



K.C. MILLS

CASUALTY

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Prologue

Isiah sat in the arm chair which sat in the study off the master suite, elbows positioned on the massive wooden arms, fingers interlocked and face stern. His sights were locked in on Noel, whose beauty had been the focus of his admiration for the past year. She was everything. Soft warm skin the color of brown sugar, doe eyes that held him captive and had him bending to her will and that body... *Damn!* Noel had a body that was unreal. Had he not been so intimate with every inch of it, Isiah would have bet his entire worth that it wasn't natural. His experience taught him. Noel was just the product of good genes. His dick began to harden at just the thought.

Pushing out a deep sigh as he adjusted himself, Isiah's eyes swept their bedroom. It was nice, laid out just right. A little too feminine with some of the features, like all the damn pillows that lined the bed when they weren't in it and the fresh flowers that were placed throughout, on dressers, in the bathroom and there in the study. Noel loved it so he didn't

complain. Whatever she wanted, was hers. That was how it had been for the last year. But now...

Checking the time on his watch, he realized there was less than an hour to get to his meeting. It was approaching four thirty in the morning, and his body was wide awake. The time was early for most but normal for him. He didn't sleep much, and that had grown in reality more so of the past few months. With a heavy mind, it was impossible to rest. There were so many things to figure out, starting with the beautiful being who was fast asleep a few feet away from him.

"I'm not pushing this shit back another day," he mumbled to himself as he called on his corded muscles to lift from the chair that he had been occupying. Moving with a confident stride as he always did, because he was indeed confident, Isiah made his way to the bed which his body departed hours earlier. The minute he reached the California King, his body folded just enough to place a shadow over Noel so that he could admire the beauty yet again. Inhaling deeply, a kiss was gently planted on her cheek. The act was followed by a whisper of her name inches away from her ear.

Upon hearing her man's deep alluring alto, Noel smiled and lifted a head full of ruffled blond tresses. Gently she

rubbed her eyes and they moved up his body until she reached that devilishly handsome face. Noel smiled once more because it was impossible not to. Isiah was all man. He was everything. With skin the color of honey and eyes only a shade darker, there was no way you didn't notice him at first glance. His features were that of a man who should be on magazine covers, wearing expensive suits. Carrying a briefcase. Not of a man who called the streets his home and carried a custom Desert Eagle which had countless bodies attached to it. But she knew it was only a matter of time. Her uncle had him under his wing and Isiah would undoubtedly transform. Either way, she loved every inch of him because there was no way not to.

“You heading out?” Noel's lazy voice was soft, seductive, feminine. It caused Isiah's dick to twitch a little. He cared about her. Only hours before, he was so deep between her thighs pushing so aggressively into her core that he was certain she would need a little time to recover from the sexual assault.

“Yeah, let me holla at you 'bout a few things before I'm up though.”

Noel's pretty brown face morphed into a frown. "About What Sih?"

"Us." That one word had Noel's chest tight. Mouth dry. Mind racing. She knew it was coming. Noel had been waiting with an unsettled spirit and an anxiousness that grew more vicious with each day, but she never thought he would follow through. He loved her too much. He loved his position too much, or so she thought.

Not wanting to hear the inevitable, Noel lowered her head back to the pillow. She swallowed the lump in her throat before delivering what she thought was a cool, controlled response.

"We can talk later. It's too early."

Isiah released a muffled laugh. It was cocky and laced with annoyance. "I'll talk you listen." He paused briefly to make sure he had his thoughts together. "I want out. This isn't working for me anymore. You keep this place; I already have another. I need a new start. Without you."

Rage and fear flushed through Noel's system like a lightning bolt. He was really doing it. Trying to end them. She couldn't let that happen. Wouldn't. There was no other man like him. Not one. Isiah was who every woman wanted,

dreamed about, attempted to lure, but she had him and wasn't about to let him go.

Shooting up like the bed was on fire beneath her curvy body and jumping from the bed with no consideration for the fact that she was only wearing a thong, Noel folded her arms across her full breasts, pushing her bare hip out to the side as she planted her feet shoulder width apart. "You must be high. Did you smoke when you got up?" With a devilish smile she stared at her man, eyebrows hiked and eyes dancing with humor.

"You heard what I said. I'm done." *I don't have time for her dramatics.*

Not in the mood to argue, Isiah checked the time on his expensive time piece. Arguing wasn't his thing. It fucked up his entire vibe and affected his ability to process like he needed to. Money was more important than irrational thoughts so he tried his best not to allow anyone to take him there.

"I heard you but now it's time for you to listen. We're not done, baby. We're only just beginning. I own you. Well me and this baby own you. I'm pregnant, Sih. I was going to wait and tell you but I guess now is just a good a time as any."

He was s already in the process of leaving which placed his back to Noel as she released her confession. When he turned and their eyes met again he found the truth. She wasn't lying. But...

“Is it mine or his?”

Noel's expression didn't change other than her smile spreading wider. “You know me better than that. He was just a good fuck when you were too busy with your other hoes. I would never slip up and let him get me pregnant. You on the other hand, I've been trying since the first time I let you get a taste.”

Isiah's teeth girt. She was right, he didn't know her. Noel was likely telling the truth about orchestrating a pregnancy with him. It made sense. It gave her security, but damn sure didn't give her ownership. He was his own man. Always had been and a baby wouldn't change that.

“Me being a father doesn't tie me to you. I will be there for my child and for you financially but that's all you get. I said I was done and I mean it.” He started towards the door again stopping abruptly.

“And for the record. I never, not once cheated on you. If I wasn't with you, I was making money, securing my future

and apparently that of my child. The same way I know you, you know me. Pass judgment all you want. The truth is still the truth. You cheated because you're a selfish bitch who wanted me for all the wrong reasons. It was never about me. It's always been about who I am and who you know I'm going to be."

Noel's chest grew tight. The truth hurt. She did care about Isiah but she loved what he represented more. Who he was and the rise that was happening was what pushed her agenda.

"You're not leaving me. No matter how much of a bitch I am. I'll tell him it was you."

Isiah's eyes flashed with confusion. When she realized she had him, that devious smile surfaced again.

"I know everything baby. I've been holding onto that for a while now. You're the one that killed my father. How do you think my uncle will feel when he finds out that the man he's claimed as a son, mentored and trusted with his only niece not only killed his brother but also stole from him? The money you used to buy your first real shipment was blood money? I think..." Noel paused and moved in closer to the hard body she had grown accustomed to lying next to every night. When

hers brushed against the steely frame, she smiled and kissed his lips. "...that he will put a bullet in your head. That's what I think. Shall we test that theory?"

Pushing away her soft body and barring his eyes into an angry glare, Isiah swept her face for answers.

"How the hell do you know about that night?"

Again she smiled, confidence seeping through her pores. "I was there. I watched it happen. I'm the one who deleted the footage from the security system, but not before I made a copy for myself. I still have it."

His face steeled again at the realization of just how heartless Noel truly was. Isiah had murdered a man and allowed his daughter in his bed months after, but he knew the sins committed by the life he took. His conscience was clean. They shared no blood relation and it was kill or be killed. When Omar Abara pulled a gun, Isiah had no options but to return the favor. He didn't miss. Able was hit with one precise shot to the head without a second thought.

Shaking in disbelief, it registered deeper than he ever imagined. Finally seeing Noel's true colors knocked the blinders completely off. *How the hell did I miss that?*

“You know I killed your father and you still want me? You’ve been with me, in my bed, for the past year and that doesn’t bother you?”

“Not at all. My father was a horrible man. He hurt a lot of people and would have died eventually. You saved so many with that one indiscretion. My uncle on the other hand didn’t know shit about how terrible of a man he was. Or maybe he doesn’t care. He loved him and would not be happy to know you’re the reason why his dear sweet brother is no longer with us.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Noel smiled and shrugged. “You can go now. We’ll talk later. I know how much you hate being late. I’ll set up my first appointment so that we can start planning for the baby. *Our* baby.” Noel blew Isiah a kiss before strutting through their master suite and then entering the bathroom. She was beaming on the inside while Isiah fumed knowing that he was really fucked. There was no way around this, at least not now. Even if she didn’t really have footage, just the mention of it to her uncle would give him cause to investigate. With enough digging it was possible to find something to pin the murder on

him. As miserable as he knew he was going to be, Isiah had to play by her rules until he figured a way out.

Casu-al-ty:

a person or thing badly affected by an event or situation

1.

“Are you leaving?” Purred from Miranda’s pouty lips the second Isiah threw the covers from his body. Long legs swung over the side of the bed, his size twelves planting down softly onto the cold hardwood floors right after.

“Yeah.” As soon as his body was upright, Isiah’s arms rose above his head exercising a much needed stretch. *Her bed is too damn soft.*

Stiff legs carried him to her side of the bed while Miranda eyed the thick heavy length of him which bounced between his thighs. Her core tightened at the same moment she felt that familiar flutter churning in her stomach. The two had spent hours exploring each other. She could still feel him as vividly as she had when she praised his name through back-to-back orgasms.

“I won’t see you for a few days. I have some shit that’s going to keep me tied up.” Isiah leaned over Miranda’s naked body, dragging the pad of his finger up her thigh until he reached the curve of her left breast. With a lustful stare, his

fingers latched onto her nipple, twisting before landing a kiss to her bare shoulder.

“I can make my schedule flexible,” Miranda moaned from the contact of his strong fingers delivering the perfect amount of pressure. As a head nurse for North Side, Miranda could occasionally control her schedule, and would for Isiah at the drop of a dime. He just never requested that she did.

He simply snorted at the thought. “Won’t help. I’mma get with you though.”

Miranda was always bending to make herself available. She wanted to see him no matter what. Over the past few months since she welcomed Isiah Cason in her bed, she developed an addiction. The man was godly. It was sinful for one man to have so much of everything. There were days when she still couldn’t believe what they had was real. *As real as it could be.* Isiah wasn’t hers. Not in the sense that women would generally claim a man. He had a life of royalty. A woman who he shared that life with. She wore expensive diamonds, pricy labels and lived in the multimillion dollar estate that was out in the middle of nowhere. Rumors were that they lived North of the city where only the prestigious and

wealthy resided, but a few days a week, he belonged to Miranda.

Isiah didn't discuss his situation with her and caused more curiosity about how he lived when he wasn't in her presence. To combat her wondering mind, Miranda followed Noel on all of her social media accounts, analyzing, trying to figure out why Isiah frequented her bed. It didn't make sense. Noel was beautiful, her personality shined in the clips that Miranda obsessed over from her pages. There was no doubt that Noel loved Isiah and from what Miranda could tell, through the pictures which were posted, they had a happy little family. *So why does he cheat?*

Like most women who knew about Isiah's infidelities, she assumed he was just a typical man who had it all and wanted more. Isiah didn't show affection outside of the sexual scope of the union she shared with him. He bought her things, gave her money and sexed her crazy, but that was it. He didn't discuss anything personal; they never went out together and his life outside of her was off limits. It hurt, but she couldn't do anything about it. Instead, she embraced what he offered. Insurmountable orgasms that surpassed what she ever imagined. *God, I want all of him.*

“Okay well if you change your mind...” Miranda was pouting but knew better than to push. Instead, she lifted her body and eased back against the headboard, pulling her knees into her chest, wrapping thin arms around them. After lowering her chin, she watched his beautiful body move about her room, layering his frame with the clothes that he shed the night before. Isiah was a living, breathing, walking god. His body was unreal and the pleasure received from it was unexplainable.

“You need anything?” His eyes were now on his phone, scrolling through messages he’d missed the night before. Most from his assistant, Cyn. There were reminders from Noel about the dinner with her uncle, sprinkled in with notifications from his team. Business was booming and that meant working overtime to clean up the dirty money that was stacking by the minute.

“You.”

Isiah’s eyes rolled over to Miranda but his expression gave away nothing. She knew the deal. He never promised her anything other than sex. It was all he had to offer. His life was complicated. Even without the complications, there wasn’t an interest with Miranda that intrigued him past the exploration of

her body. His lack of interest was in reverence to what she had to offer. He knew that men would line up for a chance to know her more intimately, she just didn't do it for him. Noel created trust issues that Isiah felt certain there was no recovery from. His heart was closed off. Women didn't exist beyond exploring between their thighs. It was his burden to bear and one he refused to share with anyone else.

“Come lock up.”

Another blow to her ego. Isiah didn't entertain her demand, nor did he feel obligated to respond. Instead, he lifted his gun and eased it in place on his body. When Miranda didn't move, his palm worked its way down his face in an attempt to ward off the mounting tension. *Please don't start this shit. Not today.*

“Does she know,” a brief pause, “that you cheat on her?”

“Miranda...” Visually frustrated Isiah's features hardened. “Don't fuck this up, okay?”

“I'm not...or at least I'm not trying to but you have to give me something.” Her own frustration was expressed with flailed arms thrown over her head.

“Come lock up,” Isiah repeated. He didn’t argue, and damn sure didn’t explain himself. It was nothing to walk out of her apartment and never return. Miranda had been one of many over the past two years who satisfied a physical need. One that had to be handled outside of his home because he refused to touch Noel. She kept an invisible leash on his life that fucked with his mind but not once since *that* morning had he touched her sexually. They shared a hug or two, possibly a kiss on the cheek to keep up with appearances, but that was all she would get from him. The terms of their agreement were solid. She was allowed to pretend that their union was picture perfect while Isiah moved about however he wanted, as long as it was done with discretion. Noel didn’t love him nor did she care about anything other than the association of being the only woman to lock down Isiah Cason. No one knew it was all a performance.

When he ignored her once again, the warning was clear. There was no discussion happening. No bargaining nor was there any way but his. Miranda backed down. She wasn’t ready to let go of what they shared, so she tucked her tail between her legs and left the matter alone.

“You can go. I’ll lock up after you’re gone.”

With no hesitation or further discussion he was gone. As soon as Isiah's body relaxed against the soft leather of his Range he connected to his first call.

“Aye boss. You moving?”

“Yeah, anything I need to know?”

“We're making money. That's all I got for you.”

“That's all I need. I'm about to meet up with Goby. Have my package ready by eight. He's getting it today. I have to see Odin and then I have some family matters to take care of later.”

“Oh that's right. Tonight's La' Familia. I can't wait until I'm up in that bitch.” Kal grinned considering the honor. It was a celebration of all the top members that worked under Odin. Isiah did his own thing and worked independently but he was considered family, so he was always there. Your position determined whether or not you were invited and Kal hadn't quite reached that level yet. Isiah was certain it was only a matter of time before he was laced in an expensive tux, sharing drinks with the elite members of the Abara family.

“Do your time. Earn it. Trust, it's inches away,” Isiah schooled and praised his young soldier.

“Will do boss. I’ll have things square for Goby by the time he gets here but, aye I need to holla at you about a few things when you have time.”

There was a slight pinch between Isiah’s eyes at the thought. One of his crew needing his time, personally, was never good. “Anything I need to be concerned about?”

“No, I just...it’s time for me to make some different moves. You know the one you been talking ‘bout. That’s it boss.” There was a lightness to Kal’s voice that settled Isiah again. With a nod that couldn’t been seen by anyone he confirmed.

“Get with Cyn and she’ll make it happen. You know how to reach her?”

“Yeah I do. I’ll get with her. Thanks, Sih.”

The call ended and Isiah reached in his consul for something to burn. His mind was always heavy and it was one of his vices. The potency that he had access to helped his mind settle. It only took a few pulls to get him right and he needed it. After blazing, Isiah thought about his conflict with Miranda. Running through the details placed him in a sour mood. He knew it was only a matter of time before they were done. She had been inching dangerously close to that line. The one he

told them never to cross, but it always happened. *Women can't fuck without feeling.*

No matter how much it disturbed his spirit, the fact remained. Women moved off emotions. The physical was simply a bonus. Isiah learned early in life that emotions were a handicap. They messed with your head in the worst way and challenged the important decisions which were required for survival. It's what ended things for his family. His father was emotional and that got in the way of business and cost him his life. Even back then, at fifteen years old, Isiah could recognize it.

Inevitably, Isiah knew that every woman he shared a bed with was going to try and connect. She would feel something that he wouldn't which was why he had so many in his life. When their hearts got involved, Isiah would be done until he could find another neutral conquest. He wasn't the type of man who was driven by his sexual needs but he enjoyed sampling the sweet oasis that many of them kept locked away between their thighs. It was another of his guilty pleasures.

Twenty minutes into his drive, Isiah's body was relaxed and his mind slowed down enough for him to run through

upcoming tasks. He was a busy man holding an important position in the city that never sleeps. He learned at an early age that there was always something moving in Atlanta.

Coming up as a young buck, he watched his father nickel and dime the streets for the little change that kept them clothed and fed, knowing that there had to be more to life, Isiah wanted more. Unlike most young men, he never dreamed of the big hustle. He had no clue what he wanted to be and after witnessing his father shot in the head over a twenty dollar loss for money he likely stole to feed them, he was certain that the streets weren't his calling. Life was funny that way because whether they were for him or not, they damn sure seeped into his being and wouldn't let go.

With a mother and sister to look after, fifteen year old Isiah had to make a decision. His first time hitting the block was selling off the remainder of the product that his father left behind. He hustled his way into that position by begging Big Lou, the man who handed off the garbage that his father was pushing, to allow him to take his place. Lou did so but taxed the young buck so unreasonably that he would forever be in debt. Or so he thought. Isiah wasn't his father. He was smart. The money he made, he moved across town with and copped his next come up from Dirty. Dirty had better product and

because of its reputation for pure bliss, sold at a higher price. In no time at all, Isiah had paid his debt to Big Lou and was hustling independently. He built quite a name for himself, which was how he ended up in the Abara warehouse that night. The night that changed his life and one he would live to regret.

Pulling up at the residence of his mentor, Isiah's brows dipped in noticing Odin was out on the massive porch awaiting his arrival. His first instinct was to check the time. Isiah valued his time so he made a point in valuing others. *I'm early.*

Once his long body extended from the car, Odin was on his way to greet him. His expression was stoic, which caused Isiah to curb his.

“Always on time, son. I appreciate that about you. They don't make 'em like you anymore. These young guys don't have respect for anyone or anything...but you...you get it.” Odin forced his protégé into a short hug. It was a sign of respect and when he pulled back, his teeth were on display.

“You know how I feel about that.” Isiah's emotions didn't just escape his relationships with women. Not many got

much from him. He was closed off to everyone for the most part.

“I do. You’re a rare breed, son. Come, take a walk with me. I want to discuss a few things with you, in private.”

Shutting the door to his ride, Isiah followed the path that Odin slowly traveled. “It must be big if you’re wanting this much privacy.”

Odin’s teeth were on display again as he nodded, easing his hands into the tailored pants he wore. At eight in the morning, he was dressed up as if he needed to be sitting in a board room, when Odin wasn’t in meetings, his day would be spent at home with his wife but he still dressed as if he were ready for a board room.

“You know how Liv is. The second you step through the door, she’s all over you. I keep checking her about that but she feels like you’re her blood. In her mind, she carried you in her womb. That woman loves you something terrible.”

Isiah smirked while his head shook lightly. It was true and nothing either of them could do about it, however, Isiah didn’t mind. After the loss of his own mother, Liv’s affection was a welcomed necessity. He loved her just as much and their

bond was one that he would miss if things ever played out like he needed them too. *I need out from this family.*

“How are things?” Odin questioned. His tone was even, and hard to decipher.

“Business is good. Money is flowing. My guys are eating.”

“Good, but that’s not what I’m asking.” The two men shared a look that Isiah read into right away. *Noel.*

“We’re making it. Things are complicated with us. Always have been.” As always he kept things vague.

“The streets talk. It’s a whisper but I have to consider it. You’re family, always will be but...”

She’s blood, your brother’s daughter and she comes before me.

“I’m a man. A well respected one who has means and access.” Isiah glanced at the man next to him searching for understanding. Their situations were very different but Odin had his indiscretions as well. He adored his wife, took care of his family but that didn’t mean there weren’t women on the side. “Noel and I have an agreement. We respect each other. I

will never soil her reputation or tarnish your family name.

That's not who I am."

Odin stopped moving and turned to face Isiah. "I know she's difficult. Always has been." A light smile teased at his lips. "Her parents, God rest their souls, spoiled that child. She has no clue how the real world works. She wants what she wants and doesn't care about the details on how it's going to happen. The same way she latched onto you I'm sure."

You have no fucking clue.

"I can handle Noel. I don't know what our future looks like but I will always make her a priority. She will never want for anything. *Other than my respect and love.* We share a mutual agreement about our relationship." Once again, Isiah kept it vague.

Odin's loaded gaze was on Isiah until he offered a slight nod of his head expressing understanding.

"Is that all you two share, a mutual agreement? What about love Isiah?"

Love? Impossible. We share responsibilities for our roles in the death of your brother, her father. The one thing that keeps me tied to a woman who's existence I loathe.

A charming smile eased in place and Isiah's corded arms folded securely across his chests. "Isn't it you that is always telling us not to kiss and tell?" With one brow slightly higher than the other, he waited.

Odin chuckled in response removing one hand from his pocket to grip Isiah's broad shoulder. "I'll let it go. You'll come to me if things with you and Noel get to be more than you can handle on your own?"

Hell no. You're the reason why I'm tied to her. If you really knew...

"You know I won't do that. Family matters are private. Again, that's what I've learned from you and I can handle Noel. I give you my word."

Inhaling deeply, Odin nodded and let it go.

"Tell me about the project you're working on out at the airport. I hear the land is cleared and things are moving along."

The conversation was over and the men were moving again. Isiah discussed business while admiring the details of the well-manicured property as they traveled through the grounds. His mind was elsewhere, but he was able to keep his

thoughts at bay and rattle off details about his latest real estate ventures. This was his life; he was used to it even if he was drowning slowly because of the weight placed on him.

&

“How do I look?” Noel stepped out of the closet into the master suite spinning on her toes. The custom sleek beaded gown she wore, hugged her body like a glove, dipping low in the front by way of a V that exposed her ample breasts. The back was completely exposed, with the material resting just above her tight round ass.

Isiah didn't respond. Instead, he extended both arms one by one adjusting the sleeves of his crisp black shirt. After fingering the diamond cuff links that rested at his wrist, he smoothed his palms down the front of his tuxedo jacket.

“So you're going to be an asshole tonight? I thought maybe we could actually be the happy couple that everyone thinks we are. Just for one night, Sih.”

He laughed smugly under his breath before lifting those maple colored eyes to meet hers. The delivery was calculated and had Noel sucking her teeth. She couldn't however deny

how tempting he looked. His Caesar was freshly cut along with his beard. The tux only amplified his hood persona giving him an edgy polished look. The man looked like money and reeked of power and authority. She wanted him so badly it would be considered obsessive.

“It’s been two years since I’ve touched you. Get over it. You have your freedom. It shouldn’t kill you to pretend like you like me for one night.”

Again he remained silent. That was the thing that drove Noel crazy. This man murdered her slowly with his cold callus treatment. In the beginning it never bothered her. She had the life she wanted, on paper. The most sought after man in the city belonged to her, or at least everyone assumed he did. That elevated Noel’s status, made her the envy of every woman she encountered. The rush was exhilarating, until she had to crawl in bed alone at night or find a substitute to pretend with. No one knew just how distorted their relationship truly was. Not even her family was privy to the fraudulent life she lived.

There were plenty of times when Noel sank into a pity of despair, but her ego refused to allow her to let go. It pained her that other women experienced the physical pleasure that she dreamt about but there wasn’t anything she could do. The

one time she crept between Isiah's legs and took his manhood in her mouth to seduce him, she received the biggest blow to her ego when he woke from his sleep and softened the second his eyes landed on her. *I can't even get him hard long enough to seduce him back into my bed.*

“Do you really hate me that much?”

Isiah snorted through his irritation. “Do you really have to ask?”

“How long are you going to treat me like I'm the one who ruined your life? You did that. You pulled the trigger.”

“And you're holding that over my head. You didn't ruin my life Noel, but you're damn sure not allowing me to live. I don't hate you. I fucking despise you. Now move your ass so that we can get this shit over with. I'm going to return a few calls. Be downstairs in ten minutes or you can drive yourself.”

Noel's mouth hung open briefly before she sucked it up and regrouped. “Fucking asshole,” she mumbled while en route to the full length mirror positioned in the corner of their room. *Her room.* One last check to make sure she had her self together and then it was time to perform.

Isiah left the master suite and moved down the hall until he reached what would have been their son's room. He had no clue why it still existed. After Noel miscarried, he knew for certain she would never carry another one of his children. He wouldn't allow her close enough to make that mistake again. It would only be another tie that bonded their already complex life.

Maria, the full-time housekeeper that Noel kept on staff, was on her way down the hall when Isiah stopped at the door to the nursery. Her eyes followed his path to the door but she quickly looked up at his face.

“Evening sir. It's been awhile.” She smiled sweetly at Isiah. He always treated her fair and more like a person than an employee. Noel on the other hand, demanded things and made no effort to consider Marie as anything more than her position.

“She shouldn't be out too late. You done for the night?”

Maria offered a nod. Isiah rarely slept in the main home that belonged to his family anymore. The staff knew not to question or speak on it. Maria had intimate details of the house he resided in because of the time she spent training her cousin to clean his new home specific to his needs. Maria kept

her thoughts to herself. His relationship to Noel wasn't her business and she behaved as such.

“Have a good evening sir.” With a quick nod, she walked away and Isiah stepped into what would have been his son's room. It was a reminder of how close he had come to being stuck to Noel for life. When he reached the massive crib, he eased his hands into his pockets and stared blankly. A sadness for their loss, had his heart swelling but the feeling didn't last long. Relief washed over him knowing that it was God's will.

Isiah pushed out an exaggerated sigh before he left his son's room. The second he reached the foyer, the tension in his shoulders returned. “Let's go,” he growled passing Noel to reach the front door. He was ready to get the night over with so that he could head home and get some real rest.

2.

“Shit.” Lake stumbled slightly, almost dropping the tray of food that she held. Her mind was moving a mile a minute as she hurried through the doors trying to keep up. This serving gig was a lot tougher than she assumed, but it was quick money and she was grateful for the opportunity.

“Relax. You can’t go out there looking like you don’t have a damn clue what you’re doing. Do you know who’s in this room?” Chloe appeared out of nowhere, or at least it seemed to Lake she did. Side by side, she stood with her cousin with a tense look on her face.

“I have no idea who these people are but they’re rich. I know that much.” Lake’s dark eyes swept the room filled with bodies covered in expensive threads and jewelry that she was positive cost more than her college tuition.

“That man over there is Odin Abara,” Chloe motioned with her head and Lake followed. “He’s one of the biggest dealers in the south. That’s his wife next to him and their niece. That man right there, the fine ass one next to Odin’s

niece, his name is Isiah Cason.” Lake’s eyes swept the man from head to toe. He was breathtaking with honey colored skin and eyes a shade darker. His curly Caesar looked as if he was guilty of visiting the barber during bathroom breaks and the beard that covered the lower half of his face was just as groomed. The way his long body stood statuesque, wide and powerful, let you know that he was confident, arrogant even, but he owned the right to be. His tux covered his tall and lean build in a way that only a man like Isiah could pull off. It was all his, and not to be replicated. He was the type that you noticed without him so much as saying one word because you could simply feel his presence. It filled the space placing anyone else second to him, and if he blessed you with those mysterious eyes, you were held captive because they were just that commanding.

“He’s royalty in the city and Odin’s niece is his girlfriend. Consider him a legend. Next in charge to Odin. All these people in this room work for Abara except Isiah, but word is, he’ll take over for him. The rest are Abara’s top paid lieutenants. They do this once a year. It’s a celebration of some kind. La’ Familia. One night where they get together to waste a lot of money on imported liquor and food. You cannot go out there nervous and acting like you don’t belong. They will have

you thrown up out of here. Everything has to be perfect. Including our service. Now get your shit together. Smile serve and be invisible.” Chloe brushed past her cousin heading into the room carrying a tray of crystal flukes. The women were drinking expensive wine while most of the men sipped on something brown.

Lake sucked in a deep breath as her anxious eyes moved about the room once more. She paid special attention to the group that Chloe singled out. The man known as Odin was handsome. You could see the age on him but he was still quite attractive wearing a smoked gray tux which fit his stocky frame. He wasn't very tall, maybe 5'8-5'9 if she had to guess but he was indeed handsome with salt and pepper hair and beard which were both neatly and trimmed. His wife was also nice on the eyes with vanilla skin which glowed under the soft lighting of the room. Her short cropped hair was low on the sides with ringlets on top. She had simple features, thin lips and nose, slanted eyes but a cheeky smile which seemed to be a permanent fixture. Her hand rested affectionately on the arm of her husband while they chatted away with the couple next to them.

With timid steps, Lake ventured out into the open space moving past guests who overlooked her presence or flagged her down to reach for one of the shrimp hors d'oeuvres that were neatly lined up on the tray she carried. As she moved about, she managed to keep her head low even if she did maintain the smile Chloe insisted was required. When she reached the area where Odin and his group were, she was halted by the man whose eyes met with hers curiously. *God he's handsome and smells divine.*

Lake waited while he lifted two of the shrimp concoctions from the tray and then offered one to Odin's wife. She blushed affectionately and accepted before he reached for another. Instead of offering it to the woman who stood close by him, he popped it in his mouth. *Damn those lips.*

The woman next to him rolled her eyes and reached for her own before shooing Lake away.

Rude.

Lake was confused by their dynamic but didn't put much thought into it. Rich people were strange. As she walked away, Isiah kept his eyes on her paying attention to the way she balled up her face after the interaction with Noel. It took everything in him not to check her for being such a bitch to the

young woman who had just walked away. She was simply doing her job even if she was doing it horribly. There was no way she should have been carrying those trays of food. He had watched her for a while, in fact, his eyes were on her every time she was in the room and there was nothing refined about her movements. *She must be new.*

She was beautiful, with expressive dark eyes, thick wild hair that she had somehow managed to tame into a bun which sat boldly on top of her head, exposing the length of her neck, even with the collared blouse she wore. *That damn neck. I bet it would look good with her head thrown back, while I stroked her deep.* The thought had Isiah widening his stance to accommodate for the hardening of his dick.

Why the fuck am I sweating this woman?

He watched her collide with a guest, barely managing to hold steady the tray in her hand. When her eyes lifted to the Lieutenants girl, she mouthed sorry and then hurried away. Isiah's mind went wild with the thought of what those heart shaped lips would feel like on him.

When he found Lake again, he took in her features. Round face, long lashes, slim nose and dark eyes. Her body was petite, putting her just under average height for a woman.

She wasn't curvy at all but she wasn't straight up and down either. He could see a slight tone to her arms and assumed her legs would match but the loose fitting black pants gave nothing away, except the cute little round ass that his eyes kept dropping too when she passed by him. He chuckled under his breath trying to figure out why his entire night had been dedicated to watching her fumble her way through the room. It didn't make sense, but there was something about her that had his attention. It wasn't just her looks either. It was a feeling. A pull that he wasn't used to. A pull that felt as if he had to experience her. He needed to know more and no matter how many times he attempted to push the idea to the back of his mind, it resurfaced every time she entered the room. The awkward brown beauty had his attention.

Lake on the other hand was too busy trying not to fall over her own feet to be worried about anyone, but she too had noticed Isiah, unfortunately she wasn't allowed the luxury of fantasizing. She had a job to do so instead of lusting over him, Lake moved about the room with trays, kept her head down and only spoke when spoken too. The process became a little easier when she was able to find her rhythm. The only issues she had was being able to keep from stalking Isiah Cason. The man was intriguing. From Lake's observation, she determined

that he was well respected. Likely the most respected in the room next to Odin. The men in attendance seemed to migrate his way and when they addressed him, it was with straight posture and a gleam of admiration. Women who were on the arms of the other men, stole glances the same as Lake had been doing most of the night. Their lustful stares and whispers didn't go unnoticed. The strange thing was the woman who was identified as his, barely held his attention. She stayed close but the two hardly talked and never touched. When they did speak, there was a tension in Isiah's face that only surfaced when he communicated with her.

Maybe they're fighting.

Whatever their deal was, Lake couldn't help but be drawn in by him. His movements appeared to be well orchestrated, calculated in a sense but delivered with a smoothness that presented as natural. Something as simple as a hand brushing across the soft coils that topped his head or the widening of his stance as he held conversations throughout the night was...*purposeful, sexy.*

“Stop. That man is out of your league and his girlfriends a bitch.” Chloe inched up next to her cousin with an empty tray tucked under her arm.

“What?”

With a cheeky grin, Chloe flicked her nose towards the corner where Isiah was standing. “You’ve been watching him all night. I even think he’s peeped you a few times but that’s not what you want. A man like that will fuck up your entire world. Look how he’s standing. There’s no doubt in my mind the dick is A1, but you and I are not from their world or welcomed in it. Now don’t get me wrong, if you just want a few good orgasms, he might hand those over but you’re not me and that’s not how you get down.”

Lake’s eyes rolled over to her cousin who had a glint of amusement dancing in hers. “I’m not checking for that man.”

“Mmmhmm, come on. We have to clean up. It’s time to close shop. We’re done here.” As Chloe turned her back to Lake, she lifted her eyes one last time and found a rich maple pair on her. Her breath stilled for a moment and when the handsome face relaxed, not quite into a smile but more or less approval, she turned away and didn’t look back. There was something about him that had her pulse racing and she knew it was dangerous to be exposed to.

Thirty minutes later, the team of servers had packed up the van and were leaving one by one. Charlene who owned

Catered with Care thanked everyone and promised payment would hit their accounts first thing in the morning. Chloe thanked her for allowing her cousin to fill in before the two left the building with their arms linked, pleased that the night had gone smoothly but was finally over.

“What are you doing with the money?” Chloe questioned as the two reached the area where their cars were parked.

“Paying my rent.” Lake frowned at the thought briefly before a smile surfaced. “I would have been moving in with you if you hadn’t hooked me up. I appreciate it. Let me know when she needs help again.”

“How do you have a whole degree but can’t find a real job?”

“Degrees don’t mean shit anymore. It’s all about who you know and I don’t know anybody.” It was true, the world functioned off of favors and if you didn’t have any in your pocket the struggle was a lot harder. Lake just prayed that things would turn around soon. She was in a financial bind with no hope of pulling out. Bills didn’t stop just because her shitty, barely over minimum wage, job couldn’t cover them.

Patting her pockets she frowned not feeling her phone so that she could map her way home and that's when it hit.

“Shit.”

“What?”

“I left my phone in the kitchen, when she fussed about us having them, I tucked mine in a cabinet.”

“You want me to go with you?”

“No, I'll be fine. It will only take me a second to grab it. You can go but text me when you get in.”

“You sure?”

“Girl yes. In and out. Go.” Lake hugged her cousin and then turned on her heels to head back to the building.

“Make sure you text me too. Love you Lake.”

“Love you too.”

When she reached the back door where they had exited, Lake tugged on the metal handle but it didn't budge.

“Shit, it's locked,” she whispered. After a moment she considered her options. She could go through the front but that meant entering the main hall. Their job was done so there was no reason for her to be there. These people were rich and

exclusive which meant they might not take too kindly to the help invading on their private affair. For a long moment she stared at the door trying to decide her next move. Regretfully she stepped away knowing that there was no other choice.

What if they don't let me in? What if I get Charlene in trouble for being careless?

When Lake reached the glass doors that lead to the entrance of the building she sucked in a deep breath, preparing for the worst.

“I thought you guys were done. Why you still here?”

Lake froze mid step and lifted her head. When her eyes moved about the darkness that surrounded her, she located a figure positioned off to the side. When he moved out of the shadows into the light her eyes widened slightly.

“Did you hear me?”

“I uhh?” He was still moving and didn't stop until they were inches apart. “My phone. I left it.”

Isiah stared down at the woman he had been admiring all night. Her smooth Hershey skin faded into the darkness but the whites of her eyes caught the light that was a few feet away. He traced the corners of her lips before moving down the rest

of her body, which was covered in black pants and a white blouse, now pulled free from the tucked state it had been in all night.

“You sure that’s why you’re still here?” His brows lifted and a smug grin teased at his lips. She was attracted to him but intimidated at the same time. Isiah was used to having that effect on women so it didn’t move him one way or the other, but she was adorable standing before him adjusting her weight from foot to foot.

“Why are you out here standing in the dark, alone? That’s kinda creepy.” Lake wasn’t sure why those words left her mouth but she was curious and it was a way to avoid his question. His felt like an accusation.

“I saw you leave. I thought maybe I could catch you.” Those beautiful mysterious eyes landed on hers, causing Lake’s stomach to leap. “So, I ask you again since you so cleverly avoided my question the first time, why are *you* still here?”

With a racing heart, Lake eventually found the courage to lift her eyes to his. “Why else would I be here?”

Maybe because you feel what I feel.

His smile widened when he lifted a massive hand and grazed the side of her face with the tips of his fingers. *His smile is beautiful.* Lake's body shivered and her cheeks warmed from embarrassment. He had her body reacting just that easily.

Isiah chuckled and stepped away. "Come on. I'll let you in so you can get your phone. It's late."

Releasing a breath that had been caught up by his presence, Lake watched him move the first few steps before she hurried to catch up. She walked behind him through the building, keeping her head low as they passed into the main hall and entered the kitchen. Isiah stepped inside first and slipped his hands into his pockets watching as she hurried to one of the cabinets and pulled the door open. Once she wrapped her hand around the phone, it was lifted in the air as proof that she actually left it. He grinned and nodded.

"I'm going to go out this way. Thank you."

"How old are you?" *I can't be fucking with no babies. She looks young as hell.*

"Huh?"

He waited until Lake turned to face him. “How old are you?”

“Twenty four.” *Good, well over legal.*

With a nod he continued. “What’s your name?”

Lake’s brows moved in closer as she stared at the strikingly handsome figure who smelled like pure heaven. *Why is he asking about me?*

When she didn’t answer right away, his deep raspy cords filled the air. “You don’t want to tell me your name?” There was now a teasing glare in his eyes which had Lake squirming.

“I just...why do you want to know?”

He was amused by the change in her demeanor. She squared her shoulders and straightened her spine when she addressed him this time. *Ahhh, she as some G in her.*

“So I can know what to call you next time I see you.”
Next time. This man is crazy.

“How do you know there’ll be a next time?”

His deep alluring tenor was offered again by way of a chuckle as his eyes swept her petite frame. “Because I want there to be a next time which means it will happen.”

Her lips parted slightly and a heat flooded her body from the top of her head to the tip of her toes. The hardening of her nipples had Lake even more anxious than before. “I have to go. Thank you for getting me back inside.”

She hurried to the door and pushed through it without looking back. By the time she reached her car and was in the driver’s seat, her heart was racing. *Was he...no, there’s no way that man was flirting with me. But what if he was?*

Lake shook the thought and started her car. The interaction had been strange but alluring at the same time. Removing the idea of a man of his status being interested in her, Lake pulled away from the building focused on getting home safely. Even still Isiah Cason was heavy on her mind. She was sure she wouldn’t see him again but that wouldn’t stop a rapid imagination from running wild about what would happen if she did.

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The first thing Lake did when she entered her apartment was scoop the tiny dog that rushed her feet into welcoming arms. Snuggling up to the miniature blue pit, she brushed her

face against the sleek fur and the pup responded lovingly by settling into Lake's arms.

“Guess what mommy did Bleu? I bought us some more time in this shitty ass apartment that we both hate so much.” Lake reared back just a little. “Well maybe me more than you. This place is probably cozy for you.”

As if Bleu knew exactly what was being spoken to her, she nuzzled closer to Lake's chest. Once the door was locked, she carried her pup to the tiny bedroom they shared and lowered her to the bed. After removing her phone, she text Chloe letting her know that's she was home safe. Chloe had already reached out to do the same.

“God, I'm exhausted,” she groaned after kicking off her shoes and lying back on her bed. Bleu inched closer and nestled her body against Lake's side. With her eyes closed and her mind wandering, it didn't take long for his face to appear. No matter how hard she attempted to erase him from her thoughts, Isiah found his way back to the forefront of her mind. The man was simply gorgeous and he was a different type of man. Lake had a few boyfriends in her past but none she felt could light a candle to Isiah. He was all man and not just in the physical sense. His life screamed that of

importance. There were people who relied on him and looked up to him. She saw it tonight. There was nothing simple about the man she was currently crushing on.

“I bet he thinks I’m a child.” *Shit I am compared to him.* Not just in age but where life is concerned.

Lake was sure that Isiah had worldly experiences. *And a lot of women.* With the thought, her eyes rolled hard behind their protective lids. *Let me get in the shower so that I can get some rest.* Sitting up slowly she brushed her hand across the back of the lazy pup massaging her back. “Mommy’s going to get cleaned up. You sleeping with me tonight?”

She smiled as the tiny pit lifted on its short legs and moved down to the foot of the bed. She curled up providing an answer. Lake smirked admiring how smart her baby was. You couldn’t convince her that Bleu didn’t understand.

By the time Lake finished her shower and was tucked into her bed, she felt a wave of exhaustion trickle through her body but her mind was still wired with thoughts of Isiah. Needing a fix, she lifted her phone and pulled up a search page, typing his name slowly. It took a minute to actually initiate the search but once she did, she smiled at the image that surfaced of him. He was wearing a suit. One that was a

little more casual than the tux that covered his body tonight, but she was guessing it was still expensive. Her finger hovered over the link attached to the photo before she actually touched it pulling up what she realized was his company. *Cason Realty*.

“Commercial and high end residential real estate.” *So he’s big, big with it.*

Lake moved through the site checking out the pictures of properties. A few times she came across photos of Isiah and had to bite down on her lip to hide her smile. At the bottom of the page she found his social media and immediately clicked on it. The page was for his business and filled with completed properties and some that were being built. That search lead to his personal page which was following the business one. When she got to it, there was a different vibe. Unlike the thousand or so pictures on the business one, this one only had a hand full. A few of Isiah which she studied intently for what felt like forever. In some, he was dressed down in sweats that hung low on his very cut body and t-shirts that hugged his chest and shoulders. There was even one of him shirtless on a basketball court with the ball tucked under his arm, while his muscular body was on full display. The print against his thigh wasn’t missed either. *Damn.*

There was no doubt about how fine this man was but the most adorable photo of all was the one with him lying in a massive bed covered in pale gray sheets with a toddler asleep on his chest. His long body was stretched with folded arms placed behind his head and legs crossed at the ankles. The boy had a head full of jet black hair and seemed to be at peace clinging to Isiah. *He has a son.*

Lake was entranced by the photo and stared at it until her eyes grew tired. “He has a son. Take your ass to sleep. That man does not want you. He has a whole family,” she mumbled swiping out of the app before locking her phone and plugging it back in. Turning onto her side, she snuggled closer to her pillow and closed her eyes trying to get rid of the lustful thoughts which seemed to consume her. The only reprieve that she had was the fact that she was completely and utterly exhausted. Sleep eventually found her but not before her mind was drifting to him, again.

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“Cyn?”

“Yeah?” Cyn had her face buried in her iPad as she sat across the room from her boss. His office was huge and immaculate, befitting of a man of his stature.

“Did Kal reach out to you? He needed to set up a meeting to run through a few things.”

“Mmmhmm,” she mumbled. “Next Thursday at eight,” she continued as she scanned through the article that she was reading.

“That’s a week off. That’s the best you could do?”

“Mmmhmm,” she mumbled again.

