the details of our deal.

All I wanted was the head of Krishna on a stick and my husband out of the picture. I knew the grief of Amell losing Krishna would make him step away from the business. I knew the grief of losing her would place him right in my arms because if I haven't learned anything, I learned that when he is at his most vulnerable, he latched onto those he trusted most. It was proven when he sought me out years ago to put his plan together when he went to prison.

There were only certain details that a handful of us knew. Details that he refused to share with his precious wife because her ass was a weak link. Lionel had the nerve to say I was a weak link, but my dear ex-best friend was the weakest link of the family.

“Shit.” Startled by the knock at the door, I wiped my face and looked through the peephole. “Shit. Shit.” I whispered placing my back against the door. Why did it seem like every person I spoke of popped up?

Closing my eyes and taking several deep breaths, I relaxed my shoulders and opened the door. “Hey-Hey, Amell.” I could punch myself in the damn mouth for stuttering.

Inviting himself in, his bulky frame dressed in his signature all black breezed past me, awakening all my senses. Don’t know if he saw me or not, but I inhaled him as he walked by and instantly got a contact high of his enigmatic fragrance. Always mysterious. Always dark but clean as the midnight air.

“I stopped by to see if you had plans today.” He looked around my living room before focusing his eyes on me.

“Uh, no. I don’t have any plans.” I held my breath not sure of what to do besides getting my hopes up.

Usually when the kids were all gathered at the park so was he. For him to be here instead of out there and questioning me about my plans, well, a girl didn’t want to get too excited.

“Good. Get dressed. I want to show you something and get your feedback.”

On the outside I was standing still as stone. On the inside I was melting like hot lava, cooing at the fact that everything I felt and had been aware of when it came to him was true. He trusted me above the rest. I was his go-to.

I was his person.

“Sure. Oh, but won’t Cassian be mad if I leave since I’m in time out?” I playfully rolled my eyes, gave a light laugh. All of it to see his reaction.

Watching his mouth transform into a smirk, he shook his head. “Now, Noe. You know I don’t answer to anyone and when you’re with me he knows to mind his business. I’ll be

outside in my truck waiting.” He left out and I ran to my room to get dressed.

Though he might’ve been dressed down in his normal black jeans, black V-neck t-shirt, and black boots. I wasn’t that simple, nor would I ever be. The king was summoning his queen and I had to represent accordingly.

An all-white set that consisted of high-waisted shorts, a silk blouse that I tucked in and wore without a bra. A pair of white and gold YSL heels and my favorite flowery scent from Chanel, COCO MADEMOISELLE. Wigs had been my thing lately and I had a new one I’ve been wanting to try. A blonde bob wig that complimented my skin just perfectly. A light beat to my face, a matte red lipstick, and I was out the door riding shotgun with *my* king!

From riding in the car with him plenty of times before, I wasn’t new to the fact that he enjoyed silence outside of his music playing. He always leaned towards the middle console, left hand on the steering wheel, right tugging on the beard I longed to touch. We’d have to get him used to that right hand gripping my thigh eventually. I did speak once I noticed we were getting on the turnpike headed north.

“Where are we going?”

“Enjoy the ride.” He spoke without tearing his eyes from the road.

So, like he said, I enjoyed the ride. It took a lot of self-control to not pull out my phone and capture this moment with him. I can’t say what but something about this ride felt different than the other times he and I rode in a car together. This felt more personal, more intimate. Part of me wanted to warn him about Lionel ambushing the warehouse but I kept

my lips closed in fear that I'd ruin this moment or better yet, he'd kill me.

Whereas Cassian had yet to switch back to the savage I married, only throwing temper tantrums and firing people, Amell lived the life he spoke of. I know I'd be a dead woman if I did half of the stuff I did to Cassian with him.

We drove for an hour and a half, entering Belle Glades and driving through country farmland. I started to get nervous knowing that Atlas had a greenhouse out here, but that nervousness died down once we pulled up to a large barnyard that was twice the size of the house I used to share with Cassian. It sat on acres and acres of land. Caught up in admiring the well-manicured grass and structure of the barnyard, I didn't take notice of Amell getting out until he opened my door and held his hand out for me.

Welcoming the pricks of heat covering my cheeks from blushing, I ducked my head as I placed my tiny hand in his large palm. A perfect fit. "Thank you." I expected him to release my hand once I placed my feet on solid ground, but he didn't.

Maybe he wanted to make sure I didn't break my neck walking over the gravel. Doesn't matter. I held his hand with a stomach full of butterflies and a smile so wide and bright that I wanted to pinch myself to see if I was dreaming.

"Wow." Stepping inside the barnyard, expecting cattle and other things that belonged on a farm, I stepped into an upgraded version of my warehouse.

"She's a beauty isn't she?" He gave me a small smile, separating our hands, giving me an unwelcomed wind of cold and emptiness.

Beauty was an understatement. I felt like I stepped into a classified world of technology and armor. Steel cages barricading walls of weapons. A medical area. TV's hung all along the walls. Plexiglass cages and so much stuff that I've never seen.

“What is this place, Amell?” I ran my hands over the cold flat metal table. This had to be his torture area. My eyes never got to behold him when he went to that other side, but I'd heard the stories.

Leaning against one of the metal columns, he locked those cold dark eyes with mine. “This is my special place. Haven't named her yet but it will come to me.”

“What about the other warehouse?”

“What about it? Cassian is doing his own thing and I'm doing mine.” He shrugged, pushing off the column. “I'm putting together a new team. Branching off and doing my own thing. You're here because I'm considering bringing you on board. Are you interested?”

Yes, I'll marry you!

And to think I thought today was going to be another boring day. Biting the inside of my jaw to keep my excitement at bay, I walked over to where he stood. “What would I be to you?” It was so easy to get lost in the depths of his dark eyes. Lost in the eeriness that laid beneath. Lost but never wandering too far out because the heat of his being always pulled you back.

A devilish look came into his eyes making my breathing uneasy. “What do you want to be to me, Noelani?” Hearing my name roll off his tongue, passing his fleshy brown lips, I ached in my hidden places. Dared myself to push my breast

against his chest to alleviate the pressure building up in my nipples.

Eyes fluttering, becoming lazy from his smoldering enormity. “I want to be everything to you, Amell. I want to be everything you need *me* to be.”

My chest heaved up and down, his lids became dangerously low, hooded like a hawk but pensive like his powerful presence. “Tell me, if I made you my right hand, my second in command, what value would you bring?”

Lightly laughing at his sudden change of direction, I was going to play along. He wanted to make sure I could handle what it took to stand beside him before we crossed the borders of romance, fine.

“I’d bring the same value that I brought when I was in charge but now on another level since this would be us operating *together*.”

Widening his stance with his arms crossed in front of him, he nodded for me to continue. “How about I’ll tell you what I’ve done, and you figure out for yourself what value I’d bring?” I winked. “Under my leadership, we increased revenue with our gun trades, which I’m sure you’re aware of since you had to sign off on the new shipment coming from your connect in Russia.” Loving that I had his full attention and all of it was only on me, I started to pace. Walking around him, breathing in his scent, feeling more and more confident with each inhale.

“I cut new contracts with local businesses and made new connections throughout the city, going all the way up to the panhandle. I doubled the supply keepers from a one man show to three. So, at any time, if something happens to one, I have two backups. I created a team that lives and breathes the definition of loyalty because I am loyal to them. They will

even go to war with their own family if I gave the order. Those same men and women were trained by me. Trained to be the ruthless savages I needed them to be.”

I paused in front of him, tilted my head a little to see if I wanted to step out on the ledge. Amell didn't need a weak bitch at his side. He needed one just as savage as he was and that included speaking up and speaking my mind.

“My purpose of stepping to Lionel Ortega was simply to show you boys that I could handle him. Yes, we all know he's a snake and he isn't to be trusted.” Moving dangerously close in his space, I ran my nail down his arm hoping for a reaction. Hoping that his heart was beating just as fast for me as mine was for him.

I got nothing.

“Luckily for this family, another one of my specialties is that I'm a snake charmer. Can't forget who my first husband was.” I licked my lips stepping back. He continued to stand their void of emotion just radiating his authority that pumped confidence through my veins. “I was able to get close enough to lower him into a place of complacency and vulnerability. I'm the one who keeps him in line. While everyone else sat around pouting and whining because no one could handle him, I stepped in with the right tools to get the job done.”

Fuck what Lionel said to me earlier.

He's a perverted ass liar and I wasn't stupid like he claimed I was. Lionel was scared to move because who plots and plots without no action? He does. So what if I fucked him? It might not have gotten the bullet I needed to be shot through Cassian's skull, but I got a hold of Lionel's west coast supplier. Not just his drug supplier but also his weapons. The same way

he manipulated me, I manipulated him. Used him just the same.

“It takes a real woman to do everything that I’ve done. Who else could triple the family’s monthly income? Have us working with those we thought weren’t workable? Me. The queen is the most powerful piece on the chessboard. I’m your queen, Amell, can’t you see that? All that I’ve done for us, for you. Lowered my goddamn standards to marry your brother. Lowered my standards and self-worth just so I could be next to you always.” I sucked my teeth thinking of how I stretched my damn body to give Cassian three kids.

One person besides myself knew that my heart only pumped and bled for Amell Kalmin and that was Honey. I loved this man since I noticed he followed me to my favorite coffee shop back when I was working at the prison. I loved his alpha maleness. Loved his boss mentality and intellect. Loved everything about him and wanted him to be Dominique’s successor but he refused, pushing his brother into the spotlight so I had to go with second best.

“I’ve always admired and respected your family views and the honor you possess. How you loved for a woman to be a boss but not a boss that would be placed in harm’s way by working on the frontline. Whereas your brother gets a damn hard-on when I started calling the shots. He’d rather have guards accompany me to high table meetings while he’s at home painting our girl’s toenails. That, I have no respect for.” I don’t know where this sudden diarrhea of the mouth came from, but I loved it.

Since he and I were about to go into business together I needed to lay all my cards on the table because there wasn’t

any going back. If we were going to be partners then we were going to be partners in every sense of the word.

Lovers.

Protectors.

Friends.

“Think about it. When have I ever not shown you that I’m not loyal or can’t handle any task you’ve given me? I even pushed my true feelings aside for you to befriend your wife because you asked me to keep my eyes on her. Sending you pictures of her, updates when she stepped out and entertained other men while you were dating, hoping that you’d leave her alone because she wasn’t as solid as you thought. You need a woman who is going to stand ten toes down and that is and has always been me!” I shoved a finger in my chest, breathing hard, and feeling the veins pop out of my forehead.

Going down memory lane and thinking of all the stupid shit I did to get his attention always left me with a mouthful of bitterness. I was tired of waiting for my turn. Tired of waiting for him to see me. How could he seriously choose a whiny, spoiled bitch who has nothing to bring to the table?

He fucking crushed my entire soul when he married her. My jealousy grew to Mount Everest size hate until it clicked. When Mitch died Amell became in charge. He inherited Mitch’s cartel. He married her to secure his future and you couldn’t tell me otherwise. That had to be the *only* logical reason why he’d choose her over me.

I refused to believe anything else.

Once I understood how brilliant he was, I pushed that anger to the side and stepped into my role again as his helper. Knowing one day he would kick her ass to the curb. The same

lengths he went through with her to secure his future are the same lengths I went through to stay by his side.

All those years ago when I revealed my hand to Cassian, how I purposely went after him, making him fall in love with me just to break his heart, I knew he'd flip. Did I love him as he loved me? No. Did I get caught up in my feelings? Big time.

I cared about him, really did. Loved the way he catered to me. Loved how he loved me, but he wasn't the one who my heart called out to. I cried from the pits of my soul that day when everything came to light. Not because I'd hurt Cassian but because I knew Dominique was about to send me away and I'd never see him again. I'd never see Amell again.

I needed a plan to secure my future because I wasn't certain when it came to Cassian. Hurt men were worse than hurt women. He might've loved me but that didn't mean he'd welcome me back in with open arms if I ever came back, so I had to think deep and hard before shit hit the fan.

What would keep me connected to the family?

What would keep me close to Amell?

My sweet baby boy Cashton.

Getting pregnant with him was intentional. Either Cassian was going to fight for me and kill Dominique, or he was going to let me walk away because I hurt him too deeply. Either way, I had to figure out how to stay in his life regardless of which way the wind blew. And the perfect solution was having his baby.

Cassian loved family too much to ignore his son, ignore the love he had for me. However, I ended up being the one who suffered more than anyone during those years Dominique

kept me in Columbia. Amell had learned to move on without my services. In that area I wasn't of value to him anymore.

I loved my son. He served his purpose by opening the door leading me back to the man I loved. Mitch and Clover died, God rest the dead, and my man stood like the powerful avenging angel he was meant to be. Slaughtering families, turning the streets of Miami into rivers of blood. Giving me orgasms without ever having to touch me.

His power, intellect, charisma, having so many other facets to all he is. He stirred my soul. Sang the sweetest songs to the blood cells running through my veins, pumping directly to my wildly beating heart.

How he took charge when Cashton was kidnapped by my brother. I thought of him when having sex with Cassian. Almost screamed his name. It was his face I envisioned between my legs. His powerful muscle stretching my walls and forcing me into submission. His hands squeezing around my neck and pulling my hair.

It was only right that I conceived and give him his junior, and that I did. A beautiful baby girl who would grow to be strong and bold like her true father, the father I wanted for all my children. In my mind he was their father since it was him I thought of when conceiving them.

“When you confided in me, telling me your plan about going to prison to avenge JD, I rose up with this strong desire.” I shuddered thinking of that day. It's like he possessed me. “A moment to stand at your side and be the queen you deserved. Krishna was around the house crying and throwing a fit and I was glad.” I laughed crossing my arms.

“Glad that you'd finally see the difference between my strength and her weakness. I knew your sacrifice wasn't in

vain. You'd be home soon, and I'd be the one to bring you home to *me*. She disappeared making my job focusing on you easier. My plan was always to kill Cassian, free you, so we would continue building an empire together. Then your ass switched shit up again by staying with her because she freed you first. I had your damn children. They may not have come from your nuts, but they have your blood."

Amell stood in the same spot, the same position, not saying a word. Hard eyes on me and calm. Though a calm Amell was never a happy Amell, I knew he hadn't shifted to his dark side by the shade of his eyes. There was still light in them.

"I'm tired of playing this game with you. You asked what I wanted to be, and I just confessed my whole soul explaining it." I tossed my arms up in the air. "I want to be yours and I want you to be mine."

Was I scared after everything I had just admitted to? Not at all which was surprising. Maybe because being near him I channeled so much of his strength that I felt powerful enough to say and do whatever I wanted because I knew he'd never hurt me.

"Are you going to say anything?" I wanted to walk back up to him but until he spoke I wasn't taking any chances.

"You know how I feel about honesty, so I appreciate you telling me how you've felt all of this time." He flicked his nose and a sense of fear shook my body. "I want to show you something." I guess I passed the test.

Following behind him we walked to the back of the barnyard, where he stopped in front of a back wall lifting one of the wooden slabs, revealing a keypad. With all its high-tech ability, I expected Atlas to have something like this than

Amell. He entered a code and the back barnyard wall cracked down the middle and opened. Shoulder to shoulder he and I stood watching it open slowly.

Feeling his eyes on me, I looked up sucking in a deep breath. He was smiling. A real smile touched his eyes and I'd earned it. "In this moment what I want you to be is a woman who stands on her word. You said you're the most powerful piece on my chessboard. Show me."

What did he want me to do? Run through the marshes and chase rabbits?

"Show you how?"

My poor heart. It was going to be sore and tired from the skipping of beats it was doing by being the singular recipient of his smile. "Correcting your errors." He looked straight ahead.

"What do you mean..." Following his eyes, I became stuck, mirroring the stone stance he had during my rant.

The barnyard's rear doors were wide open revealing a large wooden deck with Cassian standing there. Next to him in a plexiglass cage was Lionel who looked like he got the shit beat out of him, and a naked, shivering and crying Kassidy.

"Thought I was dead didn't you, Noe?" Cassian winked.

What in the hell was going on?

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

C^{oco}

“CASSIAN IS GOING to be a daddy. Whew chiille.” Keatyn was beyond tickled for the wrong reasons. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

I tried to control my cheeks from smiling so hard, but it was pointless. The minute Keatyn placed the paper in my hand confirming what I already knew, this moment was so special. I was going to be somebody’s mother. Jimmy and I were going to be parents.

“Uh, well, it’s not his.”

I looked up to see my best friend staring at me with her mouth hung open. Last she knew the only person who I told her I was seeing intimately was Cassian. I wasn’t sure how or when to mention Jimmy. Mentioning him would mean I had to start at the beginning of our story and that’s not something I wanted to tell her. That part of my life had been sealed away with a key and would remain locked away.

“Oh...oh okay. Sooo if he’s not the father then who is?” Pulling her stool next to the examination table I sat on, she

crossed her legs and arms waiting impatiently for me to explain.

Scratching that sensitive spot behind my ear, I cleared my throat and thought of my Jimmy. “Remember that trip I took to New York about four months ago, well I met a guy and we’ve been seeing each other ever since.” I shrugged, trying to play off the giddiness that warmed my body.

Everything I said was technically true. Jimmy and I had been seeing each other since we reconnected that day. What I thought would be one wild night of revenge sex turned into me staying until I had to go to Texas. Since he was in the middle of basketball season and couldn’t travel much, I came to him. Mentions of his wife never entered our hotel rooms. Sometimes I felt bad and others I blamed my actions of sleeping with a married man on my childhood.

It’s what I had been conditioned to do since birth so why was Jimmy out of the exception?

Two months ago while we were in Atlantic City for the weekend, he surprised me with the separation papers between him and his wife. He was getting a divorce. He was leaving her for me. My heart turned to complete mush. Experiencing Jimmy’s love in high school was a teenager’s dream but experiencing it now as an adult, had me walking on clouds.

“Wow. I’m shocked right now and kinda in my feelings since I’m just learning about him when you’re pregnant.” Nursing Keatyn’s feelings was off the table. She’d just have to get over it.

“My apologies, best friend. Until he and I became more serious I didn’t feel a need to mention him. However, it seems our love wanted to speak louder.” I rubbed my flat belly ignoring her probing eyes.

After I left her office I went straight home and packed for a week. This was one of me and Jimmy's weekends to see each other and I had a feeling that I was going to be staying longer than usual. Earlier this week I spoke to my boss about a possible transfer to our Rochester office and he said that it was mine whenever I was ready. Every day I awoke in stillness wanting the red flags outside of his marital status to run me away.

Prior to reconnecting with Jimmy, only one other man had the honor to say he had my heart. Orlando and I were a beautifully poignant toxic romance that started off with bolts of lightning and claps of thunder, ending with fierce passions rooted in selfishness. A dark romance based on survival. With Jimmy I always felt like I was dreaming. Felt like I was Cinderella, and he was prince charming rescuing me from my horrible life.

Even now, it felt like he was upholding the promises he made as a teenage boy giving me the fairytale love I deserved. Showing me that I was loveable. Showing me that I wasn't the definition of my past. I guess that's why this time around it seemed so easy to fall back into his arms. The teenage girl in me was blinded by dreams of the past instead of focusing on the reality of the present.

I made it to New York and checked into our favorite hotel in Rochester around eight that evening. Thankfully the food I ordered on the Uber ride over had arrived just as I checked in. Using my portable Bluetooth speaker, I played my favorite R&B playlist and took a nice long soaking hot bath. By the time I got out and rubbed my body down in my favorite body butter, Jimmy had texted me that he was fifteen minutes away.

Our food was still warm. I looked sexy and delectable enough to be his entire dessert and his entrée. My surprise wasn't the expensive crotchless lingerie in his favorite color. My surprise was wrapped in a gift I paid a hefty price for since it was last minute. Tonight was going to be special. Tonight we were taking our relationship to new heights.

"Damn, girl. You look like a good, seasoned pot of neckbones." Cassian licked his lips lustfully.

Laughing at his craziness, I picked up my phone and gave him a complete look of my outfit and new stilettos. "Am I doing too much?"

His eyes were low and dripping with lust, and the way he kept licking his lips, good thing I was in New York cause I'm pretty sure he'd be knocking on my door ready to take it off me. "Coco, mama, you look scrumptious as hell. Where you at so I can come get some loving? Got my dick all hard and shit. Show me them thighs again."

Being extra, I placed my phone on the dresser and gave him a show that earned me a series of moans and explicit praises. I loved the relationship Cassian and I had. We were never monogamous. More like the perfect homie, lovers, and friends. He had other women that he dealt with, and I had Jimmy. When I got to Florida, I planned on telling him that our physical relationship was ending. I'm sure he'd question if there was a chance of the baby being his, but I knew it wasn't.

I started to close out the sex part of our friendship about two and a half months ago. Plus, he and I always used condoms. Jimmy and I didn't. Cassian stayed the same. We hung out as normal just cut out the sex. That made me so happy because I loved his friendship.

“Do I look okay?” Arching my back how he liked, I clapped my cheeks. I almost fell off the bed laughing so hard when he turned the camera to his tented sweats. “Boy, you are crazy.”

“Ain’t no shame in my game. You know I like to lick your chocolate ass, and if that square ass nigga don’t like it, you better pluck out his nut hairs with tweezers.” Who in the hell thinks of things like that? Only my Cassian.

Hearing knocks at the door had me hopping up and straightening my hair. “Crazy man, I gotta go. I’ll text you when I get back in town.”

“Wait. Show me a titty or something.” He begged, making me laugh harder.

“Boy, bye.” I hung up and opened the door. “Hey, baby.”

His usual frown turned into the biggest shocked expression ever. “Damn, Coco.” He backed me in the room, kicking the door closed, and hosting me up against the wall. “I missed you so much.” His breath against my skin, his hands wandering all over my body. It felt so good. He felt good.

“I missed you too.” I moaned, lost in the tingles of his tongue licking up and down my neck. When his hands roamed from my butt to the opening of my crotchless panties, I wiggled my way out of his arms.

Once Jimmy got started there was no such thing as taking a break. He liked to make love until his body wore out and I had a surprise that couldn’t wait.

“Before you take my clothes off, I want to feed you, bathe you, and give you a surprise other than me.” Guiding him to the table in my suit, I removed his team windbreaker jacket,

his shoes, and placed his bags in the bedroom. I wanted my man comfortable and relaxed.

“You didn’t kiss me.” Not waiting for me to reply, he gripped the back of my neck and slammed his lips against mine. Just like the time he gave me my first kiss, he latched onto my tongue, eyes staring into the depths of my soul.

Bewitched under his unwavering stare, his tongue lapped and lapped the crevasses of my mouth in the same manner his pelvis made love to me. My body shuddered and weakened, becoming a close second to melted butter. “Jimmy.” Each time I tried to push away, he pushed into me.

“Next time you better kiss me when you greet me.” He smacked my butt hard, pecking my lips.

Shit.

Well, damn.

It took me a minute to catch my bearings after he damn near kissed me stupid.

He said grace and we dug into our Thai food. Conversation about our day and the weeks since we last saw each other came easily. It always came easily. We naturally flowed. Never forced.

“Have you thought much about moving out here?” He questioned mid bite.

My cheeks instantly stained dark crimson. Goodness, I was so in love with this man. He wanted me nearby. He wanted us to be together. Everything was going so right, and I was so happy. “I have. My job has an office here and I inquired about possibly transferring soon. They said it can be done.”

Reaching across the table, he grabbed my hand and kissed my knuckles. “Excellent, baby. Let me know where you’re thinking of moving to.”

Okayyyy...

I thought we’d be living together if I moved out here. “Um, what about in Fayetteville near you?” Rochester and Syracuse were an hour and a half apart. Granted it was closer than me being in Florida and him here, but if I moved. If I uprooted my life for him, I didn’t want to do so with so much space still between us.

Catching the way his body stiffened and his shifting in his seat, he finished his glass of water and cleared his throat. “Why not stay in Rochester where you’ll be closer to your job? You won’t have to worry about the back-and-forth traffic. We can still see each other as we do now.”

The way I traveled for work, it didn’t matter if I was close to the office or not. I may have to go in once or twice a week, if at all. Not liking the tightening in my chest or the doubt suddenly brewing, I moved to the next phase of our night. His gift.

“I got you something. Hope you like it.” Placing the wrapped gift box in front of him, I took my seat antsy to see his smile. If I was thinking straight, I’d grab my phone to record this moment, but I’d do that for when we found out the sex of our baby.

Giving me his signature pretty boy smile, he wiped his mouth and picked up the box. “Babe, it’s not my birthday.”

“Duh.” I chuckled rolling my eyes. “I wanted to show you how much you mean to me. How you changed my life for the

better. You've always been my source of hope. I want to thank you for that."

*My anxiety had me ready to snatch the box out of his hand and open it for him since he was moving so slow. I couldn't help but smile with tears in my eyes as he pulled out the pocket watch I had engraved with **the day my heart beat only for you** followed by the day he and I started dating in high school. Under that it read **the day we created life** followed by the date he and I conceived our baby.*

I'll never forget that weekend we spent making love all over Atlantic City. A spontaneous surprise getaway. He called me one Wednesday afternoon telling me I had three hours to get to the airport before my flight left without me and that there was a ticket with my name on it waiting at the counter. An hour after I told him I was packed he informed me that a car service would be at my house to take me to the airport. I expected an Uber but got a whole stretch Mercedes Limo. He flew me out to Atlantic City first class and when I landed he was at baggage claim with my favorite flowers.

That weekend was a memory I'd never forget. We basked in the pureness of bliss. We also created our first love child.

"Courtney, I'm confused." Poor thing had lines all in his forehead.

"I'm pregnant, Jimmy. We're going to have a baby." So overwhelmed with joy, tears fell from my eyes. "I really don't want to wait until I'm too far along to move so we can..."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" He yelled, making me gulp and flinch. "How could you do this to me? Are you trying to ruin my life?"

Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.

Well, that's not the reaction I expected at all. I don't know how long I sat there stunned and him staring at the watch like the meaning behind it was going to change. "First of all, you need to calm down."

"I don't have to do shit!" He barked, throwing the watch across the room. "Why would you do this? What were you thinking?"

I had to get up and walk around. Sitting there, seeing the anguish in his eyes and feeling each one of the verbal bullets enter my chest as he aimed them at me, I had to take the deepest breath before continuing.

"Last time I checked it took two people to make a baby. Second, what the fuck do you mean trap you like I don't have my own life to live?" The way my neck rolled, and hands kept clapping, I wanted a drink so damn bad. I needed something to calm down the thoughts of knocking his dumb ass out over this bogus reaction.

Rushing from his seat, he marched his tall ass right in my face. "Yes, trap me. Have you forgotten that I'm married, Courtney? Huh? What the hell do I look like having a baby with someone that isn't my wife? I hope you don't think that you're keeping it."

Thank God the couch was behind me. My legs gave out with him saying that he wouldn't have a child with someone outside of his wife. His wife. The same wife he told me he was getting a divorce from, and they were now legally separated.

When did my worth diminish from being in a relationship to being just someone?

And to trap him?

Did he really think so low of me?

“I-I...I thought you were getting a divorce?” I mumbled trying hard not to cry in front of this man.

His face scrunched up like I smelt foul. “I’m not leaving my family, Courtney. I’d never leave my wife for you.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Noelani

WHAT TYPE of survival of the fittest challenge was this? What type of game was Amell playing? I confided in him, told him my deepest and darkest secrets. Expressed how I've been loyal to him even when that meant having to silently suffer. And he rewarded me by having my niece and husband listen to our private conversation behind a wooden wall?

Wow.

I expected this type of childish behavior from Cassian but never Amell.

This went against everything he stood for.

“If you're wondering if they've been privy to our conversation then the answer is yes.” Amell stepped out onto the deck and motioned to the two large TVs flanking the side of the walls with platform speakers attached.

“Regardless of how you feel your husband has taken his leadership role, he's my brother and my loyalty will always stand with him. Sometimes we need more than hearing the betrayal of the one we love from other people's lips.

Sometimes we need more than the pictures laid out in front of us. So, since it's been my ministry to help him see what he hadn't, I gave him and everyone else a front row seat to your conniving ways. We're all here to see you perform. Welcome to your show."

My mouth kept opening and closing. Heart beating so fast that I'm surprised it hadn't burst through my chest. My knees were knocking, thighs clenched together, praying that the sensation to pee wouldn't pass my efforts not to do so. I was scared but it wasn't because of Cassian and Kassidy standing there, it was because I deliberately put myself within Amell's merciless grasp and no one would save me.

I was alone and there was no one I could call on to help me.

It took a minute to shake it off. Shake off the fear and channel back that same confidence I had moments ago. If they were going to kill me or whatever, then I damn sure wasn't going out begging and pleading for my life like they expected me to. Who knows, maybe this was a part of Amell's test, and he wanted to see just how strong I'd be when faced with the toughest decision of choosing me and him over my family.

"Why is Kassidy here and naked? Do none of you have any shame for how you're treating her?" Now that pissed me off.

She was a young girl shivering and crying, though we were standing out in the blazing heat of summer. Naked, trying to use her hands and arms to cover as much of herself as she could.

"Oh, her." Cassian chuckled looking over at Kassidy who silently cried. "Trust me, this ain't nothing new for her. She

loves being put on display. It's part of her role as a Pearl. Don't you, Kehlani Raye?"

Who in the hell was Kehlani Raye and what the hell was a Pearl?

"Leave me alone," Kassidy screamed crying. "Noelani, please help me. They're both sick in the head." Hearing her fear and seeing her tears devastated me.

"Please, whatever this is, whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. Just keep her out of it." My voice cracked under the heavy sensations piling up in my chest from watching her suffer. They didn't have to use her to get to me. They didn't have to use her to get me to fall in line. She's been through so much and bothered no one.

"Trust me, you have no authority out here to ask any of us to do anything." Cassian sneered. "Did you really think you could have me killed, Noe? Then to send Lionel to my warehouse like I wouldn't know what y'all been planning all this time?" The way he looked at me. His tone and stance, that savage Cassian I've been wanting to see for some time now had finally made his appearance.

"Aye," Amell called out to him. "You gave her more than enough time to come and talk to you. You had more than enough time to talk to her. We're done with the chit-chat." Amell scowled, turning to walk out towards the large field behind the wooden deck. "Come on. Our guests are waiting." A guard came out of nowhere and rolled the cage into the field.

"And one of them is hungry. That big bitch just gave birth and hasn't eaten in days." Cassian made this smacking sound while sizing me up. "Shouldn't have worn white. It's going to be hard to get the stains out of your clothes." He shrugged,

grabbing Kassidy by the forearm and dragging her out in the manicured field.

“Walk,” Amell ordered making me jump. Swallowing down the rapidly growing levels of fear, I cursed under my breath the minute my heel sunk in the dirt. Somebody was going to owe me a nice shopping spree once this was all done.

We walked and walked. I’m sure I’m heavily exaggerating but we had to have walked two to three miles. I was sweating and getting sticky. Feeling disgusted the more we walked. At least a mile from the wooden deck we approached high grass and a stench that made me gag.

“Oh my God, what is that smell?” It smelled of dead bodies or decaying animals.

Cassian and Amell kept walking like everything were normal. Kassidy and I were seconds away from puking. The deeper we walked into the high grass, the more the pungent smell became, and flies were everywhere.

“What was that?” I stopped walking hearing the hissing sounds. Whatever it came from sounded big as hell.

“Oh, that’s just Keisha. She doesn’t like when we’re late.” Cassian tossed over his shoulder.

Who in the hell was this Keisha bitch and why did she sound like a damn wildebeest who couldn’t breathe?

“What the fuck?” I squeaked, halting in my steps, but Amell’s broad chest pushed me forward. When Cassian parted the high grass I never expected to come up on a damn mammoth sized alligator inside of a large plexiglass circle.

“Sorry we’re late, Keish. My wife likes to be fashionably late for no reason at all.” Cassian kicked the glass making her snap her snout.

“Anthony,” I whispered feeling a cold breeze of fear blow across the back of my neck. On the opposite side of the circle, the guard rolled Lionel’s cage next to the one housing Anthony.

Last I knew Lionel was on his way to ambush the warehouse. They must’ve intercepted him because I don’t see how they could’ve gotten ahold of him. He moved too quickly and kept hidden as far as I knew. Then for them to have Anthony and from how badly beaten both looked, I knew they’d likely ran their mouths.

“I got a little surprise for you, Noe.” Cassian nodded to one of the guards who lifted a large black duffle bag with the help of another guard. Placing a ladder on the side of the cage, they climbed and started walking on the top surface. As creepy and scary it was to see this gigantic alligator, it was cool to see that there was a walking platform on top that wasn’t noticeable until someone walked on it.

Dropping the bag in the center of the platform, they unzipped it and I gasped watching Glen’s dead body roll out. His eyes were opened looking dead at me with two gun shoot wounds in his forehead. Guess it’s safe to say he wasn’t missing at all. He did what I asked, failed at it, and lost his life in the process.

“You know who this is don’t you, Noe?” Cassian waved his gun towards Glen. I stood there paralyzed unable to move, blink, or breathe. “Oh, I have one more guest.” The guards brought up another bag but this one was squirming. I covering my mouth seeing Marlin fall out.

Anthony started beating on his cage and all I could do was stand there in shock. All this time we thought Marlin was either dead or ran away but Cassian had him. Had him and

probably tortured the hell out of him to get him to talk. I couldn't even look at my husband for fear of him confirming everything I knew.

Wobbling on his legs, sliding a little here and there, he stood holding his bleeding head looking around. *Don't look down. Don't look down*, I kept repeating to myself. The minute he did I closed my eyes and braced for what was coming next.

"What the..." he screamed, and Keisha's hissing got louder and louder. She even started hitting the glass with her snout and tail. Marlin tried to move but kept sliding and falling. He managed to stand good to run but stopped when all the guards, about twelve in all, positioned themselves around the circle with their guns drawn.

"Come on now, Marlin. You've been *my* guest long enough to know that I don't like running of any kind." Cassian smiled at him. "Noe, I thought you were smarter than this, baby. Sent rookies to try and kill Krishna but they ended up hitting Coco instead. Sent another rookie to try and kill me. Tsk. I know I taught you better than this."

"You didn't teach me a damn thing." I hissed.

"You right." He nodded walking over to me. "Press the button." He handed me a small remote control. I didn't want to do it. Didn't want to be a part of whatever sick game he was playing but this wasn't a time for me to bitch up and back down.

Snatching it out of his hand, I stepped close to him until our chests touched. Leaning up in my heels, I ran my tongue over his bottom lip pressing the button. "Are you happy now?"

"Ahhh, what the fuck?" Marlin yelled.

Moving quickly, Cassian snatched the remote out of my hand as I watched in horror as Glen's body fell through the opening and Marlin trying not to fall. The button he had me push was to open the plexiglass top that parted down the middle. Glen's body barely hit the ground before that animal started chomping. Marlin tried to jump off the glass, but the guards forced him to stay with their guns. I don't know what he was thinking but I'd rather be killed by a bullet than chomped on.

