

MONICA WALTERS

Deeper
THAN LOVE

DEEPER THAN LOVE

A BEROTTE FAMILY BOOK

MONICA WALTERS

CONTENTS

Introduction

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Epilogue

Afterword

Other Titles by Monica Walters

INTRODUCTION

Hello, readers!

Thank you for purchasing and/or downloading this book. This work of art contains explicit language, lewd sex scenes, and topics that may be sensitive to some readers. For a full disclosure, click the link below.

[Bit.ly/3reYcGW](https://bit.ly/3reYcGW)

This is book two of a new family of books... The Berotte Family (pronounced Bee-Rot). It starts with the father, and the following books trickle down to the kids. So if some things seem incomplete where the sub characters are involved, that was done intentionally. Those issues will be resolved in their books. It is highly recommended that you read *Love On Replay*, book one of this family series, before reading this one.

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

Alexz and Axton are something serious! I hope you enjoy the ride this story is going to take you on.

Monica

PROLOGUE

Alexz

MY ENTIRE BODY WAS TREMBLING AS I DROVE TO DAD'S house to pick up Mama Nissa. My heart was racing, and thoughts of what I should do were still running through my mind uncontrollably. I should have been sure about what I was doing... sure about how I felt. But I wasn't. The only thing I was sure about was that I didn't want to be bothered with Knowledge Rucker any longer.

The way in which he tried to deceive me into believing we would get married and just be the perfect family was sickening. When I found out about his true intentions, it confirmed the hesitancy I was feeling about him, but it also hurt like hell. I loved him and, unfortunately, I still did. At the same time, I hated him for making me feel the way I did.

When my brother, Shyrón, found out he wanted me to be a sister wife in Atlanta, I nearly lost it. Another woman was pregnant with his child out there, and he was in the process of seeking a third woman to be a part of his bullshit. I didn't know who he took me for, but he clearly didn't think at all. Even if I would have gone to Atlanta with him, I would have left just as quickly when I would have seen another bitch in what was supposed to be a home for strictly me and him.

While I had heard of people that engaged in those situations, I was *not* for the foolery. It was one of those things where black people would say, *if you like it, I love it*. However,

I was done with his ass... Middle finger up... Boy, bye. The problem was that he left a parting gift. As much as I was beginning to hate him, I couldn't hate the life growing inside of me. I was having second thoughts about what I was about to do.

I knew now was the best time to do it since Knowledge was fresh out of the hospital. He'd threatened to intervene and keep me from aborting the baby, which was what led to all of this. Dealing with his bullshit any longer than I had to was what made me even try to make the decision. I wanted to be done with him, and had a neighbor not called the police, my daddy and Shy would have probably killed him. This baby was a part of me too though. I was happy to know I would be a mother, although I was somewhat fearful history would repeat itself.

My mother died during childbirth with me, so I never knew what it felt like to have a mother. While my dad and brothers provided everything I needed and could possibly want, the love of a mother was something I'd always craved. My reoccurring thought was me wondering if I would be a good mother. So when Dad became serious with Ms. Anissa, I gravitated to her immediately, just as he had. She was so warm and gentle, like I'd always imagined a mother to be.

Hopefully, she would be able to offer me some clarity about what I was doing. Getting rid of my baby was starting to make me feel sick inside, even with knowing punk ass Knowledge was the father. He'd been released from the hospital yesterday, but he had some broken bones. There was no way he was in any shape to come after me right now, or probably for the next two to three months.

When I turned in the driveway, Mama Nissa was standing on the porch. She and Dad had an amazing relationship already. She'd brought him out of the dark place he'd subconsciously been in, and I now felt comfortable not checking on him so much. Before her, I used to call or text him at least twice a day, to make sure he was okay. While I still hadn't heard them profess their love for one another, I

could clearly see it, and so could my four brothers and her two sons.

She smiled then made her way to my car, and despite the turmoil I was in, I smiled too. For the past week, she and I had been inseparable. Since Knowledge had thrown me to the ground and caused me to break my arm, I'd been off work. It was so amazing getting to know her, and I already loved her as if she was my mother. The tenderness and care she showed me had drawn me to her, and her hugs were everything.

When she got in the car, she leaned over and kissed my cheek. "Hey, Alexz. How are you feeling, baby?"

"Hey, Mama Nissa. I'm not sure. I'm having doubts about doing this."

I didn't even attempt to back out of the driveway. I just sat there, not knowing what to do. Mama Nissa glanced at my trembling hands on the steering wheel, then gently removed one and held it between hers. As she rubbed it, she said, "Take deep breaths, baby. Think about how you feel having to interact with Knowledge until your child is of age to interact with him on his or her own. I'm not here to encourage or discourage you, but I just want you to think of all the positives and negatives."

"I feel so guilty and selfish."

"Don't. Someone once told me that babies are gifts from God, but sometimes, we aren't able to receive that gift. Instead of bringing a child in this life that will cause more turmoil for you and possibly for the child as well, it would be better to give that gift back to God until you're ready to receive it. The environment may not be conducive to raising a child in. The joys of motherhood are endless, but only when you're ready and are mentally healthy. However, it's your decision."

She kissed my hand, and I knew what I had to do. I nodded then put the car in gear and headed to the clinic. I tried to make small talk on the way there to get my mind off things, but it wasn't working out. Mama Nissa responded to whatever I said or asked, then we'd get quiet again. She was still

holding my hand, showing her support for whatever my decision would be, and I appreciated that so much.

When I got to the clinic, my nerves only got worse. I'd never been this nervous about anything. I was a confident, straight forward woman. I stuck to my guns about what I wanted, although my family called me stubborn. But this... this was so hard. I'd dreamt of one day having a family, only for it to be snatched from me. That shit was painful.

After parking, we got out the car and made our way to the door. My mouth watered like I would throw up at any moment. I was just as nervous yesterday when I went to the doctor's office for an exam. I was only about six weeks along. They'd offered to put small dilator sticks into the opening of my cervix, but I opted for medication to open my cervix. That was just in case I changed my mind.

I squeezed Mama Nissa's hand tighter as I opened the door and walked inside the clinic. When I looked at her, she gave me a reassuring smile and rubbed my hand between hers once again. After checking in at the front and taking the paperwork to fill out, we took our seats. I was scared as hell. Mama Nissa took the papers from me because my handwriting was barely legible with as much as I was shaking. It didn't help that it was freezing in here.

I told her the information, and she filled out everything for me. She was a godsend, but suddenly, I wanted my daddy. Whenever I felt scared, inadequate, or nervous, he would hold me in his arms, reminding me of how resilient and strong I was and how I could overcome anything I put my mind to. Quickly grabbing my phone, I sent him a text. *Daddy can you please meet us at the clinic? I need you... please.*

I sent the address in a separate text and allowed the tears to roll down my cheeks. Quickly wiping them, I took deep breaths. If I was in so much turmoil about this, maybe I shouldn't go through with it. It seemed I couldn't be decisive to save my life. Daddy responded almost immediately and said he was on his way. I could have up to two people with me, and I needed all the support I could get.

Turning to Mama Nissa, I said, “I hope you aren’t offended, but I asked Daddy to meet us.”

“Why would I be offended? That man has been your protector for your entire life. You and I haven’t known one another but for two weeks. I’m here to support you and whatever you want to do. If having your father here will help soothe your nerves, then that’s what’s necessary.”

She put her arm around me, and I leaned into her, allowing her to comfort me in only a way that she could. When she started humming, I closed my eyes and let it soothe me in ways I didn’t know were possible. After laying against her for a couple more minutes, I took my paperwork to the front desk. Most of my info had been sent over by my doctor anyway. It was just a preliminary type of sheet they had everyone fill out.

As I sat, my daddy walked through the door. He sat next to me and grabbed my hand and kissed it. My support system was strong, and no matter what decision I made, I knew they would have my back, always. Within a couple more minutes, the nurse called me to the back. I took a deep breath and stood, making my way to her in what felt like slow motion.

She smiled and led the three of us to a room. She wasn’t that personable. Although she smiled, she didn’t say much of anything, just gave instructions and left out. My dad stepped out of the room while I got undressed, then came back in. I lay on the bed, thinking about what I was doing. There was still time to change my mind.

“I MADE YOU SOME SOUP, SIS. YOU WANT ME TO BRING IT IN here, or do you want to come to the kitchen?” Chad asked.

I lay in the darkness of my childhood room, cramping, bleeding, and crying. I’d gone through with the abortion, and I cried almost the entire time while Mama Nissa held my hand. This was the first thing in my life that broke the floodgates open on my tears, and they didn’t seem to want to stop. All four of my brothers seemed to be in shock when they saw my

tears, and they were all being extremely sensitive and tender with me.

I'd only been here an hour or so. After the procedure, I was in recovery for a couple of hours. When it was time to go, my daddy carried me out of there like a baby, and that only made me even more emotional. Pulling the covers from my head, I turned to Chad and said, "In here. Thank you."

He nodded then brought the bed tray inside. As I tried to sit up, he helped me get situated. I moved the heating pad over my abdomen as he kissed my forehead. It was the most tender Chad had ever been with me. They were *all* being so tender, but like with my dad, they were all making me more emotional. I had to get them out of this, especially Chad since he was the one I fought with all the time. "Who told you to put your crusty ass lips on me, boy?"

His eyebrows lifted as a smile played at his lips. "Soon as you feeling better... just wait. It's on."

I gave him a weak smile as he set the tray over my lap then gently nudged me in the head. I chuckled slightly as he left the room to get my soup. My plan was to stay here tonight and go home tomorrow, but my dad said that I could stay as long as I needed to. It wasn't like Mama Nissa was living here yet. I knew it was only a matter of time though.

When Chad returned with my soup, I noticed Dylan was behind him with a bottle of water. I really didn't have much of an appetite, but I knew that I needed to eat something, especially with as much as I had thrown up afterward. That was why I was in recovery for so long. The thought of what I'd done was sickening to me. I closed my eyes, willing myself to keep the tears at bay. I was tired of crying.

After Chad set my bowl of soup on my Tray, Dylan leaned over and kissed my head and said, "Love you, Alex with a Z."

"Love y'all too. Thank you."

One thing I could count on was my family being here for me. I knew that would never change. I just prayed that I could

show up for myself, because I needed me more than anyone else.

A xton

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL I WAS THINKING COMING TO slow ass Beaumont. I'd volunteered to fill in for Dr. West while he was on vacation. I was a gastroenterologist, but I wasn't fortunate enough to have my own practice yet. I knew this was an amazing opportunity to get a feel for how things would be when I finally did. I'd been working in the ER at Methodist Hospital in Houston and also assisting Dr. Chavez in her office one day a week.

Dr. West had moved here from Houston about four years ago while I was still in medical school. I was preparing to intern with him when he suddenly decided to leave. I didn't know what prompted the move, but he'd told me that he would look out for me. That shit had gone in one ear and out of the other. People always made promises they had no intent of keeping. So when he called with the proposition to run his office for two weeks, I was beyond surprised.

I put in for a two-week vacay at the hospital, and now the time was here. He'd given a couple of months' notice so I could prepare and learn his staff. He only had two nurses, two receptionists, a phlebotomist that was a nurse as well, and an ultrasound technician on staff. So it was pretty easy to learn them. I'd committed names and faces to memory as if they were my own staff. I'd even asked about personalities so it would be an easy transition.

The most intriguing of the crew was a woman named Alexzandria Berotte. She was beautiful, but he'd told me not to get caught up in her looks. She was deadly. I'd laughed at him like he was over exaggerating. There was no way this sweet, innocent face could be that bad. She didn't look to be any taller than five feet five judging by the group photo, had beautiful skin the color of wheat, full lips, and a head full of black and brown curly tresses that fell to her shoulders. She was absolutely gorgeous. Her nose ring only added to her beauty.

As I got situated in the office, I thought about how hard it had been to find a decent place for a drink last night. I'd gotten in town yesterday afternoon, so that didn't give me much time to scope out the city. I ended up at Madison's with a bunch of white folks. I looked like a fly in the damn milk. Although I wasn't dark skinned, I was still darker than them. The dreads really made me stick out. A couple of white women approached me, but they could have stayed where they were. My melanated sisters were all I was checking for.

My phone rang as I looked over charts for the day's appointments. When I saw it was my mother, I sent her to voicemail. I'd call her later today. She could keep a nigga on the phone for hours when she was excited about something, and she was extremely excited about me having this opportunity. I was her middle child but her oldest son. We'd all found our paths right away. My older sister was the superintendent of Humble Independent School District, and my younger brother was an anesthesiologist.

Although I was a doctor, I hadn't quite gotten to where I wanted to be just yet. I wanted my own practice, and she knew this was significant for me. As I continued looking over charts, a woman knocked on the doorframe. I smiled at her and said, "Come on in."

I recognized her as one of the nurses named Brittany. When she walked in, Alexzandria walked in behind her. I stood from my seat and extended my hand to Brittany. "Hello, Dr. Vaughn. I'm Brittany, and this is Alexzandria. We are the nurses on staff here and will be working closely with you."

“Nice to meet you, Brittany and Alexzandria.”

“Call me Alexz, please.”

I nodded at the beauty. The picture didn't do her justice. I almost got caught up staring at her, and my scalp was starting to sweat under these dreads. I pushed my black rimmed glasses up on the bridge of my nose, and said, “Then you can call me Dr. Ax.”

She chuckled. “That might be a bit intimidating.”

I smiled and nodded repeatedly. “Yep. I like it that way. Patients don't tend to bullshit you when they're intimidated.”

Their eyebrows lifted as they glanced at one another. I didn't know what their silent communication was, but I was definitely curious. “What does that look mean?”

Brittany shied away and shook her head as Alexz stepped forward. “You seem a little arrogant. Our patients gon' put you in your place.”

“It seems you are going to put me in my place too,” I responded as one of my dreads fell from the bun I had them in.

“I don't know any other way to be.” She stared for a second then said, “Just let them hang.”

I frowned slightly as I stared back at her and bit my bottom lip. She was so damn fine. I gave her a head nod then pulled them down. When the two-strand twists I had them in fell past my shoulders, her eyes widened slightly. I glanced over at Brittany and asked, “That better?”

She shrugged and said, “They look nice either way.”

When I turned back to Alexz, she was still staring at me, and her lips had parted. *Shit!* She was gon' make me lose my cool in here. “Well? This better?”

“Yeah. Your forehead doesn't look as big now.”

Brittany chuckled as I frowned. “I'm sure your forehead is probably just as big under those curls.”

She frowned and lifted her hair like she was about to put it in a ponytail. *Damn.* I thought it was a wig. Her forehead

wasn't big either. "Well, it may not be your forehead, but that neck is longer than most."

She frowned harder then rolled her eyes and left the office. I glanced at Brittany, and she said, "Uh oh. Your personalities are extremely similar. This is gon' be some good entertainment."

She turned to leave the office then turned back and said, "The first appointment will be here in fifteen minutes. Good luck."

I nodded at her as I remembered Dr. West's words. *She's deadly*. I slightly rolled my eyes. It was gonna be a long ass two weeks. My best bet was to just keep to myself and only talk to her about patients, although I could tell she was feeling me. She thought I was attractive. When I let my dreads down and she beheld what all God had put before her, she swallowed hard before her lips had parted. Her mouth had probably watered. I could see her swallow in my damn peripheral while I was engaging Brittany.

I was slightly arrogant, but it worked for me. I was a nice-looking guy, and I took care of myself physically and mentally. Most women took notice. I huffed then put on my white coat and slid my stethoscope under my hair and around my neck. *Here goes nothing*.

"SO, HOW WAS YOUR FIRST DAY? I'VE BEEN WAITING TO HEAR about it all day!" my mama said excitedly.

I smiled at the sound of her voice. I'd spoken to her on my lunch break, letting her know that today had been somewhat slow. They were all follow-up appointments before noon. When we reopened at one, things had picked up a bit. "The first day was good. Things picked up a bit after lunch, and there were two patients that I'd had to schedule for colonoscopies because of rectal bleeding. The staff is pretty friendly, except one nurse," I said as I thought about Alexz.

"Uh oh. I bet she's a mean old white woman, huh?"

“Naw. The total opposite. A young black woman. Told me I had a big forehead, so I told her she had a long neck.”

My mama laughed as I thought about how I purposely did shit to try to irritate her. Whenever possible, I initiated contact. If she handed me a chart, I made sure our hands touched. If she walked by me, I brushed against her. Watching her face turn red made me chuckle. One time, when I’d walked by her, she’d stuck her foot out and almost tripped my ass. I just knew she was gon’ eventually let me have it, but as soon as five o’clock hit, she was out the door.

She intrigued me. I didn’t know how she pulled off being serious and playful at the same time, but she did it. Her facial expression read business and professionalism, while her actions said something totally different. One time when I brushed against her, I saw her hands ball up into fists. She had to have grown up with older brothers, because she was way too feisty for someone as young as she was.

“Sounds like she’s probably just your speed. Sometimes you get a lil bigheaded, son. She sounds like she’s extremely outspoken and will knock you down a peg.”

I exhaled roughly then asked, “Where’s Pop?”

“Don’t try to change the subject! I bet she’s beautiful too.”

“She’s pretty, but I ain’t thinking about that,” I lied.

“Boy, I know yo’ ass! That’s all you thinking ’bout!” my mama responded and laughed.

Shirlene Vaughn was the woman that knew me best... her and my sister, Kaysyn. Kaysyn had the privilege of babysitting two rambunctious boys. My brother, Arrow, was only a year younger than me. Kaysyn was six years older than me. So to say we were a handful was an understatement. We stayed getting our asses spanked. Kaysyn would spank us, and then when my parents got home, they would tear our lil asses up all over again.

“Okay, okay! I picked with her all day, trying to get a rise out of her. It was like we were two lil kids that liked each other but fighting to prove otherwise.”

“Now *that* was the truth! I know who I raised!”

I couldn't help but chuckle. My mama was a trip. While we were growing up, she was firm, making sure we knew how to behave and that we did our best in school. We better hadn't brought anything lower than a B in her house. She said she knew we came from good stock and were intelligent beings. She refused to allow us to be mediocre when it came to our schoolwork. She demanded our best every time, and we strived to give her that. We respected the hell out of her and did our best to avoid that belt.

My dad was just as firm, and I believed it helped tremendously that they were on the same page when it came to raising us. They presented us with a united front, so there was no getting over on one parent. Whenever we asked our dad something, he would say let me talk to your mom about it and vice versa. By eighth grade, we all presented what career field we wanted to go into to them. So during high school, they were sure to make sure we explored those types of classes to be sure. That way, when we got to college, there would be a lesser chance of us flip-flopping majors and being indecisive.

Because of that, I nearly had an associate degree when I graduated from high school. I admired the hell out of both of them, because they wanted their children to be more successful than them. They struggled financially because they didn't make as much money. My mama was a janitor at one of the schools, and my dad drove a garbage truck. They worked hard to make sure we had what we needed.

They weren't short on love though. We played board and card games as a family and went to the park together. They were fun on the weekends. That was when we could somewhat let our hair down and just enjoy being kids... at least until high school. Kaysyn was on the drill team, so during football season, her weekends were busy. By the time Arrow and I got older, we both played football. Academically, we all maintained A's with an occasional B. Our parents couldn't have been prouder.

College life was a little different. My mama had to get me together a couple of times regarding the girls, as well as

Arrow. We were something else at the University of North Texas. If she only knew just how bad we were, she would have had a heart attack. That was when we first started growing our dreads as well, and the females loved that shit. We took full advantage of that too. There were some things that happened that I wasn't proud of, but there wasn't a thing I could do about it now.

I continued listening to my mama ramble, and my thoughts drifted back to Alexz. Her ass was straight forward and somewhat mean, but I knew that I could wear her ass down if I really wanted to. The question was if I really wanted to. She only talked to me when it was absolutely necessary. Other than that, she barely looked at me. Either she was really feeling me, or I had gotten under her skin, and she was trying to keep her job. Maybe it was a little bit of both.

Whatever the case, I had to decide whether I wanted to find out or not before my two weeks were up. I was pretty sure that I would want to find out though, so tomorrow, I would bring my A game.

Alexz

“OOOH, NAIL PWEETY.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I was able to control myself. Every time my nail tech finished my nails, she would evaluate her own work. Like, *hoe, let me say they're pretty first!* I smiled slightly as I looked at them. The blush pink color looked good against my skin tone. I wiggled my toes that adorned the same color and held my hands up, further inspecting them. She'd done a good job.

“Thank you. I'll give you a tip once my nails dry.”

I stepped down from the pedicure chair to go to the drying table as she smiled and expressed her appreciation. I glanced over at Mama Nissa as her nail tech was wrapping up as well. Every other Monday since my abortion a little over two months ago, we'd come and get our nails and feet done. It was what I did to decompress. Mondays were already rough for me, anyway, being that I wasn't a morning person, and I'd had a three-day weekend, practically.

I worked every other Friday, but when I did have to work, we closed at noon. Today was even more stressful because of this arrogant ass nigga we had filling in for Dr. West. He was under my damn skin in more ways than one. He had every right to be arrogant, and that annoyed me the most. He was so damn fine, and those dreads were sexy as hell. *Jesus*. Well-

maintained dreads and tattoos were a weakness of mine. Before he put on his coat, I could clearly see the tats on his arms.

He purposely tried to penetrate my cold shoulder, but I refused to give in. For the past two months, I'd been just as much a recluse as my father had been before he met Anissa. Knowledge had made shit bad for the next man, and until I could fully get his bullshit out of my mind, it was best I stayed single. While I would be more selective with who I entertained, I didn't want to project anger or my hurt feelings onto the next man either.

Plus, I still wasn't quite over what I'd done. I had nightmares for weeks about my abortion. It always started with me finding out I was pregnant and ended with my baby screaming for me to save him. It was always a boy in the dreams. I had to seek out counseling just to be able to deal. While I was only having nightmares occasionally now, it bothered me that I was still having them at all.

When I couldn't talk to my counselor, I wore Mama Nissa's ear out. My daddy always asked how I was doing, but now that I was growing closer to Anissa, I didn't express my innermost feelings with him as often. We still went on dinner dates every other Thursday, and since my abortion, I began talking to him every day again, along with my brothers, even Chad's worrisome ass. Chad asked the most questions. It seemed my turmoil had affected him and Shyrón the most, like they'd failed at protecting me.

Knowledge was the one who'd fucked up, and that was no one's fault but his. The only thing I regretted was that particular sex session when conception occurred. Knowledge was slanging some monster dick, and I got caught up to where I didn't care about a damn condom. I was feenin' for it... just like I was now. I had someone I could contact for that purpose, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to dip back. It had been almost a year since I'd talked to him, but he was always at the back of my mind. He was the one who'd turned me out my freshman year at Lamar University.

As Mama Nissa sat next to me to dry her nails, she said, “Sheldon is going to love this color.”

I smiled at her and nodded. My dad would love any color on her. He was smitten with everything about her, and so was I. “It’s beautiful,” I said in response. “So what do y’all have planned this evening?”

“Nothing much. We’re just hanging out around the house. We don’t want to get carried away with splurging. We still have bills to pay.”

I chuckled. Mama Nissa was retired, and Daddy was still living off investments he’d made with some of my mama’s insurance money and his retirement. His retirement wasn’t as much since he’d only worked for the company eleven years before quitting to take care of us. “I understand that.”

I stood from the station and grabbed my purse to give my nail tech her tip. Afterward, I let Mama know that I was headed to the car. After getting in my Benz, my thoughts went right back to Dr. McHottie. I thought that shit as soon as I laid eyes on him. Mel’s words from the TV show *The Game* were so true in this moment. I had to look him up once I left work. *Axton Nirvana Vaughn*. How the fuck did he have a middle name like that?

That shit only made me fantasize even more. I could imagine that being with him felt like nirvana. *Shit!* I was definitely going to have to call Jerrick. I wasn’t a sex addict or anything, but I did love sex and was sure to get some when I could. Since Jerrick had popped my cherry, I had never gone over two months without it until now.

While I waited on Mama Nissa, I looked up his contact information in my phone. It had been a year, and he could very well be involved with someone. If that were the case, he would let me know. I sent a text. *Hey, Jerrick. It’s been a long time. How are you?*

If he had a girlfriend and she saw the message, she would know that he wasn’t stepping out on her with me. His response came through almost immediately. *Damn, girl. I was just*

thinking about you yesterday. I'm good. What about you? Call me if you can talk.

Perfect, because I didn't feel like texting the entire time. I placed the call and when he answered, he said, "Damn! What's up, Alex with a Z? Shit!"

I chuckled and slowly shook my head. Besides being a fuck buddy, he was always cool people. I could talk to him about mostly anything... even another nigga. "Not too much. What's been up with you?"

"Shit. Nothing. Been waiting to see how your relationship was gon' pan out."

"Nigga, whatever. I know you been getting around. I was probably only a fleeting thought."

"AB, baby, you know me better than that. I mean... I was getting around, but you are definitely more than a fleeting thought. We have amazing chemistry."

I took a deep breath in and held it for a second, then exhaled. This shit was weird between us. We cared a lot for each other, but we both knew that he wouldn't be able to be faithful. We were friends with benefits. I'd tried to only be about sex with him, but that was damn near impossible when we were in school. I wasn't mature enough to handle situations like that, but somehow, I made it through.

I couldn't talk to my dad and brothers about sexual things. They were beyond shocked when I'd started wearing dresses and heels. I was a tomboy growing up, so I knew their wheels were turning, trying to figure out what had changed. Chad was the only one who had the nerve to ask and had said whoever the fuck was messing with his sister was dead. I'd incited a fight with him after that, and he left it alone. His ass was always figuring shit out.

Before I could respond to Jerrick, he asked, "What you got going on Friday? You wanna go out?"

"I have had nothing going on for the past two months. I get off at noon."

“Damn, girl. I’m hurt. You waited two months to call a nigga?”

I remained quiet as I thought about the reason why. After he realized I wasn’t going to answer, he said, “That’s okay. You reached out now, and I feel special that I was on your mind, AB.”

He was the only person that called me by my initials. We started out as homies, and honestly, I didn’t even know how it progressed to more. Well, I knew how, but there was no middle ground for me to see it coming. It was like, one day I was talking to him about wishing I had a mom, and the next, his tongue was down my throat.

I noticed Mama Anissa leaving the nail shop, so I said, “I’ll call you before Friday to find out where we’re meeting and what all we will be doing. I have to go.”

“A’ight, baby girl.”

I ended the call as she got inside with a smile on her face. She was always in a good mood, and I couldn’t wait until I could be that happy in life where nothing could take me out of my element. I knew love could do that, although neither of them had said in front of us that they loved each other yet. They’d been together three months, and I knew it two months ago. So I was sure they had to know. “You need to go anywhere else before going home?” I asked her.

“No, I don’t. Thanks for picking me up.”

“Always.”

As I backed out, her phone rang, and she quickly scooped her purse from the floor and carefully dug in it for her phone. I could see her frown slightly before answering. After she said hello, she remained quiet for a while, so I glanced over at her, and her face was red as hell. The phone was still to her ear. I slid my hand over the top of hers, and when she turned to look at me, her eyes were glossy like she was about to cry. “Everything okay?” I asked softly.

She nodded, then said in her phone, “Okay, Jamel. I’ll call you back when I get home and settled.”

That had put me on edge. Jamel was her son, and I'd come to know him as another big brother... him and DJ. "Mama, is everything okay with Mel?"

"Yes. Dexter Senior is in the hospital, and his organs are shutting down. He overdosed."

"I'm so sorry. I thought he was doing well."

Dexter was her ex-husband who had turned to street drugs to cope with losing his mother. He was the only man she'd been with before my dad. She grabbed my hand and said, "I thought so too. When I saw him almost three months ago, he seemed to be okay and had said that he'd been clean for a year. I'll know more when I call Jamel back."

We continued the drive to my dad's house in silence but continued to hold hands. When we got there, she said, "I'm sorry. We were supposed to talk about how work went with the new doctor there."

"It's okay, Mama. We can talk another time."

She nodded then got out of my car. I got out also to speak to my dad. When I'd come to pick her up, he had gone to the store for something to go along with their dinner. I was almost sure she would be skipping dinner to go be with DJ and Jamel in Houston. I couldn't ignore how hurt she looked as well. Maybe I would stay with him for dinner.

When we walked in, Dad met us in the hallway with a huge smile on his face. It was still somewhat weird to see him smiling so much. "How was your time at the nail salon?" he asked, then kissed her head and grabbed her hand.

"It was good. Sheldon," she started then stopped.

He looked up at her and said, "Your nails are beautiful." The smile fell from his face while he spoke. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Dexter is in the hospital, and they aren't looking for him to make it. DJ is coming to my apartment to pick me up in a few minutes."

"O-okay. I'm sorry to hear that."

I walked away to give them privacy. I could see that my dad was somewhat uncomfortable, and I knew he was probably thinking about my birth mother, the woman that gave her life to give me mine. Although I didn't know her, I had nothing but love for the virtuous woman I'd heard about all my life that she was. Between Dad, Isaiah, and Chad, they made sure that Shyrón, Dylan, and I knew what kind of woman she was. Shyrón and I looked the most like her.

When I got to the kitchen, I looked at the flowers on the table and the glasses of wine he'd poured. I couldn't stop the smile that formed on my lips. Shortly after, I heard the door close, and Dad making his way to the kitchen. I sat at the table as if I were his dinner guest. He looked like his old self, depressed and withdrawn, until I asked, "So what are we having for dinner?"

He smiled at me then said, "You don't have to stay, baby girl."

"What are we having for dinner?" I reiterated.

"Spaghetti with meatballs, salad, and breadsticks."

"Sounds good."

He smiled slightly then asked, "How was work?"

I rolled my eyes, and he chuckled. "The doctor filling in is an arrogant jackass."