Isiah lifted his eyes from the screen on his desk top MacBook and glared at Cyn over the top of the Burberry glasses frames that were on his face. Lately his eyes failed him when he had to spend an extended amount of time looking at his computer screen or devices. The doctor warned him about refusing to use the medicated lenses and he recently took their advice after arguing to himself about getting old.

“What the hell you over there reading?”

“Huh?” Cyn’s eyes rolled over to her boss at the booming of his agitated voice. A broad smile spread across her slim almond colored face which aided to his annoyance.

“An article about you.”

His face tightened even more, so Cyn rolled her eyes standing right after. The heels of her red bottoms clicked the hard wood floor as she strutted over to his desk, placing the iPad down before him. Isiah’s hard stare left her as she positioned herself on the corner of his desk watching his long body lean back against the chair that he was in, to read the article.

“It’s about the airport project. They’re raving about how *Canon Realty* is cleaning up the area and going to raise property values with the multimillion dollar revitalization. Such a genius project and a way to ear mark your commitment to bringing Atlanta back to its organic state. *Blah, blah, blah.*”

Cyn’s chinky eyes rolled again and a smile pulled at her lips when Isiah looked up. “They’re right. The fuck is with the *blah, blah, blah* shit? You know how big this deal is, right? And what it means for us?”

“Indeed I do, but they’re always kissing your ass. Or rather *she*’s always kissing your ass. You see who wrote it?” This time the smile on her face was smug and condescending. “She wants to fuck you so bad.”

Sonja Drake indeed wants me to dick her down!

Isiah chuckled tossing Cyn's iPad on his desk. He didn't have to see the name to know who wrote the article. She reached out a few weeks ago to tell him all about it. When she asked for quotes, he refused. Men in his position weren't keen on public associations, but sometimes it couldn't be avoided. The city was well aware that *Cason Realty* handled a lot of high end projects, creating jobs and opportunities, but they also knew that Isiah Cason was new money. He surfaced out of nowhere which created a bunch of speculation. The one thing that saved him was his attachment to Odin. As many years as Odin had been creating dirty money, he had been building legitimate businesses to clean it up. On paper, Odin funded Isiah's first few major properties, but behind the scenes, it was all the blood sweat and tears of Isiah. Odin had to be involved because everything was acquired so quickly. His affiliation presented the appearance that the business accusations were legit. Even if Odin was thought to be the driving force behind it, Isiah was smart. He never allowed Odin's name to be anywhere on the paperwork, just in case. At some point, they would have to sever ties and if it ended badly, Isiah didn't want to go to war over the businesses he built.

“Why you always have to take it there?” Isiah was amused behind Cyn's protective nature. She wasn't the least

bit jealous of any woman who sought his attention because as attractive as her boss was, Cyn was about dollars and cents. Being intimate with Isiah would ultimately get in the way so they forged a business relationship that morphed into a familiarity where they considered each other friends. Cyn was more cautious about who he let get close but that only derived from the way Noel had burned him. She wasn't privy to all the details but because of the close working relationships between she and her boss, Cyn knew whatever he had with Noel was only for appearances. There was no love on either end and her boss wanted out. She assumed the ties which were still in place were because of his business dealings with Odin. She simply chose to never questioned Isiah about any of it.

“I’m a woman I know. She wants to fuck you...” Cyn’s eyes grew in size. “...wait or did you already do it?”

“Nah man. I’m not ever gonna get in bed with someone connected to the media; that’s dangerous. She’s fine as shit though.” He massaged his chin gripping at the swell in his pants from the visual that played out in his head.

Cyn’s eyes rolled again. “Don’t you dare do it either.”

A teasing smile was on his face. “I said I’m not. Stop tripping. What you got lined up for me this week?”

“What’s the point of me laying out your schedule if you expect me to follow you around telling you what it is? Check your phone.” Cyn snatched up the iPad and stepped away. Isiah chuckled at her attitude. She was one of few that would talk to him crazy without consequence.

“Your next meeting is in an hour with your financial team,” she rattled off as she reached his door. Isiah nodded, not in the mood to crunch numbers but it was necessary. This facet of life was still new and not his comfort level. The streets were home. Jeans and hoodies when he really relaxed, but certain days, there was a need to step out of his casual clothes and rock Tom Ford suits like the one he was currently wearing. The college educated men who handled a lot of his legal affairs respected him, but Isiah knew they also resented him. A hood nigga from the streets who cleared more in a month than they would see in a year was not the ideal boss in their eyes, but he paid them well so they did what was required to maintain their positions.

“Is that all *sir*?” Cyn’s tone was cynical.

“Nah, one more thing. I need you to handle something for me that requires a lot of discretion.”

“I’m not buying panties for any of your jump offs, Sih.”

Her face balled up causing his to open into a smile.

“That was one time. Have I asked again?”

“No and you better not. It was demeaning and degrading.”

“But you cost me a grip copping for yourself which I didn’t agree to so you don’t really have the right to complain.”

A smug grin surfaced. “Cost of doing business with me.”

His brows hiked as he stared at his assistant and close friend. “You do realize you get a whole ass salary from me, right?”

“Consider it a bonus.” She winked and then placed her hand on her hip. “Now what do you need me to do?”

It had been three days since La’ Familia and Isiah couldn’t get the woman he met off his mind. He needed to find her but wasn’t sure how. That’s where the *discretion* came in.

“The caterers that worked La’ Familia. I need to know who they were and I want a list of names for who was there working. I’m looking for one of them.”

“Did you fuck her?”

“No. What the hell do you think of me? Contrary to what you think, I don’t just go around whipping my dick out for sport.”

“I don’t think, I *know* how you operate. Unfortunately for me, I’ve learned way too many intimate details about your life over the past few years. You likely had her bent over a tray of cheese and crackers when she should have been serving guests.”

Isiah chuckled at the thought. He wouldn’t have minded but had a feeling his approach would have to be a little more subtle with this one.

“Just get it done but I don’t need anyone to know I’m the one who’s asking for the information. Liv Abara handles everything for La’ Familia so it needs to stay away from her ears.”

Cyn knew exactly what that meant. Odin and his wife didn’t need to know that her boss was sniffing out some woman he wanted to pursue.

“What exactly am I doing with this information when I find it?”

“Handing it over to me. I just need to know how to find her. The caterer she works for is all I have. I don’t know her name. *Because she refused to give it to me.* See if they’ll provide names and addresses for everyone who worked that night and I can narrow it down from there. It was less than ten people.”

“How much?” Cyn waited to see what the price point would be to obtain the information she was well aware would cost something. She was asking for people’s personal information. Any real business person wouldn’t just hand it over.

“Whatever it takes. Just let me know.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to see this one. She must really be something.” Cyn shook her head tossing out, “*On it,*” before she left the room.

“Aight and expedite this please.” Followed behind her causing Cyn to mumble her displeasure for playing PI, but she would get it done.

By the end of his final meeting for the day, Isiah was mentally exhausted. Whoever said the streets were more taxing than a conference room had never run a multi-million dollar company. After undoing the top button on his shirt and

loosening his tie, Isiah was able to relax a little more. He had a few more things to handle concerning his illegal money which meant that he wouldn't see his bed until late that night, but the process was something he had grown used to. It was necessary.

“Hey boss, I got what you needed. Just sent it to you. I left off the guys which took the list down to six women. One of them was a fill-in and doesn't work there on a regular basis. I put her last.” *That's her because she didn't know what the hell she was doing*, he thought as Cyn continued. “There's a phone number and address for all six and you're buying me dinner tonight.” She fell in step with her boss as he headed for the front to leave.

“Preciate it and I'm tired as shit. I still have a few things to handle so dinner will have to wait,” Isiah stated as he held the door open for Cyn to walk through first. She peered at him over her shoulder with a snide grin.

“I said *buying* me dinner, not *joining* me for dinner.” She turned to face him holding out her hand.

He chuckled removing his wallet and pulling off two hundred dollar bills and placing them in her small palm. Cyn was high dollar, everything about her, so he knew the deal.

“Always a pleasure doing business with you, boss.” She winked leaving him as she moved to her pearl-finish Range, one he footed the bill for as a *company car*. She did a lot of driving from property to property, so it only seemed fair, but the truck was in her name. Cyn had sole ownership.

“Aye how much this cost me?” He held up his phone just before Cyn slipped into the driver’s seat.

“Nothing up front but I hope you liked their food because I promised they could cater the company’s next event. I pretended to need the info to do background checks since we’re exclusive and have to be careful about who we hire.”

Without waiting for his response, she climbed in her truck, so he turned in the opposite direction towards his smirking at how clever she was. It’s why he kept her on his team.

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By the time Isiah reached his last business stop of the night. There was only one more place he had to go after but there was no guarantee that anything would come of it. His eyes were heavy and all he could think about was a hot shower

and crawling in bed. While he waited in the car for the money to arrive, he pulled up the cameras at his home just to check out his property. No one knew where he lived but Isiah was cautious. The dark empty home had him thinking about Ema. It had been a few weeks since his last visit, so he pulled up his schedule to see when he would have time. Relieved he had a few days that ended at three, he quickly thought to make sure Cyn left it that way by sending her instructions. It would be easy to squeeze in a visit with Ema on one of those days.

Once the text was sent, he noticed a body moving towards his truck. Goby approached the passenger side and waited for Isiah to hit the locks with him sliding in right after.

“Count right?”

Goby unzipped the backpack giving a visual of the stacks of money. “It’s all there. I made sure. Counted it twice myself.” With acknowledgement from his boss, he resealed the backpack and placed it on the floor board between his feet.

“Everything running like it’s supposed to?”

“Yeah. Pills are picking up. You might want to check into doubling. Them college kids buy that shit in excess.” Goby flashed his grill when he smiled. His pride resided in the product he pushed. He challenged himself and his team to

always meet and exceed expectations. Isiah respected his hustle.

“Let’s give it a few months. If the numbers stay consistent then I’ll double up.”

“Your call boss man but let me get back to it.”

With a tilt of his chin, Isiah lifted a closed fist to Goby, they dapped and seconds later, Goby was swaggering back to his post tugging at the oversized sweats he wore. Isiah backed away from the building pulling up his GPS pressing the address he keyed in hours before he started his rounds. *One last stop.*

“The fuck am I doing?” Looking up at the building and then down at his phone, Isiah contemplated his next move. He could call first but she likely wouldn’t agree to see him. His chances were better if he just showed up at her door. At least then he could finesse his way inside.

Laughing at himself under his breath, Isiah brushed his palms roughly down his face, glancing at the building one last time before he grabbed the backpack full of cash and stepped out of his truck. Once he reached the back, he lifted the weather proof mate behind his seat and keyed the code on the

safe that rested beneath it, dropping the money inside and locking it back right after.

The neighborhood that he was in wasn't that great, but he had a feeling his ride would be safe. If not, heads would roll. Taking the three steps that led to the eight unit building, he eyed the first door he reached to figure out where he needed to go. Based on the numbers, he figured she was on the second floor, so he walked up the wooden stairs scanning another door to locate her unit. Isiah wasn't the chasing woman type of man, never had been. Not even in his younger years, yet here he was, months past his thirtieth birthday chasing ass.

After knocking on the door that belonged to Lake, he waited with his hand behind his back close to his banger, listening for any movement behind the door. How he was moving wasn't smart. There was no telling if she was alone, and if she wasn't, there was no telling the type of company she kept. Although Isiah had a feeling she wasn't into the lifestyle he lived, he didn't know for sure. There was a naïveté to her that had him convinced she didn't frequent the streets of anyone who claimed them but it wasn't smart to move off assumptions. That simple slip up had gotten plenty before him caught up in the worst way.

“Who’s there?” The soft unsure voice that sounded from behind the door had the right side of his face rising into a half smile.

“Isiah.”

“You have the wrong apartment.”

On the other side of the door Lake clutched her tiny pink taser praying that whoever was at her door would leave. Her neighborhood wasn’t the best but it was all she could afford. There were plenty of nights where strangers pounded on her door hopeful to find an empty unit to rob or one with a single woman like her where they could do even worse things than taking personal possessions.

“Nah, I got the right one. Open the door, Lake.”

Her breath hitched while her eyes flexed wider. *Who the hell knows my name?*

“Do I know you?”

Isiah smirked. He noticed she was nervous. *Nah she ain’t from the street or fucking with anyone who moves in them.*

“We met a few days ago. I let you back in the event you catered so that you could get your phone.”

Her face balled up at the same time a giddy feeling broke loose in her stomach. She turned her bolt lock slowly and then inched the door open. Sure enough, there he was.

“Can I come in?”

“How did you find me?” When her curious eyes swept his being, a small curl of his lip occurred. It was arrogant and teasing.

He’s well aware of how attractive he is. God, does he know that I’m attracted?

“I didn’t. My assistance did. I pay her well so she’s resourceful. Can I come in?”

“Why? What do you want?”

“To kick it with you for a minute.”

“Why? Why the hell do you want to kick it with me? I’m most certainly not the type you would kick it with.” ...*you and I are not from their world, or welcome in it.* Chloe’s words from a few nights ago were obnoxiously loud in her head. Lake wasn’t one who struggled with esteem issues, but she knew her kind. This man wasn’t *her* kind.

“Lake, open the door. It’s late and a man like me has no business in this neighbored standing outside your door. I’m

putting myself at risk, which is something I never do. My name carries too much weight to be moving like this.”

Lake’s foot tapped the floor while she stared at him through the crack in her door. There was nothing about him that made her feel as if she wasn’t safe, but regardless she didn’t know him. Her teeth sank into her lip while she contemplated what would happen next.

Before she could get a grip on what she was doing, she stepped back bringing the door with her, creating enough space for Isiah to enter her apartment. His eyes darted around before they made it back to her and landed on the pink taser she clutched in her hand.

“You know how to use that?” His tone was teasing, which had Lake straightening her spine.

“Yes, would you like for me to show you?” Her thumb pressed against the button causing it to buzz. Isiah flashed her a charming smile not intimidated in the least.

“Are you alone?”

“No.”

His brows hiked as he looked around again and she pointed to her feet where Bleu was sitting.

“A pit?” He leaned down and examined the tiny dog.

“What’s wrong with a pit?”

He chuckled shaking his head. “Not a damn thing. You just seem like a Yorkie poodle type of girl.”

Lake rolled her eyes and bent to lifted her baby, cuddling the small dog in her arms once she had her secure.

“Bleu is perfect for me.” Lake shrugged before peering at Isiah. His presence in her apartment had her anxious, stomach fluttering and her pulse racing.

“I can feel that.”

“It’s late.” Lake’s eyes met with his while she waited for him to explain. She wasn’t about to be this man’s booty call.
Or am I?

“I apologize. The day ran longer than I expected it to and I wanted to see you.”

“See me?” She scoffed clutching the tiny pup closer to her body. It was a way to keep herself grounded. There was no way this man with broad solid shoulders, charming smile, alluring scent and expensive threads wanted to see her. *But he’s here. In my tiny ass apartment...doing just that. Seeing me.*

“Is that so unbelievable? Can we sit?” Isiah’s eyes moved about her apartment examining the space. Thus far, he had been extremely careless about his safety. It was a clear sign that this woman was going to be trouble. The small space was fully decorated, no matter how simple. The hues were a blend of browns, oranges and burgundy. Earthy tones which gave it a warm feeling. She decided to give in, leading the way and as he followed close behind into the living room, he noticed the curve of her ass in the spandex shorts that covered her lower half. Her legs were bare and feet covered in multi colored fuzzy socks that extended up her ankles but remained below her calves. She wore an oversized t-shirt, the front printed with Mickey Mouse which swallowed her petite frame. As mature as her body was, her attire was very childlike, which had Isiah second guessing himself again.

“You can sit.” She waved to a brown fabric sofa once they reached her living room. It was small; looked worn but wasn’t at the point where it needed to be tossed out on the curb for garbage removal. Even if Isiah’s current dwellings were luxury far beyond what he was submerged in, he understood humble beginnings. He had been rooted in them as a child so he sat with ease, adjusting his tailored pants for comfort once he was settled.

“It smells good in here.”

“Why wouldn’t it? It’s clean.” *She’s defensive.*

He examined her body once more, standing a few feet away, clinging to her tiny pup for dear life. Isiah couldn’t tell if she was nervous or angry. Neither emotion was a factor because he had a remedy for both. While his eyes traveled, he noticed the slight definition in her thighs and calves. It was subtle but noticeable. Her hips weren’t extremely wide but there was some definition there. She wasn’t straight up. There was a nice little figure and not to mention the perky breasts with pebbled nipples pushing against the thin fabric of the t-shirt she wore. Her body wasn’t overly aggressive, but it still had Isiah’s hand resting in his lap to adjust himself.

“You gonna stand there all night or come sit with me?”

“I’m good right here. I don’t know you.” Lake plopped down on the floor a few feet away from him. The two were facing each other as she sat Indian style on the floor with Bleu in her lap, while Isiah sat across from her on the sofa. His feet were planted wide just outside of the width of his hips with his chest pushed forward, giving the appearance of a man who was important.

He smirked at her defiance but didn't push. She didn't know him, *yet*. Lake watched the insanely handsome stranger intently trying to decide why the hell he was there. Now her turn to study him; she became lost in the details. The crisp white shirt he wore was slightly wrinkled and rolled up at that sleeves exposing his forearms. The tan slacks seemed to fit just right and rose to his ankles, exposing a pair of tan socks a shade darker than his pants. *Even his damn socks look expensive*. On his feet were a pair of Ferragamo loafers. His clothes alone would pay her rent for the next several months. She was sure of it. Regardless, Lake didn't feel inferior. Money didn't have a damn thing to do with character. She was a good person, which meant that he was no better just because he could afford expensive things. *He's likely an asshole*.

“Is this your thing?”

“Excuse me?”

“This, do you do this often? Have your assistant track down women you want to sleep with.”

Isiah brow's raised but he didn't respond the way she likely expected him too. He didn't address the *sleep with* part.

“No, actually I don't and she wasn't very happy about it.”

“I bet she wasn’t.”

“Why would you bet that?”

“Because you had a woman looking for another woman.” Lake shrugged as if it made perfect sense. That only amused Isiah more.

“She’s my assistant. She does what I ask her to do. Why would that be an issue?”

“Maybe she was jealous.”

He offered a cheeky smile that had Lake sucking in a deep breath that she assumed she hid well.

“So, because my assistant is a woman, I have to have a physical relationship with her?”

“Isn’t that what men like you do?”

“Men like me?” He couldn’t hide the amusement seeping through the smug grin. “What kind of man am I?”

“One with money.” A low throaty laugh left his body.

“You’ll have to elaborate. That’s vague.”

“Men with money do things like sleep with their assistants, then ask that same assistant to track down random women so that they can sleep with them too.”

“Are you judging me?” A teasing smile appeared which had Lake’s eyes tight.

“You were judging me.” She scoffed defensively.

“How?”

“You said my place smelled good, like it shouldn’t because it’s not some fancy overprice penthouse like you’re used to.”

Isiah’s face opened into a smile bigger than he wanted to share.

“I wasn’t judging. Just making an observation. Not only does your place smell good but you do as well. Sweet, like fruit and vanilla. Am I allowed to compliment you personally, or is that considered judging too?”

Lake blushed as her eyes rolled, but she kept her thoughts to herself so Isiah clarified his position instead.

“I have never had sex with Cyn. Nor do I want to. She and I are in a specific lane that works for both of us. She handles my business and I pay her well to do so. That’s it. Now you...that’s a different story but not one we need to discuss, *yet*.” He winked at Lake and she felt her soul open.

God this man is handsome, and dangerous. I'm out of my league.

“How old are you?” Her question was rushed. She sensed his maturity but needed to confirm just how far out of her league she was. The closest she'd come to a man like Isiah was a boyfriend right after college who had an assistant management position at an IT company. A shitty job where he made no money and worked long hours. The one in her living room owned a company that produced million dollar properties, wore expensive clothes and likely drove a car that cost six figures. He also had an edge to him that could only be classified as a *hood persona*. Not only was he corporate, but he was street. Something she knew nothing about.

“Just turned thirty a few months ago.” *Six years, shit.*

“Oh.” Her eyes widened slightly but returned to their normal size second later.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. You still haven't told me why you're here.”

That charming smile of his was present once more. Isiah sensed that he made her nervous. That wasn't his intent. He

wasn't sure what the hell his intent was. That would have to be determined later. "I told you, I wanted to see you."

"Well you saw me and you're still here. You'll have to elaborate. That was vague."

His smile stretched when she used his words against him. *Ah, she's witty. I like that.*

"Come here."

Lake's lips parted slightly before she pursed them together. Her head shook slowly. Being near him was not an option. The dampness in her panties was proof.

"Lake, I'm harmless." *Until I find a way to explore between those chocolate thighs of yours.* "Come here, please." Isiah's voice was pleading and commanding at the same time. He spoke with a finality that had Lake lifting the small dog from her lap and placing her on the worn carpet. She stood right after, moving towards the sofa, stopping between his legs which were still set wide apart.

When his regard swept her body but he didn't speak, Lake's eyes became low and she damn near jumped when he moved forward to stand. She was so close that his body

brushed hers even after he was on his feet, but his hands remained at his side.

If I touch her...

“I don’t really know why I’m here other than there was something about you that I couldn’t shake. I’ve been thinking about you since that night. I’m here because I want to know more about you.”

“More?” That one word was weighted as it left her lips causing Isiah to smile with his eyes while his face remained stoic.

“Friends, Lake. Let’s start there.” For some reason the introduction of friends had her spine shivering while a challenged breath eased through her chest.

She nodded slowly, but then snapped out of the spell he somehow had her under, just that fast. When she took a step back to distance herself from the heat radiating from his body, the firmness of his chest against hers and the heavenly scent of his cologne, Isiah finally smiled.

“You don’t have to be nervous around me. I told you I’m harmless.” He slipped his hands into his pockets and watched

her face. The way her lips pushed out in a barely noticeable manner and her eyes set low. *Beautiful.*

“I’m not...” her eyes rolled up to his, “...nervous.”

“Good. I’m going to go. I’ll call you soon, if that’s okay.”

He waited for a response which was delivered by way of a head nod. Isiah then stepped around Lake, taking her soft, small hand in his. His restraint was failing and he needed some type of connection.

Once they reached the door, the two stood not speaking for a minute. Lake’s body was buzzing with nervous energy from the proximity which he didn’t miss.

“Lock up.” With a kiss to the forehead that had Lake’s knees damn near buckling, Isiah left out, not once looking back as he moved with long strides down the short corridor. Lake watched until he took the first stair to leave her floor and then shut the door, pressing her forehead against it unable to suppress her smile. *What the hell was that?*

As soon as Isiah was in his truck he had a call in place. She answered right away voice sleep laced and groggy.

“I’m on my way,” was all he said and then ended the call knowing that she would be ready, waiting and damn if he didn’t need her to be.

3.

Lake glanced at her phone examining the number like she wasn't already aware of the caller. *I can't.*

She pressed the side to silence the call but didn't ignore it. She refused to make him feel rejected but knew that now was not the time to speak. Lake loved her father but had three more hours on her shift and wasn't in the mood to push through them in an emotional tailspin.

After a few moments, a voicemail popped up which she would listen to later. *I can't do that right now either.* She was sure that her father was just checking in to make sure she was okay. She wasn't, but that wouldn't change. Her past, their past couldn't be erased, so this is where they were.

“Lake, Tony is looking for you. Said that you didn't finish passing out evening snacks.”

Her eyes were rolling instantly. “I'm on break. Thirty more minutes.”

“I told him, but he he’s still bitching about it. Just letting you know.” Kelly whizzed past Lake clutching the strap of her purse to her shoulder. Her shift was over because she worked earlier than Lake. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’m off!” Lake yelled behind her, causing Kelly to stop just shy of the parking lot.

“Oh damn, that’s right. Well I’ll see you when you get back. Do so something fun with your boring ass.” Kelly’s grin was teasing but her narrowed eyes were threatening.

“You already know better.” Lake’s left shoulder lifted slightly.

“I can’t with you. I’ll see you in a few days,” Kelly groaned as she stepped down on the asphalt of the parking lot heading to her car.

“Fun, what’s fun? I’m broke. Broke people don’t have fun,” she mumbled to herself. The only time she did anything remotely fun was when Chloe drug her out to a club for drinks or dinner, which she paid for. Money was tight which meant the budget for fun was negative. Lake had graduated at the top of her class with a degree in Journalism, which she wasn’t using. She had a love for writing since she was a small child and dreamed of one day being Editor in Chief of a major

publication. None of that had happened as of yet and her current career consisted of emptying bedpans and passing out medication to elderly patients at the assisted living facility where she worked. It was frustrating to say the least but paid more than most minimum wage jobs and was the only reason she was able to pay her bills. *Barely*. She had applied to every publication in the city and some in neighboring states where she could work remotely, but not one returned a call or job offer so far. Things were tight, but she was grateful that Chloe had offered the catering gig. It allowed a little extra money which meant a slight bit of security for the next month. It was her first time but seeing that she survived one of their biggest most challenging events, Charlene promised more opportunities when they were available.

When Lake's phone vibrated against her thighs, she glanced down to find a message from an unsaved number flash across her screen. Instantly, her stomach flipped because she knew right away who it was from. A week had passed since his impromptu visit in the middle of the night, and this would be the first time she'd heard from him.

Can I see you later?

Who is this?

You don't know?

Should I? The number is unsaved and not one I recognize.

How many unsaved numbers do you have in your phone?

None...

Then you know exactly who it is. Can I see you tonight?

See me how?

Dinner.

When?

Not sure yet. I'll have to figure it out and send you details. Is that a yes?

It's a maybe.

Good enough. I'll text you later. I look forward to seeing you.

I said maybe.

Yes, you did.

Lake didn't respond again. The grin on her face stretched to the point of being painful. She had no close

friends but needed to talk to someone. So she dialed Chloe.

“Well at least I know you’re alive.” Chloe’s greeting was typical. They two were close but didn’t speak every day. They didn’t need to, but at the very least, when a span of time passed, one or the other would check in. Right now, Lake just needed someone else to know what was going on in her life.

“He came to my house.”

“He who? And good for you cuz. I guess that’s why I haven’t heard from—”

“Isiah,” she all but yelled it in a hushed tone before pausing to clarify. “Cason.”

The line was silent briefly before Chloe spoke again.

“Isiah Cason, *the* Isiah Cason?”

“Yeah. Why did you say it like that?”

Chloe laughed hard and from her gut. *Why the hell wouldn’t I? That man has no business knowing your name, better yet showing up at your apartment.*

“Are you serious right now? Why am I saying it like that? You just told me Isiah fucking Cason came to your house. Really Lake?”

Lake's face balled up. Was it really that unbelievable? Yeah actually it was, but she didn't care nor did she need her cousin to emphasized how absurd it sounded. Even if it was.

"Yes, I'm serious. He showed up at my apartment—"

"When...how? What the hell did I miss that night?"

"Nothing."

"Then explain to me how?"

"You remember I left my phone. Well the door was locked when I went back. The only way in was through the front, which I did not want to do. He was outside the building and offered to let me in. I didn't really have a choice. I needed my phone."

"So you got your phone and then what, just handed over your address and phone number?"

"No, I left."

"Then how the hell did he know where you lived?"

"He asked his assistant to find me. Shit, maybe I shouldn't tell you that. He had to get the information from Charlene and I'm sure she wasn't supposed to give it out. Please don't tell her. I need the extra work when she has it," Lake pleaded.

“Wait, I’m hella confused. That man tracked you down and then showed up at your apartment?” Lake didn’t miss the doubt or the shade.

“Yes, and he just texted and asked me to dinner tonight.” The confidence in her delivery was a little forced.

“Did you sleep with him?”

“No!”

“Are you sure?” Chloe was still confused about the entire thing.

“Yea, I’m sure. I didn’t and I wouldn’t; not like that, Chloe.” Lake was offended, which her cousin sensed right away feeling bad about it afterwards.

“Sorry, it’s just...” pausing she grinned shaking her head. “*Isiah* fucking *Cason*. I know that’s not you Lake, but it damn sure better be. Shit, he sought you out, showed up at your apartment, you didn’t give up the goods and now he’s asking you to dinner. You better work! Don’t mess this up. I guess I was wrong. Maybe we do fit in their world, or at least you baby cuz.”

Lake rolled her eyes grinning at the same time. “It’s not that deep. I’m sure it’s just a thing and it won’t last. There’s no

way.” She had been obsessing over him, to the point where her fingers were cramped from working them overtime at night with thoughts of him. The release was great, but she wanted one from...*shit what the hell am I thinking?*

“Lake, don’t sell yourself short. You’re beautiful, smart, sexy, shit we’re one in the same. If he’s interested, roll with it and see how it plays out. You never know.”

“I’m not selling myself short. I just know men like that. You do too. He’s six years older than me, has a girlfriend and a kid. He said he wanted to be friends.”

Before her cousin belted out a laugh, Lake realized how insane her theory sounded and how immature....

“Lake, don’t fool yourself. That man wants more than to just be your friend. I’m sure you already considered this and as for his girlfriend, if he’s not married then he’s fair game. He really didn’t even acknowledged her that night. Maybe there’s trouble in paradise. Like I said, just see how it plays out, but be careful with him. I do know men like that more than I care to admit. They have a way of turning your world upside down before you ever realize it. You’re in love and their moving on.”

Lake snorted rolling her eyes. “That’s not going to be me. He’s too...” she paused. “I don’t even know what he is,

but he's not the type of man that I would fall in love with."

"Famous last words, but I have to go. Call me and tell me how dinner goes. Maybe you'll be dessert. Love you."

Chloe rushed out and then ended the call. Lake checked the time and then stood from the bench where she had been sitting for the past forty minutes. After slipping her phone into the pocket of her uniform scrubs, she brushed her palms down her thighs and then pushed out a huff of air before heading back inside to finish her shift. *My life fucking sucks*. Lake groaned through her annoyance as her hand tugged at the glass door to let herself back inside. *Time to make the doughnuts!*

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Isiah shut off the engine to his truck and lifted the folder which arrived to his home earlier that morning, hand delivered from the manager of the club he owned downtown. When he made out the identity of the grainy images, he felt the vein in the side of his neck pulsing as he thanked and dismissed his guy.

He worked out right after in an attempt to release some of the tension he was feeling, which didn't help. A few hours

later he dressed, made calls, cleared emails and checked in with Cyn before leaving the house, which brought him to his current destination.

After lifting the photos from his passenger seat, Isiah stepped out of his ride, face tight from having to do what he was about to do. Just before he reached the door of the high end boutique, his phone alerted him of an incoming text, which he only read hopeful that it was Lake, however, unfortunately the message was from Miranda.

It's been a week. When will I see you again? I miss you.

He snorted at the thought. *A week since I fucked you wishing it was her.*

Instead of responding, he slipped his phone into the pocket of his jeans and reached for the glass door, pulling it wide enough to accommodate his big frame. As soon as he entered the small space, all eyes were on him. Lisa was the first to offer a greeting, with big round eyes that didn't fit her face and exposing all of her teeth. "Hey Sih. You looking for Noel?"

Why the fuck else would I be here?

His eyes moved to the corner where Kate was approaching him. She was a busty blond. Tits purchased and she looked like a bobble head because her thin, frail frame didn't match the size of her head. As pretty as she could be considered, her figure was too damn bony for his likely.

“She's in the office. Shall I get her for you?”

“Nah. I'll go back.”

The delivery was not welcoming or friendly, which both women picked up. Isiah didn't care. It wasn't his job to be nice to Noel's employees. He paid their salaries while she pretended to be a business owner. *Fuck their feelings.*

When he reached the posh office that she claimed, Isiah pushed through the door without knocking. The teal and silver décor only further annoyed him because of the memory of the price tag attached to make it happen.

“Hey, what are you...”

Noel stopped mid-sentence when the folder was tossed on her desk. Her eyes landed on it and then lifted to his angered expression before hers followed suit. She expressed her displeasure with tight lips and a narrowed stare.

“What's this?”

“Apparently you forgot who the fuck I am. There’s some shit I’m just not gonna tolerate. You’ve been really pushing the limits lately and you either get it together or we figure out what’s next.”

Noel rolled her eyes and lifted the folder, flipping through the contents. The photos caused a tightening in her chest while her insides cringed, but she kept it together.

After tossing the folder back on her desk, Noel leaned back crossing her legs. Isiah followed the motion before his eyes lifted to her face once more.

“You do you and I do me, right? Isn’t that our deal? Hasn’t that been how things have worked for the past two years, Sih?”

With a flexed jaw, his finger motioned to the folder. “That’s you giving some nigga head in a club that I own. People know me and know I wouldn’t put up with that shit. You can do whatever the hell you want as long as it doesn’t bring my character into question.”

Noel knew that she was playing with fire but didn’t care. She was over playing house when the reward was no longer fruitful. What she thought she wanted turned out to be empty and lonely. She hadn’t meant to get caught on the security

cameras but decided to use it to her advantage now that she had.

“Your little ego is hurt because someone might actually think the great Isiah Cason can’t control his woman? You think they’re whispering behind your back about the fact that you can’t satisfy me enough to keep me out of another man’s bed?”

He laughed arrogantly as she lifted from her chair and eased over to the door where he was positioned. A pale pink almond shaped nail moved across his abs before they made it to his pelvis where she proceeded to explore. Isiah looked down with a teasing grin and her face hardened moments later when she didn’t produce the reaction she was hoping for.

“You don’t make my dick hard anymore, Noel. You haven’t in a while. I’m sure you remember the last time.” The memory sent a sharp pain through her chest. It was embarrassing. “But there are plenty out there who get the job done. I’m not worried about it being a topic of discussion. What I am concerned with is people wondering why I don’t drop your ass for doing shit like that. Keep it behind closed doors like we agreed.”

“Or what?”

“Or we decide what’s next.” The warning was clear.

When the original deal was made two years prior, Isiah was just making a real name for himself. It was necessary to be connected in order for him to eat, but that had changed. He also didn’t want the fall out with Odin over murdering his brother, no matter how much he deserved the bullet that took his life. That was then, things had changed. Isiah’s moves were now calculated, smart and business minded. The only concern he had was waging a war with the man who considered him family, if he found out that Isiah spilled the blood of the man who *was* his family.

“You want me to tell him, is that what you’re threatening? You so big now that you don’t need the Abara name, Isiah?”

“I’ve never needed it, Noel. It was just convenient and helped me get here faster. Had it not been your uncle, I would have found a way. That’s who I am, who I’ve always been. I respect him—”

She scoffed and pointed her finger in his face. “You respect him yet you killed his brother, stole our money and then used it to build your little empire. I’m sure he’ll see that as respect.”

“Your father was a god damn rapist. He even crept in your bed a few times or did you forget? And if I’m disloyal, so are you. You had no problem sleeping with the enemy.” It was a low blow, but his resolve was damn near non-existent. It had been for a while.

Without thinking, Noel’s hand landed across his face. She slapped him so hard that her fingers stung from the contact, but his only reaction was to catch her wrist to prevent her from doing it again. When he pulled her close enough for her labored breath to reach his face, his teeth grit.

“Put your hands on me again and I’ll break your damn fingers.” When she was pushed away, the heels she wore caused a slight stumble before Noel was able to steady herself.

“I hate you.” Tears burned at the corners of her eyes. She did hate him, but she loved him too. Not in the way that most considered healthy, but she did love him.

“Good, at least the feeling’s mutual. Do what you want but keep it out of the public eye. Not in my club. You feel the need to tell your uncle what I did, tell him. At this point, I don’t really care, but be prepared for the fall out.”

“Really and you’re willing to risk it all. What about Ema?”

The mention of his sister sent fire through his veins. Noel knew better. He didn't play when it came to the only living relative that he claimed a responsibility to.

“Ema? What about her. You think she's going to get stuck in the middle of this shit? She's the one thing I won't make compromises about which I'm sure you already know.”

Another warning had been issued and it sank in a lot deeper. Isiah would kill for his sister. That meant *anyone* who would get in the way of her well-being or safety. Noel was being made aware that she wasn't excluded.

Isiah left it at that and started to the door to leave, only stopping when he heard her voice. “I'm not scared of you Isiah.”

Without turning to face her again, he delivered his final thoughts. “You should be.”

Noel's spine shivered from the threat while her lips parted and her heart thumped aggressively in her chest. She knew who he was but it wasn't until that moment that it really hit home.

&

Lake took in the scenery from her seat in the corner of the cozy table where she and Isiah were dining. It was a rooftop restaurant that she had never been to or even heard of. For the hour that they had been there she felt self-consciousness about the clothes she'd chosen for the evening. Jeans, stripped boyfriend fit oxford and cream slip on Vans. Everyone else around them was dressed more or less business casual, some even more elegant than that. It had Lake fidgeting in her seat and smoothing her hands down her jean clad thighs every few minutes.

“What’s wrong?” Isiah didn’t miss that she was unusually quiet. Not that he knew enough about Lake to have a familiarity with her temperament, but he did sense that she seemed uncomfortable.

In a childlike manner she leaned across the table in an attempt to get closer. “I feel out of place. I bet they’re taking about us, well me.”

“What makes you think they’re giving either of us a second thought?”

“This place is expensive. I don’t fit.”

“Neither do I.”

Oh sir, you absolutely fit.

Isiah was dressed in dark jeans and a black Henley. The sleeves were three quarter exposing tattoos and muscles. Every woman within range had paid him special attention at least once since they'd arrived. Those maple hued eyes of his swept their surroundings again.

“You might not be in a suit, but you look *good*.”

His broad shoulders expanded as he adjusted in his chair. A smile opened onto his face before his eyes moved around one last time, landing on Lake right after. “Do you think I give a shit about this place or these people and what they think?”

“Maybe.” Lake shrugged with her right shoulder. “We’re here. You choose this place. I’m not exactly dressed to fit in.”

Not wanting to give away his reason for the selection, but feeling forced to, he exposed himself right away. “I was trying to impress you.” *Something I have never done or even remotely considered.* Impressing a woman. The sentiment in his eyes was genuine and had Lake blushing. “We can go somewhere else if you want. I’m good with anything. I just want to feed you and get to know you a little better.”

“No, we’re here and we already ordered. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“You sure? This food don’t mean shit to me either. I’ll pay and we can go. Long as you’re riding with me, you can pick the place that makes you comfortable enough to talk to me.” *Since you’ve basically been in your damn head since I picked you up.*

Lake peered at him for a long minute. Her eyes flickered with conflict and confusion before she eventually spoke. “This doesn’t make sense.”

Isiah’s face tensed as he lowered his forearm onto the cream linen table cloth. His fingers flexed before they were pulled loosely into his palm “What doesn’t make sense?”

“*This, you. Me, being here. That night at your company party, I didn’t know who you were. My cousin told me, but all she really said was that you and the people there were important and into things. She also said that she and I didn’t fit in your world.*”

He chuckled at the implication of what she assumed *into things* meant.

“Is that funny?” Lake’s face balled up while delivering a quizzical stare. His head motioned the answer before the words were spoken.

“No, it’s just interesting. You didn’t know shit about me but was handing over a vague assessment of who I am, which by your reaction right now, you’re unsettled about, but you’re still here.”

Lake’s back straightened as she adjusted in her seat. Her goal was to assert confidence but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. However, it did execute through her voice. “I looked you up too. I’m not that damn naïve.”

The internet can’t tell you a damn thing about the parts of my life which you should feel threatened or uncomfortable about, otherwise I would be in someone’s prison or jail.

A teasing smile surfaced while Isiah regarded Lake intently. Across the table she leveled her glare in his direction annoyed yet turned on by his commanding presence. “I never called you naïve. In fact, I know you’re far from it. There’s a lot you don’t know but that’s only because you haven’t been exposed to it. The two are not one in the same. It would be disrespectful of me to classify that as being naïve.”

“Okay fine, but that still doesn’t explain why me? You’re...” she paused searching for the right words. Lake was smart, funny, beautiful and she embraced it fully but she was also awkward, unpolished and had no experience with men like Isiah. He had to know that she was out of her league. “... this.” With a flick of the wrist, she motioned towards him from across the table. There was a nervous shift in her eyes that had his smile growing again. Unfortunately, their food arrived before he could respond. Two plates were lowered to the table before the server asked if anything else was required of her. Isiah’s regard shot over to Lake.

“We staying or leaving?” The server’s face balled into confusion as her eyes bounced between the two of them. Isiah could feel her stare but didn’t care enough to acknowledge it. Lake would make the call and he would go with whatever she decided.

“We can stay.”

“We’re good, thanks.” He tossed out with a heavy eyes remaining on Lake only acknowledging the sever verbally. When they were alone again, he addressed her concern.

“I have access to a lot of women. More than I’ll admit to because it’s not relevant to this conversation, but to answer

your question, *why you*, I haven't quite figured that out yet outside of the usual. You're beautiful. Which I'm positive you already know, but there's more to it. I can't really explain it but that night..." his rasped tenor vibrated through a muffled laugh followed by a swift motion of his head. "I watched you all night. When you were walking around damn near falling over your feet and bumping into everyone and everything I knew you didn't belong. The shit was awkward as hell. But those moments when you weren't in sight, I found myself watching the door, waiting for you to fumble through it. I don't watch women, study them or secretly hope that they'll acknowledge me. It's usually the other way around but that's how I was moving. Shit was fucking with my ego because I couldn't help the need to following your pretty ass around every chance I got." Flashing a charming smile that only a man like Isiah could pull off, he continued. "I just want more of whatever that feeling was. More of *you*."

Lake's lips parted slightly. Face flushed with warmth and her body prickled with excitement. Straightening in her chair once more, she swallowed hard right after. Here she was attempting to play it cool while an explosion of sorts was happening internally.

“You have a son and a girlfriend. She was there with you.” Her words moved slowly as if it startled her throat to release them.

Isiah’s face morphed into a state of confusion. “I don’t have a son.”

“You do. I’ve seen pictures of him.” Lake confessed knowing that she was making him aware that she had been stalking him. Isiah smiled at the thought knowing that the only reason she could have assumed he had a child was from his social media. His personal page. *My nephew!*

“I don’t have a son. I have a nephew, who I love more than anything or anybody in the world aside from his mother. I also don’t have a girlfriend. I don’t belong to nor am I obligated to any woman. Noel and I are connected but not in the way you think. We used to be, but now it’s just family business.”

“But you were with her. There are also tons of pictures of you together. You look happy.”

You have to look at my eyes to see the truth. She doesn’t make me happy, Lake. But you do.

“Pictures? Where?” he questioned, already knowing the answer but wanting her to admit it. She had not only been on his pages but Noel’s as well. Isiah never posted anything about her, but Noel was excessive with it. They did look happy on the surface. That was the purpose. The two had their roles. He showed up at events, pretending to be a happy couple with her on his arm. The photos surfaced and Noel was rewarded with clout and status from being connected to him. That’s all there was. Isiah played his role so that she would keep his secret.

“Huh?”

“Where are these pictures of me and Noel?”

“They’re...I’ve seen them.” Lake stood firmly. Isiah simply chuckled before getting serious again.

“It’s complicated. Unfortunately, that’s all I can tell you. But I promise you, she’s not mine and I’m not hers.” *But you can be if you trust me enough to show you just how good that can be.*

“Men lie.”

Isiah’s loaded gaze held her captive. Lake was stuck, feeling as if she couldn’t move or breathe, while she waited for

him to convince her that it was okay to feel what was happening in that moment.

