



CHOCOLATE
kisses

TAY MO'NAE

Chocolate Kisses

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AYAAME

“Ms. Rose, are you still there?” the attorney asked. I snapped out of the trance I was in, turning my attention back to him.

Clearing my throat, I nodded. “Yes, I’m sorry. You were saying?”

Truthfully, I’ve been in a fog the past couple of days and today was no different. I had gotten a call from my Aunt’s attorney telling me I was needed to come to *Butter Ridge Falls* as soon as possible. Prior to that, I was dealing with some bullshit in my private life. It had been a long week. Mentally and emotionally, I was drained. I needed to get away and get my mind together so I agreed to come to town.

“As you know, your Aunt Delilah was found unresponsive in her store by a customer. When they called 911, she was unable to be resuscitated.”

My heart dropped to my stomach once again hearing the events that led me here in the first place. The first thing I did was go to the city morgue to claim my aunt's body. Then I followed the strict orders from her attorney to come to his office once I was settled.

My throat was tight as I stared at him. It was a hard blow finding out my aunt was gone. Growing up, she was like a second mother to me.

“Yes, I know,” I finally answered him.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

Mr. Stokes, my aunt's attorney, glanced down at the files on his desk and picked up a stack of papers. He looked over the paperwork for a moment before looking back up at me.

“Your Aunt Delilah left all her assets, including her home and business, to you.”

My eyes bucked at the news. “Wait, she did what?” I sat up straight and moved to the edge of my seat, making sure I heard him correctly.

“Your Aunt Delilah stated in her will that her business, *ChocoLUXE*, and her home along with the rest of her assets be

signed over to you in the event of her passing.”

My mouth grew dry. “Wh-when did she do this?” I fumbled out.

Mr. Stokes looked down at the papers again. “She came in a couple of months ago to revise her will.”

Dumbfounded, I stated the obvious. “But I don’t even live here.”

“Apparently, your aunt wants you to relocate.”

I sat there in silence. The last thing I expected was this news.

Even though we talked frequently, I had only been to my aunt’s chocolate shop once. The summer I turned 16, my parents tried to force me to work at their marketing firm, even though I had no desire to work in corporate America. My parents refused to let me be a normal teenager and enjoy my summer. They had always pushed me more than I liked.

My aunt suggested I come to *BRF* to work at *ChocoLUXE*. My parents were against it at first, but eventually they agreed. My aunt and my mom were sisters, but they didn’t talk. I never got the full story about why they were estranged, but the two rarely interacted with one another. On

the other hand, I loved my aunt. She was younger than my mom by five years and less uptight as well.

My mind shifted to back home. I didn't have anything there for me anymore. With the bullshit I just went through with my ex, a new city might be just what I needed.

“So I would be the owner?” I asked for clarification.

Mr. Stokes nodded. “All I need is a couple of signatures from you. Your aunt also left some funds for you as well.” He handed me a slip of paper and my eyes bucked.

“100,000 dollars.”

“Ms. Delilah had a lot of bonds and stocks that she requested to be cashed out if she passed away. Once we get all the paperwork together, we'll be able to get you a check to do with as you please.”

“And Aunt Dee wanted all this to come to me?”

“According to the paperwork, yes.”

Picking the file up, I read it over. My aunt was unable to have kids and accepted that. Her husband died four years prior due to a heart condition, so all she had left was her business. She and my mom had another brother who had kids,

but they were younger. I was the closest thing to a daughter that she had.

“Wow.” I sat back in the chair, still in disbelief.

“In her will she also stated that she didn’t want a service. She requested to be cremated and stored near her late husband.”

I slowly nodded my head while taking everything in. It hurt to hear my aunt was gone. Out of everyone, she was the closest person to me that truly understood me. My mom often called me Aunt Dee’s child, claiming she just carried me. She was a free spirit and the most caring person I knew. I hated hearing she was gone. I knew she was sick, but she told me it wasn’t that bad, that she was okay.

“If you have no other questions, we can get all the proper paperwork handled, and I will get you the keys to your new home.”

I didn’t have much more to say. My mind was buzzing with all the information I just received. It was still hard knowing she was gone, but knowing she trusted me to take over *ChocoLUXE* eased that hurt some.

My week had been shit but hearing that I was getting a new start brought a little light back to it.



Before heading back home, I decided to go check out Aunt Dee's house. She lived about fifteen minutes from *ChocoLUXE*, right outside of downtown in a cottage-style home.

Stepping into her house caused me to shiver. I looked around, noticing not much had changed since the last time I visited. Aunt Dee's house always smelled like chocolate which was to be expected.

The way the house was set up you stepped into the foyer as soon as you entered the front door. Next, an open area was shared by the living room, which had a fireplace that my aunt and I loved to sit in front of. The dining room was in the right-hand corner, and in front of the dining room was a kitchen that had a large island me and Aunt Dee always used to make different sweets.

On the opposite side of the house were two bedrooms and a bathroom. The third bedroom was located towards the back. My aunt also had a back deck built a couple of years ago as well.

Memories of the time I spent here flooded my mind causing tears to fill my eyes. Walking to the fireplace, I smiled at the picture of my aunt and her late husband on their wedding day. Next to it was the urn that held his ashes.

I sighed, before leaving I knew I had to handle my Aunt's remains. I hated she didn't want a funeral service, but I understood that she wasn't close with her family for whatever reason. Her lawyer had mentioned how the town held a small memorial ceremony to honor her memory, which made me smile. Knowing her community loved her was enough for me.

Running my hand through my hair, I turned and looked around the open area. It was an upgrade from the one-bedroom loft where I currently resided.

I wasn't sure how this move would go, but I prayed the transition went smoothly.

AUSTIN

“You always get a nigga together.” I glanced over at the guy handing my twin brother, Zach, money before focusing back on the client in my chair.

I grabbed his head, tilting it to the side so I could get his line up right.

One of the barbers at my brother’s shop called off today, and since I didn’t have shit going on until later this afternoon, I agreed to come in and help him out for a few hours.

Cutting hair wasn’t my passion like it was my twin’s. I only learned how to do it because my grandfather was a barber and taught both my brother and me. While Zach loved it and made a career out of it, I only viewed it as a hobby to make extra money when I needed it. My brother had opened *Legacy Cuts* a few years ago and business has been good to him.

“You been quiet today,” Zach walked over to me and spoke as I brushed my client’s neck off. “Everything good?”

Never taking my eyes off my client, I answered. “I’m straight.”

Zach didn’t move from near me, which caused me to grow annoyed. “You gone say something else or get from over my shoulder?”

This time I took my eyes off the head in front of me for a moment and looked at my brother.

The two of us weren’t identical, but we did share similar features. By the look on his face, I knew he didn’t believe me. Zach was sensitive as hell and always thought sharing your feelings was the way to go. I was the complete opposite. I handled things on my own.

“Aye Zach, my lady wants to know if your lady is taking orders for custom pieces. She got some painting from her gallery a few weeks ago and now she thinks she’s a collector,” a man in the chair across from mine asked, taking my brother’s attention off me.

“She’s been taking it easy since it’s getting closer to her due date. I’m sure she’ll love the work. Leave me your

wife's number and I'll give it to her

Zach's wife had recently opened her own art gallery, *Remember the Time*. Her shop had been doing well from what I was told. Apparently, there were a lot of art lovers in the area. Zach said she had been shipping a lot of pieces too. Noelle was currently seven months pregnant with their son, and Zach had been on her about overexerting herself. Since they lost their first son to a terrible car accident a few years prior, Zach was being extra cautious this time around.

"I know Noelle's tired of sitting around the house," I chimed in.

Zach chuckled. "She is. She goes to the gallery for a few hours, but since she's approaching her eighth month we agreed she should chill and work from home. Now she spends a lot of time in her studio at the crib."

"You're done," I told the guy before turning to set my clippers down. I grabbed my brush from the belt on my waist and wiped his shoulders.

"I went to her last showing and your lady is talented."

Zach's face lit up whenever his wife's work was brought up. One thing about my brother was he never hesitated

to hype his wife up or be her number one fan.

“Yeah, my baby’s the shit.”

“Austin, you need to be in here full time. You always make sure I’m straight,” my client told me, standing up once I removed the cape from around his neck.

“Nah, this Zach’s shit. I only come to help out, but it ain’t my passion.” I grabbed the money from him.

“Maybe you should reconsider that. You’re good at it. Keep the change.”

Putting the money in my back pocket, I begin to clean my workstation. “You know he’s right Austin. I’m looking for a new barber, and if you want the chair, it’s yours.”

“You know I don’t really care for this shit.”

“Since when?”

“What you mean? Since always. This was you and Grandpop’s thing. I only learned because I enjoyed spending time with him. Cutting hair isn’t what I want to do with my life.”

Zach leaned back on the wall next to my booth and crossed his arms. “So what is it you want to do? I was talking to mommy and she’s worried that you’re just letting life pass

you by.” He spoke lowly so only I could hear him. The shop was loud from everyone having their own conversations, so it wasn’t hard not to be heard.

Stopping what I was doing, I cut my eyes to my brother.

His chestnut eyes that matched mine were staring at me with curiosity.

My jaw clenched.

“I don’t know why she’s so worried. I told her what I had planned.”

Zach was quiet for a moment. “We just know how you are, Austin. You start shit but you hardly ever follow through with it.”

“And this isn’t one of those times. I told her and dad that,” I spat, feeling myself growing frustrated.

Zach tossed his hands up. “Don’t shoot the messenger man. I just said I’d talk to you. She’s worried about you. Pops too. They don’t want you to just keep floating with no anchor.”

Chewing on the inside of my bottom lip, I looked back at the station I was working on and finished cleaning.

“Just because I’m not you, golden boy, doesn’t mean I don’t have my shit together.” I was going to stay a little longer, but suddenly I didn’t have the desire to cut hair anymore.

“C’mon Austin, don’t get upset. All I’m saying-”

“It’s cool, Zach. I hear you and I’m fine. I have a plan, and no one needs to be worried about me.”

Zach and I were close for the most part. Growing up, we use to have that twin telepathy thing people always spoke on, but the older we got the less it worked, probably because I learned to cut my emotions off. Even so, Zach could always tell when something wasn’t right with me.

“I’ma head out. You gone be good?”

I looked over at my brother.

I could tell he was bothered by my departure, but I wasn’t worried. I was over this conversation and had better things to do.

“You always run when something you don’t want to hear is thrown at you.”

“Ain’t no one running. I have business I need to take care of. I told you that when you asked me to come in.”

Once I was satisfied with the workstation, I gathered my stuff so I could leave.

“I’ll hit you up later.” I held my hand out.

Zach stared down at it then at me. “A’right. We still on for cards this weekend?”

I nodded.

“Yeah.”

He slapped hands with me and pulled me into a brotherly hug. “Be easy, a’right.”

Instead of answering verbally, I nodded my head and pulled back.

“A’right niggas.” I tossed my hand up to the people in the shop.

After leaving *Legacy Cuts*, I walked a few blocks over to where my attention should have been in the first place.

Rocky’s Cigars.

While Zach inherited the love of cutting hair from our late grandfather, I took on his love of cigars. I didn’t personally smoke them myself, but I wanted to do something

that honored my Grandpop. Although he and Zach bonded over the love of cutting hair, I was closer to our grandfather. He was like my best friend in a sense, so his passing fucked me up royally.

My Grandpop always said a cigar and some good whiskey or cognac goes a long way, and that's where the idea of a cigar bar originated. Having a place to come and kick back was exactly what the town needed, and I planned on giving it to them.

Rocky's Cigars was currently in the construction stage. After getting approved for the loan and dishing out some startup money of my own, I found a building that would be perfect. The inside had been gutted, and it was currently getting remodeled. My goal was to have the place up and running in the next two months.

Before stepping into the building, I paused and glanced at the building next to mine. *ChocoLUXE*. It was a shame what happened to Ms. Dee. She was a sweet older woman. She was like family to everyone around. Knowing she passed was a hard pill to swallow.

Sighing, I stepped into *Rocky's Cigars* and inhaled the smell of fresh paint. The walls were painted a burnt caramel

color and the floors were dark rustic wood. There was a full-service bar on the wall closest to the door. On the opposite side of the building was where the sitting area would be. I had black leather chairs and a couple of couches being shipped in, as well as stone surfaced coffee tables. There would be two card tables placed near the sitting area and a dartboard for extra entertainment and to fill some space.

In the middle of the sitting area on the back wall was a fireplace I had added for comfort.

Making my way around the room, I nodded, happy to see my vision coming to life. I was waiting for the small accessories I had ordered to come in.

Walking over to the bar, I sat down on the high-top rustic brown bar stools that matched the floors.

My family didn't have faith that I would see this cigar bar through to the end, but they were going to have a rude awakening seeing I was serious. Growing up, I wasn't always the most reliable. I didn't really have a lot of direction, but one thing I would never play about was honoring my Grandpop's name.

A smile found its way on my face.

Two more months and my dream will be a reality. Then my family would believe in me and see that I could follow through with something.

AYYANME

Looking around my bedroom, I took in all the boxes I had packed up. This would be my last week here in my old place.

I had spent the week tying up loose ends and packing. I was nervous about the next chapter in my life, but I knew this was for the best. There was nothing here for me anymore.

My parents weren't happy to hear I was moving to take over my aunt's business. They were still holding out hope that I would come work for them at their marketing firm, but that wasn't the life I wanted. My mom tried to hide it, but I knew her only sister passing while the two of them were on the outs was eating away at her, so she wasn't as angry about me leaving as my dad was.

Surprisingly both she and my uncle accepted some of the ashes when I asked if they wanted some. I still didn't know what caused the siblings to disband as they did, but I was grateful the two of them at least wanted a piece of their sister.

My doorbell rang, knocking me out of my thoughts.

Pushing myself off the floor, I headed for my front door.

“Who is it?” I asked.

Standing on my tiptoes, I looked through the peephole. My blood instantly started to boil as I snatched my door open.

“Why are you here?” I snapped, staring at my ex-fiancé.

“I came to talk. Can I come in?”

My eyes narrowed.

I hated how my body betrayed me right now. I was still very much physically attracted to Vance. I often told him he reminded me of Morris Chestnut, just a couple shades lighter. Emotionally though, I was cut off from the man I once planned on spending my life with.

His mocha brown eyes were pleading for me to listen to him.

“We have nothing to talk about, Vance,” I told him, crossing my arms.

“I miss you. You don’t miss me?”

I bit back on my back teeth, furious that he even had the nerve to ask me something like that. My chest ached at the pain he had caused me just three months prior.

“Does your wife miss you?”

His face dropped. “I should have told you I was legally separated,” he started in a low voice. “I just didn’t think you would have stayed with me if you knew. My feelings for you were real Ayame (EYE-AH-MAY). You were new and fresh, exactly what I needed. My wife and I had been arguing and fighting a lot and finally decided to take some time apart. When I met you, I didn’t think about all that shit.”

“Did you not think about your kids either?” My frown deepened. “You failed to mention them also.”

“Of course I did! I made sure my kids were straight even if me and their mother were separated.”

Shifting my weight to my other leg, my throat grew tight. “So you just failed to tell the woman you asked to marry you about them? How the hell were we supposed to get married if you were already married, Vance!” My voice heightened as my emotions started to escalate.

I was trying to move on from Vance and the pain he caused me. I wasted two years on him and didn't want to give him any more time or energy.

“I had the papers drawn up. That's why Kari made herself known. She wanted to fix things, but I told her I was in love with someone else. I planned on telling you everything.”

“You had a whole life I knew nothing about! You didn't even give me an option to be a part of it. I loved you, Vance, and I trusted you.”

“And I fucked up, but if you really loved me, we should be able to move on. I'm going through with the divorce, so we can focus on us.”

I shook my head. “I don't want that. I don't trust you, nor do I want to be with you anymore. I'm not a homewrecker, Vance.”

Tension filled his face. His nose slightly flared and his forehead creased.

“You weren't a homewrecker, Ayame! That house was already destroyed.”

Shaking my head, I ignored the pulling in my chest. Part of me wanted to forgive Vance and try and make things

work, but the logical side of me knew we could never be together. He had too many secrets that I couldn't overlook.

A car pulled up in my driveway, taking my attention away from Vance.

A small groan escaped my mouth when Reid, my best friend, hopped out of the car with a scowl on his face.

“You good, Charm?” he asked, calling me the nickname he gave me, claiming I was his good luck charm when we were younger.

“This nigga,” Vance groaned.

I turned and mugged him. “I'm fine. Vance was just leaving.”

Reid made his way onto my porch and stood next to Vance.

“Don't you have something else to do? Damn, you always around.”

Vance and Reid never got along. Vance never accepted the friendship me and Reid had, no matter how many times I assured him it was platonic. Reid and I have been best friends for most of our lives. We lived next door to each other growing up. The most ever shared between us was a kiss, and

that was only because I begged him to help me practice. It was weird and awkward, and we never tried it again following that.

“As long as my best friend wants me around, then Ima be here, which isn’t something I could say about you. What the fuck is this nigga doing here, Charm?”

“Who cares? He was just leaving anyways.” I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t want to fix things, Vance. Whatever you and your wife have going on, leave me out of it. Did you come to help me pack?” I asked, turning to Reid.

“Pack? Where the hell you going?”

Ignoring Vance, I waited for Reid to answer. “Yeah, even though I shouldn’t. The hell I look like a damn slave.”

I laughed and moved to the side. “C’mon.”

Reid didn’t move though. He mugged Vance instead. “Fuck you still doing here?” He went to step towards Vance, but I quickly grabbed him.

Reid had been itching to beat Vance’s ass for hurting me, but I kept stopping him. I didn’t want him to waste any energy.

“You got that cheap shot on me a while back, don’t think you’ll be lucky today,” Vance gritted.

“Let’s go nigga!”

“Reid, please! It’s not worth it. Just come in the house.”

Reid glared down at me and clenched his jaw. I knew he wasn’t happy, but I didn’t care. Fuck Vance.

“This part of our issue, you always put this nigga in front of me! You complaining about me being married, but yall was probably fucking behind my back the whole time.” I stared at him in disbelief.

If I were going to cheat on Vance, it wouldn’t have been with Reid. Now his insecurities and guilt were showing.

“Leave Vance and don’t come back,” I told him emotionless.

I didn’t have the strength to fight with him right now. I was still dealing with moving and the death of my aunt. Vance was being pushed to the back burner.

“Fuck you too then.” He turned and stalked off.

Shaking my head, I pulled on Reid, encouraging him to come into the house.

“I hope you not considering taking that lame nigga back.”

Closing the door behind us, I shook my head. “Me moving includes leaving him exactly where he’s at.”

Reid gave me a hard stare but eventually nodded his head.

“I still can’t believe you’re leaving me.”

Poking my lips out, I looked around my living room.

“I know, but I’m only a flight or car ride away. Plus, you know how much my last relationship took outta me. I need this.”

Reid stepped to me and wrapped his lean, muscular arm around my shoulder, pulling me into his broad chest.

It was hard for me to leave my old life behind, but mentally I knew this was best.

Today was my first day going to *ChocoLUXE*. I had been in BRF for a few days now, getting settled and clearing out my aunt’s house. It was rough going through her things, but thankfully Reid had stayed around for a couple days helping me.

The moment I stepped inside the building the smell of sugar and chocolate filled my nose. Closing my eyes, I

inhaled.

After taking a quick trip down memory lane, I turned the lights on and made my way around the store. It had been officially closed for about a month now and I was sure everyone was ready for it to open back up.

I walked behind the counter and to the back of the shop where my aunt prepared the chocolate and all of her homemade treats.

When I walked up to the prep table, I noticed my aunt's recipe book. From what I remember, everything was fairly simple. I made a mental note to find an address book or something that had a list of employees. They would know how everything worked better than me.

The first thing I wanted to do was clean and sanitize the place since it had been a minute since anyone has been inside.

Leaving the workroom, I made my way out the building to my car, where I had some cleaning supplies from the house.

“What you doing?” I heard from behind me.

Lifting my head, I turned around to find the voice.

“What?” My face scrunched up.

The cinnamon brown man walked closer to me. “I said what are you doing? You bought this place?” His eyes went to the building then back to me.

His voice was husky and caused the hairs on my back of my neck to rise. Taking a moment to look him over, I noted his square jaw and neatly groomed goatee that surrounded his plump lips.

Slowly I raked my eyes up to meet his. “My aunt actually left this place to me.”

His bushy eyebrow rose. “You Ms. Dee’s niece? I have never seen you before.” He frowned.

Shifting slightly, I leaned on my car. “That’s because I’m not from here. Since you are questioning me, can you tell me who you are?” I snapped.

The corner of his mouth tugged. “Austin. I own the building next door.” He nodded his head.

My eyes traveled over.

“*Rocky’s Cigars?* A cigar bar?”

He nodded.

“You smoke them?”

He shook his head but didn't go further. While eyeing me, I didn't miss the light that flickered through his orbs.

“What's your name, Coco?”

“Coco?” I bunched my nose up.

His tongue swiped across his lips, oddly causing me to squeeze my thighs together. “Your skin reminds me of milk chocolate. Plus, you about to work at a chocolate store.”

For the first time since he walked over here he smiled, showcasing pearly white teeth.

“Ayame.” This time he looked confused.

“The fuck kind of name is that?”

Snickering, I rolled my eyes. “The name my mama and daddy gave me.”

Again, his tongue went over his lips. “So *Ayame*, what are you doing? You plan on opening back up soon?”

“Yeah, eventually. I don't know the first thing about running a business, especially not a chocolatier, but we'll see how it goes.”

A nervous laugh left my mouth.

For the first time, I grew anxious about this. I was excited to start over, but now thinking about it, I wasn't sure what the hell I was thinking. I wasn't a business owner, nor did I know the first thing about running one.

I licked my lips and allowed my eyes to roam around the parking lot before focusing back on Austin.

The short-sleeved v-neck he was wearing gripped his wide chest. His arms were toned and muscular.

I gazed back up at his face.

“Shit, I don't know how to run one either.” He chuckled. “But I don't plan on failing.”

A small smile formed on my face. “Me neither.”

Licking my lips, I looked behind me. “You mind helping me take these boxes in?” I asked him after a few seconds.

Austin craned his neck to look behind me. “What is that?”

“Some cleaning stuff. I know it's been a while since the doors have been opened, so I figured it needs a good cleaning.”

“Watch out,” he told me and stepped closer.

I moved out the way and watched him pick up the bigger box, leaving the small one for me.

The two of us silently headed for the building.

Austin was walking in front of me and I couldn't help but notice how his back muscles flexed in his shirt or how his long legs were slightly bowlegged.

“You gone get the door, Coco?” Austin asked, interrupting my ogling.

I blinked a few times before nodding.

“Oh yeah, sorry.” I smiled and opened the building door allowing him in.

“You can just set that box on the counter.”

“It's weird being in here knowing Ms. Dee gone.” I placed my box next to his and looked around.

“I know I said the same thing.”

A comfortable silence formed between us before Austin turned to me. “I'm lowkey mad at Ms. Dee if I'm being for real.”

Confusion filled me. “Why?”

“Because she never told me she had a fine ass niece hiding somewhere.”

My eyes widened as heat rushed to my cheeks. “Uh, thank you.” I cleared my throat.

“I’m feeling the baldheaded look too. It fits your head.” Even though I should have been offended, I laughed and brushed my hand over my pixie cut.

My hair was badly heat damaged, and after everything happened with Vance, I decided to just cut it and start over.

“Thanks ...I think,” I snickered again.

Austin bit down on his bottom lip and squinted his eyes as if he was in deep thought. “Let me take you out.”

“Huh?”

“You heard me. You’re new in town, right? Meaning you don’t have any friends. Let me take you out.”

I popped my hand on my hip and shifted my weight. “How you know I don’t have a man?”

He shrugged. “I don’t give a damn if you do. He crazy as hell if he let you move here alone.”

“What if he moved with me?”

“Did he?”

I pressed my lips together and cut my eyes into slits before slowly moving my head from side to side. “A’right then let me take you out.”

“Austin, I’m not really looking to date anyone right now. I just went through a bad break up and-”

He held his hands up, cutting me off. “I ain’t say I was trying to be your nigga, Coco. I just wanted to show you a good time.” He shrugged. “My sister-in-law owns an art gallery downtown and she’s hosting a show. I was gone offer you an invite.”

Embarrassment filled me.

I shouldn't have jumped the gun.

Licking my lips, I released a small breath. Reid made me promise him to get out of the house when I moved. He didn’t want me alone here, as he said. “Oh, uh, sure. Arts nice.”

He nodded. “Bet.” He went into his back pocket.

“Put your number in.” He handed me his phone after hitting the screen a few times.

I stared at the phone for a moment before slowly grabbing it. “I wasn’t expecting to meet someone so welcoming right away.”

Austin grabbed his phone from me. “I have a weakness for a pretty face.” He winked at me then started to leave. “I’ma hit you up.”

I stood there watching Austin as he walked out of the building.

I was normally a friendly person and easy to get along with, but it was more than that with Austin. Something about him made me feel comfortable to befriend him. It didn’t help that he was fine as hell. Outside of Vance, I was typically a good judge of character, and I didn’t get a bad vibe from Austin.

My phone vibrated in my sweats pocket.

Unknown: This Austin. Lock me in Coco.

Coco.

Normally I didn’t care for nicknames outside of Charm, but for some reason, I didn’t care about Austin giving me one. It made my stomach feel warm inside.

Smiling softly, I quickly saved his number and tossed my phone on the counter.

Week one in BRF and I already seemed to meet a friend. Hopefully, that's a sign that my time here will be good.

AUSTIN

My eyes went from the game I was currently playing to my front door, where someone was knocking loudly.

Pausing my game of 2K, I pushed myself off the couch and went to see who had shown up at my house unannounced.

“Wassup Pops,” I acknowledged, moving to the side.

“Here, your mom made me bring you this.” He handed me a bowl causing me to smile.

My stomach rumbled smelling the aroma from whatever my mom had sent over.

“You need to start cooking for yourself or find you a woman and stop relying on mine.” I shut the door behind my dad and went back to the living room.

“What I need a woman for if my mama makes sure I eat?” I chuckled, setting the bowl on my end table.

“That’s the problem, your mom babies you too much.” He shook his head and took a seat next to me.

I was sure my dad didn't show up unannounced for no reason. I was even more confident I wasn't going to like the reason he was here either.

"Everything good old man?" I picked the controller up to start my game back.

"I talked to your brother."

"Yeah, me too." I kept my eyes on my game.

"He tells me he offered for you to work at his shop and you turned him down again."

"Grandpop offered you a job at his shop when he had one, and you turned him down because it wasn't what you wanted to do. What's wrong with me doing the same thing?"

"Nothing, if you have an actual plan."

My grip became tighter on the controller. "I do have a plan. My lounge."

"Pause that game while I'm talking to you, boy," my dad demanded.

I bit back the response I really wanted to say and did as he said.

Turning so that my dad had my full attention, I waited for him to speak.

“I understand you’re starting this lounge, but you’ve been saying that for a while, and where is it?”

My eyes squinted. “I ran into some issues with it, but everything is settled now. I’m aiming to be open within the next few months.”

“And you plan on sticking with it?”

My face balled up. “Why wouldn’t I? I don’t get why Zach didn’t get all his backlash when he opened his barbershop. Both you and mom supported him from day one.”

“Your mother and I also haven’t had to bail Zachary out the hole multiple times because he started something and quit soon as it got hard.” My dad’s eyes narrowed as his face hardened.

I flicked my thumb over my nose and chewed on the inside of my jaw. “This is different.”

“What makes it different, Austin? This isn’t the first business you call yourself starting. We can’t keep dishing you out money when things don’t go your way.”

I shook my head. My irritation was beginning to grow, but I was trying to keep it leveled. This wasn't the first time me and my dad had this disagreement. I had fucked up a couple of times in the past, but I was doing better. It didn't seem to matter because it seemed no one in my family would move past it.

“I haven't asked anyone for anything since I came up with the idea for the lounge. I used the money Grandpop left me as well as a bank loan to fund it. Any issues I ran into I handled on my own. If I fall on my ass, then that's on me, but I'm not expecting anyone to bail me out.” My tone was flat.

I was over the conversation. As much as I loved my dad, I was ready for him to get out of my crib. I had been chillin' for the day after spending the morning with contractors at *Rocky's Cigars*. The lighting and electricity were giving them issues for some reason, and they had to pause everything to get it under control.

My dad sighed then nodded his head. “Okay, if you said you got it all under control Ima leave it alone.” My dad stood up. “Just make sure you stick with it this time.”

Again, I fought back what I really wanted to say. The fact that my dad hardly had faith in me stung, but it wasn't shit

I wasn't used to. Growing up, I always came second to my brother. We were twins, but he was always treated like the golden boy, always supported without any backlash. I been learned how to push my feelings to the back burner.

I followed my dad to my door and opened it, waiting on him to leave.

“Make sure you call and thank your mom for the food.” I nodded.

My dad gave me one final hard stare before walking out the door.

Going back to my previous seat, I threw myself down and stared at my paused game, pondering over my dad's words.

Since I first mentioned my plans to open *Rocky's Cigars*, I received nothing but criticism. I expected my family to stand behind me and support me, but I was used to not truly being seen by them. If Zach and I weren't twins I would wonder if I was truly a part of this family at times.

Shaking my head, I glanced at the bowl my dad dropped off. I didn't even an appetite anymore.

Instead, I picked up my controller, pushed my ill feelings to the back burner and focused back on the game.

I leaned against my car and watched Ayame make her way to me. I had been waiting on her to get to *Remember the Time* for a few minutes now.

I didn't know what made me invite her to Noelle's art showing, but the moment I laid eyes on her smooth, blemish-free, milk chocolate skin, I was attracted to her.

Looking her over, my dick instantly twitched. The inside-out army fatigue pants she had on were slightly baggy but hugged her small waist at the same time. She was wearing an olive-green crop top that showed off her flat stomach with a black leather crop jacket on top. The outfit was different, but it fit her. Her short haircut was edgy looking, pulling the look together.

“Hey, sorry it took me so long. My GPS was acting dumb.” She smiled once she got closer to me.

I chewed on the corner of my bottom lip. My eyes focused on her full cupid's bow shaped lips and straight white teeth.

“You good,” I told her, focusing on her round, doe-shaped, light honey-colored orbs.

“I’ve never been to an art show before, so I hope this is okay.” She pulled on her jacket and looked down at herself.

“You look good as fuck for real.”

She blushed. “Not underdressed?”

I shook my head. “Hell nah, you gone have everyone looking at you and not the art.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Are you always a charmer?” I shrugged.

“C’mon.” I nodded towards the building.

“Are you an art lover?” Ayame asked when we started towards the building.

“Nah, I mean it’s cool to look at, but it’s not anything huge to me. My sister-in-law is talented as hell though and I fuck with her, so I try and show my face at her showings every once and a while.”

“That’s nice. Are you and your brother closer?”

I waited before I answered. “Yeah, I guess you can say that.” Ayame looked at me curiously.

“Wow, this is a nice turnout,” Ayame mentioned once we were inside.

I looked around the building. Noelle had been working on getting this place where she wanted it since my brother surprised her with it.

“Yeah, I might not be one of them but it’s a lot of art lovers around here.”

Without thinking about it, I grabbed Ayame’s hand and led her deeper into the room.

“Hey Austin,” Tori, Noelle’s best friend, approached us. “Oooo, who’s this?” she smirked, eyeing Ayame.

Out the corner of my eye, I checked Ayame out. She was looking around the showroom, but her attention went to Tori once she was mentioned.

“This is Ayame, she’s taking over *ChocoLUXE*. This is Tori, she’s my sister-in-law’s best friend.”

“Nice to meet you.” Ayame grinned at her.

“You too! Your outfit is cute as hell!”

“Thank you. I thought I might be underdressed,” Ayame snickered.

“No, you look cute! I’m sorry about Ms. Dee. Did you know her well?”

“Yeah, she was my aunt.”

“Oh, I’m really sorry!”

“It’s fine, she’s at peace now.”

It was quiet for a moment. “Where my ugly ass brother at?” I finally asked.

Tori snorted. “You know yall two favor, right?”

Smirking at her, I shook my head. “But we’re not identical.”

“Close enough, but he’s over there with No-No and Chase’s annoying ass.” She rolled her eyes, making me laugh, pointing in the smaller showroom.

“Get off my boy, man. Don’t act like you don’t secretly love that man.”

Tori’s face balled up. “On that note, I’m about to go mingle and grab some wine. Ayame, it was nice meeting you.” With that, Tori rushed off.

“She was nice,” Ayame commented when we started in my brother’s direction.

“Yeah, Tori’s cool people. Always have been.”

The first thing I noticed when we got close to everyone was Noelle’s stomach. I was shocked Zach let her come out tonight, being she had officially hit eight months, but I guess this event was already planned.

“What yall ugly niggas over here talking about?” I made my presence known. “Not you, sis. You look beautiful.” I let go of Ayame and walked over to Noelle, kissing her cheek.

“Don’t put yo lips on my wife. We don’t know where the hell they been.”

“Fuck yo ugly ass,” I chuckled and slapped hands with him then Chase.

“I didn’t think you were coming.” Noelle smiled when I pulled her into a hug.

“This yo last showing for a while, you know I had to show face. You ready to meet my nephew?” I rubbed her stomach.

“I’m beyond ready,” she whined.

I let her go and stepped back close to Ayame.

I noticed everyone was looking at her curiously, waiting for me to introduce her.

“Yall, this is Ayame. She’s the new owner of *ChocoLUXE* and Ms. Dee’s niece. That’s Chase, my brother Zach, and his wife Noelle. This is her gallery.”

“I’ve only seen a few, but your work looks amazing!” Ayame gushed, holding her hand out.

“Thanks, girl! I’m happy you like it. I’m sorry about your aunt.”

“Thank you.” Ayame looked at the boys. “Nice to meet yall. Are you two twins?” She looked from me to Zach.

We might not be identical, but people often could tell we were twins since we favored each other.

“Unfortunately, his ass wouldn’t let me have any shine to myself,” I joked.

“You lucky you got to share that day with me.”

“Nah, baby bro, you’re mistaken,” I smirked.

Zach laughed and waved me off, putting his arm around Noelle.

“Ayame is it? It’s nice to meet you, and I don’t mean to sound insensitive, but when you plan on opening again? I’ve been craving some chocolate-covered grapes and one of them smores caramel apples,” Chase spoke up.

“You insensitive as hell.” Zach shook his head.

Ayame giggled. “I’m hoping to be up and running within the next week or so.”

Chase grinned. “That’s what I’m talking about. I can’t wait.”

“Man, yo ass.” I laughed.

Chase shrugged and laughed with me. “Is all the work in here for sale?” Ayame asked Noelle.

“Most of it, but some is just for show. The pieces with the price tags you can purchase.”

“Nice, I saw a few when we first walked in I want to look at.” She went to walk away but stopped and looked at me. “You coming?”

Her eyes were bright with merriment. I liked that even though we had just met and she was just meeting everyone else, she wasn’t shy and closed off. Oddly, it made my heart hammer wildly in my chest.

“Yeah, I’ll be right there.”

She nodded and walked off.

When I turned to look back at everyone else they were grinning. “What the hell yall looking like that for?”

By this time, Tori had walked over with a glass of wine in her hand.

“You like her,” Chase spoke up.

“I don’t even know her.”

“You invited her here,” Zach replied.

“She’s new in town. I thought it would cool if she met some people.” I shrugged them off.

“I saw how you just looked at her, brother,” Noelle told me.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “And how was that?”

“With adoration.” Her smile grew.

I kept my face blank and looked in the direction Ayame just went. “Yall tripping. I just got a good vibe from her when I met her and invited her here. It ain’t that deep.”

“You know the last girl you brought around was years ago-”

“We ain’t talking about that.” I quickly cut Zach off. That was the last conversation I wanted to have.

“I’m just saying. She seems like a cool girl, don’t mess it up.”

Flicking my nose with my thumb, I nodded. “Ima go see where she went,” I told them and walked away.

Something told me they were going to blow this out of proportion.

AYYAMME

“I’m having a good time. Thank you for inviting me!” I looked over at Austin with what I was sure was a goofy grin on my face.

I had two cups of wine, and even though I wasn’t drunk, I was feeling nice. I had never really been into art shows, but I was having a good time here. Noelle’s work was beautiful and I found at least two pieces I wasn’t trying to leave here without.

“I’m glad you came. Honestly, I usually just stand around with my brother and Chase for a couple of hours then head out. I actually enjoyed being here this time though.”

He looked down at me with a gleam of interest embedded in his eyes. That warmth I felt when I first met him formed in my stomach.

“Your friends and family seem nice,” I remarked, looking over where Chase and Zach were currently talking.

My eyes swept the room and I saw Tori and Noelle engaged in a conversation with a couple other women.

“Yeah, they’re straight.” He nodded in agreeance. “Not better than me, but they serve a purpose.”

I laughed and playfully hit his shoulder. “How long have your brother and his wife been together?”

“Like six years or something like that.”

“You can tell by the way they look at each other they really love one another.”

“Yeah, it’s sickening for real. All they ever do is kiss on each other like we be wanting to see that shit.”

Another laugh left my mouth. “So you’re not one for public displays of affection?”

He frowned. “I mean, I’ll grope on my girl and shit so niggas know she’s mine, but they asses be doing too much. Don’t nobody want to see all that.”

A toothless grin found its way on my face before I focused back on the picture in front of us. It was a silhouette of a black woman’s side profile with a head wrap and what looked like a jungle background. It was painted in earth tones of olive green, brown, tan, and a burnt yellow.

“This is beautiful.” Excitement hit me when I noticed a price tag near the picture.

“You like this?” Austin’s head tilted as he observed the painting.

“I do. It gives me an earthy feel, like mother nature. I have an area in my house I use for meditation, I think this would be a perfect fit.” I ran my hand over the painting, picturing it in the empty space in the area I made for peace.

It had a couple of plants on the wall, a small couch, and a few other things right now, but I felt this painting would fit.

“Ima buy it,” I confirmed and pulled out my phone.

Noelle had a QR scanner that was used for payments. According to the ticket, you just had to show the confirmation before you left, and you could leave with the painting or have it shipped to you.

“You meditate, huh?”

Keeping my attention on my phone, I nodded. “Yeah, helps me keep my crazy under control,” I laughed, half-joking.

“Why aren’t I surprised? The cute chicks always crazy.”

That caught my attention. I looked over at Austin and smirked. “You think I’m cute?”

Austin tugged on his bottom lip with his teeth. “You know that shit already, so I’m not even gone entertain that question.”

I giggled and went back to my purchase. “Never hurts to hear it though.”

Austin was quiet while I finished up my purchase, and once I was done I felt satisfied.

“All done?”

“Yep, I can’t wait to take it home with me.”

When I looked back at Austin, he stared at me with a look I couldn’t really decipher. There was a hint of mischief mixed with something else.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Austin’s mouth formed a straight line. “It’s something about you.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know shit about you, but I feel like I should. Does that make sense?”

Poking the inside of my cheek with my tongue, I looked around the room before making eye contact again.

“I read somewhere when you meet a dope ass person that you feel compelled to be in their presence.”

Austin narrowed his eyes. “Fuck outta here.” His heart-filled laugh sent a flock of butterflies swarming through my stomach.

“Just saying.” I grinned.

I understood what Austin meant. This was my second time being in his space, even though we’ve spoken a couple of times in passing when we were at our stores, but I felt the same tugging to him. Kind of like I did with Vance, but it was deeper. I felt like I could connect with him on something deeper than a friendship, even though I wasn’t ready for something like that.

Austin seemed fun and easy-going. I enjoyed this short time being around him and even being around his friends. I could tell they were good people.

“I received a notification on my phone. You were the one that bought this?” I looked up and Noelle had walked up to us with Zach right behind her.

“I did. I love this piece. It’s calming.”

She smiled widely. “I thought the same thing when I painted it. Gives you a Zen feel.”

“I agree! I can’t wait to hang it up. You’re talented as hell, girl. I see a couple more I might snag before I leave.”

Appreciation filled Noelle’s face as she rubbed her stomach. “Thanks, girl!” She looked at Austin. “I like her, bro.”

He laughed. This time it wasn’t from the stomach like the one he just had given me, but it still made my stomach flutter. “Cut that shit, sis.” He waved her off, making her smile.

“When are you due?” I asked, changing the subject before it got too deep.

Noelle focused back on me. “Next month, and I can’t wait. This little boy is getting more active by the day.”

“Don’t do my son.” Zach hugged her from behind and gripped her stomach.

That love I was speaking on earlier, I was witnessing it now. You could feel how they felt about one another just by being near them. They were tied to each other.

“You guys are so cute,” I complimented.

“Thank you.” Noelle blushed.

“I don’t know why you’re always bothering me.”

Chase and Tori walked up on us. Tori was frowning while Chase looked amused.

“The moment you stop fighting your feelings, the easier for us it’ll be.” A mocking grin appeared on his face.

Tori rolled her eyes. “Austin, Zach, please get your annoying ass friend.” Everyone laughed but me.

I stared at the two. “Are you two together?” Tori quickly shook her head.

“Girl, no.”

Chase smirked. “I just like getting on her nerves.” Again Tori rolled her eyes and drunk from the glass in her hand.

“Anyways, best friend, you had a great turnout. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, girl. I’m happy and all, but I can’t wait to lay down,” Noelle laughed lowly before yawning.

“Yeah, we about to shut this shit down. I gave you more time than we agreed on, but I don’t want you on your feet any longer.”

Noelle looked at her husband and nodded, leaning her head on his chest. “Okay.”

She yawned again. “Get my number from Austin. If you see a piece that’s still available and you want to purchase later, text me the item number, and I can ship it or have it dropped off to you,” Noelle looked at me and said.

“Will do.” I smiled at her.

She and Zach walked off, and Tori went in the opposite direction.

“Why you always messing with her,” Austin asked with an amused expression.

“It’s too easy,” Chase chuckled.

He looked at me. “It was nice meeting you, Ayame. Hopefully, we’ll see you around more.” He gave Austin a look before walking off.

Austin stared down at me. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah, let me just get a couple numbers from the other paintings I was considering,” I told them.

Luckily, Noelle's displays had digital screens. If the picture was sold, it displayed on the screen so that you knew it wasn't available.

After getting the few numbers I wanted, Austin and I said goodbye to his people then headed outside with my painting in hand.

“Did you enjoy yourself?”

I placed the picture in my backseat once we reached my car and stared at him. “I did. I was nervous about moving here and not knowing anyone, but I see that was all for nothing. Thanks for inviting me.”

My eyes went to his lips. I had to ignore the nagging urge I had to feel them against mine. I didn't know Austin like that, but I was sure he didn't just kiss random women he just met. Instead, I leaned up and kissed his cheek.

“I'll see you around.” The moment my lips touched his skin, a shock shot through me.

When I pulled back, he was giving me that unreadable look again.

He opened my door for me to get in. “Let me know when you get home,” he told me lowly.

Smiling softly, I nodded my head and got in the car.

Austin tapped the hood and stepped back so that I could pull off.

It shocked me to meet someone I clicked with right away, being brand new in town. It was completely unexpected.

My eyes went to my mirror and I saw Austin watching my car.

I felt like Austin had layers to him that I hadn't seen, which was fine because we were just meeting, but a strong part of me wanted to peel those layers back and learn him more.

“Whew, June I'm so thankful for you!” I told the manager of *ChocoLUXE*. “I don't know how I would manage this place if it weren't for you.”

Thankfully, her number was in the files in my aunt's old office. Over the last couple of days, June has been showing me the ropes and helping me learn to make everything. I never realized how much work it took to run this place.

She smiled at me then waved me off. “Girl, it's no problem. I loved your aunt like she was family and I love this

place too.”

I leaned on the workstation and crossed my arms. “I don’t get why Aunt Dee didn’t leave this place to you.”

June smiled and looked around the workroom. “She wanted to keep it within the family. Believe it or not, your aunt spoke about you often.”

“She did?”

June nodded. “One would think you were her kid and not her niece. She knew you would run this place correctly and make sure it stayed up to her standards.”

I smiled. “Yeah, my aunt was like my best friend. It’s still hard to believe she’s gone.” My voice trembled.

I swallowed, trying to push the sorrow back. It didn’t seem real until I started getting things prepared for *ChocoLUXE*’s reopening. Over the past week, so many people have stopped by offering their condolences and kind words about Aunt Dee. Knowing she died surrounded by love helped ease the sting of her being gone.

“She’s definitely going to be missed,” June paused and pressed her lips together. “You’re going to do fine running this place. You catch on fast, and I know Ms. Dee wouldn’t have

left you this place to anyone she didn't think was capable of running it successfully.”

I wet my lips and looked towards the rack where a couple of chocolates were curing in molds.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I still wasn't completely sure how me running things would pan out but knowing my aunt had so much faith in me to succeed motivated me to make sure I didn't prove her wrong.

“C'mon, it's time to show you how to do the caramel apples.”

A small grin appeared on my face. “Let's do it.”

One thing I never expected was to enjoy making chocolates and all the other treats as much as I did. I remember my aunt being up late at night in her kitchen making candy or chocolate when she couldn't sleep. Helping June these past couple days showed me why.

I was still adjusting to being in a new city and around new people, but I was enjoying my time here. Everyone I've met so far had been welcoming.

Briefly, my mind shifted to Austin. The art show was a few days ago, and since then we've talked via text here and there, but he's been busy with some stuff with his cigar bar, and I've been learning how to run this place from June, so we hadn't seen each other outside of a hi and bye in passing.

"Ayame, you okay?" June asked me.

Coming out of my head, I stared at her. "Yeah, sorry. What were you saying?"

Making my way over to her, she started going over the instructions for the caramel apples. Eagerly I stood by and listened to her. Caramel apples were one of my favorite treats, so I was excited to learn how my aunt made hers.

AUSTIN

Today I was able to relax some. The issues I was having with my building had been handled. The chairs and couches I ordered were due to arrive this week, and I had found a reasonable alcohol vendor.

I looked down and made sure my shoes were laced up. Sticking my headphones in my ear and placing my phone in my arm strap, I started my jog.