"Aye, push his ass in. I ain't got all day." Cassian yelled out.

"This is so cruel." Kassidy cried.

One of the guards picked up this long stick and kept poking and pushing Marlin until he eventually fell in the cage. Thankfully Keisha was still focused on Glen to see him, but it didn't matter. Cassian closed back up the top so he couldn't get out.

"How are you liking your show so far, Noe? Is it everything you thought it would be?" Cassian had literally lost his damn mind and Amell stood off to the side unbothered by it all. Almost watching with a father's pride gleaming in his eyes. Sick bastards. "Let's go say hi to your lover Lionel." He nudged me with his gun.

"Don't touch me." I gritted pushing his gun away from me.

"You might wanna save that feistiness for later, baby." He winked walking past me. Tapping on Lionel's cage, he waited until his eyes fluttered open. "Aye, perverted motherfucker, wake your ass up. This ain't the Taj Mahal."

Sitting at the bottom of the cage, Lionel's eyes started to flutter open. "Noe-Noelani?"

“Yeah, your whore is here.” Cassian grinned at me. I kept quiet and let him have his moment. He was obviously in his feelings about what he overheard and wanted to use his words to lash out. “Grab the bucket, Noe.” He pointed to a white bucket that had a million and one flies swarming around it.

“I’m not touching it. You grab it or have one of your errand boys do it.” Now, he could call me every name but a child of God, but I wasn’t about to be his do girl. “How about...” The gun cocking and the heavy frustrated sigh behind me shut my mouth.

This was another one of those moments when it was made clear who was the alpha and who was the pup. Cassian forever ran his mouth and expected me to jump. All Amell did was cock his gun and breathe and I was lifting the heavy bucket that smelled worse than death.

I knew how he worked and moved. He never took the safety off or cocked his gun unless he was about to use it and I didn’t feel like testing his limits.

“Here.” I stood in front of my sorry ass husband and held the bucket out for him to grab. The stench was so damn unbearable that I had to hold my breath or keep turning to the side to breathe. My hands were covered in a disgusting red and brown guck.

“Climb up that ladder and pour the contents in the cage. We’re going to give your lover some fresh coffee to wake his ass up.” Cocky and arrogant, he stood there smiling watching me debate if my obedience was worth it.

One of the guards held the ladder in place while I climbed it carrying the heavy ass bucket, trying not to get my heels caught in the holes of the steps on the ladder. Good thing those

cages were made from thick plexiglass. I almost tumbled on it several times, but it never swayed or actually fell.

“That hole at the top that you see, pour the contents in it. Pop the lid and get to work.”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I mumbled to myself wanting to cry when my hands touched the gross lid. The red substance got under my nails and everything. “Ewww.” I shrieked when I finally got the lid off and liquid popped everywhere.

“Stop acting so prissy and pour the shit.” He yelled making me want to pour it all on him.

“Shut up before I pour this foul shit on you.”

“I double dog dare you to do it, Noe. Please do it.” He taunted in a voice that sounded too close to his brother’s when he tipped to that dark side.

“Whatever.” Holding my breath, I made sure to line the bucket up close to the hole and poured with my eyes closed and head turned. Feeling the liquid splatter on my lips, eyes, cheeks, and clothes. I threw up in my mouth.

“Good girl. Now come on back down to daddy.”

I dropped the bucket, not caring where it landed, and climbed down fast as hell. “Listen, I’m tired of these sick games you’re playing. Either you...why-why is she up there, Cassian? Get her down now!” I screamed, moving around him to get to where Cassidy was. My eyes instantly dropped to Keisha. I welcomed the quick moment of relief seeing her focused on eating Marlin and not Cassidy.

“Please...” Sitting on her knees holding herself, Cassidy cried sitting on the opposite end of the top covering the alligator cage.

“One scene at a time, Noe. Stop trying to rush me. Now, back to your lover here.” By now Lionel was hysterical. Banging on the cage, kicking it, coughing, and even puked. I had splotches of disgusting stuff on my clothes, hands, and face. Couldn’t imagine what he smelt being bathed in it.

“First you sent that weak ass power ranger after me and then you send Lionel to ambush my warehouse. Come on, Noe. Did you really think I wouldn’t find out? Find out how you’ve been playing me and my kids? Using me?” His head dropped before he looked up with eyes that made my spine tremble. “Using me to get to my brother.”

Think.

Think.

Think.

The longer I stood here, the more I saw my life flash before my eyes, and it wasn’t a pretty picture. An empty flash of me not living. I knew Cassian had finally cracked and if I didn’t play it safe or play him at his own game, getting inside of his head, I’d be on that plexiglass platform with Kassidy too.

“How did I use you, Cassian, when I gave you everything that you wanted?” This would normally be the time when I’d use my skills of seduction and step into his space, but we’d passed that point.

This was survival.

“What exactly did you give me, Noe?” His eyes narrowed, head tilted. “Huh? You brought our enemy to our doorstep, got me out here at odds with my brothers over your bullshit.” Ahh, there it was. His emotion finally made its appearance.

You wanna make Cassian emotional or a tad bit vulnerable hit him where it hurts the most – his kids or his relationship with his brothers especially Amell.

That was his Achilles heel and I knowingly played on it for my benefit.

“Oh, stop with the whining.” I stomped my feet. I smelt like death, sticky, and had a million and one mosquito bites on me. He needed to get to the point, so I was going to help push him there.

“I had those kids to keep your overly emotional ass in line. You love those kids more than you ever loved me. They’re my insurance to make sure you never got out of hand or focused too much on what I had going on, fool. You should thank me for giving you something that you loved more than power.”

Eyes of death stared back at me, with a soulless intensity. If this was Amell testing to see if I could physically handle the gritty parts of being in their world, he had nothing to worry about. Mentally my mind was screaming for me to shut up before we die. But that physical part of me along with that other part of my mental that got turned on by the darkness of a man, I’d give Cassian another baby if he wanted me to right now. Seeing murder brewing in his eyes turned me on.

The more his persona and aura became more and more diabolical, the wetter I became. My damn outfit was going to have the stains of blood, guts, and death, along with my gooey wetness.

“Don’t...Don’t.” Lionel coughed every time he tried to talk. “Don’t forget to tell him how you love kids so much that you swallowed mine too. Or how...” He never got to finish spilling my business. Cassian stuck the nozzle of his gun

through the side hole and blew his brains out...literally. He walked over to Anthony's cage and delivered the same fate.

"Get up there and stand on the other side of the platform." His voice dropped to a depth unknown.

This time I moved because I was afraid. Cassian had always been unpredictable and never doing the obvious or expected. Walking along the top portion of the cage was nerve-wrecking. Sweat coated my top lip, body trembling. Heels keeping me upright but my ankles, like the rest of my body, were seconds from giving out. Cassian walked up on the platform behind Cassidy and Amell walked up behind me.

Yeah, I was about to die.

"Stand up." Showing off his gentleman skills, Cassian leaned down and helped her stand. The girl was losing her shit and I didn't blame her. She's never been in this situation before. Probably the most traumatizing thing she ever endured outside of losing her parents. "Chill, Kass. I'm not going to kill you."

Hiccupping, she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "What? You're not?"

Don't fall for it, Cassidy.

She was so young and green to see through his words. Him saying that he wasn't going to kill her equaled to someone else pulling the trigger. I should've taught her the rules and the game. There was so much she needed to know but I failed the poor girl.

"No, I'm not." He ran his knuckle down her cheek, mind fucking the hell out of her. If Amell wasn't behind me I'd scream for her to wake up and not let him finesse her to her

death. “All I want you to do is tell Noelani why you sent Lionel to kill her.”

Whoa...what?

“That’s it?” She sucked up her tears quick.

He nodded, placing his gun behind his back, showing that his hands were empty. “That’s it. You know me, Kass. Who’s been rocking with you from the beginning? Me. I always have your back. I’m not switching up now.”

Wow. Wow. Wow.

His ass was good. Really damn good.

Turning to me with this newfound strength, she dropped her arms and squared her shoulders. I guess Cassian’s speech and having his presence there, she felt confident.

Silly ass girl.

“I don’t know nothing about Lionel ambushing a warehouse, but I do know he was headed to you because I asked him to bring me your head for my birthday.”

I. Was. Speechless. Wow. She said all of that without blinking, smirking, or anything. She looked me dead in the eye and told me how she ordered a hit on me.

Hearing that, seeing how unemotional she was, now that made me cry. What had I ever done to her to make her want to kill me?

“Those same tears you’re crying are the tears I’ve been crying since I was seven years old.” Her voice had so much strength in it. So much confidence and poise. Though naked, her image matched the elegance and class of those crowns and pearls I saw on her dresser.

“My mother and brother were burned alive because of you. I don’t care if you weren’t the one who killed them, you married Dominique and that makes you just as guilty. I still don’t understand how you never knew, but I think you did, and the guilt forces you to lie.” She shrugged her shoulder in a movement that made it seem like she was doing the presidential wave. “My father was also murdered because of you. He reacted as anyone would after finding out their only sister had married the man who ruined his family. Did you really think I’d believe that he committed suicide?” She tilted her head.

“Then you try to buy me off with expensive gifts, paying for my tuition, and putting me up in a condo on the other side of town away from your precious family. Tsk.” She shook her head starting to pace back and forth. Her perfect breast jiggled when she moved, hips swayed. My niece was a deadly vixen and I didn’t even know it. If she could stand in front of all these men, in front of all this death naked with confidence, she could rule the world.

“Eventually I got tired of crying for you to pay attention to me. Tired of begging you to see me. Tired of you ignoring me. One of my teachers, whom I’ll forever be indebted to, changed my life when she introduced me to Veronica Louis. Now that’s a woman who you could’ve learned a thing or two from. She helped me turn my mourning, anger, and grief into power. I became a Pearl and my life changed. Men started to fall at my feet, women wanted to be me, and I have more riches than you could imagine, but my heart was hurting and luckily Lionel asked to make me feel better by giving me the one thing I’ve always wanted and that’s you dead.”

Who said that blood was thicker than water?

My own blood has been plotting to kill me all because I didn't hug her enough while she grieved the deaths of her parents. I had no words. Nothing to say. My heart had broken but pieced itself back together. Tears dried up and my attitude came back with a vengeance.

I get it, I understand her pain, but she played herself thinking that Lionel was going to kill me, or maybe he was and that's why he kept telling me to be at the warehouse. He planned on ambushing it and killing me in the same breath.

Guess we'd never find out.

Chuckling with fists full of anger, I finally found the words I wanted to say. "Girl, you're dumb. Beautiful as hell but dumb as shit. It must come for your sorry ass mama's side."

It felt good to knock her back to reality and wipe that confidence off her face. "Bitch..." She was about to charge my way, but Cassian grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back.

"Don't let her get under your skin." He spoke too close to her ear for my comfort. Had her naked body pressed to his front, his hand resting comfortably on her stomach.

"Fuck you, Cassian," I screamed irately. I was so fucking tired of him playing with me.

He chuckled reaching behind his back for his gun. "Nah, fuck you, Noe." Turning Kassidy to face him, he cupped her face in his hands. This nigga was set on making me lose my shit. "You want your revenge, right?" She nodded her head making his smile grow. "You trust me, right?" She nodded again licking her lips.

If she or he kissed the other I was going to push them both down to Keisha. "You want to make me feel better for what

you did to Massey, get your revenge, baby girl.” He kissed her forehead before placing his gun in her hands.

My jaw dropped and my heart stopped.

Was he fucking serious right now?

“Listen to him if you want to,” I said that with so much energy but was truly shaking inside.

What stopped her from really killing me?

Nothing.

“Should I have shown you more attention and affection? Girl, please. I have three kids and I barely show them attention so what makes you think I’d go above and beyond for you? Life happens. Death happens. Grow the fuck up and use whatever pain to fuel whatever hustle you were into like I thought you were. Not out here slanging your pussy to Lionel thinking he was going to kill me for you.” I had to laugh. All of this was some weird movie shit.

“Cassian, I’m ready to go.” Amell’s deep voice thundered behind me.

Turning to Kassidy, he continued hyping her up. “I’ve always had your best interest at heart. She hasn’t. She doesn’t care if you live or die. You want to stop hurting, end it. Remember, I taught you how to aim and shoot.” He stepped back and his eyes were just as deadly as they were earlier.

“Here.” Amell tapped my hand with his gun.

“Each of the guns you’re holding has one bullet in the chamber. Kass, you want revenge, get it. Noe, you wanna save your life to live another day, get it.” Cassian pointed to the guards who had guns drawn on us. “If you try to shoot me or

Amell, you'll be dead before you can blink. Don't get too tough for your thongs, ladies."

Now they were forcing us to play Russian Roulette.

"If you live, I promise it won't be for long." Amell's voice choked me by the neck as if he gripped me himself. "You dug your own grave plotting on my wife." Shuddering, I silently whimpered.

I became a whole emotional cry baby as he signed his name at the bottom of my death certificate. My eyes locked with Cassian's and it's as if I stared in the eyes of the bringer of my death while listening to him as well.

"This right here is how Cassian handles his enemies. I don't need all the theatrics. You better hope she kills you, Noelani, because once I get ahold of you, I swear on all my children, born and soon to come, you will suffer greatly. Just how we don't know the hour or minute when God is to return, you will live each second of your life looking over your shoulder, sleeping with both eyes open, wondering if that bump in the night is me." He stepped back taking my soul, spirit, and life with him.

Dear God, what have I done?

"I hope y'all got good aim. Come on now, let's get this show on the road." Cassian and his damn mouth weren't making my nerves any calmer.

Kassidy stood there looking like she was a queen ready to defend her honor. I stood here shaking, crying, and wishing I never said yes to taking a ride with Amell. If she didn't kill me, he would, and his way would be more sinister than an alligator inside of a plexiglass cage. Either way, I was dead.

I followed Cassidy's movements. She raised her hand and I raised mine. Both of our chests were rising and falling. Both of us ready to end it but hoping for different outcomes. Her finger squeezed around the trigger and so did mine. At the same time, we fired our guns. Right under my rib cage, my skin was torn open, hot metal piercing my flesh and hitting my organs. My ears rang hearing the piercing echoes of the gun shots. She and I shot at the same time and hit the glass at the same time.

"Aagh," I cried out. It burned so bad.

I don't know if she was dead, at this point I didn't care. It felt like hot lava was coursing through my body and the pain kept getting worse. My vision became blurry, I started coughing up blood and felt the dark shadow over me without needing to see clearly.

"Guess you weren't so lucky," Amell spoke over me right as everything became numb and my eyes closed for good.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Massey

SITTING ACROSS FROM JIMMY HAWTHORNE, the man who went half on a baby with my mom, I felt like a complete fool for feeling how I felt over the years. Feeling like an outsider when around my Papa's family. Feeling like everyone's love was conditional because of him. Those abandonment issues rooted from me always questioning why I wasn't good enough for my real dad to stay and want me. Not caring that he didn't love my mom but more focused on why he couldn't love *me*.

Ha, a fool I was.

Most would tell me that I'm within my rights as a sixteen-year-old to have those feelings. To have those thoughts. To be sad and angry. Then for me to blame my mom like she did something wrong. Like she was the one responsible for what I deemed as incompetent for being unlovable.

I had some nerve.

Gosh, I wish I wasn't so stupid.

I wish I'd taken a trip to New York long ago to sit face to face with him so all these feelings I'd been harboring all these years wouldn't have taken root in my heart especially when it came to the way I viewed my mom for so long.

"I've tried to get in contact with you, Massey. Trust me, I really tried but..."

"But what?" The coldness of my tone matched my cold demeanor. After I snapped out of whatever haze his sudden appearance in my life put me in, I remembered that I haven't seen this man since I was five years old.

Eleven years and suddenly he decides that now is a good time to pop up since he heard about my mom's accident from some old friends of his. It was okay for him to leave his wife and children and come to Florida to check on his ex-fiancé because she was one stroke away from dying. Glad to know where I fell on his compassionless chart.

Meeting him at the hospital seemed like the safest thing to do. I didn't want any smoke with Papa or any of my uncles. Although now I wish I did. Maybe they could beat some sense into him.

Jaw clenched and fingers pinching the bridge of his nose, he wasn't too fond of my rebuttals like I wasn't too fond of his excuses. "Dammit, Massey, will you just listen. I tried to see you. I've always wanted to see you, but he threatened the life of my family if I didn't stay away."

He?

"Who threatened you?" I was curious to know because there is only one or two people who would threaten him, and the main one out of the two people wouldn't leave him alive to tell what he did.

Scratching his head, his fingers drummed on the table. “He never said his name just that he was your Papa now.” His fingers rubbed over a scar that ran from his left temple down to the tip of his ear.

Cassian Kalmin.

Oh, so that explained his lazy eye.

Without my doing, my lips curved into a knowing smile. That man is crazy, but I love his crazy self. “So his threats kept you from having a relationship with me? Your own child? Wow.” Who was I fooling? I know Papa probably whooped Jimmy’s behind and laughed while doing so.

Embarrassment flashed in his nutmeg eyes. Toffee complexion taking on a red hue. Papa wasn’t small at all, but neither was Jimmy who looked like he stood at six-foot-six, while Papa was six-foot-two. Shame.

“Look, at the time his threats were endangering my family. He busted my head open and forced me to sign my rights over. Then he threatened to murder my wife and kids. Said he’d even send me the eyeballs of my parents if I didn’t stay away.” His story was more than believable. “I’m sorry but that’s the truth. I told my wife about you and your mom. Told her how I got back in contact with my first love and created you.” How romantic. “She accepted the fact that I had an outside child. She might’ve hated my guts, but she wasn’t going to make me choose.

“I was selfish back then. Only wanted what I wanted, not caring who my selfishness hurt because all I cared about was that I had a chance to love on your mother again after I hurt her in the worst way possible. My love for Coco will always remain. I will never love another how I love her.” He gulped, eyes blinking back his rising levels of emotions.

My mom never told me the exact reason they broke up in high school. Only that he did the unforgivable. Then after running into him many years later, her heart spoke louder than reason and she became fixated on the ‘what if ‘portion of their story. Forgetting or rather choosing to forget he was married and had other kids. They created me out of selfishness, and he continued to string her along until she finally had enough.

“Why are you here exactly? Are you going to try and take me away knowing that my mom isn’t able to fight against you?” That hurt to say, probably hurt more to hear but I had no sympathy to give.

He stared at me with pinched brows and a pinched mouth. I had no plans on making this easy at all. “No, I’m not going to try and take you from your mom.” He’s a smart man who knew how to fight his battles. “I came to check on you and your mom. Before anything else, she and I were good friends before we ever became lovers. Hopefully, our memories are enough to push my foolish mistakes to the side, and we can all rebuild. I want to get to know you, Massey.”

I heard what he was saying, and it sounded alright, but I wasn’t sold just yet. Crossing my arms across my chest, I leaned back and twisted my mouth to the side. “Are you no longer afraid of my Papa killing you or your family?”

Looking off out the window inside the cafeteria, he blew out a surprised breath. “When I got the news about your mom and looked up the accident, I stopped breathing. Every news outlet only mentioned her name and all I kept thinking about was what about Massey? What happened to her?” His eyes locked with mine and for the first time since we sat down, I felt a different emotion other than anger.

I felt sadness and understanding.

“It devastated me that I allowed a man to keep me away from you and if there was a chance that you were alive, I prayed that God would give me another chance with you.” Reaching across the table he turned his hands over offering his palms. “I apologize for all the hurt I’ve caused you. I apologize for not being there for you. I apologize for everything. All I’m asking is for another chance to earn your trust and love. I want a place in your life.”

A million and one thoughts ran through my head. Part of me wanted to cry because this was all I ever wanted from him. For him to acknowledge me and say he’s sorry. The other part of me wanted to stay mad and not get my hopes up. Would my mom be upset with me for talking to him? As much as I wanted to jump at the idea of finally having him in my life, did I really need him?

Was this temporary because he thought my mom was going to die?

Was he only trying to make up with me so he could get close to my mom again?

I don’t know. So many things popped up in my head and all the confusion was leaving me with a headache. “You have to give me time to think on it and I hope you understand that.” Hesitantly I placed my hands in his grasp earning a big smile. I waited a few seconds to see if that spark came that I got whenever my mom and Papa hugged me. I never got the spark, but my heart fluttered so I guess that was close enough for a start.

Kissing my knuckles, he sighed. “I understand and I’m thankful for whatever space of yours you give me.”

“Good cause if you thought my Papa was crazy, I have two other uncles behind him. One that makes the grim reaper look

like an angel and will leave you with more than a scar and lazy eye if you hurt me.” I cracked not one smile. Nothing I said was funny but true.

Swallowing his nervousness with a laugh, he nodded. “Understood. So, now that we got that out the way, tell me about school and volleyball? Do you know what college you want to go to?”

Jimmy and I spent another hour or so talking and getting to know each other. He showed me pictures of his wife and my older siblings. Said that they were all excited to meet me. I wasn’t the least bit excited. They were older than me and had quite a number of years to forgive their father for what he did to their mother, but my scars were still fresh.

We talked about him being a basketball coach at Syracuse and me wanting to go to the University of Florida to play volleyball. He even became excited at the thought of seeing me play during my upcoming tournament. Now that got me excited – him watching me play.

We talked some more until nurse Natasha texted to remind me that visiting hours were almost over. I walked him out and headed up to see my mom, texting PJ to see if he was coming to pick me up. Putting my phone back in my purse, I shook my shoulders ready to share with my mom all that had happened. One step in her room and my feet froze.

This had to be a dream. Had to be. Closing my eyes, I squeezed my hands together praying. *God, please let this be real.* When I opened them and the vision before me was the same, I ran to her bed and jumped in her awaiting arms.

“Hey, my sweet girl.”

She was awake.

My mom was finally awake.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Veronica

PRIOR TO BEING MANIPULATED, drugged, and captured, I wasn't a praying woman. Didn't believe there was a higher power than me. Since I was in my early twenties I helped women find their voice, their power. Helped them find that inner lioness that lived deep down in their gut. Once I entered my early thirties I mastered the task so well that elite women of the highest social classes and nearly all nationalities wanted me to share my secrets with them.

The secret was simple – seduction.

Trust, it's not as easy as one would think. It takes a special woman to seduce her way up to a promotion. To seduce her way into boardrooms that weren't made for women, let alone women of color. Seduce her fashion brand on the racks of high-end shopping plazas. Seduce the right producer to provide an endless budget for her music career. The sky is the limit for a woman of mass seduction, and I was the creator of such divine faultless art.

These women that I taught over the years have all become exquisite and priceless art hung over my mantle.

Now, everything that I had worked hard for had been reduced to false accusations based on the jealousy of peasants wanting to be a Pearl but never had the gall to approach me for the opportunity.

“It’s been brought to my attention that all of the Black Pearls have succumbed to a horrible death. A few were hung, some were tied to the rear of a pickup truck and dragged through the woods. Others, like your daughter Stacey, were sent off to Russia. Human trafficking of any kind has never and will never be my ministry but since I have business dealings with a few men over there, it wasn’t hard to make the proper accommodations suitable for the Black Pearls that were still alive. Since you all like the demonic world of sex trafficking, I made sure they are living in such a world that will give them exactly what they’ve been groomed for.”

When were these days of suffering going to end? I called out to God like people did when they were in trouble and every day I laid on this thing, my prayers went unanswered. What day it was, I’m not sure. What time it is, I can’t see anything outside of the darkness. All I know is that multiple times a day that steely, ghost in the darkness voice came out of nowhere along with the rats. One day my entire body was covered with them. The voice said each rat represented the number of Pearls that were living in my house and the number of years I abused Courtney.

Abuse her?

How was what I was doing classified as abuse?

She willingly went on dates and vacations with men who paid for her time. Not once did she return any of the jewelry, clothes, cars, or money they generously provided her. So what

if a few men got a little rough with her. She got a big payout at the end of it for the trouble.

Everyone is so quick to point the blame at me but what about the women who continued to stay? Having leverage over them once they placed on the crown and said the vows upholding the Pearl standard was one thing, but prior to that, the choice was theirs and theirs alone.

I don't know if it was yesterday, earlier today, or what since I had no clue what dimension I was living in, but I had been given my random hosing down like a sloppy pig. I wasn't even sure if I had skin left on my back side from the harsh pressure of the hose. Between being scared out of my wits from lying in the dark, that voice taunting me, and the rats, I remained in a constant state of flux.

My bodily fluids poured out of me like a never-ending river. Almost choking on my vomit when my fluids had been so much that it had traveled up my back to my hair.

I wanted death.

At this point, I craved it.

Not because people said I deserved it but because this torment was worse than the things I've done. I don't care what people said. Call me whatever but my name will live on. I'll die an honorable death because when people ask those women about their past they'd mention me and all the things I did for them.

They'd mention how I elevated their lives. Took them from rags to riches. My legacy will live on through those women. My brand had already been emblazoned on their souls. I live in them. I'm now a part of their DNA. The generational curse didn't stop by sending my Pearls to Russia

or by tormenting me. My legacy will pass down in the form of their trauma. My spirit will live on through them.

We can go further to my children. My sons will forever remember me. Courtney and Massey, they'd never forget me. I'd always live on in some capacity.

I am she.

I am her.

I am the Pearl.

“No.” I started to squirm and scream behind the mouth guard. Those furry little bodies were back but these felt bigger, heavier.

“Our time together has come to an end, Veronica. Before I leave you, I want to share with you the events of my morning.” His deep, bone-chilling voice and the whiskers crawling all over me, when will it end? “I met your sons. Fine young men that have accomplished so much despite losing their father at a young age and knowing that their mother preferred to abuse women rather than be a mother to them. They're excited about meeting Courtney. Meeting a piece of their family that survived the sadistic form of love you gave.”

Suddenly a dozen or more red eyes were on me. These rats were small dog size. These weren't the tiny ones that had been placed on me. I screamed, withered, and jerked. My movements were tiring me out because they got me no closer to freedom.

I've never cried so much in my life.

“If you're wondering why the rats feel bigger that is because they are.” After he said that this awful liquid was poured over me. I tried to see where it came from. Tried to see what it was but I could not see anything just more darkness.

Whatever it was made the rats go crazy. I gagged and started choking. The smell was unlike anything I ever smelt before. Then, I felt it. The first bite of teeth along my body.

“My brother made this marinade for our other brother’s pet alligator. She loves it. It’s a mixture of raccoon and squirrel blood, pig guts, and a bunch of other foul-smelling stuff that he mixed. These rats love it and to them, you’re their next meal.”

The more they chewed on my flesh, the more I jerked. The more I jerked, the more I coughed, and my throat filled with more vomit making it hard for me to breathe.

“Let me help you with that.”

The mouth guard was being removed just as a bigger wave of vomit passed my lips. After I got it all out and coughed until my chest burned, I readied my lungs to release the loudest scream we could get out in hopes of someone hearing and saving me. That scream never made it further than a thought before one of those red-eye rats ran my way and lodged itself in my mouth.

“May God have mercy on your soul.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

D^{re}

MASSEY TEXTED me three hours ago letting me know that Coco had finally woken up. I received the text in the middle of Krishna introducing me to JD, her and Amell's godson that he'd raised since his parents were killed when he was a young kid. Since most of the dire threats were eliminated, Amell finally told him it was safe to come home.

One minute I'm being asked about what inspired me to create comics and the next I'm crouched down in the back of Amell's backyard having a hard time catching my breath. I wasn't sure if what I was experiencing was a panic attack, anxiety attack, or fear.

"Remember when I asked you if you were committed to the journey of loving all layers to her? If you could see past her trauma and past transgressions to love her in the now. That time has come, Dre. What are you going to do?"

I pictured this moment going several different ways and hearing the echo of Amell's words replaying in my head the entire drive to the hospital didn't stop the hands squeezing my lungs making it hard to breathe. It didn't remove the elephant-

sized pressure on my chest or the adrenaline pumping my heart.

My fear resulted from the unknown of Coco's want for me.

The last time we spoke she broke off our relationship because she had personal things to work on. Would she want me in the same capacity as she used to?

I sat in my car for two hours outside of the hospital before I found the courage to push those insecurities to the back of my mind. Telling my heart and soul that if she didn't want me here or if she had somehow fallen out of love, I'd do just as I did the first time – fight for us. Fight for her. Show her that I'm who she deserved and vice versa.

“Hey, Dre. She's up and super talkative,” Natasha chuckled standing outside of Coco's door. “This moment is big. Not just for her but for you and Massey too. You never stopped covering her in prayer. You never stopped taking care of her. Cherish this moment.” Rubbing my shoulder in a comforting manner, she gave a warm smile before walking away.

I've done some wild and crazy shit since I touched down in Florida. Things that I never imagined doing. Things that sometimes haunted me at night. I hosed a man down in alcohol after he was skinned alive. I watched a massive alligator feed on an entire family. Pretended to be interested in the same woman who made Coco's life a live hell growing up so she could be drugged.

Some wild shit, yet I was scared to open the same door I've opened and closed a thousand times since she's been here.

Shaking my shoulders free of all anxiety, I blew out a breath and rotated my neck. *Come on, Dre. You got this.* That

small pep talk worked. Pushing the door open I stepped inside and froze. I felt paralyzed and frozen in place from the glow and radiance of her smile blinding me.

“Are you going to stand there and stare at me all day, Dre?”

My head dropped to the center of my chest hearing her laughter. The more I took deep breaths to regulate my breathing, the more her scent of cocoa and vanilla engulfed me. “Co...” I couldn’t even finish her name.

She was awake.

My heart had awakened.

“Come to me, Dre. Please come to me.” She didn’t need to beg, she didn’t have to.

Opening my eyes I exposed the vulnerability running down my face. I took fast-paced steps until my arms circled her waist and my face met her neck. She smelled so good. Like she always had, but in this moment, it was better. We were chest to chest but that wasn’t good enough for me. I kept pulling her tighter to me. Had her in my lap giggling in no time.

I just held on, held onto her. Afraid that if I let go I’d wake up, and she’d be back lying in the bed in a coma. I know this moment was real. I felt the spirit of God moving around her and I, wrapping His arms around us and tying the ropes of our souls together.

A soul tie.

Our souls tying.

God had joined us together, whether we were ready for it to be or not. Outsiders attempted to put asunder what had

already been declared as inevitable, but it didn't work. Whoever tried to kill her tried to tear our love apart from the other, but it didn't work. Dafina thought she could destroy me to the point I'd keep my own heart on lock and keep it from tying to another. Nothing anyone brought our way unraveled the cord of our union because you can't destroy what is destined.

I went from feeling the sharp edges of knives stabbing my heart, making it bleed over my entire soul, thinking I'd never again get to see her brown eyes sparkle for me. Thought I'd have nothing but the memory of feeling the plumpness of her lips against mine.

But God...

"Dre, I..."

Whatever she had to say could wait. Months, weeks, days have passed since I last kissed her, and I was going to get back those kisses I missed out on. Though she'd tasted like spearmint and mouthwash, I'd still drink from her lips and suck her tongue into my mouth with the worst of her stale morning breaths.

It took no time at all for her to respond back to me how she used to, if not with even more passion. There was wetness on our cheeks and I'm not even sure if they were my tears or hers.

"Damn, Dre." Running her nose against mine, she grabbed a fist full of my locs reconnecting our lips.

All that time I spent sitting in my car creating my unnecessary fears and doubts, I was such a fool. A damn fool.

"Oh my goodness." I wasn't sure who had stepped in her room, but I wasn't going to address them. "Geesh, Ma, you're

going to suck the lips off his face.” Now hearing that, I quickly pulled back from Coco with wide eyes.

She thought my reaction was hilarious, but it wasn't. These weird nervous butterflies started fluttering around in my stomach and chest. Massey and I had talked on the phone plenty of times. We were text buddies and shared our favorite shows. But to come face to face with Coco's greatest treasure, now that shit scared me.

“Dre.” Coco cupped my face in her hands. “I think it's time for you to officially meet my baby girl. She told me all about you caring for me. Hell, all the nurses and doctors sing your praises, but that little girl there.” Her eyes misted. “If you can make that stubborn child of mine like you then you're a good man. Thank you for looking after me *and* her.” She pecked my lips until Massey released a loud sigh. “She wants to meet you, Dre.” It's like she read my apprehension easily.

Nodding, I turned my head to kiss the palm of her hand. “I didn't want to overstep with her. Thought texting was safe.”

“When you decided to put your life on the line for her and me, it became more than safe. I'll always be grateful for everything you did. Now, go introduce yourself to my child before she thinks you're a punk.” Hearing her giggle, watching her eyes squint when she laughed, I'd never take another moment to bring that much joy to her life for granted.

Standing, I looked down at Coco and winked. On the outside I was cool as a fan. On the inside, I was about to shit myself. I'd heard how outspoken Massey was from hearing her on the phone with Cassian. She openly spoke her mind like her mother.

“I promise I won't bite, Mr. Dre.” Her giggles even sounded like her mother's.

Turning around, I came face to face with Massey Kalmin. A true carbon copy of her mother with a head full of wild sandy brown curls. I chuckled seeing her wearing the new black and gold platform Chuck Taylors I got her to go along with the matching gold hoodie and black jeans.

From our many conversations about music, I knew she was a huge fan of Rod Wave, so I gifted her two tickets to see him tonight along with his '*Bottom Boy Survivor*' hoodie that she was wearing. She surprised PJ with the extra ticket.

Boldly, this little girl sized me up from my shoes up to my face and when she locked eyes with me, seeing her quick inhalation with this wave of fear come over her face, I didn't know what to do. "Massey, what's wrong?" Coco sat up holding her hands out to her.

Closing her eyes, she wrapped her arms around herself taking in deep breaths. "Give me a minute." Her voice trembled as she spoke almost as low as a whisper.

"Did something happen? I thought you two never met each other?" Coco rightfully so questioned.

"I-I... We never met. I don't know." I tried to think of what I'd done to make her react to me like this.

"I'm sorry." Massey cleared her throat before opening her eyes and smiling. A real smile stretched across her gorgeous face. "Sorry, Mr. Dre. It's just that I wasn't expecting you to look like that Jaali guy." I heard the comparison plenty of times but to hear her say it and for her to react the way she did, that mess hurt my damn feelings.

Would she not want to be around me because I had the features of the man who kidnapped her?

“I. Uh.” I wasn’t sure what to do or say. I stood there scratching my neck feeling so damn uncomfortable.

“I’m good now I promise. I had to shake it off and remember that you and him are not the same. Nowhere near the same. Now let’s hug this out.” She stepped up to me with wide arms and I cautiously hugged her back. “I promise I’m okay, Mr. Dre. Seriously I am.” She rested her head on my shoulder. “Thank you for everything especially the way you love my mom and wanting to be a friend to me. You’re special. Remember that.”

Well, damn.

“Aww, look at them.” I knew that voice. It was nurse Natasha. “Y’all come in here and look at Massey and Dre finally meeting. Courtney, do you see this, girl?”