“Everyone lies, mostly out of necessity. I won’t pretend like things with Noel and I aren’t tangled and messy, but I will promise you, I can be with whoever I want. I want *you*. I understand that you don’t know shit about me to make that call yet. Right now, all I’m asking is that you let me in and you be open enough to give me a chance so that we can both get to know each other.”

“What if you’re disappointed?”

Not possible.

A laugh bursts through his chest, that originated from his gut. “Shit, what if you’re disappointed?”

Lake grinned bashfully dropping her eyes for a few seconds. “I can’t see how that could happen.”

I can. My life is...

“Eat, I want to take you somewhere else when we’re done here.” Isiah lifted his fork taking in her feminine essence. Even at her worst or learning her darkest secrets, there was no way he would be disappointed. He couldn’t understand the pull but was challenged to learn more about the woman who

he found himself obsessed with. The sweet scent that clung to her skin had been torturing him since he arrived at her door and pulled her into his arms. Not to mention the natural and raw beauty that he was sure she had no idea of the power it held. Lake was deadly, toxic in a sense and being around her was like running through a landmine blind folded, with a gun to your head and explosives at your feet. She had the potential to be his downfall but he didn't care. Isiah wanted Lake and was going to have her.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You'll see when we get there, just eat.”

Isiah had no idea where the hell he was taking her. He would figure it out, but for now, the goal was to lock down as much of her time as possible. The mounting obsession that was brewing was new, uncharted territory but he was willing to navigate through it.

A few hours later after dinner and conversation that seemed to have the two feeling a little more familiar with one another, Lake found herself peeling her eyes open after dozing off during the drive to their next destination. The smooth vibration of his expensive vehicle and the three glasses of

wine she consumed in an effort to tame her nerves had Lake drifting as soon as they hit the highway.

Waking up and realizing they were parked in the driveway of a very nice but foreign home, set off alarms.

“Your house?”

Isiah bringing Lake to his home meant there was only one thing on his mind. Sex. *He wants to have sex with me.* The thought had danced around in her head all night but Lake decided against it. She was more than willing to offer the opportunity for him to explore her body but refused to allow it right away. *What the hell would he think of me?* Deep down inside she also didn't want Chloe to be right. It would ruin the fantasy that Isiah actually wanted more than just something physical. *Now...*

“My house, but only the back yard.”

“Huh?” Lake's mind was still groggy from the wine and short nap.

“I'm not trying to get you in my bed.” *Yet.* “But I wasn't ready to take you home. I know what it looks like, bringing you here, you can relax. It's late but the weather's

still nice. I have a fire pit I never use and the furniture is halfway decent. If you're not okay being here I can—”

Lake relaxed, quickly shaking her head. “No, it's okay. I don't mind.”

“Aight bet, come on. We have to go through the house to get out there but that's all you get. A quick run through until we reach the back. Don't be trying to sneak off.” When Isiah winked, Lake's insides fluttered. A new round of dampness was created in the bed of her panties. She followed him up onto the porch and waited for Isiah to let them in. Once he deactivated the alarm, the two moved down a hall, passing rooms and then entered the kitchen which lead them to massive French doors separating them from his yard. The journey through his home was quick, but Lake didn't miss how exquisite the place appeared to be. It also smelled faintly like him, which had her inhaling more than necessary.

As soon as the night air kissed her skin, curious eyes darted around the space which was dimly lit. She could tell right away that it was just as nice as the inside of his home. The space was immaculate, cozy.

Isiah sensed right away from the faint smile after her inspection that she was pleased. The cozy quarters were

purchased just after he found out Noel was pregnant and that she was blackmailing him, so over the years he made it his home. As fate would have it, he moved in full time after the miscarriage of their son, spending most of his time there, only occasionally staying the night with Noel in separate rooms when necessary. That was mostly during holidays when her family was known to pop up, expecting the appearance of a happy couple. The home which he claimed as his own was half the size of the one Noel lived in, but all he needed. It was just him and Ema, so there was more than enough space.

After igniting the gas to light the fire pit, the two settled into the separate spaces on a sofa that surround it. Isiah watched Lake, accessing her level of comfort until he was no longer able to fight the urge to have her close. His hands gripped her waist seconds later pulling her into his side, tucking Lake under his arm. She gasped lightly from the sudden show of affection, relaxing shortly after. Her racing mind calmed by the warmth of his body and the ease at which she fit perfectly against him. However, the minute she felt him staring without speaking, her nerves were on edge again. She could feel his gaze so intensely that it was as if the action literally grazed her skin.

“Tell me something.”

“Like what?”

“Anything you want me to know.” Isiah simply needed more. She could confess to being an alien, devote Christian or atheist and he would absorb the information as if he was starved for it. Anything that would move him closer to his goal of gaining Lake’s trust was well worth the time spent listening.

“I don’t work for *Catered With Care*. Well not officially. I just filled in that night to make some extra money.”

A cheeky grin was exposed on his face. Lake thought it was adorable because it presented the illusion that he was less intense. “You didn’t have to tell me that. The way you fumbled through the night was proof that’s not your thing. What do you do?”

“I work at an assisted living facility part time. It pays decent, but it’s not really what I want to do. I have a master’s degree in journalism.”

“Master’s degree?” He peered down while she lifted her chin so that their eyes could meet. “I knew your ass was smart.”

“Smart doesn’t pay the bills.” With an exaggerated roll of her eyes, Lake focused on the red and orange flames that blazed a few feet from them.

“Why aren’t you working in your field?”

“I’ve applied to a lot of places but it’s all about who you know and the kid doesn’t know anybody.”

Isiah thought about Sonja, but quickly pushed the thought away when he remembered his conversation about her with Cyn.

“Something will fall through.” Was all he gave, but he was already combing his brain to figure out what he could do to put her on to help. His involvement would have to be discrete, but it wouldn’t stop him from attempting to solve the problem. He barely knew anything about her, yet he still wanted everything to be right in her world.

“I hope, or I’m going to be homeless.”

Nah, that won’t happen.

“Soooo…” Lake began switching over to him. “Multi-million dollar properties?”

“Something like that.” His smile was subtle. *Cason Realty* was a huge accomplishment. Especially for a man with

no formal education past high school. Isiah had been written off by most before he could effectively dream about being anything more than just another product of his environment.

“I went to your site. It’s *very* impressive. *You’re* impressive.” *And sexy.* “What else do you do? Chloe said that you were into *things.*”

With a neutral expression, Isiah’s heavy eyes fell on Lake. “What do you think that means?”

“I don’t know.”

Yes you do.

A muffled laugh escaped before Isiah sat up straight adjusting Lake’s body once more. This time she found herself struggling for comfort as she straddled his wide spread masculine thighs. The width of them pushed her into his chest, positioning her at his pelvis, directly on top of the hard mass that was slowly growing beneath her.

“We can only get to know each other if you’re honest. You’re not giving me honesty right now. Tell me what you think that means.”

While Lake contemplated being truthful, she was relaxing into the moment. Her thoughts were clouded by the

distraction of fingers moving across exposed skin, massaging her neck and back. With a skill that felt unreal, his fingers glided up and down her spine, stopping in brief increments to show special attention to specific areas. The intimacy of his touch felt so amazing that Lake's eyes closed for a short time while exposing a noticeable increase in her breathing.

“Lake?”

“Hmmm, yeah?”

“I'm trying to respect boundaries. Stop looking like you're seconds away from cuming or I won't be able to refrain from making it happen.”

She sucked in a deep breath before her eyes met with his, transitioning down to his lips right after. She snapped out of her lustful state with lightning speed and proceeded to answer his question.

“Illegal stuff. Maybe drugs.”

Isiah's heated stare remained on her as he nodded slightly but didn't confirm or deny. Now wasn't the time, but at least she partially knew what she was dealing with being connected to him. That meant she wouldn't have the opportunity to use it against him later, but he didn't want to

talk about his career choice. He wanted to explore her mouth and feel her lips against his.

“Can I kiss you?” The feel of desperation had Isiah’s voice low, thick, rasped a few octaves lower than it’s natural tenor, but he didn’t care.

With a soft nod preceding, she offered confirmation by way of a barely noticeable, “Yes.” The word left her lips in a state of exasperation, but before she could follow up with anything presenting more confidence, his mouth covered hers. Their kiss was soft and sensual at first but grew in intensity. When their tongues met, Lake felt her core tighten and her thighs press firmly against the outside of his. As their rhythm picked up, she rocked against the firmness she felt beneath her, creating a friction that had her clit throbbing and her panties soaked instantly. The movement was unintentional but didn’t prevent the circling of her hips with a steady sensual rhythm like Isiah was actually inside her sacred place.

He was so lost in Lake that he gripped her waist and assisted her movement, wishing he was. The way she smelled, the way she felt against his body, the way her mouth tasted, was so addictive that it took every bit of will he had to separate. The two stared at each other with heaving chests for

what felt like an eternity trying to recover. Shortly after regaining his senses, Isiah shut his eyes, lifting Lake at the same time. She found herself tucked under his arm at his side right after. It was the only way to prevent him from totally losing what little resolve he had left. *I need to stop before I fuck her out here right now.*

“Tell me more about you.” Even though his voice was even, his body was struggling with a need that he had to curb or they’d both be in trouble.

As disappointed as Lake was, she knew it was best, so instead of questioning him, she began rattling off random facts about her life. Things she felt he would have no interest in while Isiah hung on every word committing it to memory. Lake was his and he wanted every detail of her life, even the things she felt were insignificant, so he let her speak. While his mind went places that it shouldn’t have, creating a pressure in his jeans that he knew wouldn’t be relieved anytime soon.

4.

“Hey dad.” It had been a little over two weeks since Lake had spoken to her father. She loved him but hated the heavy feeling that always rested on her shoulders when the two were in contact. Years had passed, but she still felt responsible. It also didn’t help that he purposely guilt tripped her from time to time. She wasn’t sure if it was intentional, but occasionally he would toss things out that had her chest tight.

“Hey baby girl. You’ve been dodging my calls. I was getting worried.”

One call, not calls. Lake thought back to the day that she ignored his call. It was the first time Isiah officially requested her time. That night the two had dinner and then ended up at his house. It was their first kiss. Their only kiss. He hadn’t initiated any intimacy since then, but they had spent time together. She was already lost in him and felt out of place when she couldn’t talk to or see him.

“If anything were wrong you would know. I was at work when you called.” *Truth and lies.* She could have easily

accepted the call but chose not to.

“I still worry Lake. Especially since I can’t be there for you like I need to.”

Here we go. This is why I ignored your call.

“I know you do. I’m only saying that I’m fine and if I weren’t I would find a way to let you know.”

Larry scoffed at his daughter’s words. “I don’t know what good it would do you. I can’t do shit from in here. Do you know how that makes me feel? I’m not a man. I can’t even take care of my baby girl.”

“Daddy don’t do that. You’ve done way more than I can ever thank you for.” *You saved my life.*

“It doesn’t feel that way,” he snorted. “How are things coming with your bills? You hear anything from any of those magazines you applied to?”

Pushing out a soft sigh, Lake shook her head. “Not yet. I will though. These things just take time.”

“Your landlord don’t give a damn about time, Lake. If you don’t pay, they’re gonna put you out.”

“I’m not gonna get put out. Things are tight but they’re not that bad.”

“But last time I talked to you; you were damn near in tears trying to figure out how you were gonna pay everything.”

And I'm still trying to figure it out.

“I'm working with Chloe. It's part time, but really good money. The tips are decent.”

“Chloe?” he grunted out. Larry knew his sister's child. She was always out there. All he could imagine was his daughter on a pole stripping for men who had no business exposed to her body. The thought had his pulse racing. “Are you dancing Lake? Please tell me that's not what you mean.”

“No. What the hell would make you think that?”

Larry snorted again. “Because that's who your cousins is. You said part time and the tips were good. Sounds like some shit a stripper would confess to.”

“She works for a caterer. I fill in sometimes. I'm not stripping. How could you even think I would?” Lake was offended and it reflected in her tone. Her father always had a way of dampening her mood one way or another.

The phone went silent for a long minute. Neither expressed what they were really thinking until Larry spoke up. “You're right. Sorry I just.... this is hard for me. I don't like

you out there struggling. It makes me feel like shit and I just
—”

“I’m fine. Please stop worrying and please stop feeling bad.” Lake sucked in a deep breath attempting to control her emotions. Tears burned the corners of her eyes but she held onto them with grace. *I don’t want to cry.* “I love you. I’m the one who should feel like shit, not you.”

“That’s not true. You’re mine Lake. The best part of me. Mine to protect and I didn’t do that the right way. You don’t need to feel bad about anything. None of it at all. I’m okay. I’m gonna be okay.. I would do it all again and I mean it. I miss her so much but I had to choose. She—”

“I know daddy. I love you too.”

“I have to go. I’ll call you soon. Make sure you pick up so I know you’re okay.”

“I will.”

Just like that the call ended. The emotional rollercoaster that Lake avoided at all costs had come to an end. She felt heavy and physically drained but relieved at the same time. Lake loved her father but the guilt she carried was too

much. At least now she had a few weeks before he would reach out and she had to relive the nightmare all over again.

A few hours later, Lake sat in her cousin's living room, sipping on some fruity concoction that Chloe had made up. It was too sweet and had too much alcohol, so Lake sipped it slow while Chloe was taking hers down in massive gulps. She was on her second, while Lake was still nursing her first.

“My dad thought that you had me stripping.” Lake's confession pushed a smug grin on her face. Chloe simply rolled her eyes. She was considered the black sheep of the family and didn't care. At the tender age of thirteen, Chloe decided to live her life the way she wanted. Strict parents had a way of pushing that agenda and her mother was a Bible thumper. By the time Chloe was eighteen, she'd experience more sexual encounters than she could count on both hands and even lived through three abortions. She was what they called fast, while Chloe called it living unapologetically. Lake was her accountability. Lake wasn't a goody two shoes, but she was nowhere near as liberated with her decisions as Chloe was. The two were close, respected each other and always had each other's backs. Especially after Lake had to move in

because her mother was no longer alive and her father was sent up state.

“I’m sure he blames me for every wayward decision you make in your life but fuck him.” Shrugging, Chloe downed a few more gulps of her drink. She was feeling a bit tipsy and her already unfiltered mouth was a little more loose than usually.

“He doesn’t. My father knows that I…”

The look Chloe delivered stopped Lake mid-sentence. This time her eyes rolled. “He knows I’m not perfect, Chloe. It’s just easier to blame you. It makes him feel less responsible for not being here.”

“Yeah well shit happens. I don’t care either way. I just want you to be happy. You deserve it, Lake. You’ve been through enough shit as it is. Your mind is all fucked up. You don’t need his issues weighing on you. He’s done enough.”

Chloe hated the dynamic between her uncle and cousin. She was more than grateful that Lake was still with her, because of him, but she loathed the fact that he used their past to manipulate her.

Baby, I lost my life to give you yours. Chloe's eyes rolled at the memory of the call she listened to a few months back. When she noticed Lake digressing into a sullen state she pushed out a sigh.

“None of it is your fault, you know.”

With sad eyes, Lake nodded. “I know that.”

“Do you really though?”

“Yes, Chloe, I do.”

“Then why do you let him make you feel bad? He could have prevented it all from happening. He's the reason —”

“Not today. I don't want to talk about them.” Lake shook her head, lightly lifting the fruity drink to her lips. After a few sips she forced a smile, hoping to convince Chloe that she was okay.

“Then tell me about Isiah. When was the last time you saw him? Have you got the dick yet?”

“No. We're just friends. That's all.”

“Yeah right. Like that man has friends of the female persuasion that he's not fucking.” Chloe grinned

mischievously. “You better hop on that dick and claim your spot, *friend*.”

“I don’t want a spot. That insinuates that I’m sharing. I would never share a man who meant anything to me. What’s the point?” *Do I want him to mean something to me?*

Chloe shrugged knowing that Lake was adolescent in her dealings with men. Not by way of age, simply in experience. Her baby cousin by no means was a virgin, but her count was low. Not only was her count low, the men, or rather little boys, she dealt with likely hadn’t exposed her to the benefits associated with sharing a man. If it were indeed the right man, the perks would speak for themselves with no explanation necessary.

“The point is, until you’ve had a man work your body in a way that have you willing to handover everything you own, including your entire soul, then you won’t understand.”

“Sex is one thing but—”

“Not just sex boo. I’m a talking about a man whose mere presence has your body humming. That type of reaction is why women like me don’t mind sharing a man. Fuck feelings. Make me cum. That’s all I need.”

“You act like the idea of really being with someone is so terrible.” Lake had no idea why Chloe swore off relationships. Since they were younger she never cared for the idea of boyfriends and commitments. She had always been the one ending them by seducing the guys enough to get into their beds but refusing to allow them in her heart.

“It’s just not my thing. I’m not the commitment type. I like my life just the way it is. No commitment, no pressure.” Chloe smirked and finished her drink. Standing from where she had been sitting on her living room floor next to Lake. “But you cuz, that’s your shit. You don’t do random sex, so I get it. You want the fairytale. I’m not sure why with parents like yours. That shit was tragic,” Chloe rambled on not understanding the implication. The struggle that Lake faced because of her parents. After grabbing the half empty pitcher on the counter, she topped her glass off with a little more tequila before joining her cousin again. “You know, maybe that’s the issue. They were so fucked up that you need the real thing, the right way.”

Lake cut her eyes at her cousin but kept her thoughts to herself. She struck a nerve. What Chloe said was true, but Lake struggled to admit the truth.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Instead of admitting the partial truth that Chloe had touched on, Lake lifted her phone realizing that she had missed two texts from Isiah because it was still on silent from earlier when she was at work.

She was able to somewhat conceal her smile but the flutters in her stomach, the prickly feeling that moved through her limbs and the warmth that flushed her cheeks couldn't be denied.

I want to see you.

Where you at? Hit me back.

Before she could process what her response would be, she felt her phone leave her hand. When her eyes landed on Chloe's she was grinning and pulling her lip between her teeth.

“Don't you dare,” Lake warned but Chloe jumped up and rushed into the kitchen typing away. By the time Lake reached the kitchen and was able to get her phone back, the message had already been sent.

With my cousin

Was the first text

Followed by Chloe's address.

“Chloe!”

“What? He wants to see you and I want to see him around you. It's not like we're doing anything. Let him come over. You won't be honest about your new *friend* so I need to see it for myself. You might like him, hell he might like you, but if he's not going to be good to you then he's no longer going to have access.”

“You just want to be nosey, and since when did you become my keeper? Maybe I just want to kick it with you today.”

“You're right and I just told you why I want to be nosey. And that big ass grin on your face while you were reading his text said fuck you cuz, bring your fine ass over here to Isiah Cason.”

“You have issues.”

“And you act like you didn't already know that, but I love you and I don't know this man, so I need to see him around you.”

Lake chewed the corner of her lip taking Chloe's words under advisement. Her cousin had way more experienced than

she herself had and she could use her insight. But...

“I’m not dressed to see him.”

Lake looked down at her attire. Nike leggings and oversized matching sweatshirt.

“Which is perfect. A man that can appreciate you in any state is the best kind of man because we both know you don’t put a lot into this, ever.” Chloe grinned, waving her hand towards her cousin. Lake simply rolled her eyes because it was the truth. Why would she invest in anything? She never went anywhere but work because she barely had the money to live.

“You’re an asshole.” Lake’s already thin eyes narrowed on her cousin who only shrugged and smiled bigger.

For the next half hour, Lake continued nursing her drink while Chloe finished off her third. She was balled up on one end of her sofa while Chloe sat beneath her on the floor, knees pulled into her chest, chin resting on them while her eyes were glued to the TV. She was watching a moving that she had seen a million times before, mumbling the lines along with the actors as they delivered them.

The knock on the door half an hour later startled both of them and instantly had Lake’s pulse racing. Her stomach

began a new round of summersaults, the first being when Isiah confirmed that he was coming by.

Cutting her eyes at Chloe, she lifted from the carpet and b-lined to the door, smoothing her cloths with shaky palms like it would do her any justice. And when she actually had the door open, her entire world froze...briefly. He had that effect on her, but what she didn't know was it was a shared feeling. Isiah's handsome face sealed into one of his charming smiles as he stood before her, relaxed and dressed down. His tall, athletic frame was covered in Nike gear as well, only his was black track pants with Nike embroidered down the side in red. The red crew neck sweatshirt had a black Nike symbol on the left breast. A black Nike hat covered his head, shielding his eyes. Eyes that she felt all over her, even though she couldn't quite see them.

After standing with no words between them, Isiah finally spoke. "Can I come in or you leaving with me?"

It wasn't until then that Lake realized she had been standing, staring like an idiot. From behind her, Chloe's voice crossed the room.

"She's not leaving with you, yet. You have to come in first. I have some questions."

Isiah's eyes shot past Lake and found another familiar face. He remembered her from the night of La' Familia. She worked but with a lot more skill than Lake possessed.

“You don't have to come in and you don't have to answer her questions,” Lake damn near whispered, but Isiah only grinned when his eyes landed on her again. *She's cute, nervous and protecting me from her family.*

“It's cool. We can hang for a minute.” Moving closer and landing into her personal space, Isiah watched her lips but kissed her forehead. Like always when he was around Lake, he played it safe. It was the only way he could control what he was feeling.

After stepping around her body, he ventured into the living room, while she locked up. Approaching Chloe, Isiah extended a hand. “Isiah Cason.”

“That you are.” Chloe accepted his hand with a scandalous smile playing at her lips. Her eyes were chinky from the liquor in her system and she was clearly well beyond her limit.

He chuckled as Lake stepped beside him, her eyes narrowed on her cousin with a warning that Chloe had no intent of placing any regard to. Chloe was too determined to

find out what the hell was going on. She was also amazed at how handsomely sexy this man was. Her was far more intoxicating up close and personal. Had Lake not been blood as well as her favorite cousin, Chloe would have been plotting on how to remove her from the equation.

“You’re gorgeous.” Chloe released Isiah’s hand and motioned to the love seat adjacent to the sofa which held her hostage. The man looked and smelled divine. It was the type of scent that lingered in rooms long after he was gone and clung to your skin after he held you close. She needed distance from it and him.

Isiah sat first, followed by Lake. When she positioned herself near him but left distance, he laughed lightly under his breath. He had grown used to Lake’s nervous energy but rarely pushed, knowing that he was a lot to handle for any woman, but with Lake it was intensified.

“So...” Chloe managed to gain enough control to sit up straight tucking her feet beneath her butt. “You two are friends?” Her brows rose while her heart shaped lips pursed together. Isiah noticed but not for the wrong reasons. He was studying Chloe to find similarities between she and Lake. It was something he had grown accustomed to, obsessing over

anything that gave him more insight on the woman next to him.

“Yeah.” His response was short and for a reason. What he had going on with Lake didn’t need to be justified or explained. Mostly because he *couldn’t* explain or justify what they had. Even still, it was no one’s business, not even her cousin’s.

“What kind of friends?”

His expression was neutral but still offered a quiet authority. “The kind that mind their business and keep their connection private.”

Chloe’s eyes went wild but only for a brief moment. Lake’s body tensed as her posture straightened next to him. She had no clue what Chloe’s next move would be, but she knew her well enough to know it wouldn’t be welcoming.

“That’s cute and expected from someone like *you*. She’s...” her cocaine white nail lifted into the air and motioned to Lake before continuing. “...important to me. Kinda all I have, so your business with her is my business. Not because I give two shits about this alpha male persona thing that you just hit me with, but because I love her and need her to be safe. Men like you with your money, power, authority to

influence and women who throw themselves at you aren't always safe to be around—”

“Chloe!”

Isiah grinned with half of his face. His regard shot over to Lake right after. “Let her finish.” He offered Chloe the floor again, like it was his home, not hers and he had the authority to control the situation. In his mind he did. “And your point is?”

“My point is don't fuck her over. Don't be her *friend* if all that means to you is getting her in your bed. Don't put her in the position to catch feelings that you know you never will. She's not like that. She's better than that.”

“She is better than that,” Isiah confirmed leaving his thoughts there.

“Good. Glad you understand my point.” Chloe narrowed her eyes his way one last time before her attention rolled over to Lake whose dark brows were blazed with anger. She wanted to choke the life out of her cousin but was well aware that Chloe loved her and was simply looking out in the only way she knew how. Regardless, Chloe was overstepping which Lake would bring up another time.

“I have to go pee. I’ll be right back.”

Chloe stepped down off the sofa, grabbing the arm to steady herself before she found a resemblance of balance so that she could leave the room. Lake took the moment of privacy to address the personal attack.

“I apologize for that and *her*.”

Laughing under his breath, Isiah removed his hat placing it beside him. His hand lifted to his head brushing across his soft coils. “You don’t need to apologize. She’s your family and wants to make sure you’re good. I respect her caring enough to do so. She thinks she knows me. I’m sure she knows men *like* me and is using her experience with them to determine how I’ll treat you.” He paused and followed the path Chloe traveled and then back to where she had been sitting, locating the empty tumbler. “Plus, she’s drunk.”

When his regard landed on Lake again, the smile he wore caused her to laugh. “You can tell?”

“Yeah, she almost bust her ass trying to get off the sofa. How much did you have?”

“Not much.” She pointed to the bright red concoction which was sitting a few feet away on the coffee table. The

tumbler was half full. “Chloe is a little heavy handed with the liquor.”

“Then it’s good you didn’t finish it. You’re a light weight.”

His observation of the first night they had dinner came to mind. Their glasses of wine had damn near knocked Lake on her ass. If she was drinking hard liquor, which he assumed was in the drink, then she didn’t stand a chance. He could tell from her heavy lids that she was a little tipsy, but nothing like that night. His eyes lowered to her lips remembering other things from that night. *The kiss*. The sight of those heart shaped lips had him craving the experience of them again, but it was dangerous. He was already obsessed over his so called *friend*. A friend who he had no intention of leaving as such. He just hadn’t figured out what the hell he was doing with her. He knew what he wanted but had no idea how she would fit into his life. *My very complicated life*.

“I am not a light weight.” Lake defended but she knew it was facts. She had a very low tolerance for alcohol which was why she stuck to wine if and when she drank. That night, she had ordered Moscato but the restaurant didn’t carry it. Isaiah explained that it wasn’t really classified as *wine* and most

high end places didn't carry it. After pushing past the embarrassment of not being cultured, she allowed him to choose. With Lake's permission, he took the liberty of ordering Riesling. It was mildly sweet but a lot stronger than the five percent content she was used to. Had she known; she wouldn't have downed three glasses. The taste was smooth and Lake got caught up. Plus she needed something to assist in managing the nerves which were running wild from being around a man like Isiah.

“She's taking a little too long. I'm going to go make sure she didn't fall in the toilet.” Lake grinned shyly and lifted from the sofa. Isiah only offered a head nod, removing his phone but watching as she walked away. Her legs and ass were a little more defined due to the legging that clung to her body. The visual definitely wasn't helping his position. When she was out of his line of sight, he unlocked his phone and scrolled through the recent emails that were sent to pass the time and to settle his thoughts about Lake. Being that the four new communications were from Cyn and too lengthy for a quick read, he focused on the one from his bank with a balance update. The notification prompted his next move of logging into his app to check funds, locking his phone again once he was satisfied.

In the back of the apartment, Lake passed the bathroom noticing it was empty and moved straight to her cousin's room. Chloe was stretched out on the bed, face down, arms spread wide and legs hanging off the end. Shaking her head, she moved to Chloe, gripping her shoulder with a firm shake.

“Chloe. Move up so you don't fall off the bed.”

“Mmmhmm. I'm fine. I just need a minute.”

“You need more than a minute. You're drunk.”

Chloe's cheeks hiked but she didn't open her eyes. “I know. It feels good though. You should fuck him Lake. That man is gorgeous and I think he really likes you. Not just like he wants sex, but he *likes* you.”

“How would you know and you just cursed him out? What makes you think he wants anything to do with me after you bullied him?”

“He does. He was rude, but only because he likes you. Trust me. I can see it. You trust me, don't you Lake?”

Pushing out a short sigh, Lake nodded even though Chloe's eyes were still closed. “I trust you.”

“Good, now go sit on his dick. I love you Lake.”

“I love you too. I’m leaving. I’ll lock up and check on you tomorrow.”

“Mmmhmm.” Chloe tucked her arm under her head and was drifting again. Lake lifted a fleece blanket from the basket in the corner, covered her body and then pulled the door closed when she left the room.

&

“Where are we going?”

Isiah could see Lake in his peripheral but kept his eyes on the road. She tried her best to persuade him to allow her to drive, but he won the argument and her car remained at her cousin’s apartment. Now she was alone with him, at his mercy. However, Isiah was just as tortured. That sweet scent of hers was playing mind games as he speed down the highway.

“My house.” This time he looked her way, curious to see what her reaction would be.

“Your backyard?”

“Nah, inside.” His heavy stare found her again while he waited. When she didn’t respond right away, he followed up looking for confirmation. “You cool with that?” Even if she

wasn't, it was where they were going. There was no plan other than to have her in his personal space. Since he met Lake, he had been trying to assess what it would feel like to include her in his world. Tonight he was going to find out.

“Yes.” Her answer was short. Lake's mind was moving a mile a minute. She could hear Chloe's words in her head and the alcohol she consumed was testing her resolve. But...

I barley know this man. I'm not about to have sex with him.

“You've been drinking. Did you eat?”

Lake's head motioned her answer and he nodded in response. “Aight, we can order something.”

The rest of the drive was quiet. Isiah and Lake were both in their heads. He wanted her so bad that he could barely contain it, however he refused to cross certain lines without a plan. Lake wasn't just any woman. He felt things for her that he hadn't experienced in a while, and if he had, it was never as intense as what she pulled from him. Lake would be a permanent part of his life one way or another. That was all he knew. The struggle was working out the details on how.

This time when they arrived at his home, Isiah pulled into the garage which was on the west side of the property. He parked in the four car garage, positioning his Range next to the Bentley Bentayga that he rarely drove. There were two Suzuki AEM Carbon Fiber Hayabusa's, one gray and one white next to the most modest of his collection, a BMW i8 Roadster and the last spot was empty. The luxury vehicles once again reminded Lake of who she was dealing with. Isiah could see her mind spinning and decided to reel her back in. He needed her to see him, not what he could afford. As simple as he was on the surface, his lifestyle was lavish and he didn't want Lake to become overwhelmed.

“You good?”

Nodding quickly, Lake pulled out of her daze and got out of his truck. She rounded the front and joined him as he unlocked the door that lead them into his kitchen. The last time she was on his property, they rushed through the space to reach the back. This time, Lake was afforded the opportunity to really experience it's beauty. The kitchen was unlike any she had ever personally experienced. Endless rows of stone gray cabinets lined the walls. There were two separated spaces positioned on opposing walls that housed double ovens with

brushed nickel finishes. *Who the hell needs four ovens? I bet he doesn't even cook.* The range had eight eyes which sat up high with wrought iron grates covering them. It looked like something that belonged in a restaurant, not someone's home. The counters were a darker shade of gray and looked expensive, maybe marble, while the floors were multi-hued specked with all the colors of the kitchen pulling everything together.

“Wow,” she whispered more to herself, but Isiah caught it.

“You like it?”

“Hell yeah. This is beautiful. But where's your refrigerator?” Her brows inched in closer while her eyes swept the massive space again. He pointed to an area that matched the cabinets and Lake frowned more moving closer. She swept her hand down the side, giving a gently tug and realized the surface of the refrigerator matched the cabinets. It blended right in to camouflage its existence. She had never seen anything like it.

“Of course your refrigerator would be playing hide and seek.” Her eyes rolled quickly and he chuckled.

“It’s cool but I’m never in here. I don’t cook.” *But you can come cook for me anytime you want.* His thoughts were tainted with Lake wearing little to nothing, preparing a meal for him. One that she put care into because she *cared* for him.

“Then why this kitchen?”

“Because it came with the house that I wanted. There are other things about this place that sold me on it. The kitchen is just a bonus, I guess. One that I don’t benefit from.”

Lake shrugged. “Then you should hire a cook. Someone needs to utilize all this.”

His mind went wild again. A seriousness settled in when he asked. “Can you cook?”

Their eyes met and Lake’s breathing picked up. The question was deeper than just wanting to know her skills. She sensed the depth behind it right away. “I uhh, I do okay. Nothing major, but I can feed myself if required.”

I bet you can feed me too. His smile surfaced at the thought.

“Then you can utilize it. I never will and neither will Ema. Come on. I’ll give you a tour of everything else.”

Ema? Who the hell is Ema? Lake nodded and followed his lead. The house was simple, but exquisite. There was a theatre room, a gym, two offices, one on the main floor which was massive, and one upstairs in the rear of the house. The master suite was double the size of Lake's apartment with a sitting area and walk in closet fit for royalty. The tour lead them to five other bedrooms, totaling six in all. The sixth one they reached felt a little warmer than the other guest rooms. It was decorated in linen with royal blue accents. There were personal items lining the dresser and bathroom and when they passed the closet, Lake noticed that clothes hung on the racks. Isiah watched her mind working. He assumed trying to figure out who the room belonged to and when Lake's focus landed on him again, he explained.

"My sister."

"You have a sister?" *Oh the nephew I thought was his son?* His smile was beautiful. This time it was soft and reached his eyes, but there was something else there that Lake couldn't read.

His hands slipped into his pockets while he paused trying to decide just how much he would expose. Ema was a

sore subject. Isiah was protective like any big brother, but it multiplied where Ema was concerned.

“Yes, it’s just the two of us. She’s younger. Twenty three.”

“My age.” Lake’s thoughts were spoken out loud.

“Yeah.”

“Where is she?” He watched her intently while his mind raked through dark thoughts again.

“In a treatment facility. She’s...” when he paused. Lake sensed the uncertainty and spoke up right away.

“It’s okay.” All types of things flashed through her mind. *Sick. Drug addiction. Alcoholism. Or just plain crazy.* At least she was getting help. *My mother never got help!*

“She’s bipolar. Because of it she struggles with depression. She can go months, sometimes years without an issue, then the manic episodes surfaces out of nowhere. When she’s not in their care, she’s in mine. I’m all she has. She’s all I have. It’s personal to me. I don’t talk about her to people. It’s my way of—”

“Protecting her. I understand.” And she did. Lake had dealt with the demons of what it meant to protect the ones you

love from the scrutiny of others.

“Come on. Let’s go order. You’re sobering up but you still need to eat.”

Isiah nodded to the door and Lake moved first. She used memory to lead them back to the main floor and into the kitchen. Hopping onto the counter, she settled in while Isiah leaned against it next to her.

He appreciated how comfortable she was in his home, proving what he already felt. *She belongs here.* After pulling up his app to order, he handed his phone over.

“Pick what you want. I eat just about anything.”

“You sure?” Lake’s eyes landed on him again and he nodded, so she went to work trying to decide what she had a taste for. As this point she just needed food, the meal didn’t really matter in her opinion as long as she shared it with him. Lake was in a downward spiral falling for a man who she knew would bring her just as much pain as he did pleasure.

5.

Isiah checked his watch and noticed the time. He was well aware that it was early but needed to know the time. *Just after five.* The sky was still dark which he could tell from the lack of light filtering into his room. Plus, his body was on an alert. This was normally the time he was up and moving, but considering that he hadn't slept the night before, his routine was off. *She* was the reason.

As he sat across the room in the oversized leather chair, which was positioned in the corner, his focus remained on the body curled up in his bed. Lake had been asleep for hours. Down for the count due to the drink she shared at her cousin's place and then the wine she had with their dinner hours later. The two spent the night talking, and then *not* talking while they watched some movie he couldn't remember. *Or rather she watched.* Isiah watched Lake until she dozed off, curled up against his side. Once he was sure she had fallen into a deep sleep, determined by the light snore that she

produced, Isiah lifted her body with ease and carried her to his master suite.

She had long since come out of her shoes and the hoodie she wore, so he tucked her into his bed dressed in the tank top and leggings that were left. That made him anxious. The sight of Lake in his bed had Isiah once again feeling things that he wasn't acquainted with. However, he quickly settled into the mindset that she could be in that same spot night after night and he wouldn't care in the least. It would be a welcomed change. He wanted to lay next to her, feel her body against his, smell her hair and the sweet scent that clung to her skin. He prayed she left that scent behind for him to experience even after she was gone. He was obsessed with all things about her. That was odd, because after Noel, Isiah never desired to have a woman in his personal space. Other than his staff, Lake had been the only one to cross the threshold of his home. Another concession he was making for this woman.

His behavior behind her was foreign. Here he was sitting in his room watching her sleep. It's where he had been most of the night, afraid of what lying next to her would do to him. So he sat like a crazy person, watching her sleep. Several times he was up and at her side. She had nightmares. He

wasn't sure what about because she was mumbling most of it, only some words and sentences were audible. But it was clear she was fighting against someone. Telling them *no* and to *stay away*. She even mentioned that she loved her attacker and didn't understand why they were trying to harm her.

Watching Lake struggle had Isiah's anger peeking. He wondered had she been abused, assaulted, *or worse...*

At some point, he would have to ask, but they had to build a little more so that he gained Lake's trust. The only reason why he didn't wake her, was fear that she would realize she was still at his home and request to be taken back to her apartment. He didn't want her to leave, so he watched her struggle in her sleep, making a promise that if he ever found out who harmed Lake, they would have to see him.

"What am I doing?" His voice was low as he questioned his motives. Shaking the thoughts of insanity he felt from his behavior, Isiah was on his feet, massaging his tired eyes with the palms of his larger hands. He needed to shower. At some point she would be up and would request to go home. Lake had a life outside of him and had mentioned having to work the next day. She had a late shift this week which he wasn't thrilled about. Three to eleven. When she

mentioned it, Lake wasn't happy either. For him, it meant he wouldn't see her much for the next four days that she was scheduled and that had his chest tight. Exhaling a short breath, Isiah left a peacefully sleeping Lake and entered his bathroom.

The sound of the door closing somehow jarred Lake from her sleep or maybe it was his energy leaving the room. Either way, her lids felt weighted so it took a minute for her eyes to flutter open. With a sleep laced mind, she snuggled against the plush pillow trying to regain comfort and that's when his scent hit her. Her eye shot open again darting around the dark room. She wasn't in her bed; she was in his.

Lake sat up and surveyed her surroundings. *What the hell?*

Raking her brain for details, she tried to piece memories of the previous night together. The last memory she had was of them in his theatre room, watching a movie. She must have dozed off. The blank spots had Lake inspecting her body. She was still fully dressed in her tank top and leggings, so nothing happened, right? Her body felt no physical signs of...

"No, I didn't have sex with him," she mumbled. The thought had her thinking of Chloe, so she searched the area for

her phone but didn't locate it. "Shit."

Lake climbed out of the bed right after, standing next to it as she stretch her body. With a full bladder she regretted the motion and then looked towards the bathroom. *What if he's in there? What difference does it make? He kept me here so that means he doesn't mind me being here. And I have to pee.*

Lake moved to the door, listening for a minute, but the sound proof doors blocked out any noise. Things were quiet, so she pulled the door open and noticed the shower running. *And him.* Isiah was standing with his back to Lake, stance wide while his head was low. The contours of his muscular torso were on display with every move he made. Water from the massive shower head above him drenched his body while he stood there unbothered. *Shit his body.*

The longer Lake stared, the more she felt like an intruder admiring his naked physique. It took a minute to regain her senses, but she eventually decided to leave, however before she could, Isiah spoke up turning to face her. "Good morning Lake." With a sharp gaze, he regarded her intensely. Lake's breath hitched and then she held it. There was no way to deny the beauty of him. Sculpted chest and abs, confident stance, corded arms. Even as he stood before her

completely exposed, there was not an ounce of insecurity about him. *Why the hell would there be?* His muscular physique stood statuesque while his loaded gaze locked her in place. Lake's heart was pounding in her chest while she admired *every* inch of him. *How is that thing even real? Do they make them in that size?* Isiah's smile was cocky and his masculinity was overpowering. The weight between his thighs had Lake's eyes going wild while she tried to find something, *anything* other than it to focus on.

"I had to...I need to use the bathroom. Sorry," she pushed out as confidently as she could manage. Isiah smirked again and pointed to the door to the left of where she stood. "In there."

Lake's eyes rolled away from him, while she nodded. Her core was tight and she knew without a doubt her panties were drenched. When her feet finally moved, she heard his voice again.

"You didn't say good morning." His tone was teasing, causing Lake to roll her eyes. *Arrogant ass.*

She grumbled *good morning* just as she slammed the door to the bathroom. Taking more time than required, she imagined he would assume she was taking a shit verses

stalling but she didn't care. When she was done and flushed, Lake peeked out and was grateful that she was alone. After washing her hands, she looked around before closing her eyes trying to erase the memory of him, *naked*. Her body reacted again with a tight core and hard nipples. *No such luck*. Her mind was so deep in thoughts of him that she hadn't noticed his presence again so his deep rasp startled her. "You can use the shower in Ema's room. There's stuff in there. Most of it's new. She took things with her, so Anisa replaced them. Girly shit. Clothes too. You can wear whatever you find. There's plenty of stuff that still has the tags on it. Ema's a little taller and has a little more weight, but I'm sure you'll find something."

Isiah was standing in the middle of the French doors to his bathroom, arms locked across his chest, watching Lake. He could tell she was rattled after seeing him naked but he was grateful it happened. It was only fair that she was thinking about him the same ways he had been obsessing over her. Lake would disagree. She didn't need those thoughts filling her head but it didn't stop her eyes from sweeping his frame every chance she got. As he stood before her, his lower half covered in jeans, exposing a black waistband of his boxer briefs, briefs that she now had an idea of what they were

containing, Lake felt a rush of warmth flow through her body. *God this man is too damn sexy for his own good. For my own good.*

“You remember what room?”

“Yeah.” Lake was flustered and couldn’t hide it. Isiah was amused by her reaction.

“You good?”

“Yeah.” *Hell no.*

“Then why won’t you look at me?”

“I am looking at you.” Her eyes lifted to meet his. Isiah’s smile sent her pulse to racing again.

“Barely.” Those maple hued irises shined and a smile was teasing at his lips. Lake dropped her eyes struggling with thoughts of things she wanted him to do to her. “You don’t have to be nervous around me, Lake.”

“I’m not,” she lied.

“You are,” Isiah challenged, moving into the bathroom. His hands gripped her waist, forcing her body against his. Lake inhaled, feeling light headed from his cologne first and then his hard body against hers. The solid mass that met her stomach didn’t help either. “I know you are, but you don’t

have to be.” This time she felt his breath against her neck. He was so close that his lips grazed her skin before placing a trail of kisses in the same area. The moment ended seconds later when Isiah stepped back allowing Lake the ability to breathe normally.

“You can’t do *that* and not expect me to be nervous,” she rushed out before brushing past him, leaving not only the bathroom, but his room as well. When she made it to Ema’s, Lake stepped inside and slammed the door, pressing her back against it. Her heart was still erratic, but a smile inched across before her teeth sank into her lip to hide it. She asked herself the same question Isiah posed to himself.

“What the hell am I doing?”

You’re falling for a guy who’s going to be bad for you.

Lake shut her eyes and inhaled deeply, letting it go. This was crazy. The entire thing was crazy but she refused to end it. She just prayed it wouldn’t be her downfall.