"Uh oh. Don't mess around and get fired while your actual boss is on vacation."

"I know. He was pushing all my buttons today."

"Well, I hate to be the one to tell you, but baby, that ain't hard to do. You have so many buttons it's almost impossible not to hit a couple of them."

"Daddy! For real?"

He chuckled as he fixed our plates. "I mean... you don't take it easy on nobody but me."

I poked my lips out as the back door opened. "Yo! Yo!"

That was Shy. Dad said he stopped by most days on his way home, even now that Anissa was around. As soon as he stepped in the kitchen and looked at me, he asked, “What happened?”

Daddy turned around and chuckled at my facial expression, causing Shy to relax a bit. “I told Alexz that she has a lot of buttons and it’s next to impossible not to hit a couple of them.”

“Come on, Alexz. You gotta know that there’s some truth to that. You don’t take it easy on a nigga. But you know, I’m kind of glad that you’re that way. Otherwise, we would have had to go to Atlanta to get you away from that bitch-ass muthafucka.”

I rolled my eyes. He just had to bring up Knowledge. Just the fact that he hadn’t filed assault charges yet was shocking to me. Maybe he was going to leave well enough alone. He got his ass beat, and hopefully he was planning to chalk that shit up to the game. My arm was still somewhat tender from what he’d done. *Jackass*. Thankfully, I hadn’t heard from him either. My hopes were that he’d moved to Atlanta as planned and was taking care of his woman and baby, leaving me in his past where I belonged.

Daddy set a plate of food in front of me as I took a healthy swig of the wine. I was going to need every ounce after being reminded of the bullet I dodged.

A xton

WHEN I GOT TO WORK, I NOTICED ONLY BRITTANY AND THE receptionists had gotten here so far. Alexz's flowers were supposed to get delivered today, so hopefully she didn't call out sick. As soon as I sat at my desk, Brittany appeared in the doorway. "Good morning, Dr. Ax. Alexz is running a little late. She said her arm was throbbing this morning."

I frowned slightly. *Does she have a disability that I wasn't aware of?* Before I could question, she said, "She just got her cast taken off two weeks ago. She wore her sling last week, but it kept getting in her way. Her words, not mine. I told her she was going to regret not wearing it. She broke her arm in two spots a couple of months ago."

"Oh wow. How'd she do that?"

"Umm... I'd prefer to let her tell you that. If she knew I was telling you this much, she would have my head when she got here."

I gave her a head nod. "Okay. Thank you for letting me know."

The doors would open in fifteen minutes, so hopefully she made it here before then. The schedule was full today. It seemed like Dr. West allowed his staff to fill his schedule just because he knew he wouldn't be here. I rubbed my hand down my face then pulled my dreads back in a ponytail. If one of

these old white women touched my hair today, we were going to have a problem. A couple of them asked my age, because they swore I was a little boy playing doctor.

Then once I told them I was thirty-two, they started flirting. Most of them were old enough to be my mother or grandmother and had bad guts. What was I gonna do with that? I chuckled to myself as I thought about it. I slid on my white coat and put my stethoscope around my neck, then looked over the first patient's chart. *Follow-up.*

As I brought the chart to the nurses' station and was headed back to my desk, Alexz practically burst through the back door. She had a huge bag in her hand, so I went to help her. She frowned at me as I approached, but when I took the bag from her, her facial expression eased. "Since I was running late, I brought breakfast."

I nodded and took the bag to the nurses' station. After setting it there for the staff to go nuts over, I went back to the office. I wasn't a huge fan of donuts. I didn't know why, but donuts, cake, pie, cobbler, none of it was appealing to me, never had been. By the time I turned eight, my mama stopped buying cake for my birthday. Cookies were my thing. They gave me a cookie monster party every year until I aged out.

I flopped in the chair and played on my phone until I felt a presence. When I looked up toward the door, Alexz was standing there. Her hair was somewhat tousled, but it was even more beautiful that way. She didn't have on any makeup, just lip gloss on those fluffy looking pink lips. She stared at me for a second then said, "You're welcomed to have donuts as well."

"No thank you. I'm not a fan of donuts."

She frowned as she stared at me. "Who doesn't like donuts?"

I pointed at myself as she rolled her eyes. "What about coffee? Do you drink coffee?"

"Yep, but I've already had a cup. Thank you."

She mumbled something then walked off. A smile played at my lips because I couldn't wait to see her face when she got

the yellow roses. I was sure to have them write on the card, *Can we have a do over?*

As I stood from my chair, I stretched like I wasn't just standing a couple of minutes ago. My body was taking a bit to get acclimated to the bed at the hotel. I rarely slept well the first night at a hotel, but that was my second night. My feet were right at the foot of the bed... like damn near hanging off. I wasn't extraordinarily tall. I was six-one. Surely their beds should still be comfortable for someone my height. If I didn't sleep well tonight, I would look for somewhere else to go.

I grabbed my small notepad and reference book and slid them in my pocket. While I liked to intimidate people, I also didn't want them to feel like I was a know-it-all. I didn't know everything, and I wasn't afraid to pull out my pocket-sized reference book to look up drugs or specific things related to my field of study. It didn't cover everything, but it covered most of what I would need. It was a lot easier than searching the web since I knew it backward and forward. People respected that... usually. I had one old lady ask me why I didn't know the answer to her question.

Most times, I did know, but the book was a point of reference, just to make sure I was right. I supposed it was like a crutch, but I took people's health seriously, and the last thing they needed was for me to make a mistake. My mistakes could be deadly, and I refused to have something like that on my conscience.

As I headed out of the office, I walked directly into Alexz, nearly knocking her down. I caught her by her waist, but not before bumping the hell out of her arm. She winced in pain then said through clenched teeth, "You need to watch where the hell you're going."

I was a little stuck though. Staring into her eyes had me like a deer staring into headlights. She was just so fucking beautiful. After glancing at me, she quickly jerked away from me and held her arm. "I'm sorry. Let me look at your arm."

"It's fine. Get away from me."

I lowered my head as I stared at her. It was a damn accident. Yeah, I should have been more careful when I exited the office, but what was done was done. She stormed off to the patient's room that I was going to, and I huffed and followed her. It was like I couldn't do anything right where this woman was concerned. When I walked into the room, I noticed the patient was fairly young. She'd had a colonoscopy about a month ago and was diagnosed with diverticulitis.

She'd completed the antibiotics he'd prescribed her, but she was still complaining of issues. "Hello, Ms. Ford. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," she responded as she stared at me.

Alexz's eyebrows rose slightly as I continued. "I'm Dr. Ax, and I'm filling in for Dr. West. Your chart says that you've still been having pain since your diagnosis. Were you placed on a liquid diet after the procedure?"

She frowned slightly. "No."

Alexz frowned. "Excuse me, Dr. Ax. Ms. Ford, you were placed on a liquid diet for two days and then a low-fiber diet for the rest of that week. He'd also said for you to take it easy that week, drink plenty of water, and to use a heating pad if needed for the cramping."

"Well, unlike y'all, I don't make a grip of money to where I can stay home and take it easy. I have to work."

"Come on, Ms. Ford. You know that's not what I'm saying. Don't say he didn't advise you when I know that he did. He gave you all the paperwork before you left explaining everything he'd told you to do."

I cut my eyes at Alexz and took control of the situation. "Ms. Ford, while I understand the financial difficulty, you can't expect positive results if you don't follow instruction. Did you at least do the liquid diet?"

She looked away from me, and that gave me my answer. People with flare ups needed to avoid certain foods, but the liquid diet gave them like a restart. It helped clean them out almost like it did for the colonoscopy. Alexz folded her arms

across her chest in irritation. Before I could continue, she interrupted again. “Ms. Ford, you are going to have to do better if you want to feel better. You’re way too young for these sorts of issues. Start exercising. That doesn’t cost money.”

She was starting to irritate me. I folded my arms as I frowned at her. “Are you done?”

Her eyes widened somewhat, then I turned back to the patient. “I’m going to prescribe you more antibiotics, but you have to at least do the diet and exercise, Ms. Ford, or you will be back in here next month, complaining. Surgery is the final step. I know you don’t want that if you can’t stand to take a day off work. Follow the instructions that the receptionist will give you before you leave and come back next month for another follow-up.”

I left the room furious. When I saw Ms. Ford leave and Alexz step out of the room, I said, “Alexz, let me talk to you.”

She frowned and headed to the office. I closed the door and turned to her. “Last time I checked, I was the doctor on staff. Your job is to get vital information from the patient *before* I come into the room. Once I’m in the room, it’s my turn to engage. I don’t need you getting onto a patient. Just because I’m filling in doesn’t mean I can’t read a damn chart. The chart showed that he’d given her all the information she needed, and she even signed for it.”

“Are *you* done?” she asked me, mimicking how I’d asked her earlier.

“Man, you gon’ have to chill out. Maybe you should have stayed home today.”

“That can be arranged,” she said as she took her stethoscope from around her neck.

“If you leave, that’s gon’ be a write up. I’m not Dr. West. I ain’t putting up with your shit.”

“You’re right. You aren’t Dr. West. Your write-up don’t mean shit.”

I rolled my eyes and left her standing there in the office. My face had to be red, because she was rubbing me raw. I made my way to the next patient room before I ended up saying or doing something I would regret. Alexz clearly needed to be fucked to get all that aggression out of her ass. I was just the man for the job, and I was on the verge of grabbing her by her neck and sucking on those pretty ass lips.

When I got to the patient's room, Brittany was inside, waiting on me. When she looked at my face, her eyebrows rose slightly. I hated their silent communication. Somehow, I was able to push the irritation out of my tone and interact with the patient in a professional manner. Once the follow-up was done and I was leaving the room, I saw Alexz at the nurses' station, sniffing the yellow roses. They'd delivered them earlier than what I expected.

I watched her take the card from the stem and the confused look left her face. For a moment, her expression softened. However, that didn't last long. She frowned again, and I rolled my eyes and headed to the office. Before I could close the door, she was in the doorway. "A do over with what?"

"Nothing."

I wasn't even in the mood to engage her. She'd pissed me off, and I would probably be that way for the rest of the day. I'd never had a woman irritate me this damn much. She was stubborn, bossy, moody, and rude. *Just like me*. No wonder we were clashing. We were too much alike. She continued to stand there as I sat in the chair and turned my back to her. She was far too beautiful to be so ugly. I stared at the wall until I heard her leave.

She didn't bother to say thank you or nothing. I rolled my eyes and dragged my hands down my face. Maybe I *wasn't* the man for the job. Whoever that man was... that muthafucka was gon' have to have superpowers to penetrate her hard exterior. After calming my attitude down by playing a blocks game on my phone, I went to the next patient's room. Alexz was on the computer inputting some information as I looked on, reading what she was typing.

She didn't say a word to me, nor did I say anything to her. However, when she looked at me, her expression was soft again. I didn't have time for her mood swings. Whatever her issues were with me, they were unwarranted. I hadn't done shit to her. I couldn't wait for these two weeks to be over.

After discussing the patient's issues and sending them to do lab work over in the next room, I went to the next patient. There was a steady in and out until lunchtime. As I was heading to my Benz, I noticed Alexz had a car just like mine... same color and everything. *Ain't that some shit.* She looked up as if sensing that I was staring at her lil ass and smirked. I hadn't seen anything remotely close to a smile since yesterday morning.

A car pulled in next to her, and a man got out to talk to her. I wanted to assume it was her brother, because their faces resembled, but I knew what trouble assumptions could get me in. Maybe he was her man and that was why she didn't have anything to say about the flowers. Whatever. I got in my car, as they stood there and talked, then left.

I'D FOUND A PRETTY DECENT SPOT TO EAT AT FOR LUNCH. IT was raggedy as hell, but places like this usually had the best food... and the worst service. The woman had barely spoken to me before taking my order. She just stood there and stared at me until I said something. This smothered pork chop made it all worth it though. It was so damn good I was sitting here licking my fingers in public, not caring in the least bit who saw me. As I ate, I heard the door open. Since I seemed to be the only one dining in, I turned to see who would be joining me.

When I saw Alexz, I quickly turned in my seat, not wanting her to notice me. What were the odds that she would end up at the same place for lunch I had come to? God definitely had a sense of humor. However, I didn't find a damn thing funny about this. I was done with her hateful ass. After taking another quick glance, I noticed the same guy from the

parking lot was with her. Concentrating on my food, I indulged in my yams until I heard her voice.

“I see you’re finding your way around town just fine.”

I looked up at her then turned to look behind me. “You actually talking to me?”

She rolled her eyes and attempted to walk away until the guy she was with introduced himself. “What’s up? I’m Shyrón Berotte, Alexz’s brother.”

I wiped my hands then shook his outstretched one. It was just as I thought. I wondered where she’d inherited her rude ass demeanor from. “Nice to meet you. I’m Axton Vaughn.”

“Do you mind if we sit here?”

“Naw. Help yourself.”

I wanted to say, *you can, but her mean ass gotta sit somewhere else*. All the other tables looked raggedy as hell, so I wasn’t tripping that he wanted to sit at the six-chair table with me. It wasn’t like we would be on top of each other. Alexz huffed and sat next to him as he smirked at her. Apparently, she’d been talking about me, because he seemed to know who I was and how I knew her.

“Alexz giving you a hard time in the office?” he asked as he glanced at her.

“Shy! Really?”

He shrugged. “I’m just saying. Didn’t we just have this talk with Dad yesterday?”

When he turned his attention back to me, I said, “Naw. She ain’t tough to a champ. I’m from Houston. I’ve encountered worse.”

I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing she was getting to me. Her eyes widened slightly as she stared at me. I stared right back at her, refusing to back down or look away until she did. Her beautiful brown eyes seemed to twinkle, and a slight smile played on those beautiful lips. I swore if her brother wasn’t here, I’d tell her just what I thought about her sexy ass.

After I slightly flexed my jaw, she cleared her throat and turned the other way until the lady up front called out their number. Her brother chuckled then he stood to get their food. As soon as he was gone, she asked, “So you’ve encountered worse, huh?”

“Mm hmm.”

“Thank you for the flowers. They’re beautiful.”

“Mm hmm.”

I was *not* going to give her conversation either. She’d torn her fucking drawz with me. I stood from my seat to get a box then rejoined them at the table where they were beginning to eat. “Axton, how long you been a doctor?”

“Three years.”

“That’s cool, man. Well good luck on everything.”

“I appreciate you. Same for you, Shyrón.”

We shook hands, and I gave Alexz a slight head nod, then left them sitting there to enjoy lunch. She had better have her ass back to the office on time though, or she was gonna really see the salty, petty side of me.

Alexz

“SO HE BOUGHT YOU FLOWERS, AND NOW HE DON’T WANT nothing to do with you. You must’ve really pissed that man off.”

“Shut up, Shy.”

I’d just gotten off work and had come to my dad’s house to check on him and Mama Nissa. While she didn’t live here, she was always here... except now. She was on her way back from Houston with DJ. Her ex, Dexter Dent Senior, had passed away this morning. So Dad was trying to create an atmosphere of peace and tranquility for when she got here. We wouldn’t be here long and assured him we would be gone before she arrived.

“So this nigga bought her flowers and now he ignoring her?” Chad asked.

“Yep. She did something to the man, and now he done gave her ass the cold shoulder. That shit pissing her off because he giving her just what she be giving other people and probably gave him. Now she wanna talk to him because he sent those flowers and he like, fuck it,” Shy explained.

I rolled my eyes and huffed loudly as they laughed and talked about me like I wasn’t sitting right here. I didn’t know why my business was their business. My dad was just chuckling at Shy’s explanation like it was a joke. Dylan’s head

was in his phone, but he was listening. He had a playful smirk on his lips. Isaiah was the only one with a straight face. He was in counselor mode. I could see his wheels turning as Shy talked.

I stood from my seat and grabbed my purse. “I don’t have to stay here for this bullshit. Daddy, I love you, and I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

He hugged me tightly and kissed my forehead. Lowering his head to my ear, he said. “It’s okay to be soft, baby girl. It’s okay to apologize when you’re wrong.”

I laid my head on his chest as I thought about what he said. I owed Dr. Vaughn... Dr. Ax an apology. I did kind of overstep with Ms. Ford this morning. I didn’t have to check her, but that was my personality. If I knew somebody was lying, their asses got checked in front of whoever they were lying to.

When I lifted my head, I shot my brothers the finger and walked out the door, Isaiah on my heels. He was the oldest and always had to make sure we were good. He took his role as the oldest seriously. “Alexz, hold up. Listen, baby girl. All men aren’t like that piece of shit you got rid of. The only way you’re gonna find out for yourself is if you give someone an opportunity to get to know the real you and not this hard exterior you got up to protect your heart. I know you crave love, because I do too. I can see it in you.”

I hugged him without giving him an indication if he was right or not, and he seemed to be okay with that. He kissed my cheek and said, “Call me if you need me.”

I nodded then got in my car. *How ironic was it that we had the same exact car?* I smiled slightly as I remembered Dr. McHottie’s facial expression when he noticed. While I tried to focus my thoughts on him and these beautiful flowers in the seat next to me, I couldn’t stop my thoughts from journeying to Knowledge and how he almost duped me. That shit happened whenever someone brought him up in conversation. *Thanks, Isaiah.*

That nigga really had me fucked up if he thought I was the type of woman that didn’t mind sharing her man. It made me

wonder if he would've gotten physical with me in Atlanta if I didn't submit to his plans. I was grateful that God had given me just the right amount of skepticism to have Shy do a background check. Then I was grateful that he'd taken it a step further by bugging his phone.

Before I could back out, I got a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. Looking around, I didn't see anyone looking at me or anything, so I didn't know what the feeling was about. As I backed out, my phone rang. Seeing it was my coworker Brittany, I rolled my eyes and answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, girl. I don't know what the fuck you did to Dr. Ax, but he was quiet as hell all damn day."

"Ugh! I overstepped in the appointment with Ms. Ford then I threatened to walk out. He threatened to write me up, and I pretty much told him that he wasn't running shit. You know... being my normal difficult self. When I got the flowers he had delivered, I got all soft and shit, but he was done. He probably purchased them yesterday after our back and forth. I'm gon' chill out on him though. He got pissed for real."

"You done met yo' fucking match, and yo' ass can't handle it."

I huffed again. "Have you been talking to Shyrón?"

"No. But if you give his fine ass my number, maybe I could."

"Girl... Shy ain't ready to settle down, at least not that I know of."

"Girl, any of your fine ass brothers can have my number... even Chad's crazy ass. I bet Dylan a freak though. His ass too quiet with his beautiful chocolate self."

"Okay, and that's a sign that this conversation is over. Bye, Brittany!"

I ended the call as she hollered in laughter. She was playing because she had a man, but I wouldn't mind having her as a sister-in-law. She was crazy as hell, and we got along like sisters already. One of my brothers would be blessed to have her as his wife. As I pulled into my driveway, I got that

weird feeling again. Checking my surroundings, I didn't see anything unusual. I continued into my garage and took my gun from my center console.

I left my garage door open so I wouldn't be blindsided in case someone was indeed watching me. I would use the keypad by the back door to put it down once I got in the house. Quickly making my way inside, locking the door, and setting the alarm, I grabbed my phone from my bag and called Shy. When he answered, he immediately went in. "Don't tell me. You calling to let me have it about spilling your business."

"No, although, that should be the reason I'm calling your ass. I'm calling because I'm getting a weird feeling that someone is watching me. That could only be one person. Although he should have his ass in Atlanta by now, I don't want to take any chances."

"I'm on it. You got your gun I bought you?"

"Yeah, I have it. I usually leave it in my car, but I guess I should start putting it in my bag now."

"Please do. I'm gon' see if I can locate that muthafucka. You have to get to work by seven thirty, right?"

"Yeah, normally. Since Dr. Ax ain't fucking with me, I better be on time."

He chuckled. "Yeah, before yo' ass get the ax. I'll be there at seven. Have me some breakfast ready. Dylan will probably be with me since school ain't started back yet."

"I didn't plan on getting up early enough to cook breakfast, but I guess."

"Hell yeah. Cook enough for Dr. Ax too."

"Shut up, nigga."

I ended the call and thanked God for brothers who gave a shit about me. I was more than sure he would probably show up here with an overnight bag. Then again, it would probably be Dylan to do so since he didn't have anywhere to be. As I thought it, he called me. "Hello?"

"I'm on my way. Should be there in fifteen minutes."

“Thank you, Dylan.”

I sat at my kitchen table, looking at the gun I'd set there. While I was a decent shot, the last thing I wanted to do was kill somebody. Hopefully I was just feeling this way for some other innocent reason, because I couldn't take any more trauma this soon.

IT WAS FRIDAY, AND THANKFULLY, THE WEEK WAS DONE. DR. McHottie and I were seeing our last patient of the day, and I couldn't be more grateful. The week had dragged by, and I couldn't wait until he took his ass back to Houston. He was pettier than me. I didn't think such a thing was possible. He refused to talk to me unless it was unavoidable. Today, it had been just me and him because Brittany was off, and instead of asking me a question, he would reread their chart or look into the computer for himself.

The patients didn't notice the disconnect between us... probably because they'd all been women. Their attention was only on him anyway. We only had thirty minutes left and no more patients, so I went to one of the rooms to change. I was meeting Jerrick, right after work for lunch, and we were supposed to be hanging out for the rest of the day. I changed into a turquoise halter dress that had a deep plunge line.

I wasn't trying to seduce Dr. McHottie, so I put my jacket back on where I wouldn't be exposing so much skin. The halter had a keyhole in the front beneath my breasts, and most of my back was out as well. The jacket failed to cover my ass though, and the dress fit me to the tee. It also had a split up to the middle of my thigh. I had a few leg tattoos that would be visible when I walked. Oh well. It wasn't like he was paying attention to me anyway.

As I made my way out of the room, I noticed that he was no longer at the nurses' station. After getting shit put away and I'd told the ultrasound tech, Tia, that I would see her Monday, I headed to the back door. When Dr. McHottie stepped out of

that bathroom near the back door, he froze. I swallowed hard and continued to the back door. "See you Monday, Dr. Ax," I said as I walked past him.

He didn't respond to me, but when I walked out of the back door, I turned to look back at the glass door to find him standing in the same spot, watching me leave. A chill went through me as I headed to my car. His gaze had my nipples hard as hell. Being that I didn't have on a bra, it wouldn't be hard for anyone to notice.

When I got to my car, I threw my bag in the back seat and took off my jacket to throw in the back seat as well. Before I could get in, I saw him come out of the back door. I knew he'd seen me because I wasn't parked that far from him. I quickly got into my car and started the engine as he stared at me. *Damn.* He was unraveling me just from his gaze.

Maybe now he was ready to stop ignoring me. It would help the days go by a lot faster. After touching up my lipstick in the mirror, I put my car in gear to head to Chaba Thai Bistro. I enjoyed good Thai food occasionally, and I knew that Jerrick enjoyed it as well. We thought it would be a good place to meet up. We would decide where else to go once we got there.

The bistro was only a couple of miles from my job, so it didn't take any time to get there. Checking my curls in the mirror, I felt a slight tremble course through me. I wasn't sure what that was about. Although I hadn't seen Jerrick in a year, we were extremely familiar. I'd been knowing him since my freshman year in college. I was eighteen years old. He was nineteen. That was seven years of history.

After taking a deep breath, I got out of the car and checked my reflection in the window, then made my way inside. When I walked in, it seemed like all eyes were on me. The hostess smiled brightly and welcomed me to their restaurant, then asked if I would be dining alone. Before I could inform her that I was expecting someone to join me, a voice from behind me said, "Naw. She's not dining alone."

That wasn't Jerrick's voice, so I turned around to see Dr. Ax standing there. He'd followed me. I walked away from the hostess as I frowned slightly. "What are you doing?"

"I just wanted to apologize for ignoring you all this time."

I frowned harder. "So, you followed me to this bistro to tell me something you could have told me before I left the office. Boy, bye."

I knew he was only wanting to talk to me because he liked what he saw, but him following me here was a little stalkerish. As I was about to walk off, he gently grabbed my arm, but it was my arm that was still tender because I was hardheaded. I winced in pain as I tried not to go off on him. "What's wrong with your arm?"

"I broke it. It's still healing, but I don't wear my sling. If you don't mind, I *am* meeting someone here. You had hours of opportunity to talk to me, so you get to watch my fine ass walk away now."

He smirked slightly as he released me from his grasp. I walked back to the hostess to let her know that I was indeed meeting someone, then turned back to Dr. Ax and rolled my eyes. *With his fine ass*. Once I was seated, I looked over the menu deciding that I would be trying the duck curry for my meal. The waitress introduced herself then took my drink order as I waited for Jerrick. I was slightly early, so it didn't bother me that he wasn't here yet. Once she came back with my Thai Tea and I'd taken a sip, there was a tap on my shoulder.

I looked up to see Jerrick in all his fine ass glory. Standing from my seat to give him a hug, he said, "Hol' on. Damn, girl. Who you tryna impress with all this body on display?"

I giggled as he pulled me in for a hug. "Well, it's been a while, so I thought you might appreciate it."

"Shit, I do," he said then kissed my lips.

After being seated again, he sat across from me. His light-skinned ass was glowing, and the freckles across the bridge of his nose and under his eyes seemed more pronounced. He

licked his slightly tinted, pink lips, then ran his hand over his short beard as he stared at me. I could feel my body heat up under his gaze. He'd gained a little weight, but it was so sexy on him. He'd graduated to being a big boy, and I loved every pound of it.

“So what’s been up, J? How you been?”

“Ain’t been shit. Same ol’, same ol’. What about you? I know you had a heartbreak, but other than that?”

“I’ve been okay. Still working at Dr. West’s office.”

We continued talking about other minor things and ordered food, but the sexual tension was extremely thick. It always was when we were around one another. Even after a year hiatus, that hadn’t changed. When our food came out, we ate quietly but kept staring at each other. I finally decided to address it. “We know what this is, Jerrick. Are you cool with going back to my place after this?”

“I’m always cool with that, AB. You know that.”

I nodded then continued eating my food. I was squirming slightly in my seat, because I was ready for him to end this slight drought I was in. I believed he noticed because he stood and sat next to me. When his hand slid through the split in my dress, I almost lost it. He knew I wasn’t wearing panties. I never did when I wore a dress this tight. His fingers went straight to the jackpot, and I nearly levitated. I needed to box this food up and get the hell out of here.

He softly kissed my ear and said, “Let’s go so I can suck this pussy dry.”

I nearly came on myself as he removed his fingers and sucked them. I stopped the waitress and asked for a box. Once she walked away, I said, “Jerrick, I need you to make up for lost time. I been getting fucked right, don’t get me wrong, but I need some good shit in my life, because baby girl feenin’ right now.”

“Enough said. Fuck this food.” He dropped a bill on the table and said, “Let’s go now.”

A xton

WHEN I SAW ALEXZ IN THAT TIGHT ASS DRESS, I NEARLY snatched her up and brought her to a closet and fucked the shit out of her. She had me bricked up. However, when I walked out the door to go to my car and I saw her without the jacket, I was ready to blast off. Her titties were sitting there waiting to be sucked. I could see the print of her nipples from where I was standing. There was no way she was wearing panties either, because there were no visible lines.

I had to follow her to where I could say something. I'd been ignoring her for most of the week, playing games with her stubborn ass. Had I not ordered those flowers, she wouldn't have softened toward me either. So I supposed we both gave each other something to melt the ice. That body she gave me a glimpse of had me salivating like I was looking at a perfectly cooked T-bone. I'd imagined fucking her in all types of positions before she could even get in her car.

She wanted to act like she was turned off by me following her, but I knew she wasn't. She wanted to stun me. When she walked out in that dress, the momentum swung her way. Somehow, I had to get that shit back. I went home for the weekend and spent time with my family and went to see my grandparents. I was blessed to still have all four of them. I was the oldest grandson on both sides, so they spoiled me something fierce.

However, Monday had arrived, and our game of ignoring one another had resumed. When she held her hand up at the bistro and said, *Boy bye*, that was the only dismissal I needed. She was so fucking fine though. There had to be a way in. We were way too much alike, and that was what was keeping us from making that connection. I shrugged it off as a lost cause and decided to move on. If she came around, I would engage. If not, then oh the fuck well.

As I made my way from patient room to patient room, I was upbeat, grateful that the day was moving along quickly. Dr. West had an amazing staff, despite my run-ins with Alexz. They all knew their job and handled it well. It was why the office ran so smoothly. From what I'd gathered, Alexz was the newest hire, and she'd been here for almost three years.

As I was making my way to the last patient for the day, my phone vibrated. I checked it to see my mother's number and frowned. She knew I was working, so it had to be an emergency. Whether it was an emergency or not, there was no way I would be able to get to her in a reasonable amount of time from Beaumont.

I sent her a quick text letting her know that I was about to see my last patient of the day and would call her back. When I walked in the room, Alexz was typing in the computer. After greeting the older gentleman, I glanced at his chart, assessing the information provided by his PCP. He had been dealing with occasional flare ups of gastritis and had already had an endoscopy to diagnose it.

He informed me that he'd been avoiding spicy and fried foods, but he did drink orange juice often. I let him know how acidic that was, and that it may be a cause of his pain. After prescribing him some antibiotics just in case it was pylori and telling him to take an antacid like Pepto Bismol or Tums, we were done for the day. I went back to the office to call my mama and noticed she'd called me twice more. That made me nervous. When I called, she answered immediately. "Axton, baby, it's your mimi. She had a heart attack. She's not doing good, baby. If you can come back home, please do."

"Okay. I'm on my way."

I swallowed hard as I stood there for a second trying to process what she'd said. Mimi was my father's mother. I'd just seen her Saturday, and she seemed to be doing fine. We'd joked and clowned around for my whole visit. I quickly got my bag and slung it across my chest then grabbed my keys to head out.