“Yeah, I see it.” Coco sniffed. “My heartbeats are finally beating as one.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

C^{oco}

“MOM, ARE YOU OKAY?” My sweet girl squeezed my hand. Her baby doll eyes puddled with tears. Chin trembling. You’d think she was the one that received the medical report about her condition.

I sat with her question for a while, looking around my hospital room, taking in all the pretty flowers brought to me multiple times a day. All the cards my god-kids drew for me. Dre’s poems and affirmations. Photos of me and Massey tapped along the walls.

All of those faces and names belonging to the people who thought about me probably never thought I’d open my eyes. Never thought I’d live after having eight bullets shot in my body, one still a pinky away from my spine.

What reason did I have *not* to be okay?

Yes, I was temporarily paralyzed but my doctor just left giving me the news that they were going to operate at the end of the week to remove the bullet and I’d start rehab the following week. So what if seventy-five percent of my hair

had been shaved off? Hair grows back. I was alive and they helped the swelling go down instead of letting me internally bleed to death. So what if I was confined to a wheelchair and couldn't get around like I usually did?

Driving yourself around was overrated and gas was expensive. Walking wore me out, especially if done for a long period of time. I'd have an in-home nurse to help care for me. Last thing I wanted to do was burden my child with the responsibility of holding my boobs up while I bathed. She was a child who had a lot of things to deal with on her own.

To put it simple, I was blessed to have woken up. Blessed to be alive. Blessed that I have a circle of friends who have done more than I could ever imagined for me and my child. I know the life I lived. I know the things I've done. God didn't have to spare me. He could've taken me when my truck flipped the first time way before the bullets. God's grace and mercy spared me plenty of days when it shouldn't have.

To know that I opened my eyes, hugged my child, kissed all over her face. Hugged the man that snatched my heart with no plans on ever giving it back. Kissed the same man until my heart became content. Rubbed my best friend's belly after being asked to be the godmother to her fourth child. Released rivers and rivers of tears after the doctors told me that after all the injuries I sustained when I first arrived, I was healed minus being unable to move my legs.

What did have to be upset about?

I was able to love on the same people I loved prior just from the confinements of a bed and soon-to-be wheelchair.

"I'm more than okay, baby girl. Come and sit. Wipe those tears and tell me how you're feeling?" Patting the space next to me, I waited for her to kick off her crocs and sit with me.

Now that I was awake, Dre made it his business to have my bed changed to one that could fit him and me comfortably. He refused to sleep in a chair, the pull-out couch, or anything else that would mean not lying next to me. I loved it. Loved his love for me. If there was a reaction I dreaded the most to witness after the doctors told me what my condition was, it was Dre's. Before I could form my lips to ask if he was sure about us, that man kindly pushed the doctors aside and kissed me until I melted into my bed.

Nurses cooed. Massey giggled and cheered him on. Keatyn swore I'd be in her footsteps soon enough since all my other organs worked just fine and Dre could rest my legs on his shoulders, her words not mine. Then, he paused our kiss and told me that he was going to step out and prepare my home to be adjusted to my needs. Yeah, now that made me cry. Keatyn tagged along with him, leaving me alone with my child who looked like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders.

"My heart is so sad, Ma." Resting her head on my shoulder, she wrapped the rest of her body around my waist as best as she could.

God, thank you for allowing me to continue to have moments like these. Thank you for giving me the grace to be here for my baby.

"How's counseling going?"

Twice a week Massey drove to Naples to spend a few hours with Andrea. I thought I'd need grief counseling after being told what happened to my freckle friend Daisey Jean so I couldn't imagine how Massey felt. She blamed herself, and while I could understand, I tried my hardest to get her to see that regardless of if she invited Daisey Jean or not, her trips around the sun had come to an end. While PJ was beating the

crap out of Hayden, he confessed that his cousin planned on killing DJ because he didn't want her or the child.

Poor Daisey Jean never had a fair chance.

"It's going good. Andrea is so sweet and she's so understanding. But out of all the people I've talked to, I like talking to London the most." She sat up wiping her face. Now that surprised me. I never met London but since I've woken up I feel like I did since Keatyn, Dre, Massey, and the kids gloat about her. "She's young and knows her fashion, Ma. You'll love her."

"I'm sure I will. Now, tell me about you and PJ?" Lawd my child was in love. One mention of his name and her eyes had hearts dancing in them. "Last I knew he swooped you off your feet with his elaborate birthday surprise for you." Leaning over until our noses touched, I asked, "Are y'all having sex?"

Rearing her head back gasping all dramatic, hand on her chest, she shrieked, "Mom, are you serious? No. No. No. We are not having sex. Oh my goodness." She rubbed her forehead while I laughed. "This isn't funny, like at all."

It was very funny.

I wanted Massey to stay my sweet little baby all the days of my life, and she would, but she's a teenager growing into her young adult years soon. Being unrealistic is someone I've never been. As much as I wanted her to wait until marriage because matters of the heart were less complicated if you were only soul tied to one man and one man only, but neither she nor PJ knew their future.

Maybe it was high school puppy love.

Maybe they'd be high school sweethearts and date throughout college.

Maybe they'd get married and live happily ever after together.

I don't know what their future held, I just knew that when in love, you seemed to want to speak all of love's languages – physical, verbal, mental, and spiritual.

“Listen.” She grabbed my hands as if what she said would reassure me. “PJ and I aren't on that wave...yet. But if we do get to that hill, I made a promise to you that I'd come and talk to you. That time hasn't come.”

Seeing her maturity, her growth, and just overall magic of being a young black girl, my heart smiled with pride.

“There is something I want to talk to you about though.” She bit her lip, eyes bouncing all over my face.

If I could strangle Massey with those two pigtailed feed-in braids, I would. “My answer hasn't changed, little girl.” I rolled my eyes hard.

“But Maaaa.” She whined, plopping her head in my lap. “All he wants to do is talk to you.”

“No, Massey.”

Her head popped up quick with a face full of attitude. “But why not? He came all the way from New York, and you can't even say thank you?” She had the nerve to roll her neck. “I think you at least owe him that.”

Boy I tell you. It be your own kids that send you to jail.

“I'm glad your father finally got off his ass after sixteen damn years to come and speak to you, but that doesn't mean I have to, nor will I do the same.” I had to catch myself because

I felt the cussing out was about to happen and Massey wasn't my intended target. "He and I don't talk for reasons that I will never speak on again because when I confronted him about being pregnant with you, all the way up until you were five, I allowed that man to drag me through the fucking mud. Yes, I knowingly slept with a married man. Have I paid for those sins? Hell, it might be the reason I'm paralyzed now, only God knows.

"But what you won't do is try and guilt me in to talking to him. Am I happy he finally reached out to you, abso-freakin-lutely? Your relationship with your father has nothing and will never have anything to do with me unless he hurts you. I'm kinda glad he waited until you're old enough that I don't have to be the middle person. And I'm sick of looking at your face. Go down to the cafeteria and do something with yourself." I propped up my pillows and laid back.

She really tried it.

I'm thankful for every person that has checked in on me. I really am because I never would've thought others outside of my small circle cared. However, Jimmy Hawthorne, he could've stayed where he was if you ask me. Do I believe what he said about Cassian? Hell yes I do. The fool is crazy, and Cassian will do anything to protect those he loves. Regardless of his threats that shouldn't have stopped Jimmy from being in his child's life at all.

"I'm sorry, Ma. I-I...I just wanted you to get the same understanding as I'm getting." She was so young and didn't understand so much.

"Massey, I don't need any type of understanding when it pertains to Jimmy. Both of us hurt a lot of people with our selfishness. We made the bed and now we must lay in it and

that means not speaking. Go call PJ or something.” I rolled my eyes turning on the TV.

“I can’t believe you’re acting like this.” She tried to remain upset until she started laughing. “Ma, I’m so happy that you’re awake.”

“Me too.” A deep voice spoke near the door. She and I turned to see Amell standing there with arms full of food. “I’m sure you’re tired of flowers and cards so I brought you a few things that you might actually like.” Smelling the spices of whatever was in those bags made both our bellies rumble. “Guess I’m right on time.”

“Uncle Amell, you have no idea. Mama was kicking me out to get food.” Kissing my cheek, she got off the bed to hug her uncle. “You always smell so good. I told PJ to get the same cologne you wear but he refuses to wear anything outside of that Dior Savage that makes the girls at school act stupid.” She kissed her teeth.

My child was so in love.

Bless her young heart.

“I’ll be sure to talk to him. In the meantime, he’s in the visiting room waiting for you.” He barely let go of the bag of food before she excitedly snatched it and was out the door.

“Call me when you’re done, Ma.” She yelled over her shoulder.

“Forgive my child,” I giggled. Out of all my visitors, the one I’ve been waiting to see most was the one suffocating my room with his larger-than-life aura. Dre had me moved into one of the larger rooms but when Amell stepped in, it felt like a small co-ed dorm room.

“How are you feeling?” He sat next to my bed squeezing my hand.

“I’m fantastic.” I howled watching his thick brows raise. “Hug me, Amell. It’s so good to see you.”

Can’t believe I made the big man speechless and freeze. He sat there for a few, a whole series of emotions running over his face before he stood and bent down to hug me. Not even realizing it, his embrace became tighter, lifting me out of the bed.

“Before you ask why, this is my way of thanking you. Thanking you for keeping your word and helping me.” His grip started to loosen but I held on but let my tears fall free. “Thank you for rescuing my child.” I hiccupped, not at all wanting to sob the same way I did when Massey and Dre explained her kidnapping. “Thank you for looking out for me even when I was too ashamed to ask for help.” He eventually realized I wasn’t letting go and squeezed me just as tight as I held on to him.

“I made you a promise, Courtney. Though seeing you like this makes me feel like I failed you, I promised to look after you, and that included my niece. You’re my family. I’ll always go to war behind either of you.” He had no idea how his words comforted me. I knew God had a special mansion in heaven for Amell. He had to have. Amell was the most selfless being I knew regardless of how dark and menacing he was.

“Sorry to have this whole moment of tears and such.” I finally let go, earning a kiss to my temple that felt like an older uncle giving his stamp of peace.

“I expected the tears just not your jubilant spirit. Did you let Cassian give you one of his new weed gummies he had

Atlas make him?” The way Amell tilted his head and started analyzing me, I wasn’t sure if he was joking or being serious.

“No.” I hollered. That laugh felt good too. “He hasn’t come by.”

Looking off for a second, his eyes came back to me with a smile. “Oh, he will. He’s just wrapping up some loose ends.”

Wasn’t sure what that look was about. Cassian and I had a lot to discuss. A whole damn lot. “Um, is she...is Veronica alive?” I scratched my ear nervously. When I woke up and found out about the accident I instantly swore up and down that Veronica was behind it. She was going to repeat the same tragic events that happened to my mother.

Without blinking and eyes void of emotion, he answered, “No. She’s been taken care of as well as Stacey and the rest of the older Pearls. As far as the younger Pearls, they’ve either been reunited with family or they’re staying at this recovery center in Hollywood that specializes in helping victims of sex trafficking.” He paused for a moment, looking off again.

“I dug deep into Veronica’s past and found out that she has two sons.” Did he just say that my grandmother had sons? “Trust me, I shared the same level of surprise. I’m not sure if they know about you. Don’t really see how but if you ever wanted to reach out to them I have their information. Pray about it, think on it, and if you want to meet them I can arrange it and go with you. Whatever you decide it doesn’t have to be alone, anytime soon, or at all. I wanted you to know that you have other family that doesn’t live the life Veronica lived.”

I had no words. None.

Hearing how Veronica played on Cassidy to get to my child, which did something internally to me. I physically felt pain even with Massey sitting in front of me and had survived the whole ordeal. The thought of knowing the lifestyle Massey would've been subjected to had Cassian and his brothers not acted when they did. Then to find out there was a casualty, and it was DJ. That mess rocked me to my core.

“Seriously, how are you, Courtney? The silver lining of you being paralyzed but alive is a blessing but how are you mentally?” He wanted to go deep while I was hungry.

“I know everyone expects me to be sad and depressed but truly I'm far from that.” I shrugged. “I woke up that day with so much joy in my heart and soul that I cried for hours. Smiling and crying like a weirdo.” My eyes started to water, and those cycles of laughter were on the verge of picking back up. “As crazy as it sounds, I think God placed me in a coma on purpose. No, he didn't cause me to get in the accident or get shot, that wasn't God. Those were the actions of evil spirited people.”

Keatyn gave me the rundown on what happened to Noelani, and God forgive me, but she got what she deserved. My socks almost blew off my feet and the rest of my hair almost flew off my scalp when she told me how ole girl had been lusting after Amell all this time and that the intended target of my attack was Krishna.

Now that did something to my spirit. I couldn't imagine Krishna being where I sat with two new babies. Again, weird for me to admit, but I'm glad it was me and not her because who's to say she would've survived?

“Before you question my sanity hear me out.” I gave him a reassuring smile. “While I was in the coma I kept having these

flashbacks of pivotal parts of my life. Parts that I tried to bury and never dwell on again. Remember how you told me that I had to deal with young Courtney before I could move on? Well, in the coma I had to face my past. Face those demons, confront them, and move on.”

It was me this time that looked off. Happiness danced so victoriously in my heart that I felt like I was doing it an injustice in describing how I was feeling but Amell said it best when he said that I was jubilant.

“Am I miraculously healed and can live a blissful life now? Not just yet, but the chains have been broken. I’m no longer drowning in my own condemnation. God couldn’t do work in me while chaos surrounded me. Though a hospital isn’t any less chaotic, I was separated from everyone else. My overthinking, worrying, doubting, and fears were silenced. Just as the doctors performed surgery to heal my body, God was performing a work in me to heal my heart and my soul.

I felt whole.

I felt complete.

I felt reborn.

I felt afresh.

I felt like I mattered.

“I get to pick out prom dresses with Massey. Watch her graduate high school and go off to college. Watch her step into her purpose and do what God created her to do. Watch her get married and have children.” I smiled knowing that Massey and PJ were going to be together forever. When I gave him the okay to date her, he vowed that he’d be by her side forever and I never doubted it for a second.

“What about you? What do you get to do?” Amell relaxed in his chair and took out his food, placed mine next to me.

Closing my eyes, I allowed my body to relax and gave my feelings permission to run free and be expressed however they felt like showing up. No longer was I going to stifle myself because I was afraid of glowing and growing. Evolving and stepping into my fullness. Blooming into the rose that grew from concrete.

“I get to watch God teach me what it means to evolve in my true authentic power. Watch myself step into whatever purpose is destined to me because I know I have one. He wouldn’t have saved me if I didn’t. I get to watch my relationships and friendships bloom as they are intended. But most importantly.” I looked over at him and mirrored the wide smile on his face. “I get to fall in love, not only with myself but with the man of my dreams all over again without my past interfering.”

He and I sat there smiling hard at each other before laughing. I wish I could bottle up this moment and kept it as a forever treasure. No one would believe that he and I were sharing such a lighthearted moment so freely.

“Excuse my French but, Courtney, I’m so motherfuckin proud of you.” He held up his cup of lemonade to toast to me. “Very proud and don’t let anyone dim your light because people will try, and when they try you call me, and I’ll handle them because as long as I’m breathing, I’m standing next to Dre to make sure that your flame doesn’t burn out.”

Aww, oh my gosh.

His personal Hallmark verbal cards were getting better and better.

“Thank you, Amell. I really appreciate it.”

“COCO, bruh, I swear on all the Greek gods, if you don’t... agh...shit.”

I’ve been waiting on his ass for two days. Cassian thought he was going to sneak in my room while I was sleeping like the first time he came. Nope. I made sure I was wide awake and ready for him. Like I suspected, he came tiptoeing in around three in the morning. Usually, I’d be asleep, but something told me to stay awake because he was coming to see me. Right when I heard the door creep open, I played sleep.

Played sleep when he questioned Natasha about how I was doing and who all came to visit me. Played sleep when he closed the door and brought his self over to my bed and pecked my lips. Played sleep when he whispered how much he was sorry and had handled everything. Played sleep listening to his promise to make up for what he said. Then, when he least expected it, I grabbed ahold of his shirt, pinched his nipples, kept twisting, and pinching making him holler and scream out.

My beef wasn’t with the argument he and I had that led to me driving like a bat out of hell trying to get to Massey. I woke up with a clean slate of forgiveness to give since so much grace had been given to me. However, my beef came from his behavior with Massey. What he said to her the night of my accident. Him threatening Jimmy and taking away Massey’s opportunity to have her real father in addition to him. Cassian was an extremely stingy person when it came to

allowing others to be involved in any way with those he loved, so I wasn't surprised he went through those lengths, but damn.

“Since I can't walk and beat your ass like I want to, this is your ass whooping, Cassian Kalmin.” I gritted twisting both of his nipples, trying not to laugh from his girly screams. The nurses came in when he first started cutting up but once I explained that he was okay and just getting a well-deserved talking to, they left us alone.

“Coco, please let my shit go. I can't breathe. You know I got asthma.” His hands were on top of his head squeezed into a fist. Face was beet red. Top lip and hairline coated with sweat.

“You better apologize to my child, Cassian, and you're getting my wheelchair bedazzled. Do you hear me?”

He nodded fast breathing hard. “Anything you want just let my shit go before you give me breast cancer.” Such a damn fool. I let his nipples go and popped him upside the head. “Bruh, your crippled ass ain't gone be abusing me like my name is Charles. I'll push your ass in a tub full of cold water and feed you a dry ass salad with no dressing.” Frowning, he rubbed the back of his head. “Scoot over and don't give me no lip.”

Now this was the Cassian I missed.

The one who joked around all the time and said the most bizarre things.

“Let me say my spiel and then we can go from there, okay?” I waited for him to nod. “Anything said or done prior to the accident is old news. We were not the same people then as we are now. We aren't the same hurt people who tried to hurt other people. Both of us said foul stuff. I forgive you. I

can't afford to carry the past with me into this present setting. It will become too draining and defeat the whole purpose of me letting go and letting God." I grabbed his hand and placed it in my lap.

"Cass, I heard everything you said that night. I think that's what woke me up, honestly. I remember you talking, silence, and then I opened my eyes. It's almost like hearing your truth, hearing your apology was the last thing I had to face and deal with before waking up." Turning his chin and making his eyes behold me, I kissed his cheek. "I forgive you, Cassian."

There weren't many moments that I had the privilege of seeing him switch off the jokester role and take one of a man who was comfortable being vulnerable. His eyes watered, hands squeezing mine tighter, his forehead resting against mine. This moment spoke volumes. I literally watched his shoulders relax and become lighter. Watched him release the breath he's been holding on to. I never wanted to hinder his growth to move on and get healed within himself, and I knew for him to do so, we had to close our last chapter to start a brand new one.

"You don't know how much I needed to hear that." His head dropped, voice thick with emotion. "I fucked up bad in so many areas of my life, but I was determined to do whatever it took to fix us. I'm talking about fixing us going back to how we were before it became complicated. Before we became enemies and only had mean things to say whenever we saw each other. Got me out here bonding with your new man to make sure he's deserving of you. You may not need to hear it, but I *have* to say it. I'm so damn sorry for everything, Courtney. You my homie, man."

The crackling of his deep tenor, his arms wrapping around me, and the wetness I felt against my cheek. I held onto him just as tight because I knew he was fighting some tough demons and he needed this moment to express himself more than me.

He was right. We were homies first. Damn good homies to each other. That's what made liking Cassian so easy because he didn't require much. He wanted your time when available. Wanted to always feel reassured when it came to his place in your life. Those things were easy to give because once you experienced the fullness of Cassian Kalmin, it became second nature to giving them freely.

“Have you ever thought about where we would be if we tried dating for real?” He looked straight ahead with pinched brows.

Staring at nothing but thinking about more than I expected to talk about. I knew all about the demise of his marriage, Noelani's betrayal, and all the other crap going on that explained his reasoning for the questioning and second-guessing himself and his decisions. Trust me, I had those moments too, but I never drifted too far in that realm because our story never included our hearts becoming intertwined for a lifetime.

“I used to until I met Dre.” I rubbed his knuckles, hoping to give him some comfort hearing my truth. “We mastered being friends to one another, but we could never get it right as lovers beyond the bedroom. That made me question what about Noelani made you choose her over me. What did I lack that she had? But by the same token, my heart wasn't on truly loving you but wanting a body to help take my mind off Jimmy.”

Cassian became the best distraction to get my mind off Jimmy back then. All of that stopped once I got pregnant. My focus was on making the first boy I ever loved finally choose me after all these years and Cassian's was on wanting the love he needed that he was trying to make us work while knowing our yokes were never equal.

"We weren't soulmates, but we could've made a damn good match, Coco." He might be right, and he might be wrong. All I know is how I felt and who was my focal point and that wasn't him but another man. In my mind, I already found my soulmate. I already found the one for whom my soul loved.

"Mentally I wasn't there because I was still running and hiding. Running to another while also hiding from you because you were like a mirror to my truth. You called me out on my flaws without caring if my feelings were hurt. I didn't want to hear that." We shared a laugh. "It was hard to try and be vulnerable enough to let you love me the way I needed and figure out how you needed to be loved. On the outside it looked like we were tailor-made but in all honesty, we were two lovers passing in the night. What we shared, Cassian, it was special but enough for what it was supposed to be."

And some damn good nights it was.

"You and I both know that our hearts loved each other to the capacity that they were supposed to because anything more than that would've been detrimental. We probably would've killed each other trying to be the one for the wrong person." Looking into his eyes I spoke what he probably thought but was too afraid to speak out loud.

"It was never supposed to be you and it was never supposed to be me. I wanted us to work so bad, but I couldn't

ruin you. I'm selfish but not that selfish. And if I would've allowed myself to love you outside of those parameters I kept up, loved you the way you wanted me to love you, I would've ruined your vision of love."

Our wires got crossed when we thought it was necessary to upgrade our relationship to more than homies but homies, lovers, and friends. We aced being homies and friends. We aced being phenomenal sex partners. But we failed to try to love with no blueprint.

He kissed the back of my hand and slouched down deeper in the bed. "I thank you though because you gave me the opportunity to look at and to experience true love through Massey." He said it so cool and free like he didn't just make my heart flutter.

"Cassian." My bottom lip poked out and tears rimmed my eyelids.

He looked over at me and rolled his eyes seeing me in my feelings. "Let me finish before you start crying."

"Ok. Ok."

He gave me the side-eye before continuing. "Seriously though, that little girl has done more for me than anyone and that includes Amell, which says a lot. Says a whole damn lot. Since the doctors put her chunky body in the palms of my hands she's looked at me like I am her everything. I saw that as my one opportunity to pour all the love I desperately wanted into someone who really needed it. The love that a child is supposed to have, I never experienced that with my parents.

"Amell raised us but in the beginning his love was that *I'm taking care of you* love. Then it became *I built this for you* so

flourish kind of love. I got love from Clover but not enough. By then it was already too late because I had hardened my heart. Massey allowed me to be completely vulnerable and be who I really am without judgment. You gave me all I'll ever need from you. You gave me Massey and some fire ass coochie."

Why was he like this?

The way I hollered and cried at the same time had me looking a whole snotty mess. I never knew he felt that way or thought that way. When he stepped up and asked to be Massey's father, giving her the world and loving her unconditionally, I'd owe him forever because he didn't have to. He could've stopped loving her when Noelani had his first biological child. He could've stopped so many times, but he never did and never would.

"That's why I threatened Jimmy to stay away. I was scared he'd come in and take her love from me and I couldn't handle that. Couldn't have that at all. I know it was selfish on my part but at the time it felt necessary. Plus, it just shows how much of a bitch that nigga really is. Ain't no other man, gun in hand or not, is going to force me to sign over my rights and stay away from a child that came out of my damn nuts. Fuck no." Well, he did have a point.

Point blank period, Jimmy didn't want Massey when she was born, and I stopped trying to force him to care when she turned five. Cassian was more than enough for her. She didn't need Jimmy and I was tired of being made a fool of and making my child suffer along with me.

"Massey has a lot to say, are you prepared to hear whatever comes out of her mouth? Will you be open-minded to her feelings?" I knew how bullheaded he could be, and I

knew how stubborn that child of mine was. Both of their personalities together clashed whenever they became at odds with the other. She spoke her mind and he gave it right back.

To avoid a repeat of the ass whooping he received from both of his children, Lord knows I wish I had a front-row seat to that show, I asked Massey to speak to Cassian with respect and for him to do the same. Emotions were high when they said things they didn't mean. If I had it in my heart to forgive him then I knew she could. Cassian just wanted his baby girl to forever love him with that twinkle in her eye only reserved for him.

"I've lost a lot in these few months." He looked down at our clasped hands. "I refuse to lose her too." Red tired eyes looked back at me. His burdens were so heavy that I felt the pressure of them with each exhale he took. "A lot of the shit going on with Noe and I..." He blew out a long deep breath. "It could've been avoided but I refused to see past the alternate reality I allowed her to create. The reality of seeing her true colors. Not wanting to see them bitches. Thinking that I could change her." Shaking his head, he leaned back on the bed closing his eyes. "I should've stayed a hoe. This love shit is for the fucking birds."

This time I masked the little bit of humor wanting to spread across my face and rested my head against his shoulder. "Look at the bright side, Cass. Now you know how you want to be loved and what you deserve. Not only you but your kids. As much as it hurts to walk through these shallow valleys, the footprints you're making along this path are meant to be seen. They're a part of your story. I promise things will get better."

He might've lost hope and belief that his life wasn't going to change for his good, but I didn't. There was a lesson in all

of this that he had to learn and once he figured it out, once he got on the other side of his pain and suffering, he'd see it and become a better man. A better man to help the next man going through or about to go through the same thing.

His son needed him; his girls needed him. If Cassian could survive the abuse of his father, abandonment of his mother, a wife who used him for her own selfish gain, and all the other trials and tribulations life threw at him, then dammit, he could have a little bit more faith to know that God was going to bless him more than he could ever imagine.

Sometimes we must go through things to help the next person coming along. *It cuts me before it cuts you* type of mantra. How can we help others without experiencing the pain first?

How could he help his kids weather the storm of surviving being abandoned by their mother without knowing what that type of pain tasted like? How could he open his heart again to true and unconditional love without first knowing what fake love, betrayal, and dishonesty tasted like?

Whether he wanted to see the facts for what they were, things had to play out the way they did because it was needed. His childhood trauma cut him first so he could properly help his kids. Same thing could be said for Massey and me. No, she didn't become a Pearl, but she saw a sneak peek into what it was like for me growing up, the dangers that came with it. She got a small taste of my childhood and now I must help her heal. This was the life gifted to us. Now we had to learn how to navigate through it.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Noelani

MY MANOLO BLAHNIK heels were traded in for a damn colostomy bag thanks to my dear niece. How could I have ever been so stupid? All this time she's been plotting on me. Plotting to kill me and my family, well not Cassian and the kids. She loved them but despised the ground that I walked on. Then to top it all off, Lionel had the audacity to try and play me too. It blew my mind that those two ran in the same circle. Kassidy wasn't the type of woman that caught his eye, or so I thought. Clearly, I knew nothing about my niece's life since she was a glamorous prostitute.

I still haven't figured out what the hell a damn Pearl was. As much as I wanted to blame Kassidy and Lionel for my new body accessory, I couldn't, especially not on Kassidy. To hear her speak on how all she wanted from me was an apology, for me to include her in my life, I failed the girl and sadly got what I deserved.

That's been a hard pill for me to swallow but when several doctors tell you the same thing, that you'll have to live with a poop bag attached to you for the rest of your life, you come to

a place of depression, acceptance, and humility. Not the life I imagined myself living but at least I wasn't dead...yet.

Amell was a lot of things but not one to allow someone to remain alive, especially after everything I've done. What was left of my gut told me that my remaining days on this earth were few. I may not die tomorrow or the week after, but he was going to kill me. The look he gave me before everything went black lived rent-free in my mind. Amell wasn't going to let me get away with what I had done. If it wasn't him then it was going to be Cassian.

I swear Marlin had one job to do. I even gave him pictures of Krishna, but the fool was stupid and ended up going after Coco instead. Though Coco saw me at the restaurant with Lionel that one night, I wasn't pressed at all about her running her mouth to Cassian. She could've shown him pictures and videos, he still wouldn't have believed her because one thing my husband doesn't like is to be made a fool of.

His pride worked in my favor, and I ended up having the wrong woman gunned down.

Hearing the front door open, I hissed trying to sit up in my new favorite recliner. By law, Cassian and I were still married but the day after that circus shit show, he cleared out my secret bank accounts, making sure to leave the amount it had in it before we got married. Not even the money I received from Dominique dying was in there. Literally, just the money I had before we got married.

How he knew what it was is beyond me. He was petty like that. I had to use my money to make sure the house that I was confined to had the things I needed. He made me pay for everything. Only thing he gave me once I was released was a

Walmart bag full of Cassidy's ashes sitting on my kitchen counter with a note –

Out of the kindness of her heart, Keisha wanted to give you a treat. She doesn't like bones too much and thought you'd have better use for them since bitches love chewing on them.

Fuck you, with love, Keisha and Cassian

“Mommy, where are you?” Melly screamed running through the house.

When you survive a near-death experience, you begin to have a love for the simple pleasures in life like your children, the freedom of taking bubble baths and not smelling like shit all day. My girls came by every day since I'd been released from the hospital. That jackass of a husband of mine didn't visit me a single day during my week-long stay. I had to catch a damn Uber home and damn near begged one of the guards to ride me in the golf cart to my house since the Uber couldn't drive past the gate.

“Mommy, were you sleeping?” Melly trying to whisper but speaking just as loud as her normal voice was the cutest thing.

“No, baby. I was waiting on you.” Knowing I'd regret it, I opened my arms for her to jump in. Sure enough, she catapulted into my lap hitting my sore side. “Oh my goodness, Melly.” Tears stung my eyes from the pain of her light-up shoes mistakenly hitting my side. “You have to be gentle with mommy, okay?”

My poor kid looked like she was about to cry. “I'm sorry, Mommy. I'll be gentle with your poo-poo bag. Does it stink? Let me see.”

Grabbing ahold of her wandering hands, I pulled them to my lips and kissed all over them to shift her focus. “I'll show

it to you later. Where is Tai and Cashton?” Since I’ve been home my kids spend all day with me. The day before yesterday all three slept over which I’m surprised Cassian allowed. Maybe he felt bad for me...I doubt it.

A lot of wishful thinking on my part.

“They’re in the kitchen washing their hands.” She hopped off my lap. “Stay here, Mommy. We’re going to make you cupcakes so you can feel better and then we’re going to get in the pool, okay?” She didn’t even give me a chance to respond before she ran down the hall.

It took me a few tries, a few more moments of embracing my newly discovered humility before I could stand. Having the right side of my stomach almost blown away, my intestines and bladder blown to smithereens, this is all I was left with now. A fucking shit bag.

That damn Kassidy.

“Mommy.” Tai ran over to hug me.

My big man was being fussed at by Melly for not wearing the apron she and Tai made for him. When he saw me he gave me a simple head nod with no words. That was progress. Him being here was progress. Him in the kitchen with his sisters was progress.

“Go sit down, Mommy. We’ll bring the cupcakes to you once we’re done.” Melly was so bossy.

Wanting to laugh but settling for a smile, I sat at the dining table. I’d regret it when I had to stand but I couldn’t pass up watching this view. When my body wasn’t as sore and I had mastered how to maneuver around with my new accessory, I wanted to recreate this moment with all of us together, maybe even Cassian too.

“Mommy, what kind of cupcake do you want? You can have strawberry, chocolate, vanilla, or birthday cake. Which one?” Melly standing in front of me tapping her foot wearing her hot pink apron and chef hat, gosh how I missed their spunky attitudes.

“Can I have strawberry, vanilla, and birthday cake? Each one of you makes one for me.”

Melly jumped up excitedly. “Oh, yes. I’ll make the birthday cake. Tai, you make the vanilla. And Cashy, you make the strawberry cake. Yayy. This is going to be so much fun.”

Like a punk, I started crying while smiling. They were so caught up in listening to Cashton read the ingredients to pay me any attention. They even brought all the needed groceries. Crazy how I used to feel like I needed better than this. Yes, my heart irrevocably loved Amell to the point that it drove me mad and lead me to do a lot of things I shouldn’t have. I’d never regret opening my heart to falling in love with him. He provided me with some of the best joy I ever experienced.

He gave me a sense of purpose when I felt lost and didn’t have a voice. He protected me, trusted me, and had a need for me. Maybe not in the same context that I had a need for him, but the want and need were still there. When it comes to him, no regret, shame, or anything lived in my heart.

However, the games of manipulation and betrayal I played with Cassian, I felt so much shame for using him the way I did. I felt ugly inside because of how far I went to remove him out of my life because my heart was greedy. If Glen had succeeded in killing him, the smiles and bright spirits of our children wouldn’t exist. They’d be grieving and mourning a

father who loved them unconditionally. I'd never take the way he loved his children from him. He earned it and then some.

Can't forget the way he loved me. Cassian's type of love wasn't what I expected or was ever prepared for. He loved me in a way that made me uncomfortable sometimes, which should've told me we weren't meant for each other or rather I wasn't meant for him. I wasn't made to fit the mold he needed in order to be loved.

Just how he dealt with pride, so did I. Dominique was supposed to leave me in charge, not scour the earth for a suitable replacement more to his liking. How much more proving my worth did I need to do?

None of that mattered now. My cards had been dealt and I had to live with them. Live with knowing that I'd never experience that type of love again. I'll never have the freedom and power I once had. I was back to being regular Noelani, the genius that everyone kept hidden.

It took the kids about forty-five minutes to make their batter. Luckily for me, I was the test dummy for all three and my sweet tooth was thankful. When the girls started pouring the batter into the cupcake pans I knew my stomach was going to fight me. Tai put gummy bears in hers and Ameliana put skittles. At least Cashton kept it simple and his tasted the best.

While the cupcakes baked, we moved outside by the pool. The girls changed and dove right in, leaving me and Cashton to sit on the side with our feet in the water. He hadn't said much but having him close was enough. More than enough actually. To be so young he carried the same protective aura as his father and uncles. Probably the reason I felt so at ease. My little man was my protector.

“How is boxing going?” I couldn’t wait to see him in action. For years I thought he’d play football or basketball. Boxing took me by surprise, but I knew he’d dominate whatever sport he played.

“Going pretty good. I like it. Helps me when I’m angry.” It was too hot out to get chills but that’s what his eyes did to me when he looked at me.

Shaking off this tiny ward of fear, I cleared my throat and done what I should’ve done with Cassidy. “I’m sorry, Cashton. Sorry for not being there for you and putting my job before you. I had a hard time balancing wanting to advance in my job and being a mom. If you ever felt like I abandoned you, please forgive me, and know that I’ll spend the rest of my life making up for it. Not just with you but your sister’s too. I love you just as much as I did when the doctor’s placed you in my arms after giving birth to you. You’ll always have a special place in my heart.” It had to be the medication that made me turn into such a crybaby.