It had been a minute since I came to the trail near the park on the outskirts of the city, but I was ready to get back to my normal routine.

I used to go jogging three mornings out the week as long as the weather was nice, but I had been slacking since trying to get the cigar bar up and running.

Feeling my heart accelerate, I picked up my speed. There was a nice breeze this morning which felt good against the sweat pouring down my face.

My body jerked and I stopped suddenly. “The fuck,” I snapped, snatching one of my earbuds out of my ear.

“I thought that was you.” *Her voice.*

Spinning around, I made eye contact with Ayame. I couldn't stop myself from checking her out. She had on a pair of dark grey biker shorts with a matching vest that was open, showing off her black sports bra underneath.

“What you doing out here?” I asked her, looking back at her face.

“The same thing as you. I found this trail a couple days ago and fell in love with it.” She took a sip from the water bottle that was hanging on her wrist.

I pulled on my bottom lip, noticing how in shape she really was. Her thighs were small, but they were toned. Her waist was small, and the biker shorts she wore made her ass sit up nice as hell.

“I wouldn't have taken you as a runner.”

“This the only running I do.” Her answer caused my dick to jump and my head to whip up. She was giving me a mischievous grin.

“You think you can keep up?” She grinned then turned around and took off down the trail.

My eyes focused on her ass for a moment, watching it bounce as she ran.

She ain't got no panties on.

Before I followed her, I had to adjust myself. She wasn't even trying to, but Ayame was turning me on.

Once I composed myself, I placed my earbud back in my ear and took off behind Ayame. She had a pretty good lead but it was nothing to catch up with her.

“Man, it really has been a while since I ran.” I stretched my arm as Ayame and I headed back towards the parking lot. We had jogged a mile and a half before we decided to turn back.

“I know; with the move, it's been a few weeks for me too. I missed it.” I cut my eyes to her briefly.

“This normal for you?”

“Sure is. I love running.”

I frowned. “Who loves to run?”

“Isn’t that why you’re out here?”

I shrugged. “Nah, not really. It just helps clear my mind, but I don’t necessarily love it.”

Ayame used the back of her hand to wipe her forehead then ran her hands down the front of her thighs, causing my attention to follow. The outline of her lower lips was barely hidden and made me wonder if they were as fat as I assumed.

“I’ve always been into sports growing up, but when I joined the track team, that became my main focus. I used to get a lot of bullshit from my parents. They were hard on me about everything, so running gave me freedom, I guess you can say. Even though I don’t do track anymore, I try and run anytime I can.”

“Track, huh?” I pulled on my goatee. “They probably used to smoke yo ass,” I laughed.

Ayame stopped walking and popped her hand on her hip. “Boy, you better ask about me. You’re looking at the one-hundred-meter dash and four-by-two state champ two years running,” she bragged proudly.

“State champ? Oh, so you was top dog.” She grinned.

“Sure was, put some respect on my name.” She laughed. “My four-by-one team would have taken it too, but it was one school that we went second to every year.” She rolled her eyes but started walking again.

“So if running was your passion and you were good at it, why you not training for the Olympics or some shit?”

A heavy sigh left her mouth. “Because my parents ruined it.”

I waited for her to elaborate but she didn’t, so I probed further. “What they do?”

Her tongue went across her lips. “Made me lose my love for it. Once they saw my potential, they tried to dictate my life with it, which made me resent running, so I gave it up.” She shrugged.

I knew it was more to the story. I could hear the regret in her voice as she talked, but it was obvious she didn’t want to talk about it anymore, so this time I left it alone.

“I can understand that.”

“Your parents the same way?”

I ran my tongue over my teeth while shaking my head. “Nah, they just ...I don’t know. My brother was the one who

always had it together. They focused on him a lot, so I kind of went under the radar.”

She snickered lowly. “I would have loved to have gone under the radar when it came to my parents.” She sighed heavily again.

This time when I looked at Ayame, she seemed to be in deep thought. Her face was tight and her arched brows were bunched together.

“Wanna race?” she asked suddenly.

My face balled up. “What?”

“Let’s race. We don’t have too much further to go. Last person back owes the other food?”

I looked at the path in front of us then at her before smiling. “I’m greedy as fuck!”

Her smile expanded. “Ditto!” She took off down the trail.

“This girl,” I chuckled and took off behind her.

“Wassup man.” Chase walked up to the hostess stand and slapped hands with me.

“Shit. Just picking up a to-go order.”

“At this point, I feel like I have to pay you as much as you eat here.”

Chase owned a soul food BBQ Spot called *Chases*. He opened it some months back, and since then I have become a regular.

I laughed. “This ain’t even for me.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket, feeling it vibrate.

Ayame ended up beating me this morning, partly because I allowed her to. I enjoyed running behind her and watching her ass move.

“Who yo greedy ass feeding?” I clicked on the *InstaFlik* app after seeing I had a DM.

My eyebrows furrowed together, realizing who messaged me.

Clicking on the profile, making sure I wasn’t tripping, my chest tightened. Brushing the tip of my nose with my thumb, I swallowed hard then went back to the message.

Hey.

One simple word had my throat growing dry.

“Austin,” Chase called out, knocking me from my trance.

“What did you say?” I closed the app.

“I asked who the food is for. What the hell just happened to you?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. Just got an unexpected message. It’s for Ayame.”

Chase smirked. “First, you bring her to Noelle’s showing, now you getting her food.”

I frowned. “Relax. I lost a bet and owed her food, that’s it.”

A girl walked up and handed me a bag. “Here’s your order.”

“Thanks.” I grabbed the bag.

“A’right bro.” I nodded his direction, ignoring the look he was giving me.

“Aye, you got time later today to line me up? I’m looking rough,” Chase called out after me, running his hand over his head.

I knew Zach and I were the only two people he allowed to cut his head, and my brother had lightened his schedule preparing for his son's arrival.

“Yeah, slide by the crib later on tonight, I got you.”

“This smells amazing!” Ayame told me while accepting the container of food.

“Chase got some of the best food around.”

A shocked expression appeared on her face. “Chase? Your friend made this?”

I nodded. “Well, it's his recipe. I don't know if he actually hand makes the food anymore, but he owns the place I got it from.”

She opened the container and her eyes lit up. “If it tastes as good as it smells, then he has a customer for life.”

My eyes swept around the room. “Looks like you'll be back in business soon.”

Ayame turned and headed towards the counter. “Yep, this weekend hopefully. I pretty much know how to make everything now. I've talked to the two part-time employees my aunt had about returning, and the manager is on board, so

fingers crossed.” A moan escaped her mouth when she took a bite of the candied yams.

Her eyes closed and her tongue ran over her lips. “These are so good.” She scooped up another bite. “You should have never brought me this. I can see the calories I’m about to gain now,” she laughed.

“A little weight ain’t never hurt anyone.”

“True, but still, I like being in shape. There’s a gym not too far from here, right?”

I nodded. “*Maxed Out Fitness.*”

She snapped her fingers. “Yeah, that place. Ima have to be a frequent visitor there if all the food places around here are this good.”

I chuckled.

Ayame was too busy eating to notice me studying her. She was different from other girls I’ve met. She wasn’t stuck up and prissy. Nor was she shy or soft-spoken.

“Oh shit, I probably look liked a pig, stuffing my face.” She grabbed a napkin and wiped her mouth.

I shook my head. “Don’t like me stop you, Coco. I hate women that try and eat all cute when a guy is around.”

She giggled. “Yeah, that isn’t me at all. I still don’t gotta eat like I haven’t eaten in years. This food is just so good. Tastes like a Sunday dinner.”

A familiar sense of attraction ran through me as I stood there watching Ayame. I loved that even though we were still getting to know each other, she wasn’t afraid to be herself.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked, darting her eyes away from mine.

I felt like she had become a caterpillar attempting to hide in its cocoon when she crossed her arms over her chest. Suddenly she looked uneasy.

“I never met a girl like you before.”

One of her brows rose. “Is that a good or bad thing?” I don’t know what changed, but something in her voice sounded off.

I stepped closer to her, eager to fill the space between us. “It’s good for sure. You’re not afraid to be you.” I licked my lips.

Explosive currents shot through me as her stance eased up.

“I spent too much of my life being who my parents wanted me to be. Now I only know how to be me,” she confessed lowly.

For a second, a flash of indefinable emotion flashed through her eyes. She seemed to get lost in her head like she did earlier on the trails, but it didn't last long.

She quickly seemed to snap out of where her head went, and a toothless smile appeared on her face after a few seconds.

“I'm glad you can be yourself.” Without thinking about it, I reached up and wiped a spot near her mouth where she had sauce.

Her eyes lowered and her mouth parted. A jolt shot up my arm, causing me to pull my arm back quickly.

“My bad, you had sauce on your face.”

“Thanks.”

It grew quiet between us.

The pull I felt towards Ayame was hard to ignore, but I wasn't trying to act on it. I appreciated the bond we were forming and I wasn't trying to fuck that up.

“I should head next door,” I finally said.

I could have been trippin' but a disappointed look filled her face.

“Yeah, I should get back to work too before the itis hits me,” she giggled.

I stepped back from her, hoping the small space would ease up the emotions that were threatening to overcome me. It had been a while since I met a female that caught my eye in the way Ayame slowly was. The way she carried herself intrigued me to know more about her. Her easy-going attitude made me want to be near her.

“Thanks again for the food. I’ll be willing to beat you anytime if this is the outcome.” I laughed and prepared to leave.

Ayame followed behind me. When I was about to walk out the door, I turned and looked at her.

“What?”

I inhaled a deep breath. “Nothing, never mind. Be easy, a’right,” I told her then walked out.

Being around Ayame reminded me of the DM I received. It had me thinking about shit I wasn’t trying to.

Taking one last glance at *ChocoLUXE*, I turned and headed for my building. The last thing I needed to do was get caught up in Ayame and ruin her.



My eyes traveled around my Zen room, as I was calling it.

The painting I bought from Noelle's art show pulled the area together just as I thought it would. I placed it in the middle of six plants that were hanging on the wall. My diffuser was currently releasing lavender, and I had a bean bag in the corner and a yoga mat on the floor in front of the painting.

I ordered a few candles from *Lit Wicks* that I was waiting to arrive to bring the room together completely.

My phone vibrated on the small table I had near the door.

I walked over to it and quickly answered when I saw it was Reid.

"Well, hello, long lost best friend!" I smiled into the phone, stepping out of my Zen room.

“You’re the one to talk. Damn Charm, you move and forget a nigga’s number.”

Laughing, I made my way to my kitchen. “It’s not even like that. I’ve just been trying to get settled.”

“And have you?” Grabbing a bottled water, I leaned against the island.

“I have. The move was easier to adjust to than I expected.”

Reid didn’t answer right away. In fact, I pulled the phone away to see if he had hung up. That’s when I saw he was Facetiming me.

I smiled as soon as the phone connected.

He stared at me curiously. “You sure you good?”

Snickering, I nodded. “Yes, why don’t you believe me?”

He shrugged and leaned back on what looked like his couch. “You just been going through a lot. With the breakup, your aunt’s passing, and then moving to a new city, I would think you would be overwhelmed.”

“I’m not going to lie, I was at first. The first two weeks kind of went by like a blur, but now I’m doing better. I’m

opening the shop back up this weekend.”

Reid smiled. One thing I loved about him was his smile. It was always so bright and optimistic.

“That’s what’s up, Charm. Ima come down there and fuck with you soon.”

“Aw, it’s barely been a month and you’re missing me already.”

“Mannnn,” he dragged out. “Get the fuck outta here.”

The both of us laughed. “For real though, it’s weird with you being gone.”

Sighing, my shoulders slightly fell forward. “I know. I miss just popping up on you whenever I wanted. I especially miss the guessing game of what girl you might be with.”

He laughed again. “I been chillin’ lately. Heather popped up at my shit a couple days ago and saw Miranda there. Beat her ass in my front yard.” He shook his head.

“Reid! I told you to stop playing with these girls! One day they gone team up and beat your ass!”

He smirked. “Then Ima call you.”

I smacked my lips. “And I’m not gone come.”

He gave me a knowing look, knowing I was lying.

Reid was one person I didn't play about. Even though I didn't approve of his mannish ways, I would never allow a woman to put their hands on him.

“Whatever. You do need to calm down though, Reid. Heather is a nice girl. Why won't you do right by her?”

Reid glanced off to the side. “You know I fuck with Heather tough. It just ain't the right time for us right now. She knows that. She just be acting crazy.”

I shook my head. “You gone keep playing with her and she gone move on.”

His eyes whipped to me and he frowned. “Her ass ain't crazy. She loves a nigga. She knows once I get my shit together it's me and her.”

Instead of responding, I just shook my head.

Reid was going to have to learn the hard way.

The two of us stayed on the phone a little longer. He was catching me up on stuff back home and I filled him in about me.

“I met someone,” I blurted out.

“Who?” The playfulness left his face.

I tilted my head to the side, forcing a smile not to form on my face.

“His name is Austin. He owns the building next to *ChocoLUXE*.”

“And what? Yall fucking or something?”

My mouth turned upside down and my nose scrunched up. “What? No, Reid! It’s not even like that. He was the first person I met here, and we clicked instantly. We’ve hung out a few times, but I don’t know, I feel something there.”

“Don’t you think it’s too soon? I mean, you just moved there.” I rolled my eyes.

“No, I don’t think that. I’m not dating the guy. I just like how I feel around him. He reminds me of you or at least how we vibe, except I wouldn’t mind jumping on his-”

“A’right, I don’t want to hear that shit!” He shot up and cut me off, causing me to laugh.

“You’re my best friend, Reid! I just want you to know about my life.”

“And I want to know about it but not that shit! Damn, you need to find some female friends while you’re there. The

only dick I'm trying to hear about is mine.”

This time it was my turn to look disgusted. “On that note, I gotta go.”

He grinned at me. “What I thought we were best friends and talk about this stuff.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

His face turned serious again. “For real though, Ayame, I don't want you getting hurt again. You stopped me from beating Vance's ass, but I won't hesitate to make a trip for this nigga. Don't rush into things with him.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know, Reid. I told you it's not even like that. I just enjoy being around him. We're friends, I guess, but nothing more than that.”

“Yeah, a'ight. Ima let you go, but Ima be out that way soon and I want to meet that nigga.”

“Whatever Reid. I'll talk to you later.”

“Love you, Charm.”

“Love you too.”

When we hung up, I tossed my phone to the side and picked my water back up. I could understand Reid's warning

because I had a habit of falling for guys rather quickly. It's probably how I missed the signs with Vance's ass. I didn't think Austin would be like that though. Anytime the two of us got close, it seemed like he pulled back, so I was sure what I was feeling was one-sided.

Reid mentioning me meeting female friends stuck out to me, however. He was my only close friend back home. There were a few girls I was cool with, but mainly I hung out with the guys. I was a tomboy at heart, so it was natural to me.

Tori and Noelle popped up in my head. They seemed cool. My eyes shifted to my phone. I had no issues getting along with girls; I just had more in common with guys. The two of them didn't seem like the stuck-up bitches I had encountered back home. Maybe I would take Reid's advice and try to befriend them.

"I told you, you had nothing to worry about," June told me as she replenished some of the chocolates in the display case.

Today was the first day ChocoLUXE was opened since my aunt's passing, and it seemed like people had been waiting because we've been busy all day.

“Yeah, because of you. I would have lost my mind if I was here by myself,” I laughed, looking down at the inventory book.

I was planning on doing one last small batch of apples, grapes, strawberries, and pretzels before we closed for the night.

“I don’t know how I can work here and not gain a million pounds,” I commented.

We had so many different chocolates and candies to offer and everything looked good.

“I’m not really a sweets person, so that helps. If anything, I buy for my grandkids sometimes.”

“I’m not either, but those apples are gonna be my weakness.”

I took a final glance at the book, making sure I had everything covered.

“I’m going to head to the back to start making this stuff if you need me,” I let June know before heading to the back.

Just as I was about to begin my phone vibrated in my pocket.

Noelle: Hey girl, my bad about texting so late. This baby has me sleeping like crazy. I gave the two paintings you bought to Austin to give to you. Make sure you get them from him because he will forget lol.

Me: I will. Thanks girl.

I ended up texting Noelle for two more paintings I thought would look good in my Zen room. One was a field of flowers in soft pastel colors, and the other was another silhouette of a black woman done in different shades of browns and nudes.

I never had an urge to buy art or even care about it, but I knew I had to have those three paintings the moment I saw them.

Sliding my phone into my back pocket, I went to wash my hands to start making the replenishments.

Knocking on the door, I waited for Austin to come and open up. My phone had died and I forgot my charger at home so I couldn't call him to tell him I was outside.

“What are you doing here?” he asked when he pulled the door open.

He moved to the side and let me in.

Instantly I looked around the establishment, impressed with what I saw. I could definitely identify it as a men's hangout spot.

“Sorry, I would have called but my phone died. Noelle said she gave you my paintings.”

His eyes roamed me for a moment. “Yeah, they're in my car. I was getting ready to head out. Let me run to my office and grab my keys.” I nodded and watched him walk off.

While I was waiting I took it upon myself to look around. The dark furniture blended well with the dark wood flooring and boarding and the burnt yellow walls.

I walked over to one of the leather chairs and ran my hand over one before walking to the fireplace.

“What you think?” Austin's voice rang out behind me, causing me to jump.

“Shit, you scared me.” I grabbed my chest.

A crooked grin appeared on his face. “My bad. What you think of the place so far?”

“I think you've got something good going here. I've never been in a cigar bar before, but this looks like somewhere

guys would like to hang out.”

Austin ran his hand over his head and nodded. “I’m glad someone thinks that,” he muttered causing my eyebrows to crease.

“What you mean by that?”

Looking at me, he shook his head. “Nothing. Just talking shit. How was your opening?”

A wide grin appeared on my face.

“Amazing! According to June, it was like Aunt Dee never left.”

“That’s what’s up. I was gone come by but I got caught up here trying to get everything ready for opening day.”

“Don’t worry about it. I bet you’re under a lot of pressure preparing for your grand opening.”

“Man, you can say that shit again. C’mon, so I could get you those paintings.”

While Austin did what he needed to shut down the building, I waited by the door watching him.

Once he was finished and locked up, we headed for his car that was parked on the side of the building where the

parking lot was.

I wasn't paying attention and missed that Austin had stopped walking until I slammed into him. Quickly he stuck his arms out and grabbed me by my waist.

My eyes widened as I looked up at him.

His arms around me sent a tingling sensation through my body.

Austin's eyes lowered as a half-grin appeared on his face. "You smell sweet." He pulled my body closer to his, causing my heart to jolt.

"Do I?" I questioned.

He licked his lips, making my pulse speed up, and moved his head up and down. "You do, probably from you being around sweets all day." He leaned forward and inhaled softly.

"Just like cocoa." When he pulled back he was biting on his bottom lip seductively.

A shock was sent through my lower lips as a hot ache grew in my throat.

"Maybe I'm just sweet," I said faintly.

Another half grin appeared on his face. “Maybe.”

Austin let me go and an empty feeling filled me.

“The paintings are in here.” He turned to the car behind him.

I took a deep breath and slowly released it trying to get my feelings in check.

Austin turned with two wrapped canvases in hand. “You eat yet?” he asked casually.

I shook my head.

“You in the mood for BBQ? *Chases* is still open and I was planning on doing carry out, but we could sit and eat if you’re hungry.”

A small smile appeared on my face. “Sounds good to me.”

“Bet. You wanna follow me or ride with me?”

I looked over at *ChocoLUXE*; my car was parked in the parking lot on the other side of the building.

“I can ride with you.”

“A’right.” He turned and opened the door.

Before I climbed in the car, he grabbed my paintings, putting them back in his backseat.

“Remind me never to get in the car with you again.” I hurriedly climbed out of Austin’s car.

“What’s wrong with the way I drive?”

I glared at him. “You drive like a damn speed demon.”

He chuckled. “But did you die?”

I rolled my eyes. “Almost.”

The ride to *Chases* didn’t take too long. On the way we listened to the radio. My heart kept feeling like it was gonna leap out of my chest as Austin drove. I don’t know if he just didn’t care about the speed limit or didn’t have patience, but his driving scared the shit outta me.

We headed into the building and Austin opened the door, allowing me to walk in first.

I glanced over my shoulder. “I’m glad to see you were raised with some sense.”

That crooked grin appeared on his face. “My mama would beat my ass if I acted any other way.”

“Hey Austin,” the hostess said when we walked up. She was smiling so big I could see her back teeth.

“Wassup Lilly, let me get a table for two.”

Her eyes found mine, and the smile that was on her face quickly disappeared.

“Sure.” I could hear the strain in her voice this time.

I pulled on my bottom lip and looked between her and Austin but stayed quiet.

The two of us followed behind Lilly as she led us to a booth near the back. “This okay?”

Austin looked at me and I nodded. “Yeah, we good.”

She sat two menus on the table. “Your server will be out shortly.” A tight smile appeared on her face before she turned and walked off.

“You two used to date?” I asked soon as we sat down.

“What?” He looked at me confused.

I nodded backwards. “She didn’t seem happy about seeing us together.”

Austin picked up the menu. “Nah, nothing serious. We went out a couple times, that’s it.” He shrugged.

Hearing that caused an aching feeling in my chest.

Clearing my throat, I picked the menu up. “Welcome to *Chases*. I’m Neal, and I’ll be your server. Can I start you both with something to drink?”

“Can I get a strawberry lemonade,” I requested.

“Sweet tea,” Austin told him.

Neal nodded at us then turned and walked off.

My stomach rumbled and my mouth started to water as I read over the menu. “Everything sounds good.”

“You won’t be disappointed with anything.”

Once I figured out what I wanted, I lowered the menu and looked at Austin, who was already staring at me.

“You have a staring problem.” He smirked.

“Can’t help it when I have something nice to look at in front of me.”

My stomach fluttered. “Tell me something about you before you moved here.”

“Something like what?”

“Anything.”

I thought about it. “My life wasn’t really that interesting. I’m an only child, and my parents are still together. Before moving here, I served at a restaurant. That’s pretty much it.”

He frowned. “That’s boring as hell.”

I giggled. “I told you my life wasn’t interesting.”

Just as he was about to speak, Neal returned with our drinks. “Are you guys ready to order?”

Austin looked at me. “Go first.”

“Can I get the baked barbeque chicken with baked mac and cheese and candied yams on the side?”

“Got you, Miss. And for you?” He looked at Austin.

“Half a slab of ribs, with baked mac and cheese, baked beans, and let me get an extra side of candied yams.”

Once Neal dismissed himself, Austin’s attention fell back on me. “Now back to your boring ass. You ain’t have a nigga?”

My mind shifted to Vance, causing me to roll my eyes. “No, I actually just went through a breakup.”

“What happened with that?”

I smacked my lips and grabbed my straw, placing it in my drink. “He was a typical guy. A liar that tossed out dreams and empty promises.”

I wasn’t ready to reveal the real reason Vance and I broke up. It was still fresh in my eyes and embarrassing as hell.

“Damn, why that gotta be a typical nigga move?”

Again, I rolled my eyes. “Because that seems to be all yall do.”

Austin rubbed his goatee. “He must have really hurt you.”

“Something like that.”

Austin’s stare grew intense. “We’ll leave that for another day then. Tell me something else.”

“There’s honestly nothing to tell. My life was simple. If I wasn’t working or hanging out with my best friend, then I was home. Sometimes I went out to the bars, but I was pretty much a loner.”

“Why? You seem friendly enough to have a bunch of friends.”

I snickered. “I normally hung out with the guys. I’ve always been into sports and stuff, so I vibed better with guys than I did girls typically. I had a couple of girlfriends I would go out with sometimes or get my nails done here and there with them, but I stayed to myself outside of that. What about you? Tell me about Austin.”

He leaned back in his seat. “Shit, I’m simple too. You know I have a twin, my parents are still together too. Born and raised in Butter Ridge Falls.”

“No girlfriends, baby mamas?”

“Nope, and not that I know of.” He chuckled.

“Are you seeing anyone?”

“Nope. It’s a few females I might kick it with here and there, but nothing serious.” I chewed on my bottom lip and shifted my eyes to the side.

“Why don’t you have a girlfriend?” Slowly I looked back at him.

It was brief but I noticed his jaw slightly clench. “The last relationship I was in didn’t end well.” His voice was now flat and dull.

“Sounds like she hurt you.”

A hurt expression showed in his eyes before they went blank. “Nah, I’m over that. It was years ago.” He waved the situation off.

Even though he was trying to brush the situation off, I could tell it still bothered him.

Our food eventually came causing the conversation between us to decrease. It didn’t bother me any because I was trying to savor the taste anyways. The food here was amazing. You can tell it was all made from scratch too.

Every so often the conversation would pick up, but I could tell bringing up his last relationship had dampened Austin’s mood, so I left him alone for the most part.

“Thank you for the food. I don’t remember the last time I ate something so good.” I rubbed my stomach and smiled.

Austin pulled next to my car and threw his in park. His mood seemed to return to normal towards the end of our meal and the conversation had picked back up.

He looked over at me, showing me all 32. “Anytime Coco, you’re good company.”

My smile widened. “So are you. I like hanging out with you.”

His eyes seemed to lighten up at my statement. He licked his lips, bringing my attention to them. Since the art show, I had been wondering what they would feel like against mine. My pulse was beating wildly in my throat.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I was undoing my seat belt leaning over and covering his lips with mine.

I could tell I caught Austin off guard at first, but he quickly fell in line. My hand went to the side of his face while a wild swirl went through my stomach. His lips against mine caused a hunger for him that belied my outward calm. His hand went to the back of my neck and he pulled me more into him. My mouth opened, accepting his tongue that I eagerly sucked on.

My heart slammed against my ribcage. Ecstasy shot through my body, wanting more of him. Even though I had initiated it, Austin was now controlling the kiss. Heat sizzled through me, lighting a flame in my stomach.

“Fuck,” he muttered against lips, biting down on my bottom and sucking on it.

A hearty moan escaped my mouth.

“You should go,” he forced out, pulling away looking at me with regret in his eyes.

Confusion filled me. “Did I do something wrong?”

He shook his head. His hand moved from the back of my neck to my cheek and he caressed it softly.

“We just shouldn’t take it there.” My lips were still warm and moist from the kiss.

Rejection filled me causing me to slowly pull back as regret shot through me.

“I get it,” I whispered lowly.

Not wanting to feel worse than I already did, I quickly climbed from his passenger seat and made my way over to my car.

I felt stupid for acting on emotions and impulses.

As soon as I was in my car, I didn’t hesitate to start my engine and pull off. The fact that Austin didn’t even try to come after me proved whatever I thought was forming between us was one-sided.

“Stupid,” I mumbled, shaking my head.

I gripped my steering wheel tightly.

I wished I could go back and erase the last ten minutes.

I was sure after this things with Austin wouldn't be the same.

AUSTIN

“Austin, where the hell yo head at?” Zach called out.

“What?” I looked up at him.

“We been waiting for you to play your hand.” I looked down at the cards in my hand.

“My bad.” I tossed a card out and laid my cards face down.

We met up once a month to play cards, and normally I would be all in, but I wasn’t feeling it tonight.

“Just what I needed.” Chase picked up the card I threw down then dropped his hand.

“I’m done.” I tossed my hand in, leaned back in my chair and pulled my phone out.

“What’s up with you? You’ve been off since you got here,” my brother commented.

My thoughts shifted to Ayame. The hurt expression on her face flashed through my mind. Her kissing me threw me off, but I wasn't upset by it. In fact, I welcomed it. Her mouth was sweet, just like she smelled. The touch of her lips incited a delicious sensation that caused me to feel drugged.

Ending it was hard as hell when all I wanted to do was pull her over to me and bury myself deep inside her, but I knew I couldn't. In the short amount of time I've known her, Ayame had weaseled herself into my life, making me crave being around her. I enjoyed her company, relished having her close to me. A few times I had to stop myself from pulling her into me and feeling her lips on mine, but I knew I was no good for her. Hearing how her ex impacted her convinced me of that. She didn't go into details about what happened, but I knew how it felt to be *let down* by someone you loved. To put *trust* in someone and have it *betrayed*. I didn't want to do that same thing to her again.

"I'm good. Just got something on my mind."

"What?"

I flicked my nose with my thumb.

"Norine reached out to me." Both Chase and Zach looked at me with shocked expressions.

“What she want?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t respond to her. Didn’t see the point.” I looked back at my phone.

Norine was the ex I couldn’t seem to escape, no matter how much I tried. She was the only woman I ever loved and one of my biggest regrets. The two of us were together when we were younger, but just like everyone else, she didn’t think I was ready for something serious. I had my *flaws*; there was no mistaking that, but I did love Norine and her leaving broke something in me. I thought she was the one person who *understood* me, who would stay by my side.

“How long it’s been since you’ve seen her?”

“Six years.” Norine ended up dipping out on me right after her twenty-first birthday.

I hated how her leaving still caused me to feel sick. She was part of the reason I shut down emotionally. She often commented about me needing to grow up, but I couldn’t help my personality. I had a great sense of humor and loved to joke around.

“Maybe you should see what she wants.” I stared at my brother like he was crazy.

“For what? She left me via a note. Didn’t even have the decency to tell me face to face that she didn’t want to be with me anymore.”

Norine and I were living together when she decided to leave. One day I came home to all her shit gone and a note on the bed. I tried to call her, but she had changed her number or blocked me. After a few months of holding out hope that she’d come back, I came to the realization that she wasn’t and had to move on.

“At least to find out why she just left how she did. I know it hurt you.” I frowned.

“I don’t care why she left. She didn’t think I was owed a conversation when she left.”

“Austin.”

“Didn’t you handle Noelle being gone how you wanted!” My voice elevated and I sat up in my seat.

Zach’s jaw clenched.

“Austin, come on man, that’s a low blow.”

“Nah, this nigga always trying to dictate something, but when he was in his feelings about Noelle, he ain’t listen to shit anyone had to say. Cut himself off from everyone and

demanded space.” I knew I hit a sore spot for my brother, but he was pissing me off right now. If I said I didn’t want to speak to Norine, he should have left it at that.

“That’s different,” Zach gritted.

“You wanted your decision respected, so respect mine.”

His eyes were cut into tight slits as he glowered at me.

“Hey, when are you coming upstairs?” Our stare down was interrupted by Noelle’s voice. “Is everything okay?”

Zach was the first to break eye contact to respond to his wife. “I’m about to come up now. They’re leaving.” His tone was harsh.

It was fucked up to bring up his past with Noelle because I knew everything he went through was a sore spot.

“Yall niggas, man,” Chase mumbled and stood up.

He walked over and hugged Noelle, then looked at my twin and me. “Yall be easy.”

It wasn’t uncommon for me and Zach to get into it because our views about many things were completely different. It often ended in an argument.

“What happened?” Noelle voiced, walking deeper into their dining room.

“Nothing,” I said, standing up.

I walked to my sister-in-law and smiled down at her. “Any day now, huh?” I placed my hand on her stomach.

“Yep, I still have two weeks, but my doctor thinks it’ll be sooner.”

I nodded. “Make sure you take it easy.” I bent down and kissed her temple before turning to face my brother. He was still staring at me with a scowl on his face.

Instead of speaking, I tossed him a head nod and strolled to the front door.

I had too much on my mind right now. Thinking about Norine always put me in a bad mood. My chest always felt tighter than normal and my stomach always turned. I hated the impact she left on me, and her randomly popping up wasn’t doing either of us any good. As far as I’m concerned, she’s dead to me.

When I stepped into *ChocoLUXE* the first thing I did was inhale the chocolate aroma. My mind went to the night me

and Ayame kissed. She smelled just like cocoa and sugar. That scent had embedded itself into my memory.

I looked around the shop and my eyes fell on a familiar face.

“You gone keep avoiding me?” I asked, making my way to the counter.

Ayame’s face snapped up and a shocked expression appeared on it. She looked around, dodging my stare.

“I wasn’t avoiding anyone. I’ve been busy.”

Liar.

I had hit Ayame up a couple times since the night of the kiss, and she ignored me each time. I even stopped in the shop, but she was always “unavailable.” I didn’t press it too much. I knew that it seemed like I rejected her, but if she’d talk to me, she would know that wasn’t the case.

“You forgot these in my car.” I lifted the canvases.

She *finally* looked at me. Her eyes went from my face to the paintings in my hand.

“Oh yeah, I was wondering where I had put them. Thank you. Just set them on the counter.”

I did what she asked but didn't leave.

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Was there something else you needed?"

I ran my tongue over my bottom lip. "Can we talk?"

"I'm actually busy right now, Austin." The irritation in her voice couldn't be missed.

"Doing what?" My face balled up. "Ain't no one in here."

She rolled her eyes. "I was doing a mid-day audit."

My hand went over the top of my head. "Look, Coco, about that kiss-"

"We don't have to talk about it." She quickly cut me off.

"But I want to explain."

Her head shook. "No need. I acted on impulse and shouldn't have. I was trippin', but I understand."

Confusion filled me. "And what do you understand?"

"You don't see me like that." She shrugged. "I misread things because you were the first person to befriend me here, and I shouldn't have. It's cool, we're cool." I noticed her eyes

were distant. By her stance, I could tell she was uncomfortable with the conversation.

Ripples formed on my forehead.

Ayame didn't know, but her thoughts were far from the truth. I *was* feeling her, a lot actually. I just had a habit of fucking things up and didn't want that with us. Just as I was about to express that to her, the bell over the door sounded.

“Hi, welcome to *ChocoLUXE!*” A smile appeared on her face. It didn't reach her eyes so I knew it wasn't real.

“Ayame.”

“I have customers now. Is there anything else you needed?”

I wet my lips. I wanted to tell her the truth, but I could tell she wasn't trying to hear me out right now.

“Nah, I just wanted to bring you those.” I nodded towards the paintings.

“Thank you.” Again, a forced smile was on her face.

My chest felt heavy as I started towards the door. Since meeting Ayame, she had been so open with me. Today I felt the distance between us. She was guarded as if she had built a wall around her. I didn't want that.

I wasn't trying to make her shut down on me, but it seemed like it was too late.

I headed next door to my lounge. Opening day was drawing closer, and I had small finishing touches to complete.

Before stepping inside the building, I took one more look at *ChocoLUXE*. Something ripped through my chest causing my heart to stutter. It had been a while since a girl had this effect on me. It had me thinking that maybe this was a sign that it was best for me and Ayame to keep our distance from one another.

AYAME

My phone went off, causing me to pause from the prep I was currently doing. I looked down and noticed it was from a number I didn't recognize.

Instead of answering it, I ignored it and started back on the prep. I had a few items ready to be put in the displays out front. I was finally getting the hang of everything. I was finishing up the chocolate turtles when my phone went off again.

Sighing, I snatched my gloves off and answered.

“Who is this?”

“Ayame?” The moment his voice sounded, my body went rigid.

“Why are you calling me, Vance?”

“I went by your house and saw that you *really* did move.”

I rolled my eyes. “I did. I don’t see why that’s any of your business though.”

“Where did you move to? Let me come see you.”

“See me for what? We’re done Vance! What don’t you get?” I gripped my phone tightly and yelled.

I didn’t like to get pulled out of character. I was naturally a calm, easy-going person, and I hated when people interrupted that. Vance *knew* that. He knew I was big on *protecting my peace*. I didn’t argue and engage in back and forth. I would leave a situation before that.

My temple began to throb listening to Vance. I wasn’t even paying attention to what he was saying. His voice that normally would make my stomach flutter was causing it to turn. He was tainting my energy right now, and I wasn’t for that at all.

“Can we fix this? I love you; you can’t say your love for me is gone.”

I closed my eyes and lowered my head. I released a heavy breath. Vance was trying to manipulate my feelings right now and I hated to feel manipulated. I didn’t like mixed signals or dishonesty. I was in control of my feelings and

actions, so when anything made me feel like I was losing that control, I needed to step away.

“Whatever I felt for you dissipated when you failed to tell me you had a family across town waiting for you. You didn’t keep it real with me, and you know that’s a big pet peeve of mine. I don’t want to fix whatever it was we had going on. Fix things with your wife and don’t bother me anymore.” I hung the phone without waiting for him to reply.

After the last time I cried over Vance, I promised myself that I wasn’t going to waste any more energy on him.

After taking a few deep breaths, I was about to get back to my prep when my phone went off again.

An aggravated groan left my mouth. “Stop calling me!” I shouted.

“Damn, what I do to you?”

I sighed and shook my head. “Hey Reid.”

“Why you sound like that? What happened?”

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat and looked up at the ceiling. I could feel my emotions starting to get the best of me, and I didn’t want that.

Since Austin rejected me, I had been in a weird headspace. My energy had been off. I didn't take rejection well. Not feeling good enough was something I struggled with my whole life. The last thing I needed to be added to that was hearing from my lying ex.

"Nothing, I'm fine." I wiped my nose and brought my eyes down to the table in front of me.

"You don't sound okay. That nigga do something to you?" Possessiveness filled his voice, forcing a smile on my face. Turning around, I leaned against the metal table and looked around the kitchen like workroom.

"No, calm down," I snickered, attempting to mask my real feelings. "Vance just called me and caught me off guard."

"That nigga gotta see me, Charm. I'm tired of him messing with you."

"Leave it alone, Reid. I told him not to call me anymore, and I think he knows I'm serious this time."

Just like I wasn't going to waste any more energy on Vance, I wouldn't allow my best friend to.

"Anyways, what's up?"

Reid was quiet for a moment. “Reid? I’m fine, I promise.”

“I’m about to Facetime you.”

“I’m working right now, I can’t.” I shut him down. I knew if he saw me, he would see my true feelings. We had been friends so long that we could read each other that well.

“Just wanted to check in on you. That’s it,” he finally said.

“I’m good. The store has been keeping me busy.”

“That’s good, Charm. How you and that nigga?”

“Reid, I told you he’s just a friend and we’re fine.”

“Yeah a’right. You meet anyone else?”

“A few people. Everyone is nice.”

“You better not be out there making new best friends.”

I laughed.

“Of course not.”

Both me and Reid were possessive of each other. It was one reason why our significant others always felt some way about our friendship. Well, his was more so because he was a natural man whore.

“Good, good. I ain’t want shit though, just wanted to make sure you were good.”

Another smile formed on my face. “I’m good. Thanks for checking on me.”

We talked a little longer before hanging up.

After that, I put on my phone on silent. I didn’t want any more interruptions.

The store was quiet, which I welcomed. I just had a small rush of kids come through from a daycare and they caused mayhem in the store.

I was doing some online shopping when the bell went off. Inwardly I groaned. It had been a long day mentally and physically. I was ready to close down and retreat to the serenity of my house.

Putting up a fake smile, I looked up. “Welcome to *ChocoLUXE*.”

“Hey girl. Ayame, right?”

My smile turned genuine. “Hey, yeah. Tori?”

She smiled and nodded. “Business seems to be running well. How are you liking it here so far?” She walked towards the counter.

“It’s a nice change of scenery. I didn’t know how I would like running the shop, but surprisingly I love it.”

“That’s great. Butter Ridge is a great city for real.” She looked around the shop. “I asked Austin about you the last time I saw him, but he wasn’t trying to give too much up,” she laughed.

The mentioning of his name made my heart gallop. I hadn’t seen him since he brought my paintings to me, which was a couple of days ago. I felt like regardless of his rejection, we were forming a real friendship, but my pride wouldn’t allow me to reach out.

“Yeah, I’m finally starting to feel at home and settled here. With making sure the store is running correctly, I’ve been busy.”

“I get it. Moving to a new city is a big deal. Still, you seemed cool at the art show. I was going to see if you wanted to get drinks or something.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. I didn't get any bad vibes from Tori. One thing I promised Reid was that I would try and find some female friends. Plus, I needed something to take me out of my sunken spirits.

"Sure," I eventually agreed.

"You free tonight? It's wing night at this sports bar called *Priority Play*, and they have some of the best in town."

I shrugged. "I'm free."

"Good." She went into her pocket. "Put in your number." Tori unlocked her phone then handed it over.

While I inserted my number, she walked off. "Let me get these."

I handed her phone back then looked at the chocolate bars she just grabbed. "Brandy infused?" I balled my face up.

"They're so good."

"I'm not a Brandy drinker." I rung the candy bars up.

"What do you drink?"

"Whiskey, if anything."

She balled her nose up. "You sound like Noelle."

After telling her the total, Tori handed me some cash and collected her things. "I'll see you later."

"Bye!"

Once Tori was gone I decided to close down early. It was only a couple of hours anyway.

"Hi, I'm here to speak to someone about getting a trainer," I told the man at the counter at the gym.

He looked up from the computer screen. Instantly I noticed how handsome he was.

"I'm the lead trainer here, Tae." He stood and held his hand out.

Giving him a small smile, I grabbed his hand.
"Ayame."

His thumb brushed over the top of my hand. I ignored the lustful stare he was giving me. I was in some black biker shorts and a white v neck, nothing over the top.

"Ayame? That's different." Slowly I removed my hand from his.

“I hear that a lot.” My eyes raked around the gym to behind the counter he was at. “So, can I sign up for a trainer?” He bit down on his bottom lip and nodded.

I watched him walked to the other side of the counter to a filing cabinet. “Fill this out.” He came back over and handed me a clipboard with papers on it.

“What is it that you’re trying to work on, Ayame?”

“Mainly toning up,” I told him, not looking up from the clipboard.

“I don’t see shit that needs to be toned,” he muttered under his breath.

Snickering lowly, I ignored his comment and kept filling the paper out.

After a few minutes, I handed the clipboard back. Tae looked over the sheets. When he gazed back at me he slowly checked me out. I noticed him checking me out didn’t make my heart race like when Austin did it.

“I have an opening this Friday at six in the evening. You free?”

“That works.”

He smiled.

He had a beautiful smile; I couldn't help but notice.

"I'll see you then, beautiful. Come here ready to work."

"Oh, trust me, I will." I flashed him a smile then turned to leave.

One thing I wasn't looking to do was confuse any more relationships. I could already tell Tae's ass was trouble and I wanted no parts of that.

I walked into *Priority Play* looking around for Tori. When I located her, I made my way over and was shocked to see who she was talking to.

"Hey!" I made my presence known.

My eyes never left the tall man in front of her though. The pictures on the internet didn't do him justice.

"Oh, hey girl." Tori turned to greet me then back at him. "Gage, this is Ayame. Ayame, this is—"

"Gage Cook, lead shooting guard for *The Titans*," I spoke excitedly. I didn't mean to sound like such a fangirl, but I couldn't help it. Gage was one of my top five players. After the setback he had last year, he had come back even stronger.

Gage chuckled before flashing me a smile. “Nice to meet you.” He held his hand out, and I happily accepted it. “You a fan?”

I nodded. “Since you were in college.”

His smile grew. “I ‘preciate that.”

“Gage runs a basketball program at the community center.”

“I remember reading something about that. I think that’s amazing.”

“Anything to give back to my city.”

It was interesting hearing Gage be so humble right now. From different interviews and what I read, he was normally a cocky, arrogant man.

“I won’t take up too much more of your time, ladies. Tori, let me know if you need anything else. Ayame, it was nice meeting you.” He smiled at me again before taking his leave.

I was smiling so hard my cheeks started to hurt.

“I can’t believe I just met Gage! He’s been one of my favorite players forever!”

I followed Tori to the bar.

She laughed. “It’s so weird seeing someone so excited to meet him. I guess because we’re all used to him around here.”

“I bet. I heard his basketball program is doing well.”

She nodded. “It is. We already have a waiting list for it and it doesn’t start back up until his off-season.”

The bartender came over and we gave him our orders. “What do you do at the center?” I asked, getting comfortable on the bar stool.

“I’m the director.”

My eyes widened. “Wow, that’s amazing. How do you like it?”

She shrugged. “It has it’s days, but for the most part, I love it. I’ve always been into sports and stuff.”

“Me too! I was a huge tomboy growing up. Still am lowkey.”

We thanked the bartender when he brought our drinks. “Well, it’s nice to have someone else around that is,” she laughed.

“Noelle isn’t?”

Amusement filled her face. “Hell no. Noelle wouldn’t know what to do with a basketball if I showed her a tutorial. We honestly became friends in art class; that was her thing. She helped me out one time and we just clicked.”

The both of us chuckled. “That’s how it was back home. Most girls were into girly things, which wasn’t me, so I mainly hung out with the guys. My best friend always told me I needed to find female friends though, but I just don’t mesh well with girls, I guess.” I grabbed my drink and took a sip.

“I get that. I was kind of both growing up. Volleyball was my thing, but I would dress up and get my hair and nails done during the off-season. I always loved sports though.”

“I played volleyball for a little bit, but I was a runner. After a while I put all my energy into track.”

“Whew, girl, I hated running,” she laughed and drunk her drink.

It felt good hanging out with Tori. We had a lot of similar interests, which wasn’t something I was used to.

“So, you and Austin,” she inquired, looking over her glass.

I shifted slightly. “There is no me and Austin.” I giggled nervously and finished my drink.

“You like him, right? The two of you seemed comfortable with one another at Noelle’s event.”

Clearing my throat, I got the bartender’s attention, letting him know I wanted another drink.

“Truthfully, I thought there was something there, but I was wrong.” My shoulders rose then fell.

“Nah, that can’t be right. I saw how Austin looked at you. Hell, even when Noelle and I brought your name up, his eyes lit up instantly.” My heart stumbled.

“Have you guys known each other long?” I asked, trying to detour the conversation.

“Me and Austin?”

I nodded my head. “For like five or six years now. I met him when Zach and Noelle got together.” I bit down on my bottom lip. “I’ve never really seen him with a girl though. I mean, I know he was *with girls*, but he *never* brought them around or to an event with everyone.”

I swallowed hard, trying not to let her words stir my insides. I was trying to ignoring the nagging feeling in the

back of my mind trying to convince me that there was something between Austin and me. Sometimes I got in over my head too quickly. It was probably how I missed Vance's double life.

“What about you and Chase? The two of you seem to have something there.” I didn't want to talk about Austin anymore.

Tori was quiet for a moment. “What about us?”

“I don't know. I just thought I sensed something between you two.”