As I was walking to the door, Brittany and Alexz passed by, heading out of the office as well. I filed in right behind them. They both turned around to look at me, but I couldn't acknowledge them. My heart and mind were in Houston. "Dr. Ax, you okay?" Brittany asked.

I shook my head and rushed past them. I wasn't sure why she asked that until I felt the tear rolling down my cheek. After quickly wiping it, I got in my car and sped off the lot, heading to H-Town.

WHEN I GOT THERE, EVERYONE WAS STANDING IN THE HALLWAY of the ICU area outside of her room. It felt like my heart was trying to rip itself loose and leave my body altogether. Mimi was the one who'd spoiled me the absolute most and got into it with my mama all the time about it. She was fun to be around, and growing up, I knew that if I could get close to her, I could get away with just about anything.

My mama immediately grabbed me and hugged me tightly. "She's gone, baby. She died about ten minutes ago."

I was ten minutes too late. I should've answered my phone the first time. That last patient could have rescheduled. I jerked away from my mother and fell against the wall, pounding it until my dad wrapped me in his arms. I couldn't stop the tears as I noticed her body still lying there. Pulling away from him, I went to her room and sat in the chair next to her. I grabbed her hand and kissed it over and over. "I'm so sorry, Mimi. I should've been here. I'm so sorry."

I stood from my seat and laid my head on her chest, wishing she could play in my hair once more... wishing she

could massage my scalp like only she could. Whenever I was around her, I was her big baby. That was gone forever, and I was grateful that I'd at least seen her Saturday. When I felt a hand rubbing my back, I lifted my head to see my sister, Kaysyn. She pulled me in her arms and hugged me tightly as the tears rained from her eyes. Mimi was special to all of us, and it was hard to believe that she'd been taken away from us this way.

After she released me, I went back to Mimi. I softly kissed her cheek then her forehead and left the room. I hugged several others then saw my brother sitting in the consultation room. I joined him in there, and he stood from his seat and hugged me. We sat in the chairs provided and remained quiet as I thought about calling Brittany to let her know I wouldn't be there tomorrow. However, the more I thought about it, I figured there was no point.

Mimi was already gone. I'd just check out of my hotel tomorrow morning and drive back and forth. There were only five appointments for tomorrow. I should be able to make it through that. I hadn't checked the other days yet, but I'd let them know not to take anymore appointments this week. As we sat there in silence, my mama came in and sat between us. I leaned against her. "I was too late. I should've—"

"No, sir. Don't do that, Ax. You got here as soon as you could. At least you saw her Saturday. That was the best thing. You were able to interact with her. I don't know if she knew any of us were here. She wasn't conscious. Cherish those memories you made your entire life... the ones from Saturday. She's in a better place now, and there was nothing you could have done to change that."

I allowed a few tears to escape me as I watched the funeral home come in to get her. "I can't watch this."

I stood and left the room, my brother, Arrow, right behind me. The last thing I wanted to see was them putting her in that black bag. We were at the hospital Arrow worked at, so people were coming from everywhere to offer condolences. He was an anesthesiologist, so he worked with damn near everybody. I slid my hand down my face and leaned against the wall.

When I heard the loud wailing from what sounded like one of my aunts, I went down another hallway to avoid seeing them. Turned out, I ended up going to the exact hallway they decided to take. When I saw that black bag, I was cemented in place. I couldn't move. Mimi was in there, and I wasn't here to see her off. *I fucked up*. One of the closest women to me left this earth before I could say goodbye. She could have heard my voice. What if my voice would have caused her to fight harder? My presence could have made a difference.

After they'd passed me in the hallway, I remained there just staring off into space, thinking about the what ifs. Someone touched me, causing me to flinch. I turned to see my sister. "Come on, Ax. Let's go."

I walked away with her arm around my waist until we got outside. Before I could leave her side, she said, "Let me tell Luckey that I'm gonna ride with you."

I nodded and waited for her. Luckey was her husband. I stood there in a daze until I decided to call the answering service at Dr. West's office before I forgot. "Dr. West's answering service."

"This is Dr. Vaughn. I'm going to be in the office tomorrow, but I need you to leave a message for the staff in case I forget. My grandmother died a little while ago, so I need to make sure they don't make any more appointments this week."

"I'm so sorry for your loss. Are you sure you don't want to just close the office?"

"I'm positive. I might drive back and forth. I haven't decided for sure yet."

"Okay. I will relay the message. Again, you have my deepest condolences."

"Thank you."

I ended the call, and me verbalizing it only made it more real to me. My grandmother was gone. When my sister came back to me, we made our way to my car. Everyone was going to my grandparents' house. I hadn't even seen my grandfather.

I was more than sure that he was torn up about this. As I drove, Kaysyn held my hand, gently rubbing it, trying to console her little brother when she needed consoling herself. She'd always been that way... mothering. I returned the gesture and caressed her hand as well.

When we got to the stoplight, I looked over at her to see her tears. She wiped them then turned to me and asked, "How are things going in Beaumont?"

"They're going okay. I can't wait to get back home."

"That bad, huh? Is the staff not friendly?"

"They are... except one. She's stubborn, hot-headed, bossy, and petty."

"So she's you?"

She giggled as I side-eyed her. "Ha, ha, ha," I said sarcastically.

"So why can't you wait to get back home?"

"Had I been home, I would have made it on time. What if Mimi would have heard my voice and started fighting?"

She frowned... Her nose scrunched up and everything. "Nigga, who you 'posed to be? Jesus? That's the only man that could have made her stay here. I know you think you were her favorite. We all were."

I glanced at her then smiled slightly. "Don't kid yourself. You know I was Mimi's favorite."

"Whatever. I ain't finna play wit'chu."

We both chuckled quietly then retreated to our thoughts for a moment. After I stopped at the next traffic light, Kaysyn asked, "So when are you going to ask her out?"

"Ask who out?" I asked with a frown.

I was confused for a moment, but then realization hit me that she was talking about Alexz. I rolled my eyes, and that only amplified my headache. "Don't roll your eyes! I can tell that you like her, big head. The way you talked about her... although you were spitting out her negative qualities, I can tell

that you like those very things about her. I could hear the tenderness in your tone.”

“You’re delusional. That’s Mimi affecting me that way.”

“Okay. I’ll let you have that, although I know you’re lying. I’m like a second mama to you, boy. You can’t hide shit from me, and you know it. I’m willing to bet that you told Mimi about her.”

I glanced at her and slid my hand away from hers. Alexz had come up in our conversation Saturday...

“It can only be a woman that has you that frustrated about doing something that you love. Now what’s her name?”

My mouth fell open as PaPa laughed. I didn’t dare argue with her though. “Her name is Alexzandria, but everyone calls her Alexz. She so damn stubborn and mean.”

“I’ve heard the same about you, although I don’t see it. You like her, and I’m willing to bet that she likes you too. That’s why she’s fighting it so hard. Be careful. The only reason a woman fights getting to know a man she’s attracted to is either she already has a man, or she has some trauma in her past that has her building brick walls.”

“That shit ain’t brick. It’s barbed wire with the electric wires at the top to shock anybody trying to climb it.”

She laughed loudly then said, “Give her time. She’ll come around. Now come over here and let me twist your hair.”

I sat on the floor between her legs and let her play in my hair. “Thanks, Mimi. I love you.”

“I love you more, baby.”

I supposed my silence was a confirmation because Kaysyn said, “Uh huh. Mimi knew everything. What’s giving you pause?”

I took a deep breath and said, “I don’t know. We get on each other’s nerves.”

“More of a reason to talk to her.”

I shrugged my shoulders. After this blow this evening, the last thing I felt like doing was being soft with Alexz just so she could clown me about it later. I wasn't in the mood to deal with her smart-ass mouth. I honestly didn't know how I would even get through being there for the rest of the week. I just knew that I'd made a commitment to be there, and I planned to see it out. At noon on Friday, that office could kiss my ass.

*A*lexz

“OH FUUUUUUCK! GIVE ME ALL THAT DICK.”

“Mm hmm. I love that filthy ass mouth, AB.”

“You love my wet pussy too.”

“Hell yeah.”

Jerrick was fucking me just how he knew I liked it. After our romp in the sheets Friday, it was like we couldn't get enough of each other. Here it was five o'clock Tuesday morning, and I had my ass tooted up like I didn't have to get my ass to work in a couple of hours. We'd reconnected last night, and he ended up staying over.

Saturday, the family and I had catered to Mama Nissa, DJ, and Jamel. We'd cooked and just tried to help them any way we could. The funeral would be this coming weekend in Houston. I wasn't looking forward to that. Just the sorrow they were feeling the other day pulled me in the dumps, which was how Jerrick ended up balls deep in my shit Sunday and last night through to this morning.

I was lonely as hell. I didn't realize how much I hated being single. Getting to know someone all over again only for them to stab you in the back... I was fucking over it. So in the meantime, I would ride Jerrick's fat dick until the man I couldn't keep my mind off of came along. The slap to my ass

brought me back to the present and how he was stretching my insides out. It was no wonder he turned my ass out freshman year. He had me feeling the most feminine I'd ever felt. He'd seen right past that tomboy façade I had going on and destroyed my virginity and nearly my entire existence in one stroke.

He made me feel sexy, and that was foreign to me. Boys didn't really look at me at school, because hell, for the longest, it was like I was one of the fellas. I didn't really know any other way to be until I met Jerrick's sexy ass. He jumpstarted my sexuality and my love of good sex, and now I couldn't stand to go too long without it. But that was what got me into the mess I was in with Knowledge. I let him sweet talk me out of my panties after dating for a couple of weeks, and I fell in love with that hook.

Jerrick gave me his final thrust as he growled out his nut, but my mind had left the scene altogether. I didn't even cum this time, and I knew he'd noticed. After sliding out of me, he said, "What's up, AB? You disappeared on me."

I shook my head and got out of the bed to start the shower. He dropped the condom in my waste basket then said, "Ain't nothing changed about me being a listening ear. As much as I love fucking up your insides, you know I genuinely care about you. Whatever you're going through in your head is safe with me. You know that."

I looked over at him. "Maybe we'll talk later. I don't have time to get into it right now. I have to get ready for work, and my brother will be here in an hour or so."

"Okay. Well, I'm gon' hold you to that. I'll get going so you can handle your business."

He kissed my forehead, then I grabbed my robe so I could walk him to the door. I refused to be all in my feelings at work and have to deal with Dr. Ax's ass. I wouldn't be in the mood for his attitude or petty ways. Jerrick turned around and kissed my lips. "I mean it. You try to ignore me, I'ma pop up on yo' lil ass."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. We'll talk."

I watched him walk to his car, then I quickly locked up and made my way back to my bathroom to shower before Dylan showed up to eat breakfast. He knew I had company, but I used that as an excuse to get Jerrick to leave. Dylan and I talked about our conquests at times. He was uncomfortable about it, but he said somebody needed to know who I was fucking around with. So he'd known about Jerrick for years... almost from the beginning.

After washing my hair, I hurriedly got out so I could look like something at work. The last thing I wanted to do was look how I was feeling. I was up to my neck in feelings about shit I couldn't change, and the last thing I felt like doing was talking about them. Once I detangled it and brushed it back in a ponytail, I glanced at my reflection, noticing how long my neck looked. *Fuck him.*

I went to my bedroom and moisturized my skin and put on my scrubs so I could go make breakfast. Dylan was gon' have to settle for this lazy ass meal. I'd gotten the thick and hearty cinnamon and brown sugar frozen waffles. He wasn't the brother that made a big deal out of much of anything, so I knew he would be cool with that. I threw some breakfast sausage in the air fryer and got some eggs out to scramble.

Just as I finished, he was knocking on the back door. I went to the door, being sure to check the peephole first. Once I saw him, I opened it. "There is no way your beard looks that great this early in the morning, Dylan."

"Naw. If I don't do anything in the morning, I brush my teeth, wash my face, and take care of my beard. The shit on my face," he said pointing to it. "I can't be looking stupid out here, especially with as much as women are loving beards these days. I can have on mismatched socks, church shoes, basketball shorts, and a long-sleeved shirt, but if this beard is right, that's all that matters."

I rolled my eyes as he walked past me. After fixing our plates, I poured us some orange juice. Once we started eating, he asked, "What kind of car that nigga drive?"

I frowned. I immediately knew he was talking about Jerrick. “A Jag. Why?”

“What time did he leave?”

“About an hour ago.”

“Shit! Let me call Shy. There was a car leaving here when I turned on your street. Your doorbell may have caught it.”

So it wasn't just a feeling. A muthafucka was stalking me, and I was more than willing to bet that it was Knowledge Rucker. While I didn't want to use my gun, I wouldn't have a problem fucking him all the way up.

“YOU LOOK LIKE YOU HAD AN INTERESTING NIGHT.”

I frowned at Brittany. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“You look tired but sexually satisfied at the same time.”

I chuckled. “You would be accurate in your description. My nighttime activities didn't end until a little after five this morning. So to say I'm tired is an understatement. Jerrick solved all my problems and created new ones.”

She cackled as I rolled my eyes and shook my head. I had just gotten to work, and we were walking through the door. When we got to the nurses' station and I saw the pot plant, kolaches, and coffee, I frowned slightly. Brittany and I glanced at one another, clearly indicating that we didn't know what was going on.

We went to the receptionist desk, and before we could inquire, Melissa said, “Good morning, y'all. Dr. Ax's grandmother died yesterday evening. We aren't taking any last-minute appointments. He's going to be here this week, but he'll probably really keep to himself. From what the answering service said, he was really torn up about it. She could hear it in his voice.”

My heart sank for him. I didn't know what it felt like to lose someone you loved, but I could only imagine. I never

knew my mother, but just the fact that I didn't have a chance to know her was painful. This had to be tough for him. I nodded as she continued. "The kolaches are for everyone, but be sure that there's at least two left for him since he doesn't eat donuts."

"That's so sad," Brittany said as we turned to head back to the desk.

"I know."

"So no petty behavior, no matter how he responds. He may be snippy."

I huffed. "Yeah, I get it. I'll be on my best behavior."

As I looked over charts and appointments, I heard the back door open. When I saw Dr. Ax, I wanted to run to him and give him the biggest hug. His eyes were puffy and somewhat red. He didn't say good morning like he normally did, just walked into the office and closed the door. I took it upon myself to go and fix him a cup of coffee. I didn't add any creamer or sugar because I didn't know what he liked. However, I brought packets along with me.

After grabbing two kolaches, I went to the office and knocked on the door. "Come in."

I'd barely heard him, and that alone let me know that he wasn't in a snippy mood. He was feeling sensitive and probably vulnerable. I walked in and closed the door behind me then went to his desk and set everything in front of him. He looked up at me and said, "Thank you."

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

He nodded. "'Preciate that. What time is the first appointment?"

"Not until eight thirty."

"Perfect."

I nodded then turned to leave and thought about the plant. Turning back to him, my eyes met his. I wasn't expecting him to be staring at me. "I'll be right back."

He didn't respond... just continued staring at me. I could see the sadness in his eyes, and that had me feeling softer than I'd ever felt toward a man... besides my dad. I left out of his office and went to grab the potted plant. Brittany offered me a soft smile as I turned to head back to his office. As if he knew that I was going to get it, he met me in the doorway and took it from me. "Thank you."

"Melissa stopped and got it this morning along with breakfast. Brittany and I didn't know until we got here. Whatever you need to make your day easier, please let us know."

As I turned to leave, he said, "Alexz."

"Yes, Dr. Ax?"

"Call me Axton. Can you bring the chart for the first patient?"

"Yeah. Sure."

My insides heated, and I knew I was so wrong for feeling turned on while he was grieving. Plus, I'd just gotten fucked this morning. *Ugh! Get yourself together, Alexz!* When I grabbed the chart, Brittany asked, "How is he?"

"Sensitive. The opposite of snippy. It won't be hard to be nice."

She smiled at me as I grabbed the patient's chart to take to him. When I walked back inside the office, he had his face in his hands, and his dreads were hanging around his face. I winced at the view before me like I could feel the pain he felt. It was like it was penetrating my soul. I quietly walked over to the desk and put the chart there then rubbed his back. I thought he would flinch or not acknowledge my presence at all, but he removed his hands from his face and grabbed my hand.

I remained still as his touch ignited feelings inside of me that I didn't think existed. I was feeling tender, loving, and caring. I'd never felt that to this magnitude for anyone outside of my family, and it caused my breathing pattern to change. I almost felt like I was about to hyperventilate. How could I feel this for him, and I didn't even feel that for Knowledge? I

didn't know Axton Vaughn and probably would never know him.

When I felt his lips on my hand, I wanted to jerk it away, but I didn't have to. He released it quickly and cleared his throat. He sat back in his chair and said, "Thank you."

I nodded as I swallowed hard and left his office. Something was happening, and I wasn't sure if either of us were ready for whatever it was. Going to the bathroom, I huffed loudly. We were going from one extreme to the other. Where in the hell was the middle ground? I would much rather hate his ass than to be this tender with him at work. I should have kept my ass at the nurses' station and left him in there to grieve alone.

After patting my face with a cold paper towel, I went back to the desk to get ready for our first patient. Once I sat, Brittany stared at me until I looked over at her. "You okay? You look a little flustered."

"Yeah, I'm okay. He just have me feeling his sorrow. I shouldn't have gone in there. You know I'm sensitive to people's emotions."

"Yeah. I'll try to ease the burden for you a bit."

Now the problem was that I didn't want her to ease it for me. I wanted to be around him. If I could stay in that office consoling him all day, I would.

By the time lunchtime rolled around, I was starving. Brittany and I had done as much as possible to lessen the load for Axton. He was only with each patient for about five minutes or so. However, I could see him coming around a bit. He even offered a slight smile at one point. As I grabbed my purse to head out, my phone vibrated. When I saw Shyrón's number, I knew he was either outside waiting for me or had something important to tell me. "Hello?"

"That muthafucka is begging to get dealt with. I'm outside. I'll let you know more when you get outside."

He ended the call before I could utter a word. I slowly shook my head because I knew I would have to deal with his

thuggish side for a whole hour. Brittany had gone to Axton's office to see if he wanted anything for lunch, so I walked by without going in. However, before I could exit, Brittany got my attention. When she caught up with me, she said, "Dr. Ax wants to see you before you leave for lunch."

I huffed slightly. "Okay."

I made my way back to his office to see him sitting there, staring at his hands. I knocked on the doorframe, and he beckoned me inside. "I just wanted to apologize for earlier. That was inappropriate, and I hope you won't report me to—"

I held my hand up, stopping him from speaking. "You don't have to worry about that, Dr. Ax. I understand the grieving process and how vulnerable a person can be during that time. You have nothing to apologize for."

He gave me a slight smile and nodded. "Thank you."

It was my turn to nod. I stared at him for a second then cleared my throat and quickly left his office. The attraction was so damn thick it was about to suffocate me. He wanted me... I wanted him too. *Jesus*. I quickly made my way out of the back door to see Shy hit his steering wheel. I didn't know what in the hell was going on, but I was sure I was about to find out.

The second I got in the car, he said, "He's suing your doctor's office and the clinic for performing the abortion. He's suing you as well for denying him the right to be a parent. Stupid muthafucka. I'm about ready to just take his ass right outta here."

"Can he do that?"

"Don't you just love Texas? Six weeks is the point where abortions can't be performed. You were right at six weeks."

"Shy, what am I gonna do?"

"You just continue doing you. I'm gon' take care of this. If I need any information, I'll get with you. Now where do you wanna get something to eat from?"

I just wanted my daddy now. I couldn't care less about eating. Knowledge fucking Rucker was suing me. What in the fuck was this world coming to that a woman couldn't legally have an abortion after six weeks? Most women didn't find out they were pregnant until they were around that gestational timeframe. He needed to be worried about the baby he already had in Atlanta and quit fucking worrying about me.

"Is he the one that's following me?"

"I don't think so, but he's behind whoever is following you. Who was the nigga leaving your house at five in the morning?"

I rolled my eyes. I knew Dylan had to have told him that. "A friend."

"Friend my ass. I can find out, but I would prefer you tell me."

"He's a friend! I met him when I was a freshman at Lamar! Damn!"

"Hol' on. Calm that attitude down. Ain't nobody in here yelling."

"Whether you care to accept it or not, Shy, I'm grown as fuck. I'm capable of peeping bullshit, which was why I had you looking into Knowledge in the first place. Something seemed off about his ass. You know what? Don't worry about lunch, Shy. I'm just gonna stay at work."

"Come on, Alexz. You have to eat. You trippin' now."

"Am I? If Sheldon Berotte doesn't treat me like a kid, then neither should you. Enjoy the rest of your day, Shy."

I slammed his door and headed back inside, nearly knocking Axton down. He was leaving the bathroom, and I bumped right into him. "I'm so sorry. I should have been paying closer attention to where I was going."

"Yeah, you should have," he said with a smirk.

I nodded and walked around him. Before I could get too far though, he grabbed my arm. I winced slightly, and he quickly released me. "Shit. I'm sorry. I forgot that fast."

“It’s okay.”

“Will you come sit with me in my office? Why aren’t you eating?”

I huffed, not really wanting to talk to him about my issues. “Yeah, I’ll sit with you. My brother pissed me off, so I lost my appetite.”

When we stepped inside the office, he closed the door. I went to the couch, and he sat behind the desk. Then suddenly, he stood and opened the door. I chuckled when he did so. We didn’t need people talking. They were going to talk anyway, but at least they wouldn’t be able to speculate about what they thought was going on behind closed doors.

Once he sat, he asked, “Is he the only brother you have?”

“No. I have four biological brothers. My dad’s girlfriend has two sons. So that makes me have six older brothers.”

“Shit. You probably went through hell growing up. No wonder you’re so tough.”

“Hell ain’t the word for it. The couple of guys that did come around were extremely intimidated after meeting them and my father. My brother Shyrón is the shortest, and he’s six feet even.”

“That’s the one I met, right?”

“Yes, and he’s the one that pissed me off.” I crossed my legs, and I watched him follow the gesture with his eyes. “How many siblings do you have?” I asked.

I didn’t want him to ask why I was pissed, so I quickly directed the conversation to him and his family. I didn’t care to talk about that and have him digging in my business. “I have an older sister and a younger brother.”

“So you’re a middle child. You probably gave your sister hell.”

He chuckled slightly. “Me and my brother did. He’s only a year younger than me.”

“I feel sorry for her.”

“Well, don’t. She’s six years older than me and got to spank us when she was babysitting. She exacted her revenge already.”

It was my turn to chuckle. He was cooler than I thought. I just hated that it took his grandmother dying for me to notice. Before our conversation could continue, Brittany entered the office with his food. After smelling his meal, it made me wish I wouldn’t have gotten so hot with Shy. Now I was wishing I had some food. “And this is for you, firestarter,” Brittany said.

I frowned slightly as she continued. “Shyrón’s fine ass gave these to me on my way in and told me to give them to you. I almost passed out when he smiled, and I saw his grill.”

I slightly rolled my eyes. He wore that snatch out grill occasionally. He was such a damn thug. I knew just by the smell that he’d gotten me some spring rolls. I smiled slightly then grabbed my phone and sent him a text. *Thank you, jackass.*

He sent back the Denzel Washington meme where he put his hand to his chest like he was hurt. I opened the bag and sniffed them as I closed my eyes. Spring rolls and egg rolls were my absolute favorites. He couldn’t have gone wrong with either. When I opened my eyes, Brittany said, “You gon’ turn into an egg roll one day.”

I waved her off as I took the contents from my bag. She left the office with a giggle. I knew we would be talking later about what led to me sitting in the office with Dr. Ax, and I would fill her in. “Alexz, you can come to the desk so you can lay your food out.”

I smiled slightly then made my way over to him. He glanced at my spring rolls, so I asked, “Would you like one?”

“With the way you closed your eyes and inhaled their scent, I wouldn’t dare.”

I laughed as I nodded. The smile that graced his gorgeous face had me heating up once again. “Smart man.”

A xton

THIS WEEK HAD BEEN AS SMOOTH AS I COULD HOPE FOR. Coming to work had helped me in ways I never thought possible. It had kept me busy. Although I had gone home Tuesday and Wednesday night, I would be staying tonight, because the ladies in the office wanted to take me out to have drinks. While Brittany and Alexz were black, the rest of the ladies were white, and one was Latino. I quickly informed Brittany that I didn't want to go to Madison's.

She'd laughed when I said that and promised that they would take me to a place called Pour 09. She said it was still fairly new, and she had heard good things about it. Work had been going well, and I knew I could attribute that to one person in particular... Alexz Berotte. Her sensitive side was everything. She was sweet, attentive, and caring, all things I would have never suspected her of being after our first encounter.

She wouldn't be working tomorrow though, so I would have to enjoy her company tonight. It would be my last time seeing her. *Sucks for me.* As I stood in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection, I slid my hands down my slacks and maroon shirt. They didn't tell me whether this was a chill out in jeans type of environment or not, so I dressed to impress. Hopefully, I wouldn't be overdressed.

I grabbed my keys and left my hotel room, prepared to enjoy tonight. Unfortunately, I knew I couldn't enjoy myself too much because it would still be somewhat of a professional environment. Just because we were out getting drinks didn't mean that they didn't expect a certain level of professionalism. One black man out with five beautiful women had to be careful how he carried himself. Being that I wasn't familiar with the area made that fact more imperative.

Once I input the address in my navigation, I took the seven-minute drive to the place. They told me to be there by seven, so I moved at the speed of light when I left the office. My sister often called me a damn metrosexual, because she said I stayed in the mirror as long as a female did. Of course, my comeback was that her friends appreciated that. Once she realized how true that statement was, she left me alone. She didn't want to entertain the thought that her teacher friends at the time were ogling a college freshman.

When I got to the place we would be having drinks, I assessed it from the outside. It looked lively, being that there were people outside dancing and looking to be having a great time. The second level was completely outdoors and had string lights hanging from the wooden rafters. I could also see that quite a few of the people out there were black. *Good.*

As I watched the people going inside the lower level, I realized I was probably overdressed. *Oh well.* I got out of my car and made my way to the entrance and saw Melissa making her way inside as well. "Hey, Dr. Ax! Brittany is already inside."

"Hey, Melissa. Okay."

I followed her inside. I noticed that she was in a skirt and top. She wasn't too dressy, but she wasn't casual either. Brittany was standing there waiting for more of us to arrive. She had on jeans and a dressy top with heels. At least my group didn't make me look overdressed. That was what was most important. After speaking to Melissa and me, and Tia, the ultrasound tech had arrived, they led us to our seats upstairs. This environment could be dangerous. All these

people were up here dancing, and I enjoyed good music. I didn't want to forget my home training and act a fool up here.

I was a Q-Dawg, and I would have my tongue hanging out as I rolled my head if the music got too wild. I already knew that I would have to take it easy on the drinks for sure. Brittany was sure to let the hostess know that we were expecting two more guests before she left us alone. I supposed they planned to eat. Otherwise, we could have chilled out at the bar. Since it was six of us though, I supposed having a table would be better.

Before the waitress could take our orders, my eyes caught a glimpse of a head full of brown curls. I couldn't look away without knowing whether it was her or not. The minute she made it up the stairs, I wanted to grab my dick. She had on the tightest pair of distressed blue jeans, but it was the shirt that fucked me up. It had a double zipper in the front that she clearly wanted to take advantage of. The bottom was slightly unzipped, showing off her flat stomach, belly ring, and tatts, but it was the zipper at the top that was making me want to grab my dick.

Her breasts were on display, because the zipper was so low, it was almost meeting the other one. I swallowed hard as I tried to figure out how I would make it through this night without expressing my every desire to her. Alexz knew her body was fire, and that was why she flaunted the shit. She looked around the upper level until her eyes met mine. She smiled then headed over to us.

When I looked away from her, I noticed Brittany watching me. She could watch me all she wanted to. She should have told her friend to wear her fucking scrubs here tonight. After ordering a Crown and Coke, I turned back to the woman that was threatening to have me acting a whole nigga in front of these people. "Hey, everybody!"

Her makeup was light, but those beautiful rose-colored lips were begging me to kiss them. "What's up, Alexz?"

She smiled at me then sat right next to me. *The devil shole is busy*. There was no way I would be able to look in her

direction without my eyes falling to her cleavage. “Hey,” she said as she shoulder-bumped me. “You clean up nice.”

“Thanks. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

The other women had to know I was feeling her. I didn’t offer any of them any compliments. Maybe they would think I offered her one because she offered me one. I wanted to roll my eyes because, as expected, my dick was hard as hell. If I had to stand, there was no way I’d be able to hide my erection. When Jackie, the other front desk lady joined us, they were in full-out party mode. Brittany had stood to dance a couple of times, while sipping her margarita.

It wasn’t until a track by Lil Durk was spun that Alexz stood up to dance. I found myself in a trance watching her bounce to the beat. When she noticed I was watching, she smiled and said, “Come dance with me!”

“Naw. That ain’t my joint.”

She poked out that juicy ass bottom lip but continued dancing. I ordered a platter of wings and another drink. Going out with them probably wasn’t a good idea, especially not a place like this. The upper level where we were was practically filled to capacity on a Thursday night. I would have never thought there was a place in Beaumont like this. It wasn’t as dry as I thought it was.

Before the waitress could bring my drink or my wings, those muthafuckas had the nerve to play “Atomic Dog.” I dropped my head back and bit my bottom lip, trying to ignore the urge to hop up from this damn chair. That was all for naught when a couple of bruhs started barking. I stood from my seat and held my hands up making our signature symbol and barking along with them. The white people looked confused as shit.