I had the full snotty nose cry going on and he made not one move to hand me a tissue or one of the extra towels to wipe my face. The timer for the oven blared in the background. “I’ll be back.” He got up leaving me there shamefaced and all. I felt like I revealed my soul to a man, and he rejected me.

Granted my love for Cashton had always been complicated because he was a source of leverage for me, but things had changed, and I wanted to build a new relationship with all my children since God spared me and I got blessed to have another chance at life. Not sure for how long, but I wanted to live the rest of my days loving my children. Create memories that they’d hold onto, so I won’t ever become a distant memory.

“Mommy, I have to pee,” Melly whined.

Annoyed, I rolled my eyes and got my own damn towel.
“Pee in the pool, Ameliana. It won’t hurt you.”

“Ewww. That is so disgusting.” Her prissy attitude was giving me a headache. I would’ve thought that both of my girls might become tomboys since Cassian had them so much. Nope. These two were the most diva little people I ever met.

“Then go in the house.” I started coughing. Goodness, this wasn’t the time for my allergies to start acting up.

“Come on, Tai. Let’s go potty like a big girl.” She helped her sister out of the pool, and they skipped their wet behinds in my house without drying off.

“Are the cupcakes done?” I asked Cashton as he sat back down next to me.

“Yes. Here, I brought you out the strawberry one since it’s your favorite. It’s hot though.” Nicely wrapped in a double napkin, he handed me the pretty cupcake with a small drop of icing just the way I liked. Knowing that he remembered, it took all the annoyance I felt a way, and those damn tears came back.

“Aww. Thank you...Cash.” I don’t know what triggered this coughing spell, but it was getting on my last nerves. My chest started to feel tight, throat felt like it was closing. “Cas... help...” I couldn’t speak clearly from coughing and wheezing. My hands clawed at my neck trying to remove the invisible cord wrapped around it.

Something wasn’t right.

Not right at all.

I couldn’t breathe.

I didn't have asthma or bronchitis. Didn't have any breathing problems but it felt like I had them all plus each different Covid-19 variant. Feeling liquid drip from my nose I touched it as I looked on in horror. It was blood. My coughing became harder and harder. Each time I coughed out and tried to inhale it felt like my windpipes became tighter and tighter.

"Ca..." Realizing that talking wasn't helping but making it worse, I reached out to grab him. He dodged my grab making me turn and fall in the pool as he stood. My eyes were wide, and I couldn't breathe at all. I tried to swim to the edge, but my arms and legs felt weighted down suddenly. Gurgling water and trying to flap my arms.

Why wasn't he helping me?

Why wasn't he trying to save me?

I was his mother.

I watched him as he stood there on the edge of the pool with his head tilted, emotionless, vacant eyes watching me.

I couldn't scream for help.

I couldn't swim to save myself.

I couldn't breathe.

Seeing my girls skip back my way I tried to move my hands so they'd see me, but Cashton caught them before they could reach the pool. "Let's go take your cupcakes over to Uncle Atlas's house so Ari and Nova can taste them. Mommy is taking a swim and she wants to relax by herself." This little fucker was lying. My salty tears mixed with the chlorine as my body started to sink, my eyes fluttering until the water reached over my head.

The deeper I sank in the water, my eyes fluttered, limbs twitching, heart slowing, and images of my life flashed before my eyes. Smiling with my parents and brother. Graduating college and getting my first job as a psychiatrist at a maximum-security prison. Meeting Dominique and thinking I found love. Holding my brother up as he grieved his family. Meeting and falling in love with Amell. Having children. Being a part of something bigger than me.

As my good times flashed before my eyes so did my bad just as my knees hit the bottom of my pool. My jealousy and envy. Betraying the man who unconditionally loved me. Selfishly ignoring my children and niece. Plotting to kill the same man who gifted me the blessing to even become a mother. Plotting to take down the legacy the man I loved built. All my evil doing replayed over and over as I took my last and final breaths.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

M^{assey}

MOMTHEESTALLION – Remember to have an open mind, baby girl. Forgiving him will help you more than you think. Text or call me if I need to roll over there and knock him out.

“Miss Kalmin, I promise the bell is going to ring in the next five minutes and my boring lecture will be over.” Mr. Luke, my biology teacher, stood next to my desk looking down at my phone. “If you need to talk, you can speak with me or the guidance counselors. We’re all here to help you.” He squeezed my shoulder, offering a kind smile before walking off handing out the rest of our test results.

I knew what he was talking about and who he was referring to. I knew the minute he looked down at my phone and saw Daisey Jean’s photo, he missed the text from my mom popping up on the notification bar and paid attention to her face instead.

My mom and Papa asked if I wanted to complete my junior year being homeschooled and I politely declined. I refused to be smothered all day and figured school would give me the break I needed. False. Unless you were an incoming

freshman you knew that DJ and I were best friends. Knew that whenever you saw her, you saw me. Now that couldn't be said.

Almost every faculty member I passed thought they were sincere when asking me if I was okay. Asking me if I needed to talk or needed a moment to myself. No, what I needed was for everyone to leave me alone and stop forcing me to relive a nightmare I desperately wanted to vacate my mind.

My cousins and PJ tried their best to steer me away from the questioning eyes of curious kids and lingering ones from the adults but since our classes were different, there was only so much they could do. You'd think after a month of school starting things would go back to normal.

Nope.

Then to top it off Papa was picking me up today instead of Mr. Dre or London. Though my mom had woken up, doctors weren't quick to release her like I hoped. A week and a half after she woke up the doctors performed her last surgery to remove the bullet near her spine. I prayed so much that I'm sure God was tired of hearing my voice. No matter how much everyone kept trying to reassure me that she was going to be okay, and the surgery would go well, I couldn't help worrying that she'd slip into another coma.

Thank God she didn't but had to stay in the hospital for another two weeks. She ended up getting some weird infection and wouldn't shake a high fever. My spirit became even sadder because it was like no matter how hard she tried to get better something kept trying to keep her down. Between the infection and not having the mobility of her limbs, she couldn't catch a break. I for sure thought she'd walk out the hospital, but she didn't.

Two days ago, she was released, and thanks to Mr. Dre remodeling the entire bottom floor of our house to accommodate her needs, she was pushing her bedazzled wheelchair around with ease.

“Don’t forget that papers are due tomorrow, and your first test is Friday. Be safe, kids.” Mr. Luke dismissed us right as the bell rang.

I took my time packing my bookbag, wanting all the other kids to pass me before I started heading to the pickup area. Looking down at my new black and white Chucks, I smiled. Usually, Papa had his signature embroidered on all my shoes but since PJ bought me almost every new pair that came out over the summer, I had a new embroidered inscription. *PJ’s heart* with an actual heart next to his name and an embroidered outline of an afro with a daisy for my Daisey Jean.

“Massey, I’m really not liking your lack of consideration for my time.” Good Lord. “I made sure that my classes were in the same building as yours because I wanted to walk with you, but you’ve taken it too far by lollygagging, knowing I like to be first out in the pickup area. If you try this tomorrow at lunch, on the day they serve my favorite gram cracker and key lime yogurt, you’ll be sorry.” Huffing, Ari pushed up her new yellow sunflower Betsy Johnson glasses.

Normally Miss Smarty Pants would be on the other side of the school with the elementary kids, but she tested high on her state exams and was bumped up to sixth grade, so now she was on the middle and high school side of our school. The funny part of it all was her thinking she was going to have something to brag about when it came to Mace.

Poor little thing had smoke blowing out of her ears on the first day of school when she saw Mace wearing the high

school colors for his uniform – navy blue, hunter green, white, and grey.

Yep, Mace also got bumped up too. So not only did he get bumped up two grades, from seventh to ninth, but he was in high school, leaving his forever competitive friend in the dust. If you let Ari tell it, Mace somehow hacked into the school's computer system and changed the grades and test scores. While I'm not denying that Mace could do it, I know that's not the case.

“Sorry, Ari. I hate walking out with all the other kids.” I ignored all the wondering stares and kept looking straight ahead until I spotted AJ and the rest of the jocks at the end of the hall. The closer we got the more my stomach turned.

DJ and I used to walk these halls and her cheeks would redden seeing AJ. I'd lean against my locker anxiously biting my lip hoping to get a glimpse of Hayden before PJ popped up and ruined my chance at catching the star basketball player's eye. Now I felt like I would pass out from anxiety knowing that I'd have to stand there alone. The only thing that stayed the same was AJ and his friends.

I had to stand there alone without my best friend.

“Are you okay? You're breathing all weird and sweating.” Ari looked up at me, but I couldn't open my mouth to say anything.

My eyes were pooled with tears, heart racing, fingertips tingling. I kept blinking hoping to make it all go away. My breathing turned from small exhales to gasping like a fish out of water. Right when my knees started to shake and I felt like I was seconds from passing out, a strong arm looped around my waist pulling me back into a familiar warmth that made me close my eyes and relax.

“I got you.” Whenever I was having one of my moments PJ popped up at the perfect time. I don’t know what alert system he had that told him I needed him; I was thankful that he listened to his intuition.

“Thank you,” I mumbled wiping my eyes.

“Were you having an anxiety attack?” Eyes round and big, Ari studied my face, her eyes becoming teary like mine when I nodded. “I’m sorry, Massey. I-I...I’ll tell Uncle Cassian that you’ll be awhile.” She stared at me for what felt like forever before she hugged me. “I’m sorry.” I hugged her back unsure of what to say.

PJ and I watched her walk off before he turned me around to face him. First thing my eyes landed on was the matching pendant hanging from his necklace. A gold diamond encrusted volleyball and a gold diamond encrusted football with the number fifteen in the middle.

My favorite sport.

His favorite sport.

Same jersey number.

With each slow trail my eyes made from his necklace up to his tatted thick neck, his beard that was growing out full like his daddy’s, the beat of my heart slowed, and I felt normal. There were so many things to this thing called love that I had to learn, that we had to learn, but one thing I knew for certain was that PJ *always* found a way to calm me, to center me.

Researching my feelings on Google left me with way too many deep meanings that confused me. The closest thing I found that described our connection was *Yin & Yang*. I was the Yin to his yang, and he was the yang to my yin. No matter

where we were or who was around, I always felt light around him.

When my mom's accident first happened, it was him that gave me hope that was brighter than the sun. After what happened with DJ and that Jaali guy, I found sleep and comfort in his arms.

He was my heaven on earth.

No matter how strong my anxiety attacks were his love and presence were strong enough to penetrate my mental fog and pull me through.

"Why you ain't wait for me?" He kissed my forehead, making me cling tight to the school sweater he wore.

Peace.

That's what he made me feel.

He was my peace.

Rolling my forehead against the center of his chest, I took deep relaxing breaths enjoying the feel of him. "I wasn't thinking. My dad is here, and I didn't want him coming in acting a fool. Walk me out?"

"Gimme a kiss first." He flashed his new open-face diamond grill, making my breathing start to hiccup and my eyes flutter.

"Why you always ask when you..." Guess I was talking too much.

Gripping my chin, he pecked my lips slow and soft. That teasing first kiss he always did that followed with a smile because he knew how much his soft kisses made me weak. Like weak in the knees and weak to the point my muscles became jelly.

“Come on before I have to kick your daddy in his shin.” He smirked against my lips.

Smiling, close to skipping alongside him, I held his hand letting him lead me out to the parking lot. “Are you going home after practice?” His parents finally gave him back his keys and he made sure to be gone as much as he could.

Either he was hanging out with his friends or with me. Now that school was in full swing, Luna was back at college, and Mace was in his own world, he tried not to be home if he could help it.

“Nah, I’m going to the gun range with my Pops. I’ll call you when I’m done and see if your mama will let me tuck you in.” He knew damn well my mom wasn’t playing that. She may allow him to come over whenever I wanted him to but tucking me in was pushing it.

“Keep dreaming lover boy.” We turned the corner and came upon all the waiting parents and kids rushing to their vehicles. It wasn’t hard to spot Papa since he stood out like a sore thumb leaning against his new bright yellow Slingshot. Aunty Keatyn was parked next to him in her truck shaking her head.

“You sure you don’t want me to go with you?” PJ knew this was the first time Papa and I were going to sit down and talk. His overprotectiveness for me always left me breathless. This boy would fight my daddy if I asked him to.

“I’m good.” Leaning up on my tippy toes, I pecked his lips until I heard Papa suck his teeth.

“Massey, girl, you must want to walk around this expensive ass school with no eyebrows or edges. Keep kissing

on that Tarzan looking boy and I'll superglue your lips shut." Papa gave me just the reaction I wanted.

"What's up, father-in-law, or do you want me to call you Pops?" PJ grinned, knowing he was going to have to run if he kept it up.

Chuckling and flicking his nose, Papa pushed off his car and PJ started to move backward. "Keep on, lil nigga. Better go on before I beat your ass."

"You got it." Taking my hands in his he kissed my knuckles. "Text me when you get home." He paused and gave me this intense look. The same intense look he's been giving me for the last couple of weeks. Like he wanted to say something but stopped himself for whatever reason.

"Have fun in practice." I needed to break that fierce eye contact.

"Offer still on the table to kick his shins." He winked melting my poor little heart even more. "Later, baby." He ran backward smiling all wide.

"Goodness." I shook off the chill and made my way over to my frowning Papa. "Ready, old man." I didn't give him a chance to answer me. I waved to Aunty Keatyn and got in the passenger side of his Slingshot.

We rode to Steak and Shake listening to music barely talking. To be honest I wasn't sure what to say even though I had a lot of questions. After finding out Noelani drowned because she got water in her poop bag, I spent most of my days after practice at his house comforting my sisters. Cashton acted like he was Ray Charles to his mother's death, and Papa seemed numb to all of it.

“How are you doing, Papa?” He and I were sitting at our favorite booth waiting to order.

“I’m maintaining, baby girl. How are you doing?” Indeed, the man sitting across from me was my daddy but the one talking wasn’t. It’s almost like he was scared to talk to me.

“I’d be better if you stopped acting like I’m your probation officer or something.” Saying that earned me a smile. We placed our order and sat back staring at each other. “Say what you wanna say.” I hope I wouldn’t regret opening the floor for him to speak freely.

Leaning back, he crossed his arms across his chest and mugged me. I shouldn’t have smiled, but I did. He was so funny when he was in his feelings. “Your mama told me about you trying to bond with your sperm donor. That’s some foul shit, Massey. I guess it’s forget my feelings, huh?” Oh, he was really in his feelings.

Giving him the same energy back, I reminded him that all of this started because of him. “I’m only following in your footsteps since you said it was forget my feelings first when you pistol whipped him and forced him to sign over his parental rights. That was selfish as hell.” I didn’t mean to cuss, but it came out.

Jimmy and I have been in communication since he arrived. *Good morning* texts, asking for my volleyball schedule and making plans to come to my games. Facetime chats and introducing me to my siblings. It was hard for me to call them my brother and sister. Hard because he had no problem being in their lives but had stipulations when it came to me like I asked to be born.

Oh, shoot.

My eyes widened seeing his left eye twitch and his nose flare. I sucked in a deep breath when he leaned over the middle of the table pointing his finger in my face. “No, what was selfish as hell is your bitch ass sperm donor playing with your mom. Come on now, Massey. Your memory is sharp as hell, and I know you remember how off kilter your mother was over him. How he played her and you. That nigga proposed to her while married. Sit with that for a second and think about how toxic and fucked up he really is to play on her emotions like that.”

Dang, I really did forget all the tears I saw my mother cry behind him. How could I forget that he’s to blame for my mother and I being at odds when I was younger? I was so caught up and blinded by him *finally* popping back up that I forgot what made our relationship strained in the first place.

“He played both sides and I was willing to do whatever it took to free your mom from the downward spiral his actions took her on.” He slammed his hand on the table making me and the couple next to us jump. Our waitress placed our food down and quickly left. My stomach was growling viciously but I was scared to pop a fry in my mouth.

“I did what I needed to do to help her mentally and to make sure you’d never, ever have to want for anything. So yeah, you damn right I stepped in and did what I had to do to protect you and your mother and I’ll beat that motherfucker all over again because once I got him out the picture your mother was able to get better.”

I felt horrible and wished I never made that comment. Papa was mad. I mean legit furious. His hands that were sprawled on the table were shaking so bad that he had to close them into fists. Lips were pinched together and eyes twitching.

“Papa,” I let out a low cry moving to his side of the booth and side hugging him. He didn’t turn to hug me back or anything. He just kept looking straight ahead angry. “I’m sorry, Papa. Please don’t be mad at me. I-I...I don’t know what I was thinking, and I guess I wasn’t thinking at all. I don’t want to replace you. I’ll never want to replace you. You’re my Papa, you’re all I know. You’re my daddy. Please forgive me. I never meant to hurt you.”

I became a complete sobbing mess. This fear of him not wanting to be my Papa anymore hit me hard and that broke my heart into so many tiny pieces. The pain of it knocked the wind out of me. I couldn’t lose him over Jimmy going through a guilt phase. I couldn’t lose him because I was a stupid teenager who forgot the rocky road my mom and I had to cross over. It was because of Papa that I had the chance to rebuild that relationship and Aunty Keatyn since she jacked me up and set me straight.

My tears were nonstop and I’m sure we had an audience, but I didn’t care. Then I remembered he just lost his wife and I just had to run my mouth not knowing that he was already dealing with a lot. Geesh, I needed to get myself together.

“Aye, now. How you gone pop off and then turn around and start crying? What kind of mess is that Massey? Do I need Melly to read you the Kalmin G-Code book again?” He kissed my head and rubbed my back, but I couldn’t stop crying. Several people asked if I was okay and if I needed help, but he told them I just got my period for the first time.

Classic move.

“Baby girl.” Managing somehow to lift me and move to the edge of the booth with his legs facing out, he placed me on his lap and rocked me like the baby I was acting like. The

more he rocked me, kissed my forehead, and kept whispering that he wasn't going anywhere and how much he loved me, I started to calm down. "Next time you want me to baby you just say that instead of cutting up in these people's restaurant. Now I gotta squirt ketchup on you so they can believe what I said and give us our food for free."

"You better not," I sniffled wrapping my arms tighter around his neck. "Are you still my Papa?"

The vibrations from his chuckle made me feel that warmth in my heart where my love for him lived. "I'll always be your daddy, baby girl. I apologize for losing my shit, but you triggered the fuck out of me with what you said. Understand that everything I've ever done has been to make life easier for you and your mother, not worse. Granted my actions could be questioned months ago, but besides that, I'd always do what I felt was in y'all best interest."

I thought back on those moments when my mom was so depressed and crying more than she smiled. How Jimmy really did a number on her mentally and emotionally. Since my mom and Mr. Dre started dating, I haven't seen her shed a sad tear once. All her tears now were tears of joy and happiness, not of suffering and sadness.

"Papa...what the heck?" I wiped off the dripping grease he rubbed on my eyebrows from his burger

He shrugged trying to rub my edges. "I'm laying these thangs down so they'll be easier to shave off since you lost your rabbit ass mind thinking you're about to cuss at me. Around here about to look like Little Bill because your sperm donor is a whole bitch. Nothing in this world can keep me away from my children. Remember that the next time you want to start defending him. Get off me so I can eat my food in

peace. Stressing me out and cutting up in public. Move, Massey.” And just like that, we were back to normal.

Locking my hands behind his neck, I tried not to smile. “I’ll move once you promise that we’re okay. That we’re back to being us and that you won’t talk about my mama again or do anything to make me sad or angry with you. I promise to do the same also, okay?” I held out my pinky and waited.

He tried to remain tough and not smile. Looking at me like I was annoying the life out of him but his resolve broke. Our wide smiles mirrored each other. “I promise.” He looped his finger around mine. “I’m really sorry for everything regarding your mom. Like I explained to her I’ll spend my life making up for it, but I won’t apologize for making your sperm donor sign over his rights. He showed me that he was never meant to be your father by being persuaded so easily. That role has always been for me.” He kissed my cheek.

“I love you, Papa.”

“I love you too. Now get your big ass off my lap. Got these people looking at me like I’m Chester the Molester or something, and you’re paying for this date. Better text PJ to send money to your little cashapp.”

I think it was safe to say that Papa and I were back to being us and I was going to put Jimmy on ice for a while. Papa was right and I’m glad he stepped in and did what Jimmy never tried to do – be my father.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Coco

“BABY, take a deep breath and relax. Everything is going to be okay, I promise.”

“Yeah, Ma. You gotta chill. If you keep sweating like this, you’re going to get musty and that’s just not a cute first impression.”

Whoever thought that I’d be ganged up on by my man and daughter?

The day had finally come for Darren and me to officially sit down and talk. Not wanting a repeat of last time when I started hyperventilating and ran out of the restaurant, I decided to invite him over to my house where I felt most comfortable. Dre surprised the hell out of me when he told me that he and Darren were in constant communication with each other since I was in a coma. How Darren visited around the clock and texted him every day to see how I was doing since I was released.

I was feeling so many different emotions but the main three were fear, embarrassment, and excitement. Fear and

embarrassment were coupled together because I wasn't sure if he'd want a genuine relationship with me once we talked about the in-depth details surrounding my childhood. Granted he found out that I was walking in my mother's footsteps long ago, that still didn't shake the feeling off.

Excited because I had a father. A real father. I had a whole family outside of the sick one I thought only existed. Veronica robbed me of so much and I wanted to grab ahold of everything I had left including meeting up with my uncles. Now that blew my mind. Veronica never mentioned having other children outside of my mom and Stacey. Stacey never mentioned having brothers. So weird to me but nothing they did should ever surprise me.

"Is all the food laid out? Wings still hot?" Since it was college football season, and I knew from snooping on Darren's IG page that he was a diehard Gator fan and today was the Clemson game. I thought watching a game would be a nice ice breaker for everyone to officially get introduced and relax.

Rolling her eyes and huffing, Massey gave me a side-eye that put a smile on my face. "Okay, ma'am, you're doing entirely too much. How about you roll yourself into the living room?" She was having too much fun telling me to roll somewhere.

Keeping his word, Cassian had my wheelchair bedazzled in the brightest colors he could find with neon lights around my wheels. He not only got me one wheelchair but three. One that lifted, one electric, and one regular. Between him and Dre, I don't know who was the most extra, but I loved it. Loved that they got along and had built this open relationship and were cordial.

“Fine. I’m rolling along.” I took one last look at the wing bar, looked over at the cooler with beer and other drinks. Then the doorbell rang, and my heart dropped into my lap. “Oh my god, he’s here.” I squeaked fanning myself. Heat flashes were becoming a thing of my daily norm and I hated it. My doctor swore it was my body’s readjustment from all the trauma and not early menopause. I still had a few babies to give Dre, so I hopped it wasn’t that.

“I’ll go get the door.” Massey skipped out before I could stop her.

Crouching down in front of me, my long loc wearing king leaned in brushing his lips against mine. “Everything is going to be okay, Coco. I’ll be right here and so will Massey. Darren is just as excited to meet you, okay?”

Andre Joseph will forever be my surprise perfect gift.

Every day he showed me that his love had no bounds. Showed me that he was committed to loving all my broken pieces and that his love was the strongest super glue to put them back together. I expected him to go back to New York after all the drama cleared. If I could stand, he would’ve knocked me off my feet when he told me that he wasn’t going back and would be living here. He still had his comic bookstore and businesses in New York but would travel back when needed.

Your heart is where my home is so that’s where I’m living.

Those were his exact words and I cried like a damn baby. No matter how many times I told him that he could stay with me he refused to, not wanting to disrupt the flow Massey and I had going on. He said that when he and I lived together my last name would be his. He refused to shack up and give Massey the wrong impression and I melted again. When she

stayed with Cassian, he spent the night with me but other than that he left every night after he tucked me in.

“Okay. I’m ready.” I kissed him back until my skin coated with goosebumps.

Without having to be asked he rolled my chair into my livingroom where Massey and Darren stood talking and laughing. The sight seemed so unreal. Was I dreaming? Was my daddy here? I needed to stop asking God what did I do to deserve this and embrace every blessing because I never thought this moment would ever exist.

Dressed in an orange and blue jersey, denim jean shorts, and Gator colored Vans, a lump formed in my throat seeing how he and Massey coordinated their game day outfits. The effort and communication shared continued to blow my mind. “Did you come over on your Harley? I can’t wait to ride it.” I think Massey was more excited than I was. She never spoke it out loud, but I know she wanted a family that shared her blood. Granted the Kalmins had shown time and time again that they were all we ever needed, it was the small desire of wanting a part of you.

Crouching down in front of me I came face to face with another form of love I’ve been searching for my whole life. The love of a parent that didn’t need to be explained or justified. He and I might be strangers, but our spirits were familiar because I was half of him.

“You’re so beautiful, Courtney.” He grabbed my hand resting his forehead against it. When his shoulders started shaking, I was no good. “I’ve waited so long.”

I couldn’t stand it anymore. Releasing my hand from his hold, I used all my upper body strength and hugged him. Hugged him and sobbed into his shoulder. Securing me tightly

in his arms, he stood, and we swayed. The feeling I felt being held in my daddy's arms knowing that he wouldn't drop me. The tingles and zaps playing hopscotch around my heart because we were welcoming someone new.

I lived coasting through life thinking that my father never wanted me because that's always been the story told to me. The way this man held me and cried with me; those were all lies.

Dre and Massey let us have our moment without interruption. Once we cried our eyes out, he helped me sit on the couch and sat next to me. Staring into his face, holding his hand, all of it felt so unreal. Like I was dreaming and floating on a cloud at the same time.

"Thank you for inviting me into your home." His voice sounded just how I dreamed my father's timber to sound but better.

"Thank you for wanting to meet me." I had to stop crying but it was so hard. "I really can't get over that you're real. That I have a father."

His chuckle made my eyes flutter close. I missed so many years hearing it, but I had a lifetime to catch up. "Trust me, I can't believe that you're alive right now. Having to mourn you twice." His grip on my hands tightened. "God is good and I'm thankful that He allowed this moment to happen. Allowed me to be in your life as well as Massey's."

I turned to my child, and she was just as bad as me curled up against Dre silently crying and smiling.

"There's so much I want to say and ask but I have one request." I swallowed hard hoping that he didn't take what I was about to say the wrong way. "Dre has given me the

watered-down version of what happened to my mom, and I know Veronica painted an ugly picture of who I *used* to be. All I ask is that from this day forward we leave the past in the past. Where I am mentally today, I can't go back down a sad road, but if it will help you better understand me then I will."

Having to tell my story over and over wasn't a form of therapy as most would think. I hated having to relive those moments in my childhood, having to tell the gritty details of what it was like to be a Pearl. Having to tell how I used my body. Maybe it was because he was my dad and I didn't want to give him those images of me or maybe it was because I was ashamed, I don't know. Right now, I just couldn't tell him where I been.

"That's fine. I think we know enough and I'm more concerned with getting to know this version of you." He reached over and grabbed a bag off the floor. "I brought a few photo albums to show you me in my prime and also the big family you have that wants to meet you." Massey moved on the other side of him, and Dre sat on the armrest next to me.

"Grandpop told me that his side of the family is having their annual family reunion next October. Can we go?" Massey was already pulling out an album.

Grandpop?

She had a cute name for him already.

"Uh, sure. That should give me enough time to get used to having a family." Right when I felt those anxiety-driven unsettling feelings trying to take over, Dre grabbed my hand and kissed me behind my ear.

"They'll love you and we'll go together." He whispered, always knowing what to say and at the right time.

“I know you said that you didn’t want to speak on the past, but I brought these for you.” He handed me a tote bag. “Your mother loved you so much and she documented almost every second she got to spend with you. There are videos and photos inside. Whenever you’re ready to take a glimpse into the other half of you, you can.” After all these years you could still see the love in his eyes for my mother.

His smile became a little lazy and his eyes become slightly hooded, but this sparkle combined with those brandy orbs, I wish I had the chance to see their love in physical form.

“Thank you so much.” He hugged me and I wanted to stay wrapped in his arms forever. It was that fatherly type of hug that I’ve dreamed of feeling.

“Oh my goodness.” Massey’s laughter separated us. “Grandpop, I know you did not have a Jheri curl and wore bellbottoms?”

And just like that we meshed and became this circle of love.

Between watching the game, stuffing our faces, and looking through all of Darren’s photo albums, it felt good to smile until my cheeks hurt. Massey was in a whole new world. Her Grandpop showed her the social media pages of her cousins and surprisingly a few went to her school. Seeing pictures of all my aunts and uncles, cousins that were my age, I never felt such an overwhelming fullness in my life.

I thought I’d be nervous and not know what to say. I couldn’t stop talking and had fallen into a comfortableness around him that it was his shoulder and arm I curled up next to during the game instead of Dre. After the game went off, we all went into the kitchen to clean and more fun happened there.

Jokes, random moments with Darren and Massey dancing, or rather her teaching him a new Tiktok dance.

We sat in the backyard for dessert and talked some more. It's like we never ran out of things to say. Never had a dull moment. When it got late he decided to call it a night and I wanted so badly to beg him to stay so we'd have a part two in the morning. I genuinely enjoyed his company and the more time I spent around him, the more my heart was ready to love him.

I know love at first sight in romance settings are common, but I felt a love at first sight connecting with my father, and I wanted to bask in it forever.

“Do you have plans for the morning?” He and I were outside by his truck. Massey and Dre were taking in all the bells and whistles of his new F150 while I sat in my chair with tears threatening to fall because I wanted him to stay.

Clearing my throat, I shook my head. “No plans.”

Leaning down until we were eye level, he cupped my cheek and kissed my nose. “Wanna have breakfast with your old man? I'll pick you all up and we can go wherever you like.”

I opened my mouth to say yes but all I could do was wrap my arms around his neck and release a shaky breath. “I'm so happy you're here and accept me. I don't want you to leave.” How I managed to channel my needy child when she got this way, I don't know but I welcomed it.

I did feel needy. I did feel so attached to him that I cried not wanting him to leave. Almost as if I got a fierce case of the ‘clingy blues’ and wanted to stay wherever he was.

His laughter against my ear made me smile. “You have no idea what this moment, this whole day has meant for me, Courtney. You’re a prayer come true, and I’ll forever hold onto you.”

“So does that mean you’ll stay the night with us?” Massey came up behind me with hopeful eyes. Guess I wasn’t the only one dealing with the sudden case of separation anxiety. I now understood how she felt whenever I went out of town. “We have two spare rooms you can choose from. Please stay the night with us, Grandpop.”

“If you need clothes, I can run you to the Walmart down the street.” Even Dre was trying to persuade him.

“I guess it’s set.” Darren stepped back and walked over to his truck. “Let me get my bag that I keep with spare clothes.”

“Oh, shoot. Grandpop got a spinnanight bag.” We all laughed. This girl and her sense of humor. “Let me find you got a few old cougars that you be creeping to see.”

“Massey,” I swatted her arm. She was all up in this man’s business.

“What? Ma, I know you see what he looks like. I read the comments under his posts. Those silver bats be thirsty.” Lawd this child of mine.

Darren was indeed a very handsome man and he kept himself in shape, so I wasn’t at all surprised to know that women were after him. “Trust me, your Grandpop doesn’t entertain bats. I do have a few lady friends that are silver stallions.” He winked making this girl act up even more.

“Mr. Dre, roll mama inside while I take my Grandpop to his room.” One of these days I’m going to roll over her damn feet.

Before he let Massey drag him back in the house, Darren turned and kissed me on the cheek. “Thank you so much for this. I hope you don’t mind sharing your kitchen with me. I’m making us breakfast in the morning.”

“She doesn’t mind, she barely cooks. Now come on, Grandpop. I wanna see what your silver stallions look like.”

Dre and I watched them walk in the house and my heart was close to bursting from being so full. “I’m so happy, Dre.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

A^{tlas}

KEATYN and I held out as long as we could before the anxiousness of what gender our baby was consumed every part of us that we threw a last-minute gender reveal party. The last time our family gathered was for Massey's sweet sixteenth birthday party and we were well overdue for a celebration. This summer will go down in history as being the most fucked up summer ever. I didn't even know what to call it but fucked up seemed like the best word for it.

We started with a boy, and we were ending with a boy.

That's right, another Kalmin man.

Keatyn, Ari, and Nova were happy, which surprised me because I just knew that they'd want another girl around the house. AJ was happy to get a little brother and I think that's why Keatyn was happy for another boy since AJ would be leaving for college soon. I had no preference. I loved my girls, and I loved my son. I just wanted a healthy baby.

"Aye, boss. I need to show you something." Ricky came over to my workstation whispering.

“Is there a reason you’re whispering?” I looked up from my microscope seeing him looking all nervous. Shifting on his feet, hands fidgeting with his tie and lab coat. I sat back and crossed my arms over my chest. “Don’t tell me you got another contact high?” I had a strong tolerance to the high grade weed I made but Ricky and a few other of my chemists didn’t and ended up having a high hangover for four days straight.

He kissed his teeth waving me off. “Why you always gotta bring up the past? Look man, I don’t want to say what I need to say out here. I’d rather show you so can you please put on your ugly ass crocs and follow me.” He could joke about my shoes all he wanted but they were comfortable as hell.

“Fine, let’s go.” I followed him into his office and stood next to his desk looking at his setup while he closed and locked the door. On all four monitors were security footage of the main warehouse floor. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“Hear me out before you say anything.” He was nervous as hell and sweating.

“Yo, Rick. Just tell me.”

Swallowing hard, he sat at his desk and started typing. “A few days ago, I performed a random inventory check. You know, just to make sure everything was copacetic and whatnot.” He pulled up the camera footage from the day Ari and Cashton came with me to the warehouse. “When I checked the inventory for your lethal pills several were missing.”

I listened to him talk but my attention was on the screens. “Again, I thought nothing of it, thinking you forgot to update the count or something but when I asked you about it days later you said you never took anything out of the warehouse so

I figured one of those interns had a case of the sticky fingers.” One the security footage Cashton was walking around reading the labels on all my plants, pills, and elixirs.

“I had security frisk everyone. Checking purses, wigs, and all. We found nothing and they all swore they didn’t take anything, so I started checking the security cameras and that’s when I found this. Little homie took your Gelsemium pills.” There, right on camera, we watched Cashton walk into my closed-off hazard area where I kept my lethal pills.

He didn’t even look over his shoulder or anything. He walked right in and looked around. Reading all the labels and tags I had on my chemicals until he got to the Gelsemium. I swear I stopped breathing seeing him read it and pocket a few. Those pills were dangerous as hell. A high amount consumed will cause dizziness, nausea, blurred vision, convulsions, and internal bleeding. It can also cause paralysis of the spinal cord, complete loss of muscular power, and eventually asphyxia.

The sneaky part of the drug was that if combined with a coverup of food, it’s undetected. You wouldn’t know it was consumed unless an extensive autopsy of the body was performed and even then, that wasn’t guaranteed since a few of the particulars were acidic and killed off a lot of the organs it would be found in. If someone...