She rolled her eyes. “Chase just loves to get on my nerves, that's it.” She finished her drink then indicated she wanted another one.

Eventually, Tori and I ordered the wings she swore by and had the bartender keeping the drinks coming. It felt good to be out enjoying myself. With all the stressful situations I had been hit with lately, I needed tonight.

“You play pool?” I asked Tori after a couple of hours.

I had been wanting to go over there for a while. I cut myself off from drinks and finished my wings, which were delicious.

“Eh, not really. I can try though,” she laughed.

“What you know about pool?” I jumped, nearly falling out of my seat.

He grabbed my hips to steady me. “Be careful, man.”

I released a staggering breath then looked over my shoulder where Austin stood. “What are you doing here?” I squinted my eyes.

“Just came for a drink.” He waved the bartender over.

My stomach fluttered when I realized his hands were still holding my waist.

Slowly I moved forward and slid off the stool, causing his hands to drop. “So pool?” I turned back to Tori.

She was smirking, looking from me to Austin. “I’m actually going to have to call it a night. I gotta be up early for work, but maybe Austin will stay and play.”

“Uh, no it’s fine. I can leave too.”

“Why leave? We can play a game.” He tossed a bill on the bar. His eyes went to the empty drink glasses. “You got a tab?”

I nodded silently.

The liquor in my system had my emotions heightened. Austin seemed to look even more attractive tonight.

I watched him go into his wallet and pull out some more money. "This for both of them."

"You don't have to!" I hurried and said.

"Girl don't complain. I need to go out with you more if I get out of paying. Thanks bro!" Tori joked, making heat rush to my cheeks.

"You're welcome." He nodded at her then turned to me. "Wanna play?" His eyes went to where the pool tables were.

The way he was gazing at me had my heart turning over in my chest.

"Uh, sure." I finally agreed.

"I had fun with you, Ayame! We definitely have to do this again!" Tori told me.

"We do! I had fun."

"You good to drive?" Austin asked her.

"Yeah, I'm fine. You two have fun." She winked at me before heading for the front door.

When it was just Austin and me, he grabbed his drink in one hand then my wrist in the other. A shock shot up my arm. He pulled me over to the pool tables and sat his drink down on the corner.

“You know how to play, right?” he asked, walking to the wall where the sticks were.

I scoffed. “I wouldn’t have proposed it if I didn’t.” I followed behind him and grabbed a pool stick off the wall.

I allowed Austin to get the table together while I sat back and watched him. I hated that it felt like he was a magnet and I was a piece of metal being drawn to him. Even though I was still uneasy about his rejection, I yearned to be close to him. In so many ways, I felt we were similar and he understood me.

“You can break it,” he told me, stepping back from the table.

I licked my lips and raked my eyes down his body, stopping at the print in his sweats. I inhaled a sharp breath.

I was sure it was liquor that made my center pulsate.

Pulling on my bottom lip and walked to the table.

Bending over, I positioned the pool stick before sending it at the white ball to break the triangle.

“Not bad,” Austin bragged behind me.

“I guess I’m solids.” I smiled and walked around the table.

Things loosened up between us as we played. I learned he was just as much of a shit talker as I was and also competitive as hell. I had forgotten all about the failed kiss and found myself enjoying his company.

“You not about to hit that,” he told me, eyeing the split balls.

“Wanna bet?”

A crooked smile appeared on his face. “You a gambler?” He wet his lips and tilted his head.

“Maybe.” I grinned.

A small titter left his mouth. “What you want to bet?”

I thought about it. “You’ll owe me a foot rub.”

Amusement filled his face. “Man, what?”

My face soon matched his. “Deal?”

“What about when you don’t hit it?”

I shrugged. "I guess I'll owe you one." He shook his head.

"Nah, I want you to be my maid."

"Your maid?" My face balled up.

He nodded. "Outfit and all." I didn't miss the way his eyes hungrily took me in.

A flame lit in my stomach and a spark shot to my kitty. I had been trying to be cool all night, but the way Austin was looking at me right now was making it hard.

"Okay," I agreed slowly. "If I don't get it. I'll be your maid for a day, outfit and all."

His eyes darkened and narrowed.

Feeling the hair on the back of my neck rise, I quickly turned and bent over to take my shot.

I could feel Austin's eye burning into me and that made my whole body tremble. Shaking my head, I focused on the situation in front of me.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I released a deep breath and sent my pool stick forward.

"Hell nah!" Austin shouted when I hit both balls.

A wide grin appeared on my face as I spun around.

I hurried toward him, batting my eyelashes. “So about that foot rub.”

He was frowning at me.

“How you do that?”

“Can’t give my secrets away.” I winked at him before giggling while poking his chest with my finger.

His forehead creased but his eyes softened. He studied my face, looking for *something*- what I don’t know.

Something flashed in his eyes.

His hand went to my wrist and he gripped it, catching me off guard. “Austin,” I throatily spoke.

Like my voice flipped something in him, he pulled me closer and bent down, covering my lips with his.

It caught me off guard, but I quickly fell in line, grabbing his face and kissing him more feverishly. It felt like I was swimming through a haze of feelings and desires.

My breasts pressed against his chest.

His hand went to the small of my back, where he held me securely.

Our tongues tangled together. Instantly I tasted the liquor he had just consumed on his tongue.

The kiss grew hotter.

Austin's kiss was filled with possession, like he was claiming my mouth as his. It was aggressive and hard but *sweet* as hell. Blood pounded in my brain, leaped from my heart, and my knees buckled.

"Fuck, man." He pulled back. He nibbled on my bottom lip, forcing a moan to escape my mouth. Lifting his head, he rested his forehead on mine. Both of our breathing was heavy.

My lips burned in the aftermath of his fiery possession.

"I'm no good for you, Coco." His low baritone made my body quiver.

"You don't know that." I rubbed his cheek.

His eyes closed and he released a small breath. "I ruin everything I touch."

His words sent a dagger through my heart. I wasn't sure if it was the drink he had consumed, but I heard how vulnerable he was.

"That's not true," I whispered.

“I want you, but I have to *protect* you from *me*.”

Leaning up, I pecked his lips. His eyes were still closed, but I felt his breathing change.

“I don’t need to be protected. I’m a big girl.” His hand went around my waist and he held me.

It didn’t matter that we were in the middle of a sports bar. Right now, it felt like only the two of us were in the room.

Austin opened his eyes when I pulled back. He stared at me with hesitation in his eyes.

“Talk to me, Austin,” I begged, tracing his jawline with my finger.

He swallowed hard and shook his head.

He cleared his throat. “We should go.” He stepped away from me, instantly making me feel empty.

“Austin, don’t pull away.”

He ran his thumb over his nose. “C’mon so I can walk you to your car.”

I wanted him to open up to me. I knew whatever I was feeling between us wasn’t all my imagination.

Defeat filled me when I noticed he wasn’t budging.

Sluggishly I nodded and walked over to the wall to put the pool stick back.

On the way to the car my mind went back to the words Austin spoke to me.

I want you, but I have to protect you from me.

I didn't know what he meant by that, but I could hear the desperation in his words. Austin shut down right after that, but I saw the pleading, the vulnerability in his eyes right beforehand.

I glanced at him.

His hands were in his pocket and he was staring forward.

I didn't know what his deal was, but I hoped one day he felt comfortable enough to open up to me completely.

AUSTIN

“He’s handsome, bro,” I told Zach as I stared down at my nephew in my arms. “It looks like he took after his uncle.”

Zach chuckled. “Man, get out of here.” His eyes traveled down to his son.

“You’ve held him long enough. Give him here,” my mom demanded, coming up on me.

Zach called me late in the afternoon telling me Noelle was in labor. It was the first time the two of us have spoken since I left his house.

“What’s wrong, No-No?” Zach looked at his wife.

Even though she was smiling, you could tell something was bothering her by her eyes.

“I just wish my mom was here,” she confessed lowly.

Zach sat down at the edge of the bed she was in. “I know baby. I’m sorry.” He pulled her into him.

My mom bounced Zacharia and walked over to the bed. Since their first son was named Zachary Junior, they went with something close.

“It’s your mom’s loss, Noelle. My grandson is a beautiful little boy and he’s going to be surrounded by so much love.” She handed Zacharia over to his mom.

“Thank you, mama. I know.” Noelle’s eyes lit up when she looked down at her son.

“When are you going to settle down and have that?” my dad stepped next to me and asked.

I kept my eyes on my brother and sister-in-law. For a moment, Ayame popped up in my head. “Who says I want that?”

“C’mon son, I know you. Since that girl left you, you’ve been different, but before then you wanted a family.”

I shrugged. “Things change pops.” This time I took my eyes off the scene in front of me and looked over at my dad.

The look in his eyes was something I was used to. He was proud of Zach, happy that he had his life together.

The golden boy.

I sighed.

“I just want you to be happy, son. Sometimes it feels like you’re all over the place.”

Already seeing where this was heading, I decided to make my exit.

Leaving my dad where he was without replying to him, I walked over to where everyone else was.

“I’m about to head out,” I told them.

“Already?” my mom questioned.

Leaning over, I kissed my mom’s cheek. “Yeah. I have some things at the lounge to handle.”

I looked over at my sister-in-law. “Congrats again, sis.” I leaned down and kissed her forehead.

“Thank you, Austin.” She smiled up at me.

“You good, bro?” Zach asked.

I looked at him. I knew he could feel the shift in my mood. His ass always could. “Yeah, I’m good.”

The last thing I was trying to do was fuck up his son’s arrival. I knew this is the one thing both he and Noelle wanted since they ran back into each other. The two of them had been through so much, they deserved this moment.

I turned to leave. “Austin,” my dad called.

“We’re good pops. I gotta go.” I nodded at him.

“Hold up, Ima walk you out,” Zach said.

The door to the room opened and Tori bounced in with balloons and a bag. “Where’s my god son!” she asked bubbly. “Hey yall!” She waved then hurried to where Noelle was.

Zach approached me and the two of us left out of the room.

Silently we walked to the elevator, both of us lost in our thoughts.

“Look, about what happened at my house,” Zach started once we were in the elevator.

“Don’t worry about it.” I waved him off.

“Nah, you always want to brush shit off, but you’re my brother man, my twin! I can tell when things aren’t right with you. I should have respected how you felt about Norine. Instead of letting it go, I pushed.”

I ran my thumb over my nose. “It was a low blow to bring up when Noelle was gone. I know how much it affected you.”

Zach looked out into space and was silent for a moment. “When I lost my son, and then Noelle’s parents snatched her from me, I felt lost. It was the lowest period of my life, and I wasn’t sure why God allowed me to survive that accident and be alone. I thought about taking my life a few times just to be with my family.”

The door to the elevator opened and we stepped up but didn’t move from near the doors. “The moment I found out Noelle was back, everything we went through to get to this point still seems surreal, but I’m happy now. Even though Zachariah won’t replace Zach Jr., I got my son and my wife. I know that you think we’re on your case all the time, but we just want you to be happy, Austin. I don’t know what happened with you and Norine, but something in you shifted when she left. I thought talking to her would bring you closure.

I know you like Ayame, and I’m sure you’re doing typical Austin behavior and running from her, but don’t, bro. Allow yourself to build with her, stop thinking the world is against you. We’re your family and we love you, bro.”

He grabbed me and pulled me into a brotherly hug.

The two of us held our stance for a moment before he slapped my back. “Enough of this mushy shit,” I joked. “Go enjoy your son.”

He smirked. “Your grand opening is coming up, right?”

“Next week as long as everything goes right.”

Zach nodded. “I’m proud of you, twin.”

It was almost that time. Everything was finally coming together for *Rocky’s Cigars*, and I was more than ready. I knew my family didn’t have much faith in me, but Zach’s words sounded sincere.

He turned and hit the button for the elevator.

I headed for the front doors.

I stopped by this breakfast spot called *Mama’s* on the way to my house.

I was at the counter waiting to put in a to-go order when a familiar face walked through the door.

My teeth sunk into my bottom lip as I took in her slim, athletic frame. I assumed she had just come from a jog since

she was dressed in blueberry blue biker shorts, with a matching vest and black sports bra under it.

“I thought you only went jogging in the morning.” I stepped out of line and over to the hostess stand where Ayame was waiting.

She glanced up from her phone and smiled at me. “Hey.” She slid her phone into her vest pocket. “I haven’t been able to jog in the mornings, so today I left the shop in June’s hands.”

I looked around the small diner. “You about to dine in?”

She nodded. “I did a light jog today worked up a small appetite.”

I licked my lips and looked over again. “You mind if I sit with you?”

We had talked some since the night at *Priority Play*, but not about that night. It was no secret that I was feeling Ayame. She was attractive, and I felt a connection to her the moment I laid eyes on her. Something sparked between us when I first talked to her in the parking lot. I couldn’t help but taste her lips again.

They were pillow-soft and tasted like sugar.

Just thinking about them made my eyes travel to them.

“Sure.” She smiled.

Someone came over a moment later and led us to the table. “What can I get you to drink?” she asked us.

“Lemonade.”

“Orange juice.”

The waitress walked off leaving the two of us alone.

“I saw the sign. You ready for your opening?” Ayame looked up from her menu and asked.

“I am. I’m more than ready for real.”

“What about your family? Are they happy for you?”

I laid the menu down. “They say they are.”

“You don’t believe them?”

“I think they will be once they see I’m serious about it.”

The waitress came over with our drinks and asked if we were ready to order.

“Ham, sausage, and cheese omelet with hash browns on the side,” Ayame ordered.

“French toast, with apples and cinnamon topping. Scrambled eggs with American cheese and hash browns on the side.”

“Coming right up.” She smiled and took our menus.

“Why are you so hard on yourself?” Ayame asked me once we were alone again.

I squinted my eyes. “Where that come from?”

She took a sip of her lemonade and leaned forward. My eyes focused on her breasts pressed against the table.

“Just an observation.”

I ran my tongue over the top of my teeth and raked my eyes upwards. “Growing up with a twin wasn’t easy. Everyone thought we should be alike, act alike, think alike. It was hard to have my own identity when someone else was always there. My brother and I were like night and day. He always followed the rules, always showed his feelings, and was the golden child in my parents’ eyes. I was the opposite. I didn’t have a clear direction of what I wanted in life, I hardly took shit

seriously, and my parents had to bail me out of more situations than I could count.”

I stopped talking and took a drink of my orange juice. “Why did you and your ex break up?” I asked her suddenly. I didn’t want to talk about my family issues right now.

A shocked expression appeared on her face. “Where did that come from?”

I shrugged. “Just curious.”

Her eyes fell on the table. “He was married,” she revealed quietly before clearing her throat. “I didn’t know it until his wife confronted me. We were engaged to be married, and I thought I would finally get my happy ending, but that wasn’t the case. He had a wife and kids at home, and I never knew.” She laughed bitterly. “So much wasted time with someone who was never mine.”

Her words made my stomach turn.

When she looked up at me, the disappointment in her eyes almost suffocated me.

“Anyways, once I found out he was married, I ended things and haven’t looked back since.”

“Damn,” I mumbled.

The waitress came back to the table with our food. After saying grace, the two of us ate in silence.

Her confession of her breakup nagged at me. Ayame seemed to have been let down a lot in life. She didn't have a close relationship with her family and her ex was a liar.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Ayame asked when she looked up at me.

One corner of my mouth rose. "You're just nice to look at."

She smiled a toothless grin.

The two of us finished our food and I took out my wallet. "Let me pay."

"I got it."

"You paid last time."

"And I'm paying this time." I grabbed some cash and placed it on the table.

"Next time I'm paying." She narrowed her eyes on me.

"Glad to know there'll be a next time." We held eye contact for a moment. For a moment, my heart swelled in my chest. There was an undeniable connection between us.

We left out the diner and I walked to Ayame to her car.

“When can I expect that foot massage?” She smirked up at me.

Stepping closer to her, I grinned. “When do you want it?”

I noticed her swallow hard and her breathing change. “Whenever.”

My teeth sunk into my bottom lip while my eyes lowered. “Just give me the word and I got you.”

Her tongue went over her lips.

I watched her chest slowly rise and fall. The sexual tension between us was intoxicating. Ayame’s chocolate skin looked smooth enough to run my tongue over. It made me wonder if she tasted like chocolate.

“Coco.” I stepped closer to her.

Placing one of my hands on the top of her car. “How is it that you smell sweet even though you just went on a jog.” I bent down and inhaled her.

She inhaled a deep breath. “Maybe it’s just me.”

Cocking my head to the side, a crooked grin appeared on my face. “I wonder if all of you is that sweet.” Slowly my tongue swiped over my bottom lip.

I wanted Ayame, bad. It was hard to deny myself of her.

I bent down and kissed her forehead.

“I’ll see you later.”

When I turned to leave, she grabbed me. “Why do you keep fighting this?”

My stomach jumped.

“I told you, I’m no good for you.”

Pulling away from her, I headed in the direction of my car. I hated to repeatedly shut Ayame down. I never felt such a strong connection to anyone like I do her, but I needed to keep things platonic between us if I wanted to continue to have her in my life.

AYYAMME

“Give me one more set, beautiful,” Tae coached, standing in front of me with his arms crossed.

Even though Tae was a flirt, I couldn’t deny he was good at his job.

Making sure my feet were hip-width apart and my core tight, I bent over and placed my hands on the floor before walking forward, ending in a high plank before walking back.

“Make sure to keep your back straight when you plank and keep your core tight.” Doing as he said, I continued my sets, feeling my muscles being stretched.

“One more.” Taking a deep breath, I completed the last set before standing up.

“Good, take a few breaths in and out.”

He circled around me. “Do you always look at all your clients like that?” I smirked, walking over to my water bottle.

“Like what?”

“Like you wanna fuck.”

He smiled widely before laughing loudly. “I don’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. You’re just beautiful as hell. I know you’re new here but I’m surprised no one’s snatched you up yet.”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling.

“Who said I’m looking?” I took a drink of my water.

Tae licked his lips. “Even if you weren’t, I’m sure niggas be at your top.”

Smirking, I shrugged. “I guess not tough enough.”

Tae ran his eyes down my body. “You have a nice body, and I mean that in the most respectful way. You used to be an athlete?”

I nodded.

“Runner?”

I raised an eyebrow. “How’d you know?”

“You have runner’s legs.” I glanced down at my legs.

“I used to run track, still try to run at least three times a week.”

“I can tell.”

Setting my water bottle down, I walked back over to Tae. “What’s next, boss?”

“Boss?” He grinned. “I like the sound of that.”

Laughing at him, I waited for him to tell me what to do next. I didn’t take offense to his flirting, and although he was cute, I wasn’t taking anything he said seriously.

“You should let me take you out,” Tae said, leaning against the front counter.

I smiled at him and shook my head. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

He shrugged. “Why wait? If I see something I like, I go for it.”

“I don’t mix personal and business, trainer,” I smirked.

“Damn, you just broke my heart.” He grabbed his chest, only making me laugh harder.

“Whatever, I’m sure a handsome guy like you has plenty of ladies anyway.” Instead of answering verbally, he gave me a bashful grin.

“I-” Before he could finish his statement, a woman’s voice rang out calling his name.

“Devontae!” she shouted.

I turned and saw a woman who looked like she had swallowed a basketball storming our way.

“I’ve been calling you!” she bellowed, not caring that we were in the middle of a conversation.

The smile on Tae’s face instantly dwindled and quickly turned into a scowl. “Tia, what the hell are you doing here? I’m working!”

Tia turned and glared at me. “Doesn’t look like you’re working to me. I’m calling you about our baby and I walk in here and you’re smiling in some bitch’s face!”

“Look, I don’t know what the two of yall have going on, but I’m not gone stand here and have you disrespect me.”

“Girl, why are you still here!”

“Tia, chill the fuck out! You don’t even know if that’s my baby!” He looked at me. “Let me handle this girl. I’ll see you at our next session.”

“Tae!”

I bit the inside of my cheek. As much as I wanted to flip, the bulge in her stomach made me chill.

“Good luck,” I told him, shaking my head.

Today was my only off day from *ChocoLUXE*, and I was not about to spend it arguing with some girl over her baby daddy, who I didn’t even want.

When I was about to open my front door, my name was called from behind me, causing me to spin around.

My eyes bucked and the corners of my mouth rose. “Reid! What are you doing here?” I rushed off my porch and threw my arms around him. He dropped his bag and hugged me back.

“I didn’t like how you sounded the last time I spoke to you, so I wanted to come and check on you.” I gripped his neck tighter.

“I told you I was okay.” I pulled away from him.

“Yeah, well I had to see from myself. Plus, I needed to get away for a couple days.” He shrugged.

I turned and headed back to my front door. “What’s going on?”

Opening my door, I let Reid enter first.

He dropped his bag on the floor next to my couch then took a seat. “Me and Heather been into it heavy lately. She been on some bullshit and I was tired of going back and forth with her.” He leaned back on my couch closing his eyes.

Snickering, I took a seat next to him. “I told you Heather wasn’t going to keep dealing with your bullshit Reid. You need to just let her go.”

With his eyes still closed, he frowned. “Why you always saying bullshit like that?”

I rolled my eyes and stood up. “Because that girl loves your dog ass, but you won’t treat her right.” I tapped his leg. “I just came from the gym and need to shower. You can put your things in the guest bedroom.” I hadn’t made any changes to the guest bedroom since moving in. My aunt already had the room set up, so I didn’t have to worry about that.

“Bet. I need some sleep anyways.” He yawned.

Once I showed Reid to the bedroom, I headed for my room so I could shower. Just as I was about to step into the shower my phone vibrated.

***Austin:** I better see you at my grand opening Friday, Coco.*

I grinned.

Me: If that's a personal invitation count me in.

I had been going back and forth on whether I wanted to go support Austin. I thought we were close enough to show my support, but at the same time, I didn't want to overstep. He was so hot and cold that I didn't know how to approach things most times. I wish he would open up to me more, but he was so guarded that he kept me at arm's length.

“So this is it?” Reid asked, stepping out of my car.

He decided to come to *ChocoLUXE* with me today. We spent the night talking and catching up and it felt like the old days. Reid's life was always interesting because of his constant female drama. His stories always amazed me.

“Yep. This is where the magic happens.” I smiled proudly at the building.

The past few months of being here and working at *ChocoLUXE* had been blissful.

We started for the building, and as I unlocked the door my name was called.

“Coco!” I couldn’t help the smile that formed on my face.

Turning around, I faced Austin. “Hey.”

His eyes went to Reid and his face went blank. I could see his jaw slightly clench. When I looked at Reid, his eyes were narrowed.

“Reid, Austin. Austin, Reid,” I introduced them.

The two of them stood in a stare-off. “Reid, can you wait for me inside?” I asked, trying to ease the tension that had formed.

His eyes never left Austin’s, but he did smirk. “I got you.”

Once Austin and I were alone I asked, “You ready for tomorrow?” I smiled at him.

His face was still tight but he slowly nodded his head. “Yeah, putting the finishing touches on everything. Ima see you there?”

I cheesed. “I told you, you would.”

He swiped his nose with his thumb. His eyes went behind me then found mine again. “Good. I’ll be looking out

for you.” With that, he turned and headed towards his building.

His abrupt exit caught me off guard but learning the kind of guy Austin was, I wasn’t shocked.

I walked into *ChocoLUXE* and noticed Reid looking around.

“So that’s him?” he asked, never turning around.

“Who?”

“Ole boy you been dealing with.” Rolling my eyes, I headed for the counter.

“I’m not dealing with anyone.”

He chuckled. “Couldn’t fool me. He didn’t look happy seeing me with you. Probably thinks I’m your nigga.”

Waving him off, I headed for the back. “I told you we’re not like that. Austin is just a closed-off person, that’s it.”

He grunted. “I’m a nigga, Charm, with eyes. I saw how he looked at you. He was tight about seeing me. He likes you.”

I brushed my bang out of my face. I needed to find someone here to cut my hair, it was starting to grow out and I wasn’t feeling it.

“Just leave it alone, Reid.” I shook my head.

He smiled at me. “You like him too, huh?”

“We’re friends.

“But you want more?” I mugged him.

I wasn’t trying to discuss this right now.

Reid tossed his hands up with a taunting grin. “Okay, okay, I’ll let it go, but don’t think I missed how you smiled when he called your name.”

Rolling my eyes, I went to the sink to wash my hands. “Why don’t you stop trying to analyze me and come wash your hands so you can help me.

Since Reid wanted to annoy me and get all in my business, I was about to put his ass to work.

AUSTIN

Today was the day.

Rocky's Cigars grand opening was today.

It had been a long time coming with many setbacks and doubts, but today was the day.

I looked myself over in the mirror. I normally didn't care to dress up, but tonight, that was unavoidable. I looked sharp; I couldn't deny that. Dressed in black slacks and a crimson red button-up with black loafers, I knew I cleaned up nice.

My hand went over my freshly cut hair. I was a ball of nerves right now. My stomach was bubbling and my hands were sweating, but I was ready. With everything riding on tonight, I needed this opening to go without any complications.

I was standing near the bar taking in the scene in front of me.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony had been successful, and now the night was in motion.

My eyes roamed around my lounge. I had been open for a little over an hour and the place was already packed. Light music was playing overhead, the bar was fully stocked, and I had found some of the freshest cigars around.

Even though it was mostly men in the audience, some women were present too.

“You really did it, bro.” Zach stepped closer to me.

“I did. It took a while, but I did it.”

“Grandpop would be proud.” Accomplishment filled my body. Even though I wanted a laid-back place for people to come and chill, I also wanted a place my Grandpop would love.

Laughter could be heard near us. I turned and noticed a group of men with dark liquid in their glasses. They seemed to be having a good time.

“You know Austin, I know you get a lot of backlash for shit, but you put your mind to this and you saw it through.” He

slapped his hand on my shoulder.

“Preciate it, bro. How’s fatherhood?” I asked, reaching back and grabbing my drink.

Zach’s face lit up. “I love it, man. Soon as I found out Noelle was pregnant again, I made a promise that I would do whatever I needed to keep the both of them safe. Now that my son’s here and my wife is happy, I couldn’t be happier.”

“Being a family man looks good on you.” He turned around and waved for the bartender.

“Maybe you’re next.”

I didn’t bother to respond to his statement.

“I know growing up, you always felt like you were treated differently Austin, but seeing this here tonight shows that you’re capable of doing whatever you set your mind to.”

“Austin! You did it nigga!” Chase walked over to us and cheered.

I smiled widely and slapped hands with him. “Thanks for coming man.” He nodded and pulled out a cigar.

“You’re my brother, you know I wouldn’t miss this.”

“Since when did you start smoking cigars?” Zach turned around and asked Chase.

Chase cheesed. “I don’t, but it’s a special occasion.” He pulled out a lighter and lit the end of the cigar.

“This shit is gross.” He frowned, making me laugh.

“You not supposed to inhale it, fool.” I shook my head. “Ima go make sure everyone’s smooth. Yall enjoy yourselves.”

Leaving my brother and Chase where they were, I did a small tour around the building. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. Because of the ventilators and smoke eaters, the cigar smoke wasn’t as strong.

Once I made sure everything was running smoothly, I went back and found the guys.

“Your girl just got here,” my brother said, looking at the door.

“And she’s not alone,” Chase followed up.

I looked towards the door where Ayame had just walked in. My eyes went to the side of her where the Reid nigga she introduced me to the other day was. I bit back on my back teeth.

It had been a while since I felt jealous. When Ayame introduced me to the dude she didn't say who he was to her, but I could tell they were familiar with one another. Even now, watching them laugh and interact had me heated.

I rolled my neck and threw the drink in my glass back.

"I'll be right back." Leaving the two of them where they were, I headed in the direction of Ayame. She was wearing baggy jeans that ironically matched my shirt and a long sleeve orange, crimson red, and tan camouflage crop top with cuts in the front. Her four-pack on full display and her skin was smooth as hell.

"Coco," I called out when I got close to her.

Her eyes left Reid's and found mine. I didn't miss how they lit up and her smile widened.

"Austin, congratulations! The turnout looks great." She stepped closer to me and threw her arms around my neck. Her chest pressed up against mine. My hands made contact with her bare skin and I pulled her tighter into me. Her sweet scent filled my nose.

"How is it that you smell like sugar all the time?"

She bashfully smiled. "I told you it's natural." For a moment, the two of us held eye contact. My heart beat erratically. The turnout was great tonight, but Ayame here made it feel even more special.

Someone cleared their throat.

"My bad, Reid. You remember Austin, right?"

"Yeah, congrats on your opening." Reid stepped up next to Ayame.

I stared at him then bounced my eyes to Ayame. "Yall together?" I narrowed my eyes.

Her nose scrunched up. "Who me and Reid? Eww, no."

"Aye, don't act like I'm not a catch, Charm!"

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, I wouldn't date him if he was the last guy on earth. Reid is my best friend, more like my brother. I would never see him like that."

"Same here. Charm's that annoying sister you can't get rid of."

She smacked her lips. "Whatever, you love me." He smirked at her.

"You a'ight."

My eyes bounced between the two again. I didn't get the vibe they were fucking or intimate, but I couldn't deny that it bugged me knowing how close they were.

"Ayame, it's nice to see you again." My brother and Chase walked up behind me.

"Hi, guys." Ayame smiled at them. "This is my best friend, Reid. Reid, this is Austin's brother and best friend, Zach and Chase."

"I'm about to head home. I don't want to leave Noelle and the baby there too long."

"Thanks for coming bro." We hugged.

"Noelle had the baby! Congrats Zach!"

He grinned proudly at Ayame. "Thank you. Hit her up. I'm sure she'd love some company." Ayame nodded.

"I will."

Zach left and Chase went to talk to a few people he recognized.

"I'm about to get a drink," Reid said, leaving the two of us alone.

I stepped closer to her. “The place looks good,” she complimented.

“Thanks.” I lowered my eyes.

“You look great in that outfit.” I ran my eyes down her body. “That’s your color.

She blushed. “I see we were on the same wave color-wise.” I smiled.

“Looks like great minds think alike.”

Again, the two of us maintained eye contact. It felt like my heart was going to leap out my throat. Just staring at her right now set a fire inside me so hot it was almost overwhelming.

My feelings for her confused me.

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head.

“I expected the smoke to be overbearing, but it’s not that bad.”

“Yeah, I took precautions so that it’s comfortable for everyone.”

I wanted to kiss her, but I held back.

“Ima make my rounds. Let me know if you need anything a’right?”

“Okay.” She nodded.

Blowing a deep breath, I left Ayame where she was and went to check out the room again.

“I know that look.” I looked over at Reid.

“What?” His eyes traveled to where mine just were. Ayame was currently playing darts with a small group.

“She’s good.”

Reid chuckled. “That’s Ayame. She’s competitive as hell and pretty much excels in everything she does.”

My eyes traveled down her the back of her body. “She tells me the two of you are just friends.”

Out the corner of my eyes, I watched him. “You sound like you got something to say about it.”

This time I turned to face him. He shrugged, keeping his eyes on Ayame. “Ayame has struggled her whole life trying to be good enough for her parents. They always pushed her to be the best at everything, not seeing what they were doing to

her. She's a good person with a huge heart. Even though she kicks it was with the boys all time, she's still a female and sensitive as hell. She's easy to get along with, and most importantly, when she falls, she falls hard.

The last nigga she was with broke her heart. She trusted him too soon and wanted love so bad that she ignored shit she shouldn't have. I hear how she talks about you, I see how her face lights up when she looks at you. I don't know how you feel about her, but Ayame has feelings for you, and they're real. I can tell you're feeling her too, but for whatever reason, you won't act on it. If you don't plan on taking things between the two of you further, let her know that before she falls too hard."

I bit down on my back teeth and flicked my nose with my thumb.

Even though I wasn't feeling how he just tried to check me, I could understand his concern. He cared about Ayame, and I couldn't blame him for that.

"Hey, everything good?" I looked and Ayame was standing in front of us.

"We're good, Charm. Damn, you worried I'd tell him something embarrassing about you," he laughed.

She playfully rolled her eyes. “I just know how you are.” She cut her eyes at him.

Walking up to Ayame, I threw my arm around her shoulder and pulled her into me. “We’re good. Just talking.”

She looked up at me. “About what?”

I smirked. “Don’t worry about it. Let me holla at you for a moment.” I looked at Reid and he nodded his head.

I pulled Ayame away from him, speaking to a couple of people.

“So, what’s up?” she asked me.

“Son!” My dad’s voice interrupted us before I could say anything.

“Pops, wassup. Thanks for coming.” I walked over to my dad and hugged him.

“The place looks nice, baby.”

I let my dad go and looked down at my mom. “Thanks, mom.” I pulled her into a hug.

When I let her go, I stepped next to Ayame. My mom’s eyes landed on her and she started smiling hard. I groaned internally.

“Mom, Dad, this is Ayame. Coco, my parents, Sharon and Larry Morris.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“She’s pretty, son,” my mom complimented.

“She is. You did good.”

Ayame’s smile grew. “Thank you.”

I shook my head. I was going to tell my parents it wasn’t like that and we were just friends, but I kept quiet instead.

My dad looked around the room. “I can’t lie, son; the place looks promising.” My dad looked at me. “I had my doubts, but you did good.”

I couldn’t lie and say my dad’s words didn’t make tonight even better. I wasn’t sure what his reaction was going to be.

“Thanks, pops.”

“You work at *ChocoLUXE*, right?” my mom asked Ayame. “I stopped in the other day and think I remember seeing you.”

Ayame nodded. “I actually own it. Ms. Dee was my aunt.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry about your loss.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I noticed the number wasn’t saved. “Give me a minute.”

“Who is this?” I answered.

“Austin?” My body tensed up.

“How did you get this number?”

“I saw you opened a cigar bar. Congratulations.”

Ice slowly crept through my veins and into my chest.

I turned and stared at my parents and Ayame talking.

“Why did you call me Norine? Haven’t you ruined my life enough?” I stalked out, heading in the direction of my office.

“I ran when I should have stayed and talked to you about our issues. I’ve regretted it every day.”

I shut my door. “Why are you calling me?” I asked again.

“I miss you.” Her words felt like thorns digging in my chest.

My jaw began to hurt by how hard I was clenching my jaw.

“Six years. You’ve been gone for six years, and now you suddenly miss me!” Anger stirred in my stomach.

“Austin.” Her voice cracked.

There was a knock on my office door. Pulling the phone away from my ear, I opened the door.

“Hey, are you okay?” I stared at Ayame.

The anger I just felt was briefly pushed to the back of my mind.

Turning away from Ayame, I walked deeper into my office. “We don’t have shit to talk about Norine.” I hung the phone up and slid it into my pocket.

Closing my eyes, I took a few breaths trying to calm the fury building inside of me. Tonight had been going so well and then suddenly my ex called and that quick my mood shifts.

“Hey.” Ayame’s hands were on the side of my face.

Opening my eyes, I stared down at her. “Screw whoever was just on the phone. Tonight’s your night. Don’t let them ruin it.” Her eyes brimmed with tenderness and passion.

Amidst the confusion and frustration Norine just put through me, I felt a burning sensation in my chest. I could feel my pulse in my throat.

My eyes lowered to the slits in her shirt. Her cleavage and bra on full display. Ayame’s body was perfect, and I often wondered how it would look with nothing covering it.

Moving my eyes back up, I made contact with her again. The way my heart raced when my eyes found her caused my breathing to speed up. All the anger I was just feeling seemed to dismantle the more I stared into her honey doe shaped eyes.

Bending down, I locked my mouth with hers as if I was trying to breathe her into me. My hand ran over her back, softly trailing it over her muscles. I pulled her body closer to mine. Heat filled my body.

My dick strained against my slacks.

I was tired of fighting my feelings for Ayame. I knew I wanted her, and the more I kept fighting it, the more I craved

her. It was like hearing from Norine today unlocked some shackles that had been locked around me.

“Austin, I can’t keep going back and forth with you,” Ayame said against my lips. She gripped my face tighter.

My lips fluttered across her cheek, down her jaw to her neck. Nuzzling my face in it, I inhaled her sweet scent. “I don’t want to go back and forth anymore. I want you.” I kissed her flesh.

Her body shook.

I was ready to take Ayame here right now in my office.

There was a knock on my office door. Closing my eyes, an exasperated breath left my mouth.

“Damn,” I mumbled.

When I raised my head Ayame was grinning at me. “Great timing, huh.”

Shaking my head, I licked my lips and then pressed them against hers. “Our time is coming,” I said before pulling away.

Turning to go to the door, I pulled it open.

“Your parents are looking for you,” Chase said. His eyes traveled behind me. “Oh, I see why you disappeared.”

“Take yo ass on, man. We’ll be out in a few.” Chase smirked.

I closed the door on him then turned to Ayame. “I guess we got carried away,” she beamed, stepping towards me.

Tucking the corner of my bottom lip in my mouth, I pulled her into me. “Come home with me tonight.”

“Okay.” Even though I didn’t think she would turn me down, relief filled me.

“Let’s get back out there.”

AYAME

Austin's grand opening was coming to an end and I was growing more anxious. After our brief moment in his office, I was ready for us to take things to the next level.

For the rest of the night, I went between the dartboards and bar. Reid seemed to be having a good time as well. Of course, he had found some single woman in the crowd to flirt with.

"Here, you can take my car back to my house. I'm going with Austin," I told Reid handing him my car keys.

He squinted his eyes. "You sure that's a good idea, Ayame?"

I knew by him using my real name he was serious. "What's wrong? Why wouldn't it be?" I stared at him confused.

He looked around the parking lot.

“Something is not right about that guy, Charm. I’m not denying he may like you, but there are red flags there. I think you should slow down and get to know him better.”

My eyes shifted. “You act like I’m trying to fall in love with him, Reid.”

“I know you, Ayame. You might not be trying, but you will. You fall quick, you crave that love that you missed with your parents in every guy meet, and then you get hurt. I don’t want that to happen again.”

I frowned and stared back at Reid. He was my best friend. I knew he didn’t mean any harm with his words, and there was truth to them. They hurt me, stabbed at my chest, and burned my ears to hear. I had been burned a couple of times, the last one being the worse, but I was trying to move on from that.

I shook my head.

“It’s not like that this time, Reid. I’m not looking to make him my next boyfriend or anything.”

He gave me a hard stare. I knew he wasn’t feeling what I was saying.

“Just be careful, Ayame. I don’t know exactly what dude’s deal is, but it’s something he’s hiding.” He grabbed the keys from me then bent down and kissed my temple.

“I’ll see you later.” Reid turned and headed to my car while I went back into the building.

Austin’s parents were still hanging around, and that’s where I found him at. He seemed to be in a deep discussion with them. I knew he didn’t have the greatest relationship with them, but I didn’t get a bad vibe from them. They seemed like nice people.

“You good?” Austin asked when I stepped closer to him.

I gave him a small smile and nodded. “Just think about what we said, son. We’re going to get out of here,” his dad said.

His mom stepped up and the two of them hugged. “I’ll see yall later. Thanks for coming.”

“It was nice meeting you guys,” I said.

“You too. Hopefully, we’ll see more of you.” His mom gave him a knowing look.

Austin’s parents left, leaving Austin and me alone.

“Let me finish closing up and we can get out of here.” I looked around the nearly empty room.

“Do you need help with anything?” He shook his head.

“I just gotta audit the bar sales and do the sales for the night. Wait at the bar?” I nodded.

He pulled on his bottom lip and wrapped his arm around me, pulling me into him. “I can’t wait to have you,” he whispered and planted a kiss on my forehead. A chill ran down my spine.

He let me go and winked.

My pussy throbbed.

For a minute, Reid’s words play over in my head, but I quickly shook them off. I was a big girl and could handle myself accordingly.

“So this is your domain, huh?” I glanced around Austin’s living room.

He walked up behind me and wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling my body against him.

“It is.” His lips brushed against the side of my neck.

I inhaled a deep breath and closed my eyes.

“I thought you would have more of a bachelor pad.”

Austin placed soft kisses on my skin. “I’m a simple guy.” His hand moved up and he gripped my breast, massaging it.

A moan escaped my mouth. Blood rushed to my center, causing my clit to throb.

Austin kissed his way to the back of my neck. He continued caressing my breast, and I gasped when he bit me.

Austin suddenly spun me around. He stared at me with passion in his eyes. It was almost suffocating.

His tongue went over his lips.

His hand ran down my chest. It brushed over my stomach before going lower. He hooked his fingers in my waistband. My heart was wildly beating in my chest. The hairs on the back of my neck rose.

With his other hand, he grabbed the back of my neck and dipped his head low, crashing his lips into mine. My knees buckled. My hands went to his shirt and I gripped it tightly.

Like we were possessed, things moved swiftly.

Our kiss grew hotter.

Austin backed me into the couch, snatching my crop top off. His mouth went to the top of my breast. He bit down on my cleavage and reached behind me, unhooking my bra.

His lips covered my nipple and my head flew back. He twiddled the opposite nipple between his fingers. His wet tongue swiped across it, sending a jolt down to my stomach.

“Austin,” I whispered.

Forcing me on the couch, Austin hovered over me. He kissed his way down my chest. His lips brushed over my stomach, pulling my skin with his teeth. My stomach quivered.

My hand went to the back of his head.

“Taste so sweet,” he mumbled against my skin.

Austin looked up at me and continued kissing lower.

His hands went to my pants. Slowly he pulled them down.

“Does your pussy taste as sweet as you smell, Coco?”

Pulling my legs open, he nibbled on the inside of my thighs. Kissing to my pussy, his nose brushed against it.

He delicately kissed on it.

My legs shook.

Austin pulled my pussy lips apart and sucked my hardened clit into his mouth.

“Yes baby!” I moaned, grabbing the back of his head.

Since the moment I met Austin, I’ve wondered how his mouth would feel on me. His suckable lips against my flesh was something I had wanted for a while.

Austin was feasting on my pussy like it was his last meal. His hands went under me, lifting my hips. His tongue dragged from my clit down to my opening, where he teased it.

“Austin!” I dragged.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head.

Austin suddenly lifted up just as I was about to cum.

“What are you doing!” I snapped.

He licked his lips. “Turn around.

Austin didn’t wait for me to reply. He turned and pulled my hips so that my ass was in the air. He pulled me to the arm of the couch and stood behind me. I had to grip his pillows when he started eating my pussy from behind. He licked his way to my ass and spread my cheeks.

I jumped when I felt his tongue brush across my hole.

“Fuck my tongue!” He slapped my ass cheek and went back to work.

My body jerked.

“How the fuck does every part of you taste sweet.” He bit on my ass cheeks.

My moans grew louder.

My stomach tightened.

My grip grew tighter.

Austin went back to my pussy, sucking on it from behind.

“Fat ass lips,” he muttered, sucking harder.

My body started jerking and my juices released. He kissed my pussy lips softly. My breathing was heavy and my body felt weak. It had been a while since I came that hard.

With my eyes closed, I tried to get my breathing under control.

Austin was moving behind me, and just as I was about to turn to see what he was doing, I was lifted in the air as if I weighed nothing.

“Fuck!” I gasped when he lowered me down his shaft.

So many times, I’d wondered how Austin would feel inside of me, but now that he was filling my walls, I knew my imagination was way off. Austin was stretching me out so good.

Austin kissed my back softly and held my hips.

My hands went to his knees. Slowly I started bouncing up and down on him like a pogo stick.

His fingers sunk into my sides.

My grip on his knees grew tighter.

Austin moved one of his hands to the front of my neck and gripped it. He pulled me back so that my back was against his chest.

His lips pressed against the side of my face.

Austin fucked me from below. I had never felt so in sync with someone as I did now.

“Kiss me,” I begged. Craning my neck, I met Austin’s lips. The lingering taste of my juices still on his tongue.

His tongue sent a shiver of desire racing through me. Ecstasy shot through me. My head spun and my eyes squeezed

shut.

I tightened my walls around him. He groaned in my mouth. I couldn't help but savor it, *savor him*.

His grip tightened on my neck. Succumbing to the forcefulness of his kiss, passion shot through my body.

My body exploded in a downpour of fiery sensation.

I felt Austin's dick twitch inside me. He let out an inaudible sound as he came with me.

My eyes fluttered open.

Memories of last night flashed through my mind causing my cheeks to heat up.

I glanced over and stared at Austin. He was on his back with one hand over his eyes.

Turning on my side, I moved closer to him and pressed my lips against his cheek. I could still feel him pulsing between my legs. It was like that quick I was addicted to him, to *his touch*.

“What time is it?” he muttered.

“I don't know.” I kissed down his face.

I kissed from his neck to his chest. Snatching off the cover, my eyes went to his flaccid pole. Climbing on top of him, I kissed my way down and grabbed his dick. I flicked my tongue his tip, while stroking him slowly. I looked up, making eye contact with Austin. His eyes were boring into me.

Once he was hard, I took him in my mouth completely.

Relaxing my throat, I took him to the back of my throat.

“You look so damn beautiful sucking my dick,” he groaned.

Moving my head faster up and down on his dick. My mouth grew wetter.

“Shit. You gone catch this shit?” I looked back up at him and nodded my head.

Austin’s seeds shot in my mouth, and I made sure not to miss a drop. Pulling up, I licked the tip.

I stroked his dick back to life before saddling it and sinking down on it.

“We didn’t use protection.” I sat on the edge of Austin’s bed after pulling my shirt over my head.

I glanced up to where Austin was getting dressed.

“Yeah, I got caught up in the moment last night. I’m clean.” One of his brows rose. “I don’t have anything to worried about, right?”

I cocked my head back. “No. I got tested the moment I found out my ex was a liar, and I haven’t been with anyone else since.”

“What about birth control?” I ran my hands over my thighs.

“I got off it when me and my ex broke up.”

“So we’ll be more careful next time.”

I fought back a smile and stood up. Walking over to him, I grinned. “Who said it’s going to be a next time?”

His arm circled around me and he pulled me into him. “You think after feeling you, I plan on giving you up.” His baritone grew low.

My breath got caught in my throat.

“We should get checked out, just to cover the bases,” I forced out breathlessly.

“I’m cool with that.” We held each other eyes and my heart felt like it was going to explode in my chest.

I knew I said I wasn’t going to make things with Austin more than they were, but after last night I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to keep my word.