When they started our stroll, it was all over. They made their way to me and slapped my hand, then I fell in line with them. There were three of them... just enough to cause a ruckus. I joined in as I watched the ladies at the table watch us

intently. There was one problem. My dick was still semi-hard, and my pants were too tight. *Fuck!*

I couldn't sit down in the middle of our stroll. It was like my dick wanted to show out, because knowing that they were looking at him only made him harder. I couldn't help but grab it as I hopped. It seemed like that fucking song was lasting forever. I didn't know what in the hell possessed these people to play that song, but it didn't matter where I was, that song called dawgs from every chapter to the dancefloor.

Finally, the damn song went off, and after shaking it up with the bruhs, I found out that those muthafuckas had requested the song. When I sat, all eyes were on me. My frat had a reputation with the ladies, and for some reason, they loved the fuck out of our asses, especially sistas. Linda, the phlebotomist, fanned herself and said, "Damn. That was hot."

I rubbed my hand down my face. I was somewhat embarrassed, but there was no way I could sit there and act like I didn't hear the call of duty to our stroll. I glanced over at Alexz to find her staring at me. "Well, you and my big-headed ass brothers would get along well. Chad and DJ are Omegas."

"That's what's up," I said as my eyes took a dip to her cleavage.

I could see the sweat glistening on her breasts. If I didn't wanna lick that shit off, my name wasn't Axton. I dug into my wings despite the eyes on me. Hopefully, they would move on to the next subject of discussion soon, because I was uncomfortable as hell. Finally looking up, I asked, "Y'all want some wings?"

They all turned me down... except one of them. Alexz reached over and grabbed one off the platter as my eyebrows lifted. "I thought you would never ask. I started to take one while you weren't paying attention."

The women all giggled as she moaned while chewing. I continued staring at her, waiting for her to finish her food-gasm. When she looked at me, she asked, "What?"

I slowly shook my head. It was like she was a girlfriend without being one. Before I could start eating again, she reached her hand over and grabbed another one. I huffed and just moved the platter closer to her as I sipped my drink. It was a little watered down now, since it had been sitting here a minute, but I wasn't about to let it go to waste. I was having a good time though, listening to them chatter. I'd consumed three drinks, and I knew that if I had another, I wouldn't be able to drive back to the hotel. As they talked, "In Dem Guts" came on, and Alexz bolted from her seat like it had ejected her.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me from my seat. I let her lead me away from the ladies, and she turned her back to me and began dancing. I took a deep breath and rubbed my hand down my beard as I watched her work her ass. I slid my hand over the bare skin of her waistline, my fingers ending up close to her bellybutton, and began grooving with her.

I was far enough away from her to where our moves looked like a cool couple of friends just dancing together. However, she backed into me and lifted her arms. I closed my eyes for a moment then slid my other arm around her and began grinding into her. She arched her back and rested her head against me then grabbed my dreads.

She was fucking with me and wanted me to bust in her guts like the song implied. My dick was hard as shit, and at that moment, I didn't care who said what. I leaned over to her ear and said in a low voice, "You keep pulling my hair like that, you gon' find me in *your* guts."

I could see the goosebumps that appeared on her skin as I licked her ear. That only caused her to grind even harder against my dick. She turned her head to me and asked, "What if that's where I want you to end up? I would love to pet that dawg."

"Then we can cut this night short as hell."

She gave me a one-cheeked smile then kissed me with those juicy ass lips. My eyes stayed on hers as we swayed to the beat of the song and my arms tightened around her.

Something more than thoughts of back shots was happening between us. I wasn't sure if it only felt that way because I'd been trippin' all week from my grandmother's death or if it was the alcohol, but I just wanted to be in her space, even if nothing more happened.

When the song ended, she looked away and cleared her throat. She bit her bottom lip and pulled away from me as if the bubble we were in had burst. I wanted to pull her back to me, but I didn't want to make a scene. Before she could walk away, I asked, "So what's up?"

"It's just the effects of the song and the alcohol. Ain't nothing happening this way, Axton."

Damn. Well, that shit put me in a foul mood. She walked away and went back to the table. I was done for the night. I couldn't sit here and act like something didn't happen between us a minute ago. Had it not been for the audience, we would have fucked right there. That was just how intense that shit felt to me. Maybe it was just the tease for her. She probably already had somebody stroking her pussy just right... the nigga she was with this past weekend.

When I got back to the table, I sat, then immediately called the waitress over to settle my tab. Alexz was talking and laughing like shit didn't just happen; however, I saw her stealing glances at me. She was playing games. That was what I got for trying to holla at a damn twenty-four-year-old. She wasn't ready for the same shit I was ready for. I was eight years older than her. I was finishing medical school when she graduated from high school.

I took a deep breath and drank the melted ice from my glass as the waitress set the check next to me. Before she could leave, I gave her my credit card. There were still plenty of wings left, and while the petty side of me was saying to box that shit up and eat it later, I decided to leave them there for them to eat. Although the others originally said they didn't want any wings, I knew the moment I left, they would be grabbing themselves a couple.

I watched the other people dance and have a good time until the waitress brought my card back. When she did, I looked around the table. “It’s been fun, but I gotta go. Y’all have a good night, and thanks for making these couple of weeks memorable. I appreciate y’all for working with me.”

They all stood to offer goodbye hugs. Alexz stood there, waiting her turn. I hugged her, and she said, “I’ll walk you out.”

“Naw. Enjoy the wings.”

I walked away from her and didn’t look back. That would be my last time seeing her, and part of me was relieved. She wouldn’t be able to continue playing games with me. I knew the longer I was around her, I would keep giving her the opportunity to do so. I was just that attracted to her. That shit was toxic. She could be toxic with somebody else.

Alexz

“SHE’S BEEN DOING REALLY WELL, SO HOPEFULLY AFTER today, we can pick up where we left off.”

We’d gotten to Houston to support Mama Nissa and my brothers as they eulogized Dexter Dent, and I was tired as hell. Last night, I’d gone out again with Brittany and had a good time, but I was paying for it this morning when I got up. We had to be in Houston for eleven, so I had to get up at seven in order to make myself look presentable.

Two nights in a row of drinking had taken a toll on me. Had I not had to get up this morning, I would have had time to recuperate. The activities of Thursday night had warranted another night of drinks, at least that was what Brittany had said. She wanted to talk about what had gone down between Axton and me. It took everything in me to turn him down, but I knew that I couldn’t take advantage of his sensitive state.

I wasn’t ready for a boyfriend just yet. With whoever this was stalking me... I just didn’t think it was a good time to be starting a new relationship. Axton was sexy as hell though. Watching him and his frat brothers stroll and seeing that huge dick print had me feenin something terrible. When he left, I had to go to the bathroom and pat myself with a wet paper towel. He had me scorching hot, especially when he licked my ear.

We both had shit going on in our lives, so I couldn't allow myself to complicate things. I shouldn't have teased him though. While I was hoping that we could at least be friends, because it seemed that was the relationship we'd been building all week, he shut that shit down quick. I really enjoyed talking to him and joking around with him. It kind of crushed me when he wouldn't let me walk him out, knowing that would be our last time seeing one another, but I understood.

As we entered the funeral home, my dad found Anissa at the front and went to sit with her. She'd come back to Houston yesterday to be with DJ and Jamel. Chad had gone to sit with DJ while the rest of us sat in back. Dylan stretched his arm out across the back of the pew and leaned over closer to my ear. "There's not a lot of people here."

"I know. Maybe he didn't have a lot of family."

Shyrón said from the other side of me, "Or friends. He's been in and out of the streets for so long, everybody close to him probably washed their hands of him."

It was sad to think that, even in death, the people in his life wanted nothing more to do with him. I watched Mama Nissa lay against my dad as he consoled her. That had to be hard for him, but he was being strong for her, and I admired the hell out of that. I wished I could be as strong and resilient as he was. His loyalty to my mother, even after her death, and now to Mama Nissa was *beyond* admirable.

As the funeral started, I couldn't help but let my thoughts drift back to Axton. He was probably burying his grandmother today. The office had sent flowers to the address he had on file. Brittany had recommended that we send them directly to him. She said when her grandmother died, her family was in rare form, taking shit that didn't belong to them. The job had sent flowers for her also, but she never got them. She said people showed their true colors when someone died, especially when that person was a matriarch of the family, the glue holding them together.

It wasn't like we had any other information anyway. We didn't know her name or the funeral home they chose to use. I

just wished I would have gone to the office yesterday and gotten his phone number or something. I was more than sure that after Thursday night, he wouldn't have given it to me anyway though.

By the time I tuned back in, the preacher was dismissing us. Since he was being cremated afterward, there wouldn't be a drive to a burial site, and I wasn't sure if there would be a repast either. There were literally less than ten other people there. While I wasn't everyone's favorite person, I surely hoped that more people loved me than this.

As we followed Dad and Mama Nissa out into the foyer, I stopped dead in my tracks. I came face to face with Axton. Although he had shades on, I could clearly tell it was him. There was no way I could forget the smoothness of his caramel skin tone or the thickness of his lips... the way his beard was lined perfectly around his jawline or the way he piled his dreads atop his head. He grabbed my hand and squeezed it slightly then nodded at me and continued behind the line of family members.

The funeral home had several chapels where they could have multiple funerals at once, but for some reason, I never expected one of those funerals to be Axton's grandmother's. I didn't know why I thought it was impossible, other than the fact I had horrible luck at times. After watching to see what chapel they entered, I took a deep breath then met my family outside. Before I could utter a word, Shyrón asked, "Was that Dr. Vaughn?"

"Yes. His grandmother died earlier this week, but I didn't know her funeral would be here nor that it would be today."

I couldn't stop myself from turning to look back at the funeral home. My spirit was telling me that I should stay. Despite his rejection of me Thursday night, I felt like he needed me. We didn't know one another well, but the little I did know about him told me that he would never ask or even expect me to stay. Him grabbing my hand earlier and me feeling the tremble in it told me that he needed someone to lean on. There was no way he would attempt to lean on anyone in his family when they were hurting just as badly as he was.

Judging by the size of their family, I figured the funeral would at least last an hour and a half. Maybe I would have time to eat and come back. As I stood listening to Dad discuss with DJ and Jamel on what they wanted to do and where they wanted to get something to eat from, someone burst through the doors. When I turned to see who had caused the ruckus, I saw Axton quickly walking to the side of the building.

Without thinking about it, I took off in the direction he'd gone until I saw him sitting on the cement, his back against the building, his knees bent, and his head hanging. I ran to him and squatted in front of him, resting my palms on each side of his face at his jawline. My heart was heavy for him. I didn't say a word to acknowledge that I was witnessing him unravel. I just wanted him to know that I was here.

In one swift motion, he pulled me to him, wrapping his arms around me tightly and causing me to fall to my knees. I winced in pain. Since I was wearing a dress, my bare skin had hit the pavement, and I'd slid a little. Hopefully, I wasn't bleeding. When I felt his body quake, I wrapped my arms around him, holding his head against my chest. I heard someone walking around the building, and when I looked over, it was a woman. She'd stopped and was just staring at us. She had to be his sister because they looked too much alike.

Pulling away from me, Axton looked too. His cheeks were wet with his tears, and I couldn't tear my gaze away from him. It was something about seeing a man sensitive and broken that activated the nurturer in me. He stood to his feet then quickly helped me to mine. Glancing at my knee, I thanked God that it wasn't bleeding. It was somewhat scraped though. "Thank you, Alexz. I'm sorry about your knee."

I looked up at him, my brows slightly furrowed. "It's okay."

He grabbed my hand and led me toward the woman standing there. "Kaysyn, this is Alexz, a nurse I met in Beaumont. Alexz, this is my sister, Kaysyn."

She nodded at me and offered a soft smile. I did the same. She turned to go back inside, and he followed behind her,

gently pulling me with him until we got to the entrance. He turned to me then released my hand. "Thank you again."

I nodded and watched him go inside the funeral home. My feet were planted though as I stared at him through the door. His shoulders were slumped, and I just wanted to hold him in my arms and console him. When I felt a hand on my shoulder, I looked up to see Shy and Isaiah standing on either side of me. "If you wanna stay, we'll understand," Shy said.

I swallowed hard then turned to see my family standing there, waiting to see what I would decide. Isaiah pulled me in his arms. His hugs always felt nurturing, similar to Dad's. It felt like a protective, big brother's embrace should feel. I took a deep breath and said, "Thanks, Zay. I think I'm going to stay. If he doesn't want me to be with him after this, I'll call to see where y'all decided to go."

"Well, we are going to Jamel's place first. It's too hot to be standing out here trying to decide what to do."

I smiled slightly. "Okay. I'll call."

He and Shy nodded as I turned to go inside. I needed to find a restroom to clean my knee. It was pink, and some of the skin was peeling. Once I did that, I would venture closer to the chapel Axton and his family occupied. When I walked into the bathroom, I quickly made my way to the sink. Glancing down at my knee, I cringed slightly. There was a little blood, but the last thing I wanted to do was put a band aid on it.

I set my purse on the countertop and took out my mini first-aid kit. After finding an antiseptic towelette, I cleaned my scrape and applied a little Neosporin to it... enough to do the job. That was better than putting a tan bandage on it. I could do that later once I changed into something else. We planned to stay in Houston with Jamel tonight, since his father once lived with him. It had to be difficult for him to live alone now. DJ had been with him nearly all week.

Once I got my kit back inside my purse, I made my way to the chapel. As I stood outside of the doors, I warred within myself if I should even be trying to be here for him. He'd been receptive to my comfort, but that could only be in the state he

was in now. As the thoughts raced through my mind, I decided that now was the only time that mattered. If he no longer wanted to talk or be acquainted with me afterward, while it would sting, I would have to accept that.

Slowly pushing the door open, trying to make the least amount of noise as possible, I slid inside and took a seat on the back pew. As I did, Axton had stood to his feet, approaching the podium. My insides tightened as I watched him. I didn't know how I would handle having to speak at a loved one's funeral. I didn't remember my grandparents, so I had no idea what it felt like to lose someone close to me. That alone was a blessing.

When he got to the podium and had taken off his shades, his puffy, red eyes pulled at the sensitivity swirling inside of me. I still didn't understand why I was so sensitive when it concerned him. It was more than attraction. He scanned the room as he swallowed hard then began. "Mimi was my everything. I was her everything too. Although she can't confirm this, I know I was her favorite grandchild."

There were some grunts and laughter as if that was an ongoing joke. However, it enlightened me on just how close he was to his grandmother. Axton gave a slight smile then continued talking about fun times and memories of her love. He was about to speak his final words when his eyes met mine. His face reddened quite a bit as he stared at me. He continued again, and I knew why his face turned red when he began.

"My last conversation with Mimi went a little like this. It can only be a woman that has you that frustrated about doing something that you love. Now what's her name?"

The crowd laughed, but my eyes had widened, and my lips had parted. "Well, after my theatrics, trying to deny that she was right, I told her, 'Her name is Alexzandria, but everyone calls her Alexz. She so stubborn and mean.'"

The crowd laughed more, but I was barely breathing. He'd spoken about me to his grandmother. My eyes had watered as he continued staring at me while he spoke. "Mimi told me to

hang in there and that she would come around. I supposed she was right. Thanks for coming, Alexz.”

The crowd looked around the room, probably trying to figure out who Alexz was. Thankfully the chapel was too full for them to realize it was me. I nodded at him as he left the podium, amid the applause, and went to his seat. At that moment, I was glad that I had come back. While I knew that his words probably wouldn't have changed, they were probably more heartfelt since I was sitting there unexpectedly.

Once the funeral was over, I stepped out of the chapel to the foyer and walked further down to have a seat on a cushioned bench against the wall so I wouldn't be in the way. But I was also in view where Axton would see me. After sitting there for five minutes, I realized they weren't coming out this way. *Shit!*

I went back inside to see them going out of a back door. Thankfully, everyone was still standing around talking. As I made my way through the crowd, I saw they were just getting the casket inside of the hearse. I released the breath I was holding, knowing that he couldn't have left yet. When the pallbearers walked away, I realized Axton was one of them. As he stood talking to a man that was also a pallbearer, I made my way to him.

When he saw me, he gave me a slight smile then walked away from the man as he was still talking. I chuckled slightly, feeling amazingly flattered. “I saw you walk out, so I thought you were going to be with your family,” he said as he reached for my hands.

“No. I thought I was getting out of the way only to realize that y'all had used another exit. Listen... I umm—”

He leaned over and kissed my forehead then my cheek and pulled me into his arms before I could complete my sentence. I was only going to offer my condolences again. I hated spewing my feelings everywhere when they were this emotional. I could clown around and be mean all day. Maybe he knew that. I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tightly.

When he pulled away, he said, “You were on my last nerve, and my grandmother saw right through my façade. I was just ready for my time in Beaumont to be done.”

I chuckled as I slowly shook my head. He glanced behind him and asked, “You wanna ride with me to the cemetery? Do you have something else you need to do?”

“I’m here for you. So, yeah. I’ll ride with you.”

He grabbed my hand and lifted it to his lips. *Dear Jesus.* This man needed to keep his lips off me. My insides were starting to stir with feelings I shouldn’t have been having at a funeral, especially for a man that was grieving as heavily as he was. He pulled me to his car and opened the door for me as someone yelled, “Ax! I thought you were riding with me?”

Axton moved to the side so the man could see me getting inside. Once he did, he yelled, “My bad! Okay.”

I watched him walk around the car and get in. Once he started it, he pulled up behind the hearse and waited. He turned to me and looked at my knee. “Damn. I’m sorry about your knee. You didn’t have a band aid?”

“I did. But you are talking about a woman who won’t wear a sling for her broken arm. What makes you think I would ruin my look by putting a band aid on my knee?”

He slowly shook his head as he chuckled. “Well, I’m glad it wasn’t worse. Had I ruined your look, I would have never heard the end of it.”

“Well, I would have to have your phone number for you to never hear the end of it. After today, I doubt we’ll run into one another again, unless you fill in for Dr. West again.”

He smiled softly as he grabbed my hand. “I’m sorry for getting salty Thursday night.”

“It’s okay. I just... I felt like I was taking advantage of you.”

He frowned hard. “Taking advantage of me how?”

“Well... I knew you were somewhat vulnerable and sensitive this past week because of your grandmother passing.

I felt like you were only making a decision like that because your feelings were on your sleeve.”

He looked away and nodded repeatedly then turned back to me. “Had that happened Thursday last week, the outcome would have been the same. You had my attention before I even got to Beaumont. Dr. West sent me your names and pictures so I wouldn’t have to spend so much time getting to know who was who. I already knew who all of you were when I got there. I also knew to walk on eggshells around you, but I ignored those instructions. I figured a woman as beautiful as you could never be so mean. But shiiiiid....”

I laughed loudly then covered my mouth and shoved his arm. “I’m not that mean. I just don’t tolerate bullshit.”

He lifted his brows. “Keep them down. Now I can’t tell how big your forehead is,” he said, mimicking my voice.

I was able to restrain my outburst, but I knew my face was red as the flames of hell. He laughed loudly, and it made me burst as well. “Okay, okay. Maybe I am a little mean.”

He cut his eyes at me as the line started to move then grabbed my hand once again. When I felt the tremble in his hand, I knew that here with him was where I needed to be.

A xton

HAVING ALEXZ SEE MY SENSITIVITY WASN'T MY FAVORITE PART about her being here for me. However, the way being with and talking to her had taken my mind off my sorrow was refreshing. I was still sensitive, but I wasn't thinking about the sorrowful state my grandmother's death had me in. I was able to laugh, and for that, I was grateful that the funerals were in the same location.

After leaving the cemetery, I'd brought her back to the funeral home to get her car so she could be with her people, but now, I was sitting here at the repast like I'd lost my best friend. My bruhs had all come through to offer their condolences and coworkers had come and gone as well, but I couldn't seem to pick myself up. When my mind wasn't on Mimi, it was on Alexz.

She was so beautiful today in her short black dress. It hugged her cleavage and flowed at the bottom, stopping short of her knees. Her hair was a mess of curls, and she wore makeup. She'd gotten plenty of looks at the cemetery, but I was sure to hold onto her for that reason, as if she were mine. I *wanted* her to be mine. Thankfully, we'd traded numbers this time. She'd told me not to hesitate to call, especially if I needed her.

When she'd joined me on side of the funeral home earlier, it was like she was pulling the emotions from me. I was

desperately trying to hold them inside, but when she hugged me back, I crumbled. I'd planned to say so much more about what Mimi had said about her that day, but when I saw her sitting there, I couldn't. There was no way I could say that she was my one and that I wouldn't rest until she knew it too... not for all those people to see her reaction to my words.

The hall was starting to thin out, and as it did, I noticed my sister watching me. Kaysyn was the only one that had gotten an introduction. I'd stayed far away from everyone at the cemetery after getting the casket in position, because I only wanted to introduce her to them as my one and only. When it was over, I took off with her, heading back to the funeral home. As I slid my hand down my face, I noticed Kaysyn coming my way. I slightly rolled my eyes.

"You can roll your eyes all you want. Go be with your woman. You been moping since you met us here without her. Any woman that will scrape her knees for you is a keeper. You would have had to get up off that cement had it been me."

I slowly shook my head. "I'll call her later. She has shit going on too. Her stepbrothers' dad's funeral was today. I don't want to be selfish. She gave me more of her time than I was expecting, so I'm grateful for that."

"Uh huh. You disappeared at the cemetery like you was a damn raccoon that had found something shiny."

"Kay, shut up!" I said as I laughed. I stood and hugged her. "Thanks, sis. I do think that Mimi was right about her though. She's the one. I just have to convince her of that."

"She already knows, Ax. I can tell by the way she stared at you. The way she consoled you on that cement, that ain't no fly by night shit. And you know Mimi didn't just talk out the side of her neck. If she said that, then you better act on it."

"Thanks. I will. Where's Arrow?"

She rolled her eyes and tilted her head. I looked around her to see him with a woman I'd never seen before. He was with a different woman at the funeral. He was still on that hoe shit, whereas I had outgrown it. I was ready to settle down, and

Alexzandria Berotte was the woman I wanted to dedicate the rest of my life pleasing. Kaysyn kissed my cheek and said, “You spoke well. Mimi would be proud.”

I nodded and gave her a tight smile, then went over to where my parents were. My dad had handled her death amazingly well and so had my grandfather. I shook my grandfather’s hand, then my dad’s and hugged my mama. “I’m about to go home. I may go to y’all’s house later if I don’t fall asleep.”

“Or meet up with that beautiful young lady you were with,” my mama said.

“Or that,” I responded as I nodded repeatedly.

She smiled brightly as they all bid me farewell. The moment I walked out, I wanted to call Alexz. I’d been at the repast a couple of hours and just wanted to go home. I didn’t sleep well last night, but just from feeling Alexz’s embrace earlier, I knew I could lay against her and sleep like a newborn baby. She relaxed me completely. Whether she would be cool with being alone with me at my house was a different subject though.

Instead of calling right away, I decided to take the drive home and make sure my house was presentable, just in case she agreed to coming over. Plus, that would also give me time to get comfortable. As I drove, I got a text from Arrow. Opting to just let the car read it, I almost choked hearing the computerized voice say, “Damn, nigga. You could have said bye.”

When I got to the traffic light, I messaged back. *My bad. I was just ready to go home. I’m tired as hell. We can hook up tomorrow.*

Arrow and I sometimes hooped on Sunday afternoons, but I wasn’t totally sure about tomorrow. It depended on what was in store for me and Alexz and if she chose to spend time with me. When I turned in my driveway and pulled into the garage, I was anxious as hell to get inside to see what was waiting for me. I was in such a daze when I came home yesterday and this

morning when I left, I didn't even remember what the house looked like.

After unlocking the door, I walked in to see that it didn't look too bad. I wasn't a messy ass person, but occasionally, I left shit around the house. Once I'd picked up after myself and made sure the bathrooms were clean, I took a shower, then settled on the couch with a beer. Grabbing my phone from the coffee table, I saw Arrow's response to my text, saying that he would need a raincheck for tomorrow. That probably had something to do with whoever the lady was that he was with at the repast.

Finding Alexz's number in my phone, I hit the call icon. I was nervous as hell, and I didn't know why. She said if I needed her that I should call. I needed her. When she answered, I could hear a lot of background noise, but the distinct sounds of my bruhs were extremely audible. "Ugh! Can y'all shut the hell up?"

I chuckled as I listened to her move around to somewhere a little quieter. "Hello?"

"What's up, Alexz?"

"Axton. Hey. How are you?"

"I'm cool. I was just wondering if you had some free time to spare. I mean... I'm at my house chilling and wouldn't mind your company."

She was quiet for a second, then she asked, "Where are you located?"

"I'll text you my address."

After a moment, she said, "Oh shit!"

"What?"

"You're literally around the damn corner from where I am."

She laughed, and I couldn't help but join in her laughter. "Axton?"

"Yeah?"

“I’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call, happy that I was close enough for her to venture out. Had I been too far, she probably would have asked me to go to her. That wouldn’t have been a problem at all. I chugged my beer then quickly went to brush my teeth and gargle. By the time I was done, the doorbell was ringing. I made my way to the front door and found Alexz standing there in sweats and a t-shirt. She waved to the car at the road as I stepped aside to let her in.

We practically had on the same attire. My sweats were black though. I figured she’d seen enough of my dick Thursday night. She’d worn gray sweats. They had the same effect on women. Nothing was hidden if they were tight enough. After closing the door, she said, “Wow. You have a beautiful home.”

“Thanks. Mimi decorated it for me.”

“She did an amazing job,” she said as she looked around, mainly at the black art on the walls.

I smiled slightly as I led her to my oversized sectional in the family room. She took off her shoes and sat, immediately tucking her feet under her. I sat next to her and asked, “So what were you up to?”

“Getting my nerves worked over. I was sure you heard all the noise. My dad and Mama Nissa took some time to themselves, so I was in a house full of testosterone, as usual. What about you?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to see you. I wanted to call you sooner.”

She lifted her hand and caressed my cheek. “You should have.”

I leaned toward her and rested my forehead against hers. “Thank you for coming.”

When I lifted my head, I turned on the TV and asked, “What do you want to watch?”

“You. Come here.”

I turned to look at her to find her scooting into the corner of my sectional. She held her arms out to me. It was like she knew what I needed. I didn't know how she knew... but she did. I bit my bottom lip and made my way to her. As I was about to lay on her, she kissed my lips. Her lips were so damn soft, and just that quickly, my dick was rising to greet her. Quickly pulling away from her, I laid across her lap.

She rubbed her hand across my face and began humming. That was going to do me in. “Alexz, you gon' put me to sleep.”

“Then go to sleep. You look tired anyway.”

“I didn't call you to come over so I could fall asleep, not this soon anyway.”

“Axton... go to sleep.”

I wrapped my arm around her waist as she slumped slightly. It was only seven, but I was worn out like it was midnight. Alexz continuously rubbed my back and began humming again. It felt like I was falling into a damn coma. I quickly sat up as she stared at me. “What's wrong?”

“I don't want to fall asleep yet. I'm so comfortable against you. I'll be out in no time. Then I'll wake up at three in the morning and not be able to go back to sleep.”

I stretched and yawned then looked over at her. After grabbing her hand, I kissed it. “So which brother brought you here?”

“Dylan. His car was the last in the driveway so he said he would take me. Had Shy not spoken up for you, he probably would have stayed parked outside,” she said as she rolled her eyes.

I chuckled. “That's good that they protect you that way. Listen... I've been wanting to say this since I first met you.” She sat up and stared at me, awaiting what I would say. “You so got damn beautiful.”

She smiled big. “Thank you. I honestly thought you were extremely handsome when I first saw you too.”

“So you deflected.”

“I have some shit going on in my life that I’m trying to keep other people out of.”

“Does the shit you speak of have to do with how you broke your arm?”

She looked away from me, giving me an answer without giving me an answer. I grabbed her chin, turning her back to me. I stared into her beautiful brown eyes and tried to bare my soul to her through my gaze. “Alexz, I don’t give a shit about what you got going on. I wanna be wit’chu. It’s not because I’m feeling sensitive or vulnerable. I truly want to get to know you... everything about you.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. This was obviously difficult for her. Shit, it was difficult for me too. She remained quiet, so I spoke again. “Okay. Just tell me one thing that you think would be a dealbreaker for me or a toxic trait you have. One thing that you think I won’t be able to understand or get with. Then I’ll do the same.”

She cleared her throat then said, “I’m not that great at showing affection, but I like to receive it. Toxic as hell.”

I brushed her curls away from her face then lowered my lips to hers and lightly kissed her lips. “I can’t tell. You’ve been pretty affectionate with me.”

“I know, and it’s driving me crazy trying to figure out why.”

“Come on, Alexz. You know why. You can’t resist all this shit in front of you.”

She rolled her eyes as she chuckled. “Damn Omegas. It must be the dawg in you.”

I growled slightly, and it looked like she’d cum on herself. “Tell me something, Axton,” she said softly.

I stared at her, trying to figure out if I wanted to be blunt with her, but then I realized that was something we’d always

been with each other. “This might be a dealbreaker, but I’m honestly hoping that it’s not, because I’m feeling the hell out of you.”

“What is it?”

“I dive in quickly. If you let me, I would fuck you senseless in here.”

She seemed to stop breathing for a moment, then she stood from the sofa. *Shit.* I guess that was a dealbreaker. As I was about to stand, she turned back to me and pulled her t-shirt off, then unfastened her bra. My dick went from ten to one hundred in two seconds. “Then I suggest you get started then, because it’s gonna take a while to render me senseless.”

Shit! I grabbed her by her hips and yanked her to me but then slowed down completely, resting my forehead against her stomach. She slid her hands through my twists as I laid soft kisses on her where my head had been and allowed my hands to take a slow journey to her breasts. I’d been dying to suck on her hard nipples for a while, and now that the time had come, I refused to move quickly. I wanted to savor every moment, because I felt like she was only letting me do this to take the attention off why she broke her arm.