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After grabbing breakfast with Lake and taking her back to her apartment, Isiah made rounds. He had no intention of

ending up at the Abara home, but Odin called requesting to see him. He had been doing that a lot lately and it had Isiah uncomfortable, but he complied. It was easier to keep a close watch on Odin's temperament so that he would know how to move. The two were in Abara's kitchen, Isiah sitting restless while Odin had breakfast.

"I need you to meet with someone." Odin lifted the mug of black coffee that the cook had placed next to his plate and peered at Isiah waiting.

"Meet with who?"

"A supplier out in LA."

"LA?" Isiah's face was neutral but he wasn't sure why the hell Odin would be dealing with a new supplier, especially one in LA. Product was moved in from out the country in containers that arrived at the port in Savannah and on private planes that landed on Odin's personal property.

"Yeah. That's just where he lives but the loads come from other places."

"Is there a problem with anything? Why someone new?" Isiah didn't want to have to build a connection with a

new supplier. It took time to vet and you could never fully trust anyone. That was the part that he never liked.

Odin sipped his coffee again, placing the mug down right after. “Sanchez is getting old. His sons are reckless. They don’t do business our way. They’re young and dumb. Driven by the money and not principle. I think it’s time to figure out something else.”

“I told you that a year ago when he started falling back and letting them take that lead..” Isiah argued. Sanchez had two sons, one his age, the other was younger. They were flashy, always in the clubs partying. Something that wasn’t smart for men in their line of work. The Sanchez brothers were loud. Loud meant attention, and attention meant problems.

Odin sighed and nodded. “I remember. I wasn’t hearing you back then, I’m listening now, which is why I think this is a good idea.”

“Why me? You should be the one to meet with him.”

The two had never had a formal conversation about Isiah taking over, but it was implied. Isiah was next in line with business, even if he wasn’t actually working for Odin. Not only because he was with Noel, but because Odin viewed him as a son. He trusted Isiah and knew that he would run

business the same as he had done in the past. Money would always be made and business would be handled.

“I’m thinking about following Sanchez’s lead. You know, falling back a little.” Odin watched Isiah for a long moment attempting to gauge his reaction, before he lifted his fork and cut into his pancakes.

Isiah’s body tensed at the thought. That was the last thing he wanted. He knew it was the plan, but never one he would accept. *He couldn’t.*

“I don’t want that type of pressure. I’m good like I am. I like doing me and my businesses are doing well. I may not even be in this much longer. It was never a life goal. Just a means to an end.”

“That’s bullshit, son. *Cason Realty* is doing well, I won’t deny what you’ve accomplished. In two years you’ve done more than most can claim in years of business. I knew you would, it’s why I didn’t mind standing behind you. Your club is also thriving along the other little businesses you have. I’m proud of you, son.”

Little. Isiah’s jaw flexed. The reference had been disrespectful but not intentional. Odin admired Isiah’s hustle.

Always had but he was still a man that placed all others under him with accomplishments and status.

“I bring in millions over what you’ll ever see, Isiah. More money than all of those businesses combined. Why would you walk away from that?” *And there it is.* Isiah wasn’t moved by money. He appreciated his lifestyle, but peace of mind was far more valuable. It was something he’d learned over the past few years. Taking on the responsibility of running things for Odin would threaten his peace of mind.

“The same reason why you’re wanting to.”

Odin grinned and shook his head. “I’m not walking away from it. Only stepping back. I would never give it up. I just want you to run things. I would be crazy to let go of that type of money. You would too.”

“It’s not mine. It’s yours. We’re separate; always have been,” Isiah made clear. He purchased from Odin in the beginning. The first buy was with money he made from drugs he stole the night he killed Odin’s brother. *But you’ll never know that.* When he had a little more status, Odin placed him in the room with the suppliers so that Isiah could do it on his own. Since his start with Big Lou, Isiah hadn’t worked for anyone but himself. That was another issue with taking over. It

would mean working for Odin. Running *his* business. That wouldn't work for him.

“I'm not saying you haven't been doing your own thing. I'm simply offering you an opportunity. A really good one. A partnership. One that you could handle in your sleep. You know this shit through and through.”

Isiah nodded. It was his only response. He wasn't feeling the offer and wanted to end the conversation.

“Look son. Is this about Noel?”

Isiah's eyes were on him quick with a hard stare “She talked to me. Said things aren't good with the two of you. That you're barely hanging on. She asked if I would discuss it with you.”

Isiah gave away nothing. He just listened.

“You're family, with or without Noel. This isn't about her. If that's why you're hesitant, then cancel your feelings on not wanting this. She's spoiled and demanding. I get it. Nothing like my Liv. I've been telling her for years but her daddy spoiled her. Gave her whatever she wanted. Ruined that girl.”

No him climbing in her bed, stealing her innocence ruined her. He spoiled her to make up for his indiscretions.

“Noel is Noel. We’re not great but it is what it is. I don’t know what will happen with us but that doesn’t have anything to do with me not wanting to be in your position. I just don’t want to take it on. It’s a lot. I have my own shit to deal with.”

The two men stared at each other before Odin backed down. “Understood, but I don’t trust anyone else. I don’t have anyone else, Isiah. It’s just you. Will you at least consider it?”

Hell no.

“I will.”

“Good, that’s all I ask.” Odin’s smile stretched wide as he lifted his fork again. No wasn’t something he was use to and not something he choose to accept. “You sure you don’t want to eat? These damn pancakes are heaven.”

“Nah, I need to get going. I have a few things to take care of.” With that, he left the house and the offer behind, knowing it would come up again, but for now, he let it go.

When Isiah pulled up at the facility where Ema had been for the past few months, his heart was heavy. He was her

protector, the person who fixed things in her life, yet he couldn't do a damn thing about this one thing. Only the doctors and the meds, which he made sure she had the best of, could do anything for her situation. It was why she was here.

As soon as he entered the waiting area and located his baby sister, his smile grew. He watched his Bean sitting quietly by the window. She looked good. *Healthy*. Her long thick hair was pulled into a ponytail that hung just past the nape of her neck. She was in all white. Which made her look pure. A far stretch from the things she had done in her life, but to him, she was an angel with damaged wings. *His angel*.

“Hey Bean, you gonna come talk to me or what?” Ema knew that voice anywhere. She grinned, leaping from her chair, charging her big brother with open arms. She climbed his long body, securing her legs around his waist and hugging him tight, similar to the love a child would show a parent. That was the exact love that Ema had for her big brother. Isiah embraced all of her love, holding her just as tightly while she buried her face in his shoulder fighting tears. Ema hadn't realized she missed him as much as she had until that very moment.

“Get your big ass down before I drop you,” he teased, kissing her forehead and then lowering Ema to her feet. Ema playfully shoved him in the shoulder, rolling her eyes.

“You better not have dropped me. I would have kicked your ass all up and through here,” she warned, taking his hand to lead them to a private area in the corner. The visitation room was empty. Isiah paid good money to visit whenever he wanted. Not just on scheduled visiting days. It was a part of the deal he cut when he arrived months back with Ema. She was in a bad place back then, but now, he could see the changes. When the current arrangement was made, Ema had been off her meds for a while and in need of help to level her emotions. Help he couldn't provide. It wasn't as simple as doping her up again. It was an entire process. One they both hated but learned to live with.

“Gosh, I missed you.” She almost whined taking him in. Ema knew her brother was handsome. Women were always throwing themselves at him. She grew used to it, but still tried her best to keep the bad ones away. She had a sense about people. Maybe it was because she was such a free spirit, but she could read people well. It was the reason why she was so infuriated when he refused to listen when it came Noel. Now

he was stuck. Ema didn't know all the details, but she knew that Isiah was only with her because he had to be. They lived in separate homes and lived separate lives until it was time to perform. Isiah just refused to tell Ema why, so she left it alone.

“I missed you too. They say when you can come home yet?”

The question was loaded and not as simple as it seemed. The doctors reported to him regularly. They had already informed Isiah that medically she was well, but emotionally that was another issue. Ema would have to make the call on when she was ready to leave.

“Soon. Maybe a few weeks,” she said softly refusing to catch his eyes. Isiah simply nodded, rubbing her arm.

“They treating you good?”

Ema's smile was big. “You know they are. They don't want to deal with the big bad monster.”

He chuckled at how many times he had shown his ass over simple things. It didn't matter. Ema's care was to be top notch or heads would roll.

“I'm not *that* bad.” It was more of a question which had her smile wide again.

“You *are* and you know you are. You don’t need me to tell you that so let’s talk about more important things. How is he?”

“Good. Real good. I saw him last week. He’s potty trained. The second I walked in to get him; he yanked his shorts down to show me his *big boy pants*. Batman.” Isiah laughed at the memory of his nephew. “I bought out every pair I could find before I took him home. Made sure he had enough. You know, just in case.”

Ema shook her head. “No, he’s smart. He won’t slip up. If he learned how to go to the bathroom, he won’t forget.”

“You wanna see him?”

That too was a loaded question. Seeing pictures of her son made Ema very emotional. It wasn’t always best for her treatment and Isiah had to let her make the call. Sometimes he would when he could tell it was a good day, but most of the time he left the decision to Ema. Today seemed like a good day, so he offered.

“Please.” She waited while he removed his phone. After swiping past the pictures he’d stolen of Lake asleep in his bed, he found the ones of his nephew and handed the phone over to Ema. She swiped through all of them smiling

before she went back to the beginning, only she passed the first one and landed on one of Lake.

“Who’s this?” She held the phone up and Isiah groaned. Reaching for it.

“Nobody.”

Ema’s eyes narrowed keeping the phone out of his range. “She’s somebody. This is your room. *Your* room. She’s in your bed. *Your* bed. Unless I’m crazy...” she paused and grinned. “...Poor choice of words but you never bring women home. Who is she, Sih?”

“A friend.” He handed Ema the same lie he had been telling Lake and himself. She was much more; he simply had no clarity on what just yet.

“A friend who’s at *your* house in *your* bed. Yeah right. She’s pretty. Very pretty.”

She’s beautiful.

“Look at your son, not her, Bean.”

Ema rolled her eyes and swiped back to the photos of Emanuel. “He looks so much like him. I hate that. I feel bad for hating anything about my son but I do. I hate that he looks like his father.”

“You love him, regardless,” Isiah spoke softly to soothe her anxiety.

“Thanks, Sih.” She handed over the phone and then perked up again. Thoughts of her son made her sad and she didn’t want to feel sad. She missed him and just wanted to be home to spend time with him again. His aunt, Emanuel’s father’s sister, kept him during times like these. Isiah spent time with his nephew, but his life wasn’t set up to care full time for a child. He took care of him financially and loved Emanuel to no end, but that was all he could offer. Reva, his aunt stepped up, never judging. She knew Ema’s struggles. She always knew her brothers addiction and that he refused to be a father, so she filled in to help, however she could. It worked.

“Can I meet her...” Ema grinned at her brother. “... your *friend*. Bring her to meet me.”

“No.” His word was firm and final which had Ema frowning. Isiah I would give his sister the world. In fact he had, over time he had also learned to use certain things as bargaining tools. “You can meet her when you come home. If you want to meet her, get well and come home, Bean.”

Offering a soft smile, she nodded. The two were silent for a while before she perked up. “Then at least tell me about her. You can do that, can’t you?”

Isiah chuckled and nodded. He pushed out a short breath before he began rattling off details about Lake to his sister. She had easily become his favorite topic lately, but Isiah had no one he could talk to about her. Ema actually fulfilling a need. One he hadn’t realized he had, *until now*.

6.

While Isiah spent time with his sister talking about Lake, she shared a lunch with Chloe thinking about him. He was *all* she could think about and it was becoming a pleasant annoyance.

“Did I tell you to screw Isiah last night?”

“Yes you did.”

“Shit, so I didn’t dream that?”

“Well you might have dreamed about it, but you actually said it. You also pretty much cursed him out with threats about me.”

Chloe’s eyes stretched wide but she recovered quickly. “I didn’t threaten him, really. I just made it clear that he had better not play you.”

“Oh, so that part you remember?”

Chloe grinned offering a slight shrug. “Kinda. But what I do remember vividly is how fine that man is. Did you screw him?”

Memories of Isiah's naked body flooded Lake's mind within seconds. Every inch of him damn near perfect. She couldn't stop thinking about him but didn't mind. It was indeed a nice thought to have.

“No. I told you we're just friends.”

“Friends my ass. There's no way you're just friends with that fine ass man, and if you are then you're insane.”

Lake dropped her eyes briefly but Chloe caught it. “You're such a liar. You had sex with him!” Her voice elevated but in a hushed tone.

“I didn't.” *I wanted to; I should have, but I didn't.*

“I don't believe you. What happened when you left my apartment?”

“We went to his house, ordered food, watched a movie and then I fell asleep. You do recall trying to give me alcohol poisoning right?”

“That baby ass drink?” Chloe waved her off with a flick of her wrist with her eyes rolling right after. “You only drank half of one—”

“And it had *half* a bottle of tequila in it. Then I had wine at his house so—”

“So you were drunk but didn’t give it up?”

“No, we ate, we talked, we watched a movie—”

“And you went to sleep. Yeah, yeah. I’m so disappointed in you. You better hurry up and lock that man down, Lake. I mean it.”

“And I’m supposed to lock him down with sex? Hasn’t every woman in the city tried that already? From what I can tell, he doesn’t belong to any of them, so what makes you think it will work for me?”

Lake’s argument was valid, one that she had heard Chloe deliver more times than she cared to recall, but deep down inside she wished she were wrong. She had even considered the possibility, replaying it in her mind so often that at times she was convinced. She wanted more than friendship from Isiah. There was no denying it, at least not internally, but out loud to anyone with sense, she refused to openly admit that she wanted him. The reality was, he would never be hers. There were moments when she could feel something more from the way he stared at her, always wanted her close, or the way he would find ways to touch her intimately...

But that's not sexual, he's never even tried. *He kissed me once and never explored the option again.* Maybe he didn't feel anything. But she did. Lake's body submitted to his will and opened up to Isiah, just from one simple kiss.

"Oh baby. You got it bad." Chloe's words were soft and her eyes followed suit. It wasn't until that exact moment that she realized just how serious things were. Lake had feelings. Not just a simple crush on a fine man with the power to entice. A man that she knew was out of her league, Lake actually wanted something serious with Isiah.

"I do not." Lake's tone was defensive and Chloe could tell from the way she sat up straight squaring her shoulders that she had delivered a lie.

"You do. And it's okay to want him. Just please be careful and know what you're getting into by wanting him."

Lake simply stared at her cousin without confirming or denying. Seconds later, needing a distraction, her eyes swept the dingy cafeteria where they were having lunch landing on Chloe right after. "My break's almost up. Thanks for this. I mean since you did get drunk and bail on me last night." The smug grin and attempted humor didn't hide the truth very well, but Chloe decided not to pry. She knew soon enough the two

would cross the Isiah bridge again, but likely with Chloe assisting as Lake nursed a broken heart. It was inevitable. She couldn't save her baby cousin from it, but she would damn sure help her through the pain when it happened.

“You're the one who bailed on me. You left me for dead and dipped out with your man.” Chloe stood piling her trash and uneaten food into the containers that it came in. Lake stood and did the same.

“You invited him, so it's your fault.” Lake stuck her tongue out as she started towards the entrance to the cafeteria. After she and Chloe dumped their trash, the two hugged and said their goodbyes, promising to check in soon. Lake clocked back in right after and sank into the mental space she needed to get through the rest of her shift.

“Lake, Mrs. Ruby is asking about you. Said to find you as soon as your break is up.” Nathan was moving full speed until he reached Lake, stopping inches away. She flashed him a smile that he returned only his with a little more giddiness than hers.

“Did she say what she wanted?”

“Nope, just to find you. I told her you were on break. The asshole is on one so make sure you're done with meds

before you go see her.”

Meds that I'm not qualified to be passing out and will go to jail behind while this place gets shut down. Sure, got it. No problem.

“What’s his problem?” Lake’s face went tight thinking about their boss, Tony. He was a mid-thirty, uptight, over-privileged asshole who felt like his family name voided him from showing the employees at *Harrington Assisted Living* any respect. They were just the help, but the help is what kept the patients happy and things running because he and his family damn sure didn’t play a role in any of it. All he did was bulldoze his way through the place, turning up his nose at the patients and barking out orders.

“What isn’t his problem? Just another day where something crawled up his ass and pissed him off.”

Lake grinned, rolling her eyes. “I didn’t need that visual.”

“Friends that care, share.” Nathan’s face opened into a handsome, yet mischievous smile which had Lake rolling her eyes.

“Let me get started before I have to curse Tony out.”

“Yeah do that because if he comes for you then I’m gonna have to curse him out too.” Nathan was dead serious while Lake assumed he was joking. Nathan had long since been carrying a torch for Lake, but she never paid him any mind. She had friend zoned him from day one when he began working there months again. To his dismay, she showed no interest other than occasionally sharing a friendly lunch or swapping shifts when one or the other needed it.

“Oh my, would you defend my honor, sir?” Lake teased.

“I will break my foot off in his ass or anyone else’s for you Lake. I’m sure you know that.”

A smile inched across her face. Lake offered a soft nod before she gripped his arm and started down the hall. “I know you would. You’re a great friend, Nate. One of the best.”

Instead of putting himself out there with a correction of what he was or wanted to be, Nathan simply took off down the hall in the opposite direction.

It took an hour and a half for Lake to finish passing out meds, something she shouldn’t have been doing because she had no medical training. Tony somehow made it a part of all of the staff’s responsibility, being that he only had two full time formally trained medical staff personnel who rotated through

the home. Most of the time, only when needed. The majority of the care for the resident was from the general staff.

Lake's first stop was to see Mrs. Ruby. The seventy-two year old woman had been there long before Lake began. Her stays were always long term, but she would occasionally be released back to her family only to show up months later for another run. Lake found it sad, so she spent as much time as she could with her.

Stepping to the door, she knocked softly, prompting Mrs. Ruby to wave her in.

"I been asking about you all day," Mrs. Ruby fussed bringing a huge smile to Lake's face.

"I haven't been here all day. My shift didn't start until three."

"Child, that don't mean I haven't been asking for you." After Lake hugged the frail woman who was propped up in her mechanical bed, she grabbed the black and wood vinyl chair from the corner and drug it to the side of the bed. After getting comfy, her white and pink Nikes were propped up on the thick metal siding while she relaxed her body, Lake fully took in her dear friend.

“Your daughter must have been here,” Lake offered after a brief examination. The two had become close since Lake started there. Not having a mother around or any grandparents to speak of she clung to the friendship that Mrs. Ruby offered.

“She was here, why you ask?”

Lake pointed to the freshly done French braids that swept across Mrs. Ruby’s shoulders. She was also in a new black satin pajama set.

“You braid it better. She does what she can.”

Lake grinned at the woman’s aged caramel face. She was up there in age but still beautiful. Even her hair showed signs of Ruby’s younger years. It was still thick and long but streaked with gray. Mrs Ruby also insisted on wearing it in two neatly done French braids which made her look like an Indian. There wasn’t an ounce of Native American in her blood, which she would be quick to check anyone on, but it didn’t stop the visual you received with her hair the way it was styled.

“You better not tell her that,” Lake warned bringing a devious smile to Mrs. Ruby’s face before she narrowed her eyes.

“Serves her right. She threw me in here, visits every few months to comb my hair and throw new clothes at me. If she was around more, then maybe she could get some practice in.”

Lake grinned but felt sad that Charlotte didn't put much time into her mother's care. *If my mother was...*

Pushing the thought away, Lake refocused. “Why you hunting me down, woman?” Her playful banter had Mrs. Ruby's eyes narrowing again.

“I haven't seen you. I also fussed Tony out about you working these late hours. You're too young and pretty to be cooped up in here all night. You need to be out courting. Living life. Not here with us draining it from you.”

“I live my life. But it's only fair that we rotate shifts. Nate can't always do it by himself.”

Mrs. Ruby scoffed. “He would if you asked him. That boy has it bad for you little girl. Real bad. He walks around like a lost puppy when you're not here. When you are, he's smiling and skipping through his shifts.”

The visual that Mrs. Ruby painted had Lake snorting through a deep heavy laugh.

“Oh my God, please don’t ever reference Nate and skipping again. That was...” Lake paused shaking her head.
“...horrible.”

“Well it’s true. That boy wants you bad.”

“Well I don’t want him. We’re just friends.” The confession pushed up thoughts of Isiah.

Mrs. Ruby studied Lake for a minute before digging deeper. “Why not? He’s a nice looking young man. Got a decent job. Treats people around here with respect. Got a nice little body on him too. I know how you young girls are.”

Lake’s eyes shot up to Mrs. Ruby. “Why are you checking him out like that?”

Mrs. Ruby rolled her small, thin eyes. “I’m not. At least not like that. He’s a baby but had I been in my younger days, I would certainly have given him a chance. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

Nodding to agree, Lake rolled her eyes. “I have. He’s nice but not my type. There’s no...I’d don’t know, he just doesn’t do it for me. You have to feel something and I don’t.”
Lake’s shoulders rose and then dropped.

“I understand but you need to live your life, baby. Find a good guy, get married, have some babies.”

Lake cringed at the thought. She wasn't having babies. Marriage maybe, but kids were a huge burden. Her past had taught her well on the sacrifices that parents had to make for kids, and she didn't want any of it. She also wasn't sure she had it in her to love a baby the way it would need to be loved. She herself was never loved completely so...

“One day I will,” was all Lake offered.

“You're so dark, baby.” Mrs. Ruby's voice was soft. A lot softer than usual which had Lake's eyes on her immediately. They met with sad, concern filled eyes which she knew were on her behalf.

“I'm not dark,” Lake defended.

“Not you, your spirit. I feel it sometimes and it's not your fault, it's what someone else placed on you. I don't know what it is but there's a darkness there and you need someone to help lift you out of it. I think if you would find a good man to love you—”

“I met a guy,” Lake cut her off quick. She didn't want to be asked about her past or to feel as if Mrs. Ruby somehow

knew. Their bond was an undeniable one. They immediately clicked and Mrs. Ruby was constantly reminding Lake about feelings, things that she didn't want to remember and not once had they talked about her life past what Mrs Ruby knew of her now. She was a college graduate, who worked at *Harrington*. That was it, that was all she knew, but she sensed things that Lake had never told her.

“Well now we're getting somewhere. Maybe I underestimated you.” Mrs. Ruby's smile was wide, stretching her thin lips.

“It's nothing serious. Don't go planning my wedding but I like him. I just don't know if it will be anything serious.”

“Why not? Is he a good man?”

No! Well maybe, hell I don't know.

“From what I can tell he is. It's still new. I haven't known him long. We've hung out a few times.”

“What kind of hanging out you doing?” Mrs. Ruby's brows lifted causing Lake to laugh.

“Not that kinda hanging out. We've been out a few times, watched some movies, normal dating stuff.”

“But you like him, huh?”

I more than like him but I also feel like he's not good for me.

“I do.”

“Then see where it goes. You need love, baby. You never talk about family other than that cousin of yours and she's questionable. No parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles. It seems like you're alone in the world. I won't pry but I feel it. You need somebody.”

Lake's chest was tight but she kept her expression neutral. “My mom's dead and my father's in prison, but I have you or are you kicking me to the curb already?”

The confession broke her heart, but she wouldn't dare make the moment worse by offering sympathy that she knew Lake didn't want. Instead, Mrs. Ruby scoffed again. “I ain't much laid up in this stale place. All I can offer you is a conversation here and there. I'll give you all my love but I know it's not the same. You need somebody, Lake. Somebody who will lift you from the darkness. If this man is it then you give it a real chance.”

“I will but I have to go now. I'm sure Tony will be hunting me down soon for wasting company time.” Lake's

eyes rolled as she lowered her feet to the floor and stood from the chair she was in.

“Tony can kiss my old, wrinkly—”

“Mrs. Ruby!” Lake warned with a finger in the air, a stern tone and teasing grin.

“Hump, he don’t run me. My money is big around here. Trust me little girl. He don’t tell me who I can talk to and when.” She waved her hand rolling her eyes once more.

“I’ll come by later when things settle down. You behave until then,” Lake warned.

“Chile, I’m old. I don’t have to behave. Who’s gonna check me?”

Mrs. Ruby’s brows lifted once more and Lake shook her head laughing as she headed to the door to leave. “Just do what you can.”

She tossed out as she left the room feeling a little lighter in spirit than she had in days. Mrs. Ruby might not have known, but she was Lake’s family. At least in spirit. And her talks really made a difference, even if on a small scale.

&

“You might want to slow down,” Isiah warned when Cyn reached for the bottle of wine to pour her third glass. It immediately reminded him of Lake. The two were at a late dinner so that Cyn could lay out all of the upcoming events that Isiah needed to focus on. He had meetings back to back about the airport project and a few new acquisitions that he was looking into. It was cumbersome but necessary. He was however grateful for Cyn because she navigated through as much of it as possible so that he didn’t have to. The major decisions were left to him, but she handled the day to day.

“I’m grown. I can handle my wine.” Cyn ignored his warning but wasn’t able to reach the bottle before Isiah’s hand wrapped around it. He poured the remainder of its contents in her glass and Cyn lifted it right after, bringing it to her lips.

“I forgot who I was dealing with.” He smirked causing Cyn to shrug, while Isiah checked his phone. It had been on the table all night which was something he didn’t usually do. *She* always had him doing things he didn’t usually do. In the past, no one had been important enough for Isiah to immediately return communication, but that had since changed. Lake was important. Even though he knew she was

at work and he likely wouldn't hear from her, his phone remained on the table where he had been checking it all night.

“You're damn right, Sih. I'm not your new project.”

“Project?” His eyes narrowed the same time his jaw flexed.

“Yes, project. Since when do you do that?” Cyn motioned to his phone. The left side of his mouth rose slightly into a half smile before he leaned back into his seat and massaged his chin.

“Do what, Cynthia?”

“Oh, I'm *Cynthia* now?” Amusement danced in her eyes. “You waiting on a call, a text, a funny video? An *I miss you; will I see you tonight?* I never assumed that was your thing, Sih.”

Isiah chuckled and the teasing grin Cyn wore pushed into a full blown smirk.

“She's not a project.”

“Then what is she? You've been tight lipped about this woman but I know you've been seeing her. What's the deal?”

“Who are you seeing Cyn?”

Her face balled up as she narrowed her eyes on him.

“Since when have you been concerned about who I’m seeing?”

“I’m not.”

“Then why ask?”

“To make a point. Mind your business.” This time he was the one wearing a smug grin.

“She must be important. I know about all the other women.”

“You do?” His right brow raised slightly while Cyn lifted her glass of Riesling again. After a few sips she nodded.

“I know who they are, where they live and what they mean to you.”

“And what do they mean to me?”

“Nothing. You don’t catch feelings. You don’t attach. You damn sure don’t check your phone waiting for calls or texts.”

A charming smile was now on display. “I’m not following, Cyn. You have to be more specific.”

“I don’t know a damn thing about her other than what I initially found. That’s because you don’t want me to know, which means that you’re protecting her from me. The only reason why you would do that is if she was important. She’s not like the others, she’s not just someone you’re having sex with.”

Because I haven’t had sex with her. As badly as I want to...

“Why would I need to protect her from you?”

“You know that I care and you know that if I sense that she’s not good for you, I’m going to speak on it, openly, regardless of her feelings or yours. If she’s with you and really with you, then she’s with me too. I’m your left and you’re my right. We’re a team, Isiah.”

His smile stretched wider as he adjusted in his seat. Cyn was right to a certain degree. Her opinion about Lake wouldn’t be the deciding factor but it would matter. She knew him well, better than most. She also cared a great deal for him and her claws would come out if anyone was by his side for the wrong reasons. It’s why Cyn kept a safe distance from Noel.

“When do you want to meet her?”

Cyn was in the middle of swallowing another sip of wine which sprayed the table as she choked a little. Her eyes were wild when the reality processed. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand she sat up straight. “Oh shit. You’re serious about this woman?”

“I am.” His expression was stoned, serious with confident eyes.

“Wow.” It was all she could manage to get out before her next question hit. “And what about Noel?”

Isiah’s hand lifted and his fingers moved across his freshly trimmed beard. “I’ll have to figure it out. It’s time. I’ve been putting it off for too long.” His mind was heavy. It wasn’t as simple as just telling Noel he was done. “When I make the call, it’s going to complicate things, not just for me but anyone connected to me. There are things that I’ve done...” he paused briefly. “Details about my life that will make me an enemy to the Abaras. You’ll have to make a decision about whether you want to—”

“I’m with *you*. No matter what it is, I’m with you, Isiah. I don’t care what you’ve done. Whatever it is...” she paused with a shake of her head. “...you’re not a bad person. No one can convince me you are. We all have demons. We all have a

past. I don't care." Cyn knew who he was, even if he never once spoke a word of proof to back it up. She sensed the ill deeds he had once committed. She felt his pain and was aware that he had done things to get to where he was. There was always a price to pay. He never admitted to the illegal activities, but she knew. There was no way she could work that close with the man and be that intimate with certain dealings in his life and not know. She didn't care. He was good to the people who were good to him and that was all that mattered.

Isiah and Cyn stared at each other for a long moment, speaking things that didn't need to be verbally expressed. She was stating her allegiance while he was warning her of how dangerous that could be. Still, she stood firm.

With a nod of his head, they agreed and the subject was dropped. "So who *are* you dating?" was his next question, followed by a teasing smile

"Why? It's not like you care."

"You're family. Why wouldn't I care?"

"You've never asked before."

"Because I didn't have to. You've never displayed any signs of being serious about anyone. I didn't think it was

necessary and I'm not sure that it is now, but anyone that you're serious about needs to go through me," Isiah warned in an unforgiving big brother fashion that had Cyn rolling her eyes.

"I'm grown. You don't need to police my love life, and for the record, I don't really have a love life. Just friends." The word sparked something in Isiah and had his eyes lowering to his phone. *Friends!* It's how he labeled whatever this thing was with Lake. "*And*, you keep me so busy that I don't have time to find a real relationship. When you decide to let me breathe a little maybe I'll consider it." The sarcastic tone she used was followed by a bright smile. Cyn loved her job and in no way did it prevent her from having a relationship. She just hadn't put much time into finding a man worthy of one. Eventually she would, but for now, her life was content.

Isiah only chuckled and nodded. "I'll see what I can do. Maybe I'll hire you an assistant."

"Aye, now we're talking." Cyn laughed at the thought but they both knew she would never go for it. She was too much of a control freak.

"Finish you food so that I'm not worried about you making it home safely. Something needs to absorb all that

wine.” His finger motioned to her plate of half eaten pasta. Instead of arguing the point, Cyn lifted her fork and began swirling it in her linguine.

“Such a pain in the ass,” Cyn mumbled but did as she was told. She knew he was only looking out and it was a sentiment that she had learned to value over the years. The two looked out for one another, and always would. It’s what you did for family. And the two were as close to family as anyone could ever claim to be. She would always stand for Isiah and knew the favor would be returned.

7.

It was late when Isiah entered the home he used to share with Noel. He had no clue if she was alone, nor did he care. Any man that she spent time with was insignificant in his eyes. If they wanted to challenge his ability to come and go as he pleased, then Isiah was up for the challenge. He had no claim to Noel nor did he want one, however he was still a man with an ego and would check any other who wanted to step to him, regardless of the reason.

The home was silent and Isiah assumed she was in bed, however when his foot landed on the first step, he heard her voice from down the hall near the kitchen. “What do you want? You don’t live here so you should at least allow the courtesy of calling before you show up.”

Grinding his teeth to control his temper, Isiah turned and moved towards the kitchen, when Noel was in his line of sight, his eyes swept her body. She was dressed in a bra, panties and floral silk robe, which was wide open, exposing every curve she was blessed with. The sad thing was it disgusted him more

than it turned him on. His body had long since stopped reacting to her.

“We need to talk.”

“It’s ten at night and we need to talk?” Noel smirked feeling the liquid courage that she had been sipping on all night. “What’s wrong, Sih? You couldn’t find a bed to creep into and you decided to try mine?”

She followed him into the kitchen, leaning against the counter while she watched him remove a bottle of water from the refrigerator which he placed on the counter next to her. “You’re drunk. Drink that.” His demand was firm. Noel only laughed, lifting the glass she held to her lips, but he snatched it away before the liquor could reach them. Isiah tossed it behind him into the sink ignoring the glass when it shattered.

“What the hell is your problem?”

“I’m done.”

“You’re not done. You keep tossing that around like you have a choice in it.”

“Because I do. We both got what we wanted. It’s time to let this shit go.”

A wave of anger flooded every inch of Noel's body causing her to rush him. She pressed a finger into his chest delivering, manic, heat blazed eyes. "*You* got what *you* wanted. I didn't get shit. You won't touch me. You barely speak to me. You think this is what I wanted? Well it's not. You got your millions, your businesses, my uncle loves you more than he loves me and what do I have? An empty fucking house, an empty bed and I lost my child. *Our* child. Don't come to me with that bullshit. I hate you. I swear I hate you."

Noel lifted her hand in an attempt to slap him but he caught her wrist, using it to shove her away. With two long aggressive strides he was on her again closing the space. "You did that shit. You wanted me even when I didn't want you. Everyone thinks we're a happy fucking couple. All that shit you post confirms it. You're that bitch, every woman in your circle wants to be you. You've done what they couldn't do. You claimed me, but not anymore. You don't need me, Noel. It's time to drop this shit. Don't you want to be happy? Don't you want more than just a got damn picture?"

"You know I do, but you won't give it to me. I don't just want a picture I. WANT. YOU!"

Isiah laughed through his frustration, stepping back because he needed space. His sharp gaze remained on Noel who stood before him, eyes wild and chest heaving. He knew in that moment that she was never going to do the right thing.

“I’m done. Do what you need to. I don’t owe you shit. Make it work for you. Tell them I didn’t live up to the hype and you dropped me. That makes you the winner in their eyes.”

He turned to leave before she spoke again. “You killed my father and you don’t think you owe me?”

Isiah laughed arrogantly before turning to face her again. “I did you a favor. That man raped you. Took your innocence, ruined your ability to love any man the right way, including me, yet you’re sticking to the belief that I owe you? That’s bullshit and you know it. Or was that just another lie, another one of your manipulation tactics?”

Her eyes flashed with confirmation of what he knew to be true. Noel hated her father, but she wouldn’t admit it, not right now. Isiah had done what she dreamt of doing more times than she could remember. It’s because of that one thing that she followed him out the warehouse that night. She talked to him for months after having developed a sick obsession

with him. When she learned of his slow rise, that made her even more dependent and eager. Their connection wasn't a coincidence. It was calculated, planned, necessary. She needed him in any way that she could have him. It was sad but true.

“He was still my father and you shot him.”

With heavy eyes on her, he moved back into the kitchen getting a few feet closer but still maintaining a needed distance. “You likely wanted to do it yourself. I never once asked you this because it never occurred to me until now, why were you there that night? You've never been a part of the family business. In the three years I've known you, your hands have always been clean, but you were there, in his warehouse where he kept his drugs. Why? Were you there to set him up, or worse? Were you there to do what I did?”

Noel's breath hitched but she kept her cool while Isiah continued talking. “I shot him because he pulled a gun on me. Your father was going to take my life because I refused to allow him to cheat me out of a deal he already made. When I got there, he changed the terms and I refused to go with it. That's my truth about that night, what's yours?”

When she didn't respond, Isiah shook his head and left Noel with one last thing. “Do whatever the fuck you want. If I

have to go to war with your uncle, I will. I'm done Noel. I mean it." He had been preparing for this day for a while. It was inevitable. Isiah had positioned himself to be free of Abara but that didn't mean Odin couldn't make things difficult. It also didn't mean that Odin wouldn't put a price on his head or attempt to kill him on his own. All factors Isiah had considered over the years, but financially and business wise he could stand on his own, free and clear of the Abara name. It was what he was most concerned with. Not only that, Isiah had gathered information about Abara that he could use in his favor. He wasn't a snitch and never would be, so cops weren't an option, but he knew how to hit him where it hurt the most; his pockets. If it came down to it, he would do whatever necessary. The time just hadn't presented itself before now. Now, he had *her*. Lake. The game had changed.

Noel didn't release the breath she had been holding until she heard the front door slam, and it wasn't until then that she actually broke down with the reality of what had just happened. Isiah meant every word. He refused to be her puppet, but the biggest concern was why? Had he fallen for someone, and if so, who? What would make him so adamant about walking away now? Her heart was crushed by the possibility, but it was one that she would never allow to

happen. She refused. No matter what she had to do, she wouldn't allow him to walk away.

After leaving Noel, Isiah drove straight to *Harrington*. It had been four days since he had been around Lake. They talked, briefly, a few texts here and there but that was about it. He had to keep contact at a minimum while he was planning his next move. The one he had just set in motion. Lake clouded his judgment and had him processing differently, imagining things that he never considered before they met. After the conversation with Noel, he was sure that she knew in her heart he was really done, however, Noel wouldn't lay down so easily. She would keep pretending that they were what everyone assumed they were. It wouldn't last long considering the way that Isiah planned on handling Lake. As cautious as he was about his personal life, he wouldn't hide Lake. That's not who she was and he wouldn't force her to be his secret. It was why he made the first move with Noel making it clear that she could do what she wanted. Whatever consequences he faced; Isiah would deal with. He was going to be with Lake.

After parking near the front, so that he had a good view of the entrance, Isiah killed his engine to wait. It was a few minutes after eleven, which meant that she would be out soon.

He hadn't mentioned pulling up, because he wanted it to be a surprise. He also needed to see Lake in her own environment. It would better help him gauge parts of her life that she kept from him. Lake didn't speak about friends or family. Only Chloe. He wondered who else she shared her time with, but his ego wouldn't allow him to ask. Lake had a way of forcing insecurities on him. A man whose confidence was so potent that it suffocated others felt insecurities behind the beautiful, awkward woman who he had become obsessed with.

Movement from the front of the building had his attention. He watched as three people filed out, all wearing matching scrubs. Lake, another woman and a man. The three seemed happy, chatting away. When the man leaned into Lake and said something that had her laughing, smiling big and body relaxed, Isiah felt a spike of jealousy mixed with anger. His fist clenched as his eyes narrowed in on the three. Right after, the woman hugged Lake, waved at the man and then left the two of them alone. The sound of an engine and headlights shortly after singled that she was gone. Lake, however, stood on the sidewalk outside the building talking. *Too fucking close to him.*

“The hell he saying to her? Why is she entertaining this clown?”

Isiah felt his pulse quicken. His narrowed stare remained on the two of them. The man was his height, decent looking but nothing Isiah was worried about. Still, he felt the rush of jealousy taking over. Clearly this guy was closer in age to Lake than he was. Maybe that was why she was hanging on his every word. *Nah, this clown is not her type.*

That thought had him releasing a cocky laugh. *Maybe I'm the one that's not her type.*

When Lake laughed again, this time throwing her head back and placing her hand over her stomach, Isiah's hand was on the door to let himself out. The man with Lake placed his hand on her arm smiling a little too hard for Isiah's liking. “Fuck this,” he spoke barely above a whisper, stepping out of his truck. Lake was moving, but too into the conversation to notice him until he called her name.

“Lake?”

She froze and her face went tight. Nathan who was next to her took it upon himself to position his body slightly in front of hers. Isiah didn't miss the motion and it angered him

even more. *The fuck he feel like he need to protect her for?*
That's my job.

“What are...hey,” Lake fumbled over her words but relaxed when she realized it was Isiah who called her name. Even if she hadn't expected him, she was happy for the surprise visit.

“Came to get you, who's this?” When he reached the two bodies, Lake's was quickly tucked beneath him. A kiss was pressed against her lips which threw Lake off a little, pushing a frown to her face.

“Nathan. We work together.”

“Word, y'all leaving together?” Isiah's question was for Lake but he kept his eyes on Nathan. A warning was being delivered. Isiah wanted there to be no confusion about his role in Lake's life. *Even if I hadn't given that same clarity to her, you better be a quick study, bruh.*

“No, he was walking me to my car.”

“Preciate that, but it's not necessary. You're going with me.” Again when he spoke, his eyes remained on Nathan. Nathan laughed under his breath. He knew what time it was.

As much as he wanted Lake, this man was marking his territory. It crushed him a little but he knew his place.

“Have a good evening Lake. I’ll see you next week.”

Nathan’s eye’s bounced from Lake to Isiah before he turned to leave.

“Okay and thank you.”

“You good. No thanks needed.” He tossed over his shoulder just as he reached his car.

Isiah watched making a mental note of the vehicle, just in case, turning to give his attention to Lake right after.

“You sure you just work together?”

She frowned first, but it slowly transitioned to a smirk.

“Yes, that’s all. Why, you jealous of Nathan?”

Yes, he made you laugh, he touched you, you seemed okay with it and I almost shot him because of it.

“Should I be?”

Her teeth sank into her lip as she motioned no with her head. “But I’m a single woman, so—”

“Nah, you’re not,” was all he said and with so much confidence that Lake’s heart damn near leapt out of her chest. For a little over a month she had been dealing with Isiah, and

aside from the kiss, he never once gave any indication that he wanted more. She could sense certain things but didn't want to assume it was more than just a man flirting with a woman. Flirting didn't always mean there was an attraction, or at least not one that meant more than just causal dates and toeing the line of friendship.

“I'm not?” With wild curious eyes Lake waited. For what, she wasn't sure but she got *it* seconds later when her body landed hard against his solid, firm one. Isiah's hand cuffed the back of her head, pads of fingers pressing roughly against her scalp just before his mouth crashed against hers. The kiss was aggressive, needy and unexpected. Lake's legs grew weak, her stomach was in knots and her hands fisted the sides of the shirt he wore. When the two came up for air, Lake's lips were swollen and tingling from the pressure of the kiss. Isiah smirked and moved his thumb across them.

“Follow me,” his voice was a few octaves lower than usual, but the demand was delivered with his usual alpha dominance.

“Where?”

“Your apartment.” He motioned to her car with a nod of his head. “You're off for three days. I'm sure you don't want

to leave your car here that long. Let's go.”

Lake wasn't sure what that meant, but she did as he asked. Isiah didn't leave his position until she was inside and her headlights came on. Shortly after, he was in his truck again pulling out of the parking lot with Lake following behind him. He had crossed that line. There was no turning back, but he didn't care. His mind was made up about the role that Lake would play in his life and there was nothing either one of them could do about it. He wasn't giving her an option to deny him.

&

After packing for the next few days, Lake placed Bleu in her bright pink carrier and the two of them were in Isiah's truck en route to his home. She made it very clear that the dog couldn't survive three days without her, and if he was kidnapping her then Bleu would have to come too. It was a package deal. Isiah wasn't a pet person, but if it was what he had to do to have Lake at his home for the next three days then he wouldn't object. From what he had seen of the pup, it was well trained and small. He hadn't expected Bleu to be much trouble, and if the pup didn't cooperate his cleaning staff would just have to handle any slip-ups. When they arrived at

his home, Lake allowed Bleu to move around getting aquatinted. Bleu was her baby and she needed Bleu to be comfortable. That didn't take much, and right after Lake was getting settled for her stay.

Isiah and Lake both got comfortable for the evening and given the late hour, the two were dressed for bed, after having showered separately. Something that damn near killed him but he didn't want to rush things. Lake was sitting at the foot of his bed, with Bleu in her lap, while he filled the massive suede sofa of his sitting area going over some contracts that Cyn had forwarded a few hours before. He was, however, barely focusing because Lake kept watching him.