“Fun night?” I looked over and saw Reid on my couch with a beer in his hand, smirking.

I had been home for an hour, showered, and was now relaxing until I headed to *ChocoLUXE* later. I was working the closing shift.

Austin had work to do at his lounge, so we separated early.

I went and sat by Reid. “Yep.”

Kicking my feet up on my coffee table, I laid my head on Reid’s shoulder. “I like him,” I confessed.

He didn’t respond right away.

“I know.”

Swallowing hard, I looked down at my feet on the table. “You don’t think I should?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.”

“It does.” I pulled up and stared up at him. “You’re the only person’s opinion that matters to me. You know I don’t have only else who actually gives a damn about me.”

Reid wrapped his arms around my shoulder and pulled me back into him. “I told you I’m not denying he likes you. I just want you to be careful, Charm. Don’t ignore any signs. With Vance, you were floating so high. You knew something with him didn’t add up, but you justified it. You’re strong, Charm. One of the strongest people I’ve ever met, but you keep blinders on sometimes. I don’t want you to have them on this time.”

I snuggled closer into Reid’s side. “If he hurts me, will you beat his ass?”

Reid laughed, and I giggled. “You know I will.”

AUSTIN

For the past couple of days, I have been on a high. The opening week of *Rocky's Cigars* had been more than fulfilling, and since I stopped fighting how I felt about Ayame, I've been feeling more at ease.

I was currently at Ayame's house waiting for her to finish getting ready. She was leaving *ChocoLUXE* in the hands of her manager today and asked me if I could take a drive with her. My lounge didn't open up until this afternoon, so my morning was free.

"You outta here?" I asked Reid.

He had a bag on his shoulders and was walking past me towards the front door.

"Yeah, gotta get back to work." I nodded.

"Nice meeting you." Reid stared at me with a hard glare. I knew it was about to be some bullshit. I let him get

away with trying to check me at my opening, but I wasn't about to let him son me this time.

“Look.” He ran his hand down his face then looked in the direction of the bedrooms. “Ayame is like my sister. She's too trusting of people and I've told her that before. She's grown and I know she's going to do what she wants.” Again, he stopped talking.

I crossed my arms over my chest, waiting for him to finish. “If you don't have good intentions with her, then leave her be.”

My eyes went to the bedrooms this time. “You're acting like some bodyguard.” I chuckled.

When he didn't laugh with me, I took a deep breath.

I couldn't fault him for how he felt. I had tried to fight my attraction to Ayame for a long time, but it was hard to keep denying her. I tended to mess up everything I touched, but I was trying to break that pattern.

“I'm not trying to fuck her over. From the moment I met Ayame, I felt a pull to her. The last thing I plan on doing is hurting her.”

He stared at me with doubt in his eyes, but slowly he nodded his head. “Take care of her.”

Ayame appeared a couple minutes later. “You should just move here.” She hugged Reid.

He chuckled. “Yeah, I’ll think about it.”

“I love you. Be careful and let me know when you get home.”

Reid nodded. “Austin.”

“Reid.”

We stood at a stare-off before he turned and left.

“Did I miss something?” Ayame asked once Reid was gone.

I shook my head. “Nah, Coco, everything’s straight.”

“You gone tell me where we going?” I looked over at Ayame as she drove.

“We’re almost there.” She smiled over at me then focused back on the road.

“Tell me where we are then.”

“*Maple Hills.*”

“Maple Hills?”

We had been driving for about an hour and a half now. Nothing looked familiar, and since Ayame wasn't from the area, I wasn't sure how she found out about wherever we were going.

I focused back on my phone and finished scrolling through *InstaFlik*. I had been getting tags all week from people who had been at the lounge.

When I saw Norine had liked one of my pictures, my stomach turned. I instantly closed out the app and locked my phone. I couldn't understand why she had suddenly popped back up in my life nor why she wouldn't go away.

“We're here!” Ayame parallel parked her car in front of a white, light green, and pink building.

“*Infinity Bloom?* This a flower shop.” I read the sign on the building, taking in the flowers in the background behind the words.

“Yeah, c'mon.” The two of us got out of the car and headed into the building.

“Hi! Welcome to Infinity Bloom.” A female's voice rang out.

My nose tickled as I looked around the flower shop.

“Can I help you two?” A short, light-skinned young girl came into view.

“I read you guys are the closest florist shop that sells lotus flowers. Can you point me to them?” I stared at Ayame with confusion on my face.

The lady’s face lit up. “Oh yeah, we only have two left.”

The woman led us to the corner. “Here you are.”

I stood back and watched Ayame do her thing. She studied the plants, asking the woman a few questions every here and there. “I’ll take them.”

“Oh, can I get a half of dozen sunflowers too,” Ayame asked.

I was shocked.

I didn’t take Ayame as a flower lover.

“So you’re a flower lover?” I asked when Ayame got closer to me.

She shook her head. “The lotus are for my Zen room, they bring good energy. I just love sunflowers because they’re

pretty to look at.”

Smiling, I shook my head.

We got to the counter, and Kori, according to her nametag, rung the items up. When she read off the total, I had my card waiting.

“Austin, you don’t have to do that,” Ayame protested.

I shrugged. “I know, but I want to.”

She grinned bashfully. “Okay.”

When we finished the transaction, I grabbed the box with the lotus flowers and Ayame grabbed her sunflowers.

“I’m so happy they had these. I have been trying to find them for a few weeks now.”

“Tell me about this Zen room.”

“Nothing really to tell. It’s where I go to meditate. Calms me down when I’m overwhelmed and helps me get my thoughts together when I need some time to myself.”

“That’s where you said you were putting that painting you bought from Noelle, right?”

She cheesed at me. “You remember.”

Licking my lips, I looked her over. I couldn't wait to kiss on her chocolate skin again. "I do." We were driving down the street when I called for Ayame to stop.

"What's wrong?"

I nodded towards the building. "Let's stop in this bakery."

Ayame parked her car and we headed into *The Sweet Spot*.

"Hi! Welcome to *The Sweet Spot*."

We walked to the counter. As I peered into the display cases, my mouth began to water.

"This place almost smells sweeter than you," I leaned over and whispered to Ayame.

She glanced at me with reddened cheeks. "Stop," she giggled.

Pulling her into me, I kissed the top of her head and looked back at the sweets. "Let me get two snicker cupcakes. You want anything?"

"Two of the vanilla cake pops."

"Coming right up."

“I’m paying this time.” Ayame already had the money ready when the lady behind the counter gave the total.

Smirking, I tossed my hands up. “Go ahead.”

I grabbed the brown bag and we left out.

“Thanks for coming with me today.”

Reaching over, I grabbed her hand. “You lucky I enjoy spending time with you.”

I couldn’t deny that I was starting to have strong feelings for Ayame. A part of me was nervous, however. When it came to me, nothing good ever lasted long.

I was in my office, in the middle of looking over the numbers when a knock on the door grabbed my attention.

“Hey boss, I need your signature on the liquor order,” my lead bartender, Maria, stepped inside and said.

She made her way to my desk and handed the paper over.

Looking over the list, I signed it and gave it back to her.

“How’s it lookin’ out there?” I leaned back in my chair.

“We have a small crowd already.”

I nodded. “Good. Let me know if you need anything.”

I went back to the paperwork I was working on.

My phone vibrated on my desk next to me. When I glanced at it, I debated if I wanted to answer. I gripped my pen tightly. Before I was able to make a choice, the phone stopped.

Blowing out a deep breath, I shook off the ill feelings starting to creep inside me.

Just as I was about to go back to my papers, my phone rang again.

“Why are you calling me!” I snapped when I answered.

“Austin,” she whined.

Closing my eyes, I flared my nose.

“Norine, it’s been six years. I don’t understand why the hell you keep calling me.”

“I’ll be in town soon. I want to see you.”

My eyes snapped open.

My stomach churned.

The ice I felt the last time I spoke to her slowly started to creep its way back into my vein.

“We don’t have shit to talk about, Norine. All that was voided when you left without a word.”

“You know why I left Austin. You weren’t ready to be in anything serious! I had no choice.”

“You did have a choice!” I yelled, throwing the pen in my hand down and popping up. “You could have stayed and we would have worked shit out!”

Norine started sniffing.

I was pacing back and forth, gripping my phone tightly.

“We still have unfinished business, Austin. Please, can we meet?” I stopped talking.

“No.” I hung the phone up.

Feeling rage taking over me, I launched my phone at the wall, instantly shattering it.

I hated that Norine still bought certain feelings out of me. Feeling that had been buried long ago. I was finally starting to see some good in my life. The last thing I wanted was for her to come back in and ruin it.

AYAME

“When do you plan on coming back to see your parents, Ayame?” my dad asked through the phone.

“It would be nice to see our only child,” my mom followed up.

Rolling my eyes, I stepped outside the chocolate shop and headed across the sidewalk.

“I’ll try and make it back home soon. I’ve been busy.”

“Busy? First, my sister wastes her life making candy, then she drags you into doing the same thing. I don’t understand why you don’t sell that shop and come back and get a real job.”

“Mom, please don’t start! Aunt Dee ran her own business doing what she loved. What’s wrong with that?”

“We didn’t pay for you to go to college to run a candy store!”

“I have a business degree. I’m running a business, daddy.”

“I swear, you act just like my sister. Head always in the clouds.”

I chewed on my bottom lip as I stood outside *Rocky’s Cigars*.

I could feel a headache forming. “I’m sorry to cut this short, but I have to go.” My parents would never change. They always thought they knew what was best for me instead of just trusting me to make my own choices.

“You’ve been gone for more than three months. We expect you back to visit soon.”

“I will. Love you guys.”

We hung up and I slid my phone into my pocket.

I stepped into the lounge.

Immediately heading to the bar, I slid on one of the stools and tapped my fingers against it, waiting to be noticed.

“How can I help you?”

“Can you get the owner for me, please?” The girl looked me up and down.

“Is there a reason why?” A frown instantly found its way on my face.

“Yeah, there is, and it’s none of your business.”

“What are you doing here?” I heard behind me.

Spinning around, I watched Austin walk up to me. Something was up with him. We hadn’t talked in a few days, and the couple of times I reached out to him, he didn’t respond. The last time we were together things were good with us, then suddenly he went off the grid. The last time I dealt with someone with random behavior like his, I found out my fiancé was married.

“So you’re still breathing.” I climbed off the stool and made my way to him.

His stance was unwelcoming, which threw me off.

“Yeah.”

My eyes cut into slits. “Did I catch you at a bad time? You seem irritated.”

“Nah. I’m good.”

“I called you.”

“Broke my phone.”

I wasn't sure what was up with Austin right now, but I wasn't feeling it.

"I hadn't talked to you in a few days and was wondering if you wanted to do something later or meet to jog in the morning."

"Look, Ayame." He flicked his nose with his thumb. "We can't do whatever this is anymore."

Confusion filled me. "What?"

Suddenly his face filled with frustration. "This, whatever the hell we call ourselves doing, is done."

"What? Why? I thought-"

"You thought wrong," he cut me off.

Pressing my lips together, I slowly nodded. "Okay," I told him lowly.

I wasn't in the business of begging anyone to be with me. That didn't mean Austin's actions didn't hurt. I hated to admit it, but I was falling for him. Him ending things was the last thing I expected.

Tucking my tail between my legs, I turned and left with what dignity I still had left. I was tired of falling for people who didn't fall back. I was tired of feeling like I wasn't

good enough. This wasn't the first time I had been let down, so I had no doubt I would bounce back from it.

“He is so handsome,” I told Noelle, holding Zachariah in my arms. “And so chubby!”

“Thanks girl. He hardly lets my boobs rest.” She laughed.

I had texted her asking about the baby, and she invited me over to see him. I had seen pictures of him, but he was so much cuter in person.

Zachariah's stared up at me and gave me a gummy smile. “Ugh, looking at him gives me baby fever!” I poked my lips out and tickled the baby's stomach.

“You want one soon?”

I stared up at Noelle and shrugged. “Once I find the right guy.”

She smirked. “You and Austin have been dating, right? Maybe he's the one.”

I rolled my eyes. Just hearing his name caused my chest to burn. “I doubt that.” My eyes went back to the baby. I started rocking him, seeing he was starting to fall asleep.

“Austin must have struck again. What happened?”

“Why you ask that?” I kept my eyes on the baby.

“Austin is like a brother to me. I love him like a brother, but he has a habit of self-sabotaging.”

“I don’t know what happened. I thought we were finally building something, then suddenly he ended things. I’m not sure why.” I swallowed the lump in my throat.

I had been trying to keep a brave face, but truthfully I was hurt. Even before Austin and I took things to the next level, we had a genuine friendship, or so I thought.

“Here, let me put him in his crib.” Noelle stood up and grabbed the baby. I had to admit she looked good to just have had a baby.

I sat there texting on my phone waiting for her to come back.

“I don’t know Austin’s deal,” Noelle started when she got back. She took a seat and turned to face me. “Zach said he had a girlfriend he was serious with and she left him. After that, he never took a relationship seriously again. Austin’s a great guy, but he has insecurities. Insecurities he’s been dealing with before I met Zach. His natural instinct is to run,

but he likes you. Anyone can see that. I don't think you should give up on him."

I gnawed on my bottom lip. "Yeah, well, he ended things. I'm not going to beg any man to be with me." I shrugged.

Noelle gave me a sympathetic look. "I get it. And you're right."

"Zach seems like a good guy. I guess you got the good twin." She laughed.

"Austin's a good guy too. He just has some shit to work out. From the moment I met Zach, I knew he was *my one*. From the first time we went out, we were inseparable. He and Austin are so different, but they have similarities too. Austin just hides them."

Twisting my lips to the side, I thought her words over.

I knew Austin wasn't a bad guy. I knew he had good in him; I had seen it.

"What have you been painting lately?" I asked, changing the subject.

Noelle laughed. "Changing the subject. I see what you did there, but I'll let it go."

I stayed over at Noelle's a little longer before leaving. I had a training session at the gym to prepare for.

“Something on your mind?” Tae asked as I wiped my face.

I glanced up at him. “I’m fine.” I forced a smile. “Why you ask?”

“Normally, you’re glowing. You look out of it today.”

“You calling me ugly?”

He gave me a boyish grin. “Now you know that’s not the case.”

I snickered and shook my head. “I’m fine Tae, just got some things on my mind.”

“I’ve been told I’m a good listener.”

Playfully rolling my eyes, I wrapped the towel around my neck. “Just stupid guy problems. I’m sure you don’t want to hear about that.”

“What he do? Want me to beat his ass?” This time I gave him a real smile before laughing.

“No, it’s not that deep. I’ll be fine. Plus, don’t you have your own issues to worry about?”

He chuckled and ran his hand over his head. “You talking about Tia’s crazy ass?”

I nodded. “Mannnn, she’s the biggest mistake of my damn life.”

“Is that your baby?” I tilted my head to the side.

He blew a frustrated breath out. “She says so, but I’m not believing it.”

Just as I was about to say something back, he stopped me. “Hold that thought.”

He brushed past me. I watched him stalk towards some girl. “Brenna!” he yelled.

The girl looked over her shoulder. When she noticed Tae, she rolled her eyes and hurried out of the gym.

Tae called her again, but the girl didn’t stop.

Frustration filled his face.

“Girlfriend?” I asked when he came back over to me.

“Nah, she’s my sister’s friend.” He shook his head.

I knew it was more to the story, but it wasn't my place to push, so I let it go.

After that, Tae and I got back to my session. Following seeing that girl, Tae was quiet. He seemed to be in deep thought for the rest of our session.

AUSTIN

I walked back over to the card table and set my drink on it before grabbing my hand and looking at it.

Instead of having our card game at one of our houses, I kept the lounge open later. Normally we only stayed open late on the weekends.

“I can’t lie, Austin; you got a nice thing going here,” Chase praised. “Having a place where the guys can just kick back and chill is what the fellas needed.”

“You do know women come in here, right?”

“Not a lot. Sometimes it’s nice to be female-free.”

Zach chuckled. “That’s why my house was off-limits today. Noelle is having a girls’ night with Tori and Ayame.”

At the mention of *her name*, I gripped my cards harder. My mind was congested with doubt and indifference. I felt like shit by the way I treated her the other day. Hearing from

Norine again had put me in a bad headspace and she was the easiest outlet for me.

“Yall two still together?” When I looked up Zach was staring at me.

I tapped my fingers on the cards. “Nah, surprise, surprise, I fucked that up.” I chuckled bitterly.

“What you do?”

I tossed the cards on the table. “What do I always do, Zach? I fuck shit up, it’s what I do.” I chewed on the inside of my cheek.

“What you do?” he repeated.

“Norine called me again. She told me she missed me, wanted to talk. I got pissed and took it out on Ayame.”

“I thought you were over her,” Chase jumped in.

“I am.”

He shook his head. “Nah, you can’t be. If you were over her yo ass wouldn’t be lashing out because of her. I know what you got pissed with Zach that day he said you need to talk to her, but I’m starting to believe he’s right.”

I was quiet.

“Austin, listen, man. I don’t know why you always think everyone is against you or why you have to ruin things, but you gotta stop that shit. You need to deal with whatever issues you got so you can move on.”

“You won’t understand, Zach. Shits always been easy for you.”

He frowned. “The only reason why you had issues is because you’ve caused them.”

“A’right, we’re not going to do this. We were having a good card game. Let’s not ruin it,” Chase interrupted. “Austin, handle your shit, man. If you like Ayame, then deal with your shit and fix things. Now can we get back to the game?”

The two of us turned to look at him. “Since when are you a mediator?”

He chuckled and collected the cards. “Yall two always going at it. Someone gotta be the mediator.”

“What about you and Tori? What’s up with yall?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Ain’t shit to tell. Tori and I got a love-hate relationship, but she’s cool people.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Yall ever fuck around?”

“Nah.”

I looked at my twin. He had the same look as me on his face. “Yo ass lying,” I laughed.

Chase smirked. “Once, last year. That’s it.” He started dealing the cards.

“Why didn’t you lock her down?”

“It wasn’t that deep. Tori’s ass is too feisty. I don’t like women like that. I need my girl more submissive.”

“Yo ass a fool,” I laughed, shaking my head.

The tension left the room and we got back to the card game. I heard what my friend and twin were saying. I knew I had to try and fix things with Ayame.

Zach called and asked me to work at the barbershop for a few hours before going to my lounge.

“The drafts are coming up. Yall think we’ll get a pick?” the guy in my chair asked.

“The *Tigers* did alright so we should get a decent pick.”

“I think they got a trade in the works for a new QB too.”

The conversation on the upcoming football season continued before switching to basketball. “Looks like the Titans are going to playoffs this year.”

“They lucked up getting Gage. He’s been on fire since his suspension was over.”

Again, I tuned out the conversation.

Laughter rang out when they started talking about one of the guys getting caught cheating by his girlfriend and her busting his windows out.

The door opened just as I was finishing up the guy in my chair.

“Give me a minute, Ayame, and I’ll be ready for you.” My head snapped up. I stared at her, taking her in. This was the first time I’ve seen her in a dress. It stopped mid-thigh and hugged her small hips nicely.

“Okay,” she said.

I grabbed the money from the guy and sent him on his way. My eyes went back to Ayame. She must have felt my stare on her because her eyes found mine before she snatched

them away. The moment she tore her eyes from me, I felt empty inside.

“I’m ready for you, Ayame,” Zach told her.

I watched her walk across the barbershop. It burned me up inside seeing how the guys ogled her. My stomach turned as jealousy ripped through me.

“I’m glad you could fit me in. Noelle recommended a hair salon somewhere in the D12 district or something, but I need my back cut first.” She showed him her phone. I’m guessing showing him how she wanted it cut.

“That’s simple. Go ahead and take a seat.”

“I never seen a pretty thing like you around here before,” one of the older guys in the shop said to Ayame, causing my jaw to clench.

“First time here.” Ayame smiled.

“You got a man?” another guy asked.

My nose flared.

Zach must have felt I was getting frustrated. He looked over at me then around the shop.

“Would yall leave the girl alone? Yall act like yall never seen a pretty face before.” He placed a cape over Ayame.

I tried to force my eyes off her but I couldn't. I felt drawn to her. It had been a week since I dismissed her, and I missed her company already. She looked beautiful as hell, and the only thing I wanted to do right now was wrap my arms around her.

I ended up taking one more head and finished just as Zach was finishing up Ayame's head.

“Zach, it looks so good!” she gushed, examining the faded look in the back. “Thank you!” She spun around and grinned at him.

Her smile lit a flame in my stomach. I felt like a bitch, but my stomach fluttered staring at her.

I normally didn't like bald girls, but *my Coco* pulled off the short look. It complimented her face well.

By the time I collected my money and cleaned up, Ayame was walking out of the building.

“The apartment still vacant?” I asked Zach.

He glanced up at me with a snide grin on his face.

“Yeah.”

Without another word to him, I hurried out of the shop behind Ayame. I knew I couldn't let her leave without fixing things.

“Ayame!” I called out after her.

She didn't slow down.

“Coco!” Relief filled me when she stopped.

I jogged up to her and shut her car door before she could get inside.

“What?” she snapped.

“Let me talk to you.”

She shook her head. “You said what you had to say the last time we spoke.”

“The day you came to talk to me, I was in a bad headspace.” I ran my hand down my face. “Come talk to me. Please.”

She squinted her eyes at me. “Why should I?”

“Because I fucked up and I know that. Just listen to me so I can fix it.”

She pulled on her bottom lip. Her eyes wandered down the street before they found mine again.

“My brother has an apartment above the shop.” I turned and pointed at the building. “Come up there with me.”

I could tell she was conflicted. “Just give me ten minutes and then you can go.” My pulse was racing. I knew I kept jerking Ayame along and she was getting fed up, but I hoped she would let me explain.

After a few minutes of silence, she nodded her head.

A small smile formed on my face. I grabbed her hand and led her back towards the barbershop, but instead of going in, we went around the side where the door to the upstairs apartment was.

Ayame hugged herself and stood close to the door when we were inside. She tapped her foot impatiently waiting for me to speak.

“The night of my opening I got a phone call; that’s why I went to my office. It was my ex, Norine. I haven’t seen or heard from her since she left our apartment, only leaving a note behind six years ago. Before this, she found me on

InstaFlik, but I didn't have shit to say to her. A couple days before you came to see me, she called again."

"What did she want?" she asked lowly.

I bit down on my back teeth. "Some bullshit about missing me and wanting to talk. I wasn't trying to hear shit she had to say. After speaking to her, I got in a bad headspace. It pissed me off that she would reappear in my life after all this time. When I saw you, I was still pissed off."

Ayame blinked a couple of times. "Why did she leave?"

Blowing a deep breath out, I flicked my nose. "Back then I was immature. I fucked up a lot, but Norine accepted me. I thought we loved each other. Turns out she got fed up with my shit just like everyone else and left." I clenched my jaw. "She was the first and only woman I loved, and I thought it was enough, but I guess I was wrong. After Norine left I shut down. I had sex with women, but I never opened up to one again. Norine knew how I battled with feeling like I wasn't good enough and how I felt like the fuck up and her just leaving messed me up."

"I hate when you say that." Her face softened. She uncrossed her arms and rested them at her side. "You *are* good

enough and you're *not* a fuck up." Ayame stepped towards me.

When she was in front of me, she looked up at me. Her eyes were beaming. "I know how it feels to feel like everything you do isn't good enough. I grew up feeling it my whole life and it took me a while to realize I *was* doing enough."

I ran my finger down her bare arm. "Tell about your childhood." Reid's words played over in my head. If anyone could understand how I felt, I *knew* it was Ayame.

She cleared her throat. "Growing up, I always had to be the best, and even if I was, I had to be better. If I scored a 96 on a test, my parents would tell me I should have scored a 97. It was like nothing I did ever satisfied them. One of the main reasons I loved sports was that it was an outlet for me to escape. I fell in love with track, the freedom it brought me. I had scouts looking at me in high school. When I wasn't studying I was training or hanging out with the guys. When my parents noticed I was good at track and saw the attention I was getting, they started pushing me. Soon the fun was gone, and I started resenting the sport. Instead of going to college for it like I wanted, I stopped running altogether just to go against my parents."

She stopped talking for a moment.

“I used to believe I wasn’t good enough. I wanted to appease my parents so bad growing up that it weighed on me a lot. I started craving attention, genuine love, and acceptance. Eventually started looking for the acceptance and love I wasn’t getting from my parents in guys. After a few bad relationships, I got with Vance and thought he was the one. He showered me with attention. He listened to me, he encouraged me, loved me.” Her voice cracked. “Finding out all that was a lie crushed me because I thought I had *finally* found someone that really gave a damn about me outside of Reid. He always told me I fell too quick, and maybe he’s right, but I want to be *loved*. I *want* the love I give to be *returned*. Still, I didn’t waver from relationships because I still want that love.” She shook her head.

She grabbed my face. “I know how it feels to feel like you *aren’t* good enough, Austin. It took me a long time to see that I *was* and that I *deserved* to have someone that *loved* me enough to *value* who I was. In the months I’ve known you, I’ve seen you open your lounge on your own. I’ve seen you put in hours to make sure it’s running smoothly. Maybe in the past you weren’t always the best or you did dumb shit, but

you're not that same person anymore, Austin. You're accomplishing so much now, and you have to be able to accept good things can happen to you."

Ayame leaned up and kissed me. It was slow and unrushed but filled with so much passion it felt like I would choke on it.

Pulling away, I stared down at her, resting my forehead on top of hers. "You're good enough too. You're damn near perfect. You're such a bright spirit. You didn't stop or let what you went through dim your light. Never allow *anyone* to dim that light."

She closed her eyes. "I'm falling in love with you, Austin."

Reclaiming her lips, I felt my heart threatening to leap out my throat. An aching formed inside me for her.

I'm falling in love with you, Austin.

Her words rippled through me. Adrenaline surged through my veins as if drumsticks were banging on my heart.

From the moment I met Ayame, I knew it was something about her. Something was drawing me to her.

Urgency took over me. The need to feel connected to her consumed me like a wildfire.

My hand slipped under Ayame's dress and I brushed my fingers over her soaked panties.

Like we were moving in autopilot, our clothes were off and Ayame's back was against the wall. Her legs were wrapped around my waist and his arms around my neck. We were kissing feverishly.

My dick plunged into her wet tunnel as I fucked her from below. She matched my thrust, bouncing wildly on me.

Passion rose in me like the hottest fire.

I grabbed her chin and sucked on her tongue passionately.

Pulling back, I stared at her. The smoldering flame I saw in my eyes startled me. At that moment, we connected on something deeper than the surface.

Slowing my strokes, I kissed her eyes, nose, and when I got to her lips, I hovered over them. Her lips quivered.

I felt her juices raining down on me.

Watching her sex faces made my heartbeat skyrocket. The moans that left her mouth sounded like *sweet music* to my

ears. The *loveliest* melody I ever heard. The wall I had built around me shattered.

“I love you,” I confessed.

I pushed deep into her.

Her eyes widened then rolled to the back of her head. She opened her mouth to speak, but a loud whimper came out instead. Her body jerked and her legs wrapped tighter around me. Falling in line with her, my dick jerked, shooting my seeds deep inside her.

My knees buckled.

Slowly, I pulled her off the wall and made my way over to where the couch was, never removing myself from her sex.

We shared a hunger-filled kiss.

Ayame pulled away and ran her tongue over her swollen lips. She was breathing heavily. Her chocolate cheeks were flushed.

She moved her face closer to mine, brushing her nose against mine before resting her forehead on mine. “I love you too.”

AYANME

“Tell me about your Grandpop.” I lifted my head off Austin’s chest.

His arm tightened around my body.

I was happy the two of us fixed things. I learned Austin was battling with insecurities I was all too familiar with. Growing up feeling like you aren’t *good enough* or you can do *no right* is tough. It’s something I struggled with daily growing up, even now as an adult. As much as I wanted to continue being upset with Austin, I understood the urge to run and retract if I felt like I wasn’t being accepted or judged.

“My Grandpop?”

I nodded and sat up.

Positioning myself so my back was against my headboard, I turned to face Austin. “That’s who you named your cigar bar after, right? Why you started it?”

Austin sat up and smiled. “Yeah. My Grandpop was my best friend. I always wanted to be around him. He taught me and Zach how to cut hair. He always was taking us places, sneaking us candy when he wasn’t supposed to. He bailed me out of trouble a few times too. My dad was a great father; he was around, of course, provided for our family, but I always was closer to my Grandpop. Even though Zach and I are twins, I always felt like my parents favored him over me. He was the easier one to deal with. He didn’t challenge my parents too often, didn’t get in a lot of trouble. Me, on the other hand, did. I was a rebel, didn’t like to follow the rules, partied.

While Zach got good grades, I got mediocre ones, enough to pass. Zach never got arrested. I’ve been locked a couple times.”

My eyes widened. “You went to jail?”

A crooked smile appeared on his face. “Yeah, I mean nothing ever stuck. My Grandpop was good friends with the chief of police and was able to get it thrown out, but I was arrested.”

“For what?”

He shrugged. “Dumb shit. A party was thrown in a house we weren’t supposed to be in. I got caught and got hit

with trespassing, underage drinking, and breaking and entering. Got busted for curfew a couple of times. A small possession once. Little things like that.

Moving over to him, I tossed my leg over his lap and straddled him. “So you were a bad boy.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t say all that.” A boyish grin appeared on his face. “Anyways, no matter how many times I tried to stay on the right path, it was like something was programmed in my head to fuck up. My parents used to brag about Zach a lot, whereas I was just the problem kid. I was in the background a lot and it used to fuck with me. My Grandpop never made me feel like that. He talked to me, tried to help me. When I would fuck up, he would set me straight. He used to sign me up for different activities to try and keep me occupied. He paid attention to me and loved me when I felt like my parents didn’t.”

“He sounds like a great man.” Austin’s hands went to my ass and he gripped it.

“He was. It killed a nigga when he died.” I moved in and pecked his lips.

“I wish I could have met him.”

“Me too.” Austin started massaging my ass cheeks. I moaned softly.

“Kitty needs a break,” I whispered.

We had been going all night long. The both of us were due to work later.

“You and Zach weren’t close growing up?”

“Growing up we were, but once I started noticing the difference in how my parents treated up, I started resenting my own brother.” He clenched his jaw.

I moved closer and wrapped my arms around his neck.

“I knew it wasn’t Zach’s fault, but I couldn’t help it. Part of me believes that’s why I acted up.” He chuckled. “I sound like a bitch, huh?”

I shook my head. “No, Austin, you sound human.” I pecked his lips again. “You have to stop being so hard on yourself. You were young and did dumb stuff, but that’s all in the past. I was only around your parents for a little while, but I could tell they love you, Zach too. Maybe you should talk to them and clear the air.”

“Did you do that with your parents?”

I rolled my eyes and snickered. “My parents aren’t the talking to type. They’re both bullheaded and hardly ever believe they’re wrong. It would be like talking to a brick wall.”

“And you don’t have any siblings?”

I shook my head. “Nope, Reid’s the closest thing I have to one.”

For a second, Austin’s eyes went distant. He slowly kneaded my ass cheeks and pulled me closer to him.

“Dude really cares about you.”

I nodded. “He does. He’s been my shoulder to cry on since the two of us became friends.” I smiled. “Our significant others over the years always hated our relationships. No matter how many times we assured them we were like brother and sister.”

“So yall never hooked up?”

My nose bunched up. “Hell no. That would be like incest. Plus, I love Reid, but he’s a damn hoe. I would never join his roster.”

He gnawed on his bottom lip and ran his eyes down the front of my body. “I always wished I had a sibling though.

Maybe that would have taken some of the pressure my parents put on me away.”

“I know your parents put a lot on you, but if it makes you feel any better, you turned into a breathtaking ass person. You’re beautiful, smart, kind, and someone I find myself falling for the more I’m around.” Butterflies exploded in my stomach, fluttering at max speed. My heart expanded, slamming against my ribcage.

Tears clouded my eyes. Grabbing Austin’s face, I moved in and kissed him deeply.

“Where’s one place you want to travel?” Austin pulled away asking.

“Huh?”

“One place you want to travel.”

“Vegas.”

“Vegas?” An eyebrow rose.

I nodded. “I like to gamble. It’s sin city. I think it would be fun.” I smiled.

“Noted.” He chuckled.

“What about you?”

He shrugged. “Never really thought about it.”

“Maybe you should. A vacation sounds fun.” I grinned.

Moving forward, I kissed him again.

From the moment I met Austin, I knew there was something different about him. The moment I heard his voice, I felt tied to him. Now being here, in my bed with him, feeling his tongue caress my mouth only proved my feelings.

“I told him I love him,” I told Reid as I worked on restocking the shelves on the floor.

I heard him sigh and knew what was coming next. “Before you say anything, this isn’t like the other times, Reid. The connection I feel towards Austin is something I never felt before.”

“Ayame.”

“He makes me happy and smile. Things feel easy with him.”

“Charm, look, I love you and you know that. I would do anything for you, and I always try and support your choices, but come on, Charm. He’s not right for you.” Stopping what I was doing, I turned and looked around the

store. It was a couple kids with their parents and one of the part-time employees was working the counter.

I walked to the counter. "I'm going to step outside for a minute," I told him, then turned for the door.

Stepping outside, I looked down the street and went and sat on the small bench in front of the store.

"Okay, I can talk. Reid."

"No, Charm, I'm for real. I get it, you're new to the city and he's the first guy that smiled at you."

"First guy that *smiled at me*?" I frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"C'mon, Ayame. You know how you can get."

I squinted my eyes. "No, I don't."

"Just forget it."

My eyes went to *Rocky's Cigars*. "No, tell me."

"You just, you know how you get. You want love so bad that you accept it in any kind of form you can get it. You always felt like your parents didn't give it to you, so when you get a guy that shows it to you, you get tunnel vision with him."

I swallowed hard.

“Wow.” I brushed my hand over my forehead.

“Charm, I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. I just don’t want you to get in another situation like Vance.”

“I know. We’re starting to get a rush and I have to help out on the floor. I’ll talk to you later.” I took my phone out of my pocket and ended the call before Reid could answer. I snatched the Air pods from my ears and gripped them tightly.

Reid called back, but I wasn’t in the mood to listen to him. I had been on a high since Austin and I proclaimed our love to each other, and I wasn’t about to Reid rain on it.

After talking to Reid, I ended up getting another call, this time from my mom. She was the last person I wanted to hear from. Of course, she was on me about coming home to visit. She then told me how she ran into Vance and wanted details on why I allowed him to get away.

I was exhausted after that.

The day seemed to drag. As soon as I closed down for the day, I rushed home and immediately went to my Zen room to meditate and get my head right. I didn’t like to feel

imbalanced. I felt like that my whole life and refused to go back.

After meditating and getting my thoughts together, I showered and got in bed.

My phone vibrated next to me. I almost let it ring until I saw who it was. For the first time today, I smiled.

“Hey,” I answered.

“I miss you,” Austin said, leaning back in his chair.

I giggled. “You just saw me this morning.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t miss you.” Heat rushed to my cheeks.

Austin’s brows bunched together. “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me. What’s wrong? You look bothered.”

Licking my lips, I shook my head. Inhaling and releasing a deep breath, I sighed.

“You don’t have any secrets or anything, do you?”

His eyes squinted. “Nah, why would you ask that?”

I shrugged again. “Just don’t want to look like a fool again, I guess.”

“I don’t just throw the word love around freely, Coco. When I said that shit, I meant it. I would never intentionally hurt you or make you feel like I don’t care about you.” I stared into his chestnut eyes.

One corner of my mouth rose. “My mom called me today.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I mean she pretty much implied I could have done more to keep Vance happy,” I laughed. “But besides that, it’s all good.”

His tongue ran over his top teeth. “He didn’t deserve you.”

“I know.”

“You deserved better.”

“Like who?”

He smiled a boyish grin causing me to smile too. “Me.”

A thrill thrummed through my veins. “Are you saying I should be yours?”

“I’m saying you’re *already* mine.” His eyes narrowed and it felt like he was studying me. “What do you need from me?”

“What do I need?”

He nodded. “To make you *stay* mine. What do you need from me?”

My chest stung. I knew Austin struggled with not feeling like he was good enough or worthy.

“I just want you to keep it honest with me. Don’t make me second guess anything. No surprises and be you.”

“I can do that.” He bobbed his head.

“What about you?” I tilted my head to the side.

“Just don’t make me feel like I gotta second guess anything and we’re good.”

AUSTIN

Stepping into my parents' house, I grinned when I smelled cinnamon and apples through the house.

My stomach rumbled the further I got into the house. "Parentals," I announced myself.

They were sitting in the living room, both eating apple pie. "I see I stopped by at the right time." I kissed my mom's cheek then took a seat across from her and my dad.

"What I tell you about using my wife for food?" I cheesed.

"That's my mama. I can't help that she makes sure I don't starve."

My dad frowned and looked at my mom. "This boy."

Mom laughed and shook her head. "I haven't seen that look in a while."

Confusion filled me. "What look?"

A big smile appeared on her face. “Happiness.”

A lump formed in my throat, causing me to swallow hard. “I didn’t know I hadn’t looked happy.”

“You didn’t look sad, but I could tell you were just coasting. Does this have something to do with that girl?”

I was quiet. “You love her, don’t you?”

Dropping my head, I tried to hide my smile and ran my hand over the top of my head. “I do love her.” I lifted my head.

“She seems like a nice girl,” my dad commented.

“She is.”

“What’s her story?”

My nose scrunched up. “What do you mean *her* story?”

“She just came out of nowhere and suddenly you’re in love. Tell us about her.”

“Ayame’s a good girl. She’s an only child that moved here to take over *ChocoLUXE*. There isn’t much to tell.” I shrugged.

“Last time you fell in love, things didn’t turn out so good, and you went on a binge of acting out. Maybe you

should slow down and make sure you really do love this girl so you don't have a repeat." I bit back on my back teeth.

"Ayame is nothing like Norine. And when Norine left I was still grieving Grandpop."

"Why don't you bring her by? This weekend? I'll cook and your brother and Noelle can come. It'll be nice."

I thought about it before agreeing. "I'll talk to her and see if she's free."

I looked at my dad. It annoyed me that he always tried to throw my past in my face. I was trying to move on from all that. Norine leaving just happened to happen around the same time as my Grandpop dying and it sent me over the deep end for a few months. He knew I was in a bad headspace then.

"Let's go grab you some pie." My mom stood up. I went to follow her, but my dad stopped me.

"How's business going?"

"It's good. Numbers are steady, sales are growing." He nodded his head.

"I'm glad to hear that. You know, at the end of the day, we just want what's best for you."

I ran my tongue over my top teeth. "I know dad."

I headed back to the kitchen where my mom was.

“She’s a pretty girl, Austin,” mom said without turning around. “If she keeps you uplifted and happy, keep her.”

Thoughts of Ayame came to my head. One thing my mom didn’t have to worry about was me losing her. I planned on doing everything I could to keep her in my life.

“Maybe I need to bet you for foot rubs more often,” Ayame moaned as I massaged her feet.

We were sitting on her back deck with the firepit lit. I was surprised when I came over and saw she had cooked for me. It was simple baked spaghetti and garlic bread, but it was good and I was full.

“You better quit moaning like that unless you want me to *give* you something to moan about.”

Her eyes lowered and her teeth sunk into her bottom lip. “Ima hold you to that. *After* the next foot.” She placed her other foot in my lap.

I grinned and switched feet. “I thought you would have some ugly ass feet.”

She giggled. “Why?”

“Because you’re an athlete.”

“So because I’m a tomboy, I gotta have ugly feet,” she grinned, closing her eyes and laying her head back.

I shrugged. “You said it, not me.”

A comfortable silence filled us. “Tell me something embarrassing that happened to you,” I spoke.

Ayame opened one eye. “An embarrassing moment.” She thought about it. “Eighth grade, Mrs. Flowers science class. I had on a light pink skirt and white shirt for picture day, per my mom’s request.” She scoffed. “Anyways, I had been having stomach pains all day and I asked to go see the nurse. When I stood up to leave, I felt liquid coming down my leg.”

My eyes widened. “You started your period?”

She laughed and nodded. “Yep, I was mortified. A boy in the class called it out and everyone was staring at me. I thought I would never recover from it.”

I tried not to laugh but I couldn’t help it. “Damn, that’s fucked up.”

“You’re telling me. The worst part was my parents made me go back to school the next day. I begged them to let

me stay home the rest of the week, but they wouldn't hear of it."

"Did you at least take the picture?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

My hand moved up Ayame's leg and I was now kneading her calf.

"What about you?"

I chuckled. "That's easy. My sophomore year, I skipped school with some girl I was dealing with at the time. Thought my parents were at work all day. Turns out my mom only had a half-day, walked in on me fucking the girl, right there in the living room on the couch."

"Austin!" she shrieked.

"I know, man. My mama cursed me out from a to z, and I was grounded for like three months." I laughed thinking about it.

"You really were hell, huh?"

"I mean...I was horny and she was willing."

"Eww, that's so mannish!" she snickered then moaned again, rolling her eyes back.

Ayame's skin was smooth like whipped butter. I could rub on it all day.

Moving her legs from my lap, she stood up and made her way over to me. Ayame sat on my lap and circled my neck with her arms.

"If my parents ever would have caught me having sex, I would have died." She dipped her face low into my neck. "I think they expected me to be a virgin until I was married." She giggled and ran her tongue down the side of my neck.

"You trying to start something." I gripped her hips when she started grinding herself into me.

"And I want to finish it."

Ayame stared at me, ardor filling her eyes. "You make me happy." She leaned in and pecked my lips, pulling on my bottom one with her teeth.

Ayame had some wine during dinner. I wasn't sure how strong it was, but she must be feeling it. She slid down my body until she was down on her knees in front of me.

"Coco, what you doing?" I looked around.

"No one's outside to see us." She messed with the button on my jeans. When she looked up at me, the desire in

her orbs was heavy. She ran her small pink tongue over her full lips.

I aided her with removing my jeans. Once my dick was free, Ayame didn't hesitate to take my dick in her mouth.

My hand went directly to the back of her head. I couldn't help but gnaw on my lip roughly.

“Damn baby,” I muttered.

She sucked harder, taking me to the back of her throat. Ayame didn't have gag reflexes and could deep throat me with ease. I never said I had the largest shaft, but I was working with a good size, and Ayame always handled it like a champ.

Ayame pulled up and spit on my pole before moving her hand up and down. She took me back in her mouth then hummed on it.

“Fuck!”

I started moving my hips and down, fucking her mouth slowly.

“Let me have it, baby,” she whispered in a sultry voice, then licked my tip.

My balls tightened and my hands went to the arms of my chair. I gripped it tightly and bit down on my bottom lip

while my seeds shot down Ayame's throat.

She cheesed up at me and slowly stroked my dick, licking the tip every so often. Her lips were slightly swollen, her eyes low.

I watched as she stood up and removed the leggings she was wearing.

Ayame grabbed my dick and saddled me, lowering herself down on me.

A breeze passed through us as she rode me slowly.

I don't know if it was because we were outside and could possibly be seen, but this moment seemed to be even hotter. She locked her walls around me, wrapping her arms around my neck and leaning in. Her mouth was inches away from mine. I inhaled her heavy breaths.

"Fuck me," she moaned.

I grabbed the front of her neck and gripped it while thrusting up. "You showing out tonight."

She moaned loudly. "Someone's gonna hear you," I told her.

"I don't care. Don't stop," she cried.

My dick seemed to get harder.

I continued fucking her from below, keeping my grip on her neck. I kissed her hungrily.

“Ah!” Her body jerked.

Her mouth parted and her head went back.

“I love the way you fuck me.”

“Look at me,” I demanded.

Her eyes fluttered. “What else do you love?” I bit her chin, then kissed it.

Licking my lips, I stared at her intensely.

“You just love this dick?” She shook her head.

“I love *you*.” Her pussy grew wetter.

Thrusting deep into her, I held my position. My heart sped up. My body tensed.

“Shit,” I groaned as my seeds shot into her.

Ayame leaned into me, hugging me tightly.

She was breathing softly into my neck, making the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

A warm glow filled me, lightening the shadows that previously covered my heart.

“I appreciate you coming by,” I told Gage, slapping hands with him.

“You know I’m always down to support. You got a good thing going on here.” He looked around the building.

He picked up his glass off the bar, taking a drink of it. “You know, when you told me about this at *Priority Play* some months back, I didn’t think you were serious. I glad you were.”

“It was time for me to get off my ass.”

“I heard that. It’s a nice laid-back spot, perfect to come unwind when you don’t want to be crowded by a lot of noise and people.”

I turned and gave my place a once over. I had added a TV behind the bar and near the chairs to play sports on.

“It’s like a man cave outside the house.”

I looked up at the TV behind the bar. Sports highlights were currently playing. “Season going good?” His eyes followed mine.

“Better than good. It’s great, probably the best one of my career.”

“I heard the Riots reached out for you to come back.”

He smirked. “They did but fuck them. I’m re-signing to the Titans. I plan on bringing a ‘ship home.”

I didn’t blame him. The Riots handed Gage a shitty hand after his injury last season.

“Outside of that, everything been good?”

“Hell yeah. Bailey’s good, Aisha’s good, life’s great. I don’t remember the last time I was this happy.” He looked down at his drink. “I’m about to ask her to marry me.”

I looked over at him. “Aisha?” He tossed his drink back and nodded.

“Yeah, it’s time.”

I got lost in my head for a moment. Gage and I hung out back in the day, got in some trouble together doing knuckle-headed boy shit.

“Back in the day, you were against the whole family thing. You didn’t want to settle down or anything. Now you got a kid, plan on getting married. What changed?”

He traced the rim of his glass with his finger. “It was Aisha. When I went through all the bullshit with my addiction and career, she was right there at my side. I put her through a lot of bullshit, but she never turned her back on me. She loved me at my lowest, gave me my daughter, it was easy to fall in love with her.” Gage looked up at me. “If it weren’t Aisha, I wouldn’t want to get married, honestly, but she makes it easy. I can’t see my life without her. She was like a light in the darkness I was being swallowed into.”

I processed his words.