She would eventually learn that I didn’t forget easily. When this session was over, I would still want to know how she broke her arm. I was sure that her dealbreaker confession would have been that she was extremely private, because although we’d had plenty of talks throughout the week, I still didn’t know anything really personal about her.

As I tweaked her nipples, she stared at me, her eyes telling me that I was moving too slowly. Standing from my seat, I towered over her as I pulled off my tee, revealing all the tattoos that she couldn’t see before. I stooped and gripped the backs of her thighs, hoisting her in the air. She wrapped her legs around me as my tongue sought out her nipples. I showed them an equal amount of attention, flicking them back and forth and slowly sucking them as she moaned softly.

Lowering her slightly to where we were face to face, I kissed her the way I’d been wanting to since we’d met. As I

slid my tongue inside her mouth, she placed her hands on my face, pulling me deeper. I couldn't help but release a soft moan into her as my dick tried to grow beyond his limitations. It seemed that turned her on, because she began slightly bouncing on it like she was on a fucking seesaw.

I couldn't take the teasing, so I began making my way upstairs as I gripped her ass. She separated our kiss and looked to see where we were headed. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't dip into her raw... not that she would let me anyway. I nudged the door open to my bedroom with my foot and dropped her to the bed then came out of my pants and boxers.

Alexz licked her lips as she stared at my erection. "I hear he's just as tasty as he looks," I said in a low voice.

Her eyes met mine as I lifted her hips and slid off her pants and underwear in one motion. I dropped them to the floor then brought my eyes back to her pussy as she slid her fingers inside of it. I quickly hovered over her and grabbed her wrist. After closing my eyes, I sucked her fingers clean as my dick teased her opening. When I released her fingers and opened my eyes, she lifted her hips, causing my dick to slide inside of her. My eyebrows lifted slightly. "I hope you're ready for the monster you're creating."

Alexz

“I ONLY WANTED TO PUT SOMETHING SWEET ON YOUR SHIT before I sucked it dry.”

He didn't respond to me verbally, but his dick gave me all the response I needed when he plunged into me. That shit took my fucking breath away. I grabbed ahold of his dreads as I contemplated the fire I was playing with. I swallowed hard as he slowly pulled out of me. “Make sure you get all that sweet shit off of there then.”

He was a nasty muthafucka, and I loved it. The tats, the dreads, and his personality turned me on completely, and I couldn't wait to get to know him. He was cocky as shit, but just from that single plunge into my pool of desire, I knew he could back up everything he said. While I dived into this headfirst, I would much rather fuck him than talk about my shit with Knowledge or my abortion. That shit still fucked with me, and after his thrust into my depths, it was immediately where my mind had gone. I could never set myself up for failure again.

He left the bed to stand on the side of it as he stared at me, waiting for what I would do. I crawled to him and licked the tip of his dick. It hopped in excitement as I stared up at him. A smirk made its way to his lips, but I was about to knock that shit off in just a second. I brought my lips over his dick and slowly sucked him in a little at a time. With each stroke of my

mouth, I took what had to be another inch until I could take no more.

I shook my head, allowing his dick to play ping pong with my tonsils then recklessly bobbed on his shit. He grabbed my hair and pulled me from his dick, the thick saliva falling from my mouth as I stared up at him. He didn't say a word, but the frown on his face said everything I needed him to. He bit his bottom lip and allowed me to get back to the task at hand. I applied as much suction as my jaws would allow, knowing they would be tingling when I was done, as I sucked his dick for all I knew it had to be worth.

He jutted his hips forward, jabbing the back of my throat, nearly causing me to die. "That's the contracting I need. Gag on this dick, Alexz."

Say less, nigga. He wanted gagging? I would give him all he could handle. I gagged with nearly every bob, causing him to grip my hair once again and grunt uncontrollably. I stared up at him then slid my hands to his ass, pulling him in deeper, giving him permission to fuck my shit up. His eyes narrowed, and he began stroking my mouth as I brought my hand to my pussy. When he realized what I was doing, he withdrew his dick. "Let me take care of that shit for you."

He rolled me to my back forcefully, widened his stance, and dropped his dick down my fucking throat, then bent over and slurped my clit into his mouth. This shit was turning me on so much I was nearly at the point of no return already. He lifted my legs and practically swallowed my entire pussy. I wanted to scream so fucking bad. Doing my best to concentrate on my technique, I massaged his balls then applied pressure right beneath them, causing him to flood my mouth without warning. "Fuck!" he yelled after releasing my pussy from his mouth's grasp.

I continued sucking his dick and swallowed nearly every drop until he withdrew from my mouth. "Got damn, baby. Let me get at this pussy right."

He went to his nightstand and got a condom, quickly strapping up and joining me back in the bed. Going to his

knees, he slid his dick over my pussy as I lifted my hips. He popped my ass, causing me to hiss in excitement. “You’ll get this dick in just a minute. Let me get a sugar rush right quick.”

It was like my shit gushed at his words. I thought Jerrick turned me on. His ass wasn’t shit compared to Axton. It could have been because we’d established somewhat of an emotional connection already. Our feelings were involved. With Jerrick, it was just fucking. My heart was soft toward Axton, especially after knowing what he was dealing with. It seemed my pussy shared those sentiments as well.

He leaned over and said in a low voice, “She so fucking pretty. It’s a shame how I’m finna fuck her up.”

I swore I was about to cum, and he hadn’t touched her yet. I tweaked my nipples as he stared at me. “Suck your nipples the way I’m about to suck this pussy, baby.”

He lowered his head and kissed each of my inner thighs, then gently sucked my pussy lips as he tongue-kissed me there. When he made his way to my clit, I gasped. He knew what the fuck he was doing. The oral surgery he was performing on my shit couldn’t be fucked with by anyone I’d ever had. His tongue was causing destruction and healing all at the same damn time. My body was trembling and jerking uncontrollably as I pulled my nipple between my lips and sucked it at the same pace he was sucking my clit.

I couldn’t take the shit though, and just as I was about to release my nipple, he slid his fingers straight to my G-spot. My orgasm seized my body and shook shit up. “Axton! Oh fuck!”

He continued finger fucking me as he sucked my clit, no matter how desperately I was trying to get away from him. I lifted my hips as he wrapped his arm around my thigh, keeping me from suffocating his ass. When he lifted his face and I saw the cream in his beard, I was beyond mesmerized. He hovered over me and entered me with haste.

The way he was digging my shit out had my eyes rolling to the back of my head and my nails scratching his back up. After lifting my leg, my knee meeting my shoulder, he kissed me,

leaving my cream on my face. That nigga leaned over and licked every drop of it off my face. “Axton, you so fucking nasty!”

“Mm hmm. So are you.”

He flipped me over to my stomach and hit me with back shots that were sure to have me wearing a back brace tomorrow. When his finger penetrated my asshole and made that shit feel so pleasurable, I knew he was a damn professional at this shit. He had to be a damn porn star. I hated anal penetration... normally. I tooted my ass up even more than I already had, letting him know just how much I was enjoying this.

He pulled out of me and wrapped his arms around me, lifting my hips to his mouth. He jiggled my ass cheeks then dove in, eating my ass like I'd never experienced. I couldn't get away, but everything in me wanted to snatch that damn condom off and suck the veins out of his shit. “Axton... oh shit!”

I squirted, and that shit was rolling down my body to my face. I didn't even fucking care. The way he was alternating between my pussy and my ass, I'd tolerate all kinds of shit to keep experiencing this pleasure. When he finally released me, he turned me on my back and stared into my face like he was trying to plan out the next phase of his attack.

Suddenly, he leaned over to me and tongued the fuck out of me as his dick entered me once again and fucked me... senseless. When I separated the kiss, I couldn't help but scream as he growled out the satisfaction he was feeling. “Fuck, Alexz! This pussy gon' drain me dry.”

I lifted my hips, doing my best to throw the pussy back at him. My eyes closed, trying to absorb everything I was feeling. Plus, I couldn't handle his gaze. This nigga would have me falling in love. I was already in love with his dick. The way it was hooking me proved it would have me divulging my deepest secrets and letting it heal me from the inside out. “Axton... oh God,” I cried out.

“Look at me, beautiful.”

I opened my eyes as he slowed his stroke, pulling the damn tears right out of me. I tried looking away, but he gripped my neck, resting his thumb and the tips of his fingers at my jawline. The tears continued to flow as he slowly fucked all my feelings while staring into my eyes. I couldn't control the whimpers and moans that left me, and it was how I knew that he would be the one to break me in every way so I could begin the healing I desperately needed.

“Alexz, tell me this pussy gon’ be mine. Tell me that you know what I know.”

I closed my eyes without answering. During sex wasn't the time to be making commitments. They tended to be frivolous and shallow. When I expressed my heart to him, it would be when I was thinking clearly. Interrupting my thoughts, he asked, “What are you afraid of? Who hurt you?”

My lip turned down as his strokes became more powerful. I knew he was trying to make me forget what he'd brought to the surface so I could continue to enjoy the moment. Falling to his side and pulling me on top of him, he said, “Take that shit out on my dick. Let me feel what you're feeling, baby. Channel that pain into your ride.”

I stared at him as I slowly rolled my hips. There was no way I could channel the hate and hurt I felt while looking at his gorgeous face. Axton's spirit was pure. That cocky, smartass dude he was on the surface was just a covering... a protective layer. He was giving me all of him, so I chose to do the same. I closed my eyes and began releasing what I had bottled inside for the past three months that counseling didn't seem to get rid of.

My ride became rougher as I met his thrusts, throwing my hips like they were weapons of mass destruction, and according to his grunts, they were just that... tearing down his defenses as well as my own. Flattening my feet, I began bouncing on his dick, utilizing the strength of my knees, showing him that I wasn't to be played with. He wouldn't be able to toy with my emotions for his own personal benefit. I was somebody's daughter, someone's sister, and would have

been someone's mother. I deserved better... I deserved the best.

When my orgasm ripped through me, I was crying audibly. Axton's fingers were digging into the flesh of my hips as he growled out, "Fuck! I'm about to cum!"

The tears were streaming down my face as I bounced on his shit like I was trying to break it off. Everyone didn't deserve me, but it was clear in this moment that he did. He deserved everything I had to offer him. Any man that could pull my emotions out of me this way deserved the world. He was quickly proving that he had the world to offer to me.

When my orgasm subsided, I opened my eyes and stared into his. The frown that was on his face pulled the words right out of me. "This pussy is all yours, Axton." He sat up and wrapped his arms around me as I whispered, "All yours."

He shot off in the latex as his grip on me tightened. I lowered my head to his shoulder and continued to cry and purge, releasing all the hurt feelings of my past. He gently caressed my back and kissed my neck, whispering, "It's okay. Let it out."

When I lifted my head, he wiped my cheeks with his thumb then allowed me to slide to the bed. After taking off his condom and discarding it, he rejoined me in the bed, pulling me in his arms. He kissed my forehead as I rested my hand on his chest. "Thank you, Axton."

"If you meant what you said and you're mine, then it's my job to help you. I want you to be whole. You can't be whole if you won't admit you're broken. I got'chu, baby. I'm here for you every step of the way."

I took a deep breath and felt the most comfortable I'd ever felt with a man I wasn't related to. "I attacked my ex. When he threw me off him, I fell to the ground hard and broke my arm. My temper is on a short fuse. He was about to be my fiancé and was trying to get me to move away with him to Atlanta. Turned out, he had a pregnant girlfriend out there and wanted us all to live together like a happy family and shit."

“He clearly didn’t know you well enough.”

“Hmm. Right. We’d been dating for seven months, and he claimed he didn’t want to leave me behind. There was no way I would go that far away from my family for someone I didn’t totally trust. I had Shy look into him, and that was how I found out.”

“Damn. That’s fucked up. I’m sorry that happened to you. But it seems like there’s more that bothers you about that situation.”

“There is. I was pregnant. That’s what bothers me the most. I had an abortion two months ago. I still have nightmares from time to time. He’s threatening to take me to court, but I don’t know when that will happen. I’m on edge about it, because I feel like it will gut check me when I’m least expecting it.”

“Take you to court for what? For having the abortion?”

“Yes. He feels like, as the father, he had a right to contest it. This country is so fucking screwed up. A man has way more rights than he should. I wish men could get pregnant.”

“Shiiiiid, don’t wish that on me. I get it though. It’s your body. Had he not been a fuck nigga, then you wouldn’t have been in the predicament to begin with.”

He kissed my head and held me closer. *God, this is it. Thank you, Jesus.* “Axton?”

“Yeah?”

“How is this gonna work with me in Beaumont and you in Houston?”

“By any means necessary.”

A xton

I WOULD HAVE NEVER THOUGHT THAT ALEXZ HAD BEEN through what she'd disclosed. She was strong, but I wanted to assure her that she didn't have to bear everything by herself. After she told me how her dad and brother stepped in after that nigga slung her, I could only nod in approval. That abortion bothered her deeply, and I could clearly tell it was something she felt forced to do. I could also understand why she was pushing me away in the beginning. She was at war with her feelings for me and whether she wanted to move on while her drama was pending.

However, I was the nigga she needed. There would be nothing anybody could do to cause her harm without suffering major consequences. I was pretty sure it was the same for her dad and brothers, but I wanted her to understand that, as her man, she was about to experience a different beast. I was all in, and only she could push me out. As she slept on my chest, her phone rang. She popped up like she was scared. I sat up with her and did my best to soothe her.

When she realized what was going on and where she was, she brought her hand to her chest and took a deep breath. "Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. You okay?" She nodded, but I knew she wasn't. "It's okay to say when you aren't okay. I'll never judge you, baby."

“I had a nightmare. I know that it’s because we were talking about it. I’m going to be okay though. You know why?”

I smiled slightly and responded. “Because you’re a strong woman.”

“That too, but mainly because I now have you. I attach just as quickly, and I hope you’re ready for that.”

“I haven’t had a girlfriend in years, so I’m ’bout all that action. Give me a kiss and go check your phone.”

She laid her luscious lips on mine then hopped out of bed to get her phone. I checked the time to see it was just about eleven, so her brothers were probably checking on her. Just as I thought it, I heard her say, “I’m good.” She glanced over at me, and I offered her a reassuring smile. “I’ll see y’all tomorrow.”

I couldn’t express just how excited I was without looking soft and shit, but on the inside, I was doing a body roll. Before she could end the call, she frowned. “What do you need his number for, Shy?”

She glanced over at me, and I said, “Give it to him. It’s cool.”

I was more than sure that Shyrón wouldn’t be a problem. He just wanted to probably talk man to man, given her past relationship. I could understand his protective instincts. She smiled and sent it to him in a text. “You got it, nigga?”

I chuckled. I was glad to know I wasn’t the only one she gave a hard time. All that shit was worth it though. When she sucked my dick, I fell in love. I now knew what it felt like to have my damn soul sucked out of me. I wanted to scream like a bitch, and that shit had never happened. Being vocal during sex was highly unusual for me. I gave the occasional grunts, said a few expletives, and that was usually it. Alexz’s lil ass had come in here and turned me the fuck out.

Her pussy sucked me in and had its damn way with my ass. When I felt her without a condom, I’d envisioned her pregnant with my baby. That shit was worth the risk. However,

I was glad that I didn't verbalize that. It would have triggered her, and she would have shut down on me. Then I would have been irritated with her and not known the real reason why she would have withdrawn.

When she ended the call, she came back to the bed and slid her naked body on top of mine. Her skin was so beautiful, and her tattoos were sexy as hell, especially the roses and dragon at her hip and upper thigh. I had a damn supermodel for a girlfriend. "Axton?"

"Yep."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Why did your mom name you Nirvana?"

I frowned. "How you know that shit? You been scoping a nigga out, huh?"

She chuckled. "When you came to the office, I looked you up."

I rested my hands on her ass then kissed her forehead. "She said that she wanted a little boy. She'd already had Kaysyn, and it took her a while to get pregnant again. So once she had me and she looked into my eyes, she said she felt like she'd reached a state of euphoria. That sounded too feminine to name me though, and since Kaysyn's middle name is Heaven, she named me Nirvana."

"That's beautiful." She stared into my eyes for a moment then continued. "I feel a state of euphoria when I stare into your eyes too."

I tapped her nose with my fingertip, then she sat up, straddling me. Before my dick could fully rise to the challenge, she asked, "What about your brother? What's his middle name?"

"Bliss."

She smiled slightly. I'd take the name Axton Nirvana over Arrow Bliss any day. Rolling over, making her fall to the bed, I hovered over her as my dreads fell to her chest. She played

with one, twisting it between her fingertips, then cupped my cheek. “Is this really real? I’m in a whole ass relationship with this arrogant ass doctor that goes by Dr. Ax?”

“And I’m in a whole ass relationship with this arrogant, mean ass nurse that spells Alex with a Z?”

She smiled then bit her bottom lip and slid her arms around my neck, pulling me closer to her. I kissed her lips, slowly sucking her bottom one as she moaned. When I released it, she whispered, “Why couldn’t I have found you first?”

I didn’t even think she was talking to me. It was more of a question to herself or maybe even to God. However, I chose to answer her. “I don’t know for sure, but maybe there was something for you to learn from that relationship... something that happened that taught you a valuable lesson. You may not even know what that lesson is right now, but I think our timing is perfect.”

She smiled again, and I knew that I could stare into her face forever. She was an angel in disguise, and I was grateful that she’d shed the costume just for me.

IT HAD BEEN A LONG ASS DAY. ALEXZ LEFT YESTERDAY afternoon, and I was missing her like crazy. When I woke up yesterday, she was already awake just staring at me. I’d joked about it being creepy, but I thought it was sweet. She’d played the song “Wake Up Love” by Teyana Taylor to describe what she was feeling. We’d fucked off and on throughout the night before, and we seemed to get closer each time we connected.

The way she pulled my dreads made me make a vow to never cut them, although I had been seriously contemplating it since the death of my grandmother. Alexz was everything I wanted in a woman, and I was beyond happy that I hadn’t given up on her. I was even happier that she came around just like Mimi said she would. Just knowing she was mine had a nigga sitting on top of the world.

When I'd gone to my parents' house and they saw the smile on my face, they knew that I had been with her... at least my mama did. She had to inform my dad. She was already asking about when they would get to meet her. I had to pump her brakes though. I didn't want to take Alexz too quickly. I knew she still had some shit to her that I needed to adjust to and vice versa. Despite the fact we'd connected sexually already, emotions were a much bigger deal for her.

As I sat on my couch, watching football highlights from yesterday, my cell phone rang. Leaning over to grab it from the coffee table, I knew it was too early to be Alexz. The 409-area code reminded me that her brother had my phone number. I was more than sure this was him. "Hello?"

"Dr. Vaughn? This is Shyrón Berotte, Alexz's brother."

"What's up, man? Call me Axton."

"My bad. I'm in professional mode since I'm still at work. I know you probably thinking that I'm calling to talk to you about dating my sister or whatever. That ain't what this is about. Alexz can handle herself, and she knows how to go with her gut when shit don't feel right. I mean, of course, I want you to treat her like a queen and all that, but I don't feel like I need to tell you that. She's been through a lot already, so I trust her to be cautious."

"Yeah. She told me about it."

He was quiet for a second, then he asked, "Told you about what?"

"Her ex, the abortion, all of it."

"Damn. She must really trust you. Alexz doesn't talk her personal business to nobody."

I chuckled slightly. "So I've heard."

I was somewhat confused as to why he was calling me. If he wasn't calling to talk about Alexz, what other reason could he be calling about?

"So, this coming weekend is baby girl's birthday. We were wanting to give her a surprise party Saturday, and we were

wondering if you could help us out by keeping her busy and away from my dad's house."

Out of everything we'd talked about, she never once mentioned that her birthday was this weekend. "No problem. I planned to be there Friday evening when I got off anyway."

"Cool. That's what's up. Well, I look forward to getting to know you better. If she told you all that, then I know that y'all are serious."

"I look forward to getting to know all of you as well. See y'all this weekend."

"A'ight. I'll get with you on details later in the week."

"Okay."

After ending the call, I texted Alexz, telling her how much I missed her today and for her to call me when she left the office. I would have to figure out what we would do for her birthday Friday evening now. I'd definitely have to send flowers to the office. Being that she was so private, I wondered if she'd told any of them that we were dating now. Brittany seemed to be pretty close to her, so I wouldn't be surprised if she told her.

After catching the highlights, I went to the kitchen and warmed some leftover stew that I'd gotten from my parents' house yesterday. The last thing I felt like doing was cooking. It wasn't that I could cook that well anyway. If I had to survive on my cooking alone, I would be malnourished for sure. As I ate, the smile that seemed to be permanently placed made its way back to my face. *Axton Vaughn is officially off the market.*

Alexz

“WHAT’S UP, BRUH? I AIN’T HEARD FROM YOU.”

“Jerrick, I have a new man.”

“Damn. That was quick as hell. You sure you ready for that?”

“I am. He’s proven to be trustworthy.”

“If you say so.”

I rolled my eyes as I drove home. I had been busy at work all day, and Jerrick was the last person on my mind. The minute I got in my car, I was going to call Axton. He’d texted me an hour ago, but I didn’t have time to respond. When people had gotten wind that Dr. West was back, they booked us solid... an appointment every fifteen minutes. To say I was tired was an understatement. The good thing about it was that I didn’t have time to miss Axton. Despite the reason I was in Houston this past weekend, it had turned out to be amazing.

The attention Axton paid to me was overwhelming. The reality that I felt comfortable enough to tell him things even Brittany didn’t know was peculiar, but it proved to me that he was supposed to be in my life. I tried not to doubt my gut, and it was saying that he was it... the real deal that I’d been searching for in Knowledge. *Grimy bastard.*

As I held the phone, waiting for Jerrick to say more, I got impatient and slightly annoyed with him. I wasn't sure why. "Yes, I say so. Axton is real. So, thank you for being there for me last weekend. See you around."

"A'ight, man."

He ended the call like he was the one that should be annoyed. We had a simple relationship, but it seemed like he was trying to make it complicated. *Fuck me when I need it.* As long as both of us were single, that was all it was... a fuck. We were friends... friends with benefits. However, when I had a man, he knew the deal. Fall back into the background and move around. Do you. I shook my head, trying to clear it of the negativity Jerrick had brought to it and called my baby.

We'd advanced quickly. Maybe I *was* my father's daughter. My spirit could sense things, and with Axton, I could only pick up on his sincerity... his genuineness... his honesty. Being with him was fulfilling to my soul, and when I was with him, he was all that mattered. Nothing else was important whenever he was near.

Axton picked up on the first ring, like the phone was in his hand. "Hello?"

"Hey, Axton. How was your day?"

"Hey, Alexz. It was good. I just wish I had you to come home to."

"Yeah. Me too. But by any means necessary, right?"

"Yep. You have plans for the weekend? I wanted to come spend it with you."

I smiled slightly. I didn't tell him my birthday was Friday. We were a new couple, and I didn't want him to feel obligated to get me anything. "No, but since my birthday is Friday, having you here would be quite the gift."

"Damn, girl. Why didn't you tell me? I'm gonna see if I can take a vacation day."

"You don't have to take off work, Axton. We can celebrate whenever you get here. I have to work anyway."

“Yeah, but you get off at noon. I know that I don’t have to, but I want to. You getting a little older, and I want to be there to turn up wit’chu. Twenty-five means you can get in anywhere now. We can go to the Sky Bar. Aye!”

I couldn’t help but giggle at his foolishness, although I’d been dying to go to the Sky Bar. I heard it was a whole ass movement in there. “Well, if you want to get here early, then I won’t complain about that. I’ll never complain about seeing you.”

“That’s what I wanna hear. I miss you so much I almost took the drive today. I just wanna be around you, even if we just on chill mode. This weekend was everything... for real. You being here made handling my grief so much easier. My heart is light.”

I wanted to close my eyes and let his words sink in. Knowing that I did that for him made me feel amazing inside. He did that for me too. Sharing my life with him was scary, but the minute I did it, I felt like a weight had lifted. I was scared of losing this suit against Knowledge. What would the system do to me if he won? What would that mean for Axton and me?

As I turned in my driveway, I noticed a car slowly pass by. *Shit*. Had they been following me and I not notice? “Axton, I uhh... I have to call you back.”

“What’s wrong, Alexz?”

“Let me call you back!”

I ended the call as I noticed the car backing up and sitting at the end of my driveway. My heart was beating out of my chest. I quickly called Shy. “What’s up?”

“Shy! Someone is sitting at the end of my driveway.”

“Are you in the house?”

“No. I’m in my car. They followed me here.”

“Do not get out of the car! Slump in your seat. I’m on my way!”

The minute I did as he said, a bullet shattered my back window. I shrank to the floor, trembling in fear. “Alexz! What the fuck was that?”

“They shot out my back window! Shy! I’m scared.”

“I’m on my way! I’m calling the police.”

He clicked his line and brought me back in as the operator said her spiel. As she did, another bullet shot out my windshield. Knowledge was a bold muthafucka! I reached under my seat and got my gun. I had to stop being a scared bitch. He was fucking with my life right now. Glancing around the seat, I could see that the car was still there. After cocking my .9, I lifted my head and fired three shots at the car.

Two bullets hit the passenger door, and the other went through the window, shattering it. I quickly ducked back to the floor. I couldn’t believe this shit was happening. Shy was screaming along with the operator, trying to get me to respond. “I’m here! I’m still here! Someone needs to get here quick!”

I screamed as more bullets rang out and windows shattered. *What the fuck!* This was crazy as hell. I could hear the sirens in the distance and the tires screeching. I quickly got up to see if I could see the plate number and was only able to get a partial on the black Dodge Charger. I was full of glass, and I could see blood. I didn’t know if glass had cut me or if I was hit. My adrenaline was pumping so fast.

When the police arrived, I could hear them approaching, asking me to get out of the car. I was scared as hell until I heard Shyrón. “I’m here, Alexz. Please get out of the car, baby.”

He didn’t know if I was okay or not, and I could hear the desperation in his voice. I eased from the floor and opened the door. I slowly emerged, feeling how much my arm was hurting. It was the same arm I’d broken. I’d shot the gun with my left hand. Bringing my hand to it, I realized I’d been shot in it. I wasn’t sure if it was just a graze or if the bullet had gone through my arm.

Shy ran to me as the ambulance arrived. “Fuck! You got shot in the arm. Let me check the rest of you.”

I was in shock as a cop came to me, asking questions about what happened. It was like I couldn’t hear a word he was saying. *Knowledge wanted me dead?* This was some cold shit. There was no way he ever loved me if he could hunt me down like this. It felt like I was blinking slowly, and I felt woozy as the paramedics approached me. When they saw me, another ran back to get a gurney. Turning to my brother, I said, “Call Axton... please.”

My eyes closed, and I knew it was probably a lot of blood loss that was making me feel this way. I hoped I wasn’t hit anywhere else because I seemed to have blood all over me. My vision was somewhat blurry, and I knew me being anemic didn’t help. The iron supplements I was taking were helping, but this could cause a relapse and have me on iron supplements even longer. I was almost done with them.

As the paramedic approached me with the gurney, I saw my daddy’s face. “Hey, Daddy. I’m okay.”

His eyes were expressive, and I could see the tears building in them. That caused them to fall down my cheeks. My eyelids fluttered, and he grabbed my hand. “Stay awake, baby. You’re so strong.”

He leaned over and kissed my head as Dylan appeared at my other side. I was doing my best to stay awake for them, but I was feeling so tired. That feeling was overpowering the pain. I just wanted to sleep. I turned my head to Shy and asked, “Did you call Axton?”

“Yeah. He’s on his way. He said he’s been calling like crazy.”

“I was on the phone with him when I noticed the car. That was when I called you.”

My eyes seemed to roll to the back of my head for a minute, and it was extremely hard to focus. I forced my eyes open and saw Chad running next to me. They were loading me

in the ambulance. I didn't even realize we were moving. I turned to the paramedic. "I'm anemic."

"Okay."

They began getting an IV done and were trying to stop the bleeding. When he pressed my leg, I nearly passed out. "Was I shot in my leg?"

"No ma'am. You have a huge piece of glass there. We were going to remove it, but it seems pretty deep. We'll let the hospital handle that."

When I turned the other way, I saw my dad sitting there, quietly, holding my hand. I smiled at him slightly, although I was in so much pain. "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you more, baby."

With that, I allowed sleep to take over.

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, I SAW THE BRIGHT LIGHTS. NOT long after I closed them again, I began coughing. I couldn't remember shit. I didn't know where I was or why. When I tried to sit up, the pain radiated to my shoulder, and machines began beeping. My eyes were heavy, and I felt extremely weak. A couple of nurses came to me and said, "Lay back, honey."

"Where am I? I mean, I realize I'm at a hospital. Why am I here?"

"I'll tell you everything in just a minute, baby. Lay back and relax."

I did as I was told, and I felt much better when I did so. She pressed a few buttons on the machine then turned back to me. "You're in recovery. You got shot in your arm. The bullet was still there so it had to be removed. You also had a major laceration in your right thigh. That needed repairing. You were only in surgery for an hour, and you've been in recovery for an hour. You're going to be fine though."

I blinked slowly as she talked while the memories of what happened flooded my mind like a typhoon. The police were probably waiting to ask questions so they could try to find out who it was. Shy had access to my doorbell camera footage though. Maybe they could get info from it. I looked back over at the nurse as she rubbed my arm. “Okay. Thank you.”

“We’re going to allow some of your family back, two at a time. Your visitors are taking up almost the entire waiting area. You are really loved.”

She patted my hand and walked away, and I stared at the ceiling, thanking God for my life. Had I gotten out of the car, I would have been dead. Whoever that was would have shot and killed me in cold blood and left me there like a wounded animal. And for what? Because Knowledge couldn’t get his way? *Because you killed his baby.* The guilt fell on me like two-ton bricks. He hated me because of the abortion, but I didn’t think he would go this far.