"What's on your mind, Lake?" he mumbled feeling her eyes on him again. The room was quiet, he suggested she turn on the TV to watch but she refused and spent time on her phone, until she took up watching him.

"What, nothing?" His voice startled her. She hadn't realized she was staring because she was so deep in her thoughts.

"You're staring at me and not that I care, but I can tell you have something on you mind. So what is it?" Isiah lifted his head from his MacBook and removed his glasses, placing

them next to him. After rubbing his eyes briefly, they found Lake.

“Am I here because of Nathan?”

Isiah considered the question for a minute but answered honestly. “No. That was the plan before I pulled up and caught him flirting with you.” She couldn’t read the stoic expression on his face but knew he wasn’t being honest.

“Then did you kiss me because of him?”

That question pulled a smug grin from him. He wouldn’t lie. It wasn’t his style. “Yes. But not *just* because of him. I’ve kissed you before.”

“Once. But tonight was different and the whole thing about me not being single.” Her loaded gaze fell on him again.

“Do you want to be single?” Isiah challenged Lake as if he were hanging on to the moment, waiting for her to defy him.

“What kind of question is that?” Lake pushed out quickly, not knowing how to respond otherwise.

“A very serious one.” He closed his MacBook, placing it next to his glasses before standing to his feet. Lake watched intently, turned on by the exposed bare chest, navy sleep pants

that hung so low on his waist that silky black pubic hair was exposed. The man's body was unreal and since she knew exactly what the thin pants hid beneath them, her body was already reacting with pebbled nipples and a pulsing between her thighs. The closer he drew to her, the more her body tensed and warmed. When Isiah reached the foot of his massive bed where Lake was positioned, he lifted Bleu. The tiny dog fit snugly in one of his large hands until he lowered her to the floor leaning into Lake by pressing his fist into the matters just outside of her hips.

“You know I'm attracted to you. Any other women I entertain wouldn't have to guess because I would have already blessed them with confirmation. But with them it would just be physical. With you, I want more. I want...” he paused moving in closer so that his lips brushed against her neck. “The smell of your perfume in my sheets and on my skin because you've been that close to me. I want to feel your body shiver and then shut down because I've made you cum so many times that you have nothing left. I want you to feel comfortable enough fuck up my kitchen cooking meals for me. I want to give you anything you could ever dream of and more but most of all, I want to not only be your friend, I want to be your best friend, because I'm your man, the one person in the

world who you feel secure enough with to give me your heart. In order for those things to happen, you can't be single. You have to be mine, all mine, Lake. So tell me, do you want to be single?"

Isiah's lips were on Lake once more. Her neck, earlobe, collarbone and then the center of her neck when he leaned in so closely, giving Lake no option but to drop her head back, exposing the length of it to him.

"No."

"What's that?" he asked still grazing her skin with a trail of sensual kisses.

"I...I don't want to be single."

His smile was delicate. "Good, because you didn't really have a choice."

In one fluent motion, the silk gown she wore was over her head with Lake on her back. Her heart was a chaotic mess of aggression in her chest, while Isiah was calm as ever. He had orchestrated this moment in his mind so many times since that kiss. As his eyes took in her feminine essence, his pants quickly tented. The length and girth he was holding pushed them forward in a matter of seconds, but she had to be okay

with what was about to happen. The nervousness in her eyes as she held her breath waiting for his next move bothered him. He needed to be sure.

“Can I have you tonight, Lake?”

Once again her eyes went wild with a mixture of lust and fear, but she nodded.

“Nah, that won’t work. You have to tell me. If you want to wait, we can wait, but if you’re afraid—”

“I am, but only because I know what’s about to happen.”

Isiah’s face tensed as his brows damn near touched. “What’s gonna happen?” He was praying she wasn’t assuming that this, sex, was all he wanted. Especially after his confession.

“I’m gonna fall for you, like really fall for you. I already have but this is gonna make it worse and I’m afraid of what that means.”

Isiah’s chest opened up and a slow smile teased at his lips before he kissed her again. “It means you’re mine. I want all of you, Lake.”

“But do I get all of you?” The words rushed out and he felt his chest tighten again. She could have all of him but it

wouldn't appear that way in her eyes. It was gonna take time.

“As much of me as you want,” was his answer. Lake's smile was proof that it was good enough, so without hesitation, Isiah removed the rest of their clothes and found his way between her legs. The first kiss had his eyes closing to regain control before he explored her essence. With every swipe of his tongue and moan that left Lake's lips Isiah grew harder and more eager to find his way inside her walls. There was no doubt that he would get lost in her, but first he had to make sure she was ready and could handle him.

He was taking his time, desperate for Lake to enjoy every swipe of his tongue. It would give her the ability to losing up enough to enjoy him as well. Pushing her legs wider, he pressed closer to her sweet spot, she was already dripping wet, which created a blissful mess that Isiah was all too willing to submerge in. The vocals that became the sound track to every flick of his tongue and gentle kiss between her thighs was torture, but he stayed the course. Within minutes, Lake's hands pressed into the back of his head while she thrust her pelvis toward him. Briefly, it threw his motion off, but Isiah wasn't new to bringing women to the edge and then sending them over into a divine world wind of pleasure. The

way she attempted to control her moans and pleas aroused him even more, and when her back arched and her body thrust towards him, thrashing uncontrollably through her climax, Isiah pulled away to watch, inserting two fingers as deep as they would reach to heighten the experience. He pushed, circled and swiped her pulsing walls while he had to struggle to keep from releasing with her. Her orgasm was just that strong, erotic. *Beautiful.*

With a heavy chest and skin glistening with sweat, Lake eventually sat up enough to see the source of her bliss. His face was saturated with her essence which caused another round of tremors to rush through her body. With lazy eyes, she smiled before falling back against the mattress.

“I’m ruined. You just ruined me,” she mumbled pulling a muffled laugh from him.

“Not yet, but I’m about to.” His voice was low, throaty and presented as more of a growl when he stepped back and found his way to the nightstand. After securing a condom, Isiah’s hands were on Lake again. His needy fingers moved across her damp skin starting at the thighs, gliding up to her waist and then her breasts. Taking on one pebbled nipple at a time, he watched her closely, desperate for a reaction. Here she

was yet again forcing him into behavior that was foreign. Isiah was skilled with women, but his goal was never to focus on them. Sex was a selfish act, but because he knew what he was doing they benefited by default. With Lake, he needed her to feel pleasure more than he cared about his own. Isiah was convinced that being inside of Lake would be reward enough. Maybe the idea of another man potentially have the opportunity to explore her depths had him that way, but the reasoning didn't matter. He needed to know she felt good, that she felt him.

When his body wedged between her legs and partially planked over hers, Isiah's kiss was delivered in a way that would leave no room for question. She was his. It was further confirmed when he aligned his thickness against her slick folds and eased in slowly, stopping halfway with curious eyes.

“How long has it been?”

Lake's eyes shot open. She didn't want him to stop. Would he, if she gave confirmation to prove her lack of experience? He was so thick that her body was rejecting him and she didn't want him to take that to mean she couldn't handle what he was offering. Even if she wasn't sure she could, Lake was determined to try.

“How long?” The elevation of his voice caused Lake to answer right away. She didn’t want to do the math in her head. She simply wanted him to continue so she rattled off the closest answer.

“A year, maybe more.”

“Shit,” Isiah hissed as he inched in a little deeper. He could tell. The way she hugged him threatening to pull him in more had his mind fuzzy. *She feels so fucking good. You’re not the one ruined Lake. I am*

“What’s wrong?”

Shutting his eyes tight, Isiah worked his way into a slow, steady rhythm. “Nothing, shit not a damn thing.” His confession was laced with lust which had Lake relaxing. Her legs opened wider wanting more of him. She was willing to endure the pain if it meant being closer to him. The way he stretched her felt unbearable, but she welcomed it with open arms. Lake was dripping wet, but still struggled to allow a comfortable fit with Isiah deep inside her. It heighten the experience more than she could ever have imagined.

While Lake welcomed his length and girth, Isiah struggled with the feel of her warmth and tightness. All sex

could be amazing if you knew what you were doing but
Lake...

His mind went to several different things in an attempt not to ejaculate prematurely. It had never been an issue before, but she was bringing him to that point after only minutes of being inside her.

Maybe it's because I've been obsessing over feeling her like this. Nah, she's just that good. She felt like...

Heaven.

The more he focused on the reason for his delirium, the more forceful his deep thrusts became. The intensity growing faster than he could control, and before he realized it, Isiah had one of her legs draped over his shoulder while he plunged deeper, back to back with no reprieve. Lake took it all in stride, vocally approving by belting out praises and asking for more. *More?* Isiah delivered, slamming into Lake so deeply that he knew she would suffer from it later. Unfortunately, he couldn't worry. He could feel himself swelling inside of her while her walls pulsed against thickness with vengeance, massaging his climax right up out of him. By the time she came, he only had a few more strokes left. He grinded deeper to make sure she felt all of him before he filled the condom.

When he did release, it was so strong, never ending, that Isiah was fearful the condom wouldn't hold, but he was too selfish to remove himself as a precaution. It felt too good, *she* felt too damn good and watching her unravel was just...

Fucking beautiful. Lake's eyes shut tight, her lips parted slightly and her chin was angled toward the ceiling extending her neck. Isiah's hand gripped it lightly, applying a little pressure while watching her body react. It caused him to pulse more against her walls before they both found peace.

He lowered himself to Lake's chest, kissing her passionately. Another thing he didn't do, but he enjoyed every inch of her mouth exploring with his tongue before sucking on her lips and completely pulling away.

"You okay?"

His eyes danced across her face, taking in every detail. The muscles around her eyes were now lazy and relaxed. Her long lashes curled above dark irises and her swollen lips due to his kiss were still parted.

Swallowing hard, she nodded and then issued a hoarse, "Yes."

The act pushed a smile onto his face as he eased out of her slowly. They both flinched from the motion before Isiah climbed off the bed to discard the condom. When he cleaned up and returned, Lake was still in the same position. On her back, legs wide open like she was waiting for his return. When he felt a rise against his thigh, Isiah toyed with the idea, but chose to stick the original plan. With a warm cloth, he cleaned what was left of their session from between her thighs while Lake flinched from his touch.

She's already sore.

“You want to take a bath? To help with that?”

Not wanting to seem inexperienced, Lake quickly shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“Lake...”

“I said I’m fine.”

He didn’t push, just left her to take the cloth back to the bathroom and then joined her in bed after pulling back the covers on his side and motioning for her to climb under. She did and he pulled her back to his chest, kissing her neck. “I was jealous.” He couldn’t believe that he was actually admitting his feelings, but it flowed with ease.

“Of Nathan?” Lake’s face balled up. She was still relaxed. Isiah’s hands moving across her skin and the beat of his heart against her back was soothing.

“You sure you aren’t feeling him?”

“Yes I’m sure. We’re friends.”

A laugh vibrated through his chest. “I was your friend, Lake. Did you kiss him the way you kissed me?”

“No, we weren’t *that kind* of friends.”

They both settled into a comfortable silence until Lake’s thoughts got the best of her and she spoke again. “What about your...what about Noel?” She knew her name but had never spoken it to him. He had told her, but she knew it from her social media.

“I told you what was up. We’re not together.”

“So you can take me places and I can post pictures of you and she won’t care?”

The thought had him tense. She would definitely care, but that didn’t change what he and Lake were and what he and Noel weren’t.

“You can do what you want. You’re not a secret, Lake. If I’m with you, I’m with you, but Noel...” He was careful with

his words. “She’s not the type to easily let go. I need you to trust me no matter what.”

Lake turned against his body so that she was facing him. Isiah used the opportunity to steal a kiss.

“Maybe you’re lying and she’ll react because you’re telling her you’re still together. Then what? I should just trust you?”

“We’re not together. She knows the truth, even if she won’t accept or admit it, but things with us are....”

“Complicated, yeah I know you keep saying that. But you want me to trust you. It feels...I don’t know how it feels, deceptive I guess.”

Inhaling and releasing it slow, Isiah kissed her forehead and pulled her close until she was buried in his chest. “I wouldn’t lie to you. I might not tell you all the facts but that’s only to protect you. I won’t ever lie. I’m not with her. I’m with you. You’ll just have to trust me until I can completely detach. You won’t be a secret. We can go wherever you want. You can post whatever you want, just trust me if there’s a reaction. Let me handle it. I don’t we want you caught up in anything concerning her and she’ll try. Just promise you’ll trust me.”

“Okay.”

She felt torn but chose to trust him. The moment felt right and being with him felt right, so it was all she could do, *for now*. If things changed, she would have to rethink whatever this was to protect herself. Lake might not have had a lot of experience to pull from, but she had never been a fool for a man. She refused to become one for Isiah. No matter how good things felt or how much she wanted things to work. In that moment, she made a promise to herself before settling into the sleep that was slowly taking over.

8.

The next morning when Lake finally peeled her eyes open, she smiled when her first sense of smell was of him. His faint scent was on the pillow and in the sheets that were balled up in her fist tucked under her chin.

After getting lost in the memories from the night before, she finally summoned enough energy to sit up in his massive bed. Her body was still void of any clothes and sore. Very sore; most of it located below the waist. Their first round was short but the one that followed hours later when she was awakened by his slow purposeful strokes while her legs were spread wide beneath him lasted much longer. When Lake peeled her eyes open, his intense stare was on her while he stroked her slow and deep. A teasing smile eventually surfaced before he kissed her and spent the next half hour making her cum three more times before his one pushed through him to end their session.

Now she was feeling the effects of her arms being held securely above her head by his large hands and her back from

arching too deeply when he reached her depths. Her legs were sore from being spread so wide to accommodate his body and then here was the other issue.

Once she was on her feet, she flinched from the swell between her thighs. It was a pleasurable pain, but still very present. One that she didn't regret even as she tiptoed to the bathroom to relieve her bladder.

After washing her hands, she turned on the shower and welcomed the steam that filled the room before stepping inside. Too lazy to dodge the heavy rain shower and wanting it to travel completely across her body, she allowed it to soak her body as well as her hair. The heated massage was soothing and much needed. When her eyes danced around, she found her bodywash placed on the shelf next to his. He must have removed it from his sister's room and moved it there. The act placed another smile on her face as she reached for the washcloth that she brought in with her and began to move across her skin. She cleansed first before tackling her hair using the coconut shampoo that belong to Isiah. By the time she was done, Lake felt and smelled brand new. She dressed and then tackled her thick tresses, taming them into one ponytail that she braided and circled into a bun on top of her

head before she left the master suite to go find Isiah. She wasn't completely familiar with his home and didn't want to snoop so she elected to begin with the kitchen. When she didn't find him there, her next stop was the living room before she found her way to the office where he was sitting on the sofa with his MacBook in his lap and phone on the arm of the sofa next to him. A warm smile surfaced when she noticed Bleu at his feet, looking extremely comfortable. Lake could hear a woman's voice rattling off dates first and then names so she froze which caught Isiah's attention.

He waved her over placing his MacBook down opposite of him and pulling Lake into his lap.

"You finally up?" he asked, burying his face in the crook of her neck, ignoring Cyn who kept talking until she delivered a statement that required his response.

"Sih, are you listening?"

"No, a distraction just walked in the room."

Cyn rolled her eyes before addressing the distraction.

"Good morning Lake. I hope you slept well. Can you give me a few more minutes with Sih and then he's all yours? I'm sure that now that he knows you're up, he's not going to give two shits about going over these contracts with me."

Lake's eyes moved from the phone to Isiah who smiled first and then kissed her neck again. "You can answer her," he said lowly against her skin.

"Umm good morning and sure."

She was about to leave but Isiah's arms held her hostage. "Nah stay here until she finishes," he instructed Lake before addressing Cyn. "Go ahead and finish. Lake had an exhausting night and I need to feed her." He winked at Lake and Cyn groaned.

"You know what? Go ahead and deal with her. I'll set up all the dates and send them to you. You can approve them before I reach out to everyone to confirm."

"Aight bet, that's what you should have done in the first place."

"Sih, don't make me embarrass you in front of your guest. I don't play that shit. You playing house doesn't stop business from running."

Isiah laughed shaking his head. "Be careful Cyn."

"Whatever, look for my email and respond right away. Lake, I hope to meet you soon. I need to lay eyes on the woman who has my boss pushing business to the side for her."

Lake's eyes bulged while she turned to Isiah. "I look forward to meeting you too."

"Perfect, I'll set it up. Have fun," Cyn rattled off before ending the call.

"That was your assistant? The one that you paid to find me?"

"I pay her to do her job, that just happened to be one of her tasks for that day."

"And you told her I was here?"

"I told her that I would give her my attention until you were up and then all of my attention would belong to you."

"If that was important—"

"It was but again, it's what I pay Cyn to do. I was just entertaining her to keep me busy since you tried to sleep all day. How do you feel?" Isiah's hand eased between her thighs caressing with a tenderness that stemmed from the damage he was sure he had done last night and this morning.

"I'm fine." His eyes remained on Lake briefly before he buried his face in her neck again. "You showered?"

"Yeah, in your bathroom. My stuff was in there."

“I moved it. You hungry?”

“A little but not really. I’m not a breakfast person. I can cook for you if you are.”

He smirked taking her in. “Nah, I’m good. I didn’t bring you here to work. I just wanted to spend time with you. How did you sleep?”

For the second time, spending time inside his home, he noticed Lake was unsettled as she slept. She tossed and turned a few times, mumbling warnings. Once, he tried to comfort her and she fought him until he held her tight whispering her name and telling her that she was safe with him. The sound of his voice allowed her to relax back into a peaceful sleep, but he stayed up for a while after just watching her.

“I slept good. I need your bed at my apartment. My mattress sucks.”

“I’ll get you one. What size bed do you have?”

“No, you’re not buying me a mattress.”

“Then you’ll have to stay here to use mine.”

Lake wasn’t taking the bait, instead she changed the subject. “What’s the plan for today?”

Isiah's body reacted, leading him to place the day's activities in her hands. "You might need to decide. If it's up to me then we'll be in my bed all day."

"That doesn't sound so bad. I'm exhausted, but I can imagine you're not considering it the way that I am."

Isiah laughed at the thought. "Nah, but I need to ask you something about last night?" His fingers pressed against the back of her neck massaging it like he had done the first night she visited his house. It was soothing in a way that she wasn't used to experiencing.

"Mmmhmm?"

"Do you remember what you dreamed about?"

Lake froze. Her body stiffened within seconds. *Did I have one of those dreams?*

"Your reaction says you do." His voice was calm. Too calm and it made Lake uneasy. She never talked about that night, with anyone. The only reason Chloe knew was because her mother was who social services called to come and sit with her at the hospital. Chloe and her mother were at the trial sitting beside Lake, holding her hand and whispering that everything would be okay. *It wasn't okay.* They lied. Her

mother was gone and her father was in prison. “Tell me about it, Lake. I want to know what troubles you at night.”

Lake pushed his hands away and attempted to get up but Isiah caught her around the waist to prevent Lake from going anywhere. “Hey, you said you trust me. You have to trust me with everything. Who were you fighting? I could feel your fear. What happened?”

She didn’t talk about it. It wasn’t something you could just casually say to someone without judgment following, but with him...

“My mother.” The word was barely audible. Lake wasn’t even sure he heard her until he repeated it in the form of a question.

“Your mother?” His face showed no expression. He knew enough about tragedy not to allow his thoughts to show, so he waited for Lake to explain.

“She...was schizophrenic. I never knew. My dad didn’t tell me. I think it took him awhile to figure it out in the beginning, but he loved her. With me, I just knew that she would go away sometimes and she was not like all the other moms. When I was younger, it was fun. She would keep me out of school for days at a time and we would do fun stuff.

Things that I knew my father wouldn't approve of, like eating candy for breakfast or going to the grocery store in our pajamas." Lake laughed lightly shaking her head at the memory. "For a kid, experiences like that are fun but the older I got, it didn't make sense. It wasn't fun anymore. It was embarrassing. I just didn't get it. Her behavior frustrated me and it strained our relationship. I loved my mother but I hated who she was. It was hard for me. When I was twelve years old she...my mother tried to kill me. I woke up to her standing over me with her hands around my neck. I couldn't breathe. She was choking me and I fought as much as I could. She was manic and she kept saying how she hated me and that I ruined her life. She didn't know who I was. That's what they told me and I almost believed it because her eyes were so dark, so cold, it's like she wasn't there. She wasn't the same person I knew as my mother."

"What happened? Who saved you? Who stopped her?"

"My dad. He came home from work and found us. He grabbed her and threw her across the room to get her off me and she landed on the dresser. Her head hit it hard. She died. He didn't mean to do it but it happened. When the cops came, I wasn't sure what was going on. They took my dad in

handcuffs and I thought it was because of my mom but I found out later that it was because my dad had a gun. One he kept for protection. He bought it off the street, or at least that's what he told me, but that gun had three bodies on it. The worst was that one of the bodies was associated with a case connected to drug trafficking and they somehow managed to put FED time on him. They gave him thirty years, no parole. He's never getting out so that night, I lost my mom and my dad. He saved me and he lost his freedom."

"Lake..."

"No, it's fine. I'm fine. You wanted to know so now you do. My nightmares are about her. About that night."

"Lake..." Isiah's arms held her tighter. His chin rested on her shoulder while he processed everything that she had just told him. It wasn't what he expected, not even close, but it gave him so much insight on who she was, her pain. The reason why she was alone, the reason why he had to make sure she wasn't moving forward. "...that's not on you. You're not responsible for either one of them."

He felt her body tense against his. "You're not responsible, Lake."

Everything Isiah felt before had just intensified. It wasn't from pity; it was simply a connection that he felt from her raw exposure. There was something about her soul opening up to him that resonated in a way that he felt but couldn't explain. Lake was his to love, to protect and the bring happiness to. In that moment, he decided that no matter what, she would always be good. He was putting his life on the line to ensure that she was.

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The next day and a half flew by but felt like time stopped as well. Lake and Isiah spent most of their time in his bed or lounging on the sofa getting to know each other. They both exposed parts of themselves that others would never be privy too. Isiah talked to Lake about his witnessing his father being shot in the head when he was a child and how he had to follow in his footsteps to make sure Ema and his mother kept food in their bellies and a roof over their heads. His mother had a high school education and could only keep minimum wage jobs.

He also shared how devastated he and Ema both were when she died of a stroke only a two years after their father

passed. Isiah was seventeen at the time and Ema was only ten. He took over paying all the bills and kept her in school so that social services never found out that the two were living alone. It wasn't easy but he managed. The only real issue was that Ema was so depressed all the time. He assumed it was because she lost both parents so early but they later found out in her late teens that it was because she was bipolar. Losing their parents didn't help but the depression stemmed from her illness. It was why Isiah was so protective over his sister. He felt responsible for Ema not being diagnosed and missing out on having some type of normalcy in her life. He also explained how Ema never blamed him, she refused to. Had he not taken care of them and kept them out of the system, her life could have been much worse.

Lake shared more about her childhood and confessed her guilt behind her father being in prison. She also admitted to the fact that he intentionally tried to make her feel guilty at times which was why she avoided his calls. Isiah made a mental note about it because no one, not even her father would cause Lake stress or pain as far as he was concerned. It angered him that her father would put that type of weight on her shoulders and he would deal with him at a later date but

for now, he was just taking it all in. Both felt a lightness after being so open and their bond was solidified.

Their connection grew so much in such a short time that it felt as if they had known each other for years. It was what prompted Isiah to hit Cyn up and invite her over to dinner with them. He was in deep and wanted to be sure that what he was feeling wasn't him getting caught up in one sided emotions. Cyn would be honest, she would never allow him to be misled by his feelings, even if it wasn't what he wanted to hear, she would tell the truth.

For the past hour, Cyn had been at Isiah's house observing. She watched Lake, and then watched Isiah with Lake, keeping her thoughts to herself. Everything about them was adorable. Their flow was that of a couple that had years under their belt and not just a little over a month. The way that Isiah clung to her side, like she was fragile and could break at any moment was sweet. He was protective, guarding her feelings, making sure she was comfortable around Cyn.

Cyn sipped her wine watching, in awe of how much Isiah had transformed. Lake had softened him in ways that she had never witnessed. Even during the time that he and Noel

were actually good, Isiah never conformed to allow his feelings to guide his actions.

“You two are adorable. So much so that I might actually consider a real relationship if it can be like this.” Cyn lifted her glass to her lips grinning after getting Isiah and Lake’s attention. She was at the counter mixing a bowl of eggs to make them omelets while Isiah wasn’t giving her room to breathe because his body was pressed against the back of hers, with his palms pressed outside the bowl. His chin rested on her shoulder, making the moment far more intimate than it needed to be.

“Thank you.” Lake grinned as well, glancing up at Isiah who only chuckled.

“She’s being sarcastic.” His eyes lifted to Cyn who feigned shock.

“I am not. I’m serious. You two are adorable. Well her more than you but I like you two together. This...” she waved her hand motioning at the couple “...it’s a good look but Lake, you can’t ruin him. I need a different kind of Isiah when it’s time to hit the streets for business and sit down in board rooms to finalize it. This one right here, I don’t recognize. Don’t ruin him too much. I barely see his alpha.”

Isiah pushed out a full-blown laugh. It started at his gut before it vibrated through his chest and left his lips.

“Cut the shit, Cyn. I’m still me.”

“Possibly, but this is a different version of you.” When he kissed Lake’s neck and stepped away, Cyn grinned and winked at her. “Good job, Lake. You’ve already gotten this one wrapped around your finger.”

Isiah found his way to Cyn and kissed her cheek. “I’m going to return a few calls to give you time to talk shit about me and get it out of your system. Behave and don’t go telling her things that I don’t need her to know.” His eyes bounced between the two before he added. “Either of you.” His warning was weak causing them both to smile. After he left the room, Cyn lifted her glass and walked over to the counter leaning against it next to Lake, with one arm folded across her chest, tucked under the other as she held her glass to her lips.

“So why breakfast?”

Lake shrugged. “It’s easy and who doesn’t like breakfast food?”

“You apparently. I heard you weren’t a fan.”

Lake stalled for a moment and then realized Isiah must have shared it. When Cyn noticed her concern she explained.

“He mentioned it the second morning you were here and slept in. I suggested he have breakfast waiting for you and he told me you weren’t a fan.”

Lake nodded smiling softly. “I love breakfast food, I’m just not a fan of eating that early in the morning. I don’t really have much of an appetite when I first wake up.”

Cyn smirked. “Not even after an *active eventful* night?” She stared at Lake with raised brows and a smug grin. Lake’s shocked expression was a welcomed surprised causing Cyn to respond with full on amusement. “Oh my God, your eyes damn near popped out of your head. He’s not detailing your sex life to me, Lake. Relax. We don’t have that kind of relationship. I just know him, *well*. Unfortunately after working as closely with him as I have, I tend to possess the ability to pick up on his moods. He’s very happy and *very* satisfied. Truthfully I’m glad that you two have whatever this is. He’s different and in a good way. There’s sex and then there’s *sex*. You’re giving him more than just a release. I sense a connection with you two and he needs it. He’s just been

buying time with all the others. It's different with you. He's invested, he's *happy*."

"Not even with Noel?" Lake couldn't help but ask. No matter how great things were with Isiah, the idea of Noel still plagued her. She had given her body to a man who could potentially be tied to another woman. He asked for trust and Lake was offering it, but still...

Cyn watched as Lake poured blended eggs into a pan preparing to make the first omelet.

"What do you know about her, about them?"

"Not much. He said they're not together."

Cyn lifted her glass to her lips, sipping slowly. Because Lake had her back to Cyn she stared for a moment. Deciding what she wanted to say.

"They're not together. Haven't been in a while. He was happy with her in the beginning when they were, but it didn't last long. They're two very different people. It wasn't meant for them to be together. So no, what I see in you two hasn't existed, not even with her."

Lake smiled feeling a sense of relief. Hearing it from Isiah was one thing but coming from Cyn validated the truth.

It gave her a sense of security.

“And he and I are just friends. We’ve never had a romantic affiliation and we never will. I don’t see him that way.”

Lake almost dropped the spatula she was holding when she turned quickly to face Cyn. The smug grin on her face only made it worse.

“How long have you been working with him?”

“Six years. A few years before he got with Noel. It was when he purchased the club he owns. He bought it cash. One hundred grand when it was worth five times that, easy. He’s smart with business. Always has been. The owner, Sylvester was in debt. He was behind on the lease for the building, couldn’t pay us and needed the money. Isiah made him an offer that he wanted to refuse but couldn’t. He kinda got me as a part of the deal and I’ve been with hm ever since. He didn’t know a damn thing about running a club, he just wanted to own something.” Cyn laughed rolling her eyes. “I did so he paid me well. That’s how I started and from there I ended up with my hands in all his business deals. He trusts me because he can.”

Lake just stared not sure what to make of what Cyn was telling her.

“I know how women think, Lake. I know how I would think. He and I have a peculiar relationship to the people on the outside. I get it, but I don’t want you to ever let your imagination get the best of you. Not where I’m concerned. I love him. That I can promise you but not romantically. He’s my family and I want what’s best for him. Right now, that’s you. It will remain you until you prove otherwise. I don’t play about that one. He’s a good guy. I hope you know what you have.”

“I do. I hope you know what you have,” Lake wasn’t a push over by any means and she didn’t take too kindly to threats. She had no right to try it with Cyn but she felt it necessary to return the favor.

Cyn only smiled wider. “I do.” She pulled her body from the counter and placed her glass on it. “I’m going to get another bottle of wine. What’s your preference?”

“Riesling.” It had quickly become Lake’s favorite. Isiah’s life was rubbing off on her in some ways.

“We’re going to get along just fine.” She winked at Lake before leaving the kitchen. On her way down the hall to the

small wine cellar her boss kept stocked on the first floor she passed Isiah's office and he waved her in.

She knew right away something was off. His body appeared tense and the scowl on his face was a dead giveaway.

“What's wrong?”

He paused and raked his hand down his face. “I need a favor, a big one.”

“Anything.”

“I have to run out. I shouldn't be gone long, maybe an hour or two. Can you stay here with Lake?”

Cyn frowned examining him. “Sure, I don't mind, but what's the emergency?”

The look that followed told her everything she needed to know.

“Isiah, no.”

“Not her, Abara. He asked me to meet him at his house for dinner. I told him I was busy, but he said it couldn't wait and we couldn't discuss it over the phone. I agreed to stop by to talk but couldn't stay for dinner. Things are already complicated enough. Until I get a handle on this, I need to play

it safe. I have no idea if or when Noel is going to do something dumb.”

Cyn wanted to know what Noel could do, but she would never ask.

“Did you consider that she already may have and that’s why he wants you there?”

“Nah, not like that. Liv was in the room when he called. He wouldn’t invite me to their home under any bullshit. Not if Liv is there. He knows how she is. She won’t stand for it where I’m concerned and she’s about the only one he bows down to. This isn’t about Noel.”

Cyn pushed out a long sigh. “And what are you going to tell Lake?”

“The truth, it’s business.”

“Sih, this is bad, the bullshit is already starting. Are you sure it’s a good time to do this, to be with her. I like Lake and —”

“And you don’t think I do. I’m with her. *I might even fucking love the girl.* I already made that promise. I’m not going to disappoint her by not holding true to my word. I can’t do that to her.” His mind flooded with all the reasons why he

had to have Lake, why she needed him and why he was going to find a way to make things work. “Cyn, every move I make has to be smart. I don’t fold for anyone, you of all people know how true that is, but right now I have to give the appearance that I will until I figure this shit out. Just do me this solid.”

“I will. I’m just worried.”

He smirked moving closer, stepping into her personal space. “It isn’t me you need to worry about.” He kissed Cyn on the cheek and then stepped around her. “I’m about to go tell Lake. Just back me up, aight?”

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes as he headed to the door stopping just outside of his office.

“And be nice. She’s important to me.”

Cyn smirked at the thought. “You definitely don’t need to worry about her. She can fend for herself, trust me.”

Isiah wasn’t sure what that meant, but he trusted Cyn with his life and with Lake. He knew she was in good hands. His goal was to get to Abara, see what the hell he needed and then get back home before he was missed, too much. He could already feel the pressure and wasn’t with it but there wasn’t a

damn thing in the world that he felt was bigger than him so Isiah planned on facing it all head on.

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When Isiah pulled up at Odin's house, he took a minute to settle his thoughts. Lake wasn't happy about him leaving, but he didn't see an ounce of uncertainty in her eyes when he told her. *She trusts me.*

The fact that he was leaving her with Cyn helped. The two seemed to have forged a bond as quickly as she had with him. It relaxed his mind to know that Cyn confirmed what he was already feeling. Lake was good for him. He was good for her. Their relationship was new but it was already proving to be impermeable which would be necessary considering all the moving pieces to his life.

After clearing his mind, Isiah stepped out of his truck and headed to the front door. He smiled brightly when Liv was the one to greet him. As always, she welcomed Isiah with a motherly embrace which ended with a kiss on the cheek delivered by him.

“I hope you’re hungry. Lonnie out did herself this evening. I’m sure you can already smell it.”

His chest tightened. Liv was the one casualty that had the power to disarm Isiah. He genuinely loved and respected her. Over the years, she had been good to him and without his mother being in his life, he welcomed her *smothering*.

“Unfortunately, I can’t stay. I had a prior engagement but promised Odin I would stop by for a minute.”

The disappointment showed immediately. It softened Isiah but he had to stick with his plan. He had to put Lake first. “Oh. I assumed that since you were here, you were staying for dinner. We haven’t seen much of you around here lately.”

“How about another night? I’ll make it up to you.” He kissed her cheek again and she hugged him from the side smiling softly.

“I know you will dear. Another night it is. Come see me before you leave. He’s downstairs in the basement.”

Isiah nodded and took the hallway that lead to the basement. Their home was about three times the size of his. Odin considered it a status symbol while Isiah felt it was a waste. It was just the two of them. Odin and Liv never had

children of their own. They tried but she was never able to carry a baby full term. Isiah assumed it was why she clung to Noel so much and then him once he was in her life. She lived for the opportunity to play the mother role, even to adults.

“Did Liv catch you?”

“Yeah. She let me in.”

“Did you tell her you weren’t staying? Lonnie made steaks,” Odin grinned hoping the offer would change his mind.

“I told her; she didn’t like it but she understood.” With a nod of understanding, Odin offered Isiah a drink, which he only accepted out of respect. He wasn’t there on a social call.

“What’s so important that it couldn’t wait?”

Odin slipped one hand in his pocket while the other gripped tightly the glass of bourbon. “I messed up. Well I’m not sure, but I get the feeling I have.”

This shit better not be about Noel.

“Messed up how?”

“Moreno, the connect out in LA that I told you about?”

Isiah offered a nod of understanding so Odin continued. His face a true reflection of how anxious he was. Over the past few

days Odin had been a nervous wreck after the meeting. “I met with him this week. It didn’t go well. I’m concerned.”

Isiah wasn’t sure why he was here. After placing his glass on the table near him, he widened his stance and folded his arms across his chest. “I don’t follow.”

“The meeting was off. He kept asking me questions about the business. Questions he didn’t need to ask in order to do business with me. The more I think about it the whole thing was off.”

“I still don’t follow. What the hell does this have to do with me and if it feels off then don’t fuck with him. It’s that simple.”

“It’s not that simple. I said some things...” the look Odin gave was a clear sign of what those things were but Isiah asked anyway.

“What kind of things?”

“You know things that could come back to us.”

“Us?” Isiah’s brows raised slowly.

“I might have told him about you.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?” The roar of Isiah’s voice caused Odin to flinch. It was so minuscule that the

average person would have missed it, but Isiah didn't. It's how he knew things were bad. Odin was a confident man, just as much as Isiah was. It was one of the things he respected most about him but apparently he *had* messed up, gotten sloppy, made a bad call.

“Because you'll be working with me. I wanted him to be familiar with you.”

In an effort to calm himself, Isiah's palm moved down his face twice but it didn't help so when he spoke it was laced with anger. “Did I say that? I'm pretty sure I told you I wasn't running your shit.”

“I know you did but I figured you would change your mind. That you would think it over and see how great of an opportunity this would be—”

“I don't give a fuck about the opportunity. I said I wasn't doing it and then you go running off at the mouth to some muthafucker you don't know, telling him shit that he didn't need to know. That's not you, what the hell is going on, man?”

Odin clearly messed up. He hadn't considered the possibility. People knew who he was and wouldn't play it. Apparently this one time he was wrong.

“I admit it. I need your help. We have to figure this out.”

Isiah laughed arrogantly. “We don’t have to figure out a damn thing. This is not on me. This is on you.”

“But he knows your name. He knows—”

“Stop, I don’t give a damn what you told him. I’ll handle my shit. You handle yours.”

Isiah started to the stairs with Odin on his heels. “After everything I’ve done for you. Its fuck me? That’s where we are?” By the time they reached the top of the stairs they ran right into Liv and Noel. That further pissed Isiah off. The entire night was feeling extremely murky. *This is a got damn set up.*

“Oh my God, why didn’t you tell me? Is that why you pretended you weren’t staying for dinner? You wanted it to be a surprise?” Liv’s smile was so wide that Odin knew something was up. Noel rushed Isiah pressing a kiss to his lips which threw him off but he still shoved her away as respectfully as he could noticing her phone was in her hand. *She’s recording this shit.*

His angry eyes bounced between Liv and Noel before Liv grabbed Noel’s hand putting a very large diamond ring on

display. A ring that Isiah damn sure didn't buy or know anything about.

This woman has lost her damn mind. Is she really pretending we're engaged? His first thought was Lake. Isiah wondered if Noel had posted anything. Was that why she was recording them? *She kissed me, fuck.*

"You're engaged!" Liv squealed releasing Noel's hand and clapping like a child.

"You are?" Odin's calm voice sounded from behind Isiah who glanced over his shoulder. The look he delivered provided Odin with his answer. They had their own issues so Odin stayed quiet, while Isiah ignored his question and turned his attention back to Noel.

"Tell them the fucking truth!" His voice was so loud that it startled them all causing Noel's phone to slip from her hand landing face down on the tiled floor. It only took her a moment to get it together.

"And what truth is that Isiah?" She was goading him but he didn't care. "What should I start with?"

He released a cocky laugh shaking his head before his eyes met hers again. "How about you start with that ring. A

ring I damn sure didn't buy. Is this the type of shit you're on? I told you I was done and you go buy a ring pretending I gave it to you? We're not getting married, Noel. We're not even together. Start there and then tell them whatever the fuck you want. At this point I really don't care."

His regard landed on Liv who's hand covered her mouth. She had no idea what was happening and it broke his heart that he couldn't tell her so he simply said, "I'm sorry," leaving out the front door right after. Before he reached his truck Odin was on the porch calling his name.

"That bullshit is not why I called you here. I had no idea."

Isiah lifted his eyes from the side of his truck and glared at Odin. "Would it have mattered if it was? The shit you brought me here on was just as fucked up."

"I know, I'm sorry, son. But are you gonna help me figure this out? It could be bad and if it's bad for me, it's bad for you." By this time Odin was right beside him with a hand on his shoulder. Isiah looked down at the connection and then at Odin with fire blazing in his eyes which prompted Odin to remove his hand.

With not so much as another word, Isiah pulled his door open and got in his truck. Had Odin not moved he would have been hit when Isiah pulled off, he was just that angry about everything that had gone on. Odin's stupidity just changed everything and now he would have to figure out how to clean up the mess he made.

9.

It was Lake's last night at Isiah's house or at least the last night of her three days off and she was strongly considering packing up her things and Bleu and heading home early. He had been distant since he left her at the house with Cyn the night before. She and Cyn shared breakfast for dinner and two bottles of wine while he was gone and at last check it was after midnight when Lake sent Cyn home, locked up and climbed into his bed. *Still no Isiah*. He returned at some point, because although she woke up in bed alone, she found him the next morning ducked off in his office focused on *work*. No explanation about where he had been and barely any acknowledgement at all.

If Lake had to guess he hadn't spoken more than ten words to her the entire day and only communicated when she directly asked questions. Isiah hadn't necessarily been rude, more distant and it had her confused. Things between them had been going well before he left that night so she could only assume something had gone wrong with whoever he went to

see. Isiah hadn't spoken about it and when she asked, he assured Lake he was fine and admittedly had a lot on his mind.

The day dragged in the worst way because she found herself alone while he spent damn near the entire day alone in his office. Lake was in her feelings and over it, so much so that when she stepped out of the bathroom after having showered for the night, she had made up her mind to just go home. When she bypassed the bed fully dressed, only missing shoes, Isiah followed her movements until she entered and returned from the closet with her travel bag.

“What are you doing?”

“Packing.”

“You can do that tomorrow.”

“Not if I'm leaving tonight.”

“You're not leaving tonight. Come get in bed.”

Lake ignored him and continued moving around her room collecting her things. *Don't acknowledge me now asshole.* Bleu lifted her little head and then curled up closer to Isiah as if confirming what he had already said.

“Lake?”

She ignored him once again.

“Lake!” This time his tone was elevated, causing her to turn and face him.

“WHAT!”

“What the hell is your problem is what? The fuck you yelling for?” His face was hard and his eyes expressive. The irritation flooding through him was on full display. That only further infuriated Lake. *You don't have the right to have an attitude.* She released a cocky laugh under her breath and stomped into the bathroom to gather the rest of her things, choosing to ignore him yet again.

He's damn crazy if he thinks he's gonna catch an attitude with me when he's the one that's wrong.

Realizing she wasn't paying him any mind, Isiah sat up lifting Bleu when he stood, lowering her to the floor while he walked into the bathroom to figure out what the hell was going on. He was well aware that he had shut down on Lake and hadn't meant to, however he assumed there was time to repair his inconsistency. There was so much weight on his shoulders that he could barely process it all so the silence was necessary. Unfortunately, he hadn't accurately calculated just how badly his shutting Lake out weighed on her mental. Standing in the doorway of the bathroom his eyes followed her as she threw

herself around collecting things that belonged to her. It fucked with his peace to see her so upset.

“You’re not leaving.”

She rolled her eyes and stepped into the shower grabbing her body wash, but Isiah blocked her as she exited taking the body wash from her hand and tossing it back inside. It landed hard on the tiled floor causing the top to pop off and fly in a different direction.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

“Because I said you’re not leaving.”

“You’re replacing that.”

“You think I give a fuck about that damn bottle of body wash? I’ll buy ten of them bitches without blinking. I told you to leave that shit. You’re not leaving tonight.” The roar of his voice had Lake frozen in place but only for a brief moment.

“Yes, I am. Why would I stay?”

“Because I want you here.”

She released an arrogant laugh narrowing her eyes his way. “Then you should have considered that while you were ignoring me all day. *Or* when you were with her last night instead of coming home to me.”

Home.

The word did something to him. *Does she consider this home? He had to catch himself to prevent from smiling at the thought.*

“Who was I with Lake?”

“*Her*, Noel, or someone else, hell I don’t know you weren’t here with me.”

She pushed against his solid frame trying to create enough space to leave the bathroom but Isiah refused to budge. Instead his hands were at her waist and she was lifted in the air landing on the counter. Seconds later his body pushed between her legs slamming his palms flat on the mirror behind Lake, claiming her as his prisoner.

“I wasn’t with her or anyone else. I just needed a minute to clear my mind so I drove around for a few hours. It was that or either come home and take my frustrations out on you.” *By fucking my aggravation out between your legs.*

“Why should I believe that?”