I wasn’t completely against falling in love or starting a family, but when Norine dipped out on me without a second thought, it did turn me off to the idea. Still, part of me hoped to find someone that accepted me with all my flaws and insecurities, like Aisha accepted Gage.

“Wassup yall,” Elijah greeted us.

“Wassup.” I slapped hands with him.

He took a seat next to Gage. “Let me get a shot of Patron, sweetheart,” he told the bartender.

Gage looked at me. “When you meet her, you’ll know it.”

He turned to face Elijah.

I tuned their conversation out and got lost in my head again.

I was sure I had found what he was talking about in Ayame. I just needed to make sure I didn't lose her.

AYAME

“Ayame, wassup girl.” Chase walked up to me.

“Hey!” I smiled.

“You waiting for an order?”

I nodded. “Your food has quickly become my guilty pleasure. I’ve been craving your baked mac and cheese and banana pudding.” Normally I tried to eat somewhat healthy, but since tasting Chase’s food, I’ve been addicted.

“Here’s your order, miss.” The hostess walked over and handed me the bag.

“Thank you.” I looked at Chase.

“I have to get back to work, but I’m sure I’ll be back in again soon.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

The two of us headed out of his building. “What’s going on with you and Austin?” he asked suddenly.

I glanced up at him. "I'm only asking because he seems to like you a lot, and I like you for him."

I cheesed. "I like him for me too."

Chase opened the door to my car.

"Can I ask you something?" I paused, getting in the car.

I thought about what I was about to say but shook my head. "Never mind, it's nothing." I smiled.

"You sure?"

"Me and Austin's ex, are we alike?"

His eyebrow rose. "Norine?"

I nodded.

He looked off for a second, almost making me regret asking. Sometimes I found myself second-guessing myself when it comes to Austin. I hated it, but it had been something I struggled with for a while. With always being pushed to be the best by my parents, I always felt like sometimes I wasn't enough for anyone.

"Nah, not really." Chase looked back at me. "Norine and Austin had a weird relationship. The two of you connect

well.”

“Weird?” He nodded.

“Yeah.” I could tell he wasn’t going to give me more.”

Smiling softly, I nodded. “Thanks.”

“Aye. You don’t have to compare what you have and what Austin had with her. My boy is feeling you heavy and he ain’t had that in a while. If you want to know about her, ask him.” I chewed on my bottom lip.

“I will, thanks Chase.”

“Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Once I was inside my car, he closed the door and stepped back.

Starting the car, I gave Chase a small wave and pulled out. Part of me felt foolish for trying to fish information out of Austin’s friends. I don’t even know why I asked. It had been on my mind since he told me she was the reason for him snapping at me, but I couldn’t find the courage to ask about it. Normally I wouldn’t hesitate to speak up on a subject, but part of me was nervous that he still had feelings for her, especially seeing how *just* her calling affected him.

“Everything good, baby?” Austin walked up behind me, hugging me.

I stopped stirring the chocolate I was making and peeked over my shoulder.

“Yeah, why you ask?”

He started kissing my neck. “You’ve just seem distracted since you got here.”

I reached over and grabbed the silicon bar molds to pour the milk chocolate in. I was currently making smores bars.

I pulled away and stepped around Austin so that I could put the molds on top of the oven to cure.

When I turned around, Austin was intensely staring at me. His eyes ran from the top of my head down to my feet, back to my head.

“A’right Ayame, wassup for real?” He crossed his arms in front of him.

I twisted my mouth to the aide. “Tell me about your ex.”

His face bunched up. “What?”

“You’re ex. Tell me about her.” I leaned on the counter near the stove.

He brushed his thumb over his nose. “Why you wanna talk about her?”

I shrugged. “Just curious. Tell me about her.” I tried to let it go, but it had been nagging me.

I could tell he was getting frustrated by me asking about her. It was written all on his face. “I mean ain’t nothing to really tell. Norine came from a good family. Some may say she was stuck up. She had her selfish moments, but when I needed her, she was there. She was the first girl to actually hold my attention and I fell in love with her.”

Even though I knew Austin loved his previous girlfriend, it stung hearing him admit to being in love with her. I knew there were other girls before me, but I couldn’t shake the gnawing feeling that bubbled in my stomach.

Austin continued to study me. I guess trying to read my mood. Eventually, he walked over to me. His arms went to the side of me, and he trapped between him and the counter, staring down at me.

“What’s up with you? Why are you asking about her?”

I found myself getting lost in his eyes. My heart accelerated and my stomach fluttered.

“The other day when you were in the shower, your phone went off twice,” I started slowly, running my tongue over my lips. “I would never snoop through your phone because that’s not me, but it went off again, so I looked at the screen. I thought it might be important since it kept going off.”

His jaw tightened but he didn’t interrupt me. “When I looked, I saw you had two missed calls from an unsaved number and a message on *InstaFlik*. I saw it was *her* by her display name, and I logged into my account and looked her up. She’s a beautiful girl.”

“She is,” he agreed nonchalantly. “But so are you. I don’t know why she keeps hitting me up, but I don’t have shit to say to her. What me and Norine had ended six years ago when she walked out on me.”

“You don’t miss her? I notice how your mood changes when she’s involved.”

His tongue went over his top teeth. “It irritates me that she’s trying to weasel her way back into my life. When Norine left, I had just lost my Grandpop, and she knew that. She knew I was dealing with a lot of shit and she didn’t give a fuck. She

bounced on me without looking back, and I can't forgive that. That doesn't mean I want her back because I get upset. I accepted she was gone and not coming back. I'm trying to move on now."

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"Sometimes I feel like you might want to work things out with her. You say she keeps calling; what if she talks her way back into your life?"

His brows furrowed together. He gripped my chin and forced me to keep eye contact with him. "You don't have to *ever* worry about that. I don't want that girl. I'm with who I want to be with. I'm happy with *you*. You don't have to worry about me being with anyone else or leaving you. I love *you*. I think about *you* all day. Nothing in my past will change that. It's me and you. Unless that changed?"

My face balled up. "What, no!"

The corners of his mouth rose. "Okay then, stop trying to break us up over shit that don't matter. You don't have to worry about Norine. You're it for me, Coco. I mean that shit from the heart."

I didn't know how much I needed his reassurance until now. When I saw how persistent his ex was, I wasn't sure how Austin felt about it. I know he told me one thing, but part of me felt like he might miss whatever he had with her and go back. Even though I tried to fight it, I fell hard for Austin. Although it happened quickly, this time felt different from the other times.

Austin and I could relate to each other in ways I couldn't with others. He was rough around the edges, but that made me love him even more. His flaws helped mold him into the person he was today. The person I *easily* fell in love with.

“Good workout today, Ayame,” Tae said behind me.

“You're being extra professional today. Everything okay?” I asked him.

Normally Tae would be flirty during our training sessions, but today he wasn't. It was weird. I would never act on it, but it was flattering.

“Yeah, just got some personal shit going on.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

“Only if dinner is included.” He smirked, causing me to laugh.

“Never mind, you’re fine.” I grabbed my phone and bag off the weight bench.

“Enjoy the rest of your day, Ayame.”

I grinned. “You too, Tae.”

I looked down at my phone as I headed for the gym doors. I had an hour until I had to be at Austin’s parents’ house. I had met them at his opening, but I was nervous about officially meeting them as Austin’s girlfriend. I was glad Noelle told me she would be there. That helped take some of the edge off.

I had worked all morning at *ChocoLUXE*, came straight to the gym for an hour session, and now I had to go home, shower, and head to his parents’ house.

My phone rang just as I started my car. When I looked and saw it was Reid, I debated if I was going to answer it. I hadn’t talked to him in two weeks since he made his comment about me being desperate for love. I missed my best friend though. I had been dodging his calls.

Taking a deep breath, I hit the button on my steering wheel.

“Hello.”

“I’m going to beat your ass, Ayame! I’ve been calling your ass!”

I checked the road before pulling out to the main street.

“I wasn’t ready to talk to you, Reid.”

“Fuck all that. I would never go that long without answering your call.”

Guilt filled me when he said that because he was right. Reid and I argued, a lot actually, but he never ignored me.

“You told me I was desperate for love, Reid! What did you expect!”

“I never said you were desperate.”

“You basically did.”

“Charm, you know I didn’t mean any harm. I just want you to take your time and be careful.”

“I want you to trust me and support my choices.”

“I do. It’s him I don’t trust!”

“Reid,” I said in a warning tone.

“I love you, Charm, and I’m never going to apologize for looking out for you. It’s something about dude that I don’t trust, but if you say it’s nothing, then I’ll let it go. I want you happy, and if he makes you happy, then I’m not going to rain on that.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Reid. I appreciate you looking out for me, but you don’t have anything to worry about. Austin and I have talked and put everything out on the table.”

Reid didn’t answer right away. I was about to call his name when he started talking again.

“Okay, Charm. How’s business?”

I snickered at him changing the subject.

I talked to Reid the rest of the way to my house, catching up on what we missed over the last two weeks. He told me Heather left him, blocking his number after seeing him out with some girl. I knew it was coming. A girl was only going to take so much. I wasn’t going to say she was done with him because this seemed to be their routine.

It felt good talking to Reid again. He was the closest thing to family I had.

“Austin told me you were a social worker, Mrs. Morris.”

“I told you, it’s Sharon. And yes, I was for 35 years.”
She smiled with pride.

“That’s amazing. I bet that was a challenging job.”

“It was. Sometimes it took a toll on me, but I loved what I did.”

“Yeah, sometimes she would forget we were her kids and not her cases, ain’t that right, mom,” Zach told her.

She waved him off. “Oh, hush.”

“And you were a manager at a construction company, correct, Mr. Morris?”

“It’s Larry, and I was, worked at that company for 40 years.”

I glanced between the two. I was trying to read them. They seemed like hard-working, good people. I didn’t get a bad vibe from them. It made me wonder where Austin’s issues with them really came from.

“What is it that your parents do?”

I cleared my throat. “They own a marketing firm back home.”

“Nice. Are they well known?”

I shrugged. “I guess. They just did *LuxeMoné’s* latest campaign.”

“Oh, I just saw that commercial with the black *Sex in the City* vibe,” Noelle jumped in.

I nodded. “Yep that’s them.” I took a sip of my water.

“That’s great. I bet they’re proud of you,” his dad commented.

I looked down at my food. Austin reached over and gripped my thigh. I looked over at him and he gave me a reassuring smile. I smiled back before focusing back on his dad.

“They actually wanted me to work for the company, but that wasn’t what I wanted.”

“What did you do before you moved here?”

“I worked at a clothing store and also coached a travel volleyball team.”

“I didn’t know you coached,” Austin cut in.

I gave him a shy grin. “I never told you?”

He shook his head and gripped my thigh again. “No, you didn’t. You don’t miss it?”

I shrugged. “I mean kind of, but it’s fine. I miss my girls more than anything.”

“You should talk to Tori. She’s always looking to start new programs at the community center. Maybe you can start a volleyball program here.”

“That’s a great idea, baby.” Zach leaned over and kissed his wife.

“Yall gotta be all lovey-dovey all the time?” Austin turned his nose up.

“Why you always hating on me and my wife?”

“Ain’t nobody hatin’ on yall. Yall just always being all mushy. We don’t want to see that.”

“You know, son, if you don’t mess it up, then you might have that too,” his dad commented. “Hopefully, you have your act together now so you don’t run Ayame off.” I frowned at him.

“I really like your son. I don’t plan on leaving him.”

“I like you,” Sharon spoke. I glanced at her and she was smiling.

“Yeah, I know I’m not golden boy over there, but I don’t plan on messing this up.” Austin threw his arm around my chair. I couldn’t help but smile up at him.

It got quiet at the table. I guess I got my answer on why Austin questioned himself a lot.

“Noelle, are you back painting?” I asked, trying to ease the mood.

She smiled widely. “Girl, yes, that’s all I been doing between breastfeeding and changing diapers. I can’t wait for my next show.” You could hear how much she loved what she did by how high her voice got. Her eyes lit up as she spoke about her art.

“Good, I need some more paintings for my bedroom and Zen room.”

“Zen room?” Sharon asked.

“Yeah, it’s my meditation room. Where I go to get my head and energy right. I’m very big on self-care and taking care of my mental health.”

“Austin baby, keep her.”

Austin laughed. “Moms is really big on protecting your peace and mental health too.”

I smiled.

Outside of the small hiccup a couple of minutes ago, tonight has been good. Dinner was great and Austin’s parents were so welcoming. They were the complete opposite of my parents, and I didn’t feel like I had to be on guard the whole time.

Zachariah started crying, pulling Noelle away from the table.

“So do you see yourself with my son long term?” Sharon asked me as we ate the peach cobbler she prepared.

Her question caught me off guard. I looked at Austin and he was staring at me. His face was blank; I guess waiting to see how I would answer.

“I do,” I responded finally. I grabbed his hand and squeezed it before looking back at his mom. “Your son and I share a lot of similarities. You two raised a great man, a passionate, loving man. I enjoy every moment we share.”

Austin squeezed my hand. Out the corner of my eye, I could see he was staring at me, but I kept my eye on his mom.

“We talking about the same Austin?” Zach cut in.

“Shut up,” Austin laughed.

“I’m just saying, she talking about you passionate and loving. Yo rude ass don’t show us that.”

“Zach, language,” his dad scolded.

“Man,” Austin chuckled.

Sharon was smiling; I guess satisfied with my answer.

“My son might have some flaws, but he’s a big baby really. He’s the oldest out the two, but I always said he should have been second.” She paused. “I know sometimes he goes through these motions, but he really is a beautiful person, inside and out. He’s made mistakes, but I know my baby boy. I know how we raised him, and I’m happy that he found someone that sees that too.”

“Mom, come on.” This time I looked at Austin, he had a bashful expression on his face.

“My wife’s right. Austin wasn’t the easiest kid to raise, but when he sets his mind to something, it’s hard to change it. My son loves you, and I can tell the feeling is mutual. The two of you look good together.”

“Thank you.” My cheeks hurt I was smiling so hard.

Noelle had come back and with the baby.

“Can I hold him,” I gushed. Their son was the cutest thing.

“Sure.” She walked over to hand him to me.

The doorbell went off just as I got the baby.

“Austin, can you see who that is?” his mom requested.

“We weren’t expecting anyone else.”

He got up and went to do as he was asked.

“Do you guys want more?” I asked the couple.

“Yes,” They both said and laughed.

“At least two more,” Noelle said.

“What about you? You want kids?” Zach asked.

I stared down at his son, admiring his chubby cheeks.

“I do, one day.”

“With my brother?”

My cheeks reddened. “Uh, well, we haven’t talked about it.” I laughed nervously. “I don’t know if he even wants kids.”

“He does. Trust me,” Sharon replied.

“I wonder who was at the door,” Larry muttered.

As soon as he said that, you could hear loud voices coming from the front.

Everyone’s eyes went in that direction before getting up and heading for the front of the house.

“You need to leave!” Austin’s voice elevated.

“Not until you talk to me!” A female’s voice shouted.

We got to the front room and I heard a gasp next to me.

“Norine? What are you doing here?” his mom asked.

Austin spun around and his eyes found mine. He looked like a deer caught in headlights.

I bounced the baby, keeping him calm.

“Mr. and Mrs. Morris, I’m sorry to just pop up.”

“Then why did you?” his mom spat.

Norine took a deep breath.

I was stuck, staring at her. Her pictures didn’t do her justice. She looked like a supermodel.

AUSTIN

The moment I answered the door, I regretted it and tried to shut it back instantly.

“You can’t keep avoiding me, Austin!” Norine put her hand up, halting the door.

“What are you doing here!” I hissed.

“We need to talk.”

“How did you know I would be here?”

“I didn’t. I came to speak to your parents. I thought they could talk some sense into you.”

My blood began to boil. My eyes narrowed and my stomach churned. This was the first time I laid eyes on Norine in six years and not much about her had changed.

She was tall and slender. Her breasts were a little larger, hips a tad bit wider, but everything else was the same. Her pecan-colored, blemish-free skin was glowing like always. The long bundles she had in was parted down the middle and

falling on the sides of her round face. She stared at me with her doe shape, deep brown eyes.

It suddenly felt like someone turned the heat on as my body filled with fire. I didn't want to see her. I thought I made that clear. I bit down on my back teeth, gripping the door handle tightly.

My heart was beating rapidly in my chest as an acidic taste formed in my throat.

“You need to go, Norine. Whatever conversation we needed to have died when you left me!” My voice rose louder with each word I spoke.

The calmness I was just feeling was gone. Rage was filling me along with disappointment. She had left me at a time when I needed her most.

“Please, Austin. I'm sorry, if you'd just listen.”

“I don't want to fucking listen!” I bellowed.

She jumped and tears clouded her eyes. I didn't have any sympathy for her though. I needed her gone.

“You need to leave.”

“Not until you talk to me.” Her voice cracked.

“Norine? What are you doing here?”

The moment I turned around my eyes instantly found Ayame. I could see the confusion bouncing all around them. My heart dropped into my stomach. We had been having such a good night, and here my ex is, fucking shit up.

I had zoned out just focusing on Ayame. Her body was tense and worry was written all on her face.

“I came here to try and work things out with my husband.” The moment those words left her mouth, I snapped my head to face her, noticing she was now next to me in the house.

“Husband!” my mom shrieked.

“You never told them?” Norine asked with a slight smirk.

“Why the hell would I! You left me!”

“And I’m trying to make it right!”

“You’re married?” I heard in a soft whisper.

Fuck.

I closed my eyes.

When I opened them and looked at Ayame, I felt my heart shatter. She was hurt, it was no hiding it. Her eyes bounced from me to Norine, waiting for me to answer, but I was stuck. I wanted to speak, but it was like my brain was stuck.

“Austin, is this your wife? Are you married?” Her voice was shaky.

Releasing a heavy sigh, I licked my lips and dropped my head. “Yes.” I looked back up. “But-” Before I could finish my sentence, her hand went across my face shocking me.

“I can’t believe I’m going through this *again!*” Tears ran down her face. She glared at me with burning, reproachful eyes.

“Coco!” I went to grab her but she stepped back.

“Don’t, just don’t!” she choked out a desperate laugh while shaking her head before rushing past me and out the door.

I felt like shit.

Instantly I regretted not coming forward and telling her what was up. Guilt stabbed at my chest as regret filled my stomach.

“Was that your girlfriend?”

My head snapped towards Norine. “Leave.”

“Austin.”

“Get the fuck out!” I barked.

Her eyes widened and her cheeks reddened as she looked back at my family.

Without another word, she scurried out the door.

My hands went to my head and I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling like I was sinking. I couldn't believe I had just lost Ayame. The look in her eyes haunted me, causing grief and despair to fill me.

“Austin, what the hell! When did you get married?” my mom asked.

“Yeah, son, what the hell was that?”

I couldn't answer either of them right now. *My future* had just been snatched away from me, and I wasn't sure I would be able to get it back.

“C'mon, bro, let's go outside.” Zach touched my shoulders.

I looked up at him and tried sniffing back my emotions. Nodding my head, I allowed him to lead me outside.

We sat down on the stoop in front of my parents' door.

Neither of us spoke at first. My thoughts were running wild. Regret consumed me. I knew I should have told Ayame about me and Norine, but she was gone, and I wanted to keep her buried.

"I knew this was going to happen," I spoke finally.

Zach didn't respond right away. "I always fuck up. Every time something good is happening in my life, I fuck it up." I balled my fists and brought them to my forehead. "Fuck!"

I was already feeling sick at the thought of losing Ayame for good. I needed her, couldn't lose her.

"When did yall marry?"

Sniffing, I looked over at my twin. We looked nothing alike, and a lot of the time I resented him, but right now I felt our connection. I could tell he was genuinely concerned about me.

"When we were 19. I thought marrying her would prove to her I was serious about her. It lasted for two years,

and then she dipped out on me.” I gnawed on my bottom lip and dropped my head.

“And I’m guessing you never told Ayame?”

I shook my head. “Why would I tell her? That would have been the smart thing, right? But typical me, always gotta make shit hard.” I shook my head. This was the second time Ayame had been through something like this. The thought disgusted me.

“You gotta stop being so hard on yourself, bro. You fucked up, you fuck up, but you’re not the only one. No one is perfect.”

I scoffed. “That’s coming from the golden child.”

“Stop calling me that shit. I know you think our parents favored me, but that’s not true. You push us away and get in your own head. But they love you just as much as they love me.” I waved him off.

“None of that’s going to help me fix this.”

Zach grew quiet for a moment. “You should go talk to her and explain things to her.”

I shook my head. “You don’t get it. Ayame is big on trust and honesty. She’s been burned a lot in the past, and I

promised her I wouldn't be like the others."

"So you gotta make it right. I saw how you looked at her, bro. You love her, and I have *never* seen you look at Norine like that. Do what you gotta do and make it right."

"And how you expect me to do that?"

"Grow the fuck up. Handle your business with Norine and get your girl back."

I rested my elbows on my knees and got lost in my head.

Zach was making it seem like getting Ayame to forgive me was easy, but I knew it was far from that. Just months prior, she was burned like this. I didn't see her as the person to touch a hot surface again after being burned. Still, losing her wasn't an option. I *had* to fix this. There was no way I was losing her.

Ayame's manager told me she called off this morning and left her in charge when I went to *ChocoLUXE* to talk to her. Instead of waiting around for her to show up, I went to her house.

I had been knocking on her door for almost five minutes and had no plans on leaving. I knew she was home because her car was in the driveway.

“Coco! Baby, please open the door,” I pleaded.

My chest had felt empty since last night. I needed to lay eyes on her.

Defeat was starting to fill me as I knocked again.

“Just hear me out, please.” I wasn’t a begging nigga, but for Ayame, I would become that.

A few seconds later, the locks turned and the door was snatched open.

My stomach churned.

Ayame’s eyes were swollen, puffy, and red. Her cheeks flushed.

“I don’t want you here,” she told me coldly.

“I know. I just want you to hear me out, and if you still want me to leave, I will.”

She squinted her eyes. “Five minutes.” She stepped back.

I breathed a small sigh of relief.

I stepped into the house and cringed when I heard the door slam.

“Talk.” Ayame’s body language was defensive. She had closed herself off from me, and I didn’t like it. From the moment I met her, she had been open to me, *transparent*. Now she was protecting herself from *me*.

“When I was 19, I married Norine. We had been having problems in our relationship. She told me I wasn’t serious about her and she was tired of feeling like she wasn’t important to me. I didn’t want to lose her. Like I told you, she was the only person who got me back then. So I asked her to marry me, and we went to the courthouse a couple of days later.”

Ayame squinted her eyes on me. They were dark and emotionless. Heaviness filled my stomach, but I continued after clearing my throat.

“We never told anyone we were married. Well, I never did. Part of me knew I would get backlash because it was a rash decision. A lot of people didn’t think me and Norine would last, but I was determined to prove them wrong. Fast forward a year and a half later, my Grandpop was sick and I knew he didn’t have a long time to live. I started lashing out,

doing dumb shit again. When he died, something died inside of me, and I cracked. I was wildin', partying and drinking a lot. Getting into trouble for dumb shit. Norine got fed up with my shit and left. I came home to her stuff gone and a note telling me she couldn't do it anymore."

I chewed on the inside of my jaw, feeling myself growing upset, but I pushed it to the back of my mind. "That was six years ago."

I stood there waiting for Ayame to say something, react in any kind of way. The tension was high in the room. My nerves were rattled and my pulse was racing.

She continued staring at me with no emotion written on her face. "Is that everything?"

Quickly, I nodded my head.

She pressed her lips together and looked off to the side. "Good, you can leave now."

My brows furrowed. "What?"

"You can leave."

"Ayame."

"We don't have anything else to talk about, Austin. Thank you for explaining things to me, but I don't have

anything else to say to you.”

My mouth grew dry. I couldn't just walk out of here with no resolution.

“I don't want to lose you, Coco. I fucked up in a major way, and I own that.”

“You're right, you did. I asked you repeatedly if you had any secrets and you kept telling me no.” I went to speak, but she kept going. “I told you about my past, about what I just went through. I trusted you, and you turned around and did the *same shit!* I defended you. I didn't want to believe you had some hidden agenda because I felt connected with you. Stronger than I *ever* felt with anyone.” Her voice began to crack, doing the same for my chest.

“I just asked you about her and you didn't tell me the truth. You allowed me to walk around here like you actually gave a fuck about me and the whole time you're married.”

“I tried to divorce her. I found out where she was and sent her the papers, but she wouldn't sign them!”

“It doesn't matter!” Tears filled her eyes and her voice trembled. “You didn't give me a choice. You didn't tell me or allow me to decide if I wanted to move forward.” She dropped

her lashes quickly to hide the hurt, but it was too late. I had seen it and it rammed into me full speed.

“I’m sorry,” I told her.

There was nothing else I could say. She was right. I should have told her.

When she looked back up at me, her tears had finally fallen. “You and I had a lot of things in common. I know I fell for you quickly, but it was something about you that I couldn’t fight. I felt like a damn *moth to a flame*, unable to help the *pull* I felt when it came to you.” She shook her head. “I never felt that connection with *anyone*. It was deeper than just being in love. I genuinely felt tied to you.”

She hugged her stomach and closed her eyes.

The despair in her voice was making me break inside. A grim feeling consumed me. I felt even lower now than I did when I first arrived.

“You warned me.” This time when Ayame spoke her voice was void of emotion and cold. Her face was stilled even though tears were running down it. “You told me you had to *protect me* from *you*, and I didn’t believe you.” It felt like my throat was closing. “I should have listened to you when you

told me you fuck up everything you touch. I'll never ignore that warning again. Leave." She opened the door. She spoke calmly, with no light in her eye, no smile or tenderness I was used to.

A pit formed in my stomach. Pain squeezed my heart.

I didn't want to leave. I wanted her to talk to me so we could *fix* this.

"Ayame," I begged.

"Please go, Austin, and don't come back."

My shoulders fell forward.

I chewed on my bottom lip.

Ice filled my stomach.

Tears filled the corner of my eyes but I refused to let them fall.

Nodding my head, I slowly started towards the door.

Stopped right in front of her, I stared at her.

It was faint but I could still see the love she held for me being closer to her.

Leaning forward, I noticed she flinched. Instead of kissing her like I wanted, I kissed her forehead, leaving my

lips resting on her for a minute before pulling back.

“I’m not giving you up,” I declared and left out the door.

The door shut as soon as I was outside.

I wasn’t giving up Ayame; I couldn’t. The raw emotion I felt from her just now proved I needed to fix this and quickly.

AYAME

I pounded on the door in front of me desperately.

The past couple of days passed me by in a blur. I kept replaying the events at Austin's parents' house over in my head, and I still draw a blank on how I could have missed the signs. For the past 48 hours, I couldn't do anything but sit in bed and cry until I was physically sick.

The betrayal from Vance felt nothing like this. I really thought I found something *real* in Austin. To have it all blow up in my face was gut-wrenching.

“What the fuck!” Reid snatched the door open and glared at me.

The moment his eyes landed on me, they softened.

“Ayame?”

Hearing my name caused a switch to flip. I fell into him, burying my head into his chest and cried.

His arms wrapped securely around me and he pulled me inside, closing the door behind us. He rubbed my back, allowing me to get it all out. This was *one* of the *many* reasons why Reid was my best friend. He didn't care if I got his shirt wet and snotty. He had seen me at my worse and never judged me.

I hated to even show up on his doorstep because even though I knew he wouldn't say it, he would be thinking, 'I told you so.'

After a few minutes, Reid spoke my name again.

Swallowing back the sob that was threatening to come out, I looked up at him.

"What happened?"

Closing my eyes, I attempted to ease the ache that sat on my chest. Just the thought of repeating the words out loud made my stomach turn.

"You were right," I responded lowly.

His eyebrow rose. He didn't respond, but confusion did fill his handsome face.

"What happened?"

Running my tongue over my lips, I sniffled back some tears and used the back of my hand to wipe my nose.

“He was married.” Instantly as the words left my mouth, I felt more tears rush to the brim of my eyes. A nauseous feeling filled my stomach. “His wife popped up at his parents’ house. Déjà vu, huh.” Bitterly I chuckled while shaking my head.

“Reid, what’s taking so long.” I glanced behind him, seeing Heather in nothing but his shirt that swallowed her short frame.

“Oh, hey Heather.” I looked at Reid and quickly wiped my eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you had company.” I hated for anyone to see me in a weakened state. Reid was an exception for obvious reasons.

“Hey girl.” She looked between the two of us.

“Give us a minute, baby.”

She looked at me and that look I hated to get appeared on her face.

Sympathy.

“Okay, Ima go to the store and get some food to make breakfast. Are you staying Ayame?”

I nodded. “Thanks, Heather.”

“No problem, girl.” Turning around, Heather headed back upstairs.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt yall morning.”

Reid gave me a stern look. “Quit playing with me. C’mon, sit down and explain to me why I gotta beat this nigga’s ass.”

Reid led me to his couch and I unloaded the last 72 hours to him. Last night I felt trapped. I woke up early this morning and left BRF and headed back home. I needed to be around someone who I knew always had my best interests at heart.

The more I talked the more Reid looked pissed.

“I’ll be back,” Heather said, but neither of us paid her any attention.

“Ima fuck that nigga up.” He went to stand, but I grabbed him.

“How did you know?”

He looked lost. “About what?”

“That something was off with him. How did you know?”

Reid shrugged. “I just got a vibe. I didn’t think he was married, but I had a feeling he was holding something back from you.” Reid reached over and grabbed my hand. “You know I hate that I was right, right?”

Slowly I nodded my head.

“I know. I hate that you were right too.” I tucked my bottom lip into my mouth, feeling *more* tears coming. I didn’t understand why I was so emotional. I was upset when I learned about Vance, but it was nothing like this. I was more so angry when I learned about my ex’s lies. With Austin, it was different. Right now, I felt like Austin snatched my damn heart out of my chest and ripped it right in front of me. Like he sliced open a newly healed wound and poured salt on it.

“The worst part is I don’t hate him. I miss him, and it’s only been a few days since I last laid eyes on him.”

I was thankful June agreed to watch over the store while I got my mind right. I didn’t want to risk running into Austin at *ChocoLUXE*.

“It’s nothing wrong with that, Charm. You loved that nigga.”

“I know he loved me too.” I looked down. “I just...I asked him numerous times if there was anything I needed to know, and each time he told me no. He told me about his ex, but never once admitted that was his wife. I don’t get why the hell this keeps happening to me.” I threw my hands over my face and allowed my tears to fall again.

Reid wrapped his arms around my shoulders and pulled me into him. “This isn’t on you, Charm. The only thing you did was love them niggas. They fucked up, not you.”

“With Vance, signs were there. I can admit some things didn’t add up with him, but I ignored it. But Austin, I didn’t see any. I felt like he was the one.”

Reid hugged me tighter but never responded to my last statement, which was fine. I was exhausted. For the past three nights, I’ve hardly slept, showered, or ate. Right now, I wanted to wash all my despair down the drain, eat, and sleep the last 72 hours away.

“What’s these?” Reid walked into the room I was going to be staying in and picked up one of the books next to me.

I had been sleeping for a few hours and it seemed like it was just what I needed. My chest was still hurting, but my body didn’t feel as weak anymore. I had a headache, but I was sure it was due to all the crying I been doing.

“Photo albums. I found them in my aunt’s closet and never took the time to look at them.” I flipped through the book that was currently in my lap. I had found four photo albums in the closet. So far, they were filled with pictures of my aunt, mom, and uncle when they were younger. They all looked to be closer then.

It made me think, I still never got the real reason why they didn’t speak anymore.

I laughed when I noticed my mom’s hair. “Your mom had a Jheri curl?” Reid asked.

“I guess so.” I chuckled.

“This looks like you.” He pointed to the girl next to my mom.

“That’s Aunt Dee.” I tilted my head. “I do look like her right here though.”

“Are you going to go see your parents?”

I flipped another picture. “I guess I should, huh?” I glanced up at him then looked back at the book.

“I mean, I won’t hold it against you if you don’t.”

I snickered. “My mom has been hassling me about coming back and visiting. When I suggested they come to me, you would have thought I spit on her or something.” I shook my head.

“You know how your mom is. You ever find out the beef with her and your aunt?” I shook my head.

“No, I stopped bringing it up because neither of them would answer me. All I kept getting is it’s better to leave the past in the past.” I shrugged. “I stopped caring, honestly.”

It got quiet between us. “You feeling any better?”

I sighed and kept my focus on the picture. “No. I’m trying not to think about it though.”

I closed the photo album and looked at Reid. “I want to call him. When he came to my house, he looked just as hurt as I was. I could tell he was remorseful. I almost forgave him, but

then his wife's snide look appeared in my mind, and I snapped back to my senses." I balled my hand into a fist so tight my nails dug into my palm. "He looked so disgusted when he saw her and crushed when he looked at me. I knew he didn't mean for this to happen, but I can't forgive him." The *humiliating, deflated* feeling I felt in that living room haunted me. Tears welled in my eyes which caused me to grow frustrated.

"I'm so tired of fucking crying." I swiped my hand over my eyes.

"I'm actually shocked you're crying." Reid chuckled. "I mean, it's a given because you're hurt, but you don't normally cry this much."

I rolled my eyes. "I know and they just come without any warning!"

My phone vibrated on the phone next to me. I reached over and grabbed it.

My heart throbbed in my chest when I looked at the screen.

Austin: I miss you & I'm sorry. Just let me know you're okay. I love you.

I stared at my phone and gripped it tightly. I knew I should have just blocked Austin, but I couldn't bring myself to. When his name appeared on my screen, I got some satisfaction that he was worried about me. June texted me that he stopped by looking for me. I told her to tell him I took some personal time and nothing else.

He had texted me a few times since leaving my house. I knew that wasn't Austin. He wasn't the one to keep at something after being ignored.

I bit down on my bottom lip.

"It's okay, Ayame. I know you feel like you have to be tough all the time." I looked up and Reid was looking at the message.

Just as I was about to lock my phone two more messages came through from the groupchat I was in with Noelle and Tori.

***Noelle:** Just checking on you, girl! We're here for you!*

***Tori:** Yeah girl, just let us know you're well and if you want to talk!*

Noelle must have filled Tori in what happened. After letting them know I was ok, and I'd talk to them later I locked

my phone and tossed it back on the bed.

“I just want to forget about him.”

“Just give me the word and I’ll go beat dude’s ass. I let that nigga Vance slide because you asked, but I’m tired of these niggas making you cry.” I smiled.

“Give me a few days and I might take you up on that offer.”

It was sad I felt so uneasy when it came to my parents. I always had to have my guard up because I didn’t know what to expect.

I used my key to open their front door and stepped inside.

The signature vanilla and lavender scent I grew up smelling filled my nose instantly.

When I didn’t see them in the living room, I kept going until I got to the steps that led to the lower half of the house. My parents had a split-level house. Most of the time, they were down in the second living room.

“Hey guys.” I made myself known.

My dad was sitting in his chair, with a table in front of him filled with papers, and my mom was watching some game show. Both of their eyes lifted and found me.

“Well, look what the wind blew in,” my dad said.

I gave a toothless smile and walked over to him, kissing his cheek. “Hi daddy.”

Making my way to my mom, I kissed her cheek too. “Hi mommy.”

“When did you get into town?” she asked.

I took a seat next to her, setting my satchel on the ground next to me.

“Couple days ago.”

“And we’re just seeing you,” my dad scolded.

“I was tired from the drive.” I shrugged.

The truth was, I had been in bed trying to heal my broken heart. Today was the first day I hadn’t cried since the breakup and I hoped it stayed like that.

“Mhm, anyways. Are you here for good? Finally got tired of working at the candy store?” My mom’s face balled up.

“No, mommy. I’m just here to visit. I love working at the chocolatier. It’s a fun job.”

There was no way I would admit to my parents why I was really in town. I would never hear the end of it.

My dad grunted. “You make candy, Ayame. I don’t understand why you don’t think you need a real job.”

I frowned. “That is a real job. I own the place.”

My mom scoffed. “I swear you’re just like my sister. Head always in the cloud. You need stability, Ayame. Making chocolate is not a career.”

“Aunt Dee made it one.”

My mom rolled her eyes. “Right, she thought she was the next Willy Wonka.”

I fought to keep the words I wanted to say down and brushed my mom’s rude comment off. “Are you ever going to tell me why you and Aunt Dee didn’t get along?”

My mom cut her eyes at me. “No.”

I waited for her to say something else, but she didn’t.

My mom was a beautiful woman, but she was so entitled it made her ugly. I looked more like her than my dad.

I'm just glad I didn't get her personality.

“Anyways, how have you two been?” I looked between my parents.

“Busy. Business has been picking up.” I smiled at my dad.

“That's great, daddy. Maybe I can hire you guys for *ChocoLUXE*.”

His face turned blank.

Knowing it was time to cut this visit short, I grabbed my satchel to get to the reason why I was here. “Look what I found at Aunt Dee's, mom.” I grabbed the photo album and handed it to her.

“What is this?” She opened it.

My mom's mouth parted as she flipped through the pictures. “Where did you get this?” Her voice was soft, which shocked me.

“Aunt Dee's closet. I was clearing it out and stumbled upon it.”

I watched my mom's face change into different emotions. Emotions I couldn't really read.

“I need to get going, but you can keep that,” I told her.

She looked up at me, again with a look I could read.

“No, take it.” She closed the book and held it out.

I was confused by her actions.

“Are you sure? Since Aunt Dee is gone, I figured you might want them more than I do.”

“Yes.” The moment I took the album, she stood up and left out the room.

“What was that?” I turned to look at my dad.

He shrugged. “Sometimes it’s better to leave well enough alone.”

AUSTIN

“A’right bro, I let you wallow in your sorrow for a few days, now it’s time to get up,” Zach appeared in my living room and announced.

I stared up from my phone at him. “Get out.” My eyes went back to my phone.

I had just sent Ayame a text, or should I say *another* text telling her I loved her. I was trying to give her space, but I couldn’t help but assure her that she was it for me. She hadn’t responded to me, but my messages were going through, so that means she hadn’t blocked me either.

She hadn’t been at work or home, so I couldn’t confront her to make her talk to me. I hated feeling *rejected*, but I knew I had caused this.

“I’m not leaving. It’s time for you to get your shit together, man. A while back when I was fucked up over

Noelle, wasn't it you who came to me telling me to get out my feelings."

"That was different."

"You're right, it was because my girl didn't even know who the hell I was. You still have a chance to get Ayame back."

"I'm fucking *married*, Zach! She's not going to take me back after learning that."

"So divorce Norine and fix things."

"You don't think I tried that. I hit up Norine, telling her we needed to get the papers signed and she texted back saying she didn't want a divorce." My hands went to my head. "She's pissing me off."

"So meet up with her and find out why the hell she's back." Zach looked around my place. "You need to clean up too."

I cut my eyes to him. "Get out."

"Look, bro, I know how it feels to lose the girl you love. That shit happened to me twice, so if anyone gets that pain, it's me. But you can't stay cooped up in this house in your feelings. I promise that shit is worse than the actual

separation. Being trapped in your head is like self-destructing. Have you been by *Rocky's Cigars*?"

"Fuck that damn lounge! My girl is fucking gone and she won't even respond back to me!" That quickly, I grew pissed. Launching my phone at the wall.

Soon as it hit the wall, I knew I would be needing another one, *again*.

"C'mon Austin, don't do this shit. You have been doing good, your business is doing good. It's something you love and started with a purpose. Don't purposely kill it because you're upset. I thought you were past that."

Again, I cut my eyes to my brother. "Why are you still here, Zach? I don't need a damn lecture right now. I don't need the perfect boy telling me how to manage my damn life. That bar will still be there, but you know who won't? Ayame!" I jumped up and started pacing.

I knew it was only a matter of time before shit hit the fan. I was hoping by ignoring Norine, she would just go away. I hadn't bothered her in years, so I couldn't understand why she just popped up ruining my damn life.

“Mom and dad are worried about you. They said they’d give you some space, but they want you to stop by.”

I turned and stared at my twin.

Here I was lashing out, and he was cool as a cucumber. Typical Zach, always the level-headed twin.

I shook my head. “I’ll do that when I feel like it.”

Zach stood where he was, watching me. “What?”

“Noelle wants to do something for both of us for our birthday.”

I bit back on my back teeth. “I’m not in the celebrating mood.”

“Austin.”

“Go back to your perfect ass life, Zach. Leave me alone.”

His jaw clenched. “You got a month to get into it. I’m not going to let you run your damn life to the ground again, Austin. You always throw tantrums and do dumb shit when you don’t get your way or when you’re upset. I’m not letting you do that shit anymore. I’ll give you the rest of today, but you’re getting your shit together tomorrow. You’re my big brother and I love you. Whatever *resentment* or *competition*

you feel when it comes to me, ends *today* too. I'm not going to keep letting you push me away. I'm not your enemy. If no one else has your back, *I do*. It's time for you to realize that."

He turned and left out without giving me any time to respond.

His words ate away at me. I could hear the hurt buried behind them. I didn't purposely try to push my brother away, but I couldn't help it. I knew he cared about me. It had always been like that. When I was in a mood, Zach was the only one outside my Grandpop who attempted to comfort me. I used to hurt his feelings a lot in the past, pushing him away, but he *always* returned.

I looked around my living room. It was junky with takeout boxes, bowls, and cups all over. I lifted my arm and sniffed, balling my nose up.

One thing my brother was right about was me coming a long way. I started *Rocky's Cigars* for my Grandpop. I couldn't let his memory down because I had fucked up.

My eyes went to my phone.

I wish Ayame would respond to one of my texts. The manager at *ChocoLUXE* told me she was taking some time off

for personal reasons. When I asked where she was, she refused to tell me. It annoyed me, but I couldn't do shit but respect it.

I knew if I wanted to get Ayame back, I couldn't just sit on my ass. I had to get Norine to sign those papers and find out where the hell my girl was hiding out at.

After my brother left, I decided to take his advice and clean up my living room. It was starting to smell anyways. Following that, I showered and headed to my lounge. It had been almost a week since I stepped inside.

My phone screen hadn't broken thanks to the case I had on it, so I didn't have to put getting a new phone on the agenda.

Even though I had been MIA, business was still running well. Maria had kept the place afloat.

"I know you didn't have to, but I appreciate you for taking the lead while I was gone, Maria," I told her as I went over the sales report for the past week.

"No problem boss. You know this isn't my first rodeo." She wasn't lying. She used to manage a club back in Texas, where she was from.

“Still, you didn’t have to take charge, but you did. You’ll be compensated for that.” I nodded at her.

Maria placed her hand on my shoulder. “It was no problem, Austin. I’m just thankful you gave me a job. It’s hard being the new girl in town.”

I could see the flirty look she was giving me, but I wasn’t about to play into it. Stepping back, I allowed her hand to fall. “I don’t want any lines blurred. I have a girl who I love, and you’re my employee. I appreciate you stepping up and running things while I was gone, but don’t blur the lines.”

Her olive cheeks reddened. “Of course, sir. I just was saying thank you.”

I nodded. “I’m going to head to my office. Let me know if you need me.” I turned and walked off.

Maria was cute, and maybe if Ayame wasn’t tattooed in my mind, I might have entertained her, but I couldn’t risk adding anyone else in the equation.

“How are you feeling, baby?” My mom hugged me tightly.

“I’m doing okay, ma.” I hugged her back.

She let me go and grabbed my face. Concern was written all on her face.

“Are you sure? You know you can come talk to me about anything.”

I smiled. “I know.”

“Stop babying him, Sharon. The boy messed up and now he needs to face his mistakes.” My eyes went to my dad, who had stepped onto the porch.

When I pulled up to my parents, my mom was sitting on the porch on the phone. She didn’t hesitate to hang up when she saw me.

“Never the one to hold back, huh, dad?” I stepped back from my mom, causing her hands to drop.

“I’m just saying Austin, what the hell. I know me and your mom raised you with common sense, but you always manage to do dumb shit.”

I chewed on the inside of my jaw.

“Larry, stop,” my mom admonished.

“It’s okay, mama. I can take it. I’ve been dealing with it my whole life.”

My dad cut his eyes at me. “With what?”

“With you always criticizing me. I know I’m not your perfect Zachary, but I try. You wanna know why I married Norine? She accepted me how I was. She never threw my fuck ups in my face or made me feel less than my brother. I didn’t have to hide in my brother’s shadow with her. She accepted I wasn’t perfect.”

“Austin,” my mom called softly.

My eyes went to her and I could tell my words hurt her.

“No one even said you had to be perfect, Austin, or that you were less than your brother.” My eyes went back to my dad’s.

I was tired of holding on to the issues I had with my parents, mainly my dad. It kept eating away at me. Feeling like I wasn’t good enough was something I was ready to let go of.

Ayame popped in my head. Even though Norine never spoke about how I would fuck up, she never really assured me of anything either. Ayame did though. She constantly preached that I was *enough* and that I was *more than* what I was giving myself credit for.

“I felt like I wasn’t good enough my whole life. That’s why I clung to Grandpop so hard because he never made me feel like that. He always had my back and pushed me to do better without making me feel like shit. Norine was trying to leave me, and I was so *desperate* for her to stay that I thought marrying her was the solution to the issues we had. I couldn’t lose the only other person in my life I felt accepted me.” I swallowed hard, feeling myself getting choked up.

The hard look that was once on my dad’s face was now gone. He looked shocked by my confession, but I wasn’t done. I wanted to put everything on the table.

“Growing up, I resented my own brother, my twin. The person who had been by my side since the womb because I felt like the both of you loved him more than me. You were always praising him and bragging on him. Then there was fuck up Austin, who you had to clean up after. I tried to stop doing shit, but it was like the more unrecognized I felt, the more I acted out. My brother was my best friend until I started feeling like I hate to compete for my parents’ love.”

“Baby!” My mom’s voice cracked, and she reached out, pulling me into her. I towered over her, so I had to bend

down, and she held me securely. I could feel her tears falling on my chest.

“I’m so sorry. I never knew you felt like that.”