As the tears fell from my eyes, Daddy and Mama Nissa appeared at my bedside. I could clearly see the tears fall from his eyes, and that only made me cry more. Seeing his worry and sadness had always affected me. I was such a daddy’s girl. Whatever emotions he was feeling always projected themselves onto me. “Don’t cry, baby girl. Everything’s gonna be fine. The police are waiting to see you to get information from you so they can catch that bastard.”

Mama Nissa leaned over and kissed my cheek. “I’m so glad you’re going to be okay, baby.”

“Me too. It could have been so much worse.”

“Unfortunately, it’s about to get worse. I’ll let Shyrón fill you in when he comes in here on the details, but Knowledge is indeed pressing charges.”

I sat up in the bed as my head started spinning. I couldn’t take this right now. That muthafucka was trying to kill me and had the nerve to take me to court too? The audacity of this nigga. “Daddy, I’m sick of this shit. I’m so tired of this muthafucka. He is responsible for today. Who else would be

trying to kill me? He's the only person I have a legitimate beef with."

"Calm down, baby. You know Shy is going to get to the bottom of it. Until he can prove that Knowledge was behind what happened today, y'all will be going to court."

I rolled my eyes as I laid there, feeling pissed. If I could have killed that nigga, I would be better off. It would have been self-defense. If it was even him. He could have hired someone to do his dirty work. "I'm going to leave out so Shy can come in and explain," Mama Nissa said.

When she walked away, I asked, "Is Axton here?"

"Yeah. He seems like a nice guy."

I smiled slightly. Just the fact that I could smile at a time like this spoke to how much he meant to me already. I knew he had to be stunned about what happened. "Did he ask why someone was shooting at me?"

"No. I take it that he knows you well, baby. We wouldn't tell him anyway. That would be up to you whether you want him to know."

"He knows about Knowledge and the abortion. He knows about how I broke my arm. I just felt compelled to bare my heart to him this past weekend. He knows more than I've ever told anyone. I can feel him in my soul, Daddy. Is that strange or what?"

"It's not. I feel that way for Anissa. I finally told her how much I loved her the other day. She was crying her eyes out about her ex and feeling guilty for the way she spoke to him when Jamel got in the wreck, thinking that she may have pushed him to that. I had to reassure her that she wasn't at fault for the demons he was fighting. She told me that she loved me too. Things have moved extremely quickly between us, and she's thinking about moving in. When you know, you know. It seems that you know that this Axton guy is the real deal, especially if you're allowing him to be here so soon."

"Yeah. I wasn't nearly as comfortable with Knowledge. I loved him, but now I wonder if I was actually *in* love with

him. I'm not in love with Axton, but the way I feel for him is way more intense than what I felt for Knowledge after six months of knowing him. I've only been around Axton for a little over two weeks. How is this even possible?"

"It's definitely possible. At least you know soon. That protects you from bullshit and keeps you from wasting your time."

"I know. I'm happy for y'all, Daddy. Are y'all talking about marriage?"

"We've talked about it, but we're taking it one day at a time."

I smiled as Shy walked around the curtain. I nearly rolled my eyes at the sight of him. He was the bearer of bad news, but hopefully he could tell me something good as well. "Hey, Shy. Thank you for calling the cops earlier."

"Girl, come on, na. You ain't gotta thank me for protecting you. I'm sure Daddy gave you the bad news already. We were able to access footage from your doorbell, but we can't see the plate."

"I remember a partial plate. Will that help?"

"Hell yeah. Anything you can tell the police will help. I'm just glad you're okay. When Knowledge's attorney called saying he was filing suit, I figured he was just using a scare tactic to get you to do what he wanted you to do. But when they sent certified mail to my office with a court date, I knew how serious he really was. I'm gon' nail that nigga's ass to the wall in court. Everything I can do to discredit his ass, consider it done."

"Thank you. I'm just ready for this to be over. I want to move on with my life."

"Speaking of which, I'll leave out so Axton can come in. He's getting along well with Chad and DJ. They have plenty to talk about," my daddy said.

I rolled my eyes. "I guess the barking is about to get louder around the house on Sundays."

Daddy chuckled then left out to get Axton. Once he left, Shy continued with what he knew. “The police are working on enhancing the video as well. When you shot out the window, they got a visual of his face. So hopefully it will be clear enough for you to identify him.”

“That’s huge!” I said excitedly. “Could you tell if it looked like Knowledge?”

“It didn’t, unless he cut his dreads and bleached his skin. This guy was brown skinned with a fade.”

I frowned. Knowledge had to be involved in some way. As I thought on who this man could be, Axton walked around the curtain. The worry lines in his forehead eased when he laid eyes on me. “Damn, baby. I was so fucking worried.”

Shy smiled tightly then left us alone. He and Axton nodded at one another, then he came close to my bedside. He kissed my lips as he rubbed my hair. “What happened, baby?” he asked as he looked over my body.

“Someone has been following me. It wasn’t all the time... at least that I noticed. I only noticed occasionally. Today, when I hung up on you, they were sitting in front of my driveway, waiting for me to get out the car. Thankfully I didn’t, or there would have been a different outcome. I was so damn scared. These stitches in my thigh gon’ fuck up my tattoo.”

“That tattoo is the last thing I’m worried about. I thought I’d lost you. When Shy called, I was already on my way to Beaumont. You sounded hysterical, and I knew something was wrong. In just the little while that I’ve known you, you don’t get that excited about shit. At least you haven’t with me yet.”

“I can get loud, but it’s usually only when I’m angry or when I’m arguing with Chad. He knows how to rub me raw sometimes. Thank you for coming to see about me. You were the first person I thought about calling once I was safe.” I closed my eyes briefly as I thought about what I felt at that moment. “I usually think about my daddy first. He’s the one I always looked to for protection and consolation. Had you been closer, I wouldn’t have even called Shy.”

This was a lot to feel so soon. Axton had buried himself deep within my soul, literally and figuratively. As he leaned over me, I gently tugged on his dreads, pulling him close to me again so I could feel his lips on mine. He was so special to me, and I loved how that felt.

Axton

“SO YOU’RE GOING TO BEAUMONT AGAIN TOMORROW? WHEN am I gonna get to meet her? Can I go to Beaumont too?”

I looked over at my mama as Arrow laughed. This woman was something else. “How about you meet me there Saturday. I’ll be staying with Alexz, so you’ll have to get a hotel if you stay overnight.”

“The party is Saturday at three, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll take you, Ma, if that’s cool with Axton,” my brother volunteered.

“That’s cool. She’s the only woman in her family, Arrow. I mean, she has a friend that she works with, but I think she’s already with somebody. I know that’s the only reason you want to go.”

He waved me off. “Naw. I wanna officially meet the woman that got your nose wide open.” He chuckled then turned to my mama. “Nigga can’t even function no more. You try to have a conversation with him, and you might as well be talking to yourself. He done zoned out thinking about how she put it on him last weekend.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and was about to get on him, until my mama added to it. “You shol’ right, Arrow. His entire

conversation revolves around her. How old is she, Ax?”

“She’ll make twenty-five tomorrow.”

“Ooooh, you got you a tenderoni! I see you, bruh. Sugar Daddy Ax on the prowl,” he said, mimicking Slim Thug.

“Shut yo’ ass up, nigga,” I said as we all laughed. “I wasn’t looking for a specific woman. Had she been forty, I would still want to be with her.”

Once Arrow calmed down, he said, “That’s what’s up, bruh. I’m happy for you, and I can’t wait to meet her and get to know her. She gotta be a firecracker though to deal wit’cho ass.”

“Hell yeah. We got into it a couple of times that first week I was in Beaumont. She told me I had a big forehead, and I told her she had a long neck on the first day. Ain’t that some shit?”

Mama and Arrow laughed so hard. Just thinking about that day caused me to laugh too. Mama was acting like she had never heard the story though. Seemed like she laughed even harder than she did the first time. Baby girl wasn’t playing with my ass though. That day in the exam room with that patient was intense too. It was hard to believe that I was falling for a woman a little over seven years younger than me, but it was what it was. I was falling fast and hard.

When she hung up on me Monday, my heart was racing. I’d called her several times, trying to figure out what was going on with her. When Shyrón called me and said she was on her way to the hospital, I was already close to Baytown. That Benz was in the wind to go see about my woman. Seeing her all bandaged up with scratches in her face and her arm in a sling, hurt my heart. However, it could have been much different. The thought alone scared the fuck out of me. While I was having a good time talking to Chad and DJ, I was dying to see her and make sure she was alright.

Knowing that someone had been stalking her was some heavy shit. That only heightened my protective instincts. I didn’t want her out of my sight. I had to leave Tuesday

morning, but she was discharged from the hospital later that day and said she would be staying with Shyrón. They seemed to be closer than the others, but she said it was because of the bullshit she was going through. Surprisingly, she said she was closest to Dylan and Isaiah. I knew that she was close to all of them in her own way though.

Watching her hurt made me wanna write her a prescription for the strong shit. The ER doctor only prescribed her some damn Tylenol 3's. I didn't know what the fuck he thought that was going to do. She was in so much pain Monday night at the hospital. They'd finally given her some morphine when I started complaining and dropping medical terms on their asses. I didn't usually throw my weight around, but that night called for it.

She'd been shot. What muthafucka he knew took a bullet and wasn't in pain? I threatened to report him and everything, letting him know just how credible my complaint would be. I did my best to soothe her. I lay in that hospital bed with her and held her all night. My body was jacked up the next morning, but she was worth it.

“See what I mean, Ma? He's gone. Ain't heard shit we just said. He might as well carry his ass home.”

I laughed and stood from my seat. “I ain't gotta stay here and take this.”

“Boy, gone. You just using that as an excuse to get away from us. How is she, though, since that bullshit Monday?”

“She's doing pretty good. Still trying to go to work, but her dad and brothers won't let her. Mentally, she isn't that great, but I'm the only one she'll talk to about it. They still haven't found the person that was shooting at her. Baby girl was shooting back though. She wasn't going down without a fight.”

“Wow. Sounds like my kind of girl. I can't wait to meet her. I'm gonna see if your daddy gonna come with us. He needs to get out of the house.”

I nodded as I thought about Mimi. It was like the grief hit him out of nowhere, and he just wanted to be alone. I felt sorry for him. Hopefully he would take the trip. “A’ight, y’all. I’m out of here. I’ll see y’all Saturday. Arrow, I’ll text you her dad’s address when I get it from Shy... one of her brothers.”

“A’ight.”

I slapped his hand and hugged my mama. Going to the back room, I wanted to tell my dad bye. He was sitting in his recliner, watching a football game. “Pops, I’m out.”

“Okay, son. Be careful.”

“Yes, sir.”

I didn’t bother trying to talk more, because I knew he just wanted to be. If my mama saw it getting out of hand, she would step in. I trusted her to take care of him, and if she needed help, she would ask for it.

“AXTON! HEY!”

Alexz nearly hopped in my arms when she saw me. I didn’t know where she found the strength. It had been hell for the past few days not being able to see her. I set her flowers on the dresser then picked her lil ass up and kissed her like I hadn’t seen her in months. “Happy Birthday, baby.”

“Thank you. Some birthday, huh?”

“Don’t do that. You alive and well. Your fine ass nigga is here with white lilies to spend the entire weekend with you.” She giggled as I grabbed my dick b-boy style. “You got a lot to be thankful for.”

“You right, baby.”

I took off my shoes and climbed in the bed with her. “So what were you doing?”

“Watching *Three’s Company*.”

I frowned. “What the hell is that?”

“You can’t be serious right now. Ax, you’re thirty-two. You should have at least heard of it.”

I kept my look of confusion as she started another episode. When the theme music began playing, I recognized it. “Oh yeah. I remember hearing the theme music. My mama or grandmother probably used to watch it.”

She slightly rolled her eyes and laid against me. I glanced at her sling and asked, “So how have you been feeling? Your leg can’t be bothering you too much since you hopping on it.”

“My leg is fine. It’s tender to the touch, but that’s it. It’s this fucking arm that’s giving me the blues. I was just getting over the shit being broken.” She looked up at me and gave me a sly smile then sat up and straddled me. “But don’t think that mean I don’t wanna feel this dick tonight.”

“Girl, you gon’ just disrespect Shy house like that?”

She frowned. “That nigga know what this is. He ain’t even coming home tonight. Told me to make sure I wash the sheets Sunday and Lysol his mattress.”

I chuckled as she rolled her hips against me. I gripped her ass as my dick hardened. “Keep on and you gon’ get just what you asking for. I hope you have good balance.”

“You act like you don’t remember my skills from last weekend. I have impeccable balance. Now get that dick out in the open while I close the door.”

“You so fucking nasty. I was trying to take you to lunch, and all you got is dick on the menu. I’m hurt, girl. I feel so used.”

“Boy, if you don’t chill with all the dramatics. You want this shit as bad as I do. You just don’t want to seem like you’re insensitive because of my arm.”

She pulled her tank top off then her sports bra and stared at me like, *nigga, now what?* I slowly shook my head as a smile graced my lips. She was right. I wanted to get in that pussy something serious, but I wasn’t going to dare say so. I pulled my shirt off and came out of my basketball shorts as she

watched with a smirk on her face. “That’s what I thought, nigga.”

I dug in my shorts’ pocket for my wallet and pulled a condom from it. I tore it open and slid it over my erection as I stared at her. “Get yo’ lil nasty ass up here. You better handle up. I ain’t gon’ take it easy on you either.”

She giggled then climbed on the bed and slid down my dick like she had a fire to put out. “Oh, fuck!” she moaned as her head fell back and her eyes closed.

“I swear you a fiend already, girl,” I mumbled, then lowered my head to tease her nipple with my tongue.

“And you aren’t?”

“Hell yeah. Throw that pussy at me, baby.”

I didn’t know how she was concentrating with her arm in that sling, but I supposed this dick had taken her mind off that shit. I gripped her ass as she rode and bit my bottom lip. The frown on my face deepened as she rolled her hips, giving my dick the satisfaction he needed. Her walls were squeezing me like they loved me, and I couldn’t contain my verbal acknowledgment. “Shit, Alexz... Fuck!”

Not being able to relinquish control for too long, I pushed her backward, causing her to land on her back, and got on my knees to reenter her warmth. The minute I did, she said, “Axton, take me to nirvana.”

I stared into her eyes, because for some reason, I knew exactly what she meant. When I told her about why my mama named me that, I said that she looked into my eyes and felt like that was where she was. My stroke was slow, intentional, and powerful. She maintained my gaze, and within seconds, her legs were trembling, warning me of the orgasm that was about to rip through her.

I rested my hands on the bed above her head and gave her the dick she craved as I continued to stare into her eyes. She scratched my back as her back arched, then she rained on me. “Oh my God! Axton! I’m there, baby... shit!”

I lowered my head and kissed her long, beautiful neck then licked and sucked it in various places until I found her spot. I knew immediately because the moment I hit it, she gushed all over me, and her nails dug deeper in my flesh. “Yeah, baby. Give me that good shit. Fuck my world up,” I said then growled.

She felt so fucking good, and our sexual chemistry was off the damn charts. The goosebumps had invaded my skin, and my entire body was tingling. It was like I’d been hunting my prey all day and had finally gotten ahold of it. The hunger I felt for her should be outlawed. My carnal desires for her were animalistic, and there was nothing I could do to change that. I needed her that badly.

Making my way back to her spot, I began fucking her stronger, giving her all the power I possessed as she screamed and creamed even more for me. If she scratched me any more than she already had, I would look like I was in the movie *12 Years a Slave*. She was gonna have my back all fucked up. That shit didn’t matter right now though. All that mattered was how her pussy was gripping me, begging me to stay.

“Axton! Fuck!”

The sweat was dripping from my forehead down to her. My gaze was still on her, and hers was on mine. That was what made this moment so intense. I could see her soul, and it loved the fuck out of me already. My soul craved her. She was so good for me. Being with her gave me peace despite the bullshit around her. My spirit was receptive to hers, and there was no way I would ever let her go. Within three weeks of meeting her, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

My nut was rising and begging to be free. I slid my hand to her neck again then lowered my lips to hers, allowing our tongues to sloppily tangle. The way my mouth watered whenever I was near her was insane, and through this kiss, she was getting more than usual. I pulled away from her, allowing the saliva to fall from my mouth to her chest. “You see what you’re doing to me?”

I released the grunts of passion as she said, “You do the same shit to me, Axton.”

She lifted her legs and tightened them around my waist, pulling me closer and forcing me to go even deeper. This had to be what it was like to be in love. As my nut rose to the surface, I growled out my release like a fucking animal. Apparently, that shit turned Alexz on even more so, because she slipped her arm from her sling and grabbed ahold of my dreads as she squirted all over me.

We were both completely out of breath... panting uncontrollably. I lowered to my forearms and kissed her ear. I hadn't worked this hard in a minute. The same position, same pace, and same power had depleted my energy. I rolled over next to her. When she finally caught her breath, she said, “I am definitely gonna have to clean this mattress.”

A smile graced my face as she giggled softly. This mattress was gonna get fucked up for sure because I was far from having enough. “We might have to buy a new one,” I added. “But we need a shower so I can take you to eat.”

“Okay, baby. That shit was amazing, and thank you so much for the flowers. They're beautiful.”

“Girl, you wasn't worried about no damn flowers. You just wanted this tree trunk to put roots in you.”

She laughed loudly then got up from the bed to start the shower. When she stepped back inside the room, she went to the nightstand and grabbed a pain pill then gulped it with water. I chuckled. “If you weren't being a nasty ass hot girl, your arm wouldn't be hurting.”

She gave me the side eye and shot me the finger. “Oh, baby, you already did that shit. And you do it so damn well.”

She rolled her eyes then winced when she moved her arm. I didn't like seeing her in pain. I walked over to her and held her in my arms as she laid her head on my chest. “I'm sorry, baby. I don't like to see that look on your face.”

I kissed the top of her head and rubbed her back. “I get carried away with you. It's your fault. You're so fucking

irresistible. Nobody told you to be so damn fine.”

I chuckled. “If I have to take the blame, then I will. I’m a work of art, for sho.”

She pushed away from me as I laughed. “You so damn vain.”

“And you love that shit.”

Alexz

AXTON HAD BEEN PERFECT. YESTERDAY HAD BEEN BEYOND amazing. He took me to the same Thai restaurant that Jerrick had taken me to for lunch, and for dinner, we'd gone to Tokyo of Japan. I loved trying different foods from different countries, and I absolutely loved sushi... to go along with my spring rolls, of course. I was anticipating my gift. Although my birthday was yesterday, he said he would be giving me my gift today, later this evening.

I knew he wanted to give it to me in front of my family. They called themselves planning a surprise party for me. I'd overheard Shyrón talking about it. Men were so damn slow. They could never surprise me when I was growing up because, somehow, I would always catch wind of it before time. Shy was on the phone with Chad, planning the menu and saying how shocked I would be that they put all this together.

I rolled my eyes when I heard him say it. When Axton had asked about my weekend, he already knew it was my birthday. Shy had asked for his number to probably tell him about this so he could keep me occupied. I didn't know why they thought they could keep shit from me. *They would have to get up early in the morning to get one over on me.* I giggled at the thought of that. My friend's mom used to say that shit all the time when we were in high school.

I was going to let Axton believe I didn't know, just so he could give me the attention I wanted. Whenever he was near, I just wanted him all to myself. This party would be interesting though. He would be around my family as my boyfriend. This shit was crazy as hell, but in a good way... like Jill Scott sang in "Not Like Crazy".

Axton was the man I prayed for. He possessed all the qualities I prayed for. The nigga was almost too good to be true. But why would I pray for a specific thing and then think it was a hoax that I got it? What was the prayer for if I didn't think I would get it? After checking myself, I had to learn to accept my answered prayer. He answered quicker than I expected. The Lord wasn't playing about me in that area. He knew exactly what I needed and dropped Axton's cocky ass right in Dr. West's office.

I never imagined such a thing would happen between us when I first met him, because I was too busy trying to convince myself that I wasn't ready to be with anybody just yet. However, God's timing wasn't my timing. He knew what I needed and when I needed it. I was just grateful that I accepted His gift to me this time around. Axton was a dream come true. I didn't know how I knew that so soon, but I did.

As I sat in the car while he ran inside the store, thoughts about where my life was had me shedding a tear. As I did, someone tapped on the window, scaring the shit out of me. When I saw Jerrick, I frowned slightly. After I put the window down, he said, "I was about to walk in the store and looked over and saw you. What's up? You good? Why you in the passenger seat of your own car?"

"I'm okay. This isn't my car. It's my boyfriend's car. We happen to have the same car."

My fucking car was in the shop because it was riddled with bullet holes and all the windows were shot out. "Damn. That's coincidental as hell," he said as I noticed Axton leaving the store.

His eyes landed on Jerrick and didn't waver. "It was good to see you, Jerrick."

No it wasn't. That crazy feeling I got the last time I talked to him was back. I didn't know why. Something wasn't right. I'd gotten the same feeling with Knowledge before all that bullshit came to light. When Axton got to the car, he gave Jerrick a head nod. I put the window up in his face so he could catch the hint and walk away.

Usually when someone said it was good to see you, they were saying that the conversation was over. He'd responded and said it was good to see me too, but he was just standing there. Weird ass. "Who was that?" Axton asked.

"A guy I went to Lamar with. He's also the guy I'd gone to lunch with when you pulled up on me at the Thai restaurant."

"Oh."

For some reason, I felt like he knew exactly who Jerrick was. He just wanted to see if I would tell him. I reached over with my right hand and grabbed his. When he turned to me, I could see the uncertainty in his eyes. "You have nothing to worry about. You are more than enough. I'm only for you."

"You know I don't doubt myself, and I believe you would be faithful. I just don't trust niggas. Sometimes their intentions are skewed. He just look shady to me. I know that might be your friend or whatever, but I'm not feeling that nigga, and I don't even know why."

I looked away and contemplated telling him how I felt. He left the convenience store and before I could say anything, he rested his hand on my exposed thigh and squeezed gently. "Maybe it's because of the way you were dressed that day, and I saw the way he looked at you. I got a feeling that he was getting what I wanted."

I took a deep breath and turned to him. "He was my friend with benefits. Whenever I didn't have a boyfriend, he was who I was with to get what I needed sexually. I'm not proud of that, but it's my truth. You are the last person I wanted to have to explain that to. However, I've been getting an eerie feeling whenever I speak to him. He called last weekend, and I informed him about us. The conversation seemed to get weird after that. I mean... he wasn't saying anything weird but his

tone... I don't know. It just felt weird as hell. Today felt the same way. It was the same feeling I got with Knowledge, my ex."

"You don't think they know each other, do you? Or that he could be the one who's stalking you?"

"I don't know. He has no reason to stalk me though. He could have called me and seen me whenever he wanted to. And I can't believe that he would have been the one shooting at me."

"How long have y'all known one another?"

"Since I was eighteen. So seven years."

He nodded, but I could tell his mind was going ninety miles a minute. I hated that he had to see Jerrick. I didn't want him to doubt my loyalty in no way. I didn't even want the thought in his head. However, I knew I had to be honest about who Jerrick was just in case the shit came up again. It wasn't like I was trying to maintain a friendship or anything, but I couldn't have my man being blindsided with that shit. Then I would really look suspect.

"What did you go in the store for?" I asked, realizing he didn't have anything in his hand.

"They didn't have what I was looking for."

"Oh."

It was probably something for the party since that was where we were headed. Although I knew about it, I was still excited. I knew we were having Jamaican food. I was ready! I loved jerk chicken and oxtails and shit like that. If they had beef patties, I was gon' be caught up to meet Jesus in the air, because I was gon' levitate.

The drive was pretty quiet, and I wasn't sure what Axton was thinking. "Baby, you good?"

"I'm cool. Just thinking about this nigga you used to fuck."

I huffed loudly. He knew I wasn't a fucking virgin. He didn't have to say the shit like that. "Axton, really?"

“Sorry. I’m just irritated.”

“I mean... how many women you fucked? What if I ran into one of them? I didn’t have to be honest, but I was. I don’t want there to be any secrets between us. Although I ain’t fucking the nigga now, I felt like I needed to tell you that. Did I fuck him recently? Yes. However, we weren’t a couple. Don’t do this to me, because I don’t deserve that.”

He slid his hand down his face as we turned in my dad’s driveway. Once he parked, he turned to me and grabbed my hand. “You’re right. I apologize. I’m extremely territorial, and I could see that he was more than a friend by the way he looked at you. I don’t like a muthafucka sniffing around my shit. Those pheromones are mine to enjoy now. You forgive me, baby?”

I could see the sincerity in his eyes. Had it been the other way around, my petty ass would have given him a hard time too. Bringing my hand to his face, I pulled him closer to me and kissed his lips. “I forgive you. Had it been a bitch, I would still be talking about the shit.”

A slight smile eased its way to his lips as he slowly shook his head. “I hope we never run into anybody from my past, ’cause you know I ain’t the type to sit quietly while you go off. I’m a tit for tat type of nigga.”

I laughed loudly. “Don’t I know it. I still ain’t forgave you for that long neck comment.”

“You have to forgive me. I love licking and sucking on your neck. You got a big ass passion mark on it right now.”

I jerked the visor down so damn fast to take a look. Axton laughed loud as hell, damn near scaring me. “I’m joking, baby,” he said through his laughter.

I slapped his arm then put my hand to my chest. “I don’t need my business in the street. These niggas in here are ruthless.”

He continued laughing as he got out of the car and came around to open my door. When he did, he helped me out, and we made our way to the back door. The house was completely

quiet. I was pretty sure Axton knew that I knew what was going on, because I hadn't asked any questions or made any comments about what was going on.

Once I was at the back door, I flung it open and yelled, "Where the hell y'all at?"

When we walked in the family room, everyone in there yelled, "Surprise!"

I smiled and giggled a little bit as they all approached me to hug me. I noticed a couple of people from my job and who I recognized as Axton's parents and brother. They were all smiles as I looked around. "Are you surprised?" Dylan asked.

"Hell no. You know y'all can't keep shit away from me. I overheard Shy talking to Chad the other day."

"Aww!" they all yelled and immediately got onto Shy.

My dad and Axton laughed. Once I hugged my daddy, Axton took me to his family. His mom's eyes were bright, and she had the biggest, most infectious smile on her face. I smiled big as well as Axton said, "Mom, Dad, this is my lady, Alexzandria Berotte. She goes by Alexz."

"Mr. and Mrs. Vaughn, it's so nice to meet the two of you."

"Child, call me Shirlene, and this is Greg."

I chuckled as she held my hand between hers. Mr. Greg nodded then took my hand from hers and shook it. He was smiling, but I noticed it didn't quite reach his eyes. I turned my attention to Arrow, and he had a huge smile on his face as well. Hopefully, there wasn't some kind of inside joke that I was missing out on. "Hi, Arrow. It's nice to meet you."

There was no need for an introduction. I already knew who he was. I was more than sure that they all knew my name as well. "Nice meeting you too, sister-in-law."

My eyebrows lifted slightly as Axton shoved him. He laughed and continued. "This nigga head is always in the clouds now. You got a hold on this man that he can't shake. You will be my sister-in-law one day if things continue the way they are. I'm curious as to how he functions at work."

Axton rolled his eyes at his brother as I giggled. That was what the big smiles were about. Axton had changed since meeting me, and they'd called him out on it. As I laughed, Shy called me to the side. I walked over to him, and he said, "You know yo' sneaky ass is wrong. You could have gone the opposite direction when you heard me on the phone."

"Nigga, really? I'm lowkey nosy. I don't go out of my way to get info, but if it's right there, I'm gon' listen. I thought you were talking about some woman you met, so I kept listening and realized you were talking about me."

"Yeah, and if yo' arm wasn't in a sling, I'd whip yo' ass. All that cooking and planning we did," Chad added.

"Chad, carry yo' ass on. The point is I'm happy. So thank y'all!"

Daddy rolled his eyes as Mama Nissa laughed. I made my way to the two of them. She looked to be the happiest I'd seen her since Dexter died. When I got to them, I hugged her tightly. "You look good, Mama. You're glowing."

"That's what love will do to you," she said as she leaned into my dad.

This was her first time telling me what they'd expressed to one another a couple of weeks ago. I brought my hand to my chest as my eyes watered. "Finally. Thank God," I responded, causing her to chuckle. "I'm so happy for the two of you."

Daddy kissed the top of her head, then she lifted her head and kissed his lips. I'd wanted a love like they had, and I found it in Axton. My brothers were working, moving around quite a bit. I didn't see Axton anywhere. As I watched, I noticed everything was being moved to outside. When I heard the music kick up, I made my way out there.

They'd gotten a tent set up with tables and chairs underneath, and the food was brought out there and set under the tent as well. All the pink and green made me excited. I didn't participate in many AKA events after I graduated, but when I did, it was always a good time. As I looked around, taking in all the décor, everyone had been seated. Dylan came

over to me and said, “Come on, birthday girl. Come have a seat so you can enjoy the show.”

I kissed his cheek then followed his lead to my seat. I was smiling big when I saw my line sisters all come through. They were ready to perform, and I was even more excited. The smile couldn't be wiped off my face. I noticed that one of my line sisters had a slight pudge. She was one that was serious as hell about her physique, so she had to be pregnant. But she still showed up for me in this heat.

As I looked around at everyone's reaction to them, I noticed Dylan staring at Chanell, my pregnant line sister. I frowned slightly. I wasn't sure what was up between the two of them, because she was staring right back. Last I checked, she was married. Bringing my attention back to the performance, I got excited about a step they'd done. “Y'all better work that shit out!” I yelled.