“Send me a copy of that recording then delete it. I don’t want no one able to find that footage, Rick.” Running out of his office, I ran to mine and grabbed my keys.

Trying to obey all the driving laws, I sped fast as hell to the compound. I knew I was right about Noelani’s death. Regardless of how much I wanted that woman dead, the way Cassian explained how she died didn’t make sense to me. Saying that her coloscopy bag filled with water and she

drowned. That story worked for his girls, but I knew something else had to have happened. I didn't care at the time about figuring it out and he had her buried two days after she drowned, so no autopsy report was ever performed.

I wonder if he had Cashton get the pills for him. Nah, Cassian had no problem asking me for things. I refused to believe that my eleven-year-old nephew killed his mom. Nah, I couldn't believe that.

"Hey, Atlas." Krishna opened the front door with Omari in her arms.

"What's up, Sis." I kissed her cheek looking around for Cashton. "Is Cash here?"

"Yeah, he's upstairs with Amell. There's homemade chili in the kitchen if you want some."

"Thanks, Sis. I'll get a bowl before I leave." I waited until she walked off before I snatched my belt off. Just as I started running up the stairs Amell was coming down.

He took one look at the belt in my hand and shook his head. "Don't bother him."

Was I the only one out of the loop and didn't get the memo about what Cashton did? Why weren't they doing something about it?

I looked up the stairs at Cashton's closed room door before turning and following Amell out to the back of his house. "What do you mean don't bother him?" I leaned in and whispered like he and I weren't the only two standing outside by his piranha pond. "His little ass stole my pills and I'm pretty sure that's what killed Noelani. He needs his little ass beat and I'm going to do it."

Not even looking my way, he stood off to the side and watched those devil fish chomp on the dead rabbits he tossed in the pond. “You’re not going to do anything. Go back to work and stop interrupting my peace.”

“You knew, didn’t you? Why y’all ain’t say nothing?” And why did they allow Cashton to do it anyway? He was a child.

“Because telling you isn’t my priority.” He looked over at me with annoyance dripping from his eyes. “My focus is on him and him only. Ask Cassian if you wanna know so bad.”

“Did you beat his ass then?”

He shook his head. “No, and I don’t plan on it.”

Was I the only one seeing the problem in this situation? “Why not? You got soft all of a sudden?” I needed Amell to stop sugarcoating and break this down to me because I wasn’t understanding his reasoning at all.

“No, Atlas.” He turned to face me, and I took a step back seeing he was in defensive mode, and I didn’t have anything big in my hand to knock him out if he jumped at me. “I’m processing the fact that my eleven-year-old nephew is walking into the shoes I had to wear when I was his age. He’s eleven, Atlas. I was twelve. Let that sink in.”

Oh, it did sink in, quickly at that. Knocked the damn wind out of me and I had to sit on his porch steps.

Outside of seeing the mental torment Amell went through after killing our father, which was as close as I came to his suffering. Knowing that Cashton was walking in those same shoes, my damn chest burned. I wanted to go upstairs and hug my nephew and tell him that everything was going to be okay. Just hug him until he felt smothered, and even then, I wouldn’t let go.

“The difference this time is that he is smarter than I was. There’s no Mitch or Duffy using his hurt and confusion to create a vessel of destruction for their own benefit.” He dropped his head back and looked up at the sky. If there was ever anything he regretted, it was leaving his future into those two men’s hands thinking they had his best interest. Though Mitch and Clover saved us from going to foster care and provided a roof over our heads, it all came with a price that Amell had to suffer greatly for.

“This is bigger than what your belt can fix. Bigger than what Cassian can yell into him. I got him, Atlas. Trust me, only I can help him from becoming another me. However, if you want to help him, love on him hard.” His head dropped back down, and he looked at me with so much weariness that I felt his heavy burden. “Don’t look at him differently. Continue to teach him but guide him on a straight path. By default, it’s our blood pumping through him. Combined with what he did,” he shook his head. “I can’t let him drift to this side of darkness.”

“That’s why you got him into boxing.” It finally made sense.

Whenever Amell drifted to those dark moments he always went to Cassian’s underground fighting ring to box out his anger and pain. Placing Cashton in the same environment but a controlled boxing ring was genius.

“Does Cassian know?”

Amell looked over at me with a smirk. “Cashton told him the truth at the burial site. He thought it was me who poisoned her but got a real awakening when his son told him what he did it. Cassian is still in disbelief about it and rightfully so.”

My words were true – this was the most fucked up summer ever.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Dre - 3 months later

I'M NEVER MOVING BACK to New York. Besides making my quarterly trips to check on my comic bookstore and other business, I've officially become a Floridian and was happy about it. Even Andrea and Landon decided on making Naples their home and were house hunting. What turned out to be a 'hideout vacation' turned into us uprooting our lives and starting new chapters. London was the second behind me to decide that she wasn't ever returning unless she was visiting her parents. The sunshine state offered so much more than cold brutal winters and bad memories.

"I think we're all set for our first showcase. Our team is already on the ball with getting promotions together so we can roll out making a heavy presence. Cassian, are you sure your people will make it?" Landon's way of managing his team was borderline micromanaging, and him questioning Cassian about the same thing over and over was quite the show.

Lifting his head from his phone, Cassian's normal glaring eyes narrowed at Landon. JD and I sat there trying not to laugh. Kellon and Khiver picked up on his annoyance early on

and were waiting like me when he was going to pop off and shut Landon up. “Are you sure you don’t like hearing yourself talk?” He tilted his head. “You asked me the same question four times and my answer hasn’t changed. Your insecurities are showing and them bitches are ugly.”

London hollered loud enough for all of us. “Thank you. My goodness, Landon. The man said he’ll bring his people and all you need to do is bring yours.”

Wanting to get a taste of the music industry, Cassian asked me what the ins and outs of the business were. The perfect example to give was for him to be a part of Kellon and Landon’s talent showcase. Landon always had a good eye for spotting talent that looked appealing to society’s standards. Khiver and Cassian clowned him for being the typical label that went after the Beyonce’s of social media instead of listening to the underdogs.

Somehow that conversation turned into a competition of them searching the best talent in South Florida. Khiver and Cassian were teamed, leaving Kellon and Landon. Each team had to bring six people to the showcase and whoever’s team won, Landon was handing over the capital to fund their albums and so forth. A good deal and I knew from how they were teamed who was going to win – Khiver and Cassian.

Landon was too mainstream and Kellon wasn’t too far behind him. Cassian and Khiver wanted the artists that sounded like Lyfe Jennings with a testimony to match. The dude in the hood who never got a chance at greatness but could sing Barry White under a bridge. The girl who was working hard, posting on Soundcloud to express herself as an outlet, but sung from the depths of her soul like Jazmine Sullivan.

London and I were brought in as unbiased listening ears since she and I shared a knack for it. No matter how much they begged me to get involved outside of that, I refused. Music was a love of mine but not a passion. I didn't mind giving my ear, writing a song here and there, but that was it.

“Fine. Meeting adjourned. I'll make sure my assistant sends everyone emails with all the changes we made and links to the social media pages. If you have questions, google them.” Landon winked at Cassian who shot him the bird.

“He doesn't mean any harm. Sometimes my brother forgets that he doesn't need to be a stickler with everyone he works with.” London already knew how her brother was, mixed that in with Cassian's personality, there were only so many jokes before I saw it going south and not in a good way.

We all shook hands and walked out. Landon and London left together. Kellon and Khiver left, leaving me with JD and Cassian. JD wasn't involved in any of the music business. He only came around whenever he knew London was going to be there. I don't know how many times I tried to warn him to stay away and that he was barking up the wrong tree. London wasn't at all paying him any attention and told him that she thought he was cute in a brotherly way.

“Explain to me what was the point of you riding with me?” Cassian questioned leaning against his truck. “I thought you said you wanted to tell them your ideas. You ain't open your mouth not one time, JD.”

Scratching his head, JD looked over at me to try and help him out, but I stood there quiet because I wanted to hear him say it out loud. “I do have ideas, but they aren't for y'all to hear. Whenever I'm able to catch London by herself, then I'll tell them to her.” He shrugged looking off, not wanting to look

Cassian in the eye because he knew what he said was complete bullshit.

“Now I know damn well you aren’t sniffing behind her.” Cassian stood up straight grilling him.

“What is up with y’all blocking people’s blessings?” He looked at me and Cassian like we were in the wrong.

“How many times have I told you that she’s not your future? You want her to hurt your feelings so you can go crying to Krishna or Amell, hoping they’d bully the girl into talking to you?” I tried to tell JD that London wasn’t his happily ever after. Tried to tell him to admire from afar.

My warning wasn’t me hating or saying that she was a bad person. My warning came from what I knew. London wasn’t JD’s answered prayer for his missing rib. He was so persistent with his approach that I wanted to tell London to entertain him just to make him breathe a little easier, but I didn’t. She’d slaughter the poor kid.

“Back up off my babysitter, little homie. Go down to Parkway and talk to them rainbow colored wig having girls but leave that one alone.” Cassian wagged his finger at him making me laugh. He looked like somebody’s uncle. “Now get in the car so we can go. I ain’t got time to be playing with y’all all day.”

“Dre, tell my future wife that I miss her, and I’ll be home all alone thinking about her,” JD yelled out the window.

I pulled out behind them, jumping on the turnpike headed south to Pembroke Pines to pick up Coco from her physical therapy appointment. The last three months have been exhausting, to say the least. I don’t know who told her that after she had the bullet removed near her spine that she was

going to miraculously get up and walk, but they lied, and my baby was having a hard time being confined to a wheelchair.

We've seen four different specialists hoping for a different answer, but they've all said the same thing.

It would take almost a year for her to walk on her own again. There was a lot of nerve and tissue damage from the fragments of the bullets and her body was slowly healing. Her muscles lost some mass but not a lot. In short, she needed to have patience with herself but that was like talking to a brick wall. Coco wanted to be able to walk without a cane or wheelchair by December. For the sake of her pride, I hoped she could.

Some days were good and others were bad. Her bad days were spent in bed crying and depressed for the entire day. I gave her those moments to feel and process her emotions however she saw fit. Other days I rolled her out of the house and spent hours at the beach like she liked. There were days when she was angry and snappy as hell. Other days she clung to me refusing to let me go. Either way, I embraced all her good and bad.

Learning how to love Coco in all her seasons wasn't as hard as I thought.

"This girl." I snickered pulling my car along the curb of the facility. Outside with two of her therapists standing next to her, sat my beautiful cocoa bean all frowned up with her arms crossed over her chest. "Another rough day?" I asked lifting her out of her chair.

"No, Andre." She huffed. I was only Andre when she was frustrated and annoyed.

After placing her in the car, I folded her chair and placed it in the trunk. “How was she today?”

Both of her therapists looked like they were about to cry. When Coco had rough days, she used her lethal words to hurt people’s feelings including those who were only trying to help her. “Um, it wasn’t too bad, but she’s been extremely aggressive with us lately. Is everything alright at home?”

Her question took me by surprise. “Yes, everything is fine. How about I’ll keep her home for a few days to clear her head and we’ll pick up fresh next week?”

From their heavy sighs of relief and the relaxing of their shoulders, you would’ve thought I was giving them a big Christmas bonus. “That is perfect. Thank you, Dre. Have a good evening.”

“Yeah, you too.” What the hell did this woman do to those people?

All the way home Coco pouted in silence. Barely said a word or uncrossed her arms. Whether she wanted to admit it, she feared me leaving. Feared that I didn’t want her the same. She and I haven’t had sex in forever. To be honest it was the last thing on my mind. My attraction to her never waned but I was more focused on helping her walk again than testing the strength of her legs touching her ears.

“Dre.” She finally spoke once I pulled up to her house.

“Yes, baby.”

She tried to cover her blushing cheeks but failed. “It’s okay if you want better than this, want better than me.” I sat quietly watching her try to remain calm. Her breathing became erratic. She kept licking her lips, not wanting to look at me. When I

placed my hand on her thigh and squeezed, her long lashes kissed her cheeks as she bit her lip.

“Look at me.” Resting my head against the headrest, I took her hand and held it against my lips. How could she want to push me away but crave me so bad that her body swayed towards me each time she exhaled?

“Dre,” her bottom lip trembled. A flash of Deja vu hit me hard in the chest making it sore. Raw emotions glistened in her brandy eyes. She could nibble on her bottom lip all she wanted to. There was no fighting the connection we shared. It was inevitable.

“There’s a lot of stuff I had to go through and yet you still love me. Why can you love all my changing facets, but I can’t love your changing seasons? You can stand by me but I can’t stand by you?” Leaning over the middle console until my lips grazed hers, I whispered, “Tell me, baby. What’s better than you? Huh? Who can touch me here deeper than you?” I rested her trembling hand against that achy spot on my chest.

“Jesus, Dre.” She rubbed her nose against mine. “The way you call out to me, it makes me tingle and become so hot.” Her voice matched everything about her.

Thick, soft, and deep.

“I know these last few months have been more than physically challenging for you, but have I not reassured you that my feelings and love for you is unconditional?” She tried to duck her head, but I gently grabbed her by the chin and kept those sultry eyes on me.

“The same way your body has changed so has the way I love you. I now love you in this capacity to be whatever you need me to be, and you know that. Whenever that fear and

doubt starts talking, Baby, tell me so I can silence those voices. I'm not going anywhere, understand me when I say that."

Wiping her loose tears with my thumb, I took it a step further to remind her that my love wasn't conditional and let my lips do the talking. My lips communicated and reminded her of the safety she felt with me. Reminded her that I was someone she could trust her vulnerability with and who would also protect it. Communicated that my loyalty and honesty weren't circumstantial.

"We've both grown from when we first met, until now. I went from needing you as my drug for suppressing my hidden demons, to not needing you, to coping with living this life as I am meant to in order to be everything I can for me and for you. Think back on the times when I was needy of you, of Andrea. How I needed one of you to suppress what I was feeling.

"Now, baby, that needy is a want of desire. A want of passion. If you're down I'm down. This doesn't work without the two of us on one accord. You do your part and I'm going to do my part to create the life we both deserve. We're working towards something that ends in us. Not just you walking again. Not me rebuilding my life here in a new environment. We, you and me, are working towards our ending.

"You and I equal, married with siblings for Massey to babysit. It just so happens that I want to wake up next to you for the rest of my life. Is that so bad? Can you tell me that you don't want the same? We're equally growing and evolving, Coco. All my life I was taught to be strong. That's how my dad raised me because I needed to be strong not only for

myself but also for my sister. Nobody ever taught me when the little boy has been so hurt that he's still hiding inside of the strong man. He's still that hurt little boy. I had to go back and find him so he could be okay before I could be okay." My growth as a man made me feel proud.

I never thought I'd see past those dark clouds. Thought I'd never have brighter days than what little peeks of sunshine I had in New York. Had I changed overnight? No, but I was a daily work in progress and had a strong support system around me. Andrea and I were in a better place. A place where I wasn't emotionally dependent on her. She was a new mother now and I was enjoying watching her adjust to motherhood. Theo and I talked here and there but Amell had become a counselor to me that I sought out often.

All I wanted Coco to see and understand was that she wasn't alone. Realize that this wasn't an overnight healing process.

"Remember when we first met, and we talked about having a purpose." She mumbled against my lips; eyes hazed over in a drunken kiss fog. "I think I know what my purpose is now." She adjusted her upper half but stayed close enough that our lips touched whenever she talked. "Several Pearls..." She closed her eyes and shook off whatever chill hit her. "I refuse to call them that anymore. Several women DM'd me on social media asking for help. Help as in wanting me to explain how I created and managed to have a normal life after Veronica."

I sat back with a big smile on my face. I've been waiting for this moment to happen. The moment when God finally revealed to her what it is that she's to do on this earth. All those nights I spent praying over her and interceding on her

behalf, still interceding on her behalf was all to get her to this moment of realizing that there was power in her pain.

“That’s kinda why I’ve been so moody lately because I’m lowkey excited about it but then these random thoughts hit me hard and tell me that I’m not good enough. That I’m still trying to figure out life. Then I start overthinking and making up all these scenarios about us and wondering how long you are going to be around.” She sighed, placing her cheek against mine. “I’m sorry for doing too much. I feel like I need to send Kim and Tracey flowers or lunch for a week to apologize for my behavior during therapy this week.”

“You’re fighting against spiritual principalities because the enemy knows you’re about to set a lot of women free from the bondages of their past, and what better way to silence your voice than start whispering doubt in your mind. Baby, you’re about to shake shit it up and the good thing about it is that you aren’t walking this walk alone. I’m standing right here with you. Use me, tell me what you need. I haven’t stopped praying over you and I won’t.”

Coco’s testimony was bigger than what she thought. Those women reaching out to her were only the beginning.

“Dre.” She leaned back looking at me.

“What’s up.”

“How many babies do you want? It doesn’t even matter. I’ll give you however many you want if you keep talking to me like that.” I swear I didn’t mean to, but I busted out laughing. She changed up the conversation quick and I was not prepared.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Cassian

BABYGRL: Papa, I need a favor

ME: Whatchu want Massey????

BabyGRL: DNT B rude!

BabyGRL: I need U 2 threatn PJ 4 Me

That little girl was seconds from being put on my blocked list. Before she got her little boyfriend, she always begged me to beat up PJ, so he'd stop teasing and aggravating her. Now that they were dating or whatever they called themselves doing, she wanted me to beat him up every time she didn't get her way with him. I wasn't beating up shit.

She wanted that Tarzan looking little boy, so she had to deal with him.

ME: How about U stop being scared & ask him why he hasn't asked u 2 homecoming yet????

ME: Have you thought about that Einstein?

BabyGRL: Wowwww!!!

BabyGRL: U R such a switch out!

***BabyGRL:** Fine! I'll ask Uncle Amell 2 do it!*

***ME:** Good. I hope he shoots him right in the ass.*

***ME:** Get off my line baldheaded lil girl*

***BabyGRL:** That's why u got the chickenpox.*

***BabyGRL:** U probably got warms too*

***ME:** Ask Ur mama*

***BabyGRL:** I'm telling Mr. Dre!*

“Hey, Cassian.” Noonie slide her thick ass in front of the checkout counter where I was working.

Placing my phone down I stared at her plumped glossy lips, leading down to the uniform shirt she cut to show her titties. Her fake hair was burgundy matching her eyebrows. She kept licking her lips so I could see her new double barrel piercing.

“Aren't you supposed to be working in the coffee shop?”

Ever since word got out that I was a widower all my old hoes popped up and my workers been around here losing their damn minds. Noonie was the most aggressive out of them all. Thinking that since she worked close to me that I was going to drop some dick into her.

Hell no.

I didn't trust any woman who bleached their damn eyebrows to match their weave.

Her fake flirtatious laugh sounded like a pig snorting. Unattractive as hell. “Why are you giving me a hard time? I'm just checking on you. Are you hungry? Can I get you anything?”

“Nut-nut, why you always messing with my daddy?” Melly was going to be my gangsta diva baby. She knew damn well the woman’s name was Noonie but started calling her Nut-Nut because she didn’t like her in my face.

Laughing like Melly was the funniest kid on the planet, Noonie crouched down to her height. She shouldn’t have done that. I know my kids. Tai was missing and I’m sure not for long. “I’m not messing with your daddy. He needs to eat. Is it okay if I feed your daddy?”

My baby frowned her face up so nasty I busted out laughing. “You eat stanky food so no you can’t feed my Papa.” Leaning in she narrowed her eyes pointing at her hair. “Why is your hair coming off? You want me to help you put your hair back on?”

Noonie’s eyes widened big as hell. “Sure. Of course, I want you to help me.”

All I could do and was going to do was sit back and shake my head. Noonie was so concerned trying to win my girls over, thinking it was going to give her extra brownie points with me, that she didn’t see the little devil plotting on her. Oh well, she’d have to find out the hard way.

“I’ll be right back. Tai!” She took off running towards the back of the shop.

Noonie stood with the biggest smile on her face. “Your girls are the sweetest.” She got right back in position, leaning on the counter with her breasts spilling out. “I’m really good with kids you know.” Melly wasn’t lying. Her lace front was lifting around her forehead. How in the hell didn’t she feel that?

“Nut-Nut, I’m back. Here. Sit down so I can do your hair.”

Winking and licking her lips, Noonie let Melly drag her over to the seats in the waiting area. “I feel so special that you’re doing my hair. You should tell your daddy to let me come over so you can do my hair anytime you like.”

“No, Nut-Nut. We don’t let strangers come over our house and you’re not family so you gotta stay at your own house.” Hopping up on the chair next to her, Melly started combing her hair and patting it down. “Tai, bring me my tools.”

Something told me to stop whatever was going on and about to happen, but I wanted to see it play out. I’d pay for Noonie to get her hair redone cause I knew they were about to fuck her shit up. “I’m coming, Melly, stop yelling. Hey, Papa.” Tai waved at me, passing by with a bright red bag. “Nut-Nut, close your eyes. We want you to be surprised, okay?”

“Okay, girls. I’m so excited.” Signing her name on the bottom line of her death certificate, Noonie closed her eyes.

“Why you ain’t stopping this?” Ray-Ray whispered in my ear. I forgot he was sitting next to me typing out all the warranty receipts.

I shrugged, watching Melly take out a small jar of gel. “Maybe she’ll learn her lesson and stop messing with me. Aye, you know who bag that is they got?” I didn’t travel with hair products, and I know I didn’t have any in my desk.

“That’s mine.” JT came from the back and stood next to me. “I hope they mess her hair up too. Her big greedy ass ate my lunch like I wouldn’t know it was her.”

“Really, JT?” Ray-Ray shook his head. “All of that over some chicken you could order again?”

“Yep,” she popped her lips. “Plus, I think she messing with my cousin’s baby daddy but I ain’t too sure yet.”

“Don’t open your eyes, Nut-Nut. I gotta spray the oil on your hair and then I’m done, okay?” Melly grabbed the yellow bottle Tai handed her and started spraying it all over her head and under the loose pieces of her wig.

“Is that...” Ray-Ray’s mouth dropped.

“Oh shit.” JT covered her mouth squealing.

“Let me take them home cause if she tries to hit my baby, I’m kicking her ass in the throat.” Those two daughters of mine really did it this time.

“You look so pretty, Nut-Nut.” Melly clapped her hands and Tai nodded, approving her work.

My baby had some skilled hands. I damn sure thought Noonie would have a forehead stacked with Eco-Styler Gel, but she didn’t. The part in the middle was straight and the flyaway hairs she had earlier were laid down.

“Let me see.” Standing, Noonie walked over to the mirror behind the counter. Ray-Ray and JT kept quiet, watching her every move. “Dang, Melly. You did the damn thing. It looks good, girl.” Noonie ran her hands through her hair, touching the edges of her scalp.

“It won’t come off this time. I used the good stuff.” Melly smiled with pride while her partner in crime was singing, “*my hair, it don’t move*”.

“Alright, little ladies. Say goodbye to everyone so we can go.” I wanted to be gone by the time Noonie realized that her lace front wouldn’t be coming off...ever. Once we got in my truck and drove a mile from my shop, I had to ask them, “Where did y’all get that Guerilla Glue from?”

“I saw it next to Mr. Earl’s mechanic cart and remembered the video we watched on Tiktok where the girl sprayed it on

her hair. I asked JT if I could use it and she said yes. Did we do something wrong?” Melly told it all and JT played dumb, and now I had an employee with a guerilla glued on lace front. I needed to hit my lawyer up and see if those were grounds for her to try and sue me.

“Next time don’t listen to JT. I don’t care what she says, ignore her, and don’t ask to do anybody else’s hair. Y’all hear me?”

“Yes, Papa.” They sang together.

I never imagined myself being a single parent, let alone a father at all but here I was raising three kids on my own and co-parenting another. Despite the circumstances I loved it. Loved my kids so much regardless of how much they acted like me and gave me a run for my money. I prayed for every one of them and God gave them to me.

My sisters-in-law, Massey, and London were a blessing. Those days when I feared I wasn’t raising my girls right, one of them stepped in and redirected my steps.

London was still living on the compound and took my girls under her wing. They loved them some Ms. London. She was fashion, makeup, and prissy – all the things they loved. Keatyn had always been my soft spot, giving me a taste of what it would be like to have a sister. London was like that, but I looked at her more like my baby sister.

Besides being all girly, she was smart as hell and was the reason I decided to switch gears and try my hands at music. One day I was over her house picking up the girls and she was playing music by an underground rapper, LJ, out of Lauderhill on SoundCloud. Dude reminded me of Rod Wave with how he used his hurt and pain to connect with his fans. She mentioned that she’s been trying to get Landon to listen to his stuff, but

he wouldn't because he wasn't ideal for his new mainstream label.

His rejection to a true artist kinda rubbed me the wrong way. I knew plenty of dudes and females in the hood that could sing, rap, spit poetry, and play ball better than a lot of these so-called celebrities.

A few days went by before I asked Dre to break the music industry down to me. He knew his shit and told me everything I needed to know. Since I already knew Kellon and Khiver Cambridge, I hit them up asking what I needed to do to get started and the rest became history.

“When we go in here, don't touch nothing. Don't bother nobody. Sit down and be quiet. You understand me?”

Every day we came to KC Boxing facility I had to give these two the same speech. If I didn't, they'd find their way on the other side of the gym asking to braid somebody's hair, hiding water bottles, or talking trash for no reason.

I literally created two female versions of me.

“Yes, Papa.” Melly thought I didn't see her big head tail roll her eyes. Tai high-fived me and got out the truck.

Purses in hand, they walked inside the boxing gym with so much sass that I had to stop and blow out a deep breath. I was not built for them growing up to be teenagers. *Lord give me strength.* I'd hate to ship them off to boarding school when they started smelling themselves, but it was either that or give them a Boosie fade or a mullet haircut.

“Papa, look. Cashy is in the ring.” Tai took off running with Melly behind her.

My steps slowed the closer I got to the ring. Seeing Cashton in his element always left me in a state of shock,

feeling like I was watching a reincarnated version of Amell. His lasered focus. The way he studied his opponent. How he favored his left hand over his right, though he wrote righthanded.

Out of everything that happened over the summer, one thing that I wasn't prepared for and still trying to come to grasps with was his change.

"What's up." I sat next to Amell who held Omari in his lap. My nephew was getting big and chunky. He stood on Amell's lap mimicking Cashton's moves, bobbing his body around and swinging his little fist.

"He's doing good today." Amell nodded towards Cashton.

One of the hardest parts of fatherhood I've been experiencing is walking in humility when it came to my son. Part of me blamed myself for his change of attitude because it didn't become noticeable until he decided to take a metal bat to my kneecaps. Part of me always saw it but ignored it, hoping that what I saw brewing behind his eyes as a young boy was only a phase and it would pass on.

"It's okay to cry, Cash." He and I were standing over the burial site where the city workers laid Noelani's casket in the ground.

Had it not been for the girls I would have feed her to Keisha or had her cremated, but Krishna said to think about my kids. Think about the girls and how they might want to visit her gravesite since they didn't know what really happened.

Instead of a full funeral, I skipped all those steps and had her ass buried in the middle of a white catholic graveyard. She didn't have family and the one niece she did have was in a Walmart bag beside her body. Cassidy's ass went straight in

the fire to get cremated. I wasn't paying for two caskets. Hell no. One was good enough.

"Why would I shed tears for someone who didn't love me? She stopped being my mother long ago. Her love for me is no different than how your mother loved you. I was born to help her and now she's passed on. I won't cry over that." His small shoulders lifted and dropped so effortlessly that I stood there stunned.

His reply made me stumble a little. Throat became dry from his stone-cold eyes bearing into my soul. I stared down at my son with a slightly opened mouth unsure of what to say.

"I read a lot. Uncle Amell is always sending me scriptures and in Deuteronomy, it talks about a man having a stubborn and rebellious son that doesn't obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother." He turned to face me head on, hands in the pockets of his black jeans. Head tilted and face relaxed. "When they chastise the man, he doesn't listen, so they take him to the elders of the city for judgment and he is judged and stoned to death. Are you going to kill me?"

What the fuck?

Scratching my head, I looked around the burial site for the hidden cameras or something because this had to be a joke. Ain't no way in the world my eleven-year-old son is having a conversation with me like he's a grown man on death row.

I wasn't a fool to believe that Noelani drowned because water got in her colostomy bag. That might have worked on my girls but that was it. I tried not to think too far into what happened because I didn't want to sit with the reality that my son, my child killed his mother.

Noelani lived to see another day because I wanted her to suffer and die a slow miserable death. Yes, I could've shot her that day when Cassidy hit her in the stomach. I've had my fair share of opportunities to end her life but after seeing her lying there on the plexiglass of Keisha's cage, I wanted her to suffer long like I had suffered.

Have her living in fear not knowing when I was going to kill her but always have the hair on the back of her neck raised and chills covering her skin because she lived in fear.

"I know you aren't." His tone wasn't condescending but void of any emotions. "Uncle Amell tells me that I'm too young to understand why you allowed her to live as long as she did, but I acted on your behalf because you wouldn't. All my life you've taught me the importance of protecting the family and I did exactly just that – protected the family. I know you're disappointed in me and that's okay. One day I hope you can forgive me."

Knowing that he killed Noelani and his reasoning behind it, I felt like the biggest failure ever.

This type of failure I felt surpassed what I felt for my marriage and running the cartel. The more it sank in that my eleven-year-old son poisoned his mother with a damn cupcake all because I moved too slow for him, how could I not feel less than a man? He didn't feel protected enough, so he moved on his own in order to protect himself? To protect his sisters?

When I sat out by my porch late at night, high out of my mind, it was because I needed the guilt and pain to stop. I needed the knife he stabbed in my chest and carved up to my throat to dislodge itself from me. My eleven-year-old son acted because I didn't. Whereas I thought I was doing something sporty by teasing death over Noelani's head, his ass

was plotting. Plotting and losing respect for me at the same time.

Then to make the shit worse, he asked to live with Amell.

Asked to live with him because he needed to process his thoughts and my brother was the only one who understood him. I cried like a fucking baby. I mean that little nigga brought me to my knees in my closet.

Here I am thinking I fixed all my problems. Killed those responsible for what happened to Coco. Fixed my relationships with Massey and her mom. Put an end to the bullshit Noelani started and revamped the cartel with my brothers. I even got drunk off Belaire with Atlas in celebration for ending the summer good despite how it started.

Sike my motherfucking berries.

“He’s also learning to channel his anger from his heart to his hands.” Bishop Cambridge sat next to me. “A few of the older kids were teasing him because he doesn’t say much. He kept quiet, stood by watching. Once his hands were wrapped up and he stepped in that ring, whew.” He whistled shaking his head. “Your son is a natural beast and if he continues, he’s going to make history.”

After that night I cried myself to sleep in my closet, I woke up to Amell sitting on my bed. Knowing that he sensed something was off with me and had come to check on me, I broke down again. I barely made it a whole day without crying and I couldn’t understand why.

He never laughed or clowned me for being emotional. He never made me feel silly as a man for crying. He asked me one question – “Are you open and willing to accept my help?”

Off old habits, I took that as him wanting to go around town shooting whoever hurt my feelings. Once I shook that off and said yes, he stepped out to make a phone call, and then an hour later Bishop Cambridge was sitting across from me in my closet explaining to me why I couldn't shake the crying spells I was going through.

Growing up having to suppress my feelings and my emotions because it was labeled as weak, all those years of buried trauma had boiled over and this was my soul crying. He asked me what I was doing or thinking about to trigger it and I told him all about Cashton.

Having this man explain that my soul was grieving for my son because my inner child was crying out to him to *not* go down the same path as I did. I may not have been the one who took the brunt of our beatings as kids or the one who finally killed our father, but I was present. Present and often on the receiving end of his beatings.

My inner child that I haven't let go of was crying because it didn't want Cashton to follow in my steps, and my adult self was grieving over our pride and heart being crushed because of his reasoning for doing what he did to Noelani.

"Is he still showing interest in boxing? I don't want him to feel like we're forcing him to do it." My eyes hadn't peeled away from Cashton's form and quick feet moving around the ring.

"His interest has turned into a passion. That will take him far. How are you feeling today?" Bishop asking me that question every day was going to take some getting used to. I don't know but for some reason it made me feel soft and angry at the same time.

It always took me a few seconds, sometimes minutes, to answer him because my natural reaction was one of defense and protection. Defending myself from having to put my hard exterior away and allow myself to be vulnerable. Putting my protective nature aside because the only person I've ever allowed to see me at my weakest was Amell, and it was taking me some time to trust anyone outside of that.

“Managing for the most part. Testing out different business ventures.” I stretched out my legs already feeling the anxiety build-up of being uncomfortable. “I. Uh. I'm going to do what you suggested. Twice a week it's you and me.”

It always amazed me that he went from running the streets with Mitch when they were younger to being a preacher of a mega church. A preacher that toted a pistol in the pulpit and drove one of the sickest droptop Chevys in the county. “Preciate you for trusting me.” He held his fist out towards me.

Agreeing to meet with him two days out of the week wasn't an easy choice. My life had flipped upside down and hadn't made a move to right itself. After speaking with Bishop that day in my closet and talking with Amell days later, it's like I had this revelation of what was happening. Kinda freaked me out a bit, but I've been around Amell long enough to know when our seasons were changing.

Up until now my big brother has been my voice of reason. The person I looked up to and sought guidance from. I owed that man my life and I'd do anything to protect his.

However, where I was mentally and emotionally, he had to pass the torch over to someone else who had more wisdom and knowledge to help reorder my steps. That someone was Bishop.

Cashton treated my house like he was a distant out-of-town cousin visiting and I don't like it. Coming over with a bag and leaving with a bag, hell no. Ringing my doorbell instead of using his key. My house was his house, and I was determined to do any and everything for him to feel like he could feel safe with me. That I'd always protect him.

I got rid of all the tangible problems in my life now I had to work on my internal issues to be better not just for myself but for my kids.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

M^{assey}

COLLEGE GIRLS WERE nothing but skanks. Skanks in lashes longer than a bird's wings. Skanks wearing shorts tight enough to give them yeast infections around mothers, fathers, and grannies. Skanks cheering and shouting for number fifteen. Posting pictures they stopped him for on their social media pages with heart eyes, purple hearts, and pregnant emojis. Hoes that were seconds away from catching these hands and all ten of my toes.

“Tell Papa which one you wanna tag team first. How about that weird looking one that drew her brows on and cocked eyed?” If I ever needed a ride or die partner I could always count on my daddy.

Finally, after four long quarters, three and half hours of watching the All-American game, it was over, and PJ was officially an All-American player.

My baby broke records and made new ones. His entire family plus every Kalmin showed up and showed out in San Antonio, Texas. Even my mom, Mr. Dre, and Grandpop came. Mr. Pacino and Papa rented two mega mansions that were

right next door to each other. The houses were so big that we all had a room to ourselves.