When she pulled away, she grabbed my face. “We never loved your brother more than you. The both of you are our babies. I carried the both of you for eight months, couldn’t wait to meet *the both* of you. The happiest day of my life was when I first laid eyes on you. Your brother came a few minutes later, but I felt complete when the doctor held you up for me to see. I had never felt so much love in my heart.” More tears clouded her eyes. “I wish I would have known you felt like that.”

I stayed quiet. Afraid if I spoke, I might start crying.

“Sharon, leave me alone with my son,” my dad said.

She ignored my dad. “I love you. You do know that, right?”

Slowly I nodded my head. I never doubted my parents’ love. I just didn’t think it was equal to my brothers.

She lowered my head and kissed my forehead. “If you ever feel like that again, come to me, okay? I’m so proud of the man you became. I don’t care about what you did in the

past. You're such a great young man, and I wouldn't change anything about you." She kissed my forehead again before letting me go.

The last thing I ever wanted to do was bring tears to my mom's eyes. She was the first woman I ever loved.

When it was just my dad and me, he sat down in one of the chairs on the porch. "Take a seat, son."

I did what he said and waited for him to speak. "How come you never said anything?"

I shrugged. "I didn't think it mattered."

His face tightened. "Your feelings always matter." He pressed his lips together and looked into the yard. "Your grandfather always told me I was treating you and Zach differently, but I always brushed him off. I was tougher on you, but that was because I wanted you to do better. I never thought I was playing favoritism."

"When Zach opened his barbershop, I remember how proud you were, how you bragged and told anyone who would listen. Not once since I opened my place have you told me you were proud of me."

He looked back at me. I could see how conflicted he was. “You’re right.” He sighed. “I am proud of you, son. I know it wasn’t easy opening up that cigar bar, but you did it, and you’re running it well. I didn’t mean for it to seem as if I didn’t notice that. Me and your brother were always closer, and you clung to my dad more. It bothered me when you were younger, but eventually I accepted it and tried to be there when you needed me. I never meant to make it seem like I loved Zach more because that’s never the case.

Both of you came from me, and I would do anything for the both of you.” My dad paused and laughed. “You know I knew you would be the one to give me hell as you grew up from the day you were born. You came out the womb yelling, and the doctor said you had some of the healthiest lungs he’d ever heard. Zach was more laid back but let him get separated from you and boy did he scream. Your brother always loved you hard.” Dad swallowed hard.

His confession choked me up as well. It always made me feel guilty about how I treated my brother at times.

“You’re my son, my legacy, Austin. I would never want you to compete with your brother or feel like you were less important in mine and your mother’s life. I wasn’t always

happy with the choices you made, but that didn't mean I loved you less. I just knew what you had the potential to do and hated to see you fucking up. I'm sorry for making you feel as though you had to find reassurance in someone else. I *am* proud of you and the man you turned out to be."

The weight I had been carrying on my back my whole life slowly started to lift.

"Maybe I don't tell you enough, but I love you, son."

"I love you too, pops."

For the first time, the chains that had been on me since I was a kid were unlocked. I wish I had opened up to my parents long ago.

"I know it might take some time, but I don't want you to walk away feeling less than anyone, you understand me?"

I nodded. "You're a *king*. Never feel like you don't matter."

Swallowing hard, I nodded again.

I felt lighter right now. Like years of anguish was being washed away.

"Have you talked to Ayame?"

“Nah, she ain’t fooling with me.” I gnawed on my bottom lip and flicked my nose with my thumb.

“That’s understandable. What you gone do to change that?”

I looked out to the yard. “First, I have to get Norine to sign those damn papers.” I clenched my jaw.

“That girl loves you.”

“Norine?”

My dad shook his head. “No. Ayame. She’s special.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?” One of my dad’s eyebrows rose.

“I do. I just don’t know how to get her back.”

“First, get that divorce out the way. Then go to her and show her why she fell in love with you. You hurt her, but she’s not done with you.”

“Ayame doesn’t give second chances.”

“She loves you. You fucked up and you gotta grow up and own it. I saw how she looked when Norine showed up, she was hurt, but she wasn’t done. Right now, she needs time to heal. You gotta fix what you broke, show her she can trust

you. If a woman can't trust her man to lead her, then your relationship won't last. Show her she won't get lost, forgiving you and allowing you to lead."

My dad stood up, prompting me to follow.

"You're going to be okay, Austin. I've watched you bounce back from bullshit you've gotten into your whole life." I chortled. "This is a setback, but are you really in love if you don't overcome challenges?"

I pondered my dad's words. He was right. I had to show Ayame she could trust me. That was a huge factor for her.

My dad pulled me into a fatherly hug.

"I love you, son."

"I love you too, dad."

AYYANME

“I’m meeting up with some of the guys. You wanna tag along?” Reid peeked his head in the room and asked.

I glanced up at him and shook my head. “No.”

He gave me a hard look. “You need to get out the house, Charm!”

Rolling my eyes, I pulled the cover over my head, hoping it would give him the indication I didn’t want to be bothered.

I had been at his house for two weeks now. At first, I was feeling okay, but I’ve been back crying on and off the last couple of days. I missed Austin, and it didn’t help that I finally broke down and answered his phone call the other day.

My phone vibrated next to me as I stuffed my face with an Italian sub.

My heart threatened to leap out my chest seeing Austin’s name. Normally he just texted me, but today he called

me. I was still ignoring him, but I wanted to hear his voice. Ignoring the small voice that was telling me to ignore the call, I answered.

Silence.

“Hello?” The moment I heard his voice, butterflies erupted in my stomach.

“Coco?”

I swallowed hard. “What do you want, Austin?”

I could hear him sigh in relief. “Damn, I’m glad you answered. I miss the hell outta you.”

Closing my eyes, I wanted to tell him I missed him too but refrained. “What can I do for you?”

“We need to talk. I haven’t seen you in weeks or heard your voice. I’m sorry for not telling you the truth, baby.”

His words warmed my chest. I could hear he was just as miserable as I felt.

“Are you still married?” I gripped my phone tighter.

“Coco.”

“Are you?”

He was quiet for a second. “Yeah, but-”

“Then we have nothing to talk about, Austin. Don’t call me back.”

I hung the phone up.

I ended up throwing away the rest of my sub, instantly losing my appetite. I regretted answering the phone because it made me miss him even more than before.

“Get up.” Reid snatched the covers off me.

“Reid!” I yelled.

“You’ve been moping around enough. I’m not going to keep letting you be in your feelings over that nigga. Get up and wash your ass. I’ll be in the living room waiting for you.”

“I don’t-”

“I’m playing with you, Ayame!”

I cut my eyes at him and he returned the same look. Smacking my lips and rolling my eyes, I finally agreed.

Reid left me alone, and as much as I wanted to lay back down, I decided against it. Reid was right. I had been in my feelings too long. This wasn’t my first heartbreak, so I wasn’t sure why it was affecting me worse than the others. Still, it was time for me to get it together.

“We should be mad at yo ass.” Craig, one of the guys me and Reid were cool with, told me.

I sipped on my lemon water and stared at him. “For what?”

“Yo ass just up and leaves without saying shit to anyone, then you come into town and not say anything to anyone. Just fuck anyone who ain’t Reid, huh?”

I snickered. “No, you know it’s not like that.”

“Hell, I can’t tell.”

“So what if it is. She doesn’t have to tell yall ugly niggas anything.” Reid came up to me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “You feeling a’right?” he bent down and whispered.

I looked up at him with a genuine smile on my face. “Yeah, I’m good.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze.

I was glad I allowed him to bully me out of the house. Our other friend Robby was having a small kickback at his house and it felt good being around all the people I considered friends back home. A few girls were in the crowd too. I knew

some of them because they messed with the guys, but a lot were random.

“How long you staying?” Robby asked as he rolled a blunt.

I shrugged. “Not too much longer. I have a business I have to get back to.”

“You like it...where the hell you move to again?”

Again, I snickered. “Butter Ridge Falls. And yes, I actually do.”

“That’s what’s up, Ayame. We miss yo ass around here, but if you’re happy, then I support you leaving.”

“Thank you, Robby.” I cut my eyes to Craig. “At least someone feels like that.”

“Aww, c’mon sis, you know I missed yo baldheaded ass, but damn, you just dipped out without saying shit to anyone.”

“I know. I just needed a fresh start.”

Reid and I had met Craig in the sixth grade. Reid became friends with them first. They tried to give me a hard time at first because I was a girl, but Reid wasn’t letting that

slide. Once they stopped trying to hit on me and accepted that I would be around, the four of us got real tight.

My head bobbed to Moneybagg Yo's *Time Today*.

Things like this is what I missed. Hanging out with my friends, not worried about if a nigga was married or not.

"Aye Ayame!" someone called out, causing me to look over my shoulder.

"You still play pool?" I raised an eyebrow and stood up.

"You know I do," I smirked at the small group around the pool table.

Robby had his whole basement remodeled. It was an open floorplan with surround sound, a large TV on the wall, a pool table, and a minibar. He had a nice turnout tonight, which I wasn't shocked by. Robby was always the social one out of us.

"Good, I need someone who knows what the hell they are doing. We playing \$15 a ball."

I fanned my hand over my eyes. The smoke was starting to make me lightheaded, but I shook the feeling off.

"Raise it to \$25 and I got you." He grinned.

“I’m down. Yall niggas move!”

I walked over to where the pool sticks were. Reid was right; this was exactly what I needed. I hadn’t thought of Austin one time since being here. I hoped that would roll over to the next day.

“Hey girl.” I looked up and saw Heather entering the room.

She walked around the couch and sat next to me. Last night, she showed up at Robby’s with a couple of her girlfriends and left with Reid and me.

“Hey.” I bit into my sub. “Reid still sleep?”

She rolled her eyes and nodded. “Yes. That man sleeps more than anyone I know.” I snickered.

“Don’t I know it. He’s always been like that.”

She shook her head before looking at me with concern. “How are you doing?”

I bit into my sub and stared at her.

I liked Heather. She was a nurse and was about her business. She was a nice girl, and I knew she loved Reid, but

he was just *too dumb* to treat her right.

“I’m doing a lot better than when I first got here.” I licked the corner of my mouth, feeling some mayo there.

“I’m glad to hear that. I know me and you aren’t best friends or anything, but I’ve always considered you a friend since Reid and I got together.”

I smiled at her. “I consider you a friend too, Heather. I like you for Reid. He needs someone with a good head on their shoulders.”

She rolled her eyes. “I wish he could see that.”

I sat my sub down. “How are the two of you?”

This time she didn’t respond right away. She brushed a fly-away piece of hair out of her face and sighed. “I don’t even know, honestly. I love Reid, but I can’t keep sticking around waiting for him to get his act together. He keeps telling me he will do better, but I can’t keep waiting around for him. I’m not getting any younger and I want kids and marriage one day.”

“And you don’t see that with him?”

She nodded. “I do, but I can’t have that with someone I can’t trust. I don’t want to leave him, but I think it might be for the best.” She inhaled a deep breath.

“Look, Heather. I love Reid. You know that’s my brother, but at the end of the day, you have to do what’s best for you. You can’t keep hurting yourself to keep him around.”

“You think I should leave?”

I shrugged. “Only you know that answer. If you feel more sad than happy when you’re with him then maybe that’s your answer.” I grabbed my sub and took another bit.

Heather got quiet, I’m sure lost in her thoughts. I didn’t like to get in the middle of Reid and his girls unless they touched him, but I would never want another woman to just sit around hurting. I would never tell her what to do, but *I would* give my insight.

“What yall in here talking about?” Reid came into the room.

He walked around the couch and stood in front of us. “Nothing nose.” I frowned.

He glared at me before grabbing Heather’s hand and pulling her up, taking her spot and placing her on his lap.

“You been fucking them subs up.”

I cut my eyes at him. “What you trying to say?”

He shrugged. "You better slow down before yo ass gain weight here." He poked my stomach.

"Move." I slapped his hand away, making Heather laugh.

"The two of you are so funny."

"I don't even know why I'm friends with him. He's like the annoying brother I never wanted."

"Girl, you love me, stop."

Rolling my eyes, I stuffed the rest of my sub into my mouth. "Whatever. I'm about to go shower, then go see my parents."

"Really? What brought that on?"

I stood up. "My mom asked me to stop by. You know she's not going to leave me alone until I do."

I headed to the room I was staying in.

After I showered and washed my hair, I sat on my bed in my towel. I was currently looking through another photo album, trying to waste time before going and dealing with my mom.

“Who the..” My voice trailed off. “I thought Aunt Dee couldn’t have kids.”

I stared at the picture of my aunt in a hospital bed with a baby in her arms. A sinking filling filled my stomach the longer I stared at the baby.

“No way!” I mumbled.

My eyes shot open. Suddenly it felt like a fire had been lit under me.

Jumping up, I rushed to get dressed. Just a few minutes ago, I wasn’t trying to be bothered with my parents, but now they had some explaining to do.

“Mom! Dad!” I yelled soon as I got inside my parents’ house. “Mom!”

“Why are you coming in here making all that noise!” My mom appeared near the split-level steps.

“Where’s dad?” I asked ignoring her.

“He’s down here. What the hell is wrong with you?”

Again, I ignored her and moved past her.

The moment I got to where my dad was, I opened the photo album. My mom had come back into the room and took a seat. Both of them were looking at me like I was crazy.

“Ayame, what has gotten into you?” my dad asked.

“Explain this!” I handed my mom the photo album.

“Gosh, not another photo album, Ayame. Why...” My mom’s voice trailed off when she looked at the picture.

Her eyes widened. “Where did- Why do you have this?”

“That’s not the question you need to be asking. That baby in Aunt Dee’s arms, it’s me isn’t it?” I swallowed hard.

“What are you talking about?” My dad grabbed the photo album from my mom. The moment he looked at the picture, he looked like he had seen a ghost.

“Baby girl!”

“No!” I shouted and backed away, shaking my head.

“Tell me why Aunt Dee is in a hospital bed holding me!”

When I first saw the picture I thought I was trippin’, but the more I stared at the picture, I realized that baby in her

arms was me.

“Ayame. I told you some things are better left in the past.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I swallowed back my tears before speaking. “Is that why you guys don’t speak to me anymore? Was Aunt Dee my mom?”

“*I’m* your mom!” My mom’s voice elevated.

“But you didn’t birth me?”

Both my parents got quiet. They looked at each other and that’s when I knew I was right.

“Oh my gosh,” I muttered, falling back into my dad’s chair.

My hands went to my face as tears clouded my eyes. “Ayame, it doesn’t matter who birthed you, I’m your mom and this is your dad.”

“How did I end up with you two?!” I snatched my hands off my face.

I wasn’t trying to hear whatever excuse she was about to give me. I had just learned my whole life was a lie and I needed answers.

“Ayame,” my dad started.

“I want the truth too.”

“Your Aunt Dee had you when she was 18,” my mom replied. “She was with some deadbeat loser who wanted nothing to do with you. She wasn’t ready to be a mom either, but our mother wouldn’t hear of abortion.”

She took a deep breath and pressed her lips together. “I couldn’t have kids. Your dad and I tried for a year straight before I went to a doctor and found out. I was devastated because I wanted to be a mom so bad. At the same time, Delilah had found out you were a girl, but she still didn’t want to be a mom. She saw how upset I was, and since she was already considering adoption, she offered me to take you.”

“Your mother and I signed the papers and we became your parents the moment Delilah pushed you out, actually before then.”

My chest grew tight and my throat dry. I could feel my heart pounding in my temple.

“I don’t get it. Why did you and Aunt Delilah hate each other?”

Mom's face went still. "When you were three, she decided that she wanted you back. Claimed she was ready to be a mom now. I told her no. For three years, your dad and I raised you, making sure you were fed, bathed, clothed. It was us taking you to and from the doctors, kissing boo-boos, getting spit up on. Three years later, my sister finally decides she wants to be a mom. I don't think so. She tried to sue us and when we won, she got upset." My mom shrugged like it was nothing.

I sat there stuck as I went over my parents' confession. "So the two of you are really my aunt and uncle?" I asked slowly.

"No, we're your parents! We raised you Ayame. We love you!"

"You love me?" I asked rhetorically.

"Of course, we do!"

"You both had a funny way of showing it." I stood up.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"My whole life, you two made sure to show me everything I did wasn't enough. No matter what I did, it was never good enough!" Tears filled my eyelids.

So many emotions were running through me right now. I was hurt, mad, confused.

“Now on top of feeling this, I learn my real mom didn’t even want me.” That fact hurt the most. I felt like my heart was constricted in my chest.

The room grew warm, and I started feeling light-headed.

“Ayame, you know that’s not true!”

I shook my head. If I stayed here any longer I was going to suffocate. The tears I had tried holding back came rushing down my cheeks. I turned and rushed out of the den.

My parents called out after me, but I didn’t slow down. I didn’t have anything to say to them right now. My whole life was a lie, and to make matters worse, my *real mother* didn’t want me.

It now made sense why I always felt closer to my Aunt Dee. I was more like her than my mom. I felt like an atomic bomb had just went off.

I sat in my car, viciously wiping my eyes trying to clear the tears.

My phone vibrated next to me.

Sniffing back tears, I reached over and looked at the screen.

I blinked a few times, making sure I was seeing correctly. My heart dropped and my breath got caught in my throat.

If it wasn't one thing, it's another.

AUSTIN

I tapped my fingers against the arm of the chair I was sitting in as I waited for Norine. She had agreed to meet me at my lounge. I had an hour to get this whole situation resolved and out the way. I was praying she wasn't about to fight me with signing the papers.

Ayame was still gone and I hadn't heard from her outside of the two-minute conversation we had on the phone.

"Hey," Norine's soft voice called out.

I looked up at her.

In the past when I looked at her, my heart would beat wildly in my chest. Now my stomach turned. She was still as beautiful as I remembered, but none of that mattered. Our time had come and gone, and I was ready to close that chapter of my life.

"Wassup." I nodded.

Norine stared at me with her eyebrow raised. "What?"

She brushed her hair over her shoulders. “Are you going to give me a hug or something?”

I gave her a blank stare. “Norine, can you just take a seat? We need to clear this up so I can get my place opened up.

A hurt expression appeared on her face, but she quickly masked it and took a seat.

Her long legs crossed at the knee and she sat her purse down on the table in front of us. “This is a nice place.” She looked around.

“Thank you.”

Not wanting to beat around the bush, I reached on the side of me and grabbed the folder. “These are for you.” I held them out.

She looked confused as she reached out and grabbed them.

Her eyes whipped up to mine when she opened the folder. “Seriously Austin?”

“Norine, come on, you know what you came here for! It’s been six years, this is long overdue.”

She closed the folder and a sad expression appeared on her face. “I know I left, but Austin, you can’t blame me! I told

you I wasn't happy and you did nothing to fix it!"

My brows furrowed. "So you took it upon yourself to just pack your shit up and leave while I was out."

Norine released a heavy sigh. "Okay, maybe I went about things wrong, but I didn't know what else to do. You were staying out all night. When I tried to talk to you, you would brush me off. Then you started getting into trouble. I did what was best for me at the time."

Chewing on the inside of my jaw with narrowed eyes, I leaned forward with my head slightly tilted. "Maybe I wasn't the *best* husband. Hell, we were young as hell and I didn't know shit about being married, but I *did* love you."

"I never doubted you loved me, Austin. That was never the issue. I just felt like you would never grow up."

I released a heavy breath. "Norine, look, we can go back and forth about me being a shitty husband."

"I didn't say you were a shitty husband. Everything wasn't always bad. The beginning of our marriage was actually good."

"Oh, you mean *before* you up and dipped on me! Around the time I started being a *bad husband*, I was dealing

with my Grandpops declining health. You knew I was dealing with some shit, and yeah, maybe I should have handled it better, but you knew what he meant to me. When he died you weren't even there for me!"

This conversation was going in circles and going nowhere fast. I could feel myself getting annoyed.

Norine's eyes shifted down to the folder in her lap. "I know that. I should have been more considerate, but I always put my feelings to the side for you, Austin. Even before your grandfather's death, you weren't the easiest person to be with."

"So why did you marry me, Norine? From what you're saying, I wasn't worth shit." My mind was racing right now. It seemed like everything I thought about our relationship was a lie. Listening to how miserable Norine really was with me was *blowing me*.

"Because I loved you!" she shouted. "Despite all your issues and problems, I still loved you, Austin. I wanted us to work and build a family, but you were always trying to prove to your family that you weren't this delinquent, and it always caused you to do fucked up stuff anyways. It was draining and exhausting, but because I loved you, I tried to stick it out!"

I was stuck after her confession. Norine had been holding onto this for a while, and I never knew she felt like this.

“Why are you back here, Norine? It’s been six years. I even sent you the papers a year after you left and you refused to sign them, so what’s up?” I wasn’t trying to have this conversation anymore. It didn’t make sense why Norine was holding on to something she felt so trapped in.

“My job offered me a position in the new office opening here, and I was considering it because I wanted to try and make this marriage work. I didn’t sign the papers because I was embarrassed. I never wanted to be divorced. I just needed some time.”

“Well, I wanted you to stay and make our marriage work, but you didn’t. When I wanted things to work out, you weren’t here. I moved on, Norine. I’m happy with my girl and I love her. You can’t show up six years later expecting us to work things out.”

She pulled on her bottom lip and fidgeted her hands. “I know I was taking a chance just popping up. I knew it might be a chance you had someone else. I guess I was just trying to hold onto hope you would have waited for me.”

We grew quiet.

“The girl at your parents’ house, that’s her?”

I nodded. “It is. Norine, I held out hope that you were coming back for a while. I dated but I didn’t take any girl seriously until I met Ayame. She helped me get past the hurt you caused me, and she helped me open up again. What you and I had obviously wasn’t as great as I thought, so why not cut the losses and move on? Sign the papers so we can be done with each other for good.”

Sitting here talking to Norine made me appreciate Ayame even more. Since she’s been in my life I have been in a better mood. My spirits have been higher, and I felt refreshed and alive around her. She knew about my flaws, but instead of making me feel insecure about them or bad, she always uplifted me. I was happy with her. I felt *loved* by her.

“Is that really what you want? You don’t think we can try again?”

“No, we can’t. Plus, after everything you just said, why would you want to?”

“We had good times together. Not everything was bad. You always made me laugh and smile. Remember us sitting up

for hours talking about any and everything?”

“And what else?”

“What?”

“What else about me was good, Norine?”

She grew quiet. Her tongue went across her lips. Her leg began to shake.

I sighed. “Look, we were young. I didn’t know how to be in a real relationship then. I wasn’t the best man back then, but I’m a different person now.”

She used the back of her hand to wipe her eyes. Slowly her head moved up and down.

Norine reached over and grabbed her purse. I watched her grab a pen out and read over the documents, signing them every so often.

“I am sorry about how I left, Austin. I wish I would have womaned up and talked to you instead of running.” She handed me the folder.

I grabbed the papers feeling liberated. “Maybe things were meant to happen like this for a reason.” I stood up, causing Norine to do the same.

Her eyes shifted around the lounge. “Good luck with this place.”

Without waiting for me to respond, Norine turned and walked off.

For so long, I had held on to the possibility of rekindling things with Norine. It hurt me how she left and played on the issues I was dealing with internally, but now after listening to what she had to say, I realized the two of us weren't as compatible as I thought back then. I was holding onto something that honestly wasn't there, and it took hearing Norine today for me to see it.

I glanced down at the folder in my hands.

Once my lawyer got these papers, everything would be set in motion, and I would officially be a free man.

Tonight instead of our card game, me and the guys went by *Priority Play* for some drinks and pool.

Maria was managing *Rocky's*, and I needed a night out with the guys.

“So it's official you're divorced?” Chase asked, drinking his beer.

“Yeah, well the papers are filed and everything. My lawyer said since we’ve been separated it shouldn’t take more than a month for it to be finalized.”

“How you feel about that?” Zach jumped in and asked.

“What you mean? I feel good. It’s something that should have been happened truthfully. More importantly, the marriage should have never happened.”

“Why you say that?”

I shrugged. “Just some shit she said when we met up got me to thinking. I thought me and Norine were good. We had some issues, but I didn’t think they were that bad. Obviously, she thought otherwise. I didn’t know how unhappy she was until we met up. It got me to thinking maybe I was living in some fantasy or some shit.” I chuckled and took a sip from my glass. “Either way, I’m glad Norine signed the papers.”

“Aye, to celebrate, Ima get us another round on me,” Chase said and walked towards the bar.

Zach walked toward me and slapped my shoulders. “Bro, there’s no reason to dwell on the past. You and Norine had yall time and it didn’t work out. Now you have Ayame.

Well, not right now, but you get what I mean. Focus on that and handle business with her. Don't let her go. Now that you're divorced find her and make it right. She's the one."

I glanced over at him. "How you know that?"

He cheesed. "Because her ass gives you that same mushy look you always complain about Noelle giving me and you return it. Let's be real bro, you're not always the easiest person to deal with, but it's obvious that doesn't matter to her, she loves you and you love her. Life's too short to miss out on that love."

I stared at my brother, processing his words. Guilt started to consume me, listening to my baby brother preach to me.

"Zach, I owe you an apology, man."

Confusion filled his face. "For what?"

"Because growing up, I held onto so much resentment towards you, and none of it was your fault. We were best friends when we were younger, but I purposely pushed you away the older we got. It wasn't right."

"Oh come on." He slapped my shoulder. "Austin, you know I didn't let that shit get to me. No matter what, you're

my brother and I love you. When it mattered you were there, and that's all that counts."

I nodded. "I know, but still. I'm sorry." I held my hand out.

"Look who's actually all mushy." Zach laughed and slapped hands with me. I pulled him into a brotherly hug.

"Now that you two got all your feelings out the way, can we get back to what we came here for," Chase walked up to us saying.

I chuckled and let Zach go.

The night with the guys ended and it was a good night. My life seemed to be going in a good direction finally. The relationship with my family was finally coming together. Norine had signed the papers, and now all that was left to do was find Ayame and make things right with her.

AYAAME

“Aye, are you going to tell me what the hell’s been up with you?” Reid complained. “You’ve been down more than you were before.”

Reid walked over and plopped down on the bed next to me. I pulled the covers up and sat up against the headboard.

“Aunt Dee was my real mom.”

“What?”

Laughing bitterly, I nodded before explaining the bomb my parents dropped on me last week. He stared at me shocked, by the time I finished his mouth was hanging.

“Hold up, your aunt and your mom had this feud going on your whole life because your aunt wanted to start being your mother.” I nodded.

“Damn, that’s some deep shit.”

I tapped my fingers on my thigh. “Yeah. The worst part is my whole life I felt like my parents pushed me so hard and

they never thought what I was doing was good enough. I always thought how much happier I would be with my Aunt Dee, and now I realize why. It all makes sense why I felt so connected to her and why we were so much alike.” I shook my head. “My whole life has been a joke and everyone was in on it but me.”

I had been going through the motions all week. My life was on a constant downhill spiral and there was no way to fix it.

“I don’t even know what to say to make this situation better.”

“There’s nothing to say. My parents, or should I say my aunt and uncle made my life miserable growing up. My Aunt Dee didn’t want me, and now I feel like the only reason why she left me her business and was so laid back with me was that she felt guilty about giving me up.”

Reid laid his hand on my leg. “Don’t think of it like that. Maybe your Aunt Dee felt guilty, but at the same time, I’m sure she did what she thought was best at the time. I know your parents had some flaws when it came to raising you, but they *did* love you. They just showed it in a different way. Your Aunt knew she couldn’t raise you at the time, and instead of

handing you off to strangers, she gave you to two people she knew would do right by you, and she was also able to stay in your life in some way.”

“So I should let all this blow over?”

He shook his head. “I’m not saying that. I’m saying, maybe you should hear your parents out and talk to them. Your Aunt isn’t here anymore so you can’t get answers from her. Talk to your mom and dad.”

I glanced down at the bed. I knew Reid was right, but right now I wasn’t in the headspace to hear it. This was a tough pill to swallow, and it felt like it was going down dry.

“When did you become so knowledgeable?” I cut my eyes at him.

He chortled. “Man, quit playin’ with me. You know I always give good advice.” For the first time in a week, I laughed. It felt good to unload the problems I was having, but I wasn’t done.

“There’s more.”

Reid was staring at me, waiting for me to continue.

My throat grew dry.

I had been sitting on this all week and hadn't even fully processed it yet. Saying it out loud would make it real.

I brushed my hand over my forehead. I realized it had been a while since I got my hair cut. With everything going on it had been the last thing on my mind.

“C'mon Charm, tell me what's up.”

I took a deep breath. “I'm pregnant.”

His eyes bucked. “Pregnant!”

Running my hands up and down the covers, I nodded.

The day I stormed out of my parents' house, I got a notification on my phone from my period tracker. I was two months late logging my period and hadn't even noticed. It took me a minute to realize that I hadn't missed logging my period, I *had* missed my period. That prompted me to go get a pregnancy test.

“Shit.”

“I know.”

Silence fell upon us. “You keeping it?”

I cocked my head back. “Of course, I am!”

He tossed his hands up. “Okay, okay, my bad. I was just asking. How do you feel about this?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know honestly. I’ve always wanted to be a mom, but right now, it’s just so soon. Not to mention my child’s father is married, and we’re on the outs. What am I supposed to do?” Without my permission, tears filled my eyes. “The last thing I want to be is a single mother. I don’t even know how to tell Austin.”

I wiped my eyes.

“Don’t start that crying shit, Charm. You’re strong and got a great head on your shoulders. If anyone can kill motherhood, it’s you. And plus, you know I got you, and believe it or not, I know Austin will be there for you and yall baby. Dude might have fucked up by not telling you about the marriage, but he doesn’t give me deadbeat vibes.”

“I’m not worried about him being a deadbeat. In fact, I’m sure Austin will be a great dad.”

“Then what’s with all the single mother stuff?”

I pulled on my bottom lip. “I want to still be with him, even with knowing he’s married. I miss him. Every day I fight with myself to not call him and makeup. Now we’re adding a

baby into this already complicated situation, messing with my emotions even more.” I sighed. “My life is such a shit show.” I laughed, shaking my head.

Reid moved closer to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and pulling me into him. “C’mon Charm, this isn’t even you. I’m not used to upset in her feelings Charm.”

“I can’t help it. Maybe it’s the baby!” I whined.

He laughed. “Maybe, or maybe you really are in love with dude.” He sighed. “Look, I gave you a hard time about falling in love so quickly, but at the end of the day, I can see your feelings were real. He might have failed to tell you he was married, but I don’t believe he had any malicious intent behind it. Reach out to him and talk.” My eyes narrowed.

“Okay, now I know something is up with you. What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Charm. I just hate seeing you upset. That’s all I been seeing since you been here and I’m ready to have my tough ass best friend back.”

I snickered. “You know for you to be such a mannish man whore, you actually are a great person to talk to.”

Reid laughed. “Damn Charm, that hurt.” He grabbed his chest. “But even if it’s the truth, I still want you to be happy, and if making up with your baby daddy does that, then go for it.”

I smiled and leaned more into him.

“Thank you, best friend.”

His grip grew tighter. “You know I got you.”

I was sitting on Reid’s couch watching some movie on Netflix and eating ice cream when a knock came on the door. He was at work, but he didn’t tell me he was expecting anyone.

Groaning, I stood up and walked to the door. “Who is it?”

“Austin.” My heart dropped.

“*Austin?*”

“Ayame, open the door.”

My mind went blank.

What the hell was he doing here?

Inhaling a deep breath, I jumped when he knocked on the door again.

My stomach churned as I slowly unlocked the door.

The moment I laid eyes on the deep brown ones I been longing to see, my heart danced with excitement. An overwhelming desire to jump into his arms filled me, but I fought it.

Clearing my throat, I narrowed my eyes. “What are you doing here?”

Slowly his eyes drunk me up. The hairs on the back of my neck rose and goosebumps filled my arms.

“Can I come in?” I nibbled on my bottom lip but moved to the side, allowing him in.

The moment Austin was in the house, I inhaled his scent, which caused my heart to flutter wildly.

An awkward silence filled the room. “Damn, I knew I missed you, but I didn’t know how much until I was in front of you.”

My heart hammered in my ears. “I miss you too,” I admitted playing with my hands.

It was easier to ignore Austin when he wasn't in my face, but now, a fire burned for him inside of me. I yearned for his touch.

“We can sit in here.” I nodded towards the couch.

Austin followed behind me and I could feel his eyes burning into me, but I kept it cool.

“How you been?” he asked.

“Dealing.” I shrugged.

“When you plan on coming back?”

I chewed on the inside of my jaw. “Soon. I feel bad for leaving June in charge for as long as I have. I just needed some time to myself to process everything.”

Austin reached over and grabbed my hands. A jolt shot up on my arm the moment he touched me.

“I know I told you this already, but I'm sorry for not telling you about being married. I *should have* been upfront with you right away, but once you told me about your past, I got scared. That's no excuse and I know that. I should have been upfront period, but Norine had been gone so long I guess I didn't think it mattered.”

I cut my eyes at him and snatched my hands from his. “You didn’t think it mattered that *you were married!* What if things got serious between us and we wanted to get married? Then what, Austin! How would that work, knowing that you were married already?”

His face dropped. “You’re right. I handled everything wrong and I can admit that. Look, Coco, I love you; you’ve become my best friend in these past months I’ve known you. You’ve helped me deal with shit I been battling with my whole life. You didn’t make me feel inadequate about the shit I was going through. You became someone I looked forward to seeing *every day*. These past few weeks without you, I’ve felt *lost* as hell. I don’t want to feel like that anymore. Tell me what I can do to fix this.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his words. I could hear the sincerity in them. I could feel how sorry he was the more I stared into his eyes. They were pleading for me to believe him.

Austin was here saying all the right things to me, and I wanted to forgive him, but he lied to me at the end of the day.

“I told you one of the *biggest* things for me was trust, Austin. If you withheld being married from me, what else could you hide from me?”

“That’s the only thing. The divorce is in the works. I met up with Norine and got her to sign the papers.”

My heart leaped. “You’re telling the truth?”

“I wouldn’t lie about this. I want to make me and you work. I’ll do *anything* to make this right with you.”

My mind shifted to the life growing inside of me. Giving my baby a family with the *man I love* was all I wanted. Still, *that* night wouldn’t leave my mind.

“Austin, it isn’t that simple. You withheld a wife from me! *A Wife!* You knew what I’ve been through, you knew what I was dealing with, and all you did was add to that hurt!”

He flicked his thumb over his nose. “I know.”

I looked at Austin and hated how much I was still attracted to him. It made me wonder if our son would look like him if I were carrying a boy. Suddenly butterflies erupted in my stomach. I cleared my throat to get the lump that formed down.

I knew this issue wasn’t going to be handled overnight, and honestly, I knew it would cause me to grow emotional if we kept talking about it. There was so much we needed to talk about, but I wasn’t ready to open that door.

I inhaled a deep breath. “My parents aren’t my real parents,” I confessed. I didn’t know why I told him, but I was comfortable with him. I missed talking to him. I missed how simple things were between us before learning about his marriage. Most importantly, I wanted to take the attention off *us*.

Austin looked at me like I was crazy. “What?”

I went on to tell him about the photo album and my conversation with my parents. “Damn. How you been handling that?”

I shrugged. “I guess I’m managing. Reid’s been a good shoulder to cry on about *everything*.”

Austin’s eyes shifted. “He’s a good friend to you, huh?”

“Yeah, he’s the best.” I smiled. “He told me I should talk to my parents.”

“I think you should listen to him.”

My face balled up. “Really?”

“Yeah.” His shoulders rose and fell. “I talked to my parents. We cleared the air about everything, and it helped me get over it.”

“Austin, that’s great! I’m so happy to hear that.”

“It makes me wish I would have *been* said something, but we’ve been doing better this past month, and I think you should do the same with your parents. Talk to them. You’ll feel better once you do.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

Austin moved closer to me. “And what about us? Do you think you can forgive me?”

He grabbed my hand again.

I swallowed hard, attempting to calm my racing heart. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” The corners of his mouth rose. Slowly I removed my hands from his. “*But* I’m not ready to fully forgive you.”

“Ayame.” He groaned.

“I know you’re in the process of the divorce and I’m happy about that, but you still hurt me, Austin. Do you know how humiliating it was for me to learn about you being married? I had just confessed to your family how much I loved you, and then two seconds later, you’re arguing at the door with *your wife!*”

“I know I fucked up. I can spend every day telling you that and proving how sorry I am to you, but there are no other surprises. From here on out, it’s *me* and *you*, baby.”

My mouth grew dry.

I knew I should tell Austin that this *me and you* were about to be added to, but the words were caught in my throat.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore, Austin,” I told him, standing up.

“Then when?”

“I don’t know! When I’m not hurt anymore!” I started pacing back and forth. My pulse was starting to race.

“Ayame baby!” Austin stood up and grabbed me. He pulled me into him and grabbed my waist. “I’m not leaving here without you forgiving me and agreeing to make this work.”

His eyes bore into me with an intense glare. The more I stared into his eyes, the more I felt myself growing weak.
“Austin.”

“I know you don’t do second chances. I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness, but baby, you have to. I’m not trying to lose you, especially when we just started.” He moved in

closer to me, and my breathing slowed. My mind was saying move, but my body *refused* to listen.

Austin's lips connected with mine and my body was awakened. My knees buckled and my arms circled his neck. He pulled my body closer to his as our kiss grew deeper.

Austin pulled away and rested his forehead against mine. I closed my eyes and inhaled the breaths he released.

"I'm scared to trust you again," I told him lowly.

Austin moved in and pecked my lips. "I know and I understand that. Just give me a chance to show you that I'm serious about us."

I cuffed his cheek. "How do you plan on doing that?"

He pulled back and gave me a crooked grin. "You let me handle that, baby."

I knew it was a risk, but I didn't want to keep feeling conflicted about my feelings for Austin. I missed him, but the two of us still had *a lot* to talk about.

"Okay," I told him.

He pecked my lips again. "I'm staying for the weekend. While I'm here I want us to spend time together. Can we do that?"

I pulled on my bottom lip and blinked a few times.
“Okay, Austin, just for the weekend.”

Austin didn't respond verbally. Instead, his lips found mine again. My heart swelled in my chest as the tension I been feeling left my body.

I hoped Austin wouldn't make me regret giving him this weekend.

AUSTIN

“Zach, man, I appreciate you for checking in on the lounge for me while I’m gone,” I told my brother as I pulled up to Reid’s place.

I was coming from the hotel I was staying in while I was in town. My stomach was bubbling as if I was a teenage boy going on my first date. I was praying everything went well this weekend and Ayame agreed to make this work with us. I wasn’t lying when I told her I didn’t plan on leaving here without her.

“As many times as you’ve come through at the barbershop, you know I got you, bro. Just worry about getting your girl back. I got things here.”

“I ‘preciate it, bro.”

We talked for a couple more minutes before hanging up.

I made sure to grab the pot from the passenger seat then stepped out of the car. Reid was walking out the front door as I approached it.

“Wassup man.” The two of us slapped hands.

“I see you took my advice.”

I chewed on my bottom lip and nodded. “Yeah, I’m glad you called. I know I fucked up, but I’m not trying to lose Ayame.”

Reid crossed his arms over his chest. “Did yall talk?”

“Somewhat. I’m hoping we clear the air these next two days though.” Reid looked back at his house. When he peered back at me he seemed to have something heavy on his mind.

“Look, man, Ima give it to you straight. Ayame plays tough, she’s one of the strongest women I’ve ever met. Partially because of how she was raised, but that’s besides the point. I have never seen her react to a breakup like she did with you. I gave both of yall a hard time, but I can see whatever yall feel for each other is real. Ayame is all about *action* and *hearing* how you feel about her. She *needs* to be shown validation in people’s lives. If you want her back, don’t just tell her but also *show* her. *Make* her *believe* that you’re

sorry. She might give you a hard time at first, but you'll wear her down."

I took Reid's words in, storing them in my memory bank. I knew how to handle Ayame because she was a lot like me. She needed to feel that love to believe it. The good thing for her is that I had *no problem* doing just that.

"I gotcha, man. And thanks for the call again." We slapped hands.

"Good luck."

Reid had called me randomly one night when I had just arrived at *Rocky's Cigars*. He had gotten my number out of Ayame's phone. He went on to tell me about how he warned me not to play with Ayame and some other shit I wasn't trying to hear. It wasn't until he told me I needed to come see her did I clock back into the conversation. He wouldn't tell me exactly what was going on, but he did give me his address and asked me to come as soon as possible.

"Hey. You didn't have to come to the door." I licked my lips when I laid eyes on my chocolate baby.

Her skin was glowing today.

Her hair had grown out a little more than I'm used to, but I wasn't complaining. It looked good on her.

Ayame was wearing some high waisted black shorts and a metallic gold shirt. I loved her versatile style. She could pull off damn near anything, in my opinion, and still look good as hell.

"I didn't know where we were going so I hope this okay." She looked down at her outfit.

I nodded. "You look good, baby." Again I licked my lips as I looked her over. "This is for you." I handed her the plant I got her.

"Austin!" she shrieked, grabbing it. The corners of her mouth lifted as she took the plant from my hands. "Did you go all the way to Maple Hills to get this?"

I shrugged. "I got it after everything happened and planned on giving it to you when I saw you again, but you never came back, so I brought it with me."

I knew Ayame loved those lotus plants, so I didn't hesitate to drive and grab her one. Thankfully, the place had one available.

“I know my plants at home are going to need some maintenance since I’ve been gone so long, so thank you. I’m going to take this in the house, then we can go.” I was happy to see the smile on her face still there.

I went back to the car while I waited for Ayame to come back out. Since I didn’t know much about the area, I had to Google different things to do.

I tapped my fingers on my steering wheel as I waited for her. Since Ayame wasn’t a girly girl, I had to do things differently. She wasn’t high maintenance either, which might seem easy, but I wanted this weekend to go perfectly.

Ayame had come out and got in the car. “I had a couple things in mind today, but I wanted to ask you if there was anything in particular you wanted to do first?”

She shook her head. “This your show.” She put her seat belt on.

“Cool, we can grab something to eat first. You hungry?”

Her eyes lit up. “There’s this Jamaican place downtown. I could go for some jerk chicken and oxtails.”

Her suggestion threw me off, but I didn't complain.

"Cool. What's the place called?"

Ayame gave me the address and I put it in my GPS.

"You ever had Jamaican food?" Ayame asked once we were on the road.

"Nah, I mean not real Jamaican. This place better be good."

"You don't gotta worry about that, it is! I used to get it all the time when I lived here."

I was expecting some tension between us, but Ayame didn't seem to be in bad spirits, which gave me hope.

"How's business been?"

I glanced over at her. "Good! We've had a pretty steady crowd every night. The guys like having a laid-back spot to come and chill at that's not too busy."

"That's good. I'm happy it worked out for you."

"Thanks. It's been a good distraction with everything going on."

"I wish I would have had that." Ayame turned and looked out the window.

“The store seems to stay busy. I always see people going in and out when I’m at work.”

“Yeah, June said the numbers look good.”

That quick Ayame pulled back from me. I cursed myself for even bringing up what was going on.

“My parents have been asking about you.”

Ayame continued gazing out the window, but I could see her looking out the corner of her eye at me when I glanced at her. “Really?”

“Yeah, they really took a liking to you. Told me I needed to make this right.” I chuckled.

“Yeah, I bet they did.”

I ignored her short response. “My dad told me you were special, and he wasn’t lying. Me and you are alike in a lot of ways. I think that’s what made me want to get to know you even more. From our first conversation, I knew there was something about you I wasn’t going to be able to shake.” I placed one of my hands in my lap and looked over at her. “Truthfully, I never really believed in that love in first sight stuff, but it was something that drew me to you right away.”

Ayame looked at me this time. “Something like what?”

“First, it was your smile. It was beautiful and caught my eye right away. Then your style; it was different, but it fit you. Most importantly, your personality is dope as fuck. I never met someone I clicked with right away like I did you. I’m not normally an open person, but you made me want to be. Your energy, as you would say, was light and easy to be around. I don’t know, man. I just loved your company, enjoyed being in your presence.”

I could tell she was trying to fight back a smile.

“Well, thank you. I know I’m dope as hell, but I always like to hear it.” When I looked over at her, she was smiling widely, making me chuckle.

“That you are, Coco. Dope as hell.” She looked back out the window.

For the rest of the drive we were quiet, but the silence was comforting.

“I’m not normally the one to try new food, but this is actually good,” I admitted while taking a bite of the curry chicken on my plate.

“I told you! This place is good and all the food is authentic.” Ayame grabbed her napkin and wiped her mouth.

We were sitting outside on the patio. It was warm out and sunny. There was a small breeze here and there, but it felt good.

“Taste this!” Ayame held her fork out.

“What is it.”

“Oxtails.” I bunched my nose up.

“It’s good, I swear!” She grinned.

Squinting my eyes, I leaned over and took a bite of the food. I licked the remaining food off my lips and slowly bobbed my head. “That’s not bad.”

She grinned. “I told you!”

I watched her eat. I could be trippin’ but her appetite seemed larger than normal. “When’s the last time you’ve eaten?”

She glanced up at me. “What?”

“It’s just that you’re damn near inhaling your food.”

A nervous laugh left her mouth. She shifted slightly in her chair and took another bite of her food. “My appetite has

been off the past few weeks. I guess I'm just hungry today.”
She looked down at her plate.

I continued to stare at her. I didn't want her to think I was making it a big deal. “Do you want some more?”

She shook her head and looked back at me. “No, this is good. Thanks.” She gave me a small smile.

I looked down at my plate and was about to take a bite when Ayame's voice stopped me. “How did the conversation go?”

When I looked at her, she was staring at me with a determined look on her face. “The conversation?”

“With your wife.” Her voice was flat.

I wasn't expecting that question, but if that's what she wanted to talk about, then so be it. “I guess it went as good as it could have. Norine tried to get me to understand why she left me all them years ago.”

“Why did she?”

I ran my hand over my head. “Apparently, we weren't as happy as I thought we were.” I put my fork back down and gave Ayame my full attention. “Norine wasn't happy with me, and I knew that. I just didn't think it was that bad, but I was

wrong. She had tried to talk to me about it, but I was so into me and my shit that I ignored it. She got fed up and thought her leaving was her only option.”