The moment they finished, I kept looking around for my baby and still didn't see him. Maybe he was getting my surprise together. They came and hugged me one by one, wishing me a happy birthday, then found themselves seats. When I heard all the barking, I knew exactly where Axton had gone. I rolled my eyes, and everyone close to me started laughing. If I didn't have brothers who were Omegas that thought they had to bark whenever they entered the house, it probably wouldn't irritate me as much.

When several of them came from around the house shirtless with camo pants and gold boots on, I scooted to the edge of my seat. My stepbrother, DJ, led the line, and Chad's big ass was right behind him. After seeing a couple of guys I didn't know, my baby appeared. He was so fucking fine. Arrow was right behind him, then there were a couple more guys I wasn't familiar with.

I glanced over at Linda from the office, and she looked to have orgasmed in her seat. Bringing my attention back to my baby, I watched as he hopped around and grabbed his dick. I was more than sure they were all doing that, but I couldn't care less about the rest of them. He stepped to the front of the line and led them in their next routine.

I was fucking mesmerized and was about to drool... but when that song started... *fuck that hoe meat to meat*, I rolled my eyes big time. That stupid fucking song irritated my soul, but I'd be damned if my pussy wasn't soaking wet watching Axton bark and do that sexy ass neck roll with his tongue hanging out. It looked like an entire frat party out here. Mama Nissa looked like a deer in headlights, and my daddy was just shaking his head.

Turning back to the action, Axton was right in front of me. He pulled me from my seat and picked me up as he stepped. I swore all I wanted to do was ride his dick at this point. When the song was over, Axton allowed me to slide down his body. He was sweaty and looked like he wanted to dive in my shit immediately. "Go sit down, baby. The show ain't over."

I sat my happy ass down and waited to see what was going to happen next. When my brother Dylan came around the side and "Wipe Me Down" started to play, I knew he and Shyrón were about to put on a show. They were Kappas, and they had that shimmy down to a fucking science. I loved to see them do it. They had four other guys with them, and the shit was insane. When the music stopped, they did a chant especially for me, like my line sisters had done.

I knew to expect the Sigmas to roll through since that was what Isaiah had pledged. They didn't disappoint either. He'd managed to get a few to join him. Their song was "Hate Me Now" by Nas. That was the last performance, and I was beyond satisfied. When Axton joined me at the table, he'd cleaned up and changed into what he had on earlier. "That was so damn sexy, baby. One day I'm gon' let you fuck me meat to meat, but I'm gon' hold you to that part about eating my pussy. I need that same tongue action you did a minute ago."

"You know you gon' get it, 'cause I'm nasty. My mama fussed at me though, so I'm gon' take my frustrations out on that pussy. I'm gon' beat that shit up tonight."

I laughed. "Mrs. Shirlene wasn't having that shit, y'all nasty asses."

"That's okay. Your girls behind you liked that shit."

I turned around to see my brothers and Arrow sitting with them, flirting. I rolled my eyes, and just as I was about to focus on that food that was sitting there, I noticed Shy walking toward me. He had a deep frown on his face, so I knew something was wrong. "Let me holla at'chu," he said, helping me from my seat.

I grabbed Axton's hand just so I wouldn't have to repeat shit. Shy looked back at me then at Axton, so I said, "I'm going to tell him whatever you tell me, so he might as well hear the shit when I hear it."

"A'ight. So, the police just emailed me a photo of the enhanced image. I need to see if you know this nigga, because as I told you previously, it's not Knowledge."

I got nervous, wondering who it could be. My grip on Axton's hand tightened while he rubbed my back. When Shy turned his phone to me and I saw the image, I was angry enough to go find that fucker and blow his muthafucking brains out. It was Jerrick Polk.

A xton

IKNEW SOMETHING WAS UP WITH THAT NIGGA. MY INTUITION rarely steered me wrong, and my shit was blinking a red ‘do not engage’ sign when I saw him. That was why I didn’t say a word to him. Baby girl was about to have a fit though. “I can’t believe this shit! I’ve been knowing that muthafucka for years, Shy! How could he do this? Does he know Knowledge?”

“I don’t know, but I’m about to find out. Don’t do nothing crazy, Alexz,” Shy responded.

“Too late,” she said as she sent a text message.

Aww shit. “Maaaaan, come on na. We done already had to assault Knowledge punk ass. Don’t put us in a position to have to kill this muthafucka. Let the law handle his ass. Let me get at him legally. Why would he want to do shit to you?”

“Fuck if I know. I told him I had a boyfriend last weekend. Other than that, we’ve always been cool. Shit, we just went to lunch together last weekend.”

As she continued to talk, I could feel the rage rising in me. Dylan, Isaiah, Chad, DJ, Jamel, and Mr. Sheldon all joined us, trying to figure out what was going on. They continued to talk, and I tried to fade to the background. I was getting beyond angry, and my temper would have me doing stupid shit with her and hunting that nigga down.

When I saw my sister walking up the driveway, I got Alexz's attention to let her know that I was going to welcome my sister and take her to meet my family. I walked away and headed to her. The minute she saw me, she smiled then frowned. "Hey, Ax. What's going on? Your face is red as hell."

"Alexz just found out who was shooting at her the other day. We just saw that nigga earlier at a convenience store. If I knew where he lived, I would lose my career today."

"Calm down, baby," she said as she wrapped her arm around my waist. "Where's everybody?"

I took a deep breath and led her to my family. My mama looked worried, so I sat with them for a minute. "She knows who was shooting at her the other day. She's pissed because she's known him for years. I'm sure they are discussing a plan of action. Hopefully, we'll be getting back to the festivities soon."

My mama rubbed my hand as Mr. Sheldon addressed everybody. "Sorry for the disturbance y'all. We're here to celebrate baby girl's birthday, and we gon' get right to it in a minute. In the meantime, help yourselves to the food. It's Jamaican cuisine, and I'm more than sure you will enjoy it. Her brothers cooked everything themselves, thanks to Google, YouTube, and TikTok."

He chuckled and continued informing the crowd. "We will all have words to say about this beautiful specimen I had a hand in creating as soon as they finish handling business. Y'all get to it, and let me know what you think."

He smiled as he walked away, glancing at me before he did so. "I'll be back y'all."

They all nodded and stood to enjoy the food as I made my way back to Alexz. When I saw her tears, I grabbed her hand and pulled her to me. "I knew something was off about him when I talked to him last week, but I would have never thought he would do some shit like this. He a cold muthafucka, Ax, and walking around like ain't shit happened."

“But at least you know. Had you not channeled your inner gangsta and shot his window out, we wouldn’t know. What did you text him?”

“I just asked what he was doing and said that I needed to talk to him.”

“Has he responded?”

“No.”

“Smart man. I’m sorry, baby. I wanna find his ass though.”

“You and me both.”

I continued rubbing her back and kissing her head as her dad looked on. We hadn’t really had a chance to talk, but I knew that would all change today. After holding her for a moment, I pulled away from her. “Come on. Let’s go enjoy the rest of your party. I almost wish Shy would have waited until the party was over.”

“Shy can’t hold cold water. He’d tell us all when Jesus was coming back if he knew.”

I chuckled and led her to her seat then walked over to the food table to fix her plate. As I did, I saw Mr. Sheldon talking to Shy. He should have thought about what he was doing before he did it. I just hoped this didn’t ruin Alexz’s evening. Chad came and stood next to me as he fixed his plate. “Shy was wrong for telling her that shit now. I bet Dad is tearing him a new asshole.”

I only nodded. I wasn’t crazy. That was their brother. I wouldn’t dare speak an ill word about him to Chad. He and I were around the same age, so I was surprised I’d never seen him before, especially with him being a bruh, which I supposed I was assuming he went to school here. I hadn’t bothered to ask. “What school did you go to, bruh?”

“I went to Alcorn State University. You?”

“Oh, okay. I was assuming you went to Lamar like Alexz. I went to University of North Texas.”

“Naw. I couldn’t stay here. I wanted to experience life away from my old man, only to end up back here because I

was worried about him. He grieved our mom for a long time.”

“What happened to her?”

“I’m surprised Alexz never told you.”

“Well, she told me that her mom was deceased. I just never asked what happened because she seemed a little sensitive about it.”

He nodded. “She died while giving birth to Alexz. A blood clot traveled to her heart.”

“Wow. Damn. That’s horrible. So Alexz never knew her.”

“Nope. Just me and Isaiah remember her.”

At that moment, I understood the woman I was falling for even more. She was afraid to be a mother because she didn’t have one. She’d never shared all the details of her mother’s death... just that she had a blood clot. It was probably because the night we’d done the most talking was the night of my grandmother’s funeral. She was missing something she never had, and I could understand that. I didn’t know what it felt like, but I could definitely understand it.

When I took her food to her, she smiled. One of her friends was talking to her. She’d rubbed her stomach, so I guessed her little tummy was because she was pregnant. Alexz looked genuinely happy for her. However, I knew her mind had probably gone to the baby she aborted. When I sat next to her, she grabbed my hand and blessed our food.

“I hate your family had to witness this shit, Axton. The more I sit here and think about it, the angrier I get. Shy could have waited until this was over or until tomorrow. I can’t get my mind off that shit now.”

“Try for me though. Maybe your gift will take your mind away.”

She wiggled a bit in her seat, causing me to chuckle. I pulled the box from my pocket as her eyes widened. “I just wanted to show you how much you mean to me. I’ve never been the type to buy women gifts. So, I guess that shows just how serious my past relationships weren’t. You are my first

really serious relationship. Although it hasn't been long, I know that you're it for me, Alexz. So... here's your gift. I hope you like it."

When she opened the box and saw the diamond studs, she went ballistic, drawing everyone's attention. I slowly shook my head at her excitement. She was showing me her layers and that she wasn't as nonchalant as I thought she was. She pulled her hoops out and immediately put the studs in her ears. Grabbing my face, she pulled me to her and kissed my lips slowly. She almost made me forget we had an audience.

"Thank you so much. They're beautiful. For a minute, my heart started beating fast as shit. I thought you'd bought me an engagement ring."

I frowned a bit. Why would she think I would move that fast? Unless she wanted me to... "What would you have said if it would have been?"

"I don't know."

She knew exactly what she would have said. I would never disrespect her family that way. I wanted to give them time to get to know me and assure them that their daughter and sister was in good hands. I leaned over and kissed her lips again as Kaysyn came over to greet her and look at her present. If things kept going the way they were, she would be getting that ring sooner than later.

I COULDN'T FUCKING FUNCTION AT ALL. SITTING HERE IN DR. Chavez's office was boring as hell. I was on the verge of quitting this shit and just devoting my time to the ER at Methodist until I was able to get my own practice running. All I could think about was how much I enjoyed my time with Alexz over the weekend. Maaaann... she swallowed so much of my seeds, every time she belched, she should have heard my kids laughing.

As I sat in my chair thinking about that shit, my phone vibrated. Pulling it from my pocket, I saw it was a text from

my brother. *Yo! That chick with the small pooch in her belly... is she pregnant or does she just have a stomach. She fine as hell and gave me her number.*

I shook my head slowly. *I'm assuming she's pregnant. I saw Alexz rubbing her belly.*

He didn't respond right away. That nigga had gotten several numbers from the party this past weekend. My family had stayed late into the night getting to know everyone. Our families seemed to mesh well. Mama and Ms. Nissa had talked for hours, and my dad was able to get out of his shell with Mr. Sheldon. Arrow had fallen in with Alexz's brothers, Jamel and Dylan, not to mention the brotherhood we both shared with Chad and DJ.

As I was about to text my baby to see how her day was going, Arrow messaged back. *That's fucked up. I mean... I didn't ask her if she was pregnant, but she talkin' 'bout fucking me and ain't bothered to bring that shit up. I'd be a little salty if I found out a chick pregnant with my baby was fucking on other niggas.*

I rolled my eyes. That was the last bit of drama I wanted to be in. I didn't see what the issue was if she was no longer with the child's father. Life goes on. However, if she was still with him, then she was triflin' as fuck. His best bet was to just leave that alone. That was what I told him. *If I were you, I'd stay as far away from that shit as possible.*

I messaged my baby next. *Hey, baby. I hope you're having a good day.*

I sat in my chair, twiddling my thumbs. On Wednesdays, I worked in Dr. Chavez's office, assisting her and also trying to get a feel for what it was like to run a practice. However, she didn't have the patients that Dr. West had, which was why it was so slow. This weekend, I had to work at the hospital, so I was hoping Alexz would be able to come to me. With this recent threat on her life, she was scared to drive anywhere alone. I would drive to go and pick her up tomorrow evening if I could. Since she still hadn't gone back to work, she could stay with me from now until the weekend.

“Dr. Ax.” I turned in my seat to see Dr. Chavez. I smiled slightly as she said, “You can go. It’s so dead in here, I fell asleep at my desk. I think I’m just gonna close the office for the day.”

“Okay.”

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I stood from my seat and slung my bag over my shoulder. I bid everyone a good week since I wouldn’t see them until next Wednesday and got out of there. When I got in my car, I took my phone off vibrate so I would hear if Alexz messaged me back. She had been in a funk all week. I knew it had to be from what she knew about her case. That nigga never texted her back and the police still hadn’t found his ass.

She also had a hearing coming up in a couple of weeks with her almost baby daddy. I wished I could just move her here and get her away from all that bullshit. There was no doubt in my mind that her family would take care of her, but damn, I needed her close to me. She found peace in my arms, so when her soul was in torment, I felt like I was slacking on my job. She could lay her burdens down with me. I’d bear every one of those fuckers like I was Mr. Incredible.

I drove to my parents’ house to see how my dad was doing. He’d enjoyed himself Saturday, and I could only hope that it had broken him out of his depression. Mimi played a huge role in his life. She was his mother, but she was also the woman he looked up to as the blueprint for his search for a wife. He was her only living son, and he took excellent care of her and his dad. His oldest brother had died some years back. He was sick, but I didn’t remember what he even had.

When I got to the back door, I found it locked, so I knocked. Normally it was unlocked when they were home. I went to the garage and peeked in to see one of the vehicles was gone. Maybe they’d decided to get out of the house. I couldn’t be mad about that. As I was walking back to my car, they turned in the driveway, and another car turned in behind them.

I frowned slightly as they drove past me inside their garage then looked back at the other car. When I saw Mr. Sheldon and Ms. Anissa get out, I smiled. They'd hit it off. That was so cool. Over the weekend, Mr. Sheldon and I had a good talk. He was cool as hell, and he enlightened me on Alexz's character and how she grew up. I'd almost choked when he said he thought she would be gay.

He told me he was on edge about me because of her ex, but when he found out that Alexz had already shared so much with me, it made him at ease. Knowledge didn't know a whole lot about her, I assumed. Alexz didn't talk a lot about her inner feelings unless she was prompted to, but watching her mannerisms was always a key indicator of how she was feeling. The only thing I didn't know was that her mother had died while giving birth to her. Chad had to clue me in on that.

The way they'd spoken about Alexz at the party had given me a lot of insight about her. She was spoiled for sure and definitely babied. They looked out for her constantly and gave her whatever her heart desired. I wouldn't expect anything less from a good man raising a princess by himself. Chad had said that they created a monster and that caused everyone to laugh, but he seriously expressed how he loved that Alexz didn't have the same dynamic with them. She bonded with her brothers differently... according to their personalities. I thought that was pretty cool.

I'd gotten extremely familiar with the family, and they'd accepted me as one of their own. Everybody was cool as hell. Shyrón wasn't as talkative though. Mr. Sheldon had informed me that he was the gangsta of the family. He didn't talk people's business to just anybody. He wasn't that type of talkative. He couldn't hold cold water where it concerned his family. He just wanted to rectify shit as soon as possible. I could understand that.

Jamel and I had traded numbers since he told he lived out here in H-Town. We could go get drinks or something one day and just hang out... along with Arrow. As my parents emerged from the garage, they had huge smiles on their faces. "Hey,

baby! Your in-laws are here,” my mama said, just as Mr. Sheldon and Ms. Anissa approached hand in hand.

I took a deep breath and huffed, then hugged her and kissed her cheek. “Mama... I can see that they’re here.”

“So you admitting that they’re your in-laws?”

“I’m admitting that one day, when the time is right, they will be.”

She clapped and giggled like a little girl while I shook my head. Mr. Sheldon nodded and shook my hand. “I’m sure that whenever you’re ready, all of us will be accepting of your proposal as well.”

I nodded at him and gave his hand an extra shake. He was giving me his blessing already. “Well, I was coming to check on Dad, but I see you’re doing good. I’m happy about that.”

“I couldn’t stay down too long. Your grandmother threatened to get out of her casket and slap me if I cried at her funeral. I can’t have her coming back from paradise to fuck me up.”

I laughed hard as hell, because that sounded like some shit she would say. Once I got my laughter under control, I asked, “How’s Grandpa?”

“He’s doing okay. We visited him earlier. He’s been spending a lot of time with Maxine.”

I nodded. Maxine was my dad’s sister, and she had always been a daddy’s girl. As long as he wasn’t alone, I knew he would be okay. He and my grandmother had been together for over sixty years. I was sure that life without her was debilitating for him. I didn’t want to live life without Alexz, and we’d only been a couple for two weeks, and she’d only been in my life for a month. So I knew he probably felt like he was suffocating with sorrow. I made a mental note to check on him sometime before the week was over.

“Okay. Well, I will let y’all enjoy your time. I’m going home and take a nap.”

My mama chuckled. “Boy, I swear you’re an old soul.”

I chuckled. I got in a nap whenever I could. It wasn't often that I could though. "I need my rest. I'll go work out later today to help the time pass. I'll probably go get my baby tomorrow."

"Oh yay! I'll get to see my daughter-in-law."

I slowly shook my head. My mama was pushing for us to be together more than me. That was alright though. She was manifesting that shit for me. I couldn't wait to get to the point where we were both ready to move to the next level. I wanted to love Alexz, and I was on my way to that point... fast and furiously.

After bidding everyone a good day, I went to my car to head home. When I checked my phone, I saw a message from her. *Hey, bae. My day has been a little busy, but it's slowing down now. Shy had me all over the place getting ready for our court date. I miss you.*

I smiled slightly as a picture came through of her pouty lips. She'd poked them out, and her eyes looked sad. I took a selfie, making sure I put on my smolder, eyes squinted and eyebrows slightly lifted, and sent it to her along with a message. *I miss you more. I'm coming to pick you up tomorrow to spend the weekend with me. I'll bring you home Sunday.*

I backed out of the driveway as my phone rang. She was calling me. Usually, we stuck with texting, but just that quickly, I'd forgotten that she wasn't at work. I could have called instead of texting. "Hello?"

"Hey. It must be slow at your job for you to be texting this much."

"So slow until I'm already off. Was your day productive?"

"I guess. It was a little stressful. We had to go to the clinic to pick up my records. I cried for an hour after we left."

"Damn, baby. If you don't have anything going the rest of the day, I'll come get you now."

"Axton..." She broke down, and I immediately made a U-turn to head to IH-10 to get to Beaumont. "Please come get

me. I have so much to tell you.”

“I turned around the moment my name left your lips. You my baby, and I can’t hear your voice sounding that way and not do anything about it. I’ll be there in an hour. Are you at Shy’s house?”

“Yes. I’ll go pack. Thank you, Ax.”

“You don’t have to thank me for being a man. A real man could never ignore the cries of his woman. Never. That shit got me in a chokehold, and I won’t be able to breathe until you’re in my arms, Alexz. Go pack. If you aren’t working next week, you’re welcomed to stay as long as you want.”

At that very moment, I knew... I loved her. I wouldn’t tell her now and scare her half to death, but I would make her feel that shit every minute of the day.

Alexz

“WHERE YOU GOING?”

I turned around to see Dylan standing in the doorway. Shy had some shit to do at his office and had left me here alone. He said he wouldn't be gone long, and if I felt uncomfortable, I could call Dylan and he would be here. I hadn't called him though, so I wasn't sure why he was here. He should have been at work since school had started back. “Axton is on his way to pick me up. I need a change of scenery.”

“You okay? Your eyes look puffy.”

“Yeah. Today was just a lot. I had to go to the clinic, and we had to go over Knowledge's ridiculous claims. It's just been heavy,” I responded as my eyes watered.

He walked in the room and hugged me tightly. When I pulled away, I said, “Thanks. What are you doing here?”

He ran his hand down the back of his head, a clear indication that something was wrong or heavy on him. “Tell me what you know about Chanell.”

I frowned. *Why does he want to know about Chanell?* She was married and pregnant. How the hell did he even know her name? “Why? She's married and pregnant. I don't really talk to her like that... not since we graduated.”

He rubbed his hand down the back of his head again and stared at me. He was making me nervous as hell. Seemed I wasn't the only Berotte with drama. After clearing his throat, he sat next to me on the bed. "We been fucking around for a while. We slept together one last time around two or three months ago, and after our session, she told me it would be our last because she was pregnant. I always wrap up, but there's still that chance. I need to know what I'm dealing with. She was extremely flirty with Arrow. It makes me think that I wasn't the only one she was fucking with besides her husband."

"Aww shit. Daddy is gonna have a heart attack."

"He already knows, Alexz. I told him about it when I first found out. This shit got me so shook, I ain't had sex since. That's saying a lot, because my dick stay wet."

"Dylan... nigga, I don't need to know allat. You barely talk, but nigga, when you do, you say too fucking much."

He rubbed his head again, so I grabbed his hand and squeezed it. "Listen. She got around in college, but everyone can change, right? When she started dating and married Luke, I thought she was done with her hoe phase. I mean, we all have or had one. Some of us are still in ours," I said, side-eyeing him.

He rolled his eyes. "Luke... as in 'light-skinned Nupe' Luke?"

"Yep."

His eyes got wide. "Aww fuck!"

"Dylan, calm down. You stressing about the unknown. Do you wanna be with her or something?"

"Hell no. I just hate that I let her talk me into fucking her. I need to shoot Arrow a message though. You know I hate telling my fucking business. If she stopped fucking with me because she pregnant, how in the hell she gon' fuck with somebody else while she pregnant? And Luke? That's my brother, man."

His ego was bruised. That was what this was all about. That bitch was playing with my brother's feelings. She knew Dylan was my brother, so when they decided to do the performance for my birthday, she knew he would be there. Then to sit there in his face and try to fuck with Arrow was crazy as hell.

“Don't worry about that bitch until you have to. If she say it's her husband's baby, relax in that. How you even meet her ass?”

“We fucking work together.”

“That's even worse, bruh. She married *and* you gotta work with her ass? That's fucked up all the way around. You need to quit wearing them fucking sweatpants showing off all your nasty ass assets.”

“It don't matter what kind of pants I wear. My monster gon' show out in whatever I got on.”

“Aww shit. Ugh!” I yelled as I fake gagged.

The doorbell rang, and I wasn't ready. I knew that was Axton. Dylan stood from the bed and went to answer the door as I stood and threw a couple pairs of shoes in my bag, then got underclothes and pajamas... although I was sure I wouldn't need the shit. When he returned with Axton, I smiled big and went to him. I puckered my lips, and he leaned over and kissed me.

I was ready to get the fuck out of here. I couldn't believe Chanell was playing like this though. She was a fucking hoe for playing with niggas like she was doing. But whatever. Dylan shouldn't have slept with her nasty ass anyway. I was more than sure he had others willing to tighten him up. This shit was teaching his ass. Still... that didn't stop me from wanting to get at her about this shit though.

I went back to my luggage and made sure I had everything, only to realize I didn't have any toiletries. “I'm sorry, baby. Dylan slowed me down.”

Dylan narrowed his eyes at me as Axton chuckled. “It's okay, baby. I'm not in a hurry.”

I sent all my brothers a text while I was in the bathroom, letting them know I was leaving with Axton so they wouldn't be looking for me. When I came out, I saw Axton holding his phone out, then I heard a voice say, "That's some fucking bullshit."

I assumed Dylan had Axton call Arrow to tell him now. At least Arrow wouldn't fall victim to the bullshit like Dylan had. My brother was a good catch, and he deserved better, but his ass needed to start *acting* like he deserved better. He was a whole man whore in these streets... sticking his dick in whatever bitch opened her legs for him. From what I understood, Jamel and Arrow were the same way. That was why the three of them clicked so well. I zipped up my luggage and carried it to the front room. When Axton looked up at me, he gave Dylan his phone and made his way to me.

He bit his bottom lip as he swept my curls from my face. "You so beautiful, baby. Damn. I can't believe you all mine."

This was not the same man I met nearly a month ago. I'd gotten past that hard exterior and was experiencing the gooey center. I loved every bit of it.

I WAS FACE DOWN, ASS UP. SEX ALWAYS GOT ME IN MY feelings enough to talk. However, Axton's dick would have me telling war secrets. "Yeeeesss, baby. Fuck me up. Shit!"

He was straddled across me, standing in the bed, killing my shit like only he could. I wouldn't even have to worry about getting pregnant again. He'd ruin my shit completely if we weren't careful. It hurt so good though, and I couldn't get enough.

"Damn, I love this pussy. Keep juicing for me, Alexz. Wet my shit up."

His dirty mouth... my God. That shit turned me on so much. I liked for him to brag on his dick too, because that muthafucka was worth bragging on. It was its own entity... had its own zip code, area code, and fucking subdivision.

Axton knew how to work the fuck out of it too. When he sank it all the way inside, I screamed then orgasmed all over him. I could feel the shit leaving me. He pulled out of me then sank his face in my shit from the back.

When I began bucking, he stopped and lay on his back beneath me. “Sit that juicy shit on my face, girl.”

I did just that, and my eyes rolled to the back of my head as he gave me that hurricane tongue. Grabbing ahold of his dreads, I held on for the ride. I screamed out my excitement as his tongue took me on twists and turns and highs and lows with speed, and sometimes at a snail’s pace. In short, this nigga was driving me fucking insane. His tongue was bipolar, and I was enjoying every manic high that shit was taking me on.

I gripped his dreads tighter as I came on his lips. Before I could ride the wave completely, he roughly grabbed my hips, picked me up, and dropped me on his dick. This nasty shit was right up my alley. Axton knew exactly what I needed. Seeing all the cream and wetness in his beard had me feeling like I would cum again.

“You see all this shit on my face? Come taste this shit.”

That nigga didn’t have to tell me twice. He had me in a trance... fucking hypnotized. I granted his every wish like a damn genie whenever he slutted me out. Leaning over, I licked his beard and lips slowly, enjoying my excellence. While I did, he lifted his hips and began slow fucking me. I was so damn wet I knew the bed had to be wet. Staring into his eyes took over my emotions as it always did. He placed his hand on my neck and squeezed slightly as he loved me. *Yes, I could feel it.*

We’d only been together for two weeks, but what I felt for him and from him was unmatched by anyone I had ever called myself having a relationship with. This shit was real... uncut... unfiltered... pure. “Axton...” I whined as my legs trembled.

“Yeah, baby. Talk to me. Tell me what you need from me.”

“I need you to keep loving me.” His pace slowed somewhat as I closed my eyes. “I can feel your love, Axton. Oooh shit! I feel it, baby. I’m falling for you too. I wanna love you with everything in me... with everything I have and in every way I know.”

It was like my words fueled his desire. His pace remained steady, but his strokes seemed to become more powerful but gentler all at the same fucking time. He had my senses and feelings contradicting themselves and my mind running in a wheel like a damn hamster. I was dizzy as fuck as I completely laid on his chest, practically collapsing, my arm folded between us. He wrapped his arms around me and continued making love to me.

“You are it for me, Alexandria Marie Berotte. Real shit. I’m not falling though.” Before I could lift my head, he kissed my forehead, and said, “I’m already there. I love you, Alexz.”

The tears rained from my eyes as he hissed out the emotions in him. His grip around me got tighter, and his pace quickened just a bit, letting me know that his nut was chasing him down. His hands drifted to my ass as it jiggled from his blows, and he slid his finger in my asshole, sending me to my next orgasm. The stimulation from his dick grazing my clit, my nipples sliding on his chest, and then the penetration of my asshole proved to be too much for me to handle.

Suddenly, Axton yelled, “Oh fuck!”

He scared the shit out of me. He’d only been grunting and moaning when he wasn’t talking in a low voice. He stroked my ass faster, and everything below my hips just felt like a huge ass lake. I couldn’t control the jerks of my body as I screamed out in pleasure. This shit felt more powerful than an orgasm, so it had to come from somewhere deep that had never been tapped into before. “Alexz... I’m ’bout to bust! Fuuuuuck!”

His body was jerking as much as mine. He bit into my shoulder, trying to stifle his growls, and even that shit had turned me on. When we’d both caught our breath, I slid next to him and let the silent tears escape me. I was ready to talk. “It

was like my baby was crying out to me the moment I stepped inside that place. It triggered me something terrible. After discussing Knowledge and the case with Shy, I'm no longer worried about his ass. He has all kinds of evidence of how I was misled and lied to. The judge will probably throw the case out."

Axton rolled over to his side and kissed my lips then wiped my tears with his thumb. "I'm here for you, baby. Whatever you need, I got'chu."

"I know. Your love for me isn't wasted. I promise you aren't wasting your time. I'm getting there."

"There's no rush. I'm not going anywhere. Tell me everything that bothers you about having your abortion. I need you to get it all out, baby."

I rubbed his chest with my fingertips as I stared at the wall. "I'm scared to be a mother. What if I'm not good at it? There are so many other women that are ready for kids that can't have them. I returned a gift that so many are dying to receive. I feel selfish, Ax. Before I knew of Knowledge's hidden agenda, I was scared, but I was embracing the fact that I would be a mom. I was starting to bond with my baby... my baby that I had killed. That shit is eating me alive. I think I should probably go back to counseling."

"I believe that you should do whatever is best for you. That includes having the abortion. If that was what was best for you, then accept that. If you feel like counseling will help, I support you by all means."