Since PJ spent two weeks out here before the game practicing with his new teammates, we ended up coming in three days before the game. That was the longest time we've ever spent apart. We Facetimed as often as he could, and he made sure to text me good morning and good night every day.

This morning I woke up so excited to finally get to see him and wear the custom outfit my mom had made for me. However, I ended up ditching my flea market spray painted shorts and tank top for the surprise outfit PJ had Luna buy me.

A replica of his All-American jersey turned into a jersey dress with matching platform Chuck Taylors that had his number and name on them. I already had my hair braided in the feed-in braids he loved to see me in with my new bamboo earrings that had my name in the middle and matching open-faced grill like his.

My boo made sure I was representing him to the 'T'.

What I didn't expect were the flock of cows trying to get his attention. My mom and aunts thought it was cute and funny that he had a fan club. I'm still waiting on the joke because wasn't nothing about it funny. Since PJ had committed to Alabama a few of their football coaches and players came out to see him play. They brought along groupie trash too.

"Mace and I can definitely take them over there with the blonde hair and heels." Luna wasn't with the groupies flocking her brother either.

We were waiting outside the arena for the players to come out and so were the fans. Is this what I had to look forward to?

It's one thing dealing with high school girls that openly flirted with him knowing that we were together but college girls?

Next year he'll be a freshman enjoying his first year of college and I'd still be enjoying my senior year of high school. Then it wasn't like we were going to the same college.

Why was this so hard?

Or was I making it hard?

He's my first relationship. I wanted more time together before the long-distance uncertainty started.

"Champ." Mr. Pacino yelled seeing his twin of a son walk out looking exhausted but smiling wide. I thought the game officials would make him take out his grill, but they let him wear it and with every touchdown he made, he gave the cameras and fans a wide view.

He bounced from arm to arm receiving hugs and congratulations from all of us. Wanting to be last, I stood back waiting anxiously. My mom and Dre were the last before he got to me. Dropping his gym bag, he stood in front of me biting his lip sizing me up. Taking my hand in his he twirled me around making me laugh.

The butterflies in my stomach were going crazy. "Take a few pictures of me and my baby." He handed his phone to Luna. "Come here, girl." Right in front of his family and mine, this boy hugged and kissed me as if we were alone. He kept it minor compared to how he normally sucked my lips off my face.

"Yass. Let these groupies know who you belong to." Luna was so damn loud, but I was here for it all. All these girls with hearts in their eyes needed to stay on the sidelines where they belonged.

“Pacino, man, get your orangutan looking son. He ain’t got no respect. Coco, get your fast ass daughter.” Papa was going to have a head full of grey hair. If he was stressing about me and PJ, then I could only imagine how crazy he was going to be when Tai and Ameliana were old enough to start dating.

After our mini photoshoot, we went back to the house where his parents had food catered for everyone. Several times Mrs. Capone apologized to me and for the sake of my relationship with her son, I accepted all of them. Blame it on a character flaw I inherited from my Papa, but once somebody wronged me, I was done with them. Just because my mom awoke from her coma reborn with a whole new view on life didn’t mean I had to.

We ate good, listened to music, and celebrated the night with shots. PJ didn’t have a limit but of course I did. Ma told me that two were my limit, but Papa said I could have four. I tapped out at two, wanting to be somewhat clear headed when I talked to PJ. After we helped clean up the kitchen, he and I went out back by the pool to listen to music and talk.

“Why do you have me saved in your phone as Roni? Is that a secret code name or something? Don’t want your fan club to know about me.” I sounded insecure as hell but oh well. Seeing all those girls fawn over him made the reality of how our worlds were about to change next year sink in.

Sitting on the ledge of the pool with our feet in the water, he rested a hand on my thigh, and I kept swaying back and forth to the music. Smiling, high as hell from smoking with the men, he leaned down and started singing ‘Roni’ by Bobby Brown. “You’re my tender Roni. Anything else you wanna know?”

“Yes, there is one last thing I want to know.” I tried to stay focused and not start pining over him but he made it so hard. Him singing to me sounded like angels whispering heaven’s promises in my ear.

“Talk to me, Roni.” He rubbed his nose along my jaw.

“Why-why...” I cleared my throat. “Why haven’t you asked me to homecoming?”

My mom said I was wasting my breath and doing too much since I was his girlfriend and there would be nobody else he’d go with. Still, my extra self wanted him to verbally ask me. He hasn’t said nothing about going, what colors he wanted to wear, or anything. Granted it was his homecoming and not mine, I wanted it laid out in black and white.

“You always doing the most.” He smirked, leaning back singing along to the music.

See what I mean.

Every time I brought the subject up, he gave me an answer I didn’t like or brushed past it. “What’s so hard about telling me that you don’t want to go with me? If you have somebody else in mind, then say that!” Ughhh I hated being the insecure girlfriend. I ain’t never been this type but I also never been in love either.

“What you wanna do tomorrow? My Pops said everybody isn’t leaving until Sunday, so we have a whole day to ourselves.”

“Are you going to be faithful to me when you go away to college? I saw the way those girls were acting at the game, so I already know they’re going to be worse when you get to Alabama. I’ve never done long-distance but I’m willing to try but I also will be okay if you want to break up once you

graduate.” By the time I vomited all my fears out, I wanted to smack myself in the forehead. No more shots and secondhand smoke for me.

He kept bobbing his head to the music, eyes narrowing as he looked at me. Those kissable lips of his disappearing in his mouth as he stared at me. “You think I’m going to cheat on you once I get to college?”

The self-inflicted pain I felt in my chest made my eyes burn. I didn’t want to believe or think anything. These thoughts were driving me crazy, and I guess I just wanted him to ease my mind. “I don’t know what to think, PJ. I... agghhhh.” I went from sitting next to him to being pushed in the pool. “What the hell? Why did you do that?” I shrieked grabbing ahold of the ledge.

“Did you find it?” He asked with a frown.

“Find what, jerk?” Every time I tried pushing myself out of the pool, he pushed me back in. “PJ, stopppp.”

“I’m not stopping a thing until you search the bottom of the pool to find your damn mind.”

Smooth like butter, he glided his way into the pool releasing his locs looking like a spartan warrior. Goodness, this boy was so damn fine, and he was all mine. Hooking his arm around my waist, our chests meshed together. Moving on their own, my legs and arms wrapped around him.

“I’m scared, PJ. Scared that you’ll go to Alabama and find a college girl and fall in love.” My heart was beating so fast. Mouth became dry and eyes started to water.

Wrapping his arms tight around my waist, he looked down at me I swear I saw our future together. Him in the NFL, us married with kids. Maybe that was my imagination, but it still

felt real. “How can I fall in love with another girl when my heart already belongs to you?”

Ooop...pause the beat.

Did he just say...

“You...”

“Yes.” He kissed my nose. “I love you, Massey.

Hugging his neck, I closed my eyes and whispered the words back. “I love you too. So much, PJ, that I’m scared of losing you when I just got you.”

He kept trying to pull me back to see my face, but I held on tighter and tighter. “I’ve waited too long to do some dumb shit by messing around on you. Yeah, we’re young and whatnot, but I don’t want anybody else, Massey. I try to show you every day that you’re my heart, my girl.”

We drifted through the warm water of the pool, him holding me while I was all in my feelings sniffing and carrying on. “If you want me to, I’ll take back my commitment to Alabama and go to UF. They offered me the same full-ride scholarship, so I’ll be good.”

“Absolutely not.” I reared my head back so fast. He was so serious and the fact that he would change colleges just for me...I needed to keep my mouth shut more often. “No, PJ. We’ll make it work. Just promise me that you’ll talk to me if you’re feeling pressured or something, okay?”

“You are talking about me but what about you?” When he started smirking, I knew he was only running his mouth.

Pacino Luciano Jr. wasn’t, nor would he ever be worried about another boy getting my attention or taking his place.

Resting my forehead against his, I exhaled kissing his nose. "I'm all in. It's you and me."

"What the hell?" He released me holding his head. A football floated by us making me look around to see who threw it.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. I was ten seconds from drowning you, Tarzan. Massey, get out the pool before you catch pneumonia." Papa yelled from the third-floor balcony. This crazy man.

Helping me out the pool, we walked to the back sliding glass door where Luna handed us towels. "Aye," PJ called after me right as I stepped inside the house. "It's always going to be you and me." He kissed me, leaving me standing there breathless.

"Girl, y'all got it bad." Luna teased.

Touching my lips, I closed my eyes and smiled. "You have no idea."

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

C^{oco}

SAM, Morgan, and Brittany.

Those were the three women that I agreed to talk to today. Like me they were once Pearls living under Veronica's roof, not knowing if a better life existed outside of her ruling hand. The ignorant part of me stared at my inbox looking at it fill with messages every day wondering what exactly could I help them with.

Did they need a job? A place to stay? Money? What did I have to offer them? Then I started reading the messages and it became clear what they needed.

Guidance.

Motivation.

A tangible experience with me to see with their own eyes that I had created a life of my own outside of that lifestyle.

Mya even reached out to me and wanted to know if she and I could sit down and talk. Put the past behind us and move on. She had a daughter and a husband she wanted to introduce me too and I wanted Massey to meet her cousin as well.

Here we were, four women, sitting under the gazebo in my backyard sipping mango margaritas and snacking on chips and salsa. Once I told myself that nothing was wrong with hearing them out to see what exactly they wanted to talk about, I reached out to the first three that contacted me and invited them over.

I'd been long gone by the time they got sucked into Veronica's web and became a Pearl. Hearing all the whispered stories about me to Mya confirming them, they reached out, and here we were.

“My problem isn't money or providing for myself. Trust me, if Veronica didn't do anything she made sure I knew how to save and hustle.” We all nodded in agreement with Sam. “My problem is putting this life behind me and not looking at myself in the mirror with shame and disgust. I met a guy last month and we connected instantly. Went on one date and I almost sabotaged it because I haven't unlearned the mentality that he wants an exchange from me for buying me a steak and lobster tail. How do I move on from that?” All the other women agreed, and I sat there blinking.

Whew Lawd.

I don't know what I expected but it wasn't this.

For years I thought it was just me that had this problem. Meeting people, both male and female, and thinking they all wanted something from you. Even when I went off to college and met Keatyn, my initial reaction to her wanting to hang all the time was *what does she want from me?*

Everything about being a Pearl was a business exchange. I give you my time, you give me money. I satisfy your needs and bring your wildest fantasy to life; you give me money.

Though money was the main form of payment, sometimes it went deeper than that, depending on the circumstances.

“Girl, my current boyfriend hates that my past is still attached to me. For instance, he loves to gift me things, right. Sometimes it’s a bag and others it’s something small like a week of love notes with my favorite candy.” We all cooed at Morgan. “Cute as hell, I know, but what isn’t cute is me thinking that he’s only doing it to buy me, buy my love, instead of it being a show of his love language and a gift coming from his heart. Chile, we’re so damn fucked up.” We all laughed because crying wouldn’t solve anything.

Why not laugh?

We made it out.

We were free.

“My issue is trusting a man with me.” Brittany’s soft-spoken voice matched her timid appearance. “Before I became a Pearl, I had just aged out of the foster care system and my caseworker thought it would be good to join this women’s group to help me when it came to my nonexistent social skills. I went from fighting my uncles and cousins off me to being placed in the system thinking they took me from my mom to save me, when that only put me in the eyes of other predators disguised as wholesome families wanting to help a child in need. Then I meet this woman who sold me on a dream of becoming so empowered that it took me years to understand that I went from fighting my attackers to taking their money instead.” Damn, that was some heavy stuff.

Sam’s hazel eyes met mine from across the table. “When I was a Pearl, I felt like I was the queen of the universe only to find out that I was a common whore who received a percentage of my profits. Yeah, Veronica made some big bank

off me. I thought I was worth more than diamonds and rubies. Silver and gold. Only to find out that my worth was reduced to the equivalent of a game card. How do we become who you are now? How do we let go and move on?"

These women thought I had the magic cure to solve all their problems and I didn't.

Was I walking around giving a false narrative that I had life figured out?

I hope not because that wasn't the case at all.

Sipping my margarita slow, enjoying the cool chill flow down my throat, I waited a few before answering as honest as I could. "Why do you have to let go?" They all looked at each other with confusion. "Hear me out, okay" I giggled nervously looking around the table, rubbing my hands over the fabric of my dress.

"We earned every right to feel all the pain and trauma. We earned those scars and bruises, so why do we have to let them go when we earned all those things? For years I blamed myself for what Veronica and Stacey did to me. Blamed myself for thinking that that was love." I swallowed hard, stomach knotting from the uncomfortableness of feeling too exposed. Too vulnerable.

"I don't know if I'm explaining this right or not but holding onto my past turned me bitter, but it also motivated me to keep pushing forward. Going backwards wasn't an option. Just how I slept with those men for money and jumped at Veronica's beck and call, I slept with my pain and trauma in hopes of it turning into rainbows and skittles." Dropping my shoulders and head in frustration, my eyes became watery from feeling like this was all a waste of time.

These women were searching for something that I couldn't give them because I had yet to understand what I had done that was so special. After leaving Veronica I started messing around with a married man and got pregnant. Where is the healing in that? I left one traumatic situation and jumped in bed with another.

This felt so much easier when I talked to Dre about it than talking to them. I knew these meetings weren't random or done to waste our time but sitting before them and hearing their problems, I felt useless. Felt like I had nothing to contribute. How is it that I found confidence and excitement explaining it but sat with barely any words that made sense?

Lord, I need help.

“Look, I know you look at my life and think that I made some big grand escape and turned my life around but that is far from the case.” Lifting my head, I took several deep breaths before looking into their eyes.

“Hey.” Grabbing my hand, Brittany scooted her chair over and wouldn't speak until I gave her my attention. “Forgive us if we came on a little too strong.” My bashful smile made hers widen. “We're not looking for a miracle, Courtney. We just want to know what got you to the moment mentally that you said you could do this. That you could continue living your life and not feel shame. How have you unlearned and unpacked the trauma to where it doesn't play a role in your relationships?”

My aha moment...I got it now.

“Thank you for clarifying because...whew chiille.” I fanned myself making them laugh. “Y'all don't understand how helpless I've been sitting here not knowing how to give you what you're looking for.”

“The only thing I really want is the support.” Sam’s eyes became teary. “People that I thought were my friends, they don’t understand. All they hear and see is that I had sex with rich men for money. Forget all the mental manipulation I endured. Forget those women playing on my low self-esteem and lack of self-worth, using all my flaws for their gain.” When she said all of that we all had our own puddle of tears in our eyes.

“I want to love myself again without feeling like trash.” Morgan cried. “I’m a grown ass woman who willingly did everything asked of me. Why did I never stop myself? Why didn’t I ever see the wrong in it until it was blasted all over TV? Am I that broken on the inside, was I searching that low for love and validation that I lowered my self-worth for a fraud?”

Giving ourselves a moment to feel and cry, I silently prayed that they would see better days. “My moment of *knowing* I had the strength to move past that life was when Stacey saw more value in money than my safety. Being a participant in a client raping me and willing to cover for him. Yeah, that really did it. Mind you this is the same woman who slept with my high school boyfriend just to prove that all men were dogs and were only good for their deep pockets.”

I refused to say God rest the dead when it came to Stacey and Veronica. I hopped wherever they were, they burnt and suffered just as they made all these women suffer.

“I went from knowing I had strength to actually living it once I had my daughter. Granted at the time I was dealing with a heavy soul tie to my past that had me stuck to a man that isn’t worth a damn, but as she got older, seeing how my actions were affecting our relationship and the way she looked

at me, I knew I had to change because I refused for my child to grow up feeling how I did towards Stacey. It may seem cliché, but I found strength in praying. Seriously I did because who on this earth could help me at that point? Nobody.

“When I was raped, I prayed for God to help me, to transform my life and he has. Along the way I had to face those demons I tried to silence by ignoring them. Moving on was one thing, but when I met the man of my dreams.” I shook my head moaning causing them to shout and clap. “First time we met I warned him to stay away from me because I was too broken inside. How is it that I felt so strong to be a mother but once love got involved I punked out?”

“Isn’t that how it always is though?” Morgan moved her purple coils out of her face. I loved her large afro. It fit her whole Afrocentric persona. “We say we’re okay. We say we’re healed but the minute God places a man who sees our worth and value in our paths, we clam up because this man looks into the depth of our souls. Sees all the dirt and filth, wanting to clean it out but we won’t let him because we’re used to holding on to trash. That trash is our comfort zone.”

“Girl, you better preach.” Sam high-fived her across the table.

“That’s my thing too I guess.” Brittany shifted in her seat. “There’s this guy that has chased me for months, but I won’t allow him to get close because when he looks at me, he *looks* at me and that scares me. I even told him about my past as a Pearl and do you know what this man said?” We all leaned in wanting to know. “He said that pressure busts pipes and that his love and my willingness to be open and to trust him will make a diamond worth wearing for a better tomorrow. That he

is my reflection and I need to stop being afraid to look in the mirror when I need help.”

“Girl...”

“Damn.”

“Whew.”

I wonder if her guy was related to Dre because that sounded like some deep stuff he’d say.

“My advice to that is to hold onto him *only* if you’re willing to put forth the effort. Do we need counseling? Show me one person in America who doesn’t. Iyanla writes all those self-help books and can talk a good game, but sis needs to get her house in order too. However, if you feel that you’re just not ready for a relationship yet, communicate that. If he’s willing to stand beside you now without the soul work, then I’m sure he’s more than willing to be what you need him to be during the process.”

“I agree with Courtney.” Sam tipped her glass my way. “We’re not some group of vagabond women who are the scum of the earth that don’t deserve happiness, love, and second chances. Regardless of how society wants to paint us, we’re all beautiful masterpieces accepting our flaws and becoming better women.”

She turned her golden hazel eyes over to me. “Please don’t feel like you have nothing to offer us because you do. This,” she pointed to each of us. “Inviting us into your sacred space and carving out time to talk to us is more than enough. I want the sisterhood more than anything. The support as I pick up my pieces and try again.”

“Same.” Morgan dabbed her eyes. “A therapist won’t understand me, but you can because you’ve walked where I

came from. It's the reassurance of knowing that you're there when I'm at my lowest and you can talk me out of that dark hole because you once sat in that same spot. We know you have a life. We know you have a child that needs you and a fine man to please." They all giggled. "All we're asking for is support if you can spare."

And here I thought they were asking for a memoir of my life and the formula to my breakthrough.

Releasing a content sigh, I smiled and nodded. "Absolutely. Whatever you need from me, I'm here for all of you."

SURPRISE DATE NIGHTS were starting to become my favorite.

I thought my creativity in the romance department was something to brag about. Ha, Dre took romance and imagination to a whole new level. One random day months ago, way before my accident, I mentioned I wanted to go to Japan to have some real authentic hibachi food. This man and his elephant memory remembered and surprised me tonight by transforming his entire backyard into our own little piece of Japan.

We had the red and gold decor everywhere. Red and gold paper lanterns strung all about. Cherry Blossom vines weaved around the tables and chairs. Chabudai table and plush pillows for us to sit on.

He even took it a step further and had a custom kimono Yukata Cosplay dress with a super high split, wooden clogs,

and socks made for me. He wore a red and black Tai Chi suit and I've been drooling since.

I kept wondering why Massey was insisting on twisting the top of my hair in Chinese sticks. Everything made sense including him being the one to do all the cooking. I for sure thought he'd hire a Japanese chef, but my man had some skills and by the time he finished his hibachi presentation, I tipped him a cool twenty dollars.

The ferocity of Dre's passion was frightening and exhilarating simultaneously. I seemed to be more afraid of myself than of him. Fearful of hurting him because of my sometimes selfishness and these mood swings since my accident. With my past lovers, I never expected anything past the fun free stages, but with Dre, I knew it was a lifetime commitment. There was no in-between.

"I'm not ordinary, Courtney." He had that right. Never doubted it from the first time we met. "Far from it. Be my muse of art, and I promise to paint all your dreams into color with my love." My eyes started to sting as I felt myself losing the strength I'd had on my feelings.

Dinner had been eaten, wine had been drunk and now he and I were sitting on a Japanese blanket across from each other having this intense intimate moment of staring into the eyes of the other, staring into our souls.

He asked me a question about where I saw us in six months, and I honestly couldn't answer it without bringing in my new insecurities. Not being able to walk like I used to, my body and hormones betraying me in the worst way possible by not getting on board to have sex with Dre, I hated it and dreaded when he'd begin to hate it too.

“I want to show you something.” My wheelchair stayed by the front door. He’s been carrying me everywhere and I wasn’t at all against it. I loved being in Dre’s arms. Loved feeling his strength wrapped around me.

When he flicked on the lights to one of the guestrooms on the other side of his house, I gasped. “Dre, where did you get these paintings?” My eyes were wide as I pointed to the stool in the middle of the room. I wanted to twirl around and take in each painting.

“I got the talent from God, and the creation came from my hands.” He leaned against the wall.

My head snapped around towards him. “This...this is you? You painted these?” I knew he was good, but not this good. I knew Dre could sketch illustrations for his comics, put to paint full canvas murals, he once again blew my mind.

“Yes ma’am.” He chuckled at my amazement.

My hands flew to my mouth. “Wow. Dre, these are beautiful. Edgy but good.”

“Thank you.” He walked over towards where I sat. “When I can’t articulate how I feel I use art to express myself.” As he marveled at his art, I marveled at him. Dre had so many hidden talents and I was so grateful that he found safety and peace to share them with me.

“You should let me paint you.”

Pause the beat.

“Dre, I can take a million and one selfies, but in front of a real artist? You trying to paint me would make me nervous.”

“I make you nervous now?” He leaned down closer taking advantage of my shyness.

I blinked rapidly and licked my lips. “Yes.”

“I promise I won’t ever hurt you, Coco. Never will I ever intentionally hurt you. You understand that right?” I nodded. “I have another surprise. Are you still hungry?”

“I smelled apple pie when I came in. Can we go in the kit...Mmmm, Dre stoppp.” I moaned as he brushed his lips along the sensitive spot on my neck.

He played unfairly.

So unfair.

He knew playing with my spots only intensified the craving I had for him. Either he was giving in to my wants and desires, figuring out how to hang me from the ceiling fan and do whatever he pleased with my body regardless of if my legs wanted to cooperate or not, or he was about to give me a severe case of the blue coochie blues.

I squealed as he picked me up and carried me up the stairs. “Andre Joseph, you better not drop me.” I tightened my arms around his neck.

Yes, it was happening.

The wait and torment would come to an end tonight.

I needed all the yoni gods and goddesses to speak life and healing over my body because I was feigning for my man. Feigning for his loving.

He used his broad back to open his bedroom door and once again he surprised me. Candles, wine, fruits, and my favorite sweets were laid out around the room. We skipped the desserts and went straight to the bathroom where he ran a hot bath for us in his garden tub. We bathed in a lover’s silence. Tonight, I experienced another intimate part of Dre. He catered to me.

My whole being was flooded with desire with each word spoken from his lips as he washed my body clean.

Back in New York when we met Dre destroyed the brick wall that I had built so carefully to avoid crossing the lines and jumping headfirst into the dangers of love. The first time we made love in his hotel room a shift occurred, and emotions became exposed. The feelings he awakened in me were much more than sexual desire. It was a need for intimacy. The need to feel past the physical, but mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

All those feelings were more prevalent today than almost a year ago.

Bare-chested and glistening, Dre sat wearing cotton bottoms giving me the perfect view of his v-cut. Just as we sat before the other outside, we were sitting the same on his bed with me dressed only in one of his t-shirts that I planned on stealing. Sleeping in his scent was the perfect contact high.

“Thank you for all of this.”

He raised my hand. “Stay with me tonight?”

Yesss.

I masked my excitement well. Or I hoped I did.

“Of course.”

His hands rested casually on my thighs, causing my flesh to prickle. “Me asking you to stay the night is because I want you close to me. I want to feel you in my arms through the night. Wake up to your beautiful face. I want a night of intimacy. Can I have that?” His voice caused my knees to knock.

Taking a long breath, I opened my eyes when I felt the bed shift. He dropped those pants making my body heat all over. I became breathless taking in the naked chocolate Adonis. Warmth spread through me as I openly – disrespectfully-lustfully drooled over the well-hung king inhabiting the space between his legs. My heart nearly stopped as he moved my way.

His muscle looked bigger than the last time I took it for a spin. It looked heavier, wider. Before Dre my poor vagina had never crossed paths with a blessing of that magnitude. Watching him come closer to me, nose almost touching mine. His eyes darkened with each whiff he took of my scent.

My body sizzled the closer he got. Heat coursed through my veins when he scooped me up in his arms. As he sat in the middle of the bed with me straddling him, my body ache heightened. Becoming painful as our most intimate parts kissed for the first time in what seemed like forever.

His eyes glowed with a savage inner fire. I wanted the bedroom bully to awaken. I didn't want the slow lovemaking. Heck, I didn't want the foreplay. I just wanted him to put out the burning fire that brewed between my legs.

“Help me,” I purred wanting him to raise my hips and sink me down on his muscle.

“No need to rush. I'm yours, baby. We have all night.”

Was he serious?

I waited this long, and he still felt the need to prolong my wants and needs.

“Dre, honey, sweetie, we can do all that foreplay stuff later. Tonight, right now, I want to feel you. Please let me feel you.”

I had no problem begging for the ‘D’. He’d seen me at my worst. All my shyness exited the building long ago.

His hands moved gently down the length of my back. One hand slid across my silken belly, and the other gripping my waist. My breasts surged at the intimacy of his touch. The pain in my groin grew.

“Dre,” I whimpered when he traced his fingertip across my bottom lip.

“You talk too much, Coco.” He pulled my bottom lip into his mouth.

“You move too slow,” I mumbled against his lips.

Feeling the vibration of his chuckle under me, watching his eyes lustfully gaze over my body, soon he wouldn’t need to penetrate me. That fire in the pit of my belly was close to erupting and then this man had the nerve to whisper “mine” in my ear.

“Then take me then. Have me pl...” My words ended on an exhale as he thrust his hips up and sank into the cleft between my legs. Hypnotized by the feeling of his girth, I prickled under his fingertips. If he promised to shut me up this way every time I ran my mouth, I’d talk trash all day.

What type of tantric sex was this? In frustration and ecstasy, I closed my eyes. “Open those eyes, baby. Look at me.”

Goodness, what did I do to deserve this torture?

“Baby?” He spoke running his tongue up the length of my neck.

“Yes.” I trembled and tightened my arms around him.

“What do you want from me?”

I leaned back and purposely rolled my eyes for him to see. “To consume me, Dre,” I whined nearly in tears.

He nipped my bottom lip. “I’ll do that and then more. First, tell me what you want from me. I want to be your husband,” He nipped. “Do you wanna be my wife?”

Flag on the field.

Did he just say or ask me what I think he asked me?

Was I ready for marriage?

Could I see myself married and having his babies?

Hell yes I could!

My breathing became labored. Eyes grew low. Heart racing but slowing down at the same time. My body overheated, and that part of my lower abdomen tightened. Chills ran up and down my spine. Sweat formed and ran down the middle of my chest. My throat became dry as I felt him stretch wider and more extended in me.

“This isn’t me proposing but I *need* to know, will you be my wife? Do you want me as your husband?” He asked again.

“Ye...Ye...” I couldn’t speak. Electricity seemed to arc through me with each whiff of his cool breath on my skin. The passion rising in me felt like the hottest fire, clouding my brain.

“Let me help you, Coco.” He nipped my lip. I groaned as I tasted my own blood.

Ohhhhhh I loved when he got kinky with me.

“Dre,” I moaned. My skin tingled. It felt as if it was being pricked with tiny needles.

I could feel the heat of his body course down the entire length of my own. I yielded to the searing need which had been building for months. I moaned in sweet agony when he placed his palm in this spot that awakened the electric charge and created the lightning that zapped between us. Waves of ecstasy throbbed through me.

“To have and to hold.” With each word, I felt as if it was half ice and half flame. His touch. Him feeling me. Only Dre could thrust into me and send me to even higher levels of bliss. “For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health. To love and to cherish. Till death do us part. I want to stand before God and make that vow to you.”

Lawd, he done turned me into one of those women who cry when she orgasms. Experiencing this moment with Dre, our flames burning and souls tying, if he took me to the courthouse in the morning I’d say yes a thousand and one times. Even get his name tatted if he wanted to know my love was real.

Instinctively, my body arched into him. His hands moved magically over me as I fought to keep my cries at bay. My mind tried to fathom how this was happening. My body was ready to betray me and give in to full submission. He snatched my soul the minute he plunged into me and robbed me of my spirit the minute he asked if I’d marry him.

Andre Joseph, he is the pleasure releaser.

“There you go, Coco. That’s it. Give it to me. Let go.” He passionately talked me through my release.

“Yesss.” A tear fell from my eyes. It became too much. The deeper he pressed his hand into my chest and stomach the fiercer my peak grew. The thrust of his hips was a delicious sensation that tipped the iceberg.

“Andre!” I cried out as I gave in, exploding in a downpour of fiery sensations. I wrapped around him tighter smooching my breasts against his rock-hard chest.

His hands moved gently down the length of my back, whispering his love for each part of my body and thanking me for letting go. Slowly he placed me on my back. My vision became blurry, and my limbs weakened as I allowed myself to bask in the vibrations of one of the most explosive orgasms of my life.

I saw it all.

I saw the moon, the sun.

The mountains and the rivers.

He made me see heaven.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

D^{re} “So, what do you think?” Looking over at Darren, who hadn’t said much since we walked inside the house, I tried not to let his silence make me think the worst or cause me to panic.

When he started dabbing his eyes and clearing his throat, the uncertainty I once felt eased off my shoulders. I couldn’t go off Massey’s reaction. She’s been a part of the entire rebuilding process, yet she hadn’t stopped crying since I showed her all the new changes the construction team made this morning.

This moment meant a lot to me. I needed everything to be perfect. I needed everything to be perfect for Coco.

Weeks have passed since Coco sat down with Brittany, Morgan, and Sam. The days leading up to their sit-down Coco was so confident and happy to offer a helping hand in their recovery process of finding themselves. Felt like her purpose in life had finally been mapped out. All that devolved into a pile of weariness and doubt once their talk happened.

While their conversation happened out in her backyard, Massey and I were in the kitchen standing by the closest window listening to what they were talking about. Not to be

nosey and hear their shared horror stories but to know when Coco had enough.

I listened to what the women were saying. I paid close attention to Coco's response and read between the lines of the entire meeting. A few days later I sat down with Darren and Massey, prayed over my idea, and came up with the name for her support group because that's exactly what it sounded like they needed – support.

A sisterhood.

A phoenix rising.

These women, Coco included, emerged from their tribulations stronger, smarter, and more powerful. They survived. They weren't weak walking around without purpose. Instead of succumbing to the cruelty heaped upon each of their shoulders and giving up, they shook themselves free of past ashes. Rising to new levels of success and telling the world to kiss their collective asses.

Each of these women are still beautiful and powerful because they survived when most probably couldn't.

That's what I got from their conversation.

That's the formula I used to come up with the name, creating a new business venture for Coco to start walking in her purpose.

Pacino put me in touch with his wife Capone who helped me find the perfect location to use. My vision for Phoenix Rising was more so an all-inclusive spa type of atmosphere. I honestly didn't know what to call it other than an oasis for women to come to relax, get pampered, all the while having girl time while being poured into.

A place where iron would sharpen iron. They come in feeling drained, on the verge of giving up but leave revived. That was the purpose for opting for a house instead of a commercial building.

Giving Coco the space and opportunity to do what Veronica should have done – break the generational curse and actually help women who came looking for guidance. Instead of creating a house of manipulation and abuse, she'd create a sanctuary of reprieve.

That's what I saw for Coco.

Helping those who couldn't help themselves.

What if there was this lavish beach home used to cater to a woman's needs?

Hearing the tranquility of waves crashing, smelling the saltwater, and seeing the sunset. Rooms for them to sleep in if they needed to escape their reality or wanted a weekend staycation. A spa to get pampered. An in-house chef to cook whatever meals are desired. A therapist on-site to help navigate the deep thoughts that were hard to map out on their own. A wellness center for them to work out. Andrea and I had several rehabilitation centers around the country, so I knew how to create one that still felt like a home but served the purpose of helping others heal.

At Phoenix Rising, I wanted Coco and every woman that walked through those front doors to feel peace. To feel like they could be safe with their feelings and thoughts without judgment, all the while being pampered and poured into.

I thought about bringing Coco along during the whole process since it would be her business, but Massey and I agreed that she might get overwhelmed and start making

excuses to push it back until she was walking one hundred percent again and that's not what I wanted. In this moment she was most raw and fragile, the perfect combination to pour into another jaded soul.

"It's...I'm." Darren coughed, clearing his throat. He kept dabbing his eyes along with Massey.

Since the home was fairly new with over twelve-thousand square feet, it wasn't hard at all to transform it to fit the vision I had. In two weeks, walls were knocked down, walls were put up, spa rooms were mapped out, and the café area was in production. Coco had a Pinterest board for everything except one of a dream business, so Massey and I put our heads together and created the perfect color pallet.

A gold champagne color to represent the grown and sexy vibe and owner.

Sage and eucalyptus green for wisdom and calmness.

White and Ivory for new beginnings.

"Mr. Dre, you spent a lot of money on this. I'm not sorry to be all in your pockets either." Massey opened the cabinets in the kitchen. "I love it. I really do. Mama is going to cry for days. She might even give me that little sister I've been begging her to have." She started dancing making me choke.

"Whoa, can we take baby steps first? I want to make your mother my wife before we start procreating." I had to pound my fist against my chest for that one. Coco and I haven't really talked about kids, but I *needed* her to carry my last name before we created a love child. Coco deserved to be a wife before anything else.

"That's what I'm talking about. Make my baby girl a wife before you have her barefoot and pregnant." Darren added in.

“But to answer your question, I think this is amazing. The way you love her is admirable. She’s going to cherish this so much.”

“I appreciate your honesty.” I looked over at Massey and nodded. Waiting for her to take the gift I hid in a cabinet out, I turned back around to Darren. “This house, I want it to mean more than just a luxury beach house. No matter how far Coco tries to run from her past she can’t, so I want to help her change the future. Change the meaning behind being everything taught to her. Do what Veronica should have done.”

Carefully carrying the glass wall plaque, she held it in front of Darren for him to read it. “This is the name Mr. Dre and I came up with for the house. It represents who my mom and those women are now and gives honor to my grandma and the better life she wanted to create. We hope you like it.”

Calligraphy script in white ink, the words *Phoenix Rising – Connie’s House* was printed on the glass wall plaque that would be hung outside by the front door. Though Coco has no memory of her mother, Connie’s fight to give her better life, is an impression on her heart that will never go away. I wanted to honor both Connie and Darren, and Massey thought this would be a perfect idea.

“Wow.” His voice became hoarse, eyes filled with tears. “That’s...mhm.” He cleared his throat, both my eyes and Massey’s were watering. “This is...thank you for honoring my love.”