Ayame chewed on the corner of her bottom lip. “So why did she come back? Why now?”

I ran my tongue over my top teeth. “She got a job offer in town and was considering taking it. She thought that if she came back that we could work things out.”

“Does any part of you want to?” Her voice was shaky this time.

Reaching over, I grabbed her hand. I ran my thumb over the top of it, stroking it softly.

“Maybe before I met you, I would have considered it, but now after being with you, hell no. I was a shitty husband, I can admit that. I was young and immature as hell. I didn’t want to face that most of my problems were because I caused them, and I blamed them on everyone else, prompting me to act out. I’m man enough to admit that now, but I did love Norine, and I thought I showed her that. She thought with her being gone I was supposed to put my life on hold for her, and maybe I did that first year, but I’m over that. I won’t lie and say my love for her wasn’t real, but we were young.

Now that I'm older and know myself better, I know how to love correctly, and I've *matured*. I know that I'm in love with *you* and only *you*! It's different from how I felt about Norine and talking to her showed me that. The two of you are different, and the mistakes I made with her are unfortunate, but they helped me grow. I'm still learning and growing, but I know you're it for me. When I think of my future, I think of *you*. No one else."

She blinked slowly and her mouth opened. "And when you say future, what do you mean?" I gripped her hand tighter. "I mean the whole nine, Coco. I used to make fun of Zach and Noelle, but in reality, I want what they have. I ran from it for a long time because I was scared I'd get left and hurt again, but I'm not afraid anymore."

"I want to get married and have kids one day. Do you want that?" Her voice lowered.

I thought about her question for a moment. "I wouldn't mind getting married again. As for kids, I never really seen myself as a father, but I guess if that's what you want, I wouldn't be opposed to it."

Slowly her eyes looked up to find mine. She seemed to get lost in her head for a second. Just as I was about to address

it, someone called her name.

“Ayame?” The both of us looked up. “I thought that was you.”

“Vance?” My eyes cut to Ayame. She didn’t look happy. “What do you want?”

He lifted his bag. “Came to pick up a to-go order. I didn’t know you were back in town.”

She rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t for you to know.”

Clearing my throat, I gave her hand a slight squeeze. “Sorry, baby. This is Vance, my double life having ex. Vance, my boyfriend, Austin.”

Even though she claimed me as her boyfriend to throw it in her ex’s face, I couldn’t help but feel good hearing the word come from her mouth.

The Vance guy looked at me with a displeased expression on his face. “Yall look cozy. How long this been going on?”

“How long have you been married?”

His eyes went to her. “I told you-”

“You were getting divorced.” She waved her off. “The fact still remains you had a whole family and never said anything about it.”

“I would have, but the subject never came up.”

“Are you divorced?” My eyebrow rose. I was about to ask why she even cared, but she continued. “I can tell by the look on your face you aren’t! You need to leave. We were having a good lunch before you came and interrupted.”

“We tried working it out for the kids. That’s the only reason why I haven’t gone through with it but-”

“Vance, I don’t care truthfully. You can stay married or get divorced. We’ll never be together again. Now please...” She waved him off.

“Ayame.” I let go of Ayame’s hand and stood up.

“She asked you to leave her alone nicely. If I gotta ask, I’m not going to be so nice,” I told him.

He turned to look at me. I had a couple of inches on him in height.

“This ain’t got shit to do with you.”

“*Anything* that has to do with Ayame has to do with me.” I stepped closer to him with my fist balled up.

“Austin.” Ayame got up and came to my side. “Let’s just go.” She grabbed my arm.

I looked down at her and saw her pleading with me through her eyes. “We were having a great day, let’s not let him ruin it.”

I bit down on my back teeth. My eyes went back to her ex. “Next time you see her look the other way.”

“Or what?” I went to step closer again, but Ayame pulled my arm.

“C’mon.”

A strong part of me wanted to punch the smug look off his face. The old Austin would have too, but I was trying to be different.

Instead of hitting him physically, I decided on a different approach. Bending down, I grabbed Ayame’s chin and kissed her. I could taste the sauce of the food she was eating still on her lips. “You done eating?” I whispered against her lips.

She gave me a small smile and nodded. “Yeah. We can go.” Again I heard her pleading.

I smirked and pecked her lips again. “C’mon.”

She grabbed my hand and the two of us turned to leave. I took one last look at her ex, noticing the crack in his face.

“So that’s him?” I asked when we were in the car.

“Yeah.” She rolled her eyes. “Two years of my life wasted. And the bastard is still married.” Her head shook.

Seeing her ex caused me to feel guilty all over again. “My intentions with you were never bad.”

Her eyes softened. “I know. If it’s one thing I believe, it’s that you didn’t mean to hurt me purposely.” Our connection seemed to grow at that moment.

I started the car. “You like bowling?”

She grinned. “I do.”

“Good. Get ready to get your ass beat.”

“Let’s bet on this round,” I told Ayame.

She squinted her eyes at me. We were currently one for one right now.

“Now you’re talking my language. What are we betting?”

“If I win, you stay with me tonight at my hotel.” Her face fell.

“Austin, I don’t know about that. I had a good time today, but I’m not ready to fully forgive you.”

“And that’s fine. I just want you for a little longer. We don’t even have to do anything.”

I watched her contemplate my offer. “Okay,” she slowly responded.

“Okay.” I nodded. “If you win, what do you want?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know yet. I’ll let you know when I win.”

I chuckled at her words and walked over to the balls and grabbed mine. I was nervous about today, but surprisingly it had gone smooth outside of the hiccup with her ex. Ayame was still dealing with everything, but she wasn’t the one to hold grudges which was good for me. I was hoping the day had gone good enough that Ayame to agree to work things out. We still had tomorrow before I left to go back home, but I was optimistic.

“I guess we gotta go pack you an overnight bag,” I bragged when our game came to an end.

Ayame rolled her eyes. “Whatever. I can’t believe you beat me.”

I winked. “It was bound to happen sooner or later.”

We headed out of the building. “You want to grab some food now?”

“Where are you staying?” Ayame questioned when we were in the car.

“*Velez Inn.*”

“We can just order in.”

“Cool, you need to go by Reid’s?”

She shook her head. “I can get a toothbrush and stuff there. We’re good.”

She got quiet and looked out the window. I noticed her tapping her fingers nervously.

“If you don’t want to stay, then you don’t have to.”

She turned to face me. “No, it’s fine. I want to.”

My heart stuttered.

Bobbing my head, I threw my car in drive and pulled out the bowling alley parking lot.

“That shower felt so good!” Ayame gushed, walking into the bedroom. I had showered while she was eating and was currently in some basketball shorts laying back on the bed.

“What you watching?” she asked, tightening her robe. I tried to ignore the fact that the only thing blocking me from her naked body was a thin cloth.

“Highlights of the Riots game last night.”

“There season isn’t going as good as they expected.”

“I knew that was gonna happen when they lost Gage. He was their closer.” Ayame walked over to the bed. The moment she pulled the covers back and slid under them, my dick twitched. I could smell the hotel’s soap mixed with her natural sweet essence.

I hit the button on the nightstand that turned the light off, leaving the tv on.

“I’m sure they’re going to trade Reggie. He’s more talk than an asset,” Ayame mentioned.

I turned to my side to stare at her. Her eyes were locked on the TV.

“Why are you so cordial with me but so closed off to that Vance dude?” It had been nagging me since we left the Jamaican spot. It didn’t make sense to me, even though I was happy.

Ayame’s eyes left the TV and she turned to look at me. “Would you prefer I treat you like I treat him?”

I slowly dragged my tongue over my bottom lip. “Nah, I’m just curious.”

She tucked her hands under her head. “Honestly, I don’t know. I guess like you said it’s a difference between Norine and me, it’s the same for you and Vance. He wasn’t right for me, and I knew it. Too many things just didn’t add up, but I rocked with it. With you, I know your intentions with me were good. I’m *still* not over everything, but I *can’t* bring myself to hate you either.”

I moved closer to her. I could smell the mint on her breath from the toothpaste.

“That’s good to hear.” I leaned in and kissed her.

My hand went to her hip and I pulled her closer to me. Her tongue found its way into my mouth and I sucked on it slowly.

My dick rose in my basketball shorts.

I reached over while still kissing her and undid the tie of her robe. “You okay with this?” I broke away and asked.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly, kissing me again.

My hands went between her legs. She lifted one to give me more access and I ran my fingers over her center. My eyes widened, feeling how wet she already was. I separated her lower lips and stuck a finger in her. Her pussy gripped it like a suction cup.

She let a moan off in my mouth. I pulled on her bottom lip with my teeth and watched her face as I fucked her with my fingers.

While I continued playing with her pussy, I removed my dick from my shorts. Snatching my hand from between her thighs, I grabbed her leg, forced her on her back, and positioned myself on top of her.

“You’re beautiful,” I told her, kissing her forehead as I sunk into her.

Her face twisted and her mouth fell open.

I had to take a minute to get myself together before I started moving. With one of her legs still being held by me, I

stroked her slowly, making sure she felt every inch of me when I pushed inside her.

It felt like forever since I felt her and I wanted to savor it, but Ayame's pussy had something else in mind. She had a death grip on my shaft and her pussy was leaking.

Moving my head down, I took her pebbled nipple into my mouth, teasing it with my tongue before devouring it with my mouth.

Ayame's moans grew louder.

Small whimpers escaped her mouth when I paid special attention to her nipples.

She gripped my back tightly and moved her body against mine.

"Austin," she cried.

Kissing my way up to her neck, I ran my tongue up the front of it until I got to her chin and bit it softly.

"I'm here, baby," I groaned, speeding my strokes up.

I grabbed her other leg and held it, positioning myself on my knees.

“I love how you feel. I don’t ever wanna leave this pussy.”

Ayame arched her back and closed her eyes. Her hands instantly went to the sheets.

“You *can’t* leave me, Coco. I *can’t* lose you.” I circled my hips into her.

The moment I hit her spot, I could see her stomach quiver.

“Tell me you won’t leave me, Ayame!”

“I, I,” she stuttered.

I pushed deeper into her. It felt like a waterfall had rained down on me as she came on my dick.

“Tell me, baby.” I let her legs go.

I kissed her forehead, then her nose, skipping her lips and going to her chin. One of my hands was on her side while the other traced her face. “Tell me.” My mouth hovered over hers.

Her breathing stuttered and her eyes fluttered.

My strokes slowed down again. I felt us becoming one. Ayame had snatched my soul with no regard of giving it back.

“Tell me!” I grunted, pushing into her a little more forcefully this time. “Are you going to leave me again?”

“No, baby! I’m not leaving again!” she yelled.

“I’m sorry, okay. I’ll *never* hurt you again. You believe me?” I knew I wasn’t going to last much longer, but I needed her to hear me.

Ayame’s eyes slowly opened and she looked at me. She stared at me as if she was staring into my soul.

“I believe you.”

My lips crashed into hers and I emptied my seeds inside her at her confession.

Ayame came with me, biting my bottom lip in the process.

The both of us were sweaty, breathing heavily, and tired, but I didn’t care. I had envisioned being back in this moment with Ayame since she left. I hoped she didn’t plan on going to sleep anytime soon because I had a lot of time to make up for.

I woke up with a smile on my face. Last night Ayame and I went two more rounds before I finally allowed her to go

to sleep. I couldn't help myself. Her pussy was like a black hole I kept getting lost in and couldn't get enough of.

I reached over to grab her but shot up when I found an empty bed.

My brows furrowed.

Maybe she's in the bathroom.

I was about to head that way when I noticed a note on the pillow.

Suddenly the good mood I was in vanished. My stomach flipped as I reached for the note.

She wouldn't have just left without saying anything. My eyes went to the bathroom. The door was open, and I didn't hear anyone inside either.

I read over the note and a familiar feeling hit me.

I'm sorry. I just need more time.

I bit down roughly on my bottom lip as I reread the words. I had been here before, but I couldn't even describe the pain I was feeling this time. I thought me and Ayame had gotten somewhere yesterday, but I guess the joke was on me.

AYYANME

My mom met me at the door and gave me a small smile when her eyes fell on me. “I’m glad you came,” she said, moving to the side.

“I’m leaving and didn’t want to leave with bad blood between us.” I followed her to the back of the house.

“I’m happy to hear that. I cooked.”

My parents had been messaging and calling me since I stormed out of their house a few days ago. Since I planned on leaving tomorrow, I decided to try and come clear the air. I didn’t like to hold grudges, but it was hard not to knowing your whole life had been a lie.

Just as we stepped into the dining room, my phone vibrated. I took it out of my back pocket and instantly cleared the call before putting my phone on silent.

Austin had been calling me all morning. I knew it was messed up to leave him with just a note, but last night was too

perfect. I didn't want to forgive him so quickly, and it seemed being around him was causing that to happen. I knew if I stayed and told him I still needed time, he would try and convince me otherwise, and it might have worked.

I still needed to tell him about the pregnancy too. I should have told him before I slept with him. Better yet, I should have never slept with him in the first place. My body craved his touch. I couldn't help but fall in line the moment he kissed me.

“Ayame, are you going to sit down?” my dad asked.

I snapped out of my thoughts and look at him. “Oh yeah.” I walked over to the table and took a seat, sitting my phone face down on the table next to my plate.

“I made steak and potatoes,” my mom said.

My mouth watered as I inhaled the food's aroma. “Smells good.” Seconds later, my stomach growled.

“Sounds like someone's hungry. Let's say grace.”

We bowed our heads and my dad blessed the food. The moment he was done an awkward tension filled the room.

Growing up my dad always ate first, so I waited for his plate to be made before starting on mine.

“I’m sure you have some questions,” my mom stated.

I looked over at her. It looked like the situation had been wearing her down. My mom normally was level-headed and calm, but she looked stressed out right now.

“Just one. Were you guys ever going to tell me?” My eyes bounced between her and my dad.

The two of them made eye contact. “What was there to tell, Ayame? Your mother and I raised you and loved you. You were taken care of and never mistreated. Why open up old wounds if we didn’t have to?”

I squinted my eyes. “You don’t think I had the right to know who my real mother was? The woman I grew up thinking was my aunt my whole life was really my mother. You don’t think I have questions? What if I wanted to know who my father was or his family? What if I wanted to know why she *didn’t want me*?” My voice began to crack.

“Ayame, I am your real father! The man that got Delilah pregnant was some knucklehead boy who didn’t want to be a father. He was some boy your aunt was fucking around with and just so happened to get pregnant by. There was no need to know him.”

I swallowed hard. “Maybe not for you, but for me... there’s a whole part of me I know nothing about.” I moved my food around on my plate.

“Ayame, my sister was young. She was just starting her life and was in no position to raise a baby. She gave you to us because she knew we could provide you a better life than she could. Your dad and I were established, making decent money, we were prepared to start a family. Your aunt wasn’t.”

“So everyone knew?”

My mom slowly nodded her head. “For the most part, yes. They knew not to ever bring it up, and eventually, it just went to the back of everyone’s mind.”

I scooped up some mashed potatoes and shoved them in my mouth. “As for your sperm donor, I don’t know who he is. I just know your aunt said he had just got out of prison the last time I asked about him. That was about six years ago. She never gave me his real name, so I can’t tell you who he is.”

I stared at my mom. I could tell this conversation was hurting her, and I didn’t want that, but I *deserved* answers.

“So you couldn’t have kids?”

She shook her head. “That’s why we were so happy when your aunt offered you to us. We loved you the moment we laid eyes on you.”

My stomach flipped. I know I had a right to be mad, but at the same time, I felt bad for my mom.

“Is that why you guys pushed me like you did?”

“What do you mean?”

I ran my tongue over my lips. “Like no matter what I did, you guys made it like it wasn’t good enough. You were never happy with my accomplishments. You just always wanted me to do *better*. You two ruined my dreams of track once you took an interest in it. You forced me to train harder than I ever had, and the joy I used to get from running slowly disappeared. That’s why I stopped running.”

“We just wanted you to reach your full potential, Ayame,” my mom replied.

“Our intentions were never to make you feel what you were doing wasn’t good enough. We just thought if we pushed you, you would always do your best. As for track, why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Because it wouldn’t have mattered. The two of you would have still pushed and pushed.”

“That wasn’t our intention, sweetheart. We thought we were doing what was best.”

“For who? Not for me! My summers, I was never able to just be a kid. You always had me in some program or working. The only time I felt like a normal kid was when I went and stayed with Aunt Dee! Even though I did help her at *ChocoLUXE*, she didn’t push me. She didn’t overwork me. She allowed me to be a normal teenager. I always felt like a robot or something growing up. Like I was programmed to be a certain way, I hated it. I wasn’t happy.”

When neither of my parents responded, I looked between the two again. Both of them seemed shocked by my words.

I inhaled a deep breath. “I’ve tried to find love and acceptance in relationships, and I’ve been hurt a lot by guys, trying to find someone that would just let me be *me*. Vance was married and never told me about it. That’s why we broke up.” I stared directly at my mom. “He’s only the tip of the iceberg. I stayed with guys who didn’t really care about me,

but I craved acceptance, so I stayed. The two of you always had me questioning my worth, my whole life.”

I blinked back my tears.

“Ayame.”

I put my hand up and shook my head. “Just let me finish. I’m thankful for the life you two gave me. I even understand why I wasn’t told the truth. I don’t know if it would have changed anything, but I get it. I just hate that everyone withheld something like this from me. Aunt Dee is gone now. The two of you hated each other before she passed, all because she was my biological mom.”

“It wasn’t because of that. It was because she tried to take you from us.”

“Even still, for twenty-plus years, the two of you have held this grudge, and I don’t want that. I don’t want to hold a grudge towards either of you and one of us passes with that hate still in place. I can’t change my childhood or anything, but from now on, I want you guys to stop acting like what I do isn’t enough. I love working at *ChocoLUXE* and the new life I started in Butter Ridge Falls. I’ve met a lot of great people there, and I plan on being there for a long time. The comments

about what you guys felt like I should be doing have to end.” I looked between the two.

“I’m pregnant.” Both of them gasped. “I don’t know how far yet, but I’m having a baby. I refuse to raise him or her like the two of you raised me. I plan on supporting them in anything they choose and encouraging them. I want yall to be in his or her life, but that won’t happen if you don’t let go of the entitled attitudes.”

I looked down at my plate once I finished my speech. I had said a mouthful and was putting the ball in my parents’ hands.

“I want to be a part of our grandchild’s life. We made mistakes, but everything we did was to benefit you. We never meant to push you or have you thinking we didn’t accept you. We love you, Ayame.”

“Your mother is right; we do love you. You’re my baby girl. My only child. We went through so much to just get you. The last thing we want to do is lose you or our grandkid.”

My dad looked at my mom. “I hope you can forgive us. If you’re happy with your life, then we’re happy.”

I swallowed hard.

It felt good hearing those words. For so long, I just wanted my parents to be *happy* for me and what I was doing.

“Thank you.” I smiled at both of them.

I could dwell on the adoption thing, but it wouldn't change anything. My parents were the only parents I had my whole life and my Aunt Dee was around. In ways I felt like I should have known, me and her were always close. Even if she and my mom didn't speak, she always made sure to have a relationship with me. I was so much like her and it made sense now.

“Are you with your child's father?” my mom asked.

I grew quiet.

I didn't know what Austin and I were right now. I didn't know what I wanted from him. Part of me wanted to just forgive him. The other part felt like I was giving in too easily.

“We're working on it,” I said slowly.

I briefly told my parents about Austin, leaving out the part about him being married. Both of them let me know they would want to meet him. Hesitantly, I agreed. I didn't even

know how my relationship with him would be once I told him about my pregnancy.

“Damn, I’m not going to lie, it felt good having you back. I hate you’re leaving again,” Reid told me, picking my bag up.

“I know, it felt good being back home and getting my emotions together, but truthfully this isn’t my home anymore. I miss BRF and I can’t wait to get back.” I followed behind him with one of my smaller bags.

My anxiety was high about returning home because I knew once I was there I *had* to tell Austin about the baby. This morning I experienced my first morning sickness, and I wasn’t looking forward to the next couple of months. It felt like I would never stop throwing up. It also seemed like my pants were already sort of tighter than normal.

Reid put my things in the trunk then shut it. He turned to face me just as I was putting my bag in the car.

“So what’s up with you and ole dude?”

I snickered. “You know he has a name, right?”

Reid shrugged. “You plan on being with him?”

This time it was my turn to shrug. “Honestly, I’m more worried about how Ima tell him about this.” I pointed at my stomach.

“You should have told him when he was here.”

I cut my eyes at him. “No one told you to invite him here.”

Since Reid was the only way Austin could have found me, I didn’t hesitate to confront him. He admitted to inviting him here but not revealing why he needed to come.

“I told you I was tired of seeing you upset. You spent the night with him, so I guess him being here wasn’t all bad.” Heat rushed to my cheeks.

“That’s not the point.!” I quickly shut him down.

“Then what is?” He crossed his arms and tilted his head.

I rolled my eyes. “I wasn’t ready to see him!”

“But you’re happy you did.”

Again I rolled my eyes before the corners of my mouth rose. “Whatever, I need to get on the road so I don’t get back too late.”

“I still say you should leave tomorrow morning.”

I shook my head. “I need to get back to *ChocoLUXE*. I been gone too long.”

Poking my bottom lip out, I stepped closer to Reid with my arms open. He snatched me up and hugged me tightly.

“I love you, Charm. Make sure you share your location and let me know when you get home.”

My grip on him tightened. “I will. I love you too and thank you for everything, Reid. You don’t know how much I appreciate you.”

“Take care of my nephew a’right and make sure you keep me updated.”

“Nephew? What if it’s a girl?”

He shrugged. “It’s not.” I laughed and hugged him once more. Reid kissed my forehead before releasing me. He opened my door and I climbed inside.

Being back home was definitely something I needed, but now it was time for me to go and face the music.

“Well, look who finally decided to come back,” Noelle said sarcastically.

“Right, I thought her ass would never return,” Tori chimed in.

I turned and looked at both of them. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Zach’s home with the baby and I have a little bit of free time. You said you were back, so here we are.”

I looked around the store. I had sent June home for the day, letting her know I had it. I told her to take the next week off with pay since she’s been holding down the place while I was gone. This morning, the first thing I did was start preparing the chocolates for the displays and dipping the fruits. It felt good being back, but being pregnant, it was hard to ignore the sweet aroma of the chocolate.

“How you feeling, boo?”

I smiled at them. “I told yall I was good. I cleared my mind and worked out my feelings and now I’m doing better.”

“You forgave Austin?”

“I’m working on it.”

They looked at each other. “What’s with the look?”

A sneaky grin appeared on Noelle's face. "The twin's birthday is Friday, and I'm planning a birthday dinner at *Roses*. They just opened the location here a couple months ago. You should come." I blinked a few times.

"Eh, I don't know, Noelle. Austin and I aren't together right now and-"

"And nothing. He would want you there."

"She's right, Ayame. I think you should come."

"It's not going to be anything too over the top. Just us, their parents, and Chase. I thought it would nice to celebrate together."

I nibbled on my bottom lip. I wasn't sure if I ready to be around Austin *and* his family again.

"Just think about it, okay? I'll text you the details and make sure I leave a spot open for you."

"I guess that's okay."

"Good, and even if you don't come, we'll all get together soon!" Tori said.

"Yes! I love being a mom, but I miss having some time to myself."

The doors to the store chimed. “Bailey, I’m not playing, you get one thing and that’s it.”

“Hey Aisha!”

Aisha looked up. “Oh hey!” She waved then went after her daughter.

“That’s Gage’s girlfriend, right?”

Tori nodded. “Yep and their daughter.”

“We’ll let you get back to work but think about this weekend. I know Austin fucked up, but I also know he’s sorry.” Noelle winked.

She and Tori waved and turned to leave.

I stood there watching them, forgetting I was supposed to be stocking the floor. My appointment for the baby was Monday. That gave me a week to tell Austin about it. I didn’t think it would be fair to see our baby without him.

“Excuse me, do you have any chocolate-covered grapes?” I looked down and Aisha’s daughter was grinning up at me.

I smiled. “Yes, we do. Half a pound or a full pound,” I asked her mom.

“Half please.” I nodded.

“I’ll be right back.”

I turned and headed to the fridge. All day we had a steady flow of customers. I didn’t know if Austin knew I was back, but thankfully he hadn’t shown his face. I hoped he kept it that way until I went and found him.

AUSTIN

“Happy birthday, baby!” my mom gushed as soon as I answered her Facetime. A smile formed on my face.

“Thank you, mama. I can always count on you first thing in the morning.”

“8:05 am. That’s when you made your way into the world. That was the happiest day of my life.” My dad appeared next to my mom.

“I’m happy to see the tradition still going strong. Happy birthday, son.”

“Thanks, dad.”

The relationship with my parents has gotten way better since our talk. We talked more frequently than before, and I was more comfortable opening up to them about things.

“You didn’t tell me what you wanted.”

I chuckled. “Mom, you don’t have to get me anything.”

“You and your brother,” she huffed.

“Leave the boy alone. You’re coming to dinner tonight, right?”

I nodded. “I am. I got some things to take care of at the bar, then I’ll be there.”

“I’m so proud of you, baby. Me and your father stopped in the other day and you were busy, but the place looks so good. Good job.”

My smile grew. “Thanks, ma.”

“You’re welcome, baby. Oh, I got to call your brother! His birth time is approaching. I love you.”

“I love you guys too. I’ll see you later.”

We hung up and I threw myself back on my bed. My phone was going off with notifications left and right, but none of them were who I wanted to hear from.

It bothered me that Ayame had just dipped out on me, but I was trying to keep a leveled head about it. I knew our issues weren’t going to be resolved after one night of sex. Even still, my patience was starting to wear thin. I knew I caused this rift in our relationship, but Ayame running wasn’t going to help us either. Sooner or later, we’re going to have to

put everything on the table and figure out what we were going to do next.

“Happy birthday, bro.” I slapped hands with my brother and pulled him into a brotherly hug.

“Happy birthday, bro.” I patted his back and pulled back.

“Happy birthday, Austin!” Noelle popped up next to my brother and hugged me.

“Thanks, sis. I ‘preciate you for putting this together.” I let her go. “Where’s my nephew?” I looked around the small area we were in.

“You know when your mom is around I’m not allowed to have my baby,” she laughed.

“Let me go see my little guy.” I left the two of them and walked to where my parents were sitting.

“Wassup yall.” My mom was gushing over my nephew but lifted her head and looked at me.

“Hey baby. You look nice.”

“Hey ma.” I leaned down and hugged her. “Wassup dad.” I slapped hands with my dad.

“Happy birthday, Austin,” Tori said from across the table.

“I appreciate it.” I nodded at her.

“Wassup man.” I tickled my nephew’s stomach. He giggled in my mom’s arms. “Yo, every time I see you, you get chunkier.” I laughed.

“Not too much on my son.” My brother walked up next to me.

“Yeah, leave my baby alone.” Noelle came and bumped past me. I laughed as she went to my mom and grabbed Zachariah. “I’m about to go change him. We’re just waiting for Chase and then we can order.”

“I’m here.” Chase walked up.

“Happy birthday, yall!” He slapped hands with Zach then me.

While Noelle went to tend to Zachariah, we all took a seat.

Roses was an upscale yet laid-back restaurant. The one here in BRF was the second location. They sold everything

from steak to seafood. I heard it was tough to get a table, so I wasn't even sure how Noelle pulled it off.

“Aye, sis,” I called out when she got back to the table.

“Yeah?”

“How you get a table here?”

She grinned. “Oh, it was easy. The owner's fiancée loves my artwork and she hooked me up.”

“I have been wanting Larry to bring me here since it opened. I can't wait to taste the food!”

“Yeah, that food blogger, what's her name?” Tori jumped in.

“Roxy,” Chase answered.

“Yeah, her, she just did a piece on their *Lynnwood* location on her blog and gave them a good review.”

“Hi, I'm Kayla. I'll be your server tonight. Can I get you started with some drinks?” Everyone went around the table giving their drink orders.

“Can I get an extra water with lemon, please?”

“Why are you ordering an extra drink?” Zach looked at his wife and asked.

She ignored him. “So 28, yall getting up there.”

I narrowed my eyes at Noelle. She had a sneaky grin on her face, and I couldn’t read why.

“Don’t say that then you’ll make me feel old,” my mom joked.

The conversation picked up and I took a minute to sit back and observe everyone. It was nice to have everyone together tonight. I didn’t normally make a big deal about my birthday. It was just another day to me, so seeing all my friends and family here tonight meant a lot.

“Sorry, I’m late.” My heart almost leaped out of my chest when Ayame’s voice sounded.

I looked up and she was standing there in a red t-shirt dress with some black high thigh boots. I bit down on my bottom lip. I swear her in dresses did something to me. She was even wearing some red lipstick that made her look even bolder than normal.

“Girl, you’re right on time. I saved you a seat.” Noelle nodded towards the empty seat next to me.

Ayame greeted my parents and waved to the rest of the table. “Happy birthday, Zach.” She smiled as she sat down

next to me.

I hadn't taken my eyes off her since she spoke. I noticed she had gotten her hair cut and the back was faded. I knew she was back in town, but I was still trying to give her space, so I ignored the urge to go across the sidewalk and talk to her. I also was still feeling some type of way about her just leaving me in the hotel room.

"He's the only birthday boy you see?" I licked my lips and lowered my eyes.

When Ayame turned and made eye contact with me, it felt like it was only us two in the room. I noticed she also had some light makeup on her eyes, making them appear a little darker.

"Happy birthday, Austin." She smiled at me.

I looked her over. "You look good as hell."

Her smile widened. "Thank you."

"It's different. I never seen you like this." Again, my eyes raked her over.

"Guess I wanted to switch it up." Her shoulders slightly lifted.

“Well, I guess the rest of us being here don’t matter. We know where his attention about to be all night,” Chase joked.

“Shut up, man,” I laughed, but he was right. Ayame had my full attention. She came in here smelling good and lookin’ even better. How could my attention not be on her?

The server came back and we sent her away while we continued to look over the menu.

“Ayame, it’s nice to see you again. How have you been?” my mom asked.

“I’ve been doing alright. How are you?”

“I’m well. Just happy to see my babies live to see another birthday.”

“I’m glad you decided to come!” Noelle held her hand out. “Tori.”

Tori rolled her eyes and slapped a bill in Noelle’s open hand. “You guys bet if I was coming?”

“I didn’t think you would come, but Noelle was confident you would.”

“Wow,” she laughed and took a sip of her water. “Where’s the baby?”

“In his seat, sleeping.” Noelle pointed next to her where Zachariah was.

“Aw, I wanted to hold him.” She poked her lips out.

“He’ll be up to eat soon. Don’t worry.”

I stared at Ayame again. She was glowing again, just like when I pulled up on her.

“Austin, stop staring at me,” she whispered.

I looked around the table and everyone was in their own conversations. Moving closer to Ayame, I leaned in so that my mouth was near her ear. “I can’t help it. You really look good as fuck right now.”

She turned to me and my eyes focused on her red painted lips. I wanted to capture them with mine. I loved kissing Ayame. I didn’t know why, but I wanted to feel her lips whenever I was around her. I knew we weren’t in the place where I could do that right now, but I was tempted.

“Thank you, but stop staring, it’s creepy.” I narrowed my eyes.

“How the hell you come in here lookin’ like that and expect me not to stare?”

I smiled. “I’m glad to see you tonight.”

“I almost didn’t come.”

I bobbed my head. “I bet.”

“Austin!” Zach called out to me.

“What?” I snapped my head in his direction. “Give the lady your food order.”

“I told yall ain’t no one but Ayame gone hold his attention tonight.”

The table laughed.

We finished giving our orders, and I decided to try and interact with everyone at the table. Every so often, I would have to stop myself from staring at Ayame. She fit right in with everyone. She was smiling and laughing like she had been around for years.

The food eventually came, and the conversations ended as we ate.

“Ou, this place is good!” my mom complimented.

“Larry, we’re going to have to come back here.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

“Your food straight?” I whispered to Ayame.

She nodded while stuffing her fork in her mouth. "It's good." Her eyes shifted to my plate.

"How's yours?"

I nodded. "This steak good as hell. You want to taste?"

She quickly nodded. "If you don't mind."

I cut her a piece and held my fork out for her. "Oo, that is good!" She ran her tongue over her lips. "Can I have another bite?"

"You can get whatever you want, Coco." I winked at her and cut her another piece.

Slowly she wrapped her lips around the fork and stared at me. My dick twitched in my jeans.

"Thanks." She grabbed her napkin and wiped her nose.

"So Ayame, I assume you and my son worked things out?" my mom asked.

"Sharon, get out of their business."

"What? I'm just wondering. She makes my son happy. I don't want him to lose that."

"Ayame, you don't have to answer that. My wife just doesn't know how to mind her business sometimes."

Ayame laughed. “Me and your son are working our issues out, Ms. Sharon,” she answered, then looked back at me. I didn’t read too much into her response because I had been getting mixed signals from her, but it did make me somewhat hopeful.

“Okay, since we’re getting to the end of the night, I just want to say I’m glad everyone was able to come together and celebrate the twins.” Noelle turned to face my brother. “Baby, this is the first birthday of yours we’ve spent together since we reconnected, and I’m so thankful for you. I pray this year is prosperous for you and that you get everything you want because you deserve it.” Zach grinned at his wife before leaning in and kissed her.

“Thank you, baby. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“These two niggas,” I mumbled.

“Don’t hate because my wife loves me.” Zach wrapped his arm around Noelle.

“Well, I guess I’ll go next. Boys, I know yall said not to, but me and your father got you something anyways. We

love the both of you and we're so proud of the men you two have become. We couldn't ask for better sons."

My mom stood up and walked over to us. She handed each of us an envelope.

Zach and I looked at each other before opening the envelopes. "Those are bonds we started for you two the day you were born. They mature when you turn 30. We thought since the two of you are starting businesses and families, now was a good time to give them to you."

"Dang, thank you guys," we both said.

"Y'all haven't done the same talk thing since y'all were kids," my dad chuckled.

"Excuse me, can you bring out the cake we had put in the back, please," Noelle told our server when she came to collect dishes.

"Well, I guess I'll go." Ayame cleared her throat.

I stared at her, surprised she had gotten me anything.

"Austin, I know things with us have been rocky and I'm still trying to sort through my feelings, but I do love you, and I hope you like the surprise."

She reached on her side and grabbed a bag I hadn't noticed when she got here. She handed me the bag and a nervous look appeared on her face.

I stared at her skeptically and pulled the tissue paper out. "A bear?" I questioned and looked at her.

"Take it out," she encouraged.

I looked back down and pulled out the bear.

"Daddy Bear plus Mama Bear equals Baby Bear," I whispered. My eyebrows bunched together. The words were on the bear's shirt written in light blue.

"Oh my gosh!"

"Turn it around."

I turned the bear and my eyes bucked. "Baby Bear Morris loading."

"Shit, you're pregnant!"

Tears were in her eyes as she nodded her head.

Yells sounded from around the table, but my only focus was Ayame. I threw the bear back into the bag and stood up, grabbing her, snatching her up with me. I didn't care if she would be mad, I had to feel her lips.

I crashed my mouth against hers, kissing her deeply.

“So you’re happy?”

“Coco, this the greatest gift anyone could have given me.” I kissed her again.

“Congrats!” everyone was saying around us.

“How far along are you?” I placed my hand on her stomach.

“I go to the doctor’s Monday. Will you come with me?”

I grinned. “I wouldn’t miss it, baby.”

“I’m so excited.” My mom clapped. “I knew I liked you for a reason.” Ayame giggled and wiped her eyes.

“Come home with me tonight,” I grabbed her hand and asked.

She chewed on her bottom lip but slowly nodded.

“We need to talk anyways.”

“Noelle, I can’t believe you’re joining the mommy club! Tori, you got next.”

“Tuh, the hell if I do!”

“I got you, Tori,” Chase told her.

She balled her face up. “I’m really good.”

The table laughed and the server brought out the cake. Noelle had even gone as far as getting us candles. After everyone sang happy birthday, Zach and I blew the candles out, and the cake was cut.

“How are you feeling right now?” Zach leaned over and asked.

I looked across the table where Ayame was talking to my mom. My heart swelled as I pictured her stomach swollen with my child. I had so many questions to ask her, but right now, I just wanted to bask in the joy I felt knowing *she* was carrying my first child.

“Like a nigga done hit the jackpot.”

“That’s a great feeling, huh?”

“It is.”

“You ready for that?”

I kept my eyes on Ayame. Finally, she felt my stare and looked at me. “I’m ready for anything as long as it’s with her.”

AYAAME

The moment Austin and I stepped inside my house, my pulse began to race. I knew a serious conversation was about to happen and the two of us had to figure things out. My secret was out there now and we needed to get on the same page, not just for us but for our child.

I was nervous about revealing my pregnancy to him tonight in front of all his friends and family. I wasn't exactly sure how everyone would react, including Austin, but thankfully they were all excited and supportive. His mom was over the moon about the news more than anyone.

"I'll be back," I told Austin heading to the back of the house.

I went directly to my room so I could shower.

I needed to get my thoughts in order. I knew lines needed to be drawn. Tonight I had to decide if I would forgive

Austin and make it work with him or just co-parent. Either way, we needed to be on the same page.

The hot water ran down my body as my thoughts ran wild. My eyes were closed, and the Bluetooth speaker I had in my bathroom was playing *Butterflies Pt. 2*. As the words played loudly, I got lost in my head.

I didn't even notice I wasn't alone anymore until I felt a brush of cold air. My eyes snapped open and I made eye contact with Austin. My eyes roamed down his naked body. *Butterflies* filled my stomach and a shock shot down to my center.

"I figured we could save water," he told me, stepping inside.

My insides started to heat up. My breathing sped up when I met his eyes again.

Austin stepped closer to me, and his eyes were dark and low. I tried to back up, but he grabbed my wrist, halting my movement.

He pulled me gently but with enough force that I came to him. He was still staring at me intensely and silently.

His hardened pole brushed against my thigh, making my center throb.

“I want you. Can I have you?” His sultry baritone sent a rumble through my stomach.

My words got caught in my throat. Instead of verbally answering, I nodded my head.

Austin wasted no time branding my lips with his. He feverishly kissed me, wrapping his other arm around my waist and holding me securely.

My arms went around his neck and I moaned loudly in his mouth.

My heart was racing.

Our tongues wrestled each other before I hungrily sucked on his.

Austin’s fingers sunk into my side, causing me to wince, but I didn’t mind it. I missed his touch. I had been miserable without him. Walking out on him in that hotel room pained me more than I cared to admit. His touch was like electric paddles that were bringing my body back to life.

Austin bent down and his hands grabbed my thighs. He lifted me up. Instantly my thighs went around his waist. He

walked forward, pressing my back against my shower wall. The moment his length filled me; fireworks erupted inside of me.

My mouth part and my grip on him grew tighter.

“Austin,” I whined. He forcefully pulled me down on him. “So deep.”

“You said go deeper?” he moaned.

“No!” My eyes rolled to the back of my head.

Austin fucked me wildly, thrusting himself deep into me. I felt him in my stomach, constantly jabbing at it.

I lowered my head into his neck and sunk my teeth into his flesh.

My stomach tightened and my grip around him grew tighter.

“Your pussy feels so *damn* amazing.” He groaned.

Lazily I lifted my head as I came on his pole. I crashed my lips onto his and pulled on his bottom lip, sucking on it slowly.

Sex had never felt so fulfilling to me before. I’d had previous sexual partners, but none of them ever enlightened

my soul like Austin did. Each time he entered me, our souls tied together, and he *shamelessly* took a part of me that I *never* wanted back. He didn't just make love to my body, but he *owned* my mind and my heart. As much as I wanted to fight the pull I had towards him, *I knew* I was Austin's and he was mine.

Once Austin and I finished two rounds in the shower, we eventually showered and got out to get dressed.

Now we were sitting in my living room. I was eating some chocolate filled with caramel I had made earlier in the week while Austin watched me. Instead of going back to his house, we decided to just stay at mine.

“When did you find out?” Austin asked, breaking the silence.

Slowly I chewed the chocolate in my mouth. Chocolate had quickly become one of my comfort foods. I was never really a fan before, but now I couldn't get enough.

“About two weeks ago.” I cleared my throat. “Right before Reid called you to come see me.”

Creases formed in his forehead. “Why didn’t you tell me then?”

I shrugged. “I was partly scared of your reaction. The other part of me wanted to be selfish, I guess. I was still upset with you and I allowed it to cloud my judgment.”

“Even though I think you should have told me when I saw you, I’m not even going to trip. The important thing is I know now.”

Slowly I nodded my head. “I know that this is all happening fast with us. It actually makes me scared how quickly we’re moving because it seems like I’m always on autopilot with relationships, jumping in headfirst without thinking. Only this time, I can’t just simply press stop and climb off the ride. I’ve never been this careless before, and I should have gotten back on birth control once we started having sex more consistently, I just-”

“Ayame.” Austin’s voice stopped my ranting. “Breath.”

I stuffed another piece of chocolate in my mouth, chewing it slowly.

“Things are moving fast, fast as fuck, but I don’t care about all that. Whose to put a timeline on the speed anything

should happen? I knew I was going to fall in love with you the first time I kissed you. In the beginning, I was trying to fight it, but what was meant to happen happened. You don't have to worry about anything because I will be right by your side with everything. You're not in this alone."

Austin stopped talking for a moment. His thumb went over his nose, which indicated something was bothering him.

"You know, when I woke up in that hotel room and saw that you were gone, leaving only a note, I had flashbacks to when Norine left. I wanted to be upset with you. The scene was all too familiar for me.

Remorse filled me. I didn't even think about Austin's previous situation with Norine. I just woke up and panicked.

"That wasn't my intention," I admitted.

His head moved up and down slowly. "I know that." His hand went over his head. "I knew you were still battling with how you wanted to move forward with me, and that's the only thing that kept me from acting out. But Ayame, all that running shit ends right here. I fucked up and I owned that. I should have told you about my marriage and it was wrong for me to withhold that information, but I filed the papers. I'm no

longer attached to her. The only things that matter to me now are you and our baby.

I wanted to give you space, but I'm tired of that shit too. You were away from me for a whole month. During that month, I made sure to handle my shit and get my affairs in order so that I could come at you correctly. Before all this shit, I told you I see myself with you for the long haul, and I meant that. I want to build a life with you. I don't care if you think it's too fast. At the end of the day, our feelings are real, and that's all that matters. I need you to forgive me."

"Why? We could always co-parent." Those words tasted bitter leaving my mouth, but I needed to know why he felt like he did. I fixed the issues with my parents, but that didn't mean the scars still weren't there.

Austin's face went blank and he sat up straighter. "Because I love you. I love how comfortable with *yourself* you are. I love that you're not afraid to be different. I love how easily you open yourself to people and how good-spirited you are. I love that you're like me. You can relate to how I felt growing up. Part of me feels like you and I were *meant* to meet, *meant* to connect and fall for one another. I know I still have a lot to learn about relationships, and I'm still trying to

get this right, but know I would *never* purposely cause you any pain.

We're so connected that I could physically feel how you felt that night. I want to be able to heal that hurt and show you that you *can* trust me. I want to raise our baby together as a family and eventually make you my wife. But to do that, I *need* you to give me another chance.”

I slowly dragged my tongue across my lip.

I couldn't stop my racing heart if I tried. It threatened to pound out of my chest. A surge of electricity ran through my veins.

His words were full of *passion*. They enveloped me in a blanket of security, washing away whatever doubts I had. As I stared into his dark orbs, I could feel the serenity pouring from them.

Since meeting Austin, he had given me no reason why I shouldn't trust him. Even with him withholding the marriage, I trusted him with *all of me*.

Releasing a staggering breath, I set the chocolate down on the arm of the couch and crawled over to Austin.

Moving in so that my mouth was inches from his, I caressed his cheek with my hand and studied his eyes.

“I love you. I don’t want any more secrets between us. If we’re going to do this, we have to be able to trust each other.”

He grabbed my wrist. His eyes seemed to get darker.

“You got that baby, but you can’t run anymore. When we have an issue, we gotta talk it out.”

Again, my eyes studied his. “Okay.”

His small breaths tickled my nose as I leaned in closer to him. When my lips finally connected with his, I instantly felt my body melting.

I moved into his lap, straddling him. I had no problem letting my guard down with Austin because I knew deep down, he was it for me.

“Are you excited?” Austin asked as we waited for the doctor to come into the room.

“Overly.” I giggled and rubbed my still flat stomach.

Outside of work, we had spent the entire weekend together, locked in my house making up. Since I had just come from a month-long hiatus, I had to show my face at *ChocoLUXE*, but I was excited to get back home knowing Austin was waiting for me.

I was glad we had made up. It brought me a sense of tranquility. Grudges took a lot of energy to uphold. Energy I had no desire to use. It was why I didn't do second chances. I would rather cut my losses and move on, but with Austin, it was different. He had tattooed himself on my heart.

"I never thought I would be experiencing this moment, but here I am." My smile grew.

"I know it's too early to tell, but I hope we have a boy."

Austin chuckled. "I'm not shocked about that. I want a girl though."

My nose scrunched up. "A girl?"

He nodded. "For one, I think a pretty little girl that looks like you is just what the world needs." My cheeks were hurting from how wide I was smiling now. "Second, I think I'd be a bomb ass girl dad."

“A girl dad, huh?” I tugged on my bottom lip with my teeth. “I can see that.”

“I know one thing, this little one already has me eating ten times more than normal, and morning sickness has been kicking my ass.”

“Coco, yo ass was greedy before the pregnancy. Don’t be trying to blame my baby.” I snickered.

“Shut up, he makes me even hungrier!”

There was a knock on the door and a middle-aged woman stuck her head inside.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Richardson.” She smiled and closed the door behind her. “Congratulations are in order, Ms. Rose, you are indeed pregnant.” She walked over and shook my hand.

“Thank you!”

“You must be dad.”

“I am.” Austin shook her hand too.

She walked over to the sink and washed her hands. “Any concerns for me today?” she asked as she walked over to me.

“How long does the morning sickness last?”