He kissed my forehead. "I know you will, Ax. I was also scared because of what happened to my mama. The only things I carry of her are her looks and her name, Marie. I never told you how she died. I mean, I told you she had a blood clot, but she got the clot while in labor with me. So even as a baby, I never felt her touch. I don't know what a mother's love feels like, and it's depressing sometimes. I know there's nothing I can do to change that, but when I was pregnant and when I had the abortion, it plagued me all over again."

“It’s okay to have moments. I’m sorry you lost your mom that way. Although you don’t remember, you got to experience her love. She gave her life for you to have yours. There’s no greater love than that. The important thing is that you don’t dwell on those depressing moments, baby. You can talk to me like you’re doing now, even though I know that shit ain’t easy for you to do. You’re getting better at it though. I’ll always be here to help you through whatever is troubling you.”

This was why Axton was penetrating my soul. He was so loving and caring. I couldn’t believe that he’d fallen in love with me so quickly. I wasn’t the easiest person to love, but I supposed his Mimi gave her life for us. Had she not died, I wouldn’t have been there for him. He wouldn’t have softened toward me either. We would still be living in this world in search of each other while hating each other at the same time. God had a funny way of doing things, but I was grateful for His way.

*A*xton

HAVING MY BABY HERE WITH ME HAD BEEN EVERYTHING. I'D just gotten off work, and I was headed home to pick her up to go to dinner at my parents' house. My sister and her family would be there along with Arrow. Wednesday night had been intense. She got those magic three words out of me. While it was true, I had no intent of telling her so soon. She'd proven that she was ready to hear them though. The fact that she could see and feel it let me know she was receptive to it. It felt amazing to tell her how I felt, although it was fast as hell.

We'd talked until we fell asleep, and neither of us showered until the next morning. When I'd gotten up to get ready for work, she'd gotten up too and showered with me, giving me some fire head and sex for the road. I didn't know I could crave a woman as much as I craved her. I could live within them walls. The way they gripped and embraced me told me that I was home. It was the most powerful sexual experience I'd ever had. Her back had slid up and down that tiled shower wall so much until I knew she would need a back rub before she left from here. The hard grainy surface couldn't have felt pleasant.

I hated leaving her, especially after some shit like that. However, Alexz had cooked spaghetti and meatballs and when I got off work, she had me stop to the store to get salads. The food was delicious. We watched a couple of movies and just

held one another for the rest of the night. So, now that it was Friday, my mama was tripping because she hadn't seen her yet. I needed time with her to myself. I was selfish with her because I craved her undivided attention, and I knew she craved that from me. We were more alike than we were different.

When I got home, she was sitting on the couch already dressed and watching TV. I went over to her and softly kissed her lips then headed to take a quick shower. I'd been in the ER all day, and the first thing I needed to do was wash the day off me. We'd treated everything from overdoses to gunshot victims and terminally ill patients. I was just over it. However, tomorrow was Saturday, and it was one of the busiest days in the ER. Today was the other busiest day.

Once I was done showering, I quickly got dressed in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt then let my dreads down. Alexz loved for me to let them hang low. She said it increased my sex appeal. Whatever she wanted was what she got. *With her sexy ass.*

When I got back downstairs, she turned the TV off and stood from her seat on the couch. "Ready?"

"Yep. Now you can have some one-on-one time with my parents and siblings. My mama is already calling you her daughter-in-law."

She smiled brightly as she wrapped her arms around me. "That's okay. I will be one day."

"Where's your sling, baby?"

"Ugh! In the room," she mumbled as she trudged off to go get it.

She was like a spoiled kid at times, and that made me chuckle. It was because she was the baby of the family and the only girl, and I could see how much they babied her... even Chad. He gave her a hard time, but he still did things for her. When she came back with it on, she asked, "Happy?"

"Yes. Now bring your spoiled ass on before I spank you."

"Don't threaten me with a good time. Your mother would hate to know that she missed me because her son couldn't

keep his dick in his pants.”

I slowly shook my head as I grabbed my dick. She had my shit getting hard. “Whatever, man. Let’s go.”

She giggled because she knew that she’d gotten to me, then made her way to my car while I locked up. When I turned to make my way there too, I saw her standing at the passenger door, waiting for me. I put a little pep in my step to open her door. Once I got to her, I kissed her lips and opened it for her. This could be us all the time, and I couldn’t wait until it was.

The ride to my parents’ house was only about twenty minutes. During the drive, I told her a little more about them, Kaysyn and her family, and Arrow. They seemed to know more about her than she knew about them. She’d had so much going on, we didn’t get to talk much about my family. I was happy that she was taking the time to get to know them.

The second we got there, my mama came out to the porch to greet us... mainly Alexz. I was pretty sure that I would be forgotten about right after she spoke to me. As I walked around to help Alexz out, the whole damn family had joined her on the porch. I guess their country asses were excited. When she got out, she mumbled, “I feel like Michelle Obama in this bitch. Yaaaasss.”

I chuckled and slowly shook my head. “Michelle ain’t got shit on you, girl.”

“You better talk that shit, baby.”

Before we could get to the porch, my mama said, “Hey, Axton! It’s about time you brought my daughter-in-law to visit. Hey, Alexz! Come on in, baby.”

She hugged Alexz, after practically pushing me out the way, then began introducing her to everyone like I didn’t exist. I slowly shook my head as I realized this was going to be a long visit... too long to be dealing with Shirlene and her foolery. My dad rested his hand on my shoulder and said, “Your mom has been dying for this moment. The way you and Arrow cut up in college with these women... She just wanted y’all to establish some roots. That time has come for you.”

I gave him a one-cheeked smile as I stared at Alexz. Her eyes were wide and bright as she talked to Mama and Kaysyn like she'd been knowing them longer than she'd known me. This moment felt good to me, even though only a year ago I couldn't fathom having a woman that I could bring here to introduce to my family. I thought it would have taken longer for me to find the one. It was weird how life worked, but I wasn't complaining. I'd met the woman that I was now in love with.

After following them inside the house, my mama and Kaysyn whisked Alexz off to the kitchen, while I went to the den with my dad, Arrow, Luckey, and he and my sister's son, Ellington. Ell was only seven, and he was the only grandchild, which meant he was spoiled as hell. Not to mention, he was the only nephew. Before we could even engage in conversation, the women were laughing loudly. Dad shook his head and looked at Arrow. "Don't you wish you had a woman in there getting close to your mom and sister?"

Arrow twisted his lips to the side. "I could have had a woman in there... a couple of them, but I didn't think y'all would be accepting of that."

I chuckled as my dad shook his head slowly. "Not one of your hoes, fool," Luckey said.

Arrow shrugged and said, "He didn't say someone I had a relationship with. He said a woman."

"You knew what the hell I was talking about, smart ass," my dad said, causing Arrow to chuckle.

"I'm not ready. I'll be sure to let you know when I am. Congratulations to Axton though."

"Yeah. She's beautiful, brother-in-law. Y'all look amazing together."

"Thanks, man."

As Dad flipped through channels on the TV, he asked, "So are you getting along with everybody? Her Dad and his girlfriend seem really friendly."

“They are. When she told me she had six brothers and was raised by her dad, I just knew they were gonna be on bullshit where she was concerned, but they were just the opposite. They trust her to make wise decisions, because her intuition can’t be fucked with. I like that about her. She’s straight forward and so is her family for the most part.”

“She was raised by her pops? Where’s her mom?” Luckey asked.

“She died giving birth to her. Her oldest brother was only nine at the time. She told me that this is her dad’s first girlfriend since her mom died twenty-five years ago.”

“Damn. That’s admirable.”

“Yeah.”

As we continued to talk, the women joined us. When Alexz sat next to me, she said, “You used to cry to wear your sister’s nightgowns?”

My face had to have turned fifty shades of red within seconds. “Come on, na. Y’all couldn’t find nothing else to talk about in there?”

“Now you see how embarrassed I was when y’all were grabbing your private parts to that nasty ass song at Alexz’s party. Anissa and I were in disbelief that our sons would glorify something so repulsive.”

Luckey’s eyes widened. He was a Q as well. He stared at me and said, “Bruh! No y’all didn’t. Not that damn song.”

“Hell yeah they did, Luckey. Him and Arrow and two of Alexz’s brothers. Knowing that she detests the song as much as I did made me feel better about fussing at Ax’s ass. They could have performed to ‘Atomic Dog’ like they normally do. And all that tongue and neck stuff was way too much.”

“She may detest the song, but I bet she didn’t detest the performance though,” I said as I glanced at her from the corner of my eyes. She looked like she wanted to shrink as I chuckled. Her face was red as hell, especially when she saw my mama’s mouth open. “That’s what happens when you throw Ax under the bus. I pull yo’ ass with me.”

“AXTON, WHY ARE YOU SO PERFECT?”

I frowned at Alexz as I helped her exercise her arm. She needed professional therapy and was supposed to be starting the Monday after I took her home. However, I knew that it wouldn't hurt to start early. Her left arm had caught hell the past few months. Dinner at my parents' house was amazing. As I figured, I was practically ignored until Alexz brought me in the conversation. They were so happy to meet her, and I understood their excitement. Alexz was a whole ass vibe... sexy as fuck, smart as hell, rowdy but kind, and caring.

She'd asked my dad a couple of times if he was okay whenever he got quiet. My mama had winked at me both times. She'd said their time with Mr. Sheldon and Ms. Anissa was cool as hell. She and Ms. Anissa had planned a shopping trip that she'd invited Alexz and Kaysyn to. When I'd reiterated just how mean Alexz was in the beginning, they all took her side, asking me what I did to provoke her. I quickly realized I was fighting a losing battle.

After working Alexz's arm in a circle, I said, “I'm not perfect. I just hope that you can accept my imperfections when they present themselves.”

“According to whose standards? You're perfect for me, Axton. Even though you cocky as hell and petty... oh God, are you petty! But I love all that about you, because I'm both of those things too. I would say we have all the reasons in the world to be arrogant. We're beautiful individuals and a fire ass couple.”

I smiled as I moved behind her to massage her shoulders. “Hell yeah. Who gon' tell us we ain't?”

“No-damn-body.”

“Hell naw.”

As we chuckled at our silliness, her phone rang. Her family had been checking on her every day since she left. She

would be going home tomorrow, and I was already dreading it, especially since I had to work today. I would have given my right leg to lay up in the house all day with her. She hopped off the massage table to grab her phone. By the time she'd gotten to it, they'd ended the call, so she called back.

“Hey, Shy. What’s up...? I know you fucking lying... Why they let them do that...? Bullshit... Ugh! Okay. Talk to you later then.”

“What happened?” I asked after she ended the call.

“Muthafucka got the judge to move our court date back by two weeks. Talking ’bout his baby in the hospital.”

“Baby?”

“Yeah. His first baby mama had their baby nearly two months ago. So now that’s almost a month away before we can go to court. I just want this shit to be over with. He’s dragging this shit out for a reason, and I’m sick of it.”

Her phone rang again, and I assumed it was Shy, because she answered by saying, “What else...? Oh. That’s good news... Yeah. I’ll be home tomorrow evening... I can’t wait to hear what he has to say... Okay. Bye.”

When she ended the call, she came and hopped back on the table. “They caught Jerrick’s punk ass. I can’t wait to hear what he has to say for himself. No excuse is good enough, but I’m still curious. The only thing I can think that he might be salty about is me telling him that I had a man. But there was no reason for him to be salty about that. We were never a couple.”

“Maybe he was going to try to shoot his shot.”

“So kill me because I moved on? You know how stupid that sounds?” she asked with a deep frown on her face.

“I know, but what logical reason could he have to want to kill you? There’s no logical explanation.”

“There isn’t, but enough of that shit. I only have the rest of today and a little of tomorrow to spend with you. Then it will be proly another week before I can see you.” She took a deep

breath and laid on her stomach so I could finish her massage. “Axton, can you tell me why you chose me?”

This woman had a man trying to dupe her into marrying him and another trying to kill her because he was pissed she’d moved on, but she needed reassuring that she deserved my love. I slowly shook my head as a smile played at my lips. Eventually, I knew she would be confident in my love for her if I was patient. It was still so soon in our relationship and since her last heartbreak.

“When I got to Beaumont, I just wanted to do a job to get experience on what it would be like to run my own office and get back to Houston. I’d seen your picture already. I thought you were beautiful, but I wasn’t caught up. Like I said, I was there to do a job. However, when I laid eyes on you that morning, I was mesmerized. Your picture didn’t do you justice.”

I could feel her tension leaving her as I rubbed her shoulders, and she moaned softly, signifying that very thing. “But girl... when you told me I had a big forehead, I knew. Me and a soft-spoken woman wouldn’t make it. So not only were you beautiful, but you were a challenge. You struck before I even had a chance to. But your petty? Shiiiiid, you got me beat.”

She giggled as she listened to the story like she wasn’t there to experience it. “When you came out the office in the tight ass turquoise dress, I knew you had lost your damn mind if you thought I wasn’t gonna lay my cards on the table. That was what you wanted though. You wanted me to drool and look like a damn fool chasing you. I should have snatched yo’ ass out of that bistro that day and took you to Houston with me.”

She turned back to look at me with lust in her eyes. I knew what this talk was going to get me, and I was all for it. “Girl, you had me so damn hot. My grandmother had to calm me down. When she saw me that Saturday, she knew a woman had gotten to me. The compassion you showed me when I lost her... that was what took the cake. You’d annoyed me at that

bar, but I was already hooked. If I couldn't have you, I wouldn't have nobody, baby.”

She turned over on her back and spread her legs. She was tripping. My eyes went straight to the prize, but she knew I wouldn't touch her until I washed my hands. “At the bar, I knew your state of mind. I didn't want to seem like I was taking advantage of that. I would never take advantage of anyone like that. But I think you took advantage of me.”

“I took advantage of the fact that you were finally willing to give me a chance to get in them guts.”

She giggled and slapped my hand as I continued. “Naw, for real though. I was just happy that we were on the same page. It took my grandmother dying for us to get here. She was going to go anyway, but I feel like this was her parting gift. Something good came out of her death, and after her funeral, I refused to let you get away from me. I'm just glad you felt the same way and made it easy for me.”

I slid my hands up her torso and down the sides, letting her feel the weight of my words. She sat up and grabbed my locs, pulling me closer to her, and kissed my lips softly. She rested her nose against mine, but her lips still grazed mine without her actually kissing me. Them DSLs were nice as fuck. She ran her hands over my bare chest then pulled away from me and stared into my eyes. “I love you, Axton.”

I was shocked that she'd said it so soon, but I knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was authentic. I eased my hands to her neck, placing one on each side and tilted her head upward. “I knew how you felt about me, baby, but to hear you verbalize that shit got me excited as hell. Mm... fuck. I need to slide in them walls now.”

She sat up completely and pulled my shorts down over my erection. I'd been free balling all day. “Pick me up, Axton.”

I did as she requested, and she slid that hot pussy down my raw dick. While I wanted all that action, I asked, “You sure about this?”

“I’m on the pill. Yes, I’m sure,” she said as she began rolling them hips on my dick, surfing all this wood.

I bit my bottom lip as I gripped her ass, allowing my eyes to roll to the back of my head. “I fucking love you too, Alex with a Z.”

EPILOGUE

Alexz

“HE’S BEING CHARGED WITH ATTEMPTED MURDER, GRAND theft auto, stalking, and harassment, although those last two charges ain’t shit compared to the first two. Are you sure you want to listen to why he did this shit?” Shy asked.

“Yes.”

It had been nearly two weeks since I’d gotten back from Houston, and I just wanted this shit to be done as soon as possible. My patience was wearing thin. At least this shit with Jerrick was moving along. Hopefully, Knowledge didn’t try to push the court date back again. Axton was on his way to town, and I couldn’t wait to see him. We missed last weekend because he had to work a double shift Saturday, so he was gon’ get fucked on sight.

As Shy and I walked through the police station, we were led to a room where I could see Jerrick and who I supposed was his attorney. He was accepting a plea deal, so there would be no trial. *Thank God.* When the detective entered the room, Shy grabbed my hand. That made me nervous as hell. It made me think that he knew something that he hadn’t told me. I wished he would have told me because I didn’t like being blindsided.

A detective joined us and turned on the speaker where we could hear what he was saying. He slid his hand down his

face, and he had the nerve to look remorseful. I rolled my eyes as I impatiently tapped my foot on the floor. “I lost my job about a year ago, and I hadn’t been able to find shit that would take care of my bills. No job wanted to pay me what I was making. I took what I could because some money coming in was better than no money, but it wasn’t enough. For the first time in my life, I was desperate.”

He lowered his head, then said, “Alexz and I had an amazing weekend when we reconnected. I have never had any ill feelings toward her. This nigga approached me the Monday after I left her house at a gas station... asked if I was interested in making some money. At that point, I was willing to do anything to get paid. I thought he wanted me to sell dope or some shit like that. But he asked me to follow Alexz. He knew I had been with her because he’d been watching her, but he needed to get back to Atlanta. I figured there wasn’t any harm in watching her, so I agreed to it. We exchanged numbers, and he fronted me a couple of grand.”

I could feel the heat rising from my shirt, engulfing me to the point that I wanted to go in that room and fuck him up. Shy squeezed my hand tighter as my lip and nose twitched like a hostile dog. Jerrick continued. “After I reported to him that she was with another nigga and that it seemed serious, he got angry. He knew that she and I were just friends with benefits because he said he’d been watching her for some years. I didn’t ask questions, because I didn’t want to know. I just needed the cash. He asked me to shoot at her to scare her and send a message.”

He huffed loudly and allowed a couple of tears to slide down his cheeks. “He said that she would know that it was from him. I was hesitant, but he promised me ten grand for the job. I stole a car out of the parking lot of an apartment complex, although it took me days to actually go through with it. He didn’t want me to kill her... just scare her. So that was what I did. When she started firing back, my instincts took over, and I started shooting recklessly. I fucked up. Alexz was my girl, and I fucked up. I let money or rather my desperation take control of me, and I could have killed someone I loved. I accept full responsibility for my actions.”

“Do you have proof to corroborate this story?”

“I have text messages from him.”

“I also pulled the footage from the convenience store to show their encounter and the exchange,” his attorney added.

The detective in the room turned the speaker off and turned to us. “What this means for you is that the case with Knowledge Rucker has been thrown out and warrants are being drawn up for his arrest. We’re working with Atlanta PD and the state of Georgia to make that happen as soon as possible. This is over. You’ll only have to go to court if Mr. Rucker refuses to admit guilt to anything.”

I released a heavy breath then fell against Shyrón. I knew it was because of him that this had been handled so efficiently. He gently rubbed my back as I wrapped my arms around his waist. “Shy, I can’t express how grateful I am for you.”

“I can help you. I drew up an invoice.”

I pulled away from him and frowned as he pulled an invoice from his suit pocket. *What the fuck?* I snatched it from him and looked at all the charges for his time and research. My temper was already on a short fuse, and this nigga was going to charge me for his services. I nodded repeatedly as I looked over the charges. I was going to tell Daddy. I’d pay his ass, but...

When my eyes got to the bottom, it read, *Payment Due: Undying love, loyalty, and unlimited home cooked meals.*

I released my tension and laughed then hugged him again. “Man, I was gon’ pay you, but you best believe, Daddy was gon’ know about this shit! Getting me all heated for nothing,” I said as I shoved him.

He laughed and put his arm around me. “Let’s get the fuck outta here. We need to get to the grocery store so you can prepare my first dinner.”

I rolled my eyes. “What’chu wanna eat, Shy?”

He pretended to be thinking then said, “Steak and shrimp, baby. Add a side of mixed veggies or steamed broccoli and a

yeast roll. Only the best for the best.”

“Bougie ass.”

“PUT ME THE FUCK DOWN BEFORE I KNOCK YO’ BIG ASS OUT, Chad!”

He threw me to the couch and said, “I told you that yo’ man can’t help you! Us bruhs stick together, girl. Come at me crazy again and I’ma tickle you half to death. Gon’ have yo’ ass stuttering in this bitch.”

“That’s enough, y’all. Must y’all grown asses do this shit every time we get together?” Daddy asked.

“Energy, Daddy. Energy. You know I match that shit.”

“Alexz, you too grown to keep saying he started it. His big ass only messes with you because he knows the reaction he’s going to get out of you.”

I huffed loudly as Daddy fussed at Chad. I didn’t know why he wasted his breath. Me and that big ass nigga were gonna always fight. That was our dynamic, and honestly, I loved it. It made our relationship different. It had been a while since we’d argued like this, because he didn’t want to hurt me. My arm was doing better, just a little sore. It had been two weeks since they’d gotten Jerrick’s confession, and they now had Knowledge’s punk ass in custody, and he was pleading guilty to avoid a trial.

Unfortunately, his baby had passed away. Despite how I felt about him, I was saddened. I knew he accepted his fate because of his depression with losing his baby. No one wanted to hear that an innocent baby had died. I especially felt for the baby’s mother. She’d gotten to hold their little boy in her arms and love on him only like a mother could. My heart ached for her. I couldn’t imagine getting to that point and losing my baby. I would be a total nutcase for a long time.

We were at my dad’s house for Sunday dinner. Mama Nissa was in the kitchen checking the food. I leaned against

my daddy, and he put his arm around me as Axton slowly shook his head. He was seated on the other couch across the room. I stuck my tongue out at him as I frowned, pretending to be angry at him for him not defending me. He always called me a big baby, and I would tell him that he could kiss my babified ass. He slowly nodded, and I knew he'd taken things a different direction. *Nasty ass.*

I was a daddy's girl, always had been. After kissing my forehead, my dad urged me to sit up. "It's time," he said in a low voice.

I giggled then stood and went to Axton and sat on his lap. When I felt his dick twitch, I whispered, "Don't make me take yo' nasty ass to the bathroom."

"As you would say, don't threaten me with a good time."

I giggled as he tickled me. I loved his sexy ass. We'd made love before we even came here. He seemed extremely excited about something when he got here, but he'd said he was just happy to see me. Again, it had been two weeks. However, that excitement had lasted since he'd been here. I'd done my best not to dwell on it too much, but it was hard not to.

When my dad returned from his bedroom, he winked at all of us then said, "Nissa, I need you in here right quick, baby."

"Okay. I'm turning the pots off now. The food is ready."

We all seemed extra excited about what was about to occur, except Dylan. That was normal though. The nigga was nonchalant as hell. He was playing on his phone, then he threw it to the couch right next to him. He looked aggravated, but I'd talk to him about that later. Daddy turned to look at the eight of us and smiled, then went to his knee.

When Mama Nissa walked in the room and saw him, she started screaming. Her hands flew to her mouth as we all cheered. The tears fell from her eyes, and I could see her hands trembling. "Sheldon! Oh my God! Yes, baby. Yes!"

I laughed so loud. She hadn't even given him a chance to ask. My daddy laughed too, then said, "Hol' on, baby. Let me speak from my heart."

He paused, then continued. “When I met you, I knew that you were special. The brief stint where I tried to deny our connection killed me. After twenty-five years of grieving my wife’s death, you came along and healed my heart in ways I didn’t think were possible anymore. Before your admission of how you felt about me, I’d felt it... since very early on. You gave me something to live for. No offense, kids,” he said when he turned his head to the side.

I smiled because there was no offense taken. I felt the same way about Axton. He was everything I’d been searching for in love. Mama Nissa and Mama Shirlene had also been positive mother figures in my life, and Kaysyn was like the sister I never had. So his feelings in this moment were mirroring my own. He continued expressing himself.

“I don’t even want to think about where I would be without you, Anissa. You are such a beautiful angel, and I never want to let go. However, I also wanted to show you just how serious I was about that. I love you beyond what I could imagine... beyond even myself. I want you to be my wife. Please tell me you want that too... to love me forever and stand by my side as my better half.”

Mama Nissa wiped the tears from her face as did I. I’d never heard my daddy be so expressive. Even Isaiah had dropped a tear. This was a moment we’d all wanted for him for a long time, and it was finally here. Axton wiped my tears as Mama Nissa said, “Absolutely. You the real thing, baby, and I would be a fool to believe otherwise. I love you.”

She held her hand out, and my daddy slid the ring on her finger. I was so damn happy. I hopped to my feet and cheered for them, then made my way to them. I hugged Mama Nissa so tightly. “Congratulations, Mama. I love you.”

Her face reddened even more than it already was, then she held my face in her hands. “Thank you, baby. I love you too. You’re next, and I can’t wait to witness it.”

I kissed her cheek as I accepted her words. Axton was perfect for me, and I knew that she was right. Our time was coming, and I was looking forward to it. After hugging my dad

and congratulating him on this moment, I went back to Axton. Before I could say anything to him, Mama Nissa was telling everyone to come to the table to eat.

Axton held me close as everyone headed to the dining area. I wasn't sure what was up with him, but he had me nervous and on edge... in a good way. I could tell it wasn't anything bad, because he'd been smiling all day... shit, all weekend. "You know I love you, right?"

"Yes. I know because you tell me all the time, but more importantly, you make me feel it even when you aren't here," I voiced.

"Well, I hope you ready to see me more often, because I put my house up for sale. I'm moving to Beaumont to start my own practice."

My eyes widened. "Axton! Are you serious?"

"Absolutely, baby. You know any nurses that wouldn't mind working for an upcoming gastroenterology phenom?"

I laughed loudly as I hopped in his arms. "I love Dr. West, but you got me in every way imaginable. You moving in with me?"

"If you'll have me."

"Hell yeah. I'll have you in every way imaginable as well. Starting now."

I gave him my lips and slid my tongue to his. When he separated our kiss, he said, "Quit playing before yo' daddy put me out of here for fucking up his house."

I laughed then hugged him tightly. Life couldn't get any better. I'd leveled up to greatness because this shit between us was overwhelmingly perfect. It was deeper than love. Our souls, spirits, and bodies were compatible at the highest level, and I couldn't wait to see where we would go from here. Wait... I knew where we would end up. *Nirvana*.

The End

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

AFTERWORD

From the Author...

Alexz and Axton were a handful! They were so stubborn and petty in the beginning! I was like... please quit playing already! LOL! When they did give in, the night of the funeral, it was amazing. The way their chemistry overpowered them was beautiful to watch. They were the perfect reflection of people with hard exteriors. Once they penetrated that, it was sweet and nasty at the same time.

I was ready for Knowledge to be a done deal. He refused to even talk to me for the entire book... jackass. However, I couldn't be upset about it, because I was more than sure that I wouldn't have liked what he had to say. Jerrick's involvement was dirty as hell though. I appreciated Alexz's intuition. She knew something wasn't right about his ass.

As you can probably tell, Dylan's story will be next. Chanell is a dirty hoe, so his story will be messy as hell. It doesn't help that he's a man-whore trying to reform. Just the way the story starts... I'm anxious to get it out to you. LOL!

Finally, I'm happy that Sheldon and Anissa have progressed as well. Hopefully, there will be a wedding soon. I know y'all thought Axton was about to propose to Alexz at that birthday party and at the end. SMH. Slow down, grasshoppers! However, before this series is done, I am more than sure that they will be married as well.

I really hope you enjoyed this story. As always, I gave it my all. Whether you liked it or not, please take the time to

leave a review on Amazon and/or Goodreads.

There's also an amazing playlist on Apple Music and Spotify for this book, under the same title that includes some great R&B and rap tracks to tickle your fancy.

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

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Only If You Let Me
On My Way to You (An Urban Romance)
Any and Everything for Love
Savage Heart (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Shawty You for Me by T. Key)
I'm In Love with a Savage (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Trade It All by T. Key)
Don't Tell Me No (An Erotic Novella)
To Say, I Love You: A Short Story Anthology with the Authors of BLP
Drive Me to Ecstasy
Whatever It Takes: An Erotic Novella
When You Touch Me
When's the Last Time?
Best You Ever Had
Deep As It Goes (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Perfect Timing by T. Key)
The Shorts: A BLP Anthology with the Authors of BLP (Made to Love You-
Collab with Kay Shanee)
All I Need is You (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Divine Love by T. Key)
This Love Hit Different (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Something New by T. Key)
Until I Met You
Marry Me Twice
Last First Kiss
Nobody Else Gon' Get My Love (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Better Than
Before by T. Key)
Love Long Overdue (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with Distant Lover by T. Key)
Next Lifetime
Fall Knee-Deep In It
Unwrapping Your Love: The Gift
Who Can I Run To
You're Always on My Mind
Behind Closed Doors Series
Be Careful What You Wish For
You Just Might Get It

Show Me You Still Want It

Sweet Series

Bitter Sweet

Sweet and Sour

Sweeter Than Before

Sweet Revenge

Sweet Surrender

Sweet Temptation

Sweet Misery

Sweet Exhale

Never Enough (A Sweet Series Update)

Sweet Series: Next Generation

Can't Run From Love

Access Denied: Luxury Love

Still: Your Best

Sweet Series: Kai's Reemergence

Beautiful Mistake

Favorite Mistake

Motives and Betrayal Series

Ulterior Motives

Ultimate Betrayal

Ultimatum: #lovemeorleaveme, Part 1

Ultimatum: #lovemeorleaveme, Part 2

Written Between the Pages Series

The Devil Goes to Church Too

The Book of Noah (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with The Flow of Jah's Heart by T. Key)

The Revelations of Ryan, Jr. (A KeyWalt Crossover Novel with All That Jazz by T. Key)

The Country Hood Love Stories

8 Seconds to Love

Breaking Barriers to Your Heart

Training My Heart to Love You

The Country Hood Love Stories: The Hendersons

Blindsided by Love

Ignite My Soul

Come and Get Me

In Way Too Deep

You Belong to Me

Found Love in a Rider

Damaged Intentions: The Soul of a Thug

Let Me Ride

Better the Second Time Around

I Wish I Could Be The One

I Wish I Could Be The One 2

Put That on Everything: A Henderson Family Novella

What's It Gonna Be?

Someone Like You

The Berotte Family Series

Love On Replay