Hearing Darren and Connie’s love story reminded me so much of how Coco and I met. That instant connection. Feeling like your world had tilted off its axis. Wanting to give her the best version of yourself. Wanting to give her every desire of her heart.

“Yayy, Mr. Dre. We succeed in making one out of the two cry.” Carefully placing the plaque where we had it hidden, Massey came back and hugged her grandpa. “Also, we’re taking a few of those pictures you gave mom and are having them blown up. They’ll be hung all around the house and we’re even dedicating the entire sunroom as hers. It will be called Connie’s Room.”

Seeing his reaction had me excited to see Coco’s. We had another month or so to get the place finished how I wanted before I unveiled it to her. Keatyn was having her annual lingerie extravaganza, Puss and Boots, and I planned on doing it there since all her friends would be present.

“Okay, there is way too much crying going on. How about we move on to lesser important things.” Massey popped her lips rolling her eyes. “Can you give PJ a little help? He’s yet to personally invite me to homecoming and it’s literally around the corner.” She was so much like her mother. Everything had to be black and white, no in-between colors of confusion. We all told her time and time again that he was most likely taking her since they were dating but since he has yet to ask, she didn’t want to assume.

“You teenagers are something special.” Darren chuckled shaking his head. “Wasn’t that the reason he threw you in the pool because you lost your mind and weren’t thinking clearly?”

Gasping and grabbing her chest, this dramatic little girl started whining. “Grandpop, you are violating the code. You’re supposed to be on my side, not his.”

Starting this week Coco upped her physical therapy appointments to twice a day. Her determination to be walking by her birthday in December was something to see. While she

was at therapy, Massey and I hung out after practice. Going to the movies, shooting paintball, or going to Lowe's and picking out color swatches. Bonding with Massey came easy. She's a smart kid that had a mind of her own and I appreciated that she welcomed me into the circle that previously only consisted of her and her mom for so long.

"Anyway, if you need my help with anything let me know. I have to head out. Got a nice thick silver stallion waiting on me." He winked at Massey making her gag.

"What I told you about that? You're going to get worms." She hollered behind him.

"You better hope PJ looks half as good as me when he gets my age."

"If I upgrade your starting line up to better stallions, will you help me with PJ?" When she poked out her lip and started batting her eyes, I knew he was a goner. The kid had the skills to get whatever she wanted, and I've been a victim of her hustle plenty of times.

Resting his hands on hips, Darren side-eyed her. "How do you think you're going to upgrade my stallions?"

Holding up her phone, she opened the Tiktok app. "I've seen those low budget grannies' you mess with. I'm about to upgrade you to the world of Ole Bay seasoned stallions with the good knees Meg hopes she can keep when she gets to be their age. I'm talking about the grey haired stallions on an alkaline diet, drinks fresh green juice every morning, and the booty is naturally plumped."

Leaving them two arguing, I walked out to the back where the infinity pool was being built. Massey's statement wasn't a lie. I invested a lot of money into this place with no second

thought. As a man, it is my responsibility to cover Coco in all aspects, that included covering and protecting her purpose. The only form of payback I needed her to give me was to walk boldly and live her life to the fullest.

“Are you ready to go?” Massey bumped her shoulder against mine.

“Yeah, are you hungry?” Coco had another hour of therapy so I figured she and I would grab something small before picking up her mom.

“A little. Can I drive? Please? Pretty please?” This little girl done lost her damn mind.

After seeing Darren’s new F150 truck and falling in love with all the bells and whistles, I decided to gift myself an early birthday gift and get one myself. Driving a pickup truck in the middle of Manhattan or near my Brooklyn brimstone wasn’t ideal for our city. Rare for inner-city living in New York but out here in Florida, it didn’t make a difference where you lived.

“Come on, Dre. I wanna take you to my favorite hot dog spot to thank you for everything that you’ve done for my mom.” Oh, she was laying it on thick. Even gave her signature pouting babyface.

“Fine.” I sighed already knowing I was going to regret it. “If you wreck my truck, I’m wrecking that Tesla you drive.”

Taking my keys, she ran squealing. “Grandpop, remember what I said. Post a few times a day, use the popular songs, and the gray stallions will flock to you. Hurry up and get in, Mr. Dre. We got places to go and people that need to see me riding fresh and high.”

This girl.

“I’ll pray for you.” Darren chuckled getting into his truck. “Thanks again for everything, Dre. Continue to make my baby girl happy.” He didn’t have to tell me twice. That went without saying. Making Coco happy had become a part of my daily routine. If I slacked, my whole day was thrown off.

I don’t know where Massey was taking me or why I even let her drive. She drove like a bat out of hell. Poor Pete was swerving trying to keep up behind us. Getting her that Jeep for Christmas didn’t seem like a bright idea anymore. She’d turn over with the way she hit corners.

“Whew, see. That wasn’t so bad.” She had the nerve to sigh heavily like she was the one that’s been pressing down on the invisible break, almost ripping my armrest off, and praying for God to not let this girl make us crash since she wanted to play Mario Go-Cart in five o’clock traffic.

“What’s up with you and your mom loving this place so much? The ice cream is good but it ain’t that good.” I don’t know how many weekly trips I made out to Dania Beach to pick up pints of ice cream for Massey and Coco. They loved Jaxson’s like New Yorkers loved pizza.

Shrugging, she tossed me my keys. “I think it’s more so about the ambiance and customer service than anything. The candy store with all the old school candy. Foot-long hot dogs and cheese fries. Can’t beat it if you ask me.” She had a point. Besides the homemade ice cream, the hot dogs and chicken wings were good. Just not good for the consistent weekly orders.

“Hey, Massey.” Such a damn shame. These people knew her by heart. “Who is this nice-looking hunk with you?” Bold in her ogling, the dirty blonde hostess licked her lips and tried

to fix her wrinkled uniform. I appreciated when cougars hit on me, but she wasn't one of those who I found flattering.

“Um. Don't do that. You know who he is, and you know that's my mama's man. Can we have a table for two on the carousel side? Please and thank you.” Sometimes I forgot Massey could get just as sassy as her mother if not more.

Face red in embarrassment, the woman grabbed a few menus and motioned for us to follow her. “My apologies. Please follow me.”

“Yeah, your apologies alright.”

“Aye, don't overdo it.” Though I appreciated her standing up in her mother's honor, she was still a teenager at the end of the day.

“What did I do?” Fake surprised, she tried not to smile but failed. “My bad, Mr. Dre. I don't play about my mama's heart and if one of these thirst buckets tries coming for you, they're catching all this pressure. No ma'am. They ain't messing up my mama's happiness on my watch.”

“Surprise.”

“Happy Birthday.”

So caught up in her thug spiel of defending her mother, I wasn't paying attention to where we were going until all the shouting caught me off guard. Everyone I knew and loved were present.

“Gotcha.” Massey clapped her hands. “I know your birthday is this weekend, but I wanted to celebrate you early. This is the best way I can thank you for loving my mom the way you do. Loving and accepting me the way you do and that's by gathering all your friends and family to celebrate you. I hope you're not mad, Mr. Dre.”

Was she serious?

How could I be mad?

Pulling her into my chest with a headlock, I hugged her tight, welcoming the sting of emotions hitting my eyes and chest at the same time. “Thanks, kid. This means so much.” Placing a kiss on her hair, I silently thanked God for opening her heart towards me because she didn’t have to welcome me into her family. She could’ve kept her heart closed and not accepted me.

My eyes opened locking in on my woman. No matter the time of day, Coco still made my heart skip a beat. Made my stomach knot with nervousness. Made my breathing hitch. Made every muscle in my body react to the beauty that was her.

Releasing Massey, I skipped over all the happy faces and came face to face with my heaven. My love. My grace. My peace. My everything. “Why aren’t you at therapy?”

Instead of answering me, she nodded towards Cassian who came alongside her with Amell. My breathing picked up and my heart slowed watching them place the brake locks in place and helping her stand. When they stepped back, and she took those first few steps my way an unexpected tear dropped.

I wanted to rush over to her and scoop her in my arms, but I knew she had to do this. Her beginning steps were a little wobbly, slow and timid, but she finally found her balance and slowly shuffled to me.

My baby was walking.

She did it.

“Oh my god, Mom.” Massey covered her mouth in shock.

It didn't take her long to reach me. The entire time I watched her this vision of her walking down the aisle towards me to become my wife rocked me to my core. "Coco." That's all I could utter once she made it to my opened arms. I cupped her face running my nose along her smooth chocolate skin. I swear every time my eyes beheld her the only emotion that surpassed all the rest was relief.

Relief that she still chose me.

"I'm so damn proud of you, Cocoa Bean. So damn proud."

She smelled like the best aphrodisiac. Fresh and warm. Like the spice of cinnamon and sweet like honey. How I felt about Coco when she and I met during New Year's Eve, my feelings now intensified and seemed to only grow with each day that passed. My love for Coco edified my growth as a man. Learning to love her in all her seasons became the perfect guide in learning to love myself in my changing seasons.

An even exchange.

She grows and I grow.

We grow together.

"Happy early birthday, baby." Not at all shy that we had a room full of people, she leaned in and branded my lips with hers. Everything about Coco was powerless to resist, and every day my love deepened and intensified for her in the most passionate way. Dropping her chin on my chest, she sighed in pleasure. "You're so potent, Dre. Damn."

"Aight now. We got kids in the room." Cassian brought us back to reality.

"I'll love on you later. Go greet your guests." Her mouth said one thing, but she had no desire to back out of my

embrace and I didn't want her to.

"I love you, baby." I kissed her with a hunger that disguised my outward calm.

"Love you too."

Painfully stepping away, I let my arms fall from her but took my time pulling my eyes away.

"Y'all are so stinking cute." Keatyn mused wiping her eyes.

Finally taking in the entire room, I stumbled a little seeing who all the bodies belonged to. All the Kalmins were present, down from the adults to the kids. Landon, Andrea, and my nephew LJ were here. I laughed a little seeing London and JD standing next to each other. Now I understand where Darren had to run off too. Kellon and his entire family were here. It was a room full of all the people who had become my family.

I had a big family, and I loved every one of them.

"Before we eat and start handing out gifts, I want to steal the show first." Cassian pushed through the crowd with a black velvet rectangle box in hand. Knowing him I'm sure it was a knife or maybe Keisha's teeth.

"For the record, I told him to get you a Nerf gun instead." Atlas stood next to Keatyn rubbing her belly.

"Stop trying to steal my shine." He mugged his brother. "Forget his jealous ass. Happy birthday. You're still square as hell but you got a few thug stripes under your belt." Is that what he called me surviving this summer? Thug stripes?

Untying the finely looped bow, I opened the velvet lid and hollered. "This is sick as hell."

“See. Told you that your ass is still a square. Who in the hell gets a custom made berretta and says that shit is sick?” He took the box so I could hold the heavy steel. “You’re supposed to say that bitch is fucking fantastic.” Cassian was a damn fool.

“I appreciate you. It’s still sick as hell.” A gold and black custom gun with my name scripted on the handle, like I said, sick as hell. “Thank you all for coming. Much love and appreciation.” I meant that from the bottom of my heart.

My past transgressions allowed me the chance at being welcomed into a family who showed how love came easily, regardless of one’s imperfections. We were all imperfectly perfect bonded together.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Massey

I'M NOT AS dramatic as everyone is making me seem. To my elders, it's supposed to be common sense that if I'm the girlfriend then I'm automatically PJ's date to homecoming and prom. Blame it on being a part of Gen-Z. Not to mention I couldn't take everything with PJ at face value. I needed to look him in the eyes, hear the words come out of his mouth to know what to expect and how to move. Maybe I was dealing with a case of teenage insecurities, who knows.

But can we not forget that this is my first relationship.

Hello somebody!

A girl wasn't used to these types of situations.

I think I'm granted a grace period for trial and error.

My junior year volleyball season went by in a blur. I went from summer boot camp to championship games to team MVP. That surprised the heck out of me. When I was on the court it felt like I blocked out everything at each game. Blocked out my personal life, blocked out my relationship

with PJ, and played. Then once the final buzzer went off, I snapped out of it and came back to reality.

Found myself blinking unexpectedly and then being hoisted up on my teammate's shoulders, being praised for scoring the final spiked ball. My mom, Dre, and Papa all saw my fog and questioned me about it, but I told them I was okay. Truly I was. Playing volleyball helped me not to worry and get depressed every time I thought about DJ. I never interacted with my teammates outside of practice but suddenly everyone wanted to befriend me, and I wasn't in the business of being befriended.

Trust me, Ari and the rest of my cousins and siblings were enough.

I was officially #teamnewfriends.

I didn't want a new friend, a new replacement for DJ.

“Guess what? I got some tea for you, but it will come at a cost.”

Before the season was over Ari stayed after school to watch me practice and would ride home with me. Besides her smart mouth, she and I got along well. She rarely asked too many questions and when she did speak, it was worth responding to. I for sure thought she'd start back riding with Aunty Keatyn after my season ended but she didn't.

“And what will it cost me, Ari? I already got you some food from Wendy's.”

Slurping her chocolate milkshake all loud, she burped laughing. “That's true. I guess I can give you this freebie. So, it was brought to my attention that Pacino Luciano Junior, your boyfriend, purchased six homecoming tickets when the limit per student is four. I'm not sure who he bought all those

tickets for but I'm sure your name is somewhere in the bunch."

Six tickets?

Who in the hell was he inviting?

"Who did you hear this from?" Pulling up to a red light, I texted PJ to see what he was doing? His season was almost over but he didn't have practice this week. Usually when he didn't have practice, he and I would be together, but he had SAT tutoring.

ME: What R U DNG after tutoring?

"A few people actually. My last block teacher asked me to grab something from her mailbox in the guidance counselors office. On my way there I overheard these girls talking about how they wish PJ was taking them and how he bought six tickets for six of his hoes. I keep telling you, *we* need to lay hands on a few of these girls so they can respect your relationship." She pushed up her glasses giving me her serious face.

LuvJones: Picking U Up.

LuvJones: We're going out. Be ready by 7. I already asked ur mom and dad.

LuvJones: Wear sumthng that will make my heart stop

LuvJones: & that Good Girl Perfume I like

With my hand covering my mouth, I smiled so hard that my cheek muscles hurt. I didn't fuss when the cars behind me started honking. Date nights with PJ were always an experience. For one, he was super romantic and thought outside of the box. Our dates weren't your typical high school

dates like going to the movies or go-cart racing, though we've done that plenty of times.

PJ would buy blank white canvases from Michaels, have one of his friends draw an outline of a picture, plan a picnic on the beach, and we'll paint and eat watching the sunset. What average teenage boy thinks of things like that?

My PJ.

Like his fine daddy, he loved hanging in the hood with his cousins. We'd ride out in one of his dad's Chevy's and drive through the hood. Nobody messed with him. Nobody at all. Besides, Mr. Pacino made sure his son stayed strapped regardless of whether he had a guard trailing him or not.

"I have a date with PJ tonight. You wanna go shopping with me to find something to wear or do you want me to drop you off at home?" This was one of those moments when I wished I had a friend to go shopping with. I could ask my mom or one of my aunts, but it wasn't the same as having your best friend hyping you and all that fun stuff.

"Ouu yes. We should go to the Promenade out in Coconut Creek. They have some cute boutique stores." Ari's eyes were wide as she nodded with a smile. I'll give it to the instigating little girl, she knew her fashion and well.

ME: Ma, I'm going to the mall with Ari 4 my date.

MomTheeStallion: Ok. Get whatever u like

Shopping without a budget always puts a smile on my face. My parents had me listed on their credit and debit cards as an authorized user since I was in middle school. Not only to help build my credit, teach me good spending habits, but to avoid being asked for money every other day. I never abused

that type of trust. They spoiled me enough. Outside of gas, food, and random Amazon purchases, I rarely used my cards.

Ari and I spent three hours at the promenade. We went into two bouquets and one shoe store to get my entire outfit. That only took an hour but most of our time was spent getting our nails done. It was funny to see Ari get her brows threaded for the first time. She was on the verge of tears, and I had to buy her an ice cream cone and cinnamon rolls to make her feel better.

Once we finished shopping, I thought she'd want to go home but she ended up staying and helping me get dressed. My mom and Dre had already left to grab something to eat so her help and opinions were needed. Since the weather in November was chilly but not up north cold, I wore a mauve off-the-shoulder long sleeved crop top sweater with a camel corduroy mini skirt and mauve knee-high boots. My hair was already styled in fresh passion twists that Ari put up in a bun. My makeup skills weren't all that great but between her and me, I managed to put mascara on without poking myself in the eye. A gold and bronze for eyeshadow and my favorite NYX butter gloss in marshmallow.

Like he requested, I spritzed on my Good Girl perfume and topped my look with the Louis Vuitton Cannes bag he gifted me for being named MVP. At seven on the dot, he was knocking at my door. It was a good thing my mom wasn't home. PJ took one look at me and swallowed my whole face. Ari recorded the whole moment on my phone, she was quickly becoming my new little bestie. She caught all the right angles and everything!

He kept it cool and sexy with his all black. Black turtleneck with his Cuban link chain, gold watch, and bracelet.

New pair of black and gold Air Jordan 1's. Locs freshly styled up on top of his head and smelling like pure sin. Him and that Dior Savage had to go before he went off to college.

Once we dropped Ari off and I had him all to myself, I planted my face in his neck and refused to move it until we got to our destination. His mood was totally different. Usually, he drove his BMW truck but tonight we were riding in his dad's new Lamborghini Urus truck. The burnt orange exterior with the matching insides complimented our attire just right.

Riding shotgun next to him while he sang along with his favorite R&B playlist was one of my favorite parts of our dates. Holding my hand while driving, those lush pink lips of his moving with each melody he belted out. Sneaking glimpses of his golds and his cologne.

Jesus D'Shunn Christ.

His lips met my wrists more times than I cared to count.

His show of affection, I loved it all just as much as I loved him.

"You look good, baby. You ready to have some fun with me tonight?" He winked before stepping out the truck. His guards were already out, standing in the shadows but their strength ever present.

My forever hood love took me where he felt comfortable and the place I was starting to love too. We were at Moe Blues jazz lounge off in the cut on Sixth Street. An establishment that had a twenty-one and older entry regulation but of course PJ had all the connections. Instead of questioning him like I normally would, I took his hand ready to have a night with my man.

My mom and aunts talked about this place often. Said that the poetry and free-style nights were the best and the food was to die for. Walking inside the red-light building, I felt like I stepped into a Love Jones version of The Sanctuary which made me even more excited. People waved and dapped PJ up. Complimenting me and our pairings as a couple.

I was in heaven.

I felt grown as hell, excuse my French, and so in love.

How could this night get any better?

He got us a booth not too far from the stage, making sure that we sat on the same side facing all the entertainment. I even let him order my food and thank goodness he knew what I liked. Being with PJ, though he was only a year older than me, I *always* felt happy and safe. Felt like for me, he'd battle the worst villain and would always win.

I knew I had fallen in love with him when my attraction morphed into this depth that was greater than what I'd ever felt for anyone else. Our bond would be labeled by society's standards as puppy love, but we called it our love. I'm his Roni and he's my LuvJones. He is everything I never knew I wanted in my wildest dreams and the whispered answer to all my prayers.

My love for PJ was indescribable. A connection no word in the English vocabulary can sum up. That's placing him in a box, and he's already shown me that there are no limits to his love for me. He's shown me that he will sacrifice his relationship with his parents, especially his mother, the woman who birthed him just for me.

PJ's love felt like home. Those early days after my mom's accident, it was his comfortableness that made me feel like

everything was going to be alright. His love was like being inside of joy, as if his tatted muscular arms were made of it and he wrapped me around in it like a blanket, giving me an ever-lasting plate of contentment.

“The night isn’t over yet, folks. We got a young cat in the building that’s about to change the game for you playas and raise the bar for my ladies. Give it up for this young lion. PJ.” The MC shouted making my eyes bulge.

Did he just say...

“Make sure you cheer for your man even if I get booed.” Before I could question if this was real, he pecked my lips winking, and walked up to the stage.

Holy shit...

He was going to perform.

Cupping my mouth, I watched him greet the MC and sit on the stool. Everyone was cheering and I sat there stunned. All the artists were good as hell. I even texted London and Papa about the spot so they could check it out since they were looking for new talent. There was a woman named Serenity who gave me all the Jill Scott vibes with her sultry poetry. When she was done giving us a visual but soul touching performance of what it means to be blessed with the love of a black woman, I was on my feet clapping and snapping her praise.

“What’s up y’all.” My entire body covered in chills hearing PJ’s voice come through the speakers. “Tonight, I’m switching it up a little bit since I like to give a visual when I’m talking about my little tender Roni.” He winked at me making me cover my face.

I wanted to shout, jump up and down. I couldn't believe he was about to sing in front of all these people.

“Now, remember, I'm an artist and I'm sensitive about my shit.” If he licked his lips one more time... “I brought along some help, so I hope y'all ready.”

The stage was circular putting him right in the middle with a drummer behind him on the left and a man on the piano to his right. Over to the right of the stage, a projector was lowered and the words *Roni, I'm hopeless for you* were shown first. “I call it uh, ‘A Blues for Massey’.” Right when I felt like my heart was about to explode and my whole body was seconds away from melting, the drummer started playing along with the pianist.

“Oh my god, PJ,” I whispered with tears pouring from my eyes reflecting the fullness of his love shooting at my heart.

My favorite song from my favorite movie, he was about to sing *Hopeless* by *Dionne Farris*.

“Go head on, baby. You better sang.”

“Whatchu know about that?”

“Do your thang, youngblood.” Everyone was going wild, and he hadn't even sung a word yet. It was just the band.

“*Hello morning,*” he belted out, my heart beating with the pulse of the music. A picture of me asleep popped up on the projector.

We facetimed all the time and all hours of the night. Sometimes we fell asleep and didn't disconnect our calls. He took a screenshot of me and him...this boy.

“*Goodbye mornin*”...A picture of me at lunchtime sitting between his legs eating pizza making funny faces.

“But I’ve cried just a little too long”...A picture of me curled into his chest laying on the couch after I had been kidnapped.

“Now it’s time for me to be strong.”... A short video clip of me making the last spike that won us the championship game.

“They say I’m hopeless”... A clip of him cheering me on at my game. A clip of him kissing me while I was sleeping on his chest at the beach.

“Than up to my head in it”... A clip of him taking a letter I wrote him that I kissed with lip gloss to a tattoo parlor and got my lips tatted. The bottom outline of the lips spelled my name, and the top had the date we became official. It was dope as hell and the catalyst that made the tears I’d been holding on drop.

Holy shit...that was today.

“Yeah, Roni. I got it tatted so you know it’s real.” He winked causing the whole lounge to go crazy while I sat there a wide-eyed cheesing crying mess. When I thought he was done, *Will you go to homecoming and prom with me?* was the last clip on the projector. “A two for one special, Roni. What’s it going to be? You going to get fly with your man or what?”

“Girl, if you don’t go, I will.”

“Damn, that’s how you do it.”

“Aye, that’s my son.”

I was so focused on him and the fact that he recreated his own version of Love Jones that I ignored my mom cheering next to his parents, Luna, and Papa. When PJ stood up, so did the pianist, and I swear I damn near tripped over my feet trying to get to the stage. The pianist was Dre.

“PJ,” I breathlessly whispered his name. You would’ve thought he asked me to marry him by the way I was crying so hard. It was the effort, the details, the entire showcase. I just wanted him to ask me, but he gave me a one-of-a-kind production.

“I know you thought I was stalling or not going to ask you, but I had this planned.” He cupped my face using his thumb to wipe my face clean. “You’re not a simple girl, Massey, and the way I love you isn’t simple. I’ll never treat you like you’re simple or give you mediocre. That’s not in my blood, baby.” Hearing his words, watching his lips move...I had to grip his shirt and rest my head against his mellow beating heart to calm mine.

My goodness, he forever blew my mind.

“I can’t believe you got my lips tatted on you.” I giggled because the side he got it on is the side I always place my face.

His eyes became hooded, and I became putty in his arms. I loved when he got that dark hazy look in his eyes. “One day I’ll explain in great detail why I got it and what happens when you kiss me there.”

And the church says...

“Son, I raised you right.” Interrupting at a very needed point, I stepped back to give Mr. Pacino and PJ their moment.

“OMG, Massey. I can’t wait to go dress shopping.” My mom and Dre came over to hug me.

“Dre, I had no idea that was you.” I punched him playfully in the arm. “I can’t believe y’all knew he was planning this.”

“Nah, Tarzan switched up and changed the program with that tattoo. Didn’t I tell you kissing ugly loc wearing trolls will

turn you blind and smelling like malt liquor and mothballs?” Papa kissed my cheek. “You look beautiful, baby girl.”

“Thank you all so much for this. Like...I’m just...wow.” I giggled trying not to cry again. I already had the raccoon eyes going on.

“Hey, Massey.” I turned to see Mrs. Capone standing with Luna.

“Hey, Mrs. Capone. Luna, I’m sooo glad you’re here. Homecoming is in two weeks, and I need a dress ASAP.” I couldn’t wait to go dress shopping with my mom and Luna. I couldn’t wait to dress up and dance the night away with PJ.

“Um, that’s what she wanted to talk to you about.” Luna nudged her mom.

Mrs. Capone and I hadn’t had much interaction since that big falling out. I tried to steer clear of her as much as I could. I accepted her apologies, but I kept my distance.

“I have the honor of sketching Andrea Pitter-Campbell’s new Miami Beach home and as a favor to me for squeezing her into my busy schedule, she agreed to design your homecoming and prom dresses.” She handed me a green and gold foiled business card.

Did she just say Andrea Pitter? As in, *the* Andrea Pitter-Campbell who is *the* wedding dress designer to the stars?

Booking Andrea Pitter-Campbell was not humanly possible. Her books were blocked for years out. I knew because I followed her all over IG just because she was a black woman designing the hell out of dresses almost every celebrity in Hollywood wore.

“Wow, are you serious right now?” I held the business card so delicately. On the back was a note *Massey, call me so we*

can get you slayed for homecoming – AP.

Hell yeah, it was real.

“Very serious.” We laughed. “It’s a peace offering and me extending an olive branch to the young woman who stole my son’s heart. I’m truly sorry that I projected my fears onto you. You didn’t deserve that. Please...” I never gave her the opportunity to finish.

Hugging Mrs. Capone was me accepting her olive branch and us moving on because I was going to be a part of their family for the long run. Her son just sang for me on stage in front of a crowd of people. Gave a visual illustration to match the lyrics that centered around him and I.

Hey, Mother-in-love!

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

C^{oco}

I NEVER FELT SO full and poured into than what I experienced at Keatyn's annual lingerie extravaganza, Puss and Boots. Though my mobility wasn't at one hundred percent, I traded in my bedazzled wheelchair for a bedazzled walker and cane. My therapists were determined to have me walking without them by my birthday next month. I wasn't in a rush now that I could move about on my own which came in handy for all the festivities Keatyn had planned.

Whoever she hired as her event coordinator, they needed a raise times ten. The theme this year was empowerment. From day one on Thursday morning when the event kicked off, it's been three full days of being poured into.

Spa rooms with masseuses giving body massages that made you feel like their hands were strengthened by the gods. Healthy meal options that left you full but not sluggish. Chefs that gave knowledgeable cooking classes and educating us on becoming healthier in our food choices while not sacrificing taste.

She had a team of nutritionists that gave each woman a full body evaluation and helped them come up with a health plan to elevate their life. On hand counselors and therapists for women who wanted to speak privately. Therapists specializing in a different modalities from childhood trauma, marital problems, to anxiety, depression, and sex. You had an issue, there was a therapist on hand to help.

She even had Shanice Royal from Coach Royal Life Coach Training come in and give us all the business. Though she isn't a preacher, her segment on walking in purpose turned into a whole revival.

The nighttime festivities were my favorite. Since the event was held in this massive beach house sitting on acres of land out in Palm Beach, there was so much space that the event coordinator transformed half of the backyard into a large circle bonfire pit. We all openly talked about our problems, fears, and whatever was on our hearts.

No judgment at all.

I was so glad that I invited Sam, Morgan, Brittany, and Mya. Seeing that it was a safe space, and all the women were genuine, they felt comfortable to share their story and it was so amazing that the other women poured life into them.

Telling them how they weren't their past. How they held the power to turn their tears into victory. In addition to inviting them, I also brought Massey along with me. She was a teenager but smart enough to understand the topics talked about. Plus, the others I invited brought their daughters, nieces, and female cousins.

It was nice to see the younger generation partake in the events and learn a few things. To hear them talk about the pressures of high school and social media.

But what I love the most was Keatyn doing all of it pregnant. Pregnant and glowing with her last son. My friend was out here doing the damn thing and I couldn't be prouder.

I remember the first year when Keatyn was about to pass out from being so nervous thinking that women wouldn't show up. Ha, the audacity! She had to change the venue several times this year and break it up into a three-day extravaganza. Women traveled from all over the world to partake in the festivities.

"But can we talk about it though? Massey, aye, all you little girls need to listen." Keatyn clapped her hands. Krishna and I were laughing our behinds off at her craziness.

Yesterday after all the guests left, Keatyn asked me to stay the night with all the women I invited. It was me and Massey, Krishna, London, Capone, Luna, Sam, Brittany, Morgan, Mya, and all their daughters and nieces.

We woke up getting the same pampering treatments but longer since it was just us. Ate a tasty brunch and ended the day out by the bonfire. We had smores, hot chocolate, and a whole bar of desserts. Then to top it off she had these custom pajamas made for all of us. Massey was in heaven.

"Oh my goodness, Aunty Kea. I'm paying attention." Massey tried to hide her face behind Luna who was laughing hard like the rest of us.

"Pay attention and understand that it is perfectly okay to tap sir's shoulder and excuse yourself if the loving isn't hitting." Standing in the middle of the circle holding her belly, Keatyn was giving her speech to a bunch of teenage girls that ranged from sixteen to nineteen about speaking up during sex if it wasn't enjoyable and providing condoms of their own.

She was by no means encouraging them to have sex. That wasn't what she was doing at all.

She was telling them that if you're going to be out here doing adult things then make sure that you're being confident and standing up for yourself. It was an open safe space for the girls to ask plenty of questions. Honestly, I loved it.

Why is it so taboo to talk to our daughters openly and candid about sex and other relations? Why is that so frowned upon? We push saving sex for marriage, but do we explain why? Do we give transparent stories about the extent of engaging our soul ties, our mistakes that beg those same soul ties to be disengaged, or how painful a process that is and why so many of us stay tethered to the very ones who drain our very essences?

I'd rather teach Massey everything even if it is uncomfortable if that stops her from dealing with a lot of my heartbreaking and toxic experiences.

"But what if they get pissed off because we hurt their feelings?" Monae, Brittany's sister asked.

"And?" Luna rolled her neck popping her lips. "Mama, close your ears if you don't wanna know me like this but listen to me, Monae." Capone took her glass of champagne to the head. "I thought the same thing until I got with the worst carpet burner in the world. Between him taking me to pound town and leaving traces of blood on my carpet from his burned knees, I got tired of limping from discomfort rather than pleasure, so I started speaking up."

"Lawd, I don't want to hear this." Capone covered her ears.

“Preach, Luna.” Krishna held up her cup of hot chocolate with whipped cream all over her top lip.

“What’s a carpet burner and pound town?” Poor Monae.

“Can I explain?” Luna looked over at Brittany whose cheeks were flushed for permission to expound.

“Please do. I’m glad you’re having this conversation with her and not me.”

“Aight cool.” Luna stood up in her slim modelesque glory, flipped her hair, made us all think she was about to start talking but dropped to the sand and started imitating a carpet burner. My stomach was in knots. “When you notice that man’s back ain’t bending or his pelvis ain’t moving along with his hips. Like putting in a matching effort, kick that nigga out cause he’s gonna get his and all you’re going to have is a wet ass and sore knees. Ask him what the hell he’s chasing cause it ain’t my nut.”

Good thing our closest neighbors were two miles away. I’m sure the cops would’ve been called on us for disturbing the peace. Once we all calmed down, London raised her hand and looked over at Massey. “Spill the tea, young flower. What happened after homecoming? From what I heard you didn’t get in until the sun came up.”

Massey’s eyes popped out so damn big along with her jaw dropping. Shoot, I wanted to know too. Since it was PJ, Cassian and I agreed to let her have a night without a curfew. I trusted them; I trusted my child more. At this point I’ve taught her everything needed to protect herself and it didn’t matter if I gave her a curfew or not. When teens wanted to have sex, they’d find the time. Cassian even asked Pacino if he rented a room for them and he said no, so I wanted to know what they did.

Falling back on her blanket with her hands covering her face, Massey couldn't stop blushing. "We didn't do anything like that." She mumbled with her hands covering her face.

"Hmm, tell us anything. Capone, close your ears so she can be truthful." Keatyn winked at me. I didn't have a hard time coming to terms that my baby girl was growing into a young woman. Hell, compared to a lot of her peers she was doing damn good right now.

Sitting up with flushed cheeks and hearts dancing in her eyes, Massey rested her head on my shoulder. "No, seriously. We didn't do anything sexual or like that. PJ is a complete gentleman. We stayed out so late because he wanted us to watch the sunrise together. Usually we catch a sunset a few times during the week but never a sunrise, so he planned a whole layout on the beach. We had this cool tiki tent and everything. I don't know where he gets his romancing skills from but I'm appreciative of them. That boy woos me every day." Looking over at Capone she smiled.

"Y'all know my brother is possessive as hell when it comes to his *Roni*. PJ will do any and everything to make sure a smile stays on her face. You see what he did to ask her out to homecoming. Created a whole scene from her favorite movie." Luna told not one lie.

When PJ came to me about what he planned on doing to ask Massey to homecoming I thought it was a little too much, but he quickly put me in my place and told me that when it comes to her *nothing* will ever be too much.

"Can we get off me and move on to you and JD." All eyes shifted to London who sat unbothered. She clearly didn't care that Massey called her out. "He is literally chasing behind you and you won't give him no play. He's far from ugly. Looks

good and he's into all that stuff you like so why not go out on one date with him?"

"Seriously though cause if I wasn't boo'd up I'd twerk my way in his line of view." Luna started fanning herself. "I was at Howard's homecoming and saw him there with his frat brothers. Girl, London, the man is a Que with a long ass tongue. If I wasn't committed, I'd let him slut me...ouch, ma, dang!" A tipsy Luna was a funny Luna.

"Look, it's not that I'm not interested in JD cause we all have eyes and the brotha is fine as hell but I'm not where I need to be mentally to accept the love of a man." Her downcast eyes pricked my heart. She'd been quiet for most of the event all weekend, actually she's been quiet since I met her, but Dre told me that she was going through some things.