She laughed. “Unfortunately, I can’t give you an answer on that. For some women, it stops after the first trimester. Others have it the whole pregnancy.” I groaned.

“I can give you something when we’re finished to help with it. Let’s check you out.”

The doctor went through the basic routine, asking questions as she examined me. Every so often, I would look at Austin, who held an enthralled look on his face.

“Okay, now for the fun part. Let’s check out your little one. Lay back for me.” Dr. Richardson took a seat and tapped the machine near the table a few times while I laid back.

“By the information you gave, I suspect you to be between two and three months, but I’ll be able to give a more accurate number soon. Since you’re still fairly early, this will have to be a transvaginal ultrasound.”

“A what?” Austin asked with his face balled up.

“Just means I have to do an internal ultrasound.”

Austin looked at me and I gave him a reassuring nod.

Excitement filled me even more once the ultrasound started and I saw the screen. Austin grabbed my hand and stepped closer to the table I was on.

“Oh my,” she mumbled.

“What?” both me and Austin ask simultaneously.

“Well...” She moved the instrument inside me.

My nerves begin to rattle. “Look here and here.” She pointed to the screen.

My eyes squinted trying to see where she was getting at.

Dr. Richardson turned and looked at us, laughing at our confused expressions. “It looks like the two of you are getting a two-for-one special.”

“What?” My eyes bucked.

“Here’s baby A and here’s baby B. Looks like fraternal twins.”

My mouth dropped but nothing came out. My head whipped to Austin, and he looked just as surprised as I did.

“You appear to be about nine weeks.” I zoned out after that. I couldn’t believe I was having twins.

“You know this is your fault.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“What?”

“You’re a twin!”

“Actually, twins typically come from the mother’s side.” Dr. Richardson removed the instrument from inside me.

“So this is all on you, Coco.” Austin grinned wildly. I rolled my eyes.

“Twins don’t run in my family, and you’re the twin, so I’m not buying it.”

He grinned. “Doesn’t matter. You’re giving me two babies and I couldn’t be happier.” Austin moved in and kissed me. I sighed against his lips as I kissed him back.

Even though I was shocked by the news, I was excited too.

“Since you’re on the small side, I want you to pay attention to your body, Ms. Rose. You’re going to experience some discomfort but if something doesn’t feel right, go to the hospital right away.”

“Should we be worried?” Austin asked.

Dr. Richardson shook her head. “No, twins take more of a toll on women, and since she’s smaller, I just would rather be safe than sorry.”

I squeezed Austin’s hand and smiled up at him.

Our appointment went on for another few minutes before we got our due date and my prescription for the morning sickness. Once we scheduled our next appointment, we were out the door.

“You still excited?” I laughed, staring at the sonogram.

Austin glanced at me then down at my hands. “I am. The real question is, are we ready for this?”

He started the car.

“We are.” I grabbed his hand, lacing my fingers through his. “We got this.”

AUSTIN

“Look at the smile on this dude’s face,” one of the guys in the barbershop commented. I glanced up and smirked.

“Shut yo ass up!”

“You better stop moving yo head before I have you walk out here looking like a blind dude cut yo shit,” Zach told me while tilting my head.

I chuckled. “My bad, bro.”

I listened to the sound of his clippers as he cut my hair. I had some spare time before having to go to *Rocky’s* and was in need of a haircut.

I had been on cloud nine since me and Ayame saw our babies on the screen earlier in the week. I wasn’t expecting the doctor to tell us Ayame was carrying twins. I had just learned I had one baby on the way and almost instantly learn it’s *actually* two. I wasn’t upset though. I felt like this was exactly what we *both* needed. Even though we had straightened out

our issues with our families, it didn't mean the scars still weren't there. Now we have *two* opportunities to make it so our kids never feel how we felt.

Ayame seemed to be in good spirits too. After the talk we had after my birthday, she slowly started going back to her old self. I hated that I hurt her, but the whole situation made us stronger. I meant it when I told Ayame the *last* thing I would do is intentionally hurt her. Thankfully, I haven't heard from Norine. My lawyer said the divorce was almost finalized and I would officially be free from that part of my life.

It was still hard to believe that Ayame was back in my life and now growing my kids inside her. A year ago, I would have never imagined this life for me. I didn't even think I would ever be a father and never really wanted to be one, fearing I would mess it up. The moment I saw that machine and saw my babies, those thoughts vanished instantly.

"Austin, you good bro? I been calling your name." I looked through the mirror and noticed Zach had turned the chair and was staring at me.

"Yeah, just got lost in my head." I looked myself over in the mirror.

Zach handed me his hand-held mirror so I could get a closer look. “Yall asses really look alike now that Austin done went with that low ass fade,” Kenny, one of the barbers, said.

I looked at my twin again and smirked.

I had him cut my hair lower than what I normally got, and I couldn't deny we did look a lot more alike now. We always favored, but it seemed like the older we got the more we looked alike.

“What's up? Everything good with Ayame?” Zach looked concerned.

My smile grew. “Yeah, she's good. We went to the doctor.” Zach brushed my shoulders off before pulling his cape off me.

“How'd that go?” I turned around to face him.

“Great.” I looked around the shop and lowered my voice. “We found out she's carrying twins.” His face matched both mine and Ayame's when we heard the news.

“Damn, that's great news, bruh.” He slapped my shoulder. “You ready for that?”

I shrugged. “Hell nah. I was cool with one but learning it's two is scary as fuck.” I chuckled. “I'm excited though. I

know we gone be good.”

Zach’s face turned serious. “Yall are. The two of you gone be great parents. It’s not always easy, but it’s worth it. Those babies are going to be two lucky kids.”

My chest swelled. “Thanks, man. Being a dad was never on my agenda, but I can’t wait to see Ayame swell with my seeds.”

“It’s a great sight indeed. If she wasn’t so against it right now, I would be trying to knock Noelle up again just for that reason alone.” The both of us laughed.

“Sis not going for that, huh?”

“Hell nah, but that’s cool. I loved seeing her pregnant the first time and then this time, *actually* being able to see her experience childbirth was *amazing*. You gone love it.”

Slowly my head nodded as I pictured the moments my brother was talking about. They were moments I couldn’t wait to experience. I knew I would probably get on Ayame’s nerves eventually, but I wasn’t worried. I planned to be completely hands-on with this pregnancy.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” Ayame asked, smiling behind the counter.

“I was on my way to the bar and stopped by to bring you this.” I lifted the plastic bag causing her face to light up.

“You must be a mind reader. I was just thinking about what I was going to eat!” I had stopped by *Chases* after leaving the barbershop to grab me something to eat and made sure to pick Ayame up something too.

I walked up to the counter and Ayame met me halfway.

I wrapped one of my arms around her waist and pulled her into me. Her hands wrapped around my neck and I lowered my head to look at her face. “How are you feeling this morning?”

“Okay. The medicine the doctor prescribed helped a lot with my morning sickness. I still had it, just not as bad.” She poked her bottom lip out. I couldn’t help but bend down and take it in my mouth, slowly sucking on it.

“I hate my babies are making you sick,” I mumbled against her lips.

“I’m tough. I can handle it.” She puckered her lips and kissed me.

Pulling her closer into me, I deepened the kiss, quickly forgetting where we were. Since Ayame's been back I hadn't been able to keep my hands off her whenever she was near. Her leaving me really fucked me up. I didn't want to be without her again. I wasn't myself and I felt lost. That was a feeling I never wanted to endure again.

The door chimed indicating someone had entered the shop, but I wasn't ready to let Ayame go.

She giggled against my mouth and slowly pulled away. "You're making me forget I'm working." I pulled on my bottom lip with a crooked grin on my face.

"I can't help it. It's easy to get lost in your *chocolate kisses*." I pecked her lips again before pulling away.

I handed her the bag of food and stepped back before I was tempted to touch her again. She wasn't showing yet, but I did notice small changes like the permanent glow her skin seemed to have now. Her breasts had started to fill out more already too.

"I'm about to head next door and get ready for this evening. You coming to my house tonight or we going to yours?"

“I hate your bed so we can stay at my place.”

I frowned. “What’s wrong with my bed?”

“Your mattress is uncomfortable as hell.” Her hand went to her back. “Your babies don’t like that.”

I chortled and looked at her stomach. “Already using my babies against me, damn.” She snickered.

“I’m just saying.” She smiled shyly.

“Hey Ayame, someone’s on the phone for you,” June said, coming from the back.

“I guess duty calls. I’ll see you later. Thanks for the food.” She lifted the bag.

“No problem, baby.” I moved closer to her and kissed her again before turning to leave.

As I was leaving, Gage, Aisha, and their daughter were walking in.

“Wassup nigga,” I greeted him. “Aisha.” I nodded at her.

“Hey Austin. C’mon Bai Bai.” She waved and guided Bailey away.

“Sup. I’m glad you’re here. I wanted to talk to you about renting out your place for a weekend.”

That piqued my curiosity. “What’s the occasion?”

“Elijah just got a big deal with his brewery, and me and Tae wanted to throw something small for him.”

I nodded. “That’s what up. I need to get up with that nigga so I can get his shit in my bar. Just stop by sometime this week and let me know when. We can work out all the details and numbers then.”

“Preciate that man.” We slapped hands and I left out.

“What you think about going to Vegas at the end of the month?” I asked Ayame. We were sitting on her couch with my head in her lap.

“Vegas?” She looked at me shocked.

“Yeah, you said you always wanted to go, right? Let’s go. We can make it a group trip.”

“You know I’m pregnant, right?” She snickered.

I licked my lips and looked at her stomach then back at her face. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you can’t go to Vegas.

You not gone be drinking or no shit.”

She thought about. “Okay. I’ll talk to June. I don’t want to leave her again after just coming back.” I moved in and kissed Ayame’s bare stomach.

“I can’t wait to see your stomach grow.”

Ayame’s hand went over my head. “I’m not really excited about how my body is about to expand, but I read if I keep up with my running and then walking when I get bigger, it’ll help.”

I kissed her stomach again. “You still gone be beautiful. You know that right?” I glanced up at her and she had a dreamy smile on her face.

“I know.”

AYYAMME

“You expecting someone?” Austin asked.

I looked up from the eggs I was beating and shook my head. “No, not that I know of.” My brows furrowed together.

I rested the whisk on the edge of the bowl and turned to head to the front door with Austin behind me. I didn’t have to go to the chocolatier until later this afternoon and planned on milking as much time with Austin as I could.

“Who is it?” I asked when I got to the door.

Standing on my tippy toes, I looked out the peephole. A shocked expression appeared on my face and I hurriedly moved back, unlocking the door in the process.

“Who is it?” Austin asked.

“My parents.”

I wasn’t sure why they were here. I honestly didn’t know that they knew where Aunt Dee stayed.

The moment I opened the door, I stood there stuck. We had fixed things, but it was weird that the two of them were here right now. The last thing I expected was for them to come to BRF.

“Hey. What are yall doing here?” I asked, bouncing my eyes between the two.

“Is that any way to treat your parents?” I stepped back and allowed them in.

“I just wasn’t expecting you two. I didn’t even know you knew where I stayed.”

My mom scoffed. “I know me and my sister’s relationship wasn’t the best, but I knew where she laid her head.”

“Hi baby girl.” My dad pulled me into a hug.

“Hi daddy.” When he let me go, I shut the door. “Hi mommy.”

My mom was looking around the house and suddenly stopped and grinned at me. “Hi baby.” Her eyes examined me then moved to the left of me. “Who’s this?”

I followed her eye and a smile instantly appeared on my face. “This is Austin. Baby, my parents, Alisha and Greg.”

“It’s nice to meet you both.” Austin held his hand out.

My dad stared at it with a stern look before reaching out and shaking it. “Nice handshake you got there,” he commented.

My nose balled up. “Nice handshake?” I had never heard my dad say that before.

Austin held his hand out for my mom and she happily took it. “It’s nice to meet you. You’re the one that knocked my baby up, huh?”

“Mom!”

Austin laughed. “Guilty ma’am.”

“Well, it’ll be nice to get to know you.” When she let his hand go, she looked around the room again.

“So this was where Delilah stayed.” I could hear the sadness in my mom’s voice as she spoke.

“Yep, it’s pretty much the same as she left it. I only changed a few things around.” My mom walked deeper into the house while I turned and looked at my dad.

“I don’t see any bags.”

He shook his head. “We’re just here for the day. We got a hotel and we’ll be gone in the morning.”

“What brought this on?”

My dad looked over to where my mom was, near the fireplace. “With everything that happened when you were in town, we just wanted to come see you. I think your mom was feeling guilty about how long she and Delilah held their grudge and started to feel remorseful. Plus, you’re pregnant and we needed to meet the boy who caused it.” His eyes cut to Austin.

I wrapped my arms around Austin’s. “Well, here he is.” Austin stared down at me smiling.

“I can’t believe she still had this picture.” My mom was staring at a picture of her, my aunt, and my uncle.

Letting go of Austin, I walked over to her. “Yeah, it was here when I moved it. I couldn’t bring myself to move it.” My mom picked up the picture.

“We used to be so close.” She sighed and ran her hand over the picture. “I need to call my big-headed brother soon.” She stared at the picture a little longer before putting it back.

After clearing her throat, she turned to look at me. “We didn’t come here for this. We want to get to know your new life. We heard what you said back at the house, and we want to be better for you and our grandchild.”

“Grandchildren.”

“What?” She looked at me confused.

I smiled. “I’m having twins.” Her eyes bucked.

“Twins?”

“Yes, twins. We just found out.”

My mom blinked a couple of times. “Wow, that’s wow,” she snickered. “That’s great, Ayame.” She looked at Austin. “I guess that makes it even more important we get to know you.”

“Well, I was in the middle of making breakfast. We can talk over that?” I looked up at Austin.

“That’s fine with me.” He kissed my forehead.

“You see that look, Greg?”

“Yep.”

I looked at my parents confused. “What look?”

My dad wrapped his arms around my mom's shoulders and pulled her into him. "The look of two people in love."

"So this is where the magic happens, huh?" My mom looked around *ChocoLUXE*.

"Yes ma'am. All Aunt Dee's hard work is right here."

"I'm so embarrassed to admit this is only my second time ever being in this place. It wasn't anything like this back then though." I stayed quiet, allowing my mom to take in the building.

Breakfast had gone great. I wasn't sure how my parents would act towards Austin because they were unpredictable, but they surprisingly took to him. My dad was impressed that Austin owned a cigar bar; he was an occasional cigar smoker. Austin didn't seem to be nervous about meeting my parents. He actually was acting like he had always known them. By the end of breakfast, I knew they all accepted each other.

My mom wanted to see where I worked and tagged along with me to *ChocoLUXE*. I honestly think her confessing that Aunt Dee was my real mom made her miss her sister after

all this time. She had been holding on to this secret for so long, and it caused her and her sister to be at odds. Now that it's out, it probably made her wish she would have just let it go.

“I know I always gave you a hard time, but this place is nice, Ayame.” My mom turned and looked at me.

There were a couple of customers in the store right now but nothing over the top. “I think the reason why I was so upset about how you wanted to live is that you acted so much like my sister. Even though she birthed you, I was raising you, and when I saw that you still acted like her, I guess I got jealous, and it made me push you harder than I should have.” My mom's eyes grew sad. “Are you still upset about what you learned?”

I shook my head and walked past her, indicating for her to follow. I waved to the part-time worker at the counter and then we stepped in the back where the chocolate was made.

“Mom, what's going on?” I asked.

She looked around the workroom. “Nothing. I just hate all the time I missed with Delilah. I started looking through the photo album you left and it made me wish things had turned out differently. She trusted me enough to raise her baby and

then I just cut her out of my life over a disagreement. I let my jealousy get in the way of our relationship, and I guess being here seeing what her life was is just reminding me of that.” Mom’s eyes fell on me. “You look like her, you act like her, now you’re running her store. I just realized she might be gone, but you’re still here, and I don’t want our relationship to be strained. You’re about to have my grandkids, and I want to actively be in their lives, yours too.”

Tears filled my eyes. I had never heard my mom sound so sincere before. The hurt in her words was pulling at my heartstrings.

“We’re good, mommy. Everything that happened is in the past. I’m thankful you allowed Aunt Dee to still be a part of my life and that I got to know her. I’m about to have *two kids*. I am going to need you.” I stepped closer to her and the two of us hugged.

“I love you, mommy.”

“I love you too, baby.”

My parents meant it when they said they were only staying for a night. We ended up going to dinner that night

talking and getting caught up. For the first time, I felt connected to my parents and I couldn't be happier. I was sad to see them leave, but they promised to visit again soon.

Now I was hanging out with Tori and Noelle at Noelle's house. Zachariah was upstairs sleeping, the two of them were sipping wine, and I had water.

"Girl, I loved being pregnant, but I don't know what I would have done with two babies at once," Noelle said.

"I know. We both were shocked at first, but now I'm getting used to the fact." My hand unintentionally went to my stomach.

"Austin's soldiers were super marching," Tori laughed. "He made sure you couldn't run from him again."

I rolled my eyes playfully and giggled. "I can still leave. I'll just have two car seats with me." Noelle joined in with the laughs.

"Seriously though, Ayame, that's awesome. Pregnancy is a beautiful thing."

We got quiet for a moment.

We had just finished a game of Uno before the baby talk. "Let's play Jenga. I know that's a game I can win," Tori

complained.

“I’m the Jenga queen,” I bragged, sitting up.

“Y’all two are the most competitive people I’ve ever met.” Noelle shook her head and stood up.

“Are you guys going to come to Vegas?” Austin made a group chat for the Vegas trip, making sure to include everyone. He even invited Reid.

“I’m going! I’ve been wanting to go.”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to be away from my baby for too long.”

“It’s just a weekend, Noelle! You know Zach’s parents won’t mind keeping him.”

“I know, but he’s still so young.”

I snickered. I imagined I would be the same way when my twins were born.

“Hey, if you don’t mind me asking, I noticed your parents aren’t around. Do you not talk to them?” I looked at Noelle.

She sat the Jenga box on the table. “My dad is dead, and I don’t speak to my mother.”

“Thank God for that,” Tori mumbled.

I looked between the two. I remember Austin briefly summarizing Noelle’s story, but I could tell it was a sore spot for her, so I didn’t push. “I’m sorry about your dad.”

“Thank you. It’s fine though. Zach’s parents are a great stand-in for mine.”

I smiled thinking about the Morris’s. They were great people and welcomed me the moment they met me.

After getting the blocks set up, we started the game of Jenga. Noelle ended up bowing out when things got intense between Tori and me. It was a friendly game, but both of us refused to let the other win.

“What yall playing?” After I finished my turn, I looked up and noticed the guys walking in. They were at *Rocky’s* playing cards.

“I’m beating Tori in Jenga.” Austin took a seat next to me and kissed my temple.

“Don’t lie to them,” Tori said, slowly removing a block.

“This must be a serious game,” Zach laughed, pulling Noelle on his lap.

“It is. I let them two have it.” Noelle kissed him.

Chase had taken a seat close to Tori. “Let me play.”

“No, move.” She slapped his hand when he went to touch the tower.

“All you had to say was no.” He frowned, rubbing his hand.

I eyed the tower trying to figure out where to grab from. “Look right there, Coco.”

“No coaching.”

Austin tossed his hands up. “I got this, baby.” I found a block and went for it.

“Damn, I never thought I would meet someone as competitive as you, baby.” I kept my eye on the tower.

“I said the same thing, but these two are running neck and neck.”

Once I got the block out safely, I put it on the top of the others then turned to look at Austin. “Did you have fun tonight?”

“Yeah, you ain’t the only one who kicked ass tonight.” He pulled me into him. “Ask these niggas who won.”

“Dude wins two hands and suddenly he’s the greatest,”

Chase groaned.

“Three, and that’s to your two and Zach’s one.”

“That’s right, baby. We only win this way.” I gripped his soft goatee and poked my lips out.

His lips met mine. “Man, I had to worry about Zach’s ass now you. Tori, give me a kiss so we not left out.”

Laughing at Chase, I looked over at Tori, and she was looking at him like he was crazy. “I think not. Damnit, look what you made me do!” she whined when the tower tumbled over.

“I told you I was a beast at Jenga.” I clapped my hands.

“You only won because Chase’s ass threw me off. Let’s play again.”

“Let’s play teams. I’m trying to get in on this,” Zach said.

I looked back at Austin. “We got this, baby.”

He smirked and pecked my lips. “Hell yeah, we do.”

What started as a girls’ night ended up being a couples’ night, and I didn’t have one complaint at all. I had never had

girlfriends before or did couple things, so it was refreshing to have that now. The night was filled with friendly competition and laughs. By the end, I was exhausted but left feeling good.

AUSTIN

“Austin?” I turned around and frowned when I noticed Norine. I looked around my bar, not really sure what she was doing here. She hadn’t contacted me since our meet up and I damn sure hadn’t reached out to her.

“What you doing here?” I crossed my arms over my chest.

She cleared her throat. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m leaving town. I’m turning down the job and going back home. I *only* came here hoping things could be fixed between us but seeing that they can’t, there’s no reason for me to stay.”

“Cool.” I nodded.

Her face slightly fell. “Can we call truce? Even though our marriage is over, we were friends before. I just want to leave knowing we at least ended on good terms.”

I lowered my defensive stance some. “Look, Norine, Ima keep it real with you. I don’t have no type of feeling towards you. We had our time and it’s over. I’m happy with my girl and we’re starting a life together. Whatever feelings I had towards you, good or bad, are gone. We’re good.”

She brushed the hair out of her face and sighed. “Okay. Well, I guess I should go then.”

“Have a safe trip.”

I didn’t want to be cold to Norine, but I wanted her gone and out of my life. Her presence had shaken my life up enough. I was ready to move on without her. Whatever feelings I was holding on to when it came to her were gone. I was finally ready to move on and forward.

“Why are you smiling so big?” Ayame stared at me curiously as I stepped further into my living room.

I looked up from the papers in my hands and handed them to her.

Hesitantly, she grabbed them and looked them over. “It’s official?”

“Official official, baby. I’m divorced!” I snatched her up in my arms and spun her around, causing her to yelp then laugh.

“That’s the best news I’ve gotten all day.” She hugged me tightly.

“Me too!”

The last thing I was expecting was to come home to a letter from my lawyer telling me my divorce was finalized.

“Even though I knew it was coming, I can’t lie and say I’m not excited seeing it in black and white.” I placed my forehead on Ayame’s.

“You know I don’t plan on being this way long, right? It doesn’t have to be right away but I want you to have my last name.”

Her eyes fluttered. “You would want to get married again so soon?”

“I was separated for six years. I hardly call that a marriage.”

Small breaths left Ayame’s mouth. I could smell the chocolate she must have had at work on her breath. Wanting a

taste, I branded my lips with hers and bent down picking her up.

With her legs wrapped around my waist, I headed for my bedroom.

“I need to shower,” she protested when I laid her on my bed.

“You good. You smell so damn sweet.” I nuzzled my face into her neck and bit into it before soothing it by sucking on it.

A loud moan left her mouth.

Her body was grinding under me causing my dick to grow harder.

“I want to celebrate my divorce buried inside you.” I kissed on her neck.

I grabbed the bottom of her light pink shirt with her company logo on it and lifted it. “Can I do that?” I asked once I had her shirt off. I kissed the top of her cleavage.

With low eyes, Ayame ran her hand over my head then nodded.

“You can do *whatever* you want to me, baby,” she whispered, causing my dick to jump.

I sucked on the top of her breast before removing her left one from its cup. Taking it into my mouth, I sucked on it slowly.

“Anything?” I glanced at her and flicked my tongue over her nipple.

Her back arched up and her body jerked. “Anything, baby, *anything!*”

“I can’t believe both of my boys are finally going to have their own families.” My mom walked up and linked arms with mine and Zach’s.

It was nice out today so my dad brought the grill out. He invited both Zach and me over with the girls for dinner. He was currently on the grill, and my mom just came outside after checking on the sides.

Ayame was sitting over at the round glass table near the back door with Noelle. She didn’t go to work today because she wasn’t feeling well when she first woke up.

Taking my eyes off Ayame, I looked down at my mom. “You not gone cry are you?” She let go of my arm to hit me before laughing.

“No, fool. I’m just happy for the both of you. You’ve both grown up to be such fine young men. Both own your own successful business, having kids, getting married. It just makes me know me and your father raised you right.” She linked her arm with mine again.

“Yall did. You never had to worry about that, mama,” Zach commented.

“Aye man, speak for yourself. I gave up on this family thing after Norine left,” I chuckled as my eyes traveled back to Ayame. This time our eyes met and she gave me a small smile.

“Sometimes people are just placeholders to prepare you for who God really had in store for you. You and Ayame met when you both were ready to receive each other.”

“I can’t even argue with that, mama. We met completely by chance, and from that moment I wasn’t able to get her out of my mind.”

“I’m just excited I’m about to have two more grandkids! I miss you boys being little boys. Yall used to come in my room and snuggle up with me or on the couch. Your dad always said I babied yall too much, but yall were *my babies*. Sometimes I wish we would have had one more.”

“Now you know Zach’s sensitive self was the one who was cuddling with you! I wasn’t into all that.” I smirked at my brother.

“Just because I ain’t afraid to show my emotions don’t mean I’m sensitive.”

My mom snickered. “I love you Zachary, but your brother is right. Well, sort of. Austin, it was *you* who would come to me first most of the time. You always required so much attention. Zach would just follow behind you because he always wanted to be around you.” That caused me and Zach to smile.

“You were a nigga’s shadow growing up,” I joked.

He chuckled. “Man, I just didn’t want to play alone.”

My mom gave both of our arms a squeeze. “I didn’t mind though. Austin you were a handful, but Zach balanced you out and vice versa. I cherish all the memories from your youth. Now I can create memories with my grandkids.”

The smile on my mom’s face was priceless.

My mom ended up walking off to join my dad, leaving Zach and me alone.

“I’m glad the girls get along,” he commented, looking in their direction.

“Me too. Ayame didn’t have any females friends before she got here. Outside of her homeboy Reid, she didn’t really have any friends. I’m glad she was able to come here and make some. Plus, I wasn’t feeling her being cool with all niggas.” I frowned at the thought.

Zach chortled. “Yeah, Noelle has Tori, but I think Ayame is a good addition to their duo. The three of them get along well, and your girl is cool.”

“Yeah, she is.” I couldn’t help but tug the corners of my mouth upwards.

“You plan on locking her down soon?”

“Her ass already pregnant with *twins*! Ain’t much more locking down I can do.”

“Nigga you know what I mean. You gone marry her?”

I watched Ayame for a moment, loving the light I saw surrounding her. “I knew what you meant, and yeah, I want to. I lowkey wanna do it before twins come. Something small and intimate with our families.”

“What’s stopping you?”

I shrugged. “My divorce was just finalized. She’s pregnant. It ain’t even been a year. Just don’t want to go *too* fast and fuck shit up. Things are good with us and I don’t want it to change.”

“C’mon big bro. I thought you let go of that negative ass mindset. Things might change a little, but it’s only for the better. Yall love each other and ain’t no time limit on that. Take it from someone who knows, your life can get shaken up in an instance, don’t *waste time* being held back by *fear*.”

He patted my back and walked off.

I knew he was right. After seeing everything he and Noelle went through, it only made sense he was thinking like that. I didn’t want to waste time with Ayame.

I followed in the direction Zach went, heading towards the girls. When I sat down I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her into me.

“You feeling better?” I kissed her temple.

She glanced up at me smiling. “A little. The soup your mom gave me when we first got here helped.” She sunk into my side.

“I’m glad. Let me know if you start feeling sick again and we can leave.”

“I’m fine, Austin. I know this comes with pregnancy. I’m enjoying myself.”

“Austin, I can’t believe I’m seeing you like this. I love it!” Noelle gushed as she handed my nephew to my brother.

“Mannnn, gone, sis.” I chuckled. “I’m trying to be like yall. In love and enjoying my family.” I dragged my eyes down to Ayame. She was staring at me dreamy eyed with a smile on her face.

“Looking at you two, I can say yall are already there.”

I bit down on my bottom lip and lowered my eyes. “You love me?” I asked Ayame lowly.

She bobbed her head. “You know I do.”

An eyebrow rose. “For how long?” One of the corners of her mouth rose.

“Forever.”

My heart quickened. “Promise.”

She moved up some and poked her lips out. Meeting her halfway, I pecked her lips. “Promise,” she whispered.

AYANME

Vegas nights...

“You over here losing money, ain’t you?” Reid stepped over to the slot machine I was playing on and sat next to me.

I cut my eyes to him before pulling the lever again. “Don’t bring that negativity over here. I’m finally starting to break even.”

He smiled. “You feeling okay?” He looked me over.

“Yep, I think the flight caused me to get sick, but I’m fine today.”

We had been in Vegas for the past two nights, and so far, it’s been a great weekend. We had two more days before we left to go back home. I was excited when I found out Reid was joining the group. I was shocked when he said he was bringing Heather along.

“How are you and Heather? I wasn’t expecting you to bring her.” Tori, Noelle, and Heather had no desire to gamble right now. Instead, they went to the bar for drinks. The guys were a few feet away from me at the card tables.

“Man, I didn’t really have a choice. Shit still hasn’t been good with us. I could tell she was pulling away from me more and more, and I can’t lose her. I told her I was willing to try to be exclusive with her, and then this trip came up, so I invited her with me.”

My head whipped to Reid. “You didn’t tell her that just so she won’t leave you did you? I hope you’re not manipulating that girl to stay around.”

His face went blank. “It ain’t even like that, Charm. I fuck with Heather tough. I can even admit I might love her. I just got dog ass ways that’s hard to shake. You know how my dad was. I hate to say it, but I’m just like his ass, just without all the damn kids.” I laughed.

Reid’s dad was a rolling stone for real and wasn’t trying to change. As far as I know, his youngest kid had just turned six.

“Please don’t start either! Having a bunch of kids with multiple women is tacky.” I bunched my nose up.

“Now you know that ain’t even me. You know how much damn drama my dad be going through with his baby mamas.”

“How many is it now?”

“Shit, like nine, I think. I don’t need those kinds of problems.” He shook his head.

“Well, I hope you get your act together! If you lose Heather then you have no one to blame but yourself.” He frowned then looked over his shoulder where the other girls were.

“Coco, you hungry?” Austin walked up to me asking.

I rubbed my belly. “Me and your kids need to eat.” He grinned and shook his head.

“You gone stop using my kids, man. You always been greedy.”

“No lies there,” Reid commented.

“Shut up! I’m eating for three now!” I giggled.

Austin grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the seat. Everyone else came and joined us.

“Where yall wanna eat?”

“I really want pizza,” I spoke up.

“Pizza? Don’t no one want that,” Chase complained.

“I do! With pineapples, jalapenos, and bacon. Oh and extra cheese!” My mouth was watering just thinking about it.

“That shit sounds like heartburn waiting to happen.” I looked up at Austin with my lip poked up.

“I want pizza.”

He enveloped me into him. “We’ll get your pizza, a’right baby? Then the rest of us can find something else to eat.”

“And you used to talk shit about me. Ayame got you wrapped around her finger,” Zach laughed.

“If you see how her attitude changes when she’s not fed, then you would understand.”

I laughed. “I am not that bad!” Austin’s face went blank, which caused me to laugh harder.

Rolling my eyes, I looked around at our friends. Reid and Heather seemed to be getting along well despite his shaky actions. Zach and Noelle never had problems from what I’ve seen, and Tori and Chase were being themselves. Everyone

was having a good time which I was happy about. The group welcomed Reid and Heather with open arms.

“A’right, come on. I want to get in the pool when we get back,” Tori said.

“I wanna get in too.” Chase licked his lips and looked her over.

She cut her eyes in his direction before rolling her eyes and walking off, making everyone laugh.

Austin kept me securely tucked under him, and I didn’t mind one bit. I loved the extra affection and attention he gave me.

“We’re going to be late getting down to the pool,” I moaned as Austin hugged me from behind kissing on the back of my neck.

“We’ll be okay. Ain’t no one checking for us anyways.” Austin moved his hand down my stomach resting it there for a moment. The bottom half was slowly starting to form.

“I like you in this color,” he mumbled against my neck before sucking on it. I was wearing a peach-colored two-

piece. I looked at the mirror in front of us. My breasts looked huge in the top due to them starting to swell from the babies. They filled the top perfectly.

“I swear I can’t keep my hands off you.” His hands started traveling south. “You don’t want my hands off you, do you?”

My head fell back when he brushed over my hardened bud. “No,” I told him breathlessly letting my fight go. I spread my legs allowing him more access to my pearl.

“You’re so wet. That’s for me?”

I bit down on my bottom lip and nodded.

My breathing picked up when he started fingering my clit. I grinded against his hand as my stomach tightened.

“I want to feel you, baby,” I begged, closing my eyes.

“Walk forward,” he whispered and took the top of my ear into his mouth.

Following his directions, I stepped closer to the dresser. As soon as I was close enough, I grabbed it.

Austin wasted no time, snatching the side ties of my bathing suit causing them to fall, and plunging in me.

“Shit,” I moaned as he filled my walls.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I gripped the dresser tightly.

“Fuck, I love this shit,” he gritted while moving in and out of me.

I started throwing my ass back on him, matching his thrusts.

Austin’s dick always felt like it was made especially for me. My pussy was molded to fit him perfectly.

“Just like that baby, keep throwing that ass.” He gripped my hips and pushed deeper into me.

“Austin!” I whimpered.

My eyes fluttered open. I looked in the mirror and watched Austin as he fucked me. He was looking down at himself moving in and out of me. His forehead creased, his eyes were low. Every so often, his jaw would clench, and his nose would flare.

I squeezed my walls tightly. Watching him, watch *us* turned me on even more.

“Lighten up, Coco,” he groaned.

I shook my head and started throwing my ass faster.

I continued watching him until his head rose and we made eye contact. We seemed to become one at that moment. My heart threatened to leap out my throat and my stomach quivered.

“I’m close,” I moaned, gripping the dresser tighter. I had to fight not to close my eyes. I wanted to maintain eye contact with Austin.

“I feel it, baby. Don’t hold that shit back.” He wrapped an arm around me and thumbed my clit. My eyes rolled to the back of my head again as my stomach tightened.

My moans filled the room and my knees buckled.

“Cum with me, baby,” I begged, squeezing my walls.

His strokes became faster and I could feel his dick jump inside me.

It didn’t take long for the two of us to cum together.

My body instantly felt weak, but Austin was holding me tightly so I wouldn’t fall.

“Now I wanna sleep.” I looked over my shoulder lazily.

Austin chuckled and pulled out of me causing me to shiver.

“You can sleep later. Let’s get cleaned up.” He kissed the back of my neck.

I wanted to suggest we just stay in the room. All I wanted was my bed now, but I decided against it. We didn’t come to Vegas to stay cooped up in the hotel all day. I was ready to have a little fun in the sun.

“I’m glad we ended up coming out here. With opening the bar and then all the bullshit we just went through, I needed this. Hell, we both did. You’ve been working hard,” Austin said as we got dressed.

Today was our last full day in Vegas and it was bittersweet. I was enjoying our trip, but I was ready to get back home and out of this heat.

ChocoLUXE and *Rocky’s* both have been doing exceptionally well. We have both been putting in a lot of work. I was trying to introduce something new to the inventory, and Austin’s lounge had been getting booked for private events since Gage mentioned he was throwing one there.

We had a doctor's appointment right before we left and our babies were healthy too.

"I know we have to come back when I'm not pregnant. I want to drink and go out with everyone!" I poked my bottom lip out as I snapped one of the straps on the jean overalls I had on.

Yesterday at the pool everyone was in the pool playing chicken and the losers had to take shots. They had played a couple more drinking games that, of course, I couldn't participate in. Austin tried to hold back, but I encouraged him to play. Just because I couldn't drink didn't mean he couldn't. I didn't mind because I was still having a good time.

"We can do that, baby! Just say the word." He nodded, walking up to me. "You ready?"

We were meeting everyone for breakfast before we all went and did our own thing for the day. I forced Austin to schedule us for a couple's massage that I couldn't wait for.

"Yep, let's go! I bet everyone has a hangover too," I giggled as we left our room.

"Hey!" Heather waved when she noticed us.

We were all on the same floor.

“Yall look like shit,” I laughed, seeing how out of it everyone looked.

“Man, I’m never drinking with yall again,” Reid complained.

He lowered the sunglasses on his face.

“No one told yall to go to the casino and overdue it.” Heather cut her eyes at him.

He waved her off. “Let’s go. My stomach is touching my back right now.”

“Wait, Tori and Chase aren’t here,” Noelle said.

I looked around noticing she was right.

“They were down at the casino with me. They were pretty fucked up.”

“Her room is right there. Let’s knock,” I suggested and headed for Tori’s door.

Everyone waited as I knocked on the door.

“Tori’s a deep sleeper, especially drunk. She probably isn’t coming,” Noelle said.

“I hear something though.” I knocked on the door again.

I could hear voices behind the door and what sounded like arguing. The lock started to turn suddenly.

“Don’t open the-” Tori’s voice trailed off and Chase appeared. He was only in a pair of basketball shorts.

My eyes widened. “Wassup yall. We’ll meet yall down there.” He didn’t wait for us to answer, he just shut the door.

I turned and looked at everyone else. They all looked as amused and shocked as I was.

“I knew something was up with them.” Noelle was the first to speak.

“Well, I guess they’re out.” I laughed and walked back over to Austin.

“Chase ass been wanting Tori for a while,” Zach commented.

“Yeah, they argue too much, so maybe this will chill them out,” Austin followed up.

We all headed for the elevator and down to the lobby.

While we waited, I grabbed Austin’s hand. He paused talking to Reid and his brother and looked at me.

“Wassup baby?”

I shook my head. “Nothing, I just wanted to touch you.”

Giving my hand a squeeze, he went back to his conversation.

I had fun the whole time we were here in Vegas, but I was anticipating it being just Austin and me. He had been keeping a permanent smile on my face since we fixed things, and I had a feeling nothing about that would change going forward.

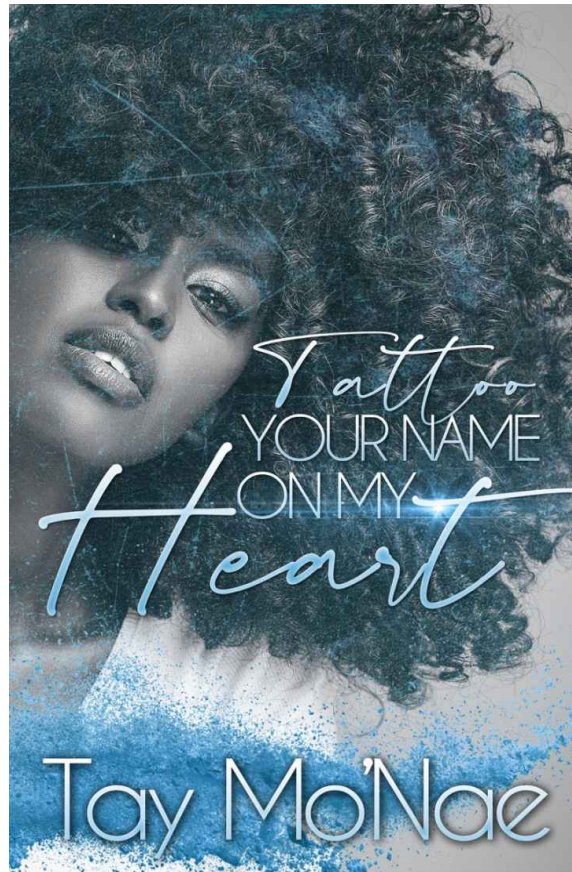
The end!

Want the background story on Noelle and Zachary? Check out their story now!

<https://amzn.to/32K0mRa>



Up next



My eyes tightened as my scold deepened.

I could feel my irritation growing as the girl under me yelling pierced my ear.

“Shut the fuck up!” I growled pushing her face into the bed and pummeled her from behind. All I wanted to do was bust a nut and go about my day but her ass was in here screaming like I was killing her.

I glanced down at her ass slamming against my pelvis. Each time it collided ripples formed in it. Her ass clapping along with her muffled screams filled the room.

Gripping her hair tighter I pulled roughly on my bottom lip, slamming into her a couple more times. Her body shook as her pussy locked tighter around my dick.

Feeling my own nut rising I quickly snatched out of her and filled the condom.

Marissa, the girl, body clasped the moment I let her body go.

Getting off the bed I headed for her bathroom to flush the condom, bringing my sweatpants and briefs along with me. The quicker I got dress the quicker I could get out of here.

I made eye contact with myself in the mirror and ran my hand over my head. It had been a couple weeks since I had a haircut and my curls, which I hated, were threatening to grow. My beard was fuller though and that's what I wanted.

Shaking my head I washed my hands before heading out the bathroom where Marissa was. She was in the process of opening the bathroom door when I stepped out. Jumping back, she smiled at me and ran her tongue over her lips.

Marissa was thick as hell shaped like a coke bottle. She was still naked, and her weave was now in a ponytail at the top of her head.

"You're leaving?" As she spoke, she went to touch my chest but I hurried and grabbed her wrist.

"You know better." I peered down at her and spoke through gritted teeth.

Her eyes widened and she slightly winced when I tightened my grip. "Keep your damn hands to yourself." Roughly I threw her wrist down and stepped around her so I could prepare to leave.

"Zay, I don't understand what your issue is. We've been fucking for weeks now and you don't let me touch you,

you only want to have sex in one position and-.” I grabbed my keys, tuning her out.

Marissa wasn't the first girl to complain about the rules I set in place when we first started having sex and she wouldn't be the last. I wasn't forcing her ass to stay around. If she couldn't comply with my rules, she could easily be replaced.

Once I had my jacket and made sure I had my keys and phone I started out of her bedroom. Marissa was still complaining behind me, but I kept ignoring her. I wasn't about to argue with her about shit she knew about from the beginning.

One thing I never did was send mixed signals. I let whatever girl I was dealing with off rip what I expected when it came to us. I didn't do relationships, nor did I do all the touching shit. I wanted to fuck, no extra shit in between. Once our nut was gotten then we went our separate ways. I didn't belong to anyone, and I never gave any woman false hope that shit with us would be deeper than sex. Soon as they started catching feelings and doing too much, I left them where they were at.

“So that’s it you don’t have shit else to say?” Marissa grabbed my coat making me stop as I reached for her front door.

Hastily turning around I bit down on my back teeth. “Stop fucking touching me, Marissa. I told you what it was from day one. If you can’t handle it then this shit is a wrap! Get yo feelings in check!”

I could see the hurt display on her face but I didn’t care. She had set herself up.

This time when I tried to leave, she didn’t stop me.

Once I was in my car I sat in it for a moment allowing it to warm up. Spring was slowly starting to show its face but the temperature was still catching up.

I was messing with the touch screen on my dashboard to find a playlist to listen to on my drive home when a call interrupted it.

My temple instantly begin to throb and my jaw tightened seeing my dad’s name appear on the screen. Without a second thought, I ignored the call and finally found something to listen to.

His ass knew I didn't fuck with him and that we had nothing to talk about.

“Aye Zav this shit nice as fuck.” Bryan said looking at his arm in the mirror of my room. I had just finished tattooing a portrait of his late mother. It had taken a couple sessions due to his schedule but it was done.

“I hope you ain't expect anything less,” I smirked while cleaning up my station. I had an hour until my next appointment and planned on going to grab something to eat beforehand. I had been tattooing since nine this morning and all I had was some chips in between. Today was full of larger pieces which made the time go by faster.

“My girl been looking to get some ink, Ima have her hit you up.” He told me digging into his pocket.

“I think I'm booked through the rest of the month but check with Maddy in the front to make sure,” I told him pausing my cleaning to grab the money he was handing me.

“Let me wrap it up for you,” I told him grabbing what I needed.

A few minutes later Bryan was heading out my booth into the lobby while I finished up cleaning my area.

Ink'd was my baby. From the moment I could pick up a pencil I took to drawing. Over time it became a way for me to escape the reality of the hell I was living in. When I was sixteen I snuck and got my first tattoo after that I became addicted. They became the stress reliever I didn't know I needed. When I turned 18 I got licensed to start tattooing. When I first started off I was working out the house. I had a small hole-in-the-wall apartment and I started off doing people I was cool with. My work spoke for itself and my name started to spread around town.

A year later the shop I normally got my tattoos from had an opening and the owner offered me the position. He had been mentoring me since I first took interest in tattooing, but I wasn't trying to be in a shop right away. When I was 23, I decided it was time for me to venture off on my own, it took a few months but eventually, I got everything in order and *Ink'd* was open.

My eyes went down to my arms that were covered with ink. If you could find an inkless space anywhere then I'd be surprised. Some of them I had done myself, practicing. I had

never gotten them covered up because it reminded me of my progress as an artist.

Standing up I pulled on my jeans then grabbed my phone off the table next to me. Grabbing my hoody on the rack near my door I pulled it over my head and headed out the room.

My shop stayed packed, I had three other artists who worked here, two of us were certified to do piercings as well and all of us stayed booked so I wasn't shocked when I stepped into a lobby semi-full of people. I looked at my favorite area in the lobby. The wall that was originally white was covered in graffiti. On the wall, I had all the artist's pictures lined up and pictures of their work under them. I took pride and making sure I hired the best artist and so far none of them had disappointed.

"I'm about to go grab something to eat. If my next appointment comes early, let me know." I told Maddy as I walked past the front desk.

"Zav, the editor of *Word Weekly* called and left a message for you. They want to do a cover story over the shop."

I stopped for a moment. “I’ll call them back in the morning, just set the paper on the table in my booth,” I told her causing her to nod.

Word Weekly was a local magazine in *Butter Ridge Falls* every month they did a black-owned business spotlight.

Soon as I stepped outside the cool breeze instantly graced my face. I inhaled the fresh air, feeling some tension leave my body as I exhaled.

It was sunny out and the street was full of people. I had got a steal when I bought this building. It was in the heart of downtown right by the *D12 District*.

Heavy traffic flow was a given.

I started down the street where a sub shop was located. I knew it wasn’t going to fully satisfy my hunger but it would hold me over for now.