“Because I asked you to trust me and you said you did. I’m dealing with a lot of shit right now. Things that you couldn’t possibly understand. I can’t begin to explain how

fucked up my life is right now but I'm trying, Lake. I'm trying to be here in this moment with you while everything else around me is falling down. I fucked up. I shut you out and I'm sorry. I need you right now. You can't leave." His eyes were pleading and desperate. He was asking for something he wasn't giving in that moment. *Trust.*

"You're such a damn hypocrite but I'm not surprised. I'm not doing this with you."

"How am I a hypocrite?" His eyes slanted when his brows moved in close from the piercing stare he delivered.

"You want me to trust you but you don't trust me. Why is your world falling down around you? What happened when you left here that made you shut down on me?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Then I can't stay. I'm going home, move." She pushed against his solid chest but Isiah didn't move an inch.

"Lake, please." Again he was begging for understanding. *For trust.*

"No, you want me to trust you? Well you have to trust me. Why did you shut down?"

He was stuck. She was only asking for what she was giving, but his demons were darker than hers.

“Lake—”

“No, I’m not compromising.” She stared him in his eyes until his head dropped.

Isiah moved his hands from the mirror and tugged at the leggings that covered her lower half.

“What are you doing?” Lake grasped at his wrist but he kept at it, tugging them down until he needed her to lift to proceed. “If you want the truth, this is the only way that I can give it to you. I have to be inside you so that I know you feel me and are connected to me or I can’t tell you.” The desperation in his eyes had Lake lifting her hips. Her leggings and panties hit the floor and his shorts followed. Right after, Lake was being pulled to the edge of the counter while Isiah entered her with one long stroke. She gasped when he filled her completely, pulled back and then filled her again. She wasn’t quite ready to receive him but she took it without complaining. Her body was cursing her because his size was unbearable, but she handled it.

“I killed Noel’s father.” He kept his eyes on Lake. He wanted to see her face when he confessed his sins while he

was deep inside her. “She has proof. That’s why I never fully walked away. It never mattered to me before now. She did her thing and I did mine.” As he spoke he continued to stroke Lake nice and slow, making sure she felt every inch. He needed her to feel him so that she was connected. He needed her to remember how good he could be to her, physically and emotionally. “But then I met you. I knew I wanted out. I knew that I couldn’t have you and keep living the way I had been living.”

Isiah buried his face in her neck holding her close while he continued slow stroking Lake at a steady pace. “I had it all figured out. I was done. I didn’t care what happened and then I found out her uncle put my freedom at risk. He fucked up in a way that could change everything. That’s what happened. It’s why I shut down. I don’t want to lose you, to lose this. I don’t want to fuck things up but I don’t know if I can make it right. You can’t leave me, Lake. You can’t.” There was nothing else to say so Isiah continued filling her in a way that she would know how he felt. He worked until she came twice and he followed right after her second one. Once he exploded inside of her, Isiah pulled out and lifted Lake from the counter lowering her to her feet. They showered in silence, dressed in silence and then climbed in his bed, *in silence*. He made sure

to keep Lake close. He held her against his body until his mind relaxed enough for him to drift off to sleep. She was the only reason why he was able to rest that night even if she didn't. His confession had Lake's mind racing. Isiah confessed to killing Noel's father and she was using that against him. He also confessed to her uncle doing something that could be detrimental to the two of them and it all had Lake's stomach in knots. Who the hell was this man and what the hell had she gotten herself into? He used sex to manipulate her and Lake had let him. He knew that it would get her to stay. Is that what their reality with Isiah would be? Lake didn't know how she felt about what happened yet here she was in his bed, wrapped in his arms. Her mind was heavy and her chest was tight. She didn't know what to do, but she knew that it wasn't as easy as just saying she was done and walking away. She couldn't do that. Or could she?

By five, Isiah was up with a heavy heart and mind. The things he confessed to Lake and the way he did it had him in a place he'd never imagined himself being. There was a chance that Lake would use it against him. She could easily go to the cops. The only proof that he knew of was what Noel claimed to have, but that wouldn't mean there wasn't more. The case was still open. He knew with certainty because he looked into

it himself. It was considered a cold case but still very much open. What he had done was risky but he felt confident that she wouldn't turn on him. What he wasn't confident about was whether or not she would run. *I can't let her run.*

Looking down at Lake. She was cradled against his side with her arm across his stomach and leg across his thighs. The weight and warmth of her body created a sense of peace that Isiah felt he was at risk of losing. His senses were heightened as he traced the details of Lake's head positioned on his chest. Her face was relaxed into the appearance of the same peace that he felt. Isiah had kept her close all night. Every time she inched away; he pulled her right back. Even as he slept, he would notice the void and make sure he kept her close. It was the first time she didn't awaken with dreams about fighting her mother. Isiah felt as if that were a small accomplishment and a clear sign that she needed him. His hope was that she realized it as well.

"Lake." With a kiss to her forehead and swiping loose hair from her face, Isiah tried to wake her. They needed to talk. The weight of what he told her had to be playing on her conscience.

He watched her face until he noticed her eyes flutter and then kissed her forehead.

“Lake, wake up. We need to talk.”

“Mmmhmm.” She was still coming out of it, but when her heavy lids finally lifted, Lake’s face balled up. Her head rose and she pushed away from Isiah’s body. He choose not to fight her being that he didn’t want to argue. *He didn’t argue.*

When Lake was up right next to him, she peered around the dimly lit room. “What time is it?”

“After five.” His tone was low, calm, protective.

“You never sleep,” she fussed pushing out a short breath. Isiah simply smiled. It was subtle, barely there, but he smiled.

“I sleep. Just not as much as I should. How do you feel?”

“Confused.” Lake’s mind was immediately flooded with memories from the night before. His troubled eyes while he worked her slowly confessing his sins. He killed someone. The emotions were so palpable that she could feel his fear and anxiety in her chest. *He’s afraid I’m going to leave him.* Isiah wasn’t the type of man that expressed fear. It wasn’t who he

was but Lake felt it. She could see it in his eyes and feel it in her spirit.

“Are you confused because of what I told you or because of how you feel about it?” Those intense eyes were on her again. She couldn’t handle them for an extended period of time so she lowered hers to her hands pinning them there.

“Both. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with that.”

“Nothing. I don’t want you to do anything with it. I just needed you to know why I was distant and why things are so complicated with not just Noel and I, but her family. I fucked up and I don’t know how to fix this without losing what’s important.” *You.*

Lake’s eyes met with his again. Isiah recognized the question right away and didn’t hesitate to give the answer.

“You. None of the other shit matters but you matter.”

It’s not that easy. None of it was that easy. She shook the thought and climbed off the bed creating space. She needed the distance. Being that close clouded her judgment and compromised her will. She needed to think clearly. Isiah knew what she was doing and didn’t fight her need for separation but was only allowing so much distance.

“But it doesn’t make sense.” Lake began pacing at the foot of his bed. Bleu sensed tension and traveled to her feet, protectively following Lake’s movements. “If she knows you killed her father then why would she want to be with you? That’s crazy. Why wouldn’t she want you to pay? How can she still want you?” *Because she has a sick obsession with me similar to the one I built with you.*

“Not all parents love their children the way they should, Lake.” Their eyes met and her face grew tight. *Is he assuming my parent didn’t love me?*

“Stop.” His voice was calm again. Protective. “This is not about you. I don’t know enough about them to make that call. All I’m saying is that her father wasn’t a good person. He didn’t give a shit about anyone past what they could do for him. Even his own child. Noel’s attraction to me is not normal. It never has been. I didn’t realize when we first met but I see it now. In a sense, I saved her from some dark places that she found herself in because of him. I really don’t think it’s about *me*. It’s about her need to have security. I gave her that without intention or realizing it but believe me, there’s nothing there. Not for me.”

Lake was frustrated with emotions that were all over the place. She fell hard and fast. So much so that she wasn't sure what the hell to do. She was already feeling things that she didn't want to let go of but...

“What the hell does any of that matter? The how, the why? If you've been with her this long, playing by her rules it's because she forced you to. What the hell makes you think that it's going to be any different now? What the hell am I supposed to do? Play nice and let her claim you while I'm tucked away for safe keeping?”

Isiah's body went rigid. The thought made him angry. When he threw the cover back and stepped out of his bed he still managed to maintain the distance she needed. “You're not a got damn secret. Didn't I already tell you that?”

“Like it matters. The second she knows about me, then what? She turns you into the cops or comes after me trying to make my life miserable? I don't want that.”

With four strides, Isiah planted himself inches away from Lake. Bleu snarled from the tension between the two of them but he ignored the small pup.

“I need you to trust me. There are a lot of pieces to this bullshit and I have to consider each one.”

“Trust you?” Lake shook her head laughing under her breath. Lord knows she wanted to. She wanted him, but she was torn. The pull between them was so strong that it suffocated her at times, but there was also the unknown.

“You can’t pick and choose. Either you trust me or you don’t.” He couldn’t curb the anger radiating through his voice. It had nothing to do with Lake and everything to do with his situation that he found himself in, but she was on the receiving end.

“Can I just...I need to get ready for work. I have to be there soon.”

With a piercing stare, Isiah stood silently watching Lake. It felt like an eternity before either of them moved. He pulled her into him, covering her body with his. The moment was draining and weighted.

“Take whatever time you need. I won’t push.” After a kiss to her forehead, he left the room and Lake’s heart felt like it was being torn in two. Half of it left the room with him. She already knew she couldn’t walk away, she simply needed time to wrap her mind around what staying meant.



“What are you doing here?” Noel’s eyes rolled after they landed on her uncle’s face. He only visited when Isiah was home. “He’s not here.”

Odin grinned and stepped inside brushing past his niece. “You don’t think I know that? He doesn’t live here, sweetheart.”

Noel’s expression froze before curious eyes landed on her uncle. There was something different about him in that moment. His typical friendly disposition wasn’t present. His demeanor felt cold for some reason.

“Isiah lives here—”

“Don’t insult me, Noel. Come, we have a lot to discuss.” Odin held up the folder he arrived with. Noticing it for the first time, Noel’s face went rigid before she slammed her door to appease whatever the hell was going on. When she reached her living room where he was waiting, Noel stopped just shy of her uncle planting balled fists on her hips.

“What’s this about?”

“You and your silly little crush. It ends now.” Odin’s face was stern, his eyes level with hers but displaying no warmth.

“My crush. What the hell is that supposed to mean? What did he tell you?”

A smug grin surfaced before Odin inched closer. “He didn’t tell me a damn thing that I hadn’t already known. Here. See for yourself.”

After extending the folder with Noel only staring blankly at it, Odin’s demand was vocal again.

“Take the damn folder Noel.”

Snatching it from his hand right after, she began flipping through the documents and photos inside. Her eyes grew wider with every piece of evidence scanned. She could literally feel her heart pounding in her ears from the anxiety that flooded her body.

“What is this?”

“I foot the bill for that very expensive college education you have but don’t use, sweetheart. Apply it now so that I don’t feel it’s a complete waste. You know exactly what that is.”

“I...” Noel swallowed hard noticing images of her handing over cash to the shooter she hired the night that Isiah killed her father. She also recognized stills of Isiah and her father facing off. Isiah’s gun aimed at his head while her father attempted to control his. She remembered the moment vividly. It was seconds before Isiah pulled the trigger. There were also image of her father’s lifeless body on the warehouse floor with a pool of blood surrounding his head. Next, she sorted through photos of her with other men, in compromising positions. There’s no way the affiliation could be confused as just cordial or friendly. The pictures showed exactly what the relationships with those men were. *Intimate.*

“You knew?”

“I know everything, Noel. For a man in my occupation, wealth and status, it’s my job. It’s necessary for me to stay ten steps ahead of everyone...” he paused delivering a stern look. “Apparently even with my own blood.”

Noel’s breath was trapped in her lungs briefly. How had she missed that and if he knew then why...

“Doesn’t make sense, right?”

“I... don’t...I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t, dear. You’re too damn selfish to consider anyone but yourself.” Odin smirked before easing his hands into his pockets. “I knew exactly who Isiah was before that night. Your father recruited him. Told me all about him. How smart he was and how great of an addition he would be to my team. Your father was always fucking up so he spent a lot of time trying to finesse his way back into my good graces. I did a little research and agreed about Isiah being a beneficial addition. He turned out to be everything I expected. He’s different. Not like all the others I tried to groom. I can only respect the man he is. Had I hand crafted my own son; Isiah would have easily been the blueprint used to do so. The man is impressive, especially given the fact that he had to raise himself. There was no father to teach him the ropes when he was old enough to learn life’s lessons. Isiah was left to figure it out on his own.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s all in there but I’m a little disturbed that you don’t already know. Isiah watched his father get shot in the head when he was a young boy.” Noel’s eyes narrowed and her chest grew tight. She didn’t know much about him, well anything past what she could figure out on her own. She

wasn't aware of much besides how he made her feel. He had always been closed off. "Those reports don't mean shit to me though. I know first-hand. I was the one who gave the order to pull the trigger. His father was a decent man, at least to his family, but he was bad with business. Never could get it right. Isiah's father was weak, I couldn't just let him go. You don't leave loose ends out there like that. It comes back to haunt you later. I refused to chance it."

"Why would you want him close knowing that you had his father murdered?"

"I didn't know at the time. When you're father presented him as an option I had no idea who he was. It wasn't until after your father died that I found out it was the same kid. He was fifteen when it happened. There was no way I would remember him. When I started doing my research, I found out. Small fucking world we live in."

"But he killed my father."

"And I killed his. Some shit just is what it is, Noel. Yet you still wanted him. Slept in his bed every night and even carried his child. It's a shame that you weren't able to deliver. I have a feeling it would have gravely changed the course of things with you two. But as for your father, we both know the

man he was. As disappointed as I am that Isiah took his life, your father was a disgrace to the family name. I know what he did to you, your mother, those other women. I had to pay out of pocket to several of them to keep things quiet. It just wasn't my place to get involved beyond that. Liv and I took care of you as best we could. Attempted to provide you balance and the resemblance of a good life. Your father stopped crawling in your bed because I made him, Noel. I was sick when I found out so I put an end to it."

Noel's eyes filled with tears and anger flooded her body as it began to tremble. Her voice barely above a whisper. "You knew. Why didn't you turn him in? He should have gone to jail."

"That could never happen. He was my brother. He worked for me which meant he knew too much about me. Your father was weak, Noel. I'm sure you know. When I found out, I made him stop but I couldn't involve the police. It would have ended badly for me, for our entire family because your father would have broken and ran his mouth."

Hearing the confusion had Noel's body engulfed with rage. She was trembling with anger when she stepped into her uncle's face.

“You son of a bitch. Do you know what I went through?”

Odin’s expression softened. “I do, but I had to do what was best for the family.”

“And what about Isiah? How is he a part of this?”

“He’s not, at least not the part concerning your father with the exception of taking his life. He did both of us a favor. But this is bigger than you, Noel. I’ve invested a lot in Isiah. I need him on my side. That means you have to stand down. Leave him the hell alone. This thing, whatever you think you have, doesn’t work. He doesn’t want you. In the beginning I assumed the two of you being together would make the process better. If he were in the family, then I would have a greater chance of positioning him to do what I needed. It never worked. I wasn’t sure why until now. The man has never loved you, maybe in the beginning he felt something but that changed. I noticed right away when it did. You used your father’s murder to make him stay, didn’t you?”

Noel’s eyes ballooned again pushing a smile onto Odin’s face. “It’s the only thing that made sense. A man like Isiah can’t be controlled without force and even then it’s a task. I wasn’t sure until the exchange between the two of you at my

house. This ends now, Noel. I need him and if you keep pushing, we both lose. I don't lose."

"So you're really choosing him over me."

"I'm choosing family. I'm electing to make sure we're all still standing when the dust clears and the storm is coming, sweetheart. Like I said, I invested too much in him. I need to get a handle on this shit, and you're the only piece getting in the way. Let it go. He doesn't want you. He's moved on."

Her chest grew tight. "How...how do you know?"

His smile was subtle. "I told you, it's my job to know." Odin's stepped closer taking the folder from her hands. He sorted through it finding a photo of Lake, holding it up right after. "This is how I know. Let it go, Noel. There are plenty of men who will make you happy. Isiah isn't one of them."

Odin had chosen sides a long time ago. Isiah's value in his life outweighed that of his niece. He had done his part and taken care of her. She would never want for anything financially but he couldn't help her with matters of the heart and he wouldn't try. The mess he had just gotten himself in required Isiah's help. Help that Odin was positive he wouldn't give if Noel continued with her foolishness. Isiah would either

find resolve or become his scapegoat. Either way, he was necessary.

“You’re no better than he is.” Noel’s heart was crushed all over again. First her father, then Isiah and now her uncle. No man in her life had ever chosen her and she felt worthless because of the realization.

“You might want to rethink that. Everything you have is because of me. I’m the one who makes this possible. Consider your life before you go pointing fingers and placing blame.”

Noel was floored by what she had just found out. *There was no way.*

“Listen...” Odin stepped closer to his niece. “It’s best for both of us if you leave this alone. If you don’t I can’t promise you how things will work out.” The warning was clear. Noel felt it in her core. “I’ll be in touch. Take some time to think about what I’m proposing.”

“You’re not *proposing* anything.”

Odin simply smirked before he left her house. At this point it was him against the world. Anyone who got in the way of his freedom would have to deal with the consequences, Noel included.

10.

“The time line is key. The entire project will unfold over a five year period; however we need the first phase completed in a little under a year.”

“I can deliver,” Isiah spoke with confidence. Even if he wasn’t sure how to get it done, he would have it figured out in time to make sure it happened.

Conner’s ice blue eyes locked into Isiah’s maple orbs. Conner hated the man’s cocky demeanor but there wasn’t anything he could do to change the situation. His father had already signed the contracts placing *Cason Realty* in charge of the two mile stretch of property that the Wellington family had purchased to renovate. There were plans to gentrify the small section of down town, building a small park, million dollar apartments in a high rise, which would be surround by restaurants and shops.

“You sold my father on this, but not me. There’s still time to make adjustments.”

Cyn who was standing next to her boss grinned when she noticed his stance widen and his board shoulder square. Isiah's left hand eased into his pocket while his right smoothed the front of his Tom Ford suit jacket. Today his muscular physique was donned in all black. Suit, shirt and shoes.

“My contracts are iron-clad, Conner. I have a team of overpriced lawyers to ensure every detail is in place and in my favor. Now, me being your typical kid off the block, I don't know much about loopholes and shit, which is why I make sure I have the best on my payroll to ensure I'm covered. What I do know is street logic. Where I'm from a deal is a deal. When you shake on that shit, it's as binding as any pieces of paper because the consequences are dire.” Isiah watched as Conner's face flushed red and his jaw flexed. It promoted Isiah to produce a charming smile. One that he knew would infuriate Conner's overpriced, entitled ass. Conner could feel the arrogance seeping through Isiah's pores. “Your father owns the company. He made the deal. He signed on the dotted line and shook my hand. You have an issue, take it up with him, however, I will warn you, there isn't a damn thing either of you can do to void the contract. Like I said, I don't know a damn thing about that side of it, but my team does. Trust me, or don't. Research the details for yourself.”

“You’re a common thug trying to pretend you’re a legitimate business owner. I bet you’re pushing drugs through the city and using your company to do so. How far do you think that will take you?”

“You’d be surprised.” Again Isiah’s smile was on display. “As for who I am, you’re right, I am a common thug. I embrace it. It’s what has your scary ass about to piss himself because you’re afraid of my silent threats, but I’m also a very rich and powerful man who holds a multi-million dollar contract with your family’s name on it. Have a good day Conner. My team will be in touch so that we can get started right away.” Isiah winked at a fuming Conner before he turned to walk away with Cyn falling in step beside him. Her long legs the only reprieve in assisting with her ability to keep up with his long stride given the heels on her feet.

“You’re an asshole.” She grinned causing him to peer her way with one brow high.

“I’m an asshole? He called me a fucking drug dealer.”

Cyn offered a look that had Isiah smirking at the obvious.

“Yes, you are an asshole. You scared the shit out of that man and then punked his stuffy ass. You didn’t have to take it

here.”

“You’re right, but he didn’t have to stick his chest out like I wouldn’t pull one shot to deflate that shit. I’m not the one to fuck with Cyn on or off the streets. I’m still me, always will be.”

“And there’s that alpha I’m accustomed to.” She teased as he opened the passenger door of her truck to grant her access. They rode together with Isiah driving. Once he was inside, Cyn grinned his way again. “I was worried Lake killed the boss in you, Sih.”

The mention of her name had his chest tight again. It had been three days since they spoke. He’d text called and stopped by her apartment, just to make sure she was good. The calls she ignored, the text she returned one or two word reply’s and when he showed up at her apartment knowing that she was home, Lake refused to answer the door. His patience was running out. Isiah wasn’t a patient man when it came to his hearts desires.

“Shit, what did you do?”

“What?” His heated gaze landed on Cyn who only mirrored the one he offered.

“She hasn’t been round. You haven’t brought her up and you’ve been in a *mood*. What the hell did you do?”

A long moment passed before Isiah decided to come clean. He kept his eyes on the road while he spoke. His heart couldn’t carry another woman’s disappointment. His situation with Lake had provided enough of that.

“I told her things...” his words stalled “...the truth. Shit that you don’t even know or hell maybe you do. You squeeze things out of me all the time but you keep rocking with me so...” he shrugged, face stoned and his eyes on her briefly before continued. “It was fucked up how I told her but it was the only way I could. I had to tell her the truth. I owed her that.”

“And?” Cyn could feel the separation even before he confirmed it. She could also feel the effect of it in his energy. When his eyes rolled over to find hers she knew.

Isiah’s deep rasp surrounded them by way of a cocky laugh before he focused on the road again. “What the fuck do you think she did? She put me on ice. I haven’t talked to her in three days. She isn’t trying to fuck with me right now, but I can’t blame her.” They were quiet again before he laughed.

This time it was a little lighter. “You know what’s really fucked up?”

Cyn waited and when their eyes met again he shook his head. “She really believes that she’s not good enough to be in my world. Like she had something to prove. From day one that’s how she saw shit but she couldn’t be more wrong. I’m the one that’s not good enough. I don’t have any business being with Lake or even wanting her—”

“Sih, you’re good enough.”

“I know you think so but really I’m not. Not good enough for *her*. She deserves better than me and I’m not saying I’m a bad choice because I know what I bring to the table, I’m just saying even with all that she still deserves better than *me*. That’s who she is Cyn. Shit you know, you’ve been around her.”

She stared at his profile with understanding. It was true. Cyn really liked lake. Everything about her was genuine. She was the kind of person you could hate but still love because you would feel bad about it if you didn’t. Cyn knew that Lake was good for Isiah.

“I’m selfish as fuck though. Whether I deserved her or not, I want her and I’m gonna have her.” This time when he

leveled his glare on her, there was a confidence and a need that Cyn felt could only be driven by one emotion. *He loves her already.*

“What do you need me to do?”

“Pray for a nigga. My connection to God is kinda weak right now. Even if I don’t speak on my sins, he knows. I can’t wash the blood off my hands where he’s concerned.”

Even though his words were light, delivered in a teasing manor, Cyn still felt the darkness behind them. She only nodded. It was all she could offer at the moment but she would pray. She loved Isiah and wanted him to be happy. No matter what he thought, he deserved it just as much as Lake did. His past simply wouldn’t allow him to believe.

&

After heading back to the office, Isiah left Cyn with the task of canceling the rest of his day and then found himself parked outside of Lake’s job. He wasn’t sure if she was there because she had shut him out the same way he had when she was at his house. Being on the receiving end was a lot harder than he assumed it would be.

It took him a minute to get his mind settled enough to actually get out. If Lake was in there, he had no clue what the hell he would even say. *But I have to try.*

When he stepped inside the place felt cold and not because the temperature. It was all in the atmosphere. *This place suffocates you. I have to get her out of here, find her something better.* Isiah couldn't imagine his beauty being here for hours at a time. His eyes swept the front taking in his surroundings before he stepped to the counter recognizing a familiar face. *This nigga ain't gonna tell me shit.*

Isiah laughed under his breath but still made the effort.

“Aye, I’m looking for Lake, she here?”

Nathan’s eyes leveled up to Isiah and his stare was hard, unwelcoming. Right after, he checked him out completely, taking in the black on black attire that covered his body. What should have come off as professional had Nathan assuming the worse. Isiah looked to be exactly what he was, a street nigga in a suit.

“No.”

“She work earlier or coming in later?”

Nathan laughed arrogantly. Before folding his arms over his chest. “Shouldn’t you already know her schedule?”

“Can you just answer the damn question and not worry about what the fuck I should already know?”

“Nah, can’t do that. It’s against company policy to give out personal information like schedules. You might not have good intentions. How am I supposed to know why you want the information?”

Isiah released a cocky laugh before brushing his hand down his face. Both slipped into his pocket right after as he stared hard at Nathan. The look was dangerous. One that held intention. If he didn’t know before, the point had just been proved. This man wanted Lake. He was putting his own safety at risk to protect hers. The gesture was cute but not necessary. Isiah would never harm Lake. *Intentionally.*

“You want Lake?”

“What?” Nathan’s scowl grew in intensity.

“You heard me. I’m asking you if you want her? She’s beautiful, smart, funny, awkward as hell but that’s one of her best qualities.”

“We’re friends,” Nathan stated firmly, his scowl growing deeper by the second but his eyes revealed his truth. The smug grin on Isiah’s face only made it worse.

“You’re probably a good guy. Likely better for her than I will ever be, but none of that matters. You will never care about her the way that I do or cherish her as much as I do. She’s mine. When I’m with her she’s mine, when I’m not around, she’s mine and that won’t change. If you see her before I do, tell her I was here.” Isiah kept his eyes on Nathan damn near dismissing him in a way that all Nathan could do was turn and walk away. Once he was gone, Isiah turned to leave but was stopped when a small cold hand caught his wrist.

“You’re her guy. The one she told me about?”

He looked down at the frail caramel faced woman who rolled up next to him in a wheel chair. She had a soft smile and piercing dark eyes, but they were kind so he didn’t react the way he normally would from a stranger touching him.

“You talking about Lake?”

Mrs. Ruby took him in from head to toe. He was handsome, dark eyes, masculine jaw covered in jet black hair

that resembled oil and encasing a nice set of full lips. *Yeah he's a ladies man this one.*

“It’s kinda drafty out here. How about you take me back to my room and we can talk there?”

Isiah’s eyes narrowed at the woman. He didn’t know a thing about her or this place. *Nah, fuck that.*

“Don’t look at me like that. My money covers my stay here just like anyone else’s. If I want to have a visitor, I can and if I can’t who’s gonna stop me? Certainly not them.” She waved her hand at two staff members that were walking through.

Isiah’s eyes followed and he laughed under his breath taking in two young women who were dressed in scrubs identical to the ones Lake wore, with *Harrington* embroidered on the left breast.

“Well, whatcha waiting for?” she fussed.

She’s too much. Pushing out a huff of air, he gripped the handles on the back of her chair desperate for any information about Lake. She directed him where to go until they reached her room. Once inside she waved to the chair by the window. “Have a seat.”

“I can stand.”

“I’m Mrs. Ruby, what’s your name? She never actually mentioned that.”

“Isiah.”

“Well, *Isiah*, I’m sure you can stand, but I asked you to sit,” she fussed. Not many people could get a rise out of Isiah or boss him around but this little woman was doing both. He sat and she wheeled herself closer.

“She was here this morning. Left with that cousin of hers, Chloe.” He sensed that she wasn’t fond of Chloe and that made him smirk. He had no issue with Lake’s cousin, but there was no mistaking that she and Lake were like oil and water. What he was sure of was that they loved each other and that Chloe had her best interest at heart. “Lake told me about you.” Mrs. Ruby’s brows lifted slightly.

“Oh yeah?”

“She sure did. We’re close. She don’t have no family so I made myself her family.” Mrs. Ruby smiled and so did Isiah.

I bet you did.

“I see why she likes you so much. You’re easy on the eyes.” Mrs. Ruby’s piercing irises swept his body again before

she smiled snuggly.

“I hope that’s not the only reason.” This time his brows hiked.

“No, she feels connected. Said you were different. Probably not good for her but she didn’t care. She really likes you.”

Yet she won’t talk to me.

“I see what it is.” Mrs Ruby frowned a bit peering as if she were looking into his soul. Isiah felt anxious like she was judging him, seeing things she shouldn’t be able to see.

“You’re dark too. Just like my Lake. I bet that’s what draws you to each other. I know all about that kind of connection.” She smiled vaguely but it reached her eyes. “It’s why I fell in love with my husband. We shared a kind of darkness too. He was the only one who could understand me and I was the only one who cared enough to understand him. That’s what you two have. I can see it.”

“I don’t know about all that,” Isiah lied. It’s what he had been feeling since he met Lake. He just didn’t know how to explain the draw and was partially afraid to because it meant that she would see things about him that he wanted to keep hidden.

“Yes you do.” Mrs. Ruby smiled hard. “She’s a good girl. Sweet, kind. She ain’t innocent by no means but she’s a good girl. If you can’t protect those qualities in her then leave her alone.”

Isiah’s face tensed and his spine straightened. “I will always protect Lake,” he defended with ease because it was his reality. She was his to protect whether they were together or not.

“Not like that. Not physically. I mean her heart and her mind. You haven’t been doing it lately, now have you? Not the way she’s been moping around here looking lost.” The image of Lake *moping*, had his shoulders feeling weighted. An uneasy feeling settled in his stomach.

I did that.

“Exactly.” Mrs. Ruby’s words were firm as if she had read his mind. “Fix whatever you did. Make it right and if you can’t leave her alone. She’s got enough darkness in her life. Don’t you add to it.”

Isiah took it all in, only nodding before he stood. “I will. Thank you.” He leaned over Mrs. Ruby affectionally kissing her cheek as if he had done it a million times before. His rough exterior didn’t take away from his ability to charm any

woman. It was an effortless characteristic for a man like Isiah. She was harmless and looking out for Lake when she shouldn't have had to. He dropped the ball. *I hurt her.*

“Can I get you anything before I go?”

She grinned shaking her head. “You can get me the hell up out of here is all I need. If you can't do that then, no.”

His face opened into a smile. “Sorry, I don't think I can manage that.”

With a roll of her thin eyes she waved him off. “Then get on out of here.”

Isiah chuckled under his breath. Again she was bossing him around. This small frail woman was telling him how to move. “She's staying with her cousin tonight. I heard them talking about it when they were leaving.”

“It was a pleasure Mrs. Ruby. I hope to see you again.”

“Child, I ain't going nowhere,” she fussed. “Oh and be easy on Nathan. The poor boy is in love with a woman that will never be his and it doesn't have anything to do with you. She just doesn't see him and she never will.”

Isiah nodded. He wouldn't fuck with Nathan as long as he knew his place and stayed there. Harmless or not, Isiah

wasn't about to play about Lake. Not even where Nathan was concerned. A man is a man and a determined man could be a problem. He wouldn't reveal his thoughts to Mrs. Ruby but he didn't have too. She saw it a mile away.

"Take care," were his parting words before he left to go home and change. Later he would be out again to find Lake and would be bringing her home with him. She didn't really have a choice. *She's mine.*



"Chloe, I don't feel like being social. I think it's best if I go home." Lake glanced over her shoulder at the two men who had just arrived at her cousin's apartment. A surprise she wasn't expecting.

"I get it. You don't want him. That's not what this is about. I want to kick it with Trey but he brought a friend. I didn't tell him you were here. Just hang with me. You can be cordial. Hell, tell him you have a man. I already told Trey you did. Please Lake." It was true. Chloe hadn't set her cousin up. She was just as surprised when Trey didn't show up alone. She had hit him up to let him know that she had just finished her

movie and would be home soon. He asked to come through and she agreed. Chloe was thinking they would kick it alone in her room but here he was with a friend that would need to be entertained.

“Chloe,” Lake warned.

“I’m not lying. I wouldn’t do you that way, cuz. I’m not trying to piss off your man and end up in a shallow grave somewhere.” She smirked hoping to ease the tension and Lake rolled her eyes. Chloe hadn’t received all the details but she knew that Lake was hiding from Isiah. She didn’t pry. When Lake was ready, she would talk to her.

“He’s not my man,” Lake mumbled; however her tone wasn’t very convincing.

“Maybe not tonight because your mad at your man or whatever he is to you, but he’s still yours. Just do me this solid. Hell don’t talk to Micah. Maybe he’ll leave.” Chloe grinned.

“Fine. But you own me.”

“I know and I’ll pay up. Charlene needs help next weekend. I told her I was bringing you. It’s a big job, we’ll make like three grand.”

Lake could definitely use the money so she perked up some. “That helps but you still owe me,” she warned, glancing over her shoulder again. Micah was a nice looking guy. He just wasn’t *her* guy so she wasn’t interested. No matter how much she attempted to deny the truth, she was already taken.

The longer she stayed away from Isiah, the more she missed him. Lake wouldn’t be able to hold out much longer, but she didn’t want to. She simply had no idea if she could deal with all the things attached to being with him. Shaking the thought she grabbed her drink and headed to the living room. Since Micah was on the sofa, she sat a few feet away on the floor, not wanting to give any mixed signals. *I guess I’m stuck.*

The night moved smoothly. Micah was actually pretty cool and didn’t try anything out of the way. The four of them played cards, drank and watched a movie. Lake kept her distance and Micah respected it. When the hour grew late and Chloe and Trey crept off to her room to talk, Micah got comfortable on the sofa while Lake took up the love seat bending her body to fit. The two were silent, in their own world which was just fine with Lake. The drinks that Chloe prepared had her a little tipsy, so she was fading in a matter of

seconds of being still. So much so that when she drifted and there was a knock at the door, it took Micah shaking her shoulder for Lake to realize what was going on. She checked her watch; it was just after eleven which had a frown on her face. Chloe was notorious for having multiple men, so Lake was praying that things weren't about to go left.

She pulled herself from the sofa toeing carefully to the door, with Micah behind her. When a heavy hand rapped against the door once more, Lake's frown deepened but her mouth dropped open right after when she heard *his* voice.

"Lake, open up. I know you're here. I been texting and calling. You wouldn't answer and Mrs. Ruby told me you were staying here tonight."

Her body steeled from the mention. *Mrs Ruby?*

Lake glanced across the room at her phone realizing it was still on silent from when she and Chloe were at the movies. Then her eyes landed on Micah.

Shit!

"Aye we're good. I'm just here with Trey. If that's your dude, I'll tell him," he admitted hopeful things would be that easy. But her *dude*, wasn't a typical dude. *Isiah's a killer.*

“No, just umm, you can sit down.”

I have not done anything wrong.

Lake inhaled releasing it slow before she moved closer to the door unlocking it. When she inched it opened and her eyes landed on his tight orbs she wanted to smile at how sexy he looked frustrated the way he was. Isiah had no patience. He was seething from having had to wait.

“What are you doing here?”

His face grew even more intense. “You know why I’m here. You gonna move so I can come in?”

“First let me tell you something so that you don’t overreact.”

“Overreact about what, Lake?”

“Chloe has company. I don’t, she doesn’t but—”

Before she could finish, Isiah had pushed the door as hard as he could creating enough space for him to enter. When he stepped inside. Micah was on his feet quick.

“The fuck is this?” His eyes landed on Lake again before they moved past her to Micah who began explaining.

“Aye it isn’t what you think. I don’t know her. We just met tonight and kicked it with—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Isiah barked across the room, causing Micah to stop talking. His jaw flexed right after. He had no idea who Isiah was but he surely didn’t want any smoke with the man. Not over a woman he had no claim to. Lake was beautiful and cool but that was as far as it went.

“You been with him all night?” Isiah was looking at Lake but pointing at Micah.

“No, just a few hours. Can we do this another time? It’s late.”

“Hell no. We’re doing this shit now.”

“Stop being so—”

Before she could finish, he had her arm in his grasp and was pulling her with him. When they reached the first room he passed, which happened to be the bathroom across from Chloe’s room, Lake was shoved inside with Isiah slamming the door and pinning her against it. His hand swiped the wall turning on the light seconds later, like he was familiar with the space.

“Didn’t I ask you if you wanted to be single?”

Lake just stared but didn't respond. That only made matters worse. He stepped into her personal space until her back rested completely against the wall.

“Lake, didn't I ask you if you wanted to be single?”

“Yes.”

“And what was your answer?” His face was hard, unchanging, unforgiving. *He's angry.*

“My answer doesn't matter.”

“You sure about that?” She could feel the anger pushing through his pores, seeping from his medium browns. It was intimidating at best and Lake felt like she was drowning.

Not anymore.

She felt the heat from his body, his hard angry eyes pinned her in place and the way his cologne assaulted her senses was proof that her answer mattered. She was his and he knew it. Isiah was challenging Lake to deny that she was. And she was stubborn so...

“Yes, I'm sure. My answer doesn't matter.”

“Okay.” The anger in his demeanor eased some before Isiah's hand pressed into the door just above her head and his

mouth covered hers. The way he assaulted the space with dominance, need and desire was surreal. His tongue working its way between her lips with the slight taste of Hennessy and mint clinging to it had Lake light headed. Her hands found the side of his shirt and then moved to his back, pulling him in closer. She'd missed him and wanted more. Even as angry as he was, no man gave the passion, need and connection he offered. The *need* she felt from him, the way she innately relaxed feeling a type of security that only he could provide was scary. The way that her body bent to his will because she knew without a doubt that he would handle her just right was alarming. *I'm his.*

“What was your answer Lake?” Isiah questioned again when their kiss ended.

“No, I don't want to be single.”

He kept his eyes on her but leaned in lower so that his hand could reach her thigh. It moved up the side, slowly. The pads of his fingers grazing her skin until he reached her hip.

“You're around another nigga giving the appearance of easy access but you don't want to be single?”

“No, because I'm not.” Lake pushed forward needing to feel close to him again.

“Then why are you out here doing single shit? How do you think that makes me feel? I show up and you’re chilling like this with another muthafucker. That’s single shit, Lake. Not something my lady needs to be engaging in.”

“I wasn’t chi—”

Her words were cut off when his mouth covered hers again but this time his hands went to work. Lake found herself stepping out of her panties just before she was lifted from the floor and positioned around his waist. With her back against the door, Isiah continued assaulting her mouth using one hand to assist with holding her in place while the other was used to free himself from his sweats. When he lifted her slightly and pushed into Lake so that she eased down on him, they both gasped at the same time. His however was more subtle than hers.

“The only reason why I’m not gonna rock that nigga’s shit is because I know he didn’t touch you. There’s no way you would have let him.”

Isiah’s heated stare was on Lake quick. He was so cocky but she loved every minute of it. He knew even if she didn’t admit it. Micah hadn’t touched her. No matter how many suits he owned, this right here, this hood persona laced

with arrogance, confidence and dominance was her Isiah. She bit down on her lip and motioned with her head to say no. No one would touch her *but* him.

“Good.” He positioned both hands underneath to pull Lake in closer while he deep stroked her dipping slightly at the knees to ensure he drove deeper each time. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

He laughed arrogantly hitting her back to back.

“I can’t tell the way you’ve been dodging me, Lake. As fucked up as it was, I can’t be mad...*shit*.” Isiah turned them both positioning Lake on the small counter angling her hips towards him, after pulling her to the edge. He needed more leverage.

“Shit, wait.” Lake’s hands landed behind her, desperate for stability. One slipping into the sink because there was not enough space. “I’m gonna fall.”

He smiled shaking his head. “Nah, I got you. Relax.”

Relax? You’re damn near splitting me in two and you want me to relax?

Lake shut her eyes and braced for the deadly thrust that she was all too willing to endure. It was a good kind of pain.

One that she missed. She truly did miss Isiah. The thought had her thighs spreading wider to allow more access. She needed more and as if reading her mind. Isiah delivered.

He picked up his pace already feeling like he was about to explode.

Five fucking minutes and she got me about to nut.

Instead of fighting, he leaned in and took her bottom lip between his teeth biting gently before they kissed. Sending his tongue in her mouth for the final kill. The way Lake's body worked with his had Isiah's stomach tight just before his release shot from his balls. Seconds later, he drove in Lake so deep that her arms gave out and he had to catch her from landing hard against the mirror while he grunted through his release. Lake was right there with him and just in time because had she not reached hers it would have been too late.

"Fuck." Isiah hissed when his body calmed. His eyes found hers as he continued to pulse against her walls. The lazy grin on her face brought a scowl to his.

"You're smiling and shit like I'm not about to curse your ass out. Not only are you in here with some random ass fuck nigga but you've been drinking." He could tell from the way her eyes slanted and their pink tint.

“A little,” she grinned.

“Not if Chloe made that shit,” he grit through his words, easing out of Lake, helping her remain steady until he lifted her from the counter and placed her on her feet.

She leaned into his body circling his neck so that she could tip toe enough to steal another kiss.

“I did miss you. I was just... I needed space.”

He nodded pecking her lips once more before removing her arms and looking around. Locating what he needed, Isiah lifted a hand towel to clean up with. Once he was done and he lifted another turning the water on right after. When it was warm, he pushed his hand under, wetting the end of the towel squeezing to drain the extra water.

“I can do it.” Lake rolled her eyes taking it from his hands. While she cleaned up he watched. She tossed the used towel on the counter and then reached for her panties stepping into them. Isiah watched her every motion like the protector he was.

“This was wrong.” She rolled her eyes. “He’s out there thinking crazy things.”

“He better be thinking about how grateful he should be that I’m not about to put that heat in him,” Isiah warned with seriousness she was sure he meant.

“Stop. I told you I don’t know him. We barely even talked.”

The look he gave had Lake letting the subject go.

“Get your shit. We’re going to my house.”

“No, I’m supposed to stay here tonight.”

That same look was back causing Lake to roll her eyes again. “Fine.”

After leaving the bathroom Lake spoke to Chloe through the bedroom door to inform her she was leaving. She then collected her things out the guest room with Isiah damn near up her ass the entire time. When they reached the living room, Micah’s eyes bounced between the two of them.

“Aye, let me give you a bit of advice. Whoever you came here with, if he tells you he’s coming here again and asks you to come, you make sure she’s not here. ‘Cause if she is and I find out you came anyway I’m airing this bitch out and everybody in it.”

Lake's eyes stretched but she wasn't surprised. She simply shook her head and lead the way to the door not so much as acknowledging Micah again. After she was in the passenger seat if his truck he looked around and frowned.

“Where the hell is Bleu at while you're out here trying to get a nigga fucked up?”

Lake grinned at him thinking of her baby. “The border until the weekend. She needed a bath so I let her stay. They take good care of her and I was staying with Chloe.”

He gave Lake a hard look before starting his truck.

“Yeah you was on some bullshit. You better be glad I'm not in the mood to snatch you up.” He paused and then leaned over grabbing her chin so that he had her full attention. “With the shit I told you the other night, this might not be the best time to admit this but I'm a shooter, Lake. I'm with that gunplay. For you, I'll air out the entire god damn city and hear me when I say that shit isn't just talk, baby girl. I mean it with everything I am. That shit you pulled tonight, don't let it happen again.” His warning had been received and it had Lake on a new level. On his level. She would never admit it but she was drawn to this side of him. It was stupid and dangerous but she couldn't help how it made her feel.

Lake grinned and shrugged. She wasn't worried in the least and that's the thing that should have scared her the most. Everyone should always worry about a man like Isiah Cason, but not Lake. When she was with him, she felt the safest she ever had in her life and that's why she knew that no matter what, he would always be in her life.