I wasn't at all jealous or insecure about the relationship he had with her. I admired it because it showed me how he'd care for Massey once she got older. London was a beautiful girl but her smile hardly ever reached her eyes. Even with how stylishly she was dressed, it looked forced. Dre said that he didn't know what had happened to change her demeanor but something bad happened and she won't talk to him about it.

Massey said whatever it was that happened, it occurred since she's been here and that the only person who knew or had an idea about it was Cassian, which explained his over-protectiveness of her. I thought it was him acting stupid because he had a babysitter that didn't mind watching his girls whenever he needed her to, but now it all made sense.

"You don't know us like that, but you can talk to us, London. I've watched you since you've been here, and your change hasn't been great." Krishna swapped seats with Sam to sit next to her. "What happened, Beloved? I love that you

don't mind watching my kids but you're using them as a band aid to cover your feelings from us so we won't ask questions." Lifting London's wrist, she kissed it making those tears swelling in her eyes finally fall. "I notice these scares, boo. Share your pain so you aren't hurting anymore."

Goodness.

London hadn't answered but Krishna's genuine questioning had me and a few others already mirroring her tears. It's like the minute Krishna showed concern, London's exhale released her emotions, and you could feel the pressure of them. Even Massey was nibbling on her lip trying not to cry.

"I. Uh." She cleared the thick emotional mucus. Legs started to bounce.

God! I felt her pain so fierce that my chest was burning. "Let it out, London. Take your time."

"I met this guy a few days after we moved down here." She blew a hard breath making her curls blow. "He seemed legit. Has his own business, place of his own, car, and good looking. Oh, can't forget that he loves the Lord. At first I wasn't interested in talking to someone because I was in a situation already, but he was persistent. Constantly called me, talked a hell of a good game. As good as he talked I ignored all the red flags because the guy from New York told me a few things about myself that I didn't like so I figured with this new guy I could change and maybe get my happily ever.

"Elgin, that's the name of the guy I met down here, he has kids. A few of them actually and he's been to prison before. I completely ignored that thinking that he was changed because he said he was. I mean this man owns one of the biggest funeral homes in Broward County. He spoke and became

every desire I wanted, even understood my stance to go celibate. He'd tease me here and there but nothing crazy until that night." She sobbed in her hands; Krishna pulled her into her chest comforting her.

I felt Keatyn's eyes on me, but I refused to look her way. When London said Elgin and what his business was, I knew exactly who she was talking about. I'm sure most of the women here knew who he was. The Dubri family were known around the tri-county area for being the biggest black owned funeral business. It was ran by Elgin, his dad, and his brothers. From the outside looking in you'd think they were handsome brothas out here making money and doing the damn thing, which they were, but they also had a dark side to them.

A dark side that London unfortunate had to be a victim of.

"I never told him where I stayed or that I was connected to the Kalmins. Can't say why but every time I started to something told me not to, so I didn't. Anyway, I started to dodge him a little bit right before the lockdown happened. He thought my decision was a joke since it had been weeks since we started talking and he wanted sex, but I was very firm in my decision to wait. The week after the lockdown was lifted I went out shopping and ran into him. He talked me into going down to Fat Tuesday's to get a drink.

"I drink wine here and there, but I'm not a big drinker especially with people I don't know. He kept pushing me to drink these long islands and I refused until I got tired of him coercing me, so I had two of them and got sick. We went by his truck so I could throw up and that's when everything went left. I'm trying to throw up and he's feeling up on me. I guess I pushed him back one too many times. He snapped. Hit me and shoved me in his truck. Speeding fast as hell down US-1.

Cussing me out, calling me all types of names, and bashing my head into the passenger window.

“Telling me that he’s tired of me teasing him and telling him no. We ended up by the port under a bridge. I fought as hard as I could, I swear I did. I screamed and tried to break free. He threw my phone in the bed of his truck so I couldn’t call anyone. When he was done he drove me back to where he picked me up at the mall. He kept biting my cheek and I don’t know why. I drove back to the compound like a zombie. God had to have driven me home because I don’t know how I made it. The next day he called me as if it never happened and for a few days after that, I entertained his calls thinking that it was my fault and deserved it.

“Physically no one could tell what he did to me. I stood in front of all of you and no one saw the bruises and scars he left on my body because he made sure to place them where my clothes could hide them. And before you ask me why I didn’t say anything, well my issue didn’t seem important, and I was a stranger. Y’all had way too much going on to entertain my small problem. So, yeah, there it is. Why my smile isn’t real because I’m fucking dying inside. Elgin wasn’t the first, but I swear to God he’s the last.” Tossing her blanket aside, she ran back towards the house leaving us all sitting there with our tears.

“I can see the tables turning in all of your eyes and the answer is no.” Massey sniffed with red eyes. “She trusts us enough to share. Don’t take that trust away by telling Papa, Uncle Amell, or even Mr. Pacino.” Her eyes landed on Luna, who sat with her arms wrapped around herself bouncing her leg.

“I can’t promise that.” Krishna and Luna said at the same time.

“Come on, guys.” Massey was about to learn just how far the reach of her family was about to go. “It’s her decision to make. Let her...”

“So, we only act when the threat is targeted at our front door?” Luna looked around at all our faces. I was with having the men handle Elgin, but I also understood that it was London’s decision to make. “She’s family.” Standing, she looked down at her mom with a hard sneer. “I’m telling y’all right now, if my dad and your husbands don’t handle him, trust me, it will get taken care of. Him and that son of a bitch that was before him.” Following London’s trail, she went in the house.

We all sat in silence stuck in our heads. I know I was. My palms were itching to call Cassian to find out just how much London had told him. From the way Krishna sipped her cup of hot chocolate and ate her graham crackers, I already knew she was going to have Amell lace up his black boots before the night was over.

“Is Luna like Columbiana or something?” Monae’s question made us all snicker. If only she knew.

“She wishes.” Capone rolled her eyes. “Luna’s boyfriend and my husband share a common interest when it comes to the way they handle their enemies. He’s also heir to a family business just like ours.” Ohhhhhh, so that’s why she has a problem with him. He’s heir to a cartel...interesting.

“Okay, moving on and lightening the mood,” Sam broke the tension making us all laugh. It did get quite intense for a minute. “Even with London’s story, which I pray she gets help for, thank you, ladies, so much for this weekend. Coco, thank

you for this. It felt good to be around other women who listened without judgment and were willing to hear me. Puss and Boots was everything.”

“Yeah,” Brittany praised. “I thought it was just going to be your typical lingerie party, but it was so much more. I wish these things weren’t yearly but monthly. Having a place like this to come to when I feel my absolute worst and leaving feeling like a whole new woman. You might want to look into that.”

We sat around the bonfire for hours talking and laughing until our sides were cramped. As dark as London’s confession hit, we turned the mood back around and made it comfortable by the time she came back out. Massey asked what it was like dating in college and the messiness of college girls. That conversation took on a life of its own. We kept it real and told her what to pay attention to since PJ was going off to college next year. Even Capone gave her two cents about it.

All in all, we had an amazing night even with London opening up to us the way she did. She tried to apologize for sharing too much but we quickly nipped that in the bud. By the time everyone’s eyes got droopy, it was after four in the morning. Since Keatyn wasn’t given a specific time for checkout we all overslept until the afternoon. Waking up to the smell of smokey BBQ. Now that’s how you send your guests off.

Massey and I finished getting dressed and made it to the main kitchen right on time. The personal chef was laying out the BBQ spread that had pulled pork sandwiches, ribs, baked beans, potato salad, and homemade lemonade. Sam and Morgan couldn’t stay so they took their food with them while the rest of us set up out on the deck to enjoy the cool weather.

“Are you excited about the family vacation this year? I can’t wait to feel the sun beating on my face and eat some real Jamaican food.” Keatyn’s days of traveling were about to come to an end until after she had the baby so her excitement for Jamaica next month was earned.

All the Kalmin men, Dre included, planned this elaborate Christmas trip to Jamaica. They wanted everyone to relax and unwind since it’s been one hell of a year for us all. Dre invited his family, Darren, and Kellon’s family. It was a whole lot of us going and I was excited to celebrate the holidays as well as my birthday with everyone.

“Beyond excited. I need to go shopping for my birthday outfit. It hurts my soul that I can’t strut in my heels. Massey said she’s going to bedazzle me some crocs to make up for them, but it won’t be the same.” Learning how to walk again gave me a new appreciation for the simple pleasures in life we take for granted. Each day my progress got better and better, but I wasn’t back to my normal self just yet.

“Who is your event coordinator? You need to give her a nice bonus.” My mind was still blown by all the intricate details and planning it took to bring everything together.

“First of all, it’s he, not she. And trust me, I gave him a nice bonus.”

“Well, what is his name? I think I’ll use him to put Massey’s graduation and birthday party together. I’d love to have it here.” Though I had a whole year to plan, I wanted to at least book a venue. Cassian already said we were going over the top since it was a two-for-one celebration.

“Just ask Dre. I’m sure he’ll let you rent it out.” She kept eating like I wasn’t side-eyeing her like she was crazy.

“Why would I ask Dre? He recommended this location?”

“No, I own the house.”

Every single hair on my body saluted at attention hearing his commanding voice. His sudden nearness made all my senses go wild. Amused by my visible resolve coming undone, Keatyn was in a fit of giggles.

“Oh, girl, you got it bad. Hey, Dre.” He came around to help her stand. “Be easy on her. I think my girl is in shock. I’m going inside to get a second helping. Thanks again for helping me out.”

“Anytime.”

On their own will, my eyes closed. Heart fluttering wildly in my chest. We talked multiple times a day and no matter what, his energy still held me captive. My palms burned with a need to touch a part of him. The longer we sat in silence the more I struggled to take a breath.

“I bought this house for you.” My eyes opened hearing his admission. His whole face spread into a huge smile. I’ll say it again and again – Andre Joseph is a work of art. How could his smile be as intimate as a kiss?

“Why?” My voice sounded so fragile and shaken from nervousness.

Loving Dre came easy. Being able to hold his gaze, stare into his mesmeric eyes and breathe at the same time, now that was hard. “Because I believe in you.” His voice was low and smooth.

I have never been ungrateful when others bought me things but this...this wasn’t your usual single-family home. Nothing about all this land and mountain of cement-laid brick was

normal. It was massive and way too much for him, Massey, and me.

“Before you start overthinking let me explain, okay?” His brows lifted a small fraction, lips curving into a glimmer of a smile.

Taking his offered hand, I nodded swallowing hard. “Okay.” His warmth provided the perfect blanket of calm for my rattled nerves.

“These last couple of weeks I’ve watched you struggle with understanding what God is calling you to do. Calling you to rewrite history. Calling you to do what Veronica and the women before her should have done. But guess what, baby, you don’t have to do it on your own. We’re going to do it together.” I tried to free my hand from his grasp, but he held on tighter. “Together we’re going to normalize the level of trauma of being manipulated.”

Whoa...

I...I had so much to say but no words to form them.

Dre couldn’t possibly know what it felt like to be traumatized the way I have. Know what it feels like to grow up thinking that men paying for my time and body equaled to love or value. Growing up thinking that being sexually exploited was a part of puberty. I guess that’s why he said *together* because even though he had no experience in those areas, I did. Dre is a certified therapist, though he rarely ever practices unless Andrea asks him to.

It blew my mind to learn he’s the one who helped JD get over the trauma he endured from his childhood.

It just hit me.

What hit me was the aha moment of knowing what it means to be equally yoked with somebody.

Damn, this was about to happen.

Not just for this new business adventure but for us as a couple.

“Here at Phoenix Rising, you’re going to provide a safe space for these young girls, women, and whoever seeks your help to unload what’s on their minds and in their hearts. Helping them come to terms with what they thought versus what it was. You came to the realization, but you didn’t have time to process it. They were thrown into the fire by the media. We’re going to help restore their lives.” His eyes beamed with pride, and I sat with my mouth wide open.

This man wanted to help women like me.

This man wanted to help me help others.

Pointing behind him he said, “I named it Connie’s House after your mom because of her strength and power. She dared to defy her mom to give you better and to want better for herself so much so that she was killed for it. So this is you undoing the harm. Undoing and breaking the generational curses. This is you giving them the opportunity that you had to steal, and your mother died for. That’s your purpose. Rewrite history.”

Well, I’ll be damned...

Pushing my chair back and moving it until my legs were between his, Dre rested his hands on my chair looking me deep in the eyes. “I’m not leaving, Courtney. You have an arsenal of therapists and counselors already on board waiting to get to work. When I found out about Keatyn’s event I asked her to let me plan it but keep her same vibe. This way I could

show you how we'd execute a daily operation of running things here at Phoenix Rising. Show you that I'm standing ten toes down. Ready. Baby, I'm ready. We're going to rewrite history. What do you say?"

I always wondered if Dre and I were for sure meant to be. Keatyn told me long ago that the easiest way to find that out is to first obviously pray but to also see if his purpose and mine aligned because together we'd be a kingdom couple. Being equally yoked in faith and walking in alignment in purpose.

Could it get any clearer than this?

How many times was God going to show me that this was the man he crafted for me?

Was I scared to step into this new world?

Hell yes.

Was I going to punk out?

No, because I knew Dre wouldn't allow me to fail. I knew he wouldn't allow me to give anything but my best which would in return cause me to level up in confidence and boldness. The strength of having a strong man leading and guiding you, protecting all aspects of you, I felt fearless.

Taking his hands in mine, I kissed his knuckles and rested my head against his. "I say that I'm ready."

Far too long I've been coasting through life with no direction. Far too long I settled in thinking that I had no purpose. Old things have passed away and I am the one who gets to behold the things are becoming new. I owed it to myself, owed it to young Coco, owed it to Mya and all the other young Pearls. Owed it to Massey and all the other women to give my best and my all even if I did it afraid.

EPILOGUE

Coco

“CAN WE STAY HERE FOREVER?” Sunbathing under the warm Jamaican sun, Keatyn rubbed her round belly sipping a virgin mango margarita.

“Seriously, this place is paradise and I want to live here for the rest of my days. I think my husband deserves baby number three that he wants so bad after this surprise.” Wiggling her arched brows over the rim of her dark shades, Krishna spoke my exact thoughts but in a different context.

The second week of December all the Kalmin and Luciano men rounded up both large families, plus extended friends that had become family, and flew everyone out to Montego Bay, Jamaica for what we initially thought was going to be a two-week stay. Arriving before Christmas and leaving days after. Nope. We landed in Jamaica on December twelfth and haven’t left and today was New Year’s Eve. After Christmas, we went from staying at a mansion rented right on the beach to staying inside a beautiful villa with the waves crashing right outside of our window.

All the women were gifted a stay at the Secrets St. James Montego Bay Resort. The turquoise waters of the Caribbean that lapped against the sugar-white sandy beaches, exuding true Jamaican enchantment, we had the privilege of having it right in our backyards. Being pampered in unlimited luxury for almost a week, a resort where no children were allowed, being wrapped in the island's nostalgic British Colonial history, a true paradise.

We were spoiled.

Ate whatever we wanted.

Did whatever we wanted to do with no men around or children under sixteen.

Two days before Christmas we celebrated my birthday. I hadn't brought it up, better yet I forgot. Once we landed on the island all my thoughts centered around relaxing and enjoying my all-expense paid vacation courtesy of Cassian. He surprised me when he told me that he had spearheaded the entire vacation. It was planned by the men, but he was the one that did most of the organizing and booking. After Christmas, Kellon and his entire family came up to join us and we've been one big party since.

This was going to be a new Christmas tradition and I was here for it all. I loved it all. Loved being around people that I loved and were genuine. I for sure thought I'd want to walk everywhere my feet would allow since my mobility had gradually moved up to the seventy percent range, and according to Massey and Dre, I had this new dip in my walk.

A slight sexy dip that made my already wide swaying hips sway more causing him to be hypnotized on more than one occasion. I loved that man something serious. I really did. Dre made it easy to love him because of how he loved me.

Phoenix Rising's doors officially would be open in February. Dre planned everything down to the very last detail. He even managed to list the business under the proper IRS filing as a non-profit and applied for government funding since part of the house would operate as a run-a-way shelter for young girls. All he asked of me was to never stop believing in myself.

I couldn't wait to get started.

Couldn't wait to start helping other women and young girls. Sam, Brittany, and Morgan cried when I told them what Dre had done and how I found my purpose. They told other Pearls and already we had two months of weekend stays booked. Things were falling into place. Dre had laid the foundation for me to walk in purpose.

God is good!

"What time are we supposed to board the boat for the tour?" As much as I loved being on the beach. Loved sitting out under the sun and burying my feet underneath the sand. When it came to getting in the water, I wasn't about that life at all. I only went waist deep and even that was pushing it but Keatyn wanted to go on this boat tour that had a glass bottom so we could see all the aquatic life.

If I saw Jaws coming our way, I was going to scream and force them to bring me back ashore.

Looking up from the book she was reading, Massey checked her phone. "We have to go now if we want good seats. Remember the guy at the reception's desk said a lot of people signed up for it."

"I'm going to go use the bathroom before we leave. I'll meet you all down by the dock." London left with Luna in

tow.

Since Keatyn's event, those two have become the best of friends. London being older than Luna didn't make a difference. I know for sure that Keatyn and Krishna spoke to their husbands about what London confessed to us that night. I know Massey questioned her father about it too but all of them had the same response – stay out of their business.

I took that as them saying they had it and to not worry about it, but Massey said that it meant the opposite. That London made Cassian swear on his word to not act until she wanted him to. I know that was pissing him off. Cassian wasn't the type to let those who hurt people he cared about walk around living life without a care in the world. Eventually, he was going to handle it whether she liked it or not.

“Somebody come help roll my fat ass over so we can start walking.” With this baby, Keatyn was all belly. Belly and ass. I for sure thought she was having twins but after performing two ultrasounds on herself, she confirmed that there was only one Kalmin baby baking inside of her.

“I don't think anybody should help you.” Delilah smacked her lips. She's been snappy since they got here, and it made us all laugh because she swore Keatyn jinxed her.

Pushing up with a roll of her eyes, Keatyn straightened out her coverup giving Delilah the same attitude back. “Is there some number I can call and report your behavior to because I don't think this is how a midwife is supposed to act? All I said was that I wouldn't be surprised if one of us got pregnant after Andrea had LJ. How was I supposed to know that you and Kellon were busting it wide open?” She shrugged, tossing a wink over her shoulder.

“Oh, hush. I wouldn’t be pregnant right now if it wasn’t for you speaking on it. Every time somebody even mentions or jokes about me being pregnant...bam. My belly is full of my husband’s seeds. Coco, you’re going to be next.”

I wouldn’t be surprised if I wasn’t pregnant by the time we left. Dre and I never used protection since the first time we made love and we haven’t started to yet. He and I talked about kids, and I was ready to have another.

“I’m glad my shop has been chopped and burned. Mace was my last. No more summers of being hot, aggravated, and pregnant. Y’all can have that.” Capone was the only one who had her tubes tied and if I had more than one or two children, I’d be right there with her. Kids were expensive as hell and when they got older they started smelling themselves. Massey was an exception.

“This place is so beautiful.” I marveled in awe walking past all the cabanas and under the archways leading out to the deck.

“Isn’t it?” Massey intertwined her fingers with mine. “Look, Ma. Let’s go take some pictures over there with all the flowers.” She pointed up ahead where a trail of hidden valley hibiscus flowers was laid out leading to an archway that had more of the hidden valley flowers along with white orchids wrapped around a vine. Behind the arch were pillar looking objects covered in a black sheet so I couldn’t make out what they were.

“We can’t take pictures close by the flowers. That’s set up for somebody.” I kept looking around for hotel staff or other folks who might be the reason the flowers were laid out. It was absolutely beautiful and a waste to just leave there.

“Y’all go ahead and stand by the archway. We’ll take the picture and be your lookout. Massey, you might have to push your mama to the ground and pretend that her legs gave out and flash her handicap sticker if somebody comes and questions us.” Sometimes I wanted to pinch Keatyn until she screamed. She got on my nerves so bad, but I loved her just the same.

“Keep on talking trash and you’re going to give birth to another child favoring Amell or Cassian.” I kicked off my flip-flops, taking Massey’s hand to walk beside the flower trail.

Gasping with fake hurt feelings, she shot me the bird before pouting. “Don’t say that. I already lost my flower child to him.” She pouted stomping her feet. “Y’all really think this baby is going to favor Amell? I honestly think this is going to be Cassian’s shadow. Every time he comes around me I swear my son starts kicking and cutting up. Damn.” She really looked like she was about to cry with her lip poked out.

“Oh goodness. Let’s hurry up before she has a whole meltdown before we get on the boat.” Krishna took my phone.

“Aight, Ma. Give me straight hot girl vibes. That thang you carrying is still thangin’ if not a lil more.” Massey drummed on my butt making it jiggle.

I for sure thought I’d lose my curves and butt from being in a coma for so long and not being mobile as I used to. It just showed you how good genetics were because my shape never changed nor had my weight. My curves were serving just as much body as they did before my accident.

Since the St. James Resort was for adults only, all of us ladies took advantage and wore our thong bikinis. We were living our best lives and not caring what anybody had to say.

At least we wore coverups when we walked around the resort. Didn't want to break too many hearts.

Massey and I posed and took so many pictures. We took advantage of the archway and flowers and used them for our own photoshoot. London and Luna came out just in time to join and we found a couple to take our group photos. "These came out really nice. Alright, Coco. Can you still make them cheeks clap?" Keatyn was snapping away all of my phone storage.

Insulted that she would try me, I tossed my coverup to Massey and shook my shoulders. If I busted my ass, oh well. "I need somebody to record this cause I'm tired of Keatyn trying to downplay my skills. I had knees before Meg did. You're going to put some respect on my name."

"Yassss, Mama." Massey started dancing.

"I got the perfect song for you, Coco." Luna played *Twerkulator* and my hips started moving on their own accord.

"Coco, you better teach these young girls a thing or two." Keatyn held her belly trying to bend over and twerk along with me.

Feeling myself far too much and them hyping me up with all their cheering, I turned with my hands on my knees, eyes closed, and gave them a show. I ain't work these hips or booty cheeks this hard in the bedroom but I was showing out just for the hell of it.

"That's my best friend. She's a real bad chick." Keatyn was singing loud as hell.

"Whew chiillle, I'm can't hang like I used to." Tired and feeling the muscles in my legs tighten, I opened my eyes and

screamed. “Agghhh, Dre.” I fell on my butt holding my chest, breathing like a raging bull.

There, on one knee smiling from my amateur show, he reached out and pinched my cheek. “Having fun I see.” He laughed while I sat there trying to catch my breath.

“What are...what are you doing here?” I questioned, taking his hand to help me stand. He remained on his knees looking up at me, hands slow but firmly brushing the sand off my thighs. It didn’t matter what he had on, Dre always looked good. Shirtless with swim trunks, locs twisted up on top of his head. Melanin skin just glowing. My baby looked scrumptious.

“Isn’t it obvious?” He stretched his arms wide, looking over all the flowers.

Maybe I had too many margaritas because I wasn’t catching on until those black coverings were pulled off those pillars behind the archway and I gasped, knees going weak.

Will you marry me?

I was so stunned, in shock, and completely out of it that I didn’t flinch when I felt someone loop their arms around my waist and tie my coverup. “Mama, what’s it going to be?” It was my sweet Massey.

Stepping around me she stood next to Dre, who was still kneeling but now with a ring box in his hand. “All of this, the flowers and archway. The whole trip to Jamaica, Papa helped me plan it because I wanted to do something special for you and Dre.” She dabbed her eyes clearing her throat.

Wait...

Is this real?

Is this really happening right now?

Am I dreaming or Nah?

My hammering heart was seconds from beating its way through my chest. Dre's intense and passionate eyes bore into mine so fiercely that I felt the blood surge from my fingertips to my toes.

“Every day you give me the world and the best love a mother could ever give their child.” Massey reached for one of my hands then held her hand out for Dre to grab it. Standing to his feet, he took it, eyes not once blinking away from mine. “I want to sow back into you, Mom. Sow my love and appreciation back into you both because Dre, you don't have to care for my mom the way you do. You could've gone on with your life and forgotten all about her, but you didn't. When she woke up and the doctors said she'd be temporarily paralyzed, you could've left then too but you didn't. Those days when she cussed you out, taking out her frustrations from physical therapy, you could've left but you didn't. Besides my Papa and Uncles, you've shown me what it means to love in sickness and in health. To love through the good and the bad. So, today, I'm asking you, Dre, will you marry my mom?”

To deserve this type of love from her.

God, thank you.

Without hesitation, Dre spoke one word that sent my heart catapulting to the moon. “Yes.” His voice sounded like silken oak with drops of warm honey.

I think Massey and I sighed a breath of relief at the same time. “Mama, will you marry, Dre?”

She didn't even have to ask. I'd marry that man today, tomorrow, and all the days of my life. “Yes.” A loud cheer

circled us, but I was so focused on the man willing to share his world with me.

“Whew, good.” She giggled sniffing. “Now, we have a wedding to get ready for. Mama, you’re going to get your sunset wedding, and everything has already been planned out. I’m taking you with me and Dre, go with the men. We have a wedding to get ready for.” She squealed dragging me away from my lover.

The more I looked deep into his eyes the more my heart lurched madly for him. Feeling my insides jingle-jangle with excitement of what was to come, I felt like I had drifted to one of my favorite daydreams. Mind replaying scenes from the last time he kissed me and the velvet warmth of his lips.

“Come back to me, Coco. I’ll be here waiting.” Before I could get too far out of his reach, he cupped my cheek rubbing his thumb along my trembling bottom lip. “There is nothing you need to worry about. Everything you need is in your room. I just need you to get ready for me so I can make you my wife. Can you do that for me, baby?”

I would do anything for this man.

Anything.

“I love you so much, Dre.” I breathed in light intakes of air between my lips.

I know I’m in shock.

I know I’m dreaming.

Gotta be.

All the ladies moved around our villa like everything was peachy and Dre hadn’t just snatched my vocal cords, leaving me gasping and searching for...hell, I don’t even know.

This man said all I needed to do was get ready and meet him at the altar. He took care of everything, and I mean everything.

When we got back to our villa there was a glam squad waiting to doll me up. Massey and Keatyn took turns guiding me around the room because the minute my feet planted in one spot for too long, I started to cry because of the powerful feelings of being overwhelmed.

Dre and I...

He asked me to marry him.

He wanted me as his wife.

He coordinated it with my daughter.

This man loved me.

Dre never sugarcoated his love for me. Never cared about wearing his heart on his sleeve or being vulnerable with me. It's like the minute I gave him permission to be a part of my world, this man set out on a journey to claim me. Own me in love's most agape and passionate of ways. I knew he loved me. I knew he cared for me. Everyone sang his praises for the devotion and care he showed to me in my darkest moments.

But this...

Planning our engagement and wedding in the same breath.

Oh, Dre loved loved loved me.

And that feeling, knowing that he loved me enough to not wait or prolong the days leading up until we stood before a preacher and exchanged vows. That he planned it all, never giving me the choice to run but to stand on what I knew was true and that was to love him in the same fashion.

However, when I saw my father walk into my villa dressed in a black tux holding the garment bag that held my dress, it hit me, and I became no good. I sobbed from the depths of my soul, heaving and shaking. My dreams of a fairytale love, romance, happily ever after, those dreams that had long ago vacated my mind after Veronica made sure to do any and everything possible to make me numb.

I never thought I'd have a father to walk me down the aisle. The reality of it all plowed so fiercely into me that my entire frame shook and shook. I ended up crying so hard that the makeup chair no longer served its purpose in holding me. I had to get on my knees, change my posture, and finish releasing my soul's cry.

By the time my sob slowed and became a hiccupping whimper, every eye in the room matched mine. These women minus my glam squad knew my trials and tribulations.

I'm not supposed to be here.

I'm not supposed to be walking along the sandy beaches of Montego Bay, Jamaica.

God's grace, I'm thankful for it.

Cradling me in his arms, my dad held me close to his chest. His rapid beating heart matching my tempo. "I never thought I would ever have this moment." He rocked me in his arms, turning my calm whimpers into spine-shaking sobs all over again. This man mourned my death for twenty-five years. Twenty-five years only to find out I'd survived but he'd been manipulated in the worst way possible.

I don't care if he and I just reconnected within the last six months. I don't care if we had a lifetime to get to know the other. My daddy, a man I thought never existed outside of

conceiving me, is about to walk me down the aisle to marry the man whom my soul loves. “It’s your big day but I don’t know if this is your moment or mine.”

Opening my red puffy eyes, I declared, “How about it can be ours together?”

In truth this moment was ours. So many people tried to make sure this moment *never* happened but see that’s the thing about the power of God. When it’s in His will, there is nothing man can do to stop it.

He helped me get back in the makeup chair and everyone got back into the groove of things. Still stuck in awe of the fact I was minutes from getting married, I refused to let my dad’s hand go and he wasn’t at all complaining. “I have no doubts about marrying Dre. In shock that he planned this whole thing, yes, but I had no doubts. No nerves. No fears. Nothing just peace and a calmness that I can’t explain or put in words. Is that weird?”

Taking the glass of champagne Krishna held out to him, he sipped before answering me. “Nothing about what is happening is weird. Not the velocity of the way Dre loves you. Not the way Massey has shown that she is comfortable with him loving you and being a part of your family. He’s been planning this for a while and I’m thankful he let me be a part of it by getting your dress and gifting your wedding band set.”

My arched brow raised in curiosity. “I barely paid attention to the ring before he closed the box. Did he do a good job?” I cared nothing about the size of the diamond Dre got me. I’d be happy with a simple gold band if that’s what he wanted.

“He did really good.” He smirked. “It’s your mother’s wedding set and before you tell me you can’t accept it; I really want you to. Your mother was so in love with her wedding

ring that she made me promise that when we got old we'd gift it to you once you got older. I've held onto her items for so long unable to part from them and now I understand why." He kissed my hand, a single tear falling. "I got you something old, her ring set, and something new which is your dress. You're about to become Mrs. Andre Joseph."

I'm glad I told the makeup artist to use waterproof mascara and only use eyeshadow because anything else would be ruined from all the crying I've been doing and will do. Somehow I managed to keep my tears at bay while my hair and makeup was being done. Probably due to the fact Massey and Luna kept me laughing with their goofiness. Those tears came back with a vengeance when it was time to put on my dress.

Jesus, Dre.

My mother never got the chance to wear her wedding dress and my dad has been holding onto it for all these years. He gave Dre the dress and he contacted Andrea Pitter-Campbell, asking if she could turn it into my style. Andrea turned it into a masterpiece that I felt so honored to wear.

An ivory gown with an A-line open back, a sweetheart neckline, an eight-foot waterfall layered train skirt, and organza petticoat creating soft but plush volume. Topping it off with a Marchesa corset bodice embellished with delicate 3D flowers and dropped lace sleeves. As for shoes, another Andrea Pitter-Campbell creation. Rose gold Cinderella sparkling rhinestone stilettos.

Dre, forever one paying close attention to details, the rose gold was the perfect accent for Massey and Keatyn's maid and matron of honor dresses. An elegant cinnamon satin gown with double spaghetti straps, asymmetrical neckline, and

hidden pockets that they both loved. Darren even had a beautiful brooch of our wedding colors added to his tuxedo.

“Ma, are you ready?” Sliding up beside me, Massey grabbed my hand, kissing my cheek. “I’m so happy to see you in this moment. See you get married.” She and I both. Something I never thought would happen was now about to play out right in front of both of us.

One New Year’s Day – a year to the date when Dre and I stepped out on faith to love each other for three days, thinking we’d be able to walk away from the other once we finished pouring out all of our hearts passion.

Ha, jokes on us.

We were standing on the sidewalk leading out to the sand where everyone sat in Acrylic chairs waiting. I couldn’t see Dre or up by the archway, but I felt him. Felt his heart call out to me the second I stepped out of my villa.

“I’m ready, baby girl.” Kissing her cheek, I closed my eyes and hugged her tight. “I love you so much, Massey.”

“Love you more. See you at the altar.” She stepped back winking.

Watching her walk down the flower aisle, seeing all our family and friends dressed up and waiting for me. Whew, I’m going to pass out. Yeah, I’m going to pass out.

Keatyn and Massey walked down to *Spend My Life* by *Kem*. I had no idea what song Dre had selected for me but I’m sure it was going to make me cry.

“It’s your turn, sweetheart.” My Dad held onto my arm as the tunes changed to *Stay with You* by *John Legend*.

“Oh my God, Dre.” My body swayed feeling the lyrics of the song wrap around me so warm that the sheets of the wind blowing past me felt like Dre’s arms hugging around me. The closer I listened to the lyrics and the voice, it wasn’t John Legend at all. It was Dre singing to me.

“Damn. The brotha is skilled.” Daddy mumbled helping me take my first steps.

Dapper in a tuxedo two shades darker than Massey’s dress, stood my *husband* standing next to Bishop Cambridge. Landon and Andrea stood next to him while he continued to wreck my whole life singing me down the aisle. He remained steady until his emotions started to get the best of him, and he had to take a knee and gather himself.

“Who gives this woman away?” Bishop’s baritone brought me back to reality. One minute I was walking slow trying to hold myself together seeing Dre breakdown and the next I’m standing before Bishop waiting for my dad and Dre to change positions.

“I do.” My Dad turned me to and cupped my face. “Thank you for giving me this moment.” He kissed the tip of my nose making me smile.

“Thank you for sharing it with me,” I whispered trying to keep it all together.

“Take care of her. She’s all I got.” He and Dre hugged one another.

“You have my word.” His eyes landed on me, and everything felt right. Everything felt like this was meant to be. “Ready to be locked in with me forever?” He rubbed his nose along mine.

Exhaling, I nodded smiling. “I don’t want anything else. Come on, make me your wife.”

THE END

AFTERWORD

Hey Loves!

So, how are you feeling? Did I surprise you? Are you shocked at the outcome of the series? Surprised about Noelani's secret deadly crush? Do you feel bad for the kids and Cassian?

Speaking of Cassian...My heart hurts for him. I want him to find love, true love, and he will get one last redemption story. Not right now, but soon. Very soon. You'll see more of the Bishop too.

But did y'all catch how I setup future stories with the kids? You like that, huh? Yeah, me too. Especially Massey and PJ. They are the cutest. Ari is so cute and sassy. Tai and Melly need their own show. And London, whew chilllee...

I have so much planned for the second generation and bonuses family. Stay connected with me for all updated.

Anywho, thank you so much for taking this wild and crazy journey with me. I truly enjoyed writing these characters, and I hope you enjoyed reading about them, too. As always, I want to hear from you. If you can be so kind to leave me a review on Amazon or Goodreads, I'd greatly appreciate it.

Let's connect and be friends!

Find me on Facebook (Chelsea Maria), Instagram (@_chelseamaria_), and Twitter (@_chelmaria_).

To stay in the loop of all things Chelsea Maria – upcoming releases, live discussions, character visuals, etc. – join my reading group

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Never goodbye but see you next release.

XOXO,

Chelsea Maria