11.

I'm ready.

Isiah lifted his eyes to the bathroom door. Lake was behind it finishing her shower. Had he not forced her to do it alone, he would have been inside her again and he knew she needed a break. She wouldn't dare admit it but for the past two days, they had done very little other than sleep and have sex. Food managed to find its way into the equation, occasionally, but most of their time had been spent with him between her legs. The reasoning was stacked. They missed each other. The two had a connection that couldn't be explained, only felt and experienced. *Obsession*. They spent the past two days experiencing it.

When?

Tomorrow. Is that okay?

His jaw flexed at her asking permission like she had to.

Shoot me the time and I'll be there.

I love you Sih. I can't wait to be home.

Love you too.

Just as he locked his phone Lake came out the bathroom. He could smell her right away. Strawberries and honey. He was familiar with the scent more so than he was with his own. It was on repeat every time a memory of Lake found its way in his head. Isiah memorized every detail about her, when he could.

“Come up here. I need to holla at you about a few things.”

“No.” It rolled from her lips effortlessly. She bypassed the bed dumping her dirty clothes into his hamper. The act had him smiling. *She’s comfortable here.*

“No?” With curious eyes and a raised brow, Isiah followed Lake around the room. His room, that had become hers in the two days since she had been there. The only thing missing was Bleu.

“No. The last time we needed to *talk*, you told me you killed someone and you tried to fuck some calmness in me so that I wouldn’t spazz out.” *And it worked.* Her eyes leveled to his but she kept her face neutral. “I’m happy right now. Can you just let me be happy before you ruin it with the toxic parts of your life?”

Nothing about what she said was funny but Isiah found himself laughing. Maybe it was the delivery or the *fuck some calmness* into her part. Lake didn't have an aggressive bone in her body. At least not one that he had experienced yet. He was sure she had some gangster in her but only when pushed too hard. She wasn't exactly dainty or poised in a way that made you consider her bourgeois but she was damn sure close. Lake just didn't come from money. That was the only thing that saved her from being high class. All the potential was there. She was an average chick with Queen potential. He planned on building Lake to embrace that potential. He wanted the best of everything for her already. She was his Queen; she just didn't know it yet but she also had a little G tucked away in her as well. That had Isiah's dick rising.

“Is something funny?” Lake placed her hand on her hip, face showing every bit of irritation building.

“Nah, nothing's funny. Just come up here. I want to discuss a few things and I promise not to talk about the side effects of my gunplay.” He winked at Lake who still wasn't amused. “Lake come on. I'm just fucking with you. Come up here, please.”

Lake's eyes rolled as she stared at his handsome face and bare chest. He smirked at her observation of him. She always tried to play it cool but failed miserably. When she gave in, climbing in bed over his body, instead of entering from the opposite side, he pulled her against him, tucking her under his arm. She slipped down just a little searching for comfort and the second she found her spot; curious eyes were on him.

“There better not be any one-eight-seven's in this talk.” She warned with a look that didn't match her tone. She tried to sound hard but it came off as fluff. Isiah chuckled peering down at her pretty face.

“The hell you know about a one-eight-seven?”

“A lot. Uncle Snoop taught me.” Her grin surfaced in a matter of seconds.

“Your corny ass.”

“You like my corny ass,” she teased. Isiah's hand found it immediately palming with ease.

“You got that.” Leaning in a kiss was pressed to her forehead.

“Okay talk.”

“Ema just text. She’s ready to come home.”

“That’s good. I know you miss her.”

“Yeah I do. Its time,” Isiah admitted feeling a sense of relief knowing that she would be home but nervous about how long she would be home.

“Ema is always a struggle. I have to watch her so closely sometimes that it becomes a job. I don’t mind because I love her but I need you to know what that means. I don’t want you feeling like—”

“Isiah, I would never be jealous of your sister.” Lake was offended.

“That’s not what I’m getting at.” He pushed out in a huff, raking a hand down his face. Noel hadn’t been very forgiving about his role in Ema’s life. She didn’t understand Ema’s dependency on Isiah and that caused problems. He simply wanted to be up front with Lake so that there wasn’t a repeat of the issue he had with Noel. “She’s just needy sometimes. Fragile and unsure. She leans on me for guidance and confidence when she is unsure. I’m used to it so it doesn’t bother me but everybody doesn’t always get it.”

“I’m not everybody. I get it. I’m glad she’s coming home. I want to meet her. I’m looking forward to it.” Lake’s spirit was genuine and that put his soul at ease. He needed Ema and Lake. He couldn’t have one without the other and had been stressing about how it would play out.

“I appreciate that. She wants to meet you too. She’s already on my ass after she saw the pictures of you.”

“Pictures?” Lake tilted her head back and Isiah laughed dragging his hand down his face again.

“Yeah, I took them once while you were asleep in my bed. You had me on some creep shit but I couldn’t help it.”

Lake froze remembering that she could have been naked. “Was I...were they?”

“Nah you’re good. You were dressed but she was giving me hell about a *woman* being at *my* house in my bed. I don’t entertain here and she knows.”

“Oh so I’m one of few.”

“Nah, *the one*, no few. The only one.”

His look was serious. There was nothing at all to insinuate that what he was saying was a lie or a joke.

“Wow.”

“Yeah wow.” Isiah lifted Lake’s chin brushing his lips across hers before he actually kissed her. “Now can we talk about the heavy shit?”

“No.”

“Stop, with your difficult ass. I’m trying some new shit with you so will you let me do it? This isn’t my thing.”

“What’s not your thing?”

“Giving consideration to someone else about how I move.”

Lake gave thought to what he was saying and grinned. She couldn’t imagine Isiah caring what anyone thought. Not even her, but here he was, trying to make sure she had insight on his life. His *personal* life. The secrets that no one else was privy to. The least she could do was cooperate.

“Heavy shit it is then.”

“I swear your ass is corny as fuck.” He chuckled and tugged Lake from his side, helping her adjust on top of his body. She struggled for a minute and then sat up pressing her hands into his abs. He followed the motion and then gave her his eyes, brows high, lip tucked between his teeth. “Be careful.

I'm trying my best to pace this shit but..." his eyes lowered again to their connection. He was already rising.

Lake sucked her teeth at the same time her eyes rolled. "Just talk, perv."

He gave the idea some consideration but chose to stick with the original plan. "Aight, the heavy shit." Isiah's hands moved to her waist. His fingers pressing into her skin in a soothing manner. "I'm not a hundred percent legit yet."

"I already knew that."

Isiah kept his expression neutral. Not wanting to give away too much. That wasn't his intent. He simply needed to see where she stood. She couldn't live in his world if she wasn't willing to understand it. *Or accept it.*

"What do you think of that?"

"I don't think anything. It's not my business."

"If you're with me it will be, by default. So tell me how you feel."

Lake's eyes bounced around before they landed on his again. "I guess I just don't understand why. It's not like you need it."

Isiah laughed sarcastically. “That’s the thing that most people *don’t* understand. I do need it. Not the money just the connection. It’s a part of me. All this shit I have reminds me who I am. That reminds me of who I was. Who I was is the person that matters the most. I know it doesn’t make sense. Its...” he paused and before he could finish the thought Lake leaned into him pressing soft lips to his.

“I get it.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah, I do. It’s like you’ll disappear and become someone you don’t recognize if you let it go completely. That’s not so hard to understand.”

Lake did understand. She was living it. As much as she complained about how shitty her life was, she embraced it at the same time. She carried so much guilt for her mother no longer being around and her father losing his freedom that it made her shitty job and living in her shitty apartment tolerable. It was like she was somehow suffering too. If she moved on and was blessed with a good life it was as if she was forgetting who she was. Forgetting that her life ruined her parents.

Isiah stared at Lake dissecting her words. There was a message weaved in to them. A message that he would have to

figure out.

“I promise I get it. If it’s what you need then I don’t care. You just have to be safe. You let me in and now that I’m here, I don’t want to leave. I can’t leave. I need this, *you*.”

There was another kiss that followed before Lake buried her face in his chest.

“I’m not going anywhere, Lake. That’s my word.”

It was indeed his word, but the fear of having to break it was suffocating. *I can’t do that. I’ll figure this shit out.*

Isiah’s arms closed around Lake’s body. His settled but his mind refused to. There was so much to figure out and so little time but for now, his world felt perfect and that was what he was holding onto.

The next morning as always, Isiah was up before the sun broke through. His mind was racing again. There were a few more things that needed to be settled. He dialed Cyn first and she answered in a sleep laced groggy sort of gruff. He woke her but it was par for the course

“Why the hell don’t you sleep like normal people?”

His smile surfaced immediately. “I sleep. The streets just control the hour.”

“You’re not in the streets anymore Sih.”

“Habit. I can’t break it.”

“Well don’t make the rest of us suffer. What the hell do you want? It’s too early to think. Tell me so that I can deal with it later.”

Isiah smirked and peered out the window of his office. There wasn’t much to see. The East side of his property lined with a massive wrought iron fence. Not much security but it closed him off from his neighbors in a sense. “Lake has a degree in journalism. She hasn’t been able to find a job yet. You know how that shit goes. I need to help her but I don’t know anyone who can. So I need you to find someone who’s willing to take her on.”

“Sih,” Cyn pushed out an exasperated sigh. “This couldn’t wait?”

“No. Bean’s coming home today. I have to convince Lake to call out to work which means I have to have an alternative option available for when she hits me with the *I’m gonna lose my job* bullshit. A job that doesn’t pay shit and she hates. I also know that I’ll be busy most of the day so I wanted to make sure you were on it.”

“At least it’s not buying panties.” Cyn groaned. “I’ll make a few calls. When did Ema decide she was ready?”

“She text me last night. I saw her recently and she looked good. The doctors said she’s been physically ready for a while but you know how that goes.”

“I do. I’m glad she’s coming home. What about Lake?”

The question was loaded and held other questions beneath the surface.

“We talked. I’m not worried. She’s looking forward to meeting Bean.”

“Good. Send my love and I’ll see her soon.”

“I will. Let me know if you find something.”

“You mean when?”

Isiah chuckled again. She knew him well. There was no option to not get it done. If he tasked Cyn with a duty, it was because he knew she could handle it. If she couldn’t he was aware that she would force a fit until it was handled.

“Later Cyn. Keep me posted.”

Once he was done with the call, he sent a text to Odin.

We need to talk soon. I’ll see you in a few days.

Immediately a response was returned. Like Isiah, the lifestyle affected Odin's sleep patterns.

Indeed. I'll be waiting.

Isiah made calls to his team to check in. The conversations were simple with statements such as *how's the family* (how is business), *is the baby growing, you need anything* (Is product selling, time to re-up)? All selectively coded for their understanding.

By the time he was done with business, it was just after seven so he found his way back to the master suite to wake Lake. He had to be there at nine to pick up Ema and Isiah wanted Lake with him.

The sight of her in his bed always hit differently. Each time a new emotion surfaced adding to the ones before it. This time it was security. Lake in his bed meant the possibility of his future with her being secure. It was something he needed.

“Lake...” soft kisses landed on her shoulder while Isiah watched her every movement. The pout of her lips, the flutter of her eyes and the way her shoulders deflated and relaxed.

“Mmmmmm, it’s early,” she whined refusing to open her eyes. His mattress was heaven. So much so that she was strongly considering taking him up on the offer to get her one. *It must be nice to have money.*

“It is, but we have to get Ema by nine so I need you to get up. We can grab food on the way or wait until we get her and eat together.”

Lake’s face balled up before she actually opened her eyes. “I don’t have to go. I’m sure she wants to see you first. I can meet her later and I have to be at work by eleven.”

“She wants you there. She demanded when I told her you were here. You can take the day off.”

“I can’t. They don’t really approve of—”

“Then quit if they’re gonna fire you anyway. You hate that fucking job. They don’t pay shit and—”

“And what?” Lake shifted slow until she was in a seated position.

“And I don’t want you there.”

“You don’t want...why?” Lake was confused.

“Because of Nathan? You said Mrs. Ruby told you where I

was. You talked to her? Did you see Nathan too? What happened?”

Isiah’s expression was hard. His posture straight while he stood before her from the side of the bed.

“Stop fucking associating my motives to another man, Lake. There’s not another muthafucker on this earth I feel threatened by when it comes to you. Don’t take that to mean that you giving any other than me consideration doesn’t do shit to me but I’m not threatened. I know you’re mine. Nothings gonna change that. But yes, I saw her. We talked about you and our relationship. She bossed up on me.” He laughed under his breath at the memory. “But that’s all that happened. I don’t want you there because you’re better than that place. You have a damn degree and working at *Harrington* is not what you want to do. You’re also breaking laws. You’re doing shit that you’re not supposed to do. You could go to jail for tending to the residents and handing out their medications. I’m sure you’re already well aware of how bad that is.”

Lake dropped her eyes before they lifted to him again and she nodded. “I have to do something. My bills don’t care

about me breaking laws as long as they get paid.” Her eyes rolled at the thought.

“I’mma help you find something. Cyn’s looking into it now. You’ll have some options soon. Until then, I’ll help you out—”

“No. Are you really going to be this damn cliché? The big money guy who takes on the broke girl, dresses her up and pays all her bills.”

Isiah smirked as his brows lifted. “I didn’t say shit about paying all your bills or any of that other shit. I said *help* you out. And how you know what my accounts are looking like? You been snooping through my shit when you’re here alone?”

“I don’t...I just...shit, never mind.” Embarrassment flushed Lake’s cheeks. She threw the covers back and climbed out the bed attempting to bypass Isiah who made it nearly impossible when his massive frame cut her off.

“Assumptions don’t feel good do they?” Amusement blazed in his eyes which didn’t help her mood.

“Will you move?”

“Nah, can’t do that. My little firecracker needs to be tamed.” His smile was charming and annoying at the same time. Isiah stepped around Lake pulling her between his legs right after he positioned himself on the side of the bed. “Let’s address this part first. I have money, a lot of it. I could pay all your bills for the next year and not even flinch, but I won’t. The only reason why I won’t is because I’d rather you be here with me. It works in my favor if they put you out of that hell hole.” When his eyes met with hers she frowned.

“It’s not that bad.”

“It’s not good either, Lake.”

“It’s what I can afford.”

“I’m not judging you. I’ve been there. Shit, I’ve been worse off. My point is, I’ll do whatever you need me to do. You call the shots and I’ll pull the trigger. But that job has to go. Let me help you.” His fingers gently pinched her chin forcing her eyes to merge with his.

Lake nodded and pushed out a short breath. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know, I feel like this went way left.”

Isiah's jaw flexed. "Don't apologize for saying what you feel. I don't have to like it and most times I won't but it's your right to own whatever feelings you have. It's my job to make sure that your feelings align with the way you deserve to be treated." He pulled her into his chest and kissed her forehead. "Now go get dressed because if we're late getting Ema, I'm throwing your ass under the bus."

Lake burst out laughing and stepped away but Isiah caught her wrist. "We're good Lake, don't sweat the little shit, aight?"

She nodded and then disappeared into the bathroom. Isiah lifted from his position on the bed and headed to the closet to get dressed. His mind had already transitioned to picking up Ema and getting her settled in. It was going to be a long day so he was in the process of mentally preparing.

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Lake agreed to call in and decided to spend the day with Isiah and Ema. The two women bonded immediately. It was likely their love for the same man giving them a connection that they wouldn't otherwise have. Even if they

both cared for Isiah in different ways, they both loved him. Lake just wasn't prepared to label it as such. Not yet. Who falls in love that fast? *I do.*

Emma and Lake consumed most of the conversation in the car and at breakfast. It offended Isiah slightly because he was used to having them both all to himself, now here they were acting as if he wasn't sharing space with them. Deep down inside it further confirmed what he already knew. There was purpose in his relationship with Lake. It was supposed to be, so when they reached his home, he retreated to the theatre room while Lake and Emma were in her room, getting Emma settled.

“Did he tell you why I was in there?”

“Your condition yes, but that's all.” Lake didn't want to offend Emma or make her feel as if they had been discussing her inappropriately. Isiah would never do that. He loved his sister and protected her always. Even in her absence.

“So you know I'm crazy?” Emma smiled while Lake's face was forced into a display of discomfort.

“You have a condition, you're not crazy. My mother was schizophrenic. She was closer to crazy than I'm sure you'll ever be.”

Ema's features softened. "Was she really?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

God did it, you didn't.

Ema smiled harder. "You're so good for him. For us."

Laughing lightly Lake shook her head to say no. "I'm not so sure about that. I've been complicating his life I'm positive. I wonder why he even wants me around most days."

"No, well maybe but not like you think. He's happy. Isaiah is never happy. Comfortable, relaxed, in the moment but never happy. He worries too much about me, about everything. My brother is always worried about something, but like I said, mostly me. He raised me. He took on the responsibility when our parents died. Did he tell you he saw our father get shot?"

Lake froze. He had but with so much more emotion than she mentioned it with. "He did."

"Sih always takes care of everyone. No one ever takes care of him. I hope you will. He wants you to, you know?"

Ema's big eyes flashed with something that Lake couldn't decipher.

“Your brother is not really the kind of man who wants to be taken care of. *Well maybe sexually.* He’s stubborn and likes being in charge.”

Ema grinned hard. “You do know him then, but that’s only part of it. He wants to be taken care of too, he just won’t ever ask. He doesn’t know how to let anyone take the lead. You have to recognize the need and just do it. I can’t. He won’t let me. He thinks the slightest thing will break me and maybe it will. I mean look at my life. But I’m strong sometimes.” She shrugged looking like a child. She and Lake were only a year apart but Ema felt much younger; her spirit felt like that of a child. It drew Lake even closer to her. She could understand Isiah’s need to protect his sister. Lake felt the same way about Ema. “But I want him to be good. I want him to have someone who cares enough to lead when it’s necessary. Even if he can do it, he doesn’t always have to. I think that’s you. I want it to be you.” Her smile was genuine so it caused Lake to smile. “At least someone around here will be getting some. I haven’t been with a man in years.”

Lake’s eyes went wild briefly from the shift in conversation. The transition wasn’t fluid at all. “How old is your son?”

“Three.”

“Damn,” left Lake’s mouth before she could help it.

“Damn is right.” Ema laughed hard rolling her eyes at the same time. “It’s hard for me. I have to be healthy up here.” She tapped her temple. “Sex is different for women and way more difficult for someone like me. I get too emotional and then I get depressed. My son’s father really put me through it. It’s on sight if Isiah ever crosses paths with him. He’s caught so many Ls because of my brother that I partially feel bad for him, but hey, he broke my heart. My big brother doesn’t play about anyone he cares for. You’ll see.”

“Oh trust me, I’ve seen it. At least on a small scale.”

Ema grinned. She could only imagine and Lake had no idea just how true the statement was. “I want you to meet Emmanuel. You’ll love him. He’s so smart and he’s beautiful. I probably shouldn’t say that because he’s a boy, but he is. My baby is beautiful. He looks just like his father, which I hate, but man did we make a pretty baby.” Her eyes shined again when they landed on Lake.

“You and Sih would make a pretty baby too. A pretty brown baby with dark eyes and a head full of thick hair. Isiah

had a lot of hair when he was a baby. He was so adorable. You want to see?"

Lake smiled softly and nodded. Ema climbed off the bed and hurried into her closet. She returned shortly after with a small photo album which she handed over to Lake. She brushed her fingers across the top before peeling it open.

Her eyes scanned the first picture with a light heart. A woman holding the hand of a little girl.

"That's me and momma. I was like four or five." Lake smiled harder and then looked up at Ema paying close attention to her features. They mirrored the little face in the picture.

"You look the same."

Ema's eyes rolled. "I know. Sih does too." Ema leaned forward flipping pages until she stopped on one of a younger version of the man who made Lake's heart do crazy things. He indeed had a head full of hair. It was massive, thick and jet black. He couldn't have been more than one year old and even as a toddler his smile was charming.

"Adorable right?" Ema grinned and Lake's cheeks hiked.

“Oh my God, yes.”

“Here you go with this shit.” Isiah stepped in the room snatching the photo album from Lake’s hands.

Ema hopped up and tried to get it back. “Sih, let her see. You were adorable.”

“Hell nah. She’s already around here trying to snap on me like she running shit, cause she thinks I’m soft. This damn sure won’t help.”

Isiah was more than positive that he’d proven to Lake above and beyond that he was anything but soft, however he wasn’t thrilled about her seeing baby pictures. There were also pictures of his parents in there and he wasn’t in a good place to revisit memories of either of them. It was something he struggled with while Ema clung to it. She couldn’t get enough of discussing their parents. He let her talk when she needed too but refused to share in the memory or entertain them. It was her thing, not his.

“I have to leave for a little while. You two good?”

Ema of course was great. She had a new friend. Someone to cling to freeing up Isiah, but Lake wasn’t so thrilled. The look she delivered said it all.

“Nothing like that.” He reasoned so close to her ear that Ema missed it. Lake still wasn’t convinced and it showed in her body language. Her spine was straight and her shoulders were now stiff in comparison to the relaxed state she had been in before he entered the room.

“I won’t be long and I promise it’s not like before.”
When I found out my world was falling apart and I shut you out.

“It better not be. You had your one chance to put your ass on your shoulders. That’s it,” Lake warned. Ema’s eyes bounced between the two searching for answers but Isiah only laughed, kissing Lake’s temple.

“See, that’s why she doesn’t need to see this shit. It makes her talk to me crazy like she doesn’t know who I am.” He winked at Lake and Ema grinned when he tossed the photo album on the bed.

“Order dinner. I’ll be back by then.” He delivered over his shoulder as he left the room.

“See, he needs that. I think he kinda likes when you talk to him crazy.”

“He hasn’t seen crazy yet but if he’s not careful he will.”

“Come on. Let me show you the rest of his pictures.” Lake settled in next to Ema and allowed her to go on and on about her brother and her parents. She seemed to be at peace discussing them so Lake didn’t interrupt. At the very least it would keep her mind off of Isiah and where he was going.

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Isiah left his house infuriated. This situation couldn’t be handled with a phone call. He had to do a face to face for two reasons. He replayed the exchanges in his head as he drove through town on his way to Miranda’s place.

I miss you.

When can I see you?

I need to see you soon Isiah.

I better see you today.

I’m pregnant. Come see me or I’m telling Noel.

She wasn’t that far from him, which she had no clue of. Maybe a twenty minute drive, thirty if traffic was heavy, but

Miranda had never been to his home so she would never know their proximity. Isiah hadn't lied when he told Lake she was the only one. She was.

With his mind back on the task, he was annoyed by the fact that a simple text or call wouldn't do, he had to show up. Had he not responded one way or another Isiah was sure that Miranda would have reached out to Noel. Dick made women stupid and good dick had the potential to make them irrational and crazy. That's where Miranda was right now. *Irrational and crazy*. There was nothing between them but sex. He never lied. Not once but that didn't stop Miranda from creating her own narrative. It had been two months since he'd seen her yet she was blowing him up making demands like she mattered in his life. He hadn't answered any calls or texts during the past two months, which made it worse. It was his thing, how he handled most women. Generally, they got the picture and moved on, some would reach out again just to try their luck and some would even show up at his club or at *Cason Realty*, but one conversation shut it down and put them in their place. That was what was needed for Miranda. Isiah wasn't worried about her being pregnant. He was careful, always strapped up and most times as he was reaching his peek he would pull out even with a condom on. It was the release that was necessary not

the woman he was inside of. Once she had done her part and brought him to that point, she was no longer relevant.

Well, all but Lake fit that category.

She was different. Everything about her was different which was why he handled their relationship with a new found motivation. One that required him to put Miranda in her place. Forget about everyone else, they no longer existed. Miranda included so now; it was up to him to make that point clear. Isiah wasn't the type of man you threatened. He didn't take to kindly to people not doing what he needed them to do and right now, he needed Miranda to move the hell on with her life. After a quick stop at the store, he pulled up to her place. When he reached the door, she opened it immediately as if she had been waiting.

“I thought you would wise up and show your face.”

She grated through a smug grin and narrowed eyes feeling accomplished that he showed. She was angry but still turned on. The man was beautiful. Everything about him was a turn on. Standing in her living room dressed in dark jeans and pocket tee he still presented the appearance of a man who belonged on a runway or magazine cover. Isiah wasn't a pretty boy. His rugged persona and hard demeanor wouldn't allow

him to be classified as such but the man was still beautiful and he smelled amazing. It was subtle but you couldn't miss it if he were anywhere near you. The attack was one that caught you off guard too. He entered the room and when you least expected it, everything about him made you light headed.

“Take the damn test,” he growled unforgivingly, eyes dark and face hard. His stance was wide, dominant and intimidating. Not at all what Miranda expected. When he pressed the plastic bag he held into her chest, Miranda's eyes doubled in size.

She definitely hadn't expected that. All she knew was that she needed to see him. If she could see him, she could finesse him into her bed. All women assumed that sex was a bargaining tool. She was no different. With a man like Isiah that had been laying between legs which belonged to a woman like Lake, there was no prize which could be handed over for him to fuck up what he had at home.

“I don't need to take a test. I already did. Don't insult me.”

Isiah's medium brown eyes were set as a cocky grin eased onto this face. “Take the test or don't call me, text me or threaten me like it would matter. Take the test or you can tell

Noel whatever the fuck you want. Y'all can cry together about the fact that neither of you has me. I don't give a fuck now take the test if you're still sticking to your bullshit ass claim about being pregnant. We both know you're not, at least not by me, but I'll entertain you while you prove me right."

"You son of a bitch." Pregnancy tests were hurled back at him and Miranda began pacing.

"I don't know who you think you are but—"

Her words stopped quick when he caught a fist full of her shirt and brought her to his face. "You know exactly who I am. Which is why I'm confused about what you thought this would accomplish. I get it. It's hard to let go sometimes but this is done. I need you to understand that."

Miranda couldn't hide the truth or the disappointment she felt. "I won't cause problems. I just...I miss you."

He let go and raked his hand down his face. "You're willing to let me in your bed knowing that I love another woman and will never love you?" He lifted his brows and stared directly at her. Isiah already knew the answer. *Yeah, you would.*

"You love...who is she?"

“It doesn’t matter who she is. *She’s* not you.”

That was the final nail in the coffin. Miranda got what she needed even if it ripped her heart out of her chest. They were done. The fantasies she created in her mind would never play out in reality and all she had left of Isiah were the memories of how good he made her body feel.

“Please go.” Her voice was soft, no longer possessing the confidence she entertained moments before. She was defeated.

Without another word, Isiah did as she asked. No more warnings needed to be issued. He’d made his point.

The house was quiet when Isiah returned. Too quiet considering the women who should have been there. It gave him an uneasy feeling as he locked the front door. His first thought was to check on Ema. It was her first night home and that was always a little overwhelming.

Maybe I shouldn’t have left her here with Lake.

At the facility there were constant wellness checks. People were on her twenty four seven but here at his house, she was left to her own devices. She had to think for herself

and handle her emotions alone. Isiah tried to give her space but maybe leaving was allowing too much space.

“You’re back,” Ema’s soft voice settled his anxiety. She glided down the stairs right into his arms. Isiah embraced his sister affectionally hugging her back.

“You good, Bean?”

“Don’t call me that.” Her eyes shot up to him and her hand swatted at his arm.

“Why? That’s what I always call you. My Lil’ Bean.” Isiah winked at his sister still seeing the little youngin’ who clung to him, following her big brother around everywhere. Even before they lost their parents she made Isiah her sole provider, her protector. Ema had never been a mommy or daddy’s girl. Isiah was always the love of her life. He was the only one who truly understood her or at least that was how she felt.

“I’m not a bean anymore, Sih. I’m a grown woman who has a bean of her own.”

He kissed her forehead and nodded, tucking her under his arm. “You ready to see him?”

With a quick shake of her head she dropped her eyes.
“Not yet. Soon though.”

“Ema, he loves you. It’s only been a few months.” She had confessed her fears about not being there for him and Emanuel potentially forgetting about her, or not loving her as much. It took a lot of energy for Ema to insert herself back into her son’s life.

“I know. Just a few more days and I’ll be ready,” she whispered softly.

He offered a head nod and she moved on. Her smile was bright again. “I like her, Sih. Much better than the *other one*.”

He chuckled at her mention of Noel. Ema hated Noel, always had but Noel made it easy to. She treated Ema like a leper, like she should feel ashamed of who she was because of her condition. It pissed Isiah off and caused a lot of arguments that never ended well for Noel, but she never got the point.

“There’s only ever been *one* and she’s here.” His eyes swept the room and Ema grinned. “She’s out back. I wanted to give her space so I told her I was going to bed. I was on my way but heard you come in. We ordered food. Yours is in the kitchen.”

“Why you think you need to give her space?”

Immediately alarms sounded in his head and his stomach tightened.

“I’m a lot to take sometimes. I’m kinda clingy and can smother people. You know how I can be.” Ema smiled softly.

“I just didn’t want to be too much too fast. I really like her, Sih. She cares about you.”

She better because I love her.

“You’re not a lot Bean. Anyone that can’t handle all of you doesn’t deserve all of you.”

“Even her?” Ema’s brows raised and when Isiah hesitated she smiled harder.

“That’s what I thought but don’t worry. It was my call not hers and I would never make you choose. You’re happy. I can’t remember a time when I remember you happy Sih. Not sense we were kids. You used to be happy before daddy died. Then you had to grow up and you haven’t been happy since.” Ema lifted onto her toes and kissed his cheek. “I’m going to bed. Will you tell Lake I said goodnight?”

Again he nodded and Ema headed to the stairs stomping when she heard his voice. “I love you Bean. You make me

happy. I'm glad you're home.”

“I love you too and so am I.”

He watched his sister until she reached the top of the stairs and could no longer see her and then he headed to the back of the house to go find Lake. It gave him peace to know Ema was under his roof, safe and in a good space mentally but it pulled at his heart in a different way to know that Lake was there waiting for his return as well.

When Isiah reached the doors that lead to the back of his home, he stopped for a minute studying Lake who was propped up in the corner of the sofa they shared the first night at his home. Her hair was pulled loosely behind her head in a messy ponytail. She likely only did it to keep it out of her face wanting to feel the heat of the flames from the fire pit but it exposed her beauty. Even in the simplest form she was stunning and had no clue how much it affected him. In that moment there was a swell happening in his jeans just from watching her sit quietly, hand wrapped around a wine glass which he was sure had Riesling in it. Likely one of the hundred dollar bottles that she had fallen in love with and drank like it was water because he was unaware of the price. He didn't mind. Isiah didn't talk dollars and cents with Lake.

She would have what she wanted despite the cost. If it made her happy he would pay.

The door leading to outside was quiet. Lake didn't hear Isiah but she sensed him. Anytime he was near her she could feel his presence. Her head turned slightly and her eyes followed his path until he stopped in front of where she sat. When her eyes rolled up to him, her face opened into a smile.

“Did you just get back?”

“Yeah, but Bean caught me as soon as I came in. I talked to her for a minute.”

“Why do you call her Bean?”

He grinned at the thought. “She was always tall and lanky. Even as a child. Mama called her Green Bean and it just stuck. She's always been my Lil' Bean.”

Lake was an only child and as close as she was to Chloe, she wasn't affiliated with what it felt like to have the love of a sibling. She admired the way Isiah and Ema loved each other.

“I thought she was sleep,” Lake pouted slightly. She would have enjoyed the company while she waited for Isiah to return.

“She’s about to be. Said to tell you goodnight. I think she didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

“How?” Lake frowned up at him and Isiah leaned down and tapped her back, so that she would sit up enough to create space for him. When he filled the spot behind her, Lake leaned back against his chest adjusting until she fit comfortably.

“She’s just funny that way, always worrying about everyone else’s feelings. Didn’t want to over stay her welcome.” Isiah snaked his arm around Lake’s waist pulling her closer before he kissed her neck. His hand moved under her shirt resting on her bare stomach and the contact caused Lake’s body to shudder. The act was intimate but delivered with a smoothness that only he could possess. Isiah always handled Lake’s body like it was his to control, to touch, to enjoy, to pleasure. She welcomed all of it.

“This is her house, not mine. How can she over stay her welcome?” Lake brought the glass to her lips sipping slow before she allowed it to rest against her thigh.

This is your house too Lake. Just waiting for you to accept the offering. “Not with the house, with you. I think she’s trying to avoid pushing you away.”

“She won’t.”

“I know but she feels like she will. Not every woman wants to deal with my dysfunctional sister. She’s no trouble and she will always be my priority but she feels like she’s a burden in my life. Bean feels like she owes me and she wants me to be happy. She does that by trying not to complicate things, or with people who she feels make me happy. That’s you.”

Lake blushed from the realization. “I’ll talk to her. She shouldn’t be uncomfortable here. I don’t want that.”

Isiah chuckled under his breath. *You two are one in the same.*

“No, don’t discuss it. Just show her. If you say anything she’ll over think it. Be easy with your words with Bean. She obsesses over meanings that don’t exist.”

Lake held her head back to see his face. She studied him briefly until his eyes lowered to meet hers. “She’s not gonna brake, Isiah. You have to stop treating her like she will. It bothers her.”

His forehead wrinkled when his eyes narrowed. “She say that?”

“In so many words.”

He chuckled shaking his head before pressing a kiss to her lips. “How you schooling me about Bean and you just met her? Y’all formed an alliance already?”

“Maybe.” Lake shrugged and lifted her glass to her lips again. “She’s sweet.”

“And so are you.” Isiah tucked his face into the crook of her neck while retrieving his phone, answering right away when he noticed it was Cyn.

“Tell her to get her writing samples together.” His eyes landed on the side of Lake’s face.

“I had to call in a lot of favors and kiss a lot of ass, but yes I got it done. And you owe me big time for this one, Sih. Lucky for you I know some important people,” Cyn fussed but with a hint of amusement laced in her words.

“It’s why I pay you good money. Who is it?”

“*ATL Chic.*”

“Cyn,” he groaned. “They’re the parent company to *ATL Business*. It’s in the same damn building.”

Lake felt the tension in his body and attempted to pull away, however Isiah wasn’t having it. He held her in place with the arm that was around her waist.

“They are, but two separate publications. There’s no way for it to be an issue. Besides, unless you lied to me, you’re not in bed with Sonja, so it won’t be a problem. You’re not are you?”

“No, I already told you that, but she’s one of the top writers for *ATL Business*. The two publications work together, a lot.”

“It’s all I have. If she’s any good then Lana is willing to pay her top dollar. I had to throw your name around a little and she wants some free promotion on your site. I’ll handle the details of that part. The company is huge, Sih. It’s a dream job and one she shouldn’t even be in the consideration for with no experience. I stuck my neck out for Lake because I like her, so she better be good. I mean it.”

His regard landed on Lake once more before the left side of his mouth curled into a smile. “She’s amazing. Trust me, she won’t disappoint. Send me the details.”

“Already in your inbox and I mean it Sih, you owe me.”

“Don’t I always deliver, Cyn?”

“Sometimes.”

Isiah chuckled and nodded. She could never just concede. It wasn't in her nature. "How do you know Lana anyway?"

When the line went quiet, he knew there was a story. "She and I have a mutual connection. Let's just say we bonded over an ain't shit man and are sisters for life."

"Do I even want to know?"

"I'm sure you don't. Make sure Lake sends samples first thing in the morning. Lana is waiting. They need someone right away for their Entertainment column. Apparently the young lady they had got caught up in a scandal and ended up as a story herself. It's all over *Caught Live*. Lana was furious about it affecting her brand. I guess you can say my call came right on time."

"My girl."

"Yeah whatever. Just remember the debt, Sih. I have to go. I have a date."

"A date?" His brows lifted and Cyn groaned.

"Yes a date, goodbye."

When she ended the call he chuckled. Lake sat up and turned against him. Placing her empty wine glass on the table.

“That was Cyn?” She had pieced together some of the conversation and assumed it was about a job. Isiah had mentioned Cyn was calling in some favors to help out.

“Take your jeans off.”

“What?”

He didn't speak right away and instead tugged Lake's arm forcing her to stand. When she was in between his legs, Isiah began unbuttoning her jeans.

“What are you doing?” Lake's eyes bounced around nervously. Ema was home and his staff wasn't due to leave until nine. Anisa had been there since three cleaning a house that was already spotless.

“I'm helping you remove these, you can either move your hands or help.”

“There are people here.”

He smirked and nodded, forcing her jeans open. When the black lace panties were exposed, his lust filled eyes shot up to Lake and a cocky grin eased into place. “I like these.” His full lips grazed the area above her panty line before a kiss landed against her skin.

“Isiah.” Lake’s voice was weak but he still got the message.

“My staff knows to mind their business and Ema is likely out cold. The medication does that to her sometimes and today’s been a lot. Even still, she knows to mind her business as well. Now, let’s get these off.”

His hands worked diligently pushing them down her hips, thighs and then to her ankles so that she could step out of them. Lake’s heart was racing. She wasn’t a risk taker, at least not with things like this. Sex outside in the open was not something she would ever assume she’d engage in, even if they were on private property, secluded from the world, but for this man, the one who had stolen her heart, she went with it.

“Did that call about me?”

“Yes.”

“Can you at least tell me what she said?”

Standing between his legs, Lake’s body shivered as his hands moved across her bare skin. There was a slight chill in the air but the fire blazing a few feet away worked to warm her body on the outside, while his touch set off an inferno internally. He always handled her with care knowing every

inch of her body and how to illicit a reaction. Every touch was intentional and delivered with purpose. By the time Lake straddled his lap, she was already drenched and ready to receive him. When Isiah freed himself and eased her down his length slow and steady, Lake's body responded right away. A pleasurable pain that she had grown accustomed.

“She needs you to send some writing samples in the morning. A friend has extended a job offer.”

“Wait, to write?” Lake's excitement was dulled by the feel of Isiah's length pushing into her core.

The first stroke was always the most potent, her body was forced into shock from being filled completely, stretched beyond what she was accustomed to, however she adjusted quickly and their movements aligned. As their bodies worked together masterfully, Lake's eyes shut tight with her back arching to perfection, sending her chest into his.

“Yes. To write. That's what you want to do isn't it?”

“Can we talk about...”

Isiah lifted her just enough to have her meet his thrust, repeating the motion several times before he responded.

“No talking Lake, we’re celebrating. I need you to let me show you how proud I am first.”

“I...shit...I...didn’t...get the...”

“You did. If you want it it’s yours. I already know she’s going to love your work. Now can we focus or do you want to keep talking?”

Lake’s hands moved from his shoulders, cupping his face, landing a kiss that had Isiah expanding a little more against her walls. She rotated her hips while he delivered steady thrusts, slamming into her from below to a rhythm that matched the beat of his heart. It wasn’t done on purpose, but that was how it played out. Isiah didn’t rush, he allowed Lake to take her time. It was necessary that she was the first to reach her peak. Even if he didn’t get there, it was a must that she did, however it was never an issue. Isiah could climax just from watching Lake struggle through hers and the way she hugged him tightly, pulling him in deeper was a guarantee that he would reach his peak.

The muscles in Lake’s thighs flexed as she threw her body against his. Her orgasms with him were always so intense that she had to brace herself for the fallout. Isiah knew what was coming. He could feel her body unraveling by the

second. Pressing his fingers into her hips, he began deep stabbing upward thrust, lifting her a little higher each time to ensure that he had the ability to go deeper. He was so deep that each stroke allowed the discovery of new territory. His lips and tongue went to work against her neck, before he removed one hand and forcefully gripped Lake's chin, pushing his tongue between her lips. The feel of hers tangled with his had him pulsing a little more with each swipe of her tongue. Lake was the first to reach the finish line, shaking uncontrollably until his arms circled her frame, securing her body against his chest. The vice grip soothed the erratic tremors while he began a round of his own. *Powerful. Beautiful. Earth shattering.* When the two settled into each other, breath easing into a normal state, Lake's head rest on his shoulder while Isiah peppered her face with kisses.

“You okay?”

“No.” The response was lazy and labored but he could feel the smile that followed.

“You want me to kiss it for you?”

Lake grinned, turning enough to press her forehead into his chest. “No. Well, yes but can we wait awhile. I don't think I can move. And this feels good.”

Laughing under his breath, Isiah lifted her chin. “You don’t have to move. I can manage. All you have to do is relax and let me handle the rest. Don’t I always have you?”

His arrogance was such a turn on. Lake was stuck. In too deep to remove herself from him, even if she wanted to.

“Can we at least go inside? I’m sure we’ve given everyone enough of a show for the night.”

His laugh was deep and throaty, just before his lips crashed against hers. Isiah had grown used to kissing Lake in a way that was new for him, but something he couldn’t live without. The passion behind their connection was additive.

“Yeah, we can but first let me handle this.” He was already growing again. Lake felt every inch as it expanded inside of her. Instead of protesting, she began a slow sensual grind to speed up the process. “And your ass better still be up in the morning to send that email,” he warned, feeling as if they had several rounds left that would have Lake down for the count shortly after.

Lake smiled, nodding before their lips met again. There was no way she would be up without him waking her, but she knew it was as good as handled, the same way that their next high was as good as handled. She planned on riding the wave

until her body gave out on her and apparently from the way that Isiah was drilling in her from below, he felt exactly the same.

12.

“Ms. Patterson, thank you for meeting me on such short notice. If it hasn’t already been explained, we’re in a bit of a bind. A situation has created a need which must be filled *immediately.*”

Lake nodded, having done what little research she could before her meeting with Lana Duvet, Editor in chief of *ATL Chic*. It was a huge media outlet in the city and the source of all things important to the entertainment industry. The focus was on Atlanta, but the publication was global being that it was online.

“Perfect. So I’ve gone over the three pieces you sent in, albeit raw and unrefined, I can see the talent. Your word play is phenomenal and had I not known the stories were fiction, I would have been online trying to find out more. Clever. I appreciate your creativity. It’s a first.”

Lake was up with Isiah at a five and quickly drafted three stories, reporting on local celebrities detailing fictional rumors that she skillfully crafted.

“Thank you.”

“I would like to bring you on for a probationary period. For the first ninety days, your stories will have to pass through a set of hands before they’re published. If you survive, the job is permanently yours and you’ll have free reign to write what you want when you want, with consideration to our reputation and brand.”

Lake’s heart was thumping and her pulse matched it’s rhythm, but she did her best to play it cool. “I appreciate the opportunity.”

“Don’t appropriate it honey, honor and worship the opportunity. Do you know how many hearts I’m breaking by handing this over to you?” Lana’s brows raised while a smug grin teased at her lips. “Cynthia is a good friend. She’s come through from me in ways I can’t begin to explain and that boyfriend of yours, well let’s just say, he’s going to pay handsomely with advertisement for AC, but...” she paused, clasping her hands together. “...your work speaks for itself. They got you in the door, in my office and the consideration. Your writing is what is allowing me to extend the offer. Call it a win-win.” She winked at Lake who smiled with pride.

“Now, what I need from you is a promise that you won’t make me regret this. After that, we’ll get you all set up and I’ll introduce you to the staff. You’ll need to go to HR and sign your life away and then we’ll issue your press passes and get you paired with a photographer. You’ll be covering your first event next weekend.”

Lake’s eyes stretched wide. “Next weekend?”

“Yes honey. I told you we’re under the gun here. Gossip doesn’t stop because of a little scandal. The Mayor is hosting a fundraiser and there will be a lot of important names in the room. You’ll be there representing AC unless you don’t think you’re ready. It’s a small function, but news worthy.”

Who the hell considers a fundraiser that the Mayor is hosting a small function?

“No, I’m ready.”

“Perfect, let’s get started.”

Without giving her much time to process, Lana whisked Lake through the building on a tour, introducing her to the staff making sure to focus on the key players. There were editors, photographer, writers, business staff, graphic and layout specialist. They had an entire department dedicated to

running the site and another dedicated to financing it. The process was overwhelming, but Lake took it all in stride when she really felt like her head was going to explode from the overload of information. By the time Lana released her for the day, she was both mentally and physically exhausted but she had a week to wrap her mind around what had just happened since they needed a few days to turn around her background check. After she was cleared, Lake would be assigned to a senior writer to shadow for a few days to get her acclimated to the set-up before they threw her to the sharks. *The Mayor's fundraiser.*

It wasn't until Lake was in her car, alone that she unleashed all the excitement that had been building since she walked into the building that housed *ATL Chic*. She screamed at the top of her lungs, pounding her steering wheel with tight fists. There wasn't a care in the world as she celebrated alone, nor was there consideration for anyone who might be passing through the parking garage where she was parked. Lake expressed her elation mindlessly taking it all in.

Once she was settled enough to gain even the slightest bit of composure, she dialed the person responsible, well one of them.

“Hey girl. I already know. I just hung up with her. She was thoroughly impressed.”

“Wow, you’re gonna make me start screaming again. I can’t believe it was really that easy.”

Cyn snorted through a smile. “It wasn’t, this is a once in a lifetime deal, Lake. God was in your corner because everything lined up. Just don’t make me regret it.”

“I won’t. I swear I won’t. Thank you so much for even making the call.”

She laughed from her gut rolling her eyes. “Like I had a choice. If I didn’t make the call, Sih would have. You have that man so open you could get anything you wanted from him. Wait, forget I said that.”

“I wouldn’t take advantage him.”

“Girl, I know but still, just don’t tell him I said it. I’m sure you already know anyway.” Lake grinned nodding even though Cyn couldn’t see her. “Just don’t fuck up, okay? I have to go. We have a meeting in ten minutes.”

“Wait is he with you?” Lake didn’t want Isiah to feel as if she didn’t appreciate his role in her job with *ATL Chic*.

“No, stop panicking. I won’t tell him I was your first call but hurry. I’m on my way to his office now. This is going to be a long meeting. Maybe you can soften him up so that he won’t be such an asshole to everyone.”

Lake laughed at the thought. She could only image him dressed to perfection, looking delectable in one of his overpriced suits scowling and barking out commands. The visual had her core tight.

“I’m calling him now. Thanks again. I owe you.”

“You can’t afford my favors, Lake. Let Sih cover that cost. Just make me proud and that’s good enough. Oh and get me in the room with some of those celebrities and we’ll call it even.”

“Done. Well if I can.”

“Bye girl. We’ll talk soon.”

Lake hurried to dial Isiah and when his deep cords flowed through her phone, she couldn’t help the smile that opened up on her face.

“Congratulations,” he rasped in that sexy, throaty tone that spoke to certain parts of her body.

“You don’t know if I got it.”

Isiah only laughed as his eyes shot over to Cyn. She shook her head to say no, so he played along. “I knew before you stepped foot in the building. It’s why we celebrated last night. Over and over again. Or did you forget?” His smooth words had Lake’s eyes closing and her thighs clenching within seconds.

“That had nothing to do with me getting the position. That was you wanting an excuse to be with me.”

Again he laughed lightly. “I didn’t think I needed an excuse to have you Lake but call it what you want. I’m proud of you either way.”

“Thank you.”

“I might be a little late, but we can do a late dinner. I want to take you somewhere.”

“You don’t—”

“Lake, just be ready.”

“Fine. I have to get Bleu today.”

“Bring her home with you. Bean will love her. I’m sure she won’t mind keeping an eye on Bleu while we’re out.”

Home?

Lake's mind was racing. This thing was moving too fast.
All of it.

“Stop over thinking. I told you what I want. Eventually that means you there permanently. When you're ready. Just know it's my end game.”

“When I'm ready?”

“When you're ready. I have to go. Congratulations again. Where you heading?”

“To go see Chloe and then maybe to see Mrs. Ruby if I have time. I feel like I'm abandoning her.”

“You're not. You'll just have to visit more often.”

“Yeah. I guess you're right.”

“Text me and let me know where you are.”

Again she was quiet.

“It's not control, it's concern. And Lake?”

“Yeah?”

“No drinks with Chloe.”

Her smile went wide at the same time her eyes rolled.

“It's the middle of the day.”

“It is, but apparently that doesn’t matter to her. I’m late, I’ll see you tonight.”

Isiah ended the call and stood from his chair.

“Concern not control?” Cyn grinned as she led the way out of his office.

“It wasn’t a lie. She’s my responsibility. I need to know where she is just in case.”

Cyn ginned harder. “Love looks good on you, Sih.”

Indeed!

He chuckled from next to Cyn as they fell in step down the hall towards the board room. The next few hours were going to be long, but his plans later were motivation to get through it. *Lake!*

After leaving her interview, Lake dialed Chloe and invited her to lunch. The two hadn’t spoken in a few days, and she wanted to tell her all about her job offer. They meet at Chloe’s favorite Sushi spot, settled into a booth and ordered way to much food before they got caught up.

“I feel like I’m losing you.” Chloe pouted, plucking a California roll from the platter that she and Lake were sharing.

“Why? That’s not true. We’re family Chloe.”

“I know, but it’s like everything about your life changed overnight. I barely see or talk to you anymore.”

“Seriously. It’s not like we talk to each other that much anyway. It’s only been a few months, so there’s no way you already feel neglected,” Lake fussed, but she was well aware that the two hadn’t spoken as much since Isiah.

“I definitely feel neglected hoe. Don’t tell me how I feel.” She rolled her eyes and popped another roll in her mouth. “Are you still going to do the job with me for Charlene?”

“Hell yeah. I haven’t gotten paid yet. An offer is one thing, but until that check hits I still have bills, and I’m pretty sure they’re gonna fire me at *Harrington*, so I can use the money.”

“Is your man gonna be okay with you slumming it?” Chloe grinned, lifting her soda. She was truly happy for her cousin. She loved her enough to celebrate her win without an ounce of ill will. Lake deserved a silver lining. Chloe just hoped she wasn’t edged out of her life. For the longest, it had just been the two of them, Chloe was afraid of what it would mean to be on her own. Her life wasn’t as complicated as Lake’s but it still wasn’t rainbows and sunshine.

“Ain’t nobody worried about what he has to say.” Lake lifted one shoulder before she popped a piece of tempura shrimp into her mouth.

“Then somebody better tell that to your face, with that goofy ass smile you’re rocking.”

“Shut up.” Lake’s smile grew a little more.

“That’s what I thought. But I really am happy for you. You seem to be in a good place and a different kinda happy. Not like that *I’m just settling* happy. You’re *I’m getting good dick on the regular* kinda happy.”

“Chloe!” Lake almost spewed food across the table.

“What? It’s true. Now tell me I’m lying?” Her eyes landed on Lake who grinned answering with a swift shake of her head. “See. I know. Trust me.”

Lake looked down at her phone and hit ignore from the call that was coming through it was the second time today, but she wasn’t in the mood. She wanted to enjoy the happy place that she was in knowing that he would snatch her out of it.

“Girl don’t be ignoring your man’s calls. You know his fine crazy ass likes to pull up. I’m not trying to fight his big

ass but I will swing on him.” Chloe smirked, causing Lake to return one.

“It wasn’t Isiah. It was my dad.”

“Oh. Not feeling him right now?”

“He’ll call back later.” Chloe shrugged before she continued with her thoughts on Isiah. “This is moving really fast. I just don’t want to get caught up and miss things. Like signs, stuff I should have paid attention to but didn’t.”

“Like what?” Chloe’s forehead wrinkled as she peered at her cousin. Lake seemed genuinely happy, and from what she could tell of Isiah the feeling was mutual, but men were good at hiding realities. She prayed that he wasn’t playing her cousin.

“Like anything. It’s always good in the beginning.”

“You feel like he’s not real with it?”

Again, her head motioned to say no. “No, that’s the thing. I feel everything about him and it all feels right. It’s so strong sometimes that I literally can’t breathe. That’s scary because to never feel that is one thing, but to feel it and then lose it or to find out it wasn’t what you thought it was...”

“Lake don’t do that. Don’t go looking for issues. That man has no reason to lie. He doesn’t have to. He can tell you he’s with you and fucking other women and you would either have to deal with it or move on because there are ten more who would sell their souls to accept whatever he’s offering. I don’t think any of it is fake, but he’s still a man, so if you sense things changing don’t be naïve. Protect your heart. That’s all you can do.”

Lake stared at Chloe for a minute before nodding. “I will.”

“And in the meantime, ride that thing like your life depends on it.”

Lake burst out laughing rolling her eyes. “Stop.”

“Mmmhmm, yep, he’s dicking you down just right.”

Chloe ginned lifting another California roll. Lake only rolled her eyes and lifted her drink. Chloe was right though. The sex was amazing but so was everything else. She just had to find a way to have balance and not be sucked into his world so much so that hers no longer existed.

&

Isiah sat outside of Odin's house contemplating his next move. When he texted to tell him he would swing through, he hadn't expected to see Noel's car when he arrived. It was possible it was a coincidence. Isiah had been the one to request the meeting, but still...

Instead of prolonging the inevitable, he got out and made his way to the door regretting the decision to stay when he was greeted by Noel. His face hardened right away but she quickly explained.

"I'm leaving. He told me you were coming and that it would be best for me to go. It's not what you think." She seemed genuine. Isiah checked her out, noticing how sad and broken she appeared to be. *The fuck is up with that?* It was hard to take, but he still didn't feel sorry for her. Noel created her own drama and had to be the one to deal with it.

"Can I ask you something?"

Not in the mood for nonsense, Isiah's face went hard. She noticed and her shoulders deflated. "Long as it's not some bullshit you know I don't want to hear."

Her head shook slightly. "No, well maybe, but I just want to know why not me? I know you moved on with that nurse. She's pretty, but nothing special." Isiah's body tensed.

Lake wasn't a nurse but she wore scrubs. How did she know?

"I don't get it, Sih. Did you ever care about me? I mean *really* care?"

He pushed out a short sigh before his hand raked down his face. "In the beginning, yeah. Shit was cool but truthfully, I never really saw anything long term with you. When you were pregnant I considered it even after that bullshit you pulled, but I just didn't feel it the way that you did."

"But why?" Noel was a grown ass woman but standing here whining like a child. "I've seen her, there's nothing special about her."

He laughed arrogantly. "You wouldn't. That's just who you are and how you see the world. The best things about people are not physical, Noel. It's who they are, how they make you feel. You wouldn't understand that, but it's not your fault. It's how you were raised. You think that a pretty face and money grants you privilege. That doesn't mean shit in my world. Men like me fall in love with women who see us despite the money. Women who may not have it all figure out but they're still confident in who they are. I want a woman who's willing to trust my lead, no matter what and how can you do that? You got all the fucking answers. You never could

just let me be a man. You expected me to just fall in line.
That's not who I am."

"I get that now. Why can't we figure this out?"

"Because I don't want to. You are who you are and I can only be me. It won't work. You'll be good Noel, just let it go and allow yourself to find the right one. It's not me. I'm not even mad about how this shit played out anymore, it is what it is. I wish you the best and whatever you have to do to make yourself feel justified then rock with it. I'll deal with the consequences, but I refuse to be stuck."

"Because you think you love that simple ass girl?" She snorted at the thought before she smirked in a way that was cryptic. "You're always gonna be stuck."

"Do what you gotta do Noel. I mean that."

"Oh sweetheart, it's not me you need to be worried about. It's him." She pointed to the door and Isiah frowned. Noel only winked and stepped off the porch to leave. He pushed the thought aside and stepped into the house in search of Odin. *Maybe he told her I was taking over and she believes I am.*

Isiah's mind was working overtime already. He needed to know what the hell Odin had gotten him into, so that he would know how to move. No matter what, there was no way in hell he was attempting to save Odin's ass, nor was he partnering with him. The thought infuriated Isiah to no end.

“Good to see you, son.” Odin's demeanor was the same as always. It was as if nothing had transpired between the two which had Isiah questioning his sanity. *Is he really this damn arrogant or just fucking crazy.* “Drink?”

“Nah, not a social call. I'm only here to figure out what the hell you did.”

Odin's eyes narrowed on Isiah briefly before he inhaled releasing it slowly. His hands slipped into his pockets and it wasn't until then that Isiah noticed his casual dress. Odin was in a velour suite suit looking as if he stepped right out of the eighties.

“I may have given more details than necessary. I'm afraid it may cause problems. If my suspicions are correct, it's going to cause both of us big problems.”

“What the fuck did you say?” Isiah grit, feeling like his head was spinning. He could already feel the bullshit rising.

“He asked me details about our distribution, how our teams were set up.”

“There is no *ours*. Just your shit and mine.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Nah, I know what you insinuated and what I’m going to have to rectify. When they asked, you answered?”

“I mean yeah. It didn’t seem like much at the time. Most suppliers want to know that you can handle what you’re buying.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it. Once they get your money they don’t give a fuck what happens to the product. You can sit on it for life and it doesn’t affect them one way or another.”

“It does on the comeback. It’s how they make their money. Shit son, you’re not new to this. One load won’t mean shit in the grand scheme of things. It made sense at the time.”

Isiah’s blood was boiling. “It doesn’t make sense. Not even a little bit. It sounds like a got damn set up. You could have been talking to the FEDS. How did you even hear about this guy?”

Odin looked away briefly.

“Fuck man. You didn’t check him out, did you?”

“I didn’t have to. He came highly recommended.”

“From who O?”

“Julian.”

“Julian Sanchez? You have got to be fucking kidding me. Your connect puts you on to another connect and you don’t find that strange? He sold you out, O. And you sold me out.”

Odin sensed it was true even if he wasn’t a hundred percent sure. It’s why he had been stressing over the past week. Barely eating or sleeping.

“Moreno working with Sanchez. Why would he set me up if it meant coming back to him?”

Isiah lifted his brows in disbelief. Odin was an OG, he had to be smarter than this. “What proof do you have that Sanchez is working with this guy? They probably didn’t trust his ass and used you to see if he was legit. Your dumb ass fell right into the trap. What did you tell him about me?”

“Not much, just that you were running your own thing but would be taking over for me.”

That’s enough dumb ass. You just set me up.

Isiah didn't speak. He just stood there fuming and Odin knew he had fucked up.

“It's not as bad as it sounds and if they were FEDS, they could have taken me in right then and there. I gave them enough to have a case.”

“THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS!” Isiah's deep cords had the windows shattering before he calmed down slightly. “The buy doesn't mean shit without the operation. They want the whole got damn thing. You just gave them enough to start looking into your shit...” he paused shaking his head. “And mine.”

“It's an easy fix. We just find him and—”

“And what, kill a got damn FED? Nah, I'm not doing that. I'll handle my shit my way.”

“And what about me?”

“What about you?”

“Are you really not going to help me out of this?”

“Do you really expect them to?”

“YES!” Split flew from Odin's mouth as his voice sounded through the room. When Isiah's hand moved to his waist, Odin lifted his palms to him. Isiah was a shooter.

Always had been. Odin decided to tread lightly. “That’s not necessary. I’m just stressed. You have to understand. I need your help. I handled things with Noel. She’s gonna leave you alone so you can move on with the other young lady.”

Lake, that’s how Noel knew.

“I’m not even upset about the Omar thing either. We both know he deserved it.”

Isiah’s froze. “She told you?”

Odin’s’ face relaxed. “No, but I’ve always known. I didn’t know that’s what kept you two together, but I knew about Omar. He recruited you. The night it happened, my guys we’re watching. I made the call for them to let you go you. The second you pulled the trigger; they could have had one in your head, but I shut it down. I knew it would pay off and it has. You used my product to buy from me. Got damn genius. You’re one of a kind. I knew it from the start. We’re in their together, son. I need you and you need me.”

This muthafucker is crazy as hell if he believes that.

“I need a minute.”

“Okay. Okay. Understood. Just tell me what you need to know so that we can figure this out.”

I'm not figuring out a god damn thing that deals with you.

“His name. Start there.”

“Joseph Moreno.”

“Aight, let me look into some things. I'll get back to you in a few days.”

“A few days?”

“Don't push. This shit is already fucked up,” Isiah warned causing Odin to hold up his hands in surrender again.

“Okay, okay. A few days.”

Isiah didn't respond. He simply turned to leave stopping when he heard Odin behind him.

“Isiah, we can make this work, son. Between the two of us, I know we can. You just have to trust me.”

Not in a million fucking years.

Isiah didn't speak another word, he just left feeling once again that everything around him was falling apart.

13.

“Are you okay?” Lake hadn’t experienced Isiah shut down on her, and even though they were at dinner, had been casually conversing, she could feel the separation. He was dangerously close to *that* Isiah. The one that shut her out.

Delivering a pointed stare which was followed by his signature charming smile, still sent a rush a warmth through Lake.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Her cheeks flushed as she adjusted in her chair. “But that’s not what I asked. I feel like I’m here alone. Is there something you need to tell me?”

There’s plenty that I need to tell you, but I won’t ruin your night.

“No, it’s just been a long day. I apologize.”

“We can go. We’re pretty much done.” Her eyes moved about the table. Both of their plates were empty and she could pass on desert. As much as she enjoyed the effort, Lake didn’t

need fancy restaurants and expensive meals. She was a burger and fries kinda of girl.

Isiah surveyed the table and then looked around. The place was a little more than casual, but still nothing over the top. This time, Lake was dressed appropriately for the occasion in a short black dress, gifted by Isiah. As nice as she looked in the expensive material that clung to her body, he was just as happy to have her in the jeans, and T-shirt she wore religiously.

The thought had him laughing lightly under his breath and Lake's eyes narrowing his way. "What?"

"I keep fucking this up, don't I?"

"What do you mean?"

"This place. It's not really your thing. As much as I knew that, I still brought you here. I wanted tonight to be special for you."

"No, it's fine. The food was good and this time I look like I belonged."

"You definitely belong. I'm the only fraud at this table." He winked at Lake who rolled her eyes. "But you make me look good so it's straight. Come here."

“Huh?” Lake looked around before her eyes met his. The small booth they were in was secluded, intimate and only fit for two.

“Come here.”

“I won’t fit over there.”

“Lake...” his voice was stern but still alluring, so she eased out of the booth and joined him on his side. His large frame barely allowing enough space for her, but they made it work. Her body was tucked under his arm before he tilted her chin towards him and stole a kiss. “I’m proud of you.”

“I haven’t done anything yet.”

“But you will. This is just the beginning for you.”

“I need some of your confidence,” Lake teased with a smug grin.

“It’s yours. But you don’t need it.”

“I do. At least for this. I’m scared shitless that I’ll mess it up and Cyn will kill me and you...”

“I will be right there to help you figure it out, but you won’t mess it up. Cyn wouldn’t have put her name on the line for you if she didn’t believe in you.”

“She never read my work and you pay her so she would have.”

Isiah smirked. “I don’t pay her enough to fuck up her connections. Trust me, she is well versed in telling me no. She put you in the room. Lana made the call. This is not about me or Cyn. It’s about you. Own that shit and make it work.”

“So aggressively sexy.”

“Just trying to keep up. You got me stepping my game up.”

“You’re so full of it.”

“And you’ll be full of me as soon as we get home.”

Lake’s body reacted immediately from the threat and she tensed from his free use of the word home where she was concerned. She was still wrapping her mind around Isiah and everything that came with him.

“In your time. I’m not rushing it.” He kissed her forehead and then signaled for their server. Let’s get out of here. I have a few more ways I want to congratulate you.”

“Of course you do.”

Isiah laughed at the thought but didn’t deny a thing. He was addicted to everything about Lake. Her body was his

sentry and having her close made all of the chaos in his life seem irrelevant. She had become his motivation to find a way to reverse whatever Abara had done. There was no way he would allow anyone in that family to take anything else from him.

When they arrived at his house, it was late and quiet as expected. Lake decided to check on Ema considering that she was home alone with Bleu. Isiah retreated to the master suite, undressing while he waited on Lake.

“They’re asleep. Bleu barely even acknowledged me. She’s such a trader. First you and now Ema?” Lake pouted when she entered the room after finding both Ema and Bleu resting peacefully.

“Now you know how I feel. You and Bean act like I’m not even around when you get huddled up around here.”

“Are you jealous?”

“Hell yeah. I feel like she’s stealing you from me.” A boyish grin eased onto his face as he stood before her, shirtless pants undone and hanging off his waist. Lake toed over to him, kicking off her shoes in the process, and when she was within range, Isiah had her wrists secured in his hand, pulling Lake

into his solid frame. “I’ve never been good at sharing. Never learned that shit and not trying to learn it now.”

Within a matter of minutes they both were out of their clothes and his mouth was all over her body. He covered every inch, exploring with his lips, tongue and teeth, tugging, pulling, swiping and invading with one goal in mind, to make her cum. By the time her body reached its second round of tremors, Lake felt as if she was done for and he hadn’t even entered her yet.

Isiah watched her limp body as she lay flat on her stomach, arms above her head, eyes closed and legs spread wide, dark brown skin, glistening with sweat. She was beautiful in every way. *I can’t fuck this up. I need her.*

Without meaning to, Isiah’s mind went dark. He wasn’t the one fucking things up. The Abara’s were the ones who placed complications in his life. The only reason why he could potentially lose Lake was behind the fucked up decisions that they made. He wasn’t perfect, had never claimed he was, but he tried his best to live better. To be a better man, they just wouldn’t allow it.

“Lake?” his voice was heavy, desperate, damn near a growl.

“Mmmhmm?”

“I need to feel something...” when he kneeled on the bed, positioning himself between her legs, she opened them wider as if welcoming him. She never turned him down. Isiah leaned into her body, pressing a kiss between her shoulder blades while positioning himself at her opening, sliding in just enough to feel her softness surround his steeled length. With a brief pause, he moaned under his breath and then thrust in deeper, sending a sharp pain through Lake that had her attempting to climb the bed. Isiah’s weight prevented the movement, but he kissed her shoulder to relax whatever anxiety was brewing, while he rocked in and out of her slowly. His length dug deeper while his width stretched her beyond its natural limits. Needing some type of relief, Lake’s left leg moved up, bending at the knee until it was near her side. That opened her wider and Isiah took full advantage by angling his body as he began long hard strokes. What started off slow and safe transitioned to fucking. His fingers dug into Lake’s thigh pulling it higher while he tried to knock her walls loose.

The deeper he went the more vocal Lake became. She was trying her best to hang on but her body was shutting down with the need to give into the mounting pleasure that was

pulsing through her body. The way she could feel the desperation in his movement had her wanting to hold to the orgasm that was inches away. *He needs this*. His thrusts were so aggressive and deep Lake tore. The rough nature in which Isiah was handling her body was creating a pleasurable pain that she hadn't experienced, ever. Not even with him, but she welcomed every second of what could only be classified as fucking. His thrusts were so strong and deep that she could barely keep up. There was nothing careful about how he pounded into her depths, introducing himself to spaces within her that had never been explored. The way he pushed and pulled her body to accommodate his tested Lake's flexibly but she handled it like a champ.

She felt his need so she allowed him to use her. Isiah was raw and exposed in a way that Lake wasn't accustomed to. Even if it was just through sex, she was more than willing to fill that need. A man like Isiah didn't express weakness and even through his aggression, she sensed him exposing weakness. She wasn't sure what it was about and she wouldn't ask, Lake just chose to be there for him.

“Cum for me Lake. I need to feel it.” Isiah leaned in and growled next to her ear. She shut her eyes nodding. Her body

was already begging for the release but she was trying her best to hold out for him. *He needs me to be in this with him.* When she felt his fingers wrap around her neck, gently squeezing, her back arched and her chest lifted slightly from the mattress.

“Oh God,” slipped from her lips when she allowed her body permission to explode and it rushed through her so intensely that she felt light headed.

“Shit baby. That’s right, let it go for me,” he coached while she trembled and jerked beneath him. His release was approaching and as much as he wanted to hold out it was impossible. The way he felt embedded in her soft, warm center had his mind on overload. The desperation and need was still there but the anger had dissipated. The fear of not having her in his life, in his bed, had settled with every thrust. *She’s mine, no matter what.* Seconds later, he was cuming, refusing to move until he filled her with all he had.

When Isiah eased out of Lake and rolled over onto his side, tugging her into his chest, a trail of kisses peppered her sweaty face. She didn’t open her eyes until she no longer felt his lips grazing her skin. His were on her, wild and full of concern, but he didn’t say a word.

“It’s okay. I know you needed that.” Her words were timid which had Isiah’s chest tight. *Shit, did I hurt her?*

“Lake...”

Her head moved quickly and a smile teased at her lips. “I’m fine, better than fine.”

Still not convinced, he searched her eyes for any signs that she was lying and when none were found he kissed her forehead and brought her in closer.

“Get some sleep.”

“Are you or will I wake up alone?”

“I’m right here Lake, go to sleep.”

She nodded against his chest knowing it was a lie. He didn’t rest and whatever was on his heart was making it worse. She could feel his mind working. His thoughts were heavy but he wasn’t the type speak on it, so instead of pushing, she closed her eyes and settled into his embrace. This was how they worked and she had gotten used to it.

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Lake woke up the next morning to another round of amazing sex before she drifted off again to officially wake up hours later starving and ready to start her day. Even if her body objected, Lake had plans that required an early start, so she forced the covers back and willed her body to leave the comfort of Isiah's bed.

Isiah!

The thought of him had Lake beaming. A warm rush of energy flowed through her body as she padded to the bathroom to start the shower. The night they shared was nothing short of amazing. His attention to detail where her body was concerned was something she still hadn't gotten used to. The simplest touch would bring out the most intense feelings. He handled Lake as if he had spent his entire life mastering the art of making her cum. Even when he was being rough, she still reached peaks of pleasure that didn't compare to any experience she had before him.

In just over an hour, Lake was dressed and ready to leave, but she had to check in with everyone so her first duty was to find Ema. This time when she knocked and peeked her head in the door, she was greeted by a smile from Ema and Bleu rushing to the foot of the bed vying for her attention.

Lake scooped the tiny pup into her arms nuzzling her face against the top of her head.

“Oh, so now you remember who your mama is? Last night you wouldn’t even acknowledge me.”

“I’m sorry. You could have just taken her. I know she’s not mine.” There was the resemblance of a pout in Ema’s tone and when Lake looked her way, she noticed something in her eyes. She could hear Isiah’s voice in her head. *Be easy with your words.*

“Don’t be sorry. You’re not the trader. This little one is, but I’m glad that she’s comfortable with you. I guess you can say she recognizes family just like I do.” Lake winked at Ema, pushing a soft smile from her. When she lowered Bleu to the bed, her short legs carried her right into Ema’s lap where she curled up like it was home. “So today’s the day, are you excited about seeing Emanuel? I can’t wait to meet him.”

Ema dropped her eyes and shrugged, but when she found Lake’s again she wore a nervous smile. “I am. I hope he hasn’t forgotten me.”

“There’s no way. You haven’t been gone that long. He’s yours Ema. Even when you’re not around, Isiah makes sure he knows that he’s yours.”

Her smile grew as she nodded and her spine straightened a little more. “He does. Sih, is a great uncle. Emanuel loves him.”

So do I.

“Well I can’t wait. I shouldn’t be gone long.”

“Where you off too?” Ema offered curious eyes. It was early. She didn’t know much about Lake, but she knew she didn’t have many people in her life and thanks to her brother and Cyn, she was currently unemployed until she was cleared to start at *ATL Chic*. Ema was usually asleep by nine and because of it, she was an early riser like Isiah. They discussed Lake while Ema had cereal and Isiah checked emails that morning.

“My job. I need to give an official notice. Not that it matters, but it’s only fair, and then I have a friend there that I need to say goodbye to. She sort of became my family and I want her to hear it from me.”

The thought of not seeing Mrs. Ruby as much made Lake sad, but she was excited about her new job and the idea of not having to punch a clock at *Harrington* was enough motivation to accept the good with the bad about her new position.

“Oh well, I’ll see you later. Sih, is picking Emanuel up after lunch. Will you be back before then?”

“I should be, if not then I won’t be long after.”

“Good. I want you here. He’s gonna love you just as much as I do.” Lake couldn’t help but smile. Ema’s energy was always so contagious and childlike. It filled you in a way that swept away any negative feelings. “Oh, Sih is in the gym. He must be stressed because only works out when he’s stressed. He went running this morning after breakfast and then went straight there.”

“Stressed?”

Ema’s shoulders lifted slightly. “Yeah, I didn’t ask. He wouldn’t tell me anyway. Maybe you can talk to him.”

Lake’s forehead wrinkled. “Maybe. I’m going to get going so that I can be back in time.” Ema nodded offering one last smile before Lake left her there to go find Isiah. The only time she had been in the gym was the second time at his home when he actually granted her a tour. It had her sensors going off as she revisited Ema’s explanation about Isiah only using it when he was stressed. The timing would make sense, given the fact that he was distant the night before. Even if he managed to recover, Lake hadn’t missed the shift in his mood.

When she reached the gym, she peered through the glass door watching Isiah as he stood with his back to her, hands gripping weights that he lifted with ease. His arms raised to shoulder height extending straight before they dropped to his waist again repeating the motion. Lake's teeth sank into her lip as she admired the contours of his muscles flexing and showing definition with the slightest movement. His corded arms flowed as if he had nothing in his hands but she could tell from stack of cast iron circles on each end, that she likely wouldn't be able to lift one of the weights, better yet two with the ease that Isiah was moving.

When she peeled her eyes away long enough to get her mind right to enter, she was surprised to hear music blasting. *The room is sound proof.* Because the music was so loud, Isiah didn't turn right away. Even when he caught her eye in the mirror, he continued his rep counting down from twenty while Lake stood behind him, gawking at how sexy he looked. Their eyes connected through the mirror until he was done and placed the weights on the floor. His breathing was slightly labored when he finally acknowledged her presence by way of a tight jaw and furrowed brows.

“Where you going?”

“Home to get a few things and then I was going to run by *Harrington* to talk to Tony. It’s only right that I officially let them know I’m not coming back. I’m sure they’ve already fired me but still...” Lake shrugged and Isiah’s face hardened a little more.

“You don’t have to tell them shit. I’m getting Emanuel today. I’m sure Ema wants you here to meet him.”

“I won’t be long and I want to be the one to tell Mrs. Ruby. You’ve met her. She won’t be happy finding out from anyone but me.”

He didn’t speak for a minute as if considering a way to change her mind but eventually he offered a nod. “You’re right. You want me to go with you?”

“No. I don’t need a babysitter.” Lake smirked causing Isiah to snort.

“A babysitter? Maybe I wanted to see Mrs. Ruby. She and I have a little thing too.”

“I bet you do.” Lake’s eyes rolled. She knew how flirtatious Mrs. Ruby could be and Lake’s reaction had Isiah chuckling.

“You’re all I see Lake. Don’t be jealous.”

“I’m not, trust me. I probably should be. I know how she is, but I’m not.”

He smiled a little harder and walked up to Lake, cuffing the back of her head with both hands before covering her mouth with his. He took his time exploring her lips, and then sliding his tongue into her mouth before he let her up for air.

“Good, because I would hope I don’t leave you room to doubt.”

He stepped around Lake heading to a work bench where he lifted a towel wiping his face and neck. “Let me know when you get there. I’m about to shower and then get ready to eat so that I can leave to get Emanuel.”

“She’s nervous.”

“Yeah I know. She always is but she shouldn’t be. He loves her.”

“It’s what I said.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. But what about you? I’ve never seen you in here and Ema said you only work out when you’re stressed.”

He stalled for a minute before flashing his signature smile. “I told you last night you got me trying to step my game

up.”

“As cute as that sounds, I’m sure it’s not the reason. You were different last night. I could tell you had something on your mind. *And you took it out on my body.* You don’t have to keep things from me.”

“Not even those one-eight-sevens?”

Lake’s eyes rolled and Isiah pushed out a smug grin closing the space between them. “I’m good Lake. Just a lot on my mind. Nothing you need to worry about.”

She held his gaze for a long moment studying his face. “You sure? You were different last night.”

No, shit is fucked up but I can’t really tell you anything about it or you’ll run again.

“I apologize. You feel okay?”

His eyes swept her body searching for signs that he had damaged her in any way as memories the night before flooded his mind. He knew that he had been rough. It wasn’t something he did often and never with Lake, but occasionally he needed to release some aggression. Last night Isiah used her body in ways that allowed him to calm the anger that had been building. Guilt got the best of him so he woke up hours

later and made up for it, sexing Lake in a manner that she was accustomed to. He was gentle and loving, making sure to treat her body with care which started with his head between her legs until she begged for mercy. Right after, he entered her slowly, delivery easy deliberate strokes until she came two more times.

“I won’t break because you’re a little rough. I might need some extra time to recoup but I won’t break. I’m not complaining, but are you sure that you’re okay?”

“Positive. Now go before I change my mind and have you in the shower with me.”

Once more, he was blessing her with a kiss that had Lake weak. She sensed that he wasn’t being completely honest, but there wasn’t anything she could do about it, so for now, she let it go.

“I’ll call you when I’m on my way back.”

“*And* you’ll text me when you get there. Tell my shorty I said what’s up.” He winked at Lake as he lead the way out the gym and she rolled her eyes behind his back.

“Keep playing and you’re going to make me hurt your feelings and hers.”

Isiah stopped at the first step turning to Lake. His eyes danced with amusement while his lips curled into a smile.

“You would hurt sweet old Mrs. Ruby’s feelings.”

“In a heartbeat, now run with it.” Lake’s voice elevate slightly. She channeled her inner gangster but it still did little to convince Isiah. What it did was have his shorts tenting.

“Good to know.” He winked and took the stairs while Lake left out the front door. It had been a while since she had seen Mrs. Ruby and she missed her dearly. The spunky souled woman had grown to be a big part of Lake’s life and she was actually sad about not being able to see her as much as she had grown accustomed to.

As soon as she stepped foot into *Harrington*, Nathan was the first to greet her. Lake didn’t miss the excitement in his eyes right before he pulled her into a hug. “I was starting to wonder if I needed to call the cops. You never miss work.”

When Lake backed away she grinned lifting her brows. “You were going to notify the police just because I missed work? I called in Nathan. I’m sure everyone here likely fell out about me not showing.”

“Yeah I asked and Tony told me after he cursed you out, but today is the second day so I was concerned and it doesn’t look like you’re here to punch in so...”

“I’m not. I was offered a position at *ATL Chic*. I start next weekend as long as my background check comes in okay.”

“Ah damn. They’re about to find out about those murders in Texas. You better go sweet talk Tony and see if he’ll forgive you for calling out.”

“Shut up fool. I have never even been to Texas.”

“So you say. But that’s dope, Lake. I’m proud of you. I know you’ve been applying everywhere. So you’re interning with them?”

She grinned shaking her head. “Nope, entertainment column. Did you see the story about Kate Black, the one who got caught up with Kole Taylor, the new point guard that was just recruited from New York?”

Nathan frowned which let her know he had no clue.

“Kate was the one who did the entertainment column. She used her press pass to get in the locker room at one of the games and got caught on video with Kole in the shower area.

It was all over everywhere. She wasn't even supposed to be covering the game."

"Damn, that's messed up but good for you I guess. They're just giving you the column. How you pull that off?"

"A favor of a friend," she shared and Nathan's face got tight.

"Yeah I'm sure."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I'm happy for you. I need to get back to work. Some of us are still punching clocks around here."

When he turned to leave, Lake caught his arm. "Hey, what's your deal?" She knew he had a crush and assumed his sour disposition had to do with Isiah, but she had never once allowed Nathan to think they were more than they were.

"It's nothing. Just be careful with him. Men like him take what they want, when they can't take it they buy it." He shrugged but looked Lake in her eyes.

"Are you really taking it there?" Her's narrowed and Nathan stood his ground. His feelings were hurt. He couldn't compete with a man like Isiah and it bruised his ego.

“Nah, I’m not. I know you better than that. Just be careful Lake. For real. I don’t want to see anything happen to you.”

Nathan’s smile was weak but he didn’t give her time to challenge it. He was gone before she could get another word in, so Lake let it go and went to find Mrs. Ruby.

When she reached her room, she stopped at the door and knocked before pushing it open. Mrs. Ruby was in her chair with glasses pushed to the end of her nose staring at the TV.

“Care for some company?” Lake smiled when Mrs. Ruby frowned at her.

“Come on in here and give me a hug. Done forgot all about me.” Lake walked in and circled her frail body, hugging her tight but careful not to make it too tight. After a kiss on the cheek she retrieved the chair from the corner and pulled it next to Mrs. Ruby.

“Where you been child? Got everybody around here in a bad mood. That damn Tony is gonna make me curse him out if he keeps on.”

“Stay out of trouble Mrs. Ruby.” Lake snorted thinking about Nathan. “I needed a few days. Why is that so terrible?”

“You been with that man, haven’t you?”

Lake blushed and nodded.

“Then ain’t a damn thing wrong with it, but you could have at least let me know. They don’t take care of me in here like you do.”

Lake’s stomach sank.

“About that...”

Mrs. Ruby waved her off. “I know, I know. You don’t have to tell me. I didn’t expect you to stay forever. You don’t belong here. Never did.”

“You’re not upset?”

Mrs. Ruby peered at Lake over her glasses. “You gonna forget about me?”

“No, not at all. I promise I won’t. I’ll still visit.”

“Then no, I’m not upset. Is this about him?”

Lake’s head shook. “No. He did help me get a new job though. I finally get to write. Well if I don’t mess it up.” Lake pushed out a huff of air. “I’m nervous.”

“That’s to be expected. It’s new. New things can be stressful, but you’ll do fine. I know you will.”

Lake grinned and nodded. Mrs. Ruby's confidence reminded her of Isiah.

"So that's your guy?" Lake peered at Mrs. Ruby with a soft smile when she asked about Isiah.

"Yeah. He told me you two talked."

"We did. He's a looker. That man is damn sure handsome. If I were a little younger..." she sported a devilish grin leaving that statement open and moving on. "He treating you good?"

"He is."

"He better or he'll have to see me." Mrs. Ruby peered over her glasses again with a stern look which had Lake laughing. She could fully imagine her dear old friend going toe to toe with Isiah.

"I don't think you have to worry about it; besides, he seems to think you've already threatened him."

"Because I did." She straightened her back as best she could. "And he better not forget either."

"Woman, who do you think you're scaring like this?"

"Anybody that wants to try me," she scoffed. "But are you happy Lake? Does *he* make you happy?"

“He does.” She blushed unable to hide it.

“Good, then that’s all that matters.”

“Is it?” Lake questioned more to herself than to Mrs. Ruby.

“It is. When you lead with your heart the rest doesn’t matter. Just details and they’ll work themselves out one way or another.”

Lake nodded removing her phone from her purse. She frowned noticing it was her father calling. After hitting ignore, he called right back so she shot her eyes over to Mrs. Ruby before standing. “I need to take this, sorry.” She was hoping to tell him she was with company and couldn’t talk long.

Lake stepped away nearing the corner of the room before answering, knowing that the recent missed calls would have him in a bad mood.

“Hey dad.”

“Where the hell you been? I’ve been calling you for days and you haven’t answered once.”

Lake’s eyes lifted to Mrs Ruby whose focus was on the TV, while she pretended not to listen to Lake.

“I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy for me? I’m your father, Lake or have you forgotten? You done moved on with your life while I’m in here alone?”

“No, that’s not it at all. I’ve just been—”

“Busy, yeah I get it. I see where I stand in your life, Lake.”

He always had a way of pulling so much guilt from her that Lake felt like that twelve year old girl who had to watch her father being cuffed and taken away...because of her.

“Can you just tell me what was so important? I don’t want to argue with you.”

He snorted. “Then answer when I call and we won’t.”

“Daddy?” she pleaded.

“Sorry baby girl. I’ve just been really anxious. There’s a lot going on and I needed to talk to you.” Alarm set in. She hoped he was okay. Had something happened? Had he been in an altercation?

“A lot going on? Like what?”

“People been to see me, Lake. They’ve been telling me things that could really help.”

“Help with what?”

“My case, with me getting out of here early. I might not have to do those last eighteen years. Whatcha think of that?”

Her face wrinkled at the thought. They didn't simply erase FED time. She didn't know much about the law, but that much she was sure of. “I think that's great, but how? Is there new evidence? Did they figure out...” she glanced at Mrs. Ruby and then lowered her voice. “...that you didn't kill those people?”

“Something like that. I can't really go into detail, but they say I'm coming home. How about that? Your old man is coming home to you, Lake.”

“Wow. That's great. When, did they say when?”

“Soon. But I need to ask you something important.”

“Uhh sure, what?”

“You choose me, right?” The question was strange. She wasn't sure how to answer but she could tell it was deeper than what was presented on the surface.

“Of course, but what does that mean?”

“Don't worry about it right now. I just need to be sure that if the times comes, you'll choose your old man. I don't

want to push, but it's the least you can do. You owe me, Lake. I never push because I did what I had to do. You're my baby girl, I chose you. And I don't regret it. Even all these years in here I don't, but I just need to know that when the time comes you'll do the same. You'll choose me."

"I will daddy but can you tell me what that means? You keep saying choose you like you feel like I won't."

"I know you will, Lake. You love your old man, don't you?"

"You know I do."

"Good, good. Just remember that. I have to go. I love you too, Lake. Everything I do is for you. I'm coming home soon. I'll be in touch. Make sure you answer."

He ended the call and Lake stood in place confused. She didn't move until she heard Mrs. Ruby's voice again.

"Sweetheart, I don't know what that was about but I can feel the darkness. He's your darkness. I'm sure of it. That's your father, I understand. I don't know what ties you have with him or what he's putting on your heart but you don't owe anyone anything. Not a damn thing. The only person you owe

something to is yourself. Don't let him tell you different.
Don't let him make you feel any different."

Lake's eyes landed on Mrs. Ruby's and she could see something there that she couldn't explain, so she simply nodded to agree.

"Don't ruin your happiness for someone else's, baby."

"I'm not, I won't." After shaking the thought, Lake gathered her composure and walked over to Mrs. Ruby kissing her cheek. "I'm glad you're doing well and I promise that I'll come see you soon. You have my number. Call me if you need anything."

"Chile, I'm old. I don't need anything," Mrs. Ruby fussed. She could feel the conflict in Lake's heart and it was weighing on hers. She had no idea what the call was about but she could sense that it wasn't good.

"Well if you do, promise you'll call."

"I will. You promise me you'll take care of yourself."

Lake flashed a soft smile. "Always."

With a kiss on the cheek, Lake left with her mind racing trying to make sense of the call with her father. She wasn't sure if she was happy or not about this news. It would mean

more of a demand on her. One she felt she owe him to fulfill. He didn't have anything or anyone which meant he would rely solely on her. For now she couldn't worry about it, she was on her way home to be with Isiah and meet his nephew.

They're becoming my family.

Home. The thought pushed a smile on her face which quickly disappeared when she thought about her father. Something was off. It had her chest tight and her mind blurred. She didn't know what it was, but Lake was sure that this moment was simply the quiet before the storm and she wasn't sure if she was prepared for the fall out.

To be continued...

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